

A vertical sword with a glowing blade and a lightning bolt striking it. The hilt is ornate and golden. The background is black with several blue jellyfish. The title 'THE THIRD PORTAL' is written in a glowing, distressed font to the right of the sword.

THE THIRD PORTAL

Journeys of the Supernatural

Jonny Boom

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WHAT I NEED TO SAY

This novel is based on true events that Ian McCormack experienced in 1982. While I have not attempted to be wholly accurate in re-telling Ian's story, much of the integrity of Ian's story has been maintained. Of the truths and validity of the spirit world, none of us are qualified to judge. This is a mystery of the Kingdom which only death will correct.

Take this journey into a world we may choose to ignore or have been blinded into not seeing. A voice calls like a wind on the desert: "I am here, I am with you, always have been, always will be. Speak now; for the time of silence is over, the dawn is upon us. Be what I called you to be." So then, I will not be silent..

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ian: I treasure your friendship, even if we live a half a world apart. You have believed in this despite the risks, and my slackness in getting it done. You are a true Apostle of the Son.

Donna, Strauss, Genevieve, Ezra and Chantelle: You have supported me all the way. Thanks for letting me quit my job and hang out at home. I know the sacrifices you have all had to make. I love you always.

The Lord of Heaven's Armies: My life is yours, always has been. I've tried my best to follow your lead, though I may feel distant, at other times you are a millimeter from my skin. If I strive in life for one thing, it is this: To stand before you one day, my head dropping, and to hear these words... "Well done, you did great!"

WHAT OTHERS SAY

This book is God inspired; Jonathan can't write this well! I love it! Well done, my darling... faithful, obedient steward of God's directing.

Donna - wife, critic and best friend.

This book overplays the importance and role of prayer in the spiritual realm; only a fool could reasonably or plausibly believe that this is how it actually works.

Lucifer - bad guy.

CHAPTER ONE

Musings

The thin mesh of the screen door quivers on salt tarnished hinges, as a knock resonates through the apartment. Ian stumps his book down on the table. Blonde hair hangs about his shoulders, while baggy muslin trousers scarcely reach his ankles. He looks like a hippy, but underneath a tanned, muscular physique is hiding.

The doorway opens into his sparsely furnished living area. A basic rattan dining and lounge suite dominates the floor space. An oversized ranch slider faces the rich blue ocean. Trees and houses break a full view, but visible patches of water sparkle in the afternoon sun. The white washed apartment block is starkly basic in such an idyllic setting.

Ian pulls the doors back, immediately his numbed eyes softening to the visitor. “Manuel!” he welcomes.

The Creole’s black hair is messy and unkempt. Khaki shorts reach just below his knees which, with a holey sweater and sandals, complete his disheveled attire. His skin is dark and weather beaten, allowing gleaming white teeth to beam from his face.

Ian chuckles inconspicuously at Manuel’s appearance, even though it is typical. “You’re a rogue, even if there’s a charm about you. Are you sure you’ve only been on this planet thirty four years? Life sure has worn you down!” The whimsical greeting passes through Ian’s mind. He steps aside in silence to allow Manuel in.

Manuel hesitates near the door, trying to appear relaxed, while Ian sits on the edge of the couch. The disparity in their social standing has given an entrance way to inferiority in his mind. “I’m not white like him, even though I like him.” Pushing the incoherent thought aside he clears his throat, and a husky Rastafarian voice speaks, “What you doing today man?”

“Today? It’s two thirty man! What? Have you just got out of bed or something?” Ian gently taunts.

Manuel’s responses are slow, but warming, “Yeah, I not feel so good in morning.” English is not his first language; he prefers Creole or French. Despite only a basic education he has mastered the three tongues pretty well.

“Ah! You had a few chillums and bongs last night eh?” Ian jibs harder.

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Manuel's cautiousness eases further with a smile. "Ah... you teasing me brother. But I not forget you bring plenty Kashmir hashish and Durban poisons when you first come here!"

Ian lets a chuckle out. Fond memories surface of blowing the locals' heads off; it ushered him quickly into their community.

"Why you not invite me then?" Ian asks.

"You not black enough, brother. You white boys not handle it."

Both men laugh effusively as Ian beckons Manuel to come and sit. "We'll see about that brother... you want a drink, Manuel?"

Manuel shuffles forward a little but lingers humbly by the door. "No, I not need one," he replies matter-of-factly. "No surf today?"

Tamarin Bay is renowned for its three-tube section, left hand barrel that breaks on the reef. It's a popular spot for surfers from around the world. When the waves go flat, surfers pick up something else, often diving or wind surfing. Ian does both proficiently. He is a qualified scuba instructor, having dived in many countries. The money from training tourists has provided for living costs as he has toured the world in search of an 'endless summer'.

Ian stirs, frustrated at sitting around for half the day. "Nah, as flat as a pancake. I didn't feel like wind surfing either." The consistent surf has hit a lull, though truth-be-known he has not been feeling himself the last couple of days.

Thoughts race through Ian's mind as he stares longingly at the water. "Why the heck did I do my degree in agriculture? I should have been a marine biologist. I would have finished the training by now. I love the ocean; it's my escape. Mum was right when she would say, "You've got fish blood son."

"Pan - cake?" Manuel interrupts the daydream quizzically.

"Yeah, flat, no surf today. It should pick up in a couple of days."

"Good. We go diving tonight Ian, down the reef. Very beautiful, you not been to this part of reef before. You want to come?"

The conversation before his first night dive surfaces in his mind. "Manuel, why dive at night?" he had asked.

"We not tell you brother," Manuel had replied. "You come diving and you see, man."

That night, for the first time in his life, Ian saw the fish sleeping on the reef. Nocturnal scavengers, such as crab and lobster, had come out of their holes and into the open. They would freeze in the shaft of light from the diver torches, like a possum caught in headlights. It was easy work, and rich pickings.

Wanting to cram every opportunity into the few days left in the island paradise, Ian is keen. A new dive would be another exhilarating experience. Not normally hesitant, something however, is unnerving him. Ian gazes out the window. A large electrical storm had passed the island during the dark

hours of the morning. “Manuel... last night... the big storm... will it be okay? I think maybe not so good tonight. Maybe it is rough and murky on the reef.”

Manuel follows Ian's arm as he translates each stanza in his mind. “This one miss us brother. We go to very special place, near Riviere Noire, Black River. Come tonight; you see the best diving in Mauritius!” Manuel casts the bait and waits; he knows you catch fishermen the same way you catch fish.

As if sensing something is wrong, Ian is unconvinced. He gets up from his seat and opens the sliding door a body width. Taking a deep breath of the ocean-filled aromas, the invigorating smell pushes the hairs up on the back of his neck. “Why have I been inside all day?” he moans. Far to the southwest, dark clouds still linger. “Are you sure it will be good tonight?”

“Good!” Manuel is emphatic, though easing the pressure to ensure Ian bites. He puts hands on his hips playfully. “Very beautiful this part of reef, I promise.”

Ian ponders, “I trust you friend. This is, after all, your livelihood. You know the ebbs and tides of the waters here. The storm was from an odd direction. Perhaps the outer waters are not disturbed.” He answers aloud, “Sure man, I come.”

Liannte steps from the bathroom. The twenty year old is petite and attractive, with smooth dark skin. Her head is tilted, allowing a black crown of hair to fall down her side. Shorter bits cling and curl at the side of her face; she dries them with a towel. Stuffing down shame, she saunters across the room. Slipping an arm around Ian's waist, she squeezes him with a suggestion of ownership, still masking the pain inside.

Manuel straightens, exchanging an awkward smile with Liannte; they know each other from the village. He moves toward the door, embarrassed that he is imposing. Ian removes Liannte's arm and attempts to put Manuel back at ease. “What time you want me at the boat?”

“Ten, or ten-thirty,” Manuel replies shortly, remembering that Ian is never late. “Renee coming too... he not finished work until ten.”

Ian nods. Many of the Creole men work two jobs to support their families. The drill is familiar. They start diving late and continue for three or four hours, collecting crab, lobster, parrotfish, and whatever else happens to come along. Docking at three or four in the morning, they wake up the chef at a tourist hotel and the bartering begins.

Manuel bids farewell, leaving the door ajar in his haste to leave. The wind coming through the ranch slider slams it shut.

Ian stands in limbo, unsure of what to do. “Why am I so churned up?” he scorns, as he walks back across the lounge. “Why did my brother have to go and get married anyway? I'm not ready to return to New Zealand. I'm not done with this yet; I don't want to go back and be boring. I'm going to miss this place. Who wants a stinking normal job, a mortgage, a family?”

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Ian had started the trip in 1980. He and his best friend had decided to sell their worldly possessions and head out on a surfing safari. They traveled light, staying in the cheapest accommodation. They surfed up the eastern coast of Australia before moving onto South East Asia. From there Ian had gone to Colombo and crewed on a schooner down to Mauritius, twenty-six days at sea. Running out of money he flew to South Africa and had found a job at a resort in Bantry Bay, teaching windsurfing, scuba diving and water-skiing. It had been a hedonistic lifestyle; he loved it, and got paid as well. Any spare time was spent surfing. In the throes of planning an overland trip through Africa to Europe, the message came that his brother was getting married in New Zealand. The weeks in Mauritius were a pleasant stopover before returning home via Australia. Now the realization that this whole stage of his life is drawing to a close hits him hard.

Liannte intercepts him before he can reach his seat. She reaches up to kiss him, her head not reaching his shoulder normally. Ian placates her a little, but is largely unresponsive. He breaks her hold again and moves to the kitchen. Liannte is left standing confused in the lounge.

Ian grabs a beer from the fridge, and slips out onto the small concrete deck. The moist breeze rouses him. Settling into a deck chair, he rests back. "I have seen so much and yet want so much more. I'm not ready to return to a mundane New Zealand life. Why aren't I satisfied? What's with that? Surely I've experienced the best of life, yet I'm still empty and hollow."

He sits up, humored at the depth of his thoughts, a sense of pride in his intellect rising. "Am I empty? Don't I live the perfect lifestyle: wine, women, and song; sex, drugs, and rock n roll. There can't be more than this; it's just the way life is - it's sweet! I'm not a bad person either. I'm one of the good guys. I'm nice to everyone. I just want to experience everything that life has to offer. For goodness sake, I don't even wear a watch! I live in a timeless zone of sunrises and sunsets. Alright then, after the wedding I'll come back and continue my journey."

Liannte has gathered her small bag of bits and pieces. She prepares to head home to her village less than a kilometer away. Ian has given her the cold shoulder and is not responding to her. Gritting her teeth, she stuffs down feelings of hurt and abandonment. Moving to the ranch slider she leans out to say goodbye. Ian speaks before she has a chance. "I'll be out tonight till late." He grins sheepishly. "Perhaps we can get together tomorrow?" He knows he is stringing her along, but in truth emptiness is gnawing at him. It's a familiar but unrecognized emotion that has followed every relationship he has had.

"Sure," she replies, somewhat withdrawn.

"All my girlfriends have been short-lived," he realizes, "just vain attempts to pacify the deep loneliness festering in the recesses of my heart." The coherent recognition shocks him.

Liannte affords a cute wave and leaves the apartment as if in a hurry.

Ian is alone. He muses over notions cycling through him. "Maybe I just haven't met the right woman yet?"

Thoughts of his mother surface, "What about her? There is something different about her, something devout and pure. Is it her religion? But she is so different to any holy men I met in Asia. Why is that?" As the thoughts stop for a time, it is a question he cannot answer.

"Are you Christian?" was a regular question he would be asked as he travelled through Asia and Africa. It always challenged him. "Being white most people assumed I was Christian. I was brought up in a Christian family, well, in a largely Christian society. But I was never sure if I should call myself a Christian. What was with that anyway? Going to church and taking communion? I did all that. I was a christened, confirmed Anglican."

"Man creates religion. It allows him to believe in something to relieve the issues and pain in life. It creates a false purpose, forcing an ethical process, to control society and lawmaking. But me, well I'm a 'free thinker'. I've lived for myself as a nomad for two years now and I love it."

"Yet I was brought up believing. As a child, I was sure." A rushing sensation of peace hits his heart, contradicted by a remorse and disappointment. Memories of this childish faith flood his mind. "I was so convinced of God and Jesus. Those stories were so real, feelings of innocence and hope. What of that now?"

"God is not real because I have never seen or met him. There is no spiritual realm, it is that simple." The afternoon sun continues to filter through the trees onto the apartment deck. Ian reaches a hand up to his heart. A slight pain is searing across his chest. He thinks nothing of it. "We just came out of the earth, evolved out of a fish. We were born; we live, then we die. There is nothing more to it. Science 101. We are the peak of the evolutionary table. Trust science and logic. Our contemplation of God is just a search for meaning beyond what is actually there. We want to elevate our position, but we are just a random occurrence in a random world. Recognize it and grow up!"

The heartburn eases as he stares at the concrete under his feet. He chuckles and gets up to go inside, aware of the depth of those thoughts. "You have got it sorted boy; there is nothing. Those poor people stuck in religions are wrong. There is no God - only flesh and blood. Trust only what you can see, hear, touch, taste and feel. Then you are 'enlightened'. No one will call you a fool."

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond this Realm

Dryden's eyes moisten. He lingers half in a daydream as his heart is heavy. He has been with Ian for three days. Now he is reluctant to leave, but the time has come to return to New Zealand. He stares wistfully as Ian bustles off the deck. "Master I love this man so much. How can I leave him to them? How can he not see the truth that wants to surface in his heart?"

He looks at the four in the near vicinity, eyes flashing to the one inside, close to Ian. Shaking his head slowly, he glances up to the sky above. He smears the tears off his strong, young face with the back of his hand. Somehow he finds comfort in the blue haze, obscured at times by fluffy white clouds.

The light bearer shifts his gaze down, speaking clearly to those tracking him since he has been in Mauritius. "You know who I am. You know why I am here. I am the promise to this man and to his family, the promise of the Creator. He has assured a heritage and a hope to His children. For twenty years now, I have stood by this man. Since he was a child, I have watched him wander and strive. You know, as I do, that one day he will set a course different to that which he now travels. This is why I was released to be here, then and now. We will not let go of him. He belongs to the Creator, to the Kingdom of Light. He belongs in the bosom of his Father." Tears re-emerge and roll, without shame, over the tight skin on his cheeks.

"Oh don't worry; we will take good care of him." A coarse voice sneers from the bushes adjacent to the deck. Snickers follow from the others marking the land around the light bearer.

Dryden brushes off the sarcasm and steps away from the apartment. Hanging his head a little, he walks across the road, down between two houses and through to the white sandy beach. Dogs nearby, which had been barking non-stop, settle as he walks past. Dryden looks through the slatted fence to the dogs and speaks gently. "At least someone knows I'm here. If only you could see, Ian, you would know what is truly real. But we are veiled, and that is for your protection, not to hold you in ignorance. It is to incubate, purify and nurture you, the bride of Christ. Love is perfected where choice is necessary." Dryden turns to check the scene round him one last time.

The four dark shadows retain their positions in and around the apartment.

They carefully watch the light bearer slip away, hostile but thankful that he is leaving.

They are not hideous to look at as many presume; in fact they are striking. Of course they were brilliant at the beginning, every part the match and balance for their adversaries. But, over time, the deep rooted decay at work in both their bodies and natures, has done its work. The intensity of it rises as measured time draws near to its conclusion. They feel it always; it consumes them, even if they are powerless to reverse the emptiness that eats inside their gut. The chilling pain has all but displaced their beauty.

Their builds are heavier now than the athletic frames of the light bearers. Taut, lean muscles have broadened into powerful bulk. The change of their physiques has not, however, increased their effectiveness. Rather it has nullified their skills against the speed of the light bearers. Gowns of white have transformed to jagged-edged, dull green capes which drape down to their calves. The gowns hide their greatest shame - ominous lumps upon their shoulder blades. Millennia before, magnificent wings of light had once emerged on each of their shoulders. The stumps now protrude a little, giving them a slightly hunched appearance.

Protective armor has had to take an increasingly important role. Tight black metal breastplates hug their bulky chests. They wear protective plates wherever they can - some on hips or legs and arms. Helmets and shields have long been withdrawn from issue and their armor is now their primary defense against light bearer blades. Each dark warrior carries a single, unwieldy but strong, metallic sword, sheathed at the waist.

The kingdom of darkness has no ability to create. It can only invade and spoil. Good and evil are not matching forces in the universe; evil is a parasite. Thereby the kingdom of darkness has been restricted to scavenging and recycling what metals they can. Armor and weaponry have become a scarcity. From necessity, huge furnaces deep under the earth recast metal from fallen comrades into new tools. Reused again and again, the metal is deteriorating over the centuries with them. Once it was gleaming silver and gold, like the light bearers'. Now it is muddied and blackened. It is still effective, but increasingly brittle, cold and dull.

Despite the striking nature, something in their appearance is out of place. It is on their faces and in their persona, their twisted glances and dark reddened eyes - eyes without hope or life. Emanating from them is their pained evil. All goodness has been sucked out, leaving death concentrate. Dirty bottles with beautiful shapes, they are disgraced. Death gnaws away at them, like a cancer in their souls. Weary in the titanic battle for dominion over the human race, their outer shells are gaunt shadows, poor forms of the beauty once theirs. These are 'the fallen'.

Mythe puts an arm out and touches Ian on the shoulder as he stands at

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the fridge numbed. He reassures himself that he is back in full control. He has been accustomed to a tighter reign over Ian, but had to back off when the guardian arrived. Dryden had been more forceful and engaging than he wanted. “That’s it - fly off now scum.” Mythe speaks arrogantly under his breath in the direction of the disappearing angelic being.

As if sensing something, Dryden turns, looking straight at the dark frame in the apartment. The two opponents have been injecting conflicting words and arguments into Ian’s mind. “You feel a sense of victory don’t you? You feel satisfied with your result?”

Caught out, Mythe stands rigid, squinting his eyes at the discerning light bearer. He says nothing.

“But I am not dissatisfied either,” Dryden continues. “You are blind to not see what lies before you. You know nothing of the workings of the King.”

The three other fallen beings look accusingly at Mythe. It is Mythe who has been appointed to monitor Ian specifically, since he arrived from South Africa ten days ago. They have been assigned only to provide backup, whilst the light bearer is here. The cryptic words from Dryden immediately unnerve Mythe. “What?” he squawks in defense.

Dryden turns again to the beach. Sand pushes up between the toes of his bare feet. Its warmth invigorates him. He bends a knee and acknowledges the Creator in words inaudible to the others. “Blessed are You, Lord Most High, King of All, King of Glory, Victorious Warrior.” Rubbing his thumbs over his finger tips Dryden feels a light oil forming as he worships. A sweet smell permeates the air, dropping off around him.

“Master, Ian is so headstrong and intellectually driven. Don’t let him die isolated and alone. Let him experience the relationship he was created to understand. He is made for intimacy with you, and I know you long for him. Please don’t let his ignorant emptiness turn his back to you forever. Your Father’s love is the only catalyst for rebuttal in this world. Break into Ian’s morbid existence with the compelling unconditional love of you, his jilted Creator. I know you will see the bride perfected. From out of this repression you are fashioning a being of beauty, worthy of your Son.”

From behind Dryden glorious white-feathered wings gracefully unfold and stretch out. They span over twelve feet from tip to tip. They connect seamlessly into his taut muscular shoulder blades. The breeze coming off the ocean seems to fill and enliven them. As if lifted from his knees by the wind Dryden pushes off the ground with his powerful thighs. He is instantly in a smooth, effortless flight. “Marie, I come to you now, I know you will need me soon. I am coming.” Completing a small arc, he proceeds horizontally out over the ocean. The flight will take hours, low over the Southern Oceans; he cannot risk faster routes, lest he be waylaid.

The fallen jealously watch Dryden disappear around the coastline. The three

holding positions outside the apartment thump up loudly onto the deck of Ian's apartment. They begin to undermine Mythe and his handling of the situation.

Mythe speaks in a curt voice. "The guardian is gone now; I have resumed my position and you can go."

"We know that," snaps one back. "What did the guardian mean by 'you are blind to what lies before you' then, oh learned Mythe?" he sarcastically challenges. The watching of the light bearer had not so much been a covert operation as an internal spat for position and superiority. A punishment of the fall was consumption with self-gratification and promotion. Their co-existence on earth is always a volatile scene of distrust, hatred, pride and fear. Despite knowing the greater purposes of their time here, they are motivated by selfish motives in everything they do.

Mythe does not answer immediately but holds his ground and looks into the spirit that sits wholly with Ian's body. This is the real Ian that both the demons and the light bearers see. Mythe can clearly see the destiny which hangs over Ian. It sits like a light cotton gown, over the deadened grey of his spirit.

"You know as well as I do that this destiny is a significant threat to our work." Mythe says looking at the light gown. "That is why they have chosen me to accompany this fool wherever he goes. It is me that was chosen for this job because I know more than you on this matter."

The others laugh at Mythe's weak, defensive arrogance. "He has been tracked and monitored by many different brothers over the last five years. Don't think you can twist the truth with us. You are merely his babysitter on this island! You do not even have complete control of him."

Mythe scoops up the six heavy chains that wrap around Ian's shoulders and gown of destiny, continuing to brag: "You know full well I have these to control him. Gray shrouds of unbelief, lust, anger, pride, false wisdom and self-reliance. It is a blanket of death, to cripple and conceal his spirit. They mark him as part of our fallen kingdom. They are so entwined that they are now a part of him, as much as his destiny is. So by these we prove who is in control and there is no threat to his spirit. It's only the peculiar visits of the light bearers that hold off my full encroachment and possession. This affords the relief and openness in his spirit. This is what the light bearer is referring to. Ian can feel these chains, though the elusive and gradual work of my entrapment has removed his ability to see them..."

At this point the other three start to snicker and look at each other. Very deliberately they threaten and undermine. Undaunted, Mythe continues his dissertation. "...They have become so familiar that he accepts them without challenge. This is the deep emptiness that roams inside him; it forces men's spirits into a subjugated, haunted desert, removing all pleasure of the spirit world. These chains create rights and authority for me to control and

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manipulate. Ian is my little living battlefield, and I shall be victorious.”

The others now look bored with the monologue. They all know that the destiny and the chains have grown with Ian from his early teenage years. They are nothing Mythe has developed. The conflicting rousing of Ian's destiny has been matched by the weight and strength of the chains over the years. Ian has made choices and consequences have been suffered, resulting in new chains and constraint. As the story is repeated billions of times across the globe, the giant battlefield often resembles more a prison camp.

Mythe has spoken accurately about his ability to possess Ian fully. Whilst most upon the earth are chained, the graduation to full possession is less common. The vice of a chain, whether pride, lust or fear, does create rights for demonic influence. Any demon may utilize the chains to affect behavior. Typically the same demon will use the different vices or footholds. Certain demons may however be powerful in the application of one vice, or conversely in the case of angels, they may be skilled in release of an area. However, most, like the four at the apartment, are simply using what is already upon Ian to affect him.

Mythe concludes in a cutting and belittling tone to the others, “You can go now - to your insignificant roles of emptiness - while I am entrusted with this man.”

The three snarl at the arrogant comments, even if they are true.

Of the tens of thousands of demons scattered over the island, many are assigned to individuals. Powerful beings may be assigned to buildings or locations. The kingdom of darkness operates under a strict hierarchical structure. From the individuals, seniors are promoted to oversee towns; commanders holding cities and regions, ultimately up to a lord of the country. With each level of seniority comes power, and with each level of power comes increased self-absorption. They jostle for position by strength in battle, deceit and evil cunning.

The self-promotion in their nature provides the fire in the belly, but it also severely destabilizes what should be the dominant force on the earth. They often outnumber the light bearers by more than one hundred to one on the planet, but they fail to subdue it. Coordinated control over the legions of fallen angels is only achieved by fierce and harsh discipline. Ultimately, they are reportable to one mighty being. He only is able to unite them in their embittered hatred of mankind. Man receives the scorn as the target of Father's love. The demonic armies believe fully in the promotion of Lucifer to control over all things, above the Creator Father.

The three assigned to watch the light bearer are low ranked and do not have specific subjects to monitor themselves. Each relishes such a promotion. They work hard to perform and survive, to be noticed and recognized.

“Well?... Go now...” Mythe repeats with hand motions, as if to shoo the

others away. The three are still unyielding, not willing to give up on the assignment that easily.

The challenge is picked up by another. “You have not been able to answer our question adequately. What did the guardian mean? What lies ahead for this man? Should this matter not be reported?”

Mythe looks at the cloak of destiny and mutters, “Within that cloak is the gifting that allows him to see beyond the constraints of his realm. But his inner self is all but lifeless. Perhaps we may even get to use this gifting for ourselves?” A smile creeps over Mythe’s face, as he relishes the quenched state of Ian’s spirit.

“He was molded to some degree as a child into what it could be; he only lacked the revelation of who the Creator is. His spirit was never enlivened by the breath of God. He had within him the power to overcome what was around him, only choices let him down. It’s ironic that his true destiny has never been beyond reach, just beyond his desire to pursue.”

Turning to the other demons he addresses them directly. “You know as well as I do that we are restricted, as is the guardian, to seeing the future. It is silhouetted beyond choices that have not been made. He is merely trying to unsettle us, and turn us upon each other, which he clearly has been successful in doing to you.” Mythe pulls hard on the chains of false wisdom and pride, staring down the challenge of the three demons in a show of control. He is not about to let go of his subject.

Within himself, Ian feels more satisfied and content. He turns to the fridge, pulls out a beer and returns to the couch. His mind feels free to roam, more than it has for days.

The loitering demons on the deck eventually wander off, without further challenge. Mythe stands tensely as they disperse. He listens as their chortling and moaning fades off into the distance. Breathing lighter, he relaxes. He is finally free to take in all that has transpired in the last few days. Turning to Ian he sneers. “You have hardened your heart to the spirit world. The great curse on the Western world!” He is more used to being with Eastern people on the Indian Ocean Island. “You are so ignorantly blind to spiritual reality. When this realm spills over into your world, rationalization is your default defense... lest answers be demanded that cannot be provided. Oh, the blessed arrogance of you Westerners, the most ‘advanced’ society the world has seen! Ha! It forces you to have answers to all questions. You breed a false knowledge and pride in theories of time, space, and every great mystery. There is no room for the unknown; knowledge takes precedence. The unknown is subdued, mocked, and stuffed away. Theories become fact as your pride says that you can answer everything. It rests on your people as a curse. In your superiority, your material success and advancement, you have destroyed your spiritual perception and awareness, fools!”

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Mythe sits and numbs his own mind. It has been a tense time with the guardian here. As the afternoon meanders into the evening, Ian roams the village. There are few conversations or interactions with others. At times he feels lonely and empty, but at other times different feelings arise. One is of anticipation at the prospect of the evening dive. Yet, contrasting this is another shadowed uneasiness. He does not recognize it but his all but dead spirit does. It, more than the angels or demons, knows that there is a change in the air. It is the spirit of man that is only ever a heartbeat from the complete knowledge of God. Only the shroud of sin and death dampens down this closeness for the earth dwellers. Despite this, and his own choices for denial, Ian's spirit knows what is happening. Like a tuning fork resonating to another across the room, it knows that it will shortly be drawn to account.

Mythe is preoccupied with things beyond Ian as he shadows him through the evening. He struts around, parading his assignment to every demon they meet about the village. He relishes being back in full control. Encounters at the beach and village are noisy, arrogant displays of power and superiority. Darkness is oblivious to the uncertainty that is burning in Ian's spirit. If it cared to look closely it might see it. But with all that has happened in the last few days, Mythe has not bothered to engage in a closer examination. The dominant force on earth is once again undone by the decisions of the past. Once they had been selfless; once they had been pure. Pride and jealousy was the wedge which started to grow and now it destroys them over and over again.

As Dryden's journey unfolds, the contrast with Mythe is stark. The light bearer is concerned only for one thing. He chews over the conversations battled over in Ian's heart and mind. "What is the plot that the King has planned?" he asks himself in a hushed whisper.

His brief had been to prepare and protect, provoking thoughts and rationalization in Ian's mind. Then he was to return to New Zealand before dawn on the third day. He knows that something is being worked beyond him. "Father, I can see it in his spirit. What of Ian's destiny? It is significant but how can it be played out when he has not even turned to the Son for forgiveness? Oh, but I know Your Kingdom has not let go of him! He is a treasure in the field, a pearl that may come at great cost. The destiny given him spurs us on to hope and fight, even as his entrapment is heightened. But what will bring that hard heart to you? What sort of event could do that? What sort of revelation of your love when you choose to hold back so much?"

"Thank you Father, I trust your plan! I will know more shortly," he concludes. Content with that he still cannot stop the questions running through his mind again and again. Being young by angel standards, this understanding challenges even the wisest of angels. They revel in the challenge of comprehending the love of the Father.

As the first hour passes, Dryden is traveling over vast barren expanses of

ocean far from enemy eyes. He looks up at the darkening night sky. He races away from the setting sun making the night fall quickly. In the fading light he looks up and strains to see through the blanket covering the earth. A rush of excitement mixed with longing hits him. "Oh to know what is going on in the heavens!" he thinks. He knows exactly what is above the realm separator but he can see little of it. The longing, the memories and the thoughts strengthen and encourage him. "What strategy is being revealed? Are they sending someone? Who will it be?" As he circles the southern part of the globe through the night sky his thoughts are his own.

Just over two hours later he can finally make out the faint lights of land ahead. He backs off his pace by shifting his body into a vertical position. Feet first he begins to descend over a small mountain range, then over lush pasture lands which look dark and forbidding in the depth of night. Within minutes he arrives comfortably on a grassed paddock on the outskirts of the small city of Hamilton, New Zealand. His great wings fold instantly behind his light robes and he walks in the direction of the house familiar to him.

Valmar has been waiting anxiously for Dryden's return. Seeing him arrive, he rushes out of the house and warmly embraces his friend. "Brother, peace to you!"

"It is good to see you my friend." Dryden warmly greets back. "How are things here? What's going on?"

"It has been peaceful here. I do not understand yet. What of you? How is Ian? How is his spirit and hope?"

Excitedly, Dryden relays the events of the days apart. The light bearers interrupt each other, encouraging and lifting each other up with added comments. Dryden's report raises many questions between them, most of which they cannot answer. As the night passes the two share and comfort one another in a loving closeness outside of the house.

"No one has come?" asks Dryden, hesitantly, as the conversation ebbs. "It was three days ago that the messenger came to tell us to prepare. I must admit I have nurtured an excitement inside me. I long for some plan to be brought to bear, but at the moment I feel vulnerable. Here I am - Marie's promise of a heritage and a hope; the promised first agent of protection to her family; the bearer of grace - yet her son lives in chains."

Seeing the concern on Dryden's countenance Valmar puts a firm hand on the young angel's shoulder. "It is the same with me. I have dared to hope; my heart has lifted, but then... well... nothing has happened. It is alright my friend; do not lose hope. The Father has everything in His hands. It is not yet even the dawn of this day. Who knows what manner of events may yet lay ready for us. Perhaps even as the sun rises we may yet see something of a new day." Valmar lovingly smiles at the angel who has become his closest friend and consort.

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It is late in the dark pre-dawn morning as the light bearers separate. Valmar moves into the house and his post beside Marie. He watches over her as she sleeps, quietly ministering peace.

Dryden quietly withdraws and takes a place at the entrance to the property facing the quiet road on the edge of town. He sits on the grass leaning on the railed fence. His head drops back and he looks up at the starlit sky. "Yes, the day is arriving but am I ready for what it holds? Or worse still for what it does not? Father I choose to trust and hope in you alone."

CHAPTER THREE

Through the Western Gate

A brilliant white shaft blazes across the morning sky. The pre-dawn dullness of the autumn sky is shocked in the dazzle, awakened before its time. The shooting star has its brief moment on the stage of heaven, leaving a lingering glow, seeming reluctant to cease, before sinking back to the gray. A young farm worker continues on his chore of marshalling the cows into the shed for their morning milking, wishing on the star. He would never conceive how close to cosmic the flash actually is.

Immediately, as if nothing has changed, all returns to the daily enactment of the battle of the ages. Without speech or sound the sun begins to lift itself out of its voluntary restraint. Relentless, unstoppable, it forces the fading depth of black into hiding. Darkness is merely the absence of light and life. Light wakes, stretches and rises. The valiant stars who continued their pilgrimage through the night can rest now. They themselves bask in the greatness of the sun, receiving the encouragement and warmth they need for their next vigil. These strong ones, ordained of God, provide guidance even on the darkest of nights. Their lamps do not grow dim; they continue through all times as a sign for all life. Life is the dominant force. Every day it has won its victory since the beginning and will continue until the end. At that time, in one glorious moment, it shall rise once more, pushing darkness into death itself.

Croydon can see the Pacific West gate approaching fast. The trail of light still streams off his dark shoulder length hair behind him. The gate is a magnificent crystallite funnel suspended forty two kilometers above the planet's crust, one of only twenty-four such openings in the blanket that covers the earth. All visitors must pass through one of the ancient structures built by the Creator; they are a realm restrictor. That is the way it has been since the beginning - a voluntary control set by a God who has no restrictions imposed on Him. With this he has granted His adversary a poor semblance of authority over the realm he has claimed.

The funnel narrows to be no wider than a two lane road before it falls toward the earth and opens broadly again into the atmosphere. Littered across the grand transparent entrance are rough balustrades and barriers which look distinctly out of place within the fine crystal workmanship. Formed by a different hand, they are made from a dull black metallic product.

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Easing through the thin atmosphere the magnificent light bearer begins his descent, arms stealthily by his side. The gate is lightly guarded and at Croydon's speed and power there is no attempt to slow his progress. The six guards spread across the entrance barely look up, dazzled, bewildered and far too slow. Seldom has such a senior light bearer come through alone. His pace and flexibility allows him to negotiate their barriers easily. He pulls his massive white wings in behind him to slip through a gap in the structure like a freefall skydiver. Exiting and looking behind him Croydon offers a friendly wave, riling the guards as the powerful wings stretch out again. They watch him vanish beneath them over the Pacific Ocean's dark blue waters, fading in the distance through the scattered clouds.

The gatekeeper has leapt up from behind his crude desk covered by huge ancient books. "What are you doing dreaming on the job?" His aggravated voice screams at the hapless demons that have still not moved. "You should have stopped him, you imbeciles!"

The guards grunt and look accusingly amongst themselves.

The gatekeeper comes closer and growls harshly. "Who was he then, boys?" No response comes from the disgruntled guards who continue to scowl at each other, looking for someone to blame, anyone but themselves. The gatekeeper holds his glare.

Eventually, with some murmuring, one is prepared to speak in a deep muffled monotone. "It was a single light bearer... Sir."

Pouncing on the comment the gatekeeper drives home his authority. "Yes - a single light bearer - and six of you cannot slow him? Let alone stop him!" He draws his reddened face to within centimeters of the guard who spoke. "You know what a breach is punishable with, don't you fool? Dreaming on the job... That is time in the vaults!"

The guard knows the threat to be idle but pretends to be scared to pacify the gatekeeper's anger. "He was traveling at significant speed, Sir. Should I go and alert base camp, Sir?" another guttural guard voice ventures to say. The gatekeeper turns and takes several steps away, thinking on his feet. Reporting the breach might be correct procedure but it would only serve to notify his superiors of a failure in his work. He turns, quickly flicking his overcoat behind him, and marches to the gate books behind his desk. The guards look blankly at each other. Quietly they return to their posts. No one even considers attempting a pursuit. The gatekeeper enters a log in the books: 6.24am March 12, 1982: Single unidentified light bearer bearing south west: low risk.

The air intensifies as it encroaches and wraps the earth, and now this new foreigner, in its seal. It has been centuries since Croydon was last in these realms but even as heaviness threatens to grip him the light bearer's spirit rallies. He focuses on where he has come from and where his purpose and mission now lead him. Stretching his arms above him and dropping feet first,

Croydon checks behind to ensure he is not pursued. Wistful thoughts flash through his mind of the distant lands of heaven, now obscured from his vision by the darkness; he is already homesick. The ground approaches quickly as he slows and retracts his feathered pinions. The lightness of his touch on the earth barely disturbs the fresh dew lingering on the lawn.

Scarcely has he landed before Valmar is upon him. The light bearer throws himself in an embrace around the mighty warrior, gripping him firmly around the chest and shoulders. He lets go quickly, as if to gain composure and steps back with his mouth open to actually take in who it is. His eyes quickly fill with tears as he sobs a little under rapidly increasing breaths.

A decade of emotion and heartache from the ongoing call of Marie for intervention in the family sits just below the surface of her guardian. And now, after all the years of prayer and waiting, a response has come. Hope and expectation rise instantly in Valmar's heart. His eyes sparkle with the moistness, feeling the excitement of what now may be possible. He studies Croydon's form and mass, finally speaking only what he can. "We are ready, Sir. Thank you for coming. Thank you, Sir." He gazes into Croydon's face for some form of approval, mouth still agape and light breathing out of his countenance.

"It is not me you should be thankful too, faithful servant of the King. You have held your vigil with diligence and patience. Well done." Croydon's words are soft, clean and deep felt.

Dryden has arrived. He stands back a little hesitant before greeting Croydon with a firm arm clasp and kiss, a little stunned at the stature of the being. There is an impetuous excitement upon the young light bearer's face. "We have been waiting..." Dryden starts before curtailing his sentence, unsure whether his excited chatter could be out of place to such a senior officer.

Croydon looks upon the young angel's face and affirms his eagerness with a friendly smile. "God's peace to you brothers; the day has come. This is our time. This is our valiant hour. May the Lord be with us and bring his bride forth." The three hold each other's forearms and embrace with exhilaration. Croydon turns to survey the scene around them.

The sun still struggles to overcome the autumn morning's mist and high cloud. The rural scene at the rear of the house is lush with grass, neatly arranged into rectangular paddocks, each hemmed with tidy three-strand electric fences and at times hedges of barberry and gorse. Meadow flowers of white and yellow interrupt the green canopy. Trees occupy the high hills in the background, having survived the pastoral development in some of the small valleys of the rolling countryside. Birds are well into their day's work and busily swoop from branches onto the moist meadows. Recent rains provide sustenance for their families. The weatherboard house is open and exposed to the back paddock, set some ten meters off the road on a generous piece of

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land. The home is modest, but functional, and healthy gardens cover the front and western side of the fenced property.

The three are magnificent creatures. Their armor is bright gold and glows with the luster of a low sunrise across the ocean. They wear breastplates hugging tightly over their contoured chests, with light royal blue material joining this to flayed mail skirts. The embossed figure of the lion shimmers on shin and forearm bands of brilliant gold, comfortably protecting limb extremities. Their lower thighs and upper arms are unashamedly bare, revealing lean powerful muscles that flex and flinch with every movement they make. The armor is shrouded beneath loose robes of dazzling white muslin fixed atop their breastplates and drawing down over their shoulders to just below the knees.

Each carry two narrow sharp double edged swords, forged in the hot vaults of heaven with silver, the metal of purity. The swords are precisely sheathed on thirty degree angles upon each hip, the tips some half a meter off the ground. Highly skilled and trained in their use they can handle the swords with speed in both hands, with deadly effect through any defense. Strapped across their backs, over top their wings and robes, is a traditional crest shield. It can be swung from here with ease. Light and flexible, the golden defense is pressed with the insignia of the Lamb, contrasting with the lion on the shin and forearm pads. Other inset patterns fill the armor - resplendent reds, blues and yellows.

They are stern and exact; every movement and word would appear planned, calculated and precisely drilled to an onlooker. Their faces have sharp curves and features, creating an inescapable beauty. Warm light glows over their whole beings and pleasant smells fill the air where they stand. There is a drawing to their splendor, along with fear - silhouettes of their Maker. These are 'the light bearers', those who show His work without blemish or tarnish; there is no degeneration or decay in them.

"Sir, we are anxious..." Dryden's sentence is incomplete but Croydon knows what he is questioning.

The magnificent senior light bearer pats the shoulder of the young angel. "All will be revealed. You know his destiny. Tens of thousands rely on him. But we cannot see beyond the choice he must make. Today he will die. That is why I am here, to guarantee the choice; the rest is in his and the Creator's hands. The Spirit has sent me to place the case before the Creator and the Son and to ensure that all is carried out as anticipated."

Valmar and Dryden soak the information in quickly. "Die?... Sir?" Valmar states what both are thinking. "But how can that release a destiny?"

"Yes, the Father's ways are beyond us!" Croydon laughs off the obvious confusion in the information. "You know as I do that the Father is continually supple and creative, not given to rules of restraint, as is man. Somewhere in those seeming contradictions is a reality that we will understand afterwards

but not beforehand.”

Dryden interrupts excitedly. “Sir, then they do not know! The fallen guard him only lightly!”

Croydon puts his palm on the cheek of the young angel and smiles. “Ah, is He not full of surprises and wonder? The enemy is weakened already. Like the mind of man, the mind of our enemy struggles to understand it all. They cannot comprehend that. Their minds take variation as instability, though for us it is plain to understand. Man wants certainties and knowledge; a formula, not choices. His great quest for answers and pride in solutions blinds the understanding of things greater than him. Things beyond understanding get rationalized incorrectly into doctrines of inflexibility. Yet man and evil will never comprehend that. They remain unable to grasp its inherent truth.”

The air around them is light and cheery as a powerful presence continues to drop like a perfume. Even the grass looks stronger and more vibrant where they stand, as if it was bathed in bright sunlight after days of cloud and rain. Creation continually groans and strains to reach out to God, longing for His touch, His approval, His presence. It has never forgotten what it was made for.

The splendid beings turn and move together towards the house. Valmar and Dryden walk on either side of Croydon, who puts his arms around their shoulders. The powerful leader is nearly a foot taller than the other two. He whispers reassurance as they walk. “Be encouraged, my brothers, the Lord is with us. Today we will bring life; let us be strong and certain for already the enemy is confused.”

The arrival has not gone unnoticed, not that the angels are attempting to conceal their activities. Two saw the splendid traveler land. “He’s not from around here; you had better report this up,” one suggests to the other.

“You go; I’ll watch,” the second retorts. The bitter allies stand off for a few moments before the second one reticently hustles off to report in the city. On his way he alerts many others holding non-essential positions to head to the house of ‘the little woman’.

The demon that remained picks his way slowly along the houses opposite the property. Within minutes he is joined by a half dozen others. Together they close in on the road side where Dryden would normally be marking the limit of their approach. Watching the three angels enter the house the demons hesitantly step onto the front of the property.

Normally they would be reluctant to proceed onto land held by the light bearers. Often guardians will protect the land of those who love Him, even to the extreme of raising a wall of holy fire. But the restrictions are lessened at the moment as the angelic beings are busy on other business.

Spurred on by the comfort of numbers and a curiosity about the new arrival the fallen begin to mass around the dining room windows. They push and jostle each other like ill-disciplined children in a shopping mall, competing for

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views into the house with chortling and hissing.

An older demon finally gets a clearer view of Croydon. He steps back, "Careful, you fools." No one takes any notice of him.

"Pull back I said! We do not know who he is. Why would such a senior officer be here?" His comments are more forceful as he moves nearer the road. The rest of the group fears little. The beauty and fellowship of the three light bearers, once something within their grasp, attracts them like moths to a flame. They take no notice of the warning. The older demon curses their ambivalence to him. Turning he scuttles off to advise the area commander, aware that the issue is spiraling in circles of significance.

Gradually amongst the confident bustle outside the cottage the fallen begin to feel a change. The bravado quells. They sense a lightening and discomfort in the environment around them. Withdrawing reluctantly they keep a distance from the windows. Spats aggravate the group as the debate about Croydon grows more intense. Word is received that the order is restriction, containment and distraction.

"Let's take them!" a hostile demon ignorantly shouts at the outside of the group. Swelling numbers increase the sense of security in the group, pushing them to dining room window vantage points. Seldom have they seen nor been so close to such a magnificent creature.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Unlikely Heroine

The old clock strikes its eight o'clock chime. "My, where is my morning going?" Marie asks herself. Colin left early for work over an hour ago; she has been alone in the house. Looking at the table she chuckles realizing she had unwittingly set the breakfast table for three. It has been only her and Colin for several years now. "Oh you dilly what were you thinking? Who was that third person anyway? Perhaps it was one of the children?" She chides herself in her thoughts.

A smile creeps over Valmar's face. For thirty five years he has been with her and she never ceases to amaze him. It is almost like she knows he is there. He is blessed to be her guardian, and he loves her dearly.

Soon the dishes are out of sight and the droning vacuum cleaner massages the carpet. The simply decorated house is straightened out for the day. Marie works from room to room, uneasy in her emotions. Her thoughts run over the children, causing a mixture of feelings to stir in her heart.

All her thoughts are perfectly heard by the light bearers. "Why haven't they fallen in love with your Lord?" Valmar whispers, prompting the direction her mind is going.

"It just isn't fair." Marie bemoans quietly to herself. A single tear rolls gently down her cheek; she pushes it back, shamed at her emotional state. Valmar places a comforting hand gently on her shoulder. An old black and white memory begins to roll through her mind...

"Father," the fourteen year old asked outside the church, "has God ever spoken to you?"

Marie observes the awkwardness on Colin's face. "No," he answered. There was a delay and then he continued unsolicited. "And if you ask me - anyone who thinks that He does is it a bit cuckoo in the head, son," motioning and tapping his index finger on his temple to exemplify the point.

The response was in line with Ian's expectation. He was seeing that faith in God was without substance. His father was a practical man, steady and realistic. His answer now was starkly honest.

Colin had often said that religion was a crutch for weak women. His irregular attendance on Sundays was only to placate his wife and give some sense of community to his life.

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“If it’s okay with you then, I would like to not come to church anymore.” Ian bluntly stated. His mind raced over the free time about to be created for his passions of fishing and surfing.

Colin squinted back at Ian tipping his head as if the request was out of place. “You’d better talk to your mother son,” he responded without emotion.

Ian turned, mildly disappointed but still past stage one. Reviewing the old church members milling around the kitchen with their cups of tea and biscuits, he spied Marie talking to the vicar.

Walking up he interrupted the conversation as if his matter was of great importance. “Mother...”

“Yes Ian.”

“Has God ever spoken to you?”

Instantly the vicar scampered off like a dog with its tail between its legs. His countenance of forced pleasantness turning to decided discomfort, a silent attestation to God’s silence in his life. Marie, reviewing the scene in her mind, chuckles in disappointment at the vicar’s lack of understanding.

Marie answered directly without wavering. “Yes son, God has spoken to me.”

Surprised at the response, Ian stepped back, but returned to dig deeper. “When Mother? Why haven’t you told me this before?” Ian’s voice was impassioned and keen; he thought deeply for his age. He knew that his mother was different from most other people, though he was not clear why. But God actually talking to her; he hadn’t heard this before.

Marie responded with a look puzzling to Ian. He was unsure of whether it was a look of love or hurt. “Do you remember I told you about when Grandma died?” Marie said.

“Yes.”

Emotions rose into her face. “After she died I was at a low point in my life; in desperation I cried out to God, and He answered me.”

Ian was attentive to everything his mother was saying, staring directly into her eyes. He allowed her to continue, his face asking, “Well what did He say?”

“He said, ‘Marie... I will always be with you.’”

A period of still silence followed, Ian and Marie caught in the moment. Ian began to feel disappointed that God had not provided some more enlightening information about life or the universe. He gathered his thoughts as best he could. It was not the answer he was prepared for, but he knew it must be completely true. Now he had to deal with this statement of fact about God. His life’s fate will be affected by a casual decision in seconds. “That’s fine for you Mother, but why has God never spoken to me?”

“Often it takes a tragedy to humble us son. Men by nature tend to be quite proud.”

“I’m not that kind of person! I’m not proud, am I?” Ian replied somewhat

offended.

Marie said nothing. "Of course you are proud," she says inside.

Ian paused again thinking further. "I'm fourteen Mother. If it's okay with you I do not wish to come to church anymore."

Marie's look deepened to sadness. As a flurry of thoughts hit her mind she stuffed them down. She had been expecting this day. "Son..." She replied quietly. "You know that we will not force you to come; if you do not wish to come anymore then that is your choice."

Ian began to walk away. Despite getting the resolution he wanted he was feeling unsettled. Marie called after him in little more than a broken squeak, her emotions beginning to break. "Ian!"

Ian stopped and turned a few meters from her. As their eyes met he could see the moisture around the rims. He swallowed the lump that formed in his own throat quickly; he hated to see her cry. His father had taught him that only women cry, but there was something upsetting when his mother cried. "Just promise me you will remember one thing."

"Sure Mum, what is it?" Ian replied nonchalantly, daring not to stare into the eyes wet with love.

"Whatever you do in life, wherever you go, no matter how far you think you've gone away from God, no matter what you've done wrong - if you cry out to God from your heart, He will hear you and He will forgive you."

Ian gritted his teeth and pushed himself to look into those eyes. "Sure Mum, I can remember that." He hustled off to the car relieved but strangely emptied at his release from religion. "Better this feeling than living as a hypocrite," he subconsciously thought. But those words would stick with him for life.

Marie shakes herself to break the daydream. She wipes tears off her face with the tea towel on the table. The vacuum cleaner is hidden back in the cupboard. The light bearers stand off; feeling her spirit stirring, they leave her alone.

The light bearers watched the memory play in Marie's mind as clearly as she does. Dryden is solemn. While he longs to play out the scenes that remain, his time with her is nearing its end. It's not that he wants to leave, but his passion is to complete the mission he has been sent to do, to the glory of his Master. Contrasts of sadness and exhilaration shadow his heart; he loves her dearly also.

Marie wanders to her bedroom, some things around the house still unfinished. The dated rosewood bedroom suite crowds three walls. One cabinet is littered with unframed family photos. Nearing the bed she falls on it; curling up like an unborn child on top of the quilted duvet. She begins to weep quietly. After a time she sits up tucking her heels under the edge of the bed. She holds her head in her hands, tears searching for ways through her fingers. The moisture mixes with powdered makeup to form muddy trails down the outside of her arms. "Father, I love you... Father, I love you... Father,

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I love you..." She chants gently rocking back and forth.

"You are a complete failure!" one quickly shouts from outside.

"You have never been a good mother or role model. What could you possibly expect of them?" spats another.

"They are lost forever now, and it's entirely your fault," the first reiterates. "Had you been able to show the way they would have followed."

The shouts, like arrows, hit into Marie's spirit; she feels a sudden pain in her side between her ribs and stomach. The demons have recognized they must act smartly. Marie has started to empower the light bearers and the atmosphere around them.

As the volley of accusations hit, three light bearers' shields ease off their backs. The massive crested sheets of gold surround Marie and the bed. She is cocooned inside, the jeering comments muffling into the background. Valmar turns inward and tenderly strokes her head. The pain eases in Marie's side and her mind refocuses on the Father. Dryden is on her left and Croydon at her right.

Marie is unsure of whether to laugh or cry; at the moment it is tears. Her spirit, that undefined inner self, is disturbed with a deep seated restlessness. Somehow she knows that this time is significant though her human mind could never even consider what is about to take place.

She continues to worship and weep. Passages begin to open above her. It starts as a narrow wedge of light dancing on her face spreading upward through the ceiling. Soon it intensifies and widens across her whole body. Marie is bathed in light as if someone has peeled back the corrugated iron roof and is drawing bright sunshine directly into the bedroom. The building cannot contain the shaft of power; light begins to pour from it.

A giant portal of light, melding into a transparent beam, forms above the house. Like a huge twisting spotlight it reaches heavenward, searching for its destination. It lengthens, severing the blanket rim surrounding the earth. Light radiates throughout the shaft as the incense of her worship expands like fog rolling in off a still winter lake. The beauty of the worship cannot be contained by the enemy's grip.

The beam of brilliant white light has curled and twisted around the bottom of the globe. Frustrated at its lack of progress it hovers high above the tropics, searching the expanses of space. Just visible around the long curves of the lonely blue and green planet is true north of the tilted axis. It only lingers a moment, plying forward at an incredible pace, severing the earth's containment and streaking far into the depths of barrenness.

Immeasurable distances disappear as the portal hones in on a unique radiance in the universe. Mistakable as a star this inimitable glow is completely different. Created light, restricted to 186,000 miles per second, is bright and cheery, dry and hot, penetrating from the outside. Yet it is a poor shadow of

this illumination. Unrestricted, alive itself with power, emotions and potential, this new light deeply transcends what it touches. The immense area of God light holds its warmth and power over time and space. It's not a surrogate carrier of life; it is life itself, reaching out to the uttermost parts of the universe. It pulsates off Him, permeating every sphere, every being, and every structure. Heaven's absorption of this light has so saturated its core that it all mirrors the same light.

Three giant tiers stretch out in front of the portal. Each laid out as on great plateaus, building upon each other in a mighty crescendo of light and beauty. In scale the dimensions are un-calculable. Here all realms cross over into a glorious new reality; shadowed distinctions of physical and spiritual are dismissed forever. As it is without decay, no human mind can relate even a reasonable impression of it.

In an instant the beam of light passes under the first plateau as if it were tiny. The massive lands of paradise, with their arresting colors of plains, oceans, forests and mountains, fall behind as the surging light moves forward.

Looming before it is the second plateau, as spectacular in emotion as the first tier is in nature. Whilst it is a 'room' it is not confined. The domain walls stretch beyond what an eye can see. The great plain extends before the throne, glistening like the perfectly calm sea under the morning sun. It's strikingly smooth. If there were not beings standing on it, it would appear as liquid. Beams of light by their thousands cast streaks under the surface, illuminating it with a shimmering glow. Marie's portal pulses toward the throne room amongst the myriad of others.

Space is not well defined here, nor is time, thought, action, touch or color. While present, you cannot identify how or what form they take, and where one ends and another begins. Even a renewed heart struggles to understand the complexities of the relationships. Great mysteries await exploration on discovery. Time appears to be moving with time on earth, though somehow slower, as if to allow the heavens digestion of every event and heart as it unfolds.

Countless millions mass on the left of the room. Standing on top of the glass sea, they are a breathtaking sight stretching into the distance. Brilliant gowns of white fall to the ground around bare feet. On many heads are crowns paid for by their spilt blood; the Son honors those who give as He did. Shame and guilt have long disappeared - foreshadows of the fall gone forever. Pure, these are those destined to be there.

Arriving over the crest of the mountains to the rear of the room are those who have moved through the lands of paradise. The numbers increase steadily, the response the same with every one, eyes and mouths wide in amazement and wonder. Awestruck they slowly move forward to take their place on the sea. We cannot imagine the feeling that they never want to leave this place. The meaning of their existence is answered in that breathtaking moment.

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The pure bride surges back and forth toward the throne, ebbing and rushing like a spring tide high up on a sandy beach. A chorus of continually impassioned praise is on their lips. It's overwhelming and heart wrenching, yet disjointed. The melodic tones change and take differing courses within the mass, creating an enormous crescendo of pleasant, excited noise. The masses wave, fall flat, jump, dance, stand and kneel with unending enthusiasm and excitement; worshipping in a stupor of seemingly incoherent fervor.

Time will bring in the full complement for the Son, and then all will be made complete. Now they gather in, time and again, to stand in His presence, to see His glory, captivated by their hearts' unification with their Creator, The King. The many glories of heaven are nothing compared to the brilliance of the presence of God, unchained by the sin of mortality. Few traverse the lands of paradise compared to those that linger in the throne room. Deep pleasure and satisfaction holds them in that place. At any time they can return to the lands, but life before the throne is not an experience tired of, even after a million years. The fabric of every being is consumed in a passion and life they never knew could exist.

The right of the room holds a vastly different group. The contrast with the bride is immense. They stand rigidly at attention, precisely ordered, line upon line falling back into the distance in a mass of glistening color. Angelic beings of incredible beauty, arrayed with swords and shields of brilliant designs. Mighty Captains of the twelve divisions stand unified in the front. Each themselves with a name and authority not yet uttered on the earth. To their back are generals, officers and warriors of the huge divisions. They fall off in rank, strong, resilient and stern faced.

The disparity of the disordered free worship of those destined to be there to the angelic host is extraordinary. The twelve divisions also offer continual praise, but it is in perfect unison, militant, chant-like and precise. It is unlike anything heard on earth; the timing is perfect, pitched both above and below where the human voice can place itself. It resonates around the room like a pre-battle cry. The precision of the worship is gripping, stirring you to the core. It calls for response: 'Stand Tall and Vigilant. Your Place is Vital, Your Purpose Ready.'

A few move in and out, attending to necessary matters, yet most have been there since the beginning. They wait the appointed time they were created for, held back by the love of the Father. It is the host of heaven - a huge and mighty army. It will never taste defeat; it is restrained for the battle of all battles, to destroy the kingdom of darkness' reign upon the earth, and to free the oppressed from the hand of death. Eagerly they await the ultimate commander to stand and take His place, that day when the Lion of Judah moves to the gate. He will crush the head of the serpent again, and deliver death and hell into imprisonment forever.

The portals of light slow as they approach the throne. Bending deep into space in a smooth arc they rise beneath the front of the throne well before the final tier. That is the great city. It rises again to the north, behind the throne, as if it was the edge of the universe. Huge radiating buildings, roads, bridges and towers of unique design look as alive as the lands of paradise. The inanimate buildings share the glory of the Creator of the Universe, glimmering in a living light. They hold the wealth and untapped knowledge of God. It will be found and released in the ages to come. Angelic beings move in and out, continuing the preparation for the habitation of the bride. Brooding on top of the city is a bright, gleaming, wispy cloud. Like a palace flag, it is a sign. 'The King is in Residence', as He will be, forever.

The cloud of the Spirit of God is unbroken as it stretches down from the occupant of the throne. The throne sits above everything else in the room, elevated in authority and purity. The one who sits on it is not well defined, being shrouded in the thickened mist. He is glorious and intimidating, inviting yet austere. No one looks at Him directly, but they all know He is there. He shines with the living light so intensely they cannot be sure of what they see. The cloud protects even the mightiest of beings from seeing Him too vividly. He is, after all, the source of all life.

It is to the right of the throne that the Son sits. His image is sharp and clear, not hidden like the King's. He is dressed splendidly. Princely satin robes with gold ribbing hang loosely around His body. There appears to be no color in it, only bright light, though it must have a color; it may be white.

His hair is brighter than a thousand suns, and clasps shoulder length around his neck, like a lion's mane. His eyes are like flames of fire, as if they could pierce the deepest of places with ease. His body oozes the light and love of the Creator Father beside Him.

On his right hand He wears the King's ring, His rightful inheritance. It is the authority over all, not only in heaven but in other realms also. His feet are noticeably bare, like a servant and, like his hands, retain ominous marks that reveal His true identity. Ten million light bearers could not match the purity, the holiness and the magnificence He has. He does not wear it brashly as those in the world; He wears it rightly. He alone is prepared to look in unabashed at the throne, and He does so with confidence allowed only by complete reciprocated love.

In front of the King's feet are seven flaming torches. They sway and stir with the tones and voices of the millions. This also is part of the essence of God, as much as the being on the throne and the cloud that shrouds the city and throne. The flames thunder and roar, emitting what appear to be lightning as the King wills. The releases strike at a bluish-green planet buried deep in space. In that most unlikely place the prize is being incubated and prepared. It is a bride, glorious and complete, ready for her role, her place that is not yet fully

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revealed. As the light of the Spirit hits the earth, various responses occur which at times are radical. The only constant is a deeper love revealing itself.

Beyond, in two arcs leaving a central passage open, are priests of the King. There are twenty four of them in all, sitting on thrones of silver. They are dressed in sapphire, emerald, opal, amethyst and other bright colors of precious gems. They utter the secret profound truths of heaven, stating and restating the pre-eminence of the Creator God, His virtue and love. They speak with wisdom of the past, the present and the future. Moving amongst them is an array of other creatures, releasing their own untainted expressions of praise and worship. Despite all of the voices there is no confusion, for all have shrugged off the restricted capacity of mortality.

Between the arched thrones of the priests are three giant golden urns. It is here that the portals of light enter and the connection of man to Creator is made. The essence of God's light that sits in mankind has instantly transcended the countless miles of space. From these golden urns rise the myriad of praises, petition and worship from those on earth. It intermingles as incense permeating the atmosphere directly in front of the throne. The same connection caused the bolt of light from the flaming torches back to the earth.

Like thousands of television sets tuned to different channels, the events of the earth are uncovered in the golden urns. The shroud of time masked, everything is examined individually. It is here that every call on earth is heard by the Son. His focus shifts and moves as He delights in the sweet love. There is something more pleasing in this worship than from any other in heaven. It is in the innocence and free offering only generated by faith. There is no choice in faith for those in heaven as they see His full glory unrestrained.

Marie's portal connects with the thousands of others underneath the throne room into the urns.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the Glory

It is all over them, their radiant gold belts glowing with increasing intensity, their faces lifted up toward heaven. They stand rigidly at attention holding one hand on their shield and one out in salute to the heavens above. An energy source is being released in the room, as if water was beginning to flow over a giant turbine forcing it to turn with gradually increasing rotations. The light bearers, like mighty batteries, absorb the power starting to emanate. They grow brighter and brighter, the light pouring off them. Each moment and prayer is strengthening them, their capabilities for the battles ahead, their foresight and knowledge.

The incense of Marie's worship mixes with a new living light appearing in the room. Drops of light like dew form in the intermingling zone above the house. They begin to fall back through the funnel gently splashing onto Marie's body. As they hit each touch encourages and ignites her spirit, pouring life into her heart. Marie holds her breath for a few moments as she basks in the sensation, sensing that God is stepping into her room. Goosebumps ripple up all over her body, every hair standing on edge. Marie's praise has passed from realms seen to those unseen.

"You must hold post until Vagan comes," snarls the lightly armored messenger puffing a little from his hasty flight to arrive well before the commander. The rabble wheeze and grumble at having to stay put.

"He is of no consequence," mutters one.

"We should attack before it is too late," a smaller member boasts in confidence. Nearby a large demon hits him mid-sentence on the chest with the back of his fist. The blow throws him against the fence to the jeers and laughter of the group.

There are many opinions of what to do, but no individual is powerful enough to initiate a coherent action plan.

"We don't all need to be here," suggests another.

They look amongst themselves at the last suggestion, as if it offers some hope. They all feel uncomfortable and out of place. Their edginess is testimony to a fear that is rising in them. Perhaps they may now be excused to go about matters more to their fancy. Despite the unspoken rationalization, none move away, for Vagan will arrive shortly.

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Those at the front are gazing into the room. The bravado behind them muffles into the distance as they are fixated by the unselfish worship - and the light emanating from the house. They linger, a longing wrestling in them to be a part of the light that is spawning inside, yet a vehement jealousy forcing them to detest it. Gradually the arguing dies down as those at the front draw back from the windows and push through the less engaged.

Marie's face begins to shine as she raises her eyes for the first time in ten minutes. The tear streams are now dry salt patches on her face. There is a change in her appearance as she stands and confidently begins to walk about the room. The light bearers stay at rigid attention, filling more than one room with their immenseness. They sense the power flowing into the room. Marie moves freely amongst them.

"I love you Lord," she whispers. "Your kingdom is dominant and your place in my heart is secure. Time will reveal your full glory, though I see so much of it already in my life. Thank you Jesus! Thank you Jesus! I give you honor and praise for everything in my life."

The edgy group increases their pace of retreat, a sensible fear pushing them back. They know what the three types of portal are. Two are one-dimensional. Firstly a prayer portal from man to God and then the rarer portal opened by an angelic being from God to man. This is type three, the one to fear the most, a bilateral power base with capacity to flow in both directions. Unpredictable and volatile, the dynamics can change suddenly. Worship, the unselfish giving of oneself in faith, expecting nothing back of itself, creates a back draft of Holy Spirit that at times is uncontrollable.

Almost glibly and carelessly Marie casts an idle comment. The innocent whisper leaves her lips as lightly as a feather. She delicately sweeps her hand across her body toward the window as she says it. "Dispel evil from me Lord..."

The huge pulse of light surges down the portal, forcing the light bearers to hold tight to their shields in the torrent as it swirls past them. Their gowns and hair thrash about in the wind of light. Gleefully their mouths open wide, and they breathe in the life giving light as deeply as they can.

Bursting from the room the wave smacks into the retreating horde outside. Like a bomb the wave hits the fallen who have no time to escape. Some are thrown and land heavily on the road and fences while others are pressed into the ground. For several seconds the wave streams past; as it subsides they panic. Getting to their feet, they push and clamber over each other. Amongst the thrashing rush, swords are drawn and wildly swung. Loud cracks resound as armor is struck and profanities uttered. As they realize they are not being pursued, they stop, keel over and grasp at their eyes and heads, writhing in pain from the light exposure.

The Spirit has taken dominion of the area surrounding the house. Rich smells fill the air. As the initial wave subsides the light bearers' chuckle. The

leading in Marie's prayer could not have been more accurate if they had spoken it to her. Light pours from the cottage like a spring bursting out of the ground. It surrounds the house, hovering twelve meters in radius and five meters deep. There it ceases its advance and holds its brilliant poise.

The fallen regroup at the light fogs limit. There is a lot of arguing and noise, weapons are drawn and several more scuffles break out. Eventually senior members of the group forcibly take control.

"Get back in there, fools!" they cajole and bully lesser warriors back toward the light. "We have been told to hold our position and hold it we will."

Awkwardly those chosen are forced forward. Holding their swords above their heads to start with, they look as if they are crossing a river as the light grips them to their waists. A moment later they disappear from the view of the ones on the outside as the cloud engulfs them completely.

One arm shielding their eyes, the other holds their weapons blindly. They are soon alone and lose perspective of each other. Vision is badly impaired and the sound of a gentle wind muffles any words spoken. They hold their breath, as the light is suffocating and smothering, as if it were poisonous gas. Anxiously they all watch their feet. Each boot forward is placed delicately and fearfully on the soft wet grass. As they creep forward they take a short breath through their noses to relax a fraction, relieved that the ground did not part to swallow them up. The environment is incredibly hostile for them; the light hangs deep over their heads. Nevertheless they stick to orders and push in.

"Father... I love you... I love you... you hold the keys in your hands, all keys... and all kingdoms at your will and purpose." Marie's prayer moves with a form of militancy as she speaks quietly and precisely marching around her bedroom. "Therefore your purpose will be accomplished. What is that good purpose Lord? For I know only to follow you and not how to hold up the pillars of the earth. Yet I declare that your good purpose that is in heaven will be accomplished here this day upon the earth. The heavens acknowledge with me the purpose of your will to redeem men from sin. To proclaim freedom to those enslaved to the enemy. To walk again with your prodigy, to laugh and cry with your children, restoring the children of the righteous to their parents..." She collapses to her knees beside the dresser and wails passionately.

Fleeting thoughts that her prayer is odd or lacking direction are thrust aside. She doesn't care, but is consumed in her fight for heaven's attention. As each phrase passes her lips, another surfaces. Occasionally a whisper in her ear directs her on a new line, but mostly they rise from her own heart.

Taking it all in the Son slowly turns his head. He focuses His attention upon a single scene. On the outskirts of a small New Zealand city, a middle aged woman is singing poorly in broken notes an old hymn. Perfectly amplified the Son enjoys every note. Following His lead the rest of heaven tune into what is happening. Stillness descends in the room. Ian's image is brought up for all to

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see. The twenty six year old is on the beach, preparing for a night dive on the small island of Mauritius. The heaviness in his persona and the demonic forces around him is apparent to all.

Every word from Marie is perfectly petitioned as if it were the most eloquent delivery of speech ever given. The Son of Light studies Marie's face and lingers on each phrase and comment. Light tears drain off His cheek; He weeps with those who weep.

The battle of the mother in New Zealand and the son in bondage are dramatically brought together. Heaven watches the two images like giant video screens at a football match. A tension and anxiety at the anguish and pain of the young man rises in the Son's heart.

It feels that five minutes has passed before the Son breaks the stilled anticipation of the crowd. "What will you do, Father?" His voice is broken. Few in the room feel strong enough to look at Him directly at the moment. The suspense continues as no response is heard. Presently the Son continues. "Father, time is upon us. You must authorize the action. Show your hand of mercy I beg. Must another fall before our enemy?" The Son is unashamedly weeping as the petitions rising filter through His ears to His heart.

"Will he choose us?" The gentle voice is barely above the level of a whisper but volume does not restrict its impact. Everyone knows where it came from. The voice that could satisfy a crying child, yet at the same time shakes the heaven's very foundations.

"Only you know Father," replies the Son, quieter now. Humbly He shifts His gaze down as if He is coy.

The Son restructures His argument and fortitude in the debate. "Father, the damage is enough. The promises of the age are close at hand. He will choose You; I am confident. You know His heart and His passion; call Him home. Please Father, hear her prayers. She should not be made to bear such pain, even if you use it to bring good. I..." Tears trickle off His eyes as He stops mid sentence. "I cannot bear to carry this pain. Father, you must authorize the action."

The multitudes of heaven are in suspense. They glance between the Son, still with His head hanging humbly, the Father shrouded on the throne, and the images of the mother and son near the urns. As if it were an aside to the audience at a show, two priests speak softly to each other in front of the throne.

"Who can understand the loving Father who always holds Himself back?"

"That is His chosen strategy."

"Why would someone with so much power be so slow to show His hand? Why would He not deal a death blow to the enemy's camp?"

"Is freedom that is legislated freedom at all?"

"No, but need He leave it for those who stumble upon it? Does He not permit suffering and pain to continue? To the observer does it not appear that

victory is lost?”

“Only for a time does the pain hold and that time beyond itself is not of significance. From the greatest of pain He brings forth the purest of gold.”

“Yet His creation is left perplexed, clinging to blind trust. Only thin cotton connects them to the mighty Creator.”

“He has always allowed for rejection of Himself by man. Only by this choice is the love of man purified, thus creating a suitable bride for the Son. That is His delight.”

“Yet I sense His heart bursts with love like none of us can fathom, even the Son, for the bride to be restored.”

“Indeed the Father has had it in His mind since He began, that a bride worthy of the Son should be brought forth. So should He show His hand and intervene or should He stand back and trust for the heart of His chosen to turn to Him?”

The conversation ceases and silence returns as the priests sit and turn their gaze again to the Son and the Creator Father. It seems an age before another voice is heard. It comes from the cloud in a whisper again, though this time it is clearly broken with emotion. “Son?...”

“Yes Father.”

“Son?...” He asks a second time.

“Yes Father,” replies the Son more confidently this time. Suddenly He interjects the pause, “Father, you know that I submit to and accept your judgment... always...”

“Judgment?” responds the Father quietly, “but I give you mercy and grace!” The hushed voice carries across the distance of the room.

For a moment there is silence as the crowd digests the statement. Suddenly and spontaneously the massive audience erupts in shouting and dancing, as if the victory is already secured.

The three light bearers are bathed in heavenly light. There is no need for any defensive action, so their shields have been returned to their backs. They stand above Marie, immense arms lifted high through the ceiling and roof, stretching up as far as they can, as if they think they might touch the throne room visible through the temporary parting of the blanket over the earth.

The Son moves to the urn, joy splashed all over his face. He looks down the shaft stretching back to the earth and puts out his hand as if to touch the yearning arms of the three chosen. Smiling He repeats the words of the Father with a satisfied heart. “Brothers, this day I give you mercy and grace.”

The light bearers hear the words but barely take them in. Shifting His gaze the Son looks directly at Croydon. “Friend, I grant you the seal of victory this day. You are authorized to act. The power and authority of my Father’s house is with you.”

Croydon nods in understanding as he drops his eyes away from the

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intensity of the Son's face. He knows exactly what he is permitted to do. Tears push into the strong eyes of the light bearer.

Dryden is looking back and forth at the Son, Croydon and Valmar, an impetuous excitement building up to the point of bursting forth. His body quivers as his hands are palm upwards to the Son, "Yes, Yes, and Yes!" he whispers with excitement.

As if hearing him the Son shifts his gaze from Croydon and turns to Dryden. "My Child," He begins. Dryden doesn't look into the face but is desperate to do it. Resolutely he forces himself to look up. Another shudder flows through his body, tears immediately finding their way out of his eyes, as the Son addresses him directly. "You have been chosen and ordained for this time. It is now upon you. Secure your inheritance this day."

Suddenly the Son tosses His head back in laughter and joy. "Yes! Yes! Yes! I shall be his absolution!" He shouts at full noise. The voice echoes and fades as the massive crowd celebrate. The Son speaks heartily toward the three light bearers. "Be confident in my name and in the name of my Father's house. We have overcome and history is our vanguard. The Spirit of Light is with you and I am for you. Go and be victorious!"

CHAPTER SIX

Skirmishes

“Fall back!” shouts an advance warrior, pushing furthest into the blinding cloud. In a stampede they scatter to the roadside, pushing past one another in the haste.

The fresh wave of light pulses from the house, rolling through the cloud. Within seconds it settles again into a gentle wisp and calm. The group collapse to the ground beyond its reach. Frustrated and indignant their hunched backs are turned to the light; many hold their heads.

“Curse that woman,” one moans, pulling deep breaths hard into his dark lungs, as if he had just run some longer distance. “I told you we should have taken her earlier.”

This is the scene that Vagan arrives to. The regional commander is furious as he stares for a moment in disbelief at the decrepit look of the group gathered. The dozen stronger reinforcements with him scowl also in superiority. Drawing his sword Vagan takes immediate charge. “Cease your blubbering, fools, and fall into line!”

The mob quickly gathers into two orderly lines in front of Vagan, who is sufficiently senior to them all to demand obedience. Walking slowly in front of the first line, he intimidates each one. Passing by he pulls his face close to theirs, forcing them to look back.

“Fools... all of you are fools. Why am I cursed with a bunch like you! In your ignorant stupidity you cannot even see that it is hardly time to thrash about on the edges. You should have struck as soon as you could.” He lifts a clenched fist in front of him. “But no, you have to wait for that petty woman to empower. Now, due to your insolence, you will experience pain like you never have before. Time is working against us and we must act quickly and decisively, if it is not already too late. We must curtail whatever is happening in that damned house. Give me three groups surrounding the house now, who are prepared to attack!”

Instantly the horde marshals into the groups requested. They move into position. Those with Vagan stay at the roadside while the other groups move through neighboring properties to either side of the house. Once positioned Vagan gives the signal. There is a shout and the three companies launch themselves into the cloud of light.

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As if knowing exactly what is happening outside, the light bearers focus. Changing their response to the physical walls of the house, they step through the walls, radiating the light of glory. Empowered by the worship, they stand meters from the house, each holding his two swords. They see clearly in the light cloud which blinds the fallen. The dazzled warriors shield their eyes and step forward at pace to engage the light bearers.

Valmar drops to one knee, having to take three demons down in quick succession. With muted cries they fall to the ground in front of him. The canopy of grass beside the house immediately opens, exposing the rich brown soil underneath. Suspended in the vacuum, the demons writhe and twist, but they cannot avoid the abyss's swallow. The momentum of the attack stops for a few seconds as the second wave look at the chasm which has just taken their compatriots in. They know where it leads.

Pushed from behind, the second wave step onto the reformed grass in front of them; they are more prepared than the first, putting up suitable resistance to the deadly speed of the light bearers' blades. Soon five demons are clustered around Valmar, matching their swords with his swifter and more efficient work. When one is struck they quickly step back and another takes their place.

Dryden follows a similar plight, striking easily through the first layer before being matched by increasing numbers. He can feel the power surging through him with rising intensity as he is lifted by the worship behind him. Stroke by stroke his pace of attack quickens with the swings of the enemy. Both the guardians are holding their ground. A smile breaks on his face. "At last!" he calls to Valmar. "This is what I was made for!"

"You were made to die on my lance," is the quick reply of a demon joining the front line. The jab of his long spear narrowly passes Dryden's waist.

Croydon steps forward from the house to meet the challenge also. Resolutely he strides forward through falling bodies struck by his swords with ease. There is no match for his empowered strength and speed; his blows drive back the forward momentum of the main group. As the light cloud dissipates, the attackers' vision improves; they drop back from the mighty light bearers' range. Croydon is left with swords in hands and the fallen forming a distant half circle before him.

Vagan, having watched his soldiers fall pitifully to the single light bearer, steps between Croydon and the others. The demonic commander holds a menacing, long sickle in one hand and a sword in the other. "I am Vagan, authorized commander, holder and guardian of the Western ward, undefeated in 800 years of confrontation on earth - and who may I ask are you?" he bellows out in an arrogant and harsh voice. The pedigree is worthy of respect, though Croydon need not be told this.

Dryden and Valmar's attackers back off also. Those nursing wounds limp back to the roadside. Assisting demons are rough, pulling injured limbs to

inflict a little additional pain for their services. One complete and wide arc mingles together behind Vagan.

They all await a response from Croydon. In the tense silence Valmar and Dryden join his flanks. Dryden whispers under his breath. "He's not commander of this land; this is the King's land!"

Vagan glares at the inexperienced warrior, pursing his lips and baring teeth.

Croydon puts a hand toward Dryden, motioning him to stand down, before responding softly. "I am Croydon, a servant of the Lord Almighty."

Vagan turns to Croydon again, frowning before looking away under the intense gaze of Croydon. The response has told him nothing of who he is facing. The name is not familiar to him.

Lightning-fast Vagan flicks a foot towards Croydon, releasing a small dagger from the base of his boot's toe. Croydon sways smoothly, allowing the shot to pass and hit the wall of the house. The warrior of light stands upright again, opens his arms wide, swords aloft, and then draws them back crossed in front of his chest.

The light has fully dispersed around the scene now. Vagan steps forward cautiously, continuing to size Croydon up. He is uneasy at not knowing what caliber of angel he fights. Several weak testing swings of his sword are met easily by Croydon.

The angels feel their belts strengthening as the portal remains open, empowering them. They are in no rush to complete the battle; Marie is safe and functioning behind them.

Vagan unleashes a more deadly volley of attack with both weapons. The demonic horde cheer as Vagan appears to force Croydon away from the house. All the time Croydon stares directly at his foe, eyeing him with a mixture of pity and sternness. The unsettling gaze fuels the demon's anger.

Having moved some distance from the house Croydon completes a perfect summersault over the top of Vagan, disarming him of his sickle en route. The commander quickly recovers his weapon from the ground. Embarrassed, and having lost some confidence in the eyes of his troops, he eases back. Words, he considers, may be a better tactic.

"You have no authority here, servant," Vagan snarls in a belittling tone hiding the uneasiness inside. Croydon is silent holding his swords loosely beside him and holding his gaze steady at Vagan. "By whose authority did you arrive? You are unauthorized, and must leave."

Dryden can contain himself no longer. "You have no idea to whom you are talking or under what authority he operates," he spouts in defense of his superior.

"Boy," chuckles a mildly amused Vagan, "I have tolerated you on my land long enough..."

"This is not your land," interrupts Dryden, "this is the heritage of one

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redeemed and you know you have no authority on it.” He is passionate about the zone he has preserved for years around the woman of God.

“Stand down Dryden,” Croydon quietly motions. Dryden steps back clenching his swords so intensely that the color drains from his fingers. He glares at Vagan, the power around his waist urging him to take the demonic commander apart.

Vagan returns his attention to Croydon with more words, fearing his opponent’s pedigree more than ever. “You are unauthorized, and you must leave. There has been no approval of your visit from the gatekeepers.” The argument is weak and pointless, but the bluff is only a stalling tactic while he determines a new strategy.

To everyone’s surprise the front door of the house opens and out steps Marie. Her makeup and face are drenched with tears, but her spirit is brighter than any of the beings have ever seen it. She looks radiant, as if aware of the royal blood hiding in her veins. Her spirit need not hear angel whispers for guidance. Something inside her felt to come outside. The Spirit of Light within her is guiding her all the time.

Hatred rises in Vagan as he looks at this petty thorn in his flesh. He cannot help the thoughts spill from his mouth. “How I would love to bind and subdue you woman. Your spirit may be unbridled, yet your time will come, or you will die.” He stares at the lightness of her spirit that rests unrestricted within her body, glowing gently in the same light the Father emits; she looks vibrant and alive.

“You have not the power to take her purity,” speaks Valmar for the first time. He says it not with arrogance, but with love. He knows she is protected, not by him, but by the force of the hand that is behind him, the authority of the armies of heaven.

Vagan senses immediately where her spirit has been and he squints at the light bearers, unable to determine how much power they hold. Croydon looks with compassion at Marie. With a humored smile he knows what the demonic commander is wondering. Gently he pulls back his robes from around his waist. The whole company gets their first clear view of his powerful torso, and the bright belt of authority he wears.

Marie steps onto the lawn between Croydon and Vagan. The bulky commander is huge and intimidating near the little woman but he is the one fearful. He doesn’t have time to react before her mouth opens only feet away from him. He lifts a hand to muzzle her but is too late. Horror comes upon his face; he knows he is off limits. Marie speaks in a soft gentle voice, staring right through the demon. “Blessed are you Jesus, my Lord, my Savior. Jesus it is you who binds the strong man and Jesus you cast him off.”

A wind sweeps in a torrent past Marie. Vagan is picked up as if he were the lightest leaf and hurled hundreds of meters away. The ground shudders as he

lands heavily on the side of a grassed hill. He lies there motionless groaning from the impact. On cue the hundred other demons scramble off the property like birds scattering at a gunshot. They regroup behind the low fences across the road, awaiting new orders.

The three light bearers cannot contain themselves, as they buckle over in laughter at the uncanny scene played out. Marie has no idea of anything. She realizes she is praying a little differently to normal, even a little strangely, but in the oddity it feels significant.

Unsure of why she came outside, Marie turns and walks through the laughing light bearers into the house. "What was I thinking?" she chides herself. "Why did I come outside? I must look a mess! At least there was no one watching on the road."

"Round one to the Kingdom of God," Valmar announces, barely able to get the words out amongst his resurging chuckles.

Reinforcements continue to dribble in, bolstering the numbers of the fallen, but that seems of little consequence now.

The three angels embrace, wrist wrapped upon wrist. Sobering himself, Croydon looks to his young countrymen. "Be strong brothers; the countdown has begun. All is as it should be and as it was foretold. We take our place alongside the great ones of old who ushered in the bride at the birth. His bride will be revealed; his love will overcome. For the King, and for the bride!"

Croydon releases the wrists of his two friends and unfolds his wide, white, feathered wings. Bending one knee slightly, his powerful thighs push him off the ground with ease. The suburban and rural scenes disappear as he soars in the direction from which he arrived.

At the Pacific West gate in seconds, the gatekeepers care little about the angel leaving the planet. Fortunately for them no attempt is made to slow or identify the powerful warrior. Above the gates in the stratosphere are great arching funnels of light. They connect all the gates to the heavenly realms. The funnels are not patrolled, being beyond the enemy's domain. The realm separator is very much a prison for the fallen; they have little capacity or desire to venture beyond.

Croydon swings along the Pacific West funnel and joins the main carriageway. Wheeling further west he crosses the blanket of brown, green, blue and white that marks Australia. The light of heaven allows his speed to be unlimited in the funnels. The morning is reversed as he travels against it ahead of the dawn. Soon it is night as he crosses over the Indian Ocean. Trailing behind him is an array of bright colors, the thousands of miles traversed in seconds. He diverts to the East African gate, as if it were an off ramp on the motorway, and begins his slowing descent towards the earth again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Enemy Territory

The shaft of brilliant white leaves stripes across the night sky. In a moment it fades like a ripple across a still pond. As Croydon approaches the gate he is prepared for the worst. Each dominion is different and he expects to find heavier demonic influence ahead of him. Placing a hand on his waist, his confidence rises.

The East African gate is held by five dozen demons superior to those at the Pacific West gate. A series of roughly hewn barriers arch inwards, narrowing the entrance into a wedge. The tightly clustered rows ensure traffic passes through the narrowest of entry points. The metal barriers are heavier and stronger than most other gates. Deep scars mark the balustrades, memories of blades and battles of the past. The planet entry point has been heavily fought over in the last two hundred years. The metallic structures create an eerie scene within the magnificence of the crystal funnel hanging high above the earth.

The gatekeepers, though bored in their vigil, are alert and ready. Days pass by more easily with heavy sarcasm and mockery of each other. Half the force hold long lances and swords in a formation across the access route, whilst a thinner line back up the rows of metal barriers. A dozen other senior demons loosely congregate around the gatekeeper and his books, talking and cajoling brashly.

Croydon's thoughts are far away as he closes on the gate. A sense of expectation rushes over his spirit. There is a day not yet enacted that stirs his heart, and a premonition of it plays in his mind. The King is riding in the forefront. "Such majesty," Croydon whispers involuntarily. The brilliant white horse rides straight and strong. A thousand million stream off from his side.

Coursing from the heavens, swords are drawn, arms brandished. In a moment they are at the divider. The army hesitates but the King does not slow down. He pierces it with his sword as if it were butter. With a mighty crash it shatters, dissipating into trillions of crystal pieces. The enemy's security is removed in seconds. Onward the King rides, with the uncounted army at his back. Thick white clouds pass by as the descent begins; all the earth looks up. Through the clouds they fall upon the false one's strongholds and ranks with full authority and splendor. Finally the restraint of the Kingdom of Light is lifted. Restoration of the rightful relationship of the spiritual and physical

realms is complete. “Yes, He is coming,” Croydon whispers under his breath.

Opening his eyes, Croydon sees he is nearly at the gate, old conversations pull into his memory. The angels talk often in hushed tones about what that day will look like, expectations rising on the visions of what is to come. Many things have not been answered, things they are not yet required to know. “How long will the battle last?” “Will the King alone subdue the Serpent?” “Who will chain him?” The conversations never doubt the inevitability of the victorious side. They know the Lamb King will be in the lead.

His mind clearing, Croydon notes the rise in his heartbeat from the excitement of the vision. He looks down at his own veiled form. Gathering the muslin cape he covers himself as best he can. He can't help but smile as his athletic frame drops with pinpoint accuracy. “Maybe next time I do this I will not be alone,” he thinks, knowing full well he has been chosen to be in that army.

Croydon is traveling at an unusual speed afforded by his time with Marie. Other gates and times have been very different, delayed on issues of dominion, right and authority. At times there have been skirmishes and battles with the gatekeepers, but today he wastes no time. He draws a sword and, with stealth, elusively drops through a weaker section of the barriers. Despite his speed and size he delicately maneuvers between them.

Nearly out of the third and final row of balustrades, three of the fallen intercept Croydon just in time. Two lances move ominously towards his abdomen, while a black metal sword hacks wildly at his upper body. Braking hard Croydon pushes his back up against the protection of a barrier and blocks the strikes. Chopping off one of the lances he begins to move forward again. Despite countermoves and increasing support, the dark angels are forced to open up an exit point from the gate. Croydon prepares to lunge into the atmosphere above the brown and green African continent.

The well drilled mob organizes quickly into a wedge to intercept the exiting light bearer's path. Spearheading this, the chief gatekeeper outstrips the others' pace and steps directly between Croydon and the earth, sword drawn. “What is the meaning of this?” he barks.

Croydon has to stop. He draws his second sword in a flowing motion, laying it across his chest. Breathing heavily he allows an assuring smile to cross his face. Carefully he monitors every movement of the powerful throng, recalibrating his attack and exit points every second. His eyes meet with demon after demon now forming three tightly clustered lines in front of him. One after another they look away. They know immediately he is highly ranked angel, though that in itself is not unusual at this gate, the scene of so much conflict. “You know the rules of entry,” scolds the gatekeeper a second time. He is a powerful and dark countenanced demon.

Not being inclined to use a lot of words, Croydon gently pulls back the side

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of his robes to return one of his swords to its sheath. The move is deliberate; to pretend he will comply with the protocols of gate access, but also offering them a glimpse of his belt. The view is not lost on much of the large group. They smirk and look at their leader, silently undermining him.

The gatekeeper grunts. He draws his eyes up the full length of the light bearer's form. Croydon's muscular forearms and calves, exposed, glisten a little from the action of the last few hours. The gatekeeper lingers on the belt, taking it in. Finally he speaks for the third time a little softer but still with authority. "You know the process. Who are you? Where are you going? Why have you come?" The gatekeeper has wisely chosen bureaucracy ahead of battle.

Croydon says nothing but stares directly at the lead demon. Not willing to hold the look, the gatekeeper scowls and turns to walk back to the record books, clearly expecting Croydon to follow. "Follow me, and we will see what you have to say," the gatekeeper demands. He intends to lumber the light bearer with process while he assimilates a suitable action plan of containment and mitigation. The demonic lines militantly form a corridor for Croydon and the chief gatekeeper to walk through. Croydon has not moved.

Still walking the gatekeeper is pondering. "Perhaps, perhaps we can take him; he is on his own..." His hand moves towards his sword fastened resolutely to his side.

Seizing his opportunity with the thinning of the demonic lines making the corridor, Croydon swishes the shield off his back with his spare arm. Holding it firmly in front of his abdomen he rushes forward at pace. He hits the demonic line at the point it had opened for the commanding officer. The demons in direct line reel back falling onto others who curse and lose their balance. Like skittles they topple and the line breaks open. Only a couple are able to swing at the back of the passing light bearer, missing by more than a meter.

The chief gatekeeper, barely through the line of demons himself, turns to see the shield bearing down on him at increasing speed. Swaying he manages to avoid a direct hit but is clipped on his forearm. With the clang of metal he falls heavily, unable to draw his sword. Croydon is off, down over to the coast of the continent. The vast expanses of the Indian Ocean fill the horizon. Massive white wings unfold to catch a breeze. The gatekeepers could never match the light bearer's flight.

The demonic look around accusingly at each other. The commanding officer picks himself up, gingerly examining his arm. Aware he is being watched, he holds in any expression of pain. His forearm protection has cracked; pulling it off he throws it on the ground in disgust. The lines of soldiers disperse, without a word, to their posts. Repairs are made to the barriers, while a messenger is dispatched. In time the regional commander on the coastal plains of Mozambique will be informed of the incursion.

Sword still in his hand, Croydon swings the shield behind his wings. He

drops quickly into the denser humidity above the western side of Mauritius. Spotting suitable cover in a group of coconut palms edging the white sanded beach, he lands silently and swiftly. Scouting about, no-one has seen him arrive. He surveys the scene hidden in the palm enclave; this is quite different territory to New Zealand.

The air is perfectly still. Only a gentle lap of water on the edge of the lagoon and a muffled reef break threatens the silence. It's nearly midnight and darkness has drawn its closing scene on the activities of the day. Tourists have dispersed into the neighboring towns or to bed. Ostentatious houses sparsely dot the beach, having lain vacant for months. European aristocracy only uses the excess of their wealth for a few weeks every year. The beautiful sub-tropical island, less than 100 km from top to bottom has a rag tag history of Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British dominion.

The lagoon looks like gooey black ink, protected from the swelling surf by reefs circling the island. Wisps of high cloud dull the half moon. An electrical storm is passing through further off shore, complementing the eerie scene as the filtered light throbs like a bulb at low volts.

Croydon turns his attention to two Creole men, a young boy and a white man polling down the lagoon. The flat bottom boat is barely fifteen foot long with a small makeshift canopy over the middle. It is basic but serviceable. Dive gear occupies most of the wooden deck; flippers, wetsuits, snorkels, masks and bottles surround empty crates awaiting the night's catch. The men travel quietly, the gentle breeze rolling off the Indian Ocean's rich waters refreshing the air.

Croydon's heart quickens as he watches the observers on the boat. Three are present; they are all at ease. Croydon can hear them loudly debating some issue of Creole tradition. Vix, the senior of the party, laughs brashly as Rime imitates a dance, taunting Mythe with overtones of superiority. Both are consumed in the mockery of Mythe. Croydon's eyes quickly run over their appearances and weapons. Customary pewter armor is complemented by flowing trench coats. Each has a sword strapped around their waist. The movement on the shore has gone unnoticed, along with bright light that just seared across the waters. Letting his breath go, Croydon offers a sigh of thanks to the electrical storm that masked his arrival.

The mighty angel hangs seven meters off the ground; suspended between palm trees, lower foliage hides his body. The intellectually superior being's mind flashes the options before him. Should he leap out and reveal himself now? Strike at the heart of the enemy before they even know what has happened? Or should he hold position and wait for a better opportunity?

Flexing his biceps around the two trunks he leans forward, willing himself to step onto the scene with authority. The trees pull together, as if to hold him back. He cannot stay long; the execution must be swift and decisive before he

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withdraws. Seldom does a messenger of light get to plunge into the depths of the evil kingdom with such power of combat.

The light bearer moves his attention back to the men on the boat. Their spirits are bent and drawn, the immense weight of demonic chains pulling them down. Emotions rise in his heart, a mixture of anger and pity. He looks at the boy who has looser bonds around his hands. "Fight the sin that seeks to trap you son; you can stay free!" The whispered angel prayer carries like an aroma across the water.

The boy looks directly back toward Croydon; he breathes deeply, feeling a rush of life for a moment. He just caught a sweet smell that dulled the deathly stench permeating the air around him.

"That's right son, like all spirits you are desperate for life, but only freedom will allow full recognition of slavery you are under," Croydon thinks dreamily. Pity grips his heart. Needing to contain it he turns his head. Breathing deeply, the heaviness and passion are contained. He drops silently to the ground, sliding his powerful hands down the trunks to control the drop. Gentle impressions push into the dirt and grass beneath the trees. Silver and gold armor hug tightly across his chest, which is still heaving a little, just short of a sob. His tanned skin and dark hair ooze beauty and power. Reaching back he pulls the cape of royal blue around his armor to dull the glowing light that seems to want to spill off it. A brilliant silver sword is returned to its sheath with a silent swish of clean, sharp metal. Croydon shivers; he knows what will become of Ian if he does not respond to the love call. "Surely, Lord, he must choose you," he whispers. The confidence of the Lamb reassures him. "Yes, surely he will choose you." Relaxing a little Croydon waits attentively.

The boy poles them through the lagoon and out the river exit and the boat reaches the outer reef. They work their way carefully up the reef. A small swell rocks the boat intermittently. Manuel and Renee slip into their full steamer four millimeter wetsuits, booties, leather gloves, hoods and flippers. Every inch of their bodies is covered. To them the tepid waters feel cold at night.

Renee looks across at Ian putting on his one millimeter short vested wetsuit and admonishes him for his choice, "Ian...very cold tonight!"

Having grown up in the cooler New Zealand waters, Ian isn't wearing a wetsuit to keep him warm, it's only to protect him from the corals. The risk of getting cut is heightened at night, with only a torch assisting him to judge distances off the reef. Ian is already worried he is going to be too hot in the water. "Not cold to me man; you're just a big softie." He replies in good humor.

Renee doesn't understand fully but knows it was some sort of joke. He shakes his head, "Ah, you crazy man."

Pulling a Vaseline pot from his duffle bag, Ian rubs a thin layer over his exposed arms, neck and face. He will be in the water for a couple of hours. This will help reduce irritation around the wetsuit edges.

Ian is busy and quiet, his mind running over the first night dive he had done with Manuel. Out directly in front of the village Ian had dropped off the outer reef where the sea floor plummets in a deep trench. "It's like an inverted mountain," he would ponder later. Fascinated with the blackness Ian sat suspended, flashing his torch out into the deep. Feeling a pull on his arm Manuel motioned him to the surface. "Ian! What you doing man? Not so good with this torchlight brother."

"Why not, Manuel?"

"Ah, wake up shark, huh!"

The memory fades as Ian puts the Vaseline away, "Yep, I learnt fast about the threat of a shark encounter; keep the torchlight on the reef!"

Manuel instructs the boy to move a few meters further; the boat is five meters off the reef. The boy must hold it there while the men dive for the night's harvest. The water only covers the coral by two feet at low tide and gentle breakers would push the small boat onto the sharp edged reef without him.

Through the dispersed cloud, clear stars and the half moon provide an ambient light for the men. At Manuel's signal the three slip into the dim water and descend below the hull. The observers hold their place on the bow, unrelenting as they argue with taunts and jibbing.

The night dive begins.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Event

The three men fan out to pick their way along the outer reef. The underwater torches are like sweeping headlights, causing the reef to take on a yellow shade. Targeting crab and lobster the men work in solitude, broken only when they surface to the small boat with booty.

A large angel fish comes into Ian's sight. Preparing to spear it he remembers what Manuel taught him months before. Motioning with his torch he had pointed out a fifteen pound parrot fish asleep on its side. Pulling a knife from his boot Manuel swam right up to the fish and thrust the knife through its head. "Ian make sure, when you kill fish brother, you hit the head ah. No good you hit the body, or the blood come from fish and shark come for you, and for me man. Not so good."

Ian shifts his spear into his right hand and pulls back the rubber. He can feel the metal tense against his forearm. He carefully aims directly at the head of the fish. He hesitates... something of the beauty of the fish wavering in the gentle currents mesmerizes him. He eases his grip on the spear and it slides slowly through. As Ian wakes from the daydream he sees that Manuel and Renee have moved some way down the reef. The boy in the boat is following their flashlights, leaving Ian isolated.

He begins swimming towards the others, still adjusting to the blackness of the water. His torch searches the reef bottom for crayfish. He spots some strange creatures in the water. They look like squid. Curious, he swims closer, reaches out and touches one. It oozes through his leather-gloved fingers. "It must be a species of jellyfish I have not seen before," Ian ponders. As it floats away he is intrigued at the odd looking creature. It has a squid-like head, but is transparent and box shaped, with unusual finger-like tentacles. Ian continues swimming toward the others.

Trawling halfway between the reef and the surface something brushes past him. Ian's forearms are the only significant part of his body not covered by the wetsuit. For a moment violent electrical currents shake him. Immediately he knows something has stung or bitten him. The pain is intensifying in his arm. Ian swings around to see what it was. He can see nothing.

"Darn, something must have bitten me, unless I've cut myself on the reef. Stuff, that hurts!" He looks down at his arm to see if there is any blood. There

is nothing - no obvious scar, no bleeding or wound - only redness. He feels throbs of excruciating pain, as if his arm were on fire. "Something must have brushed past it. Great, you've always had allergic reactions to stings and bites. Just remember your bad hay fever! So what have you touched now?" Ian thinks morosely.

An inkling of fear rises in him. He rubs at his forearm, forgetting that is one of the worst things he could do. But he is desperate to numb the pain and he wants to touch it to check it. It seems to help and Ian relaxes a little. "Can't be too bad, I'll get a crayfish and then ask the boy what it might have been. No need to be paranoid, I am a diver; calm and level headed! They say sharks can smell fear after all!"

Torch trained on the reef, Ian spots a crayfish. It scoots along the coral and it freezes in his torchlight. He kicks hard diving on a forty-five degree angle. He sees two more of the jellyfish he had seen before pulsating towards him. Unperturbed he pushes on, but out of the corner of his eye he sees some of the tentacles brushing his arm. At the touch another huge shock hits. Stunned he drops his torch, having to quickly regain it.

He knows what has hit him now. He also knows that some jellyfish are incredibly poisonous, though he has not encountered them before. Abandoning the crayfish he heads for the surface. The boat is dimly bobbing further down the reef. The pain is thumping hard in his stricken arm causing him to wince in agony.

Placing both arms behind his back to protect against any other jellyfish Ian swims along just below the surface. The boat is still twenty meters away. Closing in he feels something slide over the back of his head and onto his arm. Before he can react, what feels like thousands of volts of electricity, course through his body. He physically shakes and recoils. Thrusting his head above the surface he yanks out his breathing apparatus, drawing in as much air as he can in desperate pain. Looking behind he sees the tentacles falling off him into the water. "What stinking luck. What is the chance of being hit three times on the same arm?"

The forearm is now burning with an extreme pain. Ian feels a faintness pass over him. He rests a moment in the water before realizing that he is nearly losing consciousness. Quickly rousing he flares his light around. The jellyfish are all about him. They weave back and forth in the gentle swell like a spider web set out on a dewy morning. He flashes his light off and on in the direction of the others to signal them back to the boat.

"What sort of crazy jellyfish is this? I hope it's not deadly." Ian has no idea that it is a deadly variety of box jellyfish, often referred to as the sea wasp. It is one of the deadliest venoms known to man. Single stings have killed hundreds of people in the islands of the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Many places put up skull-and-cross-bone signs at certain times of the year to deter bathers from the

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water. The poison constricts and paralyzes its victim, causing excruciating pain such that the victim wishes they could rip their skin off. Unless an antiserum is received, death can easily follow within twenty minutes of the initial sting. Ian has three stings across his veins of his right arm, with only a thin layer of Vaseline offering any protection.

“If one of these hits my face or exposed neck, I don’t think I’ll ever get to the boat.” Ian puts the flashlight up near his face in his left hand nestling his elbow tightly into his chest out of the way. He tucks his right arm up behind his back and puts his head down into the water. He swims right on the surface and quickly gets to the boat. Using his best French and Creole he attempts to ask the boy what the jellyfish are. The boy, who has never dived, shakes his head in ignorance and points to Manuel who is approaching.

Manuel surfaces some distance off. Ian gets back in the water to swim closer, but then stops and calls out. “I need to get out.” He puts his head back in to continue swimming when suddenly right in front of his face is another jellyfish. In a split second he has to choose, does it hit his face, or does he take it on the arm? Instinctively he flings his right arm around and takes a fourth sting on the forearm. The jellyfish falls away behind him.

Ian is away from the boat again and panics. He clammers up the sharp edges of the reef, to what feels like the security of shallow water. He points his torch light down to his forearm. It has quickly swelled to nearly twice its normal size. He can see traces like knife cuts on top of heavy blistering burns, where the tentacles have dragged over his skin. The moment he takes off his mask, beads of sweat start to push the salt water off his forehead. The sweat tracks trail down into his eyes. His heart rushes at a frantic pace. He stands on the sharp corals, flippers protecting his feet, clasping his arm.

Manuel knows that something is wrong. He has moved closer also, surfaces and carefully lifts himself up on the reef. “Ce qui se passe?” He shines his torch towards Ian’s face, “What’s happening man?”

The muscles in Ian’s arm start to spasm. It feels like a fist punching him under his arm, as the poison reaches the lymph nodes. His breathing instantly starts to be constricted in his right lung. He buckles forward a little, though to Manuel, Ian only appears to be struggling to stand in the light swell. Ian cups his paralyzing right arm in his left and points the scarred swollen limb at Manuel. As the laid back Rastafarian’s eyes drop to the arm, his darkened face turns ominously white in the eerie torchlight.

Seeing the men surface, the observers had taken little notice of what was happening. The lounging and arguing on the boat has suddenly stopped and Croydon watches the three pounce into the scene. “A little late into the action boys,” he whispers. The demons dance excitedly around the boat. Degrading comments hit Ian’s mind, themselves darts of nasty venom.

“Fool! How could you not see what was happening?” Vix chants, gripping

his hands onto Manuel's shoulders.

"Hopeless, you have always been hopeless. Right from the start you were a useless idiot, a loser!" Rime contributes.

Mythe wheels behind Ian and pulls his large dark body up onto the hapless man's back. The chains tighten and Ian struggles to breathe under the constraint. He begins to swoon. "You should have known," Mythe snarls behind his ear. "You're in trouble now son. Look at the fear in Manuel's face. You are dead; isolated, lonely, sorry and dead!"

Vix moves his hands squarely on either side of Manuel's head, clenching it tightly. He pushes his face down to the throat, instinctively sniffing the scent of the man. Opening his mouth unnaturally wider he wraps his venomous bite around Manuel's neck. Poison begins to pour into the man's heart. Uncontrolled emotions start welling up in Manuel: despair, neglect, hurt, anxiety and desolation. Manuel's spirit droops in his body, drawn into a gaunt state.

Croydon leans forward from his shelter, sickened by the gut churning sight. A concerned look crosses his face. He puts a hand on his chest in longing. In the same way Vix deals in the darkness he can minister in light and life. Every fiber in his being wills him to dismember the demons here and now. Ian, eyes fixed on Manuel's face, can see the fear rising. Manuel's head stiffens and twists in an awkward contortion that perplexes Ian. He doesn't know that he is glimpsing into his spirit. The realization hits that Manuel is petrified. Things are more serious than he had considered.

Vix has taken a risk. He must be careful not to pour too much death and despair into a captive. There is an inbuilt counter weight in every human being to the devil's poison. As he pours death, a surprising response can rise in the victim to fight.

"Let the indelible Spirit of God besieged in the captive arise. Let the desperation of your spirit push back the fallen kingdom's hold." Croydon speaks in a hushed whisper toward the men, his words drifting across the water. "You can do this Manuel; you are not his."

Manuel throws his arms and head back, the jolt of resolve toppling Vix from off his back. Glancing behind him Manuel sees something out of the corner of his eye, but there is nothing there. His head straightens and he thinks clearly again, looking at Ian's arm. "Invisible un... Invisible... Invisible?"

"Invisible, it looks invisible? Are you asking if it was a jellyfish?" Ian replies trying to understand. "Oui Invisible!"

Manuel hangs his head and curses. He and Renee have been protected from the jellyfish by full wetsuits. His mind searches for resolution. He loves Ian but he knows that he will die. Before he can stop them the words slip out. "Un invisible, c'est finis for you."

Ian takes it in, shocked and unsure of how to process the information. "I

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can't believe this. How can that be true? This isn't what I was intending for my life." Suddenly the really important things in his life rise to the surface. Impulsive thoughts run through his mind: love, marriage, family... children. The impressions dissipate as quickly as they rise. Ian is left emptied with the realization that his shortened life has been purposeless.

"Ian, how come you not know this one kill you brother?" Manuel laments, swinging his head in despair.

"You think white man knows everything? I not know this one Manuel."

"How many man? How many hit you ah?"

Letting his weak arm drop Ian lifts four fingers in his good arm. "Quatre... four... invisible."

"Impossible, impossible, allez, vite! Quatre Bornes Hôpital. Allez Ian, allez maintenant."

Ian is in immense pain as he struggles to understand the words of his trusted friend. He is not helped by the din of the cajoling demons leaping around celebrating. Having finished mocking Vix they are back antagonizing the men. Ian understands 'quickly', 'now' and 'hospital' but he feels paralyzed standing there. "What can I answer? Why me? What am I doing with four deadly stings on my arm?"

Mythe looks around checking the scene; light bearers have an uncanny ability of knowing when to turn up. The coast is clear, so he leaps onto Ian's back like a vulture. Bending Ian's head to expose his neck, the dark teeth sink in. He breaks off quickly with a smug grin, savoring the taste. "I have wanted to do that for so long, my friend," he whispers. Ian's spirit sinks, venom of hopelessness and despair overwhelming him.

The boy has come alongside the men, holding a safe distance off the reef. Renee lifts himself out of the water to see what the problem is. Manuel grabs Ian, forcing him back down into the water and toward the boat. Renee quickly assists. There are no hospitals nearby. They are half a mile off shore on a reef, and it is the middle of the night. Things look grim.

Manuel beckons for the boat to come closer, but the boy is reluctant. The risk of scraping the coral is too great. Instead he grabs Ian's left arm and pulls him. Manuel and Renee help roll his body from the water. Ian's right arm is dragging paralyzed in the water as a fifth jellyfish wraps it in its death grip. Ian's whole body shakes violently and then goes limp, the paralyzing right torso feeling less impact as death begins to take its hold. He flops on top of the crates covering the deck.

"You get what you deserve," chants Mythe. He puts his hand on Ian's shoulder to assure himself that he is in control.

The word strikes a chord in Ian's heart. "Deserve? What on earth have I done in my life to deserve this?"

Immediately images pass by in his mind. Things he was ashamed of and

embarrassed about. Things he always wanted to remain hidden and unseen. In a very real way he understands; there were plenty of things he had done to deserve this. “You don’t get away with anything; life has a habit of catching up to you.”

In his eagerness Mythe has spiraled Ian’s thoughts dangerously deep. Vix throws a kick at Mythe’s chest. The demon has to let go of Ian to avoid the hit. “Now he’s contemplating the sin of his life, fool,” Vix rebukes.

Ian swears profusely, the interjection pacifying the sparring demons. They can smell death. For generations they have seen the sea creature bring an early demise to lives. Now it is the beginning of the end for another mortal soul who will die in chained obscurity, separated from the Creator. Their excitement is heightened, knowing that this destiny will never be enacted. He will fall well short of the life he was meant to live.

The bravado around the reef boat is getting louder and brasher. It grabs the attention from many other demons along the foreshore. They step out from houses to salute and jeer their compatriots in the victory dance of death.

The boy is bemused by all that is going on; Manuel clearly states in French what he must do. He is to pole Ian across the lagoon and get him to the hospital straight away. “But how?” he pleads with Manuel. “Where will I get a ride? It is midnight and I have no money. Is the white man going to die? I do not want to go with him; you must come. You should not be staying here; you must come also so that you do not get bitten!”

Ian is still lying on the deck grappling at what is going on. Knowing there can be no further delay, Manuel picks up the front of the boat and drags it across the reef. The jagged reef courses deep scars into the belly of wood. The boy cries out in disbelief and Ian sits up concerned. “Manuel, your boat!” Ian cries. He knows how meticulously the Creole men look after the boats, the primary source of income for their families. Any scratch will be viewed with wrath by the village elders.

Manuel shows no concern for the boat; Ian’s condition is more important than anything else. The most expedient way to the shore is directly through the lagoon. There isn’t time to get back to the river mouth. He pushes the boat hard and it cleanly ploughs into the lagoon. Only now realizing that Manuel is not coming, Ian is concerned. “Manuel, come with me!”

“No motor Ian, weigh boat down, we slow you down.” The boy reluctantly begins to poll towards the shore, while Manuel and Renee prepare for a slow swim.

“Manuel, my arm, what can I do for my arm?” Ian calls. Manuel motions with his finger and mutters something. Ian understands. He should urinate on the scarred flesh. “Great! Pee on my own arm! Well... nothing to lose. I guess it’s like vinegar, real bush medicine!”

There are serious issues rising between the observers as the boat leaves. Vix

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has stepped into the boat and aggressively pushes Mythe to the side.

“He is MY responsibility!” states Mythe firmly.

Vix retorts spitefully. “Not when he’s dead.”

“He’s not dead yet, and my position is with him. You know I have been appointed while he is on the island.”

“He’s currently not on the island... and besides I think we know your assignment has just been completed. I will take him now!”

“I will take him since you two can’t decide.” Rime chips in, pretending to step forward himself into the boat.

Mythe’s resentment and fury boil as he pushes past the feigning Rime and lunges at Ian. Vix is more powerful than him and strikes a sharp kick on Mythe’s stepping foreleg. As Mythe stumbles, Vix grabs the buckling shoulders and twists him out of the boat. Mythe lands in the water hissing, “He is mine.”

Vix straddles the body in the bottom of the boat as it moves silently away. “Not any more, fool. Come on, try me!” He then lifts his hands victoriously and offers a loud cheer of ascendancy. Mythe remains at the reef cursing, forced to concede his post.

Nestled in the coconut palms Croydon watches all that has transpired. Forcibly he has held himself back through everything. Mythe’s bite was the most difficult trial. His hands were shaking, fists clenched. At any time that behavior would be sufficient authority to rip the demon limb from limb. They know they are not permitted to draw from one under protection. It has been difficult for Croydon to hold himself back, but he has bided his time wisely, waiting for the most opportune moment. He feels the pain, the sadness and desperation. His own heart is aching. Placing a hand on his waist he looks heavenward and sobs quietly. The belt is almost singing in the light breeze. He still feels the power increasing. “In good time Croydon... Master, you will take from the fallen what they cannot have.”

CHAPTER NINE

High on the Mountains

He knows something has changed. Rising from the high square-backed chair, Sabre walks slowly over to a large medieval style window. The north western side of the island lies before him. Resting an elbow on the catch, the pane swings open on tarnished brass hinges.

Perched high on the mountain the view is expansive. Below the house, bushy terrain breaks into fields before the capital - Port Louis. The lights of the city glow, muted in the depth of the night. Beyond the city the ocean lies, dark and mysterious. The moon, still fighting with the clouds, glistens eerily on the water there.

The reports of the day's activities have been tediously endured. Dark leaders have strutted about like cocks before a hen, looking for any angle to promote their rank, or another's inferiority. The proud exposition has ceased now, and the room waits quietly as the restless commanders await the counsel of their lord. A dense green mist hangs in the room, reeking with the self delight of the twenty who have gathered. The putrid stench makes the air asphyxiating, as the brood of vipers writhe in the pit.

The room is large with high arched mahogany ceilings, old fashioned maroon wallpaper stretching up to the extremity. A smattering of antique furniture complements the musty but opulent feel. The large throne-like chair takes prominent position, ornately carved with mystical figures on the back, and gaunt faces pressed in its heavy wooden arms.

Sabre's feelings are unanswered in all that has been reported. Uneasiness continues to rise, binding him around his head. The piercing beginnings of the migraine blur his vision and affect his balance. Closing his eyes tightly he squeezes the vessels together as hard as he can, desperate to break the blurring. His right hand moves gently down the edge of the window frame he is leaning on. Rhythmically his hand moves through the air, and then across his waist. There his fingers hesitate and rap around his thick leather belt. He tenses, flexing his body in a contorted mix of power and evil. His eyes remain winched closed.

The others are increasingly agitated and uneasy. Sabre's behavior has been odd all evening; given the tyrant's tight control over them, they are nervy.

Nodding slowly, Sabre begins to understand. The commanders, who are

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already still and quiet, hold their breath so they do not miss a word. Sabre speaks in a barely audible, dry voice. “There...,” Contemplating, Sabre holds position, head slightly bowed. His fingers fumble with his belt. He stops the sentence and whispers through the introspection. “I sense you, light. I am not ignorant of you. What do you plot against me? Do you dare try steal from right under my nose?”

Speaking a little louder to the group he finally continues, “There... is a change.”

Sabre allows his eyes to open in a narrow slit. He searches through the dark night for some further meaning, some understanding of what he feels. In the stillness the commanders uneasily eye one another.

“Send word to Dar Es Salaam, I want to know about everyone... or everything...” Sabre slows his sentence in contemplation, “...that has come through the East African gate today.” A commander immediately leaves the room.

“Bring me the sage and begin a search of the island, the whole island, for... for...” Sabre’s gaze or poise does not change and his voice has not risen, but two more commanders hustle off in immediate obedience.

Sabre holds post at the window. Shuffling noises can be heard down the hall. With some release to the uneasy tension, the door to the evil council room flings open. The sage walks in, gathering his bed robes busily about his drawn legs. With a flurry of long gray matted hair he moves to the center of the room. Feeling the heaviness of the atmosphere he looks about the empty room, half expecting to see something.

The escorting warrior pushes him gently towards the empty throne. The shove is just enough so that the sage stumbles a little, but not so much that it be obvious who has done it. The demon wryly smirks and looks about the room for some sign of recognition and approval of his skills. None is forthcoming.

The sage swears and shakes his head. “I tripped over nothing! What the hell is going on? I’m exhausted and what am I doing here? I just want to sleep...”

Even if he didn’t recognize the suggestions in his ear or see the horde in the room, he really knows why he is here. He speaks aloud this time, betraying his insight. “I’ve been summoned, haven’t I?” Willingly, the gray bearded wizard begins to wander around the room, muttering incantations in flat unmelodic tones. The commanders encircle him.

Sabre motions behind his back, still not looking into the room. Permission granted, three commanders grab hold, towering over the sage’s body. Teeth and hands grip tightly on the neck and heavy chains that cover his torso. Instantly the unmelodic incantations give way to profanity upon profanity coursing from his lips. He swoons as the large demons pour their venom into his neck and the chains cut deeply into his abdomen. His body flinches back in pain as he falls to the ground, writhing uncontrollably. Consciousness becomes a

blur as his eyes roll back in his head. Saliva crawls down his cheek and chin, dribbling onto the dampening wooden floor. His curled body straightens and retracts incoherently before resting uneasily, his breathing speeding to a wheezing whisper.

Sabre turns and begins to revel in the worship of the island's chief warlock. He can feel the authority round his waist strengthening as he circles the curled body on the floor. The three commanders leech life from the defenseless body. They all know the toll the role will take on the human host, but they need something of what he has. "Easy, he is not immortal," whispers Sabre to the commanders. The sage draws frightfully gaunt. "Cease now!" Sabre directs. The commanders reluctantly loosen their talons.

Sabre stoops and grabs the collar of the sage's gown, roughly pulling him to knee height. He speaks gently into the warlock's ear. "What do you see friend?"

Regaining full consciousness the warlock struggles up and over to the ajar window where Sabre had been standing. He thrusts his head into the gap, gasping as if the air in the room has become a poisonous gas. Drawing short hard breaths, he drinks in the freshness ushered in by the gentle breeze. He runs his fingers gently over a carving hanging on the wall next to the window; somehow it seems to console and strengthen him a little.

"Well?" Sabre says in a more gentle tone gliding his hand in false consolation over the Sage's hair.

The grayed man looks out over the night scene. Different voices clog his thoughts but he knows what is required. Like every human he carries a portion of the promise of God within him. We are all made in the image of the Creator. The fallen however, remain stripped of their perception from the great mutiny. Lowered to scavenge now, they rely on contorted forms of knowledge drawn from lost creations, usually those destined to see such things.

Trying to make sense of what he cannot see, a vision starts to open up in the Sage's mind, but it is muddled. He can see things of the past, the present and the future. He understands his gift, and considers this his purpose in the world, but he does not know that he is merely a captive to forces far superior to him. "What do you seek Master?" he gasps.

About to speak, Sabre is interrupted. The sage suddenly buries his face into his arm, stunned by a brilliant flash of light in his mind. He drags out short words, as if tortured by the brightness. "Light... light... bright light!"

Sabre is losing patience. "Is that all?" he snarls.

"A light strikes the ground from the heavens. There is an awakening..." Before he can finish Sabre is upon him. He throws his hand across the warlock's cheek sending him hurtling through the air. He has a significant physical authority over the prisoner. The man spills onto the floor across the room with a heavy thud. The three leeching commanders slink back to the edge of the room, well

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away from the enraged Sabre.

The sage lies motionless on the wooden floor, a pained groan proving he is alive.

Grasping at the window frame, Sabre pulls himself up, tense and agitated at the stillness of the night. “Where coward, where are you?” The deafening voice can be heard right across the island.

Sabre thrusts himself fully up onto the window frame and through the pane of glass. He flies high into the air, high above the strategically placed house. Hovering there powerfully, he defies the forces of gravity that seek to humble him. Suddenly feeling vulnerable, he spins to take in the expanses of his kingdom. A comforting arrogance returns. “This is my kingdom. This is my dominion. Who dares challenge me? Show yourself coward! Why do you hide in an attempt to nip at my heels? Show yourself or be damned! I am Sabre, high lord of this island, rightful lord of this forsaken dominion. Where are you, coward?”

The night responds immediately. Across the city dogs bark frantically in a crescendo, as if an intruder has stepped into their territory. Lights come on as frustrated owners angrily yell to subdue the perceptive animals. Drunken scuffles erupt into brawls in bars and parties as tempers are roused. Mothers try to comfort children who have woken crying, both fearing dark shadows in familiar houses. Horrid dreams arrest and afflict others. An evil stench rises as the island is cloaked in a long dark cloud.

With Sabre out of the room the commanders seize their opportunity. They leap upon the sage. Though reliant on his intercession, they have no compassion. Like a pack of ravenous hyena, they tear at the carcass. What life remaining in the tormented man is sucked from his body; he is barely alive now. Reluctantly, unsatisfied, they press back to darker corners in the room, the smell of death hovering. A final word from Sabre and they will finish him.

Drawing his sword, Sabre thrashes it about wildly, dealing death blows to imaginary adversaries. Like an alley cat prowling in the depth of night, his senses are keen and alert. His striking looks ooze anger and terror. Over ten feet tall, he is no minnow. His weighty muscular frame has seen many battles. You do not get to be in his position without earning it on the battlefield. Scars on a calf, thigh and his shoulders are prized possessions. Like a wild lion in a cage, he marks his territory, stalking the perimeter of land high above the island.

“This is my domain, my land,” he mumbles to himself in the rage. “The outbreak of light here is nothing, merely spasmodic eruptions. The redeemed have no authority here. This is the way it has been and will remain. I am in control. I have neutralized the children of light, and now my darkness reigns supreme. Who dares challenge me?”

No heavenly response from the night, Sabre descends to the house,

dissatisfied but feeling a little better. He pulls himself through the window and sits thoughtfully on the throne. The room is still, only Sabre's heavy breathing audible apart from the wispy gasps of the sage. Gradually the pensive commanders step out of the shadows. They look at the man gasping and then to Sabre who stares blankly past them. It takes time before one is prepared to break the silence. "My lord, shall we take him?"

Sabre offers no instruction but a minute shake of his head. It is enough for the commanders to notice. Disappointed they look harshly at the one who raised the question. The sage groans lifelessly to the side in a crumpled heap. He will lie there for the remainder of the night. Death has been dismissed for another day.

The room remains still even though the commanders assume the meeting is dismissed. None of them want to be the first to move. Ultimately they coordinate a combined exit, filing out of the room after bowing low to the lord. The heavy door shuts quietly behind the last powerful demon. Sabre listens to the jostling voices as the commanders resume their prideful exhibitions in the courtyards outside. One commander speaks a little loudly, "It's only a shaft of light, what's the big deal? How much damage can one awakening do here? I mean, none of us want that, but one life..." The voices muffle and the night returns to its natural, dark, and quiet state.

Sabre speaks calmly to himself in response. "One light... One light... Fools! It is not the quantity of awakening but the nature of it that matters. Not on my watch. I will not allow such a life to be set free here. I will find you light and I will subdue you."

On the foreshore of a lagoon far away, a wry smile crosses Croydon's face. Croydon clearly heard Sabre's challenge. He watches the boat pole towards his concealed spot in the coconut palms. The strategy of concealment and passivity has been the correct one, though its end is approaching fast. Every minute of delayed reaction is now critical in catching the enemy off guard. The likelihood of victory is increasing as the enemy is kept in ignorance. Words to the island lord run through the mighty angel's mind. "Your time will come; you will even have your opportunity at me. To your credit you know of my presence, but your knowledge is masked. Sabre, I know who you are, yet you are unaware of me. I fear for you, that this is to my distinct advantage!"

CHAPTER TEN

Awakening

“I’m losing control over my body! I’ve got to get out of this wetsuit while I can. It’s constricting my breathing.” Ian eyes are blurring from the onset of delirium. With only one arm and shoulder that will respond properly Ian manages to strip off the wetsuit.

Manuel’s advice sticks in his mind. “This isn’t going to be easy.” Leaning forward he balances awkwardly, preparing to urinate on his limp right forearm. Nothing happens. “Great, I can’t even pee!” he mumbles. The perspiration has totally dehydrated him. Checking his forehead he realizes that even the sweating has slowed. The boy keeps polling the boat, taking little notice of Ian. He is more concerned for Manuel and Renee, swimming now a long distance off in what could be jellyfish infested water.

Ian checks around the flat base of the boat. A bottle of coke lies in the bow. He leans back and props himself up with his good arm. It takes two attempts to grab it without falling. “God I’m thirsty,” he thinks. The red lid pops off and scuttles away amongst the empty crates. Ian guzzles the bottle as quickly as he can. Within moments the perspiration quickens, beads of sweat tracking down his face. Stooping forward for a second time he urinates, smearing it over his forearm. Feeling nothing, the venom has numbed out the limp limb.

Ian rests back and washes his hand in the lagoon water. From his bag he retrieves his tracksuit and slips into it while he can still move.

“Perhaps I can slow the poison’s advance through the rest of my body.” He rustles about searching for something he can use as a tourniquet, to tie off his lower arm. As he leans forward a sharp pain pierces his abdomen. It’s as if a dagger has been thrust into him; the poison has hit his kidneys. He keels over, dropping into the stern.

The boat eerily moves through the black ink lagoon. It looks like the climactic scene of a cheap horror flick, though the picture is far too real for Ian. Aside from the lapping of the water against the side of the boat and the heavy breathing of the boy, it is silent. The stillness is unnerving. Ian looks with wearying eyes back at the reef; the waters look like tar and the boat appears to be clogged and stuck. He hallucinates. He is holding long oars across both sides of the boat. Leaning forward he desperately is trying to pull the boat through the sticky water, but it will not move. Ian shakes to wake

himself, realizing he is half dreaming; he is still lying motionless on the deck floor.

Hopelessness floods Ian's heart. "How am I ever going to get out of this? How can I possibly get to the hospital at this time of night? I'm not going to make it. What's the point?"

A heavy weight seems to be travelling with him. He is processing a growing realization that death is close. "All I have lived for is likely now to be gone. What now? What will become of me? Is this it, or is the scene about to change?" The thoughts swarm his darkening mind.

Vix stands in the bow, arms aloft like a proud athlete on the podium. He has no thoughts of anyone, not even Ian, just an enchantment with his own achievements. He glances down at the helpless man in the boat, snarling with delight at the power in his hands. "Yes son, you are right. Your destiny has now elapsed; the scene is about to change. You are within my hands. It is over, time is up for you boy. Evil has been victorious again."

Until now Ian has not known what direction his blood flows. He is really interested in it now, tracking the poison as it moves. It creeps along his veins through his chest and abdomen, down into his right leg. The leg numbs immediately. "If it gets down that leg and back up to my heart or brain I'm dead!" He turns to talk to the boy, but as he opens his mouth it is totally dry. He breathes irregularly, the perspiration stopping again as his body struggles to find fluids to eject. "I'm not going to make it."

From the bushes Croydon breathes a whisper toward Ian. "Come on Ian, fight!"

A thought jolts Ian and fresh resolve clears his mind. "What are you thinking? Don't give up! Fight this! What must I do for the rest of the journey? All I can do is lie still as in the bottom of the boat. This will slow the poison's spread, the same way the adrenalin has been pumping it." Atop of nets, crates and dive gear he shuffles and gets as comfortable as he can. Closing his eyes he slows his breathing and relaxes. Meditation techniques learnt from his yoga master allow him to begin to shut down his extremities.

Despite the determination, Ian finds it hard to concentrate; his thoughts race over the events on the reef, and his life. Alongside all this there is the continual chanting and bravado of Vix. Ian's mind is muddled and struggling to concentrate.

The boat runs into the sandy foreshore with a dull thud. The jolt rouses Ian from the half sleep he had stumbled into. He quickly gets himself prepared to hop out of the boat. The boy motions him to hurry but Ian finds his vision blurring; it is difficult to focus. Propping himself off the side of the boat Ian manages to step. As he does he falls flat back on the nets and crates; his right leg has become completely paralyzed. He looks helplessly up at the frightened face of the boy, covered with sweat from fear and the work on the pole. Ian

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can taste the residue of his own sweat as he licks his dehydrated lips to speak, blinking repeatedly to clear his vision. He stops, realizing it is hopeless as the boy can do nothing more to help.

Vix takes delight in each act of the play unfolding. With a rough hand on the boy's head he pours in fear and hopelessness, whilst with the other he smears Ian's mind. Breaking off, he momentarily leaps into the air in a dance of wicked delight. His arms thrust up in an arrogant victory salute as if the whole scheme was his own fiendish plan.

Seizing the moment, Croydon bursts from the top of the coconut palms he has climbed back into. Swooping silently like an eagle, he curls and thumps into Vix's side, while the demons arms are raised, driving him into the vegetation near the shore. Stunned terror fills Vix as he has only a moment to look into Croydon's blazing pupils. As the demon draws a breath to yell, a silver sword draws sharply across his throat. It has happened so fast and unexpectedly that the fallen warrior makes no noise. The ground opens and the muted green overcoat disappears with its contents, the stench from the carcass dissipating quickly in the gentle breeze.

Croydon wastes no time. He moves in a slow and dramatic fashion covering himself completely with his royal blue cape. He stands and peers about to see who has been watching. Demons watching the celebrations along the coast linger inquisitively, wondering what has happened. Croydon moves about clumsily, imitating the movements of a demon with very good effect. It is nothing unusual for two dark angels to fight over prey.

The dull moonlight has hidden who the players in the scene are. Croydon keeps himself carefully shrouded the whole time. His imitation of a demon's manner is enough to convince the observers along the bay, but Mythe and Rime, some distance out to sea, are not so easily fooled.

"Something isn't right. I'm going to go and see what happened," mutters Mythe.

"Was that not Vix who won? He's been aggressive all night. He won't want to see you and I would not want to face anyone who bettered him," scratches Rime in his rough voice. The comments cause Mythe to delay leaving. Neither contemplate that it was not a spat with one of their kind.

The boy is trying to assist Ian up; both are thinking clearer with Vix out of the way. There is no way the boy can lift Ian's frame.

Croydon shuffles up beside the boy, watching unobtrusively for demonic movements. A large powerful hand rests upon the boy's shoulder, causing his small body to stiffen and straighten. Reaching upward he receives the impartation of strength he needs. Taking a step out of the boat, he supernaturally drags Ian over his shoulders and back. The light bearer gently assists up the thick white sand, before they all move into the cover of coconut palms hanging between the road and the beach. "At last, the flora will provide

cover from those inquisitive eyes at sea.” Croydon thinks.

The boy releases Ian with a gasp from his part in the effort. Ian falls limply onto the coarse grass, breathing in spasmodic short bursts, the poison numbing his right side completely.

Looking to sea, Croydon spots one of the fallen cautiously approaching. Stepping back, the mighty angel stealthily hides himself behind some nearby bushes.

Mythe has come up the foreshore. Peering about the dark bushes, he curses profanities out loud to advise the demon he is there. “Ha! There is no one here!” Mythe mumbles to himself in surprise. “He must have been called away.” Mythe would have to come right amongst the bushes to see Croydon. A little perplexed he looks down on the pitiful and sorry man on the ground. Pride and lust rise in his dark soul. “You see good things do come to those who wait. What an opportunity! My bounty has been left for me. Justice prevails again my old friend.”

With a few more obscenities and a swat of his hand Mythe hits the boy’s body with fear. The boy panics and points to his older brother and Manuel out to sea. “Mon frère! Mon frère, Médusé!” he says repeatedly before turning and running to the boat.

With all his might, Ian sits up and calls frantically after him. “No, no ... Hôpital ... Allez ... Taxi...Telephone.” It’s of no use. Ian’s French is inadequate to explain the others will be safe in long wetsuits. The boy continues to the boat not understanding. Fear grips his heart for whatever it is out there in the sea. Ian watches the boy push the boat into the lagoon and pole off towards two shapes barely visible out by the reef.

Mythe stops for a moment over the body of his victim. There is an odd smell in the air. He draws deeply through his nostrils. The smell is unfamiliar and worrying to him. His concerns heighten. “Vix?” he calls a little louder, for a moment actually wanting to see his compatriot. A fresh puff of wind blows in off the ocean, moving the sweet incense from around him. He relaxes a little, watching the boy returning for the men. “We haven’t long my darling, we will have company soon.” Sensing some need for caution Mythe conducts a circumspect interrogation of Ian’s spirit. His ease increases, as he detects no change. He places his hands on either side of Ian’s head and drives in despair.

It’s just after midnight. Ian is alone, half paralyzed on the side of a desolate road. There is no apparent hope. Ian feels forlorn and sulky at his luck. Weariness is swamping his heart as he lies on the road. With blurred vision he stares at the stars peering intermittently through the canopy of coconut palms and cloud. Mythe is drawing all the life that he can, chortling and wheezing in his work. He delights in every pain in Ian’s heart. Ian feels his chest crushing inside him; it is a bizarre sensation. It is as if his body is imploding, death working from his inside out. His mind is too muddled to recognize that this

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is not a result of the poison, but rather his spirit sinking into the hopelessness of death. He begins to slip into a coma.

The bushes explode with muted light. Croydon has a sword in his right hand. Mythe only has time to instinctively drop his hand towards his own weapon. Croydon grabs Mythe's arm, thrusting it up to expose the demons abdomen. The silver sword plunges deep between joins in Mythe's midriff protection. Releasing Mythe's arm Croydon's hand slides down to cover the demons mouth. There is a shadowed groan as Croydon's blade finishes its work. Standing over his disemboweled foe, the dark body disappears in a sulfuric bubble on the long grass. A stench permeates the air for a few moments, giving way to incense again.

The mighty light bearer quickly checks Ian's vital signs. He is about to close his eyes and give up the fight. Croydon has to act fast, even though it risks exposure. He lifts his hands straight up to the sky, his face tilting back. Instantly a portal of light breaks through the palms and reaches to the heavens. Bathing in the light, Ian breathes deeply. A deep clear voice speaks. "Ian, if you close your eyes you shall never wake again."

Croydon drops his arms to close the portal with a snap. A smile passes his face; he had foreseen that moment. Scanning the vicinity, he checks who has seen what is going on. The shaft of light could well have been seen by any number of alert demons in the vicinity. Incredibly everything appears quiet. Checking towards the ocean, Rime must have been distracted with the men in the lagoon. "Thank you Master. Thank you for this hidden place. Thank you that we remain hidden from the dark forces about us." He knows he could well have been on the beach in full view of many in the crescent-shaped bay.

Ian shakes off the sleepiness and looks to his right. Then he looks left. "Where did they go? That voice was so clear and real. I am sure that is where the voice came from." Seeing no one, his train of thought changes from the oddity of the voice to what it said. "What am I doing? I can't go to sleep here. I need to get to a hospital. I need to get anti-toxins. I need to get help. If I go to sleep here I will never wake up!" The shocking realization gives him a new sense of strength.

Croydon re-wraps himself in his cape, trying as best as possible to dull the light of his being. "My concealment is coming to an end; I must be cautious." Dropping down to the ground beside the human frame he slips an arm around Ian's chest. Gently he lifts him, helping him to his feet. Miraculously Ian finds strength to stand and balance on his strong leg. He drags the paralyzed one behind him. "Come Ian, let us do this together; I am with you, you are not alone."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

All about the Restaurant

Slowly moving down the road Ian spots a small neon sign. It is from a small French restaurant nestled between opulent, lifeless holiday homes. Familiar with this stretch of road, Ian is surprised to not to have noticed the restaurant before. Several cars are parked outside. He can make out shapes milling. “What a miracle, I’ve found someone who can help.”

Half dragged down the road by his huge angel, Ian spots three Indian taxi drivers standing by the cars.

Working their shifts since early that evening, they are waiting for a party in the restaurant to finish. Descendants of immigrants brought to harvest sugarcane the century before; the men are spiteful of foreigners.

“Please, I need you to take me to the hospital. I’m dying.” Ian slurs as he comes within earshot; the toxins are working through the right hand side of his face.

“Hey, drunk white boy!” jokes one of the men, noticing the slurred speech and staggering walk. All the men turn to look at Ian with jesting and unjustified hatred.

Roughly talking in a group behind the taxi drivers are five dark beings. Seeing Croydon, they leap amongst the men and mark their property.

Staring at the men, Ian is attentive. The same driver scowls a serious answer, pointing to the restaurant. “Cannot, we have French client.” The demon behind him pulls on hurtful chains of inferiority.

Ian responds quickly, “I’ll give you money.”

The eldest looks at his car and then back at Ian. “How much money you pay us?” His eyes and thoughts have sharpened even if in vain interest.

The demons eye Croydon and Ian carefully. The two not directly with a driver peel off and circle about through the houses. Reappearing they keep some distance off still. Croydon is well muted under his cape. The demons look at the two, one after the other, trying to understand the relationship between them. “Is he yours?” enquires one of the two circling closer. Croydon says nothing.

All five demons move forward close together, squinting looks toward Ian’s spirit. Croydon swings his shield off his back and drops it directly in front of Ian, blocking much of their view. Muttering, they hold position, unsure

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whether to venture closer and challenge a light bearer who is obviously quite powerful. Instead they begin to curse and blaspheme in front of Croydon; the disparaging comments are an attempt to rile him. Croydon stares them down one by one, his eyes driving authority over the evil group.

"I don't have any money with me," moans Ian breaking the standoff. Immediately he realizes what he has said. "Fool, I shouldn't have said that; I should have lied. Why have I always been so truthful? Even when I was young I was straight up. This is the third world. If you have money, you go. If not, you don't."

The demons break into laughter. Two slap each other and mock fight in a teasing manner. "I don't have any money. I don't have any money!" they chant.

The senior demon stares directly at Croydon, as the others settle down. "You aren't going anywhere then are you?" he states. His face is stern and precise with a superiority to challenge Croydon.

"My money is at my apartment, please help me. I will give you fifty... one hundred U.S., just please take me to the hospital."

"You show us the money and then we take you."

"I don't have the money here now, but I will pay you."

The oldest Indian driver glares at Ian in a manner similar to the senior demon at Croydon. "You're drunk! You're crazy white boy!" With that the men turn and begin to walk away, drawing deeply on their cigarettes and sneering together.

"You are going nowhere with us," restates the demon in charge before he turns his back on Croydon and walks arrogantly towards the men. The other four follow suit. "What the light bearer is up to is no issue of ours; we can carry on our own ways," he offers as if teaching and showing the others good conduct.

For the second time Croydon lifts his arms heavenward. Immediately a portal appears and Ian hears the quiet, clear voice. "Ian, are you willing to beg for your life?" As soon as the words are out Croydon drops his hands and the portal closes.

The five demons have spun around, the light alerting them. It is not something they have seen often here. Something of the beauty attracts them, yet it is foreign and beyond reach. Temporarily mesmerized, they linger after the portal has closed. "Did you hear a voice?" one asks.

"You have no right to do that, light bearer. That is outside the code," the senior challenges. The sentence is strongly spoken, yet the demon is hesitant.

"His sheep hear His voice," Croydon replies quietly but firmly, speaking for the first time.

"But is he a black or a white sheep?"

"The shepherd cares for his sheep and goes looking for any that are lost."

The fallen angel groans. The riddles are not resolving their questions. "He

must be of 'The Way,'" comments another of the fallen.

Croydon ponders his options. If he unveils his form by casting off his cape they would challenge him no longer. However, he would likely have to slay them all, or else they would alert his presence to a broader group. "I might be able to fool them," he concludes.

As the demons have turned to question Croydon the Indian taxi drivers are hesitating also. Ian thinks it over. "That voice again? I sure am prepared to beg for my life - and I know how to."

Images flood into his mind of the beggars in Bali, Java, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. More recently in South Africa he had seen numerous black men cup their hands and bow their heads to the white men, "Yes'm boss, yes'm Master."

Ian leans on one of the cars, right leg already gone and left leg very wobbly. He drops to one knee and cups his limp right hand into his left. He is desperate and he knows if he does not get to the hospital soon he will be dead. Bowing his head in humility so as not to look at the men, he begins to plead for his life. It is heartfelt, nearly drawing him to tears. "Sirs, I beg you to help me, please. I will die if you do not help me. I will die here in front of you..."

The pitiful site amuses the five demons. They turn to walk on, laughing viciously. Ian watches two sets of feet walk with them but one is uncertain. The demon with the youngest Indian man hesitates also.

Croydon stares at the demon that has his hand on the shoulder of the driver. "Release," he silently mouths. As if hit by an electric shock the dark being suddenly drops his hand off the shoulder. Not having a moment to spare Croydon turns to the young man and whispers, much like blowing a kiss, "Compassion and love." The young man's head lifts and he draws in an unfamiliar breath of life.

Ian watches the feet of the young man walk to his side. The driver doesn't speak but helps Ian up to the door and bundles him in. "Thank you, Sir," Ian breathes in relief, staring at the young man in appreciation.

The other demons stop and stare in a disparaging manner at the demon that let the man go, knowing nothing of Croydon's words. "How have you let him go!" challenges one, perplexed at the behavior of the man who they felt had been trained better.

The inexperienced demon lets nothing on, but pretends to be just as shocked as the others. "I will not give them the pleasure of humiliating and ridiculing me," he thinks. "It's too late to do anything about what has happened now anyway." A little more experience would have seen him warn the others of the angel's obvious authority.

Croydon holds the gaze of the demons, and sits partially in the taxi with Ian. As the motor starts two demons rush to assume positions on the bonnet of the vehicle. They are distant enough from Croydon but close to their subject. Croydon still shields Ian, allowing no opportunity for them to view him.

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The taxi careers down the road in the direction of the hospital. From the moment the key is turned the radio begins to blast harsh Indian music. It irritates Ian immensely, but he is too tired and subdued to do anything about it. He tries to block out the noise and stares towards the front of the vehicle. On the dashboard the driver's gods are on display. There is a small golden chubby figurine, an elephant adorned with jewels, and another golden face. Ian's mind begins to roam over the self-analysis he had been through earlier. "In the face of death, is my analysis correct that there is no God?"

Croydon is circumspect himself, contemplating the loss of humanity to the evil one. "This, when intimacy with the Creator was so within your grasp," he says quietly, looking at the driver and shaking his head. He turns to Ian and holds further thoughts to himself. "Come on Ian, open your heart. As a child you had been close, until you gave up your pursuit. Yet this has given you a measure of freedom even to this point. The residue of God is more difficult to extinguish than the tainting of the enemy. The Spirit is always stronger, just not dominating. Ian, he waits for your choice for Him, not through compulsion, for only in that can love be brought out above servitude. Come now, choose him Ian."

The taxi driver has also been musing things over as they travel over abandoned roads. Two miles from the restaurant the balance of influence has changed. "What hotel you stay in white man? What your room number?" he asks abruptly. He has smelt urine and is wishing he had not put the drunk into his taxi. "At least I had better make sure I get the money," he thinks.

Ian understands the drive of the question. "I am not a tourist. I don't live in a hotel, but in a bungalow at Tamarin Bay."

"You mean I will not get any money? I have passed up a good client at the restaurant," the driver blurts in French. He feels betrayed and angry. "How will I get my money? How will I get my hundred U.S.?" he asks loudly in English. Chains of greed override all other rational considerations.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get it for you. I will find you. You can trust me."

Raised in a culture of mistrust and selfishness, the driver curses and mutters. He cannot believe his rotten luck. Looking carefully at the area he is driving through he asks, "What hotel you stay at?"

"I told you. I stay in an apartment at Tamarin Bay. I will get you the money."

"I take you to Tamarin Bay Hotel. You tourist, they look after you."

"I'm not a tourist."

"You lie to me. How you pay me? I not take you further!" Having heard the words 'Tamarin Bay' and knowing that is where they are passing, the driver swerves off the main road and heads in towards the Tamarin Bay Hotel.

Realizing what is happening Ian pleads harder, "No! No! Please, I have the money, I promise! One hundred U.S. dollars... two hundred, please take me, I'm dying." With his life at stake the money means nothing to Ian. "I'll give

you all the money I've got! I'll give you any money you want, just get me to the hospital. I'll give you it all."

Ignoring the pleading, the driver pulls into the car park of the Tamarin Bay Hotel. He stops the car, turns and yells at Ian. "Get out!"

Ian doesn't move, partly from determination to get to the hospital, and partly from paralysis.

The driver swears and reaches across to undo Ian's safety belt. He pushes the door wide open. "Get out!" he yells again. With delight in their reassertion of control the demons are edging him on in anger. Croydon allows the events to play out, still shielding Ian from them.

Ian doesn't move but continues to plead, anxiety in his voice. "My legs are gone. I can't walk. I cannot get out. I don't think I can move."

The driver swears again. He has given up on even getting money from the hotel owner. He leans back and shoves Ian on the shoulder. Unbalanced and unable to control his body, Ian falls out of the taxi and onto the ground of the car park. Looking back in disbelief, Ian sees that his legs are caught in behind the seat. The motionless limbs have not followed his shoulders. Ian looks helplessly at the man, trusting on some pity from the driver who cannot leave while he is still stuck in the car.

Croydon steps out of the vehicle. Nothing has been left to chance. Everything is happening how he hoped it would, and somehow he knows that the hotel is part of the plan.

Seizing their chance the two demons leap back into the vehicle and urge the young driver on. He puts his hand back, lifts Ian's feet and flicks them out of the car. The demons lift their hands in victory as the taxi rushes out of the car park back in the direction of the restaurant. They care nothing for Ian, never having even ascertained the state of his spirit. Foolishly they assumed him to be already of *The Way*, a significant untested assumption. The work of the Spirit has been quietly muddying their vision and forethought the whole time.

Ian is lying on the ground. "This world stinks. I've seen death, hatred, violence; this is hell, this place is hell on earth. This is a filthy, sick, evil world we live in. What's the point of even trying to get to hospital? If this is the way people treat their fellow man, even in crisis, then what is the point? If your number's up, let it go Ian, just die."

Croydon returns his shield to his shoulders. Kneeling on the rough tar seal surface beside Ian, he places his hand on Ian's shoulder and speaks calmly. "What would your grandfather think?"

Jolted from his melancholy Ian thinks. "He was a hard old nut. He went through the first and second world wars." Ian had often imagined him at Gallipoli on the beaches, toughing it out in unbelievably harsh conditions, and then in Egypt fighting against Rommel. The determination of his grandfather sits in his mind. "The old bugger survived two world wars and here is his

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grandson giving up because of five miserable jellyfish stings! Well, Grandpa, I may not be as tough as you, but you're in my blood. I'll go to the last breath; this boy is not giving up yet!"

Ian throws out his left arm and grabs a large clump of grass poking up through the car park seal. He starts to drag his body along the surface towards the hotel entrance. There are lights still on inside, despite it being 12.35am.

Croydon takes the opportunity to look around the location in greater detail. Back toward the beach the grounds are hemmed in by a chest high rock fence. Cemented into the top of the fence is jagged glass to deter undesirables from entering the property. At the gateway a view of the beach opens out. The sand looks blue in the moonlight. Taking in the peaceful beauty, it seems to replenish his spirit. His eyes are drawn in nearer. With a slight sigh he smiles and nods.

Two light bearers standing in the shadows by the gate step forward. They walk elegantly toward Croydon. A look of wonder comes over their faces as they get closer, and suddenly become aware of the magnificence of Croydon.

"We have been summoned here by the Spirit, Sir. We have been waiting for you. We are at your service."

Opening his arms Croydon puts them at ease. They rush the last few meters to embrace. "Thank you brothers, we do not have long. We have much to attend to." Croydon moves his eyes in the direction of Ian crawling along the car park surface.

The light bearers barely look at Ian; one still has his mouth open staring at the stature of Croydon. "Where have you come from, Sir? Not on this island were you? You are magnificent!"

Croydon downplays the attention by diverting them again to Ian. "The child is being given a choice. This is what we wait for." He lovingly puts a palm upon the cheek of the attentive light bearer. "Lion of Judah come be with us," he says looking directly into his eyes.

Ian drags himself along the bitumen surface. The two light bearers look at him more intently this time. They see his heart with all the confusion and desperation sitting there; with compassion they both understand. Needing no further instruction they break from Croydon and move into the hotel lobby knowing their role.

Croydon remains with Ian and studies the hotel. It may be familiar to Ian who lives nearby, but Croydon has never been there before. Built in the 1930's, it is sturdy and functional, even if in need of some repair. The customers were traditionally middle class Europeans and Americans, but more commonly now, backpackers and surfers. At best it is three stars. The hotel is a reasonable size and has a large swimming pool in view of the lobby. Placing a hand on his belt the light bearer bows his head momentarily, "May the bride of Christ come forth!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Poison Spreads

Despite the hour there is activity in the hotel. Lounging in the bar are a number of the fallen. Subdued and bored, they are willing something to happen. With them, three Chinese men are engrossed in a game of Mahjong in the pool bar. All the tourists have gone to bed; there is no one else in the bar. The characteristic slap of the table pieces echoes through the lobby. Gambling and whisky - essential parts of the game - serve to numb the emptiness of life. The only other person up is a Creole guard sitting out near reception.

The light bearer's entry to the lobby quickly dissipates the casual scene. Dark warriors leap to their feet and assume defensive positions in front of the Chinese men. One of the light bearers offers a friendly smile and wave through the glass window that separates the pool bar. A volley of rude gestures and cursing is received back.

Uninterested in the pool area the light bearers stay in reception. The security guard is standing behind his desk, puzzled as to why no one entered after the taxi pulled in. The burly Creole has a kind and loving face. He is unattended by the fallen. A light bearer rests a hand on Rafael's shoulder; goose bumps run up his spine. Immediately he heads out with a flashlight, flanked by the warrior of light. The other warrior remains in the lobby. Moving back to the edge of the room he avoids inciting action from the pool bar.

The fallen have quickly roused themselves. Unsure as to why the light bearers would be here, they argue as to what should be done. Chuckling, the angel whispers. "Oh boy, you are in for a big surprise if you go outside!"

Rafael sees a man face down on the ground of the car park and breaks into a run. Ian recognizes the approaching face of his friend and drinking buddy straight away. A strong hand reaches down and begins to help him up, but Ian is unable to assist and so the attempt fails. Rafael stands up for a moment looking at Ian in surprise. He has never seen him so stoned or drunk that he's groveling in a car park. "Ce qui se passé Ian? What's happening to you man? Look at you huh? How come you so out of it? I never see you like this man!"

Croydon puts a hand on the light bearer's shoulder, reassuring him of the help he has found. Gentleness has allowed Rafael to remain relatively free in this spiritually destitute land. The traps and disappointments laid along his path by the enemy have barely marred him. Genuine love pulses and the light

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bearers can feel it. He is an oasis in the desert for Ian tonight.

Ian can't muster the energy to speak; he pulls up his sweatshirt sleeve. Flashing his torchlight Rafael sees the swollen arm with the blistering burns traced across it. "Invisible! Méduse! You dive with Manuel tonight?" he exclaims with concern. "Oui," squeaks Ian, nearly weeping with relief at being found by Rafael. "Everything may work out yet," he thinks. "Eprouvant! Un invisible, c'est fini for you," Rafael laments as Manuel did earlier. The hope fades as quickly as it rose in Ian's heart. He turns his head in pain. "No it can't be! I am not ready to die. But they all say I am going to..."

Without a further word, Rafael scoops Ian up in his arms, turns and runs with him into the lobby.

Croydon strides in front of them. Gathering as much of his cape around him as he can, he stoops a little. The magnificent light bearer passes through the swinging doors and directly into the pool bar. The two men follow with the other light bearer at the rear. The advancing demons fall back to allow the entourage in, staring in disbelief at the angel in the lead. They maintain a barrier in front of the Chinese men.

Croydon stretches an arm in the direction of the fallen, as if to warn them to keep their distance. Instinctively they step further back, the seniority and authority of the warrior strikingly apparent, despite Croydon's attempt to subdue it. Whispered murmurs flow through the group. A lesser demon peels off the back to scout more support. The others carefully watch every move the light bearers make.

Croydon swings the shield from his back in one fluid motion and drops it in front of Ian. It effectively blocks any view by the fallen, hiding that Ian is not of The Light. To the fallen, Croydon's actions are not unusual; he could just be protecting Ian from disparaging words.

Rafael has dropped Ian gently into a cane chair adjacent to the Chinese men. Two of them glance up, then return to the intensity of their game only meters away.

Rafael turns with a light bearer and heads back to the lobby. Ian watches him disappear between the swinging doors. "Rafael, don't go," his heart calls out. It's too late; he has no energy to call. Ian turns to the Chinese men, realizing that the black Creole cannot speak to them unless he is asked. Rafael was not addressed by them. "Rafael, I need you here. Don't let stupid cultural barriers take precedence over an emergency. Now I'm going to have to attempt to communicate with them myself. At least this is my home village and I recognize them, even if I've never spoken to them."

Mustering every bit of strength Ian manages to speak. "Please, I need hospital, ambulance, hospitalization, Invisible..." Ian stops. "They will not understand the jellyfish part of the story. Darn, my speech is slurred. They probably won't understand much of what I'm saying and I sound like I'm

drunk!” He slumps awkwardly in the lounge chair unsure of what else he can do.

The men glance at him and continue playing. One responds as he drops a piece on the table with a clang. “What’s wrong with you white man, you drunk?”

With slow poorly controlled movements, Ian pulls up his sleeve to expose his swollen and blistered limb. Seeing it in the full light, Ian himself is shocked. It is red, lacerated, blistered and heavily swollen. Focusing hard on each syllable, he speaks slowly and more clearly. “I need to go to Quartre Bornes hospital immediately. I have been stung by five jellyfish... Qing.” Ian even tries mixing a little Chinese in to humble himself and honor them.

The fallen cannot see the arm due to Croydon’s shield. They rely on the physical view through the men’s minds. Hands are placed on bodies and chains of pride and hatred are pulled. There is a simultaneous eruption of laughter in the men and the demons.

The younger Chinese man stands and steps out from the table pushing his chair off with the back of his knees. With a mocking face he laughs. “Oh silly boy, how come you put the needle in the arm? Old men, they take opium in the pipe!” With that he puts his hands to his mouth as if holding an imaginary pipe and makes a sucking noise. “Why you put the needle in your arm! Cannot help you silly white man, you stupid boy!” The group bursts into laughter again as the young man returns to his seat to pick up the game. They assume Ian is a druggie. The traces on his arm look like tracks; drug abuse is not unusual amongst the patrons of the hotel.

Frustrated, Ian looks away. “Thanks for the diagnosis Dr Wong! I have to convince them that I desperately need help.”

Discussions amongst the six demons present are deepening, suspicions roused. They are somewhat familiar with Ian from the village and they are surprised at the angelic presence. “He had both demonic and angelic escorts earlier in the week,” one purports.

“Is he not of The Way then?”

“Or, just as importantly, where are his observers now?”

The aggressive nature of the group immediately rises. With growing anger they stare at the mighty angel, vainly hoping he will reveal something inadvertently.

“Why does he hide the boy from us? There are deeper actions implied here than we can see,” a demon presupposes a little louder so that Croydon can hear. He steps forward a little to challenge Croydon. The mighty angel is unmoved and leans resolutely on his shield. He stares down the challenge, giving nothing away. Despite their questions the fallen aren’t prepared yet to challenge the light bearer to step aside.

There is a clatter and bang as two scouts unwittingly arrive at the hotel.

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There village to village search for unusual angelic activity has led them now to Tamarin Bay. The task has quickly become frustrating, considered 'a vague whimsical idea of the commanders,' as one had put it. "Nothing ever happens around here; we're just wasting our time," moans the same dark messenger as they enter the lobby.

The jostling stops as they stare in horror at the back of an imposing senior light bearer. Pointlessness in the assignment ceases. In just a few moments they also get an unrestricted look at Ian before the second light bearer sees them and drops his shield. "The boy is not of The Way!" the scout shouts to the group with the Chinese men.

"We know that, fool!" lies one in response.

The concealment of the mission has been broken. Croydon has to act quickly, he can ill afford for matters to spiral beyond control. Swinging his shield smoothly back over his shoulders a hand slips to the belt behind his back. Ian is now visible to all, along with the fact that he does not have a heaven bound spirit.

As Croydon moves, the scouts turn to rush out of the lobby. A zing of metal whistles through the air, the first blade strikes between the shoulders. The brittle armor shatters and the knife plunges deep into the chest, forcing the scout forward into a sprawling heap on the ground. As the second scout sees his comrade hunch forward a sharp pain pinches at his arm. Crashing through the doors he escapes into the night with his life, the rapid fire from Croydon only just off target. As the light bearer accompanying Croydon prepares to chase, the senior angel puts out a hand to stop him. "Leave him. The damage is done; we can avoid it no longer. Very soon stronger forces will be upon us."

The demons curse; they see plainly that Ian is dying in darkness, a dormant destiny hanging over him. "How dare you tempt him to last minute choices for life, you have no right to interfere with the death. He is one of ours," the demon in front challenges. If there is any uniting passion for the kingdom of darkness it is the battle for a soul. They would die willingly on the sword to stop a spirit from being saved and reinforcements from within the hotel are boosting numbers and confidence. Swords drawn they begin to encircle the two light bearers.

"Your actions are unauthorized, with him... and with the scout," continues the leader, only taking his eyes off Croydon for a moment to glance at Ian. "You have no grounds to fight unprovoked! Leave now while you have your head. You are outnumbered and out of your depth now. We will never let you have the boy. Release him to us. He is ours anyway, not yours, and you know it."

Croydon speaks slowly and deliberately. "My Master says that all are welcome and can come at any time. He has a right to choose."

"Don't belittle me, light bearer. He has already chosen, you know that, and

now he must go. He has chosen darkness if only from indifference. You know the ways of judgment as well as I do. There is nothing more to do. Besides, you are not from here. Why should it concern you? Your Master must be confused. Who are you, who has sent you and why have you come?"

Croydon has not taken his eye off the lead demon challenging him nor has he drawn a sword. The other light bearer pushes his back up against Croydon; his swords drawn and ready.

"If a man calls on the name of the Lord he will be saved," says the light bearer at Croydon's back.

"Lord?" splutters a demon.

Croydon slowly and deliberately lifts his hands up to his neck; flicking his cape off. Finally standing to his full height the gown falls down the length of his back; the full glory of his stature, the light of his being and his belt are clearly revealed. The light bearer at Croydon's back smiles, a warmth and power flowing into him. The fallen ease off a little, closing their eyes to narrow slits at the purity of the light emanating from Croydon.

Hands moving gently down, Croydon draws both swords with a slow steady swish of metal on the sheath. The powerful blades close across his body, causing his biceps to flex in a show of power and resilient purpose. The mighty being knows he could likely take them all down within a few moments. "I must buy some time; there are things to happen here yet. I have foreseen it in the heart of the Spirit. Steady Croydon, you must negotiate your way through this."

Ian is trying to remain calm; anxiety will only move the poison faster. Involuntarily his arm starts to contract and release in spasms. Violent shaking moves through his body, as every muscle starts to twitch in unison. He leaves his seat, thrashing wildly with each contraction, as the poison assaults his muscular system.

Ian's fit breaks the deadlock; the Chinese men spring too action on their own accord. Two of them attempt to hold Ian down, but Ian is not in control of his body. "I'm going through the death rattles," he thinks, inadvertently throwing the men off.

Demons launch at the light bearers. Croydon is swift and deadly, each swing blocked before a thrust with his second sword pierces their abdomen. Three demons drop effortlessly in smoldering piles above holes that open in the floor.

The senior demon steps back and curses, but the losses have not been pointless. Croydon has to spin, to protect the younger light bearer behind him who has suffered a blow to the shoulder. In doing so, they both have been separated from Ian. The demons quickly assume defensive positions around the men. Venom spills from their eyes as reinforcements replenish numbers.

Ian's fit stops. An ice cold death surrounds him. "I'm freezing, please give me blankets," he whispers, shivering. One man heads off before a demon can stop him. The icy chill enters Ian's feet, necrosis creeping slowly up his body,

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as if the bone marrow itself was freezing over. The demon holds tightly onto his feet, pouring in venom. Ian looks down the length of his body. "Its death; I can feel it. My body is dying right in front of me. I'm so cold!"

Blankets and towels are thrown over him. Another of the men has got a glass of milk. Lifting it to Ian's lips he tries to force it in, but Ian is not obliging. "It is no ingested illness. It's poison in my bloodstream... at least he's trying..." Ian thinks gratefully.

From his training in veterinary science Ian knows death is encroaching. Outside the lobby he can see the owner's Mercedes. He recognizes it, having seen it pass a number of times as he hitchhiked into town. Mustering the energy Ian pleads again. "Please, Sir ... your car. Could you take me in your car to Quartre Bornes hospital?" Both men know it is barely twenty kilometers away.

The Chinese owner holding the glass of milk looks at his car, then at Ian. "That would not be good luck to have a man die in your backseat," a voice whispers in his ear.

He puts his hand on Ian's shoulder. "Oh, my car? No, no, cannot take you. We wait for ambulance for you. My car cannot."

Anger, racism and hatred rise in Ian, roused by the demons shouting around him. He is fuming. Adrenalin pumps the toxin through his body rapidly, the worst thing that could happen. Ian prepares to punch the face of the man. He looks down at his limp right arm; it will not move. Frustrated he looks at his left hand. "I can't get enough power in it to really hurt him. I'm not a southpaw like my father. Still, I could grab his shirt, pull him down and head butt him. Yeah, that would hurt us both. I don't care; I'm going to die anyway. May as well give him a final lesson in humanity he will never forget."

Forced to act quickly, the injured light bearer throws himself through the air. He lands on the group attacking Ian's spirit. Sacrificing himself he clears a path for Croydon. As a dark sword passes through his chest, a sudden flash of light sweeps the angel up to the heavenly realms; his time on earth is now completed.

Amongst the confusion and celebration of the demons at the victory over one light bearer, Croydon resumes control of the room near Ian. Death has had to let go for the moment and, with seemingly perfect timing, the third light bearer returns from Rafael to help.

Croydon throws his hand up. Instantly a portal of light appears above Ian, who is about to head butt the Chinese man for not taking him to the hospital. "If you hit him now the adrenalin is so close to your heart you will surely die," the voice from the portal says.

The demons fall back shocked, not understanding the origin or purpose of the portal or the noises in it. Ian checks his bodily functions and knows it to be true. "Shoot!" he says in a disgusted whisper as he turns his head to look

the other way. He controls his rage. "If I get through this Jack ... I'm going to teach you a lesson in humanity you will never forget," he thinks. "No teeth in the forehead tonight. But I have a Plan B: control my anger, look away and get you another day!"

"That voice?" Croydon whispers as the portal closes and he returns to holding his swords out at the demons so that they keep their distance.

Ian has been so consumed with surviving that he has not even really considered where this voice has come from. "That is the same voice as at the road and with the taxi drivers. Is that the voice of God? How could it be? I don't even believe in God."

Lights hit the front doors of the hotel, breaking into Ian's thought process. Out of nowhere Rafael appears with another security guard. Together they pick Ian up, and set off towards the entrance of the lobby. Immediately Ian realizes that Rafael did not abandon him but had gone straight to the switchboard and phoned the hospital. The demons curse and swear as the two light bearers back out with the men.

The ambulance comes screaming in, headlights sweeping the car park. It does a u-turn and takes off again. The driver is from a black hospital. When there was no one at the front of the Chinese owned tourist hotel he naturally assumes he had incorrect instructions, as a tourist would use other hospitals. It had seemed a strange call out from the start.

Ian is out of the hotel. He can see the blur of tail lights disappearing through the gates. Puckering his mouth to whistle he is so parched that he can't get a sound out.

Rafael wolf whistles as loudly as he can. It ricochets off the wall and down the road. Brighter brake lights illuminate the fences and trees outside the hotel grounds. Dropping Ian, Rafael runs at the touch of a light bearer on his shoulder. Leaping the fence beside the ambulance, his hand has to be placed on the sharp glass edge of the rock fence. "I have to get that ambulance!"

The old Renault 4 backs up. The front seat has been taken out to make room for a camp stretcher. The driver doesn't even get out. He leans over, opens the door and the security guard shoves Ian in. "Third world medical services at their best!" Ian chuckles. The driver is not qualified in medical matters; he is just there to deliver people to the doctors. The door is barely shut before the driver slams the car into gear. It lurches forward and out onto the road in the direction of the hospital.

Croydon straddles the top of the vehicle as it rushes down the road. The other light bearer steps between the lobby and the road. With both swords drawn he engages the demons attempting to pursue. Croydon breathes a sigh of relief. "That battle is over; now the time can come."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Battle is Drawn

The window fosters a light breeze into the dark room. Stifling air allows the freshness to crawl in, along with faint noises from trees rustling with a degree of contentment. Chin in one hand, eyes half closed, Sabre sits still. He listens intently for a voice to speak into the emptiness. The leaves' movements bother him.

Hushed tones echo down the hallway as rapid footsteps work their way closer. Muffled through the doors, two sets of feet slow to a complete stop. The island lord senses the nervousness outside, interpreting the arrivals silently. "Those sharp heavy breaths... a commander... I don't care for him... but the second? Lighter build, anxious, hesitant, must be a messenger..."

The door latch drops then lifts, breaching both realms of the stronghold. As the suspense mounts, three knocks on the wood of the high arched door resound through the room. Sabre's eyes shift off the floor to the handle.

The latch draws down a second time, and the door opens. Apprehensively the demons edge in. The commander's eyes quickly adjust to the darkness. Searching the dreary room, he scans for Sabre's form. The messenger hovers, sheltering behind him. Spying the throne's occupant the commander bows submissively. The exposed messenger follows the lead and lowers himself again behind the bulky demon. The shadow of the sage is to the left of the commander. He gasps spasmodically on the floor, curled in a fetal position.

"What?" Sabre airs his superiority nonchalantly over a commander powerful in his own right.

"A messenger from Tamarin for you... Sir," the commander states with a chilling preciseness.

Sabre flicks his hand for the messenger to come forward. The demon holds his head low, daring not to look up. The discerning commander notes the uneasiness in Sabre. He pushes the messenger forward with a shunt, distancing himself from the ominously isolated pawn.

The lord's reputation clearly intimidates the scout. He has never been this close to Sabre or addressed him in any way. Rumors of the harsh treatment afforded by the lord abound. The tyrant has held the small island in a strangling grip for 120 years. Richer assignments on the mainland have not come his way as increased movements occur toward the close of the millennium. They can

only speculate as to why Sabre has not been promoted.

"S...Sir..." the messenger stammers inadvertently, "I come to inform you of events in Tamarin Bay." Sabre's cold heart has quickened instantly, though he continues to look disinterested. "A senior light bearer and a foreign man..."

The lurking commander interrupts, "I've checked with the gates; he breached the East African at 23:45."

"Breached?" Sabre looks quizzed. "How many were at the gate then?"

"Just the light bearer..."

"No, I asked how many were at the gate."

"There was a standard posting of our troops..."

"Our troops?" Sabre glares at the capable commander. "Perhaps you could choose to state that as 'their troops'. I would hope 'our troops' would not have let him through?"

"Correct Sir," replies the commander, the conversation somehow turning against him.

"Those fools at the gate may yet offer us an opportunity... Huh, I will enjoy rubbing their noses in this one." Easing forward Sabre fumbles for the edge of his trench coat. He rubs it soothingly between his right hand fingers, daydreaming for a moment before continuing. "So who is he? Who are we dealing with?"

"They were unable to identify him; all we know is that he has significant authority."

Sabre looks to the messenger for confirmation. He still has his head bowed. "Boy?" he barks, stepping up from his chair.

"Yes Sir, that is correct! We have suffered losses, but he... we... are unsure of his name..."

Sabre's short fuse boils over; his boot connecting with the messenger's bowed head. Clenching both fists, Sabre raises his body to its full height and storms toward the window. "How many losses?" he roughly asks his lips pursed.

The pained messenger grips his cheek on the ground, forcing the commander to answer. "The reports are sketchy, only just coming in. They believe the two assigned to the foreigner have been lost, and others at the hotel."

Sabre swears under his breath. "Who is the man? Tell me everything now," Sabre asks in a more gentle tone, walking toward the messenger.

"He lives in the village Sir. Ian is his name. He is... or was... with us and ..."

"Has 'Ian' a history with them?"

The commander jumps in. "As a child, my lord... but he has no faith now. He lives for himself. The pleasures of this world above sacrifice. We have strength over him. His heart and spirit are... well...ensnared."

Ignoring the commander, Sabre asks the messenger, "and what of his destiny?"

The scout stares at the floor in silence. His mind is muddled. Desperately he

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tries to recall the hotel scene but his mind has blanked.

Sabre slowly begins to circle the struggling demon. Gently he reaches a hand out. His fingers run over the messengers breastplate, as if to sooth him. Moving across the shoulder, the cut inflicted by Croydon's knife is bare. Sabre's fingers sickly fondle with the flesh. Gradually he pushes harder, his sharp nails leaching into the wound. The demon grimaces but holds steady, dark blood oozing where it had clotted. "What of his family?"

"He's from New Zealand... I am unsure, Sir... normal I think?" The response is very uncertain.

"Normal?" Sabre turns to enquire of the commander stubbornly staring at the floor now. Sabre walks over, sensing the snubbing. "What say you, scum?" Sabre vents with a firm push onto his chest.

The powerful commander barely flinches, keeping his tongue determinedly still. He could provide more information but it seems any answer is turned against him. "I'm sick of the arrogance you waft in my face day by day," he thinks, daring to believe he will say it out loud.

Sabre storms off, searching for the elusive knowledge. Restlessness eats into him. Placing one hand on his belt and the other on his chest he walks back and forth. He pauses at the window, squinting deep into the black sky. Beauty in the bright stars is lost. "How dare you hinder the discernment of my heart", he moans.

Eyes open wider, they draw down to the houses and streets by the ocean. Suddenly he spins, lurching forward, stopping his boot a fraction off the sage's head. Kneeling, he places a hand on the broken man, stroking his head in consolation. The sage winces and shudders under the touch. Sabre pauses on the forehead of thin, grey, matted hair, his hand shifting under the head to lift it. "What is it?" he whispers.

The plot runs over and over in his mind, the insight of the sage supplementing him. Sabre processes quietly the unsettled feelings raging inside him. "A senior light bearer travels alone; a lost child he visits. Is it just the presence of the light bearer? Or has he come for some other reason? ... and what of the family?"

As the fog in his mind begins to clear, the information hits him. "Bastards! It's the mother... What has she done...? Why the man?"

The sage's head shunts hard back onto the floor and Sabre leaps to his feet. Standing still he closes his eyes high over the crumpled body. As the knowledge works through his spirit, every muscle tenses, his bulky chest and abdomen pressing hard against the cold black armor. "Not in my land!" Sabre shouts, fire burning in his eyes. "Call the legion!"

The commander takes the opportunity to exit. Within seconds a dull, low ram's horn blast drones across the land. It tapers off to the mournful thud of a heavy drum. The noise carries all across the island, rousing the legion across the barren island. Dark creatures of power begin to make their way to the

fortress.

“Normal?” Sabre relaxes enough to walk around the room. The settling in his spirit doesn't last long, his agitation growing again. A churning rips at his belly. “No, you will not take him here. Foreigner or not, it will not be.”

Stopping next to the sage, Sabre looks down at the bedraggled heap. Grabbing him by the gown he pulls him inches from his face. The sage's body hangs limply, feet high off the ground. Sabre yells at the frail body, “Who is he?”

Yellowed bloodshot eyes roll between the worlds of consciousness and dream. Sabre sits him down roughly. Large hands on either side of his head, he draws in the blank stare. “Who is the man, who is he to be?” he demands, gleaning every ounce of life.

The sage's head flops about, mouth barely moving. “Darkness... vortex... sucking... drawing in life...” Sabre casts the bedraggled heap to the ground in frustration; the sage is too close to death. The frail frame curls up again, breathing irregularly with a rasping pant.

Sabre flings the large window wide open. Hauling his huge body up by either side of the frame, he thrusts himself out into the darkness. “I know you are here, fool! I will come for you now. The boy is lost. Your time is up! You will die upon my sword, crushed by my might.” He hangs there for some time, as if expecting a reply. Unsatisfied he flicks his powerful wrists back and thumps onto the floor, marching out down the corridor.

Fifty kilometers away a magnificent light bearer balances powerfully on top of an ambulance. As the air rushes past him, he has heard the ram's horn, the drum and the fortune telling bark of the demonic lord. He knows what the sounds mean, and for the first time questions arise. “How assured of victory am I? How can I possibly fight a legion?” The concerns course through his mind, unfamiliar feelings of isolation and loneliness rising.

Recognizing the fear increasing the mighty angel looks down. Lying in the ambulance is the form of a stubborn man, a lost soul, called to be so much more. Something rises to counter the concerns in the face of an imminent defeat in battle. The crease of a smile flicks over the majestic face. “All that matters is here. I am here for you, Ian. Today it is your choice. In a sense the time is up. It is up for you Sabre; you are too late. I may fall on your sword, but not before I have completed the Master's purpose.”

Feeling better, Croydon slips a hand onto his belt and looks up. “Master, some help would be okay though!”

Exiting the mansion, shrines and statues are intermingled with gardens in the opulently groomed grounds. The two acres lies blue in the eerie moonlight, which casts large shadows across the lawns.

Nearly three hundred are already in attendance. Muted armor glistens in the dreary night light, creating an ominous scene. The tight military lines show

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no signs of instability. Sabre steps onto the scene of disciplined silence and power. A stream of new arrivals joins the lines from the various entrance points of the grounds. They come with haste: superior beings, seniors, battle weary sergeants, dark ones, the real ones responsible for the subjugation of the island.

Sabre begins to march impatiently up and down the lines, waiting for the full complement to arrive. He mutters, looking at his feet, briskly pacing over what has occurred. The concerns do not seep from his mouth. "How dare you challenge my mantle over this forsaken island? I feel you, fool; I know why you are here. A lightening may have occurred, but now I will crush it... though... what if others are on their way? My enemy is not ignorant or rash, but calculated and succinct. I must cut him off swiftly and conclusively... But who is he? How powerful is he? Why has this been hidden from me? If I do not know what I am up against then I fight blind!" In an ironic way his thoughts are not dissimilar to Croydon's. Both beings question the outcomes.

With some comfort Sabre eyes the growing legion. "Numbers will on our side but that is not all that counts. Curse it that my world should rest so awkwardly in the hands of the children of light. Let us hope they are not aware of their place in the battle."

Within minutes the legion is complete, rigidly at attention and perfectly in formation. In front of the group stand his twenty powerful commanders. Sabre leaps into the air to address his choice warriors, powerfully hovering above the constraints of gravity. "The enemy has undertaken unsolicited activity. Right under our noses he nips at your heels."

A murmur and growl rises from the powerful force. "We must be swift and decisive, willing to fall upon their swords, decimating them on our lances. I trust you are willing to do the will of our great lord. Your future is formed in such places. Show me your strength, your passion, your authority, your death, and I will show you my approval. Show me faintness, weakness, difference, and I will show you things you never conceived could be seen or experienced... What is your choice?"

"For you our lord we fight, for the victory of our Master!" the legion erupts in a low nasty reply, lifting weapons and flexing muscles.

Without satisfaction at his own rousing speech, Sabre sets off to Tamarin, 780 zealous, powerful and hostile warriors behind him. They arrive quietly at the hotel, to find they are only minutes behind the ambulance. They prepare to intercept the vehicle and the light bearer on the road.

Deep on the vacant mountains, others are arriving. They come in twos and threes from across the island. Several dozen have come in from the Reunion islands. All available have come, summoned by the Spirit, who sees everything. They gather amongst the jungle undergrowth, excited, vibrant and anticipative. Arms are clasped, and with hushed voices they greet one other with warmth and love. Alert eyes dart between them, flashing with a fierce passion for their

work. Perfect beings of war, they are unparalleled one for one by any other creature in all God's creation.

"Brothers, we must prepare to leave; may the Lord be with us," breathes a willing leader above the hum of the fellowship.

Preparing to leave, a gasp lifts from several of the magnificent beings facing the northwest. A hush comes over the group as they all turn to look. From the direction of the continent, a light dust lifts in the wake of something travelling at pace. The unnatural haze lightens the horizon, the trail of light lifting like a hand in the dark sky. The light bearers are unsure and edgy with anticipation. One whispers to another more experienced, "What is it?"

No one dares answer. Two light bearers leap high above the mountain, unfolding broad white wings to glide effortlessly in the air. They are followed by the larger gathering. Forsaking their cover they are desperate to gain a vantage point.

Across the blackened ocean the breathtaking site begins to rise. In shuddered amazement the realization becomes apparent. The light is pure and vibrant. At the head of the light, long sharp lances of gleaming metal appear, followed by bright white horses. The light bearers know who they are, if only by reputation in the earthly realms. Gleaming gold strikes the eyes as the front charioteers have come into full view. They are bearing down on the island at incredible pace. "Where have they come from?" marvels a young warrior.

"These are the ones released from out of the darkest places. The unparalleled battle of oppressed saints in the cauldron of Central Africa has brought these ones down to the earth. Yes! They are a pure foretaste from the Lord of Heaven's Armies! This is what He holds back from our adversary," an older angel exclaims.

"I have not seen them before!"

"Only once before have I! Normally they stay within the continent; you know the intensity of the battlefield there!" Tears of excitement trickle out of the senior angel's eyes, as the full column of thirty charioteers becomes visible.

Soon a second column becomes apparent. It stems from a different direction, slightly behind and to the right of the charioteers. Sixty muscular horses of whites and browns carry magnificent horsemen. The light bearers above the mountain lift arms and shout in exhilaration.

"Where have they come from?" asks the young angel with an expressive question.

The soft faced veteran weeps half in answer and half in praise. "Do you not know? These are the inheritance of the intercessors across the globe. The power base is released by their anxious weeping. They fight in bedrooms and quiet places where they are hidden and unnoticed. Oh Master! They are unrated and unrewarded in this life, but they are the few who break free from the bind of the enemy, the ones who have truly touched heaven's power. They have

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unleashed these powerful angelic beings into the enemy lines. As a maverick force they wander the globe. The Spirit controls and directs them to where they are needed. Today it is here with us! They come to bind the tyrant, to free the prisoner and to proclaim justice to mankind.”

Both groups ride low over the water. It steams beneath their feet, drawing light behind them. The island angels swoop down from the heights on the mountain, in formation like bombers. Within moments the large group hovers in willful glee above the waters of a desolate bay. They wait with excited anticipation for the phenomenon to arrive, chattering in nervousness. Closing in on the entry to the bay, the charioteers and horsemen, now side by side, pull back on their reins. The horses’ hooves dig into the tops of the rippling sea and pull to a halt. A great steaming cloud of light, drawn in their wake, catches and swirls up hundreds of feet into the air above them. The foot warriors erupt into a frenzied dance in and about the charioteers and horsemen. They themselves salute, standing high in their stirrups and chariots. With loud-cheers all exalt the Creator of all, unified deep in the enemy land.

The arrival and gathering has not been missed by any on the coastline. They do not come out to challenge, or even report, the matter. They cower back. In shame they shrink back amongst the buildings and bush that mark the landscape, terrified. Many ponder whether it is in fact the end. Yet at the same time, the light, the affection and excitement somehow draws them in. Wistful thoughts fill their minds as they long for what is not within their grasp. They are what the light bearers are to some degree, but decay rips them to the core. The light bearers live on in brilliance.

It is a magnificent moment beyond the view of Sabre’s legion. The army of light, now over one hundred and twenty strong, do not need instruction or even a leader. Mystically they know why they are here and what they must do. With a thunder of hooves and clatter of metal, the mighty group strides around the coast line south. They separate perfectly into units, the light streaming off behind them again. They aim directly for the ambush set for an isolated light bearer; both sides knowing the mission is spiraling in significance beyond one soul all the time.

Like a cowboy on his trusty steed, Croydon straddles the top of the ambulance, hands lifted high above his head in acknowledgement of his King. The smile widens across his face as throbs of light pulse from him. Empowerment from the engine room of a hidden New Zealand house has not ceased.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Get the Woman”

The clock strikes another tick and 9.50am has arrived. Marie is at the table reading her Bible. While her face glows with a healthy, enlivened aura, it shows the effects of the tears released this morning. Valmar has been guiding her reading and she has come to the story of the prodigal son.

“...the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far county, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. ... and he began to be in want.” Marie reads quietly, the parallel to her own family rising in front of her.

“And when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants’. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.”

Images flood Marie’s mind, her longing for Ian’s return to the Father and the Father’s heart to accept him. Valmar looks beyond the portal to the heavens and into the face of the Son. It glows with a warmth and contentment. Down through his neck and spine Valmar feels a trickle of heat flow; it reaches the bottom of his back and disperses into his body. “The time has come,” he whispers in understanding.

Valmar looks to Marie who is gently praying beside him. Light, transparent tears roll down his face. Stooping, he cups her lowered chin in his hand. Lifting it she gazes through his face. He draws his face up directly in front of her. “This is the moment I have seen for decades in you my beautiful. Finally it is to be brought to reality, not robbed by the enemy, but played out.” His clean breath washes her and an image of Ian’s bloodshot eyes appears in front of her.

Valmar places an arm up into the portal and Marie hears a clear gentle voice. “Your eldest son Ian is nearly dead. Pray for him now.” The light in the room dazzles Marie; she squints and shuts her eyes, dropping to the floor, weeping in bursts over and over. Salted water streams down her face, before splashing onto the wooden floor in small pools. The voice is the same she heard all those years before; she recognizes it immediately.

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“Father... Father... Father...” She blurts out in a call that rouses the beings around her. The hair on the back of Valmar and Dryden’s necks prickles up at her call. Four swords are drawn ready. The angelic bodies start to tremble in the light and power around them. Showering down the portal are thousands of drops of glimmering light that shatter on the ground like a dropped crystal glass. Heat disperses through the room and into the house.

For an hour Vagan has been making preparations. The embarrassment in front of his men earlier has damaged his ego. So he has called his full command out, complemented by a number of others more than willing to fight. Over sixty demons have taken their places on the perimeter of the property, awaiting his command. Vagan and a score of the strongest demons stand directly in line of the driveway. Whether by neglect or through his own pride in the strategy, Vagan has failed to call in support from the commander in the city.

The portal is clearly visible above the house but they don’t know exactly what’s happening inside; the light has been too oppressive. To the rear of the property another group carefully moves through the paddock. The small herd of cows is agitated and noisy, disrupting the previously quiet scene.

On Vagan’s signal, the counterforce crosses the swampy drain and makes their way up the gentle slope to the house, weapons drawn. Reaching the property edge, where the light has been dissipating, they let out a cry and charge the house. Vagan and the others drop low and edge around the side of the property to behind the lounge.

They know they have to get to Marie and, by luring her protection out, Vagan hopes Marie will be isolated. Initially it appears the strategy is working. Dryden and Valmar both step out to defend against those coming at the house from the paddock, while still keeping a watchful eye on the decoys at the front of the house that are not moving.

As several fall to the angels’ swords, the rest of the counterforce, as if defeated, retreat again from the house. Just out of the light the attackers turn to taunt the angels, willing them to lock into combat away from the light. Dryden and Valmar hang by the house, unsure of what to do.

Vagan has reached the rear of the lounge but cannot be sure what is happening on the other side of the house. Several work their way cautiously to the kitchen. The heat is intensifying the longer they linger. Vagan steps up to the exterior of the weatherboard house. Placing his hands against the white painted wood, he feels the warmth emanating from it. Forced to squint until his eyes are nearly shut he mumbles, “Something’s not right.” Feeling unsettled the commander looks down the length of the house and across the valley to check just how badly blurred his vision has become.

“Father, surround me with your protection,” Marie pleads, her spirit aware of what is about her even if her head is not. Valmar twists his head at her call; he quickly steps back inside, leaving Dryden alone outside.

The sergeant leading the counterforce yells in a husky voice as loudly as he can, “Look, the pansy boy guardian is rushing back inside to be with Mama.” He assumes Vagan has heard the information. Beside the wall Vagan lifts his head a little, he heard something above the gentle wind that blows around him, but the words are lost on him.

Dryden eyes the horde taunting him, itching to take up the challenge. He steps forward, his fingers gripping the handles of his slender silver swords tightly. Suddenly something catches his eye behind the demonic group. Approaching fast they descend over the paddocks, a dozen angelic beings. A trail of light dust swirls behind them. Dryden’s mouth drops, “Where?... What?...” the instinctive thoughts come out of his mouth. He turns to where Valmar was, not realizing he has been left alone. His eyes flick back to the angelic force.

The demons, unsure why Dryden’s expression has changed assume it is some sort of effort to distract or allay them. They don’t bother to look behind them but continue to taunt the light bearer. Dryden looks down at the dull force cursing in front of him and chuckles, “Valmar, we have visitors!”

As he speaks, they hit the dark backs, mowing down the counter force. Muted armor splits open as they move straight past Dryden, the breeze of their pace ruffling his gown and hair. Stepping through the walls they form a perimeter around Marie. Step by step they faultlessly move outward to extend their territory like a ripple out on still water. They are magnificent and perfect, with chiseled faces, radiant smiles, powerful arms, gleaming armor and weapons.

Unaware of any of this, Vagan and his choice few warriors focus and change their response to the house. They step through the opposing lounge wall. Vagan and his demons freeze in stunned disbelief at the imposing site of light bearers, shields and swords. He quickly falls back, with the others, out of the house, swinging his rough sword wildly behind him.

Aware now of what is really happening, Dryden somersaults over the heads of the circle of light bearers onto the ground near Vagan, matching the wild blows of the commander. The thud of clashing metal resonates through the air as the demons, still shocked at the eviction, retreat from the house. The warrior angels step through the house also and close off a complete loop of protection around the exterior.

Vagan’s heavier sword is now better controlled as they get nearer the edge of the light. Soon he is effortlessly able to volley a series of strikes, his vision returning to full capacity. Dryden is slight by comparison to the large demon, but he is quick and nimble even by angelic standards. He blocks Vagan’s blows with alternate swords, moving back and forth to take momentum off them.

As both groups watch the duel, it is apparent to all that Dryden is outgunned by the powerful demon. Valmar looks on with concern; “Power in the house

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can't compensate for battle skills, Dryden.”

Vagan progressively forces Dryden into more defensive maneuvers, relishing his dominance. He alienates Dryden by turning him away from the house and pushing him toward the horde now holding lines behind the fence.

“She’s not out here to save you this time boy,” Vagan snarls. With that he hooks a foot behind the heel of Dryden, while at the same time bringing his sword heavily down. Dryden is thrown off balance and falls, Vagan instantly pulling a knife from his boot and bringing it down over his head with power.

“Dryden!” Valmar calls anxiously.

The young athletic angel rolls and pushes off the ground. With some good fortune his shield collects the knife and left arm of Vagan. Feeling the precise impact point, Dryden cannot see, but he knows where Vagan’s arms must be. Swinging both swords in a precise arc behind him, Vagan is not expecting to have to be defensive. He sways from the right sword but can’t avoid suffering a rib blow from the left. The sword has little force behind it but its brilliance is enough to pierce armor and draw a pungent substance from the commander’s chest.

Vagan reels back, lifting an arm to inspect the damage, disbelieving that the youngster could get a strike on him. Regaining his feet, Dryden is winded and breathes unevenly, but affords a smile at Vagan.

Furious, Vagan launches forward with a reckless attitude. Dryden has to bend backwards to watch the sword pass narrowly over him. With incredible flexibility he manages to thrust his swords toward Vagan’s exposed bowel. One is off target but the other plunges deep into the abdomen. Dryden lets the handle go to roll away to the safety of the angels protecting the house.

Facing his men, Vagan drops his own sword and grabs onto the handle in his abdomen. “Get the woman...” he gasps to those staring at him in disbelief. The ground gapes open to swallow the commander, as he releases a short pained cry.

For a moment it is quiet. Everyone takes in what has just happened. Dryden’s bloodied sword lies on the grass where Vagan disappeared. Walking over, the angel kicks at the sword blade and flicks it up into his hand. He wipes it through his fingers, dispersing the dark fluid, and whisks it around several times at the demons. “Who’s next?”

The demonic throng hisses and snorts, baring strong biceps and taut forearms. Yet in the show of defiance and power, none step forward. Then with aggressive language and abuse they attempt to taunt the superior beings, inviting them to leave the protection of the cloud of light. The image of Vagan being dispatched, at the hands of an inexperienced light bearer, haunts the fallen. They are not prepared to venture in, and the light bearers need not leave.

As the portal holds open Marie moves to her bedroom and drops her knees

onto the carpet beside her bed. Burying her head in her hands she travails loudly to the heavens, “Jesus, surround my son with your angels. Bring him to your side, draw him to you. God have mercy! In the barren land find your son and bring him home. Bring about a victory for your kingdom this day...”

As the Father and Son absorb every word, a new power and authority of the Spirit is released thousands of miles away to an angel standing on top of an ambulance.

Valmar rushes to Dryden and throws an arm across his shoulders. “You’ve done it!”

Dryden looks modest but pleased. “She has done it!” he nods in the direction of the house.

“Then go and fulfill the role determined for you. You have done your job here beyond expectation. He waits for you now! May the Lord be with you, my friend.”

“And with you,” Dryden says as he reaches to warmly embrace his brother, “but don’t worry I will see you soon.” Bending a knee, Dryden pushes off the ground. He arcs rhythmically into the air, his white wings fanning out from behind his back. They lift him higher and higher as he turns once more to Valmar. The angel stands in front of the house watching him as he goes. He salutes the valor of the young angel and calls loudly after him, “that the bride of the Lamb may come forth!”

“In God’s mercy she will!” Dryden shouts back contentedly. Turning toward the West Pacific gate, Dryden is not challenged at the exit to the world. Within seconds he follows the funnels of light to the East African gate. Concerns quickly rise. “How will I ever get through? But this is the course I must take to get there in time. I do not understand. Yet the task would not be set for me if it were not possible, would it?” Hope rises as quickly as the concerns dull.

A stunning sight is exposed before him. A dozen angels of light stand ahead of him with a stern looking Captain in their lead. Fresh out of the throne room, the force have been released for a single purpose. Waiting for Dryden to approach they step into the crystallite funnel.

The gatekeepers keep an uneasy distance, knowing when to let it be. The chief gatekeeper scowls from behind his desk. The only opposition they offer is disparaging comments at the angels who push the barriers back. Dryden flies through at pace, unobstructed, mouth agape. “A whole force at the gate just for me?” the young angel gasps in disbelief.

Four of the light bearers draw upon golden bows pulled from off their backs, arrows in the shaft. The Captain calls to Dryden as he descends quickly over the Indian Ocean. “To victory my son; the kingdom of heaven comes to the earth!”

No one pursues Dryden under threat of the bow wielding angels. The gatekeepers hold their places squinting and chortling with reticence. At the

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Captain's signal, arrows are returned to quivers and the twelve light bearers step out of the funnel.

“At least this time the record will not look too bad for me,” the gatekeeper curses under his breath.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Swing of the Sickle

Weights on Ian's eyes compel them to shut, dragging the lids powerfully to his cheeks. His bare feet lie limply in the front of the vehicle. The little Renault jolts as it negotiates another narrow corner. "I'm barely awake! I have to stay conscious till I get anti-toxins. I have to stay alive until the hospital. Come on, Ian, stay awake!"

The ambulance takes the final turn on the coastal road and begins its long steady ascent up the mountain to the hospital. Ian's feet become noticeably elevated above his head. In moments he can feel the neurotoxins and poisons from his lower lymphatic system draining up his body. They encroach around his heart, neck and head. "This is crazy! Perhaps the driver can turn me around?" Ian opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. "I can't even talk, my mouth is so dry. How can I possibly stop the poisons free access of my vital organs?"

The mighty angel knows Ian is struggling, he can sense the nearness of death. Focusing his response to the physical state, Croydon plunges an arm through the roof. His hand stops across Ian's forehead. Looking up Croydon thrusts his other hand forward of the windscreen. Closing his eyes, Croydon concentrates, as if trying to hold back the breeze rushing over his palm. Slowly the vehicle steadies, struggling less with the labor of the hill climb. The dashboard clock reduces its consistent rhythm, first to half, then quarter, then to an eighth, of its regular pace.

"That is enough; you are nearly there Ian, but there is still much to be done," Croydon says quietly, rechecking the proximity of the frail body to death.

At the moment Ian lies rigid, eyes wide open. All free moisture has been pushed out of his body, sweat no longer bothers his eyes. He tilts his head gently to look at the trees passing by. They look like giant ogres meandering past with stooped shoulders. "What's going on? Everything's moving in slow motion! Is it just me? I can still hear the motor pulling hard but the trees are barely moving!" Puzzled, Ian turns back to the dirty colored roof lining. "My half consciousness must be blurring awareness of what is going on," he rationalizes.

Croydon hold his hand firmly on Ian's forehead. A black and white picture appears over the ceiling of the ambulance. A snowy headed boy is playing with

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a toy car on the floor of a 1950's lounge. Back and forth he pushes the wheels into the thin carpet. The little mouth burrs out noises for the Matchbox Ford. "Gee he's got white hair," Ian thinks. Fading, the scene transitions to a growing boy walking through a paddock. His feet are bare as he heads off on an across-the-farm adventure. The grass looks so lush and long.

In horror, Ian registers what is going on. "That's me! The snowy haired boy is me! What's happening? I've heard about this. Just before people die they see their life flash before them. It's as if I am looking at a movie of my life on the roof. Don't watch it Ian; fight death off!" He clenches a fist tightly onto the rail of the makeshift stretcher and tries to sit up. His body does not respond at all. Squeezing his eyes tight he forces a closure to the movie. His thoughts are racing as he feels a deep pain in his chest. "Why am I going to die? I'm too young for this. Why did I go diving? What an idiot! I should have stayed home. Why am I going to die? I'm not prepared for death."

Forcibly he calms himself, "Logically assess the situation Ian. Conduct a survey of your vital signs. Start with your legs. Move your left one." Focusing his energy onto his left leg, Ian wills it to lift. Nothing happens. "Alright maybe that was a little ambitious; move your right, start with the toes." There is no response to the signals from his brain. Tension lifting higher, Ian moves through each limb and muscle; none of them will respond. Tilting his head slightly, he tenses his left hand again that seemed to be working a moment ago. All of a sudden he is not sure whether it responded or not. "I can't even tell if my body is moving!"

Quieting his spasmodic breathing Ian listens intently, closing his ears to the road and vehicle noise. Breathing out in relief he finally hears it... that rhythmic slow beat we all have. "Thank God my heart is okay, but it's so faint! All that's working is the last gasp of my heart, my hearing and some of my sight. If I die, is there life after death, or is there nothing? What'll happen when I die? Where will I go?" The questions surge from the hidden depths in Ian's gut. He did not know the questions were there until now.

Croydon breaths out, relieved to finally here a cry from the embattled soul. The opening of Ian's spirit has begun. The mighty light bearer closes his eyes and internally begins to plead for the Creator to give grace.

"But I'm an atheist. When you die the worms get you. There's nothing out there... Then again I have been wrong before! Am I a gambling atheist? It's like playing Russian roulette; the loaded pistol is at my temple. What am I to choose? If I'm wrong where will I end up? Could I possibly have missed the most important thing in this life?" A shudder of regret pushes at Ian's heart and suddenly he recognizes a void of absence. "I have no idea where I am going, but I know I am about to find out!"

Croydon convulses in subdued sobs that grow in intensity. He can feel the deep sense of abandonment and fear through his hand. "Come on, Ian. Open

up. Take that step towards Him. He is gentle, loving, gracious and forgiving. He is better than life. He is your beloved, your promise and you are His. He is ever near you, poised to run to you.”

A portal twists above the ambulance travelling in slow motion along the quiet road. The mighty angelic being basks in the light. The portal loops through the throne room to a weeping mother thousands of miles away.

Staring at the roof of the ambulance, a clear vision of Marie opens in front of Ian. She is on her knees in the bedroom, hands raised, smeared tears upon her face. “She’s praying for me, I know it. She was always praying for me, weeping for me. I used to mock it. Well Mum, here I am about to slip away without finding that God of yours. Sorry, it’s too late now. Perhaps you did know a thing or two; maybe you were right all along, but your praying isn’t going to help me now. Do I believe there is a God? Am I going to pray? I’ve almost become a devout atheist. I don’t believe in anything out there in the cosmos.” Somehow Ian’s body finds a little moisture to push into his tear ducts.

Great angel hands rest on Marie and Ian’s heads at either end of the portal. She is kneeling in her bedroom just as Ian is seeing in the vision. Knowing it is time, Valmar speaks gently into Marie’s ear. The obedient servant speaks words from many years before. Ian hears her clearly on the dirty vinyl ceiling of the Renault. “Ian, no matter how far you think you’ve gone away from God, no matter what you’ve done wrong in your life, if you will call out to God from your heart, he will hear you and he will forgive you.”

A gentle thump hits the ambulance roof. Absorbed in what was happening, Croydon has dropped his guard. Instantly his hand moves to his sword. Before it draws he smiles. “Dryden! You’re right on time.”

“I was never going to let you have all the fun on your own,” Dryden laughs looking at Ian lying helplessly in the ambulance. Giant, white, feathered wings retract and hide under his cloak of light muslin. He drops the shield off his back in a smooth motion, examining the dent from Vagan’s dagger. Smiling, he whispers, “Thank you for your protection, Father.” Spinning the shield around, he places it solidly on the front windscreen ahead of the driver and Ian. His left forearm is secured in the rear keep, braced for whatever may be around the corner, while his right arm draws a sword, flexing at the ready. He glances down the shaft, checking its condition. The strong silver shaft bears no marks; it is as sharp as the day he got it.

Marie’s words swim around in Ian’s head. “God will hear me and forgive me? But if there is a God how could he forgive me? All those things I’ve done wrong; there are so many things!” Memories surface from the boat where he had been reminded of all the rebellion and darkness in his life. “And I mean, which God? Buddha, Kali, Shiva? There are thousands of them. I don’t know God.”

“Okay God. If you’re real, show me your face and then I’ll pray.” Ian is

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sincere in his first prayer to God for many years. In the silent response no face appears in the ambulance, just the lingering vision of his mother praying. Surprised to note he is disappointed, he flicks his head to the side, "My mother isn't God!"

"Maybe I do want to believe. My mother has only prayed to Jesus; she is a Christian. If anyone has projected who God is to me it's my mother. She is so gentle, never holding malice or evil words. She only prays to Jesus. Could it be a Christian God? But I'm a million miles from this God and his ideals. I remember those Ten Commandments. If it is this God then I'm in serious trouble, I know that much from Sunday school!" Ian grits his teeth in bitter regret, "I hate it when you are right, Mum. What would I pray anyway? I haven't prayed for years. What do you pray at this point? What's the prayer you pray if you're about to die?"

"Pray from your heart Ian, pray from your heart," Marie speaks as if she were beside him.

"But my heart is hard and cold, like stone. You could strike a match on it; it's like flint. I don't know if there is anything good in it. I can't pray from this heart!" Ian forces his teeth together even harder and turns his head further away.

"If you call out from your heart, he will forgive you. God will forgive you." The words will not go away; they keep cycling in his head.

A memory surfaces in the midst of the turmoil of his mind. "That's right mother, you taught me a prayer once; I remember it. Well, I used to know it anyway, I'm not sure that I can get it right but I can give it a go. That's what I'll pray now. I will mother; I will pray as you taught me, right at my last moments of life."

Sabre's large frame hovers a meter off the ground, straddling the centre line. Like a bull elephant blocking a forest trail he waits. An intense, powerful look is etched over his handsome but disturbing face. "Release him, foolish intruder!"

With a heinous call, the legionnaires leap out from the houses and bush surrounding the roadway. People and animals throughout the surrounding township wake in frenzied fear. The cacophony of noise arrests the quiet of the night. As the ambulance moves in slow motion, hundreds of powerful evil spirits engulf it.

The swing of Sabre's twelve foot sickle is perfect, passing through the vehicle at head height. Croydon leaps the black metal object as it passes between him and Ian and collects the base of Dryden's shield. The shield buckles and cracks under the powerful blow, knocking Dryden onto the side of the road. The sickle completes its arc, barely slowed by the shield, and passes through the head of the driver. He winces in pain, shaking and swerving before correcting his steering. Sudden throbbing in his head blurs his eyes.

Ian's mind blanks as despairing words, like darts, are shot from fallen beings close at hand. A poison sickens and kills his thoughts, making him fretful and frightened. "Fool! You've always relied on your mind to pull you through. Now you can't even remember the stinking prayer you want to pray. You're so arrogant in your academic capacity and now that's what is failing you. Your brain is dying!"

"No Ian, from your heart!" Croydon calls in desperation as he hovers above the ambulance. He thrusts an arm out, and time slows again, the vehicle barely moving along the road. "I'm not going to lose you; you are His!"

Dryden is forced to roll as he falls, narrowly avoiding the swing of a demonic sword. Recovering well, he scrambles up behind Croydon, swinging his cracked shield onto his back. He presses up against Croydon, who is engaging the arrogant stare of Sabre, feet back on the roof of the ambulance.

The demons mass around the vehicle like a thick black circle of ants. A wry smile passes over Sabre's face at the ease with which he has forced the light bearers off the human. He stands motionless, sickle upright beside him. "What fool would come into my land without support?" The two angels face off against nearly eight hundred powerful evil beings; it is a total mismatch.

The demonic lord searches Croydon's face immediately for recognition. Croydon says nothing. He can feel Dryden against his back; all four silver swords are drawn.

"Do I know you?" Sabre asks, turning his head slightly, peering in genuine interest at his opponent and sensing some familiarity. "You will know me; I am Sabre, victorious commander of this land. Undeclared in 6,300 years on this despised planet. But who are you, fledgling?" He pulls back his trench coat to reveal a thick dark belt notched repeatedly, representing angels he has dispatched during his time on the surface.

"There is no point in hiding any longer," Croydon thinks, so he lifts his hand and unclips the cape tied with a crested brooch above his chest. The brilliant blue material wavers through the air and drops silently onto the ground just behind the vehicle.

The action causes a murmur through the legion. Their eyes pass over his glimmering armor, his athletic physique, his straight back and strong masculine face; all eyes fix at his waist. His belt shimmers and sings in brilliance as if a breeze were blowing through it. There are no notches; rich gems are stuck all around it, ornately carved into magnificent patterns. "I am Croydon, dedicated servant of the most High God, the true architect of the heavens and the earth, the ruler over all domains and territories, and lover of man, all men."

Sabre's face straightens, smugness dissipating in a thoughtful sternness. "Croydon... Croydon..." He repeats to jog his memory. "Croydon... you... you were at Cairo. It was your hide that was saved by that cripple Simon." His mind flicks over a thousand years to the great challenge of the tenth century

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that threatened to martyr tens of thousands of Christians at the hand of Islam.

“No, we were not saved by a man, but by the worship of a people prepared to die for truth against a lie, prepared to die for freedom over constraint.”

“Huh,” grunts Sabre. “Had not the army of light intervened... had not the Creator broken the code, and moved the mountain, I would have whipped you, you are nothing without Him!”

“You’re correct; I am nothing but for Him. Do you care for me to remind you that you are not either, for His hand also fashioned you, all of you.”

“But he couldn’t control what he made, could he?”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t? He has always asked for compliance in love not forced will. It’s you who lost in the great separation. You were my brother, my equal, but now you are degrading; I pity you.”

“Enough pleasantries, scum, you are no brother of mine,” Sabre responds abruptly. Sabre’s mind is sharp as he remembers past conflicts. “I know you; we fought on that day... and I was the stronger. I also remember you at Constantinople, Morovia and Belarus. Why did you always manage to escape by some pitiful intervention?”

“That is what we are meant to be, brother, interveners, those who point to the great light. You are not made to suffocate them in darkness.” Croydon’s belt shines brilliantly, every demon knowing that prayer is empowering him.

“Enough I said! Your rhetoric is tiresome. Hand the child over,” Sabre states, concluding the conversation again.

“Master, shall I check the island for the source?” a burly commander whispers as an aside to Sabre. Not really thinking it through Sabre signals behind his back and the commander, with a unit of demons, scatter instantly.

Sabre focuses again on his enemy. Time constraints have gone as the light bearer has slowed it so heavily. Ian lies as a neutral beneath the angels; neither side has him under their direct influence.

Sabre moves around the front of the vehicle, strengthened as he spies the legion with his peripheral vision. “Numbers will count for something,” he thinks.

“You have no authority here. He is with us. Give him to us. Fly off while you can. You cannot possibly win against me.”

Croydon holds his stare but does not reply. “Father, help us,” he utters quietly under his breath.

Sabre is not fazed by the request, confident in his control. “And who is the minnow who follows you?”

Dryden speaks for himself, clearly and slowly as if to mock the intelligence of the fallen. “I am Dryden, the first agent of protection of this family and this man. I have been named and appointed as such by the Son himself, the one I serve with my life. He is the one who has already defeated you.”

Sabre stops for a moment; the understanding he has been seeking is revealed

instantly to him. Brooding to himself for a moment he anticipates a response. "I must be cautious; they have rights I could be at risk of underestimating. I cannot deal with the mother at this time, but she will falter; they all do." He looks up to stare at the still carcass of the man lying in the ambulance. Darkness shrouds the destiny still throbbing inside Ian; death is working only in his physical form. "I will have to do it here and now, even though it may be costly," he realizes.

The first wave strikes, launching from both sides of the vehicle. Meeting the defensive swords of the light bearers, they fluidly land adjacent to where they started. It is the start of an arduous test of strength, a searching of defensive techniques for a weakness. Croydon and Dryden match this first volley with relative ease. Two new groups of ten pass again in quick succession, though this time passing fractionally closer. The process will continue as long as necessary, to wear the light bearers down and to find the point of victory.

Sabre stands back monitoring the scene, walking back and forth in front of the vehicle impatiently. He studies every move and touch of Croydon as the demons move through. A condescending smile crosses his face as he speaks. "You cannot succeed here. You are weak and hopelessly outnumbered. You are ill prepared. Where is your Master's help now? He has neglected and abandoned you at your moment of need. Surrender the boy. Spread your pitiful wings and take flight or you die upon our lances."

Amidst the fighting Croydon manages a reply. "I am not here beyond my call or my destiny. The heart of the Father has allowed this intervention. I am not here carelessly; he is to be given his choice."

Squeezing his eyes together Sabre looks again at the lifeless body in the ambulance, trying desperately to foresee what sits upon Ian. "Where is the sage when I need him? The boy will die, I can see that, but there is something more, I know it. Why can I not fully understand it? I am missing something."

The question spills out of his frustrated blindness, "Who was he to be?" Sabre lifts a hand and the demonic passes of the light bearers cease to allow Croydon to answer unrestricted.

"Are you still so blind in your knowledge brother? How can you ever understand the Father's heart? That is for Him to know. You know only what He has chosen for you to understand. You have no right to know, but I will help you. He is being given a choice, like all men. The choice has always been there, ever since the beginning, you know that. Whether it is sixty years left for Ian or five minutes, that is not for us to decide, you know that as well. But this day, I stand here to hold out a choice to this man. He can choose the peace offered by the Son; the victory wreath can be received for his life. Or he can choose his own foolishness and pride. He can choose life or death, light or darkness. The Son is at his door, knocking. He cries to be let in, His hand upon the latch. Whether I live or die is not important. Love has brought me here, and love will prevail."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

No One Can Forgive

Words ring in Ian's ear, "From your heart..." His eyes close in a desperate search within the void of sadness he feels.

"I cannot find my heart... there is no good in me. What possibly can I find in my heart? Who am I? I am an empty shell. I have nothing in me, no good left. In my darkest hour there is nothing in the reservoir of my heart. I drained and abandoned it long ago." As he tips his head, somehow a cry squeezes through his parched lips. "God, I don't know how to pray. There is nothing good in my heart. If you see anything good in my heart, help me. I want to pray. Help me to pray."

They all hear it, freezing as the words spill into the atmosphere. For a moment everything sits suspended in time. The rally from Ian's spirit was not expected by either side. Croydon and Dryden stop and stare in awe at the hollow frame that managed to release the cry to the Creator. Sabre's eyes dart over the houses, then the bush and the skies. The land and the heavens hold their black hues, offering no change. Sabre breathes out again in relief and turns to Croydon.

The legion pushes in on the angels. With Ian's cry the commanders have been forced to order a stronger assault. Mighty muted black warriors leap forward at the light bearers, willing their sword to be the one that passes through an angelic body.

Dryden swings the shield off his back, slipping his right arm tightly in behind it. Still holding his sword, the cracked and twisted shield now has two feet of the gleaming silver stretching out of its base. The sharp weapon glistens in the ambient night light as he stretches the new weapon horizontal to the ground. Beginning to rotate with increasing speed, the protruding shaft defiantly resists the massing demons.

Croydon has no time to spare. He drops his hand onto Ian's head. Immediately words appear on the roof of the ambulance. "Forgive us our trespasses and sins."

The first and second volleys of attack are unable to threaten the light bearers. Dryden's unusual maneuver is effective, but the horde is thickening. The dark forces close in for the kill. As the words linger in front of Ian, Croydon is forced completely flat on the ambulance under a low wide swing of Sabre's sickle.

Suddenly, to the north the sky lights up with brilliant golden flamed white light. The cry for help has not gone unnoticed as a salvo of thirty arrows arch high above the trees. In unison they begin their descent. They fall with precision to the right of the ambulance. Dark beings collapse on the ground, the stench of sulfur filling the air. Caught totally by surprise the whole legion looks about in disbelief, taking their focus off the ambulance. The roadway and verges open up as the bodies bubble in a mass before disappearing to the underworld. The yawning ground closes the wounded retreating with curses at the pain.

The fallen trace the arrows back from the direction they came. The sixty horsemen are out of sight, the portent of their glowing haze bearing down low over the surrounding houses. The horses breathe heavily as manes fly in the haste. Horsemen at the rear stand upright in their saddles to draw on large bows. The second salvo raises high in the air. The demons stand dumbstruck as the arrows reach their apex then begin to descend. Falling onto those massed on the left of the ambulance, many dodge the shots, but in the congestion others are trapped.

The front horsemen rise above houses and trees into full view, swords drawn to engage the demons at the outer reaches of the dark circle. With them a throng of foot soldiers shout a melodic battle cry. "For the King and for his bride. Let the glory of the Creator be revealed!"

Shaken by Sabre's barking commands, the legion gather into tighter clusters before the ambulance. They still outnumber the light bearers by more than five to one, but the horsemen are a different concern.

Lord Sabre is not unprepared for such opposition. A commander behind the ambulance whistles and from out of the shadows ten hidden demons pull unwieldy catapults. The heavy equipment looks obsolete; as it is difficult for the kingdom of darkness to forge elegant weapons in the spirit world. Yet the rough mechanisms are still very powerful. Heavy spears are loaded, and tension applied by the operators, as the gauge is adjusted toward the closing horsemen.

Dryden has stopped spinning, as surprised as the demons at the approaching army of light. He drops beside Croydon as five vicious javelins sail over their heads. Two sail harmlessly above the targets' heads, as another one strikes accurately at the foot soldiers. Explosions of light illuminate the night sky as three light bearers fall. The other two strike at the horsemen. As one horse falters, the rider spills onto the ground beside a large tree, toppling two others on his way. The legion cheer, their courage rousing, as the operators jostle for new ammunition.

"Forgive me my sins? The prayer doesn't start there! It's in the wrong order... so what... I had better try it anyway. I've not been that bad a person. I try to help others." Every thought echoes out amongst the spirit beings. A flood of

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memories come back to Ian's mind as demons closer to the side of the vehicle throw quick accusations.

"You hurt her."

"You used others."

"You fool, no one can forgive..." The words drop off as Dryden's broken shield slips down beside Ian.

Ian finds resolve; Croydon's hand is still upon his head. From his heart it comes. "Okay God, I've done a lot of things wrong. I can't possibly list all my sins, because there are so many. In fact I don't know how you could forgive me for these things. But if you can do it, then I ask you to forgive my sins. I know they were wrong. I don't know how you can do it, but please forgive me. God forgive me."

The sincerity of the plea even amazes Croydon. His face softens in the midst of the imminent danger surrounding him. A silver blade slips under two chains draping Ian's body. The limp body heaves with the pull. The chains snap and fall off as Ian's chest settles back easier than before.

Sabre's head droops as the chains dissipate. He has no choice now; it will be a costlier victory than he intended. Lifting his arms he signals the demonic horde to split into two groups. Like a mass of giant ants, twelve deep, the first group encircles the ambulance. All weapons are drawn at the ready, whether sickle, sword, axe or club. They prepare to throw themselves upon the ambulance.

Whistling overhead is the ominous shrill of another volley of fiery arrows. The tight bunching now reduces the arrows' effectiveness as all but three shafts are deflected off. Where a demon is struck the circle quickly closes over and the matt black shroud shuffle forward, inch by inch.

The demonic group musters in front of the ambulance, line upon line, prepared now to take the horsemen and foot soldiers head on. The second salvo of heavy spears is released from the catapults toward the horsemen. With dazzling flashes three horsemen disappear in an instant.

The gap is barely fifty meters as the army of light also separate in two. The fallen were expecting a direct assault on the critical land surrounding the ambulance. Instead the light bearers prepare to pass them by, causing the tightly clustered lines of fallen warriors to curse as they pass by out of striking distance. The angelic lines circle to strike at the catapults at the rear of the ambulance. They are about to nullify the weapons to protect a more powerful group approaching.

Realizing he has left the catapults exposed, Sabre quickly directs lines to protect the rear. The changing orders are all happening so quickly that an element of confusion is setting into the legion.

Dryden has taken over ministering to Ian. As his hand rests upon Ian's dampened hair, more words appear in the top of the ambulance. "Forgive

those who have trespassed and sinned against you.”

Croydon stands tall on the ambulance roof. His feet push out against the brackets of the roof rack, thigh muscles rippling as he flexes. Dropping the lion crest shield off his back he swings it about with a smooth action. Despite it being significantly larger and heavier than Dryden’s he moves as if it were cardboard. Holding its sharp base edge out perpendicular to his body with his left arm, Croydon’s right arm brandishes one of his straight silver shafts.

The demons shout and launch simultaneously from all sides of the ambulance. Ten to fifteen aggressive demons leap forward, hundreds packed in around them. They snarl and salivate, anticipating their belt notch in reward of the kill.

Poised beautifully Croydon’s feet stabilize him. He can only be described as magnificent as he sways and twists his upper body. The sword does most of the damage, powerfully slicing to his right and rear. His shielded arm is far from defensive, as it swats demon after demon to his left and front. Within moments a dozen have fallen at his feet, armor pierced. The carcasses scarcely touch the ground before it swallows them in desperate hunger. Where the blow is not fatal they roll off, fingers scratching for grip into the road surface, none wanting to be engulfed by the underworld. The air is thickening in a hazy stench. Dryden looks up stunned as he holds his hand on Ian’s head. He has never seen such a single display of might; Croydon is striking powerful demons down like flies.

Ian understands what the prayer means and that he must forgive those who have hurt him. “Well that’s easy to do. I’m not a vindictive person by nature. I’m not revengeful. I don’t hold grudges. I can forgive. Heaps of people have ripped me off and back-stabbed me, said bad things against me and done things to me, but I can forgive them, no matter what they’ve done.”

Things are not going well for Sabre. He prepares to deal with Croydon himself, when something catches his attention out of the corner of his eye. He turns to look down the road ahead of them.

A growing rumble resonates through the air as, thundering at a full gallop, meters above the road is a new light. Long silver spears rest on top of chariot frames extending beyond the two white horses that pull each one. They ride three abreast in ten rows, creating the look of a column much longer. Each horse has a splash of gold armor marking them down the length of their faces. The plate glistens in the dark night, as it is fixed to the bridle and reigns. Nostrils flare and mouths grip and heave with pleasure in the charge. Each wheel hub has shiny eighteen inch silver blades protruding from it. Charioteer capes flay behind in the draught, as they tie down the reigns onto the chariot frame to free both arms. They brandish the lance in one and a great sword in the other.

“No!” Sabre shouts, realizing why the horsemen had not made the frontal

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attack. He throws himself forward over the group of demons moving to protect the catapults, landing on the road ahead of the charioteers.

Sabre's shout has caused everyone to turn. The attack on Croydon stops, as demons settle back on the ground to take in the change. A murmur ripples through the legion as the brilliance dazzles them.

"It's true that they are in the earthly realms!" gasps one legionnaire familiar with the stories. Like many, he has never been certain which parts of the stories were true.

Senior demons who have faced them before quickly try to motivate the flagging legion. "They are just light bearers; they fall like any normal soldier." A commander barks, "Just watch the wheels to the sides, time your jump right, avoid the lances and hooves to the front."

Croydon retains his shield and sword in position, muscles twitching from the exertion expended. His mouth is open as he breathes heavily. A look of excitement on his face he tilts his head back and calls, "Glory to the Lamb! You step into your dominion with authority. Thank you!"

Having to give up on protecting the catapults the legion musters in behind Sabre. The lord of the island stands stern and confident. His dry, expressionless face stares down the new challenge. He relishes the opportunity to fight such a group. However, the salivating and snarling of the legion has been replaced by grumbling reluctance. Commanders prod and push demons onto the front line.

With a crash the horsemen arrive at the catapults, cutting through the heavy wood and metal with powerful swings. The unprotected operators are trampled under hooves.

There are now no exit points for the legion as the back and sides of the area are sealed off by the horsemen grouping in threes, interspersed with the foot soldiers. They form as large a semi circle as they can, waiting now for the chariots to close in from the front. The legion regroups around the ambulance, but it turns away from Croydon to face the horsemen. It is an odd look as the vastly outnumbered light bearers command a dominant position.

Croydon lifts his arms to heaven, the portal instantly opening. The face of the Indian taxi driver appears in the ambulance roof. "What is this man doing here?" Ian scowls.

A familiar voice speaks. "Will you forgive this man for pushing you out of his car tonight and leaving you for dead?"

"What, that man?" Ian responds indignantly. "You must be joking, why should I?"

Immediately the face of the Chinese hotel owner appears overtop of the taxi driver. "And what's he doing here?" Ian scowls again, malice increasing in his voice.

"Will you forgive this man for not taking you in his car tonight and leaving

you to die?”

Sabre is swift and powerful but unable to use a weapon in the move. He leapfrogs the lines facing the chariots in a summersault, throwing himself broad beamed at a pace greater than any other demon has managed. His body hits the tensed thighs of Croydon, who is caught off guard by the move. Sabre curls his right arm down, also latching onto the chest and neck of Dryden crouching down over Ian. The portal closes instantly as the angels are thrown from the ambulance. Three beings spill onto the road behind the ambulance between the two opposing forces of light and darkness.

In the tumble, Croydon loses a sword. It falls by the dark forces at the rear of the ambulance. They stare at it as if it were some alien technology, none daring enough to pick it up. Croydon draws his second sword as Sabre gains his feet. The two mighty beings face each other. Sabre nods at the shield in Croydon's left arm. Looking down at it for a moment, Croydon flicks it back over his shoulder in a gentlemanly gesture. He is prepared to face Sabre without that advantage.

Dryden gathers himself to the side. He looks anxiously at Ian lying unprotected in the taxi, before looking back to his senior officer. The demons have not jumped on Ian. They ease their backs in until the ambulance is touched on all sides by trench coats, content that no light bearer will gain easy access.

In the desperate move Sabre has swung the pendulum. Ian thinks on his own and for himself. He is left with the image of the two faces lingering in the taxi. He had other plans for both these men if he came through this. Imagining his hands on their throats, his thoughts betray him to the opposing forces. “Are you okay? Why... are you having problems breathing? Don't worry; you won't have a throat left soon!” The vengeful scenarios course through his mind.

“No, I won't,” he concludes in stubborn anger. “I won't forgive them; they deserve to be punished.” No more words appear and everything drops into a holding pattern. Time ticks ever so slowly as Ian's mind is left contemplating his choices. A wicked demon puts a hand back and grasps Ian's foot, an icy death grip pouring into Ian's spirit.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sabre v Croydon

Sabre circles round his foe fondling his sickle with a sense of delight. “We know I am stronger Croydon. Don’t foolishly rest on the authority the woman gives you. Despite her you will fall to my cut. We have him. I will not let him go. You can pull back now, escape from this foolishness with your life, just like the other times.” Croydon twists to carefully monitor the demon lord, keeping his legs firmly planted on the road.

The clang of metal breaks the slow conversation; the chariots have met the front line. The riders strike at the legion directly in front of the ambulance. Long lances pierce the outer edge of the mass. Demons swinging at the charioteers are largely ineffective against the speed and power of the column. The lines part as the fallen push back to avoid the hooves and sharp silver hubs. Still the legion is desperately trying to hold onto control of the ambulance. As the second and third rows enter the enemy ranks, they ride slightly wider. Like an arrow head the column split the black mass. A sickening stench leeches from the ground as over a dozen powerful demons end their time on the surface.

In strong positions now, the horsemen select arrows from quivers on their backs. They target, at close range, the exposed joints in the demonic armor and the ensuing volley of light picks off another dozen demons. Four commanders at the rear of the ambulance step out in front of their men. With superior reflexes they begin to deflect many of the fiery arrows, but their power cannot protect them all. It is a slaughter.

Sabre understands he is watching an imminent capitulation of his legion. The charioteers are preparing to part and split the legion around the ambulance. Turning his back to Croydon he accelerates; with ease he passes over his warriors and lands on the ambulance bonnet. The huge demonic lord is extraordinarily supple. Stepping forward off the bonnet, Sabre weaves to avoid the front charioteer’s swing. Twisting in a fluid pirouette Sabre’s sickle arcs and decapitates the rider. A burst of light and incense illuminates the scene. The driverless chariot pulls away from the battle, forcing chariots beside and behind to slow in evasive action.

Sabre strikes immediately at the other lead chariot, plowing his sickle along the metallic frame before collecting one of the horse’s rear legs. The animal crumbles and the chariot collapses in a mass of flesh and metal. The column

has lost momentum, forced into taking a wider berth to avoid the powerful strongman striding forward to challenge them.

Seeing charioteers falling rallies the legion. Clustering into smaller groups, they attack at closer range. Two manage to mount the rear of a chariot and dispatch the rider. Part way through the column two horses are dismembered by a commander.

Despite this, it is increasingly apparent that the column is far too swift and powerful. Chariot losses are minor compared to the fallen mowed down as each chariot turns in wide arcs, light streaming behind them. The demons near the ambulance break rank and surge back to the main group. The ambulance is engulfed in light as the legion regroups on the road ahead. Sabre curses the charioteers now avoiding him twelve meters in front of the ambulance. His foot warriors have little answer for the dominant force.

Croydon and Dryden negotiate their way through the chariots to resume positions with Ian. Croydon looks intently at the seething Sabre. Dryden puts a hand on his shoulder, "Sir, it is inevitable you face him, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Dryden thinks for a few moments and then continues. "It is okay, Sir. We are in this with you. Whether it is until the Masters will is fulfilled... or we are done. Be confident Sir; if you were ever to take him it is now."

Croydon smiles back at the young warrior. "Thank you friend; you are indeed a faithful servant of the King."

Ian thinks it through. "That voice, those words, is this God dealing with me? If it is, then I have to listen. I've got to forgive them, but I don't want to. Give me one good reason why I should forgive them?"

There is no reply to the question. Ian realizes he is in a catch twenty-two situation. "If I don't forgive them, God won't forgive me. This whole thing could actually be true. This is where the rubber hits the road. Is that God speaking to me?" As Ian stares at the faces he knows that they are the tip of the iceberg of the people in life he needs to forgive.

A distant memory surfaces from Sunday school. "What was it Jesus said? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The words hit Ian's heart. "Jesus life view was so disparate from my own. I am so self orientated. He was able to forgive the very ones killing him."

The words spill into the atmosphere. "Okay, I'll forgive them. If you can forgive me for all the rotten stuff I've done, well... I don't know how you can do that... but if you can, then I can forgive them. I forgive them."

Dryden slices his sword through two more chains inhibiting Ian's spirit. As he does, the change occurring within the young man accelerates. Light has been welling up since he started to pray; now, as the light intensifies, it is met by a narrow beam from above. Barely visible to those around, a wispy mist is forming in the light. Drops of liquid life gather as the narrow beam broadens

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a fraction. They fall back onto the besieged body lying on the stretcher.

Ian takes a deep breath. Despite being near death he can feel the lightness over him. "I've let something go, something I did not even know I was holding onto!" Quickly he breathes out to allow another gulp of fresh air blowing in through the window; his spirit is lifting.

Standing above Ian an image runs through Croydon's mind. Instantly he recognizes it as a premonition. He watches a young Chinese woman run down the aisle of an Edwardian styled church. Ian stands in the pulpit waiting for her. There is an incredible look of light and life on him. "Forgive us, forgive us! I am from Tamarin Bay, that man is my uncle; will you forgive what my family did to you?" the young girl weeps.

Ian's speaks freely. "I forgave them in the ambulance years ago; of course I forgive you."

Croydon turns to Dryden, startled at the vision. Dryden has not seen it. He is preoccupied by the chariots that have wheeled about to face the breaking legion. Demons stranded from the main group are still being picked off as the horsemen and foot soldiers step forward to close in the rear of the ambulance.

"What? Is he still to live? Death is not to be permanent? His destiny may still work itself out, but how?" Croydon keeps the puzzled questions to himself.

New words in the prayer appear in the roof of the ambulance. "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Ian seriously contemplates the significance of the statement. He does not take it lightly and is unsure of his capacity to say it. "I've lived my own selfish way for twenty six years. I've been doing my own thing. I've never given my life to God and His will. Whatever He is doing in heaven I have definitely not been doing on earth. But I need a miracle. I have been my own boss, my own god. It's been all about me, about myself. This is going to have to stop now and I will have to live under a different code."

Croydon has been expecting the attack, just as the legion has been waiting for leadership. Leaping high in the air above the chariots, Sabre swats arrows from the horsemen with his heavy arm protectors as if they were blades of grass. Croydon meets him in mid-air. The dark lord has drawn a dagger to complement his long sickle, while the captain of light holds just one thin silver sword. Croydon leaves the shield on his back, forces of light and darkness all watching in anticipation.

The two mighty beings circle and weave, striking, blocking and counter striking. Sabre looks to have the upper hand as he uses both weapons with great effect to push Croydon into defensive moves only. A cheer resonates through the demonic throng as Sabre breaches the light bearer's defenses and cuts across Croydon's left bicep. The demonic lord wryly smiles at his foe, giving the being of light a moment of respite. A light oozing liquid flows from the cut. Croydon withdraws the injured arm behind him but holds his

ground.

Dryden looks on anxiously. “This is no time for chivalry Croydon. Use your shield; Sabre is using two weapons!” Turning, he spots his leader’s second sword lying on the ground by the chariots now. “It’s too distant for him to gather and I should not leave Ian... Think, think, think...” Suddenly he stands; as he lifts his arms straight up a portal forms above his head, “... that the Son be revealed!”

Marie has become militant as she walks about her lounge. The behavior is out of character for the normally passive woman, but something knots deep in her stomach. She stops and puts her hands on her knees for a moment. Standing again a look of fire is in her eyes, “All majesty to the God of all creation! You are beyond comparison in your might. Father! Father! Release your power and overcome the attack of the enemy. Strike him down and save my son! Release your power! Break the enemy’s hold, bring salvation this day!” The words ricochet high into the heavens.

Dryden bows and tightly grips the roof rack of the ambulance. The massive pulse hits with a crack, the ground trembling under the intensity. It smacks the entire legion off the road verges and into the surrounding trees and houses. Blinded, Sabre is disarmed of his sickle as he falls back to a clear piece of ground. Tensing, he leans forward into the pulse, but Croydon follows him and lands a solid kick onto his chest. Sabre drops, winded, onto a fence by the roadside.

With a rousing cheer, radiant beings, a mixture of charioteers, horsemen and foot warriors, secure the battle site. The legion regain their feet and mill about, looking to Sabre for further leadership. Breathing heavily Croydon stands waiting outside of the angelic group. His muscles flex and twitch; and with each little twist he makes eyes with the legion. Suddenly seen for all he is, he stands tall. A foot soldier retrieves and humbly presents a gleaming silver shaft back to the leader, bowing in submission.

Dryden looks deeply into the fading eyes. “Come on Ian, you can do it,” he whispers passionately.

Ian is still processing everything, just two chains restricting his full freedom. Dryden grips the heavy bond of self reliance in his hand, still looking directly into Ian’s face. “Come on,” he repeats, “it’s time you acknowledge you can’t do it your way. I cannot free you unless you accept this.”

Gradually Ian’s thoughts clear. “God, if I come through this... I have no idea what your will is; I know it’s not to do evil things... but, if I come through this, I will find out what your will for my life is and I’ll try to accomplish it. I’m independent and self reliant. But that is going to change. I turn over the reins to you. I’ll make a point of following you wholeheartedly with everything I’ve got. Okay? Do you hear that? I submit my life to your will. Come into my life. Be my Lord and Savior.”

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“That’s it Ian! And with the authority vested in me, and in the name of our Lord Jesus, I declare you free!” As Dryden rips the remaining chains off, Ian’s body heaves then drops back to the stretcher. Desperate to shout an emotional victory Dryden opens his mouth but is knocked flat onto the base of the ambulance beside Ian before another word is uttered.

Dryden lies there unable to lift himself up, laughter initially trying to escape his chest as the crescendo of power spills from the heavens. His open mouth breathes in everything it can of the vibrant rushing wind passing by. Soon the laughter subsides and he begins to shake and sob. Years of hope smeared with disappointment pale into the past. Rich fulfillment repairs every moment of grief in his brave heart. “Hope is always rewarded. Thank you Master,” he manages to weep.

Feeling the heat of the light streaming down the portal on their backs, the army of light austere turns, basking in the warmth. They know what they are about to observe. It is undeniably the most incredible spectacle to be seen in the earthly realms. The shadow living in Ian for so long, that dead being of his spirit, is about to be born.

Moment by moment it intensifies. The shade of grey in the young man’s body threatens to crack. Weakening, it seems to rattle and shake, as an unearthly glow of light pushes from within. At first it appears to only be absorbing and reflecting the light of the Father. But as it continues, Ian’s spirit looks as if it is swelling as well as brightening. The burgeoning light continues. Light bearers shield their eyes as the light of the Father and his child intensifies. The spirit swells, looking like it is about to burst. Suddenly it happens. With an eruption of flames and light the spirit of Ian ignites, the grey shroud instantly burnt off. Flowing out of him and rising up into the portal is a light, the same as that coming from the Father. The real Ian, the inner man, is bursting from his skin, the dreariness peeled off. His body shines as he is saturated in the light. His persona has instantly changed.

Tilting his head back, Ian’s mouth opens to drink in the light. An indescribable and incredible presence and power comes in. “Oh my God! What a rush!” he whispers. His breathing steadies and he stares at the roof, wondering what he has actually done. Assurance rises in his heart and for the first time in life he is at ease. A desire for love is kindled, an expectation of hope coming alive. “I’ve just met the Maker of the Universe. Everything Mum said was true! The sting of death is not in a jellyfish, nor cancer, nor an accident or a knife. No, the sting of death was sin, and it’s broken off me... I’m free... I’m free... I’m free! Finally I know what it is to be at peace!”

Ian has resurrection life inside of him, and his spirit understands it all. It rises and wells up within him and bursts into life. The second death has no power over him anymore and he is finally in a place close to what he was created to be. His God space inside is filled. Waves of peace are flowing over him through

the light. As he looks at the ambulance roof Ian sees the complete prayer and understands what it really means.

Finally able to stand again in the burst of Father light, Dryden has Ian's last chains dangling in his hand. Lifting them high in victory, he looks up to the Father in acknowledgement, and casts them toward the remnants of the legion. They instantly dissipate as they hit the ground, and the army of light cheer again in joyous delight.

Sabre curses, turns and wanders off through a patch of bush; it will take months for him to recover from the losses he has suffered. Following his lead, the legion begins to break away in twos and threes, returning to where they had begun the evening. The wounded are left, without pity or assistance, to hobble off alone.

The charioteers wheel their vehicles back around to face the ambulance. Similarly the horsemen pull around. Arm in arm the foot soldiers link and begin to sing in unison a spontaneous song. It's fresh, like nothing ever heard before. It lifts their spirits and worships the very source of the victory:

“The angels of the Lord camp around you.
Let Him hold you in His arms and tenderly caress you.
Like a hedge around a field and ocean by an island.
The Lord is a fire no man can pass.

So hold him now, stand with him now.
Hold him close, in your embrace.

The angels of the Lord camp around you.
Warriors of power, ministers of glory.
Like a forest on the hills and grass upon the meadows.
His army shall hold strong defeating all in battle.

In Him there is protection, healing arms that hold you safe.
His arms are sweet caressers, smile upon His face.
Like a watchman on the wall, a tower to the village.
The Lord is a warrior, skilled and mighty in war.”

Tears flow as the beautiful melodies flow and they lift their arms in devoted worship. Horses treading their feet to the militant theme provide a driving drum-like percussion. Light dust lifts off the road and grassed area around them, drifting up in a cacophony of adoration throughout the island.

Ian doesn't understand it all but he gets a fair bit of it. That was his prayer for salvation. Not from his head, but from his heart. He had asked, “God forgive me for my wickedness and evil-doing. God cleanse me. I forgive all

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those who have hurt me. And Jesus Christ, I'll do your will; your will be done. I will follow you." He had prayed a sinner's prayer, the repentant prayer to God. God had responded and now he is finally alive. He can feel the life pulsing in him, so contradictory to his physical state. "I know I'm dying but why am I so at peace about it! This is unreal! For the first time in my life I have no fear. I know it! For the first time I have touched God and actually heard Him. I'd have never heard Him if I hadn't had this accident, but now I hear Him speaking, like He is right here beside me, whispering, reassuring, loving... no one else could have told me the Lord's Prayer. I've made peace with my Maker."

Croydon pushes through the excited army of light, who have engulfed the heroes. He pushes his way through to Dryden where they share a tight and lengthy embrace. The mighty being of light then climbs up the ambulance bonnet. He lifts his arms and raises his voice to a volume seldom heard from the austere light bearer. The call rings out for the entire island to hear. "Yes! Yes! Yes! The Lord is victorious in battle. His name goes forward. The Lord is praised. It is for you all, there is no limit, and there is no end. Life! Yes, life! It is for all His creation to taste. Come, drink and be filled, that you may thirst no more. Come taste of the Father of Creation. It is He who made you. It is He who has loved you from the beginning. Come and drink, His children!"

As they sleep, new hope rises in hearts distant from God. The miracle of love is strengthened, suppressed spirits reaching out from the barred windows of their prisons. Meanwhile an ill dread fills the pits of fallen stomachs. Fear and desolation creep over them. Always deep in them hides the tinge of a longing for life they once tasted.

The army of light swing crested shields from off their backs and lift them high. With clenched fists they beat the outside in acknowledgement of Croydon and Dryden, who humbly deflect the attention of the salute. As the celebration ends, charioteers and horsemen simultaneously shout and lift into the skies. Leaving a trail of light behind them, their mission here is now complete. The foot warriors linger. Brothers in the battle of this suppressed island for many years; they encourage and lift each other up. Reluctant to give up on the moment of victory they gradually leave in the direction from which they came, excited and empowered. It has been quite an experience for them all.

Croydon is struggling to hold the normal resolve he portrays. He turns to Dryden and puts an arm around his shoulder again and kisses him warmly on the forehead. The two warriors share a moment as tears roll freely in the relief that victory brings. They are alone once more on the quiet road. The ambulance crawls along the road as Croydon releases his embrace. Thrusting his right arm forward he concentrates hard. Air starts to rush through his fingers as time is returned to its normal pace and the ambulance veers around

corners. Soon it makes the final turn towards the hospital.

Ian stares in contented shock at the roof. The light pulsing within him causes a smile to creep over his face. “What irony; I’m finally alive, yet I’m nearly dead. What a time to know life!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Final Curtain

It's 1.05am and the hospital car park is finally in sight. The driver pulls up to the emergency entrance, jamming on the hand brake and throwing his door open. He pulls a wheelchair up beside the passenger door. Grabbing Ian under the arms he drags the limp body off the stretcher and into the chair. Ian's head wobbles and hangs limply to the side; he has lost all control over his bodily functions. The driver flicks Ian's feet onto the pedestals and runs him up the concrete ramp. The old World War II army hospital was deserted by the British and turned over to the local people. It looks derelict, dirty and decrepit as the Creole lack resources to maintain it properly.

It has been a quiet evening for the three demons that wait near reception. There are often many more on hand to assist in realm changes, last minute decisions, and disputes that flare up. One of the three has just arrived and he talks in low tones to the other two about the latest news. The report is sketchy and the fallen are cynical but they listen intently. As the two light bearers enter they hear the tail of the story... "They say chariots were there."

"Impossible," retorts one of the others. "They are never in this realm; it's a lie."

Croydon has gathered his gown around him to look less imposing. As they walk in, the demons shift their gaze. Extraordinary light emanating from Ian draws in their line-of-sight. They eye the tall light bearer suspiciously. "What are you doing here, light master?" one enquires of Croydon, who has not successfully fooled the fallen.

"Our child is coming home," Croydon responds calmly, maintaining a persona that nothing is irregular.

"Humph," grunts the demon as the light bearers pass, "you pathetic beings are starting to celebrate death more than we do."

Dryden holds his breath, anxious that they do not detect anything out of place. He checks Ian thinking, "There is little evidence to arouse suspicion. It's totally appropriate for the child of light to be accompanied by light bearers..." As his eyes move over Croydon, Dryden can see bright light casting out from between folds in his gown; a chuckle escapes his throat, "...though Croydon is not quite normal around here!"

The demons return to their more interesting discussion of strange rumors

spreading. A tired nurse meets the wheelchair in the foyer. She slaps a blood pressure kit around Ian's left arm and pumps. Ian can feel nothing. Frustrated the nurse hits the gauge with her finger before looking at Ian's eyes. "Yes, they are open," she thinks. "You are still alive. What's wrong with my machine?" She hits the gauge again to no avail, "Why can't I get a reading?"

Ian straightens his head and focuses hard. His mouth opens to a tiny slit but nothing comes out. "Blast, I can't even speak. There's nothing wrong with your machine lady; it's my heart, and it's not pumping!"

A light bearer steps from a corridor, sensing a change in the atmosphere of the building. Seeing Croydon he stops. With a warm smile he salutes, before acknowledging Dryden with a deliberate approving nod. Croydon beckons the angel gifted in healing over. He puts a hand gently on Ian's head. New warmth and comfort rushes over Ian, his spirit lifting. "Well done, son. You're doing great. The Father loves you. Don't be fretful or anxious; you're in good hands," the healing angel whispers. He looks again to the brothers entering his domain. "If there is anything I can do, I am here; let me know."

Croydon places a hand on the angel's shoulder, a pulse of power passing between them. The healing envoy jolts and shivers under the exchange. "Wow!" he exclaims.

"Be encouraged brother. The enemy is weak; we ride in victory. Continue in the work set for you. Encourage and love them home," Croydon assuredly whispers.

The words and touch of Croydon lifts the angel's heart. His eyes are wide open, and his body straightens. His hand runs up Croydon's left arm as he pulls away. Delicately he slows and turns the large bicep over to reveal the wound seeping from the cut of Sabre's dagger. Croydon attempts to deflect the attention. "It is nothing; go to where you are needed."

The angel of healing is not deterred. "Been having some fun tonight?" he jests. Placing his palm across the wound he looks to the heavens. "Father, you bring healing; it is your very nature, life, love and light." As he moves his hand off, he smiles at Croydon, who looks down to see the wound neatly sealed, the slither of a scar lightly pressed where it was. Breaking with them the angel moves down the corridor into a room where a patient rests. Croydon is left smiling in admiration of the little scar.

"It gives you a wholly roguish appearance," jibs Dryden.

The nurse rips off the blood pressure unit and hustles off to a cupboard. Rummaging through, she is trying to find one that looks newer. Satisfied, she pulls one out. She slaps it on Ian at the same place and puffs it up. Ian can hear the machine tighten but it is not registering much. The nurse looks at Ian again, and then looks back at the machine. "His eyes are still open, but how?" she ponders. "With this pressure his eyes shouldn't be open; he should be dead!"

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Ian realizes what she is thinking. "I'm not going anywhere, lady. I've got to live. I want to stay in this body!"

"Sir," addresses Dryden seriously now. "How can he die? For, the destiny... it is still there. It rests upon him now so perfectly. Perhaps it is comfortable with him for the first time in his life. Yet she is confirming what I had suspected. The thin thread that he is hanging onto could snap at any moment. What about the angel of healing? Should we not call him back? There must be a way, or else how can this be?"

Croydon does not respond and so Dryden continues looking down at Ian. "I am not concerned for his passage into death. In fact it shall be my most magnificent moment of joy. I understand that he will simply change gears and be released to real life. But how can the purposes of God be complete when the destiny is completely unfulfilled? How can he have destiny when he is going to die? Will the Father provide a miracle? Or is it too late for that now?"

Croydon places a hand on Dryden's forearm and finally responds to the deep questions. "Peace, my friend. He will live in this destiny. I have seen it. We have not fought for just this life but for the destinies of many yet to be revealed. I don't know how it will work, but I know that we can trust our Lord. I have seen him this day living out this destiny. Let us leave him in the Lord's hands."

"You have seen him living it out this day?" Dryden seizes on the veiled statement of hope.

"Let's get him antitoxins," Croydon says with a poignant smile. He pokes the ambulance driver playfully in the back. The driver twitches and leaps into action. Ignoring the fussing nurse, he rips the gauge off and runs the wheelchair through the doors. Two Indian doctors sit, heads down dozing, behind the reception desk.

The younger doctor rouses a little at the noise. He doesn't even look up, asking in French, "What's your name? Where do you live? How old are you?"

Ian ignores him, unimpressed. "I don't even know if I can talk. The other doctor has a bit of grey hair, he's been around for a few years, and might know how to help me."

The young doctor stops talking and looks up. Ian is not looking at him but waiting for the older doctor to look his way. Croydon leans over and lifts the older doctor's face.

Ian locks into the older doctor's eyes and gives him the heaviest look he can muster. As Dryden releases power into the frail body Ian is able to whisper. "I am about to die from jellyfish stings. I need antitoxins right now!" The doctor doesn't move as Ian keeps his eyes on him. The nurse arrives with a piece of paper showing the hopeless blood pressure results.

The senior doctor looks at it, then looks at Ian and as Croydon pokes him he also jumps. He screws up the paper in disgust. "Why didn't you look at

this young man?” he mutters at the young doctor. Pushing the driver out of the way, he grabs the wheelchair himself and starts racing down the corridor. Croydon whispers in his ear, and the doctor screams out for dextrose and antiserum for box jellyfish to be brought. Ian only hears muffled voices as the toxins cramp around his head.

Running into the main treatment room, there are racks of bottles and medical equipment lining the walls. Nurses and orderlies pour out from the corridors at the doctor's commands. A nurse kneels by Ian's feet and slaps his hand as hard as she can, startling him. "What's she doing?" he thinks, "She's trying to get a vein up to put the drip in... but no vein is appearing!" The nurse lifts the skin up between the second and third fingers and pushes the needle in where the vein should be. Behind Ian a nurse is filling a huge syringe, squeezing the air out of it. Another nurse jabs a needle in the other arm. "Shove them in, I don't feel a thing." Ian says in his mind. "At last, something is happening."

The doctor brings his face down near Ian's and looks into his eyes, speaking with an Oxford English accent. "I don't know if you can hear me son, but I am going to try to save your life. Keep your eyes open. Come on son, fight the poison. Try to stay awake. We're putting dextrose in for rehydration and antitoxins to counteract the poison. It will be all right."

The nurse with the drip hanging loosely in Ian's vein nods to the one holding the syringe large enough for a horse. She moves around to be in front of Ian and nervously notches into the drip feed. Squeezing the serum in, Ian's vein swells up like a small balloon. She shakes nervously, trying to hold the needle steady inside the vein. "It's going to rip open!" Ian thinks nervously. It holds, and she is passed another needle, again the vein blows up.

The nurse looks at the doctor as if to ask if another is needed. The doctor nods. She gets it ready, while the first nurse massages the serum up Ian's arm. The vein keeps rolling off her thumb. "Doctor I can't get it into the blood stream; it's just not moving," she says in frustration.

Watching, Ian remembers the veterinary science study in his degree years before. "My veins have collapsed. My heart is obviously not pumping enough blood into my body. My extremities have shut down. They can't do anything about it." Ian knows he is slipping into a comatose state. "I'm totally paralyzed, my eyes are blurring, and I can't speak anymore. I have no idea how I managed to say something to the doctor minutes ago. I don't think my heart is working properly anymore, I have to be perilously close to death."

Croydon and Dryden have their arms stretched toward the heavens, offering praise and worship to the King. Dryden half prays and half prophesies, "There is no sadness in the death of the saved soul. Only man mourns, for they understand only the few years on this planet, but we know that this life is just a dot on a long line of eternity. It may be important, but it is only the

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beginning and foreshadow of real life. Man's spirit lives forever, his time here becoming distant memories of seeming irrelevance. All honor to the Creator of the Universe."

The doctor looks Ian in the eye again. "Don't be afraid," he says.

Ian can see the concern in the doctor's eyes. "Mate, you're more afraid than I am!" Ian is feeling a peace and comfort, given the gravity of the situation. Orderlies lift him up and put him on a mobile bed with his drip feed. The drip is bringing liquid back into his body and he is starting to perspire heavily, particularly on his head. The doctor wipes it from his face with part of the sheet. As each pass of the sheet is made new moisture immediately appears. "Where's all that sweat coming from?" Ian thinks, unsure of how his body can produce so much fluid. "Still at least part of my body is working!"

The doctor lowers his face directly above Ian again. "Son, that's about all we can do for you. It is up to you now. Fight! Keep your eyes open," he states clearly.

"Sure, I'll keep my eyes open all night. I'm not going to close them! I've done that plenty of times in my life. I've stayed up at plenty of parties until the dawn!"

Slowly a peculiar feeling begins to come over him, like he is detaching himself from his body. It is as if he is watching everything in 3D from a new angle in the room. As the doctor stands over him sponging his head he almost feels that he is looking down on himself. His spirit has nearly left his body, the shell almost worn out. Only the thinnest of threads holds the two together.

Ian's fight to keep his eyes open is the only thing keeping him alive. As the doctor walks off to check something the sweat quickly trickles into Ian's eyes. He focuses hard to move one arm and then the other, willing his hand to wipe his face, but they do not respond. "I'll have to drain my eye by tilting my head," he thinks. Focusing all his energy on his neck he prepares to move it, but it will not respond either. His head sits stationary, the salty moisture stinging and irritating him. Pools are filling his eye sockets. "I've got to keep my eyes open!"

He wills the doctor to come back and wipe his face, but he does not return. "Doctor," his mind calls but his lips do not move. Again he tries desperately to tilt his head, but it won't move. The only option left is to flick his eyelids. Squeezing tightly, it works a little but the pools do not disperse fully and his vision is still blurry. He squeezes again open and shut. Each time he enjoys the sensation. "Keep them shut just a little longer this time," his mind offers.

He can hear noises further down the corridor as the nurses and doctors discuss the rushed moments of work. It's his only faculty working, the last one to go, his hearing. Desperately tired, Ian decides to shut his eyes just for a short time. "I'll give them a short rest before continuing the fight."

The two magnificent light bearers stand over him. "Stay with him Dryden. I

do not know what will occur once he is gone. Well done my friend, I must go now with him,” Croydon says, looking seriously at the younger angel.

Dryden puts his hand on Ian’s head; he knows the end is here. He whispers gently, “Well done. I’m proud of you. Go to the Son now. Your mother’s prayers have been answered. You are alive, truly alive, even in this first death. He waits for you at the gate; go to Him now.” Ian prepares to shut his eyes for what he thinks is a short rest. He sighs, like a sigh of relief, closes his eyes and knows something has happened.

Croydon knows his brief; he gently puts his arms into Ian’s body and around the spirit of light brightly burning there. In an instant they both disappear from the room.

The doctor and two nurses rush back as the heart monitor flat lines. Ian is motionless and lifeless. One of the nurses picks up his left arm, then his right to check for a pulse. Looking across at the doctor she questions resuscitation. He lifts a hand and shakes his head. “It’s too late; there is nothing we can do.” Putting a hand to Ian’s sweaty eye he lifts an eyelid to confirm Ian has gone. “We’ve lost him,” he laments, disappointed.

A nurse soon returns with paperwork, a clipboard and form. The doctor sits in a chair checking the time. They have no name or identification; they will know in the morning when the police come who the John Doe is. He completes what he can:

Time of Admission:	01.05
Time of Death:	01.20
Cause of Death:	Stings to right forearm
Treatment Offered:	Dextrose/Antiserum

With that he signs the form and places it on the end of the bed, pulling the white bed sheet up over the corpse. Something causes him to linger. He stares at the sheets until the orderlies arrive to wheel Ian down the hallway. The corpse is moved around a corner and down into the small morgue, awaiting the second doctor’s sign off. Dryden stays beside the body all the way, watching and checking what is being done. “How can it be? I still do not understand,” he whispers in contented sorrow.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Where Emptiness Begins

The cold concrete floor seems to grip at Croydon's sandaled feet, as if it can sense the apprehension of the mighty being. Everything hangs in the balance; his eyes are closed. He wistfully contemplates what he must do. One arm wraps around Ian's torso and the other braces up against the ceiling. Croydon focuses on the physical elements smothering him. Instantly the floor melts allowing the two beings to pass through the clammy foundations into the earthen layers below the hospital.

Increasing pace plunges them deep into the planet's crust. Like shadows they cut through the ground as if nothing were there. Croydon arcs in a smooth motion bearing north-west. The colors and contours of earth, stone, sand and deep ocean trenches stream past in a blur. He can feel it pulling him, the encroachment and suffocation swallowing him. Only once before he has been to the dark realms, a journey normally reserved for the condemned.

The rock formations break into a huge underground cavern. Croydon quickly reduces his speed; the sensation of flying changing to falling. Hundreds of meters pass as they drop, though no wind freshens their faces. Alighting the deep chasm surface safely, large white wings fold back into position. The servant of heaven instantly feels an immense presence of evil around him. The putrid air grabs at Croydon as if it were itself alive.

The realm of the abyss is a dense desert for lost souls and demons. Far from the light and life of the surface it is a broad void of pitch-black. The stench of death hangs in the stuffy humid air, confined in the massive cell. Those imprisoned here have had attributes for passing the physical restraints of the rock stripped from them.

"I cannot be noticed," Croydon thinks as he checks his thoughts. He clears his mind to external beings. With perfect vision he surveys the black surroundings as a thought escapes. "At least light is not restricted by darkness." Easing a little he loosens his grasp and balances Ian uprightly on the cavern floor. The mighty angel reluctantly steps back to allow the human spirit to discover his consciousness and thoughts.

The journey has only taken seconds. Ian felt nothing of the trip. He had been having a floating feeling for the last fifteen minutes anyway. Fighting to hang on to his body, he had been determined not to go anywhere. But the

moment he relaxed, the release came and the battle to stay alive had finished. He does not understand that he is dead. "Where am I, where have I gone?" peeps his first conscious thought.

Croydon clenches his fists, unfamiliar feelings rising in him. He can see them cowering and hiding, shriveling in nooks and crannies. Once strong spirits on the surface, now they are broken and harangued, tormented and chased. He knows some have been here for thousands of years. Pity sweeps over the pure angel's spirit as he releases his grip and sobs quietly.

He has to let his mind process. Carefully the light bearer shields his thoughts from those around him. His heart weighs heavy as he contemplates the suffering the Son was subjected too in this place. Thoughts like intercession spill upwards from his silent mind, "Three days Master? How could you pay this price? You, the Lamb of God, dragged from Golgotha by Satan himself. How could any being of light endure here without been undone? It is but a moment, and already sadness and confusion are upon me, and I have a clean spirit! Master how could you... scarred with the sins of the whole world? It's a burden you should not have had to carry. Depths of pain and despair you should not have endured."

"Did you know? Were you certain? Did you know you would overcome the darkness? Was it yet undecided who would win? Was there a chance you might have been subdued? What risk did you take for this love? What caused the adversary to let you go? How did you break the Dragon's hold? Was it the Lamb that burst forth in deep unrelenting purity of power? Ultimately you were not contained, but what happened in those long days? Yes you rose in victory, but I know you still carry the pain of this place in your heart. I honor and acknowledge you."

Croydon squeezes his eyes tighter, pushing tears down his cheeks. Memories of those days flood his mind. "How is it I remember exactly where I stood in my division at that moment? That heaviness in the armies of light as you, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, forbade the rescue. We lacked an understanding of your plan, but who could have ever comprehended it? All those tears, the pain of loss, even the mightiest - the twelve captains - had no understanding. Who will ever forget their compulsion to question you for the first and only time? The tension as we could not fathom it. We could not understand that your instruction was correct. We all felt it. How could the cherished Bridegroom be given over to the destroyer? Was it not enough for a third of the heavens to be damned, let alone the loss of humanity? But then you offered up the precious side of yourself. How could you give the beauty of your own relationship over? Heaven was forced to bear the heaviness it thought it could never endure. For those long days even you seemed sad and distant." Croydon shakes himself from the conversation. "I have a mission to complete. Father, I need you; all I need now is you."

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Perplexed, Ian finds he is not lying down but standing upright in a jet black room. He looks around to orientate himself. As if he has woken from a bad dream in someone else's house, he searches for something familiar. His second coherent thought surfaces. "Where has everyone gone? Maybe there's been a power cut? Why have they left me alone in a hospital room and turned out all the lights. There'll be a flicker of light somewhere to provide a bearing for me." Slowly, turning 360 degrees, he peers into the darkness trying to focus. "There is not even one tiny slither! Don't panic Ian. Your eyes just need to adjust. Just find a light and turn it on."

Ian's thoughts have ricocheted out around him. His notions are like a beacon echoing for disgraced demons to hone in on. Uncomfortably, Ian shuffles forward, putting a hand and then a foot in front of him. "There will be a wall with a light switch." The stuffiness and a strange fear are starting to grip him as his breath shortens and quickens. Having moved a few meters forward he realizes he must be going in the wrong direction. "Maybe I have been moved into the general ward and I am walking between beds?" Bending lower he searches in a broader range but cannot find the wall, a chair, or anything to provide him bearings. "I'm not even bumping into anything! What do I do...? I'll go back to my hospital bed. There'll be a lamp there. There's always a lamp!"

Turning around to where he came from, Ian searches for his bed, a safer place to wait. He can't find it. "Great, you idiot, you must have gone past it, now you've lost your bed." Ian draws his right hand up in front of his face. "Wow, its dark in here; and it's stinking humid; and what's that hideous smell? My eyes haven't adjusted at all. I can't even see my hand in front of my face." Nonchalantly he pulls his hand in to touch his face. It seems to pass right through. Panic rises. "What? I can't miss my face; I'll use two hands!" Bringing both hands up in front of his face they pass through where his head should have been. Immediately he remembers the stings. "Oh my God, they have had to amputate my arm. Amputees often feel phantom pain in their missing body parts; they must have amputated both my arms! There's nothing there to touch my face! That's why I couldn't find the wall!"

Petrified Ian throws his right hand over to grab his left; then swings both arms wildly trying to feel his body. Nothing... they pass straight through. "Yet I feel like I'm totally here. What's happening? It's not amputations; I just can't feel my body. Am I a ghost? I'm a ghost!" Different realizations wash over him. "I'm here, Ian McCormack, standing in this place, but I have no physical body. I have the sensation of being here and the feeling that I have a body, but I have nothing physical to touch. I'm now a spiritual being! My natural body must have died. But I'm very much alive. I know I have arms and legs and a head, but I can't touch them anymore! Where on earth am I then?"

An incredible coldness and fear creeps over him. He has felt the presence of

evil before in his life. Like when you walk down a deserted street late at night, the buildings closing in. Doorways seem to enlarge and peer at you. Finally you arrive home and rush inside, feeling there was someone watching, ready to pounce.

“There’s an evil in this darkness! Someone’s looking at me but I can’t see who it is. This darkness is not just physical but spiritual. It’s alive with fear, anger and death. I’m being watched!”

“Worse still the evil is moving in on me. Whatever is out there is coming for me!”

Ian has not spoken but to his right a guttural voice screams at him. “Shut up!”

Croydon looks sympathetically at the condemned soul discerning immediately his plight. He is hiding in a small hollow nearby, curled up like a fetus. Terror grips his heart for the attention being drawn to this part of the cavern. As if reading the man’s soul Croydon whispers, “You have learnt the affliction and pain that follows being found down here. You’ve no idea how long you’ve been here, or even what your life used to consist of. The only defense you have is to mask and blank your mind. Life is torment; torment is life. Silence and fear are all you know, every moment of every day.”

Ian lifts his arm in defense to the aggressive voice. “Shut up? But I didn’t say anything,” he half thinks and half speaks.

The man has not moved a muscle but remains curled and hidden in the tiny hole.

“You deserve to be here!” a different voice shouts from the left. It is not an accusation but a desperate attempt to help Ian understand to shut up and not question why or what he’s doing here.

Croydon shifts his gaze to the second soul huddled alone. “You fear being found above all else. You know the longer Ian thinks, the greater the attention it draws to this part of the chasm. You’ll be tortured, your spirit feasted upon, only able to suffer a pain that cannot be released in death.”

Ian doesn’t understand the need for silence in his thoughts. “Deserve to be where? Where am I?”

“You’re in hell, so shut up!” the chilling voice screams again.

They’re closing in; with reddened eyes keener than the blinded souls, the closest demon drops the limp carcass he had been savaging. He can only make out shapes and positions. The silhouette of the fresh arrival is visible but he hesitates as a larger form lingers behind the soul. Squinting, he is unable to make out any movement or thoughts of the being in the background. He holds back, its posture and size concerning him. Looking behind he can hear the others coming. “If I don’t hurry I’ll have competition.”

A sick feeling rises in the pit of Croydon’s stomach. His piercing eyes clearly see the fallen closing in. “You lose your life on the surface to live out your

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days in this abyss. Your sordid bitterness drives you to torment lives already completely broken. But it is you who are afflicted. This the only way your sad existence can offer any sense of satisfaction, scavenging out this fresh meat. Don't you know it will not satisfy you? Nothing can; the hurt and damage in your heart is too deep. There is an inevitable day coming, a day when this will end, you know it and you fear it, but you are incapable of altering the course your heart is set upon."

The coldness is rising and encroaching around Ian. He is certain there are many dangers around him. Frightened, he becomes aware of others scurrying, shuffling and hiding. "They are in the same predicament as me. What are we all afraid of? I don't understand." Unwittingly he takes a step back, into the direct reach of the motionless light bearer.

Unquenchable thirst spurs them on. They ignore the discerning hesitation over the large shape behind the man. The closest demon is preparing to launch. Seeing this, Croydon takes the smallest of steps forward. He stretches his arms out on either side of Ian. The demon freezes, straining to identify the being behind the man; he can see nothing of its features. Even though he's unnerved by an odd feeling in the atmosphere, he would never consider it to be an angel of light.

"I'm in hell; this could actually be real! But I don't believe in hell. How did I end up here?" The anguished questions rise in Ian's mind. Terrified, he's afraid to move, speak or even breathe. Far beyond any fear you can absorb on earth, a crippling fear mounts an attack over his spirit. His skin can feel a wrapping, stinging discomfort, causing him to shiver and release the little air he was holding inside. Ian looks down in shame; his chest sinks, crumpling into his being. "I do deserve to be here."

In an instant a dozen memories flood Ian's mind of what people said hell is. "This is no party place, no place that you get to do all the things that you couldn't in real life. There is no sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll here! Debauchery released in all its pleasure... gee, that view was trash. This is a terrifying place; it's spiritual not physical. You can't do anything here that you want to, you can't do anything. There's no boasting, no talking, not even any thinking. Who could you boast to? 'Yeah bro I raped, plundered, and pillaged.' Well whoop-de-doo boy! There's nothing to talk about here... nothing! And so much for the people who said there were red guys with pitchforks roasting rotting corpses..." He looks around in the darkness; something in that image feels closer to the truth, even if it is not true.

Ian's mind is released from the restrictions of the physical world; its ability to process and understand things is immeasurably lifted. Suddenly he understands what those around him were trying to lead him to. "There's something near me. I don't want to find out what it is. I've got to hide, find some hole to crawl into. I've got to stop thinking, stop moving and avoid anyone or anything.

Don't do anything to attract attention to me. There's more though, isn't there? What is it? Oh my God, there's an impending doom; judgment is coming!"

The loneliness and desperation of millions of souls grips him. "You've been here thousands of years, some of you, but there is no relationship to time. You can't tell what time is. You couldn't tell whether you'd been here ten minutes, ten months or ten thousand years. I've told people to go to hell! What a fool. I wouldn't want my worst enemy to go here. This is the scariest, most terrifying place possible. I'm not ready for this; no Hollywood movie or bad dream has got close to portraying this. Why didn't I know? Why didn't I prepare myself for this? How can I ever get out of here? How do you get out of hell?"

Croydon whispers, leaning forward to Ian's ear, "You must understand, this place was prepared for the angels that disobeyed God, not for people. It is only man's choices that have led him here. It is not God's choice; no one was meant to come here. This is the Kingdom of Darkness, ruled by Satan himself. It's not meant for you, not made for your loved heart."

The words pull hope into Ian's heart. He is reminded of something. Tears begin to gather. "Hang on... I prayed... Why am I here? Didn't I pray just before I died? I asked God to forgive my sins. God! Why am I here? I've asked you for forgiveness. Why I am here? I've turned my heart to you! God help me..."

Instantly a dazzling white light sears the roof of the cavern. Pouring down, it illuminates the top of Ian's drooped head. The shaft cascades over his body, bringing warmth and life. Like a stage spotlight it broadens, engulfing his whole spirit. Ian throws his head back into the light, the radiance pouring down over his face. With a gasp and huge gulp, he breathes, drawing the freshness into his lungs. Eyes widening, his heart opens, his head lifts, and an immediate change in his state occurs. The warmth starts to tingle all over him, the stuffy air dissipates and an invigorating breeze flows across his senses. His hair falls to his shoulders as he drops his head back further, mouth wide open, gulping in massive swallows. The brilliant light overcomes the darkness in a moment and finds its soul. The brief encounter with the pit falls from Ian's mind, the sensation of light engulfing everything in him.

The fallen drop to the ground, as if pressed down by an immense invisible force. Blinded by the light that illuminates the cavern around them they lie groaning on the rock floor; it is beyond their ability to grasp.

For the spirits of men hiding nearby the response is completely different. They still cower and shield their eyes, but for the first time since they arrived in the forsaken prison, they are able to see something. It casts a hope into the darkest of the shadows. Longingly they stretch their arms out in a desire for the warmth and comfort of the living light. It grows in them above their fears and subjugation. Slowly their eyes adjust so they can see something of the living light. Their hearts start to feel and open up for the first time.

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Ian lifts his hands up in exhilaration as if trying to grab it. The light seems to run through his fingers as if it were liquid. Croydon puts a large arm around Ian's chest and thrusts his other arm into the light. Man and angel lift, floating toward the cavern roof. Croydon whispers, "Those walking in darkness have seen a great light. It shines into the darkness, onto the one walking in the shadow of death. The light finds him and surrounds him. Never to stumble again, never will he live in fear and helplessness. The light guides his feet into the paths of peace and righteousness. Yes!"

The light is enveloping him; Ian can feel the darkness to his left and right fading, falling off. The incredibly radiant light is not like normal light; there is something vastly different in it. It is alive and new, like laser light but more brilliant. Instantly the fear he had been feeling has gone. A sense of weightlessness is overwhelming him. With Croydon holding gently onto his chest, Ian floats up slowly at the start, into the brilliant white. Like a limp ribbon he lets go. His arms drop loosely behind him. He is drawn like a speck of dust floating in the warm summer light.

A passageway is opening above him. He is being lifted into a large circular shaft of light. The earth's rocky crust has opened into the tunnel. Charging with him Croydon flies harder now, gaining momentum. The invigorating rushing wind begins to pass over Ian's face as they clear the earth's surface. Ian does not notice any of this; he's just captivated by the light. Looking down the long passage it seems to continue forever, coursing into the dark night sky.

Croydon can see beyond their tunnel to many others streaming off from the earth at the same time. Melding together they form a great highway of light roving deep into space.

Ian sees only the immenseness of the light drawing him up and up, at ever increasing speeds. To him the portal is ten feet wide and the intense brightness seems to carry on forever. The vibrant portal connects directly to the soul it holds.

"I must release you soon, my son," Croydon whispers. "I cannot pass the realm separator as you can. The drawing of the light is sufficient on its own." Pulling his mouth up close behind Ian's ear he speaks even more gently. "Well done my child. Go. He is waiting for you at the gate. You can go to him because he has paid the price for you to come. Your fare is paid in full by his pain and death, by his days in that place, and his ultimate triumph over its grip. You just made it before you died. You turned your sins over to the Lamb. You cannot repent after you die; you have to do it on this side. No one can pray you out of hell. Forgive me for taking you to that place, but the Father needed you to understand. I do not fully know why. But you are in the light by His sacrifice accepted by you. He came and found you. You need hide no more. He wants to be with you. Go and meet the Bridegroom. He is adorned with splendor and majesty. Go to the wedding feast, a banqueting table has

been prepared for you... go... He waits for you..."

Ian is so absorbed in the light that the words are lost on his mind, though his spirit accepts the confidence and excitement in. Croydon throws his arm off Ian's chest in a sweeping movement and watches him disappear into the column of powerful light. Hovering forty two kilometers above the earth, the mighty angel hesitates. Broad white wings unfold and hold him effortlessly at the edge of the restrictor. A quiet sobbing starts deep within Croydon's chest. It grows as sob after sob of anxious release spill into incredible joy. He bends and bows to the King, his head reaching down below his knees. His large frame is heaving about his chest as the loud cries break from his spirit.

Impulsively he arches his back and he throws himself in a beautiful arc, arms hitting and flexing against the crystallite realm separator. He hangs there in space, pushing with all his strength against the crystal barrier. In an instant his tears cease. Celebration rouses him. Twisting and spinning he begins to dance and shout at the top of his voice. "The Son has won... the Son has won... the Son has won!" he shouts again and again. "Blessed is the Son of God who takes the sins of man upon Himself. He has made complete and adequate provision for his acceptance to the Father. He is Lord of all, King of all. He has made a way... available to all... it is available to all! The King's mercy and grace have no finality. There is no limitation, no constraint! All who wish may come!" The call resounds out above the earth, spilling hope into the spirits of men; hope that there may yet be a Creator.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the Vortex

Ian's speed intensifies, as if he were being sucked into an incredible vortex of light. The constraints of natural light have been left far behind. He travels at hundreds and then thousands of times the speed of light. The engaging warmth of the light causes every hair to straighten, only to curl back against his skin in the velocity. The pace doesn't hurt; his mouth is agape, breathing in every fraction of the living heat that he can absorb.

"This is incredible! I'm not looking back. I don't want to fall back into the darkness!" A heightened exhilaration from the contrast grips him. He will do nothing to risk losing his course. His focus is absorbed by the light. Looking over the unfathomable distances, Ian senses that the source of the light is emanating from the very end of the tunnel. "It's so incredibly bright, as if it was the centre of the universe. It looks as if it were the source of all power, the very epitome of light. It's more brilliant than the sun, more radiant than any jewel, yet I can look right into it."

Ian feels more alive as each moment passes; tangible changes are occurring in his wellbeing. The living light is not only glazing over his skin, but penetrating into the fiber of his spirit. He doesn't understand it but his inner man is being transformed into a heavenly creation. "Why am I so excited?" he wonders, closing his mouth.

A wave of what appears to be thicker light breaks off from the source. As it cascades down, Ian knows there is nothing he can do to avoid it. "What's that light doing? It's going to hit me! Will it wash me back to the darkness?" Clenching his fists just in case, the surge of light engulfs Ian's body like a massive wave swirling over a child. Enshrined in it, an amazing warmth and comfort comes over him. "This light's living! It's not just physical. It's giving off an emotion! It's... it's stripping me of my fears. It's washing me clean, carrying my filth back down the tunnel." Images flood his mind: a child crawling onto the secure lap of his father; a sunrise glistening upon the ocean; a camp fire warming arms and legs; the sun breaking from clouds onto a bare back... Feelings of exhilaration and life rise, infusing hope into his spirit. "Maybe, just maybe, everything is going to work out after all!"

Basking in the sensation, a second pulse breaks from the end of the tunnel. The huge pulse explodes down the passage as a tsunami of billowing light. Ian

has no apprehension to the risk of the wave this time even though it looks thicker than the first. Feeling he is half way down the tunnel the crescendo of light hits him. Ian's body shakes as the swirling light washes around him, yet his pace does not slow. "What... what is that sensation? I know it, yet it is foreign to me... Yes, that's it; its peace, living liquid peace, permeating my innermost being. What a fool, all those years I searched, but only ever found fleeting moments of it. Years of trying it all: alcohol, drugs, education, sport, career, relationships... I tried philosophy, Keats to Shakespeare... and now, who would have thought! Here it is in this tunnel, in this light; it is the light! I've found it! At last I'm content; I'm at peace!"

As an idea surfaces Ian dares himself to take his eyes off the end of the tunnel. "In the darkness I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. I must be able to see now that I'm in this light. Maybe I can see what my body looks like!" Dropping his head for a moment he looks again at the light; it has not gone. So he pulls his arm forward and looks down properly this time. "I can see right through it. I'm transparent, like a ghost... No, I'm not just transparent... my body... it's full of the same light that's shining from the end of the tunnel!" Turning and twisting his arm he is captivated by the light shining out of his being. "I've been transformed into a creature of light!"

Puzzled but excited, Ian fixes his attention back on the light at the end. "I'm getting closer; I must stay focused on what is ahead. Wow! It looks as if a mountain of the most spectacular diamonds in the entire world is at the end. Maybe light is pouring through them, creating prisms and fractions, radiating out of the facets?" A third wave peels off, stronger and brighter again than the first two. It billows and rolls before splashing across his body. Ian's mouth opens in a wide smile. He gasps and convulses forward in excitement. "I've got to get to the end. What's it going to be? I'm so excited! I've never been so happy. Whatever I am about to see will be the most awesome experience in life; it will be beyond anything I am even able to comprehend. I'm amped, cranking; every part of me is wired and firing!" The thoughts spill over into one word he manages to let escape his mouth, "YES!"

Ian's pace slows as the light is expanding into an open area. As Ian stops he finds himself standing upright. His view is no longer restricted to the tunnel; but it is totally taken up with the incredible light. It is all he can see; there is nothing else around him. It as if he is standing in a brilliant white universe of nothing but light, though it still appears to be spilling from one direction.

"I must be standing before the very source of light and power in the universe! This light emanates out from this pivotal point to the very extremities of time and space. It's so beautiful, so strong! This has to be the very hub and centre of all life. This is the focal point, the centre of all the constellations of light. This radiance replaces the sunshine! Light on earth has only dimly reflected this true light; it's been a cheap imitation." Ian stares into what looks to be a more

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brilliant centre. “It doesn’t even hurt my eyes!”

Words to try to explain it begin to pass through Ian’s mind; he doesn’t know what he’s looking at. “It’s an aura. Is this just a force, as the Buddhists say, or karma, or yin and yang? No it’s glory, it’s a glory. But is it some innate, impersonal power or energy source? Or could there be a person, someone or something standing in the centre of this light, surrounded by this radiance?”

Immediately, in answer, a calm tone speaks from the centre of the light. “Ian, do you wish to return?”

Ian is shocked to recognize the voice, “It’s you! You are the one who spoke to me by the road, and with the taxi drivers, and then again at the hotel. What are you doing here? There is someone in the centre of the light! He knows my name. Who would be in there? They must know my inner thoughts. What have I been thinking? Return? Return to where? Where am I?” For the first time, Ian looks behind him. Disappearing off into the vast expanses of the universe, which look dark by comparison, he can see the tunnel of light. Memories of the darkness surface, “I don’t want to go back there!”

As if it were a distant dream, Ian suddenly remembers his life on earth. “Where am I? Am I in my hospital bed dreaming? Are my eyes closed? Or am I actually standing here? Darkness... hospital bed... my body... am I out of my physical form? Is this really happening?” Checking his senses, Ian is confused because it seems very real.

“Ian, do you wish to return?” The immense authority in the voice compels Ian to reply. He has no idea what to say but his mouth opens and speaks as if he had no choice. “I... I don’t know where I am. If I am out of my physical form, then yes, I wish to return.”

“Ian, if you wish to return then you must see in a new light.”

“See in a new light? Light? Are you the light?”

Immediately, a memory comes to Ian’s mind. In South Africa he had received a Christmas card from an Indonesian friend. She was writing wanting to be a pen pal. It amused Ian that the Muslim girl probably went to a lot of effort to get a Christian card. He had chuckled as he read the text. ‘God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1:5.’ The words from the card seem to appear and shimmer in front of him.

Standing before the source of all light a notion pierces Ian’s mind, “God is Light? If you are the light then you are God? God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. I’ve just come from darkness, and there is certainly no darkness here. God... Am I standing before God? This is light, incredible light, like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It must be the very source of all light. I’m standing before God? Is God in that light? If this is God, He is light. He knows my name! What else does He know? He must know the secrets of my heart and mind. He must also be able to see everything I’ve ever done in my life. Everything! I’m exposed and transparent, dirty and unclean.” The deductive

process only takes a second. Feelings of shame and regret begin to cloud Ian's heart.

"They've made a mistake. I shouldn't be here. They have brought the wrong person up. They've beamed the wrong one in this time! I shouldn't be here! I'm not a good person. I'm undone. He can see everything in my rotten heart and life." Ian's head drops to the side, a pain gripping at his chest. His posture, which was true, begins to stoop and lower as he looks for shelter, somewhere to hide. "I've got to get out of here. I'd better crawl away quickly! I must find a rock or something to hide behind." He sees nothing but the tunnel fading off in the distance, as if it were the path to darkness. "I should go back where I belong; I am not worthy to be here."

Wistfully staring at his feet, Ian begins to edge back. Sadness comes over him. The ache in his heart pushes against his chest, making it feel like it will explode. "I've blown it. I should have known. Mum was right. You can put on a mask and masquerade before men, but before God I am undone... He knows my name... He knows everything, the innermost secrets of my heart. He knows all the stuff I've done. I'm ashamed. I've got to get out of here."

Ian catches a glimpse of another wave of light breaking off from the brilliant core. The pulse moves towards him and he tenses. "Here it comes; here I go back to the pit of darkness." The crest of the wave strikes his body. Ian falls limply to his knees, not resisting being flushed away.

A tingling sensation rushes up his arms, unfamiliar emotions flowing over him. A powerful charge starts to course through him. "No, it can't be; it must be wrong. Love... but I don't deserve this! You can't give me love!" Gritting his teeth he attempts to resist. "You don't understand. I can't accept it." Desperate to refuse what he's feeling it builds and builds in a crescendo behind his reticence. He can't hold it off anymore; he crumbles, like a lost child into loving arms.

"Why?... Why?..." are the first whispers he can get from his mouth. He is consumed in it. "I should be judged. I should be rejected. I should be shown pain. But you give me love! How? Me? It's pure, unadulterated, not watered down or tainted by other agendas. How can you wash me like this? How can you do this with no expectation or requirement of return? Isn't all love given selfishly and of itself? So then, how can you do this?"

The clean, uninhibited and undeserved love roves over the man spirit in reckless abandon. The intensity lifts as fresh waves break off and engulf him. He shakes and shudders, his face pressed down as if he is bowing on his knees.

"Perhaps He doesn't know what I've done wrong? I will tell him all the things I've done wrong!" Croaking out between sobs, Ian wails, "God you can't love me..." A fresh wave passes over him. "But God I've cursed you." Another wave of love hits. "And I've done so many things wrong... I've lied... I've cheated... I've betrayed people... I've hurt... willingly..." After each confession

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he anticipates rejection; there is none forthcoming. The intensity of the love is increasing.

Frustrated and nearly hysterical with the sobbing, a remorse at the purity he is feeling before God grips him harder. "Surely you cannot understand what I'm saying! Listen to me and I'll tell you all the disgusting things I've done under the cover of darkness. You wait while I tell you. You are forcing me to pick up the pace and be more forceful." The voice in the light doesn't say a word.

"I'm so proud, so hapless... I'm cold and dead... I'm shamed and dirty from evil in me..." Love continues to pour out in fresh waves, as if every rotten thought and deed were nonexistent. Nothing seems to threaten the love. The list continues for some time. Ian is pushed down and down onto the floor until he is prostrate under an immense weight of love that hangs about him.

Finally the words stop. Only sobs escape his mouth and mind. Ian has nothing left to refute the emotions. He weeps uncontrollably. The love is so clean and pure; it has no strings attached, no conditions or convictions. As a gift it is unrequited and unrelenting. He has no defense for it. The taste of love a permanent imparting, that will resurface again and again. It is the last thing he expected.

Settling after a time Ian manages a few feeble thoughts. "I've nothing more, nothing more to say. I'm at the end of my list and I'm now exposed before him. I've known sensual love, but this is completely different. I remember being loved by my mum and dad, but I went into the big wide world, only to find there's not much love out there. I found things that I thought were love. Sex wasn't love; it just burnt me up. Lust is just a raging fire inside, an uncontrollable desire that seared my insides. But now... now I know the taste of love. This love has watched over and waited for me. This love touches now the very depth of who I am. My burnt out shell has been cleansed, my inner man has begun to fill at last... Do with me as you will..."

The waves stop. Ian feels lighter and more wholesome than ever before in his life. Unsure of what is expected of him, he feels strangely confident and assured. The cocoon of love encases him. All the light is filled with the intoxicating emotion, wholesome and correct in its place. Struggling to his feet Ian stares into the bright core. It seems to call and draw him.

"This light is the very place that stars and galaxies are formed. They would just leap out of this light! Yet it's so still... and I'm so close! I wonder if I could step into it, get closer to it? I wonder if I could step into the light itself? Perhaps I can see whatever is at the centre of this light. Is it God? Then what does he look like? If only I could see him... That's it! Then I would know the truth! I would know who God is truly. I'm sick of hearing the lies and deceptions of the world... I need to know the truth."

An insatiable desire is rising, urging Ian forward, the love now having

removed every restriction of worth. "I've been everywhere trying to find the truth. No one seems to be able to show me. This is my chance. If I can step through and meet God face to face, I'll know the truth; I'll know the meaning to life. I'll never have to ask another person again. I'll know who God is!"

"Since you love me so much... can I step in and see you?" Waiting a few moments, there is silence. With a confidence that can only come from knowing you are totally loved, Ian puts a hand out. It disappears into what is like radiant fog, veils of suspended light.

Bit by bit he edges forward cautiously. As if creeping into a hidden secret garden, he doesn't want to disturb a thing. He can hardly walk under the intensity of the glowing cloud. Stretching his hands wider, the light separates a little. It is as if he has come inside suspended stars and diamonds, causing the light to shimmer with an amazing radiance. He can feel it working inside, healing the deepest parts, areas forgotten years before. Ian's inner man is being transformed into what it should be, his broken heart renewed.

Searching the light intently, Ian continues to orientate toward the brightest part. Suddenly the shimmering diamond lights separate fully and Ian freezes. Before him are the bare feet of a man. They emanate and transcribe the light he has been drawn to. Hesitant at first he slowly lifts his line of sight. Dazzling white robes loosely hang on the ankles. The garments are not like earthly fabrics but are made of light. It's as if He has taken the cloud and wrapped himself in it.

All Ian's senses are keen. Alluring fragrances and aromas filter through his nose, awakening a pure passion inside him. His mouth can taste the freshness and purity in the air. Gentle whispers of quiet refreshment seem to wash his ears. His skin is tight and goose bumps ripple over it again and again; as if a fresh wind was rousing him. "I am more alive than I have ever been!"

Ian dares to tilt his head back, forcing his reluctant eyes to roll up the body of the man. The chest radiates light, while the man's arms are stretched out wide. A rush of adrenalin hits as Ian realizes what they are saying. "He's inviting me into his embrace? Oh, to lose myself in that light and love! I can enter it!" Something holds Ian back, as the decorum of his masculine upbringing surfaces.

Ian is reluctant to look into the face, yet at the same time he is compelled. He knows that this is where most of the light is coming from. It is so bright that it seems to be about ten times brighter than all the other light. The sheerness of it makes the sun look yellow and pale. Slowly he brings his vision up to the cheeks of the man. "This has to be the true source of all light in the universe... it's so bright! I can't even make out facial features."

Peering more intensely Ian can see what looks like pores on the skin of the man. The light seems to ooze out of them, hiding his actual appearance. Contemplating this, Ian notices that there is another feeling emanating in

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the light. “What is that?... Purity!... Holiness!... and it’s entering me, pouring through my core. This must be God! No one else could have a face that shines and fills the universe!”

Ian is willing himself closer. He has no fear; the perfect love that he felt pour through him has banished all the fear in him. He feels total freedom and acceptance as he moves towards the face. Standing only a few feet away, Ian pushes his head slowly forward into the brilliant light. He desperately wants to see the man’s eyes and precise form. He can make out hair as white as snow, hanging loosely, moving in the whispering breeze. “It’s like looking into pure eternity and life. I feel as innocent as a child! It’s as if I have never done anything wrong in my entire life. I have no shadow left; nothing can withstand it. Purity is overwhelming everything else.”

As the man’s form stays shrouded, Ian pushes in just a little further within inches of the face. He has never been told that it is impossible to see the face of God and live.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Critical Decisions

Their faces about to touch, the being of light steps aside. Dramatic colors arrest Ian's vision as an opening, the same dimensions as the tunnel, sits in front of him.

"This must have been behind Him all the time! What is this place?" His nose quickly detects what his eyes are absorbing as wafting scents tantalize and pull fresh tastes into his senses. "I know this place... I'm looking at a brand new planet. Here I am standing at a cave entrance of a perfect, unspoiled new earth!"

He does not understand exactly where he is, though his perception is not far from the truth. He stands on the threshold of the lowest and first of the tiers of heaven. The lands of paradise are the arrival and starting point of the celestial realm. Like a huge new planet, it is perfect and without decay. Those destined to be there roam freely. It was prepared in the beginning for those who love and submit to the one who made them.

Ian stares in disbelief over the forelands. Rolling valleys and grassy meadows abundant with life, resplendent with lushness, stretch into the distance. Fields of multi-colored flowers raise a pungent aroma that tantalizes the senses. Augmenting that, the smell releases emotions of love, purity, acceptance, joy and peace. No longer are the colors restricted to the shades of the earth's rainbow; there are multiple new tones not detectable by the physical eye. A warm breeze wisps gently through the air causing the grass and flowers to roll in waves.

Scanning the scene, Ian can see no cities, no houses, no fences, in fact nothing that is or could be made by man. Without night, winter, or even the need for sleep, structures are unnecessary. The scene seems to vary and change with every turn made, continually unfolding in beauty and intrigue.

The plains are broken only by crystal clear streams traversing briskly through the shallow depressions in the land. Beautiful trees and flora are dotted in small groups by the water edge. In places the bushes and trees link into small glades and forests. They produce an ample abundance of fruits, beautiful in appearance, delicacies to delight and deeply satisfy any who would want to eat.

Ian stands motionless, his eyes flicking over the green meadows, rolling hills and flowered glens. Perfect ryegrass moves in a gentle breeze. The fields roll off

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to the left as if they go on forever. “There are no thistles, no disease or damage on anything! The plants are giving off the same light and life as the personage of that man. Whatever I stepped on would spring back up as soon as my foot lifted. It’s so vibrant and lush; look at the colors!”

The nearest crystal clear river is winding its way through the meadows, trees on either side. It is narrow, deep and quick flowing. The glistening water looks so restful. Ian eyes run up the trunk of a tree. There he spots a huge orange fruit hanging off a branch. “I could reach that!” His tongue hits the top of his mouth; suddenly Ian realizes he has a wonderful appetite. “The water looks too refreshing to drink; I should dive into its coolness! Everything I would ever want is here in abundance.”

Practically quivering in anticipation, Ian’s spirit eyes seem to focus further inland without straining. Stretched out on the massive plains he can identify what must be roving herds of animals, at times the same strain and at others a wondrously disparate mixture of species moving in harmony. They spread and roam over the gigantic plains as if they also can feel the exhilaration and freedom of the place.

To the west the land drops, the invigorating streams gathering together to form rivers, cascading over sheer drops in magnificent waterfalls. Finally they feed into an immense ocean. The sea seems to fan out forever, alive with movement as waves rustle off from the depths to the white sanded shoreline. The coastline swings and jags into the distance where rocky cliffs hold back the waters which break in mountains of foaming white spray. Endless varieties of fish populate the clear waters and river mouths. All the waters look cool to soothe yet warm to arouse.

Flicking his head, Ian looks east. Elevated a little are the wild lands. They cannot be compared adequately with the wild areas of the earth, because everything here is grander and without decay. They are wild in contour, contrast and color. Gigantic canyons, deserts and dry lands, even richer in terrain than the meadows, create varying scenes and sensations for those who go there. Strong steady winds hold mighty birds high in the air above the ravines, where they nest on remote ledges and steeps. The air is not dry or bothering but clean and invigorating, carrying the sounds and odors of life.

Beyond the meadows and plains, the land begins to rise also to the north. Eventually the ocean, meadowlands and wild lands seem to meld together and give way to a dense forest. Mighty trees, varied in form and size, cluster tightly in places. The differing shades of green are unmatched. In the cool and refreshing forest smaller birds and insects work noisily in places, yet in other places it is mysteriously silent. Tracks ramble through in seeming randomness, like a playful maze for the destined to explore. In the variations, contrasting moods and feelings are experienced. Without fear, Ian knows instantly that this paradise is a place of overwhelming excitement, exhilaration, exploration

and wonder. Life and peace flood every being that moves here.

Past the great forests, mighty mountains rise over the lower lands of paradise. Rocky rough bases give way to snow, which deepens in broad valleys reaching up to jagged mountain tops. Only the great birds hover up there, held on the fresh cooler winds, thrilled at life itself. Trails can be seen cutting up the mountainsides, where the tireless inheritors of this kingdom run with free abandon. Compelled and drawn they are desperate to move up to the next tier. They run through the fields in joyous abandon, swimming rivers, traversing forests and steeps and then rushing up these mountain paths, like carefree children exploring in complete assurance and confidence.

Ian understands only a part of all he sees and senses. He is aware that he is on the edge of paradise, gaining a glimpse of eternity. It is the very entrance point to the heavenly realms. Too excited to move, contradictory impulses seize at his heart. He lets his eyes drink in every blade of grass, every tree, flower and changing contour. His hands tremble in anticipation. The lofty peaks are daunting yet appealing. The sky is brilliant blue above the great mountains, unlike anything he has seen before. "There's something calling beyond those Alps, I know it," he mumbles to himself. He has no comprehension of the throne room or the city of God that lies beyond. "I'm going over them! I've got to see what's over there!"

The excitement is bursting in his heart, every fiber of his being telling him he is home. "I could run like an antelope for days; I feel so strong and alive. The river is pleading for me to douse myself, to refresh and absorb. Oh, just to dive in and float with the current... I belong here! I travelled the world looking for paradise, but now I've found it. It's as if I have been born for the first time, like this is the real reason that I was born in the first place. It's just one step away. Why wasn't I born here in the first place? No wonder I always felt like a stranger on that old planet! There'll be no more death, no pain, sickness or despair here."

So astonished by the scene, Ian has felt glued to the spot for some time. He finally feels he can move forward. At the threshold of eternity, his heart rate quickens in anticipation. Exhilaration rages as he lifts his left foot ever so slightly. "I'm going to savor this moment. One small step for man, a giant step for ..."

The man of light suddenly steps in front of the opening, His immense radiance blocking the way. Words run through Ian's mind, either from the recesses of Sunday school or from the man, he's not sure: "I am the way to the Father. No man comes to Him except through me. I am the door and through me you will go in and find green pastures. I am the door to life, the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. There is one narrow passageway that leads into my kingdom. Few find it. Most find the broad highway to darkness. I am the only way to God."

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For the first time a notion rises in Ian's mind. "Jesus? Wasn't it Jesus who said those things? Is this Jesus?" The thought confuses him. "It sure isn't Peter standing at the gate with a set of books and a white gown. There aren't any corny jokes or cute questions. No naked babies with bows and arrows guarding it. Could this be Jesus?" The question subsides as the man speaks matter-of-factly.

"Ian, now that you have seen, do you wish to step in or do you wish to return?"

Ian's foot returns to the ground; he is almost indignant at the question. "Return? Of course not - I'm in! Why would I want to go back? Why would I want to return to the misery and hatred? That old world has nothing to offer me. No, I wish to go in!"

The Creator of Light doesn't move. Light fills Ian's vision. "He must need further convincing," Ian decides. Unsure why he is being blocked, he speaks directly, "God, I'm not married. I have no children... or none that I know of... I have no mortgage or unpaid debts or responsibilities. There is nothing to return for."

There is still no change, so Ian continues. "No one really needs me. In fact, God, you are the first one who has unconditionally loved and accepted me. In my life I have never known anyone who has loved me like you do. Your love has touched the depth of my heart; I want to be with you and stay with you. No, I have nothing to return for. I want to go in!"

Dryden holds his vigil. He stares at a clock in the passage aware that these seem like the longest minutes of his existence. Initially hope was assured in his heart; he had not doubted Ian would recover and return. But in the emptiness of the room, belief has been diminishing. As five, then ten, minutes pass, the young angel's concerns are heightening. He walks around the room praying and talking, increasingly fidgety. Over and over he replays assurances received over the last twenty years, but now the hope of the years feels like it is crushing his heart.

The lifeless corpse is the only thing he is able to talk to. "You finally come to faith, only to be taken from me. You held a destiny your whole life, Ian. I watched it birth, saw it glow in you as a child, tutored it in you. Somehow it clung to you through it all. Only now it is cast aside. It has been my very source of hope. Don't leave me now. There is so much to do, so much that could be done. Just when it looked like everything was going to come right, why is doubt surfacing? What of the promises I received? What of the place that prayer secured for me? Am I not the first agent of protection for your children, Marie? I am so sorry; I fear I've failed you. I have failed you. I should have done more." An unfamiliar wave of despair washes over the being of light. Quietly he calls, "Croydon, where are you?"

Croydon plunges through the wall as if anticipating he is late. The splash of

light is dazzling, his cheeks flushed from the weeping and shouting. Croydon's eyes track across to the hollow shell lying under the sheet on the old hospital mattress.

"Sir," Dryden blurts. Croydon turns, knowing where Dryden's heart has been wandering. The concerns are written all over the hapless angel's face. "Sir, it has been eleven minutes. I don't understand. The destiny... I guess... I believed deep down that the Father would bring him back. Now, as time eludes us, my heart is so anxious for the fulfillment."

Croydon assuredly puts a firm hand on Dryden's shoulder. "It's okay. Peace with you. Ian had to go to places neither of us enjoyed. He'll be at the gate now, with the Lamb. They will be talking; there may be much to say. There is still plenty of time. The Lamb will be presenting choices, dealing with matters that need to be addressed. There is much healing to be done; it is out of our hands. Let us hold to our hope and trust in the Master's heart." Delaying for a moment he continues, "Like you, my friend, I believe he will choose to live out that destiny. Now he can actually become what he was created to be. That destiny involves you, Dryden. Let hope rise, it will become faith and from that faith, joy and peace will spawn."

Dryden puts a hand on Croydon's, the tension easing with the words and presence of the great angel. "A promise might bring hope, but execution brings release," he whispers with a sigh.

The two beings crowd the bare concrete morgue where Ian's body has been placed. Croydon thinks over what has happened, and the distress he senses in his brother. "Dryden, you were magnificent at the ambulance today... thank you. Here and in Marie's house you have earned your reward. Trust in the Lord; you will get to see the promise fulfilled and walk with this man in the life destined."

Dryden's face lights up; he looks wide eyed at Croydon, "Sir, it was you who were magnificent, your valor and strength, and those chariots! Have you seen those in the earthly realms before, Sir? Were they not magnificent! Did you see the faces of the fallen? They did not know of them!" The angels laugh, comfortable in each other's company. Dryden sobers the mood, "Sabre still lives Sir. He will be smarting, seeking the solace of vengeance. Should Ian return, it will be even more dangerous than before. They will not tolerate the return of one who has seen the other side."

The concerns and consequences are not new to Croydon. "Time will be the determiner of life and death. Prayer has won our victory and the King has seen it done. We shall be victorious. Only then will the bride take her rightful place. You are right; we should be alert, but let us also stand encouraged. That is what we can now do."

"Oh, I am encouraged, Sir," Dryden emphasizes, leaning back on the wall, daring to draw hope into his heart again. "I have no fear in me Sir; only a

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desire for the life I am destined to nurture.”

Ian knows the door is behind the man. He has still not moved. Images of what he saw flood his mind, a longing infusing his spirit. He can practically taste the scene from moments ago. Looking down at the legs of light, he contemplates. “I could dive past him; I know the door is behind him! If He loves me that much He will allow me to get past.” Ian turns back one last time to say ‘Goodbye cruel world, I’m out of here!’

The tunnel of light still draws off into the distance behind him. Now, standing in front of it is a clear vision. Ian’s mother is standing there. She looks beautiful, dressed in a flowery top and pleated skirt. The scene is not comforting at the start. “What have I done? I’ve just lied to God! There is someone who loves me. I’ve felt love from her all of my life.” Ian stares at her face intently. Foreign feelings rise from within. His cold heart has gone and he can feel love again. “Not only has she loved me, but she has prayed for me every day of my life. She has wept and born her soul out, longing that I might find God. She tried to show me God as best she could, weeping over my disbelief and arrogance. In my pride, I mocked her simple faith.”

A brace of tears fill Ian’s eyes. “She has been correct all the time, yet she has never seen any of this. There is a God, there is a heaven, and there is a hell. It is far more real than even she could imagine. Yet I ridiculed her beliefs.”

He recalls a specific conversation, “Mum, science and evolution. Wake up! Welcome to the 21st Century! It all proves that Christianity is wrong.”

He can remember her quiet response precisely, “Son, I’m praying for you. I love you.”

Dropping his head, he understands. “That’s great Ian, as selfish as always. Why not go on through to paradise and leave your mother thinking you’re in hell! If she hadn’t appeared in the ambulance, I wouldn’t have made it. She’ll have no idea I prayed a deathbed prayer. I’ll have no way to communicate with her. She’ll just get a boxed corpse from Mauritius. From what she knows of my life, she’ll have to assume I stayed in hell. Nothing will tell her differently. There’ll be no evidence to the contrary, none! It’ll break her heart, faith torn by my selfishness. Selfish... have I learnt nothing through this? I’m still just thinking about my own needs, so how can I go through?”

Ian turns back keeping his head bowed. He understands why he was not allowed through yet. “There is someone who loves me. There is a person I want to go back for. It’s my mother. I need to tell her that what she believes in is real. There is a God, a heaven and a hell.”

Ian is suddenly concerned as to whether he can come back to this place. “I don’t want to miss out on all this. If I go back into my body, I’ll have to find out where this is and come back. I need to return whether anyone believes me or not.” The silent response confirms ‘yes’, so he concludes. “I don’t know how it’s possible, or how I got here but I want to return. I wish to return to

my body.”

“Son, if you wish to return, you must see things in a new light,” the voice replies.

Ian’s eyes are fixed on the bare feet and dazzling white robes. “I prayed in the ambulance to surrender my will to you. Seeing what I have will provide plenty of impetus to that decision! My surrendered will to you is still valid, but see in a new light, do I understand that? Does that mean I must see through the light of your love and of your presence, through the light of forgiveness and joy? Okay... I’m getting it... I must see things from an eternal perspective not a temporary earthly one. I need to see the world as you see it, through the eyes of eternity. I must cast off my indifference; how do I do that? I don’t know that I could ever do that.”

Underneath, a battle has been building. Ian is desperate to step into paradise. He turns to look at his mother again, hoping to be reminded about why he must go back. The vision has expanded; behind his mother now are his father, brother and sister. Cascading off them are friends, relatives and a host of other people. Some he recognizes, others he does not. Absorbing the scene, tens of thousands of people stream off into the distance. Unfamiliar feelings rise inside of a responsibility in life, a sense of destiny and mission. Ian stares into individual faces, many look sad and hurt. “I sense their emptiness; they’re bereft of life. Some are beautiful, but others confused and anxious. So many emotions to absorb; how can I ever do this?” Sadness and longing rise as he asks out loud, “God... who are these people?”

“If you don’t return, many of these people will never get an opportunity to hear about me; they may not put a foot inside a church to find out.”

“I can imagine a lot of these people won’t step inside a church; I wouldn’t! They don’t know about you, I know that. But I know some of these people... they curse and hate you. There is pain and suffering in all lives on earth and I can’t fix that. I don’t have a responsibility to them, do I? It’s too much. How can I deal with all this hurt and sorrow?” The cognitive process runs quickly through his mind. The blur between speech and thought is well advanced. The words spoken in his mind are in part addressed to the man, but not directly. Ian knows he still must turn to the feet of light and specifically make comment.

“God, I don’t know these people. How can I care for those I don’t even know? I do love my mother; I will go back to tell my mother.”

There is a change in the voice, a sense of anxious concern rising from the light, “But I love these people! I desire they come and be with me. I love them all and want them to come. Would you not go back and tell them what you have seen? Many will listen; I long for them more than they could ever know.”

The passion in the voice cuts Ian; he is embarrassed by the heart, so much bigger than his own. Ian thinks it through, “These are my family and friends,

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and he loves them more than I do. There is so much love in him; he loves those who curse and hate him.”

Ian answers aloud. “God, I’ll return for them, but how do I return? Do I go through the tunnel of light, into the darkness, and into my body? How can I go back? I don’t even know how I got here.”

Ian closes his eyes and braces for whatever is needed to return to his body. He feels a gentle breath blow over him. It seems to flow into his very being, every hair on his arms and legs standing, as a tingling sensation passes over. “Ian,” the voice says, “tilt your head... feel the liquid drain from your eyes... now open your eyes and see.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The Return

The doctor steps through the door, thumbing over forms detailing the cause of death. It is a morbid job in such an eerie room, let alone doing it on your own. Lying under a white sheet is the silhouette of the man. To say it is still is an understatement. A shiver runs up the spine of the young Indian doctor. “Why do I always have to perform the final rites; I hate documentation,” he mumbles.

Dropping the clipboard on the end of the bed he pulls the sheet back. The corpse’s white hair is matted and wet, sticking to the forehead and scalp. Lifting the eyelids, the doctor notes the fluid around the sockets. Empty whites peer back at him. He places a hand loosely over Ian’s mouth and nose; there is no breath. Putting a hand under the neck and then on the wrist, again there is no sign of life. Pulling the sheet further back, he examines the body for marks and injuries. He pauses at the seared arm; it is so ghostly white and gaunt. The swelling never dissipated, causing it to be significantly larger than the other arm. His finger tips run across the burns, forcing him to convulse a little.

Stopping for a moment, the doctor stares at the wall, checking his feelings. “Why am I so jumpy? Is it because this is the first white body I have ever examined; the color is so stark and unnatural? No, that’s not it... my heart is warm... though my head is cold.”

“Where did that come from?” he chuckles at the deep thoughts that have surfaced. The nervousness eases as he begins to hum an unfamiliar tune. “I do feel strangely content. This is not a great task, but I am blessed to have a vocation with meaning. This is right for me. This is my place, what I am made for. God... does God provide meaning to me?” The mighty beings’ presence is influencing the young man, though they are not interfering with or touching him.

A dark shadow passes the doorway, pausing to look in. Unwilling to enter or linger the demon has to quickly assess what is happening. Croydon continues to conceal his rank as best he can; loose robes cover all his belt and armor, and he stoops a little to appear smaller than his physique affords. Croydon stares directly at the shade, forcing him to look away nervously. Involuntarily the demon puts his hand down to the weapon about his hip. Knowing he must, he looks back into the room, avoiding the powerful stare this time, unsure

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of what to do. “They are not interfering with the doctor, but why are they lingering with one who is gone? Are they protecting the body? Why would they do this?”

The whisper slips Croydon’s mouth as a silent dart penetrating the dark mind. “There’s no reason for concern; there is nothing for you here.”

A hidden desire causes the shade to look at Croydon again. “Who is the senior and what is he doing here? Did he say something? I should report the matter at the end of my round; perhaps someone knows what’s going on... but then, there is need to panic, they are not interfering. Who cares what pointless mission they are on; I will stick to my rounds.”

Dryden glances at Croydon for instruction. Croydon gives a diminutive shake of his head. The demon walks off. “Leave him. At the moment we are anonymous and have nothing to hide. Subduing him would only escalate matters. Let’s wait. I’m not sure what to expect; I’ve never seen one return.”

“Neither I, Sir,” Dryden nods, a little excited as hope pushes harder into his gut.

The fifteen minute mark passes; Dryden is all too aware of the time. He can’t stop the concerns rising, though he keeps it inside. “Perhaps Ian will go through; perhaps our destiny will be forsaken. Surely Master, surely you knew this all.”

Pulling the sheets back up around the neck of the corpse the Indian doctor prepares to sign off. Pausing, he contemplates a further procedure. Scuffling through the drawer of a small desk he picks out a scalpel. He sets it in front of his face for inspection. Uncovering Ian’s feet, he scoops the left foot under his arm and prods the base of the foot gently with the sharp tool. Looking down the length of the body, only the head is visible. “He is obviously dead; I don’t know why I’m bothering. There is not a live nerve in the body at all.” Dropping the foot he swaps hands to check the other. “Better finish this off, then I can get back to my desk.”

Ian obeys the command. He tilts his head, fluid runs from his eye down the side of his face. His right eye opens. As simple as waking from a dream, he is back in his body. The shift has been instantaneous; there’s no travelling back through the tunnel or darkness. God spoke and it happened.

The thud of light hits the room with an audible noise. The angels both jump, startled. Breathing fast in excitement they stare at each other before laughing, Dryden blurting out, “How could I have doubted?”

Ian sees he is laid out on a stretcher, a white sheet up around his neck. Down the end of the bed he can see a young Indian doctor holding his right foot. He is prodding it with a sharp pointed instrument. “That should hurt! What’s he doing with my foot? Does he think I’m dead or something? God, what’s happened? What’s happened to me?” The doctor is oblivious to the fact that Ian has opened his eye and is staring at him.

Dryden puts his hand on Ian's head and raises his other arm toward the ceiling. The portal of light pours into the room and Ian hears a clear familiar voice, "Son, I've just given your life back."

Suddenly the doctor stops what he's doing, sensing something or someone is watching him. Looking briefly to the door, he shifts his gaze back down the length of the bed sheet. As their eyes connect, terror sweeps over his face. He stumbles back in fright and lets out a shrill squeal; the blood has drained from his face as if he has seen a ghost. Standing frozen, he is unsure if he has hit a nerve and got the dead corpse to twitch, or whether there actually is life in the body. "He's dead, the man is dead; I'm only here to confirm that!"

Ian is also shaken. "What? What's that going to mean? If this is true, this man doesn't know what's going on. God give me strength to tilt my head to the left and look out the other side. I'm sick of looking at this guy." An angelic hand gently assists Ian to turn his neck to the left. Nurses and orderlies have run to the door in response to the scream. A nurse leaning forward jumps up in surprise, the back of her head smashing into the chin of a friend peering over top of her. With a moan she falls to the floor. They all know Ian has been dead for nearly twenty minutes. Two sets of red eyes peer in also. Looking at each other, they scurry off in different directions.

"Where's the man with the heart pump?" Ian thinks. His eyes search the room for medical equipment used to resuscitate him. "You don't bring a guy back to life by holding his foot and staring through a doorway! It was you, God, wasn't it? You did it, didn't you? It was all real!"

The terror turns to excited action as the hospital staff take control of the situation. The doctor releases the foot and jokes to cover obvious tension at the live body in the morgue. Coming close to Ian's face the young doctor has a rich accent. "We thought you dead for over fifteen minutes. Apologies, we no understanding how you are being here! You do very well."

The chatter and noise muffles into the background. Ian takes in all that has happened. He rolls his head back to the centre. "Was that a dream? God, I used to say that if I could see you I would believe. I know it was real! What's this going to mean for my life? It's going to require a complete change in lifestyle and direction! God, I don't think I can live a holy and pure life. I've tried before and failed. So where does that leave us?" Tears and sweat mingle in Ian's eyes, the liquid sliding silently down the side of his face. "How can I ever live successfully for you? We both know me..."

"Son, I will help you," the voice responds calmly.

"What will my friends think if I tell them I've become a follower of God? They'll think I've flipped." Savoring the fear for only a moment, Ian continues. "I don't care what my friends think. Peer pressure and the search for acceptance have caused enough suffering in my life. I'm going to follow you whether anyone else is or not! Nothing I have ever experienced, nothing anyone has

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ever told me, compares one iota to what I have just glimpsed!"

Dryden has his mouth open, a rabid excitement burning inside. Attempting to assist Ian processing, both heads are spinning way to fast. Putting a hand on Ian's head again, Dryden tries to calm himself by pulling long strong breaths into his lungs. "Peace, truth, love, hope and understanding..." the notions permeate from him in a jittery, fluid rush.

Tears stream down his face, a deeper sobbing lifting up from the pit of his stomach. "At last... at last the destiny can be fulfilled... Ian, we can finally complete the role determined for us!" Deepening howls begin to pour from the guardian's spirit.

Croydon leans against the wall, cherishing the young angel's passionate sense of purpose. Enjoying every moment, he closes his eyes. As the natural sights slip from his vision a picture comes into the mind of the angelic captain... She is dressed in white, beautiful, elegant and dark featured. Gracefully she rises to her feet and steps forward. She seems to glide on the glassy sea, her veiled face radiant itself with light. Ten million light bearers escort her, ushering the bride in toward the blazing light. Drawing nearer the thrones she reaches out to take the hand stretching from the cloud; it is a form seldom seen in the glory realm. He hears the words whispered about her as she takes her honored place at the marriage feast. "Blessed... Beloved..." The great table sits before them, brightly arrayed with the choicest of foods the colors of which seem to glisten in the bright light. He knows the groom is there, but the glory of his form is veiled in the vision.

The vision begins to fade but Croydon's eyes are still shut. His body tenses as he lifts himself to his full stature. In the seclusion of the hospital room he rises to stand rigidly at attention. An arm is raised as he salutes to the Creator high above the portal. Holding the poise emotions begin to rise also in him, "Yes Master... that the victory of the Lamb be revealed!"

The older doctor has come to Ian's side. "Young man," he says with his clear Oxford English. "I don't know if you can understand me or not, but we thought we had lost you. You've done it; you've made it! Amazing! We had better get you into the ward now."

Ian is not focusing on anything that is said. Deeper thoughts run through his mind. "I feel different. In fact, I know I am completely different! I can still feel the love, acceptance and warmth... There is a sense of something live, burning inside me... I have a purpose! I've been dead! I've been to heaven and hell! I saw God! I am not here by chance! I am on this earth for a reason. It just makes sense, though I don't know how or why..."

Turning his thoughts to the situation around him, Ian realizes he is paralyzed. "The darn poisons are still moving through my blood. If I've been dead that long, with no oxygen to the brain, then I'm going to be a vegetable. I can think and I can move my neck to some degree... I can't be a vegetable, that's a miracle

in itself! But I can't feel my legs; God, I might not walk again..."

Staring at the ceiling, as if that must be the direction of God, Ian speaks clearly in his mind. "God, I don't want to go through the rest of life as a cripple. If this is how it is, then take me back to that place I saw. I don't want to be here on earth. If you've given my life back, then you can also heal me. If you want me here then you will need to do that. I want to walk out of the hospital and live a normal life. I don't want to be a quadriplegic or on a machine. Please take me to that other place if you're going to do that..."

The prayer passes the earthly realms in an instant. The light in the room begins to change. It crackles and sparks, like electrical cables exposed to rain. Ian can feel new warmth rippling down into his head. Tingling goose bumps move down his neck. Healing power pours into the room, pushing the sensation through his chest and limbs, electrifying his numb extremities. The ends of his fingers twitch as the heat expands, flowing through his whole body.

Recognizing everything that is occurring, the light bearers grin at each other and place their hands on Ian's chest. New light washes over them, pouring down into Ian's still frame. His chest heaves as the angels concentrate the life into him. Ian can feel the heat all over his body, the Holy Spirit flowing from the top of his head to the tip of his feet. Suspended droplets begin to form in the portal above their heads. They gather and slide down, falling onto Ian's body. The healing balm from heaven is bathing him in the light. Ian knows a supernatural restoration is taking place. Immediately he can feel a little movement come back into his hands and feet.

The change in Ian's state has raised serious alarms right through the hospital. A disgruntled full rank of nearly thirty gathers in the bunker like basement of the old war hospital. The fallen warrior with overall responsibility for the hospital quickly gets to the point of the meeting. "One of them has returned from the other side. You all know the protocol for this offence; we must subdue, muzzle and confuse any knowledge gained. But first, what do we know about the man?"

The question creates opportunity for discussion. No one is sure who Ian is, or what his background or apparent destiny are. The reports are mixed and jumbled, frustrating the lead demon. None of them have ever had to deal with a matter like this. He struggles to control the noisy band that shows him little respect. The rowdy group is soon discussing rumors of the legion's defeat, rather than matters at hand. Cynicism rises at the validity of the reports, as snide remarks and sarcastic comments interrupt proceedings.

"Charioteers have not been here. Why would they? We have never seen them, you're a liar!" one demon spits loudly.

"What else could have taken the legion on then?" retorts a proponent spreading the rumors.

"You don't even know the legion has been challenged!"

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“I know more than you, fool!”

The two arguing pull on each other's trench coats, turning the debate into a physical standoff. They eye each other savagely as the group cheer and protest, egging the two on. Leaping up onto a table beside them, the senior demon draws his sword and shouts above the circus din, “Stand down, scum!” The group settles a little as the two back off. “We are here to discuss the child of light, not the legion. I will personally deal with the next one who brings that up again,” he yells, eyeballing everyone in the room.

“Oh!” several belittle in mock fear. Despite this they quiet down.

“I want us to deal with fact only. So... two light bearers protect the unidentified man. He has been on the other side. He undoubtedly has seen things he should not have. We don't know who he is or for what purpose he has returned. One of those with him would appear to be of significant rank, but we are also unclear of that!”

Chuckling rises as the group undermine the leader. It will be his head to roll if it all goes wrong; there is no love lost amongst them. The demon scowls and lifts a weathered thumb and forefinger up to grip his forehead. He can feel the blinding work of light about the room.

Seizing their opportunity the group rouse themselves again in raucous debate. “He has seen the kingdom of light, I can sense it,” shouts one.

“Who is the man then, bright boy? Or should we call him Sparky?” mocks another.

“If we stand here debating any longer we risk reinforcements being brought in. We have to attack now. We can take the senior if we work together.”

“The charioteers might still be around...”

“There are no charioteers, dimwit...”

In the rowdy bustle little is gained. Inevitable concerns emerge that the legion's defeat and the senior angelic presence could be linked. The matter is fiercely debated, but no one has even heard a rumor as to why the legion was called out in the first place.

The hospital leader knows he has to make smart decisions and fast. He barks a hasty conclusion, “I want you two to report to headquarters... or what remains of them. You, you, you, you, you, and you,” he says, pointing to the ones who have been more vocal, “check the status of things upstairs. Come back with some decent information... if you are capable of that. Everyone else must return to their positions. Don't let me hear that you've been shirking, just stay alert, we are all at risk tonight.” The arguing group disperses; two remaining with the leader to strategize once more information is received.

Orderlies are preparing to wheel Ian out of the room. His head has been placed on a pillow and he stares at the ceiling in quiet wonder. Dryden still has his hand on Ian's head, the portal closed for now. Croydon steps into the hallway ahead of the stretcher at the same time that the weapon wielding black

shadows are edging down the hallway. Swords drawn, he stands at full stature and authority, his head barely contained under the high ceiling. The six shades buckle at the unexpected appearance of the light bearer, quickly pulling back. Well ahead of the procession they carefully scrutinize the majestic light bearer. “Well, well. Despite your bravado downstairs you are wise enough to know to hold off,” Croydon quietly states to the group, demonstrating an unforeseen knowledge of their movements.

It is 1.35am and Ian arrives at a small room on the first floor of the decrepit building. The orderlies leave a nurse writing up details on a clipboard. She strains to see in the poor light beside the bed. The drips have been reattached into Ian’s arms, rehydrating and feeding his body. He is sweating heavily, the toxins still at work.

The fallen split up. Three hover in the corridor, while the others leer outside a window at the opposite end of the room. Light pouring from Ian’s spirit is now a major point of interest to them. The destiny and life apparently hanging over Ian is immense. One demon whispers in a husky voice, “Has he always been like this, or is this new?”

“I don’t know. What role does he have or how does that link?”

“We have to get access. We have got to find out what is going on in his mind.”

None of the six move; they are low on numbers, having seen Croydon in his full authority.

Light and moisture fall spasmodically as the healing process continues and the portal comes and goes. Distant thoughts, like voices, come into Ian’s mind.

“Nothing has changed; you won’t amount to anything.”

“You’re dreaming. None of this really happened. By morning you will feel much better and everything will return to normal.”

Ian barely notices the comments offered him. He is basking in the new warmth of life beating within him. On either side silver shields drop down and peace envelopes him. He lies still, feeling desperately tired. He slowly closes his eyes, only to suddenly re-open them wide. “I’m still here? Man, I’m petrified I’ll disappear into the darkness again. But I’m so tired, I’ve got to sleep. Relax Ian, it’s alright, you are in your body now.” Again he shuts his eyes, but suddenly opens them fretfully. Nevertheless he feels more assured than the time before. Determinedly he closes his eyes a third time and falls into a deep sleep.

Croydon and Dryden swing their shields back behind their folded wings, deeply content as Ian rests peacefully between them. Spontaneously their hands lift high above their heads, as they sing out praise to the heavens; unashamed and passionate.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

A Quiet Night?

The silhouette of the sage's hilltop recluse stamps a grey shroud against the dark sky. The night is quiet, with few stars visible. Shadowed light from the moon struggles to overcome slow moving clouds.

"We come from Quartre Bornes with information for the Master of the house," the first messenger states correctly.

One of the muscular demons guarding the imposing iron gates stares blankly ahead, arrogantly devoid of any response. The other picks at his teeth and nails with a dagger. Retaining perfect control of the weapon, he flicks it cleverly, rotating it around each massive fist.

Frustrated at the elitist attitude, the messenger is careful not to portray too much arrogance himself. "May we proceed to the house?" he pushes a little more assertively. The gate keepers do not respond.

Looking at each other the messengers nod to proceed. One reaches for the latch as a black sword smashes broad sided on top of the gate. The messengers jump in fright, the clang of metal ringing in their ears. The gate keepers amuse themselves with snide laughter.

Hearts thumping, the messengers squint, but force their mouths shut. The belittling attitude of the demons riles them, discretion helping them to hold it in.

"The Master of the house does not want to be disturbed. Please come back in the morning, if that pleases you, sirs," mocks a rough voice with a pirate twang.

The ridicule is not lost on the messengers; the closed gates heighten their curiosity rather than deter them. They don't ask why the Master cannot be disturbed. Carefully they check the surroundings for any evidence of the rumored conflict. Nothing appears out of place.

"Our commander has ordered us here with information that may be crucial in relation to events this evening," one astutely retorts.

The imposing demon, his sword still on the gate, stands at the comment. Raising himself to full height, he looks down through the bars of steel. The messenger is at least a foot shorter than him. "What information could you possibly have that is of interest to me?" the hard voice challenges.

Knowing they have hit onto something, the second messenger steps in to

mediate, "Sir, we simply wish to complete the task assigned to us. We will then go back about our business. May we please enter to speak with the Master of the house?"

The gatekeeper enjoys the show of respect. He lifts his sword in a threatening manner, only to drop it to his side. "Thank you. You only needed to say please... scum. Enter into your destiny... it may come sooner than you think."

The gate creaks and groans. Opening the smallest of gaps the gate keeper bows effusively. The messengers are forced to open the gate further. Its hinges are rusting badly, but it widens and they enter the courtyard of the opulent residence.

The messenger flings the gate with all his strength. It rattles to an abrupt close behind them, ribbing the two gate demons. Dobermans begin to bark wildly at the noisy interaction. "Those fools need to be taught a lesson in politeness," the messenger whispers as they move up the cobbled driveway.

"Perhaps we could assist the process on our way home," the second one pluckily agrees. They snigger to ease their tension as they quietly approach the foreboding three storied mansion. Dark shadowed windows cast an evil presence onto the courtyard in the veiled moonlight.

Wide stone steps unfold in front of the house. Lifelike dragon statues hold vigil to the sides as they walk up to the ornate wooden door. Two powerful demons stand at the entrance directly behind the statues. Lances tower high above their heads, bases resting on the stone steps.

"What's your business here?" demands the doorman.

Unwittingly one of the messengers notices a wound on the forearm of the demon. The large doorman flicks his lance within inches of the messenger's throat. "What are you looking at fledgling? Do you taste fear?"

The messenger submissively drops his eyes, "No Sir."

The second messenger steps in to placate the edgy demons again. "We have come from Quartre Bornes hospital simply to deliver a message to the Master."

Not lifting his lance, the demon processes the information. "The hospital, you have come from the hospital?" The messenger nods without looking up, ensuring he controls his tongue. "You had better go in then," concludes the doorman lifting his lance.

"You'll find him at the end of the corridor on the first floor."

"Thanks," the second messenger politely replies pushing the door open.

The lance-wielding demon bends and gently whispers, "Savor what the last few minutes of your life on the surface look like, pretty boy..."

The messengers laugh as if humored, but fear is mounting as a large dark hand shuts the door behind them. The high ceilinged hallway and entrance raises a sense of exposure in their guts. Silently they move to the stairwell of the impressive house.

Across the landing a corridor opens; at the end, the door they are seeking is

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highlighted. The hallway seems to take an age to navigate as they cautiously pass closed door after closed door. Both evil beings ponder what may lie behind each one. While they have seen no one in the house, they know they are not alone. The brasher messenger dares to whisper, "They're all hiding, slinking in the recesses, licking their wounds." The quiet comment seems to resonate down the hall. They return to silence, in fear of being heard.

The imposing door looms in front of them. Neither is willing to knock, but eventually a hand is raised. Three short knocks ring down the still corridor. The arm is withdrawn as they wait. There is no response and so they knock again. Moments pass as tension builds, making them increasingly fidgety in the lack of response. Soon a long minute has passed. It is inevitable that they have no option but to enter. Breathing heavily, they knock for a third time and cautiously lean on the door enough to slip in.

The room is wrapped in darkness. Dimmed hall lights draw the only rays of light in with them. The door shuts and the room plunges into darkness again. They scan what they can. A large table and some red leather chairs occupy the middle of the room. Morbid paintings hang on the walls between large bookcases of every genre. A high-arched chair has its back to them, one of the spires broken. It faces a large window shut hard. Stuffiness fills the room; it is evil and dark even for the messengers. The sage lies curled up, breathing spasmodically, in a broken sleep near the wall.

They linger nervously near the door as the dull moonlight casts insufficient vision into the room. Gradually their eyes accustom to the darkness. A large, dark, evil mass sits hunched in the chair, motionless.

Together they bow until their faces are only a foot above the wooden floor, one knee upon it. "Master," one says in a stifled voice, freezing in their positions of humility. The silence seems to shout back in fear.

"Master, we are sent to advise you of an event at Quatre Bornes hospital minutes ago. A child of light has been to the other side and has returned. He is attended by light bearers, one whom is of significant stature, Sir."

Both messengers breathe irregularly, aware that Sabre could well ask questions which they have no answer for. The lord exhibits no evidence of life. Pleased then to have delivered their information the demons edge back toward the door. Silently dragging their kneeled leg along the floor a hand reaches for the handle.

A voice ceases the retreat. Sabre's tone is numb and melancholic, "I curse you Croydon, vile light. I would have prevailed... I am stronger than you. But now you sit in the smugness of your shallow victory. You are nothing to me... I rule here... I still rule... yet I still thirst your life blood, to have it ooze over my sword, spilling upon the ground. To have you writhe in pain, begging my blade to cease and complete its work..."

Rising, and stepping to the closed window, Sabre fantasizes the address to

Croydon. “So the plan of heaven has shown itself. You believe this ‘experience’ will cement his life and salvation? Dare you think this destiny can still be achieved? Huh, this will not be activated on my watch...” Feelings of self pity and resentment grip Sabre from the failure on the road. It deludes and slows his action. He lost nearly two hundred warriors, but worse, he lost credibility, something unfamiliar to the headstrong demon.

In the ensuing silence the messengers nervously ease back outside. Behind the closed door they look at each other with relief. “How did we get out of that?” one mouths to the other. Walking more confidently through the mansion now, they have a glowing sense of accomplishment. Passing the final gatekeepers they strut out in front of the massive guards. One gatekeeper steps forward and swings a fist, missing their heads by several feet. The messengers break into a run, laughing victoriously as they head back to the hospital.

Sabre’s mind is awash with wishful, vengeful thoughts. A vehement stench fills the room. He rests his massive knuckles on the wooden sill, heavy breath misting the glass pane. The fantasy captivates him. “What’s your next move boy? You will not outsmart me. The wounded serpent will strike when you least expect it. This time you will not have your sweet chariots. You won’t even see me coming! I stalk you now, the superior of us two. I will thrust my dagger silently between your pretty winged shoulder blades. Then, I will pluck your cherished feathers until my blade draws back, smeared with your light blood. You will be forgotten, remembered only as a notch about my waist.” Sabre fondles his multi notched belt with a sickening pleasure. “You may have secured the precious soul for the Son, but the walking out of any destiny will be smeared this night.”

The day meanders on for Marie, though it has been anything but normal. Deep in her stomach a light cramp has knotted her up time and again. As it does so, she stops to weep and pray a little. Then it passes. Her face is vibrant and alive. Pausing, she speaks openly as if God were right there. “Father, I know it is your weight I carry. You are so close, so real. Odd as this day has been, you have brought me to life. I don’t know if I’ve grasped what I needed to, but I know the emptiness in my life is insignificant now. I have purpose. I’m not alone. Thank you, my counselor. No, I am not alone.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, her arms are folded, clutching her abdomen as the cramp passes. The intercession has not stopped all day. Every being around the house has watched the portal like a beacon resonating out to ships afar off. Gently Marie begins to rock back and forward a little. Trails reform and roll down the front of her reddened cheeks, two wet spots growing on her skirt. Her heart is re-living the sound of the voice earlier. “I wonder what’s happening to Ian, protect him Father, hold him, bring him to you, redeem the lost and restore the prodigal. Stand about Him Lord.”

Valmar has not let her out of his sight since Dryden left. The demonic force

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has largely dispersed. Thirty linger at safe distances on the grassed hills behind the house. Seven of the angelic group that arrived to shelter the intercessor remain. Encircling the house at even intervals they have drawn a large ring of fire about the outer edge of the property. The imposing force guarantees the demons will stay a distance off. Any approach would be costly through the firewall.

The portal twists above the house, alive with movement, wavering in a breeze of liquid light. It pours like a spring, spilling onto the glass sea. Light oozes over the edge of the golden urn, creating a mist that lingers and eventually dissipates some meters away.

There had been much exuberant shouting when Ian had prayed in the ambulance. The massive room was awash with noise for what seemed like ten minutes. Everyone had danced and yelled in victory once the tension of the battle had passed. The divisions of angels sat alert, longing to be the help released. When things had looked their darkest, they anxiously turned to the Father. No instruction for intervention was received. Seldom does he give such a command. He let the enemy fulfill their time. Sufficient authority had been enacted and He was prepared to wait for Ian to choose. Never would He compel, tactics so disparate to the dark world's. The depth of that decision is hard for all other beings to comprehend.

The Son is now standing between the throne and the urn. He has not stopped staring into it since returning from the door. Now, an unanswered desire floats quietly from his lips. "How long Father, how long will my bride be removed from us? When will the betrothed become one with us?" Graciously He turns to the Lord of Heaven's Armies directly. He looks a little coy as he speaks again. "Father, is she not beautiful? You prepare the most splendid of brides for me! I eagerly await her fulfillment, for my heart bursts with passion. So now, how long will you hold yourself back? Is it not time for suffering to end? Is it not time to bring her home?"

"Patience Son, she is beautiful and will soon be worthy of you. But there are more, so many more I know will come. How can I stop them? The fleeting pain and suffering will be overshadowed by the victory. Our Spirit as one will see the greatest mystery that ever has been conceived to fruition. I long for her also, for she is made to be one with us."

A contented smile crosses the Son's face, a look of mischief in his eye. Nodding at the Father He turns to the massive divisions of angelic beings. With the slightest of signals there is movement near the front of the regimented lines. A path opens as a spirited warrior runs forward. He bows his head in honor of the Son.

"Galius," the Son begins. "It is time. Let us show the enemy our hand. Take your position; the time of reconciliation is upon us. It is time to anoint him. It is time for him to be. For that which I conceived at his birth is to be brought

to bear.”

A mighty angel salutes enthusiastically, excitement etched on his face. He returns quickly to his rank and carefully selects four to accompany him. The five immediately make preparations to cross to the earthly realms.

Leaning on the urn as if it were a well the Son whispers a word to Marie. “Peace daughter of the King... it is done!” His breath washes over Marie. She sits bolt upright for a moment on her bed, as if waking. Instantly the call to prayer has finished. Refreshed and complete, she stands and resumes the chores of her day, a wellspring of love bubbling in her heart.

Valmar lets out a huge sigh as the portal fades away. Following her about the house, he is struggling to contain his emotion. “Magnificent, you have been magnificent. You have completed your assignment without flaw. If only you knew what you have accomplished this day. One day you will. Well done daughter of the King. He smiles upon you with favor, His scepter extended toward you. He welcomes and loves you... and... well... I love you. Thank you!” Tears stream from the face of the guardian as he asserts the same word again and again under his breath, “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Destiny

The lines of dark warriors maintain their somber mood, the echoes of defeat still ringing in their ears. Only a few will be chosen for the special mission. Sabre paces the line. He hesitates; an unfamiliar demon stands in front of him. His eyes pass over the massive creature whose size matches the demonic lord himself.

“Who promoted you?” Sabre barks.

The warrior holds his breathing steady, “Markian... Sir.”

Sabre pulls his face near the demon’s ear, switching to a tender tone, “What’s your name boy?”

“Smyrn, Master,” replies the demon, mimicking Sabre’s tenderness.

Sabre turns and moves on as if to pass Smyrn by. Pausing, he turns his head as his eyes narrow. “Do you desire to taste the blood of light... Smyrn?”

Smyrn looks straight ahead in the dull night light. “Master, I have drunk already... but I thirst for more.”

Sabre is impressed, rousing a little from his melancholy. Grabbing the collar of Smyrn’s trench coat he pulls his face within inches of the younger demon’s. “And thirst is what I want, Smyrn!”

Smyrn holds his poise and stares straight ahead, as if seeing through the lord whose height matches his own.

Sabre holds the powerful grip on the coat, attempting to unbalance Smyrn as he turns to walk again. The young demon rocks forward, exhibiting only a little unsteadiness.

The demon lord isn’t challenged. He completes the selection of eleven evil agents, dismissing the others. The chosen remain isolated where the line had been standing. Beckoning the group, they efficiently move into an ordered shorter line. Sabre paces before them. “My precious ones, tonight we will settle the matter yet unresolved with the dogs of heaven. I have selected you to assist me in this dangerous dark action. It will be quite a different show of force than engaged in earlier. The man is being held at the hospital. He was dead, but is now back. You understand what that means. So we will possess the hospital under the disguise of the night, before surprising our bright little friends. Where the open confrontation allowed them to utilize their empowerment, close quartered attack and cramped conditions will permit us

to use our superior strength. This will be the difference between us tonight. The man must fail, or powers beyond us will be seeking discipline to quell their disappointments. So then... are you with me?"

A short united call comes back from the eleven, "Master, we fight for you!"

Within minutes they lie hidden amongst houses behind the hospital, darkness having shrouded their arrival from all other eyes. Sabre draws the sinister warriors in close as they assess the property. The hospital contains a series of barrack-styled buildings, laid out parallel to each other. The main building is the exception, as it stands alone. Sabre patiently surveys each of the near fifty windows exposed to them.

"Enter through the basement. The car park will give us poor shelter, so for a time we will be visible. Scouts have checked the adjacent sides; there is no improved access. The boy's room is on the opposite face, the one that faces the atrium. The grassed area is enclosed by the other buildings. As we can't enter unnoticed we are going to have to work slowly. Don't underestimate the preparedness of the light bearers. I am happy for us to take our time; there are many hours at our disposal. Split into pairs, Smyrn with me. Shroud yourselves and look petty. With luck the light bearers will think nothing of us. Leave a few minutes between you and don't you dare draw any undue attention."

The party obeys in militant silence. Sabre scrutinizes the windows again. On his signal the first pair steps out from the shelter, crossing the road and the car park. Thirty seconds later they are in the basement. The ten remaining sets of red eyes carefully monitor the windows of the building throughout the walk.

Sabre humphs, "Maybe our friends are not as observant as we thought." He signals the second pair to proceed from a different angle.

The practice is repeated over half an hour. It seems increasingly unlikely that light bearers are actually watching. Sabre and Smyrn are the last to move. The two large demons are well suited. From a distance it is difficult to distinguish their size from the others. They stoop and swagger unimpressively. The mimic is effective as they enter the door ajar at the bottom of the building.

A smattering of the hospital demons are dispersed amongst the other ten inside. Sabre notes the smirks on the faces of his legionnaires; they intimidate the others. A salty taste enters his mouth as he senses the fear intensifying in the minions overawed by his presence. Proudly he resumes his purposeful strut and takes immediate control of the room.

"You need not be told why you are here. It's time to take back to the depths of darkness what the scorn of light has wrongfully stolen. We have seen already that numbers mean little; strength and surprise will be our victory. We must take the light bearers before we cripple the child. We have seen their weaknesses and they are readied for our defeat. Now you must show me your valor and resolve."

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With that Sabre squares his huge frame. “Where are the plans?” he snarls at the demon in charge.

Expecting the request the leader nervously jerks into action. Fumbling, the hospital plans fall onto the cold concrete floor. The group sneers at the incompetence and rising fear in the demon. They are more fascinated by this than the uninspiring speech by Sabre. The snickering stops as Sabre looks disdainfully around the restless room.

The papers are gathered up and brought to Sabre. “The child is in this room, Sir. He is only guarded by two. One is a guardian and the other... well... he is a senior... Sir,” the leader speaks confidently, covering his nervousness in this rare opportunity to try to impress Sabre.

“Croydon,” Sabre grunts tautly under his breath. The demon flinches, unnerved by the lord’s knowledge of the situation. Sabre’s sharp mind quickly focuses and absorbs the information on the plans.

Staring at the plans for more than a minute, a pained look falls over his face as he rationalizes the alternatives. Frustrated, he pushes the plans away from him. They balance then topple onto the floor again. Sabre resumes a stalking position back and forth in front of the group.

“Am I a minnow to hide or skulk around?” he asks rhetorically.

“No, you are the lord of this land, Sir!” responds a legionnaire eager to suck up to the powerful leader.

“That is right! It is entrusted and given to me. No man or angel dare challenge that! It is to your peril, Croydon... Any of you can take the boy, but Croydon is mine. Smyrn you are with me.” Sabre struts out of the room, closely shadowed by Smyrn lapping up the favor. The island demonic lord brushes out two doors, up the stairs, and steps into full view on the grassed atrium.

The ten follow, but hesitate at the door. “Why waste an hour coming in hidden!” one mutters short of Sabre’s earshot. They move out to form a semi circle at the perimeter of the grass. The local demons are left bewildered as to whether they are to follow or not.

Sabre is in the middle. He turns to look at those with him before grinning and leering up at the first floor window which emanates a gentle light. “Croydon,” he shouts. The thunderous voice ricochets off the buildings, waking animals and birds prematurely for the dawn. They moan and squawk uneasily. Patients wake anxiously, causing a few minutes of panic for hospital staff who struggle to pacify their plights in life.

Croydon moves to the window, lifts a hand and offers a friendly wave to Sabre, as if they were school friends passing each other in a mall. The gesture amuses the group but riles the ruling demon.

“We have unfinished business, Croydon. Get your yellow hide down here. You have my word that I will leave the child alone... while you live. Let’s not fuss with formalities but decide his fate between us, here and now.”

Dryden's hand is on Croydon's shoulder, "Don't let him rattle you, Sir. Even Sabre cannot take our destiny. Let him writhe in the squalor of his own defeat."

Croydon doesn't move but a mischievous look is in Croydon's eyes. Concerned, Dryden moves to more forcefully engage his senior. "Sir, no! You do not need to risk sacrificing yourself in this battle. Don't listen to him. Let's wait for support and stay here where the Spirit is surrounding us."

"Dryden... brother... you know your destiny, but you don't know mine! This is what I am. This is what I am created for. I long to fight! I have been fashioned by my Master for that express purpose! Here and now we can settle this matter. He is weakened and I am strengthened. If ever I were to take him, it is now! I feel like I have seen this moment already, I think it is my time. The Lion of Judah be with us!"

The hand on the shoulder drops as the warrior steps onto the window ledge. Focusing, he passes the wall and window as if they were not there. He drops one knee to the grassy ground as he lands, as if submitting himself to a higher power. Twin silver blades glisten in the shadowed setting. Croydon is only ten meters in front of the island's demonic master.

Dryden looks anxiously to Ian, who is peacefully sleeping. "Father, help us," he whispers.

The demons spread to engulf the two mighty spirit beings in a large circle. Stretching an arm above him, Sabre's hand engages his huge lateral muscles. An ominous sword is pulled from between his shoulder blades, slowly drawn down in front of him. His left hand fondles the long dark sickle.

"Oh, your foolishness never ceases to amaze me, Croydon! Now your blood will be spilt in hollow failure. Then you can spend your remaining days with your precious Master. My sickle has already savored your blood..." Sabre's eyes move with a sense of ascendancy to where he struck earlier. Squinting, the healed cut is barely discernable. He turns and spits disdainfully onto the ground, hiding his disappointment.

Croydon wheels around slowly, passing each leg in front of the other in a scissor movement. His swords hang at his side, though his arm muscles flex and tense. Adrenalin pours through his body as a sense of greatness arrests his heart. He looks up into the dark sky and smiles contently. "So, explain again how I lose, Sabre? If I die, I go to the fountain of light until the end. That's a pretty severe punishment, don't you think?"

He continues moving fluidly with his feet. "But then, if I prevail, where do you go? Oh... You will spend your days in the pit, with nothing better to do than scavenge in the dark for some poor wretched soul to torment! Blinded and weak you will be reduced to the level of every other foul spirit in that place. Yes, Sabre..." Croydon nods, "I know that place, I have seen it!"

Sabre is silent, allowing Croydon's words to spur the rage inside him.

Croydon continues, "But let's go back to my first assertion. Allow me to

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think this through to the end. What if you do succeed tonight? What if you survive to some other day? What will happen to you in the end? From where do you source your expectations? How do you kindle your hope? Does your Master suggest you can win? How could he ever overthrow the Creator? That is bordering on the ridiculous sublime! We both know that cannot be. No, your hope has been crushed. For in the end, there is an inevitable appointment for you. Yes, you will be cast into the eternal fire, a place so destitute that even you don't deserve it! Yet, even now if you submit back to the King, perhaps you can find mercy for your tormented soul. He is full of grace."

Sabre has no intention of thinking too much about anything Croydon says. Finally he interrupts, looking as disinterested as possible. "Enough rhetoric; put the valor of your pitiful words into action."

Croydon lifts both swords horizontal to his body with striking poise of light. He looks directly at Sabre, "For the Creator's Kingdom to reclaim the earth, for the Lamb and for His bride!"

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Galius!

The two magnificent beings lock in battle. Croydon opens with a volley targeting Sabre's left. It appears the warrior is gaining ascendancy as the demonic lord defensively blocks each swing.

Croydon varies his attack, but gradually Sabre twists, and brings his favored right hand into play. The dark sword deflects the twin blades of silver with relative ease. Several wide swings of the sickle pass in front of Croydon, creating moments of silence before the clanging of metals resumes.

The empowered light bearer is suppler than Sabre, mitigating Sabre's advantage in body mass and brute strength. But the battle aged demon is working to a different strategy. He slowly maneuvers the battle towards a tree near the edge of the atrium. Lurking there is Smyrn's ominous shadow, crouching. He is obscured by the night light and foliage and his dark sword lies motionless behind the trunk.

"Careful Croydon, careful," Dryden whispers, seeing the whole scene from the first floor window. Ian continues to rest contently on the bed. "I can't leave you, but I must warn Croydon." Dryden yells as loud as he can, "Croydon, watch your back!" The call is futile as the demons jeer and yell for their champion.

On cue, Sabre completes a high arc over Croydon. The move forces Croydon to turn, exposing his back side to Smyrn. Sabre moves onto the attack with a series of powerful strikes, forcing Croydon back toward the tree. Smyrn seizes his opportunity but rushes a little. A dull thud resounds amidst the clang of metal as the broad side of Smyrn's sword connects with Croydon's exposed calf. Croydon stumbles forward as the leg collapses, dropping a sword to grip at the pained limb.

Sabre brings the full force of sword and sickle simultaneously down on the faltering light bearer. On his knees Croydon holds his remaining sword above his head to deflect the strike. Sabre's strength and weight push down on the sword. Croydon puts both hands on his handle, arms and shoulders shuddering under the pressure.

Hauling his face over top of the angel, Sabre breathes heavily into the pained expression below him. "Where are your pretty chariots now, fool? Even the woman cannot save you. You see, you cannot match me. Make your last plea

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for mercy from your God.” The demonic weapons slide ominously down the silver sword.

Croydon twists and flicks his hands. The golden carved handle hooks Sabre’s tools. All three weapons are plied from their hands and fall to the ground.

Amidst the action, Croydon has lost his balance. Ceasing the moment Sabre grabs both his hands and bends them back. The powerful demon places a heavy black boot on the damaged calf. Croydon’s face droops in agony. Sabre twists and lifts, forcing the light bearer into painful submission. “Come on fool, beg for mercy,” he snarls viciously.

The warrior angel holds his cry in. Putting full weight on the damaged leg, Sabre lifts his left boot, preparing to smash the backbone of the hapless angel right between the great folded wings. “Beg, boy, beg that I finish this quickly.”

In a last ditch effort, Croydon back kicks his free leg, aiming to catch Sabre under the chin. The kick misses, but does force the release of one arm and Sabre topples off the damaged calf. Croydon limps up, only to have Sabre cleverly twist and regain control of the free arm. With a merciless look Sabre nods and Smyrn steps forward.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” a fast-talking cheery voice interrupts. “One... two... I count two on one! Now that’s not normal for a duel is it? Sabre, surely that’s not you playing unfair?” the voice chides as if it were two children fighting in a school yard.

“Galius!” Croydon gasps instantly recognizing the infectiously excitable tone. Finding relief in the pain, the warrior chuckles to himself, “That’s Galius alright, light hearted no matter how dour the situation.”

Galius stands with his hands folded across his chest. Sabre sees four unfamiliar beings are behind him. All have swords drawn, threatening the larger circle of demons. Sabre snarls, “You’re too late to save your pretty brother, Galius, but I value you coming to watch his final moments before you have your turn!”

Thrusting Croydon toward the looming sword, Smyrn draws the sword back to pierce the angel’s chest. Finding a little balance on his strong leg, Croydon bends and pushes up with all his strength. Mighty white wings unfold to assist in the lift. Sabre’s grip breaks and the warrior arcs tightly, landing a knee low down on the muted green overcoat of his adversary. Sabre falls forward, unable to slow his momentum. Smyrn’s sword is already in motion as it pierces the abdomen.

The demonic lord stops, impaled, falling to his knees. Staring at Smyrn in terror he whispers, “Fool!” Dark blood oozes over the handle and hand of Smyrn, dumbstruck at what just happened. Sabre’s hands clutch at the weapon before they spread wide, grasping at the short cut grass. His nails and fingers rip into the soil surface, desperately seeking a solid hold. Beneath his waist the ground begins to open, parting enough to engulf the lord’s body. As quickly as it opened the ground closes again, Sabre’s hands still clutching at the earth. A

muffled cry dissipates and a strong sulfuric stench permeates the air.

Croydon rests with one knee on the ground breathing heavily, watching the hands slip away. Smyrn has quickly shuffled into the shadow of the tree, dazed and confused.

Galius puts a firm hand on Croydon's shoulder and bends to help him up. "That certainly clears the air, doesn't it? Well... once the wind picks up!"

The enthusiastic presence of Galius heartens the pained warrior. Turning, Croydon throws his arms around his brother. "Thank you Galius!"

"Thank me? Croydon, what a scalp to take! Sabre has been your nemesis for so long!" Both warrior angels chuckle in the warmth of each other's embrace.

"All right, boys, the show's over; find your hovels and go home. The picnic is done; you need to go home to your mummies now." Galius sings out enthusiastically to the silent, dumbstruck circle of powerful demons. They look amongst themselves for next in line; no one steps forward. Galius smirks mischievously, understanding their thoughts. He looks about the group with his casual and cheery expression, "Okay then, who's in charge here?" No one moves or answers. "Right... we do have a bright lot here, don't we? Okay then, I will speak very slowly and clearly." The powerful angelic captain mocks in a steady monotone, "We have been sent to show you our Master's strong hand. I can now advise you that it is finished for you here. His hand is stretched out toward the child of light. The time of reconciliation has begun; you cannot stop its progress. It is too late; we are not going to give in. Things set in motion beyond your comprehension have fallen into place. Therefore, henceforth and hitherto... take your leave... go... it is over!"

The fallen absorb the words with grunts and moans, breaking off in ones and twos. Smyrn moves back to the building behind the grassed area, quickly wiping the blood on his hand off onto his coat as if it were hot oil. Last to leave, he wanders off down a narrow walkway alone.

"It's not me Galius, and you know that! I had favor from the Son. Beyond that I had my secret warrior fighting for me." Croydon smiles as he puts a hand onto his belt in acknowledgement. "It's still warm." Tears gather as he thinks of Marie fighting so far away, ignorant of the forces she has never even seen or understood.

"You are too modest, brother. You were magnificent!" Galius laughs heartily as he turns to address his light bearers. "Secure the area. Let's do what we've been sent to do! Let the Father's heart be established."

Three of the four move into the hospital where Dryden has been literally bouncing with excitement. Only Healing hovers near Galius. "Now, let's have a look at that leg of yours," Galius commentates.

"Don't worry about me. Go to Ian, he needs you more," Croydon defrays, hiding a wince as he prepares to walk away.

"Whatever!" laughs Galius gripping Croydon's shoulder so forcefully that

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he can't move off. "There is plenty of time," he says quietly but determinedly.

Croydon chuckles; he cannot fool his brother.

Healing hands tenderly wrap around the bruised and swelling area on Croydon's calf. Warmth spreads, quickly dissipating much of the pain. Healing looks lovingly directly into Croydon's face. "I'm sorry; there is little more I can do, you will bear the limp until you return to the Master."

"Gladly," Croydon replies with a gentle smile.

Dawn is breaking. The first shaft of sun creeps over the horizon, as if to herald the end of the battle. A crimson sky fights the dispersing cloud out of its last efforts of subjugation. "The sky is telling us of the blood spilt this night," Croydon says solemnly. "Let us remember those who have departed for the honor of this victory."

"They have entered into their inheritance already," Galius cheerfully chips in. The three light bearers stand for a moment in honor, before moving to the main hospital building.

The new arrivals quickly become acquainted with the spirit of the young man who narrowly clasped onto life through the night. The desolate physical surroundings have already begun to glow with a rising taste of victory. Light and life emanates from the seven beings, hanging about them, oozing the Spirit of God. Their influence increases at an alarming rate through the whole hospital, as patients wake from troubled sleeps with new optimism and faith. The tumultuous night has passed; a new day has dawned.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Getting Out

Late afternoon sun is heavily filtered through the dirty window. A single fluorescent bulb adds its luster to the naturally dreary room. The absorbing scantiness is, however, displaced by a cheeriness that emanates throughout the hospital.

Ian's room is full, a sweet presence hanging in the air. Dryden and Croydon have kept vigil all morning, weeping and praying. Galius has finished another wander through the hospital, generally causing mayhem. His presence, along with that of Croydon, has now invoked a significant change in the spiritual dimensions at work.

Healing and Presence complete the cluster in the room while Deliverance and Salvation stand in the hall, having roamed with Galius. The four angels have emptied themselves again and again into Ian's spirit. No one had been prepared for how much the dry sponge of a man would be able to absorb.

Most of the fallen stationed in the hospital have spilled into the adjacent buildings, placating their feelings of inferiority with moaning and grumbling. They are not ignorant of what is going on or who the four gifted angels are, but there is little they can do about it. The few remaining inside have carefully monitored and manipulated as they have been able. Any close to freedom have been kept away from the room. The fallen know the current activity of light will eventually reduce, adding to the impatient wait.

Word of Sabre's slaying has spread quickly. The island's senior commanders gathered early to decide who would assume operational control until a permanent position is advised. There had been a lot of bickering and jousting and they were unable to reach consensus on temporary positions. Messengers were, however, quickly dispatched to the mainland and a containment plan has been put in place until further details are confirmed.

In distant lands, powerful forces are unsettled at news of the defeat of the respected Indian Ocean lord. Messengers are soon dispatched back to Mauritius and onto the fallen archangel himself. He alone will determine the new appointment.

Despite plans and contingencies made by either side, they know the greatest factor at play is out of their hands. Croydon summed it up succinctly when the light bearers had been briefed on actions: "The outcome doesn't lie in our

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hands, or the dark palms of the fallen, it lies precariously in the hands of the young man before us. He will make choices, again and again, and those choices may be for or against the Kingdom of Heaven. His destiny cannot be assumed; it must be walked out. Only as he proves himself will the ramifications of our victory increase. The Kingdom will only invade the earth as much as he allows it.”

“Don’t understate it Croydon; what has begun will threaten a disruption the enemy has no comprehension of,” Galius had interjected.

“Oh, I know my friend.”

Ian’s eyes open with a start. He finds himself lying still, staring at the ceiling. Despite his body healing fast, he still feels weak and exhausted. His mind immediately turns to what happened in the night, moisture filling his eyes. Frustrated at the vulnerability, he blinks and turns his head to the side.

Beside him, sitting in an old wooden chair is Harley, his flat mate. Oblivious to the fact that Ian has woken, he thumbs over an old National Geographic magazine with waning interest. Ian’s gaze shifts to the hallway. Manuel stares wide eyed back at him. Ian’s eyes soften and he smiles warmly.

A wiry demon pulls hard on the chains that hang over the Creole. Ian’s smile is not reciprocated, a battle raging inside. His face draws paler and gaunt. Ragnort whispers, “It’s a ghost. No one can survive that. It isn’t right; evil has been released. Keep your distance; you are going to have to tell the elders, you know that!” Manuel swallows hard as each phrase passes through his mind.

Deliverance and Salvation dwarf Manuel and his attaché. Ragnort holds tight to the all too flimsy chains of fear and witchcraft. It was a risk the fallen were willing to make in putting Manuel here. Now his soul has been waged against the risk Ian poses to them.

“Good old Manuel, he must have followed the trail to the hospital and sorted Harley out. I bet he’s been here all morning. Jeepers, he looks exhausted and freaked! But then, I guess he would have been expecting to be dealing with a corpse,” Ian thinks.

The conflict continues. Manuel’s mind fights against the overbearing control Ragnort is asserting. “It does not matter. It may seem impossible to survive this, but he did. Ian has survived and is alive...”

“You can’t touch me,” Ragnort states warily, shrinking even lower behind Manuel’s torso.

“Even one whisper from him, Ragnort, and you are gone,” Deliverance states slowly and deliberately, cupping his ears and leaning forward, as if listening for Manuel’s spirit to call.

“Who can I turn to?” a cry wells from within Manuel.

Ragnort strains with everything he has, bracing a knee against the man’s back. Manuel’s breath shortens to a wheeze, constriction rippling across his chest, causing his body to twist and contort.

“Call to the Creator, the one who made you. He has been waiting for you since the beginning. You have never been far from His sight. Only He can free you.” Salvation’s emotions rip at his own tender heart as he pleads with Manuel’s harangued spirit.

Manuel’s head shakes mournfully amongst the confusion in his head. The words penetrate but seem muffled.

Aware of the increasing risk, Ragnort is determined to get out intact. Forcibly Manuel stumbles down the corridor in haste. The two light bearers follow, leaving a generous distance, but ready should his spirit rally and call.

“Manuel! What? Come back! Where are you going?” Ian strains to sit up, willing himself to call after his friend, but he cannot find the words in his mouth. His mind quickly runs over everything that happened on the reef, in search for an understanding of Manuel’s behavior. “I didn’t offend you did I? I would never do that. Please, Manuel...”

“So you had a rough night aye?” Harley asks, noticing now that Ian is awake.

“Yeah mate,” Ian replies, easing back onto the bed. “I don’t really know what happened.” Ian contemplates what to say. It’s not something he is prepared for. “I mean, what can I say? ‘Mate, I died! I got thrown into this place of darkness and then this presence and incredible light lifted me out!’ It’s not really something to pop into our platonic relationship. What’s more, if I start talking about darkness and light they’ll start saying, ‘Hold up mate, it’s off to the rubber room for you. You’ve taken too much dope and now it’s coming out your mouth!’” Ian looks away and holds his lips tight, not humored by his own jokes.

“It’s okay Ian; the time will come when you will share about this.” The light hand strokes Ian’s head, though Dryden does not interfere with the thoughts. He looks to Croydon for confirmation, “Sir, caution is sensible at this point?”

Croydon smiles approvingly.

In the hospital car park, Manuel is restlessly pacing back and forth over the shingled asphalt. Attempts to calm his pounding heart are unsuccessful. Emotions shatter any chance of peace. He can’t rationalize his way through the dense forest of his mind. Cultural norms and beliefs confirm Ian has to be avoided, their friendship annulled. Yet another notion will not stop surfacing. Permitted by love, the uneasiness rouses him. “How long have I been like this? How long has my upbringing constrained life in me? It is as if I am in the eye of a giant storm, tossing me back and forth on the sea of life. How long have I been bound to this fate? How long have I been here? What’s going on?”

“You know you are bound, and you want to be free. That option is before you right now,” Salvation confidently states, above the constriction of Ragnort’s poison.

The prisoner looks about at the dirty white buildings, fear and longing each fighting hard for his heart. “But I do not know if I can lift myself out of this

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terror. If I could be free, even for a day, what does that look like? I cannot be free; I'm falling, and who will catch me? I will die, isolated and alone..."

Harley has been waiting for Ian to come round. He stumps the magazine down on the bed and leans toward Ian. "Mate, this place smells like a latrine. We've got to get you out of here. I'll look after you mate, come on, let's go."

Ian notices for the first time the stained and peeling paint smattered over the concrete walls. Flies, intent on freedom, hover noisily above extinct comrades at the window. Sucking deeper into his lungs, the smell is a little insipid. "Well, it isn't the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, is it?" he jokes quietly. Then he remembers the pleasant face of the older doctor. "Let's wait Harley... the doctors will do their rounds soon. May as well see what they say, no need to rush, man."

Turning his arms over, needles are taped to his forearms. The feeds have been disconnected but the access remains available. "Well, there is nothing tying me here, I guess," Ian ponders.

Harley is off his chair and walking about uneasily; soon his resolve increases. "I've seen the rest of this place when we came in, mate. Believe me, this hospital is a tip. We're going, end of discussion. More than likely you'll catch your death disease in here if you stay." Harley takes Ian's arm and gently pulls him up, swinging his feet toward the floor. Grabbing Ian's shirt from the bed end he lifts and lets Ian flop onto him. Ian had nothing with him; he is still dressed in his sweat pants from the night before.

Ian staggers the first few steps, having to go along with his friend. A smile crosses his face as he remembers the prayer for healing, "My legs are surprisingly strong!"

As they try to stealthily negotiate the hallway, a young doctor spots them. Rushing to their aid, he moves to take Ian's arm onto his own shoulder. "No! No! He must lie down now! He cannot get up!"

Harley, a muscular surfer himself, pushes the doctor back with a gentle resolve. "I'm sorry, but we are leaving. I'll take care of him. Thanks for your help."

The doctor calls louder for assistance, but they are unable to stop the determined pair. Unobserved by the natural world, five incredible beings of light cocoon the men between them.

Out of the reception, Ian spots Manuel pacing the car park. Harley whistles for the taxi to return to the pickup area. Manuel hears the call, as Ian walks independently for a bit. Leaning on a white painted rail, he stops to look towards Manuel. Following the gaze, Harley calls, "Manuel! Let's go, man."

The Creole is frozen to the spot, terrified. Ragnort draws hard on the chains about him with powerful control, as if reigning in a bolting horse. Ian and Harley have no idea what's gripping Manuel. "Blimin' heck, Simo!" Harley mutters, pushing on towards the taxi.

“Manuel...” Ian calls at half volume, lingering by the rail.

“Leave him man; he’s been weird all day. He’s spooked, driving me crazy, superstitious nutter. We’ve got to go before the orderlies catch up with us. He’ll be fine.” Harley pulls Ian to the taxi and assists him into the back seat.

Salvation and Deliverance join the others, looking vibrant but a little disappointed. “He never got there. He opened up for a moment but...”

“The light flickers are running off!” Ragnort yells, feeling cocky now, though mostly from relief.

The call causes those in the nearby buildings to peer out. It is an odd scene as the seven angels are baited by the small demon.

“Shut up fool!” barks a demon near him. “We’ve won no victory here. Look at them! We couldn’t take them in a hundred years, not with the Captains here. Any of those gifted ones could have changed his heart despite your sniveling. So shut up, fool, and let them be gone.”

Ragnort holds his tongue and shrivels back, glaring at the one putting him in his place.

“Tamarin Bay,” Harley instructs. The taxi leaves untracked, the fallen content to see the light brigade move on.

Passing down familiar roads, the journey seems to take forever, but Ian doesn’t mind. Passing isolated houses tucked into the hillsides, he relives every part of the strange night. The beauty and serenity of the changing scenery captivates him. Everything is so vibrant, as if trumpeting out the glory of God. The trees sway in rhythmic pleasure on the warm breeze as a new hope and confidence rise in the softened heart. Increasing contentment is washing over him, as a presence fills the taxi.

Harley lets the voyage progress silently. He has no frame of reference for the notions stirring inside. His thoughts run over life, its joys and regrets. Desires for family, belonging and love, rush to the front of his mind. Unfamiliar scars seem to draw tight on his heart; and for a change he recognizes the pain and sorrow hidden in those deep recesses. The light bearers do not speak with him directly, yet the presence of light draws him minute by minute.

Lacerations from the jellyfish stings protrude on Ian’s forearm. He turns his arm over and gently traces his fingers over the bubbly flesh. “How in the world did I survive that?” he wonders.

“You must have someone praying for you mate!” Harley jests, noticing what Ian is doing.

“Yeah... I’ve got me big angels too!” Ian replies warmly. Thoughts of his mother sit near the surface, the images of her praying come to the forefront of his mind now; he looks away to diffuse the emotions threatening his cover.

Ian looks back to Harley, who has resumed the daydream stare out his window. Harley’s frame pulls to the foreground as his vision changes. “Weird... it’s as if I am seeing things in 3D for the first time. This is crazy!”

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Words suddenly come into Ian's heart, things he did not conceive. Discernment and knowledge are beginning to shape his responses to those around him. "You have always seemed so confident, self assured and together. But a shadow of emptiness haunts every step you take. The party boy is not the real you, it's a superficial façade. You desperately crave acceptance and love..." Ian turns to his window, stuffing down the insights. "God... he's so lost, so lonely... please help him..." His eyes moisten, unfamiliar with the compassion rising inside him as he cannot erase what he has just understood. "Keep it together Ian; you're turning into a blubberpuss," he tells himself sternly.

The taxi drones unevenly down the road. Ian shifts his attention to the driver, unwilling to look back at Harley. "Safer ground, I don't know this man. Probably your typical middle aged Indian, indifferent and arrogant."

As the eyes of Ian's spirit open again, the veil that separates the physical and spirit realms becomes indistinct. Ian sees what look like dark clouds hovering over him, as if he were wearing a dreadfully heavy coat of death. "What is that? Oh... such pain! Where did that come from? You are full of fear with a longing for happiness... and it's all trampled down by deep hurts inside..." Ian turns midstream to his window for solace, forcing shut the inner voice. The scenery passes, but images of both men will not leave his mind. "What's wrong with you, Ian? The drugs must still be having an effect!"

All the light bearers have warmly observed the interactions. They hear every thought and premonition, seeing the darkness that hides in the men's hearts. "He's beginning to understand. His spirit is seeing the oppression and chains draped over the blessed. He is learning and recognizing, for the first time, the shame that haunts the subdued hearts of mankind..." Dryden proudly says. "Look at his spirit! Wow, I never... Blessed be the Lord..."

"Look at the glow!" Galius butts in as he playfully slaps Dryden on the back. The contrast to a day ago is remarkable. Growing light and power is gripping the depths of Ian's being.

They all stare in wonder at his spirit. Galius continues, "The seed has taken root; the marvel of God's creation! Called and secured by God from obscurity, now unfolding the greatest mystery of all. He's going to struggle with the mind for a while though, eh? You've got your work cut out for you, lad. Ah, but the good work has begun, even if behind the joy lurks the danger. Be careful in the early days, son. The risk of it being robbed is the highest. He'll have many choices for failure laid before him. His mind has always been strong and it will fight against the heart." The sobriety in Galius's statements mutes conversation for the remainder of the journey. The light bearers all consider the ramifications of where they are in the battle.

Back at their apartment, Harley is full of forced pleasant chatter. Ian cannot help but see past the shallowness of the words to the pain in his heart. Frustrated, he showers and slips into bed, sitting up against a couple of pillows.

He twists his left arm over and carefully undoes the tape to pull the needle out. A drop of blood forms as he plugs the spot with his finger. The needle and tape are placed precisely on his bedside dresser. He repeats the process on the second drip.

“You want a beer mate?” Harley asks rhetorically, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah of course mate! Line them up, eh?”

“Or do you want something to eat, man?”

“Nah, I’m cool. I’m pretty wasted. Just some water would be good.”

Harley returns with a glass and makeshift jug of water before settling onto the rattan couch with a beer and magazine. Leaving the door to the bedroom open, he stays alert for any call Ian may make.

Word of Ian’s diving accident spreads quickly through the local expat community. As the afternoon draws out, a boisterous crowd gathers at the apartment to celebrate Ian’s dance with death. There is plenty of idle talk and frivolity. By eight o’clock fresh supplies of beer and dope prop the party up to full swing. Ian’s exhausted, but the celebrations don’t assist rest. He stays in his room, disrupted regularly by well wishers popping in to check on him. Dropping off several times, he is roused each time by loud voices or new arrivals. While conscious, his mind is consumed by the events of the last twenty-four hours.

The party allows a number of hedonistic demons to have cause to enter the apartment, even though the mighty light bearers present a severe deterrent. They keep a wide berth of the commanding beings, which hold positions in the bedroom.

Despite appearances to the contrary, they are well briefed outside the apartment, and every action inside is calculated and deliberate. As a new demon arrives, the one assigned the task of providing the orientation meets him at the roadside. Speaking in hushed tones, the conversation is short. “Focus on those around the enigma, no direct conflict is to be entered into. He has been to the other side, though we do not know for what purpose. A significant destiny has sat upon him for years. Weary him, expose his weaknesses, and exploit the soft underbelly common to the frail race. He is isolated, alone, exposed and vulnerable. That means it a matter of time before his spirit tumbles. We just have to be patient. Use alcohol, lust and pride at the start. Any one of these should succeed, but if not, incite anger and work hard on his sanity. Our primary focus is to mitigate the impact and effect of whatever happened to him; this will frustrate and confuse him. With sin and torment, when the situation arises, we can push him over the brink. This is not like any normal assignment; we know the boy presents a significant risk to the kingdom. Orders are that he must not rise from his stupor, at any cost!”

It’s not really a new strategy, just the same one applied over the millennia: the exploitation of sinful nature, the real counter to the weight of the Spirit. The

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dark forces are militant and precise in their action. Whilst it could seem like any normal party, everything has been deliberately orchestrated. The oddity of this situation is the presence of the incredibly powerful envoys around Ian. Seldom would seven powerful beings be assigned to a child of light, let alone two captains. One guardian, allied to a child of light, should be able to dispel most evil kingdom ambitions. But here, both sides know the significance of what has occurred.

The uneasy peace between the two opposing forces of the universe appears to have returned and with it a new confidence is brewing inside the dark forces. They pass the bedroom door with regularity. While it is part of their task, they cannot help being captivated by the beauty of their adversaries and by the light emanating from Ian. It wills them in with a longing, the beauty beyond but not lost on them.

A demon in the lounge tests their theory with loud conversation, ensuring the light bearers hear him. "They are bound by the code as much as we are. Intervention is to be limited. It remains that the choices of the boy will prevail. He must stand on his own; only when asked will they assist him. With this, our access will increase. When the time is right, we will hit him with all we are worth. Then we will see what's really in his heart. Squeeze a sore and puss will come out!"

Dryden steps forward to the frame of the door and glares at the one who spoke. The demon casually lifts both hands as if to say he meant no offence. Turning his back on Dryden he smirks at the others, pleased to have riled the guardian.

Over the first few hours, Ian is repeatedly plied by the vices of alcohol and drugs. His buddies, pawns now of the dark kingdom, urge him to drink or smoke in celebration, and to ease his pain. "It's medicine man!" one doped out buddy spouts. Oddly, the thought repulses Ian. He has tasted genuine purity, and his spirit is relishing clean clothing. It is so light and free. So with relative ease, Ian gently rebuffs each approach to reacquaint with his old anaesthetizing comforts.

The attack relentlessly continues; mixed into the atmosphere is arrogance, malice and lust. The tone of conversation is continually lowered. Ian's tiredness helps; he can't be bothered with it all, as he just wants to be left alone.

Galius draws close to Dryden. "You know, son... they've made one huge mistake. Ian's time with the Lamb has escaped their notice. They know his spiritual eyes are opened, but they innocently believe that what has been birthed may be turned against him. They cannot undo meeting the Son! They have no idea what transpired in those minutes and they totally underestimate the work of the Spirit in him. Keep them ignorant of the impartation as long as you can."

Reticently, the fallen have to acknowledge their early setbacks. Ian's easy

rebuttal of alcohol, drugs and degrading conversation has thwarted their efforts. A messenger is dispatched to play the next card. Within thirty minutes Liannte arrives. She looks stunning. A skanky skirt and top reveals far more flesh than her conservative culture would condone. As she flirts through the room, feverish male eyes rove over her form. A stench of lust rises in the room. The demon pulling on the chains of seduction guides her steps. At the bedroom door he reluctantly has to let her go in alone. She waltzes in, oozing sexuality, stopping by the bed where Ian dozes, and nestled amongst the presence of seven mighty angels of light.

Liannte rouses Ian with a gentle kiss on his forehead, the sensuality eking from her. Ian's eyes open with a smile, inadvertently tracking down her top. She moves around to the other side of his bed, flaunting in front of him, enjoying the attention.

Suddenly Ian's smile freezes. Beyond her physique, he sees a trapped girl, hurting and confused. Her beauty masks a deep shame, guilt and disgrace. Still attractive to his eye, Ian is now hit by the real emotions of her spirit. It rips at his heart with a deep compassion, not lust. The insight unnerves him, as he shifts his gaze to stare wide eyed out the door. Friends mill there, innocently glancing in after Liannte. As if the clock stops for a moment, Ian is suddenly exposed to what is real: he freaks out. Exteriors drop off and the inner shells tormented with a destitute loneliness grip him. Dark shadows drift in and out of the shallow forms reveling in the 'pleasure' of the party. Liannte caresses and mothers him, but Ian numbs, disinterested and distant.

Croydon whispers in the beautiful young woman's ear, "Enough child; you can go. You are worth far more than this. Only one love can satisfy you and it is not in his embrace. There is freedom from your shame and guilt; it would reveal your true glory and beauty. The Architect of Life is now the only one who can recreate you. He is the one you need to fall upon, not Ian."

Waking from the seductive vice motivating her, Liannte stands up straight. The words hit deep into her heart. She looks down at the man she hardly knows. "What am I doing? This is not what is meant for me. I shouldn't throw myself at you. You cannot offer me what I am longing for."

"Let the call rise in your heart, child. Call to the Creator. You can do it now; call out to Him from the depths of your hurt," Salvation pleads.

Liannte instinctively takes a couple of steps back from the bed, a real awareness of her barrenness hitting her. "No, I cannot call. He would reject me. I am dirty, too far gone. I cannot call to Him. There is no hope for me. I am to remain destitute and abandoned, that is what I deserve. I'm too dark for anyone to look upon, for anyone to love..."

"No, the Creator, He only, has always loved you. He does not condemn you. He looks to you now; if you would look to Him, you would know. He did not form you in your mother's womb to be dark; even now it is not too late, you

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can be light. He waits only for you to call. Call now! He knows the hurt and the pain; give it over to Him, exchange it for peace.”

“But I do not know peace. I cannot have it. I do not deserve it. I know nothing of peace.”

The demon who escorted her in has to take a risk and work fast. Desperately he leaps onto her back from the door, monsterring the petite frame. Grabbing roughly at the chains, he pulls hard.

Salvation places a hand gently on the shoulder of the beautiful girl. “Liannte... call! You are loved. Do it now before it is too late.”

“Leave my host alone!” demands the demon, pushed into confrontation by the desperate situation.

Salvation doesn't move, waiting patiently for Liannte to respond.

Reluctantly she turns. “I cannot,” she mumbles, hurt drowning the call for love on her heart. She leaves the room in a flurry, Salvation's hand dropping as she goes.

Pushing through the crowded apartment, cheers and calls rise from the demons. Her sensuality still wafts across the room. In a hollow sickly way, she feels valued. Her heart hears the calls, but it hardens and bites at the tenderness showing. She knows it will fail to pacify the deeper desires for love and intimacy rising in her. Looking about the room, a shallow smile dwindles. She leaves to walk home alone. At the door a vicious demon of hurt and betrayal attaches itself to her, fresh chains thrown over her wilting spirit.

The light bearers watch her disappear, pity at her pain in their hearts. “Why didn't she call?” Salvation laments.

“It will be a frightening walk home,” agrees Deliverance.

“You did well, Ian,” consoles Dryden. He puts his hand on the blond hair of his charge. “Sorry, but we are not to assist you to overcome every temptation. The curse of the fall is to live within the confines of this sin ruled world. We cannot subvert attacks; you must learn and choose to overcome. Right choices lead to strength, and that strength in time will withstand any attack. One day you then will become like Job, not dependent on what life deals you, but secure in the truth about the Father. He insists man finds the way to Him, despite his surrounds. In the furnace of life, love is purified. In desperation you will recognize your absolute reliance on Him. Then love will complete its work. This is the victorious life, when faith and gifting move hand in hand. Then confidence in who you are in Him will rise, despite the circumstances around you.”

As the beer runs out, Ian's mates gallantly recognize that they have adequately celebrated his skirmish with death. The party wanes and Ian's heavy eyes finally drop gratefully to sleep. The light bearers stand vigilantly in the room; they know a group has been gathering outside.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Mind Games

Ian wakes shivering. Perspiration clams the cotton sheets tight against his skin, soaking his hair and back. It is the middle of the night. He rolls over to face what is frightening him. The mosquito net dulls the shape of the steel window bars. Behind them are eyes, seven or eight pairs, glowing red. Cut into slits they look like cats' eyes. They all look directly at him and around his room, twitching in hate.

"He's seen us!" shout the demons in frenzied excitement.

Ian is terrified. "God, what on earth are they? Are they human or animal?"

Focusing energy to break even further through the dimensional barriers, a deep haunting voice resounds about the room. "You're ours and we're coming back to take you."

"Oh no you're not!" blurts Ian, fully alert and fumbling for the flashlight that lies near his bed. Negotiating the switch, light pierces the netting and illuminates the window frame. The beam flashes back and forth in search of whatever is out there.

"There's nothing there! But I know something was there. I heard a voice... didn't I? That can't have been my mind?" Ian lunges through the netting for the wall light, his eyes struggling with the sudden brightness about him. There is nothing in the room. The only noise he can hear is the heavy breathing of his own chest.

Outside the demons are ecstatic. Ian's gifting, combined with their focused effort, allowed a degree of crossover. The downside of the realm transition was the exposure to the light. Even the flashlight had inflicted pain as it cut across them like a burning fire. They have quickly forgotten about the stinging ache. Their dark shadows hover near bushes down from the window. "He is vulnerable and flimsy and will crumble before we are finished with him! Let's see how you resolve that in your mind, boy!"

The words spark thoughts and emotions in Ian's mind. He tries to calm his racing heart but cannot. Sitting on his bed he thinks it through. "Am I about to crumble? Am I going crazy? Is that what happens when someone loses it? Come on, I need to get a get a grip; now I'm seeing things out my window. I've got to settle down before I snap."

Grabbing a shirt from the floor, Ian wipes sweat off his face. He lies back,

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confused and exhausted. Finally he speaks out loud, “God, what’s going on? Please help me.”

It’s all they’ve been waiting for. Croydon and Galius step forward, swinging the lion crested shields from off their backs. The fallen back up, threatening and taunting the powerful beings of light. Silence and peace fills Ian’s room. Dryden puts a hand on Ian’s head and looks at Croydon who nods, “He’s ready.”

The last two days begin to run through Ian’s mind like a movie. He lies still as the work of the Spirit drills through his body, mind and soul. Inch by inch, every detail is reviewed and relived. The encounter will seal the event in his heart and memory forever.

An hour and a half pass. Ian’s eyes are wide open the whole time and, as the vision finishes, he whispers, “God, what are these things that want to attack me?”

Dryden speaks clearly, “The Lord’s prayer Ian. But remember it must be from your heart, not your mind.”

The words spill freely at the start, “Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be your name... But this is my mind. How can I speak from my heart; it is cold and dead!” Tears creep up in the sockets of his eyes.

“No, your heart is not bad Ian, it is good. You have been given a new heart. Gone is the death that you once lived in. Now you are renewed. Let your heart lead you,” Dryden guides.

“Okay... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...” Ian sits up erect. The light is still on in his room, but he suddenly feels a different light. He is oblivious to the connection of the portal above him. The prayer comes to life in his heart, each passing phrase lifting courage into his heart, “...Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one... Ha! That’s it! Deliver me from the evil one!”

Croydon and Galius draw four gleaming silver blades, ready to strike. The fallen, who have been testing the protection around Ian, quickly scatter, knowing they are no match for the captains. They won’t return this night.

“Well done, Ian, now turn the lights out,” Dryden whispers.

Heart pounding, Ian gathers up the nerve and gets off the relative security of his bed to turn off the light. Settling back again, the flashlight leads the way. Like a Jedi warrior, he sits swishing it about, checking for eyes in the darkness. He sees nothing, but the harrowing image grips his mind.

A minute passes. “If I don’t turn my flashlight out, I’m going to have to spend the rest of my life sleeping with the light on.” He cocoons himself in the mosquito netting. Sliding the top sheet up to his neck, he feels like a frightened child. Flicking the switch off, the flashlight seems to fade to grey, then black. He checks the room in the darkness; everything is still and silent.

“Crazy, that prayer worked; they’ve gone!”

Ian rests well and wakes feeling stronger. Preparing breakfast, he sits alone at the table. His stomach churns as he thinks of Lianne. For the first time in his life, he recognizes that he feels terrible for how his behavior has made her feel. He shakes his head, mulling the pain of regret. “I’ve caused so much hurt. I shouldn’t have strung her along. I’ve got to be more sincere with people. If only I could change what I’ve done, but I cannot go back.”

Ian’s flatmates, Harley and Gozzy, stumble from their rooms, a little under the weather from the party. Talk is slow and shallow. Ian concentrates hard to listen to what they are saying, but he is getting confused and agitated. A longing is rising for intimacy and life in all his relationships. “I hear what you are saying, but that isn’t what you mean. What’s in your heart is not what’s coming out your mouth. You project action, enjoyment and pleasure, but there is actually emptiness and hurt behind everything you say. You’re haunted by loneliness... desolation. God, I’m frightened. How can I handle this? I feel compassion, remorse, carnality and freedom, all mixed together in my heart.” Ian leaves the table and its conversations, retreating to the solitude of his room.

Harley and Gozzy head off on their day’s business, assuming Ian to be tired. Ian feels more comfortable in the isolation. He packs a small bag with water and snacks and heads off to Manuel and Lianne’s village.

The village lies inland. Taller plants from the lush tropical vegetation sway gently in a breeze cooler than normal. Not wanting to overdo his first outing, Ian walks slowly. He is enjoying the whole experience. Everything seems so vibrant and alive. The village comes into view, with its sparse dirt lawns and shantytown dwellings. He does not perceive the seven mighty angelic beings that fan out behind him.

Dark spies have been monitoring the apartment closely. On Ian’s exit they have run ahead. Two elders talk, unwittingly guarding the roadside. “There he is,” whispers one of the demons with them. Instantly, half a dozen Creole men pour from out of the shacks. The group of men appears agitated and restless as the blond haired white man approaches.

Smiling and waving at some familiar faces, Ian draws closer. His head is down a lot as he carefully picks his way along the rough road, aware that he is tired and could easily stumble. Hearing shouting, he pauses to look up. There seems to be an argument brewing. He suddenly realizes that the group of men is shouting in his direction. “What?” Looking behind, he checks they are not yelling at someone else. “They are telling me to stay away?” Ian takes a few more steps forward, confused at the gestures.

With the elders’ call the village men gather on the road. They have been anticipating the arrival. Gaining assurance from swelling numbers and a sense of unity, two of the men pick up long sticks. The others find small rocks. Massing with the men, two dozen demons vividly seethe above the height of

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the men. Women shelter inquisitive children in doorways and windows of the shacks nearby.

Ian sees a single man distanced from the group. “Manuel!” he speaks under his breath. Despite heavy influences, Manuel has not been coerced to join the group. A demon yanks and prods at his spirit, but like a stubborn mule he will not move. He lingers back, a battle raging inside him.

The first stones land well short of Ian on the dusty road. Baffled, Ian freezes and looks again beyond the crowd to Manuel. His Creole companion drops his head, shaking it gently from side to side in lament. The group continues to shout at Ian. He can understand enough from their mixture of languages to hold his ground. “You can’t be serious! I’m not a ghost, you superstitious fishermen. I’ve not come back from the dead to haunt you. Why would you chase me out of the village? You guys are the freaks!”

The elders’ begin to chant an incantation. Suddenly Ian can see a darkness hovering above the group. It looks like a heavy grey blanket draped over them. His voice isn’t heard by the oppressed group. “It’s just me, Ian! I’m not a ghost, I’m alive!”

The stick-wielding men move to the front of the group, ferociously yelling and waving their make-do weapons. “This is crazy. They’ll kill me rather than let me anywhere near the village. I’m no ghost!” A stone lands closer by Ian’s feet. He is reluctant to accept that he has no choice but to turn away. He backs up a little, not taking his eyes off Manuel. “Come on Manuel, talk to them and tell them.”

Instead of relaxing, the Creole men gain courage from Ian’s small retreat. Ian has to quicken his pace significantly as they surge forward. “Crap, I’ll have to let things settle down. In a day or two they will realize I’m not a ghost.”

Ian passes through the beings of light holding their ground. They look with pity on the band of wild, impoverished men, their hearts filling with compassion, not fear. “Brothers,” whispers Galius, “we could dismember them in seconds! Come on, let’s do it, they’ve threatened our child.” He barely moves his lips but his hand is on his hilt.

“Don’t tempt me,” responds Croydon a little louder, “you know it’s not our time. The men have not asked for our help. Let them be.”

Playing with the notion, Galius turns to Deliverance and Salvation. “What about you two?” he asks.

The gifted angels feign a step forward, drawing their swords.

The fallen instantly pull hard on the chains controlling the men. One calls loudly to the light bearers, “You can’t touch us. You don’t have the authority. This is our village and you know it.” There is uncertainty behind the statement, as they are ignorant of what authority may actually have been prayed in.

“Oh, if only Ian knew the armor and power of God he holds,” Galius says under his breath, “then a different scenario could have played out. They’re

lucky he's still innocent in his faith and doesn't understand what is at his disposal."

Croydon stretches his hand to ease the zealous angel. "Come, let's leave them; Ian is no longer under threat."

The fallen jeer, spurred on by their apparent success and the reluctance of the light bearers to engage them directly. "He may yet be vulnerable," one encourages.

"Alienation and loneliness will eat at him."

"If we can muddy his mind enough, he will let go of the foolish notion of the Creator's love."

The return trip seems to take a long time, Ian's mind awash with images. "What's going on?" he whimpers quietly. Dryden puts an arm around his shoulders as they walk. Gradually the torment gives way to a sense of purpose that is still very fresh.

Back at the apartment, Ian has preparations to make for his departure to New Zealand. Passports, flight details and finances are checked. His mind is constantly churning over the events of the last two days. A battle rages between his hardened mind and softened heart, giftedness struggling to overcome intellect.

As night falls the apartment surrounds are rich with activity. A larger group of dark warriors have gathered again. Their confidence and brashness is rising. They recognize that access to Ian is increasing. Smyrn is among them. Despite the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Sabre's death, he has received some promotion. He briefs the group preparing for the attack.

Three thinner, wiry demons arrive from another part of the island. Their etched faces and leathered skin are gaunt and dull. The monstrous thug Smyrn towers over them. "A little late aren't you? I will not tolerate slovenliness on my jobs. Do well and you will be richly rewarded; fail and I will personally grind your languid spirits into the dust of this wretched island."

Insanity, Fear and Suicide are not intimidated; they know their worth, and Smyrn's need of their particular skills. Smyrn continues addressing the larger group. "The light bearers are withdrawing as time goes on. At midnight we will strike. This is our opportunity to take him. His mind is weak. You all know what to do."

The three leaching demons slither unseen past the windows into the apartment adjacent to Ian's. Smyrn's brash voice barks above the jeers of the group, "Light flickers, have you lost your sting, your power? Let's have some games, some fun. Pit your strength against ours, sportsmanlike. Or in your puny reliance upon prayer, are you now weak and reluctant?"

Croydon turns to Dryden, "Stay close to Ian; they must be stupid if they think we don't know what they are up to!"

"Give him a lesson, Sir; we'll be fine."

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Looking mischievously at Galius, the two captains step through the narrow walls of the apartment, alighting on the lawn with the gentlest of touches. The demons have arched around Smyrn. He is certainly an imposing sight. At nearly ten foot tall he would weigh in at over six hundred pounds of steroid induced muscle in human terms. He drops his trench coat, exposing huge, bulky biceps and triceps. They flex and twitch with his every movement in the moonlight. An evil darkness seems to fall off his skin as he grins at the four angels moving onto the verandah to watch.

Galius moves deliberately ahead of Croydon. Jovially he drops his cape, his swords and shield, exposing toned, taut muscles across his shoulders and arms. He looks three hundred pounds lighter and a foot shorter, but light glows from his flesh in a healthy luster. "Street thug versus athlete," Deliverance says to the other three on the verandah.

The powerful beings circle each other. Smyrn makes two half-hearted swings with his fists, which Galius barely has to sway to avoid. "You know you don't have to live this way," the chatty captain jibs with a thick Highland accent.

"What way, worm?" responds Smyrn, as another swing is unable to affect the light bearer.

"With so much hatred and anger..." "Do you suggest that I love the despised race?" "That was your original destiny. You can stop your decay, you know?" With that Galius lands a sharp left hand jab onto Smyrn's massive bicep, before dancing out of reach of the wild counter swing.

Hiding the pain, Smyrn flexes his arms in a show of power. "Do I look like I'm decaying?"

"You are having trouble keeping up!"

The cheeky conversation is starting to rile the giant demon. "You just aren't prepared to lock arms scum." As Smyrn lunges again, Galius, with incredible subtlety, pirouettes a kick across the same arm. The power in this hit is undeniable. Smyrn falls to one knee, grabbing at the arm in obvious pain. It hangs limply, knuckles clenched and resting on the grass.

"I think you might be decaying a little more quickly than you are prepared to concede."

Putting weight onto his left arm, Smyrn curls his immense body perpendicular to the grassed area, swinging his heavy boots in a long arc. Effortlessly Galius jumps to avoid the strike, like a school girl skipping a rope. Smyrn quickly gets back to his feet and rushes at Galius. The light bearer holds his ground, permitting the heavy frame to lock onto his shoulders.

The challenge has, of course, merely been a diversion. Insanity, Fear and Suicide are moving now into the apartment. Dryden stands at the window watching the entertainment outside. He turns to see the loathsome demons meld through the apartment walls. They sneer at him with piercing, slitted eyes. Dryden says nothing but turns his back to the window and draws

a sword. As first agent of protection, Dryden knows he has full and right authority to restrict them. But, like the Creator, he holds himself back. The kingdom of darkness strikes for numbers, whereas the Kingdom of Light looks always for character and wholeheartedness. Whilst it is hard, Dryden knows it will quickly strengthen Ian, assuming he overcomes. His sword remains down at his side. The demons warily watch the guardian, unsure why he is not calling for assistance. Then they quickly rouse the resting man.

Ian wakes in a cold sweat. It is midnight and fear is gripping his heart. To his horror, three pairs of evil red eyes peer at him through the mosquito netting. "What... they are in the apartment now?"

Venomous words spew from the demons' mouths. Like poison they hit Ian's mind. "You're nothing... worthless and helpless," Insanity begins. "We've come to take you away. Where are those men with the nice white coats?" All three chuckle at the humor.

Childhood fears re-open under a barrage of comments; haunting thoughts plague Ian's mind for a moment. He does not see the funny side to the notion. "Why are they intimidating me?"

"This will be the end of you: torture, affliction and death," Suicide chips in.

Dryden looks at Ian's rising tide of fear. "Come on, Ian. Let the Spirit of God rise in you. Say the word, dispel fear, call to Him, rely on Him to overcome." The whisper from the guardian is inaudible; Ian must stand on his own through the dark night.

Grabbing his torch, very deliberately kept near his bed after last night, Ian dares not get out of the bed. The mosquito netting feels like a layer of protection, though it is fickle. The flashlight sweeps around the room, endeavoring to reveal the threat. There is nothing there; the red eyes have disappeared. A feeling inside tells Ian they are still there, just hidden now. Suddenly a realization surfaces, within his spirit; something fights back. Peace has been steadily taking hold and now it begins to surface. He begins to pull hope into his heart. "They can't get to me! They can intimidate me, but they can't touch me. They're trying to drive me mad. But I've seen the light of God and that light is in me now. No matter how small the flame is, it is in me."

Courageously Ian jumps out of bed and flicks on the main light. Shielding his eyes in the brightness, he scans the room but still sees nothing. The three demons wait to the side of the room, watching Dryden carefully. Their confidence is eroding fast, but they keep the accusations flying.

"You'll never amount to anything. You're too far gone. You've lived too much in this world to be able to stay close to the light. Give it up, give in, surrender to your old ways and everything will return to normal. Otherwise..." Insanity toys with his mind.

"Why the hell did you fob Lianne off! If anyone can she can comfort you, call on her."

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Ian struggles with thoughts and premonitions. He lifts a hand to his forehead as pain tightens across his temples. Anxiously he falls to his knees on the floor by the wall and begins the only prayer he knows... “My Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name...”

Smyrn’s superior reach and weight bear down on Galius. “Now you feel my power, don’t you, worm?” the demon spits into the face below him.

Galius simply lifts a foot to the chest of Smyrn and flips. Using his supple frame he powerfully lifts the bulky demon off the ground, turning him over his own head. It is a magnificent stunt and Smyrn lands heavily onto the ground on his back. Galius moves with the turn landing on top of the surprised demon. His knee is at Smyrn’s throat and he opens his hand, as if it were a dagger, threatening the demon’s face. No words are passed, but Galius hops off, letting the gigantic demon up.

A volley of swearing and abuse spews from Smyrn’s mouth. He is embarrassed at the power Galius showed in flipping him. He hides it behind a vicious anger. “They have failed,” states a demon near the front, spotting the portal streaming upward from the apartment.

“Fools!” mutters Smyrn, as he hits the demon holding his sword and trench coat on the chest. The demon releases the items and falls back as Smyrn storms off.

Croydon slaps his brother’s shoulder in an affirming embrace. Galius chuckles, “Just a big baby, eh? Poor little fellow; I think I trod on his toes!”

The four beings of gifting are back in the room. The demons have withdrawn as a gentle light begins to emanate of its own accord around the humbled form on his knees. “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven... lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever, Amen.”

As Ian completes the prayer, Croydon and Galius step out the opposite side of the apartment to where the three demons are lingering. “I think you already know that it is time to go,” Galius informs. Authority for intervention gained, they run off like dogs with their tails between their legs.

Ian rises from the floor. Peace is all over him; he half wonders if it was a dream. Turning off the light he hops sleepily back into bed. “Thanks goodness I’ve only got two more nights here before I fly home!”

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Pawns of Satan

“I’m not sure we should back off so fast,” pleas Dryden, looking at the confusion ripping at Ian’s mind.

Galius tries to placate the concerned guardian. “He will be strengthened in the end brother. You know the strategy we’ve agreed to work to. Do you doubt that now?”

“I don’t know what I doubt... it’s just taking a massive toll.”

“Balancing enough protection is always tricky. But we must propel Ian quickly into the new life burgeoning within him.”

“But can we do that without leaving him quite so exposed to them? They are making a lot of headway; we all know that, and I am not so sure that we had quite anticipated that.” Dryden continues.

“The harshness of the experiences is sealing everything in his heart. We have to see that this is accomplished.” Galius replies, firm in the long term strategy adopted.

“I only hope that it does not sear his heart... I am not sure I am prepared for that.”

“Brothers,” Croydon says putting a hand on Dryden’s shoulder, “it is better he suffer now, than fall prey to the greater trappings already set for his life. Complacency and church will anaesthetize everything that has happened unless we push strength through into his will. We must see that his destiny is walked out, whatever the cost now. There is no greater risk than this. We all know that.”

Dryden embraces the captain in acknowledgement. “Yes Sir, I know, I do not undermine you. I just feel so deeply for Ian.”

The level of attention Ian is receiving from the well organized and relentless dark forces is extraordinary. The dominant force on planet earth has found space in Ian’s heart to cultivate unhealthy desires and passion. This, as much as the increasing access, has vastly improved their influence and effectiveness.

While the new day seems to pass without dramatic event, Ian’s mind feels like a box of dynamite. Conflicting notions parade through like a fringe film festival. Liannte is top of the list. Feelings of purity and purpose push him from one side but lust’s cancer eats from the other. His thoughts have become a squalid home of confused and deranged notions as the battle for sovereignty

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continues. The enemy has been working all day toward one end, a lot darker than a battle with lust.

It's 9.30pm. Ian checks several times around the room before turning out the light. Harley and Gozzy are out, leaving Ian alone in the apartment. He settles into a light sleep when there is a tap on the door. Ian recognizes Liannte's voice muffled by the walls, "Ian, let me in, we need to talk."

"She's not here to talk, Ian. She is not what you need; be careful. Your heart is still vulnerable," Dryden states clearly.

Ian waits, sitting up in his bed, unsure of what to do. Something is telling him not to go, but then he feels an isolation and loneliness. Shunning the inner voice, Ian gets up and moves to the door. Sword drawn, Dryden walks disappointed next to him. Liannte's arrival at the apartment is a serious risk.

As the first slither of darkness cuts through the opening door, Liannte's petite arm is thrust into the gap. Confused, Ian resists the unexpected force being pushed onto him. Holding it with difficulty a foot ajar he can make out Liannte's petite frame, but shadowed in her face redness is behind her eyes. Intimate thoughts quickly dissipate as Ian recognizes what has haunted him each night. He holds the door firm against Liannte's weight.

The young woman's body contorts and twists unnaturally. Cryne's mouth is fixed harrowingly over the back of her neck. His strong arms are locked around her abdomen, chains of fear and betrayal pulled tight across her. The pain and resentment nurtured in her heart made it easy for the demon to take full control. Like a stringed puppet he controls every movement and Ian can see it. A faint call seems to rise but her mouth does not move. "Ian, help me. Please help; I don't want it to be like this. I want to be free." Cryne releases a hand to slap the back of her head shutting down the cry.

Ian is sobering quickly from his sleepy state, uncertain of what to do. "I've got to help; how can I not fight for her, they've got her! What is going on?"

"Ian, let me in. I want you to come with me tonight; let me take you somewhere."

Ian is horrified. "She just spoke word perfect English! She has never done that before! That voice is not hers; it must be the eyes." He can hear other footsteps moving up the metal stairs. "She isn't alone either! The villagers have come to take me out, pawns in the hands of the devil." Ian pushes hard but the door will not shut as Cryne's poison gives Liannte supernatural strength.

Putting his hand on Ian's shoulder Dryden stares at the taunting face of the demon. "Come on Ian... Rise up Son of the Most High."

Ian does not know the words that well up from his spirit. "Be gone in Jesus name," he breathes.

Barely off Ian's lips, something hits Cryne squarely on the chest. He reels back, unable to hold Liannte, who staggers also, as if both of them have been punched. Galius and Croydon move forward in a show of force to the demons,

but no angel made the blow.

Ian slams the door and slides the deadlocks into position. Stepping back half a meter he stares in disbelief at the frame. "What in the world is going on?"

Cryne coughs, the constricting pain searing up his neck. Liannte has a moment to gather herself together, confused as to why she is there. "What did I say? Where did those words come from? Why has Ian shut me out?" The vicious demon manages a sharp pull on a chain wrapped around her. Bitterness bites across her stomach making it knot and clench.

Breaking the weakened hold she turns and pushes past the four men with her from the village. Deep sobs start to rise from the tender damaged heart.

"What? What are you staring at?" Cryne curses at the chiding looks of the fallen with the men. He picks himself up, the pain not letting up in his throat.

"I think that's enough for tonight," comments Croydon looking across to Dryden who is struggling with the access of the demons.

"No Sir, it is okay, we have made it through," Dryden replies.

"Yes you have done admirably." With that Croydon nods at Galius and the captains move to assume positions on the landing. The demons and men quickly disperse back to the village.

Ian is dumbstruck as he listens to the feet retreat back off the landing. Slowly he walks back to his bed. Feelings of tenderness and concern for Liannte are mixed with fear and repulsion. The possession haunts him. "What was that in her? Can they really take control of your body? What could they do with me? Yet they don't seem to be able to touch me. Why am I different? Why am I left alone? Is it the light? Where the heck did that 'Jesus' come from?"

Tossing and turning in his bed no rationality surfaces in his mind, just confusion. Exhausted, he decides to pray the Lord's Prayer. As the portal pours into the room, the gentle peace settles over him in the midst of the turmoil. An hour later Gozzy and Harley return home; he opens the deadlocks to let them in, saying nothing of the events that have occurred. Finally he rests back in his bed, able to sleep shortly but sufficiently well through the rest of the night.

Ian packs his bags meticulously. The taxi will come at 5am the following morning. Sitting on his bed it's 10.30am. "Just one day to go. I've already done everything I need to, darn it. I've got to get off this island. Tomorrow can't come soon enough." He flops back on his bed frustrated.

Ian's surfing buddies arrange a small farewell at a local bar that evening. No one mentions the stings or the hospital, though it is high in their minds. There has been such a significant change in Ian that they have all noticed it. Assuming it to be from the shock of the whole experience, they ignore the topic. Amongst themselves they have talked about what is going on, but they are ignorant of the real change at work.

"Harley," Ian asks seriously, "could you go to the village for me tomorrow? Just to say thanks for everything from me? I can't go. Especially Manuel and

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Rafael, can you tell them... tell them goodbye from me? Say that I wish I could have come myself... I'll see them again, eh?"

"Haven't you seen Manuel since the hospital?" Harley asks surprised.

"Why, what's happened to Manuel?" another friend chips in.

Harley looks at Ian, who isn't prepared to answer. "He was pretty freaked about the whole jellyfish thing. I don't know what got into him but he's been acting pretty weird. He's just... I don't know, just pretty weird right now." Harley can't find the words to express it and Ian says nothing. "Superstitious freaks!" Harley concludes. Turning to Ian he continues, "Don't worry mate, I'll say goodbye to them from you."

The village elders are also meeting, with the same agenda item: Ian. They gather in the bare wooden hall, night now covering the land in darkness. Amongst them is an increasingly influential spiritual leader. Only a generation ago he would have been a revered witchdoctor, but modern age has stripped much of his role from him. The villagers have all made adjustments to living in the twentieth century, including dropping much of their spiritualism. Now the evil man sits piously among his peers, relishing his chance to exert authority. For three days he has intimidated many with irrational levels of fear. Aside from the seated elders a significant number of village men are present, crowding the small room.

A heavy atmosphere clouds the room lit by a single fluorescent bulb. Stench fills the room as the strong demonic presence intricately guides the proceedings. Smyrn is still in charge. He has quickly learnt to dominate with arrogance and threats.

Initially there was plenty of resistance to the suggestions that Ian would have to be nullified. Attempts to bring him to the village for 'cleansing' have failed. As the evening draws on, the evil leader's influence increases and the more rational attendees are silenced into the background.

An hour later a small band of men leave for Ian's apartment, wielding ancient spears carved with primeval designs and decorated with feathers. So told by the spiritual leader, the weapons will allow them to coax and direct the ghost, keeping them safe, so they hope. Once brought to the village, then the witchdoctor will take over. They all know it is his intention to have him killed, thus preserving the safety and prosperity of the village. "The evil must be sent to the underworld," he emphatically argued. The laid back group of men are edgy and apprehensive, unsure even of the validity of their instructions. Not normally accomplices to murder; fear grips every heart.

Ian leaves the bar early and heads back to the apartment for the last time. He is still exhausted and needs to rise early for his flight. Harley and Gozzy stay drinking in town with the other friends. Ian told no one of the events in the village or at the apartment; they have no reason to suspect he could be in danger.

Ian double checks the ranch slider and windows of the apartment. They are all securely fastened except a small window by the veranda left ajar for fresh air. The security allows him to settle into bed alone.

Early in the morning small stones hit a window. "Ian... Ian..." Liannte calls out in false seduction.

Ian wakes and quickly rationalizes the situation. "Whatever these creatures are, they're out to kill me and they're using humans to do it." Pretending not to hear, he stays in bed, but the stones become more forceful.

A little concerned about the window left open, Ian gets up. He knows that it's on the first floor and has metal security bars, but given what is happening there is no sense in taking any risk. He has been in many dangerous situations travelling in Asia and Africa; he works hard not to lose his head but his heart thumps inside his chest. "I do need to be careful."

"Ian, I want to talk to you. Please come outside," Liannte's gentle voice wafts in.

Ian recognizes that it is close to, but not quite, her own. "At least the voice is coming from down on the grass."

Ian creeps quietly up to the window in the dark. All of a sudden he makes out a black arm attempting to flick the latch open further. The silhouettes of three men are on the deck. "They must have scaled the drainpipes!"

Liannte calls louder, growing more agitated each time. "Ian, come out." Heavier stones are threatening to break the apartment windows.

Galius and Croydon stand in front of the ranch slider; three demons control the men perfectly. Smyrn stands on the grass with Liannte, hurling abuse at the light bearers and directing activities.

"Stay back," Dryden whispers.

Listening to the inner voice, Ian stands away from the window. Unexpectedly a spear is thrust through the bars. It passes right through where Ian would have been standing had he moved to shut the window. Backing up to his bedroom, Ian grabs his flashlight. "The best form of defense is attack," he thinks.

The light blazes directly into the spear wielders' faces. Ian can see red behind them. He shouts loudly, grabs the shaft of the spear in his right hand and pushes it back out the window. The men and demons shrink back, temporarily blinded by the light and allowing Ian to slam the window shut. Panicking, the men half scramble and half fall back down to the grassed area in front of the apartment.

Ian retreats to his bedroom, breathing heavily. "What can I do now? I'm going to have to stay awake the rest of the night until the taxi comes. It can't be that long until five o'clock! Where are Harley and Gozzy?" Tuning in he can hear them, breathing heavily from their rooms. "At least they are home from the pub! Fat lot of use those two are though, I am going to have to stay up alone through this." Ian turns on his bedroom light to show he is awake and

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sits nervously on the edge of his bed.

As the early morning approaches the group of men is strengthened by the arrival of the witchdoctor from the village. The fallen work hard, imparting hate, violence and fear into the volatile group.

“Take out the taxi, the boy must not leave,” Smyrn barks as two demons move their hosts down the road.

There is only one taxi in Tamarin Bay. Finding it parked outside the owner’s house, they quickly thrust steel rods through the radiator before returning to the main group.

The skies lighten a fraction and Ian watches attentively for the lights of the taxi. It’s now ten past five and he is getting anxious. He can’t go outside. Rationalizing his options he knows he must wake Harley and Gozzy. With some difficulty he rouses them both and explains what is happening; they sober up quickly.

“Harley and I had better go and get the taxi eh!” Gozzy blurts out, excited with the sense of adventure as he pulls his trousers and shirt on.

“Yeah that’d be great; better hurry; and be careful out there.”

“No worries mate; we aren’t the freaky white ghost!”

They leave the apartment to wake the taxi driver assumed to have slept in down the road. The aggressive group of Creole men amuses them more than frightens them. They know the men’s faces from the village. “What’s with that?” Gozzy whispers to Harley. “Those dudes are normally so placid and laid back! They are pretty wound up. I’ve never seen them like that; this is so cool!”

The taxi owner is easy to find; the Indian driver stalks up and down the road cursing at the act of sabotage upon him. Harley and Gozzy now understand the gravity of the situation. As they run back to the apartment they are more cautious. The Creole mob hustle them as they move pensively through the group. They feel the threats that are unspoken but obvious. Increasing morning light allows them to make out a variety of sticks and spears. The irony of the primitive scene is not lost on them as the villagers wear modern jeans and tee-shirts.

Harley bursts back into the apartment, adrenalin rising all the time. “They’ve wrecked the taxi, man; what’s going on? Is this all ‘cause you survived the jellyfish? These guys are nuts, man! They’re pretty wound up and they’ve got sticks and spears!”

“We’ve got to get a taxi from another village. I’ve got to get on that plane or they’ll kill me!” Ian states very seriously.

Croydon rests his hands on the men. Harley soon turns to Gozzy. “You go and get a taxi, they won’t bother you leaving. I’ll stay with Ian. They aren’t going to win this battle!”

Gozzy rushes off on a pushbike they share to find another taxi. Harley and Ian turn all the apartment lights on to show that Ian is not alone. The bags,

including the long surfboard, are set ready to rush out when the taxi arrives.

It's closer to 6am when Gozzy returns with a taxi. He has to pull on the steering wheel to force the driver to divert through the angry mob surrounding the apartment.

"Take out the tires," snarls Smyrn, the taxi pulling closer.

Galius looks at Croydon, "How is the standing back policy now, brother? I think the lad could do with a break. Why don't we secure this one for him, eh?"

Croydon needs little convincing. Together the mighty captains focus and step through the walls of the apartment. Landing effortlessly on the driveway, four swords brandished. Stepping forward, the demons pull hard on their hosts, spitting and swearing at the angelic protection.

The group of men opens up as the taxi slides through unharmed between the captains of light. The driver is terrified and yells at Gozzy in Hindi. Gozzy determinedly has a hand on the steering wheel and will not allow deviation. "You will be fine, mate, just drive," he firmly states. Croydon and Galius usher the vehicle in up as close to the stairwell as they can.

Frustrated, the fallen daren't come any closer. A guardian or two they might foolishly try to take, but two captains would be certain suicide. They snarl and hiss at the warriors from a safe distance. One villager lifts a spear at the tires. Reading the situation, Croydon steps forward and the crowd around him scatter. The man is left isolated, standing alone with no one in five meters of him. He drops the spear in a grip of conscience, falling to his knees and holding his head.

In a moment of irrational bravery Gozzy charges at the remaining men blocking the access to the stairwell. They part, surprised at his valor; Gozzy is pumped with adrenalin. "Those dudes are crazy, man! Let's go - fast!"

The three foreigners quickly gather Ian's bags and rush down the stairs and onto the open ground in front of the apartment. Five escorts of light shield them every step of the way, having to clear a couple of plucky fallen who try to interfere. Gozzy is carrying Ian's longboard. He waves it in exaggerated movements in front of them. It fends off the mob, forcing them to back up, cursing and yelling.

The light bearers, united, form a wedge around the taxi. The driver needs no encouragement and, even before all the doors are shut, he chucks the car into reverse. The tires squeal into action, backing out of the driveway and onto the road. The angry mob masses on the driveway, chasing the taxi with loud voices, spears and sticks waving violently in the air.

As the taxi careers down the road, Ian looks out the rear window at the masses of red eyes in and out of the bodies of the Creole band. "They would have killed me... but they couldn't touch us," he mutters quietly.

Harley swears loudly, relieved to be out of there. "What the **** is going on!"

"Stuffed if I know bro, that was gnarly," gasps Gozzy, still excited by the whole ordeal.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Farewells

Smyrn tracks the taxi with six other powerful demons in a volatile mood. He is fighting the growing realization that he has lost. Seething hatred drives him on, in an outside chance that there may be an opportunity to pry Ian from the light bearers.

The taxi passes the airport gates. Guards at the terminal entrance disperse immediately. One takes a wide berth through the car park to head for island headquarters. He stares back at the magnificent beings that have arrived with the taxi. As he passes the gate he glances forward. The fallen in pursuit are steaming toward him. Smyrn does not deviate as he hits the guard at full speed, throwing him off the road.

The taxi comes to a jerky stop outside the tardy terminal building, the driver pleased to have ended the strange trip. Despite the delays they have made good time and Ian should have plenty of time to get on the plane. Galius steps off the top of the taxi with the four under his command. They pause on the concreted area outside.

Nearly twenty pairs of red eyes now stare from behind the large windows of the departure hall, murmurs rising.

“Why are they here?”

“Who’s the man?”

“Who cares, have you ever seen those captains?”

“They sure aren’t from around here, we need to be careful. Check the commander knows.”

The five draw swords and fan out. Healing and Presence move a distance apart on either side of the doors while Galius steps inside with Deliverance and Salvation. The fallen quickly disperse to their posts, watching carefully as the light bearers take dominant positions in the room.

“Put your swords away; this is a shared building,” snarls the terminal commander, rushing into the hall.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” replies Galius stepping forward assertively, “you would probably like us to have packed a nice picnic lunch and checkered tablecloth as well?”

The humor is lost on the commander who doesn’t understand why Galius should be so aggressive.

“Let me put this as simply as I can,” Galius continues in a serious tone. “We are here, like it or not. You do whatever you want to, but if you interfere with our business anymore today, you will be playing tiggy in the pit before you know it!”

The terminal commander looks at Galius’s form and lifts his hand to diffuse him. “Yeah, okay, take it easy, no need to be so tense.” Looking beyond Galius he can see Smyrn and the others stop short of the taxi outside. Overshadowed by the powerful captain, the commander turns and leaves the room, not wanting to be shown up any more in front of his warriors.

Croydon and Dryden are with the men as they gather the bags and surfboard from the taxi. Croydon turns to Smyrn, who is still cursing profusely. “It’s over for you now,” he mouths slowly and deliberately.

Smyrn has seen the light bearers enter the terminal with drawn swords. “They’re activating under authority now,” he mutters. Croydon need say no more. Smyrn watches them disappear into the terminal. As the automatic doors close Healing and Presence wait near the entrance. Fuming for a minute, Smyrn and his warriors turn to leave the airport for their respective bases.

“You all right now, mate?” Harley asks as Ian’s bags are weighed.

“Yeah, hey, thanks heaps for what you did this morning. I totally appreciate it. I’m fine now, no point in hanging about.” Ian shakes Harley and Gozzy’s hands. No further affection is given, despite their close friendship over the last few months. Ian moves through to the customs processing area. Harley and Gozzy stand numbed at the perimeter of the customs area for a while. They turn and leave, both starting to feel the effects of the alcohol in their bloodstream and the early morning start.

Shaken and exhausted from the morning’s events, Ian manages to move through customs with ease. Walking slowly down the passages he flops into one of the few vacant seats in the full departure lounge. Looking up he checks the information on the screen above. “Perth, yep, that’s right. I’m shot. I’ve got to relax a little before we board. I hope my brother remembers to pick me up from the airport. Why did I book so many stopovers? I just want to get back to New Zealand, darn it.”

Through the louvered windows, the early morning sunlight starts to lift the coolness off the room. Dirty stains on the high panes of glass cannot subdue the increasing light. It seems to breathe life into the building. Passengers and staff assume the excitement of the dawn journey is lifting their hearts but, in actual fact hope is pulling into hearts from an unrecognized source.

The seven magnificent angelic beings crowd around a tanned young man with snowy white, shoulder length hair. In the tight circle of embrace it is time for farewells.

Galius looks around the group of sojourners standing deep in enemy territory. The subverted nature of their operation has passed; they stand in

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honor and power, together. Looking at his four, Galius nods and smiles; they have completed their tasks valiantly. “Our time is complete. The Son has been proclaimed. His Kingdom has sought and found establishment in the hearts of man. So, brothers, it is done. Now let us rejoice! For the King has come and His bride is prepared!”

Galius tips his head back and begins to sing loudly. It is a new song, unlike any ever sung before. The captain’s strong tenor voice resonates through the room, spilling into the rest of the building in a crescendo of power:

“You are the King of Glory
Strong and mighty in battle
You are the King of Glory
Whose arm is not short
We choose You as our banner
You are our King of Glory.”

Joining in the second and third recitals, the others stand rigid, singing out of full hearts. The rhythms change and vary, as the words spill out to permeate the spirit of every child in the room. Unassigned fallen warriors have scattered, the few still amongst the passengers sit in corners, curled up, hands over their ears. Unnatural light permeates every part of the room.

Two rows from Ian a well dressed Indian woman sits watching Ian’s every move from behind oversized sunglasses. Something about him attracts her, not in a sexual way, but with a longing. She can see the light all over him; it draws her.

Presence has been watching her as they sing. He speaks quietly, much like blowing a kiss, “The fulfillment you seek is close at hand, the years of torment and haranguing over. Open your heart to the light, for your eyes were not opened correctly as a young woman. It is the enemy of your soul that used this insight to trap you. What you see now is but a portion of the freedom and light you desire. Let peace and expectation rise in your heart. This is light and life.”

Two demons escorting her are crouching, clutching their heads as pressure pushes hard on their temples. Each hold a chain loosely attached to the woman. They are oblivious and careless as to what is happening.

Dryden and Croydon, who have been embracing either side of Presence, look to see who he is talking to. Presence speaks louder through another stanza of the song, “Light, light brings life and hope, turn to him, the King of Glory.”

“How dare you address our host,” one of the fallen barks between fingers covering his face.

“Why? Why would you seek to stop me? She is permitted to hear... and to choose,” Presence replies looking upon the woman with mounting compassion.

Deep from her heart a call rises above the repression holding her down, “I long to be free, I long to experience light and life. Help me to be free.”

Presence taps Deliverance on the shoulder; he turns his head to see what's happening. He breathes towards the woman and the demons. "Release her to receive."

"We will not! You have no rights here," spits one of the demons.

"You will release her to receive; she is calling out!" Deliverance states strongly, breaking from the fellowship of the circle and walking toward the demons. Blinding light obscures his approach as he silently draws two long silver swords. Before anyone can respond, the escorts dissipate into the carpeted floor of the room. The perfume of the presence of God totally masks the heavy sulfuric smell.

The woman convulses forward as a light cramp folds over her stomach. Sitting up, she draws a deep breath into her lungs as chains are loosened about her abdomen. Exhaling, she breathes again and again, release flushing over her face. "What? I feel so innocent. I feel as free as a child!"

Some fallen further off managed to observe some of the events around the dispatch of their comrades. Fanning through the room they rouse those shielding themselves behind hosts closer by. Within moments they have all evacuated, leaving the light bearers with the two hundred people on the flight.

"Let the truth of Jesus be revealed to you," Salvation's whisper drifts purposefully across the room. A light bearer has been sitting with a young English woman in attentive awe three rows across. He speaks softly into her ear. Looking up, she hesitates, uncertain. A second time the light bearer repeats his instruction. This time she gets up and moves to a spare seat beside a middle aged Indian woman drinking her first free air in years. As the conversation begins, the cross of Christ begins its work, and opportunity for true freedom is provided.

As the angelic anthem finishes, Galius grasps the arm of Croydon, "Always a pleasure, my friend. May the Lord strengthen you."

"And His bride be revealed."

"Yes! She will come forth with authority and power, rising in beauty from the ashes of the enemy's fortress!" Smiles beam across the captains' faces.

Galius and the four step from the circle, extending broad white feathered wings in perfect formation. They seem to fill the room; the half dozen other light bearers in the room stand in salute. With an effortless push the five beings pass through the high metal slats on the ceiling.

The hall is peaceful and quiet. Dryden and Croydon stare up to where the angelic beings disappeared. The intercom calls for the first passengers to board the plane. Dryden turns to his captain, content but uncertain. "Sir, why should the four not stay? I know they have imparted, but I foresaw them being right with him?"

"You have seen correctly, and you will see them again. Many times they'll return, as permitted by prayer and worship. He will learn to move in their

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gifts, I foresee that too. But they are not here at all times; that is your place alone.”

Dryden straightens with a look of purpose at the comment. He would rather them here, but he understands the responsibility entrusted to him.

Ian boards the plane with his invisible stowaways. Clearance received, the plane departs. Normally unable to sleep in the cramped seats, Ian is exhausted and drifts off quickly into a restful doze. Croydon and Dryden stand relaxed. Never tiring, they worship and feed strength into Ian’s volatile spirit.

As the hours pass, the spiritual atmosphere changes dramatically. The heavy demonic cover of Africa gives way to the indifference and denial of the Antipodes. The light bearers feel the change more than anyone. It feels pleasant but purposeless. They know with concern that the fact it is lighter is the very deception that makes it deadly for any child of light.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Indifference of the Antipodes

The plane descends in over the rich blues of the Indian Ocean, the dry continent of Australia panning off into the distance. It creates a beautiful distinction to the unrelenting ocean depths.

Dryden turns to his experienced senior. “Sir, what should we expect at these ports?”

Croydon contemplates the question. Turning he surveys the good-natured people in the plane. Men, women, and a smattering of children, fill every seat. Beyond the pleasantness and easy temperaments, a numb emptiness hangs over them. They look lifeless, dry and barren, even dead. The picture frightens the mighty angel. He understands the trappings of the West, with its affluence and indifference. “We are entering into the Kingdom of Self; where everything is dumbed down into the death of ambivalence. We should not underestimate the resourcefulness of the enemy in this. They do not know us yet; they will be curious and determined. All his family will be targets, more than ever. But that creates opportunity, does it not?”

Thinking further Croydon turns to his faithful assistant, “We also should not underestimate the work of the Spirit that has already taken root. His destiny is strong, his acceptance of the mantel powerful; his time... and your time, is now upon us.”

Encouraged, Dryden looks directly across at his senior. “I know, Sir, I can feel it! It is as if I have been reborn with him! I feel so alive, so empowered... so ready! It’s the indifference and apathy of those with light here that concerns me most. This is not an environment suited to any with deep passion. Still, I know that Ian’s call is so mixed in with this, as if he is being sent as one to shake the sleeping giant. Oh, that the Master will raise up a generation that will pierce through this cloud of comfort. God, use this one, preserve him; prepare now an environment of like-minded ones living beyond themselves. Perhaps he can be one who will challenge them to rise up and take their place to call again upon the authority of the Kingdom of Light.”

“You speak with wisdom and insight Dryden. You have learnt much from your time in these lands already. They need him now, and they need him passionate. The challenges of Mauritius will pay handsomely now in rewards over indifference. Let us pray that the battle ground imparted enough to push

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his gifting above the traps of normality.”

Croydon steps off the plane. The placid warmth of the airport terminal feels like a light breeze does to a racing yacht. Though peaceful, the air seems to stick and slow the mighty beings. A sick feeling rises in Croydon’s gut. “There is nothing as abhorrent as the lukewarm,” he whispers sadly to Dryden a stride behind him.

“But Sir, they have an inheritance of gold, their reward from patient endurance,” Dryden replies.

Croydon smiles at the strength and hope in his young friend, “Yes Dryden, the earth groans in anticipation, that these Sons of God should stand up and find themselves.”

The gatekeepers quickly report the arrival of the captain to their seniors. The airport controller bisects them in the customs hall. “Who are you and why are you here?” he challenges.

Croydon looks directly into his face; the controller is roughly his height. “I need not give my account to you. I am accountable only to the Creator, as you will be one day.”

The controller stands his ground, glancing past Croydon to the blond haired hippy waiting nonchalantly in the queue. Pure light seems to drip off him, as if he were saturated in white glowing oil. It stuns the controller, though he appears unimpressed.

“Who’s the boy?” he barks, not expecting a sensible response, but glad for permission to linger and query.

“A child of light, one who is redeemed and loved; what is that to you?”

“How many days are you here?”

“Three,” Croydon offers, knowing the information will benefit their cause. The controller grunts in approval and moves on as if satisfied.

In back rooms the task force is quickly established. Ian’s name and travel history are retrieved. Records show no history of him in terms of the Spirit’s presence upon him. The lack of information is a concern. The dark kingdom works on rules and rights, set patterns for containment. The unknown is where their concern rises. Three demons are briefed to find out what they can.

Ian’s younger brother is waiting at the terminal. The two men embrace warmly, even if a little awkwardly. As they exchange pleasant conversation Ian’s brother immediately senses something different in Ian. “You’ve changed, mate,” he states openly.

“Yah reckon?” Ian diffuses.

“Perhaps I’ve missed him? Or perhaps I’m missing family?” his brother ponders. “No... there’s something else. Some of his arrogance has dropped off.”

“You’ve softened up a bit bro’; that’s not like you!” he jests with a serious edge. “Yah met a woman?” his eyebrows lifting.

“Lots man, just no millionairesses willing to support me in my pursuit of the perfect wave!” Ian keeps the conversation at a safe distance but enjoys the closeness of the contact.

His brother pries gently all the way to his home. Ian answers the questions politely, letting little out beyond the direct necessity. “We have company,” Dryden states reticently seeing the three following the car.

As the men enter the house, the fallen draw near, not hiding their intent. Peering through windows, they look for an opening. Above the unused fireplace sits a small Buddha. The souvenir was picked up on a South East Asian holiday by Ian’s brother. “Let’s go in,” comments one of the three, as they move to linger near the idol, feeling safe enough there.

Dryden steps to the door looking at the fallen. “We have a right to be here, flicker boy!” one of the demon states smartly, pointing at the seemingly insignificant object on the mantelpiece.

“As you wish,” responds Dryden, showing little interest in their arrival.

Ian puts his bags down in the spare room and joins his brother in the dining room. They share the experiences of the last few months.

Dryden leans over to Ian, “Careful. It is okay to keep things to yourself at this stage.” The light bearers are fully aware that the kingdom of darkness knows nothing of what happened in the fifteen minutes yet.

Heeding the advice, Ian continues to be cautious in his responses about Mauritius. The fallen can sense the hesitation. With some influence they manage to direct the questions of his brother, insightfully searching out why so much light is upon the young man.

“What did you do to your arm?”

“Jellyfish sting.”

“Serious? Must have been pretty bad; looks like you’ve been shooting up!”

“You know I only do dope, man!”

“How did it happen?”

As Ian explains the stings on his arm, the story is clumsy and disjointed, as thwarted by the light bearers. He leaves out many details, not wanting or knowing how to express them. For the first time though, he attempts to relay the experiences of light and darkness.

The fallen are confused but take it all in. “He isn’t like the others,” one comments.

“Not a lot of religion, not a lot of knowledge, but a lot of freedom and light.”

“Not a lot of complacency, not a lot of history, not a lot of anything...”

“Do you believe he has actually been on the other side? Or was that a dream?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t heard of this. I don’t like it. We had better inform the controller and see what he wants us to do. He is only here for three days.”

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Ian has to drive his brother back to the airport a few hours later, as he is doing a short business trip to Sri Lanka. The fallen discuss the findings with their controller. He listens intently, contemplating protocols for such a situation. He does not have a lot of historic examples to follow.

Settling on some instructions, the three are sent again to travel behind Ian's car. They are still confused as to why no one knows anything about Ian. "If he has experienced this, why isn't it evidenced in his records?"

"Yeah but it only happened in the last week."

"So does that mean it is of little consequence or that it has been hidden from us?"

"We are going to have to try to get closer access to him."

"Through the light bearers will be difficult."

"That is our only option, but they know the rules for engagement."

It's nine o'clock. Ian is alone in the house and feeling the effect of his early start and poor sleep. He slips into bed exhausted. At midnight the fallen make their move.

Dryden's hand moves to his hilt. "Hold," Croydon whispers. The three pass gingerly between the light bearers into Ian's room.

"Wake up sleepyhead," provokes one, looking warily at the swords so close by him.

Even before Ian's eyes open he senses something is wrong. Streetlight filtering through the curtains provides a little light in the room. He sits up with a start. Three white eyed demons are taunting him with what look like starved narrow arms. Ian can see them, though not in their full form. Accusing and alarming thoughts barrage his mind. Dryden's breathing deepens, but he doesn't interfere.

A transformation has occurred in Ian's spirit. It is no longer fear that rises in his heart but frustration and repulsion. He gets up and storms out of the room. The demons run ahead, unsure if they are leading him or in retreat. Ian's spirit guides him through the house as if he is searching for something.

Coming to the lounge he turns the light on; his eyes flit over the room and stop at the statue of Buddha. Petrified, the shadows realize they have totally underestimated the child of light. Croydon and Dryden stand behind Ian, now more amused than concerned. Dryden is unable to hide a giggle that pushes out of his lips.

Ian's mind ponders experiences in Asian temples. Reaching forward he picks up the seemingly innocent figurine. The demons duck low as he comes near. Having tied their rights to the idol, their lives are intricately linked to it at the moment. Ian looks at the figure disdainfully. Croydon speaks clearly, "Yes Ian, they are here because of the idol."

"But I can't throw it out the window or burn it. It's my brother's, not mine."

Dryden shakes his head still giggling as he looks at the demons in mischief.

“Oh I don’t know Ian, you could burn it! Your brother won’t miss it!”

“You wouldn’t dare... he won’t,” states one demon uncertainly.

Looking about, an idea comes to mind. Ian bustles off to the kitchen, Buddha in hand. He rustles in the semi light for a tea towel from the drawer. Coming back into the lounge he smothers the Buddha in it and returns it on its side to the mantelpiece. “There you go, is that enough or should I put it outside?” his inner voice echoes for them all to hear.

The symbolic step is hugely significant. Dryden tries to adopt a more serious voice, putting a hand back on his sword, but he is not masking the humor of it all well. “You can leave now... or be sent, you choose.”

The demons need no convincing. They take the opportunity to untie their authority from the statue and quickly leave in the direction of the airport.

“I was worried he was going to call down light,” one groans.

“Or fire!”

“Let’s report back, I think we have accomplished our mission.”

Ian senses the shades have gone as soon as he lets go of the statue. “I have no need to fear them, they can’t touch me. I even have some authority over them, it seems. But why do they keep tormenting me? Surely this isn’t normal, and I hate losing sleep! It’s taking a toll on my sanity!”

At the airport the demons are animated, exaggerating Ian’s authority, as they report back to their commander. The senior demon listens carefully to the report with his eyes shut in considered thought. As they finish he asks, “How long is he here again?”

“Two more days, Sir... then he has a stopover in Melbourne.”

The controller ponders a moment. Leaning back in his chair he suddenly releases a hearty laugh. “Then let’s leave him; he’ll be someone else’s issue soon enough.”

“Shall we inform Melbourne and document what we know?”

“Inform them? Never, fool! Let’s not spoil their fun. They can have the nice surprise we did... We owe no favors there! I don’t think there is any long term threat here.”

The intensity of the heavy demonic influences in Mauritius has taken a huge toll on Ian’s strength. With the attention of the fallen removed, a couple of days of rest allows a significant emotional rebuild. Healing and strength are flowing into his body, and his spirit is growing in life quickly.

Ian’s biggest concern becomes the changing perception rippling through his spirit. The lonely, empty desperation haunting the spirit of man exposes itself everywhere he goes. He sees it hanging over them, this shroud of darkness, with its shackles and bondage. The trauma forces him to contain a growing empathy and compassion. It is a heavy weight in his heart and spirit. “They numb and anaesthetize themselves, not even recognizing their plight. I’ve got to find a way to help, to expose the truth of their lives. If only I could shout it

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out loud from a roof top, perhaps they would wake from the stupor?”

The dominant powers on the Australian continent could coordinate a cohesive strategy to unsettle Ian's fragile heart. But ancient conflicts, bitterness and rivalry distort communication lines. In the Melbourne domestic arrivals hall, bored hosts are caught unprepared as the mighty angelic captain steps off the domestic flight.

“Sir, a senior captain has arrived in from Perth,” a boorish voice informs the airport commander.

Taking a moment to shuffle from his melancholy, the powerful warrior's temper quickly rises. “How dare that Perth upstart undermine me? That fool will pay.” Pushing his chair back he aggressively strides out to intercept the arrival, a small group following him in support. It is not hard to spot Croydon and Ian; light pours off them both in a healthy glow.

“Who are you and by what authority are you here?” the commander shouts closing in. The anger is moving to nervousness as the presence of the light strikes him. A shudder runs up his dark spine.

“We are here with the child, and you have no right to anything here,” Dryden replies, stepping up beside his captain, a steady look on his face.

The commander looks past the light bearers to leer at the mysterious man. Ian's persona is changing fast. There is a marked change from Mauritius. Sheets of pure white linen, Ian's destiny, calling and authority, drape over his spirit. But it is no longer this that hangs brightest on him. His whole spirit being is now rich with the light of God. It pulses and breathes inside of him, radiating a light to now rival that of the light bearer. The dark empire's knowledge is shrouded. “Who is the boy?” the commander asks with a forced voice.

“There is no authority or power that you hold over us. We owe no account to you. If you are ignorant of us then that is what is meant to be,” Dryden answers matter-of-factly.

Croydon says nothing but holds his gaze steady at the small group of demons. His obvious authority and power dominates the enemy warriors. The commander is cautious, refusing to look at Croydon. He continues to draw what knowledge he can from Ian. There is something alluring, but hidden, in the light about the mysterious man. “New in the light, but it's so intense! How can that be?” he contemplates, understanding that something significant is stirring in Ian's heart. He determines nothing of the struggle raging close to the surface of Ian's mind.

Put off by the powerful support of light, the commander retreats to his control room. Four are hastily chosen to monitor the light bearer's activities, while messengers are dispersed into the city, unsure of what to expect from the visit. “We haven't heard of any issues in Perth, but watch him carefully. I worry why we have no record of the man, and there is no explanation why the captain should escort him. Either of those I might excuse, but together it spells

trouble. Once you gain access to the boy, find out what's going on. Report back to me as to what we are dealing with."

Ian is staying with a friend near the city centre. At midnight the demons make their move. Ian wakes, sweating heavily. Immediately he knows something is wrong. Turning over, evil thoughts and disparaging words are hitting his mind. Ian's discernment reveals their presence; deep sunken red eyes seem to hide against the walls. They have no idea he knows they are there.

"It's almost like he is looking at me," says one of the demons, unsure of what he is detecting in Ian's direct gaze.

"Stop thinking about yourself for just a moment on this assignment, will you, fool," another snarls.

"I'm no fool; I think we had better get out."

"Whatever... the light bearers are not permitted to stop us being in this house, it is one of ours..."

Ian sits up and speaks plainly and confidently, "God, I ask for you to protect me. Deliver me from the evil around me."

The four demons dive out the room, just ahead of silver blades unsheathed in authority.

Perplexed at Ian's insight now, the group is unwilling to bother Ian again. Their report to the commander is discussed further up with senior city officials. Choosing to let the remaining day pass quietly, they trust Ian is not a direct threat to any of their subjects, and soon will be someone else's problem.

A familiar pattern emerges at the next port. As a stronger demonic force at the Sydney airport gates scatter, Dryden comments dryly, "Well, hello! Guess who is the unexpected guest, Croydon? Surely we don't have to undergo the same ignorant level of scrutiny in every city?"

"It's making our trip interesting," Croydon replies with a warm smile.

Evening closes it. In a bar close to the city harbor, Ian meets up with some old friends. They sit on high bar stools exchanging pleasantries. Ian's eyes pass over each friend. A sense of sadness rises inside him. They remind him of what he was like only a week ago. "Have I really changed though? What is happening to me? I feel so alive now, so real and purposeful. But what purpose can it be for? I see right through the masks. Their hearts are so desperate for knowledge and life, but they don't have it. I was just the same; what has happened to me? Have I really changed that much?"

He fancies he is bold enough to speak it out, but his heart contains the cry. "Stop fooling yourselves guys. You're dead! You've thrown yourself at so many things, only to find they cannot satisfy the hunger buried deep in your hearts. What honor or pleasures lie in your flaccid relationships? Has it given the sense of purpose you ache for? Has the deep longing in any way been appeased? No, it has left you alone, empty and hurt. There is only one end in your plight as you go; darkness, and I have seen it. But oh, there is a light also! In that light

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everything is corrected and made whole, you are changed, consumed...”

The words become inadequate to describe any bit of what has happened to him. Ian looks away. He pushes hard the emotions surging inside. His eyes shift across the bar, skipping from person to person. They settle on an attractive girl waiting nervously on her own. A week ago he would have absorbed her form with a sense of pleasure. He suddenly feels what she is feeling, knowing her more than he has known any of the women he has been with. “What? How do I know you? There is such a cry in your heart for love, it’s... it’s crushing you. You’re still trying to replace love abandoned at your home, but you’ll not find it in the kingdom of men. The acceptance and love you never felt from your father... it was too weak to support and hold you. Now you search for it in the arms of other men who, like him, cannot give you what you need.”

“What hope do you have left? What desire can lift you out of this pit? Nothing... except... light! Light! Light! That is where the hope comes from; it is in the light, the light that is God! He can lift you up, comfort you and love you. Only He can carry you, heal you, love you... accept you. Only He can heal the scars man has smeared on your spirit. Only He can cut the cords that bind your heart. Only He can provide the release of love you need.”

Ian looks down to play with the rim of his glass, choking up emotionally. Circling his finger around and around, the conversation amongst his friends has been lost. He forcibly stuffs down the feelings pulling at his heart. “Pull yourself together Ian; you’re turning into an emotional sap!”

Dryden puts a hand on Ian’s shoulder. “It is okay Ian, it is right what you are feeling; you are sensing the true heart of the Father. This is Father’s love for mankind. What could be more right to feel? The time will come when you recognize this gift and don’t shun it. It is there so that you may show the love of Father. Then He can reach out to His children through you. This is genuine love; let it find good soil in your heart.”

The observers from the airport understand enough of the elements of what has taken place. The level of discernment in the young man is so bright and new. “Something is not right. We are going to have to get a closer look,” whispers one of the demons following him.

“It reminds me of something I haven’t seen for a long time... I don’t like the look of it. Come... let’s get some support... then we will find out what’s really happening. We cannot have an issue arise.”

It is 2am before the dark forces are satisfied they have adequate access to the room. Ian wakes, instantly aware of the presence of the demons in his room. Despite the more powerful group intimidating and harassing him, Ian remains calm, lying on his bed. “My Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Your name...” The portal of light begins to break above him.

“Curse that senior angel,” grimaces the leader, “there is nothing we can do; pull back.”

Dryden turns to his captain, “Sir, this is placing a lot of pressure on him; should we not be more forceful?”

As Ian settles back to bed, Croydon considers the matter for some time. He studies Ian, noting more the frustration than the fear that is coming up inside. He knows the options available to them but he has to distinguish the heart of the Father in the matter. “We have nearly completed this mission. The challenges are birthing strength; look at that rather effortless response to an attack that potentially was well armed. It’s becoming easier, but I hear you. It is time to provide him a place of solace, where the Holy Spirit can become deeply rooted. We need to get him back to New Zealand.”

Ian wakes early, as the morning sun pushes through the curtains in the apartment. His first thoughts are clear, “I need to get home.” Well placed calls allow him to arrange an earlier flight. Before long he is packed and on his way. It could be a lonely trip and wait at the airport but Ian is surprisingly content and at peace in the isolation. The dark forces are at ease with his early departure and allow him through without challenge.

Pushing back into his seat, he runs over the events of the week, as the plane cuts a large arc over Auckland’s western harbor. “An hour to go; I can’t wait to see Mum and Dad.”

He closes his eyes and settles into the rhythms of ‘Men at Work’ playing through the airline headphones. The plane draws in to approach the runway, just a kilometer away. “God, what have I become? What’s happened to me?”

A shaft of light breaks the enclosed tube of the aircraft, surprising the light bearers. A clear voice speaks over the music. “Ian, you’ve become a born again Christian.”

Ian sits up startled. His breathing quickens as he drops the headphones onto his lap as if they were dirty. He looks left and right. All the passengers near him are busy doing their preparations for landing; no one is in the least part attentive to him.

“Where did that voice come from? I wasn’t expecting that instant or real a response!” Ian slumps back puzzled, “Then again... nothing is too weird these days. But what the heck does that mean? Born again?”

Shuffling through the duffle bag in front of his feet, Ian finds his sunglasses. Putting them on, he hides away from the invisible conversation he fears may show in his eyes. In the seclusion he quietly freaks out. “Christian? Is that what I am? Who would want to be a Christian? I didn’t want to become one of them! Born again? What is that? I have heard of Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican but what’s born again? Crap, this is getting weirder by the day. A Christian... I can’t actually be a Christian now, can I? I’ve always mocked them so hard!”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Reunion

Valmar fidgets all the way to the airport, an irregular manner for an angel. He's been wound up for days and now the tension is boiling over into impetuous excitement. So many notions run through his mind. Every scenario of what may have happened to Ian, Dryden and Croydon has been considered many times. Turning to Marie he can see the same anxious excitement in her. "Oh, but Marie, you know nothing of what is meant to have happened!"

The guardian sticks close to Marie, but is severely distracted as they move into the arrivals hall. He shifts and peers through into customs. "Come on, where are you Dryden?" He can only see masses of people massing from a previous flight.

Ian steps out of the plane. Dryden is close behind. Standing tall, he shepherds the snowy haired man with tender looks. Tears threaten the guardian's eyes, emotions for the reunion with Valmar and Marie close to the surface.

The airport contains the usual flurry of spiritual activity. Ian passes into the larger immigration room. Every spiritual being turns, sensing a change in the atmosphere immediately. Dazzling light is pouring off Ian, oozing out of his renewed spirit. Like a virgin, purity seems to surround him.

Confused, the room supervisor quickly checks the flight lists. "We aren't expecting anyone today are we?" he mutters to his assistant.

"Shall I inform the controller?" the assistant asks.

"Wait a moment. Let's go through the lists again. There must be someone on that flight who can tell us about him."

The assistant bustles off to try to find a demon that has come in on the same flight. As in every airport they know the names of every child of light perceived as a significant risk. The rest of the fallen in the room stare on in surprise, wondering what the enigma is. They have seen powerful men and women in the spirit before, ones who have dedicated themselves over and over in pursuit of the Lover of Mankind. But Ian looks so young, so fresh; the presence about and on him is mystifying. Scrutinizing Dryden, nothing else appears out of place, so they return to their activities, monitoring the new arrivals discretely.

The light bearers in the room peer longer. Gradually they stand up rigidly, one by one, holding a long salute. The extreme beauty of the sight is natural

for them, but somehow they can feel the presence of something else beyond them. Admiring the young man, they honor them both.

As if it was planned to toy with them, Croydon follows over fifty meters behind. Subduing his form with a sense of mischief, he cannot hold it back any longer. It's not arrogance but authority that surges in him. Stopping at the open door entrance to the immigration hall, the roof lifts high above the large room. "Too long have I been masked and subdued, Master, on your creation. Allow me this moment for the sake of your Kingdom. That the bride may be shown," he whispers.

Pulling his hands up to his collar, he flicks at the cape fastened at the front with a gold tie. The colored material cascades majestically back behind his wings and shield. Breathing deeply, he steps forward a pace and rises to his full stature. Instantly the light begins to pour from him in greater dimensions than ever before in the earthly realms. It surges from his image and pulses into the room, glistening and glowing. His armor, made of the finest polished gold, ripples with his muscles glowing in the light, where the gold does not hold it. The intensity of the light continues to increase as he releases the contained glory of God inside him. An exact look is etched upon his masculine jawline.

There is not a spiritual being that does not notice the change upon his entrance, but the responses are very different. Not a fallen warrior speaks, sneers or even moves. None moan, backchat or offer degrading comments. They are hushed as a longing pierces their cold hearts. Slowly their heads drop, unable to continue to look upon him; it wakes them from the stupor they are in. Silently they withdraw and shrivel back inconspicuously behind their hosts.

The standing light bearers cannot believe their eyes. They cannot rationalize why such a supreme being should be present here. In unison, standing strongly at attention, they salute, wide-eyed at the power of the mighty captain.

Dryden smiles and chuckles as the responses change in the room; as he does he turns and looks behind him, the last to do so. His own mouth drops agape, "Croydon!" he whimpers, shocked at Croydon's real splendor himself.

Looking up to the heavens, Croydon slowly draws both swords, every eye fixed upon him. Shifting his vision he looks to Dryden and Ian. Very carefully his weapons drop lower to point directly at the young man and his escort. The attention of the room moves in line with Croydon's focus.

Dryden suddenly feels incredibly small; the honor of the mighty being directed at him. Tears stream from his eyes as he drops his head humbly. "Thank you Father for the company you sent to us... thank you!"

The crowd of witnesses looks at Dryden and then the child of light before them. Somehow they sense the strength of the moment unfolding inside. An overwhelming presence of the Spirit of God begins to flush down from the ceiling of the large room. With it an atmosphere of victorious celebration

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and joy is rising. Light bearers through the room break their salute and begin to step forward. Applauding and calling they form a tunnel, swords lifted, through which Dryden unwillingly must follow Ian who walks toward a queue.

Croydon holds his position at the door, gentle sobs beginning to well up also in his stoic heart. Still holding his swords perpendicular to his body, he fights to control his emotions. As he does he speaks clearly in a voice which seems to carry powerfully across the air. "Peace to you, my brothers. The Kingdom of Heaven is amongst us; today it is here with us. What has been purposed has been achieved. Behold, the child of this land, redeemed for the bride! The prodigal, returned; victorious is the hand of the Lord!"

They know what has taken place: the battles, the storms, the pain and the cost. Amongst the losses a splendid taste of victory splashes across their faces. Ten light bearers now form the tunnel of honor ahead of Dryden. Unable to control himself anymore the guardian collapses onto the floor and begins to weep in heavy sobs. The warriors part as Croydon comes alongside the buckled over angel, now his close friend. Tenderly reaching down, large hands grip on either side of the heaving shape's side. The sobs resonate in Croydon's clasp. "This is your time, brother. Stand with me these last minutes. Well done servant of the King! You have done it!"

Ian has stopped just in front of where Dryden lies, gathering his bearings. Strange sensations rise in him. He reads the signs and instructions of where to go, but he is distracted. It is as if the large hall is welcoming him home. He looks about. No one is looking at him; the familiar clamor of noises continues as it has all day. Breathing deeply, a rush of goose bumps sends a shivers up and down his body. "Weird! I never thought I missed home that much... I guess it's been a long time... it is good to be home."

Croydon lifts Dryden up as the cheers, clapping and shouting continues. Dryden straightens, moisture pouring from his eyes, shaking his head in gratitude and relief.

Valmar can't contain himself any longer; he can hear the commotion going on. Checking Marie is okay, he turns from her and focuses quickly. Changing his response to the physical he runs full pace through the walls and hallways, shops and desks. As he passes the final wall of the immigration hall he draws to a halt, mouth falling open.

Twenty meters away Dryden stares at the ground, surrounded by a dozen light bearers. Valmar's eyes dart across the room. The light bursting off Croydon is making it hard to see who else is present. He lifts a hand to acknowledge the mighty warrior, who nods and smiles. Croydon uses his eyes to direct Valmar's gaze in the right direction. Valmar moves on, searching as directed. Suddenly from behind Dryden, Ian steps forward into view. "Dryden!" Valmar screams, his whole body starting to shake, feet fixed to the floor; light is pouring from

Ian's spirit.

Dryden fights hard to lift his head, his eyes meeting the moist eyes of his best friends. Valmar lunges forward into Dryden's embrace. "You won! You won! You won!" Valmar shouts over and over in a frenzy, jumping up and down and lifting his friend with him in each joyous bounce. The realization and exhilaration of the victory hits both guardians as they hold each other tightly.

Croydon prepares to address the crowd. He still has swords in his hands as he stretches out his arms in broad authority over everyone in the large hall. "From the heart of your Creator comes a call. It's a call in the midst of your heaviness and bondage. 'Return to me,' he cries. 'I long for you. The garden waits; it has been restored to you. Come walk with me. Come to the garden again; I am waiting there for you.' It is time to find your place with your Maker. His heart is not cold to you, not pushing you away, not condemning. It is full of grace, full of hope, full of love. There is room at my Master's table for all who are willing to come. Listen to the call of your inner being, the call of your heart, and turn, turn to the Son again. Yes, it is Jesus, my Lord; He is the Holy Partner of your spirit."

Longings, images and thoughts flood into the hundreds of people in the large room. In that single moment the Kingdom of Heaven heaves forward into the trapped territory of their hearts. In the days and months that follow, they will turn, the deep call rousing the call in their hearts, as deep calls to deep.

Walking slowly forward Croydon keeps his arms out, blessing every one he passes. "Freedom... freedom... freedom..." he whispers. Every angelic eye follows the loop he makes before stops in front of Dryden and Valmar who are still arm in arm.

"My time with you has come to its pleasant end. Whether or not I will see you again on this side of the great reunion, I do not know. Something in my heart says I will. That I should be proud of you both and the role you have played, I do know for sure! You have secured your roles, your places. With the blood of light and of darkness your victory has been secured. Let the Kingdom of Light now push forward with fresh zeal and life in those you stand with. Be strong and content. Difficulties will come to distract and deviate. Be alert and on guard, hold steady with your gaze; I know you will not let up. When all is said and done, when time is completed, your lives will be most marked by your love of these ones. You cherish what He cherishes, for the bride to be revealed!"

Croydon's massive white wings open as his swords return to their sheaths and he bows to the guardians. Preparing to lift off, four strong hands grab his shoulders.

"No, Sir!" Dryden begins, shaking his head to the captain. "It has not

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been me, Sir, it has been you.” The guardian lifts his voice ensuring all hear him, and stares up into Croydon’s fiery eyes. “You have secured the victory. Magnificent... undaunted... even against the greatest of odds... steadfast in the midst of darkness. Even to the place of torment you have gone. I know, Sir, where you went for Him. I know the pain you felt. I know the mark it has left on you, something you will carry forever. We are in gratitude to you, Sir. Should that day of reunion come in this generation, Sir, should we see you in the draft that cracks the divider, we shall shout and salute you! We shall salute you rightly at the side of our King. As light is finally revealed in clarity, as the power He withholds is finally released, and freedom for those He loves is made, Sir, we will salute you. You have fought with dignity, authority and power. Our time apart is but a moment, Sir. Yes, that His bride may be revealed.”

The intensity of the light around them has been growing. Drops like oil have formed high up on the ceiling. They are now falling, splashing about them. The Spirit has stepped in. Suddenly aware of it, the three gently slip their heads back and bask in a touch that energizes and lifts them. Arms falling limp to their sides their hands stretched palms upward. Life, strength and hope pour into them from the Spirit of God, the source of all light.

Valmar eventually turns his head down and speaks. “Sir, I cannot permit you to leave until you have seen my command and blessed her with your own hand. I implore you, come and bless her.”

Looking directly into the bright eyes of hope, Croydon nods and the three walk on as the group of light bearers applaud and cheer.

Ian spots Colin and Marie. Stepping to them with a smile, they all embrace. Marie weeps openly as the men exchange emotionally controlled greetings. Conversation is light and friendly as the angelic beings gather amongst the hub. Marie stops, something arresting her heart. Great angelic hands are on her shoulders. Ian and Colin chat about family, fishing and the weather as she hesitates in a daydream.

“Father,” Croydon begins staring beyond the ceiling. “Father!” he shouts with passion. “We hold before you your handmaiden.” In an unusual show of strong emotion Croydon has to stop. His head drops as big sobs rock his chest in and out. Finally he composes himself again and continues. “This is your handmaiden Father, for whom we join in crying for the great lament of her heart, that her family should come to You. Let them find their security in the hands of Your keep. Kingdom of Heaven, you are here, and it is time to increase. Father it is Your pleasure, grant her victory, let her children draw the Kingdom of Heaven to this dark world with power. It is for Your glory alone Father. We bless you Marie; you are blessed and that is what He calls you.”

The warm sensation is rushing over Marie’s body, goose bumps sitting raised and tense. Ian turns and looks at her. About to draw her into the conversation,

he stops. He sees something. Pure light like diamonds is falling off her face. She is staring pleasantly into the distance past him. Ian smiles as if knowing where she is in her heart. He leaves her alone and turns to Colin again.

The three angelic beings embrace one last time before Dryden and Valmar step back. Croydon unfolds his massive wings for the second time. He bends and drops his left leg back slightly before thrusting off the floor up and through the light hanging about them. He passes through to the open skies high above the airport. Corkscrewing repeatedly he drills powerfully towards the West Pacific gate. With a sudden longing for heaven he looks up. He has only a small tinge of reluctance in leaving the earthly realms. "There is no comparison of heaven to earth. Despite the relevance of this place to You, Master, I rather desire to be with you."

Dryden and Valmar stand together, united in love and purpose. They salute the captain who has left them. "One day, he will break the divider to ride with our Lord," Valmar says dreamily.

"I know" says Dryden. "He is rightly honored with that rank."

As they leave the airport, two busy conversations are occurring. The light bearers sit reliving the battles and events that have unfolded, while Ian is engaging in lively conversation. His spirit is warm and strong. Looking back he smiles at his mother in the back seat, "It's good to be home Mum."

"It is good to have you back," she replies with a loving smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Where We Leave Off

Surf posters hang at odd angles on the walls. The small room seems to crowd in on Ian. Knick knacks long residing on windowsills and furniture are all too familiar.

“Mum! My bedroom is exactly how I left it two years ago... Is this a shrine? Maybe I’ve been in a time warp. Scotty can you hear me?... I hope you vacuumed it at least while I was away!” Ian teases.

“I just want you to be comfortable, son,” Marie replies, a little embarrassed that the room has not changed since he left.

“Yeah, I know... I’m just kidding you. It’s good to be home, it’s like walking into a refuge of peace.” Ian places an affectionate hand on the little woman’s shoulder.

She is caught off guard again by the warmth of the touch. Thoughts and feelings inside her have been working overtime since the airport. As the affection lingers, she settles on the matter, as only a mother can. “You’ve changed, son. You’re different than when you left. You’ve grown up a bit, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know about that Mother,” Ian deviates.

“Well, you have changed and it is lovely to have you home as well. I hope you might settle down a bit with the wedding and all.”

“Oh, Mother... and I was just starting to like you! Don’t you start thinking that marriage is an option for this free bachelor!” Ian bounces on his childhood bed as if he were a six year old.

“Maybe you haven’t changed that much?” Marie smiles wryly. She busies herself around the room, finding permission to linger and enjoying Ian’s company as much as he is hers.

The luxury of ignorance in the short Australian stopovers has passed for the light bearers. The dark ranks ruling Ian’s hometown know the full extent of the change that has occurred. The unheralded prodigal’s return has sparked a massive response behind the scenes. Looking for opportunity to foster a grievance with the forces of light, Ian has become the very symbol of defeat for the fallen a week earlier.

Messengers have been dispatched and a task leader appointed. The matter is discussed with interest at a briefing at regional headquarters.

“How long has he been in the light?” enquires the commander.

“It is a week now, Master.”

“Hmmm, and a week since your defeat by the woman,” rubs the commander who has successfully distanced himself from the matter.

“Yes, Master, we now see the product of the woman’s battle.”

“So is that a week of strength or of struggle for the boy?”

“It is strength, Master. The boy appears abnormally resilient for someone so young in the light.”

“So what was the point of the years of marking and containing the woman’s territory? The energy and sacrifice made has been thrown to the wind. She has delivered up her son, the very one we feared. As if that were not enough, now God himself is parading him before us.” An unusual hush fills the room; every darkened face sitting silent. The failures are fresh in their minds, and none are willing to be identified with the embarrassing episode at the house.

“You are going to have to make amends. I charged you for it to never happen on my watch, and now this pungent stench is in my nostrils. Even now you underestimate what you have released... fools! So where are we do you suppose? What do we have remaining over the boy?” scowls the commander as he continues.

“That is a perplexing matter, Master. Whatever happened at the time of the battle here led to a significant encounter in Mauritius, the extent of which we have not yet ascertained.”

“Don’t avoid my questions; what remains over the boy?”

“Nothing...” “What?” the commander voice lifts.

“He was completely freed. I have never seen it happen in a week like this before...”

“We must gain access to see how this happened,” interrupts the task leader over his immediate superior. “There are the two guardians marking them as previously. We seek your approval; you will remember the land has been quarantined.”

“Mauritius?” mumbles the commander, thoughtfully fumbling the coat hanging drearily down below his waist.

“Yes, Master, Mauritius.”

“Huh, there has been turmoil there as I remember. It may be connected... but it has little relevance to us. You must gain access to the boy, the sooner the better. No one shrugs off our kingdom in a week. He will have weaknesses; they all do... Don’t you dare underestimate the guardians this time; much has been waged by the Kingdom of Light on the boy. No destiny can play out where we hold dominance.”

The task leader nods, impressed at the commander’s knowledge. He did not offer up all the information he possessed and had not mentioned the destiny before.

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“The light bearers will be well prepared. It is the boy you are after, not the woman; they have to allow you some access. Yes... you may proceed, and you gain opportunity to prove your worth to me.”

“I will, Master, and you will not be disappointed.”

Night falls, and with it the confidence of the evil domain increases across the city. A significant intimidating force gathers at the roadside of the McCormack household. Heavy chains are held by two warriors across their shoulders. Despite this, the house seems to rest quietly. The mandate from the Kingdom of Light, which has been hanging over Ian by a thin thread, seems secure in the refuge of Marie’s home.

Dryden turns to his friend, “Can you feel them?”

Valmar lifts his nose as if finding his foe. “Yes. They are here.”

“Croydon allowed them to come close.”

“Yes, it is sealing the work begun, though the strategy has its risks.”

“I know, but it pushes hard against apathy and complacency, which I fear more than his failing...”

“We should continue with it then,” Valmar concurs.

The task leader arrives and moves directly to the chain holders. Running his hand down the links across one back he smiles with a sense of sick satisfaction. “Forget the woman; we know she is sheltered. The boy is our target, fresh in the light, our chains will be anxious to reattach! We must cut him off before the destiny is enacted. Let us exact our revenge, turning things again to their rightful position. This one has been wrongfully stolen from us. Don’t be sloppy; we all know the guardians are not to be underestimated. Move to wake him; they will let us to him.”

Ian rouses with the familiar sense of evil about him. His body shakes. The task leader powerfully crosses realms to rock his body a little. Five sets of red eyes taunt him, the chain holders lingering behind. Dozens more wait outside for the call.

“This is ridiculous, can’t you leave me alone?” Ian moans aloud.

The fallen are perplexed; they expected a fearful response rather than reluctant confidence. Ceasing control again, the task leader speaks harshly, “We’ve come to take you with us...”

“Our Father which art in heaven...” Ian cuts him off, ignoring the conversation and barely phased by the threat.

Dryden steps forward into the channel of light forming above Ian as rightful authority is enacted. The task leader curses his luck, as the fallen must retreat. As prepared, one warrior separates from the group. He stalks the hallway toward the room where Colin and Marie are sleeping.

Ian rolls over to go back to sleep. “It doesn’t have to be like this,” comes a gentle voice in his heart.

Sitting up, anger and repulsion push into his gut. “That’s right! What are

they doing in my bedroom, in my house? They shouldn't be doing this!" Flicking his light on he begins to address the beings loudly and directly. "You have no right here. This is my house. You can't intimidate me. I'm a child of the light, and you must stop this attack. I demand you cease these nightly attacks. I dismiss and deter you in Jesus' name."

"Ian, are you okay?" Marie ventures to say. Colin stands in the doorway behind her, the demon hovering further back. He holds tight to chains drawn across Colin's chest fearing that something might hit him in the darkness. His breathing eases as the name of Jesus seemed to pass without consequence.

Embarrassed, Ian sits on the edge of his bed calmly. "Sorry, did I wake you. Yeah, just a bad dream, I guess. I'm cool. It's like evil things are attacking me."

The comments slip past Marie's limited experience in overt encounters. A searing bind constricts Colin around his forehead as the fallen warrior pulls hard on chains gripping his torso.

Valmar moves close to Marie, less than a meter from the demon. Putting hands on his hips, he eyes the dark figure.

"You know I have a right to be here... you cannot cast me out... the oaths of the Lodge permit me," the demon snarls.

"Perhaps I cannot," Valmar replies quietly, "but there are others here who may act on his behalf..."

"You have no right to initiate that; the man has willingly opened the door for me!"

Dryden's hand is firmly on Ian's shoulder. "You only have the access we allow. You know either of these children can deal with you more harshly than we ever could. Go now; tell your leaders we will not let you have him. He will grow stronger, for light has fully overcome the shadow of his soul. Mark your time Wormwood; prepare to leave."

Wormwood looks angrily back at Dryden, irritated that he discerned his name.

Still on his bed, the eyes of Ian's spirit open further. There is an unnatural look etched on Colin's face. His normal blank countenance is distorting and twisting. A grey shadowed cloud seems to be lurking behind him. Ian cannot believe what he is seeing.

Aware his presence has been sensed, Wormwood responds quickly to the fear rising inside his dark heart. "That's right, we are all around you, boy. We'll get you; it's a matter of time. You have nowhere to hide; we will find you."

As Colin's breathing intensifies the words pierce Ian's spirit. He is uncertain of what to make of it. Shaking his head he turns to climb back under his sheet in tired confusion.

Wormwood has already wheeled Colin around, seeking the relative safety of his own room. Valmar stands deliberately across the hallway blocking his path. "Another day, light flicker," Wormwood idly mumbles, forced to momentarily

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let go of Colin.

Colin is swearing and heaving audibly as he passes through the eight foot tall being of light filling the hallway. "I hate been woken. Doesn't Ian know I've got to work in the morning? Fine for him; lazy bugger doesn't even have a job. It's just irresponsible..."

"Life, Colin," Valmar breathes.

Amidst the anger and pride in Colin, deeper questions begin to surface. "What did Ian say... evil? Can there really be evil here? There isn't even such a thing... is there? Why am I so angry anyway?"

Marie watches Colin disappear down the hallway, mouth agape at the flurry of foul language. "Colin!" she sternly corrects, tracking him to their room.

Ian exhales heavily and whispers under his sheets, "God, I'm sick of these things harassing me. What do I do to get rid of them?"

Dryden replies instantly and matter-of-factly, "Read the Bible Ian."

Ian chuckles at the implausible suggestion. "Read a Bible? Yeah right! Next you'll be asking me to go to church..." While contemplating the value of his humor Ian continues, "I haven't got a Bible anyway, so how can I read one."

"Your father has one; ask him for it."

Ian sits up again on the edge of his bed, holding his head in his hands. "What?... Now?... What are all these voices in my head? Am I going mad, or is that you God?... Or are these two things closely linked? Oh I am so funny!" There is no response to the questions this time.

"Voices, then no voices, I am going mad! Anyway I can't go and ask him for a Bible... it's the middle of the night and he's fuming! Does it have to be now or can I ask tomorrow? I will not disturb him again tonight." Ian hears nothing. He stares at the door which seems to beckon him like it was a large mouth. In his mind it calls him, "Come on Ian, you know what you need to do!"

"You can't be serious! It is the middle of the night," he mumbles. Waiting a moment he submissively gets up and meekly heads off down the corridor. His parents' door looks foreboding as its dark silhouette is contrasted to the brightness of the light coming from his bedroom. "Hey Dad," he casts into the darkness, "do you have a Bible I can borrow?"

A searing pain still constricts Colin's temples. It muddies any cohesion in his thoughts. His pursed lips manage to release some profanities as he battles with the situation. Marie cowers to her side of the bed, confused by the unusually open display of anger from her husband. "...What next son? What do you want from me? Where is this going to end?" Colin viciously spits.

"Well?" Dryden asks stepping up toward Colin. He puts a provocative hand onto the man's head. Valmar stands on the far side of the bed, sheltering Marie.

"Don't you dare give it to him, and don't you dare put your hand on my subject again," Wormwood snarls.

“Or what?” Dryden asks, equally as determined.

“Life, Colin,” Valmar breathes again.

Confusion and voices seem to echo through the pain in Colin’s head. His mind is suddenly awash with the questions of life he has left undisturbed through the years. Unaware they were even there; they all seem to rise at once. The call bursts from his trapped heart above the afflictions. “What has become of me... am I lost? What have I done to resolve the real questions of life? Is there evil? What role could the Bible have in deflecting that? Is it not just a fabled mix of history and old wives’ tales? Where is my heart? Do I know where it is?”

Wormwood pulls hard on the chains to hold Colin down. Dryden’s hand has not moved from his head. A small pulse of light shudders through the angelic hand, and Colin sits up to dig through his bedside drawer. “I don’t know what I keep the stupid thing for anyway,” he mutters as he stumbles onto the unused Gideon Bible given to him at school. He throws it unceremoniously toward the end of the bed.

“Thanks,” Ian genuinely replies as he takes the book and turns away.

“Fool!” shouts Wormwood as he clips Colin heavily across the head. “I said don’t give it to him! Now look what have you’ve done!” As Dryden’s hand is released Colin swoons and drops back on his bed.

Ian closes his bedroom door and sits down, placing the old relic on his lap. “How can this antiquated storybook be relevant? This is a joke!” Slowly he runs his fingertips over the drab exterior. For some time he stares at the faded, hard green cover. “Darn it all, what am I meant to do now?” He looks over to his bedside table. Tilting his head to look at his watch it reads 1:15am. “Well... can’t hurt. I’m awake now anyway. Where do I start though?”

Thumbing through the contents and title pages a musty smell arouses his nasal passages. “Well, Dad, you sure haven’t been using it! I guess I start at the beginning, whatever that is.” On the first page of tighter black writing, Ian absorbs the title ‘Genesis’. He sighs nonchalantly, “Yeah, yeah, blah, blah, blah, we have all heard of Genesis before.” Not four sentences in, he stops and looks with wide eyes to the wall adjacent him. His heart rate has suddenly accelerated. “I did not just read that! I must be dreaming.” He pulls his head down and starts from the top of the page again:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.

His knees part, the old book falls unceremoniously onto the carpet. Feeling it’s like a valuable, uncovered treasure he quickly picks it up again. “No... no... no...” Unable to hold it, he delicately places the Bible on the floor this time.

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He quickly stands and circles the relic. The words stare back at him from every angle. Looking about the room in shock, he half expects to see someone who will help. The room is silent and empty. A heavy mist blurs over his eyes.

“What a fool I’ve been. I’ve been so proud. I’ve been to university and studied all sorts of books. Yet I never even bothered looking at the one book that could tell me the truth. It’s been there all along, sitting in my very house; here it is written in plain language. Light and the darkness; it’s true, I have seen them both. The Bible is true! I know what God did here; He made and is in the light! I have been so blind to what was right before me. Darn, why am I crying again? I haven’t cried for twelve years, but since I was touched by this light I haven’t stopped.”

By 3:30am Ian has devoured most of Genesis. He puts the previously unemployed book carefully onto his bedside table. The stories and imagery have come to life. Understanding has begun to rework truth inside him. Many false notions and sentiments have been falling from his mind. The great transformation of the renewing of his mind has quickened immeasurably. Flicking the light off he collapses back onto his bed, exhausted but content.

In the days that follow, Ian hides many hours behind the closed door of his quiet room. He devours every chapter, determined not to miss anything. Working through books of the law and the stories of the kings, he is gripped by the raw truth of it. What he is less aware of is that it is reworking his academic mind and stoic heart into a new shape.

With the hours Ian consecrates each day, a new devotion is being fostered. The light of the Spirit is rising all the time, changing his very persona. As he reads he pauses often, talking to God at length, pouring out questions and concerns. Dryden is gentle and patient, inputting truth and understanding with the Holy Spirit. No one was quite ready for what Ian could absorb.

“That’s so Ian,” Dryden says proudly one day to Valmar, “When he is in, he is in boots and all! He could be finished the whole thing in a month!”

“I know. It’s incredible. I have never seen someone take in so much so quickly. It is the Spirit, is it not? He is absorbing in days what, for many, takes years to learn. Now the destiny becomes clear Dryden for both you and Ian...”

“Do you think he will be one who restores truth that has been lost?” interrupts Dryden, with a new thought he has not pondered before.

“What does your heart say?” Valmar queries back.

“I don’t know, it was not what I had anticipated, but, it may be... he understands much of the Father’s love that has been lost.”

“We cannot see fully the plan the Master has. But we do see the heart the Father has for him! You’re right, I believe in your insight of his understanding of the Father’s love. Focus him here. It is time for the bride to rediscover this truth. But we understand so little of the puzzle of destiny beyond that.”

At Psalms the intensity suddenly changes. Ian’s pace of consumption slows;

the unfamiliar language of intimacy perplexes him. “How can David use this sort of talk about God, like he just knew God so well? And yet why would God allow David to go through so much?”

“It is not that bad things do not happen in your life now, Ian. You are blessed, yes, but you are not wrapped in cotton wool. Now, when the hard times come, you have opportunity to turn them into gems in your life. You have the capacity to overcome and find joy even in the middle of crisis. This is the quality of character that David had,” Dryden replies.

“How can I ever have such a character; I am angry, resentful... well, lots of things... you know!”

“It is never about you, Ian; it’s about God in you. You have a good heart, a good heart, Ian. For in you is the hope of glory! You are transformed. He delights in you now, even as you are! He will be with you through every battle and struggle...”

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

“You mean you were there with me all along in the darkness? But I did not see or sense you there? Were you really there?” Ian holds back the lump in his throat. “I want to believe that you were with me but I am not sure I can accept that.”

A broad shaft of light opens in the room. “I was there, but only because you prayed. The darkness would have taken you and you would have been left there had you not turned your life over to me in the ambulance.”

“But I didn’t see you there.”

“I was always with you, standing beside you. Even now, though you do not perceive or understand it, I am with you. In the darkest night of your life I will be right with you, ready for you. You have a part of me in you; the light that shines within you now is me. I am always with you. You carry me.”

“Why did I have to go there at all? What was the purpose in that?”

“It was to show you where you should have gone. This will allow you to understand and explain to others.”

“I don’t think I could explain it to myself let alone to someone else! I can’t imagine I’ll be doing that too often! You must have seen how confusing it was for my brother.”

If I ascend up to heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there... If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth me not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Psalm 139:8, 11-12)

“Okay, I get that now, you were there. I couldn’t hide from you, even if I wanted to. You’re always there.”

The heartfelt plea of the Psalms gives way to the intense desires of Solomon’s Song. Ian is not sure what to make of it all. The plea of God through the last

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seventeen chapters of Isaiah grips him. The gifts birthed in Ian bring to life what is missed by many. For only a prophet can fully comprehend a prophet. “Have you always been so desperate for relationship with us? You are on a passionate pursuit of mankind. Yet we have shunned you. The thread and weave of it is right through these writings.”

Within four weeks, Ian, has completed the Old Testament. “Part II,” he thinks, not certain why the division is in the book. “Oh, it’s about Jesus, this bit.”

The revelation of who Jesus is begins to unfold. He comes to the prayer he has prayed so regularly since the first time in the ambulance in Matthew 6. “What’s with that?” he asks, dwelling on the passage.

“It was a prayer of salvation, Ian. You were born again at that point. Your sins were forgiven when you gave your life fully over to Him.”

“But why me? Why did you step in and help me? Why allow me to come back? Most people don’t get a chance to return.”

“You’re wholehearted, Ian. I am searching for those that will fully lay themselves out for me. When you believe in something, you pursue it completely. You were allowed to return because I know how you will handle that.”

Enter ye at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in there: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

“I have seen that gate! The way is narrow and few would find it. Everyone could find the main way to darkness, through ignorance and a willingness to live blind. Yet, it is in the capacity of all to find out. I could have found out before now. I mean, I hadn’t even read the Bible! How could I say I did not have an opportunity? As a child I knew what was right but I willingly turned my heart from what I did not want to perceive.”

“That’s right Ian, everyone has the capacity to believe, but few choose the narrow way; they prefer to march off to the darkness in ignorance.”

“But Jesus’ teaching is so baffling and confusing. My world view is so perverted and wrong. He turns it all around, elevating the least and demoting the great. This is not what I have lived and I am not sure I agree with it...”

“You have not been living in a place of truth. But you are now on a journey that will see that world view corrected in you. Be careful though. You can slip from here at any time, don’t be arrogant and proud in it.”

I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

“What? It’s here in the Bible! That’s what you mean when you keep telling me I am born again! It seems that everything is in the Bible: the darkness, the light, the tunnel, the door, the glory, the heavenly lands, everything!”

Through the rest of John a barrage of new revelation begins to unfold. It hits at Ian's heart again and again, unraveling and rebuilding him.

Light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hates the light, neither comes to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God. (John 3:19-21)

He that hears my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. (John 5:24)

I am the light of the world; he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. (John 8:12)

Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. (John 8:23)

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (John 9:5)

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. (John 10:9)

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

(John 11:25-26) I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me shall not abide in darkness. (John 12:46)

I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 12:46)

"The theme is continual. Light and life! It is all around Jesus. Was that Him in the light? Was that Jesus? There are two kingdoms: a kingdom of darkness and a kingdom of light. I am in the middle of a titanic struggle between the two opposing forces in the universe, and Jesus, this mysterious man, is in the middle of it all. Who are you?"

"I am who I am, Ian; who will you say I am?"

"But am I the only one? Have others experienced you, God, like I have? People will think I am making it up if I tell them about what I have seen. Apart from Jesus others must have had experiences like I have?"

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man... How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (2 Corinthians 12:2)

"What about the waves though? Are they in the Bible? Everything else seems to be."

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. (Galatians 5:22)

"That's what I experienced, the Spirit! The waves are there, really, they are! They are the Spirit of God!"

The Third Portal

By week six Ian turns the page of Jude over. The word ‘Revelation’ stands atop of the new page. “I’ve heard about this one. People talk about it mystically, 666 and all that. I wonder what it’s really about.” Nothing Ian has read thus far has prepared him for the directness of what he reads:

And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire. His feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shining in his strength. (Revelation 1:13-17)

“Unbelievable! It is in here in plain language. It’s not all in my imagination! It was you! It was you, Jesus! It was you in the light! That’s you! You are the one blocking the narrow door. Everyone has to come to you and through you to the Father. There is no other way, I could see that. You were completely accurate in all that you said. I will see you face to face when I get into heaven but at the moment no man looks on the face of God and lives. That’s why I could not see your face when I pressed in. I believe and understand. You are the light of the world.”

Tears roll down his face, as Ian humbly understands everything that has transpired. “The only pictures I ever saw of you before were the bearded face with a tiny halo glow around your face. God you were reduced in Sunday school to a gentle white haired grandfather. Yet Jesus, you rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where now you are glorified, surrounded by light, with no darkness in you. You are the King of Glory, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Lords and the King of all the Kings. Moses went up Mount Sinai for 30 days and he saw the glory of God. When Moses came down, his face shone with so much of the glory that they had to put a veil over it, so the people wouldn’t be afraid. He had seen the light of God, the glory of God, like I did! Paul was blinded by a glorious light on the road to Damascus, the glory of Jesus, like I saw...”

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamb is the light thereof. And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:1-2, 23, 22:1)

“The new earth, the rivers, the trees, it’s all here! It’s up to a man to believe in God. That is faith. You desire that all men come through the gates of glory. You are the door to life, the Lamb of God, the light. You were the first to rise from the dead. The power of your love is not just for when we die; it is for

now! God, your presence can come to anyone. You will melt, heal and restore their hearts. You are the gentle, loving, caring shepherd of all souls. They say there is nothing perfect in the world, but Jesus you are!”

Closing the book Ian lies back on his bed. What happened from there is now church history; the Book of Acts carries on, in him... and in you...

EPILOGUE

As I finish this book it is March 2011. That's over nine years since God started me on this crazy journey. I might be slow but eventually I do what God asks me... I'm not sure if that means I'm obedient or not! I'm as unsure as day one, of God's wisdom in choosing me to write this book. Clearly I can think of more qualified applicants. So why the heck did God tell me to write this? Well you better ask him that; I have given up on that one! Actually the story bears telling of how I come to write.

In 1982 on the island of Mauritius Ian McCormack was stung five times by the deadly box jellyfish. Ian's life was miraculously changed from that day, following Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior since. He has become an ordained minister, worked with the head-hunters of Borneo and in refugee camps, led churches and travelled the world with his story of life and the truths of God. This book is based on the events that surrounded his real life experiences for two weeks in 1982.

Ian goes back a long way in both our lives. I first met him shortly after he became a Christian in 1982. Our church in Hamilton, New Zealand, was the first church he attended after his conversion. Soon the long-haired hippy joined the outreach team, became a missionary and then a staff pastor, and was acquainted with us all. I vividly remember one of the first times I heard his story: I was eighteen and running a small group, as Ian came and captivated us for two hours that Wednesday night with the story that has since spread around the world.

Our paths parted until 1997 when we shifted to Tauranga, New Zealand. Ian and Jane were living there also, having settled for a while with children from ministering around the world. We got together and each week attended incredible meetings upstairs in their house with a small group of 'God Chasers'. God spoke to me plainly one of the first times we met, "Ian is going to go again and you are going to go with him." I told no one about this (except Donna of course) and we stored the matter in our hearts.

By 2001 Ian and Jane were planning ministry trips to the UK and beyond. This is when I told Ian what God had said to me and that, crazy as it was, I felt we were meant to travel with him. Ian is clearly mad; he just said, "Great, come along!" When Donna fell pregnant with our third child we decided to do five months travel with the McCormack's before returning to New Zealand. It was an amazing time to witness them ministering in around ninety churches in those months. Generally Ian would be sharing his testimony; it was something

you never got tired of hearing. What fun living out of our suitcases with two kids each and pregnant wives.

As our time closed out, I began contemplating my future in God. What did God have in store for me? What of my job as a Financial Controller, and the imminent birth of our third child? Sitting in the last few meetings I began to imagine the amazing battles that must have been happening in the spiritual world during Ian's conversion experience. Bold images and ideas would flood my mind. I imagined angelic names, demonic encounters and the role of prayer. I went home one Saturday night and said to Donna, "I wonder if God wants me to write a book about Ian's testimony and the angels and demons involved in the battle for his heart." I think we were both humored by that thought, as to be honest Donna is quite the literary queen whereas I am not! Ah yes the irony with God in asking us to do what we are totally unqualified to!

Anyway I stored that thought and went to our Sunday night meeting at a large church in Brighton. Sitting in the auditorium my mind was filled with images of what must have been happening in the spirit world. I pondered "Is this you God, do you want me to write? Surely not! That would be pretty crazy of you!" He did not answer, but after the meeting I was milling near the front of the church. A man came directly up to me, whom I had never met before. Without even introducing himself he said, "I don't know what this means but I see a pen hanging around your neck, I think you are supposed to write." I keeled over, grabbed at my face and sobbed and sobbed. I knew God had spoken. I think his name might have been John Harley. I don't even know that, but thanks John; you don't know how much trouble you have caused!

The purpose of the book is still unclear to me. The personal journey in writing it has been incredible. Just to spend 4 hours alone with my computer, worship music blaring, God and me in my room, day after day... wow! He met with me so many times. I have wept a thousand tears over this, and then tried to put them into words. I have been truly blessed. If God has used it beyond that to bless you then that is a bonus. He loves you!

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