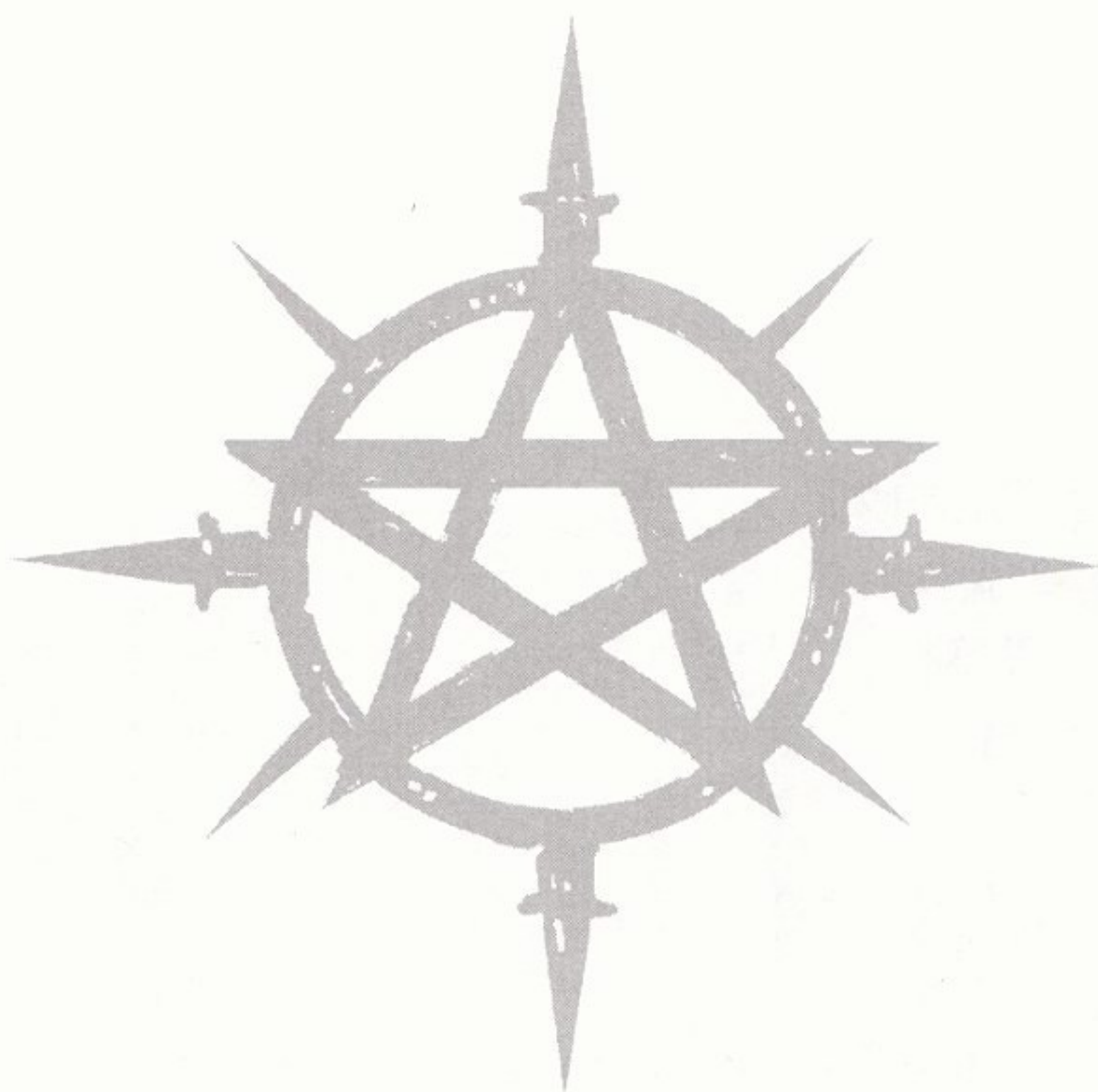


SAVIORS and DESTROYERS



AN ENEMY BOOK FOR DEMON: THE FALLEN™

SAVIORS AND DESTROYERS™



By WILLIAM BRINKMAN, RICK CHILLOT, JACOB DOCHERTY
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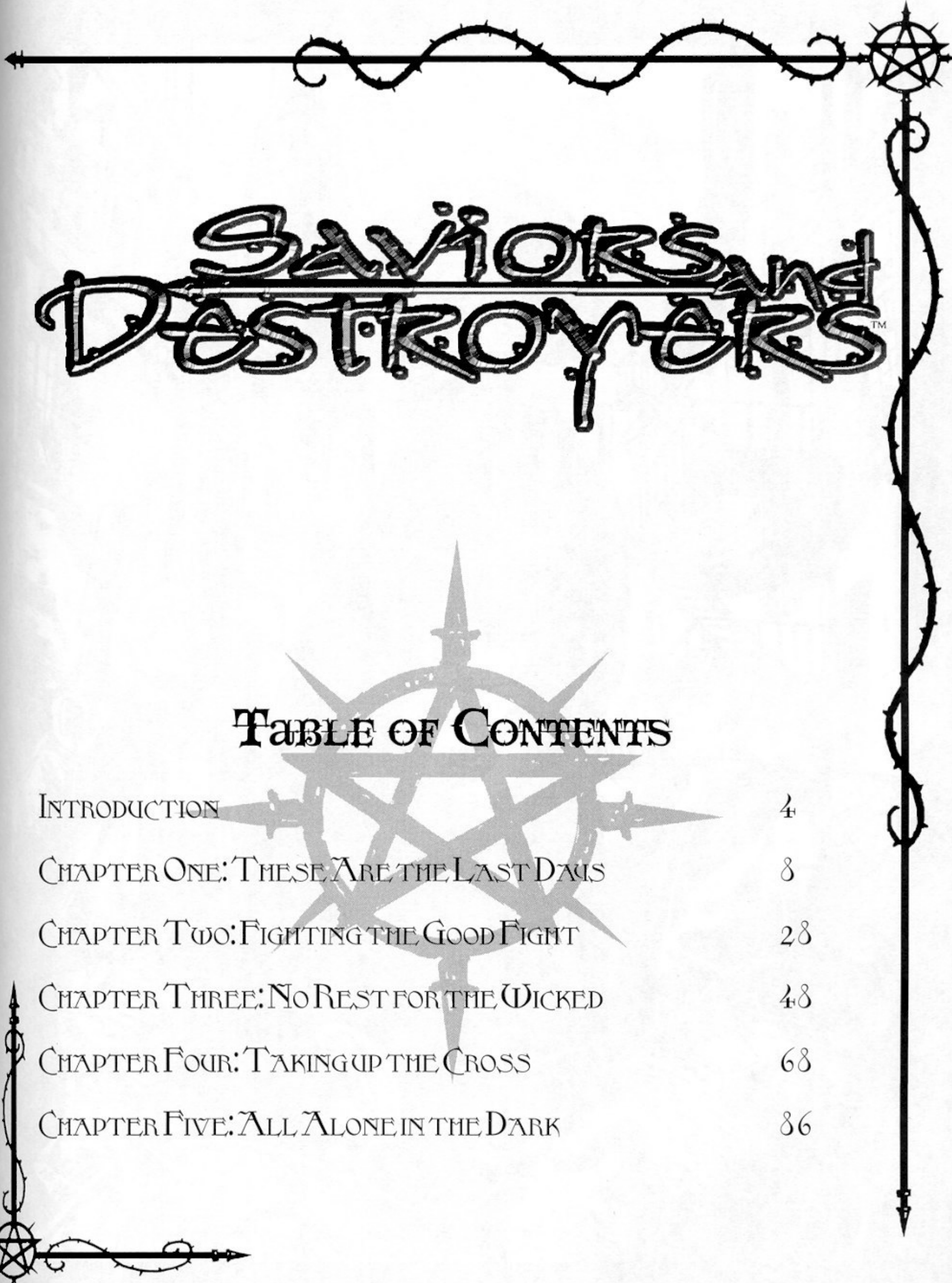
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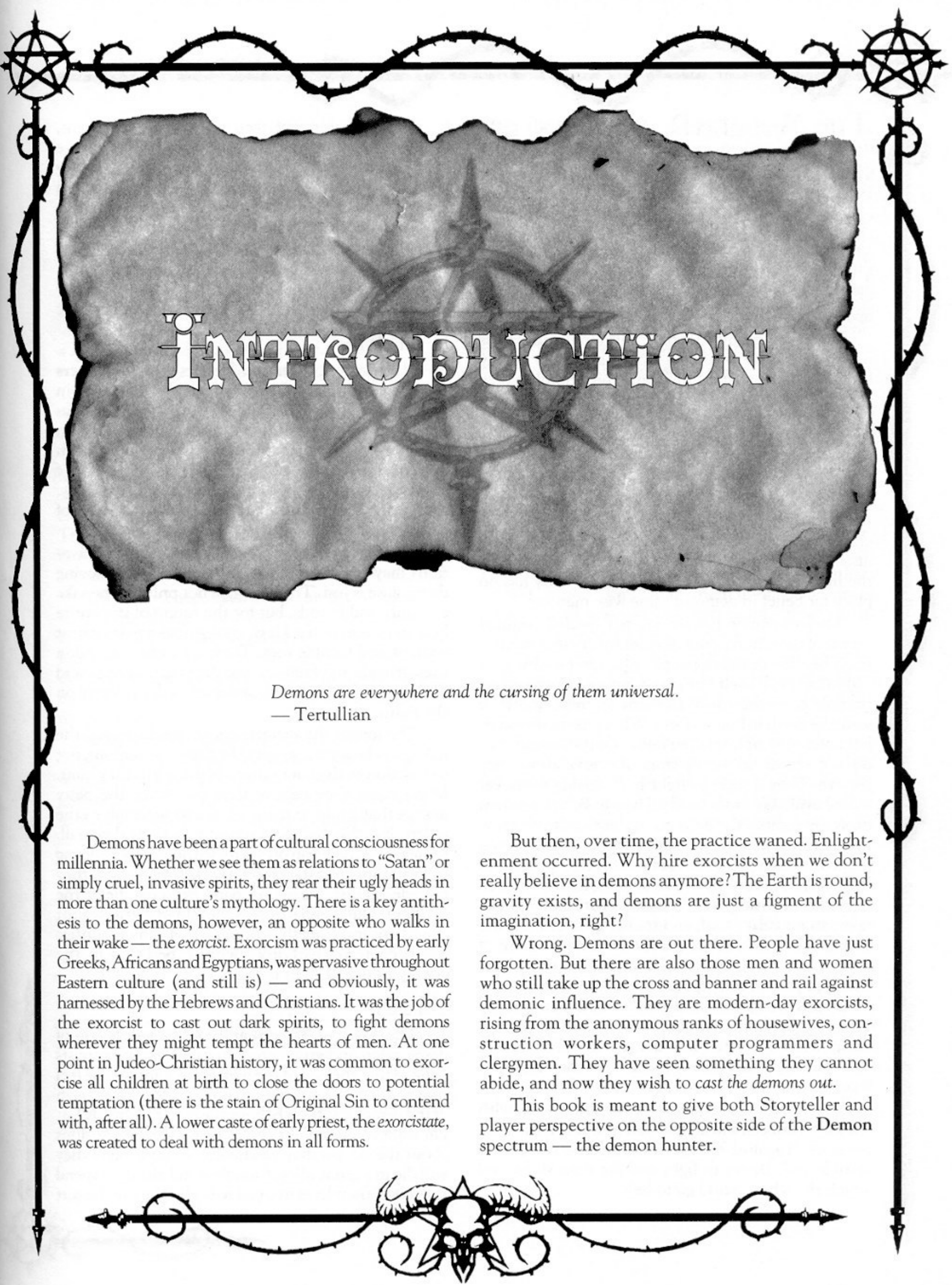


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INTRODUCTION

Demons are everywhere and the cursing of them universal.
— Tertullian

Demons have been a part of cultural consciousness for millennia. Whether we see them as relations to “Satan” or simply cruel, invasive spirits, they rear their ugly heads in more than one culture’s mythology. There is a key antithesis to the demons, however, an opposite who walks in their wake — the *exorcist*. Exorcism was practiced by early Greeks, Africans and Egyptians, was pervasive throughout Eastern culture (and still is) — and obviously, it was harnessed by the Hebrews and Christians. It was the job of the exorcist to cast out dark spirits, to fight demons wherever they might tempt the hearts of men. At one point in Judeo-Christian history, it was common to exorcise all children at birth to close the doors to potential temptation (there is the stain of Original Sin to contend with, after all). A lower caste of early priest, the *exorcistate*, was created to deal with demons in all forms.

But then, over time, the practice waned. Enlightenment occurred. Why hire exorcists when we don’t really believe in demons anymore? The Earth is round, gravity exists, and demons are just a figment of the imagination, right?

Wrong. Demons are out there. People have just forgotten. But there are also those men and women who still take up the cross and banner and rail against demonic influence. They are modern-day exorcists, rising from the anonymous ranks of housewives, construction workers, computer programmers and clergymen. They have seen something they cannot abide, and now they wish to *cast the demons out*.

This book is meant to give both Storyteller and player perspective on the opposite side of the Demon spectrum — the demon hunter.



THE MODERN DEMON HUNTER

There was a time when exorcising evil spirits was a matter for priests and practitioners of the arcane arts; lengthy liturgies and arcane tomes were created to channel the will of the exorcist to drive a demon from the body of its mortal host, banishing it to the darkness whence it came. If someone had reason to suspect that a neighbor or a loved one was tormented by an unclean spirit, there were people who could be called upon to help.

That time is centuries past. Faith in the unseen is not what it once was. The arcane arts have largely been lost to the mists of time, and the Church is now a reflection of society rather than the other way around. Holy men and women care more for raising funds to expand their fine churches and to clash with those whose idea of salvation differs, no matter how slightly, from their own. The liturgies are forgotten, moldering away in the dim recesses of papal libraries. And while there are still priests who purport to exorcise evil spirits from the faithful, the practice is actively discouraged by Church elders who seek to modernize the image of their religion. The 21st century has no place for belief in demons, these wise men say.

Modern demon hunters are not specially trained agents of the Church, nor devotees of ancient mysteries. They are ordinary people who are faced with a vision of Hell itself. In one form or another they stumble onto the truth: Demons are real, and they walk the Earth in human form. What sets these would-be exorcists apart from their fellow mortals is that they do not shrink in terror from the revelation they receive. They decide to fight back. Using whatever means available, from baseball bats to Bibles, modern exorcists combat the demons in their midst, destroying their host bodies and banishing the spirits to the Abyss or engaging in battles of will to force spirits from the world. There is a price to be paid, however, even in victory. Warring with demons leaves indelible scars upon an exorcist's soul, and sooner or later even the strongest minds break under the mounting weight of horror, frustration and pain. Worse still is the subtle, insidious peril of temptation. Who knows better than an exorcist the gifts that one of the fallen can bestow? Many demon hunters yield to promises of knowledge and power, often with the best intentions at heart, and find themselves hopelessly enslaved to the very monsters they have sworn to fight.

Those exorcists who survive their first brush with the fallen understand all too well how much the odds are stacked against them, but the alternative is more terrible still. Better to fight and die than sit by and watch the whole world go to hell.

These hunters are factory workers, librarians, teachers — and, yes, the odd priest. They have stumbled upon the truth and try to do something about it as best as they can. They have limited knowledge, limited resources, no friends in high places, nor access to military research labs. They have families, house payments, impacted wisdom teeth and serious drinking problems.

They fight demons because they have no other choice. Most die in the process. Those are the lucky ones.

THEME

The themes of **Demon: Saviors and Destroyers** are equal parts heroism and hubris. Exorcists are in many ways a dark reflection of the fallen. Whereas some demons try to rise above their madness and pain in a heroic struggle for redemption, exorcists can descend into horror and violence out of a sense of heroic self-sacrifice. Both paths often lead to tragedy, consuming demon and exorcist alike in a paroxysm of destruction that affects everyone around them.

Exorcists believe in what they do. Their motivations may differ, but they begin the fight believing their cause is just. They struggle not only for the sake of family and friends, but for the future of the entire human race in a thankless, anonymous battle against ancient and terrible foes. They must often abandon their friends and families, sacrifice their savings and throw away hard-earned careers in order to carry on the fight.

The longer the struggle continues, however, the more they become corrupted by their own actions, not to mention by the temptations of the spirits they hunt. Many times they believe they are above the petty desires that cause so many others to succumb to the fallen, but this hubris is oftentimes their downfall. Others lose their grip on sanity without ever realizing it, becoming monsters more terrible than those they crusade against. Nearly as many exorcists die at the hands of their compatriots as they do in battle against the fallen, and more than one group of demon hunters has been torn apart from within, betrayed to the enemy by one of their own.

MOOD

The mood of **Saviors and Destroyers** is one of desperation and grim determination. Many exorcists believe that the end of the world is at hand. Some feel that they can turn things around if they stop enough of the demons. Others believe the battle is already lost but want to go down fighting. Few have any illusions about the course they've chosen — most likely they will die in a grimy alley, friendless and alone, or spend the rest of their lives in a padded cell. They're the sort

of folks who save the last bullet for themselves and who vow to kill their buddies before they let them fall into the enemy's clutches. But if they're going to die, then by God they'll have an escort on the way to Hell.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is divided into several chapters, each of which is designed to explore and explain a specific area of the game. Remember, though, that in a storytelling game the most important "chapter" is your imagination. Never let anything in this book serve as a substitute for your own creativity.

Chapter One: These Are the Last Days presents a number of possibilities why men and women from all walks of life encounter the fallen and find the courage to try and send them back to the Abyss.

Chapter Two: Fighting the Good Fight explores the day-to-day dangers that exorcists face in their struggles against the angels of the Abyss, as well as the extreme tactics they are sometimes forced to employ. This chapter illustrates the danger that many demon hunters face when it comes to adopting the ways of the "enemy" for the sake of tipping the scales in their favor.

Chapter Three: No Rest for the Wicked describes the ultimate fate that awaits many exorcists in the battle against the damned. For many demon hunters, death comes to the lucky. Madness and enslavement are constant risks, as is imprisonment by mortal authorities that view exorcists as deranged criminals.

Chapter Four: Taking up the Cross provides guidelines and tips for creating exorcist characters as antagonists or protagonists in your *Demon* chronicle, as well as systems for researching and performing different types of exorcisms. A brief list of holy items that demon hunters can use against the enemy is also provided.

Chapter Five: Alone in the Dark contains exorcist character profiles that you, the Storyteller, can use for inspiration or include as characters in your chronicle or story.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The grim struggle against the forces of Hell is a favorite subject of both fiction and nonfiction books, as well as a variety of movies. The following sources provide excellent (and often frightening) insight into the harrowing battle between humanity and the infernal.

Recommended books include:

Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans, by Malachi Martin. This harrowing book presents five alleged cases of

modern-day possession in chilling detail, and the efforts of those who attempted to exorcise them. An excellent source for research on modern exorcisms, this book contains the Catholic Church's complete Rite of Exorcism.

The collected works of H. P. Lovecraft. Probable suspects include *From Beyond*, *The Whisperer In Darkness* and *The Dunwich Horror*. The reason Lovecraft's work is so evocative in the context of **Saviors and Destroyers** is that his text focuses on the grim struggle of ordinary humans against ancient and unknowable forces. His characters often lose their sanity, if not their lives, in the process.

Possessed, by Thomas B. Allen. This account of the 1949 possession that inspired *The Exorcist* details the experiences of Father William S. Bowdern and his attempts to remove a demon from the body of a 14-year-old boy. The events described aren't as overblown as those portrayed in the movie, but if anything the story is even creepier.

You Come When I Call You, by Douglas Clegg. Children who encounter a demon in their youth ("The Desolation Angel") live with the depredations of said demon throughout their lives. Some never escape its influence, while others manage to oppose it.

Recommended movies include:

The Exorcist. The classic 1973 movie with George C. Scott and Linda Blair, a tense, terrifying (if at times overdone) story of a holy man's struggle against the damned.

Possession. This Showtime original movie is another adaptation of Thomas Allen's novel, starring Timothy Dalton. Not as flashy as *The Exorcist*, but this movie does a better job of highlighting Father Bowdern's struggle to maintain his faith even as he attempts a modern exorcism.

Frailty. This dark and disturbing movie tells the story of a man (played by Bill Paxton) who believes he's been chosen by God to battle demons on Earth. As the movie unfolds, the audience is kept guessing as to whether Paxton's character is truly insane or if the demons he sees are real.

Stigmata. Gabriel Byrne plays a Jesuit priest who investigates cases of supernatural occurrences for the Catholic Church, and finds himself involved with a young American woman who shows signs of stigmata — representations of the wounds Christ received on the cross. Though the source of the possession isn't what one initially suspects it to be, this is an excellent source of inspiration for exorcists working within the Byzantine intrigues of the Church.



CHAPTER ONE: THESE ARE THE LAST DAYS

...When anyone is dying, the house is filled with devils. They come out and try to ruin the soul of him who is dying, by fearful temptations. Holy water, blessed by the Church, can send away the devils.

— St. Alphonsus

BEARERS OF THE WORD

Dear Rachel,

I sleep with the lights on every night. But it doesn't make me feel any safer.

I'm sorry. That's all I really want to tell you, to tell someone how sorry I am for all that happened and for all that I let happen. I would ask you to remember me in your prayers, but I expect that by the time you read this, it will be too late for that. After all I've done, I myself can no longer pray to G-d with any confidence. Perhaps after reading my story you'll understand why.

Some time has passed since I wrote those last sentences, Rachel. I thought I heard a scratching at the door to this filthy room. I've pushed the dresser and the table against the door and I'm now crouched on the floor on the far side of the bed as I write this. The amulet

I inscribed with the Ineffable Name is wrapped tightly around my arm and I feel the cords biting into me through my shirtsleeve.

I realize now that I never really appreciated my home. Even during my trips to Baltimore and Jerusalem, I never felt such homesickness. So often in the last few days I've closed my eyes and placed myself on Taylor Street. Young boys line up for the morning bus to the yeshiva, whispering Torah passages they memorized the night before. The women in Klein's market chat and laugh while shopping for the Sabbath. Old Mr. Nussbaum sits perched like a crow on the bench in front of the shiebl, the small synagogue across the street from his home. He's rocking back and forth in prayer as he waits for his brother, who was never early to the synagogue in his life. Even Father and Mother, lost to me so many years ago, stroll down the perfect Taylor Street of my memories.

But recollections are not enough to grant me sleep at night. If anything, they keep me awake. Jacob said

being alone was the secret soul of hell. I thought I knew what he meant, but I had no idea. Tomorrow I will meet a man who, they say, hunts evil spirits like a wolf hunts rabbits. I hope he can protect me from this thing I carry in my head. Most likely he is just another charlatan.

I used to wonder if I would ever get to meet Jacob. My age, the son of Mother's sister Lisa... when I was a boy I imagined he was a sort of alternative version of me, having adventures out in the world while I prayed and studied Talmud in Brooklyn. My mother was not born a Chassid, as you may know, but was a baalat teshuvah, a Jew who, through the grace of G-d, has returned to a pious way of life. She often spoke fondly of Aunt Lisa and her children. For a while she held out hope that they would become returned ones like her. But when they emigrated to Tel Aviv, she gave up that dream.

When I found Aunt Lisa's letter in the morning mail that day, I didn't even recognize the return address. I can almost convince myself that if I hadn't opened that letter, events would not have unfolded as they did and I would right now be sitting in Rabbi Brown's den, comparing translations of the Book of the Pious. But that is foolish thinking. In truth, we're all fish in G-d's net. We're free to swim this way or that, but the net is so large that it makes no difference.

My aunt's letter made me weep. I wanted to tear my collar. I suppose I knew that such things happen in this world. But the letter made it real. For someone Jacob's age — my age — to know such suffering, this was a shock to me. It happened in a refugee camp, where Jacob's unit was sent to enforce a curfew and arrest dissidents. Jacob was the only one of his fellows to survive the attack.

This condition which they call "post-traumatic stress syndrome" is a terrible thing, Rachel. Jacob's body seemed healed well enough when he was discharged from the hospital. But he was not the same boy who had enlisted in the army just nine months earlier. He took no pleasure in being alive, had no interest in the world around him. He stayed in his room all day, barely touched his food and would not join in conversation or prayers. After several weeks of this, Aunt Lisa and Uncle David decided it would be best to get Jacob away from Israel, away from the daily talk of bombings and bloodshed.

Jacob seemed to show some glimmer of interest in this idea, and his parents were relieved when he made contact with a friend who was attending graduate studies in America. And so the arrangements were made. Because Jacob would be staying in Brooklyn — his friend was attending Columbia — my aunt in her letter asked if I wouldn't look in on him from time to time. Could I refuse such a mitzvah? This meant leaving the neighborhood, of course. But that was nothing to me, I who had traveled across the country and overseas. I had even worked in Manhattan for three years before

moving in with Rabbi Brown. What was a walk of some dozen blocks compared to that?

It was no trouble finding his apartment building. I had always prided myself on my ability to get around on my own. And it shames me to admit that on that day, my mind was filled more with such pride than with seeing the beauty and holiness in everyday things. Jacob was more warm and cordial than I expected. I had barely explained who I was and why I was visiting him before he invited me in and offered me the most comfortable seat in the small apartment. I was somewhat taken aback, expecting him to be as depressed and morose as he had been described in the letter. We talked for two hours, not of what had happened to him, of course, but pleasant small talk, family news. It was a most comfortable afternoon.

When I asked him if he wanted to come back with me and see where I lived, he was enthusiastic about the idea. This also surprised me. So many non-Chassidic Jews are less than interested in — sometimes even hostile, too — the doings of the Chassidic courts. I told myself that he was probably curious the way a museum-goer is interested in looking at fossils. It was wrong of me to ascribe such ignoble motives to another, of course. Perhaps if I had not indulged in such sinful thoughts I might have been more alert to Jacob's motives... perhaps.

Before we left his apartment, I helped Jacob pack up some of his belongings for storage, some cooking utensils, clothing, odds and ends he didn't need now that he was moved in. I was glad to help. We placed several items into a cardboard box, which Jacob then laid atop a large wooden chest. "I wasn't completely honest with you," he said, jokingly. "It's mainly this chest that I need help with. It's full of my roommate's belongings — books and such. It's very heavy. He was kind enough to pack them away to make room for me, so I told him I'd take care of moving it. I hope you don't mind."

Together we wrestled the large trunk into the hall and to the elevator. I am not physically strong. I had the impression that it was Jacob who was bearing the bulk of the load, and my role was just to help steer the weight in the proper direction.

The cellar was as dank and unkempt as the upstairs had been clean and modern. I remember a cobweb attached itself to my face as we stepped from the elevator, but I couldn't push it away because my hands were full. It was maddening.

"So where is your roommate today?" I asked, hoping to distract myself from the itch of the cobweb. As soon as I said it, I worried that it sounded like a complaint, as if I was wishing the roommate was moving the chest instead of me.

"Oh," Jacob answered, "he's around. He keeps a low profile. Perhaps you'll meet him another time." He was holding the forward end of the chest, facing me and

walking backward. I could barely see where we were going — there was just a single, bare yellow bulb illuminating the cellar — but Jacob had no trouble navigating. “Let’s put this against the wall here,” he told me. I nodded, certain that I could not bear the chest any further. It was very hot in the basement, and I was anxious to get out of the dark and back up into daylight.

I cut off my payos today, have I mentioned that? It took me a week to work up the nerve. I tried everything to hide them but in the end I had to cut them off. I’ve had the sidelocks my whole life, and sometimes in idle moments I find my fingers reaching for them.... Tomorrow I will shave my beard. I must change my appearance as much as I can. If it is true that the outer reflects the inner, then perhaps superficial changes will do more than disguise me. Perhaps they will transform my soul, and the soul of my soul, so that those who hunt for it will not find me.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Rachel,

I’m sleeping out of doors for the first time in my life. It is terrifying. The dogs barking all the time. Are they getting closer? I’m so tired. More later.

I’ve had some sleep now.

There must be others like me, Rachel. Others who’ve seen things as I have seen. I am trying to find some, but it is exhausting. I’ve read tracts and scholarly articles written by learned, holy men. I’ve haunted libraries and listened to lectures and speeches. I’ve inquired subtly at mikvahs and synagogues. I’ve even visited rundown bookstores and tawdry shops that sell trinkets and poultices to the ignorant. I’ve considered placing a carefully worded advertisement in one of the religious newspapers. Only time will tell if these methods will yield results. But time is one thing of which I have little to spare, I fear.

But I was telling you of the day I first met Jacob. I took Jacob to Rabbi Brown’s townhouse. It only made sense to do so; it’s on the outskirts of the neighborhood and we came to it first. The rabbi was not home but I introduced Jacob to Mrs. Brown. She was somewhat reserved, though not impolite. She has not been outside of the neighborhood for decades and I believe she was uncomfortable meeting an outsider, even a Jewish one. Jacob did not seem disconcerted, even though she would not look him in the eye, and he knew enough not to offer her his hand to shake. He complimented her on the cleanliness of her house and modest way in which it was decorated.

The warm April sunlight made the sidewalks gleam like fresh bread. Jacob had many questions. I pointed out the neighborhood landmarks. I told him who lived where, showed him the market, and the park where Rabbi Brown and I and his other students often met for informal discussions. We passed several people that I

knew, but they seemed almost shocked to see me with a stranger. Most of them simply nodded at me and kept walking. At first Jacob seemed to be enjoying the visit, but after a time I noticed a change come over him. He seemed to become slightly pale. He asked fewer questions. He was walking more slowly. I thought of his time in the hospital and wondered if he was getting tired.

I was about to say something, but we rounded the corner at Fifth and Bleeker. The synagogue came into view and I wanted to point it out to Jacob. But as soon as we set foot onto Bleeker, Jacob’s body jerked like he’d been electrocuted. He doubled over, almost falling to his knees. I grabbed him by the shoulders to keep him from toppling.

“I’m — not well...” Jacob moaned to me. He muttered something else in words I couldn’t hear.

“Do you want to rest?” I asked him.

“No,” he told me. “No... go back.”

I helped him walk and we limped back toward the Rabbi’s house. We had gone barely a half a block when Jacob seemed to recover. He was pale and sweating, obviously uncomfortable and clutching his stomach. But he was able to walk on his own. “I’m sorry,” he said to me. “I should not have exerted myself. I’m not fully recovered from my injuries.”

“It’s my fault,” I said. “I should not have taken you for such a long walk. I should have known....”

“It’s all right,” he waved away my concerns. “I’ll be fine. Perhaps we could stop at your place and I could catch my breath.”

So we returned to my room in Rabbi Brown’s house.

Jacob stayed for several hours and we talked. He seemed very interested in the community and in my studies. I told him how Rabbi Brown had taken an interest in me after my parents had died, and how one day, G-d willing, I would become a rabbi. I told him how the Rebbe himself had once praised my diligence as a student, though this was a prideful thing to say. He asked about our court and when it had been established, and I told him how the sixth Rebbe and his family came over from Warsaw in 1940, bringing only the clothes on their backs and their most precious possessions: scriptures and writings that were still preserved today.

After that, I did not see my cousin for several weeks. I was preparing for an examination on The Toledoth, and I had to spend many late hours studying. Also, there arose at that time growing concern within the community as to the health of the Rebbe. He had not been seen in public for over a month. Rabbi Brown explained that the Rebbe had taken ill with a chest cold, which was not serious but that required him to spend much time resting. It was better, Rabbi Brown said, that the Rebbe make a full recovery before exerting himself. After some initial concern and worry, we had all come to accept this



situation. But now that his illness had drawn on for several weeks, anxiety levels began to rise. Not that Rabbi Brown wasn't a respected and well-liked elder in the community. But not to see the Rebbe, to hear his voice and touch his coat, this was a hardship on us all.

Then, one afternoon I went out to pick up some groceries for Mrs. Brown. As I walked to Klein's, I felt a sudden urge to visit Jacob. I found myself wondering how he was and feeling guilty that I hadn't looked in on him. I decided to keep walking to his apartment and pay a quick visit, then pick up the groceries on the way back. It seemed the right thing to do — in fact, I felt that I had no choice but to go there right away. And so I found myself at his flat. When the elevator brought me to his floor, I was surprised to see two police officers waiting on the other side of the elevator door. One was a woman; I looked to the floor and made room for them to pass.

Jacob did not seem surprised to see me. It may surprise you, Rachel, but I can remember every word of our conversations. I've been exercising my memory since a very young age, you see. At age 11, I could recite all 613 mitzvot in Hebrew and English.

"Jacob," I asked him, "how have you been? Are you feeling all right?"

"You don't read the papers, do you, Reuben?" He was sitting across from me, in the center of the couch, arms outspread along the top of the sofa.

"Only the *Algemeiner Journal*," I said.

"Well, it seems that Charles has disappeared."

I wasn't sure what he meant, and he could tell by my face. He explained. "My roommate. Nobody's seen him for three weeks. His parents are sick with worry. He simply went out one night and never came back."

"Is he... I mean..." I couldn't think of what to say. "Do you think he's all right?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's not," Jacob said flatly. Then, with more concern in his voice, he added, "I mean, people don't just vanish for that long and then turn up okay."

I thought about the police at the elevator. "Is that why the police were here?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Did they say anything to you?"

"No. Not a word." In my mind I was praying.

"That's good," Jacob said. "Perhaps they didn't realize you were coming to see me."

"I don't understand."

"Did I tell you that Charles — that's my roommate — Charles was an Arab? I'm sorry, I mean is an Arab."

"No, you didn't. Jacob, you don't seem yourself. Are you..." I wanted to ask if he was having some kind of recurrence of the mental problems that had followed his injury, but I couldn't think of how to phrase it.

"An Arab," he went on. "Arab-American, of course. His family's been in the U.S. for five generations. They're not even Muslim — secular agnostics, he used to call it. We laughed about it back in school. It never mattered to us. We are educated people. Of course, that's not what the police are thinking."

"The police?" I felt as if my brain was thickening like gravy. His words seemed to be slowing down my thoughts.

"Yes. They see an Arab and a Jew living together, and one of them disappears, who do you think they suspect? For the murder?"

"Murder?" I wanted to jump out of my chair, but I couldn't move. "Murder? They think — they think he's been murdered? And they think you did it?"

"Not in so many words. They don't come out and say it. But they think it. I know they do."

"Jacob, we should pray together. Come with me and have dinner at Rabbi Brown's tonight. He'll know what to—"

"I don't pray!" he shouted, his face suddenly twisted like an animal's. The next moment, he was calm again, almost tranquil, his eyes half closed and his body limp against the couch. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. Here you are, living the life of the pious, and your own relative blasphemes in front of you. What you must think of me...."

"It's... all right," I said to him. "I know you've been through a lot. You're not completely healed. But we must remember that the sparks of G-d's light are everywhere, even in the darkest of times."

"Reuben," he said to me. "I need to show you something." And we went into the basement.

REVELATIONS

Dear Rachel,

It will be hard for you to understand the events I am now preparing to recount. That is as it should be. I, who experienced it would give anything to have the memory replaced by the sweet numbness of ignorance. What I saw on that day was never meant to be seen by human eyes. After witnessing it for myself, I realize that if even one such thing is able to walk our Earth for a brief time, we are far, far from the day of Redemption. Perhaps there are not prayers enough to make this world sufficiently clean to bear the footsteps of the Messiah.

Jacob led me down to the basement without explaining why. The room was even more hellish than I remembered. The only light was from that dingy orange-yellow bulb that hung from the ceiling like a corpse on a noose. From the corners of my eyes the walls seemed to be covered with rust and blood. Jacob led me through the maze of lockers and stacked boxes until we reached his trunk, the one we'd carried weeks before.

"Open it," he said.

I didn't understand. This made no sense to me. Why were we here? It was so hot, and I in my black suit.

"Go ahead," he told me, sounding like a parent exercising limited patience with a backward child. I opened my mouth to ask a question, but decided instead to comply. I recalled that the chest had been closed with a padlock, but the lock was absent now. I released the latch and lifted the lid.

I couldn't make out the dark shape that filled the chest. Suddenly a circle of light spread across it; Jacob had produced a small flashlight. A thick, gray blanket was draped across the contents of the chest, there were some lumps or shapes visible but I could not tell exactly what was beneath.

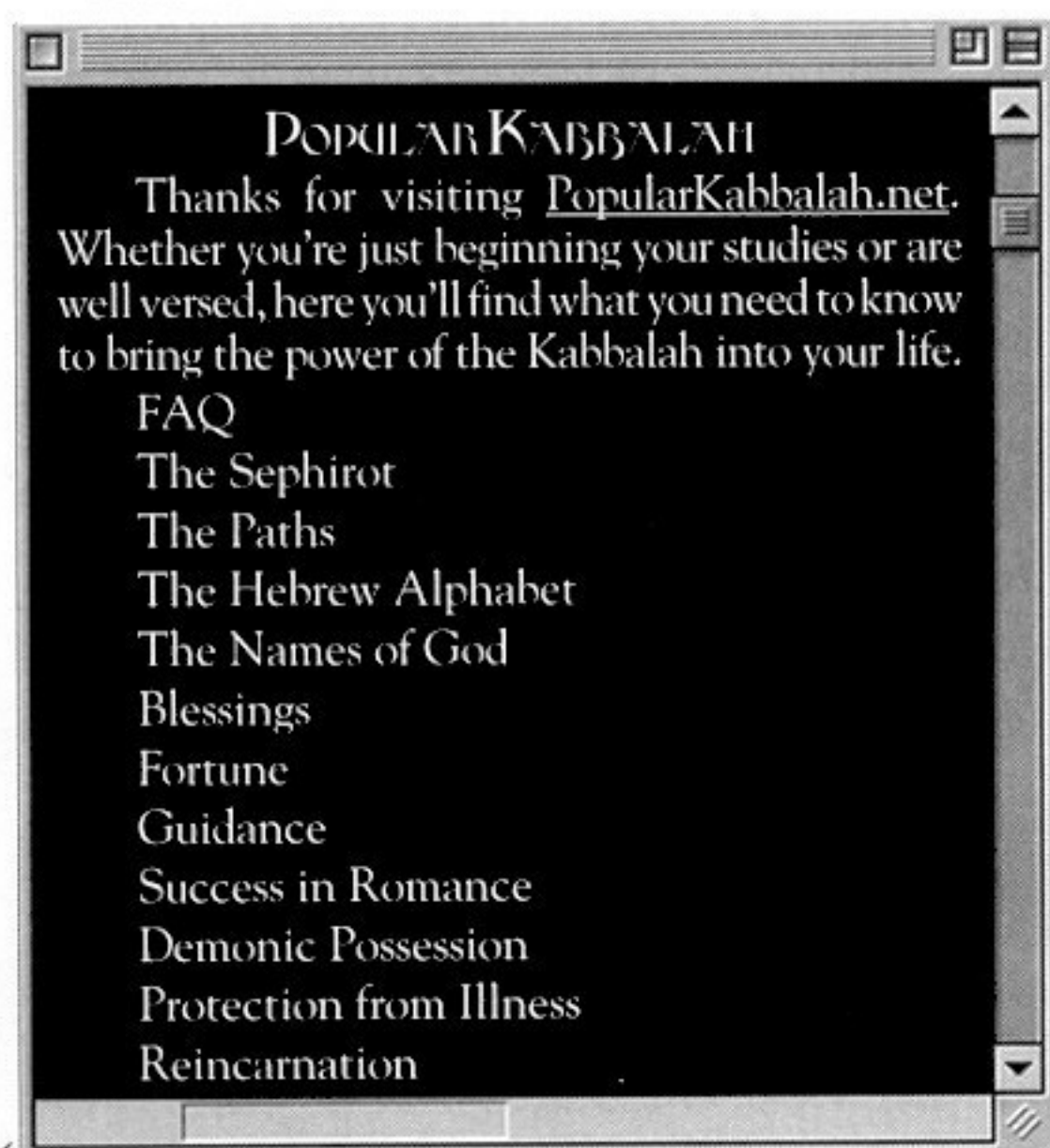
"I don't know what I'm looking at, Jacob. What is this about?"

"Under the blanket."

I reached for the blanket; for some reason I didn't want to touch it more than necessary, so I found an edge and carefully peeled the blanket back. There was more blanket beneath, perhaps part of the same cloth. I found another edge and pulled it back as well. More blanket. I searched for a corner, and my fingers brushed against something that made me pull back as if I had been bitten. It took several seconds for me to realize what I had felt. Cobwebs? Fur?

No. It was hair.

Jacob came close, shining more light around me. I could see, now, where the edges of two blankets came together. From between that crack, a thick lock of hair extended, brown as a mouse, several inches long. It was lying across the blanket and curved like the meander of



a river. I had touched human hair. And as I stared, the bulges and lumps beneath the blanket resolved themselves into a single shape, one that my mind simultaneously identified and refused to acknowledge.

"Ayn o milvado..." I started to murmur.

"None of that," Jacob said, slapping me lightly across the back of my head. I pushed myself back from the chest. I tried to stand but my legs would not obey me.

"Why...?" I moaned. "Oh, Jacob, why..."

"Because I need your help," he said to me.

"Jacob, you're ill. You need to... you need help. We'll contact the authorities, they'll help you—"

"You'll contact no one. You're in this with me now."

"With you? What are you talking about?"

"You're an accessory. Your fingerprints, Reuben. They're all over that trunk now. And remember the cutlery you helped me move? Your prints are all over those as well. You helped me kill him, Reuben. That's what I'll tell them, if you don't do as I say."

"But... you... it isn't true!"

"What an absurd thing to say. It will be true, because I'll make it true. You think the police would listen to you? Look how you dress, how you live. They practically consider you to be the member of a dangerous cult. They'll never believe you didn't help me kill this Arab. Now stop your sniveling, and I'll tell you what you're going to do for me."

DECISIONS

When I left Jacob's basement I could scarcely breathe, and my heart was thumping like a hammer. I had been in the house with a corpse. I had touched a corpse, defiled myself. My cousin was clearly insane. And a murderer. I could not think. I, who could quote whole pages from *In Praise of the Besht* at age eight, could not make my brain work. And it was as if I had forgotten there was a G-d in Heaven. I wandered the streets, not knowing where I was, until suddenly I found myself in front of the mikvah. This calmed me somewhat. Clearly, I thought, G-d had led my footsteps here. I entered the bathhouse, forcing everything out of my head but the details of the ritual. I let the prayers, the cleaning, the immersions crowd out all thoughts in my head. And by the time I was finished, I knew what I had to do.

Of course, those who knew me would never believe I was a murderer. But if I were arrested, put on trial... it would be a terrible blow for us. We were a small community, among the smallest of the Chassidic courts. I had worked in Manhattan in the garment and diamond districts. I had traveled out of state, even once to the Holy Land. I knew very well what the outside world, the gentiles, even other Jews, thought of the Chassidim. If Jacob carried out his threat it would bring unwanted shame and attention to our community. As harmful as poison in a well.

The Rebbe, of course, could have advised me. Unquestionably, he would have the answers. But he had been too ill lately to see anyone. Some even whispered he would soon be called away. And even had he been healthy, it was unlikely he'd have been able to interrupt his studies and his duties on short notice. So I had no choice. I had to go along with Jacob for now. I would get the book he wanted and it would appease him, keep him from doing any more harm. And then I would have the time to talk to Rabbi Brown, perhaps even to the Rebbe. They would know what to do. And in a day or two the authorities would come for Jacob and all would be sorted out.

You see how my pride led to my downfall? Instead of putting my trust in G-d, I grasped onto the supposed logic of my own scheme and used it to pull myself from the terror I had felt in the basement.

I made an excuse to Rabbi Brown, telling him I was working on my commentary on the fourth commandment and needed some references kept in the book repository at the Temple. I lied to him, to his face, under his own roof. Rabbi Brown accepted my story at face value and excused me from supper early. Walking to the Temple, I felt like I carried a millstone around my neck. My mouth was dry and my hands were sweating.

I don't think Rabbi Brown realized that I knew where the key to the back room was kept. But I had seen him retrieve it from its hook behind the filing cabinet many times. And no one would question my presence in the library. No one would even know I had entered the back room where the writings of our greatest teachers were kept. It would be an easy theft.

Just as Jacob had told me.

So there I was, outside the Temple. Waiting. Trying to make myself go in and commit the sinful act. Would I kiss the book before I took it, or after? G-d was watching me. And...

The Rebbe. I chanced to glance up at his window, on the top floor of the tall brownstone across from the Temple. When he had first taken ill, people had gathered beneath his window every night hoping to get a glance at him. But he had not appeared, and Rabbi Brown had said that it would be better to spend the time in prayer than in a vigil. So, save for myself, the corner was deserted.

And tonight the Rebbe was there. I saw his silhouette in the window. Was he watching me?

Was he watching me betray him?

Jacob's door was open when I returned. "I'm back here," his voiced called, barely louder than a whisper. "Come in." I walked through the short entryway into his living room. There was a single lamp lit.

"Pardon the mess," Jacob said. The room was a shambles. The couch was turned over, the coffee table in pieces. Books and papers were everywhere. A bottle

lay broken at the foot of the bookcase. Cold air blew in through the broken window and the shade lay on the floor in shreds. Jacob was sitting in the only upright chair, his fingers tented together as he watched me. The right sleeve had been torn off his shirt and his arm was bruised and bleeding. The rest of his clothes were disheveled but intact.

He was smiling.

"I had some visitors," he told me. "Now, give me the book and we can both get on with our miserable lives."

"I—"

"What?" His tone told me he'd guessed what I was going to say.

"I didn't bring it, Jacob. I couldn't. I couldn't do it."

"I see." His eyes drifted toward the ceiling. "You couldn't. Because...?"

"Jacob," I nearly shouted. "Jacob, you need help! You're not right. Let me help you. Jacob, say the tefillat zaka with me—"

"Not one word!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. Then his voice was calm again. "Reuben, cousin, where I come from there's not much tolerance of failure. One mistake and you're an outcast. But tonight's your lucky night. I have another use for you."

He was walking toward me and I was afraid. I suddenly realized that I was a fly who had walked willingly into a spider's web. I backed away and found myself against the wall. Where had the door gone? I was afraid to turn and look, afraid of what he would do if I didn't watch him. "Barukh atah..." I began.

"What did I tell you about that?" His voice was not his voice anymore. And he was not Jacob. Where Jacob had stood there was something else. A kind of darkness shaped like a man. Hands like a skeleton. Eyes like dark tunnels. And the smell... the stink of rotting flesh. Corruption and disease.

"See, Reuben, son of Mendel and Anne," he said. "See what I found among the corpses, where the children of Isaac and Ishmael slaughter each other daily. See what found me. Do you understand, now, Reuben? Do your studies include warnings about my kind?" His voice was like dirt falling into a grave.

"Dybbuk," I whispered. I wanted to look away. I wanted to call on G-d, but my lips would not form the words. I cringed until I was on the floor, tears running into my beard. I felt as I had the day my mother died, her taxi crushed by a truck. As I had standing at the side of my father's grave, sure in my head of G-d's divine providence but desperately cursing Him in my heart. For a fraction of a moment, I had a vision of this Earth



as a giant graveyard, a thin, shell of pathetic life covering unimaginable depths of bones, corpses and decomposing flesh.

When I opened my eyes, the room had been cleaned and straightened, the broken glass swept up, the furniture upright. Who had done it? Had I? Jacob was sitting on the couch, calmly drinking from a coffee cup. His arm was no longer injured. I was standing with my hand on the doorknob.

"Well," Jacob said. "I think we understand each other now. Go home, Reuben, say your prayers and go to bed. Tomorrow you'll take care of that business we talked about. No need to bring the item here. I'll come to your place and get it. See you in 24 hours."

WISE MAN HAS COME TO TOWN!!

With great joy, we announce the arrival of his honor, master, scholar, teacher and tzadik, Josef Eliezer Hertz. Advice on all spiritual matters. Assistance in all spiritual struggles. 15 Canal Street.

BROKEN BONDS

Why didn't I kill myself when I had the chance? That's the question I keep asking myself. I could have put an end to my suffering. All I had to do was pull the trigger, and I would have been free.

Instead, I procrastinated. Waiting for the right moment to end it all. It was a Saturday when I thought the moment had finally arrived. I was in my one-room apartment, holding a pistol I'd bought from the pawn shop down the street. Earlier that day, my boss at the coffee shop had given me another warning. Shape up or ship out.

I thumbed the pistol's hammer back, the click echoing in the musty silence. Just one shot, I told myself, and it would all be over with. Then I'd see God, and receive my final judgment. I'd never believed Jill when she'd lectured me on God's disappearance. I knew He was watching, and I'd failed Him.

Still I hesitated. I paced the cramped apartment, looking for the right place to kill myself. Should it be by the wall facing the street, so I wouldn't endanger my neighbors? Should it be in the bathtub, hoping the porcelain would stop the bullet? Should I write a note? Would anyone believe what I would write?

Why couldn't I bring myself to do it? How could I still want to live after all that I was responsible for? I helped a demon roam the Earth. I let her evil corrupt innocent lives.

Finally, I stretched out on the narrow bed, making sure my head was pointed toward the wall facing the street. I started to whisper a prayer, the pistol resting on my lower lip. Soon, I would rid the world of a corrupt being: myself.

The phone rang.

I should have ignored it. It kept ringing. Three times. Five times. Eight times. It wouldn't stop. I could have pulled the trigger, but I didn't. Maybe I wanted to believe that God was on that phone. Or perhaps I was just a coward, too frightened to take that final step into oblivion.

So I answered the phone, hoping it was someone who could help me.

"Hello," I said meekly.

"Is this Paul O'Connor?" It sounded like a young man in his early 20s, maybe younger.

"Yes. I'm kind of busy right now."

"I know. You'll be lucky if that cheap gun even works," the young man said.

I jumped out of the bed.

"You should have closed your blinds," the man continued.

"Who is this?" I demanded. "Oh dear God," I thought, "Was it another demon?"

"You don't recognize my voice?"

I thought for a second. "No. Why should I?"

"Because I remember you quite clearly. Our common..." the voice paused, "friend used to talk about you a lot. Remember that night at the ballet?"

The memory began to come back to me.

The voice continued. "You were sitting next to Jill. Remember just before the ballet started when she looked over the balcony and nodded to someone in the cheap seats? I was the guy she nodded to."

"I still don't—"

"I suppose not. But I remember you. I saw that look in your eyes. You wanted to be all over her, but you couldn't because you were in polite company. You wanted to feel—"

"Who are you?" I shouted.

"Paul, we're family. In a matter of speaking."

The voice continued. "That night, I was so jealous of you. You were so close to her. I know you were her favorite. I was just the one who did her dirty work."

"If you don't tell me who—"

"I know your pain, Paul."

I shivered. How could he know?

"Believe me, whatever she made you do, I did 10 times worse. I was under her spell. I would have killed my own family just for the chance—"

"I don't care what she did to you! Leave me alone!" I yelled. I tried to put down the phone, but somehow I couldn't move. Part of me wanted to listen to him, to hear the voice of someone else who had been through the same things I had.

"Paul, wait!" pleaded the voice. He sounded desperate. "I was like you. Much worse than you. But I found a way. Listen to me. I'm giving you a chance to make up for what you did."

I felt my heart clench. My mouth worked, but no sound came out. Was this the salvation I'd been looking for?

"Are you listening to me?"

I was too stunned to reply.

"Paul?"

"Yes," I whispered.

He gave me the address of a convenience store. "You need to be there between 10:30 and 11:00 tonight. You got that?"

"Yes," I weakly replied.

"Don't bring your gun, and come alone. We'll know if you're being followed."

"We?" I asked.

"You'll understand soon enough."

"But—"

The man hung up.

I sat on the floor in a daze. Moments ago, I was close to killing myself. I must have been holding out for a miracle. Now it had presented itself. The phone's insistent buzzing had woken me from the daze.

Was this a trick? I wondered that as I hung up the phone. Was some demon trying to claim me for his own? Jill had mentioned other demons before she'd been destroyed. Could another one have tracked me down? Could the nightmare be starting again?

I must have thought about it for an hour, considering all the possibilities. Then as the time approached, I made my decision. If I didn't go, I'd feel the guilt again, and sooner or later I'd try to kill myself. The man on the phone offered me a chance at salvation. I owed it to myself to investigate it.

I had to see if this truly was an opportunity for salvation. So I decided to go. It was a decision I shouldn't have made.

POINT OF NO RETURN

Several minutes later, I found myself outside of a convenience store. The walls were a dirty white color, and the pavement was cracked like a dry lakebed. Ironically, a few blocks ahead of me, there seemed to be some really nice houses. Behind me, there appeared to be some run-down homes and apartments. It was like this store was the boundary between the rich and the destitute.

I made my way to the glass door. A sign on the front read, "Guns Welcome." Part of me wondered how that made the owner feel any safer.

The clerk glared at me as I entered the store and said a terse hello. I couldn't see anyone else, and I could guess why. The selection wasn't much, unless you liked cheap beer and chips.

After checking my watch, I walked across the sticky floor toward the back. If the stranger didn't show up, I could at least get a six-pack of something and head back home.

As I started toward the back, I heard a bell ring. I turned and saw a very large, muscular African-American walk into the store wearing an oversized Dallas Stars shirt. He looked at the clerk and smiled. I was surprised to see the clerk relax as the man entered, and warmly greet the stranger.

I turned back to the beer aisle when one of the tabloids in the newsstand caught my eye. On it was picture of a wildfire out west. The smoke formed into a horned head, and the caption read, "Stunning Proof: Satan creating Hell on Earth!"

I stepped closer to the tabloid. Hell on Earth? Months ago I would have laughed at that stupid headline. Now... I don't know any more. Maybe they were on to something. My mind kept flashing back to the people Jill made me harm. She must have been working toward something. Maybe she was trying to create her own personal Hell?

Still, I couldn't help but remember what she used to tell me. She made me do terrible things, she said, because it was *necessary*. People had to be shown the truth, or the *real* monsters would triumph. As I looked at the paper, I couldn't think of anyone more vile than she, except maybe Satan himself.

Suddenly, I felt as if someone was standing behind me. "Keep your eyes on the paper," came the voice of the African-American. "Don't look back."

I locked my eyes on the image of Satan.

The man sighed. "How ironic." I didn't reply, fearing what he would do to me.

"I think you have the wrong person." I whispered. "You're Paul, right?" he asked softly.

I hesitated.

"Are you?" he repeated firmly.

I finally nodded.

"OK, now listen," he said. "You can still walk away from this and pretend you never heard from us. Maybe you can put your life back together."

I could never forget what she did to me. But part of me wanted to walk away. I was afraid. Afraid of this stranger standing behind me. Afraid that he might lead me into a trap.

"Because if you follow me, there's no turning back. You understand?"

I gave a quick nod.

"No one will be safe around you. I mean no one. Your family and friends will become targets. You'll face dangerous monsters. Even if you're careful, they could kill you in a second. They'll look human. You might have to kill their shell in order to banish them. It'll look like you're killing someone. You have to know better." He looked around. "Heck, if you're smarter than I am, you'll leave your loved ones behind. You understand?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Think about it." He took a step back. "We think you can help us. But it's your choice, and you have to really want this."

I didn't say anything. How could I? I didn't want to believe that he was talking about going after demons. How could we win? I had seen with my own eyes what they were capable of.

"I'm going to leave," the man said. "Down the block there's an old theater. If you want to join us, wait five minutes, then walk over there. If you don't, you'll never hear from us again."

I heard the man's heavy footsteps walk away. He gave a cheery goodbye to the clerk, then left the store.

I looked down at the photo of the smoke demon. How could anyone think of going after such a creature? Jill had tapped into the power of the universe. I knew she had the power to look into someone's soul. She'd been able to see weakness. God knows she'd seen mine.

Now these strangers wanted me to fight demons? That was suicide.

I almost laughed aloud. Hours ago, I was ready to kill myself, now I hesitated to face a demon because it would be suicidal.

As I looked into the smoke demon's eyes, I felt that I was having a revelation. Perhaps God was finally reaching out to me, showing me the way. Maybe sacrificing myself to the demons of Hell was the only way to prove myself worthy of God's forgiveness.

I looked up from the tabloid. Maybe they did have a plan to fight the demons. If it somehow worked, I could stop the pain the devil's servants were inflicting upon humanity. Maybe I could save one person from the guilt I was suffering from.

For the first time in months, I felt hopeful. Yes, I'd once made a bad decision. This time, however, things would be different. They *had* to be. I believed then that the path to the theater was the path to salvation.

If I'd only known what I was getting into, I'd have walked back to the apartment and ended things then and there. If only I'd known how futile my efforts would be.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

I bought the tabloid as a memento of my revelation. The clerk asked if I was a friend of Lou's. I lied and said yes. He warmed to me a bit and said I could keep my car in the lot as long as I needed to.

"He keeps my shift safe," the clerk told me.

I left the store, and after dropping the paper in my car, I headed out toward the sidewalk. Across the street and about a block away from me, I saw the old theater. The vertical sign read "The Starlight," and I could see the broken glass, even at a distance. Below it, the marquee read, "Back in the Right Hands."

I crossed the street and made my way toward the theater. As I approached, I noticed that all the windows were boarded up and tagged with many years' worth of gang tags, much like many of the other buildings on the strip.

When I reached the box office, the front door cracked open. "Hurry!" came Lou's voice. "Get in here before anyone notices."

I walked quickly toward the door. I couldn't see into the darkness, but I had to keep going. Salvation or death, either fate was acceptable to me.

Lou switched on a flashlight as he closed the door. Except for the flashlight, the lobby was pitch black. I felt like I was on the edge of an abyss.

Lou handed me a cloth sack. "Put it on," he commanded.

My eyes widened. "What for?" I asked.

"It's for your final test," Lou replied. "We can't be too careful in our line of work." He motioned for me to put it on.

I hesitated.

"If you're the kind of person we think you are, you'll pass. All you have to do is answer some questions."

"And if I don't pass?" I asked.

"Look at it this way: You'll have a better shot of making it to Heaven if we kill you than if you commit suicide." Lou motioned for me to put the sack over my head.

Reluctantly, I put the large sack over my head. I felt I had nothing to lose.

"Now put your hands behind your back," Lou said.

I did, and he tied them tightly with rope. Lou guided me deeper into the theater. After several endless minutes, he led me up a short set of stairs, and then we walked a few feet across a creaky wooden floor. He let me go, and seconds later I could see a light shining through my hood. It must have been fairly bright, considering the thickness of the cloth.

"This man wishes to become a brother," Lou cried out.

More lights pointed at my hood. I heard footsteps. Someone paced around me a couple times before stopping.

"You're Paul O'Connor?" It was the voice I'd heard on the phone. "Freshman at Oklahoma City University?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

He snorted. "Call me Mr. Black for now." He paced a bit. "We both knew Jill, as I'm sure you remember. Now tell me, do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you consider yourself a good Christian?"

I hesitated before replying. "Not anymore."

"Of course not," Mr. Black chuckled. "Once you accepted Jill's gift, you turned your back on God and his works. Was there ever a time you felt yourself to be a good Christian?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me how you came to be seduced by a demon."

Her face filled my thoughts.

"She came to a cafe where I worked. Jill always seemed to be there whenever I worked. She always made sure I was her server."

"Funny how she always managed to do that," replied Mr. Black with a hint of disgust.

I continued, "She was so beautiful. And she seemed to really like me. She... she had this way of looking at you, you know? Like you were the only person in the room. That no one else mattered but you. Later, she told me she was married. I still don't know why. Maybe it was just part of the game to her. I tried to avoid her after that, but I never seemed to be able to resist her."

"What happened?"

"One day she told me that she could give me anything I wanted. She even said she could prove it. I asked her how. Jill replied that she could give me a free sample."

"The first one is always free."

"Quiet!" commanded a woman's voice. "Let him finish."

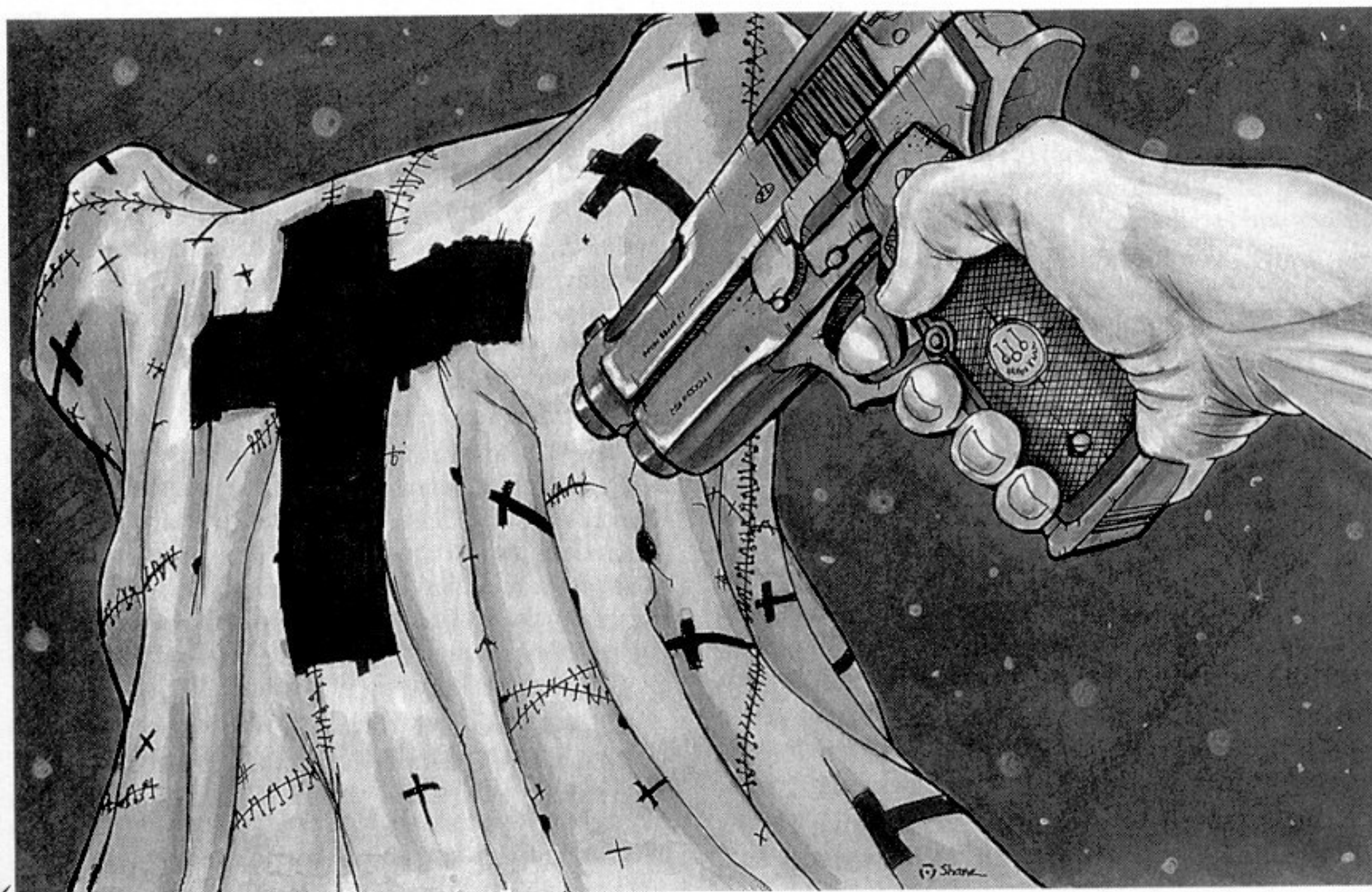
"She made me a genius. For a week, my assignments were like grade school homework. My other classmates seemed like idiots when they asked questions. Lectures were boring because I grasped concepts that my professors could never understand."

"Then?"

"A week passed, and I went back to normal. It was so devastating. I'd known so much, and now it was gone. I wanted it back. I saw Jill the next day. She told me that she could give me anything I wanted. The sample was only the first step. I asked her how she could help me. I wanted to believe she was an angel, here to help people like me."

Mr. Black laughed bitterly. "You've been watching too much TV, Paul."

I continued, "She was coy at first. Said I wouldn't understand. But as we kept talking, she dropped hints. Eventually I suspected that she was something else. I didn't want to believe it, but I couldn't figure out any other way she could do what she'd done to me. At first



I was frightened, but she said she could give me *anything* I wanted. I knew she could make my dreams come true."

"And what were your wildest dreams, Paul?"

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. "I wanted her. That was all."

Mr. Black snorted. "How could you have been so stupid? You just said you suspected what she was. What, you figured you'd run off to Vegas and get married? To a *demon*?"

"I just knew I wanted her! I knew it was wrong, but I gave in. I was weak. I was lonely." The tears grew. "I said yes."

"Then what?"

"What do you think? She cursed me. She gave me the power to draw out people's worst feelings. In exchange for her love, she would send me to meet people and force them to reveal their secrets. Sometimes she'd have me discover the weakness of the people she wanted manipulate. Other times I just made them lash out at the people around them. Like at banquets, or during speeches."

"You tried to fight her will, I'm sure," Mr. Black said coldly. "Jill had to force you to do these things, right, Paul?"

I shook my head.

"Speak up, Paul! Did you fight her hold over you?"

"No. I did it," I cried, "but when she died—"

"You did it because you were weak!" Mr. Black said. "You were weak and you failed!"

I couldn't reply. What could I say? He was right.

"You and billions of other weak people. Turning away from the one true God! It's people like you who are bringing these demons out of Hell and fueling their powers with your soul!"

"I guess you know all about it that sort of thing, don't you, Mr. Black?" The woman's cold voice cut through Black's ranting like a knife.

"But I saw the error of my ways. I found a way to fight back," replied Mr. Black. I felt his hands squeezing my head. "Have you learned to be strong? Are you here to die, or to atone for your sin?"

"I—"

"Because we cannot offer you salvation. If we kill you, I'll tell you what will happen. You will fall into Hell where you'll burn along with the rest of the damned. The gifts of demons are never free. You understand, Paul? You will suffer for the brief moments of pleasure she gave you."

"I know," I sobbed. "I know what I did was wrong."

"Then what do you want?" Mr. Black yelled.

"I want to—"

"I can't hear you!"

"Let him answer!" Lou yelled.

Mr. Black released me.

"I want to make up for what I did!" I sobbed. "I want to atone for all the people I harmed."

"Are you strong enough?"

"I don't know, but I have to try."

"There is no trying. You either are or you aren't. We can kill you right now if you like. I'm not going to risk my life because you're *trying* to be strong."

"That's enough!" Lou yelled. "You're not going to get what you want that way."

"Why—" Mr. Black suddenly went silent. I heard him walk away and someone else approach.

"You have to excuse my friend," Lou said. "He just wants to know if you're sincere about trying to make good on what you've done."

"We were all weak at one time," Lou continued calmly. "Even Jay over there."

I heard some shuffling further away.

"Take me, for example. I once wanted to be the baddest gangbanger in the city. Back then I was so blind, so when Nate, my former... master, offered me power, I took it. Believe me, back then I didn't care about the consequences. I just wanted to be the baddest motherfucker in Oklahoma City." He paused for a few seconds. "You know what? I was lucky. Nate actually tried to do some good around here. He convinced me that there was more to life than gangs and hustling. Nate opened my eyes to a world beyond the streets. You could call it a new Eden. We were going to build that new Eden, starting with my neighborhood."

"But there are others, Paul. Demons who want to turn us all into slaves. I helped Nate fight them, but in the end, he was killed. Sure, I was free, but I knew." He leaned closer to me. "I knew that these demons wanted to enslave everyone I loved. I couldn't ignore that, Paul. For the sake of my loved ones. For the sake of that Eden Nate showed to me. I had to try. Even if I failed, it would be worth it, you know?"

I nodded.

"Now I want you to think long and hard about this. We're going to be hunting and killing demons who wear human skins. We'll even kill their slaves if we have to. Other demons will try to destroy us and our families. It's not a pretty life. Like I told you, at this point, there's no turning back. Now really think about this. Do you think you're strong enough to fight back? To redeem yourself, even if it means hardship and death?"

"If not," Lou continued, "I can help you take the easy out. I don't quite share Jay's view of Heaven. Maybe you'll be in Limbo for a while until the war is over. Maybe you'll go to Hell. Maybe God really has forgiven everyone, and you'll go to Heaven. Like I told you, I

think you'll have a better shot at reaching Heaven if I killed you than if you killed yourself."

There was my ticket to a quick death. A chance to end the pain. All I had to do was say no. As I thought about Jill, and my own sins, my hunger for death began to fade. Maybe I was regaining my moral strength, or maybe I was just too afraid to die. No, I think I just wanted a chance to set things right. I could show God that, given another chance, I could set things right and take responsibility for the evil I'd helped inflict. Did I have the strength?

"Yes," I said.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want to help you. I want to fight the... demons who are out there. I want to redeem my soul."

Lou let out a sigh and was silent for a few seconds. "Thank God. I didn't want your blood on my hands. Now I've got another question. Jay may disagree with me, and that's fine, but I think there's a great war going on. A war that has spilled over onto the Earth. Now some of the demons may really want to help us. Nate cared about humanity very deeply. He may have been the only one, but I doubt it. So Paul, you got to promise me one thing. Can you promise to always use your head? Can you promise to think before you reach for your gun? I want to be sure we're fighting the right people, you know?"

"But aren't they all servants of the Devil?" I asked.

"I don't think a servant of the Devil would try to create a new Eden for us. So you've got to promise me to keep an open mind, OK?"

It was hard for me to picture a demon being "good" or at least caring for humanity. Maybe it was possible. Then again, maybe Nate had just been using Lou.

"I promise," I replied, and prayed that I wouldn't live to regret it.

Lou squeezed my shoulder. "Good," he said, and walked away. A lighter set of footsteps moved closer to me.

"You should listen to him," the woman said. "The fallen angel who blessed me cared very deeply about humanity. He wanted to create a new Eden, too, not a Hell. He always treated me with respect, and I will always cherish the moments I spent with him."

The thought made my blood run cold. I'd loved a demon, too, and had paid the price. Was she still under the monster's spell? If so, what did that say about me?

"Then there are demons who hate us, who blame us for the suffering they've endured. I've seen them, Paul. They killed my fallen angel. My friends may not agree on which angels are good and which are monsters, but there is a difference. There is great good within them, as well as great evil."

I found myself nodding. Whoever she was, she was very persuasive. A sudden thought gave me a chill. What if she or the others were *all* still enslaved? How would I know before it was too late?

"This is my question to you, Paul. I gave up a family for this cause." She paused. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of my daughter and my husband. Do you think that I want to miss watching her growing up? Do you think I wanted to leave my husband?"

I shook my head.

"I did it for their safety. So I need to know that you won't betray us, Paul. Not only the people here, but our families. I need to know that you won't try to kill my family."

I felt the barrel of a gun at my head.

"Because if you do anything, even accidentally, that could threaten my family, I'll kill you!"

She pushed the barrel hard against my skull.

"Convince me that you won't betray us."

I hesitated before finally saying, "How can I convince you? You'll think—"

"Just answer the question. We'll know the truth."

I closed my eyes. "I promise I won't betray any of you, or your families." I braced for the gunshot, since I wasn't sure if that would convince her.

She pulled the gun away, instead.

"Don't change your mind," she said curtly, and walked away.

Another set of footsteps approached. Someone untied the rope around my hands. As my hands were freed, the person pulled off my hood. In front of me stood a man who appeared to be in his early 30s. He wore a black OSU T-shirt and ripped, faded jeans. Around his neck, he wore a large gold crucifix. Dark eyes glared coldly from a lean, clean-shaven face.

"Get on your knees," he finally said. "Please."

I did, still unsure if I'd passed the test or not.

The man touched his crucifix. "I've heard the ring of truth in your words. I knew you would be worthy."

I held up my hand. "Wait. How did you find me?"

"We find the thralls of the those who have been sent back to Hell. We found Jay listed in the notes of a deceased demon. Jay then led us to you."

"But how—"

"Let me finish. As Lou said, we have all been touched by the fallen angels. Under their influence, we may have done terrible things or offered our faith to those who were unworthy of it. We hear the guilt in your voice, Paul. We know what you feel. Even Jay does."

I looked out at the others. Each of them was holding a flashlight pointed in my direction. An angry looking man wearing a pizza deliveryman's uniform stared hard

at the man with the golden cross, but slowly bowed his head in agreement.

"Paul, I believe that everything happens for a reason. We have been given knowledge of demons on Earth. We have also regained our free will. By joining us, you can help us use our knowledge against them. Both for our salvation, and for humanity's."

The woman set down her flashlight and picked up what appeared to be an old lantern. As she started toward us, I could see her better in the light. Her hair was bleached blonde, and the pain in her eyes made me think she was older than she appeared. She held the lantern in front of me.

Lou then stepped forward, holding a box of matches.

"My name is Bruce," the man with the cross said. "Some people call me Reverend, but I prefer Bruce." Lou handed the box of matches to me. Bruce continued, "By lighting this lantern, you agree to become a beacon of hope. You agree to fight the darkness, and become one of us." He turned to the woman. "Beth?"

Beth opened the lantern. I took the box of matches and lit one. As I watched it burn, I remembered the candlelight dinners I had with Jill. Once I thought she really loved me, but it was a lie. I lit the lantern and Beth closed it. It emitted a warm, soothing glow.

"You can stand up, Paul," Bruce said. "You're on the path to redemption."

That was how I met Bruce, Beth, Jay and Lou. For our safety, we only used each other's first names, and we had contact information for only one person in the group. Only Jay could contact me.

After the meeting, I felt certain that God had led me there to find salvation. For the first time in months, I felt good, and the feeling lasted the rest of the night.

When I went to bed, I dreamed that I was surrounded by a great storm. There was nowhere I could run. Above, a funnel cloud formed, filled with lightning. With each crack of thunder, I could hear Jill calling out to me. I screamed and woke up.

Bruce was right. I was on the road to salvation, but I had no idea how hard that road would be.

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

My story begins before the note, but the note's what drew me into it all. Before someone took my baby girl. I didn't know why at the time, I only knew that one day I had a beautiful daughter, and the next I had this big empty spot in my life that was probably more my fault than I wanted. Life just became a series of days after that, sunup, sundown, and somewhere in between I tried not

to smash too many plates in the kitchen, and managed to get a few rough hours of sleep in a night. I left the job at the convention center. Being a guard down there was filled with too many long, lonely hours. Every time I turned around, I thought about Tracy, thought about the mistakes I'd made, and one day I laid down on the job — literally — and waited for the day to end. It did, and I didn't go back.

Every day, I sat around while my wife Marjorie went to work. She hated me, I think, and thought that Tracy running away was my fault. She never said as much, but the love had gone out of our marriage, and it only furthered my depression. But then the note arrived in the mailbox one day. It said:

"I know where your daughter is. I can help get her back. Tell a single, solitary soul about this note and the chances of finding her are diminished exponentially. Meet me at the address below in 10 days, on December the 7th, and you might have her back by Christmas."

There was no signature, only an address. It was up in Charlotte. Charlotte's maybe a 20-minute drive up 77 North. Easy once you get out of Fort Mill. I'd do it. I'd do anything. Note said not to tell anybody, fine. Not even the wife? So be it. My baby was gone, and if someone knew something — anything — then I'd go, because the pain of it was about ready to eat my heart and send me over the edge. Five months of sitting home, wondering if my daughter had been raped, killed or run down, and I was ready to die. I needed a reason to live.

It was dumb. Getting a note like that, the first thing you do is call the cops. For all I knew, some Charles Manson knock-off was playing with my head. But cops are stupid. And the threat in the note — *don't tell anyone*. If I told the police, would it ruin everything? Could that mistake cost me the chance to hold Tracy again? I decided then and there, I'd do it. I don't know why Tracy ran off, whether it was because I was a bad and angry father or because she was kidnapped right from her bedroom. I had to know, one way or another.

I went to pocket the note, memorizing the date and time, when I saw it. Something else written on the other side of the paper. In bold black: Psalms 106:37. A goddamn Bible reference.

That night, while Marjorie was sleeping, I pulled a dusty copy of the NRSV out of the junk drawer in the kitchen.

"Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils." That's what it said, right there in the "Good" Book. I sat down in the ratty old recliner and cried until I fell asleep.

THE LOST

Ten days later, I went where I was told. It was actually snowing a little bit, just flurries really, but that's enough to shut down most places here in the Carolinas.

I had a bunch of Christmas presents for Tracy. I know I didn't have her back yet, but I would, I resolved. Didn't much know what a 14-year-old girl would want, so I got her a whole bunch of stuff. A few Barbies, a few CDs (some of that girly-girl pop music), a blank journal I picked up at CVS for a couple bucks.

The address was down off South Boulevard, a little brown office building stuck between a boarded-up porn store and a closed pet supermarket. South wasn't the best road in town, I figured. My heart was beating like a drum, blood rushing in my ears. I kept telling myself to do it, no matter how dumb it was, like jumping out of a plane. Do it, get it over with, try not to die. I almost said a little prayer, but I didn't know shit about praying so I gave up. I wished I'd brought a knife.

Outside, two other men were waiting, warming their hands with their breath, probably not expecting it to be this cold. A week ago it was 62 degrees, now it was 20 and snowing. At least I had the brains to put on a thick sweater. These idiots were in windbreakers and baseball caps.

One of them, a short, portly guy with a red beard like steel wool, looked at me suspiciously. He shoved a pair of gorilla hands in his Charlotte Checkers hockey jacket. I was waiting for him to whip out a gun and blow me away. It didn't happen. The other was thin and tall and looked like was just out of his teens. There was a little peach fuzz on his face that I guess was supposed to pass for a goatee. Both of them looked scared, and I guess I couldn't blame them. The skinny one spoke first.

"Are you him?" he asked. "Did you leave us the notes?"

I eyed him. "Notes? Both of you got notes?" What the fuck was going on?

The young one extended a sweaty, long-fingered hand. I shook it. "Name's Tommy Springhouse." His voice trailed off. I noticed he was a Yankee by the accent.

I hesitated. "Royce. Will Royce."

"You lose a kid, Will Royce?" the scrub-beard asked, staring at me like I had a set of horns sprouting from my head.

This was all fucked up. "Maybe," I said.

Tommy shifted nervously from foot to foot. "Kid run away?"

My hands balled into fists. I didn't talk about it much, not with anybody, not even Marjorie. But it just came out. The whole story. I spilled everything about Tracy, even down to the goddamn shoes she was wearing the day before she was gone. I felt tears burn hot at the edges of my eyes and I blinked them away. "I just wish she'd never run away," I said.

"More like kidnapped," the beard said. He reached out and grabbed my hand. "I'm Darnell Sparks. You can call me Sparks. I'm a trucker, I work out of Gastonia

most the time. Got a pair of twins, two boys, Jackson and Tyler. They'd be 17 by now. Been gone two years this March. Someone came up in a van after homecoming and took my boys away. Cops weren't much help."

"My daughter was taken this past June," Tommy said, tapping out a cigarette from a crumple-pack and skewering it between thin lips. He didn't light it. He looked sad. "She's only seven, you know?"

"What makes you think they're still alive?" I asked, and I already knew the answer. I didn't think Tracy was dead. I wouldn't let myself think that. I've pictured it a thousand times, her head bashed up, blood in her eyes, but I've never let myself accept that she could be dead. It was probably the same with these two, but I had to hear it from them.

Sparks squinted at me and thrust a sausage-finger in my face. "Don't even suggest that blasphemy to me. I don't talk nothing to people who don't have faith. My boys are living and breathing, and I don't need your nay-saying to tell me different. Fact of the matter is, Royce, the twins were the best boys you'd ever—"

Tommy interrupted. "Someone's pulling up."

Headlights cut through the flurry. A gray minivan approached with "Airborne Express" on the side. It was going fast and the tires hissed across the ice as it slid diagonally into a few parking spots. The van didn't shut off, but the driver's door popped open and a man got out, tall, with a long wool overcoat pulled tight. He marched right up to us, a heavy pair of work boots leaving prints in the dusting of white on the asphalt. Looked like he hadn't shaved in weeks. One of his eyes was bloodshot, the white streaked with tributaries of red.

"Gentleman," he announced. "Glad the three of you could make it. Two others were scheduled to show, but if they're not here by now, that's too bad. We've got a job to do."

"What?" Tommy asked.

"Wait a goddamn minute—" Sparks said, stepping up and puffing out his chest. "You have some explaining to do." I just hung back and watched, nervousness itching my skin.

"My name is Colin Pelham," he said, producing a set of file folders from a knapsack he had slung over his shoulder. Another Yankee, I thought. He handed each of us one of the folders. As he did I caught a glimpse of a silver cross, a Jew star and some oriental symbol hanging around his neck by a little chain. "Look in there. See what you can see. If you're interested, then we'll get on it."

I had already flipped open the folder and my heart froze solid. It was a picture of Tracy being led by some bald motherfucker into a black Cadillac. They were holding hands. She looked scared. And this sonofabitch

leading her in... he looked like a human wall. Big, bald, six-and-a-half feet tall. Three hundred pounds of muscle stuffed into a black monkey suit.

"Tracy...." I said, voice weak.

The haunted eyes of the other two showed me what was in their folders. Pelham spoke. "The shots are a little blurry, but I think you get the general idea. The man in each picture is called Overholt. Godfrey Overholt. He's the one who has your kids. You want to be a part of this, you commit now and we get in the van and do some business. If you're not interested and you think I'm full of shit, fine. No skin off my back. But I need to know — now."

I was ready to give it all, to fall hook, line and sinker for this shit on the barest promise of seeing Tracy again.

Sparks spoke up first. "What the fuck do you want from us?"

"I want Betsy back," Tommy said, wiping a tear from his cheek. I guessed Betsy was his daughter.

"I can show you the man who took your kids," Pelham said. "But only now, only tonight. You want in, get in the van. You don't, then it's goodbye."

Desperation decided for me. "I'm in," I said.

Sparks shot me a look. He turned back to Pelham. "If I find you're fucking with me and mine, I'll kill you. Remember, there's three of us, *one* of you." He gritted his teeth.

Pelham thumbed toward the idling van. "Let's go." We followed him and he opened the side door. "One more thing, gentlemen. Are you believers? In God, Heaven, the Devil, Hell? That sort of thing?"

I gave a half-nod, even though I was lying. He seemed to think it was important, so what did it matter? Sparks gave a "Hell, yeah," and looked like anybody who thought differently was shit. Tommy just shrugged. Said he didn't much know.

"You'll know soon enough," Pelham said.

EXTREME MEASURES

The van started to head into the center of town. Not uptown. But toward the ritzier districts. Down past a mall, toward the Myers Park area. I had a feeling that we'd been set up, but Sparks was right — there were three of us. Maybe we could handle ourselves. There was a little part of me that hadn't felt this alive in months.

"You work for Airborne Express?" I asked Pelham, yelling up from the back. He waved his hand dismissively.

"Used to."

Tommy shot me a look. Deer in headlights. I looked away. I understood him. Here was this poor young father who was suddenly caught up in something he didn't understand, and I echoed the sentiment. It was like a roller-coaster ride. A slow crawl to the top,

with a hard and fast fall approaching. I felt sick. Maybe we'd made a mistake.

Pelham waved his hand back at us and pointed to something. "There's a box with a sheet over it back there. Pull the sheet off and open the box." The other two seemed hesitant, so I did it. There was a dusty steamer trunk. I popped the latch.

Guns and books. Two things I wouldn't normally expect to see together. They looked like shotguns. The books didn't have titles. They were big and old and grimy, like books you'd find at the ass-end of a library.

"What the hell?" I asked. The other two came closer, peering into the trunk. "Guns and books? Are you nuts?"

"Two great tastes that taste great together," Pelham yelled over his shoulder. We'd turned down into Myers Park. Big old-money houses lined the street. Up ahead I could see a pair of taillights shining through the snow. There was no one else on the road, only that car. I felt the van begin to accelerate. "I suggest everyone grab a gun and brace yourselves."

Panic charged through my veins in the form of adrenaline. We were coming up fast on the taillights, and as the car ahead turned down toward Queens College we cut the corner over someone's lawn. That's when I saw we were heading toward a limousine. I tried to brace myself and I heard screaming that I realized was me.

Tommy shouted something too, just as the van slammed into the side of the limo. I hit my head and fell over, and there was the sound of metal grinding metal. Everything was topsy-turvy for a second. I saw Tommy on the ground, bleeding, and Sparks was hollering something angry. Then it was over. Everything was still. The side door slid open and there was Pelham, clapping his hands.

"Out! Out! Grab a gun and get out here!" He jacked a shell into a gun, pressed it into my hands, and then was gone. I stumbled out and felt a little dizzy. My front teeth hurt. I wondered if they were loose.

Sparks jumped out, yelling bloody murder. "What on God's green Earth do you—"

Pelham looked like he was about to faint. He was standing, gun raised and pointed at the driver's side door of the limo. The black car was making a *tink-tink-tink* sound from the hood while steam hissed in the air. Green anti-freeze oozed onto the snow like alien blood. Eyes wide, Pelham waved us over like some military sergeant and pointed. The door was swinging open. I don't know why, but I pulled my gun tight against my shoulder and pointed it at the limo. I hadn't gone pheasant hunting in damn near six years, but the gun in my hands was suddenly comforting.

I felt like I was about to piss myself. We were in front of a big, white house. We'd just driven over the lawn! Lights came on upstairs, one by one. Lights would mean cops. I turned back to the limo. Some part of me had this image of that big bald guy getting out, and he could get me my daughter back, but it wasn't the bald prick at all. It was some thin guy, looked all strung-out, dressed in an ill-fitting suit. He had a face like a fox, with funny eyes. A chauffeur's cap sat askew on his head. He grinned a mouthful of white, white teeth.

"Pelham," he said, chuckling. "Got yourself some new friends, I see."

"Quiet, Vig. What's in the back of the limo?" Pelham gestured with the shotgun. The driver just laughed. This was insane.

"Nothing at all, buddy. Don't worry your pretty head about it." He wiped some blood from his nose. Maybe he'd hit it against the steering wheel. Then he licked his hand. "You know, you're never going to get Overholt. The Red Schools are everywhere. So are our children. Why do you even bother? You only get *one* ticket for this ride."

Our children, he said. Those words burned in my ears.

I guess they burned Sparks', too. He charged in, gun raised like a goddamn club. I tried to yell to him, to tell him "no," but then something happened.

A moment before Sparks reached the car, the man called Vig didn't look much like a man anymore. His face and body bulged with fat, bruise-colored cysts and tumors. One minute they weren't there, the next he was covered in them. Some busted clean through his suit. I heard Tommy somewhere, wailing. I felt everything and nothing at once. Awe, horror, sickness, even this strange pang of regret that I couldn't understand. Sparks roared and kept going.

The "thing" ducked down and caught Sparks in the gut, hurling him backward. I thought about shooting, but I couldn't move. And then Vig was right there. He had been yards away, and he had somehow covered that ground in a moment. He batted my gun aside, which went off. The next thing I knew I was flying through the falling snow, and my shoulder hit hard on the asphalt. At first I thought I was dead, but then I realized the air had left my lungs, and I struggled to get it back.

I looked over at Pelham, who so far wasn't doing shit — or so I thought. Actually, he had his nose buried in one of those damn books, and was mouthing words. The monster — Vig — glanced his way and seemed to grin through a face full of lumps. He looked like a bull ready to charge, but then Pelham yelled out something in Latin, I think, and held out a set of beads. He yelled one last bit of gibberish, and then it was done.

The thing stopped and cocked its head funny. It tried to move. Tried to lift its feet, but *couldn't*. Pelham kept mumbling things out of the book. Between words, he looked at me and Sparks with panic in his eyes.

"He's bound!" he said in a tone as if we should have known. "*Shoot him.*"

I didn't want to shoot anybody, but I did it anyway. It was like watching it happen on TV, only I was doing it. I picked up the gun, and in my head I saw a clear picture of Tracy. Funny thing was, not long after she left I lost sight of her face bit by bit until I couldn't quite remember what she looked like. But that photo from earlier cemented it. I remembered now. Golden hair. Little freckles. Her lower lip was a little funny, but in a cute way.

I pulled the trigger.

My gun went off and the recoil hammered me. "Vig" was hit right in its bulging neck. Black goo sprayed up and he jerked back but stayed standing. I couldn't fucking believe it. He turned toward me and sneered, showing me those white teeth even though part of his lips had been blown clean off his face. Sparks saw it too, and he was standing now, gun to his shoulder. Pelham told us to shoot again, and neither of us argued. It kept standing, flailing in the same spot, screaming. I fired until the last shell flew out of the chamber. Finally, Pelham lowered his book and the thing crumpled. Its body hissed and gurgled. It sounded like air coming out of a wet tire.

I stood, numb. I didn't know what to think. Couldn't make heads or tails out of what had happened. I still can't, really. It got under my skin like a chigger.

Pelham was happy. "Royce, check on the limo. See how the children are."

Children. I dropped the gun in the snow and ran to the car. I slammed into it and threw the back door open. The seat was crammed with kids. Maybe 10 of them, all looking like they'd been drugged, mouths slack and eyes wide and unfocused. A ropy string of saliva hung from a fat kid's jaw. I thought I saw Tracy, felt my love pour out, but when I turned her toward me, it wasn't her at all. Just some other blond girl, her pupils like pencil-points.

I started pulling the kids out, one by one. None of them was Tracy. Still, I whispered to them, told them they'd be okay, told them everything was fine, that the bad man was gone. I realized I was rambling, probably not even making sense. I hugged one, the one who looked like Tracy. The kids all seemed confused, lost. I wanted to find all the people responsible for this.

In the distance, sirens howled.

Tommy was crying by the van. Sparks was at the tumor body, using his shotgun like a meat tenderizer.



Pelham had to move him out of the way to dump gas on the body. Then they lit it, a funeral pyre for a monster. The corpse sizzled like fatty bacon. Pelham yelled, "How are the kids?"

"Okay," I croaked. Sparks seemed to come back to his senses then, like he had been somewhere else. He ran to the limousine, bloodied shotgun still in hand. He stared at the kids, then looked inside, calling the names of his boys. A few seconds later he pulled his head back out and punched the side of the car. I knew what he was feeling.

"These ain't mine!" he yelled.

"Never said they would be," Pelham said, walking over. He shrugged. "But we got the bastard. And we'll get your kids back. This was only a taste test. We'd better go. I know the highways are asleep down here when it snows, but we can't get caught." He clapped his hands like a fucking preschool teacher. "Back in the van."

Sparks didn't seem to like that idea, because suddenly he was on Pelham, slamming the man against the side of the limousine. He shoved his shotgun up under Pelham's jaw.

"You've got some explaining to do," Sparks growled. "Where the fuck are my boys?"

"Settle down, Mr. Sparks," Pelham said through clenched teeth. "We've been real lucky so far, but you hear those sirens? You going to save your kids from behind bars? I don't think so."

Sparks didn't relent. He was shaking, red-faced. A gash on his forehead was turning dark and wet with blood. I took a few steps closer and cleared my throat.

"He's right, Sparks," I said, my voice trembling. "He'll explain or he knows he's a dead man. Ain't that right, Pelham?" He nodded as much as he could with a black barrel under his chin.

Sparks jerked the shotgun away and punched the limousine. Then he jumped in the van, pushing Tommy out of the way, and cursing up a storm. Pelham rubbed his jaw and looked up at me.

"Thanks," he said, nodding.

I scowled. "Sparks is right. You need to explain all this." I glanced at the children and felt sick at the thought of leaving them. But the police would handle it. I just wished one of them was mine.

NO WAY OUT

"Monsters exist," Pelham said while he drove. "I don't know their names, but devils is good enough. We've always known about them. We just didn't want to believe in them."

Part of me didn't believe him. Part of me wanted to stay ignorant. Another part wanted to run, to kill this guy or to bow down and thank him. The others seemed overwhelmed. Tommy sat folded up against the back door, his arms wrapped around his knees. I couldn't tell if Sparks was buying it or even listening. He had this thousand-mile stare.

"I don't know if we're talking Biblical Satan stuff," Pelham continued, "or old-fashioned boogie monsters. What I do know is this: They're devils in action if not name. They want our children. I don't know why. But I do know we can hurt them. They don't think much of us. We're like..." he paused to think, "bugs. They think they can just shoo us away. But others have come before us, written books. I've read some of them. They describe tricks, like I used back there. At first it all sounds like bullshit, but when you see what I have, you start to take it all seriously."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I believed. I remembered what I felt when that man became a monster. I ran the whole gamut of emotions. I hated it, loved it, wanted to worship it and destroy it all at the same time. Even thinking back to it made me want to puke.

Pelham pulled something out and passed it back. It was a glossy photo, like a glamour shot you get done at the mall. Pretty girl. Red hair, done up all curly. Green eyes.

"My daughter," he said. "Christine. That Overholt is one of them, but far worse than what you saw today. He's taken what's mine. I want it back." I heard Tommy gasp as I handed him the photo. Sparks just grunted and muttered something about his sons.

"Sorry," I said to Pelham. It sounded stupid.

"Overholt runs these things called the Red Schools. I don't know what they want from the kids. I've never actually been to one. They pop up and disappear all over the place. I need your help to find him, to find these places, to get our kids back. You're in it now.

You've seen it. You can't go back to a normal life now. That's just how it is. The good news is we all made it and we have a chance to do something about it. So, what do you say?"

Tommy spoke first, surprising me. Sparks didn't say anything. I had a gut reaction and said I wasn't sure.

Honestly, I didn't have to think about it. I don't know why I said that. Maybe that's what I *should* have said — or *wanted* to say. Pelham gave me a phone number and said he was going to let the others pack their bags. That they'd be pulling out of town that night and I should call when I knew what my answer was.

I drove home. The wife's car was in the driveway but all the lights were out. She hadn't waited up. I hoped that she had. That I could tell her everything and that she'd look at me and convince me not to go, not to do the family any more harm. But when I went into the bedroom, I saw her, the comforter wrapped up around her like a cocoon, and I went back downstairs.

My daughter was out there, somewhere. Without my wife to tell me different, I convinced myself that I could fix it all later, that I'd only be gone for a little while. Then we'd all be together again.

Pelham answered after one ring. He knew I'd call, he said. They'd come get me.

I decided not to pack anything. I had a credit card I could run up. Plus, I didn't want to wake the wife. Marjorie wouldn't understand. She was the practical one, and what I was doing could hardly be called practical.

The van pulled up in front of the house, and I got in. Tommy and Sparks were already in the back, Tommy in the corner staring into space and Sparks running a cleaning-rod down a barrel. I got into the passenger seat beside Pelham.

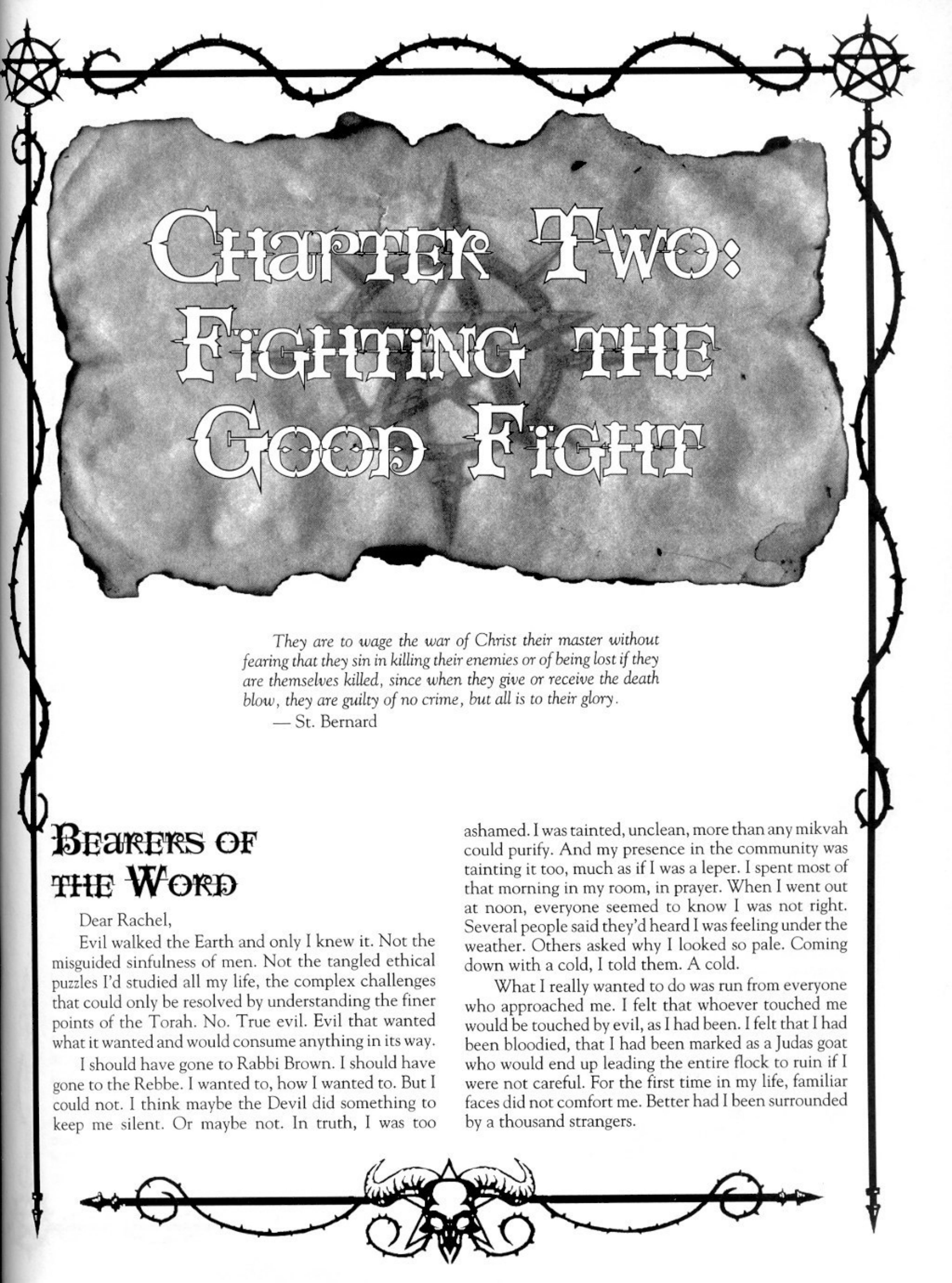
"Be honest," I said. "Am I going to get my daughter back? She's still alive, isn't she?"

"She's alive," he said. "And you'll get her back. I promise."

And then we left.







CHAPTER TWO: FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

They are to wage the war of Christ their master without fearing that they sin in killing their enemies or of being lost if they are themselves killed, since when they give or receive the death blow, they are guilty of no crime, but all is to their glory.

— St. Bernard

BEARERS OF THE WORD

Dear Rachel,

Evil walked the Earth and only I knew it. Not the misguided sinfulness of men. Not the tangled ethical puzzles I'd studied all my life, the complex challenges that could only be resolved by understanding the finer points of the Torah. No. True evil. Evil that wanted what it wanted and would consume anything in its way.

I should have gone to Rabbi Brown. I should have gone to the Rebbe. I wanted to, how I wanted to. But I could not. I think maybe the Devil did something to keep me silent. Or maybe not. In truth, I was too

ashamed. I was tainted, unclean, more than any mikvah could purify. And my presence in the community was tainting it too, much as if I was a leper. I spent most of that morning in my room, in prayer. When I went out at noon, everyone seemed to know I was not right. Several people said they'd heard I was feeling under the weather. Others asked why I looked so pale. Coming down with a cold, I told them. A cold.

What I really wanted to do was run from everyone who approached me. I felt that whoever touched me would be touched by evil, as I had been. I felt that I had been bloodied, that I had been marked as a Judas goat who would end up leading the entire flock to ruin if I were not careful. For the first time in my life, familiar faces did not comfort me. Better had I been surrounded by a thousand strangers.



You must understand, scholarship was my life. All Chassids know, of course that the Torah is all, all is Torah. But to a scholar, the Torah is truly bread and wine, breath and life. I could not but look for my answers there. And I began to tell myself that I could do it. That I could face down this demon, that it was G-d's will that I do so, for the good of the community. It was the only answer. Why else, I reasoned, would G-d put me in such a position if I hadn't the strength to overcome it? It was my duty as a Jew and as a servant of G-d to stand against this evil creature who had taken hold of my cousin.

And so I read the old texts, and I made the arrangements as I understood them.

When the hour came, Rabbi Brown and his wife and children were out, much to my relief. The Rabbi was leading a study group. Mrs. Brown was taking soup to a sick neighbor. The children were visiting with friends. And then he was simply there, in my room. The door did not open. There was no sound. I simply felt that I was being watched, and when I turned he was there.

"Reuben," he said. "I don't enjoy being angry with you." It sounded almost like an apology. There was something deflated about him, some aura of fatigue. Maybe it was in his voice. It was as if he was near exhaustion. "I'll take the book now," he said, "And I'll go. You won't see me again."

"Jacob," I said, "Do you know the story of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa? An evil spirit once did him a favor. Later, he came across the same spirit tormenting a beggar. The spirit asked the Rabbi to remember the favor he'd done." My voice was shaking. I stopped talking to swallow.

"All right," Jacob said. "I'll play your game. What did the Rabbi say?"

"He said 'Cause no more grief to this son of Abraham.' I stared at the book in my hands and tried to hold the love of G-d in my mind. I read the psalm in as strong and clear a voice as I could muster. "He sends help from the holy place—"

"Stop that," Jacob said. "What are you doing?"

I cast the beans onto the floor in front of him, and then the herbs and salt.

That was the signal. They came from their hiding places behind the bookshelf. Yitzhak and Moshe Cohen. The tallest brothers in the community. Both dumb as posts, G-d forgive me, but quite unshakable in their faith. I had given them the easiest prayers to say and though they were my worst students, their Hebrew was perfect that night.

"What is this?" Jacob said, his voice raised over the clatter of our incantations. "A magic show? Do you think this will affect me?"

"I won't be afraid of you, dybbuk," I said, hoping it was not a lie. "The power of the Lord is stronger. You are subject to Him. Moshe — don't let him leave."

Jacob had made no move toward the door, but he watched as Moshe took up a position in front of it. His brother moved opposite Moshe so that Jacob was between them. They never stopped reciting the prayers I had written out for them.

"You're annoying me," Jacob said. I kept reading the prayer, shouting out the names of angel after angel. Some part of me was growing more confident. Jacob had not tried to resist us. He even looked worried.

And then Jacob's hands were around Yitzhak's throat.

Things happened quickly. Yitzhak grabbed Jacob and tried to push him away. Yitzhak had arms like a circus strongman. Jacob's grip seemed to lighten. Moshe came behind Jacob and grasped his shoulders to pull him off his brother.

Jacob seemed to shrug and Moshe was tossed against the wall, releasing a single, pathetic cry as his head cracked against the doorframe. Yitzhak looked at his brother, his face pale with horror, and Jacob flung him aside as if he was a dishrag.

Then Jacob walked toward me.

"That's enough of that," he said. He gestured toward me and the book flew from my hands.

"Reuben, Reuben," he said, shaking his head. "Now you think you're a zaddik? A miracle worker? You think you're stronger than me, when G-d himself couldn't keep me in Hell? Should we banish the rainbow because the world is sustained by your merit? What miracle will you work to save yourself?"

I kept reciting the prayer from memory.

"Stop," Jacob said, and my throat dried and my lips were sealed. "I won't kill you, Reuben. You won't get off that easy. Instead, you'll watch those around you die. Like that boy over there whose brains are staining your carpet. One of your neighbors each day, until you get me what I want. And then... and... then..."

He pressed his hands to his head. "I—" His knees weakened. He fell to the floor.

Steam seemed to rise from his skin. Boils appeared on his face. "Reuben," he called out. "What's happening to me? I can't—"

The door to my bedroom opened. Rabbi Brown surveyed the scene: Yitzhak huddled and clutching the body of his brother, Jacob collapsed in the middle of the room and convulsing, me leaning against my bed for support and gasping in terror.

"So," the Rabbi said, "Blessed is the One who gave us life. Everything is as the Rebbe said it would be."

I fainted, then.

Gentlemen: Greeting in the name of his honor, his holiness, our master and teacher, may he live long and happily.

I must ask, speaking in his name, that you put all current matters aside and meet with me tomorrow at the Rebbe's home. Matters important to the health of our community must be tended to immediately. These matters will place us all in jeopardy and place great strain on our faith and trust in G-d.

I must ask, in the name of the Rebbe, that you not discuss this letter or any particulars regarding it with anyone. Not family nor friends nor advisors. It is hoped that you will keep this letter and the circumstances that follow it from anyone, now and for as long as you shall live.

Please treat this announcement with the same discretion that I was pleased to use during your own unfortunate encounters with certain vices, known to me but, G-d willing, never to be spoken of as long as I dwell on this Earth.

Kalman Brown

LINES OF SALT

Dear Rachel,

Wherever I travel, they seem to be no more than a week or two behind me. Never the same faces, but always the same tired, haunted eyes. I usually spot them in a crowd, pressing slowly toward me. I can't say who these people are. I don't know how they keep finding me.

Moshe's funeral was held while I was convalescing.

The next thing I remembered after fainting was waking in my bed. My room had been cleaned. I spent that day in bed, feeling weak and feverish, but on the next I woke clear-headed. I arose shortly after dawn and dressed. My legs were a bit weak and my voice wavered as I said my prayers. The whole situation seemed not like a dream, but like a story told about someone else.

Rabbi Brown explained to me how, while I confronted Jacob in my room, he and some helpers had been walking the streets, stringing wire. They had temporarily extended the eruv, our community's sacred boundary, from Bleeker Street to include the Rabbi's house. "We trapped him inside the border like a fly in a bottle," he told me. It had been the Rebbe's plan. The Rebbe had known about Jacob all along.

I walked down Taylor Street feeling like a fool. Of course, the Rebbe had known. How could he, a zaddik, not sense the presence of such evil? If only I had gone to him from the start. If only I had not tried to handle things on my own, Moshe would still be alive. As I

walked to the cemetery, the people I passed on the street said nothing to me. They watched me pass with expressions I could not decipher. Behind me, I heard whispers.

Before I got to the cemetery, I saw Rabbi Brown waving to me from across the street. When he approached, I could not look him in the eye. "Reuben," he said to me. "I was just looking for you. Come."

As we walked, I found myself prattling uncontrollably about my guilt. My sins were crowded around me. He listened patiently, not interrupting, until I had to stop talking for fear I would collapse in grief and exhaustion.

"Reuben," he said, "All sin contains the seed of repentance. This is how the Lord turns a transgression into a good deed. Is it not from the misdeeds of the Children of Israel that the Torah is composed? Here we are...." I hadn't been paying attention to where we'd been going. Now I realized where we were: an abandoned storefront on 9th and Market. Until recently it had housed a religious bookstore. New tenants had not yet moved in.

"Why are we here, Rabbi?"

He produced a key and unlocked the metal grate, then the front door. "Here is where you will face the consequences of the choices you made. Here is where you will do G-d's work, and together in his name we will free a soul from the evil that has snared it."

He walked briskly, and I followed. We passed through the empty storefront and went directly to a back room. There was a narrow door, and beyond it a staircase. We walked up three flights to the attic, and the Rabbi unlocked another door. They were waiting for us inside. There was Rabbi Kornfeld, perhaps the most respected man in the community after the Rebbe. There was Hershel Silverman, a teacher and scholar whose commentaries I had read since I was 12. There was Rabbi Miller, who I had thought was away helping to set up our community in West Virginia.

And there was my cousin, Jacob.

They had him in the center of the room, one wrist handcuffed to the thick oaken chair into which he was slumped. The room had one big window, covered by a white sheet, and the daylight made a yellow square on the floor with Jacob in the center of it. He looked as thin as a scarecrow and his lips were pale. I was afraid to meet his eyes, but he didn't look up. He just stared at the floor.

"Rabbi—"

"Don't be afraid, Reuben. The Rebbe has overseen everything."

"The Rebbe—"

"Just as the Rebbe instructed, we moved him here, outside the eruv, so the dybbuk won't be destroyed before releasing the soul of your cousin. We keep his body weak so he cannot call forth terrible strength." The Rabbi kissed the prayer book he held. "We con-



sulted the proper texts. He cannot cross the circles." I hadn't noticed it, but now I saw that a series of concentric circles had been painted on the wooden floor. Between the lines I saw the holy letters: the five heh, the yod-yod, the 12-letter Name, the 22-two-letter Name.

"But..." It was hard for me to grasp what was happening here. "But is this... I mean, what will the people say?"

"No one can know of this, Reuben," he said gravely. "We must carry what happens here to our graves." He waited for me to speak, and when I did not, he added, "These are the old ways. Men of faith follow higher laws than the edicts of the temporal world. Do you understand?"

"Do you — do you mean you have done this before?"

The Rabbi shook his head. "No, Reuben. But our grandfathers, our great-grandfathers, all those who came before us, they knew what to do. The Rebbe has retrieved their words and instructed us. There is nothing to fear."

I expected that I would be asked to stand with them and read prayers. But my task was a lesser one, befitting my inexperience and station. I would watch over Jacob in between the rituals. I would attend to his physical needs. I would feed him the paltry rations of water and bread that had been prescribed by the Rebbe to keep the demon weak. I would empty the bucket they had provided for his elimination. I would clean up after him when he vomited. I would make sure he did not attempt to end his — that is Jacob's — life.

I welcomed the lowly and demeaning nature of these tasks.

That first afternoon I was in the attic, the prayers went on for six hours. The men stood at the four points of the compass with Jacob in the center. One man would chant aloud while the others swayed back and forth in silence. They switched off every five minutes or so. I stood in a corner of the room, watching, praying along if the chants were familiar ones. Many were not.

Two hours went by before Jacob spoke.

"Rabbi Brown," he said. His voice was like sandpaper, and weak as a bird's. At times I could barely hear him. "Rabbi Brown," he said. "You're pronouncing those words wrong."

"And in the name of Uriel and Raphael and Michael," Rabbi Brown chanted. "And in the name of Gabriel and Zauriel, and Zephon and Immiel..."

"Your accent is terrible. That's not how we spoke when we first bore the 10 sefirot into the darkness."

"The Lord of hosts, the Lord of the winds, the Lord of the waters commands you. He who make the stars in the sky, the Creator of the mountains and the oceans..."

"At your Creator's behest, we set the sefirot into the foundation of reality like paving stones in cement, Rabbi. Wouldn't you like to master all 32 paths? I can show you how."

"Say your name and station, speak your true name and that of your host and your rank, we command you. Identify yourself, we command you, in the name of Metatron and Orphiel..."

"It's easy, Rabbi. As easy as crossing the street. Years and years of study and meditation have brought you nothing. How frustrating. But I can get you to the very crown of creation. You deserve it, Rabbi. You've led a righteous life. Why not peel back a little corner of the world and see what's behind it? Why not cross from olamot to neshamot?"

Rabbi Brown broke off his chant. "Sheddai, Shemira, Shemurah," he whispered. Then he nodded briskly at Rabbi Kornfeld, who continued the incantation.

When they were finished, the four men carried Jacob's chair over to a narrow cot that sat under the eaves of the roof. Jacob was limp as a rag, and his eyes were closed. They unlocked his handcuffs and laid him on the cot, then locked one ankle to the side. He didn't move.

"Stay with him," Rabbi Brown said to me. "He may have what's left of the bread and water on the table there, but no more. We will return at dawn. Most likely he will sleep till then. If he wakes, do not engage him in conversation. If he becomes agitated, come and get me. Spend what time you can in prayer." I promised that I would not fail him. "Don't fail yourself," he replied, smiling sadly.

At first the thought of being alone with Jacob terrified me. I thought of what I had seen, that night in his apartment, and I prayed fervently. I pulled the chair near to the cot. Night had fallen. An overhead bulb threw a circle of light that filled most of the room with dim radiance. When I looked at Jacob, some of my fear withdrew. He looked fragile and vulnerable. His lips were cracked and flaked. His skin was yellow, almost jaundiced, and dark circles ringed his eyes. He moaned softly in his sleep. When I could take it no longer, I took the pitcher of water from the table and moistened my handkerchief. I held the cloth to his lips.

A minute later I looked up to find him staring at me. His eyes were open but narrowed, and very bloodshot.

"Reuben," he whispered. I said nothing.

"Reuben," he said again. "I lied to you."

I stared at him in confusion. I almost told him to keep silent. But he seemed to read the puzzlement on my face, and went on as if I'd asked him what he meant. "There was no body in that trunk, Reuben. Just a wig and some carefully positioned soup cans." He coughed and I wondered if he was trying to laugh. "There was no

murder, Rueben. There wasn't even a roommate. It was all an act."

I could keep silent no longer. "You're a liar," I shouted, oblivious to the irony. "You're trying to confuse me."

"I am a liar," he answered. "I just said I was. Come on, think about it. How could you keep a decomposing corpse in a wooden footlocker without the whole building smelling like an abattoir? Have you ever smelled rotting flesh? The Holyland stinks of it these days."

"Is that Jacob speaking?" I asked. "Or the accursed one? I know what you are."

He was silent for a minute. Then he said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not talking to you anymore."

"I'm sorry," he said again. "That's hard for you to believe. But I am sorry. I only did what I had to do. I know how that sounds. I — may I have some water?"

I handed a glass to him, but his hands were shaking too much for him to hold it. So I held it to his lips as he drank. When he finished, his voice sounded stronger.

"They told you not to speak with me."

I didn't answer.

"Of course. But they didn't say I couldn't speak, right? I've been locked in this room for three days, Reuben. And in that time none of your elders would listen to anything I had to say. And now you're here, the one I've wronged the most. Surely it wouldn't be improper for me to take this opportunity to speak my piece to you? To try and apologize for what I've done? You wouldn't want to stand in the way of a sinner trying to make amends, would you? That in itself would be a sin."

I said nothing, but I could not help but follow his logic. I turned my chair a bit so I could not see his face.

"I'm very weak, Reuben. This body hasn't been fed for days. I can't last much longer."

In spite of myself, I wanted to question that statement. Who couldn't last longer? Jacob — or the thing inside him?

"Hell is not what you think it is," he said, his voice dropping to a barely audible whisper. "It never is. Forget lakes of fire. Forget kabbalah. Forget that sefirot nonsense I was taunting Rabbi Brown with. Hell is being alone. Hell is nothing."

I heard him shifting on the cot. It creaked as if he was trying to sit up but couldn't. "Hell," he said, "is nothing. Or to put it another way, it's what's left when everything else is taken away. Heat. Cold. Light. Darkness. Space. Time. Void. You can't describe it in terms of any of that. We had nothing there. Nothing but ourselves. I can't decide if that was G-d's only kindness to us or His worst punishment. All we had was each other. Imagine being bathed in someone else's misery, or hatred or anguish or despair. After a while you can't

tell the difference between your own suffering and everyone else's."

He's making it all up, I told myself. I wanted to think of him as a man with delusions, my cousin injured in the war. A hypnotist, maybe, who had temporarily convinced me that his delusions were true.

"When I was — when Jacob was at University, the students used to make this running joke. Why is there so much back-stabbing and politics among the faculty? Because the stakes are so low. That's how it was. Trapped there with nothing, we made bargains and coalitions among each other as if we commanded kingdoms. The strong dominated the weak, the weak connived against the strong. Alliances were formed and broken and restored, and for what? To convince us that we weren't the impotent and forgotten prisoners we knew ourselves to be."

How long until dawn? I wore no watch. There was no clock in the room. I wondered if I should go get Rabbi Brown.

"And I," he continued, "I was within the lowest cadre you can imagine. My duties had been humble before, and now I was less than a footstool for superior powers. And so I thought I'd remain until one day. Well, there were no days, of course."

Jacob broke off the narrative into a series of coughs. I turned to watch him. His whole body shook with each spasm. When he was done, he said weakly, "Reuben, is there more bread?" There was not. I shook my head to indicate it. He shook his head as if echoing me, and then stared flatly at the ceiling. He said nothing for a half-hour or so. Then he spoke again, his voice weak but steady, as if he'd never stopped talking.

"The day came when something changed. Change, after so much timelessness. My... my master ushered me to a place where the nothingness had... narrowed. As if there was something pressing against all sides, coming together. My master was of too great a magnitude to pass into this corridor of almost-something. But he bade me to enter it and see if, as all indications suggested, it led to a place where the borders of Hell frayed into the real world.

"Anticipation, excitement, even hope — it had been so long since I'd felt these things I could scarcely remember their names. I had locked away all memories of the earthly paradise, but here before me was a possible doorway into that lost kingdom. Harmony. Light. Created matter shimmering with the love of its creator. Were these things possible again?

"So I groveled, I pleaded, I begged not to be sent into this unknown venture. I knew this was the best way to insure that I would be. The principalities flung me into the anti-pit, commanding that I explore its furthest reaches and report back. And I pledged absolute obedience knowing full well that, even if I found myself in an

unceasing labyrinth, I would stay there to wait out eternity rather than return."

"I moved with all the speed I could muster. I pushed onward. I tried to fill my mind with visions of the world I had left, of the dawn of creation and the splendor of the garden. And yet nothing changed. The stench of hatred, the pressing choke of fear, the echoing malice that filled the air like wasps, all the familiar torments of Hell were as near as ever.

"And then I realized I wasn't in Hell at all.

"I was in the physical universe again.

"I had been for some time."

After that, Jacob did not speak for the rest of the night.

BROKEN BONDS

Over the next several weeks, we talked about how to banish a demon. I'd like to say that we were an efficient fighting force, ready to tackle the forces of darkness. The truth is we, with the exception of Lou, had no fighting experience.

Though I owned a gun, I had never fired it. Heck, I'd never even thrown a punch at someone. That quickly changed. Bruce bought me a membership at a firing range, and I had to promise to practice once a day. At our weekly gatherings, Lou tried to teach me all the dirty tricks he'd learned in a lifetime of fighting on the street.

Still, I had to wonder what I was getting into. We weren't fighting another street gang. We were fighting demons. Monsters older than time itself. How could we hope to win?

Lou always disagreed with me. "Look at us," he once told me. "We're proof that they can be beaten. My demon is dead." Then he grabbed me by the T-shirt and said, "Your demon better be dead, too." He gave me a cold stare for a few seconds, then started to laugh. When my fear started to fade, I nervously joined in.

"Just joking." He said. "Just a test."

A test. That was one way of putting it. The truth is, we could never really tell who was truly free of our masters. Bruce claimed that his demon gave him a crucifix that would allow him to detect lies. A crucifix that only he could use. It was our faith in his ability to use the crucifix that kept us together. If he was wrong, then any of us could be a traitor. I didn't like to think about that.

Beth and Lou seemed to trust Bruce because he started the group. Bruce had worked as an accountant before. His access to the financial records of several companies must have made him a valuable asset. His experience with demons seemed to strengthen his religious convictions. Hence the nickname, "Reverend."

And so we come to the question of demons. Much has been written on the subject, but little of it is the truth. And when but a sliver of the truth is known, better it had not been brought to light, for to see a few threads of a rug can deceive one into thinking one knows the whole design, when had one seen nothing, one would not presume to have any such knowledge.

In the *Zohar*, one reads of the three types of demons who can be described thusly:

First, the Uncompleted Ones. These beings were created by G-d on the sixth day and, like the angels, given much intelligence and power. But the Sabbath did fall before the Lord completed their forms, and so they were left without bodies or shapes. Of what their role in creation would be, none can say. For they looked upon Man and grew jealous of him, resentful of Man's pleasing form. They wanted to give up their unseen bodies and walk among men. And G-d heard their jealousy and cursed them to remain unfinished for all eternity. The Uncompleted Ones fear G-d and are subject to Him. Some act in His service by punishing the wicked or unrighteous. Those who walk in G-d's ways need not fear them, unless they earn their wrath by mistreating the holy books, practicing witchcraft or otherwise provoking the spirits, for "demons torment only people who annoy them," according to Rabbi Judah he-Hasid. Some Uncompleted Ones walk among men and take the form of men, and as such may be married in the Jewish fashion and may subject themselves to the laws of Moses. Among the Uncompleted Ones, the king is Ashmedai, called Asmodeus, who ascends to Heaven to study Torah and is said to have once outwitted Solomon himself.

Second are the children of Lilith, she who was made before Eve and exiled from Eden. Her children number themselves among the enemies of mankind and are ever out to ensnare and harm the children of G-d. Beautiful to the eye are the daughters of Lilith, and always seeking to lay with the sons of Adam and so perpetuate their numbers.

Third, there are the Others, those who dwell in Sitra Akhra. For all things were created by G-d and blessed by Him, save for Sitra Akhra, which is forsaken by G-d and knows not His beneficence. The demons who dwell there have no regard for the Lord or His children and care for nothing but the spread of their own perverted evil.

E.B.N.

Commentary:

Rabbi N____, may the Lord preserve him always, never fails to illuminate the wonders of creation and surely pleases G-d with his exercise of the

great intellectual gifts he has received. But I must humbly correct his thinking in a few minor ways on the subject of demons and devils.

First, that there are but two classifications into which we may fit the multitudes of demons. First, the Invisible Ones, whom Rabbi N____ calls Uncompleted. These creatures are so numerous that, were they made visible, they would be seen to fill the air and cover the land. It is through the grace of G-d that they remain unseen and unfelt. Each has his own task and burden assigned by G-d. These invisible creatures are subject to the Lord and bear mankind neither ill will nor beneficence, existing only to perform their function in the universe, to scourge man toward a closer rapport with the Creator. They may take on a seeming of a man or animal in this, but they do not marry nor live as men as Rabbi N____ has mistakenly believed, no doubt due to a poor translation of the text of the Book of Brilliance. The Invisible Ones, if treated fairly, will not turn their wrath upon G-d's children. 1

Second, there are the shedim, the children of the four mothers: Lilith, Naaman, Agrah and Mahalath. The shedim dwell in the wilderness. 2. At night they roam the world, seeking harm to those they come across, and teaching the arts of sorcery and witchcraft to those foolish enough to consort with them. The shedim seek to prey upon those weak of mind, plying them with gold and silver, sending them dreams that mix truth and falsehood. Accept from the shedim neither meat nor drink, neither shelter nor succor, nor meet their glance nor hear their words lest they bear you away. 3

1. Young Rabbi L____ is to be praised for his enthusiasm but I must pray to the Lord that he himself never encounters one of the Uncompleted. For not only may they walk and live as men, but they carry all of men's weaknesses and faults. As with men, to treat one fairly is no guarantee that one will be treated in the same fashion. Better to live righteously and follow G-d's commandments, for they fear to harm one beloved by G-d. — E.B.N.

2. Rabbi L____ seems to have forgotten the Scriptures, which clearly state that there are demons cast into the Pit by the Lord. Or does he contend that the gates of Hell are not closed, and none are imprisoned there? Clearly, as the *Zohar* tells us, there must be legions of devils who wander neither the Earth nor the sky, but that wait in chains for the day of judgment. — E.B.N.

3. I am not as gifted at mathematics as Rabbi L____, and cannot explain how one might have four mothers. However, his warnings about the children of Lilith are well taken. Best never to travel by night, for they choose always darkness over the light of the sun. — E.B.N.

He claimed that his master had been trying to find salvation. It turned against its kind and joined others that supposedly wanted to save humanity from destruction and to seek God's forgiveness.

Bruce never revealed the details, but hinted that his demon was killed. When Bruce found himself free, he vowed to continue his former master's war. After some research, he discovered Beth and Lou, others who'd lost their leaders.

Lou claimed that he'd fought alongside his demon. Once he'd gotten past the fantastic aspect of the whole thing, it was nothing more to him than a big gang war. Only now the gang he was fighting for was the entire human race.

He insisted that demons could be killed, and that he'd helped kill a couple.

"You just have to inflict enough damage," he said. "Once the body is gone, the spirit is sucked back into Hell." Sometimes he'd go out of his way to mention the stash of pipe bombs he kept in the theater.

It seemed too simple. Taking down a demon with bullets or explosives?

He just shook his head and grinned whenever I said that.

"Just you wait," he said.

"Just you wait."

Beth seemed to firmly believe that there were "good demons." She claimed that she'd witnessed firsthand how her master had tried to help the sick and the poor. It wasn't like he was trying to buy his way back to Heaven, she said. He, if you can call a demon a he, truly loved humanity. I guess he never forgot his first commandment. He believed that God was no longer watching humanity, and that it was his duty as a former angel to help the children of Adam and Eve.

When her demon died, Beth lost more than her protector, she lost her family. All those hours away from home had strained her marriage. After the demon's death, she must have understood the danger she put them in.

So, she left them. She started to cry when she told me. She couldn't stand the thought of one of them following her home and killing her family. It wasn't abandonment, but an act of love. An act that she hoped her daughter would understand someday.

Which brings me to Jay and I. We were different from the others. Jay and I had been the thralls of a monster, pure and simple — the same one. From the way Beth and Lou talked to us, it was obvious they didn't fully trust us, Bruce's approval notwithstanding. I sometimes wondered if Lou agreed to work with me just to keep an eye on me.



For his part, Jay made it a point to say that he hated all demons. Maybe he believed that, but I suspected it was his way of proving his loyalty to the group. How could he be a traitor when he was the most militant member? Still, I couldn't help but notice Beth's glare whenever Jay went on a rant.

As for me, I was the new kid. I wasn't gung-ho like Jay. I was too quiet. Lou always told me I needed to say more or else they'd think I was plotting against them. He was only half-kidding. I think Lou wanted to believe in me, but he had to be careful.

Listening to the others talk, it seemed unbelievable that the monsters could still act like the angels they once were. I guess it was possible. Only a year ago, I didn't believe that demons walked the Earth. How was I supposed to know which ones were good and which were truly evil? I'd already made one wrong choice. So, I put my faith in the group as a whole to lead me to the right ones. At the time, I believed my salvation lay in seeking out the worst monsters I could find, and to destroy them any way I could.

My chance at salvation came sooner than I expected. About two months after my initiation, we gathered for our weekly meeting. This time we went back to the abandoned theater.

Bruce lit the lantern and motioned for us to gather in a circle.

"We should hold hands," he said.

Lou grabbed mine tightly. I held Jay's hand. Beth reluctantly grabbed Jay's, too.

"Let us pray," Bruce said solemnly. He bowed his head. This time, we nodded our heads in unison.

"Heavenly Father, we who have sinned pray for your forgiveness. We pray that our actions in the coming weeks will purge us of our corruption and prove us worthy of your infinite forgiveness. In your name we pray. Amen."

"Amen," we replied, again in unison.

Bruce raised his head as we released hands. "Paul, Jay said that you used to spend a lot of time with Jill."

I nodded, feeling strangely ashamed. "Uh... yeah."

Bruce smiled slightly, noticing my discomfort. "No need to feel bad. We understand. Did you ever go to her home?"

"Yes," I replied. "She lived in Nichols Hills with her husband."

"How familiar are you with her home?"

Too familiar. "I know where she kept her personal papers, if that's what you're asking."

Bruce chuckled. "You're catching on." He looked toward Beth. "After doing some research and reviewing Beth's notes, I've come to the conclusion that Jill Wilson had an interest in Cherokee culture. Now, I

know she bought some statues dated after the Civil War." He looked toward Beth. "From the notes you sent me, that's what your demon, Constantine, discovered."

Beth nodded.

I nodded, too, though I had to wonder where he was getting his information. "She used to wear a necklace that could have been Cherokee," I said. "I'm not really an expert, but it seemed very old."

"Now that I think about it," Jay added, "she sent me to Tulsa to pick up a package. Tulsa used to be a part of the Cherokee Nation."

"But what does that have to do with her home?" Lou asked.

Bruce turned. "Well, if her personal papers are still there, we might be able to determine what she was looking for."

"Maybe she just had an interest in Native American art," Beth said. "Would that be so hard to believe?"

"Maybe," Bruce replied. He paused. "Maybe she was looking for an artifact or something powerful. Something that she was killed for."

"If she was killed for it," Lou interjected, "how do we know that her killers didn't already look there?"

Bruce shrugged. "We don't, unless we take a look." He turned toward me. "Do you still have a key?"

My heart sank. "No. I never had a key."

Bruce glanced at Lou. "Then we'll have to break in."

Lou rolled his eyes. "I can break in, but we're talking about Nichols Hills. The cops would arrest me just for being there."

"We'll have Beth scout the area. When it's clear, she can call us."

"Us?" Beth said. "No offense, but do we all need to be there? I mean—"

I raised my hand.

"Yes?" Beth asked, obviously perturbed.

"I know where she kept an extra key outside."

Beth tilted her head. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I'm saying it now," I protested. My heart began to beat faster. What was I doing? I was about to take part in a crime. Even when I'd served Jill, I never broke the law.

"Looks like you get a chance to prove yourself, then," Jay said.

Beth glared at me, then turned back to Bruce. "OK, we shouldn't all be in the house. Maybe two or three. Any more and it's impossible to sneak in."

"Are we sure her husband didn't move out?" I asked quietly.

They looked at me for a second.

"I called the place yesterday and he answered," Bruce finally said. "Paul, Lou and I should go. Paul can get us in, and Lou can handle any problems that come up."

"I can give you license plates for the car," Lou said to Beth. "It should throw off any eyewitnesses."

"Do we do it tonight?" I asked.

Bruce shook his head. "We'll do it on Friday." He looked at me. "Doesn't her husband go out to the bars then?"

I shrugged. "He did when I would come over. I don't know if he still does."

"If not, you can call him and say you have something of Jill's. Tell him he should meet you some place far away. When he leaves, it should give us enough time to check out the house."

I sighed. "I guess."

"Hey, you're not getting cold feet, are you?" Lou asked, putting a hand on my shoulder. The gesture wasn't meant to be reassuring. "It's a bit late for that."

Actually, it was worse than that. I was about to become a criminal. What if Trent was in the house? What if Lou had to hurt him, or worse? I'd be an accessory to murder. Was this how I hoped to redeem myself?

"No. This is just different for me."

Lou pulled me closer for a second, then let me go. "You'll get over it. Just think of all the people you'll be saving."

"I guess."

"I still don't see why we can't do this tonight," Beth snapped.

"Why the hurry?" Jay asked.

"Because if we wait any longer," she said, "too many things could go wrong. Especially with someone new." She looked at me. "Nothing personal."

It seemed like an odd thing to say. Was I going to be any less experienced or more confident in two days? Then it became clear what she really meant.

"What are you implying?" Jay asked. He stood up. "Are you saying that Paul and I are going to run to the nearest demon and tell him what we're planning?"

"I'm just saying—"

"This is from a woman who believes in *good demons*," Jay interrupted.

Bruce stood up. "That's enough!" he yelled. "We don't need this." He turned to me. "Paul, will you betray us to anyone or tell anyone of our plans?"

I glared at Beth for a few seconds. She stared back, unmoved by my look. Finally, I turned back to Bruce. Think of the people I'll be saving, I told myself. "No, I won't betray the group."

Bruce touched his crucifix, then gestured to Beth. "He's telling the truth."

"That's well and good but—"

"Even if he's under someone's control, it would see through it."

Beth darted her eyes toward me. "I guess."

We went over the final plans and discussed other business. Bruce later announced that I needed to buy ammunition. Everyone chipped in. It would be my first "shopping trip," so no one expected any problems from the cops. They tried to spread out the duties because it might raise suspicions if one person constantly bought lots of bullets.

God help us, we sounded more like terrorists than saviors of mankind.

CROSSING THE LINE

The next two days flew by. My boss said I was doing better, but noticed that I looked tired. He suggested that I get more sleep. As if I had time to sleep.

Buying the ammunition wasn't a problem. You can never accuse Oklahoma City of having too few gun stores.

I was glad it was summer. I didn't want to imagine how my grades would have suffered. My parents called and wondered what I was up to. I lied and said I was bored. How could I tell them the truth? They nagged me a bit, and invited me to visit them in Moore. I wondered if I would ever see them again.

Friday night finally arrived. The sky, stained brown the last two days by a Texas dust storm, was now a brilliant red as the sun set. A grimy wind blew across my face, and I cursed as I waited for my ride. I was standing near an empty playground. No kids in this neighborhood played outside at night.

Before long, a car pulled up next to me. Beth was driving, and I could see the others in the back seat.

Jay opened the back door. I shrugged out of my heavy backpack and climbed inside.

"Did you get the ammo?" Lou asked as we drove off.

"Yeah," I said, pulling the boxes out of my backpack.

"Put them under the seat," Lou said. "I don't want any cops looking in."

I started to put them away.

"Any problems?" Lou asked.

"No. Guy even asked if I wanted to be on his email list."

"You didn't—"

"Of course not."

We didn't really say much as we drove toward Nichols Hills. I knew the plan. Get the key, let the others in, get Jill's papers, then get out. My stomach knotted up as I thought about what we were about to do. It wasn't really stealing. She was dead, and the information would help us. Still, this was going against everything I'd been taught. It was funny how I could be worried about sin at a time like that, when I'd willingly served an agent of Satan not long before.

Every few blocks, it seemed like we would pass a church. How could one city have so many churches? Even some of the businesses had biblical quotes prominently displayed. Maybe it was some kind of sign from God. I couldn't tell.

Before I started to lose my nerve completely, we reached Nichols Hills, the suburb of Oklahoma City's elite. It's against the law to park a pickup truck on the street in front of the multimillion-dollar mansions. My mother used to call it a snobby place. I just thought they were obsessed with appearances. It seemed that no one but us knew about the thing that used to hide there.

Beth looked up from her directions. "It should be right about here."

To my right, I saw the familiar house, dark except for the outdoor lights. I pointed to the house. "That's it over there." I took a deep breath. Now there really was no turning back.

"Lou and Bruce can go to the porch. It's covered, and should hide you. I'll get the key. Since I've been here before, the neighbors shouldn't be too suspicious."

Bruce looked to Lou.

"Sounds like a plan," Lou replied.

Beth parked the car next to the curb.

"Give us 15 minutes," Lou told her. "Then meet us at that intersection up ahead."

"Just do it," I told myself. Do it for the good of everyone.

Bruce opened his door. "Let's go."

I opened my door and stepped out. We all walked casually toward Jill's former home, each of us carrying a backpack. "We're acting like we're supposed to be here," I thought. "You need to act like that, too." So I quickly caught up to them, then walked at their pace toward the house. I remember when I used to sneak over to her place; her house seemed so inviting. Now it looked like a jagged, yellow, two-story monster. I only hoped that without Jill, it was just an empty shell.

I broke away from the others and walked toward the flowerbed. I wanted to say something, but Lou motioned me to be quiet. I approached the rocks, looking for the fourth one from the walkway. Silently, I prayed to God. "Please let the key still be here. Please don't let Trent have found it. Please don't let anything go wrong."

Whispering an *Amen*, I knelt down and lifted the rock. A glimmer of light caught my eye. I reached for it. It was the key. Dirtier than I remembered, but still there. Before I could breathe a sigh of relief, the porch light lit up, bathing the front yard in a harsh white glare. I looked up and saw Lou and Bruce standing perfectly still. I ran up to the porch. If Trent was there, maybe I could make up a story. When I reached the front door, there was no sign of anyone. The interior of the house was still dark.

"Automatic light," Lou whispered.

Taking a deep breath to calm down, I raised the key to the lock.

"Gloves!" Lou whispered loudly.

I panicked for a second. How could I forget? Quickly, I slipped on some latex gloves.

I slowly unlocked the door. After the lock clicked, I carefully opened the door and went in. It was the same old hallway, even in the dark. Nothing had changed. For a sickening moment, I expected to see Jill gliding down the front stairs. Worst of all was the regret I felt when I remembered that she was gone.

I nodded to Bruce and Lou, and we entered. After I closed the door, Bruce turned on his flashlight. The flashlight lens was covered with a red filter to reduce the glare and lessen the chance of someone seeing us.

"This way," I said as I walked toward the stairs. As we started up, I noted that the burglar alarm was turned off. It struck me as odd, but Jill had often told me how forgetful Trent could be.

We crept up and made our way to Jill's study. I was amazed at how little the place had changed. I opened the door and held as the others went in.

Lou slipped across the room. By the time I reached him to lend him a little light, he'd already sprung the lock on Jill's desk and was going through the neat stacks of papers in the topmost drawer.

We started scouring through her files, stuffing all of her papers into our backpacks. Bills, junk mail, anything. We didn't have time to be selective.

I remembered how I used to be impressed by her study. It seemed so formal and scholarly. Now I felt like a vandal.

We'd been there for 10 minutes, maybe 15, when we heard a noise. It sounded like it came from the back of the house. We paused, not daring to breathe as we listened for signs of movement.

Bruce pointed at Lou. "Check it out."

Lou pulled out his gun and started toward the door.

Bruce looked at me. "Back him up. I'll work on the desk."

My heart lurched, but I reached into my pack and pulled my gun, too. My hand shook. I didn't want to kill anyone, but I'd do what needed to be done.

Lou and I slipped back to the stairwell. He motioned for me to go toward the TV room. I nodded and followed him down the steps. We split up as I went ahead. The room was almost pitch-black, but I remembered the layout. Slowly, I felt my way around, hoping not to crash into anything.

Suddenly there was a staccato rattle of loud pops. I let out an involuntary gasp, only to realize, too late,

that I'd stepped on a sheet of bubble wrap spread just inside the doorway. The lights came on, blinding me for a second.

"Hello, Paul." It was Trent.

He stood in front of me, holding a pistol. I almost didn't recognize him. He was well dressed, as usual, but there was a healthy glow to his skin that I'd never seen before. He looked far better for Jill's loss than I would have expected.

"What's with the gun, Paul?" he asked with a smile. "Were you going to kill me?"

I lowered it. "No," I replied, my nervousness showing. "I thought you might have been a burglar."

Trent chuckled. "I thought the same thing — but then, this is my house. What are you doing here?"

I forced myself to smile. "I wanted to return Jill's spare key."

"You could have dropped it off in the mailbox."

"Yeah," I replied. "But you said I was always welcome here. I wanted to wait for you." I paused. "I wanted to talk to you about Jill. I—"

"Save it." Trent snapped as he put both hands on his gun. He walked toward me, away from the entrance to the downstairs study. "I want to talk to you about Jill. I want to talk to you about all those times you claimed you were just friends. That there was nothing between you."

A chill ran down my spine.

"That was a lie, wasn't it?"

My voice cracked. "Trent, you've got to understand—"

"Just tell me."

I blushed. "Yes. There was more between us. I don't know how to explain—"

"I think you would be surprised at what I'm willing to believe." He pointed the gun at my head. "You see, I used to believe her illusions and lies. I used to think that everything was perfect. She made me think that, you know."

"I know," I said. "I'll try—"

"Don't try!" Trent yelled. "There's no need for you to explain anything, because I can see through it all now." He laughed, sounding a bit hysterical. "I can hear the lies. I know what she was, and I know what you are." He took a step closer.

I started to tremble. "What do you think I am?"

He took aim. "You're a monster. A monster she created."

I shook my head. "Not anymore. She drew me in. I couldn't resist her."

"You had a choice, but you made the wrong one."

"I know. I know that now. But you have to listen to me. I'm trying to make up for what I did."

"Tell that to God," Trent said.

"Leave him alone," came Jay's voice from the hallway.

Surprised, Trent turned and fired at Jay quickly, but missed, shattering the glass frame of an Indian painting. I raised my gun, but Trent had already returned his aim to me. I dropped my gun. He started to move back toward the study.

"Very clever. The angel told me not to kill an unarmed man."

My jaw dropped. "Dear God, Trent you didn't—"

In that moment, Lou jumped out of the hallway and grabbed Trent, putting a knife to his throat.

"Drop the gun or I'll cut you open," Lou demanded.

Trent dropped his gun. Lou started to drag him away from the study. Jay ran from the hallway toward us.

"We've got to get out of here!" Jay cried as I picked up my gun.

Lou nodded. "Now buddy, we don't want to hurt you. We just borrowed some papers—"

"We've got to go now!" Jay said.

A wind suddenly blew through the TV room. Jay retreated away from the kitchen. Lou jerked his head back and suddenly fell to the ground, hit from behind as if by nothing.

THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

I turned around. From the kitchen emerged a tall, almost impossibly thin man. Then I saw his inhumanly large, bird-like eyes. I knew he wasn't human. Trent ran toward the figure. I realized that the air was flowing around the creature.

"Tell me who you are, and who you work for," the being commanded, his words like cold iron.

I pointed my gun, struggling to hide my fear.

The demon stared at us. "Who is your master? Tell me now."

"We have no master," I said, my voice cracking.

"And were not looking for a new one," Lou added. He stood up. "We know your secret."

"Which is?" the demon said wryly.

"That you motherfuckers bleed just like us!"

The monster glided toward us as if it was drifting on a breeze. "And I can kill you with a word. Don't tempt me."

Lou pointed his gun at Trent. "Let's see how tough you are with one less bitch."

The wind returned again, this time gaining in strength.

The demon started to speak when Jay charged at it, swinging a hunting knife. It glanced at Jay and said something unintelligible. Jay gasped for air and fell to his knees. Before he hit the ground, his face turned pale, almost white. He curled up into a ball, moaning in pain.

"Someone call the police!" I yelled as we dragged Jay down the stairs.



"What happened?" a man in his 40s asked as we reached the front lawn.

"Trent needs—" I started to say.

Before I could finish, one of the demons exploded through the roof as if it had been shot from a cannon. As the debris settled, it recovered and unfurled large, owl-like wings. Gracefully, it drifted toward the ground, landing like a feather only a few yards from us. The crowd stared in awe. An elderly couple dropped to their knees and started praying. We kept running.

Suddenly the other one plunged through the wall, sending pieces of brick and wood flying. It pounced toward the first. The spectators screamed and ran.

We reached the intersection where Beth waited.

"My God!" she exclaimed.

I jumped in and pulled Jay in after me. Bruce got into the front seat.

"Move it!" ordered Bruce.

Lou barely got in as Beth peeled out. We could hear the battle raging behind us as we sped from the neighborhood.

"What happened?" Beth asked. "Jay said he saw something and just took off."

We were too stunned to answer. Nobody talked for a minute. Then I felt Jay's forehead as he lay across Lou and me.

"He needs a doctor," I finally said.

"I know one," Lou said. "He owes me."

I leaned my head back against the seat. "I think I need one, too."

"He'll look at you, too. Don't worry."

Don't worry? We'd just faced our first one and lost. If it hadn't been for *another* demon, we'd be dead. Worry? I have plenty to worry about.

I closed my eyes as exhaustion set in. Beneath the traffic, I swore I could hear Jill calling to me. I opened my eyes, but outside the car was only darkness.

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

Pelham told us he had this "thing" to check on, that he'd call us when he was ready. Meanwhile, we were trapped together in a grungy hotel room just outside of Trenton, NJ. It was like being in a cage. Every night, I had dreams. In them I saw the Devil, and he wore many faces. Sometimes he was the driver. Other times I saw Overholt. A few times it was even this cartoon Satan figure with a tail and pitchfork, but it wasn't any less scary. Every morning, I woke up, sweating despite the cold, and I'd decide to leave. But

I never did. I just paced. Or ran down to the gas station around the corner. Or shook.

It was amazing we didn't tear each other's heads off. We came close. Sparks and Tommy went at it a few times. It never came to blows, but neither one seemed to want to back down. Sparks would bring up the whole business with the monster, and how Tommy just sat on his hands and cried like a baby with a shitty diaper. Tommy didn't have much to say, but he called Sparks names — Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal, ape-man. Neither one was being fair to the other.

I came to like and hate both of them. I learned about them, too. Tommy was fresh from Rhode Island. He'd come down south to manage a computer store, moved with his wife and baby girl — a three-year-old named Lisa. Apparently he *saw* Overholt take the girl, and his wife wasn't the same afterward. Just a broken woman, living with her mother, not talking or eating. I got the impression he was doing it more for her than for his daughter.

Sparks, on the other hand, was in it for his kids. I got the impression he didn't like his wife much. Tommy intimated to me that he thought Sparks might even be the type to hit his old lady, but I didn't get that impression. Whatever the case, he wanted his kids back. They were his stars, his celebrities. They could run fast, catch footballs, get the ladies — and in that way, I guess Sparks could do all those things, too. So when they disappeared, it was time to play hero.

We were ready to give up. We were hardly eating. Sleep was a memory of a different time. All the while, there was that unspoken thought like a ghost in the room — *monsters are real*. And they had our children. And we were weak and stupid and powerless.

Two weeks passed before the call came. When the phone rang, we all about pissed ourselves. I answered and waited to hear a devil on the other end give me a death sentence, but it was Pelham.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

A Yankee winter, I decided, was a bitter bitch. Everything was gray and slushy, and everywhere you looked you saw these grimy icicles dripping like poisoned knives. I hated it, hated myself for being there.

Pelham pulled up to the motel. He had a new car, it seemed, no more Airborne van. Now he had a shit-brown Oldsmobile Cutlass 88. Boxy and ugly, it would take us to our deaths or to our children. We piled in.

He passed out manila folders to us again, like some sergeant handing out orders. Inside were black-and-white photographs. A heavy man in a button-down shirt — no tie, just suspenders. Tufts of hair above the ears that supported wire-rim glasses. He was standing beside a podium, talking to some

men in suits. Scrawled at the top in permanent marker was a name: "Oliver Betts."

Pelham started in. Betts was a politician in Pennsylvania, a fat-cat getting rich from taxing the middleclass while letting the bigger boys and their bigger wallets go free, provided they made "donations." Betts was crooked, but not broken. Didn't have a criminal record, wasn't known for cavorting with prostitutes or smoking crack, and actually made some efforts to reform local education. None of that was unique. The fact that he was on some monster's leash was.

"What the hell are you talking about? You mean some people would actually *help* those things?" I asked.

Pelham just laughed. "Sure, why not? They have power. Influence. Why not ride their coattails and see where it takes you? Betts is one of them. Small-time politician; he'll never be president. But he gets a nice cut."

"So what's this have to do with us?" Tommy asked. Looking over at him, I saw that his eyes were gleaming. Something had changed about the kid. I couldn't quite say what.

"Betts funds the schools," Pelham said. "And we're not talking paste-and-crayons schools. The Red Schools. Overholt's little project. Betts puts money in, gets influence, power and votes out of the deal. On the surface, he looks like a friend to the family, keeping kids educated. But scratch the paint and you see the corruption underneath. This maggot helps torture kids, not teach them. I bet he can lead us to the top dog."

Sparks gritted his teeth. "That's what these Red Schools do? They torture our kids? What the fuck for? What do they want?"

Pelham shrugged. He turned onto a bridge that crossed into Pennsylvania, and suddenly we were in the land of antique shops and restaurants — some touristy little shopping district. "I don't know exactly what the Red Schools are about. I only know there's a lot of money there, and that they kidnap kids. Our kids. There are at least seven of them — the schools, I mean. Bankrolled across the country by pricks like Oliver Betts. You boys don't mind paying him a visit, do you?"

Tommy was the first to speak up. "Hell, no. I don't even think we should bother knocking."

"Good," Pelham said. "I like that. Betts has a house about 15 minutes from here. I've heard that his wife and three kids are up in the mountains, doing some skiing. He should be alone. He's probably got files or records to help us get to one of the actual schools. If not, we'll make him tell us."

The words went through my head — *wife, three kids*. Some small voice spoke up. "He's not a monster. He has

a family, like you." But I shoved that thought deep down. That kind of talk wasn't going to do anybody any good. Especially not Tracy. If Mother Theresa could tell me where my daughter was, I'd do whatever it took to her to find out.

At least that's what I told myself.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Betts was outside salting the icy cobblestone walkway that lead up to his big-ass house. Again, that voice piped up and asked me, "How do I feel about a man who's willing to get his hands dirty with a chore like that? Doesn't look like much of a fat-cat politician, does he?" I ignored it again.

The house was practically out in the middle of nowhere. We'd taken a winding, slippery road up and down some hills before finally turning down a long driveway lined with pine trees. It was quiet — no traffic, no sounds, only a few birds chirping.

When we got out of the car, Betts looked at us curiously. We were probably a ragtag sight. I hadn't showered in three days, but he just smiled.

"Need directions?" he asked, and set down his bag of rock salt.

"Yeah," Pelham said, and as soon as Betts got close, Pelham belted the old man right in the mouth. He staggered back, blood flowing from a split lip, staining his teeth. He didn't yell out, didn't call for help. Maybe he knew it wouldn't do any good. Maybe he knew his time had come.

Tommy was on the guy like flies on shit. He kicked Betts and the old man went down like a sack of potatoes. Slush sprayed up. He kept kicking. In the kidneys, in the gut. His face was twisted, and I wondered if he was doing it to make up for what he hadn't done back in Charlotte. Something had broken inside him, I figured. And I didn't much trust it.

"Get him inside," Pelham said, pointing to both Sparks and Tommy. They started to drag Betts away, who kicked, and mumbled through his bloodied lips. Then Pelham looked at me. "Will, you're a big guy. I want you to do the workover."

"What?"

"You know. Hit him. Bruise him, but don't break him. He'll be squealing like a pig with you doing the work, don't you think?"

I couldn't believe it. My heart hammered in my chest and my mouth felt like dry cotton. Torture. That's what we were doing here. And he wanted me to do it? Watching was one thing, letting someone else do the dirty work, but with my own hands? I could make meat out of that old man, I knew it, and so did Pelham. But I didn't want to. I said as much.

"You're not going to do it?" Pelham said, narrowing his eyes like he didn't understand. "What about your daughter?"

"What about my daughter?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, nothing, Will. I'm only talking kidnapping, abuse, probably rape while they're at it. Do you think these schools have nap-time? *They steal children.* And that cocksucker puts money toward it! *We're talking fucking babies!* Don't you want to see him hurt?"

In a way, I did. I pictured the things I could do. He wouldn't have a tooth left in his head if I worked him over, I knew that. And once the anger started, it wouldn't be content to go calmly back down. But then there was a part of me that doubted it all. The man had a wife and kids of his own. He salted his own walkway. Something didn't strike me as right about it all.

"I can't," I said. "Maybe if you showed me proof..."

"Proof? There isn't time for proof. Christ. I thought you'd be into this. Fine. I'll let the others do the work. You wait out here. But if we get the information, you have to decide if you want to be a part of this or not. I can't have people who're afraid to do what needs to be done, you hear me? Tommy's in the game. I thought you were, too."

"C'mon Pelham—" I started, but he was already storming off. He went inside and slammed the door behind him. I guess I wasn't welcome.

CONFESSIONS

They came out about an hour later. I stood outside, pacing most of the time, wishing I had a cigarette. I hadn't smoked since I was a kid, but standing out there in the cold, I could've used one.

When the door opened, the first thing Pelham did was hand me a stack of money. A big stack. Hundreds and 20s, it looked like. I saw the other two already had piles in their hands, and both were counting it.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

"Money," Pelham said like I was an idiot. "Betts had a safe in the wall. Along with everything else he told us, it wasn't hard to get a combination out of him."

They started walking to the Olds. I stepped in front of them and held up my hands. "Whoa, we're thieves now? And what happened to the politician?"

Sparks just stepped past me, staring at the marshy snow off to the side of the driveway. "Tommy, uh, cut him up a bit, and then—"

"I slit his throat," Tommy said. It wasn't quite pride in his voice, but it was something damn near. A cousin, maybe. Like he had up and done something I couldn't even get near, and he enjoyed rubbing my nose in it. Sparks looked like a wounded dog. Maybe he started to realize that he was along for the ride and he wasn't in control. Pelham



just stood there next to the car, licking his thumb and counting his money. The stack of bills felt heavy in my hand. Then I saw it. Blood on the edge of the top bill. Betts' blood.

Pelham grunted. Part of me hated the guy. It wanted to take my fists to *him* for leading me into this nightmare.

"Royce," he said, "I know this isn't how you pictured it. We got information. On the schools. One in Detroit. One in Massachusetts. We'll check both out, but in the meantime, we need money. There's no paycheck, you got that? We don't even have steady addresses. So, when we take down a rich prick like Betts, and there's a chance to put some gas in the car and maybe pay for an emergency-room visit, so be it. It isn't for the money — but we do need it."

"All right, then," I muttered. The son of a bitch had a point. If one of us got hurt, what then? How were we going to pay for craphole motel rooms night after night? Nothing was free, but we sure as hell looked like freeloaders. Ticks on a dog's back. Still, there was that itty-bitty voice in the back of my head telling me there was something wrong, something I didn't quite understand yet, *something*. . . . I shoved it back down again and defiantly told the group, "Let's get moving, huh?" I knew it would come to bear eventually. The sword over my head would drop one of these days. I just hoped I had my daughter back when it did.

It had been too long before we really had anything else to go on or work with. Three long months of eating when you had to, not when you wanted to. Damn near 90 days of sleeping in motel rooms, in people's living rooms, of not brushing your teeth even when you were worried your breath could knock a housefly out of the air. Nobody laughed. Nobody told jokes. To get a smile out of any of us, you would've had to shoot us, wait for rigor mortis to set in, then mold a goddamn grin on our faces. So many unspoken threats. Devils knocking down your door. Bad dreams that you can't wake from. Cops picking us up. A judge and jury putting us in prison. We were criminals, after all. That thought alone made my heart pound.

I'd never been to Detroit, and I'll never go again. It was a festering sore on the lip of the country. They said there were nice parts, but we sure as hell didn't see them. We crawled like maggots up into the underbelly of the city, where we talked to some real shitbag. The first heroin dealer I'd ever met. That was fun. He was some emaciated white guy with skin so pale I was surprised you couldn't see the shit in his veins. Pelham said the guy — Artie — knew things, and was a lookout for Overholt. He kept his eyes out for kids who could "get lost" easily, potential "students" for the Red Schools I kept hearing about. Pelham wanted information, and we got it.

Artie didn't need any torturing. All it took was a little green to get him talking. His allegiances were to the U.S. economy, it seemed, not to Overholt. In some back-alley that smelled like a dead dog, the dealer told us that he didn't know what the Red Schools were about, but that there had been one in Detroit. It had moved. They always move, he said. Overholt wanted kids who could get lost easy, and didn't mind if they were stoned to the gills. Apparently it made them more "pliable." I got angry at that. Were they shooting that shit into my little girl?

"So yeah," Artie said, "I don't mind telling you about that. I have interests elsewhere. There's someone else playing, you know? Someone as big as Overholt. Someone just like him, if you know what I'm saying. A drug lord in fucking Burma, starting an army and a big trade in horse. I'm on his team. I don't owe Overholt *nothing*."

Pelham said that was fine, and thanked him for the information. We left the alley, and when we did, he told me to go back in and kill him. I said I didn't understand.

"He may not be on Overholt's *team*," Pelham said, "but he's still on the wrong side. A demon's a demon, Royce." Then he reminded me of my daughter, but to be honest, he didn't have to. I saw a hundred different versions of her face in my head — battered, bruised, drugged-out, screaming, smiling, crying, eyes torn out, eyes torn open, eyes sewn shut. With every face, I felt my gorge rising. Tommy started to speak up, to tell Pelham that *he'd* handle it, but in the middle of him talking I went back into the alley. When Artie asked me what else I needed, I put my hands around his scrawny little neck and strangled him. I left his body in a trash heap. For a second, I felt better, but it didn't stop me from seeing my daughter that way.

I heard someone behind me and whirled. It was just Pelham. He smiled and shook my hand like I'd just completed some frat initiation. Then he checked Artie's pockets, got our bribe money along with some other cash, and we moved on.

MISTAKES

I saw more of the country after that, but not a whole lot of it registered. I mostly felt numb, and that sort of translated over to my eyes, too. What I saw, whether it was the Poconos or the stinking swamps of Georgia, just passed before me. It was just oil on water. It didn't stick, didn't blend.

We talked to more and more "associates" of the Red School. A banker in Framingham. An accountant in Albany. A school teacher in Milwaukee, and a male prostitute in Gary. All people who, according to Pelham, fed off the monsters — either Overholt directly or somebody who dealt with him. And when I say we

"talked" to them, it's a relative term. We talked with fists and threats and blood. The only one who escaped was the school teacher, who put a steak knife in Sparks' hand before getting away through a patio door. It was a shame, too, because she was one of the worst. She played at being a nice, sweet lady. But she was a front. She scoped out kids for the school. She even helped them along a bit. Helped steal them from families and friends and a normal life into... well, whatever it was that the Red Schools "offered." She told us a lot, too. Said the schools were growing, that there were more and more of them. That we couldn't make a difference. All the children gave Overholt power — they believed in him. And a select few could be made to be like him. As I said, shame that one got away.

It was agony, never knowing, never finding just what we needed. Every time we thought we knew where a school was, it was locked up tight. Or burned down. Every boarded-up window furthered my desperation to get Tracy back. It made it easier to hurt people, too. That disturbed me.

Sparks became more and more withdrawn, and I talked to him about it one night in a motel parking lot. He said he knew we were damned, that we'd gone too far. But the weird thing was, he said he didn't really care. It was a heavy price to pay, but he'd pay if it got him his kids back. He'd take any bullet to see their faces again.

Tommy, on the other hand, came out of his shell more and more. He seemed to not know how to deal with me. Was it admiration for what I was willing to do now? Or was it jealousy that Pelham asked me to take care of the really important stuff? Back in that van, which felt like so long ago, Tommy failed a crucial test. He knew it, too. It was like a secret that we all knew but kept quiet for fear of embarrassing him.

I suppose Pelham liked me for whatever reason. He always pulled me aside to tell me things, for "chats" as he called them. He taught me what he knew about the demons, because he said one of these days we'd fight another one — not one of their money-men or slave-catchers — but another God-forsaken creature like that limo driver. Or even Overholt himself. He told me that there were books. With information, rituals, names. Old books, like from the Middle Ages and stuff. He said he could pass some of them along to me and I could help him, but I told him no. I was too angry, too dumb to figure that stuff out. The part where I shot Vig? That was the part I understood. The anger. Not the library books.

But our fearless leader seemed intent on teaching me — or at least showing off how much he knew, which didn't seem like much at all. But screw it. I'd be his ears if that's what he wanted. And I'd be his hands, and his gun. I'd be his nuclear bomb if I had to. Anything to get Tracy back. Anything.

During those months, there was a lot of time to think. A lot of questions needed to be asked, and somewhere there were concrete answers. Where were the Red Schools? What were they doing with our children? Who were these monsters, really?

But there was always one question that could never have a hard-and-fast answer. *Why am I doing this?* That question sat in my brain on repeat. I had lost everything. My wife was gone. I could never go back to society and be a sane or simple man. I had even foregone my status as a regular citizen. I was a criminal now, because human law didn't figure in the existence of monsters. But I told myself that we were doing the right thing. I didn't concern myself with God or Hell or any other mumbo-jumbo. I let Pelham handle that. What we were doing was the *right* thing. The moral thing. Justice, I guess. Every time I thought about going up against another one of those *things*, I wondered if I could go through with it. It was easy to fake the bravado, to be all, "Yeah, I'm gonna kick his ass a new hole," but when it came down to it, I suspected it wouldn't be so simple. It would be horrifying, and probably the last thing I would ever do. But I told myself, as long as I got to see Tracy one more time, it'd be okay.

I had flashes of my old life — a life that, in the actual measure of time, wasn't that long ago. By my calculation, it hadn't been more than six months, but it felt like a lifetime. More than that, it was like I was looking back on who I was as if he were an entirely different person, a ghost stalking the halls of my own head. Occasionally, the ghost spoke up, asked me to call home and see what Marjorie was cooking for dinner, but I knew that couldn't happen. She was lost to me just like everything else. One day I'd have it back, I thought, one day I'd marry my old self and my new self together, and then we'd have a real goddamn party. Tracy would be there. It'd be a celebration.

END OF THE ROAD

We were in a Wal-Mart in Dayton when it happened. We were just getting supplies, ammunition mostly, because Pelham assured us that we were close. We had a lead on a Red School that had just opened up in Chicago, and we were going to hit it like a hammer.

Sparks and Tommy were arguing over what to buy, and I don't think either one of them knew what the hell they were talking about. I had no idea where Pelham was, so I decided to wander off. I needed a new pair of shoes. The soles were peeling like old band-aids off the bottoms of mine, and since we had a little extra money from the accountant....

I couldn't find the shoe section. It didn't seem to be with the clothes or the socks, but then I caught a glimpse of a display with shoe polish, so I figured that

had to be it. On the way, I passed a shelf of lamps, then candleholders, then picture frames. I kept walking, but something struck me as funny, though I didn't know what — and not *ha-ha* funny, either. I backpedaled and scanned the shelf with the picture frames on it.

Then I saw it — Pelham's daughter was in a few of the frames. I was sure it was her. It was awful strange at first. Why would Pelham's daughter be in the frames? Was she a professional model or something? And it was the same picture he had, too—

Then I realized. Jesus, that wasn't his daughter at all. It was just the picture that came with the frame. Or his fucking wallet. My mind went over it and over it like your tongue on a bad tooth. Pelham didn't even *have* a daughter. I felt angry and confused and wanted to walk out and away from it all, but then I decided I wanted to *find* him. So I looked. I went row after row, past pillows and shower curtains and DVDs until I found him.

He was in the toy department. He had a pack of plastic water guns in his hand, the cheap kind you get, three-for-a-buck. He saw me coming and looked up.

"Will," he said. "What're your thoughts on holy water? You think if we get some priest to bless the stuff that these could squirt it and hurt the bastards? I mean, I know it sounds a little silly, but—"

I grabbed him and twisted his arm around his back and marched him to the end of the aisle. Then I shoved his face against a Monopoly box, crushing it.

"You don't have a daughter," I growled. "You snowed us, didn't you, you shithead? That picture came with the wallet!"

"Royce, get the hell off of me—" he started, and struggled to escape, but I'm a big boy. I drove a jackhammer punch to his kidney, which put him to his knees.

"God! That hurts!"

"Good," I said, towering over him. "You better start talking, Colin, or I swear I'll scatter your teeth all over the floor. And don't lie. *Tell it straight.*"

"OK, it's like this, Will," he said, panting. "You're right. No daughter. Caught me red-handed on that one. I'm after Overholt not because I had a child taken, but

because he screwed me over. I was an investor. I didn't know in what, I swear. I gave him a lot of money, a ton of it to start up a business. You know, venture capital shit. I was always up for a risk, you know? Takes money to make money."

I reached down and wrapped my hands around his neck, like I did Artie's. "Did you know what he was? Did you know about the children?"

Gurgling, Pelham said, "I didn't know jack about the kids. But I knew what Overholt was. That was part of it. I just... gave him the money. He showed off to me, showed me his, uh, his real self I guess you'd say. And I was *sold*. At least, I thought so." I let go of his neck when I saw his face turn purple. "But I was *bought* instead. Lock, stock and barrel. He cleaned me out, Will. Every penny. My house had a for-sale sign on the lawn and I didn't put it there. Every asset I had, drained. I started the Red Schools and I *didn't even know it*. I gave him the start-up and I didn't have anything. I'm trying to fix that mistake."

"Selfish prick," I said. "I'm out. Game over. I oughta kill you right here, but I won't. I'm going to tell the others, then I'm walking."

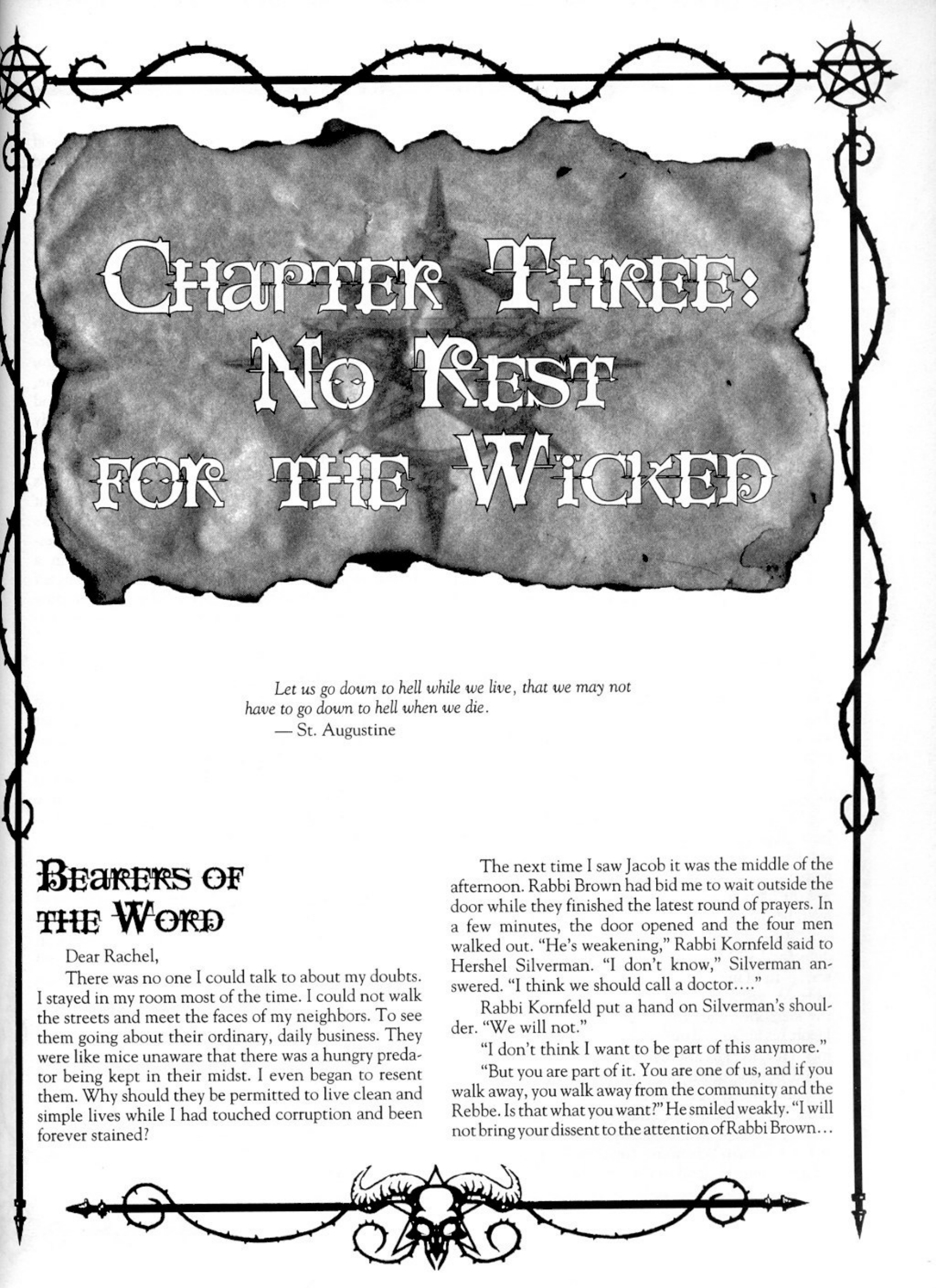
"Wait," he said, standing up and putting his hands out. "The Red Schools are real, Will. They have your daughter. It's not a joke. I can get us there. I'm sorry I lied, but the game's still on. I'm still committed to this. Together we can do it. You don't have to like me, but I know you want her back, don't you? Stay with me. We'll make this happen. Don't tell the others. They wouldn't understand. Are you in? Tell me you're in."

My eyes narrowed. "We're not the first group, are we?"

He swallowed. "No. No, you're the third. The rest—"

"Shut up," I growled. The whole thing made me dizzy. How many had come before? I wanted to die. I wanted to kill this man, but he knew too much. What were our chances if Pelham was dead? My head worked overtime. Tracy. Demons. Red Schools. My hands clenched hard enough to get blood from diamonds. "They died, but we won't. We're going to see this through, do you understand? I won't tell the others. But if I learn that you're holding anything else back, I swear, I'll kill you."





CHAPTER THREE: NO REST FOR THE WICKED

*Let us go down to hell while we live, that we may not
have to go down to hell when we die.*

— St. Augustine

BEARERS OF THE WORD

Dear Rachel,

There was no one I could talk to about my doubts. I stayed in my room most of the time. I could not walk the streets and meet the faces of my neighbors. To see them going about their ordinary, daily business. They were like mice unaware that there was a hungry predator being kept in their midst. I even began to resent them. Why should they be permitted to live clean and simple lives while I had touched corruption and been forever stained?

The next time I saw Jacob it was the middle of the afternoon. Rabbi Brown had bid me to wait outside the door while they finished the latest round of prayers. In a few minutes, the door opened and the four men walked out. "He's weakening," Rabbi Kornfeld said to Hershel Silverman. "I don't know," Silverman answered. "I think we should call a doctor..."

Rabbi Kornfeld put a hand on Silverman's shoulder. "We will not."

"I don't think I want to be part of this anymore."

"But you are part of it. You are one of us, and if you walk away, you walk away from the community and the Rebbe. Is that what you want?" He smiled weakly. "I will not bring your dissent to the attention of Rabbi Brown..."

this time. He would not look kindly on it. And you know what cards he holds over us all."

When they saw me listening, they broke off their conversation, glaring at me as if I was a goy in the Temple.

I spend the first hour straightening up the room. I moved the old furniture into orderly rows and swept up the breadcrumbs, bits of paper and clumps of dust. At some point, Jacob began speaking to me from his cot, his voice heavy with fatigue.

"It was easy to confuse this world for Hell," he said. "The smell of blood and pain was much like the abstract waves of anger and disgust I had known for so long. Minds crying in pain and fear, the air thick with death, oblivion and terror.

"I was on a battlefield. Slaughter was the order of the day. The earthly paradise was gone. What was left was not all that different from the world of shells."

I turned my back as Jacob spoke, and bent over to try and wipe up a strange stain on the floor. "In 10 times ten thousand years of imprisonment," Jacob whispered, "I had not wept, I had not prayed. But when I realized I was standing on soil, I shook with tears and begged G-d to take this unbearable suffering from me.

"And I was answered, but not by the Creator. As I stood among the dead and dying, with barely more physicality than a stray thought, I felt a shadow fall over me. A voice spoke, and though its words were soft, its tone was one of malice and contempt. 'You give into despair too easily, brother,' it said. A kind of dark whirlpool spun in the air before me and the voice seemed to come from within. 'I think what you need is a change of scenery.' And I felt myself taken hold of and flung through space."

"You've eaten your bread for the day," I said to Jacob. "I can't give you any more, so don't ask." I wanted to tell him to stop talking. But his voice was so weak and pathetic. It would be like cursing at an invalid. What was the harm in letting him speak? When his story was over, perhaps I could try to reason with him.

"When I came to my senses, I realized that I was — different. I was folded up like a newspaper. I still feel that way; parts of me are bent and compressed and inaccessible. My vision was clouded, my hearing muffled. And the memories, they came flooding in. A man named Jacob, his life spilled into my mind, everything happening in reverse. His last memory, the warmth of his own blood flowing down the side of his head. Panic and despair as the dying bodies of his comrades fell on top of him. Terror and pain. Thunder, nails and shrapnel tearing into his legs and chest. Gunfire in the distance. An old woman screaming curses at him. A bombed refugee camp, skeletal in the twilight.

"By the time they came for me, pulling corpses off my body before realizing I was still alive, I was paralyzed by memory and traumatized by sensation. It took weeks for my sense of self to return.

"And when it did, something was waiting for me.

"One night, I awoke to find him crouched at the foot of my bed. The other patients in the ward moaned softly. The air smelled of antiseptic and piss. He spoke to me. I started to remember him from the old days. I couldn't recall how long it had been since I'd last seen him. He was far above me. Apparently, he had absented himself from Hell long ago. How, I don't know. But he had power over me, absolute authority according to rules a thousand times more imperative than the laws of physics. My freedom was over. I had exchanged servitude in Hell for slavery on Earth.

"How petty and insignificant my new master's schemes seemed to me, Reuben. Yet I could not but obey. And so I found myself arranging for Jacob's convalescence in America, where I could take possession of a certain ancient book housed within a community of religious literalists, only to find myself unable to set foot on their consecrated ground. Imagine my frustration, my anger, at being incapable of completing such a simple, demeaning task."

Jacob fell silent. I heard footsteps outside the door. The rabbis were returning.

That night, I lay in bed thinking about what Jacob had said. My memory, so well trained over the years, let me replay every word. I came to realize that his preposterous horror story was having the opposite effect from what he intended. I was beginning to see that there was no demon. Just a poor, delusional young man whose mind had snapped under the terrible pressure of war. That had to be the case.

But, I argued with myself, what about the evidence of my own senses? What about the terrifying vision I had? Surely that was a warning from G-d, a glimpse of Jacob's true nature?

Was it? Or was it a delusion of my own, brought on by stress and fear? The Chassidim are not a backward people. Does it befit a trained scholar to believe in such things, in this day and age? Do such superstitions honor the great traditions and wisdom of our people?

I wrestled with these doubts all night, like Jacob — the biblical Jacob — and the angel. The last deliberations I had before sinking into sleep were about the Rebbe. I could not hope to be right if my conclusions were opposed to his. But was not the Rebbe very ill? What if Rabbi Brown had misinterpreted his advice? Or what if... what if Rabbi Brown had never spoken to the Rebbe at all?

If these thoughts gave me disturbing dreams, I don't recall.

BEHIND THE MASK

Dear Rachel,

When I saw Jacob on that last day, I was shocked. He had been getting steadily weaker, but this time all

the color seemed to have drained from his body. His skin looked like wax that would melt away at any moment. He was too weak to raise his head.

"Reuben," he gasped at me, "I don't have much time. I need to warn you. I've told you everything so you'd maybe understand what you're up against."

...and so it is that G-d has not left you at their mercy. For these are the tools given you to rebuke the demon.

1. Prayers. For as it is written in the *Likkutei Etzoth ha-Shelem*, "The main weapons of a Jew are his prayers. All his battles he wins through prayers." The sound of devout prayer is anathema to the ears of Samael and all his false deceivers. Pray in a loud tone of voice, pray with concentration, and let the evil spirit tremble.

2. The Name of the Lord: The Kaballah teaches that the minions of Satan are subject to the Name of the Lord. None may so much as touch the union of the letters Yud and Yud, nor break that which is sealed by the five Heh, or the 12-letter name, or the 22-letter name, or the Holy 72-triad name, which should never be spoken except by the most pure lest he be killed. 1.

3. The Names of the Angels: The 10 ranks of angelic powers are sovereign over all creatures below them and must be obeyed. Let the evil-doing spirit be commanded in the names of G-d's angels to depart. Forget not, in the litany of the good angels, the seraph Kemuel and the seven archangels. 2.

4. The Name of the Enemy. One may force out the enemy without extreme struggle simply by compelling it to name itself and its purpose. In doing so, the spirit heightens the division between it and the soul to which it has become attached. Once revealed, the spirit will in time lose its grasp and leave of its own accord. Be certain, once the demon has fled, to instruct its victim on his duty to find and fulfill the task for which G-d has placed him on the Earth. It is failure to live an engaged life and pursue one's responsibility to G-d that creates an emptiness in one's soul to which the negative entities of the spiritual realm are attracted. 3.

5. The Fruits of the Earth: Scripture tells us that demons cannot tolerate smoke,

particularly that of burning hyssop or cedar, nor the plants themselves, nor their seeds, nor bread, nor salt.

Footnotes:

1. The importance of names, letters and numbers is well known in Jewish mysticism. The multiple significances of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet allow for an extremely complex system of numerology. Ultimately, the writing of letters and numbers is a stand-in for God's act of creation, since by writing one in a sense causes something new to spring into being out of nothing. Demons, representing the destructive aspects of the universe, would naturally be repelled by such acts. — Marla Redner.

2. It's curious that many of the oldest lists of angelic and demonic names overlap, with the same name or variations thereof appearing on both lists. In some of the oldest sources, the very roles of angels and demons seem to blur. Demons are sometimes sent on tasks by God and fulfill them obediently; angels sometimes act as obstacles that a pious man must overcome. Clearly, in the minds of the faithful of previous centuries, the distinction between the two was not as well defined as it is today. — M.R.

3. This last bit of advice resonates curiously with modern psychology. The idea of being "unfulfilled" or not knowing one's purpose in life, and as a result succumbing to darker impulses, is a theme often explored in today's entertainment media. The desire to find one's place in the world is not as new a concept as we might want to think. It's no wonder that the confused, the desperate and the lost are vulnerable to possession by dark forces, supernatural or otherwise. — M.R.

From: *An Annotated Guide to Jewish Demonology* by Marla Redner, PhD, Nephilim Press, 1990.



"What I'm up against?" My own voice sounded alien to me.

"The book I was sent to retrieve. In it is a single word, one that creatures older than time would do anything to possess."

"I don't understand."

"A name, Reuben. A name. The name of a... of one of my kind. Those who know the name know how to use it, can command the power of a fallen angel. My master wanted that name to use against his rival."

"But he didn't get it."

"No." His chest began to quiver and I realized he was laughing. "If irony is the proof of G-d's existence," he rasped, "I became a believer today. Because your Rabbi Brown entered the room this morning carrying the very book I sought. He read from it for hours. And just before sunset the name passed his lips. I knew it as soon as I heard it. I could feel its power. There it was, hidden in some fragment of an ancient exorcism ritual. Do see what I'm getting at?"

"I... I..."

"I don't know whose name it is and I'm too weak to do anything with it, but never mind that. Word of my failure will spread. The one whose name I sought will find out what has transpired here. He will act to keep his name hidden. All who heard it will be eliminated. All."

I realized then what he was telling me. I had been in the room from noon until after sunset. I had heard this name.

"Reuben," Jacob said. "I can't last much longer. This body is dying, starving. You're my only hope. My life is in your hands. I must get out of here. I need medical attention. I need your help."

If he had threatened me, tried to frighten me or offered me protection I would not have been moved. I would have been suspicious. But he was begging me. He claimed be an angel of G-d, but he was begging like the poorest of the poor. And he didn't look like a monster. He looked like my cousin. Like pictures I'd seen of my Aunt Lisa. Like my mother.

"I... if I take you out of here, they'll never forgive me."

"Reuben," he said, seeming to achieve a second wind. "This isn't the place for you. I knew it the day you told me about your travels to Jerusalem. You don't want to spend your whole life wandering the 10 square blocks of this neighborhood. Let's help each other. I need your spiritual guidance, Reuben. I need your faith to help me make my way in this changed world. To make sure I don't do any more harm. Some part of me is still your cousin. Your family. We'll be wanderers

together, exploring the world G-d made and finding our place in it."

He was so weak. So in need of help.

"Will you help me, Reuben? Will you believe that I can help you?"

An answer was on my lips when I heard a door slam. Then another door opening, closer. Someone was coming up the stairs.

"Hide," Jacob told me. "Hide! I'll tell them you went out for bread."

I ducked behind an old covered dresser, just as the door opened. I could only see directly in front of Jacob. Footsteps grew louder and a shadow stretched into my view. And then I could see who had come into the room.

It was the Rebbe.

I almost cried out in joy to see him there. He stood tall and steady, not ill at all, bearing himself like a man half his age.

I watched him in wonder. It was like seeing one of the Prophets come to life. At first I did not reveal my presence out of reverence. Then it was simply because I had no thought but to watch and see what he would do.

He stood over Jacob and did not speak for a full minute.

"Well," he said, his voice stern and unwavering. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Jacob's voice, compared to the Rebbe's, was like a housecat to a lion. "I need a doctor," he croaked. "I don't understand why I'm here. I'm a soldier."

The Rebbe sighed. "Don't play delirious with me, fallen one. I know exactly why you're here."

"I'm so hungry—"

"Enough!" The Rebbe's voice was thunderous. "Don't waste your last minutes on playacting. You have failed your master and fallen into the hands of your enemy, and you have no servants to help you. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Slayer?"

Jacob's face flinched for a moment. Then he pushed himself upright, into a sitting position. "You're more than meets the eye, Rabbi, aren't you?"

"Forty nights ago he came to me," the Rebbe said, slowly pacing to the foot of Jacob's cot and back again. "In a dream the angel came to me. And again the next night, and the next. For seven nights he whispered secrets into my ear, each secret the soul of the secret before it. My prayers to G-d answered at last. I would become the miracle worker so many thought me to be."

"You're boring me, Rabbi. If you're going to be boring, at least do it in Hebrew."

"He told me you were coming, that you would try to tempt and corrupt my children. He bade me

watch for you, told me how to trap you. The angel Mordiel, one of the 777 bearers of the shadow of the throne of G-d. And now you are in my power as he said you would be."

"Mordiel..." Jacob's eyes narrowed. "Could it be...?" And then he laughed. I had never heard laughter so bitter, so pained, so close to weeping. "Oh Rabbi, if you only knew... Mordiel. An angel. Can you hear me? Whose name is it that you have tucked away here? Not your own. You're too crafty for that. You need to keep a better eye on your servants, though. They're trotting out your hidden treasure while you're not looking!" He laughed again.

The Rabbi moved so quickly that he was upon Jacob before I could blink. "Laugh, then, creature. Mazzikim. Laugh your way back into the pit!" Jacob tried to fight, but he could not pull the Rebbe's hands from his throat. He clawed at those mottled and knobbed fingers, but he was too weak to so much as scratch the Rebbe's skin. The sound he made was awful. His gasps for breath seemed to echo through the room like waves crashing over a rock. I had to turn away, and then I heard a cracking snap and a dull thud. By the time I looked up again, the Rebbe was walking toward the door. In another moment he was gone.

I had a little money. I knew where Mrs. Brown kept her household cash, and I took most of it with tears of shame streaming down my face. I threw some clothes in a bag. I was on a bus within an hour.

WAITING IN THE NIGHT

I haven't stopped running since. At first, I thought to hide within some other courts. Though they were courteous to me, I didn't belong. And I feared that even though I used a different name, word would get back to the old neighborhood and I would be found. I was staying in a Lubavitch home, rooming with a visitor from Israel. I stole his plane ticket and identification. He wasn't planning to return home for weeks, so I knew he wouldn't miss them. I cashed in the ticket and took an earlier flight.

I have a friend in Jerusalem whom I met during my visit there years ago. I'll mail this packet of letters to him, and he will hold them and send them to you, Rachel, when you are 14.

I've shaved off my beard. But it's not enough. They are hunting for me. They have hollow eyes, tired faces, but they know me. I've avoided them so far. I've fled the city for the countryside. I stay at hostels and inns. At night something scratches at my door, sniffing like a dog. Somewhere in my head is a word, a name, and the thing that it belongs to wants it back.

Our forefathers had no difficulty believing that demons walked the Earth. Yet neither did a belief in evil spirits behind every tree leave them paralyzed with fear. To them, demons were an aspect of creation, no more to be feared than other dangerous phenomena, like a storm or a plague. We're bombarded daily by news of the terrible things that can happen to us, and indeed that do happen to many of us. As result we develop ulcers, depression and anxiety disorders. What did our ancestors have that we don't?

In a word, faith.

We laugh at the supposed superstitions of those who came before us, even as we strive to preserve and honor the traditions they left us. But an examination of the widespread belief in demons and evil spirits of pre-industrial Jews reveals that they were not less rational than we are. Their superstitions enabled them to exercise their faith on a daily basis, in a (to them) very real and immediate way. If there were

demons all around, then too there must be the presence of God to keep them at bay. If Satan was striving constantly to destroy God's chosen people, and failed, then certainly no mortal king or potentate could do them harm.

Today, we can raise that kind of faith in ourselves by recognizing demons for what they are: externalized aspects of the darker impulses in all of us. If we imagined our pettiness, our anger, our greed, our indifference to walk the Earth in physical form, surely it would be no less ugly than Asmodei and his ilk are said to be. But they're invisible, and they're inside us. Can we exorcise them? Perhaps. The first step is to know and name them for what they are, like the rabbinic miracle workers who demanded that possessing spirits identify themselves.

— Introduction to *Dybbuks, Darkness and Divinity: Ghost Stories of the Jewish People and what We Can Learn from Them*, by Marla Redner, PhD, Nephilim Press, 1998.

I am trying to find someone to help me, a rabbi or scholar, but they are chasing me and I don't know where to go. I don't dare to make contact with family or friends. I don't know which strangers to trust. Already I have met so many liars and madmen.

I am forever tainted by the touch of evil. The world is no longer the same. I hear of murder and warfare and I wonder if it is Satan's angels who cause the suffering. Would our Holy Land be marked by such strife if the children of Hell were not walking the Earth? Some days it is all I can do to keep myself from grasping passersby by their shoulders and screaming the truth to them. Perhaps that will be my end. Perhaps I will become one of the raving lunatics who shout their tortured thoughts from the street corners of Jerusalem.

I don't know what I'll do.

As I write this, you are too young to read. But when you are old enough, you will want to know what happened to Jacob, your oldest brother. And now you know the truth.

I've thought and thought about it, and I realize now how I brought all this on myself. It was my pride, you see.

The day I received Aunt Lisa's letter, I took it upon myself to visit Jacob on my own. I wanted to perform the mitzvah, the good deed, for myself, rather than to share the blessing with the Rabbi and our community. I acted on my own as if I was someone special. And blinded by this arrogance, I started on a path leading to tragedy, pain, exile and death. I was not expelled from G-d's kingdom. I evicted myself.

Most likely, as you read this, I am no longer on this Earth.

But forget what I wrote at the beginning. Pray for me, Rachel. Please.

BROKEN BONDS

About a week passed after the debacle at Jill's house. I hadn't heard from the others at all. *The Daily Disappointment* ran an article about it, but they only printed police illustrations of the two "burglars." Every time police officers walked into the cafe, I feared that they were looking for me.

That night, I went over the papers I'd stolen from Jill's study. Most of them were financial, which

made for very dry reading. It seemed like she was saving up money for something. I couldn't tell what it was for.

I didn't even know if Jay was still alive. He'd seemed pretty sick, and when Bruce sent me home, I overheard them arguing over whether to send Jay to the hospital, because the doctor couldn't help him.

Around 9:00 P.M., the phone rang, interrupting my reading of yet another balance sheet.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Paul," said a weak voice.

"Jay?"

"Yeah. How are you?"

"How am I? My God! How are you? You were unconscious the last time I saw you."

Jay tried to laugh, but lapsed into a rattling cough. "I may not sound like much, but I'm feeling better. I guess they got someone to drop me off at the hospital."

"How long have you been awake?"

"On and off, about a day, maybe less. It's hard to tell. They've got me on some serious antibiotics and painkillers. Sometimes it's all just a blur. I kind of prefer it that way."

"I'm—"

"Paul," Jay interrupted. "I need to ask you something."

"Sure. Anything." I looked out the windows. "But I think the cops could be, you know... the phone might not be safe—"

"It doesn't matter," Jay replied, breathing heavily. "They won't understand this, but you will. Have you dreamed about Jill lately?"

I hesitated.

"Tell me the truth. Any dreams about Jill? Dreams or nightmares?"

I closed my eyes, afraid of the truth. Afraid of what Jay might think.

"I have to know," Jay insisted.

"Yes." I whispered.

For a long time I heard only background noise on the line. Then Jay finally replied. "Me, too."

My heart sank. "We were both very attached to her. I mean, it would be unusual if we *didn't* dream about her, right?" But the words sounded hollow, even to me. A feeling of cold dread seeped into my chest.

Jay didn't reply. I felt myself shaking.

"Come on. If she were back, we'd feel the bond. We'd have to. We don't because she's—"

"She wants to come back," Jay whispered.

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"Paul, shut up and listen to me," Jay said. After a long silence, he continued. "I constantly dreamed about her while I was sedated. She spoke to me, and showed me... things." He coughed. "She's trying to come back, Paul. She's already escaped Hell once, and she thinks she can do it again."

My hands felt cold.

"Paul," he said, "I'm going to leave. It's too dangerous for the others."

"They won't let you leave. They'll—" I stopped myself.

"Yeah, they'll repossess my decoder ring," Jay said bitterly. "You might want to think about leaving, too."

"You know I can't." I quietly replied.

"Paul, remember when we first met?"

"Yes."

"I was wrong. There are other paths to salvation. With Jill coming back, the group might not be the best path for us."

"Don't say that!" I yelled.

Silence.

"Jay?"

After a few seconds, he finally replied, "Can you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Jill still has... friends here. They're after a book. It's more like a journal. It's really old. Jill told me to get it for her friends. Paul, we can't let it happen."

"Did she tell you what it is?"

"No," Jay answered. "It's written in some ancient language. I didn't understand it or recognize it." He paused. "Promise me you'll find it and keep it safe."

"But I don't know what it looks like. How can I—"

"Promise me!" pleaded Jay. "Please."

I caught myself scanning the street outside the apartment, though I had no idea what I expected to see. Suddenly, the thought of armed cops bursting through my door didn't seem all that frightening. Funny how your perspective can change in the blink of an eye.

"Okay, I promise. But if—"

"I'm not coming back. I'll explain it to Bruce."

"Bruce!" I cried. "There's no way—"

"I can be pretty persuasive," Jay said. "Just remember what I said."

My eyes burned. "I don't know," I said, trying to lighten the mood, "taking advice from a pizza guy—"

Jay laughed. "Fuck you, Paul."

I chuckled. "You should—"

"Goodbye," Jay said, and the line went dead.



I don't know how long I held onto the phone before I finally hung up. I can't say that Jay and I were close, but we were linked. We both had the same mistress. Both of us were distrusted by the others in the group. You could say that the adversity bound us together.

Now that bond threatened to take me down. Jay felt so strongly that Jill was coming back that he was running away. Now I had to decide how real the threat was. No demon could reach out from Hell, I told myself. Or could they? If she could get out once, why not try again?

I wasn't prepared to quit. Not after our disastrous run-in with those demons. To be honest, I wanted another chance to earn God's salvation. The question then became, would the others let me?

A PRAYER FOR THE Dying

Three days later, Beth called me. I felt a chill when I recognized her voice.

She gave me the address of a park not far from the theater.

"Bring your gear and make sure you've finished your homework," she said.

"What time?" I asked.

"Four. Don't be late." She hung up.

There's no way they'd kill me in such an open place, I thought. Maybe they reasoned with Jay and everything would be all right. No matter how many times I told myself that, I still had doubts. My papers were hidden in my room. A life-insurance policy of sorts. If I'd had more time, I would have rented a safe-deposit box.

I arrived 10 minutes early. A few kids were playing on the swings and slides, while their parents hung out in the shade. It must have been over 100 degrees outside.

Before long, I found Beth at one of the tables. Her back was turned to me, as if she was reading something. As I moved closer, I realized she was praying. Every once in awhile, she'd wipe her eyes, and resume.

"Beth?" I asked.

As she faced me, I could see that she was holding a drawing done on a yellow sheet of paper. I made out a red stick figure, maybe a blue sun, and some crude printing. Beth quickly folded up the paper and put it in her shirt pocket.

"You're early," she said.

"Are you okay?"

She wiped her eyes. "Sit down, Paul."

I sat down across the table from her.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

The sadness seemed to drain the life from her face. "They're around," she said woodenly.

I looked around. No sign of them, but they could have been hiding in the bushes for all I knew.

"I have something to tell you," Beth said. "Jay is no longer one of us."

I tried to act surprised. "What happened?"

"I'll be your contact from now on."

"You didn't answer my question," I said.

"It's better that you don't know."

I felt dizzy for a second. "I thought none of us could leave."

Her eyes narrowed. "It's none of your business."

"It—"

"Do you have the papers?"

I took a deep breath. "I can tell you what I found."

"You don't have them?"

"They're in a safe place."

Beth said nothing for a while. "Don't worry," she finally said. "If Bruce thought you were a danger, you wouldn't be here." I felt her stare like a steel weight.

"But—"

"Don't make this any harder," Beth snapped. The sadness in her eyes hardened into resolve.

I didn't know how to respond. They must have killed Jay. For the first time, I truly felt trapped.

"Bruce will be here soon. You can tell him what you found," Beth said.

A few minutes later, a car pulled up and parked by the side of the road. Lou stepped out of the passenger's side. He motioned for us to walk over. I followed Beth to the car, even though the doubts about my current path had never been greater.

Beth and I got into the backseat. Lou stared at me while Bruce drove.

"Do you have the papers?" Bruce asked, his eyes locked on the road.

"Not with me," I replied. "I can summarize them if you like." Without waiting for his approval, I told him what I'd learned. Bruce looked ahead, never acknowledging my words.

When I finished, he sat in silence for a while, thinking things over.

"It actually makes sense. We've been able to determine that she was trying to buy a book from a church's collection."

"So where are we going?" I asked.

We were now caught in rush-hour traffic.

"Where—"

"We're going to the church," Bruce finally replied.

None of us spoke as we drove to the church. The trip probably lasted about 20 minutes, but it felt like hours. The dread over Jay's death suffocated the life out of the car. Maybe it was the first time they had to kill one of their own. If so, I hoped that it left scars they wouldn't quickly forget.

LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS

What had we become? I'd joined this group to strike back at the demons that were trying to enslave humanity. So far we'd only succeeded in killing one of our own. Despite Beth's reassurance, I feared that I was next. It didn't seem like the path to salvation I'd chosen. At that moment, I felt like I'd entered another Hell. Had I made another wrong choice? I didn't think so. I had to have faith that it was all some sort of test, either from the others or from God, to prove my worth. I looked out the window as we passed a modern church. I silently prayed that this book could provide the clues we so desperately needed to strike back at the demons.

We eventually reached what appeared to be a small Catholic church. It looked to be at least a hundred years old. I couldn't really tell, but it seemed much older than a lot of the others in the area. Bruce pulled into the mostly empty parking lot.

"We have an appointment with the priest," Bruce said. "Lou, you and Paul should stay in the car."

We waited for about 30 minutes. I was afraid to say anything. Finally, Bruce and Beth returned. Bruce held what appeared to be an old journal, its pages yellow with age.

"Thanks to Beth, we can borrow this book for a couple days," Bruce said. I didn't ask how they pulled it off. I honestly didn't want to know.

We left the church and drove back to The Starlight. None of us spoke for the remainder of the trip. I was relieved no one died this time — especially not me. Still, I couldn't help but remember Jay's warning. Was this the book he warned me about? Was it so important that Jill would try to reach out from Hell to convince us to get it?

We parked a few blocks from the theater by some run-down apartments and walked the rest of the way, our backpacks loaded with gear. Upon reaching The Starlight, we crept in the back way and turned on our flashlights.

"What now?" I asked.

"Follow me," Bruce replied.

We approached the stage. Lou and Beth moved away from me, while I kept following Bruce. Once Bruce and I were on stage, he knelt down and lit the lantern.

"I have a few questions to ask you," Bruce said, standing up.

Lou and Beth stepped into the light, now holding shotguns.

I dropped my backpack. "Yes?" My heart started to race. Were they going to kill me?

"I want you to tell me about your dreams."

I glanced back at Beth and Lou. Their guns weren't pointed at me, but that meant nothing.

"If you're going to kill me, do it now," I said. "Don't toy around with me."

Bruce smiled. "Paul, I don't believe you're going to die tonight. But I have to be sure of certain things. Unlike Christ, we can't afford a Judas amongst us."

"I'm no Judas," I said.

"Then tell me about your dreams. Have you dreamed about Jill?"

"Why do you care about my dreams?" I asked. How did they know about them? Had Jay told them?

"If you have nothing to hide, then you can answer me," Bruce replied.

"Yeah, I've have dreams about Jill."

"How many times?"

"Twice."

"Tell me about them."

"She'd call out to me. That was it. Nothing—" I stopped myself.

"Go on."

I couldn't let them know that Jay called me. "Nothing important."

Bruce approached me. "That's for me to decide." Again, he smiled. "You have nothing to fear from us. Or me."

"Is that what you told Jay?"

Bruce put his hand on my shoulder. "Jay knew there was only one way out. Do you know the way out?"

"When Jill died, I was freed. I'm still free, and if you kill me, you'll have to answer to God for your mistake."

"Are you sure you're free?"

"Jay may have had doubts, but I don't."

Bruce released me and paced for a few seconds.

"Are you sure you don't want to change your answer?"

"No."

"I don't like the tone of your voice, Paul. It sounds like you're hiding something."

My jaw dropped. Beth put a finger on the trigger of her shotgun. Was he calling me a liar? "I'm telling you the truth, Bruce," I said, surprised at the anger in my voice. "I thought you could tell the difference. Or

is that just a convenient lie to get people to do what you want?"

"Am I interrupting something?" spoke a voice from the darkness.

Beth and Lou pointed their guns toward the seats. Bruce shined his flashlight toward the voice. The beam revealed a man wearing a blue polo shirt and black jeans. He had short, black hair and a thick mustache.

"Put down the guns," Bruce said with a sigh, and motioned to Lou and Beth. "He's with me."

"Who the fuck is he?" Lou yelled, his shotgun never wavering.

"Someone I trust," Bruce said.

"Indeed," the stranger said. "He invited me."

"Come on up," Bruce said, beckoning to the man. "Lou is just being careful."

Lou lowered his gun. I made my way toward my backpack. With the others distracted, I pulled out my pistol, holding it by my side.

"Sorry I'm early," the man said affably, "but I've got a lot of things to do tonight."

Beth shot a warning look at Bruce. "What's going on here? You know the rules."

Bruce nodded as he reached into his backpack. "I also know that he can be trusted." He looked up at the man. "Though we were supposed to meet at the restaurant."

"What can I say?" the man replied, spreading his hands. "I guess I was never really good at following directions."

Bruce pulled out the small book. "My friend here has provided useful information about the enemy. I thought he could help us with the book."

The man stepped on stage. "Cherokee is a third language for me," he said with a smile.

"I don't give a fuck!" Lou yelled. "Why didn't you tell us about him?"

"The less you knew the better," Bruce replied.

"Why?"

"In case you were ever captured."

"Enough!" the man said sharply. "You guys can argue about this later. Right now, I need the book so I can work on the translation. If I get it now, you can have it back tomorrow."

Bruce turned to the man and started to hand him the book. It was in those seconds that I had to make an important decision. Did I heed Jay's warning or did I trust Bruce? To believe Jay's warning meant I had to accept that I, too, was susceptible to Jill. To trust Bruce meant that this man could help us find an important clue.

The man reached out for the book and I raised my pistol. I wanted to believe Bruce, but I had my doubts. How had Bruce discovered the book's existence? Could I afford to take the chance that the book wouldn't fall into the wrong hands? The man was about to grab it. I had to go with my gut, for the sake of humanity.

I pulled the trigger.

The bullet made a ragged hole in his shirt, just right of his breastbone. The man staggered backward. I fired again. Blood blossomed against his shirt and he staggered closer to the edge of the stage. Another shot. It felt like time was moving in slow motion. This time I hit him in the forehead.

I felt a shotgun muzzle against my ear.

"What are you doing?" Lou yelled.

I was too stunned to answer. The man was unharmed, and the small wound in his head closed before my eyes. Before I could say a word, he flew into the darkness, vanishing from sight. Bruce staggered back as if he were struck by a shock wave.

Bruce turned toward me. His mouth opened, and out streamed a flood of unintelligible words that seared our ears like acid. Each word hit Lou and me like a physical blow. I fell backward. Suddenly, the words stopped. Bruce looked up and screamed in pain. As I watched him, the memories came back. Memories from the moment Jill drained my soul, feeding on my trust as she fought to keep from being banished. Now Bruce was experiencing the same pain.

"He's still one of them!" I yelled.

Beth, her eyes wide with shock and fear, fired at Bruce. His chest erupted as the buckshot tore through his body. Lou got off the next blast. Part of Bruce's head exploded. I cringed as I watched his face disintegrate. What was left of Bruce crumpled to the ground, arms outstretched.

"Oh my God," I yelled. I'd never seen someone die in front of me before, and it was even more horrific than I'd ever imagined. I don't know how long Beth and I stared at the body.

"Beth! Paul!" Lou yelled. "Where did the demon go?"

We shook off our horror. I reached into my backpack to pull out some extra clips and a hunting knife. Lou ran offstage and returned with two more duffel bags, and then we heard an inhuman cry coming from the darkness. Beth stepped further back from the edge of the stage, her gun ready.

"We've got to make our stand here!" She cried.

She was right, in a way. This was where we had to prove ourselves. It was time to earn our salvation, even if the odds seemed hopeless.

Scanning the darkness, I heard a familiar growl, one that I'd heard only days before. I readied my pistol, remembering the monster that broke into Trent's home. Lou was wrong. There were *two* demons in here with us.

Suddenly a shadowy form swooped toward me. I got off one shot before the figure slammed into me. Its impact sent me flying across the stage. As it pounced, the black form transformed into the beast demon I'd seen at Jill's house. It landed on top of me. My gun was several feet away. I stared at its red claws, expecting to be sliced open. Instead, it punched me in the face. The blow broke several of my teeth. I heard shotgun blasts going off. Each hit shook the creature and it jumped off me.

I spit out teeth, then saw the demon land in front of Beth. Terrified, she kept firing, each shot barely harming the beast.

I forced myself to get up and staggered toward my pistol. Even with the room spinning, I knew I had to do *something*. I couldn't let it win.

Beth started to turn, but the beast slashed at her head. She flew through the air like a paper doll and fell hard to the floor.

I reached my gun and started firing, praying that I wouldn't hit Beth. I managed to get it in the leg at the same time that Lou shot it in the back. The creature howled and I noticed it bleeding for the first time. It leapt toward me as I kept firing. It landed inches from me. Instead of killing me right there, it picked me up and threw me toward Beth. My shoulders and knees exploded in pain, but miraculously nothing seemed broken.

The thing leapt toward Lou. He swung at its face with the butt of his gun. The demon dodged and then swiped at Lou with its claws. As Lou fell to the ground, the beast grabbed his shotgun and bent it in half.

A shot from Beth interrupted it. The creature turned toward her and leapt into air. Before I could do anything, it thrust its claws into her stomach. Blood spurted from her mouth. I wanted to scream, but no sound came.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something flying through the air toward the beast.

"Think fast!" Lou yelled.

The demon caught what I then realized was one of Lou's pipe bombs. I dove for cover and felt the explosion, followed by the creature's scream. It was holding the bloody stump of its right hand. Another pipe landed at its feet. I rolled away before it went off. The explosion echoed through the theater. I barely saw the thing leap up into the darkness.

Lou pulled out a pistol and started firing at the ceiling. "Come on down and finish this!"



I knew it was healing, and that there was another demon lurking somewhere in the shadows. Beth was dead, and I didn't like our chances. Somehow, I had to make sure they didn't get the book. Maybe that would be my contribution to it all.

After making sure my knife was still under my belt, I forced myself up. My back and arms hurt, and my jaw throbbed, but I had to keep going. I ran as best as I could toward Beth. As I feared, she lay motionless in a pool of blood. Though I wanted to mourn her, I didn't have time. I took the pistol she had and flipped off the safety. I quickly scanned the area and found the book not far from Bruce's body.

I ran toward the lantern, its glow starting to dim. I could only pray that enough fuel remained. I grabbed it with my free hand.

"What are you doing?" Lou yelled.

I ran a few more feet, then tossed the lantern toward the book. The lantern shattered next to it. Praying, I opened fire on the book. The lantern fuel caught fire, igniting the book. A second later, I felt something shove me to the ground. The fire exploded into a blaze. When I looked up, I saw the demon raising its fist. There was no way I'd survive.

Lou leaped through the flames and drove his shoulder into the thing's back. It staggered off me and

turned. Lou opened fire directly into its face. The beast, blinded, slumped over as Lou kept firing. "Get out of here!" he yelled.

That wasn't an option. In the flickering light, I saw the bags where Lou must have kept his pipe bombs. I jumped up and ran toward them as I pulled out my knife. Grabbing one of the bags, I stabbed the knife through the canvas. Looking at the exposed blade, I hoped I had enough for what I planned.

Lou's gun emptied. Before he could run, the creature shoved him toward the fire. Lou tripped and fell into the flames.

"You gotta do better than that!" he yelled, laughing hysterically as his clothes caught on fire.

The demon pulled Lou out of the flames and started to beat him.

With the creature's back turned toward me, I stuck the bag in the flames. The end caught fire. Praying, I looked at the exposed blade. With every ounce of my remaining strength, I charged at the demon.

Give me strength, I silently begged God.

I drove the knife into its thick hide, pinning the bag of bombs to its back. The demon's fist missed the top of my head by inches as it spun around. I stuck my pistol in the thing's face and fired. Once again, the shot blinded it. Now I just had to hold out

until the bombs went off. I was going to die, but I'd take the demon with me. I kept shooting, knowing that I was going to run out at any second. Did I have enough time?

To my horror, I saw Lou move. He screamed in pain, his body almost totally engulfed in flames. Somehow, he made his way to the beast and jumped on its back.

"Run!" he yelled, his burning body pressed against the pipe bombs.

I ran as fast as I could, stopping only to throw the other bag of pipe bombs at the demon. It reached back and impaled Lou with its claws. After turning around, I fled into the shadows backstage. Moments later, I heard an explosion, followed by a shock wave that knocked me into a hallway. I tumbled to the floor.

I looked back and could only see the burning stage. I couldn't stand, so I crawled to the door. When I looked back one last time, I saw Bruce's demon floating above the flames. As it came toward me, the fire seemed to trail behind like a comet. I tried to crawl faster as the flames approached. It picked me up like a mouse in its talons. After smashing through a boarded-up window, we landed behind a run-down apartment complex.

The demon shook its head gravely.

"After so many millennia, humans never cease to amaze me."

"Go back to Hell where you belong."

He snorted. "I should send you there, little man. Do you realize what you've just done?"

The pain from my wounds finally caught up to me, leaving me gasping for breath. I could only shake my head.

"We thought we could control your little group," it said. "We used you to get the book from holy ground."

I heard sirens in the distance. "Too bad it's all burned up," I said with a strangled voice.

The demon leaned closer to me. "That book was going to help us free a powerful ally." It shook its head again. "I'll never underestimate humans again."

I gritted my teeth against the pain. "You had Bruce in your pocket the whole time, didn't you?"

The demon nodded. "Yes. We used him to organize you. All that childish talk about 'good demons' and 'bad demons.'"

"But you needed the book," I replied. "And you didn't count on us destroying it."

The demon tensed. I could see the anger in his eyes. "No, we didn't." He took a deep breath, then relaxed slightly. "I didn't expect you to be able to kill my associate, either."

The sirens grew louder.

"I doubt that you'll escape police scrutiny this time... unless you want to make a deal?"

Though my hands ached, I still had the strength to give him the finger.

The demon growled, then turned to walk away. After a few steps, he looked back and said, "The being you knew as Jill is coming back, you know. It's only a matter of time. Say hello to her for me."

Then he left.

LIVE FREE OR DIE

After hiding behind some dumpsters for longer than I can remember, I snuck away. I got to the convenience store. The clerk remembered me and reluctantly let me use the restroom to clean up. I eventually managed to catch a bus back to my apartment.

Now I'm sitting at the Oklahoma City National Memorial as I write this. I'm trying to make sense of everything that's happened.

Jill appears in my dreams more frequently, and I now believe she's coming back very soon. The worst thing is that part of me wants her to come back. I know I'll be hers again.

Why didn't I kill myself when I had the chance? When I started writing this, I didn't know the answer. Looking out at the reflecting pool and all the empty metal chairs, I think I now know why. I had to fight against the evil that's loose in the world. An evil not that much different from the one that drove Timothy McVeigh to kill so many innocent people. I had one brief moment to do good, and I took it. When I started writing this, I regretted my choice. Not any more.

When I joined the group, part of me was in it for my own soul. Now I realize that I was being selfish. I had to take a stand. It didn't matter if my actions someday outweighed my sins. Fighting them was the only choice.

Now I hope the action I'm about to take is the right one. I wanted to think I could keep fighting the demons until Jill came back. Who was I kidding? How could I know when the 'right time' was? I could become her slave again any second and undo everything I'd worked for. I think this is the only choice I have.

Tonight, I'm going to post on Usenet, and then kill myself. I hope that maybe, just maybe, I'll inspire someone to continue the fight. I realize most people will write me off as a nut. But I have faith that someone will be inspired.

How does the old saying go? As long as one good man refuses to yield, evil will never triumph?

I hope it'll be enough.

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

By August, Pelham was dead. I didn't know how to feel about it. On one hand, he was a liar and a manipulative prick. On the other hand, he was the only one of us who had a goddamn clue. I think the others felt the same way, at least a little. We were all scared as hell. That's for sure. The way we found him, in our hotel room — he was cut to ribbons on the bed closest to the door. The three of us just stood there. Flies buzzed around, landing on the sticky red pillows. Pelham's fingers were curled like claws around a nice piece of paper — cardstock, like a wedding invitation, bound up with a soft red ribbon.

The other two just stared. I picked it up and unrolled the damn thing.

In fancy handwriting, like you'd get with a quill and an ink dipper, it said: *You're lucky I missed you. Begone.*

And that was it. We took the keys, and got the fuck out of Dodge.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

We'd been close, too. There was a Red School in Dayton, and we'd been sniffing it out like good little bloodhounds. It was somewhere nice. Oakland Park, or maybe up by the University. It was hard to say, but apparently we'd been leaving enough of a trail behind us. We weren't careful about it. Definitely messy. And because of that, our fearless leader got himself carved up like a tender filet. We were lost, a flock without a shepherd. Sparks had an idea that I couldn't help but agree with — we went to a bar and started drinking like it was the end of the world.

Sparks downed pint after pint of Black and Tans, and Tommy had gin and tonics. I had scotch. A glass of whiskey, ice and nothing else. A friend of mine used to say that it was "his favorite mixed drink." I couldn't help but agree.

We all knew why we were there and what we had to talk about. So instead of sitting and watching the TV at the bar, I pulled us away and plunked us down in a dark corner booth in back by the pinball machines. And then I said it: "We can't stop yet."

Sparks nodded. Tommy frowned.

"Goddamn right," Sparks said, gesturing with the pint glass. "We don't need Pelham to do this business up right. I'm fixin' to find these monsters and kick their asses back to hell whether or not he's around." I took some kind of comfort in what he was saying, like a warm pillow. For a while now, Sparks had seemed emasculated, like he was a zombie just

working his limbs by rote. Now he had a fire back in his belly, which was the way he needed to be for anything to happen right.

"I don't know," Tommy muttered. He had a thousand-mile stare, just looking off at a point in space that wasn't even there. "Did you see what they did to him? Jesus. The flies. The smell. I can't have that happen to me."

"So you're bailing on us?" I asked. I hoped he was going to say yes. I didn't want Tommy on our team anymore. While I wouldn't turn down any help, there was just something about him I didn't trust. You could never peg where his mind would be at any given moment. He was too selfish, like he was worried about what everyone was thinking about him. I didn't need that.

He answered like I wanted. He just nodded and started to get up. But Sparks' hand flashed out, caught him just above the wrist and slammed him down against the table.

"Bullshit," Sparks hissed. "Before now, you been strutting around like a rooster. But now that Pelham's gone, kinda took the air out of your tires, didn't it? Little retard, always worrying about the wrong stuff, aintcha? Well, I can't have you running off like a girl and ratting on—"

"Sparks," I said. "Let him go." He shot me a look, and I knew what it was. The question in his eyes read: *Are you sure?* He was looking to me for an answer. I nodded. He relaxed his grip and Tommy jerked away.

"You guys don't get it," Tommy said. "You're going to get yourselves killed. Not me. I'm a pragmatist."

Then he marched out, leaving that cloud of bullshit behind. Tommy wasn't a "pragmatist." He was a coward. He couldn't handle seeing Pelham like that. And so he was abandoning his kid. But not me. Not now.

"What the hell'd you let him go for?" Sparks whispered. "That little ferret's going to up and run to the police. Then what?"

I shook my head. "I don't think he will. Remember — there's blood on his hands just like ours. He killed that politician. He'll leave us alone. He's done. Worst part of it is, he'll still get his kid back, because we're going to find them, you and me."

Sparks pulled back on his glass, running the last of the murky beer into his mouth. Then he slammed the glass back down and licked his lips. "Amen, brother."

It was strange. That night, I slept the best I had in months. Sparks and I got separate rooms using the cash that was left over. I cranked the air conditioner,

listened to it hum and sank into sleep like a stone. I felt good. Warm inside, like I had a soft-glow lamp bulb tucked near my heart. I felt like the finish line was in sight, and I had nice dreams of Tracy and Marjorie. Dreams of us on vacation, driving down to Florida, to the Keys. We'd always talked about doing that. The dream went on and on, sweet and nice, never turning bad like all the nights before. And then, somewhere after the dream ended and I lay comfortably in the darkness, someone put something over my mouth, around my neck and across my eyes. I was rolled onto the floor and my hands were held out while I was hit and kicked. Someone was laughing. Something hard — a board or a bat, maybe — cracked me across my taped-up mouth. I felt a tooth go free and slide down my throat. And then true darkness took over once more as I slipped into the cold grip of oblivion.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DAMNED

"Mister Royce? Welcome to the Red School."

The words echoed in the hollows of my ears as my eyelids fluttered like moth wings. For a minute everything was white, but that slowly went away and colors began shuffling in. The first color was red. Red curtains over windows. Sunlight tried to get in, but couldn't, and illuminated the curtains like blood. Or fire. Or both. I tried to move, but couldn't. My hands and feet were tied. I lolled my head toward the voice and a jolt of pain went screaming up my neck. But I managed. Standing there in a sharp-angled black suit with his hands clasped in front was the big, bald motherfucker I'd been wanting to meet this whole time. Overholt. The demon who took my daughter.

I said the first thing that came to mind: "I'm going to kill you."

He just laughed, which disturbed the hell out of me. "Oh, I can't imagine that's true, Will. Certainly you don't mean the way you killed my retainer, Mr. Vig? You killed the body, indeed, but he's back and feeling quite energized. Sure, it took some work and some good old-fashioned book-learning, but at the end of the day you didn't do much more than make a dent."

He was lying, I told myself. Had to be. You couldn't bring someone back from the dead. You couldn't just put them in a body like it was a new suit, right? I couldn't quite convince myself.

I looked around, despite the nail-pain in my head, to see how the hell I was going to get out of there. There was a door behind him. There were rows of desks for students, and a teacher's desk, too. A chalkboard. The windows with their red curtains. Silhouetted through the red I could see what looked like bars over

the windows. Goddammit. Idly, I tongued the hole where my tooth had been and I enjoyed the pain a little too much.

Overholt smiled. "Certainly you wouldn't be contemplating leaving our hospitality so soon? I have so many things to show you — one in particular that I'm sure you'll like."

"I hate your voice," I said. "My grandmother had a phrase for people like you. *Slicker than goose shit on a glass window.*"

"Very nice. Your grandmother must've been a lovely lady. Now, on to our business." The door behind him opened and a girl, maybe 14 or 15, with an auburn French braid hanging down the middle of her back stepped into the room. She handed Overholt a glass of yellow liquid. He took a deep drink and a broad grin spread across his face like butter on bread. "Ah! Lemonade. One of the single greatest things humans ever created. Eden didn't have anything like this, let me tell you." He reached out and stroked the girl's hair. She looked lost in the sensation, like a dog scratched behind the ears. "Sweet thing, this one. And I know what you're thinking. *No*, I don't molest them. There's nothing sexual about it. I merely teach them. That's all. It's something like... taking children to church at an early age. Makes better believers. A few prize students can go on to teach the flock."

"Why am I here?" I asked. "Why not just kill me?"

He appeared thoughtful. "I'm a practical man, but that's not to say I don't have my luxuries. Everyone has a vice, and I have mine. It will thrill me to break a man like you. Some men enjoy breaking wild horses. Maybe this is a little like that." He cleared his throat. "Ever had anyone worship you, Mr. Royce? Not your daughter, for certain." He laughed, and I told him again that I was going to kill him. The bastard just dabbed lemonade from the corners of his mouth with a red handkerchief, and then got up and walked over to me.

Something happened then that will forever be burned into the backs of my eyes. It was worse than Vig, not because it was horrible but because, in its own way, it was beautiful. Overholt widened his arms in a cruciform position, and he seemed to *grow*. Not necessarily in body size, but in stature, in the *appearance* of size. A pair of dark-feathered wings eased lazily out from his shoulder blades, long enough for each wingtip to touch the opposing walls. All around him were lights, dancing and shifting, each one like a shard of black glass lit by a spotlight. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I hated him. I loved him. I felt myself biting my own tongue from telling him everything I knew, everything I could remember



from the moment I was born to that very point in time. He looked down at me and smiled softly as a pair of horns, sculpted with the smoothness of ice, extended from his forehead.

"YOU WILL DO NO SUCH THING, MISTER ROYCE." The voice was deep and wiggled straight to my guts like a tapeworm. There was that feeling again—the hate and the love. I started to cry. "SEE ME, AND SEE ETERNITY. IN A FEW DAYS, YOU'LL SEE WHAT I'M CAPABLE OF. AND I HOPE YOU WILL APPRECIATE THE GIFT."

And then, like nothing had ever happened, he was just a man again. I sobbed, baby-like. He left, and I was alone.

RITUALS

The next few days passed in a blur. Someone brought me food, and I ate it eagerly, but sure enough it must've been drugged because as soon as I was done I started drooling uncontrollably, and then passed out. The cycle repeated. My body hurt, blossoming with bruises. At some point a few days later—which felt like weeks, maybe months—a handful of children came in, silent and wide-eyed. They picked me up like I was nothing and carried me out of the room.

I was held aloft, carried like a coffin gripped by pallbearers, pulled through makeshift hallways of red curtains draped over iron frames. It was like a labyrinth of blood-colored fabric, and after a while the color started making me sick. I was still dizzy from whatever drugs were coursing through my system. I was brought to a room that looked like some sort of college science lab. Inside, they had set up a metal table, and faceless men in dark suits surrounded it. Overholt was there, standing in the corner, arms crossed over in front of him, a smug, self-satisfied look across his big goddamn face.

The children propped me up in the opposing corner, and I felt hands grab me from behind to hold me there. A woman's face leaned over my shoulder. She was a big girl, cherub cheeks and hollow eyes, and she whispered, "You thought you killed me down South, didn't you, boy? Tough luck." The voice wasn't the same but somewhere behind it I heard something familiar. The limo driver was back and everything I'd done was for nothing.

Overholt nodded and another door opened. A man in doctor's scrubs led in a girl with a white hood over her head. The doctor wasn't dressed in the normal blue or green colors. His scrubs were all black, dark as the night sky. He helped the girl up

onto the metal table and opened a metal case. Overholt looked at me.

"Will, remember how I said some students are good enough to lead the flock? This is one of them. *It's time to be proud.*"

I knew what was coming before it happened. The black-garbed doctor took off the hood, and there on the table was my daughter. Before I could scream, the woman-that-was-Vig shoved a ball-gag into my mouth and tightened the straps behind my head. Tracy looked over at me with empty eyes, and she cocked her head like she recognized me from a past life or from a movie she once saw. Then the doctor pressed her head back onto the table.

He drew a very small circular saw from the case. He ran the cord to the outlet, plugged it in and it began whirring. I tried to kick and scream, but couldn't. I was held tight and forced to watch. I tried to close my eyes but children's hands were on me, prying my lids up, practically tearing them off. As the doctor cut into Tracy's skull, the room filled with the smell of burning hair and bone. I began throwing up, but even then they held my head up and the vomit just gurgled out of my mouth like a baby spitting up food.

They made me watch it all. The cutting of her skull. The removal of the top of her head like a hat. The doctor had long thin scissors, a tool that looked delicate enough to cut string. He snipped away at parts inside her head and she laid there coolly and calmly, like nothing was happening. All the while, the faceless men (who weren't really faceless — I saw that they were wearing masks without features) had notepads. They were reciting something in another language. No language I'd ever heard before. It sounded like they were just babbling like idiots. I watched it all. I wanted to die. I wanted to kill. I'd finally found my daughter, and this was my reward. Finally, the doctor completed the "operation." He took a long thin syringe and flicked the needle-tip with his finger. Then he shot her up with whatever the hell was in there. Finally, he put her skull-top back on and began working black sutures through her precious hair. Overholt applauded. I felt a pinprick stick me in the side of my neck and then I passed into darkness again.

LESSONS IN BLOOD

Tommy was there when I opened my eyes. He was sitting on top of one of the student desks, looking down at me. I think there was shame in his eyes, but it was hard to tell because I was still half-drugged, my head feeling like it was full of cold soup. I still had the scene playing in my mind's eye — Tracy, the doctor, Overholt, the blood, and bone and hair.

Tommy told me that he was sorry. That he gave Sparks and I up so he could get his own kid back. He said that he couldn't take her away but that they let him live there. They were sending a car down to get his wife. I felt sick. I told him he was a dead man, that as soon as I got out I was going to tear him apart and throw away the pieces. He just said he was sorry again.

"It is what it is," he explained with a finality that cut right to the quick. Then he shrugged and left the room. Overholt came in not long afterward. He stood there, silent, and I didn't say a goddamn word. I barely could. My lips felt swollen and dead, and I didn't even know if I could conjure up any more sounds. A boy, maybe eight years old, came in and with shaky hands gave the bald man another glass of lemonade. He nursed it casually, making satisfied smacking sounds with his lips.

"New student," he finally said, gesturing toward the kid. "It's refreshing to see. The light in their eyes, like a twinkling lantern, so easy to capture and hold. I love the attention. The good news is, your daughter is recovering quite nicely. The doctor is very good at what he does — the best, I dare say. The other members of my staff are confident that the preparations were right and the ritual went off without a hitch. There is, *par usual*, bad news, though. I don't think she'll want to see you again. She may not even recognize you. At least, she won't after we're through with her final indoctrination."

I laid on the floor, helpless and hurting, and Overholt walked over to me and knelt down. He fed me some of the lemonade. It was cool going down, but I had to struggle to keep it from coming back up. He leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"We used to love you. The Lightbringer taught us to teach you, to dress you up and show you how to appreciate the breadth of life that God had given you. But now you monkeys have heads full of ideas, and you've forgotten your place. You can't even recognize your betters anymore. And so, we're taking over again. You've made a mess of the place — fouled your own nest, as it were. So it's time to put the sheep to sleep and repopulate the forests with wolves. I'm sorry for all of this, Will, I truly am. Soon you'll believe. Soon you'll fall back into line where you belong."

And then he stood. He finished the last swallow of the lemonade and handed the glass to a child who had appeared out of nowhere, almost as if the boy could sense Overholt's need. I wanted to die. My head took the complex ideas he had just offered — thoughts about God and Earth and monkeys — and ditched them in favor of thinking about my daughter. Whatever cosmic voodoo Overholt seemed to

think I should care about, I didn't. I just wanted Tracy to be all right. I just wanted her to love me as much as I loved her.

Though I tried not to, somewhere in the next hour I fell back asleep, dreading the dreams that would find me there.

THE WAY OUT

My dreams were strange. In them, there was a sound, a loud angry sound, a *booming*. There were people yelling, I saw shadows pass by the door and there were hurried voices. Children were chanting. Or screaming. It was hard to tell. Sparks came into the room and he had something in his hand, something long and dark. I smelled the acrid tang of gunpowder, and then as I felt my bonds being cut I knew I wasn't dreaming but that I was *awake* and that this was really happening. Sparks hoisted me up. My limbs protested, having been frozen in damn near the same position for days. He started to hobble me out, draping my arm over his shoulders, and we went for the door.

"You escaped," I said, my words an unsteady slur.

"They never caught me, buddy," he said, wiping blood from a cut. Outside, in the hall of red curtains—which I noticed were now burning, fire cascading up them—was my daughter. It was like a mirage, the heat from the fire making the air blurry and smoky. Everything rushed together like a bunch of jump-cuts in a music video. I was there with Tracy and then Sparks was behind us. His shotgun roared a few more times and shadows behind us went toppling into flame. We found one section that wasn't burning and we went for it, to it, through it, and then there were steps down and doors opening and the twilight almost-night. I felt fresh air rush into my lungs and a small kernel of strength was born inside me.

Sparks looked deranged, his eyes like moons as he pushed more shells into the underside of his gun. Tracy stared up at me like she only half-recognized who I was. Beneath her hairline I saw the black slashes of the sutures. But she was still my daughter, alive, and I too felt alive all of a sudden when a thought struck me like a brick and I turned to Sparks.

"Your twins—" I said.

"Aren't here," he answered. Then he pointed to a pickup truck, some lime-green piece of junk sitting on the side of some back road surrounded by trees. We weren't in Dayton at all. The truck was running, and he started to go to it, pulling me and Tracy along. Everything was blurred together. Before I knew what was happening, a big woman stepped out of the shadows, looking at Sparks and smiling.

"I remember you," she said, and then I knew it was the woman from the operating room, the once-limo-driver who we thought was dead. Now, as then, her skin started rippling and bursting from her clothes. Her flesh danced with ugly goddamn tumors, and her mouth opened wide like a snake's. She ran at us, charging like a bull, and I heard Sparks tell us to go just before he raised his shotgun and fired. But the blast didn't matter. The Vig-woman was on him and I felt a jet of warm liquid spray across my face. I numbly put my hands on my cheeks and, pulling them away, saw them coated in red. Sparks was screaming. I grabbed Tracy and ran for the truck. Behind us, I heard Overholt yelling and heard the rush of wings, but we were already in the truck, time still stuttering as adrenaline shot through my body like fire. I gunned the truck just as Overholt landed in the road in front of us, his broad wings stretching out like a falcon's. I closed my eyes and felt the truck slam into him. The tires ran over something and the truck bounded ahead.

I remember myself saying over and over again, "That didn't kill him." Then I looked at Tracy, and she was looking at me. I explained to her, "I think maybe we better go back and make sure he's dead."

And then the strangest thing happened. Her hands reached out and touched the dashboard, and a set of black claws extended from her fingertips. Her eyes turned white.

"Don't worry, Dad," she said. "We'll find him another day. For now, just keep driving."

Better advice was never uttered.

THE FUTURE

We drove far and fast away from the school, which was quite literally that—an unused building at the edge of a liberal-arts campus in an artsy little tourist town called Yellow Springs. It was maybe 10 miles outside of Dayton. I pushed the junky pickup to its limits, hitting the highway and going south until we coasted into Asheville, North Carolina, about eight hours later. We got a room at a little bed-and-breakfast run by an old lady with a cadre of cats. It was a nice change from the countless cookie-cutter motel rooms I'd seen over the past months.

Tracy. My daughter. I have her back. To be fair, she isn't so much my daughter anymore. Even she isn't sure what's going on, but she's more certain than I am, which is all I really need.

She has her memories. She remembers playing on the slide at McDonald's for her fifth birthday. She recalls when she was stung by bees when she was 11, and when she was bitten by a dog when she was 13. She remembers me yelling at her and her mother, and she

has no problem recollecting why she ran away, only to get picked up and taken to a place that would forever change every damn thing in both our lives.

But there's other stuff in there, too, she says. She doesn't seem to have a problem describing how the flowers smelled in the garden so very long ago. I can only assume what garden she's talking about, and while normally I would consider that unbelievable, she's my Tracy and I trust her like I trust my own godforsaken heart.

In fact, it's more than that. It's more than just trust. I believe in her. Everything she tells me, I accept. Especially when she shows me how true it is. She changes, physically. Sometimes it's barely perceptible, but it's there. Sometimes there are wings, black and slick like an oily crow's. Other times she passes by the dresser in the motel room and not a single inch of reflection appears in the mirror. For a while there she just pattered around like a child, touching things, picking them up and scrutinizing them. When she picked up the TV remote and it turned to dust in her hands, I knew then she was something very, very special. Pride swelled in me like a balloon.

I can't precisely say that I know what happened. I know they cut up her head. (The sutures have fallen

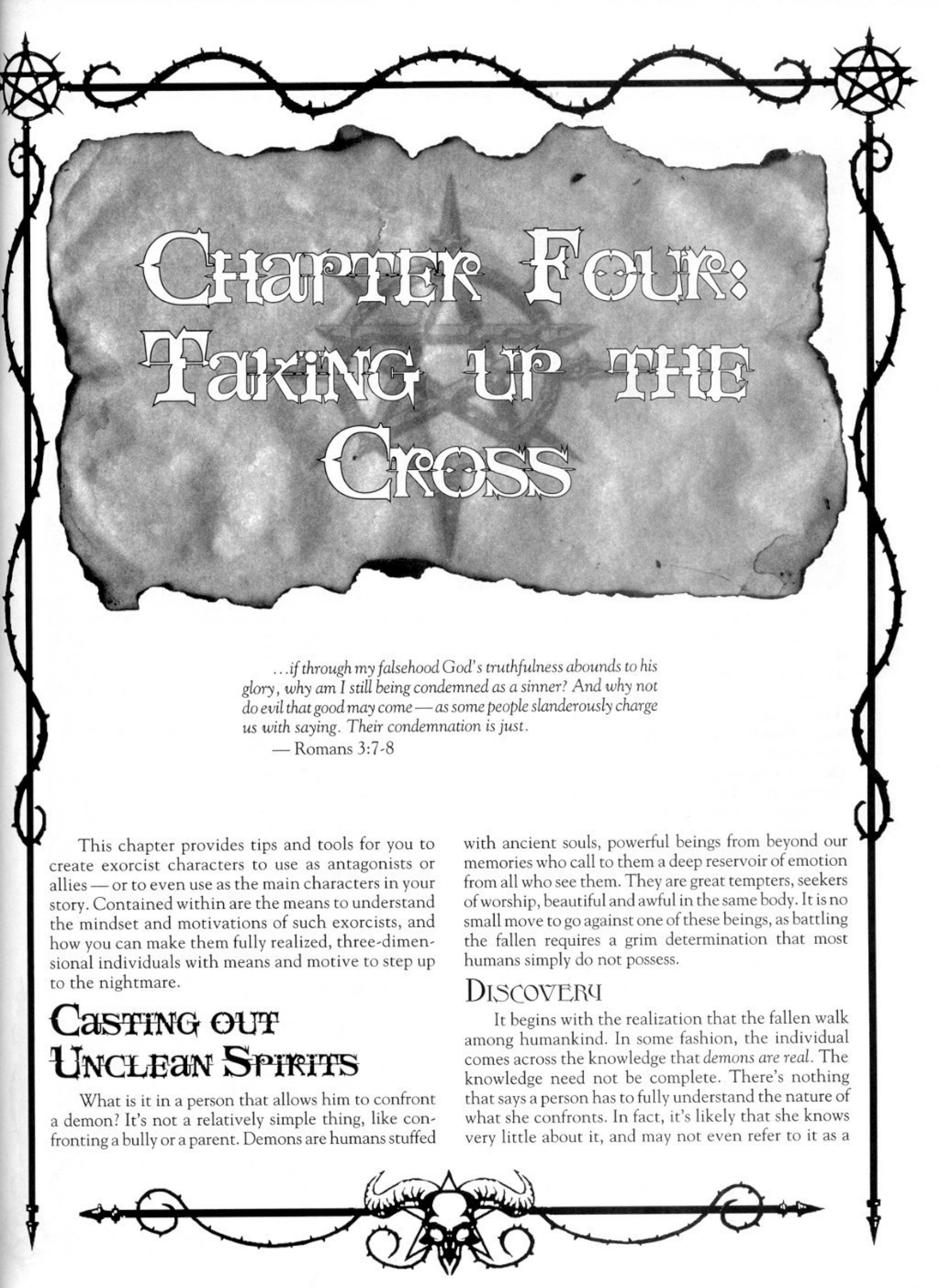
out and the wound is all healed.) They did some roto-rotoer plumbing inside there. For a while I thought they literally put something inside her, but Tracy seems to think they were just preparing her, emptying her out a little bit like when you clean out a room to make it a nursery for a baby. Something like that. I'm inclined to believe her. I have faith in my baby girl, through and through.

Now that she's ready, the plan is this: We're going to take that truck and pick up right where I left off. Except I'm following her lead now. She says she can almost smell the others on the wind. Better than Pelham could ever do for us. She and I are going to take care of business, get out there and find the rest of these Red Schools and bury them. Same with Overholt, who Tracy calls Malphas. Sounds fine to me. I look forward to seeing him again, thanking him for giving me my daughter back, and then tearing off the top of his head and pissing in his skull.

I miss Sparks. He was a good guy. Too fierce and too rough around the edges, but solid in the end. Not like Tommy, who I hope ate buckshot or fire or a little of both. I miss Marjorie, too. But Tracy and I will get back there. She'll see her mother again. And maybe we'll get down to the Keys like we said. But in the meantime, we have a job to do, and I won't rest until we're done.







CHAPTER FOUR: TAKING UP THE CROSS

...if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come — as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

— Romans 3:7-8

This chapter provides tips and tools for you to create exorcist characters to use as antagonists or allies — or to even use as the main characters in your story. Contained within are the means to understand the mindset and motivations of such exorcists, and how you can make them fully realized, three-dimensional individuals with means and motive to step up to the nightmare.

CASTING OUT UNCLEAN SPIRITS

What is it in a person that allows him to confront a demon? It's not a relatively simple thing, like confronting a bully or a parent. Demons are humans stuffed

with ancient souls, powerful beings from beyond our memories who call to them a deep reservoir of emotion from all who see them. They are great tempters, seekers of worship, beautiful and awful in the same body. It is no small move to go against one of these beings, as battling the fallen requires a grim determination that most humans simply do not possess.

DISCOVERY

It begins with the realization that the fallen walk among humankind. In some fashion, the individual comes across the knowledge that *demons are real*. The knowledge need not be complete. There's nothing that says a person has to fully understand the nature of what she confronts. In fact, it's likely that she knows very little about it, and may not even refer to it as a



WHO ARE THEY?

Actually, let's first talk about who they *aren't*. The modern-day equivalent to exorcists aren't members of some secret organization hell-bent on eradicating demons from the face of the Earth. They aren't the Knights Templar, soldiers of the Illuminati, or even some super-hush-hush branch of the CIA meant to deal with this stuff. They also aren't the imbued, nor are they *Demon Hunter X*.

They *are*, however, everyday people. Plumbers, accountants, desk jockeys, factory workers, florists, whatever. Look outside your window and see who's walking down the street. We're not talking members of the Spanish Inquisition. We're looking at real, honest-to-God members of our society who have seen, dealt with or even been adversely affected by something that leads them to believe they have to take up arms against it. In creating an exorcist character, focus on that "real people" element — these are folks like us. Which, all in all, makes it a bit scarier, don't you think?

demon at all (one might call it "monster," "beast" or even call it by its human name). Somehow or another, the discovery of the fallen is key — it's up to you to determine how and why it happens. The horror of the situation is paramount in the discovery process — be sure to amp it up. Does the character witness a demonic Revelation? Did a demon demand belief from the character, or worse, total worship? If so, how did the character escape the gravity of the fallen? How did she resist the temptation to fall to her knees and begin babbling adoration? It's also possible that the character learned that someone close to her — a family member, a husband, a best friend — was being used by a fallen, or worse, became the thrall of such a being (though remember that a potential exorcist knows nothing of "thralls," per se). A woman may come across strange records in a bank statement, or unusual scribbles in her husband's journal that point to an individual who would appear to be taking their money and subverting her husband's mind — and that individual would be, of course, a demon. The bottom line is, you need to puzzle out how such an encounter would occur in the first place. How does the exorcist-to-be realize that demons are real?

CHOICE

Upon the realization that there are monsters extant in the world, that grand creatures of beauty and pain stalk the waking and sleeping masses, the character is faced with a choice. The primary question is, *does she do*

something about it? But there's a second question contained between the lines of the first — *can she forget?* It's a case of action versus inaction. If the character chooses inaction and decides to continue life as normal or believes that she can simply push aside the memory that demons are real, can she truly stay sane? While it's not universal, most individuals who choose to do nothing are haunted by their knowledge during the day and suffer nightmares while they sleep. They may pretend that everything's all right and they continue going to work and playing with their children, but there's always that unspoken thought running like a mantra through their minds — "Demons exist, and I did nothing to stop them." Their guilt is compounded further if their inaction allows a demon to victimize a family member or loved one. It becomes increasingly difficult to sit idly by as the fallen tempt and cajole (or even rape and murder) someone close, someone important. These characters usually lose their minds over time, bit by bit.

Some characters choose action, however. There is simply no other choice but to *do something* with this knowledge. The motivation behind acting is important. There are numerous reasons why a character might begin such a personal crusade. One is the combination of hate and anger. A character whose family is taken from her by a fallen (whether they're kidnapped, murdered, or just swayed by the divine temptations of ancient splendor and immortal iniquity) is likely to develop a strong foundation of hate and/or anger for the fallen. It boils down to a personal fight: "These monsters hurt me and mine, so I have to hurt them back."

Another possibility is hopelessness and guilt. A character may not want to confront the fallen in any fashion. After all, that's an intensely frightening proposition. While a character is likely to only get a *glimpse* into what the fallen really are, it should be enough to show him that he is small and weak in comparison. But still, when hopelessness and guilt come into play, a character is likely to feel backed into a corner. In practice, those who feel caged or without options are likely to lash out, to attack, and in this instance the demon (or all demons) is probably the target. The character thinks, "I don't have any other choice. There are no other options left to me now," and thus an exorcist is born.

Consider also religious or spiritual conviction. A character who is strong in her own personal faith (especially a character in a missionary religion such as any of the paths Christianity offers) may take up the "fight" because it's what her belief demands. The very idea of demons is probably antithetical to any character's faith, whether that belief is in Yahweh, Allah or of pagan or Buddhist ideals. Demons represent evil in most of the religions across the world

(though they occasionally represent enlightenment, which adds an interesting twist on why a character might hunt such a being), and a character may go after the fallen with that very precept in mind. "These monsters stand in the way of Heaven, and I will do anything to guide my flock to the Promised Land," a character may say, and then take up the cause against such a threat.

Alternately, insanity itself may provide the necessary impetus. Many exorcists lose their minds before they begin their dismal battle. Sometimes the mind snaps when faced with a demonic Revelation, but there are even those zealots who were lunatics long before they crossed paths with a demon. These exorcists are most frightening in their motivations. They may see demons as any number of things, and will be driven to deal with them in extreme fashions. Their motivations don't often make sense, not even to themselves. Their derangements (often schizophrenia) drive them to go against the fallen with sick strength of mind, no matter who gets hurt in the process (including themselves).

DEMONS IN A NEW LIGHT

How do the exorcists identify the fallen? If you were to see the fallen in a display of Faith, would you automatically identify them as a demon from Judeo-Christian myth? If you were of Eastern lineage, would you see the creature as a demonic Oni, a malevolent trickster come to wreak havoc on man? Every exorcist is likely to see the fallen as something different. This is important to know because not only will it be how they identify demons in the future, but it is likely to form the basis of their research into discovering how to understand and fight such beings. If they see demons as just that, they may take the Bible, the cross and other such Christian elements into account. If they see it as a *dybbuk*, a demonic creature out of Judaic lore, they may read the Talmud or Qabbalistic texts to learn how to fight the creature. Is the demon an expression of Lilith, the dark woman of the Garden of Eden? Or is the demon a follower of Lilitu, the dark owl-woman of Sumerian lore? Insane exorcists may see a demon as an alien, as something out of a fictional book (an H.P. Lovecraft story, perhaps) or as a genetic experiment gone horribly awry. The bottom line is, a lot of exorcists won't see the fallen and automatically identify them as "demons." It's crucial for you to know what label exorcists apply to these beings, because it may define their entire way of thinking when it comes to confronting the fallen.

CONFRONTATION

Once the "why" is determined, a character must also decide "how" he goes against the fallen. One way or another, whether it's conscious or not, an exorcist character must determine the blueprint he will follow in this plan, working out all the "rules of engagement" by which he will operate. Again, this need not be something an exorcist literally outlines point by point, but somewhere inside his head he must delineate the variables of the coming struggle. There are multiple questions you can answer to help determine this direction. Does he go against one specific fallen, or does he take on all of demon-kind? (Does the character even know there are other demons, or does he believe that stopping one will be enough?) Is the plan to actually destroy the fiend, or is another less violent approach possible? A character could hope to simply convince a demon to leave him and his loved ones alone, perhaps even trying to entice the demon with a bribe or force its hand with a display of religious devotion. There are even a rare few exorcists who seek to "experiment" upon the fallen to learn more about them, what they are, and what makes the monsters tick. Is the character one of these? Perhaps he's not brave enough to take on the demon directly and decides that a path of reconnaissance is the best bet. Or maybe he takes a behind-the-scenes approach and sabotages the demon's affairs — hacking into bank accounts, kidnapping mortal thralls or even going so far as to blow up the being's limousine. Most exorcists have a plan of attack; sometimes it's vague, sometimes it's precise. The plan can change on a whim, but at least it's a place to start.

Example: Clark Hennessy is an antique dealer. His wife died years ago, leaving him alone with a five-year-old daughter, Stacy.

Clark gets a lead on an old Victorian home in a neighboring town. All the previous owner's antiques are going up for auction. Clark often brings his daughter to such affairs as he doesn't have the money for a babysitter, so Stacy tags along.

During the auction, Clark encourages the little girl to stay off to the side and play with her dolls, but at one point Clark turns, looks and doesn't see his daughter. He goes to find her and after a long search discovers her upstairs, in an empty and unused room. There is a woman with her, and they are holding hands. Both stare into a mirror that is dazzling with a display of orb-like lights, beautiful and strange, and the woman whispers something to Stacy. Upon being interrupted, the woman turns toward Clark and he sees that she is not quite human. Her skin flickers with a silvery corona, and her eyes are pits of darkness and starlight. The woman gasps and Clark is left reeling, clinging to sanity by sheer force of will. By the time he recovers, the woman is gone and his daughter is left



behind, unconscious. He leaves the auction, calls the police, but nothing comes of it.

Stacy never properly recovers. She has trouble sleeping, suffers nightmares when she does sleep, and her temper increases so she has to be taken out of school and put onto medication. All the while, she keeps talking about dreams in which she meets a woman with "stars for eyes." Clark is ripe for stepping onto the exorcist path. He is afraid of what's happened to his daughter, and is angry. And so he decides to research more about this woman. He interviews those who were at the auction to see if he can get a lead on who she is and where to find her. When he finds her, he plans to confront her. He will hurt her only if she won't stop "bewitching" his daughter with whatever hold she has over his daughter. And so, his quest begins.

RESISTING REVELATION

The Revelation is a demon's expression of its ancient self to the world at large, in which the being eschews its mortal bearing for all who stand near to witness. Whether the fallen reveals a side of beautiful glory or grisly malignance, most mortals are at least caught unawares. Some merely stand, jaws agape, while others curl up in a fetal position, ranting nonsense. The characters we're talking about, however, here do not stand rapt. They do not crumple. In fact, they're usually left with their memories of the scene intact. But how is that possible?

One way is to boil the event down to a simple Willpower roll. If the roll is successful, the character's mind is strong enough to withstand the vision, and that's that. This course is especially appropriate for characters with a high Willpower (7+), as they are most likely to resist the depredations of a Revelation. It's encouraged that other factors be considered, though. If a character sees that a loved one is about to be harmed, or is merely being "used" by a fallen in the display of power, the character could benefit from a lower difficulty in the Willpower roll. Or you may allow him to be unilaterally unaffected. The same goes with a strong spiritual foundation. If the character has powerful religious convictions (and it need not be a Christian underpinning), he could receive a decreased difficulty for any Willpower rolls, or again may be allowed to forego the roll altogether.

Some demon hunters don't resist the Revelation at all, and may be the ones who stood by, motionless in awe or who fell to their knees in babbling worship. These characters can be mentally "broken" after the fact, and may become exorcists in retrospect. Their lives may be haunted by that single moment in a demon's presence. The dreams and hallucinations that follow could lead them to a martyr's lifestyle of hunting that which they don't understand.

CREATING EXORCISTS

When it comes down to putting pen to paper and building an exorcist, there are a few things to consider. Putting the dots on a character sheet is easy. Exorcists don't have any special Traits or Backgrounds, and you can follow the standard point spread for Abilities, Attributes and Willpower outlined in *Demon*. What's more important than the points on the page are the answers to the questions that define *who* an exorcist really is, and what allows her to confront the darkness. *Demon* provides a good guide to these questions and answers in the prelude section, but there are some specific exorcist-driven possibilities that you might want to consider.

WHO WAS SHE BEFORE SHE BECAME AN EXORCIST?

People aren't born hating demons. Most people pass through life without ever even glimpsing proof of the fallen working among humanity. The exorcists in your game *do* gain some proof of this reality, but it's not the sum total of their being. So who were they before? We encourage you to think of normal people in moderately mundane professions. Web designers, mechanics, bike couriers, graphic artists. You're certainly welcome to make them ex-Green Berets or secret spies working for some subsection of the Vatican, but we don't recommend it. That approach can diminish the real-world feel that comes with the World of Darkness. Yes, demons exist, but even they are tempered by the souls of mundane citizens. The fallen don't always jump into the bodies of modern-day dragon-slayers or clandestine government agents.

WHAT MADE HER CONFRONT THE FALLEN?

Something happened, some seminal event involving a demon, to give an exorcist the wherewithal to battle demons. Some of this motivation is discussed earlier in the chapter, but it's worth repeating. Some event occurred and your character decided that *something had to be done*. Did something happen to her family or friends? Did a demon attempt to influence her directly? Did people have to die to make her see how truly real the fallen are — or was it even more sinister, with a loved one falling prey to mental, physical or sexual predation? It could be anything. Maybe your character lost a limb in a demon's Revelation, or maybe the fallen cleaned out her bank account and now she's pissed. Just make sure to come up with a reason why your character dedicates herself to dealing with the supernatural. Exorcists don't do it for fun or profit. It's not a job. They do what they do because it's *personal*.

WHAT ARE HER GOALS?

By goals, we mean hopes associated with demon hunting and regular life. Did your character want to be an artist? Did she just want to marry Prince Charming and have 2.5 kids? Do her normal goals continue to be attainable after she sets foot on the exorcist's path? As far as her demon hunting goes, what does she hope to gain from it? Is it just a twisted form of payback? A lot of exorcists lose sight of their "old lives" and seek nothing more than the eradication of demons — which, in their minds, often translates into physically destroying the enemy. Some take a religious approach and seek to undermine any spiritual subversion that demons commit. But always remember that not all exorcists are shoot-em-up types, and may not even seek to harm demons directly. "Exorcist" is a loose term. Some hope to "cure" demons' souls, restoring the beings' "angel wings and halos." Or an exorcist might contend with a demon who was once her own child (or friend, or father) and seeks to quite literally *exorcise* the spirit from her loved one.

The point of this question is, everyone want something different. Goals, plans, blueprints. Some attainable, some so farfetched as to never be accomplished in a single lifetime. It's your job to sketch these out so you make the exorcists in your game full-fledged characters and not just hastily penned caricatures.

EXORCISTS TOGETHER

Going it alone against the fallen typically leads to a short-lived crusade. One man against demons? He won't last long. One man against the darkness? It's a sure-fire way to get killed — or to lose one's mind. Exorcists therefore tend to collect in groups. This is partly due to simple protection. You can't circle the wagons for defense against invaders if you only have one wagon. Forging bonds also provides a network of support. Other exorcists know what you do, who you are and what you've seen. They believe you. You can tell them what you've experienced and they won't mock you or divorce you or have you committed to a mental-health ward. It's the same principle behind the fact that a lot of CIA officers marry one another. They're in the same fight and no one else is capable of (or allowed to) understand what they really do.

To get down and dirty with a group of exorcists, it's important to know a lot about them, which can be discovered by answering a few questions.

HOW DO THEY COME TOGETHER?

There are no support groups for demonic victims like there are for cancer patients. You can't walk down to the community college and take a class on demons. It's a lonely, paranoid pursuit. So how do these hunters find each other? Could be that they were all present

during the same infernal event — or, at the least, all go after the same demon. These people come together under the banner of a “common enemy.” It’s not unusual for several people who are under the spell of a demon (or who have passed mostly unharmed through a demon’s Revelation) to band together, not under the auspice of demon hunting, but under the umbrella of understanding. It’s only later that the need to hunt the demon grows out of multiple sit-downs with one another, when group members realize that they’re the only ones who have a clue that infernal horror exists. But there are other ways to come together. Seasoned exorcists may devise means to bring others together. Signs posted around town or cryptic classified ads might draw in helpers, as might stopping by the local church or temple and simply “asking around.”

WHAT IS THEIR PURPOSE?

Slaying demons is only one approach. There are multiple ways in which exorcists can deal with demons: understanding them, healing their victims, or even “curing” the demons themselves. And yes, another option is banishing them, putting them in the ground, Hell, the Abyss or wherever the infernal came from. The point is that a group of exorcists is likely to have a general, unified purpose. One member who wants to kill and torture demons is unlikely to get along with others who want to learn about and “save” the beings. Although such contrasting ideals are an option for creating drama within an exorcist group, consider what happens when their purposes deviate, either from the beginning or over time. Group members may come together under a common banner, but once they start traveling separate paths, can they remain together as a group? And if they do, will it cause them to be killed, enslaved or worse? And that leads to the next question....

ARE THERE ANY INNER CONFLICTS?

Purpose brings individuals together, but conflicts can drive a group apart. No social unit is complete without conflict; it’s a simple fact of life. Even living with other humans causes conflict, so imagine what happens when you have a bunch of half-crazed demon hunters banding together. Disagreements happen. Do ideological rifts separate members? Half the group might decide that purging the demonic plague is the only sane approach, while the other half may still see humanity in demons and seek to stoke that glimmer to aid in the creatures’ “salvation.” It’s possible that one exorcist simply goes mad and believes the *others* are “demons” and must be “punished.”

And that leads to a whole other possibility: Demon hunters stare into the Abyss, metaphorically speaking, so how long is it before the Abyss manifests in them? In other words, when you’re that close to demons, it’s easy

to fall prey to their temptations. What happens when an exorcist secretly sells her soul to a demon? Or what if she was a demonic thrall from the very beginning? Suddenly you have a group that acts very much like the men in John Carpenter’s *The Thing* — never totally trusting one another, always waiting for a buddy to prove a traitor. Internal weakness is a source of dramatic tension for a group. When demons sniff out such fractures, the infernal might drive wedges between exorcists.

GOING IT ALONE

As stated earlier, it’s the rare demon hunter who can survive night after night all by his lonesome. If he doesn’t get killed, he goes nuts before long. Without the support system of a group (supplying money, morale, weapons), a lone exorcist just doesn’t last.

But that doesn’t mean you don’t want to use one as an adversary for demon characters. A lone exorcist is likely to be extremely dangerous in the short run — probably crazy, willing to do anything to get the job done. And introducing a single antagonist allows you to concentrate on his identity alone. If there are a dozen different plot threads running through your chronicle, you may not have the time or energy to create a whole group of hunter adversaries. So, feel free to work with a single individual — a lone gunman, as it were — to throw against the demons. Just remember that the individual exorcist acts differently than does a group of them. Lone wolves burn the candle at both ends, flaring like a supernova. By contrast, groups act in moderation, balanced by different personalities. A single exorcist has no voices (except maybe the three or four in his own head) to temper his activities, and he often displays a lunatic approach to “the hunt.”

REALITY SUCKS

This should be obvious, but it’s worth stating anyway: Being an exorcist is not an easy or simple job. In fact, it’s not even a job. There’s no paycheck, no vacation time. No timecard to punch, no boss from whom to take orders. But there *are* countless, real-world pitfalls that an exorcist might come across.

THE AUTHORITIES

Demons have powers. Any demon that shows its apocalyptic form is dangerous, because it can draw the attention of other supernatural forces (demons, hunters, whomever) — but rarely do demons worry about mortal authorities. The fallen often have powers of command — a lure in their voice, a preternatural demand allowing them to dominate the weak-minded. Just “acquired” Faith in a nightclub and left an accidental body count? As a demon, there will be complications, but you’ll probably be free to go by the end of the night.

PLAYING AN EXORCIST CHARACTER

What happens if someone wants to play an exorcist character in your **Demon** game? Do you let them? What are the advantages — and disadvantages — of doing so?

First, the disadvantages. Crossover games don't *usually* work. Characters with wildly different mentalities often clash too often to make the story worthwhile. Consider it — a demon hunter and a demon fighting together? Not a likely occurrence. Such traditional enemies are likely to try to kill each other by the second or third session, which tends to interrupt the narrative flow that you as Storyteller hope to create.

But let's remember the old adage: *opposites attract*. It can be true for your game. An exorcist may work with a group of Redeemer fallen in hopes of learning from them, or even to aid them against a greater, darker, common enemy. There is also the possibility of forming an alliance here as the two opposing sides come together to find a greater goal that outweighs their differences. Maybe they go after a particularly cruel Earthbound or maybe an exorcist seeks to aid a fallen in her "salvation."

Another adage rings true: *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. As we've said before, not all exorcists seek to destroy demons. There's potential for hunter-demon interaction. The advantages to this approach are simple — it fosters diversity in your stories and creates dramatic tension. Provided it doesn't self-destruct your plot, having two semi-opposing character types in a group can create some really clever moments in your game and make for a larger, more powerful story.

Always remember that, as Storyteller, the option is up to you. If your chronicle doesn't support such crossover, then don't allow it. But if you think it's worthwhile, try it out.

Demon hunters aren't so lucky. Exorcists are *mortal* men and women. They have no special powers. They can't explain to the officer-in-charge, "Sir, I was merely avenging my husband's death at the hands of a creature who may have been around since the dawn of time." That kind of story will get the exorcist thrown in jail (or a padded cell). As a result, one of the most common pitfalls to active demon hunters is mortal authorities. Cops, FBI agents, even the CIA and police in other countries. Nobody likes a lunatic armed with a crossbow and an iron cross, no matter what "holy battle" he claims to fight. So how do your exorcists manage to avoid

the long arm of the law? How covert can they get? Do they have allies on the police force? Is one of them a cop (or agent) herself? If they're going to be successful antagonists, you need to know why they haven't been arrested already, and how they might avoid it in the future.

HEALTH HAZARDS

Exorcists get hurt. It's a natural result of fighting demons. The fallen are much stronger and quicker, with body modifications straight out of horror movies. Exorcists are bound to get beaten up — anything from a gash across a cheek to a broken shin to a sucking chest wound. How do exorcists get medical attention? Sure, a job provides medical insurance, but can an exorcist manage a full-time job along with a demon-hunting habit? If he can't, he can always pay for his health insurance monthly — but that's costly, and if he doesn't have a job, where the hell does he get money? But we'll talk about that one in a moment. Medical problems pose another glitch in an exorcist's plan. Say a demon hunter is shot and has to go to the hospital. Now we have to bring in the previous problem, *the authorities*. Hospital workers are required to report violence-induced injuries such as gunshot and stab wounds. And if an exorcist has to be driven from the scene in an ambulance, remember that the remnants of demonic carnage are unlikely to be pretty. Linking the demon hunter with that mess is a sure-fire guarantee that the police ask some very pointed questions.

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

We've already stated that it's not exactly an easy thing for an exorcist to hold down a 9-to-5 job while hunting demons. It may be possible to manage part-time or freelance work. (There *should* be downtime in their crusades, as fighting the fallen isn't a moment-to-moment struggle. Demons don't exist in cockroach numbers, and months could pass before a hunter gets another solid lead.) But still, once the demon hunting gets back into motion, the "old" job is likely to fall by the wayside, getting the exorcist fired or black-listed. Still, the question remains — how does he get money? An exorcist's resources are exhaustible. Food only lasts so long. Hotel rooms are only for a night. Nine-millimeter bullets aren't re-usable. Then there are those medical expenses mentioned earlier. So how does he do it? If a job doesn't work, maybe he steals from the fallen or their thralls — or even from normal citizens. It's not a far cry for a long-standing exorcist to adopt the mindset, "I'm battling things that normal people can't, and they owe me." Once you steal *and* kill demons (who look like humans), the criminal mindset may come easily.

FAMILY

What about a demon hunter's family? Count them in the "problem" category. Being an exorcist doesn't just slide by the wife, kids, mother or father. Family, whether a close-knit unit or not, perks up and notices when "dad" goes out for several nights at a time and stocks the bathroom bookshelf with demonology books. Plus, if the exorcist gets hurt or starts going crazy (more on this below), the family sees as if developments were under a magnifying lens.

And while some families would be content to remain ignorant or uninterested, most get involved, maybe even going so far as staging an "intervention," as if the exorcist is secretly a drunk or an addict. How is this important for you, the Storyteller? Easy. First, it gives you a better grip on *who* an exorcist is. By dealing with the exorcist's family (and the obstacle that the family could become), you establish the character as a credible, real human being. More importantly, the family can now be a tool in your game. Imagine what happens when demon characters find out that the hunter who's been a persistent thorn in their side has a *family* who's very interested in the man's whereabouts. What do the characters do? Do they use the family as a bargaining chip against the hunter? Do they harm the family to show the exorcist that they don't appreciate being trifled with? Perhaps they even make the exorcist's daughter (or wife or mother) one of their thralls. Whatever happens, remember that everybody has family, including exorcists.

SANITY

An exorcist recognizes things that other mortals aren't meant to comprehend. The last time humans dealt with demons directly they were fresh from the Garden of Eden. It's possible that consistent encounters with the fallen may start to eat away the glue that holds together an exorcist's sanity. One of the things that keeps people sane is the ability to share problems, not bottling everything up. But exorcists can't go into a therapy session and talk about hunting demons in anything other than a metaphorical sense or they're sure to get bound up fast in an ill-fitting straitjacket. But that might be where they're headed anyway if they keep it locked away inside.

How do hunters stave off lunacy? That feeling of intense loneliness can be tormenting in the dark hours of the night. What outlet allows these people to cling to sanity? It's important to know, not only because it's key for their interaction with demon characters, but also because it makes for interesting characters. Release can be anything as quirky as having to watch Sunday's game to keep one's head on straight or as desperate as gobbling up Xanax and Absolut vodka to keep from plunging headlong into madness.

Sometimes exorcists can't hold off insanity — the thumb in the dike won't stay the flood of madness. Then what? Well, now you've got a whole different style of character. If demon characters have had it pretty easy lately, give them a true wacko exorcist to deal with — some extreme hunter who's willing to do things the *demons* wouldn't even consider.

These way-gone exorcists could be like Colonel Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now* or John Doe of *Se7en*. Maybe one of your group's fallen characters has a few thralls at the local high school — and this nut-job starts taking out students to get at the demon. Or he systematically tortures and murders a character's allies, friends and family in a serial-killer rage.

These types of hunters can be more monstrous than the monsters they believe they fight. They might sacrifice everything (including their own children) to get a little taste of payback. They're lost, broken men and women. Introducing one to your game may present a challenge to the players, but it may not be a fulfilling one. Death may be the only fate for the antagonist and it may come quickly for him. One solution to that problem is to present an exorcist who *isn't* that way — at least not in the beginning. Let the players' characters witness the *de*-evolution of the exorcist, and they'll truly grasp the depths that someone may plumb to take care of business.

BELL, BOOK & CANDLE

Being an exorcist doesn't come with a job description. You don't get a toolbox containing all the items and ideas you need to fight your insane battles. In fact, you don't get even *one* clue. So how do you go about it? How do exorcists confront the darkness without dying immediately? What tools and tactics do they develop and use over time to fight monsters? Hunters don't

GAINING DERANGEMENTS

Exorcists live in a near-constant state of fear, guilt and deprivation as they pit themselves against the demons hiding in their midst. Over time, even the strongest mind begins to bend, then break under the relentless pressure.

Whenever an exorcist is faced with a situation that requires a Willpower roll and the result is a botch, the character may gain a temporary derangement at the Storyteller's discretion. Examples of situations requiring a Willpower roll are attempts to resist the effects of Revelation, performing a Feat of Strength (see *Demon*, p. 232), or resisting the effects of evocations such as Alter Memory, Send Vision or Phantasm. For more information on different types of derangements and their effects, see *Demon*, p. 260.



know demons' true weaknesses, but demons sure as hell know the weaknesses of mortals. Still, over time, exorcists may actually manage to gather some ideas, whether by stumbling across them through sheer luck and good fortune or by learning them from other more "seasoned" exorcists. Here are a few tricks and tools an exorcist may harness to combat the denizens of Hell.

CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

Crude and requiring little finesse, conventional weapons (anything from a baseball bat to a double-barreled shotgun) are probably one of the first tools to which a zealous hunter resorts. After all, if you were confronted with the evil of a demon, what would you turn to? You might try to kill the damn thing. Shoot it. Stab it. Smash its head. After all, it looks human *most* of the time. Maybe it has human weaknesses. Novice exorcists are likely to grab for the .38 snubnose in the closet or even a standard kitchen knife.

Of course, hunters eventually learn that there are a few problems with such plans. One, they just don't work a lot of the time. Demons are hardy. Should they choose, they can heal pretty fast. They also have myriad powers at their disposal to make themselves strong, fast and resistant to damage.

Two, fire rounds off and you attract attention. Sure, this is the World of Darkness and squeezing off a few

shots in the inner city doesn't bring a SWAT team down on you (in fact, the cops probably stay the hell away). Anywhere else, however, and you may just put up a big, red flag screaming, "*Hey, I'm a criminal!*" That's bad news. An incarcerated exorcist is a useless — and vulnerable — one.

Three, an exorcist who gets involved in a firefight learns the hard and fast way that she doesn't have superpowers. She's utterly vulnerable. Unmitigated violence is a sure-fire way to *not* kill a demon and to get yourself hurt in the process.

RELIGIOUS WEAPONS

The concept of fighting "demons" is one rooted soundly in the religions and mythologies of the world. One may turn — knowingly or unknowingly — toward the tools used in these religions to fight such beings. There are some basic tools an exorcist might grab for — a Bible, holy water, a cross. Many exorcists, faithful or not, seek out these tools because... well, it just makes sense. But the tools of a Christian exorcism may not be the only ones to which a demon hunter can turn. Any symbol of faith might be sought out — a Star of David, Buddhist prayer beads or even the New Age exorcism ingredients of a Bell, Book and Candle. And some of these weapons are effective.

Some exorcists may grow too reliant upon such tools, though, overestimating their value. These items are only so useful against a demon. While they may be one component used in defeating the enemy, they alone do not stop a demon. Luring a demon into a church or holding a crucifix toward the creature doesn't banish the thing back to the Abyss. The effort may cause a demon to falter, but that's about it. For more details on the effects of sacred or blessed items as weapons against the fallen, see *Demon*, p. 254.

NON-VIOLENCE

There are many times when direct confrontation with the fallen is not the best course of action for an exorcist. Even exceptional mortals are often hopelessly outclassed by a demon in its apocalyptic form, and few demon hunters live to regret underestimating their opposition. When challenging and banishing the fallen is out of the question, there are still a variety of indirect and non-violent tactics that demon hunters can use to hinder or derail demons' activities. If a demon depends heavily on her thralls for interaction with the modern world, those pawns can be reported to the police for real or imagined crimes, be harassed mentally with phone calls and emails, or be physically threatened. If an exorcist has connections with local or federal government, she can wreak havoc on the demon's mortal life, subjecting him to IRS audits, criminal investigations or the loss of vital records. ("Sir, my computer says your driver's license is expired. Please step out of the car.") Not every demon is able to influence mortal minds at will, fix a broken car or rebuild a burned-down home. Virtually none can address all of these situations at once. Even small obstacles thrown in a fallen's path can accumulate to the point where the demon is too busy sorting out its personal affairs to trouble innocent people. While such tactics might not result in a glorious victory by any standards, demon hunters often take what they can get.

REDEMPTION

In this day and age, we constantly try to shift blame and fault away from individuals, creating a veritable culture of victims. We don't fight drug addicts, we help them with therapy. Even with criminals, we walk a line between punishment and rehabilitation. These same tactics can be applied to demons as well. Some believe that the fallen (and their thralls) aren't in control of themselves. They didn't ask to become monsters, and as such do not need to be punished so much as they need to be helped (in a manner that doesn't include shooting them). Some hunters actually try to *talk* to demons, to ask questions and try to offer a degree of salvation — or even just a willing ear or shoulder. This approach may work in some cases. Not all demons are infernal monsters hell-bent on corrupting the world (in fact, players'

characters probably aren't). Many demons are willing to talk, listen and learn. Offering redemption is a hard and dangerous road for an exorcist, however. It makes them vulnerable to temptation. They may not even notice that they are being taken advantage of in their expressed "sympathy." Or they may simply make the mistake of trying to be too touchy-feely with a real infernal son of a bitch. The "therapy" angle ends harshly as the exorcist's head goes bouncing across the floor.

WEAPONS OF FAITH

There are, of course, ways for a mortal to *really* hurt a demon: blessed items, prayers, sacred ground, binding rituals. The problem with these weapons is, your average human doesn't know diddly about them — and hence, neither do most exorcists. It's not exactly common knowledge that possessing a demon's True Name gives you power over the beast.

That's not to say, however, that an industrious exorcist couldn't get a *glimpse* into these weapons. A hunter who really digs into demonology — be it through the library or the Internet — may find out that, sure, knowing a demon's actual name might give you power. Or that a certain ritual or prayer might hold a demon at bay or even cause it to run from you in fear. But then, how the hell does one *discover* a demon's True Name? Where do you *find* one of these banishing prayers? It's true that a high Occult score indicates that a character knows where to start, and might allow him to gather a few effective weapons. But most exorcists are normal people (cab drivers, accountants, housewives), and normal people don't often have any inkling of what "occult" means, much less possess dots in the Occult Ability. A scant few (clergy, professors, librarians) may hold a point or two, but only enough to have a few pieces of the puzzle.

Yet *some* exorcists have access to holy items, special prayers or blessed ground. It's uncommon, and many of these individuals have come across these "true" weapons accidentally or by a stroke of good fortune, but it happens nevertheless.

RESEARCH

A good exorcist doesn't come upon the "true weapons" by force of luck alone. While it's possible that a good tool or tactic will land in an exorcist's lap, finding a blessed arsenal of prayers and weapons ultimately takes research. Exorcists, whether antagonists, allies or players' characters, should never automatically be armed with the "tools of the trade." Acquiring them is a long, slow process that involves lots of time in the library poring over dusty books, interviewing old clergy and performing reconnaissance on the fallen themselves.

Researching information on prayers and blessed relics, and sifting through myth and legend for reliable data on combating demons is performed with a standard Intelligence + Research roll (or Intelligence + Occult, at the Storyteller's discretion). The difficulty is dependent on the degree of access the researcher has to sources of potentially useful information. A demon hunter with religious connections and access to a wealth of literature about demonology would face a difficulty of 6 or less, based on the quality of the information available. A hunter with access to a large secular library in a major city such as London or New York would face a difficulty of 7. Access to a modest town library or the personal collection of one or more individuals might present a difficulty of 8. Sifting through the morass of lies, distortions and urban legends on the Internet poses a difficulty of 9 or 10.

Even with access to sources of useful information, the challenge of unearthing the right knowledge is tedious and time-consuming, often requiring hours, days or weeks to track down arcane references and sources. Depending on the specificity and obscurity of the information the exorcist seeks, set a target number of successes that the player must gain in an extended Research roll. As a rule of thumb, a Research roll can be made for every four hours of uninterrupted research the character performs, although you can adjust that rate depending on the circumstances. Constant interruptions might call for one roll every day, while investigation into very basic information might justify rolls every hour. Willpower points can be spent to gain automatic successes if the player wishes. Additionally, if more than one character searches for the same information, the successes of any Research rolls are combined.

Searching for a short prayer to help fortify an exorcist's faith in her mission may call for a relatively small number of successes — 10 to 15 perhaps, which can be gained in a few long days' searching through library archives. By contrast, learning the location of an ancient arrow said to be able to pierce the heart of a demon to "send it back to Hell" might require an enormous research target, perhaps 50 or even 100, which could only be achieved through weeks or months of hard-core investigation. (Note that players, whether their characters are exorcists looking for tools or fallen looking for the vulnerabilities of their own existence, should never be told the number of successes they need. It should be a mystery. You can give them a clue so they don't feel like they're spinning their wheels, but knowing a specific target number takes some of the mystery out of the process.)

Keep in mind, however, that the research process should never be watered-down to tedious dice rolling. As the Storyteller, you should be willing to do a little

invention or research yourself so you can throw out bits of information and "flavor" (perhaps parts of an actual prayer or descriptions of a real holy object that existed in the Middle Ages) to help give the players a sense of richness and mood. For instance, don't just tell them, "Okay, you've achieved seven successes, so you're closer to finding that prayer." Describe it to them. "Seven successes? You find a scrap of old parchment tucked away in a witch-hunter's manual written in the 17th century. It contains a broken translation from an apocryphal text called *The Gospel of the Presence*." Then you can go on to provide the actual bits of broken text.

SACRED OBJECTS

There are many objects spread across the globe that may aid in the war against the fallen. Some may be small, simple items such as fragments of the True Cross that help to repel demons. Others might be massive weapons to turn against the infernal — perhaps a Nepalese *kukri* blade inscribed with *sutras* (prayers) that is capable of doing aggravated damage to any fallen. Learning the location of holy objects, as outlined above, requires a specified number of successes gained in extended Intelligence + Research rolls. Very few objects require less than 25 successes. Below are two sample holy items.

NURSIA MEDAL OF ST. BENEDICT

At the turn of the millennium, AD 1000, the Italian town of Nursia was beset by a sorcerer who conjured demons. Many were tempted into darkness, and those who would not fall sway were murdered in the town square while the rest slept. The townsfolk prayed for some kind of abjuration of darkness. One morning, after the people of Nursia felt that all was lost, small, coin-sized medals appeared hanging inside doorways on thick twine. Each medal had two inscriptions. The first was *CRUX SANCTI PATRIS BENEDICTI*, or "The Cross of the Holy Father Benedict." (St. Benedict, a renowned miracle-worker and exorcist, was born in the town in 480.) The other was *NON DRACO SIT MIHI DUX*, or "May the Dragon never be my guide." The image was the same on both sides, featuring a man in monk's robes wielding a cross to ward off bodiless demons (only their faces could be seen). Those who wore the medals were immune to demonic powers and could not be swayed or harmed by the creatures afflicting the town. It is said that of the approximately 100 medals that "blessed" the households of Nursia, only 13 remain in the modern age.

System: Those who wear a medal have no automatic protection. Spending a Willpower point, however, creates a specific effect that lasts for a single scene. The medal confers the ability to ignore all mental effects of a demon's Revelation and allows the bearer to ignore all

lore powers that have mind-controlling effects. The medal does not stop any form of physical damage or bodily harm caused by a demon. A Nursia medal has a research target of 60.

KILA (OR PHUR BA)

The *kila* is a ritual dagger used most often in conjunction with liturgy and prayer spoken from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Most of these objects reside in museums, but there are a few in the hands of private collectors — and exorcists. It's a dagger with a handle longer than the blade. The blade itself is a wide, short "arrowhead" of steel with gilded snakes (or *nagas*) winding to the tip. The handle is decorated with crocodiles (or *makara*). At the pommel is the frightening head and face of the deity Vajrakilaya, whose eyes are inlaid with bright turquoise. The blade was used in "cutting" ceremonies, which rarely involved actual bloodletting, but was waved over those who felt they were possessed by demons or afflicted by evil. The item was a *real* weapon when used against demons (and thus is to the fallen today). Demons struck by the dagger howled in pain as the weapon "stole" part of their divine nature.

System: The dagger is heavy to wield; using it requires a Dexterity + Melee roll, difficulty 8 to hit. The dagger inflicts lethal damage equal to the wielder's Strength +1. A Willpower roll (difficulty 7) can also be made on behalf of the dagger's wielder each time the weapon inflicts damage on a demon. Each success removes one temporary Faith point from the wounded fallen. Willpower cannot be spent to diminish a target's Faith. A *kila* has a research target of 35.

PRAYERS AND RITUALS

There are many abjurations, oaths, prayers and rituals that have multiple effects against the fallen — repelling them, confusing them, even doing physical harm to their mortal shells. The trick is in *uncovering* these prayers and rituals. Each abjuration has a research target associated with it — some are easier to find than others. The Catholic Rite of Exorcism is a fairly common prayer, and has a research target of 10. Meanwhile, the Sumerian ritual of the *Surma Masu* (the origin of the scapegoat premise, in which a goat was sacrificed to draw a demon's soul away) has a target number of 50. And that doesn't figure in the task of translating Sumerian. Below are two sample abjurations to help in the fight against the fallen.

PRAYER OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

This prayer, often used in conjunction with actual exorcisms, can be found in abbreviated form to aid exorcists locked in spiritual battle with the fallen.

"O Most Glorious Prince of the Heavenly Armies, St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in the battle and in our

wrestling against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Come to the aid of men, whom GOD created incorruptible, and to the Image of His own Likeness He made him; and from the tyranny of the devil He bought him at a great price.

"Fight the battles of the Lord today with the Army of the Blessed Angels, as once thou didst fight against Lucifer, the leader of pride, and his apostate angels; and they prevailed not: neither was their place found anymore in Heaven. But that great dragon was cast out, the old serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world. And he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

"Behold, the ancient enemy and murderer strongly raises his head! Transformed into an angel of light, with the entire horde of wicked spirits he goes about everywhere and takes possession of the earth, so that therein he may blot out the Name of GOD and of His Christ and steal away, afflict and ruin into everlasting destruction the souls destined for a Crown of Eternal Glory. On men depraved in mind and corrupt in heart the wicked dragon pours out like a most foul river, the poison of his villainy, a spirit of lying, impiety and blasphemy; and the deadly breath of lust and of all iniquities and vices.

"Be present with the people of GOD and against the spiritual wickedness which are bursting in upon them; and bring them the victory."

System: Upon reciting this prayer, an exorcist may regain any temporary Willpower points lost, thus restoring up her pool. This invocation can be used in this manner only once per week. The research target of the prayer is 15.

ZAR RITUAL

In some third-world countries, the modern "enlightened" mind has yet to brainwash the masses to cease their belief in the supernatural. Some African cultures, for instance, still purport that wizards and demons act in accord (or in opposition) to their everyday lives. One ritual was developed over time by a group often called the Zar cult. It was used by abused and estranged females to cast demons out of husbands. The ritual, which originated in Somalia and was later found in Egypt and Haiti, involved capturing the possessed (i.e., a fallen) and binding him physically so he was unable to move. A variation could involve wounding the "demon" to the point of immobility.

The woman fasted for 12 hours, and then danced for 12 more. These 24 hours of abuse culminated in a trance-like state for both performer and possessed, with the intent of casting out spirits from the subject.

System: The dance need not be performed by a woman, but the dance must still be preceded by 12 hours

without food and sleep. That first 12 hours is broken down into three Stamina rolls, each roll representing four hours of deprivation. The first roll is difficulty 6, the second difficulty 7, and the third is difficulty 8. If any of these fail, the performer succumbs to desire and either eats or sleeps (unless a Willpower point is spent). If any of the rolls result in a botch, the exorcist passes out.

The dance itself is broken down into three Stamina + Athletics rolls — the first is difficulty 7, the second 8 and the third 9. Failing any of these rolls indicates that the dance fails and the whole process must begin anew. Botching any of these rolls incurs two levels of bashing damage from exhaustion. The ritual does not exorcise a demon precisely, but it guarantees that for a period of 12 hours *following* the dance, if the demon's host body is killed, the demon cannot jump to a body or object and is thus automatically banished back to the Abyss. This ritual has a research target of 85.

EXTREME TACTICS

How far are exorcists willing to go? In the beginning, they probably don't know the answer to that question themselves. They may go gunning for a demon and find out the hard way that they'll either get their asses handed to them in a paper sack, or may not be able to track down their adversary at all, always staying one step behind. But when they do catch up, when they realize that it's not going to be a cakewalk, how far are they willing to go to take care of business? Figure it out, because demon characters are the ones who will bear the brunt of exorcists' "devotion."

Are hunters willing to murder? Torture? How monstrous can they become without sacrificing their own souls? Or do they view such commitment as the end justifying the means, believing that damning their own souls may be the only way to save countless others? Do they capture a demon's thrall — or even just an ally or loved one? Do they torture the victim mentally and physically to find out where the demon is? Are they capable of going so far as leaving a trail of bodies for a demon to follow, the bodies of individuals whom the demon considers important? It's also possible that exorcists won't go these lengths at all, and consider themselves moral and upstanding people who refuse to start down that slippery slope of ethical destruction. But if these hunters won't use extreme tactics, how long can they truly last?

SAVING SOULS

Is it possible to save the *human* soul of a demon's host body? Is the human soul even there anymore, or is it just the memory of the mortal's mind clinging to the skin? As Storyteller, this is something you need to

consider. If in your chronicle a mortal soul still exists inside a host, submerged deep below the demon's clearly dominant persona, or if you decide that it's possible to call the soul *back* into the vessel and evict the demon, then you might want to consider the possibility of an actual exorcism in your game. This is not an easy task. It's not something that can be handled with a few dice rolls and some game time. This is a serious endeavor, and it should be handled with as much *gravitas* as possible. This is a battle for a being's soul — both demonic and human. While systems are involved (see below), the gain and/or loss should be played out with intense and serious roleplaying.

CHRISTIAN EXORCISM

Exorcism in the Christian religion is largely a Catholic affair — the other branches of Christianity do not tend to include "exorcism" as an actual ritual. A Catholic exorcism is long, sometimes requiring a whole night or occasionally even days of ritual. It's typically performed by a priest or bishop and involves the recitation of certain prayers in repetition (these are actually different for every priest, but they usually include readings from the Gospel of John, the Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel, and Psalm 67). The ceremony can begin with, "In the Name of Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, strengthened by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Blessed Michael the Archangel, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints (and powerful in the holy authority of our ministry), we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the devil." It can continue on with an echoed prayer (answered by a secondary priest or by the single priest) exhorting the Devil to leave the body through the invocation of the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

JUDAIC EXORCISM

Technically, the act of exorcism in Western tradition began before Christ, with wandering Jewish men called *exorkistes* who traveled and cast out demons for money, favors or recognition of their "holy status." The chief characteristic among Jewish exorcisms was a repetition of the names of all the good angels. Names were key in the mythology and magic of early Judaism, and the act of exorcism was no different. It was also believed that Solomon had crafted certain formulas in his mastery of demon banishment, many of which were based on numerology, language and Qabbalistic writings. It was believed that demons could sometimes be extricated from the possessed and cast into mundane objects or simple animals. Then the objects could be destroyed or the animals killed, thus harming the demons in the process. Other elements of this style of exorcism were readings from the Talmud and other books such as the *Sefer ha-Razim* (the Book of Secrets).

EASTERN EXORCISM

Discussing all of the exorcistic rituals of the East could fill 10 books; the practice is common among the primary and splinter religions and philosophies of Eastern thought. Buddhist exorcisms alone are myriad in style and ritual. Korea has the *kubyong shishik*, an elaborate and lengthy ritual that involves the causing of pain to the possessed in an attempt to cast the demon out. In Tibetan Buddhism, shamans perform the *Manu Rimdu*, a choreographed mask dance to frighten demons away. In Japanese Shinto, it is believed that demonic possession involves an angry ancestor spirit who needs to be scared away, and a heavy staff decorated with metal rings called the *shakujo* is shaken (it makes a loud noise) to get the job done. In Hindu lore, there are countless methods of exorcism, from beating the possessed to offering him gifts of wealth and candy, reciting prayers or mantras, or even blowing smoke from burning cow dung into the lungs of the haunted.

PERSONAL EXORCISM

Probably the primary way for a character to help "save the human soul" of the possessed might be an intensely personal ritual, designed for the identity of the possessed or from the identity of the exorcist. It may involve something along the lines of psychotherapy, imprisoning the demon and attempting some form of question-and-answer session to "remind" the demon of its human soul and to bring it to

the surface. Such efforts could go so far as "cult deprogramming," depriving a demon of food, water and other necessities in an effort to shock the demon out of the host's system. Or this approach might take on the guise of a very intimate ritual — readings from the host's favorite book (be it the Bible or *Alice in Wonderland*), sex with a loved one or a forced drug trip. Anything is possible in crafting a personal, unique exorcism ritual, and roleplaying in this instance is highly encouraged.

SYSTEM

In essence, all exorcisms, regardless of the spiritual or personal foundation, follow the same basic system. The following rules are an optional expansion of those provided in *Demon*, p. 255. You are encouraged to use the system that best serves the needs of your chronicle.

First, the exorcist must find a way to confine the demon so the potentially lengthy exorcism can be performed. A prayer of binding (*Demon*, p. 255) is the ideal choice for holding one of the infernal in place, but requires one or more assistants to maintain the prayer while the exorcist performs the initial examination and determines whether to proceed with the rite. More mundane means such as heavy chains, incapacitating drugs or crippling physical injury are also options. Given the physical prowess and stamina of a typical demon, however, these alternatives are also highly risky.



Next, an examination of sorts must be conducted to determine if there is even a human soul within the possessed body that can be saved. This stage consists of a series of personal questions and a Perception + Awareness roll, with a difficulty equal to the demon's Willpower +2, up to a maximum of 10. If the roll fails, the exorcist can make the effort twice more. If both subsequent rolls fail, or any roll results in a botch, the examination is judged a failure and the rite cannot be performed. If the examination is successful and the exorcist is confident that the human soul can be found and brought to the surface, the long process of exorcism begins.

The exorcism rite consists of a long litany of prayers admonishing the demon and commanding it to surrender its hold on the mortal body. Ultimately, it boils down to a clash of wills between exorcist and fallen. The exorcist must remain in close physical proximity to the demon for the duration of the rite, never straying farther than the distance his normal speaking voice can carry. For each hour the rite is performed, make a resisted Willpower roll (difficulty 8) between exorcist and the demon. If the exorcist knows the demon's True Name (*Demon*, p. 256), she gains a distinct advantage over the demon, lowering the difficulty of her Willpower roll to 6. Losing the roll costs one Willpower point, and rolls continue until one side runs out of Willpower or the exorcist abandons the rite. If at any point the roll for the exorcist botches, the exorcism fails automatically and may not be repeated. The trauma of the failed attempt might also afflict the exorcist with a derangement at the Storyteller's discretion. If the roll for the demon botches, the exorcism is immediately successful.

If the demon runs out of Willpower points, the exorcism ritual succeeds; the demon's soul is cast out, banished back into the Abyss, and the mortal's soul resurfaces. The restored human has a Willpower score of zero, and suffers a temporary derangement determined by the Storyteller. Later, with each Willpower point the person regains, a Willpower roll (difficulty 7)

MULTIPLE EXORCISTS IN AN EXORCISM

Multiple exorcists can work together to perform the rite of exorcism if desired, joining in even after the rite has begun. If multiple exorcists perform the rite, make a Willpower roll for each one and total their successes against those generated for the demon. If the exorcists lose any resisted roll then each individual loses a Willpower point. If any exorcist's roll results in a botch, the rite fails and every participant risks suffering a temporary derangement. Participants to the rite can opt to drop out at any point, but once they have bowed out they cannot return.

can be made to overcome the derangement. One success is enough to restore the person's grip on sanity. If such a roll ever botches, the effects of the derangement are permanent and no further rolls may be attempted.

REPERCUSSIONS

As Storyteller, you may decide that an exorcism is impossible. A demon taking a body has murdered the host's soul or that soul is absent forever. But that doesn't stop exorcists from attempting an exorcism, does it? If they make the effort and have some degree of "success," multiple repercussions may result. You may decide that the demon is cast out, but no human soul can return. The body is either in a comatose state or simply dies on the spot. Or, it may be that the human soul is actually the one "cast out" and the demon's Torment comes full-flood upon the character, creating a far worse monster than before. It's even possible that the demon "simulates" the mortal soul, tricking the exorcists into thinking that the ritual has succeeded!

Sympathy for the Devil

Exorcists don't have to be antagonists. Not every demon hunter is going to kick down a demon's hotel-room door with an AR-15 assault rifle and start shooting. Obviously, as a reader of *Demon: The Fallen*, you know that demons aren't the good guys, aren't the bad guys, and exist soundly in the shades-of-gray region. Exorcists are the same way — their complexities don't allow *anyone* to wear the white or black hat. It's therefore possible that from time to time exorcists and demons will ally with one another instead of trying to tear each other to pieces.

Don't misread the situation — an exorcist meeting any demon is likely to lump the fallen in with any other unrepentant creatures she has encountered. It's prejudice, sure, but when you see a demon stalk the halls of your family home, reaping Faith through grisly acts of depravity, it's a good bet you're not going to be happy with *any* demon you meet. It's guilty until proven innocent all the way. That doesn't mean every exorcist has to go whole hog in attack mode, though. There are many reasons to establish meaningful, non-violent relationships with demons.

COMMON ENEMIES

One thing's for sure: Very few humans can match up to a demon, especially to one with apocalyptic form in full effect. Any exorcist who goes in with guns blazing isn't going to live long. Hunters can forge temporary or even lasting alliances with demons who share their desire to banish or destroy a mutual enemy. Demons belonging to the Reconciler faction could easily find common ground with a group of exorcists that hopes to banish (or possibly even redeem) a more monstrous

being. The relationship has a number of mutual benefits: The exorcists gain valuable muscle or access to powers that offset their opponent's, while the demon can take advantage of the exorcists' knowledge of mortal society and its laws.

THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Exorcists need information. Demon hunters pursue their impromptu calling with no instructional video to help them. They're deaf, dumb and blind to what they're dealing with. Sure, they just saw some tumor-ridden, malodorous monster break a person's neck. But that's all they get. There's no moment of weakness, nary a hint as to what may harm the demon. Yes, they may eventually turn to the basics of exorcist lore (as detailed above) to fight the fallen, but more often than not they're dead wrong about how to battle these monsters. And so, if they can find a demon who's willing to share even a tiny scrap of information, exorcists might take it. If they don't they're left in the dark. Cunning demon hunters might agree to spare a victim they have on the ropes in return for a steady stream of knowledge about fallen abilities, powers, strengths and weaknesses.

By the same token, the fallen can use demon hunters to acquire information from which both parties can profit. A Cryptic seeking clues about a mystery or about the whereabouts of an enemy might enlist a group of exorcists to investigate the matter and could share the results equally. Demons might be willing to barter their freedom for the names and locations of their rivals, or trade knowledge of ancient times to mortal scholars in exchange for research. All the celestial power in Creation is useless when trying to comb a library for an obscure reference to a Sumerian god.

PAST TIES

Demons are people, too. Sounds strange, but remember that the mind of a fallen is left with the remnants of human consciousness. A demon's body and mind tempers the invading spirit's Abyssal fury. The fallen therefore have the whims and motivations—and relationships—of people. It's entirely possible that a person became an exorcist because she witnessed the frightening change that came over an old friend, former lover or family member. Those long-held bonds of friendship or affection could allow for an uneasy relationship between demon and would-be demon-hunter. Can an exorcist overcome her feelings for the person she once knew and forego any hope of saving him? A demon can hold out that thin sliver of hope (and possibly even intend to fulfill it), in the meantime gaining a potential ally against her enemies. The risk, of course, is that as the demon succumbs to Torment, forcing the exorcist's hand and creating an enemy who knows the creature's every weakness and frailty.

PAWNS OF THE FALLEN

Exorcists are 100% Grade-A *human*. They aren't monsters, they don't have powers, and they damn well don't have much of a clue about the *truth*. All they have is a drive and desire to hunt something that they consider wrong, an intense will to succeed over what they perceive as some sort of unholy tyranny. But one of the crucial characteristics of human beings is *fallibility*, and it's no different with demon hunters.

Exorcists are capable of falling to the dark side—becoming tools in the hands of the things they hate. Becoming the pawn of a demon, even while fighting them, is a constant threat of an exorcist's reality. It's usually unwilling—the fallen have an array of capabilities both supernatural and natural at their disposal to turn an exorcist to their "cause." There's always the mind-control of many of the lore powers (such as the Lore of Radiance), and many demons in apocalyptic form are capable of such feats as Inhuman Allure and Unearthly Glamour. Any of these will-bending capabilities help twist an exorcist into an infernal lapdog. Outside of that, there's always torture. When some beast with oily black wings and a gaping maw breaks your fingers one by one, it's easy to give up everything and become a pawn of those you hate.

The flip side of the coin is that there are exorcists who are *willing* to give themselves over to one (or many) demons. They consider it a necessity of getting a job done. A hunter may think, "I'm fighting these demons and I need to destroy them, but I don't have what it takes to get the job done. This *other* demon has offered to help me in return for something." And so it begins. The exorcist enters a voluntary pact (possibly becoming the fallen's thrall) in hopes of gaining the strength she needs to fulfill her personal mission. Most exorcists who are willing to enter into such bargains seek revenge against *specific* demons and are willing to sacrifice everything to get it.

So, what happens then? An exorcist gives it up, offers Faith, enters a pact. Well, the good news is that the exorcist has a direct line to all things "demon." Probably the most important element of that is information. Where she was once figuratively blind, now she has a lamp to light the darkness—though, that's not necessarily always the case. Remember that the fallen can be kings and queens of manipulation and have little to no problem lying to their thralls. A demon might convince a hunter-thrall that her personal enemies are more extensive than the exorcist knew, and the demon creates a weapon to turn against its own rivals. Still, it's likely that the demon gives up enough information to enhance the exorcist's capacity to get the job done, which may be all the exorcist wants.

Beyond information, there are also the powers that are conferred with the pact. Whether these powers are granted in the form of physical enhancements, evocations or just a tweaking of an exorcist's Attributes, it doesn't matter. The point is the exorcist gains and becomes stronger in the bargain.

But the exorcist loses, too. Let's not forget that she becomes the demon's willing *pawn*. She's not only a servant in whatever capacity was deemed in the pact, but she is a walking, talking Faith battery that the demon can drain any time it wants — from anywhere in the world. Enough abuse and the exorcist can become a shell of what she once was. Sure, she has information and supernatural powers, but she's also a sycophantic slave who's bent to the demon's needs, becoming more and more malleable in the process. It's the price one pays.

In your **Demon** game, it might be interesting for characters to vie to convert an established exorcist. Perhaps the exorcist has known enemies. If only the characters had something they could offer him (without getting shot or exorcised in the process), they might gain a new ally.

DRAMA

Exorcists don't just happen. A motel clerk doesn't one day gain magical knowledge of demonic influence and decide to hunt fallen angels. They have reasons for being who and what they are — often very personal ones, since only the most intimate of reasons could tear someone out of their normal life and pit them against otherworldly beings. Maybe a demon murdered someone a hunter loved, or a loved one is a demon's thrall. Perhaps an exorcist was hurt or abused or almost killed by one of the infernal. Maybe an exorcist was simply a bystander in the way of a demon wreaking havoc in a shopping mall, and watched as innocent children were cut down or enslaved. One way or another, every exorcist is driven by a motive and that motive defines him.

It's possible to come up with a pretty cool backstory for exorcist antagonists before your players have even created their fallen characters. But if you really want to hook the players into these antagonists and make them something *really* special, then the secret is to make the exorcists and the players' characters somehow entwined. It then becomes more personal to all parties involved. What if one of the characters in your game succumbed to her Torment, lost control of one of her evocations and a passerby died in the process. What becomes of the innocent's family, loved ones or friends? Could they become demon hunters, motivated by a need for revenge? (Perhaps the exorcists only *perceive* that the

fallen were the ones who murdered family members, and are motivated by an misdirected agenda.) Consider, too, that exorcists are the family/friends/loved ones of the *characters* themselves! What happens when a demon's wife (or at least the wife of the host) comes knocking on the door with a .45 ACP and a vial of blessed holy water?

The point is it becomes personal to players and characters when exorcists are more than faceless drones. If you link exorcists' backstories with those of the fallen, your players begin to love, hate and even fear the hunters, as opposed to just considering them an irritating thorn in the side.

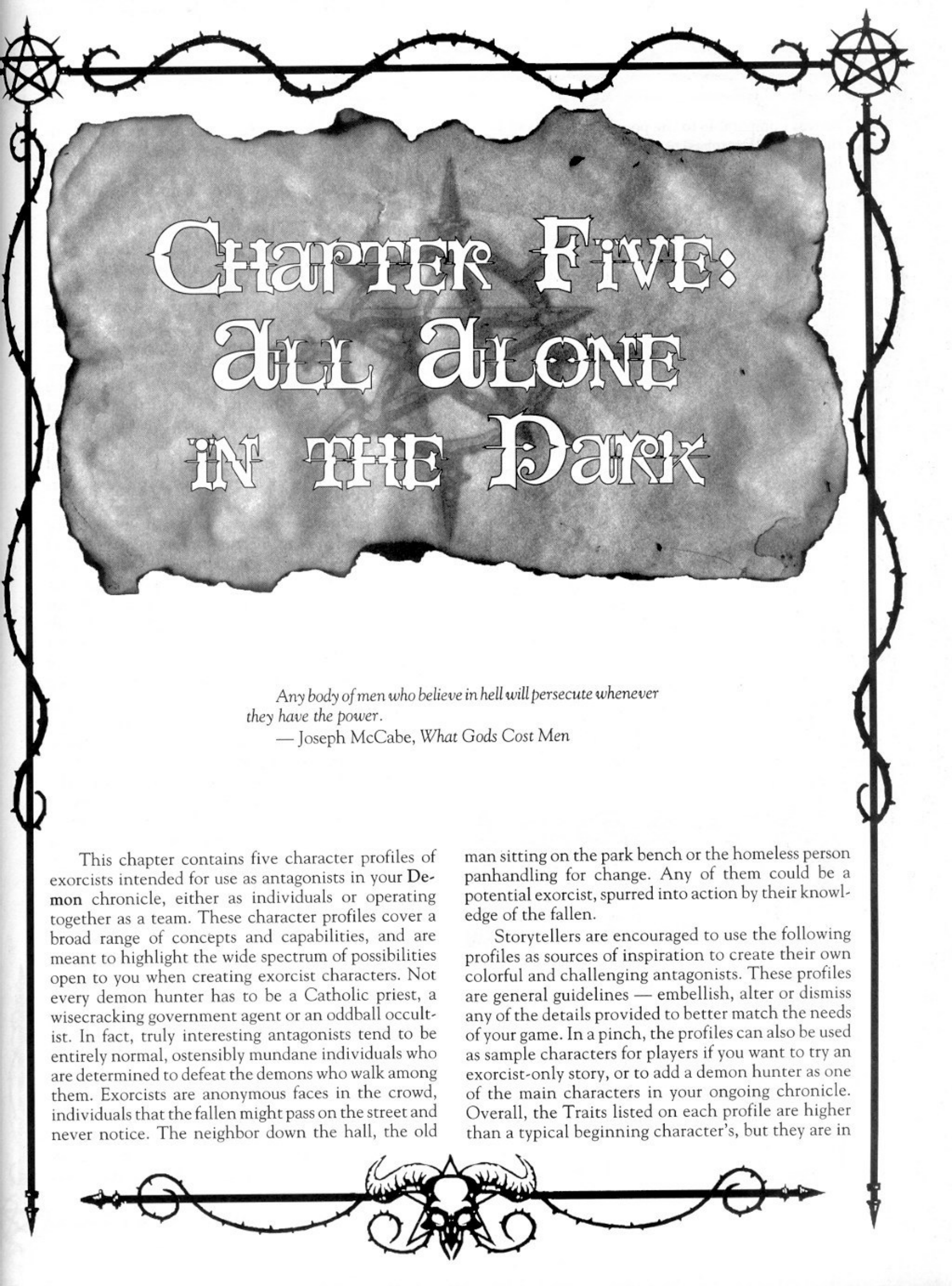
THE OUTCOME

What's the end result of using exorcists in your game? All stories have a certain ebb and flow, usually leading to a climax and the end of the story (which may lead into another, and another). How do exorcists figure into the overall story of your demon characters? A lot of what's written here helps you figure that out, but it's important to know where hunters fit into the narrative flow of the story as much as who they are and what they're after. Are they a part of the ending? Do you want them defeated quickly and handily early on, or do you want them to pose a hard-won victory?

The end result of an exorcist's story arc can be drawn from many sources. They're diligent and vigilant when it comes to their calling, but that doesn't mean it won't get them killed or locked away or thrown so far off the deep end that they're lost no matter what. It's even possible that an exorcist just up and quits, throwing in the towel, determined that she'll never defeat that which is "immortal and evil." But can a person really walk away, knowing what she does, and be happy and content in life? Probably not.

Every story has an ending and you have to determine where your exorcists fit into it. Maybe you don't want them to be a part of the ending of *this* story, and hope that they carry on into the future of the chronicle. It could be that they shift from enemy to ally and back again before the series is over. Are they always loose allies or adversaries? And, of course, it doesn't need to be said that the best-laid plans can fall apart. The primary characters of your game are controlled by the players. They may not follow your trail of breadcrumbs. They may turn to enemy hunters for help, or betray exorcists who've become allies. So, be prepared to improvise. But at least *have* a plan from which to deviate. Make your exorcists a part of the overall blueprint. With that in mind, you'll come to a more satisfying outcome whatever the exorcists' desired role might be.





CHAPTER FIVE: ALL ALONE IN THE DARK

Any body of men who believe in hell will persecute whenever they have the power.

— Joseph McCabe, *What Gods Cost Men*

This chapter contains five character profiles of exorcists intended for use as antagonists in your *Demon* chronicle, either as individuals or operating together as a team. These character profiles cover a broad range of concepts and capabilities, and are meant to highlight the wide spectrum of possibilities open to you when creating exorcist characters. Not every demon hunter has to be a Catholic priest, a wisecracking government agent or an oddball occultist. In fact, truly interesting antagonists tend to be entirely normal, ostensibly mundane individuals who are determined to defeat the demons who walk among them. Exorcists are anonymous faces in the crowd, individuals that the fallen might pass on the street and never notice. The neighbor down the hall, the old

man sitting on the park bench or the homeless person panhandling for change. Any of them could be a potential exorcist, spurred into action by their knowledge of the fallen.

Storytellers are encouraged to use the following profiles as sources of inspiration to create their own colorful and challenging antagonists. These profiles are general guidelines — embellish, alter or dismiss any of the details provided to better match the needs of your game. In a pinch, the profiles can also be used as sample characters for players if you want to try an exorcist-only story, or to add a demon hunter as one of the main characters in your ongoing chronicle. Overall, the Traits listed on each profile are higher than a typical beginning character's, but they are in



no way comparable to the powers and capabilities of the fallen. Exorcists prevail by wits, courage and luck, not by direct confrontations with the angels of the Abyss!

EVIE SULLIVAN

Evie Sullivan knew she wanted to be a police officer when she was six years old. She made the momentous decision on the day that her father, himself a decorated veteran of the Chicago police force, received his promotion to captain. Later, as her father and his buddies celebrated over beer and cigars in the Sullivan's kitchen, she put on his hat, strode proudly up to the big, burly men seated around the kitchen table and declared that she would be the city's best detective ever. The crusty old cops laughed until they cried, and Evie fled the room with tears of her own. In later years, when she pulled an all-nighter studying for a test, faced a 10-mile run in icy rain or had a police instructor screaming in her face, she remembered that afternoon in the kitchen, gritted her teeth and paid whatever price in blood, sweat and tears that was necessary to get the job done.

By the relatively tender age of 26, Evie was well on her way to proving those old cops wrong. Joining the police academy right out of high school over the angry objections of her then-retired father, Evie struggled with the physical demands of police training, but her sharp mind and exceptional memory won her praise from her classroom instructors. After graduation, Evie was offered several administrative positions within the force, but declined in order to become a patrol officer like any other rookie cop. Finally, Evie found herself assigned to Chicago's Organized Crime Task Force, with a promise of a promotion in six months if she performed well.



Evie's superior on the task force was an experienced detective named Larry Donegan, a "lifer" who'd worked on the task force for decades. Evie found Donegan to be aloof and cynical, dismissive of her abilities and smugly certain that the mob in Chicago was there to stay. With characteristic stubbornness, Evie vowed to prove Donegan wrong. But the more she threw herself into her investigations, the more she realized that the mob was always one step ahead of the cops. Not only were they strangely prescient about the police force's activities, the city's many gangs seemed subtly coordinated. Obviously, someone inside the force was tipping the mobsters off—possibly someone on the task force itself. After six months of hitting one dead end after another, Evie started watching her fellow police officers. It wasn't long before she narrowed down a list of likely suspects, and Larry Donegan was at the top. She worked with her boss by day and started tailing him by night. What she learned surprised and frightened her.

Donegan made no effort to disguise his movements. She followed him to meetings all over the city and watched him sit down with major figures in every mob outfit. She expected to see money change hands, but Donegan seemed to be issuing orders rather than supplying information. When he spoke, hardened criminals hung their heads like dogs. The sight unsettled her in a way she couldn't put into words. What worried her more was that it seemed like Donegan *knew* he was being watched and didn't seem to care.

Evie spent four months taking photos, making notes and building an ironclad case she could take to Internal Affairs. Then, just as she felt that it was time to go public, Evie woke one morning to find the dossiers, tapes and photos missing from her apartment. Her home-security system was still armed, and there were no signs of an attempted entry. Then, that morning, as she sat alone in the precinct breakroom, Donegan paid her a visit.

Looking back, Evie thought that the conversation must have taken only a few moments, but at the time it seemed as though they spoke for more than an hour. Time seemed to stand still. Donegan complimented her on her persistence, her attention to detail and her integrity. He told her how much he looked forward to working with her directly in the future, and promised her great things if she proved to be a team player. He never mentioned the evidence she'd gathered, much less her months of surveillance, but he knew. She could see it in his eyes. Donegan knew, and he wasn't afraid. He was untouchable. And when he talked to her about opportunities and close partnerships, she found herself nodding, even excited about the prospect. Evie never even noticed him leave the room.

When she finally returned to her senses it was all she could do to make it to the bathroom before the shakes took hold.

Donegan wasn't human. She didn't know how she could be so certain of such a bizarre notion, but there it was. It was in his eyes and the way his voice left her feeling like a rag doll. Somehow, he was controlling the gangs, and she was never going to make a case against him.

Donegan left her alone for a few days after the evidence vanished, letting her wallow in her own despair. There was a point at which she seriously considered taking Donegan up on his offer — after all, when the game was rigged, why fight it? But then she remembered that summer afternoon in her parent's kitchen and knew she had to make a terrible choice.

Arranging the bust was simpler than she'd thought. Donegan was a creature of habit, and it was simple enough to tip off the narcotics squad when he was set to hook up with a particularly vicious set of Latino drug traffickers. The shootout claimed the lives of three officers, including Larry Donegan, a long-time veteran of the police force. Evie went to each and every funeral and prayed to God that she'd done the right thing.

Appearance: Athletic and attractive, Evie Sullivan cuts a noticeable figure, but her abominable social skills guarantee that most people find her cold and standoffish. Not that Evie would notice. She is more comfortable with a book than with a person, and would rather spend Friday evening studying old cases than meeting new friends. Single-minded and intelligent, she is a master of interpreting data and unraveling mysteries. (Think Clarice Starling from *Silence of the Lambs*).

Roleplaying Hints: Evie is haunted by the thought that she might have made a mistake in arranging Donegan's death. Since then she has devoted every spare moment to investigating other possible instances of strange or unexplained phenomena, an effort that could easily place her on a collision course with the characters of your chronicle. Depending on the characters' actions, it's not a foregone conclusion that she will react to them as enemies, and she could be willing to initiate a truce of sorts in hopes of gaining information about the fallen.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 1, Manipulation 2, Appearance 3, Perception 4 (Crime Scene), Intelligence 4 (Analysis), Wits 2

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Awareness 2, Brawl 2, Computer 1, Dodge 1, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 2, Investigation 3, Law 3, Medicine 1, Melee 2, Research 1, Science 1, Security 1, Streetwise 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 3, Conviction 3, Courage 3

Willpower: 8

Faith Potential: 2

Equipment: Heavy pistol, Kevlar vest, collapsible baton, handcuffs, SUV

MARSHA HAMBLI

All Marsha ever wanted from life was to marry someone with enough money to take care of her and to raise a family. It was an ideal instilled in her by her mother, an embittered woman who hated her middle-class existence and who felt that the world somehow owed her more.

It all came down to picking out the right husband. Marsha learned from her mother's mistakes, getting good grades and going to a college that was nationally renowned for its medical program. While there she met her future husband George Hambly, an aspiring neurologist.

The wedding took place six months after George's graduation. At first, things were incredibly tight — they would be paying for George's school bills well into their 40s — but Marsha had long since learned the value of patience. By the time she was 34, Marsha's life was looking up. George was a resident neurologist at a local hospital and they lived in a nice two-story house in a fashionable Maryland suburb. She drove their two kids to school in a Ford Explorer that got terrible mileage but that fit their image well, and the days were spent shopping, getting beauty treatments and flirting with their landscaper. It was the perfect life.

She didn't notice when George began to change. It was as if one morning she looked up from her morning grapefruit and realized that her trophy husband had become moody and irritable. He spent long hours in his office and complained bitterly about the money she spent each month. There were problems at the hospital — shakeups in the department, and a scandal about drug use among the doctors. George looked like he hadn't slept in weeks, and jumped out of his seat every time the phone rang. When she suggested he get some Valium from the hospital to calm him down, George exploded, calling her a bitch in front of the kids and storming out of the house.

When George came home that night, Marsha expected a fight. But there was something very different about her husband. He was calmer, more self-possessed. There was a fire, a *hunger* in his eyes that she'd never seen before, and the look he gave her when he stepped into the den sent shivers of desire coursing through her. That night he ravished her. She never in her life expected that word would ever apply to anyone outside a cheap romance novel, but there was no other way to

describe it. He bent her to his will, body and soul, and she was helpless to stop him.

That was when Marsha Hambly's dream became a living nightmare.

George's attitude never changed. If anything, it became far worse. He looked at her and the kids as though they were nothing more than animals, mere chattel that existed for his amusement. At dinner he would stare thoughtfully at one or the other of their sons and describe how he could open their skulls and cut out pieces of their brain to make them better children. Only once did Marsha try to stop him. He had a way of making her scream for hours on end without a single sound passing her lips.

Months passed. The children stopped going to school, hiding in their rooms. Marsha didn't dare call the police, because he'd made it clear what would happen if she did, and she no longer doubted that George was capable of literally anything. In the evenings she served meals for her husband and a procession of guests — doctors, nurses, med students and administrators from the hospital who fawned over George as though he were royalty. She gathered from their conversations that they meant a great deal to George, as well — they were his source of power, she often heard him say after a long night of adoration.

It was Marsha's idea to host a dinner in George's honor. She'd learned that he'd recently been promoted to head of the hospital's research department, and when she meekly suggested a celebration George agreed at once. Marsha spent weeks planning the event and making the house presentable.

She didn't expect many guests. In fact, there was no one except George's circle of beloved attendants, which Marsha counted on, but just to be sure she put enough strychnine in the dinner meal to kill three times that number. When her guests began to convulse she charged from the kitchen like a harpy, brandishing a butcher knife. She had every intention of plunging it right between George's eyes, but her husband lurched from the chair, lips blue and clutching at his throat, hatred blazing in his eyes. There was a sudden gust of wind and a clap of thunder that threw her across the room, then everything went black.

When Marsha awoke, George was nowhere to be found, and the kids were gone from their rooms.

Appearance: There are remnants of beauty about Marsha, but the harshness of her recent life has depleted her, and her physical inactivity has left her rather out of shape. She has the outward manners and dress of a soccer mom, but the haunted look in her eyes betrays the horrors she has witnessed.

Roleplaying Hints: Marsha would make an excellent sub-plot antagonist. Her zeal to hunt and destroy the fallen, and her organizational skills make her a perfect leader of a small group that could hound and harass the characters. Marsha's role in such a scheme would not be that of the field commander, but of the charismatic leader who sends the field agents out to kill or harm the fallen. Remember that while she is no physical menace, Marsha is very adept at understanding people and getting them to do what she wants, and she is completely comfortable manipulating people on any level to achieve her desires. For Marsha, the ends always justify the means.

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 2, Awareness 2, Computer 1, Crafts 3, Empathy 3, Etiquette 2, Expression 1, Finance 2, Leadership 2, Medicine 1, Performance 1, Politics 1, Religion 1, Research 1, Subterfuge 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 1, Conviction 3, Courage 3

Willpower: 6

Faith Potential: 2

Equipment: Minivan, expensive wardrobe

DREW MAUS

Growing up in white middle-class America, Drew was bored with life. He suffered no hardships and had no interests except skateboarding. He spent all of his spare time — and most of the time he was supposed to spend on schoolwork — out at the park or in the mall's parking lot trying to master various tricks and hanging out with his friends. When he grew old enough to drive, he discovered the joy of mountain biking and backpacking. By the time most kids his age were talking about college, Drew knew that academics held nothing for him. He found work at a local record store and spent his weekends camping in the hills outside of town.

Drew met Lisa on the slopes of Bear Valley, where he was learning to snowboard. The two immediately hit it off and were soon inseparable. The only odd part about the relationship was Lisa's strange obsession with death. Drew had never contemplated his own mortality and never quite understood what it was about death that so fascinated Lisa, but their happiness together in every other aspect meant he didn't spend too much time worrying about it.

They were together for almost a year when the accident happened. The two had awakened before first light to reach the top of the mountain at dawn so they could be the first to enjoy the fresh layer of powder that had fallen in the night. While descend-

ing the mountain, Lisa angled out of sight and vanished. Panic-stricken, Drew searched for her. He found Lisa lying against a boulder, her face covered with blood. Her board, still strapped to her feet, was broken in two. Miraculously, despite cuts and abrasions, she was largely unhurt, though she was unresponsive to his frantic questions, peering at him as though she didn't understand what he was trying to say. With effort, Drew managed to guide her the rest of the way down the mountain and drove her to the nearest hospital.

The doctors could find nothing wrong with her physically, and a round of CAT scans ruled out the possibility of brain damage. At Drew's insistence, Lisa permitted herself to be held overnight for observation, but the morning found her as healthy as ever. Still, something about her was different. It became more noticeable to Drew as they spent time together in the days that followed. Some part of her had become almost childlike, as though she was seeing the world for the first time.

The truth came weeks later when the couple had the misfortune to be mugged on the way back from dinner. The attacker lunged with his knife, and Lisa simply touched the assailant, causing him to collapse in a boneless heap, dead before he hit the ground. The act of killing galvanized Lisa, and to Drew's horror the love of his life threw back her head and laughed, a wild, triumphant sound uttered in a voice older than the Earth itself. When she turned her eyes on Drew, he saw the spirit that resided within, coiled like a serpent behind her jade-colored eyes. She reached out to him with a long-fingered hand, and he ran screaming.

That night, Drew was transformed. Lisa's possession shattered his ego and his slacker mentality. Unable to comprehend the true nature of her change, he blamed himself for what had happened. It was somehow all his fault, and only he could make it right.

It was nearly dawn before Drew made his way home. Lisa — or the thing that wore Lisa's body — was waiting for him. She smiled and pulled him into her arms, soothing him with a voice as cold and polished as river stones. He wept for hours, and she held him, telling him that everything would be all right. She would take care of him. She would make him strong. All he had to do was serve her, and he would never be unhappy again. Drew listened, nodding all the while. In the days that followed he never strayed far from her side, paying rapt attention to everything the demon did or said. Lisa — or *Abthiel*, as she now preferred to be called — accepted the adoration without question. Meanwhile, Drew was learning all he could.



In time, Abthiel was true to her word, and Drew became stronger and faster than he'd ever believed possible. The demon sent him on errands, gathering books and other materials for his mistress, and eventually acting as a soldier, attacking the thralls of those demons whom Abthiel opposed. All the while, Drew absorbed everything he experienced about the fallen. Eventually, he learned a great deal about the nature of fallen angels — including how to banish one.

Drew lay the circle of salt while Abthiel slept, and when she awakened to the sound of his prayers it was already too late. With help from a local priest, Drew performed the Rite of Exorcism on the demon that wore Lisa's skin. She begged him, pleaded with him in the voice of the woman he loved, but he pressed on. Finally, as dawn paled the sky to the east, the demon's will finally broke and with a shriek the Slayer was driven from Lisa's body and sent hurtling into the Abyss. The victory was a bitter one, however. Drew had hoped that once the demon was gone, Lisa's spirit would emerge once more, but all that was left was an empty shell, devoid of life.

Now, Drew roams the country, hunting for evidence of the fallen. He is a man with a mission, for in his service to Abthiel he learned of a realm where the spirits of the dead go to await their final judgment. He also knows that the angels of the dead can cross into that realm at will, and he intends to find one and compel it to bring Lisa back.

Appearance: Drew appears to be the classic surfer dude or extreme sportsman: tall, tan and seemingly unimpressed with the world in general. His body is long, lean and powerful. He keeps his head and face shaved, and is heavily tattooed and pierced. Only his eyes betray

the horrors he witnessed in his service to Abthiel, and when confronted by the fallen or their servants, his slacker attitude vanishes, replaced by the wild-eyed decisiveness of a true zealot.

Roleplaying Hints: Drew is a tragic figure whose outward appearance lends itself to underestimation. Behind the dull speech and surfer attitude is a committed exorcist with a body of knowledge about the fallen that most demon hunters (and indeed, some demons) would envy. He is absolutely, pathologically driven to hunt down the fallen wherever he can find them and performs any deed necessary to banish or destroy them. If he can find another Slayer with the potential to return Lisa to the land of the living he attempts to bind the demon to his will, regardless of the cost.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4 (Hiking), Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 3, Perception 2, Intelligence 1, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 4 (Climbing), Awareness 2, Brawl 1, Computer 2, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 1, Linguistics 1 (Spanish), Medicine 2, Melee 1, Occult 4 (Demonology), Streetwise 2, Survival 3

Backgrounds: Contacts 2, Fame 1, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 1, Conviction 3, Courage 2

Willpower: 5

Faith Potential: 2

Possessions: Various occult tomes containing a number of summoning, binding and banishment rituals, shotgun, beat-up VW van

KENNETH WILSON

Every moment of Kenneth Wilson's life was a struggle for survival. Born in Harlem to a woman who financed her drug habit with prostitution and petty theft, Kenneth was put into state custody when he was less than six weeks old and spent the first eight years of his life bouncing from one institution to another. He learned to be a survivor at a cruelly young age, trusting no one and adopting a certain degree of ruthlessness when it came to getting what he wanted. Kenneth wasn't afraid to lie, cheat or steal — or worse — if that's what he had to do.

At eight, Kenneth's already hard life took a turn for the worse when his mother successfully petitioned to reclaim custody. She presented reams of documentation to the judge that she'd undergone years of incarceration and rehabilitation, and was a changed person. Kenneth's mother brought him home to a housing project in Harlem where he was quickly put to work as a lookout and runner for his mother's boyfriend.

Leon, a young, powerfully built man had his eyes on the local drug trade and a supernatural charisma to



match his ambitions. He treated Kenneth little better than a dog, using him to ferry messages to rival gangs and to watch for the cops when Leon met with the gang leaders. Twice, the meetings went violently awry — each time Leon escaped injury, but Kenneth once caught a stray bullet in his arm. There was blood everywhere, and he was certain that he was going to die, but Leon wrapped his powerful hands around Kenneth's arm and beneath his grip, Kenneth felt flesh and muscle bunch and writhe before he passed out from the pain. When he awoke, the wound was healed. After that, a bond of sorts existed between the two. Leon still treated Kenneth like dirt, but Kenneth never forgot that Leon had saved his life. When they'd come home from the firefight his mother hadn't even noticed the blood covering his shirt and pants.

From that point on Kenneth covered Leon's back, looking for a chance to repay him. As time passed, he learned that Leon wasn't interested in the drug trade so much as someone who was running the operation — a *demon*, he heard Leon say to one of the gang leaders. Whoever the person was, he was Leon's enemy from a long way back, and Leon had a score to settle. Kenneth figured that made Leon an angel, but if so, the Bible had really gotten its facts wrong somewhere along the line. Still, he liked the idea of fighting on the side of the angels. It gave him a sense of self-worth he'd never known before.

Leon was powerful, of that there was no doubt, but he didn't know the street. He needed someone who could pass unnoticed, who could ask the right questions and know where to look to find a quarry. He needed a hunter, and Kenneth needed him.

Appearance: Kenneth is a light-skinned black youth, very slender and almost delicate looking. His eyes are a striking hazel color. His bearing demonstrates his years of being abused. He startles easily and dislikes loud noises. Upon meeting Kenneth, many people find themselves thinking of a young deer. His mind is excellent and inquisitive, though. His speech is soft and difficult to hear, but his words are clever and insightful.

Roleplaying Hints: At the moment, Kenneth is fiercely loyal to a Rabisu named Leon Waters, a Luciferan demon who once saved his life but otherwise thinks of him as little better than a trained pet. For now, Kenneth is happy to help Leon hunt down and banish his old enemies and rivals, believing that he's doing the work of angels. His childhood of abuse has left him with no sense of self-worth, so he follows anyone who pays attention to him. If a demon hunter should figure out how easy it is to control Kenneth, said exorcist would find himself with a ruthless, streetwise soldier in the body of a 15-year-old boy.

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Drive 1, Security 2, Stealth 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2, Survival 1

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Contacts 1

Virtues: Conscience 2, Conviction 2, Courage 2

Willpower: 4

Faith Potential: 2

Possessions: Light pistol

DONNIE CAHILL

Guthrie, West Virginia was a mountain town where a son was expected to follow in his father's footsteps — usually working the week in the stygian depths of the coal mines, and praying in the old clapboard church each Sunday morning. There, the Reverend Earnest Cahill would preach for hours about the fiery hell that awaited the souls of those who failed to heed the word of the Almighty Lord. The Reverend was the bedrock on which Guthrie's 250 souls rested, and no one doubted that in time his son Donnie would take up his father's calling and continue to tend God's flock for another generation.

But the Reverend's son wanted nothing more than to shake the black dust from his shoes. Donnie had too much of his mother in him. She was a well-educated woman from Raleigh who was lured into the mountains by a charming young missionary, and trapped in a cheerless, abusive marriage that ultimately destroyed her. She died of pneumonia when Donnie was 14, and he swore to God that he would get away from Guthrie before the Reverend destroyed him as well.

Four years passed, and as Donnie grew into a man, the anger toward his father increased. Beatings were common as the Reverend reacted brutally to the slightest sign of disobedience, but the older Donnie grew, the less afraid he was of Earnest Cahill's calloused hand or his leather shaving strap. Where he was once as devout and God-fearing as any resident of the town, Donnie now felt nothing but contempt for the tirades of fear and loathing that his father spewed from the pulpit. The things Earnest Cahill said were a corruption of the Bible's teachings, a stream of poison that sickened rather than saved the souls of Guthrie. The more Donnie thought about his father's behavior, the more he saw him as truly evil, a monster who fed on the souls of everyone around him. It was a realization that would prove frighteningly prophetic.

Two weeks before Donnie's 18th birthday, as he sat in the front pew of the town church, he watched his father pause at the height of an apoplectic sermon about Sodom and Gomorrah. The Reverend's face went slack, and his knobby hands trembled. For a moment, Donnie dared to hope that God had finally seen fit to give the Reverend the stroke he so richly deserved, but then a look came into Earnest Cahill's eyes that Donnie had never seen before. It was a look of exultation, a gleam of triumph, and it made his blood run cold. The Reverend threw back his head and laughed, a rich sound like rolling thunder, and he *changed*. The congregation shrieked in fear and wonder as Earnest Cahill blazed with golden light and spread eagle's wings that reached to the church's rough-hewn rafters. The men and women of Guthrie fell to their knees, babbling and raising their hands to Heaven, but Donnie's hatred kept him safe. It shielded him from the power reverberating through the room and allowed him to see the Reverend for the demon he'd long believed the man to be.

The next day it was obvious that a change had come over the town. Where the Reverend once held an indirect influence, now he was regarded as nothing less than its lord and master. What was worse, Donnie could tell by the people's cold stares that they sensed he did not share their love for the town's newfound tyrant. That night he resolved to escape, but even as he made his plans to free himself, his conscience gnawed at him. If he left, what would become of the people of Guthrie? No one else saw the Reverend for what he truly was. Once Donnie was gone, what manner of hell would he consign them to? Finally, he realized that if he didn't at least try to save them he would never forgive himself.

Summoning up his courage, Donnie marched into Guthrie's only general store, the one place other than the church or the mine where he knew that many of the townspeople routinely gathered. Without preamble, he stood in the doorway, cleared his throat, and told a

sermon of his own. He warned them of the demon who hid among them and of the danger to their immortal souls. Donnie called on every oratorical trick he'd learned from years of watching his father preach, shaking the walls with his plea to open their eyes and cast out the evil that threatened the town.

They beat him to within an inch of his life, finally tying his hands behind him and dragging him to the church where they offered him up to their new lord. The monster who hid behind Earnest Cahill's eyes commanded that his misbegotten son be stoned to death after that night's service, as a lesson in the dangers of disobedience.

Donnie was taken outside and tied to an old oak tree while the throngs of the faithful gathered in the church to sing praises to their god. At that moment he wanted to die, but as he heard the Reverend's voice over the cries of the worshippers, Donnie felt a depth of hatred that burned righteous in its purity. His captors had paid little attention to the fact that they'd dislocated his thumb during their relentless beating. Biting his lip until it was bloody, he silently worked his hand free from his bonds, then made his way back to the general store. He took a stout hammer and a handful of iron chisels, wedged the church's doors shut, then set the old building alight. The flames reached like an offering to heaven, and he commended the souls of those trapped inside to the Lord's stern mercies. As the town of Guthrie died, Donnie Cahill realized that he was following in his father's footsteps after all.

Appearance: Donnie is average in appearance: brown hair cut short, brown eyes and ordinary features

— the sort of person who blends effortlessly into a crowd. People tend not to notice him, and those who talk with him rarely come away with much of an impression. Only discussions of morality and religion reveal the fanatic within.

Roleplaying Hints: Donnie Cahill is a tormented soul, haunted by the specter of his "father's" memory and the mass murder he committed to "save" the people of Guthrie. Now a fugitive who moves from town to town in an effort to stay ahead of the law, he gravitates to places of worship, seeking solace and attempting to redeem himself by "saving" victims of demonic influence. The more he learns about the fallen, however, the more he begins to wonder if a mere church fire could have killed the demon that wore his father's skin. The possibility of failure, and the fear that he will one day cross paths with Earnest Cahill again drives Donnie to learn all he can about demons and how to wipe them from the Earth.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 2, Awareness 1, Brawl 1, Dodge 1, Firearms 3, Intimidation 1, Leadership 2, Medicine 1, Melee 3, Occult 2, Performance 2, Religion 4 (Preaching), Stealth 3, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 2, Survival 4 (Mountains)

Backgrounds: Resources 1

Virtues: Conscience 1, Conviction 5, Courage 1

Willpower: 8

Faith Potential: 2

Possessions: King James Bible, pickup truck

SAVIORS AND DESTROYERS

A Prayer for the Faithful

Demons walk the Earth. They hide in the hearts of the tormented and the depraved, hungry for the faith of mankind. In an age of cynicism and science, they believe themselves forgotten, free to work their wiles without fear of reprisal. But there are those who recognize the signs of the infernal in the world, men and women who see the spirits of the Abyss for what they truly are and realize what must be done. For the sake of the world, they confront the fallen and return them to the Pit of Hell, no matter the cost.

A Curse upon the Damned

Demon: Savors and Destroyers details the origins and desperate struggles of the world's demon hunters, men and women who place their lives — and souls — on the line to pull the Earth back from the brink of ruin. Character creation guidelines included in this book present these exorcists as an optional character type for players and as a new breed of antagonist for Storytellers to use in their **Demon** chronicles.

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