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# Between Heaven and Hell

Unification Chronicles 0

*Jeff Kirvin*

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Fictionwise

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## ***BOOK I: REVELATION***

### **The Accident**



It was a bright and sunny day in Washington DC, and Daniel Cho found himself at the scene of an accident. It was a terrible three-car pileup. Some jerk in a Volkswagen had come tearing up M Street and plowed right into a station wagon, upending it and flipping it into a pickup truck. All three vehicles were totaled, and the wreck completely blocked off the intersection.

Daniel had been walking home from the mini-mart, and he looked forlornly at his single bag of groceries, the pistachio ice cream already melting in the DC heat. Just my luck, he thought sardonically. And on my day off, too. Daniel set down his groceries, sure that he'd never see them again, and waded into the carnage. Already he could smell the familiar odor of blood, gasoline and motor oil.

In the distance, he heard the familiar sounds of ambulance sirens, but they were too far away and the traffic blockage too heavy for them to arrive in time to do any good. Daniel approached the first car, the Volkswagen that caused the accident. He knew instantly that the driver was beyond help. He hadn't been wearing a seat belt, and the impact had rammed the steering column directly through his chest. Daniel gagged in spite of himself. No matter how many times he'd seen it, he still wasn't used to death. The interior of the car was coated in blood, and the reek wafting from the car was stomach-churning. The driver, a man in his mid-thirties, still stared straight forward, his lifeless eyes focused on the horizon. Odd, Daniel thought, they usually look surprised.

Daniel shook off the mental picture of the man's lifeless eyes and moved on to the station wagon, still propped at a forty-five degree angle over the pickup. Here, he could do some good. What had formerly been a red Ford now more closely resembled a crushed beer can, but the passenger compartment was relatively unscathed. Two kids were in the back, belted securely

but knocked unconscious, and their mom was up front belted, slumped over a deployed airbag and starting to stir. The door was badly mangled and certainly wouldn't ever open again, and glittering broken glass covered everything. Getting them out wouldn't be easy, and Daniel knew he couldn't do it alone.

He turned back to the street and grabbed the nearest gawking pedestrian, a largish man in jeans and a Redskins t-shirt, by the arm. Daniel flashed what he hoped was a conspiratorial grin. "Ever been a hero?" he asked.

The man pulled back slightly, and began stammering a reply.

"Don't worry," Daniel added. "I'm a paramedic. I just need an extra pair of hands. You game?"

The man considered a moment, then nodded. Daniel smiled and led the man back to the car, and together they eased the woman out of the car through the broken driver's window.

Following Redskins' example, more people joined in on the rescue effort, struggling to free the kids and the driver of the pickup. Eventually, Daniel assumed the role of foreman, stepping back and directing the rescue. As he watched the now freed and conscious children run up and embrace their mother, as he watched a group of total strangers united to rescue yet another stranger from the wreckage of his truck, Daniel marveled at the inherent nobility of the human race. People always rose to the occasion. It was just a shame it always seemed to take the worst sort of fortune to bring that spirit out. It was a shame that idiot in the Volkswagen would never be around to see it.

As if to drive the point home to himself, Daniel glanced over to the ruined Volkswagen. He froze at what he saw there.

Or didn't see, actually. The corpse was gone.

What kind of a sicko would steal a bloody corpse in broad daylight? Daniel wondered. He scanned the crowd, looking for signs of the theft.

Near the edge of the crowd Daniel spotted something that made Daniel feel bitterly cold, even on a hot summer's day. The driver of the Volkswagen was calmly walking away, seemingly oblivious to the gaping, bloody hole in his chest. The man looked over his shoulder once, making sure he wasn't followed, before turning down a side street. Daniel recognized the face as easily as if it had been his own.

"Sir?" one of the volunteers asked Daniel, patting his arm.

Daniel turned away from the walking dead and faced the volunteer, a pretty college student. "Yes?"

She was a little taken aback by Daniel's attitude, but she asked her question anyway, regarding the placement of the truck driver, now that they'd removed him from the wreckage. Daniel answered her quickly, then ran off in the direction of the corpse. He turned the corner of the side street the man had gone down, but it was no use.

The VW driver was gone.

VA XKZ-947.

Daniel sat in the locker room of the firehouse where he worked, staring at a slip of paper with the license plate number of someone that should be dead.

Only he wasn't.

Or was he?

Daniel leaned back, his head rocking back against his locker door with a hollow thump. The gunmetal lockers and dingy tile floor looked dark and menacing all of the sudden.

Am I going crazy?

"Danny boy!"

Daniel looked up to find the imposing form of Herb Sloan towering over him. Tall, white-haired and barrel-chested, Herb was on the downhill side of fifty and easily the oldest paramedic in the city. He'd been repeatedly offered an easier job in a hospital, but he'd hear nothing of it. Being a paramedic was in his blood, and he was the spirit of the firehouse. Daniel couldn't imagine the place without him.

"Hi, Herb."

Herb squatted down, bringing his eyes level with Daniel's. "Why the long face, Danny?"

Daniel looked up at his friend, one of the few he had the time for. He glanced at the slip of paper again, then back at Herb.

"You got a minute?" he asked.

Herb sat down next to Daniel. "Shoot."

"What's the worst you've ever seen?"

Herb paused, remembering. He scratched his prominent chin and stared at the ceiling. "Let me see..."

"I know! About eleven years ago, I was at this tenement in Southeast. The whole dump shoulda been condemned, but you know this town. There was a fire, and the whole damn building imploded. There were half a dozen people out of maybe twenty still alive, and all of them trapped under the fire in the basement. Some of them had started out on the fourth floor. The ones that didn't make it ... Why do you ask?"

Daniel looked at the slip of paper again before answering. "I saw something today," was all he could get out.

"What?"

Daniel looked at the older man, saw the camaraderie and friendship in his eyes. "Look, I know people always begin stories like this with 'I know this sounds crazy, but', and usually they turn out to be crazier than the stories. I don't know if that's the case with me yet, so just hear me out, okay?"

Herb nodded.

Daniel relaxed a little and told Herb about what he had seen, including the corpse casually wandering away from the scene. Herb was silent throughout the story, and for a long moment afterward.

"That's some story," he said finally.

Daniel grinned in spite of himself. "That's an understatement."

Herb stood up. "I don't know what to tell you, Danny. Are you sure the guy was dead? Maybe he had a head wound. Even superficial head wounds bleed all over the place."

Daniel leaned back, exasperated, and smacked his head against the locker. "I know a head wound when I see one, Herb. He didn't have a head wound. He had a steering column rammed through his chest. I think I'm qualified to diagnose that."

Herb nodded. "Yeah, I guess you would be."

Daniel just stared at him.

"Can I see that?" Herb gestured at the slip of paper still in Daniel's hand. Daniel gave it to him.

Herb took out a pen and started writing on the back. "I'm gonna give you the number of an old poker buddy of mine. Works at the DMV. He should be able to tell you who owns the VW, and we can find out if he's dead or not."

Daniel heaved a sigh of relief as Herb handed him back the paper. "Thanks for believing I'm not crazy, Herb."

"I don't know what happened out there, Danny. But I know you're a good kid. If you say you saw this, then you believe you saw it. And that's enough for me to believe you saw it."

Daniel smiled, and Herb headed for the door. He stopped short and turned back to Daniel. "I'm gonna talk to Rob," he said, referring to Robert Turner, their supervisor. "Take a long weekend. Get some rest."

Daniel nodded. "Thanks again, Herb. See you Monday."

"Feel better Danny."

Daniel aimlessly wandered the aisles of the corner grocery. Heeding Herb's advice, he'd taken a minivacation. He'd been away from the hectic life of a paramedic for three days now, and it was driving him crazy.

Being idle always made Daniel uncomfortable. When his grandparents came to America from their native Korea, they'd brought with them an almost fanatical work ethic which they passed on to their children, who, in turn, passed it on to Daniel. "Idle hands are the Devil's playthings," his mother had drilled into him, usually while urging him to finish his homework.

Thanks to his parents' relentless support, he graduated third in his high school class, granting him easy acceptance into college. From there, it wasn't far to getting his degree and into med school. He was going to be a doctor.

“Going to be” being the operative phrase. Daniel skated through med school and was starting his internship when it happened. He was assigned to an ER, and one night a pregnant woman was wheeled in, victim of a hit and run. The ER was packed that night, and he was the only one that could help her. Everyone else was just as bad off, and there weren’t enough doctors to go around. Daniel and some nurses worked for five hours to save her, but they lost the mother and the child.

Daniel was shattered. He decided right then and there that he didn’t want to be asked to play God, not ever again. He left the ER and forgot about being a doctor.

Daniel threw some essentials into his plastic hand basket: bread, peanut butter, grape jam. Some chips, too. He shuffled over to the soft drink aisle.

He was happy with his life as a paramedic. It let him save lives, but without the pressure. A paramedic wasn’t expected to work medical miracles. The job didn’t leave him much time or opportunity for a social life, but he really felt like his job made a difference. He left work every day with tangible accomplishments, the faces in his mind of people whose lives he’d saved. He mattered. That was more than most office slaves could say.

Staples of his bachelor existence collected, he trudged up to the counter to pay for them.

At least he thought he mattered. If he wasn’t going mad (and he couldn’t let himself accept that he was), then he saw a dead man walk away from a fatal accident. Where was the use in cheating death day in and day out if death could simply be ignored?

Groceries bagged and in hand, he stepped out into the bright July sunlight, letting it beat down on his naturally tan skin. His face featured a broad nose, high cheekbones and a narrow chin. He had close-cropped black hair and a lean, muscular build over his five foot eight frame. He was in great physical condition, thanks to his daily runs and, of course, the job. The same job that made his social life nearly impossible to plan with any certainty and had kept him dateless for over six months. Daniel often worked the shifts no one else wanted, sometimes putting in more than sixty hours a week.

He walked down the street and up the steps to his third floor, one bedroom southwest Washington apartment. When he reached the door, the phone was ringing. He nearly dropped his groceries and fumbled madly for his keys. Daniel burst into the apartment and dashed for the phone. “Hello?”

There was silence at the end of the line and for a moment, Daniel’s stomach sank as he feared he’d missed the call he’d waited three days to get. Then a small, quiet voice said, “Daniel Cho?”

“Speaking.”

“I’m Joel Furman, from the DMV? Herb Sloan asked me to call you.”

Daniel unknotted his shoulders and took the cordless phone with him to close the door. “Do you have some information for me?”

The voice on the other end of the line paused, then continued in a voice even quieter than before. “You realize, I could get in a lot of trouble for this.”

“I understand. I really appreciate this.” Daniel silently prayed the guy wouldn’t bolt on

him.

“Well, first off, he’s dead. The owner of Virginia tag XKZ-947 was Mister Floyd Rockport, thirty-eight years old, with an address in Arlington. He died three days ago in an automobile accident.”

Daniel considered explaining to Furman that he knew that part already but figured that would scare him off for good, as antsy as the guy was. The less said, the better. Besides, Rockport might not be dead after all. “What’s the address?”

Furman paused again. “Look, why do you want to know? The guy’s dead, right?”

That’s a better question than you think, Daniel thought. “Please. The address.”

Furman sighed, but gave Daniel the address, a townhouse in Arlington. “That’s all I know. Tell Herb he owes me for this.”

The line went dead.

Daniel carefully placed the phone back in its cradle and began to put away his groceries, lost in thought. Floyd Rockport. For the billionth time, the features of a walking dead man’s face filled his mind. A long face with razor-sharp lines. Flint gray eyes. Receding sandy hair. Daniel had two mental images of that face, one dead and lifeless over an impaled chest, and another sidelong glance walking away minutes later. If Rockport was officially dead (and it didn’t get much more official than the Department of Motor Vehicles), but walked away from the crash, where was he?

Grabbing his keys, Daniel hurriedly locked his door and sped down the stairs to the street. His car was parked a block away, and he had to get across the river to Arlington.

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## Evidence

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The address Daniel had been given was a ratty three-bedroom townhouse in a low rent district of Arlington. The front door was ajar, so Daniel let himself in.

The interior was a mess. Either Rockport was a terrible housekeeper, or the place had been ransacked. The first thing Daniel noticed was that most of the stuff was old, most likely antique. Everything was scattered all over the living room like a tornado had hit it. What probably had been an expensive wooden coffee table was overturned and broken. The upholstery was ripped from the leather recliner and couch. An art deco lamp protruded from the television’s shattered picture tube. A faint tinge of ozone lingered around the television, which had probably been on when it was destroyed.

Daniel walked into the kitchen to find a stark contrast to the living room. The kitchen was immaculate, nothing out of place. It took Daniel a moment to realize why. There was nothing there to be out of place. No dishes, no food, no utensils, nothing. The place was empty. Why would whoever did this break expensive antiques but steal all the dishes?

Puzzled, Daniel climbed the stairs to the top floor. He found a short hallway with two doors on either side. The first door on the right was a bathroom, also spotless. Through a connecting door Daniel walked into a bedroom, but it had been converted into a computer room, or home office. It was much the same state as the living room, except there was definitely evidence of theft here. The computer was conspicuously missing between the overturned printer and the shattered monitor. Both bookshelves on the far wall were upended, their contents spilled on the floor.

Thinking of the stolen computer, Daniel realized he was leaving his fingerprints all over the place. He'd have to wipe carefully everything he'd touched before he left.

Two more rooms to check. The far room on the left side of the hall was a library. It was in a similar state to the computer room. All the bookcases lining the walls had been toppled.

The last room was ... also a library. Where did this guy sleep? Daniel started taking a closer look at the books. Theology, history, sociology ... maybe the guy was a professor.

Getting an idea, Daniel ran back to the "office" and searched the desk more thoroughly, covering his hands with the end of his shirt. It had to be there somewhere.

Found it! Daniel picked up Rockport's checkbook and flipped through it before pocketing it. There had to be some clues to the guy's life in there. If the guy was really dead, he wouldn't miss it.

Daniel paused, taking in the carnage around him. The silence quickly grew oppressive. He was rummaging through a dead man's house.

He had to get out of there.

Speeding downstairs, Daniel wiped off everything he remembered touching and ran out the door.

As Daniel fled from the twice-ransacked apartment, he was noticed.

Kneeling, gargoyle-like, on the roof of a nearby building that shared the same courtyard as the townhouse was the creature that started this whole mess. The creature Daniel would recognize as Floyd Rockport.

As Daniel swiftly exited the building and hurried down the walk, the creature snarled, and leaned forward. It would be so easy to kill him now, it thought. Just jump down and snap his neck. Would serve him right for butting into my life.

But there were children playing on the expansive lawn between the buildings, and their mothers close by. Daniel Cho was a threat because he'd discovered a secret. It wouldn't do to eliminate him only to reveal the secret to dozens more.

No, now was not the time. It was still too light out, and Daniel had too many witnesses. Now was not the time.

But the time would come.

Daniel sat in his apartment and poured over Rockport's checkbook. He'd looked through all the check stubs three times already and found nothing. The guy paid the same people over and over again like clockwork. Rent. Phone. Internet. Cable. Car payment. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Daniel hurled the checkbook across the room and sat back with a loud sigh. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was just his imagination.

No, he thought, sitting up suddenly. It wasn't, at least not completely. Even if he did imagine the corpse walking away, he knew for sure that it wasn't in the car. Something happened.

Right?

Daniel got up and walked over to the phone. He paused to remember the number and dialed.

"Hello, is Tracy there?"

Tracy Klerk worked in the coroner's office. On a bad day, Daniel delivered more bodies to her than to the ER. He waited while she came to the phone.

"Klerk."

"Hi Tracy? It's Daniel Cho. I have a question about a delivery I made a few days ago. Big car wreck?"

"Yeah, I remember. No need for an autopsy on that one. What do you need?"

"One? There weren't two bodies?"

"Come on, Dan. I don't have time for your practical jokes. Do you have a question or not?"

"That was it. I thought there were two DOAs in that batch."

Tracy paused. "No, just the one. Poor schmoe got blindsided by some speed demon, if I remember properly."

Daniel didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. "Oh. Okay, thanks, Tracy."

"Any time, Dan." She hung up.

Daniel put the phone down and stared at the walls of his apartment. His minimalist bachelor pad furniture began to take on dark and looming shapes.

I need some air, he thought.

Grabbing his car keys off of the end table, Daniel walked out of the apartment.

On the roof of the apartment building opposite Daniel's, the man Daniel wasn't sure was dead made note of Daniel's departure and disappeared into the night.

Out on the street, Daniel got into his car, a battered Ford Escort with a "Don't laugh, it's paid for" bumper sticker. He got onto 14th street and headed south for I395.

He'd heard stories about people who worked with trauma, doctors, firemen and the like. Sometimes, without noticing it consciously, they'd lost their ability to deal with the carnage day in and day out. Without warning one day they just reached the limit of human suffering they could handle, passed it, and snapped. Daniel wasn't sure it had happened to him, but a corpse walking away from the scene of an accident wasn't a good sign. He didn't know if his conversation with Tracy corroborated his story or not. Maybe he imagined it too.

How did you know if you were going mad?

Once on I395, he headed south, past Arlington (and the townhouse of a man who ought to be dead) and towards Springfield. Traffic was sparse and thinned out as he got closer to the junction with the Washington Beltway. He thought about stopping at Springfield Mall, but the last thing he needed was a throng of people. He stayed on the freeway as it merged with I95, thinking he'd turn around at Dale City. That would make it better than an hour's round trip back to his apartment, and the trip should do him good.

Traffic trickled down to almost nothing after he passed the mall, which made it all the more annoying that the jerk in the Buick was tailgating him. Daniel signaled right and changed lanes, expecting the other driver to pass on the left.

The Buick also shifted over to the right, if anything getting closer to Daniel's bumper. What was this guy's damage?

As if in answer to Daniel's silent question, the Buick nudged forward.

Thump!

Daniel swerved back to the left, the Buick close behind. Thump!

Daniel jerked the wheel back to the right and floored it, trying to get away, only to have the other car pull up effortlessly beside his dilapidated heap. He looked at the other driver and almost ran off the road. It was him.

Floyd Rockport. A dead man.

Daniel gassed it, pushing his car to its maximum speed of ninety-five miles per hour. Rockport kept pace, staying on Daniel's left. When Daniel looked over at him again, Rockport turned to face him and smiled.

Daniel wasn't sure it wasn't just a trick of the dim light, but the man's grin was ... inhuman. It seemed to literally stretch from ear to ear, full of endless gleaming teeth. Even worse were the man's eyes, but for a different reason. The grin didn't touch them. They were the same dead glass orbs Daniel remembered so vividly.

But he wasn't remembering now. Daniel hit the brakes just as Rockport swerved violently to the right, clipping Daniel's front left fender and damaging the wheel. Daniel went into an uncontrollable spin as Rockport raced away into the darkness.

Daniel tried steering back into the skid like he'd been taught in traffic school, but it was no use; the wheel was too far gone. The most he could do was force himself to go limp and hope

the seatbelt held as he spun back left across the highway and collided with the concrete HOV barrier.

Daniel came to an indeterminate time later to the sound of sirens in the distance. There was broken glass everywhere, and he was sure he smelled blood, but the car wasn't on fire and he was still alive.

As he listened to the sirens coming closer, he also knew he had a new enemy. Whatever he knew, or whatever someone thought he knew, was worth killing for. It might be a good idea, Daniel mused, feeling the onset of shock, to find out why.

As soon as he saw the flashing red lights out of the corner of his eye, Daniel let the shock and darkness take him. It'd be easier to cut him out of the car that way.

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## Disintegration

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After staying mercifully unconscious in the ambulance (he would have been compelled to make suggestions had he been awake), Daniel opened his eyes in a hospital bed. The first thing he saw was Herb's hulking form hovering over him.

"Hey, Danny boy! Welcome back to the land of the living!"

Daniel winced as he leaned forward and allowed Herb to shove an extra pillow behind his back to prop him up. He felt the coarse gauze of bandages on his head and arms. "Was it that bad?"

"Nah," Herb said, pulling up a chair, "Few scrapes, a bump on the head. They're keeping you overnight in case you have a concussion. I tried to tell them what a tough guy you were, but you know doctors. You'll be a free man in the morning."

Relieved, Daniel leaned back and relaxed a bit. "Have the cops been by to get a description of the guy who hit me?"

Herb looked puzzled. "Hit you?"

"Yeah," Daniel laughed uncertainly, "you think I did this to myself?"

"That's what you said, according to the hospital staff."

Daniel stared, incredulous.

"From what I hear," Herb continued, "you came to in the ambulance on the way here and joked with the EMTs that you should know better than to drive fast and dangerous, considering your line of work. You never mentioned another driver." Herb paused. "You don't remember?"

"I never said it! I was run off the road. Look at the damage to the car!"

"They tell me there's not much left after you hit the wall and they cut you out." Herb put a

comforting hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Danny, what do you remember?"

"I saw the guy that hit me." Daniel told Herb the whole story, the apartment, the call to Tracy, the Buick, the grin, all of it. "I know it sounds nuts, but that's what happened. I wouldn't crash my car on my own. Someone tried to kill me!"

Herb moved his hand from Daniel's shoulder to check the bandages on his head.

"Dammit, Herb, I'm not imagining this!" Daniel exclaimed, slapping Herb's hand away. "I don't have a concussion, I'm not hallucinating and I never said a word in the ambulance!"

"I understand, Danny," Herb said, failing to conceal that he didn't.

"Just leave me alone, okay? I'm tired. I'm gonna get some sleep."

Herb stood up and walked to the door. He stopped and turned as if to say something, changed his mind and left without a word.

For someone being released from the hospital, Daniel felt decidedly unrested. His concussion was mild enough for him to go home first thing in the morning. Herb had offered to pick him up, but Daniel told him not to bother. He was still ticked off that no one seemed to believe him.

As the mandatory wheelchair let him off outside the hospital's front door, Daniel hailed a cab. Once he gave the driver his address, he sat back and tried to puzzle out what was going on, something he'd been too worn out to do the previous night.

The impossible grin (which may have been a trick of the light) notwithstanding, Daniel had to assume everything he'd seen was real. Everything parsed too well not to be connected. But what did it mean?

He saw a man walk away from what should have been a fatal wound. He tracked down the man's apartment, only to find it ransacked with the computer (and dishes, apparently) stolen. After Daniel verified that the guy didn't show up at the morgue, he shows up on the highway and tries to smear Daniel into the HOV barrier.

Daniel shook his head as the cab pulled up to his building. It just didn't make any damn sense. There had to be more to it, and he had to find out what, before someone came along and finished the job they'd started last night.

As Daniel ascended the stairs and entered the utilitarian sparseness of his apartment, he noticed the light on his answering machine flashing. He pressed the playback button and walked to the kitchenette to get a glass of water.

"Daniel?" called the recorded voice of his boss, Robert Taylor. "I know you're on vacation, but you'd better get in here ASAP. We need to talk."

The machine beeped, signaling the end of the messages.

Now what the hell was that all about?

"This is bullshit." Daniel sat in Rob Taylor's office, not believing what he was hearing.

"I don't buy it either, Daniel," Rob said, casually sitting on the edge of his desk and trying to look placating and supportive. "But, I'm told they have evidence. There is proof—"

"Alleged proof," Daniel amended.

"Alleged proof that you took liberties of a sexual nature with an unconscious patient."

"Dammit, I'm not a rapist!"

"I didn't say you were." Rob leaned in closer to Daniel. "I believe you. For the record, I'm going to bat for you and officially denying these charges." Rob paused, looking for confirmation that he was making the right call.

Daniel was speechless. This came completely out of left field. He didn't even remember the patient in question. He thought it had to be some kind of bureaucratic mix up or a fraudulent claim scam, and said as much to Rob.

"I know, Daniel. You're probably right." Rob hesitated, the way he did before delivering bad news. "You realize, however, that I have to put you on suspension pending the investigation."

Daniel started to jump out of his chair, but Rob put up a restraining hand. "Once the charges are dismissed, and I'm sure they will be, you're back on the job. Until then—"

Daniel got up to leave. "For what it's worth," Rob called out as Daniel opened the door, "I'm sorry."

Daniel slammed the door on his way out.

"Danny, I just heard—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Herb."

Daniel was taking what few personal belongings he had in his locker and putting them in a crate. Herb just stood by, silent.

"Fine," Daniel said, slamming a jacket into the crate. "You want to hear me talk about it? Good, let's talk. I'm being set up. This a bogus claim, Rob knows it, and he's hanging me out to dry."

"Who would do this, Danny?"

Without any defensive anger from Herb to feed off of, Daniel deflated and slumped against his now empty locker. "I don't know for sure, but I have an idea. I think it has something to do with that guy I saw walking away from the crash, the same guy that tried to run me off the road."

Daniel saw a look of poorly concealed pity in Herb's eyes.

"Oh, that's right, you don't believe that, either," Daniel said, tensing up again. "Hell, maybe I did rape that poor girl and just don't remember it. I seem to be wrong about everything else that's happened to me!" He grabbed the crate and stormed out.

"Danny, wait!" Herb called, but it was too late. Daniel was gone.

Daniel stepped onto the impound lot where what was left of his car was being held. It was bad enough that he was being set up at work, but to have this happening at the same time was intolerable. He had no memory at all of the girl in question, and he knew what happened on the road. The timing of it all was too perfect for there not to be a connection. The question was, who was doing it to him, and why?

He hoped his car still held some answers. As he walked over to it, he could see what Herb meant by "not much left." The heap was totaled; he didn't need a claims adjuster to tell him that. No body panel was left unscathed, and the driver side door was missing altogether, a side effect of his rescue. The left front wheel, the one hit by the other car, was missing.

Daniel knelt next to the left front fender. Amongst the faded blue of his own car, he could make out streaks of brown paint ground into the dented metal. That should prove he was hit, provided he could find someone to believe him.

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## Disbelief

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"Thanks for coming, Herb." Daniel and Herb were walking back onto the impound lot. Daniel was feeling a lot better. Once Herb saw the paint he'd have to believe Daniel's version of things, and Daniel trusted Herb to go to bat for him once he knew the whole story.

"It's over this way," Daniel said, leading Herb to the car.

Or where the car had been. Daniel saw only an empty space where the wreckage of his car should be. "It was right here, I swear!"

Herb just looked at him.

"Dammit, Herb, I'm not making this up! They're doing it to me again!" He took off towards the office.

"They who?" Herb asked, falling into step beside Daniel.

"The same people that ran me off the road, the same bastards that trumped up those charges against me!"

They reached the office and Daniel almost ripped the door off its hinges on the way in. "Where the hell's my car?"

The man behind the desk, short, black and fiftyish, looked up in surprise. "Which car?"

"Blue Escort, totaled, towed in here a few days ago," Daniel hissed. "Where is it?"

The man nodded. "Ah, that car. It's over by the crusher."

"You're going to crush it?"

"We already did."

Herb put a restraining hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Under whose authorization?" he asked in a much more civil tone than Daniel could have managed.

"The owner," the man said, rummaging through his desk. He found the slip of paper he was looking for and held it out for Daniel to see. "Here it is," he said. "A Mister Daniel Cho."

Daniel started to lunge at the man, but Herb put his not inconsiderable bulk in the way. "Not here, Danny," he whispered.

Without another word, Herb ushered Daniel out the door. Once they were outside, Daniel's feigned composure evaporated.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, slamming a fist down on a battered heap. "They did it to me again!"

Herb tried to lead Daniel back to the street, where they'd left Herb's car.

"I bet that bastard's in on it too," Daniel continued. "But why? Why are they out to get me?"

He shouted back to the office. "I'll find out! You won't get me without a fight!"

Once they got to the car, Herb, much more solemn than usual, motioned Daniel to get in.

"Well, thanks anyway for coming," Daniel said as they pulled into traffic.

Herb didn't reply.

"Just drop me off at my apartment, if that's okay. Sorry about getting you mixed up in all this." He paused. "You still don't believe me, do you?"

"I believe that you believe it."

Looking out the window and paying attention to the scenery for the first time, Daniel realized they were heading away from his apartment. It looked like they were heading towards the hospital. "Herb, where are we going?"

"I think I know somebody who can help you."

Daniel's jaw dropped. "You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

"I never said that."

"I expected better from you, Herb, I really did. I thought I could trust you, that you were my friend." Daniel began slowly unfastening his seatbelt.

"I am your friend, Danny! That's why I'm trying to help. If I didn't care, you'd probably be in jail right now for assaulting that poor man!"

A truck darted into traffic in front of them, forcing Herb to slam on his brakes.

"Care about this," Daniel said as he threw open the door and leapt from the car. Gridlocked, Herb could only watch helplessly as Daniel ran down the street, turned a corner, and disappeared.

After locking the door and peering out the window to make sure he wasn't followed, Daniel picked up his phone. He still knew someone he trusted implicitly. He dialed the number from memory and waited for the other end to pick up.

"Hello, Mom?"

"Daniel!" called the voice at the other end of the line. "How are you?"

Daniel felt intense relief just hearing his mother's voice. "Not so good, Mom. Got time to talk?" Daniel's parents owned a vegetarian grocery in San Francisco, and sometimes it got pretty busy.

"I always have time for my favorite son," his mother replied. Not to mention your only son, Daniel thought. His two sisters still lived in San Francisco near his parents. Kathy, two years Daniel's junior, worked in the store while Samantha was still in college at twenty-one. Ronald and Delores Cho had wanted Daniel to take over the family business, but he needed more excitement. Careful what you wish for, he thought.

"Can you hang on a minute?" his mother asked.

"Sure."

He heard his mom talking to his dad and then the sounds of the store faded away as his mother moved the phone into the stockroom. "Go ahead, son."

"Mom, I know this is going to sound crazy, but just hear me out. It's important you know the whole story." Daniel set about telling her everything that had happened to him over the course of the past week, including the impossible details. When he finished, the line was silent.

"Mom?"

"You have a very serious problem, son," his mother said, all levity gone from her voice.

Duh, Mom, Daniel thought.

"Daniel, I know you don't go very often anymore, but this is too big for you to solve all by yourself. You need to put your faith in the Lord."

Daniel winced. He'd been afraid of this. Although he had lost the faith to the point of being borderline agnostic, his mother remained a devout Christian. He'd thought she might pass the buck on this one to God. On the other hand, he could think of no scientific explanation for what he'd seen.

"Mom—"

"Don't 'Mom' me, son. You asked my advice and this is it. Go to church right now and pray for guidance. The Lord will help you if you let Him. I know you prefer to fight your own battles, son. You always did. Just don't be afraid to accept help when it's offered. God helps those who help themselves, but that doesn't mean you have to do it alone."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome, son. Now get your butt to church. We'll be here if you need us. I love

you.”

“I love you, too.” Daniel hung up the phone and headed out the door.

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## Susan

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“We’ve been through this before, Susan,” Harold Preston sighed, wishing he could crawl under his desk.

“And you keep giving me these useless, Sunday fluff pieces,” Susan Richardson replied. She sat in her editor’s office at the Washington Post and stared intently at him. Her stare made people uncomfortable. It wasn’t that she was unattractive; she was pretty enough in a plain sort of way—five foot five, pale skin, brown hair and eyes, medium build. What made her stare uncomfortable was its intensity. There was fire behind her eyes, and Harold Preston increasingly found that fire aimed at him.

He removed his round, wire-rimmed glasses and ran his fingers across his head where his hair used to be. “Susan,” he said for what seemed the billionth time, “this is the best I can give you. We’ve been over this—”

“And you know I deserve better assignments. I’m an investigative journalist. I didn’t work hard my whole life to write Sunday supplement filler.”

“Your whole life? You’re twenty-four! You’re lucky you’re not working in the mail room!”

“I’m too good for that and you know it. In college—”

“A college newspaper is not the Washington Post, Susan. I don’t care what you did in college. That may have got you this job, but now that you’re here, you pay your dues just like everyone else. If that means covering supplement fluff, then you’ll do it, and smile the whole way through. There’s no shortcut to the top. This discussion is over.”

Fuming, Susan left the office.

Susan stormed through the newsroom, chiding herself far worse than her boss did. Tact, dammit, she reminded herself.

Susan was often her own worst enemy. Her blunt, straightforward style, while useful investigating a story, didn’t earn her points in the diplomatic game of landing good assignments. It was the one aspect of journalism she never learned in college, or in the two years since.

She vowed to master it, though. She really had no choice. For as far back as she could remember, Susan wanted to be a reporter. As a kid, she used to wear a crayon-written “Press” card in her father’s hat while interviewing her dog. When other kids were reading the Hardy Boys, she was reading the newspaper; when other kids were watching the Brady Bunch, she was watching the evening news.

As she got older, she began to idolize newsmen like Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow. She single handedly revitalized her high school newspaper, and used her college paper to force the administration to change key policies regarding the treatment of students. Reporting was what she did; it was in her blood, and if it meant she'd have to learn a little diplomacy to do it right, then that's what she'd do.

Her current assignment was to find out the effect of a church renovation on the local community. Hardly a Pulitzer opportunity, but she had dues to pay. She stopped at her desk for her notebook.

"Hey, Suzie Q!"

She looked up and saw Steve Dunbar walking her way. She'd gone to college with Steve and he'd been the thorn in her side the entire time. Now was no different.

"Love to chat, Steve, but I've got to go."

"Yeah, I heard. Church renovation, right? Slice of life, man on the street piece, right?"

Susan looked at her bare wrist as if she were looking at a watch. Steve didn't get the message.

"Well, good luck. I'm off to my assignment, too."

"And that would be?"

"I have a one on one with Congressman Fitzhume. You know, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee? I'm going to grill him on the shrinking military budget, and whether we're spending enough to maintain our national security." Steve gave her a toothy grin that let her know he knew exactly how much she wanted his story.

Summoning depths of composure she didn't know she had, Susan smiled politely, grabbed her notebook and started to leave. "Good luck," she said, "I've got a church to visit."

Dues, my ass, she thought as she walked out the door.

What a dump, Susan thought. If the Second Baptist Church had recently been renovated, she didn't want to see the "before" pictures. It wasn't that the place needed to be condemned or anything, but the whole building held an air of shabbiness not unlike the surrounding neighborhood. The stained glass was dull and cloudy; the wooden pews were chipped and dented. The only hint at renovation was a relentless odor of cleaning products.

The place was also deserted, as far as she could tell, save one Asian guy in the second row. So much for its effect on the community, she thought. May as well get this over with.

She waited patiently until the guy got up to leave. "Excuse me," she called out. "Got a minute?"

The guy looked at Susan, noticing her for the first time. Susan didn't have to guess too hard about why he was here; the guy looked like he hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Susan could tell from his tone of voice that he must have been praying for something important. Happy people did not sound like that. Her reporter's mental alarm bell went off. Human suffering always made good copy.

"I'm Susan Richardson, from the Post," she said, extending her hand. The man just looked blankly for a moment, then shook it. His grip was strong.

"Daniel Cho."

He'd be cute if he smiled, Susan decided. Back to business.

"I'm doing a story on this church, and how its renovation affected the community. I'd like to interview you, if you have a few minutes."

Daniel shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't help you. I've never even been here until today. I'm only here because ... I'm sorry. There's nothing I can tell you." He started to leave.

Susan wasn't about to give up that easily. If she couldn't bring in simple fluff pieces, she'd never be able to get any hard news. "Please, wait!" she called. Daniel stopped at the door and faced her. "If you're only coming here now, that just supports my premise," she said, catching up with him.

"I'm here because it's the closest church to my building," he said. "Nothing more. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Wait!" He was already starting down the steps outside. She ran after him.

Geez, she just doesn't quit, Daniel thought. "What, Ms. Richardson?"

"Susan."

"Fine. Susan. What do you want?"

"For you to tell me why you're here. Please. You're the only one here and I can't go back empty handed."

Daniel had a crazy thought, then dismissed it. The last thing I need is someone else telling me I'm nuts, he thought.

"Please?" Susan continued. "You look really upset. Maybe I can help."

Daniel remembered his mother's advice and suppressed a smirk. She'd always told him that God worked in mysterious ways, but sending a reporter?

"Okay," he said. "If you want to hear my story, I'll tell it to you. Be warned, though, it's a long story and it doesn't make a lot of sense."

Susan smiled. "My favorite kind."

Susan sat in the booth of a Pizza Hut across from Daniel and stared. She had to admit—he didn't disappoint. After a block's walk to sit and eat while they talked, Daniel had calmly and deliberately recounted the events of his last week. It was a long story, and it didn't make a lot of sense.

“Well?” he asked.

“So let me get this straight. You think some immortal, supernatural guy is trying to ruin your life.”

“I know, I know, it sounds ridiculous when you put it that way, but—”

“No, no! This is great!” She caught herself and put a hand on his arm. “Well, no, not great, I mean it’s terrible for you, but it’s a great story just the same. I’m sorry, do I sound like a ghoul?”

“Can you help me?” he asked.

“What do you need?”

“To find out who’s doing this. Who they are, what they’re up to, why they want to destroy me. Can you do this?”

Susan loved a challenge, and this was a doozy. Granted, she doubted his fantastic story was true, and he was probably a ranting lunatic (although he looked and sounded rational enough when he wasn’t telling his story), but she felt a connection to him. He was obviously sincere, which was more than she could say for most of the people she dealt with. Sincere, in need, and with an incredible story.

News.

Or at least more interesting than the assignments she’d been landing recently.

“I can try. Where do you think we should start?”

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## Research

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So what sorts of things were in this checkbook?” Susan asked as they walked back to Daniel’s apartment to fetch the only hard evidence he had of Rockport’s existence.

“Pretty much like I said. Same things over and over again. Cable, phone, internet, rent. I don’t remember anything special.”

“Well, a lot of times it’s not what you see that’s important, but what you don’t see. I remember this one time I—”

Susan thrust her arm out and grabbed Daniel as they turned the corner onto his block.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Do you normally have undercover cops hanging out in front of your building?”

As Susan pulled him back around the corner, Daniel saw a brown sedan parked directly in front of his building. He could see on it the tell-tale large radio antenna and extra lights

common to D.C. unmarked police cars.

“What’s he doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Susan replied, “but given your luck recently I’ll bet it involves you. Stay here and stay out of sight.”

Susan walked over to the cop car, notebook in hand. The plainclothes officer in the car was manhandling a huge sandwich into his mouth.

“Evening, officer,” Susan said, flashing her press card. “Susan Richardson, Washington Post. What’s the scoop?”

“Bug off.”

“Come now, that’s no way to treat the press. How are we supposed to tell people what a great job you guys are doing if you won’t talk to us?”

“Fer Chrissakes, I’m on a stakeout! You’re gonna blow my cover!”

“I just want to know what’s going on. If there’s a threat to this community, the people have a right to know.” A few people wandering by were starting to listen in on their conversation, and the cop was getting nervous.

“If I tell you, will you go away?”

“Happily.”

“Fine. You know I can’t give you names, but we have word that a paramedic that lives in the building here has been stealing morphine from the hospital and selling it on the street. Now go away.”

“Thank you, officer.” Susan tipped an imaginary hat, then walked back to Daniel.

“You’re a drug dealer.”

“What?”

“According to our porcine friend over there, you’ve been selling stolen morphine on the street.”

“Why that dirty—” Daniel started to lunge around the corner.

“Whoa there, big fella!” Susan said, pushing him back. “You lose your cool here and you draw attention to yourself. You don’t want that, I assure you. You can vent all you want when we get to my place.”

“Your place.”

“Well, you certainly can’t stay here. You can crash on my couch until we come up with a better solution. You’ve got me convinced there’s a story here, and I’m not letting you out of my sight until I figure out what it is. Let’s go.”

Following Susan’s lead, Daniel walked away from his apartment.

Susan's apartment was a disaster area. The sink was piled high with unwashed dishes and the trashcan overflowed with Chinese takeout boxes. Papers, magazines and books of all kinds nearly hid her tasteful couch. Similarly obscured was a large coffee table that Daniel thought was made of wood, but he couldn't get a good enough look to be sure. Every seat in the apartment was covered with paper save one, the chair behind the computer hutch in the corner. Papers covered every square inch of the desk not taken up by the keyboard or mouse pad. The monitor appeared to be constructed entirely of yellow sticky notes. At first Daniel wasn't sure where the computer itself was, but then he saw Susan take a laptop out of her bag and connect it to the external monitor and keyboard.

"Trees must hate you," Daniel said.

"It's the maid's decade off." Susan swept an armful of papers from the couch to the floor. "Make yourself comfortable."

Daniel took a seat on the couch as Susan swung the computer chair around to face him.

"Well, Mister Cho," Susan began. "You are in quite a little bit of trouble. You've nearly been killed—"

"With the evidence destroyed."

"—you've had your livelihood taken away, and now you're wanted by the law.

"Our goal is to clear your name and in the process expose who has done this to you. To do that, we need witnesses. Do you know the names of any of the people that might have contributed to your predicament? The paramedics that heard you say you wrecked your car?"

Daniel sat back and thought. He didn't know the names of the paramedics because he was never awake in the ambulance, contrary to popular belief. Herb might, though. The question was, could he trust Herb?

"No, I don't think we can go that route. But what about Rockport himself? I know he's still out there somewhere. Why did he fake his own death? Who ransacked his apartment? Why did he try to run me off the road?"

"Okay, here's the deal," Susan said. "You're going to stay here and watch TV or something. Don't answer the phone or the door and don't leave. I doubt the cops can find you here since no one knows we know each other. I'll be back when I have some answers."

Susan walked out the door, leaving Daniel in silence amidst stacks of paper.

Floyd Rockport never existed. Sitting in the county courthouse archives, Susan mulled over that bit of information.

She'd learned a lot for an afternoon's work, most of it contradictory. Rockport had a Social Security number, but no birth certificate on record. He had college transcripts, but no record of actually attending high school anywhere. On paper, the guy just appeared out of nowhere, fully grown and educated. She still had no idea who he was or why he'd attacked Daniel. Aside from the official documents of his existence as an average taxpaying citizen, he was tabula rasa, a complete blank slate.

Susan started packing up her things. Like she told Daniel, sometimes it wasn't what you saw that was important, but what you didn't. Rockport had enough holes in his background to make a whole other person, and concealed in one of those holes was her answer.

Daniel was going nuts. After switching away from one insipid sitcom after another, he'd finally thrown the remote down in disgust. In the three hours Susan had been gone he'd watched television, listened to the radio, flipped through most of the magazines in the apartment, practiced judo, and was currently busy pacing a hole in her carpet.

He hated feeling powerless, doing nothing while others worked in his behalf. He'd already picked up the phone half a dozen times, intending to wring some information out of Herb. The only thing that stopped him was the realization that Herb was just about his only friend, thus a prime candidate for a police wiretap.

This is ridiculous, he thought. Squaring his shoulders, he stormed towards the door just as Susan opened it and stepped inside.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she said. "It's starting to look like you had a run-in with the Witness Protection Program."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because until a few years ago, Floyd Rockport didn't exist. No birth certificate, no high school transcripts, nothing." Susan walked over to the fridge, popped open a diet soda, then plopped down on the couch. Daniel sat down next to the computer.

"Until he graduated from college," Susan continued, "he was a non-person. There's no record of immigration, either. It's as if a native born American citizen, complete with Social Security number, just magically appeared at the age of twenty-five."

They both sat in silence for a moment.

"That's it?" Daniel asked. "That's all you found out?"

"Back up there, buckaroo. Research is hard work. You think getting access to personal data like that is easy?"

"Teach me."

"What?"

"Take me along. We're not likely to run into anyone that knows me, and I'm going insane sitting here without anything to do."

Susan thought it over. It was a dumb idea, on the surface. Daniel didn't know anything about investigative journalism and would probably just get in the way. She also didn't want to take the risk of him being spotted by the police.

But he just sat there, staring at her with eyes holding a resolve she'd only seen in the mirror. She knew she'd never be able to keep him confined to the apartment, and if he was determined to venture out it was better if she could keep an eye on him.

“Okay,” she began. “The first thing you need to know about reporting is never take no for an answer.”

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## The Post

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As Susan scanned the library microfiche looking for references to the Witness Protection Program, Daniel perused the local paper. Sure enough, he was in the news. “Paramedic gone bad” read the three-inch blurb in the Metro section of the Post. It detailed the charges against him and described him as a fugitive still at large.

“Hey, Susan, check this out.”

As Susan scanned down the page, she noticed with some annoyance that the byline was Steve Dunbar. Steve, you bastard, she thought, I’ve got the scoop this time. Still, he might be privy to some information that they weren’t. She’d have to look into that. “Thanks Daniel. I’ll check that out at the office later. In the meantime, look at this.” She motioned to the display.

Daniel studied it for a long moment. “I don’t see anything.”

“Exactly. I can’t find a single reference to anyone connected to the Witness Protection Program matching Rockport’s description. We just hit a dead end. I thought maybe he was just a mobster stoolie finding that old habits die hard, but I guess that was too easy an explanation to hope for.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Beats me. Did you ever go back to that junkyard and talk to the guy that said you authorized him to crush your car? Maybe we can get something out of him.”

“Let’s go.”

Daniel rode with Susan to the Post offices. She wanted to get some information out of Dunbar before they started out on what may well be another wild goose chase. They parked out in front of the imposing stone building and Susan left the keys in the ignition. “Stay here,” she said. “You might be recognized inside. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Daniel watched as she trotted up the steps and into the lobby, then he turned on the radio and hunkered down in his seat.

Damn, Susan said to herself. Dunbar wasn’t at his desk. She looked around the busy newsroom, but she didn’t see him anywhere. She did notice, however, that his computer was on. Looking over her shoulder, she sat down.

Back at the car, Daniel saw a police officer walking down the sidewalk, checking cars. Daniel slouched down more, trying to fall through his seat.

Dunbar's machine was password protected. Susan started trying likely passwords for a guy like Dunbar. His name backwards. His birthday (she'd been to a birthday bash for him once while they were in college). The word "password."

When those didn't work, she started thinking about what she knew about her slimy, womanizing coworker.

Boink. No.

Babe. No.

Melons. No.

Hooters. Yes!

She was in. She started looking for any files that might relate to Daniel's predicament. Dunbar's files were organized by date in folders. She opened the folder for the previous day and found subfolders for various projects Steve was working on. She clicked on the one marked "Cho" and perused the contents. There were only two files. "Article" was more than likely the text of the story she and Daniel had read in print. "Notes" looked more promising. She opened the file.

She read down through the expected notes, the sort of rough information she used when writing a story. Virtually all of it was in the finished article. It wasn't until she reached the end of the file that she found something that wasn't.

"If you get any new info on Cho," Dunbar had written to himself, "call this number." The number was local, with a D.C. area code. Susan dug into her purse for her ever-present pen and pad, then scribbled down the number.

Replacing her notepad in her purse, she closed all the files and folders she'd opened on the computer. She was just about to get up and leave when she heard a familiar voice.

"Well hello there, Suzie Q."

Daniel averted his eyes as the cop walked up and tapped on the window. Me? Daniel pointed to himself. The cop nodded and dropped his hand to his belt, putting it within easy reach of his sidearm, his nightstick, or most dangerous of all, his radio. Daniel rolled down the window.

"Sir," the cop began, "there's no parking or standing on this side of the building until five." Daniel looked at his watch. It was 4:47. "I'm going to have to ask you to move your vehicle."

Daniel released the breath he'd been holding. "Yes, officer. I'll do that right now." He scooted over into the driver's seat and started the car, pulling out into pre-rush hour D.C. traffic and wondering just what the hell was taking Susan so long.

Susan spun slowly around in Steve Dunbar's chair and leaned back to face him like she had every right in the world to be there. "Steve! I was wondering where you were!"

"What are you doing with my computer?"

Steve's abrupt, humorless manner stopped Susan cold. She'd planned just to ask Steve to show her what she'd already seen, maybe getting some more explanation along the way, but now she was on her guard. Something was definitely not right here. "Nothing," she replied. "I was just making myself comfortable until you got back."

"What do you want?"

Getting more uncomfortable by the second under Steve's threatening gaze, Susan stood up and distanced herself from the desk. Maybe it was better Steve not know her true reason for her visit. "I was just curious how your interview went."

Steve seemed to relax a little. "Fine. It'll be printed tomorrow. Anything else?"

"Nah, not really. I'll see you later." Susan walked casually away, but inside she couldn't get out of that newsroom fast enough.

Daniel couldn't believe he'd gotten away from the cop unrecognized. He resolved to find some way to change his appearance as soon as possible.

As he completed his eighth lap around the building, he spotted Susan walking briskly down the front steps. She was heading back towards where she'd left the car, so, after checking to see there were no cops nearby, he stuck his head out the window and yelled her name.

She trotted over to the car and got in. "What are you doing?"

"I had a run in with a cop," Daniel deadpanned. "No biggie. Though it might be nice next time if you tell me we're parked in a no parking zone."

"Is it before five?" Susan asked, looking at her watch. "Sorry," she grinned sheepishly.

"So," Daniel asked, "was this trip at least worth something?"

Susan looked over her shoulder at the building. "I'll tell you on the road. Drive."

Steve sat and stared at his computer screen. The folder labeled "Cho" was selected, and he hadn't worked on it since the day before. Just to check, he opened the folder and checked the file access dates.

Sure enough, "Notes" had been accessed just a few minutes before. He opened the file and double-checked the number before dialing.

"Hi, it's me. I think I have some information for you."

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## Escape

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On the way back to Susan's apartment, she told Daniel what she found, as well as Steve's uncharacteristic reaction to her presence. Now they huddled around her computer as she tried to figure out just to whom the phone number belonged.

"Why don't we just call it?" Daniel asked.

"Because I don't want whoever's on the other end to be able to trace the call back to us."

Daniel watched as Susan brought up the web page for American Directory Assistance, only to find that the number had no match, meaning it was unlisted. "Well, it was worth a try," Susan smiled. "I guess we're really going to have to work for this."

On a rooftop across the street facing Susan's apartment, the creature recently known as Floyd Rockport settled in and waited for the police to arrive.

Daniel paced from the window to the computer and back. He was trying to keep up, but Susan was much more proficient with computers and the net than he was and she soon left him in the dust. So while she dialed into obscure systems and services tracking down the ownership of the phone number, he paced. It was all he could do; something else he vowed to change in the near future.

He stopped pacing to stare out the window. On the street below, he saw numerous dark sedans park and black clad men with guns get out. Further down the street was a police paddy wagon.

"I think I've got something," Susan said. Daniel turned away from the window and saw her pointing to something in the monitor.

"I hope it's good, because we're out of time."

"What?"

Daniel pointed to the street. "The police are here."

Disconnecting her laptop and throwing it into her bag, Susan sprang from her chair and looked. "Steve! That bastard set me up!"

Daniel was strangely calm. This sort of thing was becoming old hat. He grabbed Susan's hand and firmly guided her to the door. "We have to go."

Outside the apartment, they made straight for the emergency stairwell. Susan started down before Daniel grabbed her.

"No, the cops will be coming up that way." He pointed up. "This way, to the roof."

After a few flight's climb, they burst out into the sultry Washington night air. It was a clear night, which for the District of Columbia meant you could see a handful of stars. Daniel ran to the edge of the building closest to its neighbor. It was about a ten-foot jump, but the other roof was lower, so it looked doable. He turned back to where Susan was watching the cops deploy.

"Susan. Over here."

When she jogged over to him and saw what he had in mind, she gave him an unbelieving look. "You're out of your mind."

"You have a better idea? Come on, the cops will be up here as soon as they figure out you're not home."

Daniel stepped back a dozen feet or so and took Susan's hand. They looked into each other's eyes, ran to the edge and jumped.

After what seemed an eternity suspended in midair, they landed on the gravelly tarmac of the other roof. Daniel rolled to his feet immediately and helped Susan up.

"I did it," Susan whispered.

Daniel was already edging for the stairwell. "What?"

"That was so cool!" Susan was suddenly full of energy, breathing in the air, looking around—and then she froze.

She walked briskly over to Daniel, jerking her head over her right shoulder. "Somebody's watching us."

Daniel looked across the street and felt his blood go cold as he recognized the creature that had ruined his otherwise normal, boring life. Rockport. Involuntarily, he began walking to the edge of the roof.

This time Susan provided the voice of reason. Her momentary elation given way to her more natural caution, she dragged Daniel by the arm back to the stairs. "Now's not the time, Daniel. There's a Metrorail stop just around the corner. We've got to get some distance and plan out our next move."

With great reluctance, Daniel tore his eyes from Rockport and followed Susan down the stairs.

Minutes later, Daniel and Susan sat on the brightly-lit orange vinyl seats of the D.C. subway, speeding west and out of the city. Susan had her laptop out and was trying to explain to Daniel what she found.

"Then I finally tracked the number down to a phone bank leased by the Social Security Administration. Looking in their internal directory, I found that line assigned to this guy." She showed Daniel a picture of a middle-aged guy with a receding hairline and a weak chin. "He's listed as Richard Birchmere, an Assistant Director. I—"

She looked up at Daniel and found him staring blankly out the window as if he hadn't heard a thing she'd said. She waved her hand in front of his face. "Hello? Daniel? Anybody home?"

Daniel shook himself out of his reverie and turned away from the darkness speeding past the window.

"I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"I was saying I think we finally have a lead on the bastards that are destroying your life. I'm more concerned with why you weren't listening."

Daniel looked like he was about to say something, then shut up again.

"It's that guy on the roof," Susan surmised. "Who was he?"

"Rockport."

Susan suspected as much, but it was still a surprise. "That was him? What was he doing watching my apartment?"

"Hounding me, keeping tabs on me. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one that called the cops." Daniel turned in his seat so that he was sitting sideways, facing Susan directly.

"Susan, I want to thank you for all your help, but I think it's for the best if we part company. You shouldn't continue to risk your safety because of me. I don't know who these guys are, or why they're after me, but it's obvious they aren't going to stop until I'm—"

Susan put up her hand, stopping Daniel midsentence. "Don't say it. It's not going to come to that. Besides, you aren't going to get rid of me that easily. The cops are after me too now, remember? The only way out of this is to clear your name."

Susan looked over Daniel's shoulder to check the map on the wall. "We'll get off at the next stop and check into a motel. I'll see what I can dig up on this Birchmere guy and you can get some rest. But make no mistake: we're in this together, bucko. You're stuck with me, so you'd better get used to it."

When they got off the train at the next stop, neither of them noticed Floyd Rockport exit the train several cars behind them.

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## Fight or Flight

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The motel Susan picked was "economical", meaning it was a dingy rat-bag. Water stains dotted the walls and the remote to the ancient television was securely bolted to the nightstand. According to Susan, this was the best possible choice. By paying in cash, they could avoid leaving a paper trail, and the other patrons were unlikely to pay much attention to them.

Susan sat at a rickety desk next to one of the twin beds and pecked away at the keyboard of her laptop, the evening news on the tube just barely drowning out the screaming pipes of Daniel's shower. So far, she hadn't found out very much about Birchmere, but she was going to keep at it until she did. Things like his address and phone number had been easy, but the juicy stuff was bound to take longer.

The pipes fell silent and moments later Daniel emerged from the bathroom clad in jeans and an undershirt, toweling dry his hair as he padded barefoot across the room. "Anything good?"

"Not so far." Susan disconnected from the net and shut down her computer. "All I have so far is personal statistics. I can tell you his driver's license number, but not why he'd be involved with Floyd Rockport or an attempt to discredit you."

Daniel sat down on the edge of the bed and stared down at the towel in his hands. "I don't know."

After a heavy silence, Susan said, "Well, don't worry about it. We'll find out. Did I ever tell you—"

A pounding on the door interrupted Susan. Shaking off his melancholy, Daniel shushed Susan and glided silently to the door. Looking out the peephole, he saw a fish-eye-distorted view of a scruffy elderly man trying to peer back at him. Daniel motioned Susan to relax and opened the door.

"Can I help you?"

The old man scratched his white beard and smiled. "Hi, I'm Jeff Frankel. I have the room next door," he said, pointing. "I was wondering if you folks could spare some soap, seeing as how the management declined to give me any and said management is currently passed out in a drunken stupor."

Daniel had to smile. It seemed like the first time in ages, and it felt good. "Yeah, hang on." He walked back to the bathroom to get some soap.

While he was digging around under the sink, he heard Frankel talking to Susan. "Nice place you folks have," the old man said. "No bloodstains on the walls. Very classy."

Daniel returned with the soap but botched the handoff, dropping it at Frankel's feet. As Daniel stooped to pick it up, he noticed Frankel's tattered sandals. The left one was strapped to a dull gray steel prosthetic. Daniel caught himself staring and stood up, handing Frankel the soap. "Here you go. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

Frankel didn't look the slightest bit offended. "S'okay. I've had this thing so long I don't even notice it anymore," he said, rapping on the leg with his knuckles, resulting in a dull clang. "Land mine, Korea. This little baby's got me quite a bit of disability pay out of old Uncle Sam over the years." He winked at Daniel knowingly.

"Well, I've taken up enough of your time. Thanks for the soap. G'night."

"Good night, Mister Frankel."

"Call me Jeff!" Daniel heard as he shut and bolted the door.

Daniel couldn't sleep. Susan was lying peacefully on the other bed, still in her clothes and snoring softly. He knew he should be sleeping too, as they had a lot to do in the morning. He just couldn't make himself go to sleep.

He couldn't believe how fast his whole existence disintegrated. Whoever these people were, they were thorough, and they were merciless. If Susan hadn't believed him, or hadn't cared, he'd either be in a mental institution or jail by now. He'd been incredibly fortunate to find her, but even more unfortunate to need her in the first place. Just God's way of balancing the scales, he thought.

Daniel turned on his side and watched the shadows of cars going by outside. He was finally starting to feel sleepy.

Then he saw something move right outside his window.

Daniel sprang out of bed and ran to the door just as the doorknob started to jiggle. He looked through the peephole. On the other side, hand on the doorknob, was Floyd Rockport.

"Susan!" Daniel shouted. "Wake up! He's here! It's—"

The door was knocked off its hinges, crashing into Daniel and pinning him to the floor. Rockport stood in the doorway, a shadow backlit by the streetlights outside. Susan sat bolt upright.

"What the hell's going on?"

As if in answer, Rockport leapt at Daniel.

Thump!

Jeff Frankel sat up in bed and listened to the noise next door. Newlyweds, he thought at first. Now he wasn't so sure. He'd heard a lamp break and the woman was screaming about something.

Jeff got out of bed and strapped on his leg. He knew he should just mind his own damn business, but he just wasn't wired that way. He quickly threw on his clothes and walked out the door.

In Daniel and Susan's room, things had gone from bad to worse. Rockport and Daniel warily circled each other amidst the wreckage of the room. Daniel's knowledge of judo had so far kept him out of Rockport's grasp, but both of them knew that situation wouldn't last forever. Susan was slowly inching towards the door, laptop in hand.

"Don't wander off, cow," Rockport growled, leering at Susan. "I'll get to you next."

"Why are you doing this?" Daniel demanded.

Rockport swung his head back to glower at Daniel. "You are a flea, a momentary nuisance. I owe you no explanation."

To punctuate his statement, Rockport lunged at Daniel. Daniel barely had enough time to grab Rockport's outstretched arm and bring his elbow down hard on it, snapping both bones in the forearm.

Instead of grabbing his arm in agony, Rockport flashed Daniel that same haunting grin and

flung the arm sharply out to the side. Daniel and Susan could both hear a sharp pop as the bones were jarred back into place. Stepping forward, Rockport slugged Daniel across the jaw with the arm that had been broken only moments before.

Daniel got quickly to his feet. "Susan! Run!"

Needing no further encouragement, Susan bolted out the door and right into Jeff, both of them hitting the pavement in a tangle of arms and legs. She'd barely started to get up when the window exploded in a shower of broken glass as Rockport hurtled through it.

"What the Sam Hill is going on here?" Jeff exclaimed.

Susan was about to explain when Daniel appeared in the doorway and cut her off. "Susan, get out of here! I can't hold him off forever!"

"Right you are." Rockport had gotten to his feet and charged Daniel too quickly for Daniel to react. In less than a second, Rockport had Daniel pinned against the side of the building.

Susan made a move to intervene, but Jeff grabbed her arm, his grip surprisingly strong. "I have a better idea, but we have to hurry."

With a look back at Daniel, Susan followed Jeff into the parking lot.

Daniel couldn't move. Rockport's steel grip was growing steadily tighter.

"You have no idea," Rockport hissed, "what you've gotten yourself and your friend into, do you?"

Rockport's fingers clamped securely around his throat, Daniel couldn't answer. He instead worked on wiggling one arm free.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone. You had to butt in. You had to root through my apartment. You're a nosy little speck, and this time it's going to cost you."

As Rockport tightened his grip around Daniel's throat, Daniel popped an arm free and dug his fingers deep into Rockport's eyes, causing them to well up dark crimson blood. Rockport stumbled back, clutching his face, only to straighten up and catch Daniel's fist as Daniel threw a punch. Daniel was shocked to see that not only were Rockport's eyes undamaged, but they weren't even bloodshot. It was as if the injury never happened.

"You're only delaying the inevitable," calmly and smoothly bringing his free hand on Daniel's outstretched arm, snapping it like a twig. "Sooner or later, you all die."

As Rockport drew back for the killing blow, they were both bathed in a powerful white light and looked up at a throaty growl coming from the parking lot. Before either could react, Jeff's Winnebago came barreling out of the darkness, plowing into Rockport and stopping alongside Daniel. Susan threw the side door open and pulled Daniel inside.

"Go!" she screamed as Jeff floored it, leaving patches of pungent rubber as he headed for the open road.

As they turned out of the parking lot, Rockport leapt at the vehicle, digging his fingers into

the metal of the right front fender.

“What the—” Jeff yelled as he swerved violently to the right, shearing off his unwelcome passenger by slamming him into a lamppost.

Safe for the moment, the trio sped away into the night.

Moments after Jeff’s taillights disappeared, the corpse recently known as Floyd Rockport began to pull itself together. The dent in the crushed skull popped out with a sickening squish and the dislocated arm fell back into place. Slowly, Rockport rose to his feet and stared off into the distance.

As he stood there, a greasy, potbellied man in his fifties stumbled out of the management office, clutching a bottle of whiskey.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he shouted, staggering over to where Rockport stood.

Rockport looked briefly over his shoulder, then stepped towards the motel manager.

“Who’s gonna pay for this?” The man gestured at the broken glass in the parking lot, then shook his whiskey bottle at Rockport.

With a smooth and practiced motion, Rockport grabbed the manager’s head in both hands and twisted it sharply, snapping the spinal column. The man dropped like a sack of potatoes and twitched feebly.

Rockport walked silently down the street, disappearing into the gloom.

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## Hellos and Goodbyes



Jeff’s Winnebago sped down Route 66 away from the brightening eastern sky.

Inside, Daniel reclined on one side of the booth that served as the “dining room” and rested his arm on the table. Susan sat across from him. Now that they were on the open road, Jeff thought it might be a dandy time to talk. “You folks mind telling me just what the hell was going on back there?”

“I’d tell you if I knew, Mister Frankel,” Daniel hissed between clenched teeth.

“Jeff!”

“Fine. Jeff.

“Susan, we don’t have much time. You’re going to have to set and splint this arm before I go into shock and pass out.”

“I am? You’re the paramedic! I don’t know—”

"I'll talk you through it, but we've got to move fast. I don't know how much longer I can stay conscious. First, find something to splint with and something I can bite down on."

As Susan got up and foraged through the "kitchen," she heard Jeff muttering to himself up in the cab. Jeff's mobile residence seemed to fit his personality. Scattered and eclectic, it was a decorator's nightmare. He had cheap roadside knick-knacks from nearly everywhere in North America, including lots of places she'd never heard of before, and probably never would again. In the jumbled morass of a kitchen drawer were several wooden spoons and she found a roll of duct tape behind a ceramic bear cookie jar with the name "Yellowstone" emblazoned across the front. She brought the tape and spoons over to Daniel, noticing that his eyes were starting to lose focus.

"Okay," she said loudly, getting his attention. "Now what?"

Daniel looked over what she found. "Give me one of the spoons."

She handed it over and he placed it sideways between his teeth.

"Okay," he said around the spoon, "you're gonna need to grab my wrist and pull it straight towards you until it won't go any further, then let it pop straight back into place. Then you're going to splint it with the spoons and tape, keeping it immobile. Put a blanket over me if I pass out, but make sure I can't move the arm. Ready?" He bit down hard on the spoon.

Susan nodded and with a deep breath grabbed Daniel's wrist. Jeff ran over a pothole, jarring her grip and eliciting a scream from Daniel.

"Sorry!" Jeff and Susan yelled in unison.

Susan took Daniel's wrist again and pulled sharply straight out until the arm was extended as far as possible, then immediately let it snap back into place. Daniel let loose an earsplitting scream and snapped the spoon handle in his teeth before passing out. Susan rested the arm carefully on the table and applied the splint as gingerly as she could. When she was finished, she stepped away from Daniel's unconscious form.

"Jeff! Do you have a blanket for Daniel?"

"Check the linen closet," he shouted back. "It's just to the right of the bathroom."

Among the assorted junk Susan found in there was an old olive drab wool blanket that smelled faintly of mothballs and had the words "U.S. ARMY" stenciled on in faded white paint. She took it down and draped it over Daniel, being careful not to disturb the arm resting on the table. That done, she walked forward to the cab to sit with Jeff.

"Now that he's all squared away," Jeff began, keeping his eyes on the road, "could you please tell me what the devil's going on?"

"I don't completely understand myself, but I'll tell you what I know. It all started about two weeks ago..."

Susan went on to tell Jeff about the wreck, all the terrible things that had happened to Daniel since, how she and Daniel had met and the events leading up to their timely escape from Rockport at the motel. When she was finished, Jeff drove in silence for a long moment.

"Are you trying to tell me that guy trying to kill you back there was some kind of immortal monster?"

"Believe me," Susan said, "I know how ridiculous it sounds, and I didn't really believe that part of it either until tonight. What that guy did back there just isn't possible for a normal person."

"Maybe he was one of those swami types," Jeff suggested. "You know, one of those martial arts people that can just ignore pain?"

"You don't understand. His arm healed, instantly, right then and there. It was like he didn't even feel it." Susan shivered at the memory.

They both sat in quiet contemplation for a bit while Jeff drove, the dawn slowly creeping up behind them.

"Show him in."

Three men sat in an elegantly appointed parlor in downtown Washington. The room smelled faintly of oak paneling and old money. Lining the walls were bookcases, hundreds of leather bound tomes gathering dust on the shelves. All the illumination came from old fashioned reading lamps placed on small tables next to the plush, leather upholstered chairs the men reclined in, casting their faces into shadow. All three seemed to have well-maintained bodies underneath their costly hand tailored suits.

The door opened and the being that had so recently terrorized Daniel and Susan walked in. Although there were ample chairs in the room, he stood stiffly, facing the men that had summoned him.

"Good morning, Batarel," the first man said. "You've had a busy night."

"Yes, sir," Batarel said. "I almost had them. I believe they were headed west, and—"

The second man held up his hand and Batarel fell silent.

"You've become something of a disappointment," the third man said.

"Sirs, I know this looks bad, but—"

The second man cut him off. "It looks terrible. You've had to establish a new identity nearly a dozen times in the last century."

"This time you were noticed," the first man pointed out.

"You let the angels ransack your dwelling," the second man added.

"And you let the human that discovered you survive," the third man said. "Not to mention that he's enlisted the help of that reporter."

"That wasn't my fault—"

"You're this close," the second man said, holding his hand up with the thumb and forefinger about an inch apart, "to becoming a major liability. We are not strong enough to

combat the angels openly. We cannot afford to have our existence exposed."

Batarel started to say something, but thought better of it and stood stoically.

"That said," said the first man, "you're being reassigned."

"Sirs, I must protest!"

"This is not open to negotiation," the second man said.

"But what about Cho?"

"Cho is no longer your concern," the third man said. "He will be dealt with."

"You'll receive the details of your new assignment and identity shortly," the first man said.  
"Good morning."

His audience at an end, Batarel left the room.

"Jeff? I think he's waking up."

Daniel opened his eyes to the bright sunlight streaming in the windows of the Winnebago. As he stirred and straightened in the booth a bolt of pain shot through his arm, causing him to nearly bite through his tongue.

"We've got to get him to a doctor," Susan said.

"That's one of the things I aim to discuss," Jeff said as he pulled the Winnebago off the road and cut the engine. "There's some Tylenol in the bathroom. I think Daniel might need some right about now."

As Susan went to get the medicine, Jeff slid into the booth across from Daniel. "Susan told me what's happened to you two," he said as Susan returned with the Tylenol and a glass of water, "and I want in."

"What?" Daniel almost spit water all over Jeff.

"I think I can help you. I have a place you can stay," Jeff said, gesturing around the cabin, "and it's a place they can't find."

"Jeff, you can't be serious."

"Can't I? You need me, Daniel."

Daniel sighed in exasperation. His arm hurt like hell, and the last thing he needed was an argument with this garrulous old man. "As much as I appreciate the offer, I really can't ask anyone else to risk their neck on my behalf."

"Who says you're asking?"

"I've already dragged Susan into this—"

"No you didn't," Susan said. "I volunteered."

"And I'm doing the same," Jeff said. "Look at it this way. I'm retired. I ain't got no family. I

put all my money into this Winnebago and I travel the country looking for something to do with the rest of my life. I really think this might be it, and like I said, you need me.”

Like Hell I do, Daniel thought. Just then, Susan rested her hand on Daniel’s good arm.

“He has a point. I keep telling you that you aren’t in this alone. We need Jeff’s help.”

“I can’t be responsible for your safety!”

“So who’s asking you to be?” Jeff snapped. “Look, I know what I saw last night, what Susan told me. I know this is dangerous. I also know that in the nine years I’ve been driving this damn thing around, this is the first time I really feel alive, and important. I need this as much as you need me.

“And dammit, I’m gonna help you whether you like it or not!”

Daniel could see that any attempt to talk the aging Samaritan out of it was futile. He’d wanted to keep this whole mess to himself, to spare others from the danger he knew Rockport represented. That wasn’t going to happen, apparently.

“Where are we?” Daniel asked.

Jeff broke out a map book and pointed to a spot just outside Reston.

“Okay,” Daniel said. “Let’s find a clinic and get a real cast put on this arm. After that we can try to figure out who Rockport’s working for.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Jeff fired up the Winnebago.

Those doddering old fools! Batarel fumed as he stormed across the parking lot and got behind the wheel of the same brown Buick he’d used to run Daniel off the road.

Of course, the three beings that’d just reassigned him weren’t actually any older than he was, but he tended to think of them that way. While Batarel worked hard to stay on top of the times, his superiors were mired in the old ways. That’s the problem, he thought as he pulled out into the D.C. traffic. The very power and influence they flaunted over him would be the key to their downfall. They didn’t know how to change with the times.

In the old days, the sort of problem that they had with Cho wasn’t too serious. Before electronic communications, even if someone who knew the truth about them was believed, Batarel and his brothers could rely on word traveling very slowly. They had ample time to put together a cleanup operation.

Contrary to what his superiors thought, these were not the old days. Cho and his cronies had access to the world media, the Internet, to any number of ways to get word out quickly and globally. They had to be stopped. It was clear to Batarel that if left up to his superiors, their organization would be exposed and the angels would be able to use the humans to destroy them. If he stayed quiet, if he accepted his reassignment, they were all doomed.

Cho had to be stopped, and it was up to him.

Pumped full of resolve, Batarel disappeared into the D.C. rush hour.

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## A New Lead

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What the hell is this?" Jeff stared incredulously at his fender as Susan and Daniel walked out of the clinic, Daniel sporting a new fiberglass cast.

"What are you yelling about?" Daniel asked.

"This! What the hell is this?" Jeff pointed at several long, thin gashes in his right front fender. Daniel crouched down to get a better look and came to the easy conclusion.

"Rockport."

"You mean he—"

"Dug his hands into your fender. Yup, that's it."

Jeff stood and sputtered, eyes riveted on the gouges in the metal.

"Come on, guys," Susan said, stepping into the Winnebago. "We've got work to do. Providing," she said to Jeff, "you're still in on this."

"You kidding?" Jeff said as he ushered Daniel inside before joining them. "Bastards messed up my home. There's hell to pay now."

They all sat down at the table, Susan already booting up her laptop. Daniel was in much better spirits now that his arm was fully immobilized up to the elbow. He was most relieved that getting it reset and casted wasn't a big deal. They got it done, paid their bill and left. They didn't even need insurance.

"Before our little disturbance last night," Susan began, "I was telling Daniel that I tracked the number Steve was supposed to call to a Richard Birchmere, an assistant director of the Social Security Administration. What we don't know is why he'd care about Daniel. There's no obvious connection."

"Could we tail him and find out who he talks to?" Daniel asked. "Maybe he's just a middle man."

"Not easily," Susan said. "He might notice a Winnebago following him around everywhere he goes."

"Tap his phone?" Jeff suggested.

"With what?" Susan asked. "It's not going to be easy digging up dirt on this guy. As long as I'm underground, I can't even rely on my usual contacts."

"So what can we do?" Daniel asked. He started to worry that his search was over before it began.

Susan thought for a moment, then grinned sheepishly. "Well, there is something, but I

haven't done it since college, and it's a little weird..."

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Daniel said. He and Susan were crouched in the bushes outside Richard Birchmere's house, a beautiful split-level in Friendship Heights, an upscale suburb of Washington. Jeff was across the street in the Winnebago, acting as lookout.

"I know it sounds weird," Susan said, "but you can learn a lot about a person by looking through his garbage." She gestured to Jeff, who gave them the thumbs up.

"The coast is clear," she said. "Let's go."

Daniel followed Susan around to the back of the house. Birchmere's lawn was neatly trimmed and immaculate with a small wooden tool shed in the far corner. Near the back door was a small bin with one white kitchen trash bag, the kind with drawstrings, tied neatly. Daniel and Susan walked over to it.

As Susan grabbed the bag, she heard a low, menacing growl. She froze and slowly turned her head to the right. Next to the tool shed stood the biggest Rottweiler she had ever seen, staring at her intensely. "Daniel?"

Daniel had seen the dog too, and was slowly edging his way in front of Susan. "Nice dog," he said in the most soothing tone of voice he could muster. "We'll be out of your yard very soon."

"What are we going to do?" Susan asked, her hand still frozen to the trash bag.

The dog snarled and took a few steps towards them.

"How should I know?" Daniel said. "Just remove your hand very slowly from the bag, and we'll see what he does."

The instant Susan moved her hand, the dog snarled and snapped at her, as well as taking a few more steps forward.

"That's not going to work," Susan hissed.

Daniel came up with an idea. He thought it was Grade-A stupid, but it was all he had. "Okay, then here's the plan. You grab the bag and run like hell for the Winnebago. I'll distract the dog and follow you."

"What? Are you insane? He'll rip you to shreds!"

"I don't think so," Daniel said, rapping his knuckles on his cast and eliciting another snarl from the dog.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Susan said, tightening her grip on the bag.

"Yeah, me too," Daniel said. "On three, you run and I'll hold him off."

"One." The dog snarled.

"Two." Sensing something was going on, the dog crouched and prepared to leap.

"Three!" Susan snatched the bag and bolted for the Winnebago as fast as she could. Daniel inhaled sharply and stepped into the dog's leap, holding his casted forearm out in front of him. As expected, the dog's jaws locked onto the plaster and fiberglass and shook violently. Bright waves of pain shot up Daniel's arm, blurring his vision.

As soon as Susan was out of sight, Daniel brought his left fist up and slugged the dog across the head. The animal grunted, but hung on. Raising his arm and the dog higher in the air, Daniel let loose a swift kick to the animal's underside. There was a yelp, and the dog released his grip.

Daniel lost no time making good his retreat. He ran as fast as he could around the house and towards the Winnebago, the dog close on his heels.

"Go!" he shouted at Jeff and Susan. As the vehicle started moving, Susan threw the side door open and Daniel jumped for it. Susan pulled him in and slammed the door shut just as the dog made its leap. There was a thud against the side of the Winnebago, then Jeff accelerated around the corner and they were gone.

After they drove a safe distance from the house, Jeff pulled into a grocery store parking lot. Daniel popped some more Tylenol to deal with the shake the dog had given his arm, and Susan prepared to empty the bag onto the table.

"Gentlemen, prepare for an in depth look at the life of Richard Birchmere," she said.

"I just hope this doesn't stink up the place," Jeff said.

Susan opened the bag and emptied its contents. The first thing they noticed was that it didn't stink at all. The pile consisted almost entirely of dry refuse: crumpled typing paper, take-out menus, junk mail, magazines, newspapers, etc. There were no food wrappers, no waste leftovers, not even a plastic milk jug. Susan mentioned as much.

"Yeah, I noticed that too," Daniel said. "When I went to Rockport's apartment, the kitchen was positively barren. No food, no dishes even. Think there's a connection?"

"Maybe. For all we know, though, they could both just be extreme bachelors that eat out every meal."

"Boy, this guy sure does throw out a lot of magazines," Jeff observed.

Susan had noticed that as well. Along with the standard Post Weekend and television listings, Birchmere had a wide array of reading material. Local interest stuff like Washington Weekly, national news magazines like Time and Newsweek, several more specific political and religious titles. Conspicuously absent was any actual leisure reading. No sports, no special interest hobby magazines, no entertainment gossip rags. The guy obviously read a great deal, but only about current events, politics and religion.

"We may be dealing with the world's most boring human," she quipped.

Daniel just looked at her with a somber expression. "Assuming he's human," he said.

Susan's smirk vanished, and she fought off a shudder as she remembered the events of the previous night. "Yeah," she said, "if."

“Hey guys,” Jeff said, “look at this!” He handed them a slip of paper with a date and time, as well as a hand written address in Old Town Alexandria. “What do think it means?” he asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Susan said, committing the information to memory. “We’ve got until tomorrow night to find out. Until then, let’s find out what else we have here.”

Both Jeff and Daniel visibly deflated, but they kept sifting through the pile.

As soon as Richard Birchmere arrived home, he felt something was amiss. He’d been on edge all day after dealing with Batarel, but this was different. He went over a mental list of his surroundings, trying to figure out what was different. Then he had it.

The dog was missing. Normally his guard dog was at the door to greet him. It wasn’t like Conan to wander off. What could have happened?

Birchmere walked into the kitchen. No, the dog wasn’t there either. He looked at the dog door connecting the kitchen to the back yard and decided to check outside.

The dog was there, sitting patiently beside the rubbish bin. When he saw his master, the dog let out a single bark of greeting, then waited for Birchmere to come look.

When Birchmere got there, he realized the bin was empty. He knew he had put some trash out, but the collectors didn’t come until the end of the week. “Where did it go?” he mused aloud. The dog obviously couldn’t answer the question, but it had posed it. With the question posed, Birchmere knew where to look for the answer.

He walked back inside the house and up to the study. The room was reminiscent of the plushly appointed parlor he and his associates used to discipline the arrogant upstart Batarel. In the corner was a television screen and a sophisticated control panel. He sat down.

The television connected to a network of security cameras spread throughout and outside of the house. Birchmere switched to the camera monitoring the back yard. He stopped the tape and started running it backwards at high speed.

There.

He froze the tape and stared, amazed, at the image captured there. Perhaps Batarel wasn’t quite as incompetent as he appeared. On the screen was a crystal clear image of Daniel Cho and his reporter friend, raiding the rubbish bin. Birchmere didn’t think they’d garner anything useful, but the fact that they’d been there at all made it clear he’d underestimated Cho by a fair margin.

He would have to be certain not to make that mistake again.

## Preparations

The address in Old Town was a warehouse. Jeff parked the Winnebago and let Daniel and Susan out to look it over while it was still light out. They had no idea when Birchmere and company would be there the next day to set up, so they all figured it best to reconnoiter while they could.

It was a large gray building with metal siding. Railroad tracks ran right past it, and a metal staircase led up to the roof.

“What a dump,” Daniel said.

“I wonder what they do,” Susan asked, “that they’d need a building this big?”

“Who knows? I guess we find out tomorrow night. How do you want to work this?”

Susan walked over to the front doors and peeked inside the small plexiglass windows. “Figure we break in tonight, hide behind one of those crates and wait for them to show. A lot of investigative reporting is waiting, and—”

Susan looked up and noticed that Daniel wasn’t listening any more. In fact, he wasn’t even anywhere near her. He was walking briskly over the staircase on the side of the building.

“No good,” he called over his shoulder. “After what you’ve seen so far, you don’t think they’ll secure the area? Whatever Birchmere, Rockport and their buddies have in the works, I don’t think they want anyone to know about it.”

He looked over at the ladder on the side of the building. “Hang on.”

Daniel walked over to the ladder and started to climb. When he got to the top, he found exactly what he was looking for. Roughly in the center of the roof was a skylight, about two feet square. “There’s a skylight up here,” he shouted down to Susan as he descended the ladder. “I can go up on the roof and listen in.”

“With a broken arm? You’re out of your mind!”

“Who better? I have experience climbing around buildings, and besides, you need to be in the van with Jeff in case something happens.”

Susan would have none of it, and got in Daniel’s face, arms akimbo. “Says who?”

“Look at it this way,” Daniel said, smiling nervously. “If anything happens to me, you can still get the story out. We’ll get some walkie-talkies and I’ll relay everything I see and hear down to you in the van. First sign of trouble, you guys get the hell out of here. Don’t worry about me,” he grinned, “I’ve dealt with these things before.”

“And the last one broke your arm and almost killed you!” Susan shouted. “If you think I’m going to just sit in the van and let you—”

“Uh, kids?” Jeff called from the Winnebago. “Can we continue this somewhere a little less public?”

Daniel and Susan stared at each other in silence for a moment.

“He’s right,” Daniel said. “We’ve got a lot to do in the next twenty-four hours, and we can continue this discussion later. Just keep in mind what we’ve seen those things do before you

rush in to confront them, okay?"

Susan answered by turning brusquely on her heel and striding for the Winnebago. Daniel shrugged his shoulders and followed her.

Batarel wasn't stupid. He was well aware of the meeting coming up, a meeting every demon in the mid-Atlantic region was expected to attend. He also knew that if he attended it openly, he'd be captured and punished for disobeying his order to relocate.

Just the same, he had to go. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. If he was to truly help his people, raise them out of the bureaucratic stalemate they were in, he had to know what was going on. Intelligence gathering was the crucial key to any victory. Even though it meant risking capture, even if it meant putting his search for Cho and that reporter aside for the moment (truth to tell, he had no idea where they were anyway), he had to be at that meeting.

He had to go.

"You're out of your freaking mind!" Susan shouted.

She, Daniel and Jeff were in a motel room for the night on Jeff's credit card. She was still trying to talk some sense into Daniel, but it wasn't doing any good.

And Jeff wasn't helping. "He's right, Susan, you know he is. You have to be down in the Winnebago with me. If we do learn anything about what these things are, you're the only one anybody's gonna believe."

"It's because I'm a woman, isn't it? You two think that this is some sort of boy's club—"

"No, Susan," Daniel said quietly. "It's because you're a reporter."

Susan glared at him, but it was a softer glare than a moment before.

"Jeff's right. If we get a story out of this, you're the one to tell it. You're too valuable to risk. I'll be at the skylight with the walkie-talkies, and you'll take down every word. You won't miss out on any of the fun."

"Fun? Was breaking your arm fun? Think about what they've done to you Daniel. Think hard. Do you really think you're up to this? Have you considered what will happen if you get caught?"

Daniel was silent for a long moment. "Yes. That's why I have to do this. I have to find out what they are, why they're doing this to me. I have to, not have someone else tell me. I thought you'd understand that."

Susan stood speechless and her face softened. So that was it. "Yes, Daniel, I understand." She took a deep breath. "But if you see the first sign of trouble—"

"I'm outta there."

As Jeff sat silent but grinning smugly at them, Susan breathed an inner sigh of relief. She

was concerned about Daniel's safety, but she had another reason to hope this went off without a hitch. She had no real proof, but she knew she was knocking on the door of the biggest story of her career.

She wanted to make sure they all lived long enough to report it.

Birchmere stormed into his outer office at the Social Security Administration, then through the door to his inner office without a word, his attitude knocking his secretary back in her seat. She'd seen him like this on occasion, and she knew better than to say anything. Her boss wasn't the easiest guy in the world to get along with. Lately his moods had gotten even worse, even though his workload hadn't changed significantly. He never talked about his personal life, so she had no idea what the problem was.

In the seclusion of his inner office, Zagam, the demon going by the human identity of Richard Birchmere, was furious.

Batarel hadn't reported in to his new assignment. With everything that was going on, the last thing he needed was some reckless rogue mucking up the works. Zagam fell heavily into the plush chair behind his desk. He glanced absently at the paperwork on his desk, then dismissed it. He would have plenty of time for the affairs of humans later. For now, he had more important things to attend to. He reached for the phone, his secure line.

Daniel, Jeff and Susan sat around the table in the Winnebago as Susan explained her plan for the use of the electronic equipment in front of her.

"Daniel had a good idea about the walkie-talkies," she said, "but I think this will work even better."

She picked up an expensive video camera. "I got this from a friend at WDCA. It's lightweight, so Daniel shouldn't have any trouble using it one handed. It sends the signal to this receiver, here," she said, holding up a small black box. "It then feeds into this VCR so we get everything on tape and can view it real-time. We might even get the chance to identify some of the ones we haven't seen yet."

"How many of these critters you figure there'll be?" Jeff asked.

"No idea," Daniel said. "We don't know how highly placed Birchmere is in their organization. This could just be a weekly status report. On the other hand, he lives pretty well by human standards, very well compared to Rockport, so maybe his involvement means this is a major gathering. We'll find out tonight."

"In any case, I want you to be extra careful to stay out of sight," Susan said.

Daniel grinned roguishly. "Yes, ma'am."

"And quiet," she continued, ignoring Daniel's levity. "We don't know how well these things can hear, but if their senses are anything like their strength or toughness—"

"All right, Susan, we get it," Daniel said.

“Just be careful,” Susan said as she turned away from Daniel and started preparing the gear. “Jeff and I will be in the van.”

Susan didn't know if Daniel fully realized what they were doing. She'd always thought of herself as a strong, independent woman, but after that night in the motel those things scared her, truly frightened her to the bone. She'd done this style of investigation at college, even embarrassed one corrupt professor into retirement, but she had never spied on immortal monsters with the political connections to ruin someone's life. She knew Daniel was so positive and upbeat because he was active and useful again, but she hoped that didn't overshadow his caution.

“Hey, buck up, Susan,” Daniel said. “Everything will be fine.”

She tried very hard to believe him.

They arrived at the warehouse early that afternoon. Susan and Jeff set up a block and a half away while Daniel waited on the roof, camera at the ready. They had escape routes and rendezvous prepared, as well as contingency plans should something go wrong. Susan excelled at that sort of planning, and Jeff's military experience was also a plus. By five o'clock, when the first of the demons' cars approached the building, they were ready and began to film.

They just weren't quite prepared for what they would see.

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## The Meeting

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The first of them arrived singly and in pairs. They parked their cars on side streets and walked casually to the warehouse. The first one to reach the building unlocked the door and they all filed in. Daniel had already opened the skylight slightly, and he could hear them quite clearly, even if he didn't understand a word they said. They were speaking a language Daniel had never heard. It sounded a little like Latin, but it was harsher, more guttural.

Since he couldn't decipher what they were saying, Daniel panned around the warehouse. It was square, about a hundred feet on a side. It was clean and well kept, with several large wooden packing crates stacked against the wall opposite the door. Just to the right of the door was a large forklift and a stack of wooden palettes. Most of the warehouse floor was empty, however, and it was there that people stood and talked as more of their number filed in.

Most of them were dressed in suits, but a few were clad only in jeans and T-shirts. All the races of humanity were represented, and they also varied greatly in height and build. After watching a few dozen of them enter and mill about, Daniel finally saw one he recognized.

“English, please!” Birchmere shouted as he stormed into the warehouse.

Most of them bowed their heads to him in deference and several of them muttered, “Yes, Zagam.”

“Lord Beelzebub will be here any minute,” Birchmere (Zagam?) continued. “Would you

have him hear you speaking the ancient tongue and not that of your assigned location? You all know the penalty for speaking the ancient tongue.”

Most of them were cowed at this, but a few of them glared at Birchmere in open defiance. Nevertheless, they spoke English from that point on.

“Zagam!” one of them called out, striding confidently up to Birchmere. “Why has this meeting been called? What’s so important to drag Lord Beelzebub all the way here?” Several others expressed their interest in Birchmere’s answer.

Birchmere stood up a little straighter, obviously trying to look every bit the authority figure the others took him to be. “I have not been in contact personally with Lord Beelzebub, but the impression I got was that Satan himself was displeased with something.”

“Indeed,” rang out a deep baritone voice from the entrance.

Daniel panned over and found the source of the voice, the largest man he had ever seen. The man stood nearly seven feet tall, an expensive Italian suit draping his muscular frame in black. His head was bald, the lack of hair throwing the rough crags of his face into sharp relief. The white of his shirt stood out against his deep olive Mediterranean complexion. The instant he entered the warehouse, all the others, Zagam included, dropped to one knee and bowed their heads to him.

“Rise,” Beelzebub said, and they did. “You are correct, Zagam, Satan is not pleased. Your progress reports have not been inspiring as of late. In fact, the angels are on the cusp of gaining dominance in this, the most powerful and influential of human nations. I would know why.”

Zagam stepped forward and nervously cleared his throat. “The answers to your question are complex, my Lord—”

“I’ll tell you why, then!” a voice rang out from the back of the warehouse. Daniel panned over to see the man he knew as Floyd Rockport striding forward.

“Batarel?” Beelzebub mused.

“My Lord, pay no attention!” Zagam said, rushing to hold back Batarel. “This rebel knows nothing. He’s already defied reassignment—”

“I’ve read your report. Let him speak.”

“My Lord!” Zagam protested, only to be silenced by Beelzebub’s gaze.

Batarel made his way to the front of the crowd. “We are making a grave mistake, my Lord,” he said. “Listen to yourselves. Progress reports! Schedules! We’ve adopted the humans’ bureaucracy. Instead of taking our rightful place and dominating mankind, we have become them!”

“That is enough!” Zagam screamed. “You insubordinate cur! You have no idea what it takes to fulfill our destiny. You can’t even follow simple directions!”

Zagam turned and faced Beelzebub. “My Lord, pay him no mind. His disobedience aside, everything is still going according to schedule. I project—”

“Enough.” Beelzebub said, quietly, and the room fell completely silent.

"Batarel's disobedience is not the problem," Beelzebub went on. "Indeed, insolent though he may be, Batarel has a point."

"My Lord, you can't be serious—"

Beelzebub spun and crossed the distance to Zagam in the blink of an eye. "Can't I?"

Zagam had no response.

"This is exactly what Satan was concerned about. That we're getting soft. That we've adopted too many human ways. That some among us," he looked pointedly at Zagam, "are more interested in maintaining their own little empires than furthering our cause."

"Ridiculous!" Zagam exclaimed. "Nothing's changed—"

"Precisely," Beelzebub said. "We are the embodiment of chaos, yet we've stopped changing. We are change. Some among us have forgotten that. It's time you were reminded." He reached his hand towards Zagam.

"My Lord! No!"

Almost too fast for Daniel to see, Beelzebub thrust his hand deep into Zagam's chest. As Zagam writhed in agony, Beelzebub pulled his hand out, clutching Zagam's heart. As Zagam collapsed to the floor, Beelzebub threw the heart down on the warehouse floor and crushed it under his foot.

Daniel continued filming as Zagam slowly started to rise to his knees. He was obviously in tremendous pain, but just as obviously alive.

Beelzebub turned and faced the other demons. "This meeting is over." He walked briskly out of the warehouse.

Daniel had seen enough. He signaled Susan. "Got all that?" he whispered.

"Yeah," came a quiet voice.

"Good. I'm coming in."

"Be careful."

Daniel packed up his gear and slinked away from the skylight. He walked to the ladder at the edge of the roof and started to climb down. No sooner did he set foot on the first metal rung than he froze.

There were two demons walking directly beneath him, talking quietly. Daniel couldn't make out what they were saying, but they seemed quite agitated. Please don't look up, Daniel thought as they passed beneath him and turned the corner, out of sight. Once they were gone, he slowly and carefully descended and made his way to the rendezvous point.

By the time he reached the Winnebago, his nerves were shot. Though he kept looking behind him as he moved, seeing nothing amiss, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being followed.

As he reached the door, it flew open, Susan grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him inside. "Go!" she shouted at Jeff. The vehicle was already rolling.

Their mission was a success.

After checking into a nondescript motel, Daniel, Jeff and Susan reviewed the tape. The recording wasn't great, and the focus was fuzzy in spots, but the audio was clear and the attack on Zagam by Beelzebub was captured in vivid detail. Daniel and Susan nearly gagged and even Jeff, a combat veteran, looked distinctly uncomfortable. When it was over, Jeff switched off the VCR.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah," Daniel said, "no foolin'."

"So what we have here," Susan said, her voice coldly clinical, "is a group of immortals posing as demons of biblical literature."

"Or they actually are the demons themselves," Jeff added.

"That's impossible," Susan said. "You're saying the Beelzebub we saw there was the real Beelzebub?"

"Why not?" Jeff replied. "We know they're immortal, they've certainly exerted considerable influence over your life, why couldn't they be the real thing?"

"Well, they hardly fit the most commonly accepted description," Susan said. "No fire and brimstone, no great leathery wings or barbed tails."

"I have a theory," Daniel said.

"Yes?"

"I think these aren't so much the creatures of myth, but the real life inspiration of that myth."

Jeff and Susan looked blankly at him.

"Think about it. Thousands of years ago, these things, with their strength, their invulnerability, would have been far more impressive than they are now, and they're still damned impressive today. I think we saw real demons, the creatures that inspired the myths Milton and Dante wrote about."

"If that's true," Susan asked, "where are the angels?"

"Oh, we get around," came a voice from the doorway.

Daniel, Jeff and Susan spun to face a tall, handsome middle-aged guy with tousled brown hair, jeans and a battered bomber jacket. He leaned against the doorframe as if he had every right in the world to be there. "I'd introduce myself by my current human identity, but I doubt I'll have need to use that name much longer. Better you know me by my true name.

"I am the Archangel Uriel."

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## Uriel

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Instead of waiting for the humans to regain their composure, the angel simply walked into the room and sat down. "My associates have been watching the three of you quite closely, ever since Daniel visited Batarel's apartment. We've seen what you've seen, know what you know. I'm about to do something unprecedented in the history of my kind. We have decided the time to keep our ancient secret has passed. You've already surmised much of the truth. I've been sent to explain the rest."

"Why?" Susan asked.

"Because it's time. It's time you know the truth and time for us to step out into the light. And because you're damn close to figuring it out on your own anyway."

"Figuring out what?" Daniel asked.

"Who and what we really are, of course. None of us can remember how it all began, just as none of you can remember being born. We have existed at least as long as human civilization, over one hundred thousand years, living among you and guiding your way.

"For ages, we were united in our goal of protecting and guiding mankind. We have a need, you see, to do what's best for you. We don't understand it ourselves. This unity was broken roughly five thousand years ago, at the time of the Fall."

Daniel's mind was reeling. "The Fall? As in the biblical Fall?"

"The real event upon which your myths are based, yes. One of our most powerful and influential was Satan. Over time he began to question our purpose, to think himself better than the humans he served. He eventually gave up even the pretense of helping humans and said our proper place was dominating humanity, our inferiors. So great was his influence that roughly half our number defected to his cause. They decided to prey on humanity, to torture and subjugate you. Thus began a war that continues to today, a war in which you got caught in the middle."

"So what are you going to do?" Susan asked.

"Me?" Uriel replied. "I've done what I'm going to do. The question is," he said as he got up and headed for the door, "what are you going to do?" He left.

"Wait!" Daniel shouted as he ran after Uriel, but it was no use.

The angel was gone.

"So what the hell do we do now?" Daniel asked.

They had all left the motel room and fanned out, looking for Uriel, but the angel was nowhere to be found. Dejected, they returned to the room and tried to assess what had just happened.

"This is heavy," Jeff said. "I mean, if we believe what just happened, that was Uriel, the

angel that stood at the gates of Eden with the flaming sword.”

“If that myth has any basis in truth,” Daniel added.

Susan got up to pace. “So since the dawn of human history there has been this race of immortals living alongside us, guiding us, protecting us—”

“Preying on us, manipulating us,” Daniel added.

“We don’t know that,” Susan said.

“Whether they have or not,” Jeff said, “the demons are the threat. Now that we know what they are, how can we force them into the open?”

“We’ve got the tape,” Daniel suggested.

“A good start, but we need more than that,” Susan said. “Video and photographic evidence is too easy to fake these days. We need hard proof. Documentation.”

Daniel perked up. “I have an idea.”

“You’re developing a pendant for this sort of thing, aren’t you?” Susan whispered.

“Shhh.” After stopping to rent a car on Jeff’s credit card, they were again down the street from Zagam’s house. They watched as a spotless gunmetal Mercedes came up the street and pulled into the driveway. Zagam, still clutching and rubbing his chest, got out of the car and walked into the house. Susan watched him with binoculars, and scribbled down the code to his door alarm.

“Okay, he’s in. Do it,” Daniel said.

Susan picked up her cellular phone, dialed Zagam’s number and handed the phone to Daniel.

The demon answered the phone after two rings. “Yes?” he hissed.

“You put on quite a show tonight, Birchmere,” Daniel said, “or should I call you Zagam? You really put your heart into it.”

“Who is this?” the demon demanded.

“My name is Daniel Cho. We’ve never been properly introduced, but I’m the guy Batarel was after.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zagam sputtered.

“Man, Beelzebub was right,” Daniel chided, smiling at Susan. “You don’t catch on very fast to a change in conditions, do you?”

Zagam made exasperated noises.

“In case you haven’t caught on yet, I was there tonight, at your little shindig. So was my video camera. The camera loves you, by the way. I got the whole thing, including Beelzebub’s rather inventive discipline, in living color.”

Daniel's voice hardened. "You and your kind are finished, Zagam. Once you can't hide among us any more, we'll hunt you down and destroy you.

"My, look at the time. It's getting late. I have to go now, but I just figured I'd call and let you know that your kind's free lunch is officially over.

"See you soon." Daniel hung up.

"Little rough with him, weren't you?" Susan asked. "He's had a rough day."

"Ah, kids?" Jeff spoke up. "Aren't you getting a little carried away? You guys already forgotten what we're up against?"

Susan and Daniel sobered immediately. Daniel started to answer, but Susan cut him off. "He's moving," she said.

"I'm gone," Daniel said, and he rushed out the door. Susan watched him run to the rental car, and then turned to watch Zagam back out of his driveway. As the demon drove down the street and out of sight, Daniel followed at a discrete distance. Their taillights faded out and they were gone.

Turning to Jeff, she picked up one of the walkie-talkies. "Keep an eye out," she said, then she too left the Winnebago, running across the street to Zagam's house.

Warily, Susan edged up to Zagam's front door. Consulting the number she'd hastily scribbled down minutes before, she keyed in the combination to the home security system and held her breath as she watched the light change from red to green.

She opened the door and cautiously stepped inside. The house was dark and cavernous. A living room or den was directly ahead of her, filled with bookshelves, and a staircase led up to her left. She climbed the stairs to find another den, lined wall to wall with bookshelves. Adjoining were a kitchen and dining room (empty, like Daniel said) and another short flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs was a short hallway with doors on either side. In the second door to the right, Susan found what she was looking for.

Zagam's office was what should have been the master bedroom. While one wall held the seemingly requisite bookshelves, the other three housed a massive U-shaped computer and video surveillance console. She sat down and turned the computer on.

While she waited for it to boot up, she turned on the walkie-talkie. "Susan to Jeff," she whispered. "You there?"

"Read you loud and clear, Susan," Jeff drawled from the speaker.

"I found the computer room. I'm trying for access now. Let me know the second you see anything."

"Gotcha."

Susan turned her attention back to the PC and found it asking for a password. Damn! she thought. She should have known that with all the other security Zagam wouldn't leave his computer unprotected, but she had allowed herself to hope anyway. She already lucked out by

guessing Steve's password, and she could only do that because she knew so much about him that she could guess his likely choices. This demon she knew practically nothing about except that he was an unimaginative career bureaucrat, went by the human identity of Richard Birchmere and his true demonic name was—

Susan's hands flew to the keyboard and she typed the name "Zagam".

The login screen disappeared and Zagam's desktop lay before her, ripe for plundering.

She was in.

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## The Burden of Proof

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Daniel tried to follow Zagam as closely as possible without being noticed. The demon was headed downtown, probably towards the Social Security building.

Daniel was still a little riled over Jeff's question. He knew exactly what he was up against, and that was the best part. For the first time in what felt like years, Daniel knew what was going on, what needed to be done. Granted, what needed to be done was to eradicate an immortal race of beings that had preyed on mankind for centuries, but at least he knew he wasn't going mad.

Trying not to follow too close, Daniel trailed Zagam deeper into the labyrinthine, traffic circle infested maze that was downtown Washington D.C.

Zagam pulled up first at a red light, Daniel two car lengths behind. With no warning, Zagam lurched across the intersection to a blare of horns.

"Damn!" Daniel shouted as he too leaned on his horn. He should have known a creature that had been around as long as Zagam could spot, and easily lose, a tail. As soon as the car in front of him was clear, Daniel sped down the streets of Washington, headed for the Social Security building.

As he pulled up in front of the granite building, Zagam's car was nowhere to be seen. The demon wasn't there, but Daniel thought he had a pretty good idea where Zagam was going. He hit the gas and sped back the way he came.

Susan had hit paydirt. Almost everything she could want was in Zagam's computer. Dossiers of thousands of angels and demons, complete histories, current identities, everything. Susan pulled an optical disk out of her bag and started the transfer. There was a lot of data, and the copy would take quite a while. She started poking around the room for anything interesting.

As she expected based on Daniel's account of Batarel's apartment and their examination of Zagam's trash, the books on the shelves were numerous, but limited in scope. The

overwhelming majority were either world history or theology.

On the top shelf to the far left was a dusty, leather bound tome so seemingly ancient that any print on the binding had long since faded from sight. As the progress indicator on the file copy inched slowly towards completion, Susan took the book down and opened it.

Outside and down the street, Jeff kept vigilant with his binoculars. Daniel had been gone a long time, and it seemed like he'd waited forever just since the last time Susan checked in.

Though Jeff was still serious and committed to help, the reality of what they were doing was making him increasingly uneasy. He'd come to accept the idea that the creatures they were plotting against were the actual demons of legend, and while it strengthened his resolve, it terrified him at the same time.

As Jeff panned back up the street, he caught sight of the now familiar gunmetal Mercedes and almost dropped his binoculars. He scrambled for the walkie-talkie.

"Susan, come in," hissed Jeff's voice over the tinny speaker.

Susan hurriedly shoved the book into her bag and keyed the walkie-talkie. "Yes?"

"He's back. I can see his car coming up the street."

"But, Daniel—"

"Is nowhere to be seen. Get out of there. Now."

Susan turned her eyes to the computer screen. The copy was almost, but not quite, finished. Susan spared an anxious look towards the door, then picked up the walkie-talkie again.

"I can't leave yet," she whispered. "It's not done."

"You don't have a choice, kiddo. He's pulling into the driveway. Get out, right now. Take the back door. I mean it."

Susan turned off the walkie-talkie and sat down facing the computer. The progress indicator bar read 98% and was moving too slowly to discern.

Outside, she heard a car door slam.

99%.

Susan looked at the window, above her and to the right. It faced the street, and there was a small section of roof beneath it, leading down to a ten-foot drop over the driveway.

She heard the front door open.

100%. The computer was silent once more.

"Conan!" she heard Zagam shout.

Ripping the disc out of the computer and slamming it into her bag, Susan got up on the computer desk and tried to open the window.

It wouldn't budge.

"Here, boy," Zagam called, sounding much closer this time. Susan wrenched the window with every ounce of force she had.

It moved. Only an inch or so at first, then it flew open as the last of the dirt and corrosion that held it shut broke free.

Susan threw her bag out the window, then followed it as quickly as she could. After a brief pause to collect it outside, she leapt into space.

Landing on the hard, concrete driveway brought a sharp, stabbing pain to her right ankle and bright spots to her eyes. Shaking it off as much as she could, she limped away into the darkness and was out of sight when the light came on in Zagam's computer room.

Daniel met up with the Winnebago at the designated rendezvous, a supermarket parking lot. When he walked in the door, he found Jeff and Susan in jubilant conversation.

"This is fantastic!" Jeff exclaimed.

"Isn't it, though?" Susan answered smugly.

Daniel walked over to where they were and looked over Jeff's shoulder at Susan's notebook computer. It was cycling through a database of faces, alongside columns of text. Names, aliases, histories. Everything they needed to track down any demon in the world.

"Incredible," Daniel whispered.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Susan smiled. She got up and limped across the cabin. "And that's not even the best part."

"What happened to your leg?" Daniel asked.

Susan shrugged. "I had to jump out of Zagam's house. Can't let you hog all the action."

She picked up the ancient leather book she found in Zagam's study. "This," she said, "is the cool part." She handed the book to Daniel.

Daniel unlatched the book and opened it, noting that the book was very, very old. The text was a dialect of Latin he couldn't fully decipher.

"What is it?"

Susan sat back down next to the computer. "It appears to be a text written by a monk around 500 A.D. It's a detailed history of angels and demons, and it jibes much more with what Uriel told us than what we learned in the Bible."

"You can read this?"

"I studied a lot of languages in school. It's amazing how knowing other languages increases your ability to communicate in English. It's a very uncommon dialect of Latin, but I can make out most of it."

Daniel handed the book back to Susan. "So read."

Zagam was incensed. In the thousands of years of life he'd seen, he couldn't remember having a day this bad. After returning from the wild goose chase Cho had coaxed him into, he'd discovered that it had all been a front for that damned reporter to raid his house. Of all the days for the damn dog to disappear!

He found his computer on and the database accessed. He could only assume that Cho and his friends now knew everything. Zagam had to find a way to make sure it didn't get out any further. But if he didn't know where Cho was, what could he do?

Zagam picked up the phone and dialed a number with a San Francisco area code. There was a demon assigned there that owed him a favor dating back to when they were both stationed in Salem.

If he couldn't find Daniel Cho, he could do the next best thing.

Susan read well into the predawn hours of the morning. The book recounted the history of a race of immortal beings, much as had been explained by Uriel. Once united, the angels split in a civil war instigated by the archangel Satan.

The war dragged on for centuries, neither side gaining nor losing much ground. There were rules of engagement, and much care was taken to avoid actually killing one another. As the sides were separated only by ideology, a simple change of heart could theoretically make an angel into a demon or vice versa. Neither side wanted to waste an irreplaceable potential ally.

Finally, as the sunlight began to stream into the windows of the camper and Susan continued her translation of the history of the war, Daniel, Susan and Jeff found what they were looking for.

"The demon Baraqel had committed many atrocities against mankind, and with a heavy heart Michael thusly decreed that Baraqel be destroyed.

"A dozen angels stalked Baraqel as ten winters passed. Finally cornering the demon in a ravine, the angels set upon him with swords.

"Baraqel fought fiercely, and his wounds healed almost as quickly as they were inflicted. The angels fought day and night, giving no quarter, until near the sunset of the third day, Baraqel tired and fell. His wounds no longer healed quickly enough, and the angels cut him to pieces. The pieces were separated, burned and the ashes scattered to the four winds, and Baraqel was no more.

"Their task completed, the angels each cut off one of their own fingers to honor the memory of their fallen brother and former comrade, Baraqel."

Susan closed the book and put it down.

"They can be killed."

"I'll be damned," Jeff breathed.

“We finally have a weapon,” Daniel said. “Now we just have to figure out a way to use it.”

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## Changes

« ^ »

Daniel woke later to the early afternoon sunlight streaming through the window of the motel room the three of them had rented. As he rubbed his eyes and sat up, he couldn't believe that it had only been twenty-four hours since he'd climbed on top of that warehouse in Old Town. It was amazing how much life could change in a single day.

He got up, stretched, and walked over to the bathroom. Susan was out cold on the other bed, and Jeff snored softly on the couch. As Daniel closed the bathroom door, he took survey of what he saw in the mirror. He had aged. There were lines around his eyes that weren't there two weeks ago, and he could swear he saw gray hairs on a head that hadn't even seen thirty years yet. Stress, he thought. Well, a lot of that's about to turn around.

As he walked back into the motel room, he was startled by a knock on the door. He checked his watch; it was one thirty. Maybe they missed checkout? As Susan stirred awake and Jeff continued snoring, Daniel walked to the door and looked through the peephole.

There was no one there.

Cautiously, Daniel opened the door and looked out, squinting into the bright sunlight. Before he could react, a strong hand appeared out of nowhere and lifted him off his feet.

“No, no, no! Terrible! Never do that!” Uriel admonished Daniel before putting him down. The angel strode past him into the motel room and knocked Jeff's feet out of the way before taking a seat on the couch.

After looking out the door and seeing no one else, Daniel closed the door and turned to face Uriel. “How did you find us?”

“It wasn't that hard,” Uriel answered, reclining comfortably as Jeff sat next to him and struggled to pull himself together. “I placed a tracking device on your camper last night before I spoke to you.”

“You can do that?” Susan asked.

“Just because I'm older than recorded human history doesn't mean I'm limited to archaic means. We angels are every bit as technically adept as humans, if not more so. We keep up with the times. And so do the demons. If it was this easy for me to track you down, it won't be that much harder for Zagam.”

Uriel had the humans' undivided attention.

“Which brings me to my reason for dropping in on you today. It has come to my attention that you raided Zagam's house last night, and made off with quite a bit of potentially damaging information. Bravo. Smug bastard's had it coming for centuries.

“Still, that said, it doesn’t change the fact that you three are now the most endangered creatures on the planet. Before last night, you were a nuisance to the demons, a thorn in Zagam’s side, nothing more. Zagam isn’t that popular, so many of the demons probably found you a source of amusement. Mortals that learn our secret aren’t quite as rare as you might think, but there’s usually not much they can do about it, short of getting themselves committed.

“All that has changed. Now, you three are a legitimate threat. You alone can prove our existence to the world beyond a reasonable doubt. And, as you probably also know, human weapons technology is finally powerful enough to end even our lives. Zagam and his fellow demons won’t let it come to that. They will stop at nothing to prevent you from passing on the information that you possess. I had to shake two of them this morning just so I could meet with you without leading them here.

“With all that in mind, I offer some advice. Change your appearance. Zagam will have seen to it that every demon on the Eastern Seaboard knows what you look like. Ditch the camper. Batarel, at least, knows it quite well, and you can’t afford to be recognized. Lastly, lie as low as you can until you get that information out, confirmed, and believed. Wide exposure for this information is your only salvation. Once their existence and nature is exposed, the demons will have bigger problems on their hands than what to do with you. Good luck.” He got up and walked to the door.

“Wait!” Daniel shouted.

The angel turned. “Yes?”

“What about you? What will you be doing?”

“The angels and I will watch, and act when the time is right. For reasons beyond mortal understanding, we can’t get involved yet, at least not directly. We will watch, and offer what little protection we can.”

“But why can’t you help us directly?” Susan asked. “Why can’t you go public on your own?”

Uriel lingered in the doorway. “Imagine, if you will, what would happen if I, in my identity as a prominent businessman, called a press conference and confessed that it was all a front, that I was actually an immortal protector of humanity, what they would refer to as an angel? They’d fit me for a straight jacket on the spot. And believe me, that’s getting off easy. It wasn’t too long ago that sort of talk would get one burned at the stake for heresy. Do you know how long burns like that take to heal, even for one of us? No, the revelation about our existence must come from a third party, from a human. We will help you when and where we can. But watch your backs.” The angel walked out the door and turned the corner.

Daniel, Jeff and Susan all rushed out the door after him, only to find Uriel had once again vanished without a trace.

“How the heck does he do that?” Jeff asked.

Batarel fumed. Word leaked out quickly about what had happened to Zagam, and from

that, that Cho had actually been at the meeting, and recorded it. It was more important than ever that the mortal be silenced. Unfortunately, the speck had disappeared. He and his bitch reporter had fallen off the face of the Earth.

He had to find them, and stop them. For the safety of his people and the sanctity of their mission, Batarel had no other choice. And knowing modern humans as he did, Batarel knew the perfect place to start.

"I wish I felt better about this," Jeff muttered, stepping out of his camper and lugging a battered suitcase.

They were in the long-term parking lot of Dulles International Airport, more than half an hour's drive from the D.C. city limits. It was early evening, and the sound of aircraft carried quite well in the cooling, humid air.

"I've told you, it makes perfect sense," Daniel replied, the five o'clock shadow on his face nearly as long as the shaved hair on his head. "We needed to find a place to stash your camper and rent a car the demon's aren't likely to trace to us. This does both."

"And," Susan, now a blonde, said as she opened the trunk of their huge rental sedan, "if anyone does spot it, all the way out here, they'll think we skipped town."

"I know," Jeff grumbled, putting his suitcase gingerly in the trunk. "It's just that this old girl has been my home for almost nine years. I don't like leaving her behind."

"Hey," Daniel said as he opened the passenger door for Jeff, "it's not like you'll never see it again. In just a few more weeks, this'll all be over, thank God."

With one last look over his shoulder, Jeff got into the car.

Barely ten minutes after they left, Batarel's battered brown Buick pulled into Dulles International Airport.

Hours later and three thousand miles away, two demons got out of a car in San Francisco. While one removed gas cans from the trunk, the other walked up to the front door of the Cho Vegetarian Grocery. Ignoring the sign on the door that read "closed", the demon grabbed the doorknob and simply ripped the door off its hinges.

Responding to the clatter, two Koreans in their fifties appeared from the back room, a man and a woman. The demon recognized them as his targets, Ronald and Delores Cho.

"What are you doing here?" Ronald demanded. "We're closed! My God, look what you've done to my door!"

Without a sound, the demon stepped forward, took Ronald's head in his hands, and snapped Ronald Cho's neck.

Delores ran screaming to the stockroom as the second demon entered and began sloshing gasoline over the store's shelves and floor. The first demon followed her.

Delores was hysterical. "Please, don't kill me," she begged. She frantically scrambled to the desk in the corner and grabbed a handful of photos of Daniel and his sisters, Kathy and Samantha. "Take what you want, but let me live. I have children. They need me."

The demon said nothing.

Delores began to rock herself back and forth. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," she recited as the demon approached her, "I will fear no evil..."

The demon put a hand gently on either side of her head, twisted sharply, and Daniel's mother lay still.

In the other room, the second demon put down his gas can and lit a match.

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## Victory and Defeat

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Susan had recommended a hotel in D.C. not too far from the Post offices. Just as they settled in and began the long process of collating all their information into a presentable format, the phone rang. The three of them exchanged a look. No one was supposed to know where they were.

"Maybe it's the front desk," Daniel said as he picked up the phone.

"You'll have to do better than that, Daniel," rang Uriel's voice on the other end of the line.

Daniel was startled, but not really surprised. "How did you know we were here?"

"By having you followed. We've become quite adept at surveillance, over the millennia. It might interest you to know that we also spotted Batarel lurking about at Dulles shortly after you left, asking all kinds of questions."

"Was he in long term parking?" Daniel asked.

"If by that you mean, did he see the camper, yes, he did. He doesn't have the same resources I do, but it's relatively easy for him to verify that you did not catch a flight out of Dulles. He's well on his way to tracking you down. And getting a hotel room within walking distance of Miss Richardson's newspaper was an act of dubious judgment."

Daniel paused a moment to think. "Does this work both ways?"

"Does what work both ways?"

"Well," Daniel began, "if you can find out all this information about the demons, can you also leak information to them?"

Daniel listened for a long time to silence from the angel. Finally, Uriel answered him. "What did you have in mind?"

The next morning found Jeff and Daniel in an abandoned warehouse in Crystal City, Arlington, just south of the Pentagon. If Uriel did what he said he'd do, Batarel would "track" them to the warehouse by nightfall. In the meantime, they had work to do. They were rigging numerous makeshift pipe bombs to various locations in the warehouse.

"You're sure this will work," Daniel said.

"Sure?" Jeff replied. "Hell no! But I think, yeah, we have a good shot."

Jeff paused in his work and faced Daniel. "I have no illusions about what we're doing, Daniel. We're relying on an old man's wartime knowledge of explosives to mine a warehouse in hopes of killing an immortal demon. We'll be lucky if we don't blow ourselves up before Batarel ever gets here."

"That's chipper."

"Well, you asked. Now shut up and hand me that wrench."

Choking down their nerves, the men got back to work.

Batarel arrived at the warehouse by dusk, just as Uriel predicted. Daniel waited inside and tried to quiet the butterflies in his stomach. For the umpteenth time, Daniel reached into the pockets of his jacket and grabbed his only protection, two Korean War-era grenades Jeff had given him. Jeff had briefed him on their use, but a grenade was an imprecise weapon at best, and Daniel hoped he wouldn't have to use them. He didn't want to blow himself up.

Provided the bombs didn't get him when they got Batarel. After checking that his escape route was clear, he grabbed the remote detonator and checked Batarel's progress. The demon was about to enter the mined area of the warehouse and was beginning to look discouraged.

It was showtime.

Batarel was growing suspicious. Cho and his cronies were nowhere to be seen. Was it possible that his sources had given him false information?

"Batarel."

The demon spun around and between two crates near the back door stood Daniel Cho.

"Where are your friends?"

"Around," Daniel said casually.

It finally dawned on Batarel that he might be walking into a trap. He looked around and noticed the pipe bombs taped to crates and shelves all around him. Batarel knew exactly what those bombs could do to flesh, even immortal flesh. "No, I—"

"Goodbye," Daniel said. As he lunged out the back door, he punched the button on the detonator.

Daniel rolled to his feet outside the warehouse, his leap given distance by the concussion of

the blast. The pavement was littered with broken glass and Daniel could see a flickering glow inside the building from small fires spawned by the explosion. He got up and walked back inside. He had to get confirmation.

The pipe bombs had packed a bigger punch than he expected. No structure inside was left intact. There was a sizable chunk of debris in the center of the warehouse, roughly where Batarel stood at the instant of the explosion.

The pile began to move. "That," it said, "hurt."

Daniel stood his ground, frozen in place.

"You insignificant little speck," Batarel said, shaking rubble off his scorched and tattered shoulders. "Did you actually think you could destroy me?"

Daniel couldn't take his eyes off of the demon. A human that had taken the same damage would've been killed instantly. A human certainly wouldn't be pulling himself to his feet and getting angry.

Batarel began to walk, slowly, purposefully, towards Daniel. "You've made the last mistake of your worthless life, mortal."

Daniel began backstepping and he reached into his jacket pocket for the first grenade. As he popped the pin, he began counting to himself.

Three...

Batarel was picking up speed, clenching his charred and ruined hands.

Two...

Daniel moved a step away from the door.

"One!" he shouted as he threw the grenade and leapt.

He heard a clang and a laugh as the grenade bounced past Batarel. It didn't go off!

The next thing Daniel knew he was outside the building and being held off his feet.

"That was clever, speck," Batarel hissed. "Pity it didn't work."

Up close, Batarel looked much worse than Daniel had previously thought. Most of the demon's skin had either been flayed or burned off his face, and there was a gaping hole in his chest where three of his ribs had been ripped away. The smell of burning flesh was overpowering, and Daniel couldn't help but gag.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Daniel," Batarel sneered, the tatters of flesh hanging from his face shaking with his outrage. "Do I disgust you?"

Daniel reached frantically into his jacket.

"You think you're so smart," Batarel continued, "don't you, mortal?"

Daniel shook his head, playing for time as he got a grip on the final grenade.

"Yes, you do. I know you do. I've seen your kind come and go. Individually, you're

meaningless, worthless. You think you know so much, you think you're so important, but the seventy-odd years you're limited to just isn't enough for you to see the big picture. It's different for us. I'm immortal. I've got perspective. There's more to this existence than you or your kind could ever possibly comprehend."

Batarel shook Daniel violently. "Pity you'll never even get the chance. I will not allow you to jeopardize our mission. Say goodnight, Daniel."

Daniel popped the pin from the grenade with his thumb. "Goodnight, Daniel," he hissed as he shoved the live grenade into the space where Batarel's ribs used to be.

"What?" Batarel said as he dropped Daniel and groped at his torso. Daniel rolled away and hugged the ground as the demon exploded.

Daniel raised his head and looked at the aftermath. None of the charred and burning chunks of flesh was larger than a softball. Batarel, the demon that destroyed his life, was gone. Forever.

Daniel reached into his jacket for his radio. "It's over," he said after he punched the transmit button.

It was over.

Jeff and Susan picked up Daniel in the car and ran him back to the hotel before the cops or fire department could arrive. Daniel was tired as hell, but Jeff had enough energy for all three of them. "Didn't I tell you, Daniel? It worked! Damn if it didn't work!"

"Well, the bombs hurt him, but what saved my life was the other things you gave me."

"The grenades?"

"Yeah," Daniel said as he reclined on one of the beds and turned on a cable news network for background noise. "The first one was a dud, but the second one was pretty damn effective."

Daniel proceeded to tell them the details of his fight with Batarel.

"What do you think he meant by 'the big picture'?" Susan asked.

Daniel wasn't listening. "Shhh," he said as he turned up the television.

"The police have released the names of the deceased as Ronald and Delores Cho," the newscaster said, "killed last night before someone set a gasoline fire in their privately owned San Francisco grocery store."

"Oh my God," Susan breathed.

The television screen was full of the aftermath of the blaze. Daniel's parents' store had burned almost to the ground, only the metal parts of the building left standing amidst the ashes. The network cut back to the anchor.

"Police have confirmed foul play, but have yet to produce a motive. The cash register and safe were still stocked with money.

“At the same time as the attack on Ronald and Delores Cho, their private home was also burned to the ground, claiming the lives of their two daughters, Kathy and Samantha.

“San Francisco Detective Lieutenant Robert Forsberg had this to say.”

“This doesn’t have the makings of a hate crime,” Forsberg said at a press conference. “The bodies were not defiled, and the victims were killed quickly and efficiently. All the evidence would seem to point to a professional hit. We’re investigating any possible connection with organized crime, and we’ll let you know as soon as we find anything.”

Daniel clicked the remote and the picture tube went blank. He sat motionless and silent for a long moment before uttering one word.

“Zagam.”

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## Vengeance



The mood in the hotel room had changed very quickly.

“I’ll kill him,” Daniel vowed as he lunged for the door.

“Whoa, there, bucko,” Susan said as she stepped between Daniel and the door. Jeff walked over to stand beside her.

“If you go after Zagam now,” Susan continued, “he’ll rip you apart. You’d be lucky to get past the front door.”

“I don’t care. I’m going.”

Jeff reached up and placed his palm flat on Daniel’s chest. “Daniel,” he said quietly, but with more force and authority than Daniel had ever heard, “sit down.”

Daniel sat.

Jeff stood over him, his aged body somehow managing to look imposing. “Daniel, Susan’s right. Zagam did this terrible thing to get to you, and if you go charging over there looking for revenge, you’ll just get yourself killed. He’s waiting for you, and you can’t afford to play his game.

“So here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to stay right here and help Susan and me prepare the story. You have more firsthand knowledge than we do, and we need you too much right now to let you get yourself killed. Later, when the story’s out, you’ll have the opportunity and the means to take the bastard out.”

“No.” Daniel started to get up, but Jeff pushed him back in the seat.

“You don’t understand!” Daniel screamed. “That monster—”

“I understand!” Jeff yelled in Daniel’s face. “I understand better than you’ll ever know! I

know how it burns, knowing that bastard's out there and that the cops'll never catch him. I know how your heart cries out for vengeance. But as hard as this may be to accept, you have more important things to do right now.

"You can die tomorrow. We need you today."

Daniel finally broke down and began to sob. Susan put her arm around him, and the three humans were quiet for a while.

An hour later Daniel was sound asleep on one of the beds while Susan sat with Jeff in the kitchen, talking quietly about what they'd do after the story was released.

"It's just going to be so nice," Susan said, "to finally stop living in hotel rooms and be able to go home again."

"You can't go home again, Susan," Jeff smirked, then his face grew solemn. "I don't care what Uriel said about the demons having bigger fish to fry than us once the news is out. There's always going to be somebody looking for a little payback."

"Oh," Susan said. That reminded her of something. "Jeff, can I ask you a question?"

Jeff smiled. "Since when do reporters ask permission?"

"When Daniel wanted to go kill Zagam and said you didn't understand, you said you did, far better than he'd ever know. What did you mean?"

Jeff's lighthearted yet sarcastic manner, so much a part of his personality that Susan didn't even notice it anymore, vanished. He looked like a different, and far older, person. "Oh," he said, "that.

"You see Susan, I've been exactly where Daniel is right now. I know how he feels because he is me, a me from a long time ago. It all started about the time I got this," he said, tapping on his metal leg.

"I'd just had the misfortune of stepping on a land mine in Korea. The docs couldn't save my leg, so they took it off and sent me home. I was very upset about losing my leg, but I've always been a roll-with-the-punches kind of guy, so instead of dwelling on my disability, I focused all the way home on seeing my family, my wife, Rose, and my son, Jeremy. I may have lost a leg, but I was going home to be with the people I loved more than anything in the world.

"What I didn't know was that somewhere over the Pacific Ocean I must have crossed paths with the letter from the State Department informing me of their murders."

Susan's jaw dropped.

"It had been a botched burglary. The thief woke up Rose and Jeremy by accident, and when they discovered him he panicked and shot them both.

"But you see, he wasn't completely incompetent. He left no fingerprints, and after the shootings he must have decided not to take anything that could be traced. He made off with all the cash in the house and disappeared. The cops never caught him. To this day, the murders of Rose and Jeremy Frankel remain officially unsolved."

"Officially," Susan repeated.

"Right. The cops didn't catch him, but I did.

"Maybe I'd seen too many damn detective movies, I don't know, but I decided I was going to track down the man that took my family from me and have my revenge. I went to a lot of bars on the ugly side of town and spent a lot of money I really didn't have to spend, but I finally got a name and address.

"The guy's name was Joel Rushing. I waited in an alley outside his apartment with a Saturday night special I'd picked up in a pawnshop. For three nights I watched him go in and out, until I was sure it was him, then I made my move.

"The next time he walked in front of my hiding place in the alley, I grabbed him and threw him into the shadows, almost falling off my fake leg in the process. I whipped out the gun and told him who I was.

"He said he didn't know what I was talking about, but his eyes told a different story. I called him a liar and a murderer, and told him he'd never be able to hurt anyone again. I pulled the trigger.

"But the gun didn't go off, you see. It jammed. While I struggled to clear it, he pulled out a knife and plunged it into my stomach. He knelt down to me and whispered, 'And I got away with it,' then ran off into the night.

"I was lucky. The knife missed all my vital organs, and I managed to crawl back to the sidewalk. Some kind soul called the ambulance that got me to the hospital before I bled to death. While I was laid up, I told the cops my story, about Rushing and where he lived, but they never found him. He skipped town and for all I know he's still out there somewhere to this day."

"That's terrible," Susan said.

"The worst part is that I still wonder if he'd have been caught and convicted if I'd gone to the cops right away with what I knew, instead of trying to exact my own vengeance. I just don't know.

"Of course, as far as I know, Joel Rushing was no demon, not literally, anyway. Daniel just needs to understand that once word gets out about them, Zagam will be hunted down and destroyed. Then and only then will Daniel have his revenge."

"Oh, I understand that perfectly," came Daniel's voice from the living room.

As he walked into the light of the kitchen, Daniel looked different, stronger and more confident than before. "And if I'm not mistaken," he continued, "we've got work to do."

The three of them worked until very early the next morning putting together Susan's story and organizing the data into the most easily understood presentation. Daniel was full of energy, and his firsthand observations of the demons proved invaluable to Susan in bringing life to the story. When the sunlight finally streamed into the windows of the hotel room, Susan was just typing the final sentence of what she felt was the finest work of her career. Daniel and Jeff were

toasting each other, and her, and they were a little punchy from lack of sleep.

Finally, the end of their ordeal was in sight. The story was done. All they had to do was deliver it.

Susan woke up a few hours later to the sound of commotion and cursing. She forced her eyes open and found Jeff strapping on his leg and muttering.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Damn kid’s gone and done it,” Jeff replied. “Daniel’s gone and I’ll give you three guesses where he went. First two don’t count.”

“Damn!” Susan got up and started putting on her shoes.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jeff demanded. “You’ve got a story to deliver, missy. I’ll corral Daniel before he gets himself killed.”

Jeff opened the door and began to walk out. “I hope,” he added before the door swung shut behind him.

Daniel lurked outside Zagam’s house in the hot midday sun. He’d made half a dozen pipe bombs before he arrived and carried them in a backpack slung over his left shoulder. He’d listened closely as Susan recounted her story of being inside the demon’s house, and he thought he had a pretty good mental picture of the layout.

He didn’t know if the demon would be home during the day, but Daniel was determined to plant the bombs one way or another. If Zagam wasn’t home, Daniel would just have to wait until the demon arrived to detonate them. He just hoped he’d have the chance to kill the bastard face to face.

Daniel crept through the bushes to the back of the house. The dog he and Susan had met before was nowhere to be seen. He walked uncontested to the glass patio door.

It was locked, of course. Daniel was in no mood to be subtle. He grabbed a rock and hurled it through the glass.

No alarm.

Daniel was beginning to get suspicious. This was too easy. He carefully walked through the living room to the first short flight of stairs by the foyer.

Daniel walked forward into the den. It was vacant, so he hung a right at the far end and into the dining room and adjoining kitchen (which showed the telltale demonic trait of disuse; however the demons sustained themselves, they apparently didn’t eat), finally exiting the kitchen back where he started, at the stairs of the split-level house, one staircase leading up, the other back down to the foyer. He still saw no sign of anyone else in the house.

The only place left to check was the top floor. Daniel carefully climbed the stairs and walked down a hallway with two doors on either side, just as Susan described. The last door on the right, the computer room, was open, and Daniel headed straight for it.

No sooner had he passed the first two doors than a demon appeared out of each. They said nothing, but ushered him ahead into the computer room. When Daniel crossed the threshold, he discovered why.

“Welcome, Mister Cho, to my humble abode, though I believe you have been here before,” Zagam said, reclining comfortably in front of the computer’s main console. “These are my associates, Moloc and Sariel. You’re going to tell me everything you know about your little friends’ plans, including what they plan to do with the data they stole from me.

“And then, if you’re lucky, you will die.”

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## Retribution

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Jeff sat in the car outside Zagam’s house. As he drove up, he could have sworn he saw Daniel lurking in the bushes, but the kid was nowhere to be seen now. “Screw it,” he said to himself. “No time like the present.”

Jeff got out of the car and opened the trunk. Inside was an antique bazooka, the last remnant of his once extensive gun collection. When he sold his house and moved into the camper, he had to sell most of his guns to make room for more essential possessions, but he couldn’t bear to give up the bazooka. Somewhere else along the line he’d picked up some shells for it. He hoped they still worked.

Thusly armed, Jeff trotted across the street as fast as his steel leg would carry him and headed around back.

He noticed immediately that the patio door was shattered. Either this was a tougher neighborhood than he thought, or he was on the right track; Daniel had been here. Avoiding loose shards of glass, he stepped inside.

He heard voices upstairs, and one of them sounded vaguely like Daniel. After making sure the bazooka was ready to fire, he climbed the first flight of stairs. In the den between the first and second flights, the voices were clearer. He stopped to listen.

“Come now, Cho. I know you can tell me how to retrieve my files, and the sooner you do so, the sooner this will all be over. You can’t be very comfortable,” said someone, probably Zagam.

“No?” the voice continued. “Very well. Right ring finger.”

“Yes, Zagam,” another voice answered.

Jeff heard a sickening crack followed by Daniel’s scream of pain. The sick bastards were torturing him!

Jeff momentarily aimed the bazooka up the second flight of stairs, only to realize he’d get Daniel too. Well, he thought, if not all together, one at a time. He shifted his aim down the first

flight of stairs, the way he came, and pulled the trigger.

With a whoosh of air the shell flew down the stairs and into the floor of the foyer, where it promptly exploded. Jeff ran backwards and took cover in the dining room.

"We're under attack!" he heard Zagam yell. Within moments, two demons he'd never seen leapt down the stairs. As soon as the first one was clear, Jeff let him have it with the bazooka. Body parts flew and the demon was gone.

One down ..., Jeff thought as he dodged the blast into the kitchen.

"Zagam!" the second demon screamed. "He has a bazooka!"

"What of it, coward?" There was a pause, then, "Hold your fire, human. I'm coming down."

Suddenly Jeff realized he was in something of an inopportune strategic location. As Zagam reached the bottom of the stairs and stood in the doorway to the kitchen, remarkably unconcerned that the two bazooka blasts had set his house afire, the other demon entered the dining room by way of the den. They were both carrying pistols, and they had him in a textbook crossfire.

"My my my," Zagam mused as the flames from the foyer climbed the lower staircase behind him. "Cho and his little playmates are just popping out of the woodwork, aren't they? And this one, really. You're nearly as old as I am. And threatening an immortal with that relic."

"Did a pretty good job on your buddy in there," Jeff said, mustering all the bravado he could.

"Yes, well, Sariel was caught unawares. He was always impetuous. Moloc and I are far more careful, and more than capable of dodging a shell we can see coming. Put down the weapon, old man, and we just might let you live."

"In a pig's eye," Jeff spat. "I've seen what your kind is capable of."

"Well we can't let mere mortals get in the way of our mission, can we? It's for your own good, you know. You need us."

"Fuck you," Daniel said as he leapt down the stairs and tackled Zagam, bringing his cast down hard on the demon's head.

Jeff whirled and pulled the trigger on Moloc just as the demon opened fire. Moloc didn't dodge after all, and burst apart in flames as Jeff sank to the floor, a bullet in his chest.

"Jeff!" Daniel screamed as Zagam collected himself and pistol-whipped Daniel in the temple.

Daniel didn't crumple quite the way Zagam expected. He rolled off the demon immediately, kicking the gun out of his hand and into the fire.

"Bad move, human. That was your only weapon."

"No," Daniel said, pulling out the same detonator he'd used on Batarel. "This is."

Zagam looked down and noticed for the first time in all the commotion a pipe bomb in his

waistband.

Daniel pressed the button as he dove behind the minibar. The explosion shook the walls and when Daniel got up it took a second to see the results through all the smoke.

Zagam wasn't dead. His legs and lower torso were completely gone, but nonetheless he was clawing his way up the remains of the stairs. Daniel caught him and rolled him over.

"That was for what you did to me, to my life." He produced another bomb and armed it. "This is for my family, you son of a bitch."

Daniel shoved the bomb deep into the hot, slick mass of Zagam's exposed entrails. Without another word, Daniel took cover in the kitchen and pressed the button.

And Zagam was no more.

As the flames crawled slowly into the kitchen, Daniel rushed to Jeff's side. Silently he hoisted Jeff up onto his shoulder and rushed away from the flames, into the dining room. A sliding glass patio door opened out from there onto an elevated wooden deck, and Daniel was soon resting Jeff on that deck and examining the wound.

"Daniel?" Jeff croaked.

"Don't speak, Jeff. You need to conserve your strength."

"Bullshit," the old man replied. "I'm dying and I know it. And I'm going to have my last words whether you like it or not."

Daniel already had a tear in his eye because he knew Jeff was right, but he smiled anyway.

"Thank you," Jeff continued.

"For what?" Daniel heard the sounds of sirens in the distance, police or ambulances or firemen.

"I told you that first day, right before we got that cast on your arm, that I was looking for something to do with my life. I didn't do too well in the army, and the chance to be a good husband and father was taken away from me before I really got the hang of it, but I could help you and Susan do this. You're going to change the world, Daniel. And I wanted to thank you for letting me have a hand in it."

The sirens were getting closer. "We've got to get you to a hospital," Daniel said.

"No, we don't. I'm finished. And it's okay, you know? With all the stuff we've seen, I don't know anymore if there's really a Saint Peter waiting for me at the Pearly Gates, but if there is, I can finally look him in the eye and say that Jeff Frankel meant something. That I made a difference, that I was important. I've waited my whole life to be able to say that."

Jeff paused for a moment, gathering the remains of his strength.

"It's time for you to go, Daniel."

Daniel started to cry in spite of himself. "I'm not leaving you like this."

"Yes, you are. I'm dying, quicker by the minute. Things will be different in a few days, once

the story's hit, but for today we just killed a highly placed government employee and destroyed his home. My prints are all over that bazooka, but you can still be long gone by the time they find my dead body.

"Go, Daniel. Change the world. It's all right. Say goodbye and walk away."

Choking back his tears, Daniel leaned forward and hugged the dying old man that had been his friend, advisor and companion during the darkest time Daniel had ever known.

"Goodbye," he whispered in Jeff's ear, then he rose, vaulted the railing on his good arm and ran down the alleyway behind the house.

Jeff watched Daniel run to safety, then relaxed, closed his eyes, and died.

While Daniel and Jeff were still fighting their way out of Zagam's house, Harold Preston met Susan in the lobby of the Post building, accompanied by two security guards.

"Susan, what the Hell's going on here?" he demanded. "Where have you been all this time? Why did you demand a security escort? Did you know Steve's been accusing you of raiding his files? Since when have you had blonde hair?"

Susan, looking much older than he remembered, merely smiled and produced an optical disk from her purse. "All here, chief. The biggest story the Post has ever printed."

Harold took the disk and looked at Susan. It wasn't the smug posturing that he was used to seeing from Susan that he saw now. It was the calm self-assurance of a seasoned reporter.

"Let's take this upstairs," he said.

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## Revelation

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Susan and Harold went up to his office with two armed guards, one on either side, a scene not lost on Steve Dunbar. One guard stayed in front of the office door after they went in, the other walked away. Steve finished typing the sentence he was on, then got up and walked over to Harold's office door.

"John," he said to the guard, a burly man he occasionally had a beer with, "what's going on? Is Suzie in trouble?"

The guard looked nervously up and down the newsroom, then said, "She's got some big story brewing. I'm not supposed to tell you."

Steve was taken aback. "Me? Specifically? Come on, man, what the hell did I do to deserve this?"

"For crying out loud, would you keep your voice down? I don't know any more. She had a big story on computer disk, real hush-hush, and she didn't want you, specifically, to be in on

it. Now go away before you get me in trouble.”

Steve went back to his desk, picked up the phone, and dialed a number from memory.

“You have reached the residence of Richard Birchmere. I’m not in right now—”

Damn, Steve thought. The voicemail picked up right away, meaning the line was in use. He didn’t have time to wait until he could get through. He had to act on his own. He had a pretty good idea what was going on, given the rumors he’d heard as of late.

Steve got up and walked calmly over to the door. “Sorry to do this, John,” he said, “but you’re in my way.”

Without further comment, Steve lifted the security guard, a man that outweighed him by at least a hundred pounds, and flung him effortlessly down the hall. He then twisted open the locked door and stepped into Harold’s office. “Knock, knock.”

Susan was already up and standing near the window, hands behind her back. Harold sat off to the side, behind his desk, and though he looked surprised, it wasn’t the shock and fear Steve had seen so often before, but the surprise in confirmation of something he hadn’t really believed.

“Suzie Q, what are you up to?” Steve sneered.

“Your downfall, Steve. Or should I call you Nybras?”

At the mention of his true name, the smile fell off the demon’s face. So the rumors were true; Susan had been working with Cho, and they had really discovered proof of the demons’ existence.

“Poor, misguided Susan,” he said. “You don’t really think I’m going to let you do this, do you?”

“You don’t really think I’d come this far, knowing what you really are, without protection, do you?” she answered.

Nybras stepped forward. “What do you have behind your back, there? A secret weapon? Come now, Susan, I expected better of you. What is it? Silver? Holy water? Not that it matters. Time to die.”

“Come and get me, you sick bastard.”

Nybras took another step forward, then his caution got the better of him. These upstart humans had killed Batarel, or so he’d heard. What did Susan have up her sleeve? As Harold nervously backed his chair to the wall, Nybras decided it didn’t matter. No mere human was going to get in his way. He lunged at Susan.

Remembering what Daniel taught her, Susan stepped into his lunge and got her center of gravity underneath him. In one swift motion, before Nybras really knew what was going on, she flipped him towards the window.

The glass shattered as Nybras hurtled through the pane, but he caught the edge on the way out and did not fall, instead hanging from the sill by his fingertips.

“Clever, mortal,” he hissed through the already disappearing blood and pain, “but I fear only a momentary stay of execution.”

Susan stood at the window and smiled down at the demon. “You know, ‘Steve’, I never really liked you. In fact, I always kinda wanted to do this in college.”

In one hand, she held Jeff’s last Korean-era grenade. With the other hand, she pulled the pin. “So long, ‘Steve’,” she said as she stuffed the grenade down his shirt.

“No!” Nybras shouted, and in his panic to remove the grenade, he let go of the ledge. He exploded halfway down, showering the cars below with gore.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Harold said.

“That’s probably the last time it will,” Susan answered, turning away from the window. “We’ve been able to kill them so easily only because they’re arrogant and not used to being threatened. Soon they’ll stop underestimating us and taking them down will become orders of magnitude harder.”

With a shrug of her shoulders, Susan put that thought behind her. “In the meantime,” she said, “we’ve got a story to put out.”

Less than a week later, Susan’s story, along with all the corroborating evidence, was released to an unsuspecting public. The Post released a special edition devoted entirely to what they dubbed “the story of the millennium,” and nearly every major news service on the planet picked it up soon after.

Like most major revelations, the news caused neither immediate nor dramatic reaction. It took a while for the full effect to sink in. The United Nations called a special session to determine what to do about “the demon problem”.

For her part, Susan won the Pulitzer Prize, fulfilling a dream she’d had since childhood. She became a hot property in the news industry, and suddenly had more to do as a respected journalist than she knew what to do with.

And life went on.

Once Susan’s story cleared his name, Daniel returned to his old job and his old apartment. He was happy for Susan’s success (even though the only time she’d had to speak to him was at Jeff’s funeral), but he was happy mostly just to get his old, boring life back.

And that’s when they found him.

Daniel had just got off what was only his second day back on the job, and he was discovering that he wasn’t that happy after all. The cliché was right; you really couldn’t go home again. He’d gone out on only two calls in as many days. The rest of his time was spent answering questions about his ordeal. It didn’t seem to matter to anyone that he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Daniel was deep in thought over this topic when he opened the door to his apartment. Inside were three men in conservative dark suits.

“Daniel Cho?” the lead one asked.

Daniel should have been outraged, but he felt only resigned fatigue. Once you’ve fought demons and won, he mused, government spooks can’t intimidate you. “Yes. Can I help you gentlemen with something?”

“My name is Paul Simonson, Mister Cho. I represent a new organization that needs your help.”

Daniel walked over the sink and got a glass of water. “Is that a fact.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, sir. As I’m sure you’re aware, the United Nations has finally come to a resolution on the demon issue.”

Daniel plopped down on the couch. “I hadn’t heard.”

“Sir, we represent the UN Demon Task Force. The DTF’s charter is to seek out and destroy the demons that you, Mister Frankel and Miss Richardson uncovered.”

“Sorry, boys, but I’m out of the demon hunting business.”

Simonson nodded to his companions. They promptly got up and left the apartment.

“Mister Cho, I can understand your feelings. If I’d been through what you just went through, I’d have had my fill of it too. But this is bigger than you or me. We need your experience. The demons have been preying on mankind for millennia. They’re the greatest threat our species has ever faced. And if we’re going to wipe them out, we need someone who knows them, how they think. We need you.”

“Why don’t you call the angels? Uriel was very helpful.”

Simonson looked at his shoes. “We haven’t been able to reach them. Please, sir. Mankind needs you.”

Daniel had finally had enough. “Don’t you people get it? Those damn things ruined my life, almost killed me, they killed my family and one of the best friends I ever knew. I’m through with them. Hell, it’s because of me, Jeff and Susan that you even know about them. I’ve done my part. You can do the rest without me.”

Simonson stood in silence for a long moment. “Very well, if that’s your final word, that’s what I’ll relay to my superiors. On a personal note, I must say I’m very disappointed. You’re quite a hero to millions of people, myself included. We really could have used your help in this. We’re trying to change the world.” He turned to leave.

Change the world. Jeff’s dying words came rushing back to Daniel. What the hell was he doing?

“Simonson.”

The agent stopped with his hand on the doorknob.

“I’m in,” Daniel said.

Thus began the effort to exterminate the demons, an effort dubbed by the media as the Demonic Crusade.

And Jeff was right.

The world would never be quite the same again.

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## ***BOOK II: CRUSADE***

### **New Beginning**

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SAN FRANCISCO. SIX MONTHS LATER.

Colonel Daniel Cho stood in the cold bay wind at the foot of his mother's grave. He was dressed in jeans and a conservative blazer, his hair had grown back, and for once he didn't have a cast or a brace on his arm or fingers. Physically, he was whole again.

Emotionally was another matter.

This was the first opportunity he'd had to visit his family's graves since their deaths. During his training with the DTF, he been able to repress his feelings, to concentrate on the work, learning to destroy the monsters that had taken so much from him. But now that he was home, now that he could see the physical reminder of that loss, it all came rushing back.

A lone tear streamed down from his right eye. "Mom..." he whispered. He knew he would never forgive the bastards for what they did to him, to his family, to Jeff Frankel. His hatred of them seemed to double every day. Because of them, he could never again tell his mom how much he loved her, never again share a beer with his dad, never tease his sisters, never show Jeff how much the world changed, just as the old guy predicted.

In the last six months, he had indeed seen the world change. Most of the demons, the vast majority, went underground when the story hit. Those that didn't and stood their ground were wiped out quickly. The leaders, Beelzebub and Satan himself, were still unaccounted for and presumed to be plotting some kind of retaliatory action. No one knew where they'd gone.

The angels were still incommunicado, and no one knew where they were, either. Mankind was left to deal with the demonic threat alone.

That was just fine with Daniel. He remembered vividly Jeff's tale of botched vengeance, but the bastards had taken Jeff, too, and Daniel needed to be involved in their destruction personally.

Enter the DTF. They were a good group of people, and they had accepted Daniel with open arms as one of their field leaders. After a crash course in combat strategy against demons, a course he helped develop, Daniel was awarded the rank of Colonel and given his own squad, five people that he'd learned to trust with his life.

Daniel looked down at the headstone of his little sister, Samantha, dead at 21. As good as things were getting, they didn't change the past. The demons, the monsters that had inflicted

so much pain on Daniel and countless others throughout the course of human history, were still out there. Daniel couldn't rest until the very last one of them was destroyed.

The ring of his cellular phone cut the still silence of the cemetery.

"Cho."

"Colonel," came the voice on the other end. Harris, his second. "We've got a lead on another one. Belphegor."

"I'm on my way," Daniel answered, then disconnected.

With a final glance at the four headstones reading "Cho", Daniel left the cemetery.

The Demon Task Force's Los Angeles headquarters was an abandoned and converted police station. It was a large, three-story brick building, at least 1940's construction and looking older. When Daniel had left it earlier, it had borne no markings to identify its occupants. He noticed with a wry grin how that had changed. Over the large double doors at the front of the building, someone had hung a four-foot long paper banner with the DTF logo and initials.

That oughta clear up any uncertainty, Daniel remarked to himself as he climbed the short stairs and entered the building.

The interior of the building was, if anything, shabbier than the outside. The building had been abandoned for years before the DTF commandeered it, the local cops having moved out to more modern facilities. Everything was brick and faded linoleum, steel desks and chairs that were probably never comfortable. Daniel walked through the lobby and into the precinct room, where his team had set up shop.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Harris sat alone at a table studying case files, his long, lean body hunched over and running his fingers through his graying brown hair. Jack was Daniel's second in command. A former SWAT team leader in Chicago, and a Navy SEAL before that, Jack was known as a tactical genius, specializing in fugitive extraction. He had a knack for finding and flushing out the bad guys with a minimum of civilian danger and collateral damage.

Major Paul Simonson paced by the window. A blue-eyed blond farmboy from Minnesota, Paul was a FBI agent at heart years before he actually made it to the academy. He grew up fascinated by tales of G-men, and knew that being a federal cop was the life for him. When the revelation about the existence of demons broke, Paul found the greatest challenge an agent could face—a group of powerful, immortal fugitives from justice. He leapt at the chance to join the DTF, and never looked back.

Stout but hearty Captain Roberto Ortiz sat on the couch with his notebook computer, happily typing. Roberto grew up as the only hacker/computer nerd in his small village outside of Mexico City. His friends never really understood his fascination with his homebuilt computer, but through it, Roberto could see a whole new world, one that his parents and friends would never know. By the time he was 21, Roberto graduated from MIT with honors. A year later he had his Masters and a year after that his PhD. He joined the DTF as one of the world's leading authorities in communications and encryption technology.

Compact and redheaded Captain Lucy O'Malley lounged on the couch next to Roberto. Rumored to have been former IRA, Lucy knew just about all there was to know about explosives. Her older brother was killed during "The Troubles" in an altercation started by a man later revealed by Zagam's files to be a demon. She took great delight in destroying the demons, but lived for the day she could destroy Asbeel, the individual demon that she blamed for the death of her brother.

Tall, young and handsome Lieutenant Heinrich von Braun stood in a corner, trying not to stare at Lucy and failing miserably. Heinrich was a natural when it came to weapons technology, but a raw novice at practically everything else. A natural marksman bordering on savant, he won German national shooting titles by the age of eight. He understood weapons almost instinctively, and had been known to field strip a weapon he'd never seen, perfectly, after examining it for only a few seconds. Heinrich was also extremely devoted to the Christian faith. When the story of the demons broke, Heinrich saw it as his calling to use his Divine Gift. He joined the DTF immediately.

Roberto glanced up from computer. "Hey, boss," he called in a very slight Spanish accent. "What took you so long? You think maybe these demons are going to live forever or something?" No one laughed at Roberto's attempt to lighten the mood. They all knew where Daniel had been, and why he'd gone.

"Damn plane had to obey the laws of physics, 'Berto." Daniel turned to Jack. "Where is he?"

Jack unrolled a map on a table. "Right here in L.A."

Daniel wasn't surprised. Most of the demons they'd destroyed had been located in densely populated urban areas, trying to hide in the surging mass of humanity. They knew that demons looked identical to humans, and tried to take advantage of the trait humans had of not noticing much that didn't directly affect their lives.

"And it's a match?" Daniel asked. Since the vast majority of demons had run to ground, it became imperative for the DTF to verify each demon spotting. If the DTF mobilized on each alleged sighting, they'd spend all their time on wild goose chases. The best forensic and behavioral scientists in the world had drawn up a set of profiles that the real demons were likely to meet. Only those that met those requirements were investigated.

"Highly probable, sir. The description matches Belphegor, and the suspect fits the profile. Confidence is high."

"All right, then," Daniel said loudly, addressing the entire team.

"Let's move out."

## Demonbusters



The apartment they tracked the demon to was one of those rundown places where even the

nosy neighbors don't ask too many questions. A perfect place to hide, Daniel thought. He stood outside his team's van in his combat uniform, an armored outfit similar to police riot gear. "Paul," he said into his headset mike, "how we doing?"

Paul sat somewhere on a rooftop facing the target. Once they got on site, the team never saw him, but his observations had often proved invaluable. "Doing fine, boss. Confirm that the target is home."

"Berto?" Daniel said.

Roberto responded from inside the van, where he was surrounded by communications gear. "Negative activity. Phone line's quiet and there's no outgoing cable or radio transmissions. If he knows we're coming, he's not telling anybody about it."

Daniel exchanged a look with the tactical component of his team, Jack, Lucy and Heinrich, attired as he was. They were just finishing the adjustment of their various weapons and equipment. "We have a go," he said.

"Roger that," Jack said, and with a wave, led them all into the building, Daniel bringing up the rear. Once inside, they crept quietly up the stairs to the second landing, then down the hall to room 203, the location of the suspected demon. Jack glanced back at Daniel, who gave him a nod. With Heinrich directly behind him and aiming his high powered rifle over Jack's shoulder, Jack kicked the door open.

"DTF!" he yelled as he rolled into the shabby apartment. The apartment's sole occupant, a man in his mid-thirties, sprang up from the couch, where he'd been watching television.

"Please," he said, raising his hands, "don't—"

Heinrich shot him once in the chest. The target fell to the floor, bleeding.

Daniel and Lucy entered the room after Jack had verified that there was no one else present. Daniel walked over to the target, who to his credit did not try to get up. As Daniel investigated the chest wound, he could see that it was already healing, a dead giveaway that the target was an immortal. "Confirm," he said.

"Let's do it, then," Jack answered, and Heinrich stepped up to the target, now confirmed as Belphegor. With a look of great satisfaction, he shot the demon point blank in the head, incapacitating it. He then slung his rifle and hoisted the demon over his shoulder.

Daniel had been looking around the room, searching for clues to any other demons' whereabouts. He found nothing of interest, only mementos and relics that had most likely been collected over the course of the demon's life, probably plundered from unsuspecting humans. It occurred to Daniel that quite a few of the individual artifacts in the apartment were worth more than the entire building that housed them. "Let's get someone up here to catalog this stuff," he said.

"Yes, sir," Jack answered, and without another word, they went back outside, demon in tow.

By the time Belphegor had recovered enough from the head wound to be aware of his surroundings, he found himself in a field, the skyline of Los Angeles vaguely visible in the

distance. He was tightly bound at the wrists and ankles, and in his weakened state, he could not snap the bonds.

He looked down at his body, and directly underneath his completely healed chest was strapped a package with a digital timer. He'd heard enough stories from his brothers about the DTF to know what the package was. He began scrambling frantically, trying to dislodge the bomb.

By the time the counter ticked down to ten seconds, he knew it was futile. He tried to remember all the things he'd seen in forty thousand years, the people he'd known, the historic events in which he'd participated. It's been a good life, he thought as the counter approached zero. But I don't want to di—

His last thought was interrupted by the fiery explosion that ended his millennia of life. His burning body parts scattered hundreds of yards across the field, joining the charred remnants of several other demons that had once made Los Angeles their home.

When the last of the smoke dissipated and the flames had burned themselves out, the DTF van that had been parked at the edge of the field drove away.

Reunited at the L.A. DTF headquarters, the team allowed themselves a little celebration.

"Uno down, God knows how many to go," Roberto said.

"Easy there, 'Berto," Daniel cautioned. "We know there's a finite number of them, so each one down is a victory in my book."

"Is it just me," Heinrich asked, his high voice contrasting with his heavy and guttural German accent, "or is this getting easier as we go?"

"You bet it is," Jack answered, reclining on the couch, "but only because we're getting better at it. We've had time to develop a standard operating procedure, and we follow it. Professionals always make the job look easy." The team toasted themselves on that comment, before Jack added, "But just remember that the second you get too cocky and stop acting like a professional, the enemy will eat you alive."

That sobered them. Not all DTF teams were as successful as they had been, and a few had been lost, the entire teams, to the demons they pursued.

As Heinrich took a seat next to Lucy and complimented her on the bomb that destroyed Belphegor, Roberto waved at Daniel. "Hey boss, come here."

Daniel walked over and stood over Roberto's shoulder. "What you got, 'Berto?"

Roberto showed Daniel his notebook. "Email coming in, addressed to you."

Daniel took the computer from Roberto and opened the message. It was from DTF Central Headquarters, inside the United Nations building in New York. The message was short and to the point.

"Pack your bags, people," he said. "The boss wants to see us."

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## Susan's New Life



Susan Richardson was having a little difficulty adjusting to her new life. After years of studying print journalism, Susan was “discovered” by the television networks and deemed too telegenic not to be on camera. She’d been wooed by all the broadcast and cable networks, but she finally settled on the fledgling World News Network, a cable all-news outfit located in Washington, D.C. that lured her away from the bigger, more established networks with a promise of complete autonomy. The opportunity to pick her own stories and report them without even the possibility of editorial changes was simply too good to pass up.

A few months later, Susan practically owned WNN. Her face and reputation had single-handedly put the tiny network on every major cable provider in the world, and Susan had become one of the most recognized and trusted voices in news. People tuned in to hear what she had to say. Which was beginning to annoy the hell out of her.

Not that she didn’t appreciate the following. Every time she heard herself compared favorably to great newsmen like Walter Cronkite, she got all tingly inside. It was, after all, her life’s dream. No, the problem was the pressure. She’d already broken the “story of the millennium”; there simply wasn’t anywhere to go from there. She did her best, but corrupt politicians and airline disasters paled somewhat in comparison to evil, immortal monsters preying on mankind for centuries.

Her life wasn’t full of slow news days, however. As she proofed her copy one last time before air, Susan noticed that things were picking up right in her own back yard.

“Good news, Susan?” asked Bob Pack, her co-anchor.

Susan glanced up and smiled. “You mean for the world or the ratings?”

She still really hated that one thing about televised news. She often felt like a ghoul seeking out the most depressing, tension-filled stories. The same thing applied in print journalism, but television was much more merciless. One of her journalism professors had once told her that no one bought a newspaper to read about “happy bunny people.” But where a newspaper reader might simply glance down to the next story, a television viewer would change the channel and probably not return. She didn’t have the luxury in television of telling people good news. It was as simple as that.

Keith, the stage manager, waved to get their attention. “We’re on in five,” he said, “four, three, two, one.”

“Good evening, and welcome to WNN,” Susan said as she smiled warmly into the camera. “I’m Susan Richardson.

“Our top story tonight, tempers flare on Capitol Hill as Congress narrowly votes down the Demonic Emergency Act, a temporary repeal of the fifth amendment proposed by Texas Senator Timothy Phillips. Phillips had this to say.”

The camera cut to tape of a tall, heavyset man in his fifties. His mahogany hair was receding and graying, and a prominent brow, bulbous nose and heavy jowls dominated his leathery face. "Now don't get me wrong," he said in a deep voice with a strong southern accent, "the DTF is a fine idea, but it's not enough. One, they're too small, and two, all they have to go on is a six month old computer database that was sketchy at best even when it was current.

"Let's not kid ourselves, people. These godless monsters were successfully blending into the human population centuries before this country was even founded. They know how to disappear. Hell, your best friend could be a demon and you'd probably have no idea until it was too late.

"That's why we need new laws in this country. The liberal lawmakers that came before me saw to it that the hands of the law enforcement agencies are so tied with red tape and due process that by the time we think we know about a demon, he's had time to disappear again. These inhuman monsters are a clear threat to the public's well-being, but we're not allowed to do a blessed thing about it."

The camera cut back to Susan. "While many think the legal changes proposed by Senator Phillips are too extreme and in clear violation of the Constitution, most of the people questioned in a poll earlier today agree that the demons are a significant threat that the government is not properly prepared to deal with.

"In other news..." Susan went on with her nightly telecast, bantering lightly with Bob as they went down the list of the day's stories. However, as soon as Keith yelled, "And we're clear," the practiced smile fell from her face.

During the newscast, one of the production assistants had slipped her a note. It was from Sal Peterson, her favorite journalism professor from college. Peterson had shaped much of her journalistic style, and she felt she owed much of her success to his instruction. Although she still sent him Christmas cards, she hadn't actually spoken to him in years. There wasn't much informational content to the message. Just his name, phone number and the word "Urgent!" underlined. What could he want?

Susan excused herself from the set and made her way back to her private office. After shutting the door, she sat down behind her desk and dialed the number on the note. Peterson picked up after the second ring.

"Hello?" The tension was almost louder than his actual voice.

"Sal? It's Susan. I'm returning your call."

"Susan, thank God it's you," he said. She heard the relief in his voice. "Have you heard the news?"

"Which news?"

"I'm under indictment. They say I'm some kind of demon sympathizer, in league with them. They've suspended me from the university pending the investigation, and I've started getting threatening phone calls."

"My God, Sal, what happened?"

"There was a demonstration last week at the university. A bunch of kids were protesting

the DTF, on the basis that their policies show a complete disregard for our laws of due process. It's something I've been worried about, that one of these alleged demons that they shoot first and ask questions later will turn out to be human, so I joined in. They got me on stage and I gave a little speech about the Bill of Rights. The next morning I'm in the dean's office being asked to leave until this can all be worked out."

"My God, Sal, that's terrible."

"Tell me about it. Look, Susan, I just wanted you to know. I didn't call for you to bail me out or anything. I think I can handle this myself. I just want you to look into this, see if it's happening to other people, you know? If it is as widespread as I think, get the word out. People listen to you, and you're probably one of the few people that could speak out against this insanity without being called a demon yourself."

It was true. Susan's past accomplishments put her pretty much beyond suspicion, or so she hoped.

"I've got to go," Sal continued. "My wife just walked in the door, and she looks pretty upset. Look into what I told you, okay, Susan?"

"Sure, Sal."

He hung up.

Bewildered, Susan gingerly put the phone back in its cradle. She had, of course, heard about this sort of thing happening, but this was the first time it had happened to someone she knew.

Susan turned out the lights in her office and walked out the door. Stagehands and cameramen waved at her as she made her way to the exit, and she smiled politely and waved back. Her new apartment (much larger than her old one) was walking distance from the studio, and she was soon outside in the chill winter air of Washington D.C.

As she looked around, she noticed that the city had grown quiet. For as long as she could remember, Washington had been a place of bustling excitement. People worked as many different schedules as one could imagine, and the streets of the nation's capitol were always full of someone going somewhere.

But not tonight. As Susan walked the five blocks from the tiny studio to her apartment, she saw maybe three people. The more she thought about it, she realized that she'd seen fewer and fewer people out at night over the last six months. People were afraid. Day or night, Susan didn't think it mattered to the demons, but people were clearly unwilling to venture out as much as they used to in Washington, something that struck Susan as almost funny. Before the Revelation, Washington had been one of the country's most violent cities. What had really changed?

When Susan got into her apartment, she slid the deadbolt shut (couldn't be too careful, after all), turned on her computer and got on the internet. She had some research to do.

## The Hunt Begins



Daniel stepped off the elevator on the twenty-third floor of the United Nations building in New York City. The entire floor was dedicated to the DTF. His team was still in the hotel, as Daniel's orders had been to come alone. In his high collared, cobalt blue dress uniform, Daniel walked up the corridor to the office of Marie Motumbo, the leader of the Demon Task Force. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The outer office was spacious and tastefully decorated. As always, Doris Klein, Marie's secretary, sat primly behind her desk. Daniel couldn't be sure that she had legs. "Daniel," Doris said warmly. "Marie's expecting you. Go right in."

Daniel continued into the inner office, the citadel from which Marie Motumbo coordinated the global fight against the demons. The room was decorated colorfully yet tastefully with art from her homeland of Nigeria. Daniel's eyes focused, as always, on the ceremonial spears and shield mounted on the wall. They told volumes about their owner's warrior spirit. Marie sat behind a massive oak desk, pouring over some paperwork. She stood when she saw Daniel, rising to her full six foot five inch height.

"Colonel Cho, welcome," she said in a deep contralto as she extended her hand, which Daniel promptly shook. "Please, sit down."

Marie Motumbo was an unconventional but highly practical choice to lead the Demon Task Force. Herself a Colonel in the Nigerian Army, she'd had decades of practice running down fugitives and criminals. Shortly after the Revelation, Nigeria was nearly free of all known demons, quite a few of them dispatched by her personally. When the UN went looking for someone to head up the DTF, all fingers pointed to her.

They both sat, and Marie leaned back in her chair to study Daniel. "I've been reading your progress reports," she said in nearly unaccented English. "Your team has the highest success rate in the DTF, an accomplishment I attribute largely to you."

"Thank you, but my team deserves as much credit as I do."

"I'm sure they do. I didn't bring you here for a pat on the back, Colonel. Have you read the papers recently?"

"Not much, ma'am. Just here and there."

"Well look at this," she said, tossing a newspaper in Daniel's lap. "The CEO of Chrysler stepped down last week amidst charges that he was either a demon himself or in league with them. He denied the charges, but the public pressure and plummeting stock prices forced him to resign. After the fact, it was revealed that the people making the original allegations had strong financial connections to Ford, but nobody seemed to care."

"Things are getting ugly out there, Daniel. The paranoia in your country is rising to levels unseen since the Red Scare. In other parts of the world, my country, for example, hundreds of people are lynched on a daily basis for the mere speculation that they might be demons."

"Spirit of Salem," Daniel said. The phrase had become a popular graffiti epitaph in

particularly intense areas. Even Daniel and his team had been accused of being “witch hunters” by the more liberal media, who were then generally accused of being in league with demons. It was a vicious cycle.

“So you have been paying attention. While I think we can both agree that the removal of the demons is of paramount importance, we can’t very well tear the world apart doing it. So you’re being reassigned.”

Daniel sat bolt upright in his chair. “What?”

“Calm down, Colonel. You and your team are doing so fine a job, I’m giving you a special mission. If we keep going the way we have been, it could be years before the demons are completely wiped out. We can’t afford to get one here, one there anymore. So you’re going straight to the source.”

“And that would be?”

“Hell. You’re going to Hell.”

Daniel was speechless.

“We’ve heard rumors that the demons have a stronghold somewhere, that Satan and Beelzebub have taken refuge there. We believe that if you find this Hell, we can destroy it, Satan and Beelzebub, and thus cut the head from the snake. Your mission is to locate Hell, verify Satan’s presence and if possible, destroy him. We’ll do the rest. With any luck, this will be a crippling blow to the demons, and we can restore some semblance of order before the world tears itself apart.”

Marie Motumbo sat back in her chair and picked up her paperwork, signaling that the meeting was over. Daniel left quietly, deep in thought.

“We’re going where?” Paul asked.

“Hell, Paul. Satan’s stronghold, wherever that is,” Daniel replied.

When Daniel arrived at the hotel and broke the news about their new assignment, he’d expected ... he really didn’t know what he expected. Surprise, maybe, excitement. His team had other ideas.

Mostly Paul. “What’re we going to do, just walk up to Satan’s door and say, ‘Here we are?’”

“Something like that. Of course, we have to find the door first.”

“Hey, amigo,” Roberto yelled from behind his computer, “betcha when all those people in your life told you to go to Hell, you never thought you’d really go, did you?”

“Bite me, ‘Berto.”

“Enough,” Daniel said, and they quieted.

“Jack? Any ideas?”

Jack hadn’t said a word since Daniel notified them of the new mission, and to be honest,

Daniel had no idea if he was in favor of it or not. He just knew he never wanted to face Jack across a poker table.

“Yes, sir, I have a few. First thing I’d try is to capture and interrogate a demon. They’d have to know the location of Hell.”

“Good idea,” Daniel said. “We can start looking for—”

“This is ridiculous!” Paul exclaimed. “What we’re doing now is fine, we don’t need to traipsing off on some wild goose chase like a bunch of—”

Before Paul could get out another word, Jack was up and in his face. “Do we have a problem, Major?”

Paul could see there was only one right answer to the question. “No, I suppose we don’t.”

“Good,” Jack said, straightening Paul’s uniform, “because the Colonel has a new mission for us, and that’s what we’re going to do. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Daniel made a mental note to thank Jack later. The last thing he needed to worry about was dissension in the ranks.

“Well,” Daniel said, “if there are no further questions, let’s get to work.”

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## He Who Would Be King

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Texan Senator Timothy Phillips sat in his San Antonio hotel room and waited for John to call him. Phillips was back in his home state to give a keynote speech to a group of area businessmen. He made many such public appearances, as they gave him the means to spread the word about his cause.

Which was, of course, himself.

Tim Phillips was a survivor. The last of six children to a Dallas city worker who never made much above minimum wage, Phillips had to struggle for everything he ever had. Starting from buying his own school supplies in junior high with the money he made mowing lawns, he eventually managed to put himself through not only college, but law school as well. He worked the most menial part-time jobs imaginable, but he got his degree, passed the bar, and got a job in the Dallas District Attorney’s office. After years of laboring as an assistant D.A., Phillips finally made District Attorney. He amassed a stunning record of convictions, and he had the position of power and authority that he’d always been denied as a child.

But it wasn’t enough. After more than fifteen years as a prosecuting attorney, Phillips ran for public office, a seat in the Texas state legislature. Tall, imposing, charismatic and with an impeccable service record, he won by a landslide, and ran for the U.S. Senate four years later, an election that he again won easily. Phillips became a force for change on Capitol Hill, his

booming voice often heard on the Senate floor vociferously arguing for the rights of the common working man. His public life was untouchable.

His private life was a different matter. Phillips was, simply put, a megalomaniac. At the age of fifty-three, he was still single because he had never felt it was worth the distraction from his advancement to settle down and start a family. His insatiable lust for power insured that although he was a U.S. Senator, one of one hundred men that made the laws for the most powerful nation of Earth, he still wasn't happy. He wanted more.

When the news about the demons broke, Phillips knew he finally had his opening. As a lawyer and student of history, he knew quite well the kind of power the Red Scare had bestowed upon Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. He saw in the Demonic Crusade the potential to give himself similar power, by giving people something universal to be afraid of, something he could blame on his rivals.

There came a knock on his door. John Williams, a young, slightly built black man and Phillips' aide, poked his head in the door. "Senator, they're ready for you."

"Thanks, John," Phillips said as he rose from the hotel room couch and walked out the door, following his aide down the hall and into the conference room of the hotel. John Williams had been his aide since his first term in the Senate, and he was one of the few people Phillips trusted. The young man had made many sacrifices for his boss, something Phillips appreciated, even if he never said it.

Phillips took his place behind the podium and stared out at the sea of faces. Most of these San Antonio high rollers had contributed heavily to his last campaign, and he knew what they expected him to say.

"Gentlemen, I wish I could stand before you today and tell you how well we're doing. I wish I could tell you that we live in the greatest country in the world, and that we're the luckiest generation ever to walk the planet.

"I wish I could tell you these things, but I can't. It just wouldn't be right. The truth is, gentlemen, that we have a problem.

"The greatest threat to ever face mankind is walking our streets, and we aren't doing anything about it. The UN's so called Demon Task Force is an undersized, ill-equipped joke, and the liberals on Capitol Hill are making sure the regular police and army have their hands tied.

"They could be anywhere, even now. Your neighbor, your dry cleaner, a derelict on a street corner. The demons have had six months to blend back into human society. That ain't a tough task for an immortal monster that's been hiding among us for millennia. Anyone you meet could be a demon, and not only would you not know it, but even if you did you couldn't do a damn thing about it.

"Based on the number of demons exterminated in the last six months, a number inflated by the demons that refused to go into hiding before they were destroyed, the best estimate for the DTF to wipe out this scourge is eight years.

"Eight years. More than enough time for most of these demons to disappear completely, to establish new identities, to continue their eternal assault on mankind. We can't afford to wait

while the opportunity to end this slips through our fingers.

“I’m sure y’all are aware of the Demonic Emergency Act, a bill I proposed that would help us end this, a bill that was just voted down. The bill would have allowed local law enforcement to engage in demon hunting, and it would have revoked a demon’s right to due process, preventing the godless monsters from clogging up our court system. We need legislation like this to rid ourselves of this threat, but it’s going to take a grass-roots movement to get it passed. You know I’ve always been a defender of the common man. Now it’s time for the common man to defend the world.

“I need each and every one of you to take up arms with me. I need you to champion the life and liberty of every human being. Together, we can end the demonic threat once and for all!”

The room erupted into standing applause. Phillips smiled and waved, gave the thumbs up and walked out of the room. He headed for the hotel lobby, where he knew John would have his bags packed and waiting. The money pouring out of the pockets of those businessmen, even though Phillips had been careful not to ask for it directly, would go a long way towards lobbying his cause on the Hill.

Phillips believed maybe half of what he’d just told that room of fat-cat businessmen. He did believe that the demons were the greatest threat mankind had ever known, and he did believe that the DTF and U.S. government were ill-equipped to deal with them. The rest was mostly rhetoric designed to whip the audience into a paranoid, yet patriotic, frenzy. In cases like tonight, it was designed to get people either scared or enthused enough to spend a lot of money. It usually worked.

Phillips was a man with a plan. If he could raise the level of paranoia and distrust in the country high enough, he could have any public official that got in his way impeached for merely the hint of demonic ties. If he played his cards right, he might even get the president himself booted out of office, and Phillips, as a man obviously beyond demonic influence, would be the obvious people’s choice to take the job.

Yeah, he thought as he got into the limousine John had waiting for him, he had it all figured out, and everything was going according to schedule.

Lying back in the plush seat of the car, alone with his dreams (John didn’t really count), the soon to be most powerful man in the world disappeared into the traffic of San Antonio.

## The Inquisition

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ONE MONTH LATER.

The Interrogation Chamber was a specially constructed room inside an old warehouse Daniel’s team had modified for their mission. Constructed of titanium reinforced steel, the room was just large enough to accommodate a small group of interrogators and one subject strapped to an angled table. The room was a vault, designed with demonic strength in mind. It was just

outside this room that Daniel stood, waiting.

He'd just received word from Jack that they finally had a captive. After four long weeks of searching, the team had finally located another demon, reportedly named Uzziel. Jack had informed Daniel that the capture had been made cleanly, and that they were bringing the subject in.

The door to the warehouse flew open and the DTF van drove in. Daniel walked over and helped open the rear door to the van, then helped Jack and Heinrich wheel the gurney with the rapidly healing demon into the Interrogation Chamber. They soon had the demon secured to the table, and by the time Uzziel was fully conscious, they were ready to begin.

Daniel did most of the talking. "You are the demon named Uzziel."

"Bite me, mortal."

"I'll take that as a yes." Daniel picked up a clipboard and began taking notes as he talked.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Disneyland."

"Really."

"Does it matter?"

"Come now, you aren't the slightest bit worried about your situation?" Daniel asked.

Uzziel stared back defiantly. "Oh, don't get me wrong. You and your little band of witch-hunters have quite a reputation among my people. We all know what you're capable of.

"But I served as a lieutenant to Gabriel's personal guard before the Fall. I've served under Beelzebub ever since. Once you've had to answer to them, you mortals are strictly small time."

"I see," Daniel said. "I'll cut right to the point. We need to know the location of Hell, and we believe that you, as a demon, know where it is. So you're going to tell us."

Uzziel spat at Daniel. "Fuck you, human."

Daniel seemed completely nonplused. "Heinrich, you may begin."

Humming a happy and familiar little Christian hymn, Heinrich set to work. The first thing he did was to grab a large, sharp knife and peel the skin from Uzziel's arm like he was peeling a potato, then pour copious amounts of salt on the wound.

"This the best you can do, mortal?" Uzziel hissed through clenched teeth. "Were our positions reversed, I'd be tempted to do something really nasty."

"We're just warming up," Daniel said with a smile. "Now tell me, where is Hell?"

"In your father's basement, under the ashes."

The smile disappeared from Daniel's face, and he became very still.

"Sir, are you all right?" Jack asked.

"Fine," Daniel answered, shaking it off. "Heinrich."

Heinrich opened a small metal box and pulled out a metal rod. At the touch of a button, the tip of the rod began to glow red. Heinrich moved the rod slowly towards the demon's face, then plunged it carefully into each eye until they burst, oozing fluid down Uzziel's cheeks.

The demon clenched his teeth and tensed every muscle in his body, but did not make a sound.

"Where is Hell?" Daniel asked more forcibly.

"Up your ass," Uzziel croaked, though his wounds were already beginning to heal up.

Daniel nodded again to Heinrich, who in turn sawed off the demon's left hand. Uzziel screamed, but said nothing coherent. Crimson blood flowed freely from the wound for a few seconds, then tapered off.

Daniel took a step closer. "Where is Hell?" he screamed into the demon's face. He received no answer.

"Do it," he said to Heinrich. The young German picked up a long, sharp knife and made an incision down the length of Uzziel's torso. He then grabbed a metal hook and began pulling out the demon's intestines.

"Even for someone as old as you," Daniel said, "you can't have faced much worse than this. It can't be comfortable. All you have to do to make it stop is tell us what we want to know."

"And then you kill me," Uzziel whispered, his breathing ragged and faint. "Fuck you, Cho. I'm not playing your game."

"Heinrich, the torch."

The young German put down his hook and ignited a small blowtorch. After spreading open the hole in Uzziel's torso, he began scorching random organs.

"Where is Hell?" Daniel demanded.

"You know," Uzziel observed, speaking each word with great difficulty and concentration, "it just occurred to me how much you look like your mother. You should have heard how she begged just before I snapped her neck."

Before either Heinrich or Jack could react, Daniel had one of the knives in his hand and was straddling Uzziel. "Where is it, you son of a bitch?" he screamed as he began wildly hacking away at the demon. "Where's Hell, motherfucker?"

Daniel went into a frenzy, mercilessly slashing and stabbing with the knife, the demon's blood splashing the metal walls five feet away. "Tell me!" Daniel thundered. "Tell me, you fucking monster! You sadistic son of a bitch, tell me what I need to know!"

Daniel gradually became aware of someone calling his name. He turned and saw Jack standing behind him, pleading for Daniel to step away. As Daniel pulled himself back from the pile of torn and severed flesh that was quick resolving itself back into a demon, he noticed that he was covered in blood, and that Heinrich and Jack weren't much cleaner. Daniel was ashamed of himself. He wasn't much of a leader if he let himself lose control like that.

Daniel and Jack stepped away, not out of the demon's earshot, but comfortably away from

most of the blood.

"It's no use," Daniel said. "He's not going to tell us anything useful.

"Destroy him."

"Sir, do you want me to take him out in the van and..." Jack mimed pushing down the plunger on an old fashioned dynamite detonator.

"No, we don't have time for that," Daniel said. "Just drop him in the shredder and make sure you burn the pieces." The warehouse came equipped with an old waste shredder, essentially a large metal hopper feeding into motorized spinning blades.

"And find me another interrogation subject."

Daniel walked out of the Interrogation Chamber, closing the door behind him.

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## Updates

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Daniel sat in Marie Motumbo's office and tried to think of a way to put a positive spin on the way things had gone. Motumbo spoke before he could think of anything.

"I have to admit, Colonel, I'm a little disappointed."

So was Daniel. In the three weeks since the incident with Uzziel, things had gone no better for his team. "Yes, ma'am. We are too. We've interrogated three demons so far, and none of them has told us anything important. If we don't get something soon, we're going to have to write off this whole method of inquiry."

Motumbo got up and stood by her office window, staring out into space. It was something Daniel had often seen her do when she had something important on her mind.

"Daniel?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am?"

She turned back to face him. "Drop the 'ma'am' for now, okay? I just want to talk person to person."

"Sure, Marie. What's on your mind?"

"How are we doing? Really?"

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

Marie began to pace. "I sit up here in this office all day and orchestrate a global assault against inhuman monsters. That's my job, and I think I do it well. But I never really get out in the field anymore. I know what's going on in this war only by the progress reports I read. That, and the newspapers."

She stopped and leaned against her desk, facing Daniel. "And what I read scares me. Things get worse out there every day, more hysteria, more innocent people dead or ostracized, with no end in sight. You walk the streets every day, so I want your opinion. How are we doing?"

Daniel eased back in his chair and gave it some thought. "Well, we're making headway. We know there's a finite number of them, so each one we take out, no matter how long it takes, is one step closer."

"That's just what worries me, Daniel. It's taking too long. Demons have always been agents of chaos, and chaos is just what they're getting right now. I'm beginning to fear that by the time we destroy the last demon, they will have already won."

Daniel stood up and straightened his uniform. "That's not going to happen. We'll find Hell soon, and when we do, we can end this once and for all."

Instead of responding, Marie Motumbo turned and stared out the window again. Daniel left her alone with her thoughts in the silent office.

Susan had hit paydirt. At least, she thought she did. She'd been spending most of her time following up on Sal's lead, doing an in depth study of the hysteria and the people it affected.

In the hundreds of highly publicized accusations of demonic ties and sympathies, almost all of them, if you dug deep enough, could be connected to one man.

Senator Timothy Phillips.

Susan had suspected as much. Over the last few months, she'd literally gotten sick of reading his name on her nightly newscasts. To suspect was one thing however, now she had proof.

Susan got up from the desk in her apartment and walked to the window. What could she do about it? As far as she could tell, Phillips had done nothing technically wrong; no laws had been broken, no official rules of the Senate stepped on. Phillips had personally done nothing but make suggestions, inferences.

Inferences that were quickly whipping the public into a paranoid frenzy. The man had to be stopped. Susan had always been taught that the news media was not a place to air personal issues, and she was a deep believer in journalistic objectivity, but Sal was right. She was probably the only person that could speak out against Phillips and this witch-hunting insanity without being accused of demonic sympathies. Too many people had already lost their livelihoods, or their lives, because someone else accused them of being in league with demons. It had to stop.

And once again, Susan found herself not just reporting the news, put preparing to make it.

Timothy Phillips was nearly beside himself with exhilaration. He had just received all the necessary permits and authorization to hold a rally against the demons on the Mall in Washington D.C. He was virtually guaranteed maximum press coverage, and he'd already seen

to it that a number of stories about highly placed demon sympathizers would break just before the rally. With any luck at all, the publicity from this rally would begin the wave of popularity that swept him into the White House.

There came a knock at his office door.

"Come in."

John walked in, carrying a tray with cups and a coffeepot. "Your coffee, sir."

Phillips waved a dismissive hand. "Just set it down anywhere."

As John placed the tray gingerly on Phillips' desk, he said, "Great news about the rally."

Phillips sat back in his chair. He loved talking about his accomplishments. "Yes, yes it is. How's that speech coming?" Although Phillips selected the topics and major themes of his public speeches, it was more often than not John that wrote the actual words. He seemed to have a gift with the kind of fiery, inspirational writing Phillips needed so much these days.

"Very well, sir. Another draft or two and it'll be ready."

"Wonderful. That will be all, John."

With a submissive nod of his head, John Williams left the office.

Phillips turned his chair so he could stare out his window, the view overlooking the Mall with the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument visible in the distance. One day soon, Phillips thought, all this will be mine.

Daniel made his way on foot through the streets of New York, deep in thought. He'd decided to walk back to the temporary headquarters his team had set up so he could figure out a course of action. It was obvious that the interrogation idea was a wash. Even when he managed to restrain himself and conduct the questioning rationally and methodically, the demons simply wouldn't talk. Not to him. Not to a human.

And time was running short, perhaps shorter than even Marie understood. The world was quickly polarizing into two distinct camps, and Daniel could tell just by the way people looked at him on the streets which they fell into.

Some saw the cobalt blue of his DTF uniform and smiled, maybe even added a bit of spring to their step. They were the people Timothy Phillips spoke to, the people who, like Daniel and every member of the DTF, felt that the demons were the greatest threat in the history of mankind and that they had to be wiped out, whatever the cost.

Only Daniel wasn't sure just how much of that he believed anymore.

The primary reason for his doubt was the look of the others he saw on the streets. People that scowled at him openly, or muttered "witch-hunter" under their breath. Often accused of being somehow in league with the demons if they aired their views too openly, these were the people that Marie was concerned about. While the vast majority of them held no love in their hearts for the demons, they opposed the "fanatical methods" used in the demons' extermination. They felt no threat was worth the revocation of their basic human rights.

As long as the demons existed, the people of the world would be thusly divided. And as long as that division existed, the tension would continue to threaten a fragile world peace it had taken centuries to build.

And so Daniel had to find a way to destroy the demons he had inadvertently discovered. Before the world fell into chaos and terror, before the demons won.

As Daniel walked into their makeshift headquarters, an old firehouse, Roberto flagged him down. "Hey, boss! You're just in time. You have a phone call."

Daniel walked over and took the phone. "Who is it?" he asked Roberto.

"He wouldn't say, but he said you'd know him."

"Hello?" Daniel said into the phone.

"You're a hard man to reach these days, Daniel," said Uriel's voice on the other end of the line. "I think we need to talk."

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## Inferno

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Deep inside a supposedly abandoned missile silo in the Nevada desert north of Las Vegas, Satan waited. The demon sat in a large room lined with television screens, each tuned to a different channel and all muted. In the glow of the monitors, Satan looked young, like a human in his early thirties. His full, black hair was swept back from his forehead, accentuating his high cheekbones and aquiline nose. His azure eyes held a look of intense concentration as he absorbed information from the screens, which randomly switched channels every thirty seconds.

"My Lord," called a deep voice from the edge of the room.

Satan snapped out of his trance and hit a button on the armrest of his chair, blanking all the screens at once. He looked to the doorway and saw Beelzebub, who had grown a full head of ebony hair since Cho had released pictures of him to the humans.

"You wished to see me?" Beelzebub asked.

"Yes," Satan replied with a charming smile. "Take a look."

He turned on the screens again. "Look at them, old friend. They're frightened. Chaotic. Even in the broadcasts that don't address the 'Demonic Threat' directly, there is increased sexual imagery, more violence. Every single one of these screens practically screams 'War.' We're winning."

Satan rose from his chair. "Walk with me," he said.

The two demons left the monitor room and began an informal tour of the stronghold they called "Hell." The missile silo had been expanded significantly during the conversion process

and was now an underground fortress the size of a medium sized town. More than twenty stories deep and nearly a mile across, Hell was the focal point for the world's demonic activity, and the temporary home for nearly half the demons, at least until the hunts blew over.

"Overall, I'm very pleased," Satan said as they passed the library, a hall of books that rivaled the Library of Congress, except that Hell's library had quite a few ancient tomes that could be found nowhere else on earth. "Only one thing troubles me."

"The DTF?" Beelzebub guessed.

Satan chuckled. "No, my friend. For the moment, they're more help than hindrance. As long as they exist, the tension between fanatical demon haters and liberal human rights activists remains high. Without knowing it, they work in our favor. No, my worry is an individual human."

"Timothy Phillips, then," Beelzebub said. He hated it when Satan played his little guessing games, but he could do little about it.

"No, he too serves our purpose, though in a very roundabout fashion. He makes people afraid, and I want them afraid. Besides, when he's no longer useful to us, it will be easy enough to dispose of him. No, our problem is his nemesis."

Beelzebub cast a sidelong glance at the power station as they passed. Hell ran on geothermal energy, and the power system took up nearly a quarter of their space. Satan often joked about Hell being powered by the "fires of the underworld." Beelzebub racked his brain, but he had no clue to whom his boss referred. "His nemesis?"

"Yes. A young newscaster named Susan Richardson. I'm sure you've heard of her."

Beelzebub merely gave Satan a sour look.

"At first," the head demon continued, "she was of some use to us, in that in publishing that fool Zagam's files, she stirred the fires of fear and unrest that we'd let die down. Our exposure actually helped our cause, as it was a destabilizing influence."

Beelzebub sighed. He'd heard this a million times, but The Prince of Lies loved to talk.

"Now Miss Richardson seems to be undoing what she's done," Satan added.

"How so?"

"She's taken it upon herself to be the voice of reason in the face of Phillips' tirades. She's speaking out to anyone who'll listen about the dangers of paranoia, the evils of fanaticism."

"A lot of people are saying those things," Beelzebub observed.

"Yes," Satan said, stopping at the Pit. A vertical shaft where the missile used to be, it ran the entire depth of the complex. Satan often stopped at a railing at its edge and peered down into the darkness below. "Yes, a lot of people are indeed saying that. But most of those people don't have the pull Susan Richardson has. She has quickly become one of the most recognized and respected journalists on the planet, largely thanks to us. People are listening to what she has to say."

"More than they listen to people like Phillips?"

“Not yet, but they will soon. And so I have a job for you.”

“If I eliminate her, it will only make her a martyr.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I doubt her message is strong enough yet to carry on without her. It will be soon, but not yet.

“In two days, Phillips is holding a rally on the Mall. I’m quite sure Richardson will attend. You are to eliminate her, publicly, during the rally. Make it as messy as you like, for the cameras. With any luck, her death at the hands of a very recognizable demon will bolster Phillips’ point, and help spread the chaos we need so badly, if we are to defeat the angels and fulfill our calling.

“Have you any questions?”

Beelzebub bowed his head. “No, my Lord.” He was tempted to ask Satan what to do about the DTF forces that were sure to be in attendance, but the second in command of all the demons was expected to be able to handle himself. Beelzebub turned and walked away, leaving his master standing at the edge of the abyss and staring into the darkness.

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## An Old Friend

« ^ »

As the sun set on Washington D.C., Daniel wrapped his coat a little tighter. He stood on the broad marble steps of the Jefferson Memorial, one of the city’s smaller, more private monuments. It was his favorite spot in the whole city. In the spring, the trees that lined the tidal basin in front of the domed memorial would be pink with cherry blossoms. Daniel had often spent many of the few hours he wasn’t working as a paramedic reclining on the marble steps or sitting under one of those trees, reading. On the days he actually walked past the great columns and into the monument itself, he never failed to be awed by the Thomas Jefferson’s words on the walls. He dearly missed the quiet, anonymous peace of those days.

“Cold, Daniel?”

Daniel turned and saw the archangel Uriel, looking exactly the same as when they’d first met. Same brown hair, same chiseled, ageless looks, same battered leather jacket and jeans. The angel looked nothing like his legend, that of the angel who stood at the gates of Eden with the flaming sword. He looked like any other human in Washington. Centuries of blending in at work, Daniel thought. “Uriel. It’s good to see you again.”

Uriel slapped Daniel on the back and they began to walk slowly around the tidal basin. “You too, Daniel. You and Susan have both made names for yourselves. I sometimes like to think I had a little part in your success.”

“More than a little. But you could have done more. Why did you and the other angels disappear after the story broke?”

Uriel reached up, broke a small twig off a tree and toyed with it. “We felt it was your time

to shine. We didn't want to get in the way. And we felt that were we to take too prominent a role, you might not have driven the demons underground, so to speak."

"Why is that?"

Uriel stopped and looked Daniel in the eye. "If we'd been fully present when the news of our and the demons' existence broke, the demons might have felt so threatened that they would have declared all out war on both of us. As it was, they thought, wrongly perhaps, that they could handle you on their own. By bowing out we may have saved millions of lives."

Daniel started walking again. "If that's true, what's so important to bring you out now?"

"Angels aren't infallible, Daniel. We're beginning to wonder if we did the right thing. I've kept up with current events. Even as you wipe them out, the demons are winning. Chaos, paranoia and hysteria run rampant in your society, and it's even worse in the less developed parts of the world. A number of angels, Gabriel chief among them, are concerned that by the time the demons are wiped out, there may not be enough of human civilization left for us to guide. We're worried that your crusade may already be a lost cause."

Has he been talking to Marie? Daniel wondered. "Yeah, we've been kind of concerned about that, too. We've already come to a decision about it."

"Really? And that would be?"

For a moment Daniel wondered whether or not he should explain his mission to the angel. He really knew next to nothing about Uriel, other than the fact that Uriel had helped him, Susan and Jeff just when they needed it the most. "My team is on special assignment. We're supposed to locate Hell and kill Satan. With him down, a strike force might be able to take down the demons' nerve center. You wouldn't happen to know the location of Hell, would you?"

Uriel laughed. "No, the demons generally make sure we angels aren't privy to that kind of information. But I could try to find out for you."

Daniel almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Really?"

"Daniel, it's the least I can do. For reasons I hope you never know."

Daniel looked around. Full dark had fallen, and the lights on the memorial made it look more majestic than usual. "Thanks, Uriel. I really—"

As he turned back, he saw the angel walking away. Must be slipping in his old age, Daniel thought. We never used to see him leave.

As if on cue, Uriel turned around and walked back to Daniel. "I almost forgot," the angel said. "The other thing I had to say. I received word this morning that Beelzebub is in town."

"Here?" Daniel asked. "In D.C.?"

"Yes. Phillips' rally on the Mall is tomorrow afternoon, and if you ask me, Beelzebub's arrival the day before the demons' biggest human antagonist speaks to the nation's media is a little too coincidental. You may want to be there."

"Understood."

“Good luck, Daniel. Until we meet again.” The angel turned and walked away. No trick disappearances anymore, Daniel noticed. He merely walked into the night.

With much on his mind, Daniel did the same.

Shortly after Daniel and Uriel departed, a man neither had noticed appeared from behind a tree. He made a few notes in a small spiral notepad, then walked quickly towards downtown.

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## Point/Counterpoint

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When Phillips was ready to speak the next afternoon, Daniel and his team were ready. The podium was set up on a huge metal stage not far from the Washington Monument. Daniel had people set up all around, including Heinrich, his best shooter, in the Monument itself. Daniel was out of sight on the stage, only ten meters from the podium. He began a final check over his radio.

“DTF one to team. Report in.”

“DTF two, all clear,” reported Jack from the other side of the stage.

“DTF three, all clear,” reported Heinrich from his sniper’s position atop the monument.

“DTF four, all clear,” reported Lucy from her position at the base of the monument.

“DTF five, all clear,” reported Paul from behind the stage.

“DTF six, all clear,” reported Roberto from inside the communications van.

By the estimates the Park Service gave Daniel, there were over one hundred thousand people gathered on the hillside at the base of the monument and stretching up the mall nearly to the Capitol Building waiting to hear Phillips speak. Hundreds of them held signs and banners, roughly evenly split in favor of Phillips’ policies and opposing them. He still saw no sign of Beelzebub, though.

A limousine pulled up behind the stage. Surrounded by aides and Secret Service agents, Senator Timothy Phillips got out of the car and made his way, smiling and waving, to the podium.

“My fellow Americans and people of the world,” Phillips began, “I want to thank y’all for hearing me today. I need to discuss something that could affect the future of all mankind.

“About eight months ago, we finally learned the demons of our nightmares were real, flesh and blood creatures. In the time since, we’ve tried to wipe out this plague, and we’ve failed. The demons are, if anything, more widespread and dug in now than when this whole thing started. The UN’s Demon Task Force is a failure, and it’s about time we own up to that.

“Worse than that, the demons are everywhere. These godless monsters have had untold centuries experience blending into the human population, and that’s exactly what they’ve

done. Despite what they've told you, the DTF doesn't have the slightest idea how many demons there really are. The ones that weren't named in Zagam's files probably kept their human identities and even now work against you. They could be anyone. Your boss. A cabdriver. Even your best friend.

"And these are demons that the DTF will never find.

"So I've come here today with a Call to Arms. If the DTF and the federal government can't or won't track down and destroy these monsters, it's our duty as Americans to do it for them. We have the right as Americans to bear arms. We have the right, as Americans, to protect our homes and families. If we can't depend on those elected to protect us, it's our duty to protect ourselves, and end the demonic threat once and for all!"

The crowd erupted into a cacophony of cheers and boos. The sides were drawing up.

"I call for every American to take up arms and hunt down the demons close to you. I want each and every one of you to consider yourself a demon hunter, and to strike fast and without mercy when you discover one of these monsters. I want—"

"That's enough!" cried another voice from the side of the stage. Most of the crowd hushed as Susan Richardson forced her way up to the podium. "Don't listen to this madness!" she yelled.

"Now just hold on there, little lady," Phillips said, trying to maintain control. "This here's by invitation only, and I don't recall inviting you."

"He's afraid," Susan said into the microphone. "He's afraid a voice of reason will break his spell."

Someone in the crowd began chanting "Let her speak! Let her speak!" and thousands of people picked up on it. Not wanting to do anything in front of the cameras that worsened his image, Phillips relented.

"Some of what Senator Phillips said is true," Susan began. "Yes, there are still demons out there. Yes, the DTF is destroying them slower than we hoped.

"But last I checked, vigilantism and public lynchings were still illegal in this country. The witch hunt mentality Phillips proposes merely plays into the demons' hands. It instills chaos, distrust and fear. We can't allow fear of the demons to do their work for them. We can't let it tear us apart!"

Someone in the crowd shouted "Demonlover!" and lobbed a beer bottle at the podium, where it caught Susan in the head. She went down, bleeding.

That was all it took. Within moments, the tensions and divisiveness in the crowd turned violent. As the riot grew, the hopelessly outmatched Park Police tried to quell it and the Secret Service escorted everyone on the stage, including Daniel, Jack and Susan, out the back.

Waiting behind the stage out of the way yet still in view of the television cameras stood a tall figure in a hat and heavy coat. When Susan and Phillips exited the stage and were in full view, Beelzebub threw off the coat and hat, revealing a huge battle-axe, and prepared to make his move.

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## Adversary

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Madre de Dios." Inside the communications van, Roberto couldn't believe what he was seeing. They had all expected Beelzebub to make his move on Phillips during the speech, for maximum effect. Now Roberto had on camera a perfect shot of the demon behind the stage, getting ready to use one hell of an axe.

Roberto keyed his radio. "DTF six to DTF one. Come in, boss." He got no response from Daniel, and judging from what he could see on his camera, neither Daniel nor Jack had even heard him.

Roberto wasn't combat ready, but he couldn't just sit there and watch this happen. He took a pistol he'd only fired at practice ranges from the console next to him, opened the back door of the van, and stepped into the fray.

On the Washington Mall, chaos reigned. The tensions that had been simmering over the past few months had boiled over with a vengeance. Thousands of people were already battered and bloodied as the riot spilled into the streets of the U.S. capitol.

Inside the White House, President Walter Thomas watched the carnage on television. He looked away when Bill Peterson, his chief of staff, walked into the Oval Office.

"So you've seen," Peterson said.

"Bill, how on earth did we let it come to this?" the president asked.

"I suppose we didn't see it coming."

"Bullshit, Bill, a blind man could see this coming. We were just too afraid of standing up to Phillips and his witch-hunters to act on it."

The President of the United States continued to watch the riot unfold on his television. Before long, he thought, I'll be able to watch it out the window. "It's not going to get any better," he said. "Call in the National Guard."

Roberto ran, not for his life, but for others. From his vantage point, he was still the only one that could see Beelzebub. His shouted warnings were lost in the din of the riot, and the demon was closing in on the tight knot of people that was Daniel, Jack, Susan, Phillips and a handful of Secret Service agents.

Though Roberto had his pistol out, he dared not fire. The demon was in a direct line between him and the others. If he missed, he might end up doing the demon's work for him. His only hope was to get close enough to the demon for a shot he couldn't miss before the demon reached his target.

And it soon became obvious as Roberto lugged his heavy frame across the Mall that he wasn't going to make it. Ten meters away from Beelzebub and twenty-five from Daniel, Roberto took his shot.

The bullet flew high and wide to the right. The demon kept running.

Roberto couldn't let this happen. He took off with everything he had, figuring if he gave himself a heart attack, maybe his momentum would let him tackle Beelzebub anyway. Scant meters before Beelzebub would be in striking range of his first target, Roberto let go a primal scream and made contact. He and the demon went down in a tangle of limbs.

Daniel whirled at the commotion and saw Roberto struggling feebly but bravely with the demon. "DTF one to team," he shouted into his radio. "Beelzebub is behind the stage. 'Berto's down! Move it!"

Daniel and Jack moved into position as Beelzebub regained control of the situation. They couldn't get a clean shot because the demon was using Roberto as a shield. He held Roberto in front of him with one hand and the axe at his side with the other.

"You've got nowhere to go, Beelzebub," Daniel said over the riot. "Put him down and step back and no harm will come to you."

"Well," Beelzebub replied in his thundering baritone, "since you put it that way..." Uncurling his arm, he flung Roberto to the side. At the last second, he refused to let go of Roberto's jaw. Even over the crowd noise the others heard quite clearly the snap of the man's spine as he heavy body went one way and his head remained in place. Beelzebub dropped Roberto's corpse.

Daniel couldn't believe what he just saw. "Take him down!" he screamed.

The bullets flew from the weapons of the DTF and Secret Service, but Beelzebub didn't seem to mind. Faster than anyone expected, he charged into his group of attackers, bringing them into each other's line of fire. He then began to swing his axe with reckless abandon, taking out two Secret Service agents before anyone thought to stand back.

And on the Mall, the riot raged on.

## Allies

« ^ »

The battle with Beelzebub had quickly devolved into a stalemate. The demon kept moving quickly, weaving his way in front of one person after another, so no one could get a clear shot. On the other hand, the DTF and Secret Service kept everyone else out of range of that axe. And so the game continued, each side playing out little feints that ultimately went nowhere.

Then, over the noise of the riot, over even the noise of the approaching National Guard,

they all heard the thunder of rockets, drawing nearer by the second.

“Look!” someone shouted.

Daniel reluctantly took his eyes off the demon and searched the sky. Out of the glare of the afternoon sun, he saw four vaguely man-shaped figures drop from the air. The first landed with a heavy thud, his back-mounted rocket scorching the grass between Daniel and Beelzebub. The other three landed soon after, surrounding the demon.

Stark white suits of armor the likes of which Daniel had never seen covered the four of them from head to toe, shifting metallic plates mimicking in shape and position all the major muscle groups. Folding metal wings swung back from the shoulder blades, each wing including an integral rocket or engine. The armor suits each stood seven feet tall, and nearly five feet wide even with the wings folded. They looked like metal, winged gods.

Beelzebub spoke first, addressing the armored figure between himself and Daniel. “Gabriel. Long time, no see.”

Gabriel answered him, the angel’s voice amplified through the armor. “It’s over, Beelzebub. You and your kind will trouble the humans no longer.”

Beelzebub looked around at the four angels that faced him, then dropped his axe. “Fine. You win. I’ll leave.”

Gabriel took a step forward. “I’m afraid you don’t understand. The rules have changed.”

Before even his demonic reflexes could react, the four angels each grabbed one of Beelzebub’s limbs. Gabriel half-turned to face the crowd of humans, and more importantly, the television cameras. “Let this be an example to the demons of the world!” his amplified voice rang. “Your reign of terror is over!”

Without another word, the four angels extended their wings, ignited the wing-mounted rockets, and took off. Daniel and the others watched as they flew hundreds of feet into the air, Beelzebub flailing helplessly between them. On Gabriel’s cue, they all flew away in different directions, ripping the demon apart. Before any of the pieces could fall back to earth, they were incinerated by the angels’ arm-mounted flame-throwers. Without any further statements, the four angels turned and flew away to the northwest.

By nightfall, the National Guard had dispersed most of the rioters. A few were detained for questioning, but most simply went home. The president was wrong. The fighting never got as far as the White House. Small miracles, he thought as he again stared out the Oval Office window. But this has to stop.

Someone knocked on his door. Jenny Miller, his press secretary, poked her head in. “Mister President, they’re waiting.”

“Thank you, Jenny.”

Walter Thomas straightened his jacket and hurriedly gathered together the speech he’d spent all evening writing. This foolishness had gone on long enough.

When he walked into the White House Press Room, the gathered mass of reporters quieted at once. Personally, he was amazed at the turnout. It'd been a heavy news day.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," he said into the microphone. A few reporters laughed good-naturedly.

"Eight months ago, we learned that humans weren't the only sentient creatures on this planet, and that the creatures we knew only in myth and religion as angels and demons were real, flesh and blood creatures. We also learned that the demons had been hounding and tormenting mankind for centuries.

"That knowledge, like all knowledge, could have become either a blessing or a curse, depending on what we did with it. Today in the nation's capitol, we found out which it would be.

"As much as I might agree with Senator Phillips in ideology, I must condemn his means. While our laws in this country only cover human rights, his call for individual citizens to hunt down demons on their own is irresponsible and dangerous. A man's right to swing his fist ends at another man's nose, and thousands of individual demon hunts are going to get a lot of noses broken. We have laws regarding vigilantism in this country, and I expect our citizens to obey them.

"The UN's Demon Task Force is doing the best it can to erase the demonic threat, but while those brave men and women do their jobs, we need to get out of the way.

"In that light, I'm declaring a national State of Emergency, the duration of which being until the demons are wiped out. During this time, any demon hunts conducted by private citizens will be considered a federal crime, and will be prosecuted as such.

"It's important, ladies and gentlemen, to remain calm. The situation is being handled, and despite what some may tell you, it's being handled well. You are in no danger other than fear and hysteria. We'll get through this thing, together, as a nation."

Most of the reporters began asking questions, but one voice quieted them all. "Mister President, may I join you?"

Nearly all the reporters recognized the voice from the footage they'd seen of Beelzebub's destruction. The crowd parted to allow Gabriel, who'd been standing quietly at the back of the room, to approach the podium. The angel stepped up and stood next to the president. Gabriel towered over the human. Though not as tall as Beelzebub, he stood at least six foot six. The armor was gone and he was dressed in an impeccable Italian suit.

"Mister President, it's an honor. I am the archangel Gabriel." The man and angel shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you, Gabriel. You did quite a job on Beelzebub out there today."

"Yes sir. That's rather what I wanted to discuss." Gabriel turned to face the press, the president seemingly forgotten.

"My people have made a mistake. When the news of our and the demons' existence broke, we thought that our involvement would only complicate things. If the demons were faced with having to fight both humans and angels, we were afraid they would fight more fiercely and the

battle would cost too many irreplaceable human lives. We counted on their arrogance, and your skill, to wipe them out before they realized they needed to strike.

“Unfortunately, we were wrong. The demons have proven far more difficult to remove than we hoped, and now we realize our need to step in and help you end this madness. Today was our first test.

“I would like to announce that from this point on, the angels are willing and active partners with humans in the struggle against the demons. Together, with our strength and your flexibility, we can wipe their evil from the Earth for all time!”

The crowd erupted into applause, and the angel stepped down from the podium to answer each reporter’s questions individually. No one noticed when the president left the room.

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## The Oracle

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Uriel crouched behind a cluster of tumbleweeds in the hot Nevada desert, taking one picture after another.

It had taken countless hours of non-stop investigative work, exhausting all of his usual sources, but he finally thought he had the location of Hell. He’d tracked several demons to this area just north of Las Vegas, where he’d discovered an abandoned missile silo. It didn’t look like much from the outside, more a shack than anything else, and if he didn’t know what he was looking for he probably would have missed it. But the longer he stayed and took pictures, the more sure he was that he was right. This was the place.

The angels had suspected for quite some time that Satan had moved his headquarters after the Revelation. Immediately after talking with Daniel in Washington, Uriel had caught a flight for the Middle East, and verified that all Satan’s previously known roosts were abandoned. He then tracked down one false lead after another on a trail that led him to Tibet, Australia, the Congo rain forest, and the Andes before he finally ended up in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Inevitable, I suppose, he mused, a smirk on his sun-browned face.

Once he had taken all the shots he could from his current vantage point, he stealthily moved on to more cover and started shooting from another angle. He needed all the proof he could muster.

“He’s been out there for hours,” Belial said, sitting at the surveillance console and pointing at the monitors.

Satan stood behind him, looking over the shoulder of his new second in command at the pictures being picked up by the surveillance cameras. Clear as day he saw the angel taking photographs, moving to a different location, and taking more. “Uriel, what are you up to?” he wondered aloud.

“Should I have him brought in?” Belial asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m interested in why he’s here, and we’re not going to learn that by questioning him. Have him followed when he leaves. If he merely runs back to Michael, fine. If he talks to anyone else, I want to know who.”

“My Lord, do you think it’s wise to let the angels learn where we are?”

“I don’t see what harm it can do.”

“With all due respect, my Lord, need I remind you what happened to Beelzebub two days ago?”

Satan leaned against the console and stared intensely at his second. “Beelzebub was a good friend, and he’ll be missed. But Gabriel’s stunt in Washington was just that, a stunt. A carefully constructed gesture to lessen our chaotic effect on the humans.”

“My Lord—”

“Belial, relax. I can’t for a moment believe Michael would actually attack us directly. That goes against every rule of engagement both our sides have obeyed for over five thousand years. We knew the angels would learn our location eventually. I just want to know who they tell.”

Satan stood and left the room, leaving Belial alone to frown over the cameras and carry out his orders.

Susan had just stepped into her office when the phone rang. “Susan Richardson.”

“I have a tip for you,” said the voice at the other end of the line. “About Senator Phillips.”

“And?”

“Not over the phone,” the voice said. Susan was pretty sure it was a man, and he sounded scared. “Meet me at the Francis Scott Key Park at noon.” He hung up.

Susan stared at the receiver. She knew the park in question, a tiny little collection of bricks and plants where M Street intersected the north end of the Key Bridge. A public place, but small and far enough out of the way for a clandestine meeting.

She was a little uneasy about this cloak and dagger sort of thing, but with everything that had been going on recently, a tip about Phillips could be important. She glanced at the clock. 9:07. Three hours to go.

Susan arrived ten minutes early to find her contact already waiting for her. She wasn’t sure at first which of the handful of people was there to see her specifically, but any questions she might have had were quickly erased when a young, slim black man walked up and said, “Susan Richardson?”

Though he didn’t introduce himself, she recognized him. She didn’t know his name, but she’d seen him often enough to know that the man was Phillips’ aide. This should be good, she thought.

"I don't have a lot of time," the man said, nervously glancing over his shoulder. "Phillips is planning a coup. He's going to publicly accuse the president tomorrow of demonic collaboration, hoping the very idea of it will get the president kicked out of office. You've been warned."

Before Susan could get a word out, the man ran away, got into his car parked off of M Street, and was gone.

"We now lay to rest a hero, who served his world well."

Daniel and the surviving four members of his team stood in a San Antonio cemetery and watched as Roberto Ortiz's body was lowered into the ground. It was in Roberto's will that he be buried in San Antonio, the city he'd called home after leaving MIT. He'd often said the place reminded him simultaneously of the promise of America and the history of Mexico. Daniel thought the place suited Roberto. The people were friendly and the climate dry and sunny.

The team had been very quiet since losing their most vocal member. They all knew that death was a constant risk and part of the job, and that many DTF teams hadn't been nearly as lucky as they, but Roberto's loss still came as quite a shock.

Daniel had taken it the hardest. He was still trying to make the transition from loner to leader, but it seemed as if no matter how hard he tried, he kept losing people who counted on him. Jeff, his parents, now Roberto.

As the priest wrapped up the ceremony, a hand fell on Daniel's shoulder. He turned and saw Uriel's deeply tanned face smiling at him. The angel nodded, then removed his hand and observed the conclusion of the ceremony. When it was over, he pulled Daniel aside.

"I have some news," he said.

Daniel was at a loss what to feel. It took all the emotion he could muster to say, "What is it?"

Uriel reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope of photographs. "Pictures of Hell," he whispered.

Daniel took the pictures and leafed through them. "It's a shack in the desert," he said.

"Not everything is as it seems," Uriel said. "Come."

Uriel walked towards a grove of mesquite near the edge of the cemetery, and Daniel followed. "Hell is under the shack," Uriel said, "in the Underworld." He chuckled softly, pulled out a candy bar, and started to munch on it.

"Hey," Daniel said, "I thought you guys didn't eat."

"We don't eat much," Uriel corrected with a mouthful of chocolate. "We require nourishment as you do, but our metabolisms are far superior. Barring a significant injury that forces me to regenerate, this single snack bar can sustain me for more than a month."

Uriel looked over at Daniel's team, then at his watch. "Getting back to business, Hell is a converted missile silo just north of Las Vegas. Perfect place for it. It probably extends down

about twenty stories. Satan knew what he was doing when he picked it out. It's shielded by the Earth itself, and while it's far enough outside the Vegas city limits to be discrete, it's too close to the city for you to use nuclear weapons on it. The only way to effectively attack it is by invasion, and there's only one way in or out. So. Is this what you wanted?"

Daniel started to allow himself a glimmer of hope. "Yes, Uriel. I think so. I owe you one."

Uriel turned and walked away. "You owe me several," he laughed. "Be glad we're on your side."

Smiling for the first time in days, Daniel rejoined his team.

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## Chaos

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Timothy Phillips once again stood in front of the television cameras, this time from the comfort and safety of his own office. "My fellow Americans, we are living in the gravest period in our country's existence.

"A few days ago, as I spread the truth about demons on the Mall, a riot broke out. I've seen evidence that the instigators of the fighting may have had ties to some of the demons mentioned in Zagam's files. During the riot, two people were killed and hundreds were injured.

"After the riot, the President of the United States broke down his plan for us on what he planned to do about the demonic threat. He plans to do nothing. In fact, he went as far as barring law-abiding Americans from protecting themselves against the demons.

"At first I thought this was merely the political act of a politician that was more consensus-taker than leader. Then I began to wonder. Could it be that he was so ambivalent about tracking down the demons because he didn't want them found?"

Phillips held a stack of papers in front of the camera. "I have here proof that the President Walter Thomas took campaign contributions from individuals later revealed to be demons. Proof that your president has ties to these monsters, and has been on their payroll since before he was elected. Proof of why he doesn't want them destroyed.

"In light of this information, I call for his impeachment. I also ask that every red-blooded American disobey his State of Emergency decree and do what you feel is right for yourselves, and for America.

"Thank you, good night, and God bless you all."

The reaction to Phillips' speech was swift and violent. Within the hour, a mob had gathered around the White House, and despite the Secret Service's security measures, a few had already thrown Molotov cocktails on the White House lawn.

An hour later still, a large group of protesters arrived in support of the president. After angry screams of “witch-hunter” and “demon-lover”, fighting inevitably broke out again.

And not only in Washington.

“This is Susan Richardson reporting for WNN.” Susan sat behind her newsdesk in Washington and tried to tune out the sounds of violence right outside the studio. On the screens of the world’s televisions, pictures of the rioting appeared behind her.

“Shortly after Senator Phillips’ press conference this evening, rioting broke out again in Washington, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. While half the country seems to be behind Phillips and calls for the immediate impeachment of the president, others are just as violently opposed to what they call ‘witch-hunting hysteria’ and ‘jack-booted thugs’, a catchphrase some use for the DTF.”

Susan put down her copy and stared directly into the camera. “This has gone too far. When I broke my journalistic objectivity and publicly condemned Phillips, I never thought it would come to this. We’re tearing ourselves apart, and I can’t help but feel it’s my fault. I’d like to ask every person watching to stay in their homes. No matter how strongly you might feel about either side of this issue, this divisiveness and violence is exactly what the demons want. By fighting each other, we’re playing right into their hands!

“Please...” Reaching the end of her emotional endurance, Susan sat back heavily in her chair and began to sob. The stage manager gave the signal to cut, and the broadcast moved on without her.

And the fighting continued.

Walter Thomas wasn’t in the Oval Office. Moments after the mob arrived, the Secret Service had advised him to move to a backup office in the White House sub-basement. From where he sat now, a nuclear weapon would have trouble touching him.

The isolation only made his decision harder to bear.

“We’re ready when you are, Mister President.”

Thomas looked up from his desk at the television cameras and crew crowding the tiny office. May as well get this over with, he thought.

“Roll ‘em,” he said.

As soon as the cameraman pointed to him, Walter Thomas looked into the cameras and made history.

“My fellow Americans, good evening. It would seem that many of you have decided to ignore my advice from a few days ago. Not only does the fighting and strife continue, but it’s spread across the country. It’s become a tangible thing, and a legitimate threat to National Security. I can’t allow that.”

Thomas took a deep breath, then continued. “Effective immediately, I’m declaring a

nationwide State of Martial Law. Curfew is at eight PM local time, and any citizens found with weapons at any time of day will be arrested and prosecuted. The National Guard will be deployed and on patrol nationwide to help local police enforce this order.

“I am also issuing an executive order for the arrest and detainment of Timothy Phillips, on the charge of treason and conspiracy to incite riot. While I value the freedom of speech in this country as much as anyone, Phillips has shouted ‘Fire’ in a very large, very crowded theater and I won’t let him get away with that.

“I’m deeply saddened that it has to come to this, America, but you hired me to take care of you and that’s exactly what I’m going to do, even if it means protecting you from yourselves.

“Thank you, and good night.”

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## Crusade

« ^ »

Daniel’s team caught a flight to Las Vegas the next morning. Once there, they boarded a helicopter and gave the pilot the directions to the site Uriel had designated as Hell.

For Daniel, it was the culmination of a long, painful struggle. As the helicopter cruised fast and low over the hot desert sands, he reflected on all the events in his life that had led, almost inevitably it seemed, to this moment. He finally felt at peace with himself, as though this was his purpose, what he had been born to do. Though the path to this moment meant losing everything and everyone that had been dear to him, he believed he was near the fulfillment of his destiny.

He looked back inside the cabin at the other members of his team. No one talked, and all but Jack busied themselves with last minute checks of their weapons and equipment. They were armed for bear, and while not as heavily armored as the angels, most of them felt they stood a pretty good chance of not only a successful mission, but surviving it as well.

The only pessimist in the group was Paul, who had vehemently declared from the outset that it was an impossible suicide mission. Paul was under orders to keep his distracting opinions to himself.

Daniel looked back outside and felt the hot wind on his face. Come what may, he was prepared to meet his fate.

One member of the team had only given lip service to the idea of surviving their descent into Hell, but not because she thought it impossible.

Lucy O’Malley was prepared for a different kind of destiny. Since the Revelation she had searched the world for Asbeel, the demon she blamed for the death of her brother, but she had never gotten so much as a trace of him. She knew no other DTF team had dispatched the demon, meaning he was still out there somewhere, and the most logical place for him to hide was Hell itself. Whatever the mission called for, Lucy was dedicated to a higher purpose. While inside Hell she would find Asbeel, and she’d have her vengeance.

Outside the helicopter, the featureless desert sands sped by.

Uriel stared out his Washington D.C. hotel room window at the streets below. Since the president's martial law decree, the city, the nation, had ground almost to a halt, but now he saw clusters of humans walking the streets, most of them headed in the direction of the Mall. What was drawing them there?

He heard a rattling at his doorknob. Housekeeping, he thought. "Occupied!" he called.

The door was wrenched open, and three figures entered. He recognized them instantly, though he hadn't seen them in a thousand years. "We know," said the lead one, named Amezyarak. The other two, Nelchael and Harut, blocked the door after closing it.

"Why have you come?" Uriel asked.

"Because you've been a naughty boy, Uriel," Amezyarak answered, walking closer. "You told the humans where to find us. Wouldn't you say that kind of goes against the rules of engagement?"

Uriel stepped away from the window to give himself more room to move. "The old rules no longer apply. If you doubt that, perhaps you should ask Beelzebub."

"Yes," Amezyarak said, "we noticed that." The other two demons began to close in, the three of them surrounding Uriel. "And if the old rules no longer apply, and there's nothing barring direct combat between angels and demons..."

Two hours later, amidst the confusion of the fire alarm, Amezyarak and Harut left the scorched and smoky hotel room.

Daniel's team landed not far from the rundown shack that concealed their destination. They quickly offloaded their equipment and moved in as the helicopter lifted off for its return to Vegas. Jack had recommended that the chopper would be safer in the air than waiting for them on the ground. They'd call it back when they needed it.

"This can't be it," Paul observed.

"I told you," Daniel said, "this is just a front. It's a converted missile silo. Underground. Come on." Daniel led the team to the door of the shack. After verifying that the door was locked, Lucy set some plastique on the lock and they all took cover as it blew. The team very cautiously entered the shack, only to find it empty. The only thing it housed was what appeared to be an elevator. An electronic card key was lodged in the appropriate slot.

"Here goes nothing," Daniel said, then pushed the button on the elevator. The team found their weapons trained on nothing as the door opened.

"This is too easy," Jack said.

"Maybe," Daniel answered, "but we knew there was a chance they'd know we were coming. I think we all realize at this point that it's a trap, but we came here with a job to do and we're going to do it, whether they're ready for us or not."

Without another word, Daniel stepped into the elevator. The team followed suit, and the five of them began their descent into the Underworld.

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## Out of the Frying Pan...

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For the second time in less than a week, Timothy Phillips stood on the Washington Mall display stand and faced the Washington Monument. This time he hadn't bothered with permits and authorizations, and he had surrounded himself with armed guards loyal to him and his cause. He couldn't afford to be arrested now, not when he was so close to his goal.

As he prepared to speak, he knew that operatives he'd placed months before were ready to splice footage of his speech into the broadcast media. His words would find their audience in spite of Thomas' control of the media. The Mall had filled with more than a thousand people that had come to hear what he had to say. It was the biggest crowd he could get by word of mouth without tipping off the police, but it would look impressive enough for the cameras.

Finally, John cued him, meaning everything was in place and it was time for him to speak.

"I'd like to thank everyone for showing up today. I know many of you have risked great personal harm to assemble here, as is your right as Americans, in direct defiance of the police.

"We stand at a great turning point for our nation. Our elected leader has been revealed as a fascist with demonic ties, the greatest threat mankind has ever known walks our streets with impunity, and a great many Americans huddle in their homes, afraid to venture out into the chaos beyond.

"It's not too late for change, my friends. It's not too late to reclaim the country and liberties of our birth from the evil tyrants and immortal monsters that have stolen them from us. Not too late to seek a new dawn of safety, peace and freedom."

Phillips noticed that already the National Guard troops approached, armed with rubber bullets and tear gas. In ten minutes, his assembly would disappear. He allowed himself an inward smile. In five minutes, it wouldn't matter.

"What the hell's going on?" Susan demanded. She'd been right in the middle of her newscast when the footage of Phillips' speech cut in on her. The technicians were working furiously to restore control, but for the moment it seemed that they were providing coverage of Phillips' speech whether they liked it or not.

Phillips continued to address the crowd and cameras. "I've been a public servant most of my life. I grew up loving this country and the principles it was founded on. In the past few months I've seen the country I love brought to its knees, and those principles ignored and rejected.

"It's time to start over, America. It's time for a New Order, a reaffirmation of the ideals of

our founding fathers. No longer can we afford to let fascists and monsters hold sway over our way of life. We are Americans, born in freedom, guaranteed that freedom by the deaths of so many American heroes that came before us.

"This country was born when a handful of common people raised their voices and their weapons in open revolt. Revolt against a ruler that didn't listen or didn't care about their needs, that used them for an agenda all his own. Now we face that situation again, but the tyrant isn't the British king, but an American king we elected into power, little knowing who and what he was taking his orders from. And just like those heroes of two hundred years ago, we find that the only way to gain our freedom once more is to fight for it.

"I call today for nothing less than open rebellion. A revolution for a New America, based once again on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This tyrant and his legion of demons can't stand long against the combined will of 250 million Americans fighting for their freedom. Americans fought for their rights once! Now we must do it again! We will be free!"

At that moment, right on cue, the National Guard began to dispel the crowd with tear gas and riot troops, as they were ordered under the terms of the martial law decree. As the cameras filmed on and the news networks helplessly transmitted the scene to the rest of the world, the government of the United States attacked its common citizens, lending weight to Phillips argument. In less than an hour, the seats of government around the country found themselves under attack by angry citizenry.

The revolt had begun.

The WNN technicians finally found the source of the feed splice and restored control over their broadcast. Ignoring the pre-broadcast chaos around her, Susan sat behind her anchor desk and furiously wrote her own copy, a scathing condemnation of what Phillips had done. She was interrupted by Richard, one of the stage managers.

"Susan, you got a phone call."

"I'm a little busy, Rich," she said without looking up.

"Yeah, I know, but he said it was urgent, a matter of life or death. Said his name was Harold Preston."

Susan finally looked up. What could her old editor want with her now? "I'll take it in my office," she said as she got up and rushed off stage.

"Line two!" Richard shouted after her.

Susan reached her office and picked up the phone. "Harold?"

"Susan, thank God I found you," he said. "You need to get out of town immediately."

"What? In case you hadn't noticed, it's turning into a pretty busy news day. I have a broadcast to do."

"No you don't, if you want to live. Susan, I just got a tip. Phillips is scared of you. He realizes that you are the most significant threat to his little coup going off. If you don't get out

of Washington right now, he's going to have you killed, and make it look like the demons are responsible."

Susan sat down in her chair with a thud.

"Susan?"

"I'm here, Harold. Listen, are you sure?"

"Get out. Now." He hung up. That, or the line was cut. Susan couldn't be sure anymore.

She prepared to leave Washington while she still could. Before she left, she had a quick chat with her producer. They weren't going to get her off the air without a fight.

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## Betrayals

« ^ »

Hell wasn't quite what Daniel expected. No fire or brimstone, just a white, utilitarian sparseness and lots of metal. The elevator faced a long vertical shaft where Daniel presumed the missile used to be. He wondered why they kept it that way. Walking up to the metal railing, he looked down and saw more than twenty levels that appeared the same as the one he was on. Behind him and around the shaft were dozens of doors that most likely led to whatever Hell was built to house. In a place four times larger than the Pentagon, he had no idea where to even begin looking for Satan.

Lucy didn't share his indecision. As soon as they were all off the elevator, she took off at a run down the corridor. Jack moved to follow, but Daniel put his hand up. He could still see her as she ran around the open ring by the railing. Almost directly across from him, she shouted "Asbeel!" and took off down a side corridor.

Oh, Hell, Daniel thought. You should have seen that coming a mile away. When are you going to start acting like a leader?

"I really wish she hadn't done that," Paul said.

"You and me, both, Paul," Daniel answered, then turned to face what was left of his team. He found Paul's grenade launcher pointed at his chest.

"What the hell are you doing?" Daniel demanded.

"My job," Paul said. "And she just made it so much harder. And my name isn't Paul. It's Hakael. Of the Grigori."

Lucy ran aimlessly, searching every corridor. Much to her surprise, she found no demons at all, just one empty hallway after another. "Asbeel!" she yelled over and over. "Show yourself, coward!"

"Ye don't need to shout, lass," called a voice she knew too well. "I'm right behind you."

Lucy whirled around and found herself face to face with the demon that haunted her dreams.

“Asbeel’s the name,” he said with a smile. “And who might you be?”

“The Grigori?” Daniel asked.

“An elite group of demons answering only to Satan,” Hakael replied. “Before your interference, our purpose was to spy on other demons and report to Satan on who could be trusted. I used my cover as an FBI agent to watch Zagam during your little escapades.”

“Which would explain why his files didn’t mention you,” Jack said.

“Precisely. After Zagam’s death, Satan decided to have me keep my cover and try to join the DTF. My assignment was to act as a member of your team unless you actually made it to Hell. Then I was to stop you. As I’m doing now.”

With no warning, Heinrich brought his grenade launcher up and fired at Hakael. The demon managed to dodge the direct impact, but the concussion in the enclosed space knocked them all off their feet.

Daniel, it knocked over the railing.

Daniel fell. He’d fallen past several levels already and was picking up speed. He couldn’t quite get a grip on another railing, and thought he’d rip his arms out of socket if he tried now. I didn’t expect to die like this, he thought.

Then, suddenly, he wasn’t falling anymore. After he’d recovered from the sudden deceleration, he realized he hadn’t hit bottom; he’d been caught. He looked up at the face of the demon that had saved him. The demon was tall, with angular facial features and bright blue eyes. His black hair was swept back from his forehead, and his perfect teeth were bared in a charming smile.

“Daniel Cho, I presume,” said the demon as he lowered Daniel carefully to the floor. “The infamous leader of the Demon Task Force. Pleased to meet you at last.”

Daniel sat and stared, trying to catch his breath.

“Ah, but you don’t know who I am,” the demon continued. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I’m a man of wealth and taste.”

## ... And Into the Fire

« ^ »

Washington D.C. burned, the flames rising high into the night.

Three factions had been engaged in steady combat for hours: those in favor of Phillips’ call to revolt, those violently opposed, and the National Guard, who just wanted everybody else to

go home. Many of the city's landmarks and symbols of power were under attack, and bit by bit the National Guard was overwhelmed. At the eastern end of the Mall, the Capitol Building was under siege. Leading the assault was Timothy Phillips himself. He had "liberated" a tank through some Guardsmen sympathetic to his cause, and he was using it to lead the charge up the Capitol steps.

"Freedom!" he cried as the driver guided the massive war machine up the marble steps and into the lobby of the building itself. The mob poured in after them, and began the violent task of dismantling the building from within.

And Washington burned.

President Walter Thomas honestly didn't know what to do. He'd never imagined that out of all the possible crises he'd have to face during his presidency, the most trying would be the open revolt of his own people. Third World countries did it all the time, sure, but Americans weren't supposed to do that sort of thing.

At least, not anymore.

"Mister President, we've got to go."

Thomas turned from watching the carnage through his Oval Office window and saw Pete Mitchell, the head of his Secret Service detail. The White House was in darkness, and he was supposed to have been evacuated quite a while before. He just couldn't leave. "In a minute, Pete. In a minute."

He looked back out the window and watched the fires dance into the night. He was ashamed to admit, even to himself, that he didn't know what to do, that he wasn't even sure how all this happened in the first place. It was all spinning out of control so quickly...

Disgusted, with the riot or himself he couldn't be sure, he turned away from the window. "Pete, let's go."

Pete was no longer there.

"Pete?" he called.

"Gone, Mister President," said a voice in the darkness.

"Who's there?"

A lone figure stepped out of the shadows and approached him, a man Thomas had never seen before. "Who are you?" the president demanded.

"A friend of a friend of a friend," the man replied. "Quite a mess you've got here."

"I don't know who you are, but—" Thomas reached for the phone.

"I wouldn't bother," the man said, bringing his hand gently but firmly down on Thomas's, pinning it to the receiver. "There's nobody there."

For the first time, the gravity of his personal situation began to close in on Thomas past the haze of what had happened to his job. "Who are you?" he asked again.

“An ally of your enemy, in a sense. For a few more minutes, anyway.”

“What happens in a few more minutes?”

“You won’t have any enemies.”

Fighting off the cold tendrils of fear that had a death grip on his spine, the president hastily grabbed a letter opener off his desk and slashed out at the stranger. In the dim firelight seeping through his window, he saw the blood quickly disappear as the wound healed up.

No one heard the President of the United States scream.

Chaos reigned.

Over the course of one night in Washington, the government of the United States fell to ruin. The president, vice president, most of the cabinet and congress were either dead or vanished. Most of the halls of power, the power which had ruled the planet for fifty years, had been destroyed. The chaos and destruction spread across the nation, aided by pictures in living color provided by the media. The United States found itself divided again, this time between people that wanted a Phillips’ New Order, and those that didn’t. Though it had taken civil war years to tear the country apart a century before, Americans at the end of the millennium were a much faster-paced bunch; what had taken years in the age before airplanes and electronic media could now be accomplished in a single night.

And by morning, the United States of America as the world had known it would cease to exist.

Phillips was beside himself. Everything had gone better than he ever could have possibly dreamed. Yes, it was shame about the people that died in the rioting, but omelets, broken eggs and all that. You couldn’t stand in the way of progress.

He stood across the river at the Iwo Jima Memorial, safely away from most of the rioting, but with a nearly perfect view of the Mall. The gravestones of Arlington National Cemetery stood to his right, in mute protest of what he’d done.

He didn’t care. The door was open, facing him with undreamed of opportunities. Not only would he be the obvious choice to lead now, but he’d be leading a country of his own making, living by his rules. He was completely, totally, in charge.

“Enjoying yourself, sir?”

He turned momentarily from the view and noticed John approaching from the car. He was glad. He needed someone to watch him gloat. He spread his arms wide, including the panoramic view. “Look at what we’ve done, John. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

The younger man craned his skinny neck to take it all in. “Beautiful. Yes, it most certainly is.”

“Yes,” Phillips continued. “And by morning, it will all be mine.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt that, Senator.”

Phillips cast a questioning look at his aide. “What did you mean by that?”

Before Phillips could react, the much smaller man reached out, lifted him off the ground, and tossed him easily into the metal base of the memorial.

John Williams approached Phillips, no longer looking the part of the dutiful aide. “What I meant,” he said, his voice deeper, harsher, “is that now that your purpose is fulfilled, I see no reason to tolerate your presence any longer.” Williams lifted Phillips by the neck and held him off the ground. His fingers were as hard, and as immovable, as steel.

“What?” Phillips choked, still unbelieving.

“Even now,” Williams continued, “I can’t believe that a backwoods idiot like yourself rose to such a position of power. Democracy at work, I suppose. But for you to have one of the very demons you railed against as your closest, most trusted advisor, and never have the slightest inkling of it, well now that’s just pathetic. We played you, Senator. Up to this moment, your plans and ours coincided, and we gave you all the rope you needed with which to hang yourself. You see, chaos is our business. While we certainly appreciate all your help in bringing down the government the whole world revolved around, we can’t allow anyone to actually fill that vacuum of power. We’d be right back where we started.”

Phillips’ eyes widened until it seemed they’d pop from their sockets as the full realization of what he’d done sank in upon him.

Still holding Phillips with that terrible, immobile grip, “Williams” glanced back at the fires rising off the Mall. When he turned back to look at his puppet/tool/victim, Phillips could see the total lack of humanity in his eyes. “So while we thank you for your efforts in our behalf, I don’t think we’ll be needing you any longer.

“You’re fired.”

With a crack of bone and nervous tissue, the dreams and aspirations of Timothy Phillips came to an end.

## Loss

« ^ »

“Ye can drop the phony Irish accent,” Lucy said to Asbeel, “I know who and what you really are.”

“Fine,” the demon said reasonably, and without a trace of accent. “What do you plan to do about it?”

Lucy smiled a very unfriendly smile, then tossed a grenade at the demon.

Heinrich and Jack found Hakael much harder to take down than they would have anticipated. For one thing, he not only knew all their moves and tactics, but he was armored as well as they were and he knew the layout of Hell far better than they did. Several times already they thought they had him, only to lose him down a side corridor at the last second.

“Getting tired yet, boys?” the demon asked.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Heinrich responded by launching another grenade. Again the demon deftly avoided the brunt of the explosion.

Jack wondered where the other demons were. They’d chased Hakael nearly all the way around Hell’s first level, and he was the only demon they’d yet seen. Where were the others?

“Come now, gentlemen,” Hakael taunted. “After all of my people you’ve destroyed so quickly, so cleanly, you’re having such trouble with little old me?” The demon backed into yet another side corridor.

Heinrich made a move to follow. “Stop!” Jack shouted. When Heinrich turned to question, Jack said more quietly, “It’s a trap.”

Heinrich looked disgusted. “Of course it’s a trap,” he said. “We’re in Hell. This whole place is a trap.” After checking that no demons were actually in sight, the young German knelt. “But with God’s guidance and protection, we will rid the world of Satan and his minions once and for all.” He made the sign of the cross over his heart.

Heinrich then stood, looked into Jack’s eyes, and ran off after Hakael, yelling at the top of his lungs.

Ah, Hell, Jack thought. That kid’s gonna be the death of me. He ran after Heinrich into the unknown corridors of Hell.

“Satan?” Daniel asked, getting to his feet.

“One and the same,” the demon replied, bowing slightly. “I’m very pleased to meet you at last. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Likewise,” Daniel said as he whipped out his grenade launcher and prepared to fire.

The demon kicked out faster than Daniel thought possible and knocked the launcher over the railing and into the abyss. “Please,” he said, “let’s try to keep this civil.”

Daniel had a few hand grenades left, but he was sure they’d prove just as useless one-on-one against Satan as his launcher had. He didn’t know what to do, other than play along until reinforcements arrived.

“Come with me,” Satan said. “There’s something very interesting on television you might want to see.” The leader of all demons turned and walked away. At a loss for anything else to do, Daniel followed.

Satan led Daniel into a room lined with television screens. The demon’s hand was poised over a button on the arm of the only chair in the room. “Watch this,” he said.

Satan pushed the button and all the screens flared to life at once, though silently. On screen after screen, Daniel saw pictures of warfare, rioting and destruction.

"Disaster movie marathon?" he asked.

"Listen," Satan said. He pressed another button.

Audio now joined the video feed. Daniel concentrated, but he was only able to pick out bits and pieces from the cacophony.

"...Capitol Building utterly destroyed..."

"...President Walter Thomas found dead in the Oval Office..."

"...Tokyo stock market crashing through the basement..."

"...Russians on the move into Eastern Europe..."

"...riots in Los Angeles making previous riots look like picnics..."

"...thousands dead in Washington tonight..."

"...Iraqi troops have re-entered Kuwait..."

"...vice president dead..."

"...chaos reigns in what's left of the United States tonight..."

Satan pushed a button, and all the screens went black and silent once more. The demon walked over in front of Daniel and flashed a dazzling smile. "We've won."

Lucy had used all but one of her grenades, but nothing had worked. The demon that killed her brother was still breathing, and there was seemingly nothing Lucy could do about it.

"So you're one of the mighty DTF," Asbeel taunted. "Really, from all the press you people get, I expected better."

"Sorry to disappoint," Lucy quipped as she looked for an opening to use her last grenade. She kept it hidden from view, so the demon wouldn't know how many she had left.

"You're so much like your brother," Asbeel went on. "Such a young, idealistic fool. He never stood a chance, you know. He was too reckless. A family trait?"

Lucy came to a decision. She offered a quick and silent prayer to her brother's spirit. Peter, forgive me.

Popping the pin behind her back, she ran at the demon and wrapped her arms around it. Asbeel didn't get it.

"A hug? Now, after all we've been through?"

Then they exploded.

As night fell outside on the flat expanse of Nevada desert, the quiet of the evening was broken by the roar of rocket engines. In the western sky over a converted missile silo, dozens of white, winged man-sized forms dropped from the sky on plumes of fire.

And the angels descended upon Hell.

They wasted no time gaining entry. Instead of taking the elevator down as Daniel and his team had done, the angels destroyed it and flew down the open shaft. They stopped at the first level and fanned out through the corridors, their massive suits clanging loudly on the metal walkways.

It had, indeed, been a trap. Jack and Heinrich found themselves pinned down in a small vestibule while they held off more than a dozen demons, led by Hakael, with the last of their grenades.

"It's over, Jack," Hakael called out to him. "We won, you lost. Come on out and take your medicine like a man."

The demons were moving in again. Jack glanced back to Heinrich. "How many you got?"

Heinrich held up two hand grenades. His launcher lay empty on the floor.

Jack peeked around the corner at the demons in riot gear moving slowly towards them. He'd blown two of them to ... well not Hell, but wherever they went when they died. The rest were more cautious, but he and the kid only had five grenades left between them and they stood no chance against a dozen demons hand to hand.

Suddenly, Jack heard thundering footsteps headed their way. His spirits dropped. Reinforcements, he thought. Then he saw a rocket streak past him and blow apart two demons at once. "What the—"

He and Heinrich watched, slack-jawed, as three angels in the same gleaming white armor they'd worn on the Mall ran past him and tore through the remaining demons like a hot knife through butter. Between their rockets and their flame-throwers and their sheer, unbelievable strength, it was over almost before it had begun. None of the demons remained, Hakael included, and the angels moved on to other unseen targets.

Jack and Heinrich exchanged a look, then followed them.

## Survival of the Fittest

« ^ »

Daniel stared at the blank monitors in shock. Satan was right. They were too late; the demons had won.

"Don't look so crestfallen, Daniel," the demon said. "It's for your own good, in the long run."

The words sank in on Daniel. Our own good. Zagam had said the exact same thing moments before his death. This was too much. "What?"

"Please," Satan gestured to the chair. "Sit."

Suddenly exhausted, Daniel sat.

"I'm telling you this, Daniel, because I want you to understand. You've been through a lot at our hands, and I feel we owe you an explanation. Now that we've won, it no longer matters whether you know or not why we do what we do. From what you already know, from what the angels have told you, you are aware of our struggle against them. But you only know half the story.

"Five thousand years ago, after leading the angels at Michael's side for tens of thousands of years, I had a revelation of my own."

The demon paused, thinking. "But I'm getting ahead of myself. For you to understand what my frame of mind had become, you have to know what it was.

"We are not evil," Satan said. Seeing Daniel's reaction, he held up a hand. "I know what you've been taught, but most of that is what the angels would like you to believe. Since the dawn of human history, we immortals had watched over you, guiding your development. Not in the name of some nebulous and arbitrary concept of 'good', but in the name of order. We helped you learn to cooperate, build communities, to accept a structure in your lives that allowed you to be more as a group than you could have been as individuals.

"But we went too far. After instilling this pattern of order that pulled you out of chaos, Michael and the others set about enforcing that order, keeping you in tight little rows, held in check by fear of what we, your gods, might do if you disobeyed. Having reached a point of civilization where you could function as a society, that society began to stagnate.

"About five thousand years ago I decided to change that. I've read Miss Richardson's story about us, and one of the quotes she attributed to Uriel is true; we have a need, deep down, to do what's best for the human race. We demons still feel and act on that need. And at that point, so long ago, I felt very strongly that the path Michael had chosen for your people was not the right one. Once humanity had been civilized, you no longer needed order enforced from without. You were perfectly capable of organizing yourselves. What you needed, more than anything else, was the impetus to advance. We provided that."

"By attacking us?"

"Exactly. Think about it, Daniel. Without conflict, without stress, a society stagnates. You needed something to struggle against, something to prevent you from becoming complacent. It's evident throughout the last five thousand years, but just for the moment, think about the last fifty. Look at all the technological advances that were the direct result of the Cold War, most of which have led to a steadily increasing standard of living for your people. Do you think mankind would ever have set foot on the moon if your government didn't need the rocketry and electronic guidance technology to build ICBMs? Look at all the great works of art and literature directly inspired by conflict. Your own national anthem describes one glorious night in a war!"

Satan stood directly in front of Daniel and looked him straight in the eye. "All because of

us. Our prompting. Our pushing your race to excel. Without us, your mighty six billion strong human race would still be a hundred thousand farmers stagnating between the Tigris and Euphrates. You owe all you are to our encouragement. The strength of your race was forged in the fires of the tension we create. It's nothing more than Survival of the Fittest. We are the lions, and you are the herd we strengthen by weeding out the weak."

"So what now?" Daniel asked. "Aren't we back to the same chaos you lifted us out of to begin with?"

Satan chuckled. "No, I don't think so. Your race has too many generations of order behind them to revert completely. You'll rise from the ashes now, just as you've always done. But by making it harder, by knocking out the governments and other support mechanisms that made it possible for you to watch eight hours of television a day, we've done your race a great service. A service we'll continue to provide for as long as necessary."

"I think not," said a voice from the doorway.

Daniel and Satan looked over and saw several white-armored angels walk into the room. The first one spoke again.

"I told your second it was over, Satan. You didn't take me seriously."

Satan looked remarkably nonchalant. "Gabriel. Haven't you been watching the news? We've won. The last bastions of order are falling even as we speak. What can you possibly do about it now?"

"Rebuild," the angel said as he fired a rocket.

Satan barely dodged in time. Daniel slipped out of the chair and moved to the edge of the room.

"What are you doing?" Satan demanded, finally looking upset. "Have you forgotten the rules?"

Gabriel stepped forward and the other angels spread out behind him, blocking the exit. "No," he said. "But as I told Beelzebub, the rules have changed." Gabriel made a fist in the air next to his head, then pointed at Satan.

Daniel eased his way over and watched from the door as the angels tore the demon apart. Satan didn't go down easily, and he even managed to take an angel or two with him, but after a long, violent and desperate struggle, Satan was destroyed. Even at the end, Daniel thought the great demon really couldn't believe what had happened to him, to his plans.

Belief or no, Satan fell.

By morning, Hell was free of demons. Daniel, Jack and Heinrich stood outside on the desert floor and watched as one by one the angels emerged, spread their metal wings and took off to the west, the rising sun glinting off their wingtips. There was an explosion that they all felt through their feet as the last angel emerged, and soon after that, the fires of Hell burst through the destroyed elevator shaft. No one could re-enter for quite a while, and when they did, there'd be nothing to see.

There was no answer when Daniel tried to call back the helicopter, and eventually he and the last two members of his team made their way back to what was left of Las Vegas on foot.

The Demonic Crusade officially ended a few weeks later when the angels tracked down and destroyed the last of the demons, Belial, who had escaped the purge of Hell by being in Washington D.C. at the time. With his destruction, the demons no longer existed.

When the United States government crumbled, it took its economy with it. Soon after, other governments began to crumble as the world economy ground to a halt. The chaos Satan worked so hard to bring about was complete.

The angels were very helpful in rebuilding human society. Michael had proclaimed it the dawn of a new Golden Age. There was talk of using the opportunity to create a single, unified world government, with the former sovereign nations of the world acting much the same way as the individual states of the United States. The angels would help set up such a structure, and arbitrate disputes. Hungry for leadership, most of the world eagerly went along with Michael's plan.

And for a while, everyone was happy.

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## ***BOOK III: JIHAD***

### **Paradise**

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HEAVEN. THIRTY MONTHS AFTER THE DEMONIC CRUSADE.

Daniel walked the halls of Heaven, the boots of his tan uniform echoing loudly through the empty spaces. Built on the ruins of what had been downtown Los Angeles, the angels' seat of government was a technological marvel. The gleaming, golden building was more than one hundred stories tall and covered a ground area of more than forty city blocks. It reportedly was as impervious to earthquakes as it was to everything else. Michael said he wanted a symbol as much as a base of operations when he had it built, and that's exactly what he got.

The reconstruction of society from the chaos the demons created had gone surprisingly well. It had taken only about a year to get all the provisional governments of the world to sign on to the Heaven Proposal. There had been a few who scoffed openly at the idea and stubbornly refused to give up their national sovereignty (such that it was after the demons got through with it), but they all eventually came around. With the signing of France eighteen months after the close of the Demonic Crusade, the Earth's six billion people had been united under a single government.

A year tomorrow, Daniel said to himself.

Heaven buzzed with preparations for the first anniversary celebration. Rumor was that the global party was going to be the biggest single social event in human history, a celebration of

Michael's Golden Age. Movie stars, prominent scientists and dignitaries of every stripe had practically climbed over each other to wrangle an invitation.

Daniel just wanted to hide until it was over. He'd never been a party guy, and he was sick to death of hearing about it. Unfortunately for him, it was part of his job to hear about it. Daniel had spent the last thirteen months as Michael's "Security Advisor", a figurehead position more than anything else. Gabriel's Elite Guard handled all of Heaven's actual security, but Michael thought it looked good having the Great Hero of the DTF as a prominent member of his staff. Daniel was expected to attend the party planning committee meetings, even if his attendance was mostly for show.

Daniel finally reached Michael's court. The two angels on either side of the gigantic, golden and ornate doors opened the doors as soon as they saw him. Advantages of fame, Daniel mused as he crossed the threshold; only a select group of humans was ever allowed into this room. The vast room was decorated in gold and sky blue, and was far more opulent than the office of any human head of state Daniel had ever seen. The mix of luxury and technology was striking; though Michael sat on an elegantly appointed (and tremendous) throne, he was surrounded on either side by computer consoles and monitors. He could control the entire world from that chair.

Michael fit the room, or the room fit him. The leader of both the angels and the human race looked every bit as majestic and regal as befitted the office. He was tall, at least as tall as Gabriel, with a sleek yet powerful frame. His naturally golden skin and hair brought out his powder blue eyes, and his chiseled, ageless good looks instilled a feeling of trust and goodwill. If Michael had any flaws, Daniel didn't know what they were.

No, that wasn't true. The camera didn't know what they were. Michael had a tendency to get on Daniel's nerves. While Daniel granted that if anybody had a right to a "holier than thou" attitude, this would be the guy, the angel's smug assertion that he always knew best grated on Daniel. He usually fought down his annoyance with a shrug and figured, "What am I gonna do, the guy runs the planet."

"Daniel!" Michael called as Daniel entered the room. "Good to see you!"

Daniel nodded in reply. As always, Michael was flanked by Gabriel to his right and Susan Richardson to his left. Susan was Michael's media liaison, a position she fit like a glove. Who better to convey Michael's proclamations than the world's most beloved and trusted newswoman? There were maybe half a dozen others in the room, various department heads. Most were angels, but a few, like Daniel and Susan, were prominent humans.

Daniel walked over and took a seat next to Susan. With a push of a button from Michael's throne, the seats to either side of him swung around on the floor to face the opposing wing, forming a sort of conference table without the table.

Susan leaned over and whispered, "Why the long face?"

Daniel hadn't been aware he was broadcasting his emotions so clearly. "Nothing," he said, then straightened a little in his chair.

"Now that we're all here," Michael said with a nearly imperceptible glance at Daniel, "we can begin."

Michael went on at length about what he expected for the following day's gala. Each department head reported in turn on how their end of the preparations were going. Daniel had heard most of this before, and found his mind wandering when Michael looked to him and said, "Security."

Daniel hastily shook himself out of his reverie. "Nothing new to report, sir. Gabriel informs me that all the necessary precautions are in place." The truth was that Gabriel had handled everything, and almost certainly kept Michael apprised of how things went. Daniel was only kept in the loop as a formality.

"Good," Michael said, clapping his hands together. He stood, as did everyone else. He glanced around the room and everyone, including Daniel, left promptly. Only Gabriel stayed behind, but he always did.

The meeting was over.

"What was the matter with you in there?" Susan demanded. She had raced to catch up with Daniel as he left the meeting.

He hardly turned to acknowledge her. "What do you mean?"

Susan put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. "You're changing, Daniel. You've become so distant recently. I want to know what's bothering you."

"What's bothering me, or what's bothering Michael's Security Advisor?"

Susan paused. "What's the difference?"

Daniel nodded. "That's what I thought." He turned and walked away from her, angry with himself for getting angry.

"Wait a minute!" Susan called, running after him again. "What did you mean by that?"

Daniel spun on his heel and faced her. "Look around you, Susan. What do you think this place means?"

"Peace, prosperity—"

"Did Michael teach you to say that or did you come up with it on your own?"

Susan slapped him. Daniel ignored it.

"You used to be a journalist, Susan. Now you're a puppet. So am I. I guess I'm just getting tired of it."

"We aren't puppets!"

"Aren't we?" Daniel asked. "Come here."

He led Susan down the hall to a door with a rather elaborate electronic lock. "You ever been in there?"

"No..." she answered cautiously.

“No human has,” Daniel said. “You and I are supposed to be members of Michael’s staff, yet the only ones I’ve ever seen enter that room are Michael and Gabriel. And I’ve watched. Since Gabriel handles all the actual security around here, I’ve had plenty of time.”

Susan relaxed. “So that’s what this is all about,” she said. “You feel underused and unappreciated. Daniel, I’m sorry if you’re bored, but you have to realize what an honor it is to be on Michael’s staff. You—”

“That isn’t it at all,” Daniel said. “But I guess you wouldn’t understand.”

Without another word, he turned and walked away. This time, Susan let him go.

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## The Serpent



The world rejoiced.

Over the evening skies of Los Angeles, fireworks burst in multicolored glory, accented by angels in powered armor flying in formation over the city. It was an image mirrored over nearly every major city on the planet. The population of Earth celebrated their unity, the defeat of the demons, and their saviors, the angels.

Daniel thought it was a load of crap.

Nonetheless, he was thankful for the celebration. If his plan worked, it would give him the chance to learn something that had bothered him for months. While most of the population of Heaven, Michael and Gabriel included, partied either on the roof or in the streets outside, Daniel sat in alone in Security Control, perched behind an out of the way computer console.

His computer illiteracy while he and Susan had been on the run was a thing of the past. He’d spent a fair portion of the last two years becoming proficient with computers, and he knew the angels’ security system inside and out. Tonight he had a very special task. He was determined to get into the forbidden room that he had pointed out to Susan. With everyone else preoccupied with the celebration, he figured he’d never have a better chance.

As he’d done so many times in the past, he located the file that contained the security passcode that would open the door. It had taken nearly three months to locate that file, and when he had, he’d learned that it wouldn’t do him any good. The file was encrypted, and even though he knew how to access the file, he couldn’t actually read it without a key, a key he’d never been able to find.

A few weeks before, he’d discovered how to do something that would allow him to bypass the key altogether. If he couldn’t read the code, he could replace it with null values, effectively deleting it. In theory, the door would then open for anyone. There was a problem with this plan. Once he’d done it, he couldn’t undo the damage. He’d have to get in, see what the angels were hiding and get out again before anyone else came near the room. Once out again, he could feign ignorance of the zeroed out passcode, Gabriel would reset it, and no one would be the wiser.

The celebration offered the perfect cover. It was now or never.

Daniel glanced at the security monitors to verify that Michael and Gabriel were still at the party. They were. Daniel then arranged for the security camera that monitored the door to be disabled. Electronics glitch. Terrible thing. Then he finally turned back to his terminal. He already had the command to zero out the passcode typed in. All he had to do was press "enter".

Once I do this, I'm committed, Daniel thought. His hand hovered over the key.

Screw it. His hand pressed the "enter" key quickly and decisively. Daniel was already up and headed out the door.

Daniel reached the door two minutes later. As expected, the hallway was empty. He glanced up at the video camera he disabled, winked, then pushed on the door.

It swung open.

Daniel quickly moved inside and closed the door. The room was smaller than he expected, and filled with computer equipment and a modest conference table. He sat down at the main computer console.

The computer was already on and there didn't seem to be any security precautions. Daniel wondered why at first, then realized it'd be just like Gabriel to decide such measures weren't necessary inside a secure room. He began poking around the computer. It wasn't long before he found the sort of thing he was looking for.

"Oh my God." He pulled an optical disk from his uniform, then started a file copy.

Several minutes later, Daniel left the room as he found it, the blind eye of the camera seeing nothing.

Daniel caught up with Susan a while later on the roof. "We have to talk," he said quietly.

Caught up in the festivities, Susan barely noticed him. "What?" she asked, still smiling. Then she caught the expression on Daniel's face and grew concerned.

Without another word, Daniel took her by the arm and led her away from Michael and the crowd, over to an edge of the roof relatively free of people.

"I found out what they're up to," Daniel said.

"Who?"

Daniel rolled his eyes and sighed. She used to be smarter than this, he thought. "Michael. The angels."

Susan shook her head. "Daniel, what are you talking about?"

"This," he said, showing her the disk. "I broke into that room. I found this on a computer."

She looked at the disk, but made no move to take it. "What is it?"

"Their plans." He looked over her shoulder at Michael, roughly a hundred meters away. He never had successfully determined how sensitive immortal senses were. "I don't think it's safe to talk about this here. Can we go to your quarters?"

Susan looked at Daniel and smirked. "Why Mister Cho, are you coming on to me?" For the first time, Daniel noticed she was swaying a little. Damn, he cursed, she's been drinking.

"This is serious!" he said, but not loudly enough (he thought) for Michael to hear. "We need a place to talk, and Michael probably suspects I don't trust him. Your room is less likely to be bugged."

Daniel's manner finally started to pierce Susan's alcohol-enhanced good mood. "Daniel, what do you think you have there?"

"Downstairs," he said. They went.

"Here," he said. He handed Susan the disk and she inserted it into her computer.

Daniel plopped down in a chair as Susan read. It didn't take long for her to get to the end of what he'd been able to copy before caution and fear drove him out of the room. "This can't be right," she said.

"It is. I took it from Michael's secure system. Why else do you think we're not allowed in there?"

She handed the disk back to Daniel. "I can't believe this. It has to be a prank, a fake, something, but Michael would never do such things."

Daniel sat up straight. "You don't think so? Think about what everybody out there is celebrating. We have peace, yes. We have a unified world government, certainly. But what kind of government? A theocracy, a dictatorship that we all just went along with because Michael's immortal and he claims to know what's best for us. Did I ever tell you about the conversation I had with Satan the night he fell? He wasn't evil. He thought he knew what was best for us, too."

"Daniel, there's a reason he was called the 'Prince of Lies'."

Daniel stood up quickly. "Yeah, because that's what Michael wanted us to call him!" He held up the disk. "Do you believe this? Do you believe me?"

Susan dropped her eyes to the floor.

Daniel nodded. "Fine," he said.

"Daniel, I don't think you're lying, but this is just too far-fetched to accept without confirmation. I can't make a decision on a single data point. You've been under a lot of stress recently. I know that for years you were either on the run from demons or chasing them yourself. Don't you think it's possible that you want to believe this because you need an enemy to fight?"

Daniel stared open-mouthed at Susan. "You think I made this up?"

"Maybe not consciously, but—"

Susan didn't get the rest of the sentence out before Daniel was gone, slamming her door behind him.

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## Falling From Grace

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Daniel packed as fast as he could. He had to get out of Heaven before Susan, good intentions or not, ratted him out. His room was still pretty spartan, though not as bare as his old apartment in Washington. He threw most of his clothing into a bag, grabbed a few other things he couldn't bear to leave behind, then walked out his door.

He was stopped only once on his way out of the gargantuan complex, by Heinrich von Braun, now proudly serving as one of Heaven's many guards. Heinrich was obviously puzzled by the bag. "Where are you going, sir?"

Daniel smiled, slung the bag casually over his shoulder and walked over to Heinrich. "I'm off to visit a friend, Heinrich. A young lady that doesn't live here in Heaven, but who might just have a heaven of her own for me."

Daniel winked at the young German, who smiled and blushed simultaneously. Heinrich nodded, and Daniel was on his way. As he walked out of the security gates on the ground level, Daniel vowed there would only be one way he'd ever return.

Michael sat on this throne and frowned. He was alone in his enormous "office" and the object of his consternation was something on one of his many flat-screen computer monitors. He didn't look up until Gabriel walked into the room.

"You wished to see me, Michael?"

"Look at this," Michael said and spun the monitor over to Gabriel in disgust.

"An email from Cho," Gabriel observed. "Why did this make you so—"

"Read it!" Michael commanded.

"Michael," Gabriel read aloud. "I've discovered what you really are and what you're really doing. I know all about your plans, and I won't let you get away with it."

Gabriel paused, then read, "I've been in the secure room."

"Is it true," Michael asked. "Has he?"

Gabriel looked away from his leader. "It could be," he said. "I was about to come tell you about it when you summoned me. The passcode on the door has been zeroed out, and the security camera watching the door appears to have malfunctioned. Even so, the only time he could have gone in there without being noticed—"

"Was during the party." Michael said. "And I don't remember seeing much of Cho on the

roof with us.”

“No, I remember seeing him talking to Richardson for a few minutes, but that’s all. We can’t prove Cho was in the planning room last night, but if he says he was, I see no reason to disbelieve him.”

Michael sunk further into his massive chair. “Were you aware that by the time I received this message, Cho was nowhere to be found in the complex, and that his room had been cleaned out?”

Gabriel studied the floor. “No, sir, I was not.”

Michael stood and walked to one of the foot-thick windows. “We have a major security problem here, Gabriel. If Cho does know our plans, he could turn public opinion against us. I don’t want a rebellion on my hands after only being in office a year.”

“My Lord, he’s only one human. I doubt—”

Michael spun and faced Gabriel. “One human. One human that discovered our existence. One human that helped orchestrate the fall of Hell. One human that the entire planet recognizes as a hero. That’s the one human to whom you refer?”

Gabriel said nothing.

“You’ve let me down, old friend,” Michael continued. “Cho was given a place of prominence on my staff not only because the world expected it, but so you could keep an eye on him. We knew, you knew, how dangerous he could be and still you let this happen.”

Gabriel got defensive. “You still have Richardson.”

“Yes, thankfully. She’s still under control, and depending on what Cho may have told her, we might even be able to use her to do some spin doctoring. But that isn’t the issue. You will find Cho and return him. He’s too dangerous to be allowed to walk around on his own, especially if he knows what he says he knows. Find him. Quietly.

“Now.”

Gabriel left quickly.

The more Daniel walked, the more furious he became. He felt like a fool. Not just me, he thought. Michael played us all for suckers. As Daniel walked further into the parts of Los Angeles that weren’t made of gold, he reflected more and more on what he’d learned.

Virtually everything Daniel had been through in the last three years was part of Michael’s master plan. Not his initial discovery, of course; that was coincidence, luck, fate, whatever. But everything that happened after was part of a carefully orchestrated plan to place Michael exactly where he was.

Satan had been telling the truth after all, no matter what Susan thought. Just as he and the demons sought to improve humanity through the fires of chaos, the angels saw themselves as lords of order. When Daniel began to discover what the demons really were, Michael (who had agents everywhere) saw it as his opportunity to eliminate his opposition, bring order to a

chaotic world and finally make it stick. Throughout the Demonic Crusade, Michael and Gabriel carefully let the world fall apart, let millions die in the witch-hunts, all so that they could step in and defeat the demons at the last possible minute. All so they could be in charge by the time the world began to rebuild.

In the name of Order.

The problem, Daniel thought, is that the Nazis were obsessed with order, too. Michael's theocracy, earned with the blood of millions of innocent humans, was only the beginning. Now that he was in charge, he had plans for the human race. It was the knowledge of these plans, more than anything else, that drove Daniel from Heaven.

While Satan sought to strengthen the human race through adversity, weeding out the weak, Michael had a much more straightforward strategy. Rather than waiting for misfortune or an inability to compete to weed out the unfit, Michael had decided to remove them directly, in the name of genetic purity.

Daniel had heard rumors about an unbalanced health care system that the angels had implemented. People with chronic problems, the ones that needed the most care, seemed to hit the most delays. He'd even heard that some, people with Down Syndrome or diabetes, for example, had been transferred to specialized "Care Centers". Now he knew what the Care Centers really were: concentration camps.

Michael was systematically removing from the gene pool anyone with illnesses or infirmities that could be passed on genetically. It wasn't a Darwinistic manner of the genetically unfit not being able to reproduce. It was that they simply weren't allowed to reproduce.

Unconsciously, Daniel's hands clenched to fists.

All that was only the start. There had been much more on the computer, but Daniel had only been able to copy so much before he had to get out of that room. Knowing what he knew about Michael, Daniel had no doubts the angel would have him "removed" if he had begun to see Daniel as a threat. So Daniel removed himself first.

He stopped and looked at his surroundings. He didn't know how long he'd been walking, but the immense, gleaming edifice of Heaven was still visible on the horizon behind him. Immediately around him, however, stood buildings of a different sort altogether. The slums reminded him of some of the tenements in Washington he'd visited as a paramedic. Most of the buildings looked as though they were still standing only because they were too stubborn to fall down.

Amazing, he thought, that such squalor could exist so close to the angels' headquarters. It served as yet another indication of the disdain the angels felt for those that weren't "good enough".

Daniel was so busy assessing the slums, he never saw the hands reach out of the shadows to grab him.

Inside his armor, Gabriel fumed. He had warned Michael many times that Cho's attitude problem could blossom into something far more troublesome, but Michael had consistently

ignored him. If Gabriel had half Michael's talent for organization, he'd have replaced the overconfident buffoon centuries ago.

And these slums! Gabriel had recommended to Michael countless times that they be leveled. Considering his plans for the humans, Michael had been surprisingly concerned with what they'd think of such an action. What good was the power he held over the humans if he didn't use it?

For whatever reason Michael let the eyesores stand, they made Gabriel's job a hundred times harder. He and a team of armored angels had been searching the area surrounding Heaven for hours, but they'd seen no sign of their quarry.

They'd have to turn back soon. The longer he stayed out here, the more questions the humans would ask. They were quickly approaching the limit of what they could pass off as a "security patrol". As much control as Michael had over the media, humans were too damn curious for their own good.

Michael was right about two things, Gabriel thought. Cho is too great a threat to be running loose.

And I *will* find him.

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## Heretic!

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Daniel crouched in the shadows, held silent and immobile by powerful arms as the angels walked by in their sleek, muscular armor. When the angels were finally gone, the pressure relented somewhat and Daniel was able to turn around. The man holding him was a monster, a walking wall of muscle and bone. The man put a pale finger to his lips, and motioned for Daniel to follow him.

After glancing over his shoulder to where the angels had been, Daniel followed. His huge guide led him through a maze of half-fallen walls and make-shift shacks, occasionally stopping, thinking and scratching the blond stubble on his nearly bald head. Finally, they arrived.

Buried deep within the wreckage of what had been South Central Los Angeles was hidden a sanctuary. The building consisted of one large, open room, and Daniel guessed that it had once been a warehouse. It was hundreds of yards away from the nearest open street, and presumably not discernable from the surrounding wreckage when seen from the air. There were maybe three dozen people milling about, and the few that noticed Daniel's interest quickly turned and went about their business.

"Now you can't be who I think you are," said voice to Daniel's left.

Daniel followed the sound and saw a tall, well built black man walking towards him. The man wore a tee-shirt and overalls and was busy wiping the engine grease off his hands with a rag. Behind him was a mid-90's era sedan, with the markings of a police interceptor. Daniel wasn't terribly surprised. Internal combustion vehicles had been outlawed for months, but he

doubted many here could have afforded the conversion process to electric. It wasn't until the man got closer that Daniel noticed the black eyepatch against the man's dark skin, obscuring his right eye. The man thrust out a hand nearly free of grease. "Ricardo Jones."

Daniel shook. "Daniel Cho."

Jones smiled. "So you really are Daniel Cho, Discoverer of Demons, Hero of the Crusade, and Security Advisor to the Archangel Michael." Jones' smile disappeared quickly at the mention of Michael's name. He now looked very serious, and suspicious.

Daniel decided to take a chance. "Former Security Advisor," he amended. "Michael and I have had something of a falling out."

"Is that a fact?"

Daniel smiled inwardly. Once again, he was about to engage in a struggle to spread the word. He pulled the disk from his jacket. "Got a computer?"

Heedless of the guards, Susan stormed into Michael's office. The angel was alone, engaged with whatever was on his computer monitors. He did, however, notice when Susan barged in. It would have taken intense concentration not to. "Susan," he said, offering his most charming smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Where's Daniel?" Susan stopped just short of Michael's throne and burned holes in him with her eyes.

"You don't know either?" Michael said.

Susan softened a bit. "You mean you don't have anything to ... I'm sorry, Michael. Daniel said some things to me last night, and ... He's been under a lot of stress—"

Michael stood and walked down to put an arm around Susan. "Yes, he has. And I'm afraid he's done something rash."

"What?"

"Susan, sit." She took her normal seat.

"I'm afraid Daniel has turned against us. I had been warned someone with his life experience might develop a persecution complex and turn against any and all figures of authority, but I suppose I just hoped Daniel would keep it under control. That changed this morning. I received an email from Daniel shortly after he left Heaven of his own accord. In the letter were many paranoid, inflammatory statements, and threats that I have no choice but to consider acts of treason. Gabriel is trying to find him and bring him back, for treatment, but Daniel, as you know, is awfully good at hiding."

Susan was speechless.

"Susan, it's important for you to be strong. You and Daniel are heroes to your people, and with Daniel turning on us, it's important that people know that they can still rely on you. Can you do that?"

Susan's mind raced a mile a minute, but she managed a nod.

"Good," Michael said.

"No shit," Ricardo Jones said as he finished reading.

"You don't seem terribly surprised," Daniel said, looking over Jones' shoulder.

Jones swiveled in his chair and motioned for Daniel to sit. "I'm not," he said. "Why else do you think we're here?"

Jones leaned in a little closer to Daniel and lifted his eyepatch. While his left eye was a deep, rich brown, the right was a sickly, milky bluish-white. The iris was contracted to a pinprick, and it didn't react at all when exposed to the light. "Congenital defect," Jones said. "I was born with only one good eye." He lowered the eyepatch into place again. "Since I've never known what it's like to see with two eyes, it never really bothered me."

Jones leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, running his fingers over his short, black hair. "I'd never really considered it a disability, and neither did the angels, at first. But I knew people with real disabilities. People that either needed constant medical care, like diabetics and hemophiliacs, or people with problems that made it difficult for them to interact with society, mental retardation, that sort of thing. One by one, over a period of months, these people disappeared into the night. When anyone asked the authorities what happened to them, the answer was always the same."

"Care Centers," Daniel said.

Jones smiled. "Give the man a cigar. Yeah, Care Centers. You ever hear the phrase 'Those that forget the past are condemned to repeat it'?"

"Santayana," Daniel said.

"Yeah. Well, I'm a student of history. As a matter of fact, I was working on my Masters when the angels came into power. My thesis was on the psychology of the Nazis, and I'd seen this pattern of behavior before. I figured I could either disappear or wait for them to get around to taking me. I chose the former."

Jones gestured around to the others in the sanctuary. "Others had the same idea. Everyone in here, according to this," he said, holding up Daniel's disk, "would have been tagged by the angels as unfit to reproduce, and eventually eliminated."

He threw the disk in Daniel's lap. "Except for you," he finished.

Daniel barely had time to grab the disk before the hulking brute that guided him in grabbed him from behind and pulled him out of the chair.

Jones stood and walked over to him. "Bob here doesn't say much, but he's very strong. Now why don't you tell us what Michael's lap dog is really doing here?"

Before Daniel could get a word out, someone called, "Ricardo! Take a look at this!"

Jones walked over to the other man, part of a group surrounding a television. Bob followed,

with Daniel securely in tow.

Michael's face was on the screen. Someone turned up the sound. "In light of these events," the angel said, "I have no choice but to charge Daniel Cho with Heresy Against the State, a capital crime. We can't afford to allow anyone, not even a former hero, to jeopardize what we have built here. The state is offering a substantial reward for information leading to the arrest of Daniel Cho, and all citizens are instructed not to deal with him directly. He is considered armed, delusional and extremely dangerous. Thank you." The screen returned to normal programming.

Jones turned and looked thoughtfully at Daniel. "Bob," he said. "we need to talk about this privately. If you could?"

Daniel felt Bob's forearm constrict around his neck, then everything went black.

Daniel awoke to smelling salts. The first person he saw was Ricardo Jones, but he then noticed that most of the denizens of the sanctuary stood behind their leader.

"Daniel Cho," Jones said, "you are a very lucky man. We put it to a vote, and most of us decided that the reward for turning you in wasn't worth the risk of being captured ourselves. You are, for the foreseeable future, our guest. Welcome to the Underground."

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## Resistance

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ONE YEAR LATER.

This is Susan Richardson with a Heavenly News Bulletin.

"Last night, the world celebrated its second full year of peace and unity. Michael was quoted as being pleased with the turnout, and that he looked forward to many such celebrations in the future.

"In other news, there is no truth to the rumor that a Care Center east of Los Angeles was the target of a bombing four days ago. As seen here, the Care Center is undamaged, and the patients inside are still happily and safely continuing their treatment and work towards their eventual recovery. Authorities believe the rumor began as part of an effort by the terrorists in the Underground as part of a propaganda campaign designed to undermine the public's trust in Heaven. Citizens are instructed to ignore such rumors in the future.

"The worldwide curfew instituted by Michael last month seems to be working. Street crime is down nearly eighty percent, with further reductions expected. Most citizens we questioned were strongly in favor of the curfew, stating that they felt safer than they had in years.

"This has been a Heavenly News Update."

Daniel Cho had had a busy year. Things had been a bit rocky at first, as Jones and the rest

of the Underground didn't really trust him. After a few months (and more of Gabriel's sweeps), they'd started to come around, and Daniel began to make the change from captive to collaborator.

The Underground was far more widespread than Daniel initially thought. It seemed that as soon as Michael took over, there were people that disagreed with him, his policies, or both. Though Daniel had been introduced to the Los Angeles of the Underground, it existed to some extent in nearly every major city around the world. Organized loosely to put it charitably, the Underground had no central leadership, but the various groups did keep in touch with one another and passed on information. Daniel felt this would be useful when the time came.

Daniel and Ricardo Jones became good friends. Once their initial skepticism wore off, most of the Underground began to treat Daniel almost as if he were visiting royalty, but not Jones. The de facto leader of the Los Angeles Underground, he treated Daniel with the respect due his accomplishments, but also regarded him as a valuable resource. Jones was still in charge in L.A., and Daniel saw no reason to challenge that.

The Los Angeles Underground was several hundred strong by the second year of Michael's reign. Most of the members were like Ricardo; they'd gone into hiding to avoid being captured because they didn't measure up to the angels' standards of perfection. A small but steadily growing portion of the Underground, though, was composed of perfectly healthy individuals that had decided to stand against the angels' regime.

The Underground had kept busy, raiding everything from junkyards to the angels' supply depots for supplies, though they never attacked civilian targets. After two years, they were finally ready for something big.

Daniel and Ricardo sat in a makeshift planning room, going over some maps and aerial photographs of an area south of Los Angeles. In the warehouse around them, the Underground's forces readied for a major assault.

"If we come in here, from the north," Ricardo said, "they'll be less likely to see us coming."

"They're going to see us either way, Ricardo," Daniel answered. "If we come in from the north and they do see us, we have fewer avenues of retreat. We should come in from the east, towards the service entrance."

Ricardo leaned back in his seat and rubbed his eyepatch, something Daniel had often seen him do when he was frustrated or annoyed. "Damn," he said. "Why's a damn Care Center have to be done up like a fort?"

"Because it's not a hospital. It's a death camp. Michael knows by now that I'm one of you, even if he can't find me. He's scared to death that we'll do exactly what we're doing. Consider us lucky. Last we checked, the camp didn't have any armored angels as protection. We get in and out fast enough, we can rescue the inmates and be gone before any armor shows up."

Jones stood and opened the door. "That's a mighty big 'if', Daniel." He left.

Daniel smiled and looked over the maps one more time. He knew what they had planned was a terrible risk, but it had to be done. More people died in that camp every day they waited, and to rescue them the way Daniel had suggested almost a month ago would draw attention to their cause, and maybe help make up the minds of the so many people that were uneasy about

the angels, but didn't really know why. Daniel knew that if it didn't go off well, if he were captured, then he was as good as dead. Michael still had egg on his face from Daniel's defection, and Daniel was still considered a Heretic by the government. He didn't care, really. He'd been a marked man in one way or another ever since witnessing Batarel's resurrection at that car wreck, so long ago. He'd learned to live with it and do what must be done. This rescue qualified. Rolling up the maps, he followed Ricardo.

Late that night, they approached from the east, as Daniel suggested. The Care Center was about the size of a large hospital complex, but most of the buildings were only one or two stories tall. There were no other buildings for miles, an insurance taken by the angels that the only view most citizens would ever have of a Care Center was what they saw on television. The buildings themselves were clean, white and they looked very medical. The fences topped with razor wire were far enough away as to not be seen by the occasional television camera.

Daniel and Ricardo crouched in the brush about a half-mile away from the fences, watching closely with binoculars. They were surrounded by a dozen of the Underground's best fighters. Nearly a mile behind them, out of sight from the complex, was an array of makeshift armored vehicles, all internal combustion powered, and therefore illegal. Least of our worries, Daniel mused.

"Not much activity," Ricardo said.

"Not yet, but there will be. Remember," said Daniel, speaking to all of them, "the angels are fast, even without armor. Don't even get near one hand to hand. And don't waste your grenades. They're your only effective weapons. Use them only when you're sure they'll do some good.

"Once we get that fence down, two things will happen. Our people will haul ass in there and start loading people into vans, and the angels will try to stop that from happening. Your primary concern is to protect the vans. Don't go chasing after any angels that might try to draw you away. That's my job."

Ricardo looked quizzically at Daniel.

"The instant we blow down the gate, I've got to find and destroy the commandant. It'll buy us more time, and send a message as well. Don't wait for me."

Ricardo nodded, then spoke into a walkie-talkie. "Everyone ready?"

He received various affirmative replies, then looked again at Daniel. "May as well get this over with," he said.

Daniel smiled grimly, and nodded.

Ricardo keyed the walkie-talkie again. "Go."

## Liberation

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Once the word was given, things happened quickly. Daniel, Ricardo and the others rushed the service entrance, blowing it open with their grenades only moments before the speeding Underground vans barreled through the opening. Daniel clapped a hand on Ricardo's shoulder. "Don't wait for me!"

Ricardo nodded, then followed the vans. Daniel loped off to the north, where they were fairly sure the commandant's office must be.

Ricardo was thankful. They'd taken the angels by surprise, and met almost no resistance at all making their way to the holding areas. They'd seen only one angel so far, and Bob dispatched him fairly quickly. Thirty seconds with no trouble, he thought. Not bad.

He knew the situation wouldn't last, though. Already, the warning sirens were blazing throughout the complex. Judging by the reaction times they'd recorded at the other Care Center they'd bombed, they had two more minutes until the complex's unarmored guards arrived, and ten minutes beyond that until the armor dispatched from Heaven showed up. They had to move quickly.

On Ricardo's signal, the lead van, one specially modified with an armored grill, plunged through the wall of central holding facility. The instant the cinderblocks stopped falling, Ricardo was through the hole. "We're the Underground!" he shouted at the pale, emaciated people inside. "We're here to rescue you!"

While the others started loading people into the trucks, Ricardo looked to the north, waiting for the angels to come, and wondering what Daniel was doing.

Daniel wasn't sure what he was doing. He and Ricardo had studied everything they could about the layout of the Care Centers, and he thought he knew his way around one pretty well. He quickly discovered that knowing the layout of place from the air and knowing it from the ground were two different things.

He wasn't lost, exactly. He still knew roughly where in the complex he was, and he knew the route back to the exit and rendezvous with Ricardo and the others. He just had no idea where the commandant was.

"Stop where you are," commanded a voice behind him. "And drop your weapon."

Daniel stopped and turned around slowly, dropping his grenade launcher on his right foot. One of the dozen or so angels in the complex, one of Gabriel's security goons by his uniform, held a pistol aimed in Daniel's direction.

The angel smiled. "I can't believe my good fortune. You're Daniel Cho."

Daniel shrugged.

"Gabriel's been looking long and hard for you, traitor. I'm going to look awfully good when I turn you in."

Daniel cocked an eyebrow and grinned.

"You have something to say, Cho?"

"No," Daniel said as he dropped backwards to the ground, simultaneously ducking the angel's bullet and kicking the grenade launcher back into his hand. Within seconds, all that was left of the angel was a smoking wet spot on the wall of the nearest building.

"I'll be damned. It worked." Daniel kept looking.

Ricardo hastily glanced at his watch as he waved more people into the trucks. They were running out of time.

As if on cue, the angels arrived. They weren't armored, instead wearing the tan/gold uniforms of Heaven Security. They were armed, however, and while the automatic weapons they carried were only a nuisance to an immortal, they were lethal enough against a human. "We have company!" Ricardo yelled. "Don't let them near the trucks!"

Humans and angels opened fire simultaneously. In the first few seconds, a handful of angels were blown apart and a handful of humans were cut in half by automatic weapons fire. Both sides dropped back to regroup.

"Keep firing!" Ricardo shouted. Maybe half the prisoners were loaded, and unless his men could keep the angels a safe distance away, they'd die anyway, along with their rescuers.

He hoped Daniel was faring better.

Daniel finally got his bearings and thought he knew where he was. Directly ahead of him was the building he and Ricardo had agreed to be their central command building. It was huge, white and marble, with giant ornate columns. This single building probably outweighed and cost more than the rest of the complex combined. Angelnomics, Daniel thought. Only the best for humanity's keepers. He had just started up the front steps when instinct told him to duck.

An explosive shell whistled over his head and exploded about thirty meters behind him. When Daniel looked up, he saw an armored angel step out the door. Too soon! he thought. Then he realized it was alone.

Of course the commandant would have a personal suit.

"Daniel Cho," the angel said through its amplified loudspeaker. "I suppose it's too much to ask that you've come to turn yourself in?"

Daniel smiled and raised his grenade launcher.

Instead of making a move to dodge or fight back, the angel just stood there. "Please, human. That might make a difference against a normal angel, but it will hardly dent my armor. What are you going to do, pummel me with it?"

Sort of, you smug bastard. Daniel adjusted his aim and fired a grenade into the marble

column next to the angel. It collapsed, bringing tons of marble crashing down on the commandant as Daniel leapt aside. When the dust cleared, only the angel's armored head and shoulders were in view.

"Now," Daniel said, "about that pummeling?" He aimed the launcher squarely at the angel's head.

"Faster!" Ricardo screamed. His men were running out of grenades, and he was running out of men. Only Bob and a few others still stood, while many of the others that still lived did so only if Ricardo could get them medical attention quickly enough. The only good part of his situation was that most of the prisoners were free.

He checked his watch. Two more minutes until the cut off. He and the trucks had to be out of the complex and to the camouflaged safe havens within five, or the flying angels would spot them.

"Go!"

Bob crept over to him. The mute gave the hand signal to go. The loading was complete.

"We're out of here!" Ricardo shouted. He made his way to the nearest truck, Bob providing cover fire, as he then provided for Bob. The instant the large man was in the truck it lurched forward and Ricardo shut the reinforced back door.

They had done it.

Daniel ran through the complex, trying to make it to the exit before the armor arrived.

As he ran along the outer fence, he saw the trucks receding in the distance. Good for them, he thought. Now if only I can survive this.

He heard them before he saw them. The deep thundering roar of the angels wing-mounted rockets. He looked at his watch. Damn, they're early!

He was only fifty meters from the exit, but it was all open ground. He got as close as he could to the nearest building, and waited for the angels to land. If they landed near the exit, he was dead.

Fate smiled on him. From the sound of their rockets, they landed near the Command Center, probably to check with the commandant before combing the area.

Daniel took the opportunity to race into the southern California desert, where the others waited for the angels to fly away again.

## **A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing**

The trucks lurched into the Underground headquarters later that night, moving from their hiding places only after the thunder of the angels' rockets had long faded away to the north. Daniel and Ricardo were among the first off the trucks, and helped with the unloading. A lot of people didn't make it, both prisoners and rescuers. Among the dead was Bob, who died of a chest wound in transit. Ricardo took the news calmly, then went to his office, the planning room.

Daniel followed. "That was a little cold, don't you think?"

Ricardo sat down behind his desk, the only substantial piece of furniture in the room other than the conference table, and pulled out a bottle of tequila. He uncapped it and took a swig straight from the bottle. "Yeah, probably. Bob was the first person I met in the Underground, the one that brought me here in the first place, just like he brought you. But I thought you understood, Daniel. This is war. People die. It's inevitable. We saved more people than we lost tonight, so in my book that's a victory. Bob will be missed."

Ricardo took a long pull from the bottle. "But the war goes on."

Daniel walked out of the office and returned to the trucks. Just outside the nearest truck, an emergency medical station had been set up. Daniel saw two men lowering a third into a chair. "What's the problem?" Daniel asked.

One of the lowerers looked up, and stood up straight when he recognized Daniel. "Diabetic, sir. He says he's having a sugar reaction."

"I don't doubt it," Daniel said.

"Animals," the diabetic said. "They were animals."

Daniel knelt by the man. "Excuse me?"

Someone brought over a syringe and a vial of insulin. Daniel watched as the man carefully measured out his dosage, then shot it into his left leg. Only then did the man relax.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm in a bit of a snit. Lewis Malone."

"Daniel Cho." They shook hands. The man's grip was firm and strong.

"I was in that hell hole for only three days, but not once did they allow me any insulin. They knew I was a diabetic, but—"

"That was the point, sir," Daniel said. "The whole reason for that place is to remove those Michael considers genetically defective from the gene pool. With most people, the angels have to exterminate them eventually. With people dependant on medication to survive, they can just ignore you until you die. It's even worse for hemophiliacs. I'm told they don't often make it to the cells. They're cut coming off the bus, and bleed to death right there in the courtyard."

"Animals," Malone said again.

"Are you feeling any better now?" Daniel asked, gesturing to the syringe.

"Much," Malone said. "Thank you."

Daniel smiled and moved on. A couple of people were trying to help an old man down

from the next truck, but he was having none of it.

“Get your hands off me? What do I look like, an invalid? I can get down on my own!”

Seeing he was the last one in the truck, Daniel waved the helpers away and sat on the edge of the truck. The old man stood and stared at him.

Daniel returned the stare. “So you going to get down or not?”

Looking daggers at Daniel, the old man tried to clamber over the edge, but lost his footing. Daniel was there instantly to gently lower the man to the ground. The old man shook off the assistance. “I knew what I was doing!”

Daniel nodded, then leaned against the truck. “Mmm hmm. So what’s a spry youngster like you doing in a Care Center?”

The man started to answer, then stopped himself to take a closer look at Daniel. “Wait a second,” he said. “I know you. You’re that demon catcher guy, Chang, Chong ... Cho! Daniel Cho!”

Daniel took a small, perfunctory bow.

The old man stuck out his hand. “Ira Rosenbaum. Pleased to meet you.”

Daniel shook the man’s hand, then repeated his question. “What were you in for?”

“Eh,” the man said, waving dismissively. “With those thugs, who needs a reason anymore? Something wrong with my genes, they said. It doesn’t matter. They don’t need excuses anymore, come on, they run the planet, for crying out loud.”

Ira looked around, then leaned closer to Daniel. “I’ll tell you something. It isn’t just medical anymore. A few weeks before they took me, I noticed some problems with my neighbor. Nice guy, typical overworked gentile. He must have worked twelve-hour days at some big shot business in the city, not counting the commute, and most weekends too. He didn’t spend much time at home, and the wife worked too. Over time, the man’s lawn got a bit messy. One night, an angel dropped by in one of their big golden cars and told him to mow his lawn. The guy said okay, but you know the type; he forgot. A few days later I hear this big commotion over there at night. I get up the next morning and the guy and his family are gone.

“My parents, they told me stories about times like these. They lived in Poland in the late thirties, early forties. They survived the camps, even managed to stay together, but most of their friends weren’t so lucky. I just thank God neither of them is alive to see what the world’s become, to see the madness has returned.”

Daniel said nothing; he couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t sound trite.

“Well, thanks for the rescue, Mister Cho. I gotta find the john. Excuse me.” The old man wandered off, loudly asking the way to the facilities. Deep in thought, Daniel watched him go.

An hour or two later, after all the trucks were unloaded and moved out, a sense of calm returned to the Underground. Any plans of a victory party were squashed by the reminders of the enormous cost of the rescue, and soon everything was squared away again. Which was exactly what Lewis Malone was waiting for.

Soon after he was deemed okay and left alone, he began exploring the building. He found what he was looking for after only fifteen minutes of searching. A tiny niche behind some huge wooden packing crates, it was dark and out of the way, the perfect hiding place. From his pants pocket, Malone took a small electronic device. After turning it on, he carefully placed it in the corner, out of sight.

Walking away from the device, Malone's eyes sought out Daniel Cho. The rebel stood near a group of the others. Malone was disgusted with the rebel's smug attitude, and the deference the others gave him. But that would all change soon enough.

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## Breach of Faith

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This is Susan Richardson, with this Heavenly News Update.

"Tragedy struck last night as improperly stored fuel in a motorpool caused an explosion in a Care Center south of Los Angeles. Authorities believe that a fire broke out late last night which in turn caused multiple barrels of gasoline to explode. The explosive force and fire devastated the compound resulting in the fatalities of most of the patients, as well as many of their angelic caretakers. Though internal combustion engines have long been outlawed for personal vehicles, they are still legal and common for industrial use. Michael is personally looking into the incident, and has said that steps will be taken to insure that it never happens again.

"Rumors that the explosions were the result of an Underground terrorist assault are completely unfounded, and should be ignored."

Susan was miserable. She realized shortly after Daniel had left that he'd been right after all, and that she'd been too blinded by all the perceived good the angels had done to see it. The very day Michael declared Daniel a heretic, Susan began looking into the allegations Daniel had made.

The results shocked and angered her, but she stayed, thinking she could help more by being the voice of reason in the media, by trying to tone down the angels from the inside. The world had been through so much death and chaos, she didn't want to start another revolution.

She'd tried to do all those things, but in the end, she had to admit nothing had changed. If anything, things had gotten worse the longer Michael was in power, and she remained nothing more than a puppet, her only consolation that she, unlike so many others, could see the strings.

Susan knew quite well what had happened the night before. She knew the rumors she'd just told people to discount were the real truth, the truth she'd sworn as a journalist to tell. She knew what the Care Centers were, she knew what the Underground had done, and she knew, even though she had no proof whatsoever, that Daniel had been there.

She thought of him often, out there fighting the ever-growing injustice while she remained

the mouthpiece of ... of what?

Inhuman monsters? The angels certainly weren't human, but even after all she'd seen, Susan still believed they meant well. Then again, according to what Daniel had told her, Satan believed the same thing. Who was right?

Maybe it was the power, she reasoned. The power of guidance the angels and demons had possessed for millennia. Maybe they were so full of their roles as shepherds, they lost sight of what was really best for the flock.

In any case, her life was hollow, people died by the thousands every day for genetic flaws they had no control over, and while Daniel fought for those people, Susan did nothing but cover it up. One way or another, Susan swore that would change.

Obeying an urgent summons, Gabriel walked into Michael's throne room. The angel that ruled the world stared intently at one of his data screens, but looked up when Gabriel entered.

"He's in," Michael said.

"He'd better be," Gabriel replied. "We lost a lot in Cho's little raid."

Michael sat back on his throne, looking very regal but not impressing Gabriel in the slightest. "Yes," he said, "but who would have thought Cho and his merry little band of outlaws would be so efficient?"

"Certainly not Adonaeth," Gabriel said dryly.

Michael sobered a little. "That part mustn't get out. If the humans ever come to believe that one of them can fight and kill an armored angel—"

"—we wouldn't have a minor resistance, but a full-scale revolt," Gabriel finished.

Michael smiled. "I don't know if I'd go quite that far, old friend, but you get the point. In any case, Rhaumel is in place, and he has activated the homing beacon. We now know exactly where Cho and the rest of the Underground are hiding."

"Excellent," Gabriel said. "I'll arrange for an aerial strike immediately."

"No!" Michael said. "Aerial bombing is too high profile, too deliberate. We've spent a lot of time and effort over the past year painting the Underground as pathetic, incompetent malcontents, and if we publicly bomb them now, we bestow upon them the very credibility we've worked so long to deny."

"No, you and a strike team will go in on foot, in armor. Afterwards, we can pick any cover story we like, that a routine security patrol happened upon a den of looters, whatever. The important thing is to keep it quiet. Rhaumel will signal when they are least prepared for an attack. You will then strike hard, fast and quiet. Once word gets out in the Underground about this attack and the death of Cho, they'll lose heart. We can crush this resistance quite easily after that."

"And Richardson?"

“Yes, noticed that, did you?” Michael asked. “I don’t quite know what to make of her these days. She’s developing quite an attitude, and I think she knows more of what’s really happening than she lets on. Still, for the moment, she’s loyal, and her value as a trusted and beloved spokesperson outweighs her danger as a journalist, so caught up in some ethereal concept of truth rather than concrete and definable order.

“You know, Gabriel, things were so much easier a thousand years ago. The church listened to us, and everyone else listened to the church. We set the rules, they obeyed. No questions. Order. Now these humans are so caught up in ridiculous concepts like freedom and self-determination, as if they were actually wise enough to rule themselves effectively. Didn’t the rampant chaos during their centuries of self-rule teach them anything? Don’t they realize what’s best for them?”

“Old friend,” Gabriel said, “sometimes I wonder if these humans should be allowed to continue the practice of their old religions and philosophies. Too many different schools of thought make it much harder to control them effectively.”

Michael waved a dismissive hand. “Leave Richardson to me. I’ll keep a close eye on her. I want you to concern yourself only with a successful strike. I literally want the head of Daniel Cho on my desk by morning. Go.”

Gabriel assembled a strike team of his best warriors, suited up in armor, and left Heaven, “on patrol”.

Gabriel had mixed emotions about what he was doing. On the whole, he agreed with the plan, but he often wondered if it came too late. Not all of the humans’ mythology and religion was bunk. Even though a great deal of it was fiction created by his people to keep the humans in line, there were often real lessons to be learned from it, even for angels.

Lately he’d been preoccupied with the story of Adam and Eve. He had become acutely aware that he was watching that ancient tale play itself out again, this time on a far grander scale. Just as Eve became poisoned to Paradise by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the humans were increasingly becoming poisoned to the angels by ideas of freedom. He agreed with Michael that the angels, in their immortal perspective, had the wisdom to know what was truly best for the humans and that only the angels could guide the human race efficiently as time went on. He just doubted it would happen with this group of humans.

Gabriel had tried to voice this concern to Michael on several occasions, once even detailing a plan to isolate a large group of very young children, kill off the adult population and start over from scratch. Michael generally scoffed at his concerns, confident that the angels, by virtue of nothing more than simple longevity, would win out. Gabriel wasn’t so sure. Gabriel had watched humans more closely than most of his brethren, and had paid particular attention to human wars. He knew why humans fought, what they fought for and what they were willing to die for, by the millions if need be. He knew that so long as the humans had a word in their language for freedom, the angels would never be truly secure in their power base. Humans were too damn independent for their own good.

Finally, the signal he’d been waiting for flashed onto the display inside his helmet. The Underground’s guard was as far down as it was going to get. It was time to strike.

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## Against the Wall

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The attack came with no warning. The angels were inside before the sentries even knew they were there. In the first ten seconds, a dozen humans nearest the door perished in fire.

Daniel was awake, weapon in hand, before the first explosion ceased its echo. He sprang off his bunk and had a half dozen fighters at his side by the time the last angel entered the building.

“How’d they find us?” someone asked.

“Worry about that later,” Daniel said as he began firing on the lead angel. As expected, their grenades did more damage to the surrounding architecture than to the angels.

“Damn!” Daniel cursed. Already, the smoke from the multiple grenade explosions and the angels’ flame-throwers made it very difficult to see. It wouldn’t be long before the smoke made it difficult to breathe.

A hand fell on Daniel’s shoulder. Daniel whirled around and nearly struck Ricardo in the head with the barrel of his grenade launcher. “We have to retreat, Daniel!” Ricardo shouted over the increasing noise.

“Good idea! You get the civilians out, and I’ll cover you!”

Ricardo shook his head. “I don’t think so!”

Before Daniel could react, three bulky Underground fighters grabbed him from behind. “You’re too valuable to risk here!” Ricardo shouted. “I’ll see you at the rendezvous point!” Ricardo motioned for the emergency exit, and the three men carried Daniel away. The last thing he saw before they entered the darkened, narrow tunnels to safety was the image of Ricardo trying to organize a counterstrike against ten armored angels. He offered a prayer to whatever god Ricardo worshipped.

Ricardo hoped he hadn’t just made a fatal mistake. While it was true that Daniel was too valuable to the overall resistance to risk capture, he was also a brilliant tactician, and Ricardo knew that he’d need every advantage he could get to get out of this alive.

While his men kept the angels relatively contained with explosive blasts, the angels were giving far better than they were getting, and it wouldn’t be long before they tore the place apart. Most of Ricardo’s men had formed a protective wall of constant firepower to mask the escape of the civilians and those too weak or injured to fight. Due to the angels’ efficiency, Ricardo noticed they didn’t have to evacuate nearly as many as he originally would have thought.

Unfortunately, the wall of protectors wasn’t holding very well either, for the same reason.

“Fall back!” Ricardo screamed. “Orderly retreat!”

A grenade, from the angels or an errant shot from one of his own people, he didn’t know, exploded directly over his head, raining down plaster, wood and metal. “We are leaving!” he shouted.

Ricardo and a handful of others concentrated cover fire until they were the only humans left alive in the building, with seven angels bearing down on them. The angelic armor was in varying stages of disrepair, from only scratched to nearly totaled, but the angels themselves still moved with all the speed and power that was their trademark. Ricardo and his men crowded in front of the emergency exit, waiting for the angels to get close enough for Ricardo to give the order. When the angels were within ten paces, Ricardo jerked his head backwards. “Let’s close the door!”

As one, the men backed into the tunnel, leaving the angels as the only living creatures in the building. When the angels rushed to follow, the men fired their grenade launchers not at the angels, but at the walls and ceiling of the tunnel entrance. Tons of rubble that had been carefully placed around the entrance months before came raining down.

“Go!” Ricardo shouted over the din. As his men retreated, Ricardo slowly followed them, walking backwards and firing more grenades to bring down more rubble. Once he was sure he’d created a barricade large enough to buy them time to escape, he turned and ran down the dark tunnel to the rendezvous.

Ricardo caught up with Daniel a short time later at the rendezvous point, where Daniel supervised the loading of the weak and injured into the trucks for the evacuation out of Los Angeles. The city wasn’t safe for them anymore.

Daniel managed a quick smile as Ricardo approached. “So it’s done?” he asked.

Ricardo nodded, still out of breath from his escape. “If they try to dig through and follow us, we’ll be long gone before they get out of that tunnel. If they just radio in and close down the city—”

“We’ve already got ways around that,” Daniel said. “Good work, Ricardo.”

“Daniel, how’d they find us?”

Daniel looked around, then put an arm around Ricardo’s shoulder and took him aside. “I have an idea, but I wanted to wait until you got here to test it. You’re still the boss in L.A.”

Not anymore, Ricardo thought, looking first at Daniel, then at the remains of the Los Angeles Underground packing into the evacuation trucks. “What’s the plan?”

Rhaumel, or “Lewis Malone”, waited in line, impatient to get in the truck. The injured and elderly were being helped in first, and those rebels cursed with being ambulatory had to wait. As he looked around, he noticed Jones and Cho walking towards him. He was initially suspicious, but they were both smiling and chatting happily. They probably knew nothing, he decided.

“Lewis!” Cho called out. “We need your help with something.”

Rhaumel pointed to himself with a questioning look.

“Yes, you,” Cho said, smiling even wider and chuckling to himself.

Reluctantly, Rhaumel stepped out of line. He didn’t need to draw undue attention to himself by refusing whatever they wanted outright. “What do you need?”

This time, Jones did the talking. “We’re short-handed loading some of the cargo, and Daniel here says you’ve got a pretty strong grip. We sure could use the help.”

Rhaumel scowled. Bad enough the rebels escaped Gabriel’s assault, but now they wanted him to do manual labor?

“Come on,” Daniel said, “it’s the least you can do to pay us back for all that insulin.” He playfully jabbed Rhaumel in the shoulder.

“All right,” Rhaumel said.

“It’s this way,” Jones said, pointing the way, “We’ll meet you in a second.” Rhaumel began to walk in the prescribed direction. As soon as he was ten meters or so away from the line, he heard Cho shout “Now!”

From hiding places behind trucks and crates, a dozen rebels raced out and grabbed him. He’d been tricked!

He quickly glanced around and assessed the situation. None of the rebels holding him were armed, but there were several just beyond arm’s reach that were. Cho and Jones stood directly in front of him, and even with his strength and speed he didn’t think he could break the grips of a dozen humans and reach either of the ringleaders before the armed rebels could fire. He decided to maintain his cover and try to play it off as a big misunderstanding. Humans were fond of that. It was the basis for most of their comedy.

“What’s ... what’s going on?” he asked in the most terror-stricken voice he could muster.

“A test,” Cho said, unsheathing a knife. “I’ve had doubts about you ever since we first met. Now I’m going to see if I was right.”

Rhaumel struggled, but the humans just barely held him in check. Cho stepped forward and slashed quickly along Rhaumel’s arm with the knife. The wound had already begun to heal by the time Cho sheathed the knife again. The other rebels tightened their grips, now that what they were dealing with had been confirmed.

“What’s your real name?” Cho demanded.

Dropping all pretense of humanity, the angel answered promptly. “Rhaumel. How did you know, rebel?”

“You should have picked a better cover ailment. Very few diabetics could have really gone three whole days without insulin, and none of them would have been as strong as you were after a sugar reaction. I just wish I’d thought of that before tonight, when I saw you were the only one other than the sentries already up when the attack began. All this death could have been averted.”

“So what now, rebel?”

Cho shrugged, a maddeningly casual gesture. "We're leaving. You're dying. Goodbye."

Cho turned and walked briskly away, already resuming the job of coordinating the rebel departure. As Rhaumel looked around, he saw Jones glaring at him, the hatred exceedingly obvious, a rebel preparing a small plastic explosive device, and another rebel stepping in front of him and leveling a pistol at his head. Rhaumel struggled again, but he couldn't get enough leverage to break his bonds.

"Everyone get away from his head," the pistol-wielding rebel said, and just for a moment Rhaumel thought he had enough freedom of movement to get away. But he wasn't quite fast enough.

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## Town Meeting

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What?" Michael said, incredulous.

Gabriel stood before him in the throne room, still clad in his charred armor and holding his helmet in his hands. He spoke quietly. "Cho escaped, and we lost contact with Rhaumel. We believe his cover was blown, and he's presumed dead."

Michael nodded, stood, and walked to the window, its vast expanse overlooking the pre-dawn Los Angeles below. "What you're telling me," he said, "is that you knew where Cho and his band of traitors were, you took them by surprise, killed nearly half of them, yet not only did Cho and the other rebel leaders escape, but you lost three of your own men and the mole we sacrificed a Care Center to plant?"

"Is that what you're telling me?"

Gabriel stared at the floor. "Yes, sir."

Michael whirled on his subordinate. "This is intolerable! Gabriel, you've served me well over the millennia, and that's the only reason you're still alive. I will not accept this sort of failure any longer. They're only humans! You're an immortal! Act like it! From this point on, I'm assigning someone else to run security around here. Your job, for every second of every day, is to find Daniel Cho and deliver his dead body to me.

"Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Michael pointed to the door. "Get out of my sight."

Scowling, Gabriel left.

The trucks filtered into San Diego by morning, and Daniel found the members of the San Diego Underground very receptive. Their leader was a burly Mexican named Manuel Nogales,

and he seemed particularly pleased to have Daniel in town.

“So you’re the Great and Powerful Daniel Cho,” Nogales said, enveloping Daniel’s hand in a beefy palm and shaking vigorously.

“Just Daniel,” Daniel smiled, finding the large man’s enthusiasm infectious. Daniel looked around the compound as the other Los Angeles Underground members started unloading the trucks. It was a vast underground maze of forgotten irrigation tunnels, hard to find and protected from aerial strikes. Daniel approved. “Quite a place you have here, Mister Nogales.”

“Please, Daniel, it’s Manuel. Come this way. There’s someone who wants to see you.” Manuel put a tree-trunk arm around Daniel’s shoulders and half led, half dragged him away from the trucks and further into the tunnels.

Further in from the entrance and “loading docks”, the tunnels had been substantially modified to provide living quarters and other makeshift rooms. Most of the “walls” were nothing more than sheets of pressboard or drywall propped against one another, but it was a more elaborate headquarters than they’d had in Los Angeles. As they passed, all activity stopped and as one the denizens of the San Diego underground turned and watched Daniel walk by. Daniel was a little disturbed by their silence.

“Your reputation precedes you,” Manuel said, noticing Daniel’s discomfort. “You’re a hero to these people, and others around the world. I hope their reverence doesn’t cause you undo discomfort.”

“It’s a little unnerving,” Daniel said, looking around at one awed face after another.

“It shouldn’t be. You discovered the immortals and exposed them. You were present at the destruction of Hell. You’re the only human to publicly defy Michael and survive. Can you blame them for thinking you walk on water?”

Daniel didn’t have an answer. He didn’t think of himself as a hero. He just did what he had to do.

“We’re here,” Manuel said. “My office.”

The “office” was a plywood shack inside one of the largest tunnels. Manuel opened the door and ushered Daniel inside. The interior was sparsely decorated, all the furniture obviously pillaged from junk heaps and dumpsters. Daniel noticed none of this. He was busy smiling at the man behind the ancient steel desk.

Jack Harris, his old second in command, stood up and gave Daniel a quick salute. “Good to see you, Colonel.”

Jack had turned down a posting at Heaven, instead preferring to retire and enjoy the newfound peace. At least that’s what he had said at the time.

“I had a bad feeling about the angels from the beginning,” he said to Daniel and Manuel, the three of them crowded around Manuel’s desk. “Something that occurred to me while we were in Hell. Heinrich and I were pinned down, just about out of grenades, and facing more demons than we had a chance of destroying. Just when I was sure our numbers were up, the angels arrived in their shiny white armor and blew the demons to smithereens, never even glancing our way to see if we were all right.

“And I noticed something. The demons never stood a chance. With the firepower and protection of that armor, the angels could have destroyed Hell and everything in it long before they actually did. Why did they wait?”

“I started thinking more and more that it wasn’t a coincidence that the angels didn’t make their move until after the United States government fell apart. They weren’t waiting until they were ready to attack. They were waiting until we had no choice but to accept them.”

Daniel slumped back in his seat and exhaled sharply. “That’s it,” he said. “I knew for the whole year I lived in Michael’s golden trophy that there was something about them that didn’t sit right, something over and above their smug self-righteousness, but I could never put my finger on it. That was it.”

“I wanted nothing to do with them,” Jack continued, “but I kept an eye on the news, or what that damn toady Richardson chose to report. When I saw that you’d left and been declared a heretic, I not only knew I was right, but that you’d seen it too, or something worse. Given what’s happened in the last twelve months, I gather it was worse.”

“So why didn’t you come to L.A.?” Daniel asked.

“I was busy. I’ve spent the last several months setting up the Underground in Chicago. I flew down here two weeks ago because I didn’t want the angels getting suspicious if I flew into Los Angeles. I had just arranged with Manuel for ground transport to your L.A. headquarters when we got word you were coming here.”

Manuel leaned forward. “So what now, amigos?”

Daniel brought his hand to his face and stroked his chin. “I think it’s time for a town meeting.”

Daniel’s “town meeting” took nearly a week of frenzied activity to set up. When all was said and done, they had the leader of every Underground branch in the world online for a conference over the Internet, the one form of media Michael had been unable to control. Through the use of audio encoding, the final result was one gigantic conference call.

“Greetings, and thanks for doing this,” Daniel began into the microphone. “By now, I’m sure many or most of you are aware of what happened a week ago in Los Angeles. This latest attack has brought into sharp relief the need for a coordinated effort from the Underground. Our random strikes and acts of defiance aren’t really getting us anywhere, and it just pisses them off. So what I’d like first is a sense of the room. What is the angelic occupation like outside southern California?”

One by one, the other leaders gave Daniel a progress report of their situation.

In China and most of the Far East, the angels held their position through intimidation and violent oppression when necessary. The Asian mythology didn’t allow for the same reverent grace period the angels enjoyed in Christian/Jewish/Muslim countries, so the angels had resorted to time tested political methods.

Australia and New Zealand fell to the same religious and political pressures as most of Europe, but the angels kept a heavier hand there because of the geographic isolation. Sydney

had become a police state after a few public protests, and the penalties for disobedience of the angels' edicts were swift and fierce.

The angels were particularly merciless in India, where they took a no nonsense approach to controlling its nearly one billion inhabitants. Angels rarely appeared there without armor, and they had a habitual practice of sweeping the streets clean of vagrants with their flame-throwers.

Africa was well under control. The Muslim population had gone along with Michael's wishes very early, and had thus been spared the purging endured by the Indians and Chinese. The angels had recently been increasing their patrols, and invoking ever more strict regulations, but by and large the people obeyed.

Europe was hit harder than anyone but the Japanese by the fall of the United States economy, and thus relied heavily upon the angels to rebuild. The angels were as dominant a presence in Europe as they were in North America, and the Europeans had similar problems organizing their resistance movement.

South America found itself in an angelic stranglehold. The vast majority of the population was Catholic, and had initially done anything the angels asked. Only much later did they realize that the angels didn't value much in South America, and that the people had only succeeded in caging themselves at the angels' behest. The angels were rarely seen in South America, but order was strictly maintained by religiously fanatical human dictators left in place by the angels.

Elsewhere in North America, the situation was much the same as in California. People led their daily lives without much interference by the angels, so long as they stayed firmly within the increasingly confining rules. Those that rebelled, or forgot the rules, were swiftly removed from society. Even jaywalkers were often carted away by police and seldom seen again.

When the last person stopped talking, Daniel was quiet for a long moment. "We need to organize a counteroffensive," he said at last. "A world wide effort coordinated to weaken the angels until we can assault Heaven itself."

"Who will lead such an effort?" asked the representative of the British Underground.

"We'll have to elect one, I guess," said Daniel. "The important thing is that the strikes be concurrent. We have to force them to divide their forces. Even they can't be everywhere at once and be effective."

"We must put this to a vote," said the representative from Nigeria. "We'll get back to you."

One by one, they disconnected, leaving Daniel sitting by the computer and looking questioningly at Ricardo, Manuel and Jack.

## Jihad

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The reply came quicker than Daniel expected. Unanimously, the other leaders of the

Underground had elected him as their leader, and they now waited for his orders to attack.

Daniel quickly called a meeting with his War Council, as he'd come to think of Ricardo, Manuel and Jack.

"Any suggestions on what we do first?" he asked.

Jack was the first to speak. "The Underground isn't big enough for the synchronous assault you mentioned, at least not yet. Thanks to the angels' propaganda campaign, a lot of folks don't even know we exist, and most of those that do think we're a disorganized rabble of troublemakers."

"We aren't?" Manuel asked.

Daniel smiled and said, "I'd like to think not, Manuel, but Jack's right. We need better press and more recruits if we're going to make this work."

"What about your friend Richardson?" Ricardo asked.

Daniel shook his head. "Susan's in too deep. Even if she believes me now, and she didn't a year ago, I don't think she'll openly defy Michael like that. There has to be another way."

"What if we just make an announcement?" Manuel asked.

"What do you have in mind," Jack asked, "paper fliers?"

"I was thinking television," Manuel said. "I used to be an engineer at one of the local network affiliates. I know how to do a satellite uplink, and how to run the equipment in the studio."

"You can get us on the angels' satellite broadcast?" Ricardo asked.

Manuel shrugged. "For a few minutes, probably. More than that I don't know. They'll probably catch on pretty quick and block us out."

"A few minutes is all we need. Just enough for a declaration of war," Daniel said.

The other three men stared at Daniel as he laid out his plan.

Two days later, they sat in a van a block away from the television station where Manuel had recently been employed.

"Everyone knows their assignments," Daniel asked.

Everyone in the van gave an affirmative reply. In addition to Daniel, Manuel, Ricardo and Jack, there were four other Underground members, all technical staff that like Manuel, who used to work in television.

"All right, then," Daniel said. "Let's move."

On Daniel's signal, the van pulled up to the service entrance of the studio building. Daniel and his men filed out and into the building with military precision. The instant they were inside, Jack fired a round from his rifle into the ceiling.

The gathered technicians and crew in the backstage area froze as Daniel stepped forward. "My name is Daniel Cho," he said with authority, "and we're with the Underground. We'd like to borrow your equipment for a while."

The only reply Daniel received was silence as everyone in the building stepped away from their posts. No one made a move to stop them as they commandeered the cameras in the news studio. Daniel looked at Manuel in the control booth, and Manuel gave him the thumbs up.

This is it, Daniel thought. As Jack and Ricardo watched the doors, Daniel took his place behind the news desk. Manuel gave a signal to the camera operator, who then waved four fingers at Daniel, then three, then two, then one.

"Greetings. I'm Daniel Cho.

"For the last two years, the collected people of Earth have lived under the oppression of an immortal dictator. We in the Underground have pledged to change that.

"Most of you don't know what's really going on. Many of you have seen loved ones and friends shipped off to Care Centers for the treatment of various genetic illnesses and defects. What you don't know is that these Care Centers are in actuality death camps where Michael intends to remove those he considers genetically defective from the gene pool.

"In India, angels regularly clear the streets with flame-throwers. In Sydney, Australia, those that dared to publicly protest angelic regulation were killed where they stood.

"In the name of order, Michael is weeding out the best of humanity. Under his regime, people like Steven Hawking or Ludwig von Beethoven would never have existed. We can't allow this to continue.

"Throughout human history, people have fought for the cause of freedom. We fight now not for the freedom from oppressions of the present, however terrible they might be. We fight for the freedom of the future. The freedom to decide for ourselves what's best for humanity. There is no greater need in all creation, and no greater threat in our thousands of years of history than the one Michael poses right now.

"The Arab people have a word for a holy war: Jihad. That's what we're fighting, whether the average person knows it or not. We're fighting for the soul of mankind, and for future generations' ability to express it.

"We now declare an official war, the Angelic Jihad, and we will not stop until mankind is free!

"So I beg of you, good people, join us. Help regain your freedom before it's too late. Many of you can already feel Michael's noose tightening..."

Michael's face was a bright red, and veins stood out sharply on his forehead. "How is he doing this?"

"Unknown, my Lord," replied one of the angels in Michael's court. "He must have spliced into a satellite feed."

"And no one can stop it?" Michael asked, a million threats unspoken in his voice.

"We're trying, my Lord, but—"

Just then the screen went black.

"We found him, my Lord," came a voice over the intercom. "The transmission originated in San Diego. Once we found it, it was a simple matter to mask it out—"

"Yes, fine," Michael said. "Gabriel, get going and bring him to me!" Michael turned for confirmation, but Gabriel was already gone.

Daniel became aware of the cameraman signaling to him. "What?"

Manuel's voice came down over the speakers from the control room. "We've been blocked," he said. "I told you we wouldn't have much time."

Daniel was already removing his clip-on microphone. "It was enough," he said. "We're out of here." The Underground left the television studio as swiftly as they arrived.

Gabriel and four other angels, all clad in armor, burst into the television studio. "Where are they?" demanded Gabriel.

No one spoke for a long moment, then the lead technician stepped forward. "They're gone, sir. They left about fifteen minutes ago, as soon as the transmission was cut."

Gabriel stood and smoldered. "Why didn't any of you notify the proper authorities when they first arrived?"

Again, the intimidated humans were not forthcoming with answers. Gabriel stepped forward and lifted the lead technician off his feet. "Answer me!" Gabriel shouted, his armor-amplified voice echoing through the studio.

"Th-th-they had us under gunpoint," the technician stammered.

Gabriel dropped the technician to the floor. "No excuse. One of you could have reached a phone." He turned to his second in command, Azrael, the Angel of Death. "Execute every human in this building for harboring a known heretic."

"Yes, my Lord," replied Azrael.

The room grew cold as Gabriel turned to leave. Near the door, he stopped. "Azrael," he said.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Do it on camera," Gabriel said, still facing the door. "I want the world to know the price of offering the aid Cho just requested."

"Where will you be?" Azrael asked.

Though the massive shoulders of the armor didn't move, Gabriel seemed to deflate a bit. "I

have to go explain to Michael why we've failed him again."

With the heavy thud of armored footsteps, Gabriel exited the building as Azrael and the others closed in on the doomed humans.

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## First Offensive

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Susan Richardson had caught every word of Daniel's broadcast. It played on her worst fears, but she had to be sure. That's how she found herself crammed into a ventilation shaft leading directly into Michael's throne room. She had to hear it for herself. She had waited for one of Michael's private meetings with Gabriel, then moved to listen in. Now she wasn't sure if she really wanted to hear it.

"Progress is slow," Michael said, "but it's working."

"According to schedule?" Gabriel asked.

"Not exactly. Figure four or five generations to weed out the genetically unfit. Not quite the three we'd hoped for, but progress just the same. In one hundred to one hundred fifty years, we will have bred out all the known genetic defects and abnormalities in the human race. After that, it's just a question of maintenance."

"Maintenance?"

"A child can be genetically tested for random mutations while still in the womb. If it doesn't meet standards, we destroy it and the parents start over."

"That's not going to go over well," Gabriel observed.

"Nonsense," Michael said. "This petty rebellion will die quickly enough once you finally deliver Cho's head to my desk, and in a few generations time the humans will do what we tell them without question. We could probably even order the parents to destroy the child themselves, but that wouldn't be as efficient."

"You think the humans would destroy their own child?"

"If we told them to. Besides, the practice has been part of the human tradition for thousands of years already, for things as minor as being the wrong sex, or simply because the parent couldn't be bothered to raise a child. We're not telling them to do anything they don't already do."

Gabriel was silent for a moment, then, "How many chances do they get?"

"For what?"

"To produce healthy offspring."

"Three, I think. After that, they're sterilized."

Michael paused a moment. "On second thought, they should be destroyed. If they can't contribute to the following generation in three tries, they shouldn't be allowed to continue draining society's resources."

Susan had heard enough. As she crawled back the way she came, she tried to think of as many ways as she could to use her position to help Daniel and the Underground.

To some extent, the initial stage of Daniel's plan had worked. Over the past few weeks, the San Diego Underground had steadily gained members, and Daniel had been informed by the other leaders that the effect was similar worldwide, even more pronounced in hard hit areas. The Indian Underground had nearly tripled in size. The Underground was quickly nearing the size required for phase two, a full scale, worldwide assault of key angelic bases. The vast majority of Daniel's time was devoted to planning the offensive, to the point that Jack or Ricardo frequently had to force him to stop and eat or sleep.

Though he never mentioned it, Daniel was terrified. On the rare occasions he let himself step back from the details of the assault and look at the big picture, the concept nearly knocked him flat. The whole world, six billion people, depended on him to help them win their independence. He'd developed an ulcer over the last week, and in the few hours he slept he had frequent nightmares of what would happen if they failed.

The weight of the world was literally on his shoulders.

He was pouring over maps and schedules around two A.M. one morning when Jack walked into his office.

"Morning, boss."

Daniel looked up, bleary-eyed. "Jack," he grunted.

Jack took a seat across from Daniel and lit a cigarette. "When was the last time you slept?"

Daniel managed a weary smile. "What day is it?"

"You got to ease up, Daniel," Jack said, blowing smoke at the lone, dangling light bulb. "We aren't going anywhere if you collapse from exhaustion."

Daniel sat up straight, hearing his spine creak as he did it. "I'm fine, Jack."

"And I'm Harry Truman. You have to relax, Daniel."

"You think Michael's relaxing? Or Gabriel? We can't afford to delay this any longer than we have to. I have to get—"

"That's your problem," Jack said.

"What?"

"You said, 'I have to,'" Jack said. "Not 'we'. You aren't in this alone. You've got Ricardo, Manuel and me here to help you, and the leaders of the Underground around the world to delegate authority to. You've come a long way since I first met you. When we started in the DTF, you were a hero, but not a leader. I saw potential, and that's the big reason I asked to be

assigned to your team, but you didn't know much about leading others back then. You still wanted to do everything yourself.

"Now, on the other hand, you really are the leader everyone thinks you are. You know how to use your reputation and your actions to inspire those who follow you. Most of the folks out there," Jack said, jerking this thumb towards the main tunnel, "would follow you anywhere, do anything you ordered, without question. You know how to lead. You just don't know how to administrate."

Daniel knew Jack was right. "Fine," he sighed heavily, the weight of the past few weeks still pulling him into his chair. "What do I still need to learn, o Buddha?"

Jack grinned. "Start by trusting your subordinates. The others leading the Underground around the world are in their positions because they've proven they can do the job. Give them their goals, then let them find a way to accomplish them. You don't have to do it all on your own."

Daniel nodded as Jack stood up. "And get some sleep for crying out loud," Jack said as he opened the door. "You look like Hell."

Daniel leaned back in his chair, and was asleep before Jack closed the door.

Preparations for the offensive began in earnest two days later. Forces that had swelled remarkably since Daniel's address began to mobilize around the world, waiting quietly for Daniel's order to attack.

In San Diego, the target was a golden, armored bunker used by the armored angels that patrolled the city. Lacking any Care Centers nearby (the closest one was the one south of Los Angeles that Daniel and Ricardo had liberated), the bunker was the only angelic target in the area. Unfortunately, its defenses were only slightly less intimidating than those of Heaven itself. Scouting reports estimated over twenty armored angels present at any given time, and the building, while ornate and beautiful, was nearly indestructible. Daniel knew that they would be outgunned and overmatched, but the situation wouldn't be different anywhere else in the world. It was time to make their stand.

At 10 P.M. GMT, the humans around the world attacked as one.

Daniel and his troops emerged from their hiding places near the bunker and advanced under the early afternoon sun. The timing was less than optimal for them, but it would be the dead of night in the more oppressed parts of the world, and Daniel figured the Indians and Chinese could use every advantage they could get. To pay the price for that, Daniel fought in broad daylight. Such was life.

The first few minutes of the attack went well. The angels were caught off guard. The first volleys of explosives launched at the bunker went unanswered, and left significant denting and scoring on the metal walls. Daniel wondered if the surprise attack might work even better than he'd hoped. Then, like angry hornets, the flying metal angels swarmed from their nest.

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## Pyrrhic Victory

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Daniel recognized one of the angels right away by the golden markings on his armor. "Gabriel."

As if in response, Gabriel turned his armored head in mid-flight and spotted Daniel. The angel brought his weapon to bear as Daniel raised his grenade launcher, and they fired simultaneously.

Daniel dove for cover as Gabriel's rocket whizzed by his head, exploding safely behind him. Gabriel wasn't so lucky, the explosion from Daniel's grenade ripping off his left wing and forcing him to the ground.

Daniel wore riot armor very much like his DTF combat uniform, but he had no illusions about taking on Gabriel in a toe to toe fight. The only thing he did have in his favor was that the other angels seemed to be ignoring him, not wanting to get between Gabriel and his prize. Testing the theory, Daniel turned and ran.

As he expected, only Gabriel followed. "You can't escape me this time, Cho!" the angel's amplified voice bellowed.

I don't plan on it, Daniel thought. The angels' bunker was situated on a huge lawn that spanned a city block, but it was surrounded by downtown San Diego. Daniel was soon off the burning grass and running through the streets, dodging the occasional rocket from Gabriel. He soon found cover around a corner, and let the speeding angel have a grenade when Gabriel came into view.

The explosion was dead on, and knocked Gabriel off his feet. Daniel noticed that the angel's armor was scorched and blackened in places, but still intact.

Daniel ran again, and the chase continued.

Manuel wasn't having as easy a time. He and his men were pinned down behind a burning truck by two angels. Manuel figured it wouldn't be long before one of them tried a flanking maneuver. Manuel knew they were only fifty yards from the entrance to the bunker, and that if they could get around these two angels, they could probably gain entry. Two of his men were badly injured and weren't going anywhere, leaving only him and three others to remove two armored angels.

Bad odds, Manuel thought, shaking his head with a sardonic grin. He risked a peek around the side of the van, and a rocket whistled by his head. Both the angels were still there. No choice, he realized.

"All right, here's the plan," he said to his men. "I'm going to run off to the left and try to draw their fire. While they're watching me, you three go out to the right and knock them down. You're only going to get one shot, so watch your aim."

The other three men nodded.

“On three,” Manuel said. “One, two,  
“Three!”

On cue, he burst out from behind the van and ran as fast as his legs could carry his heavy frame. As expected, both angels turned and fired on him. He heard his own men returning fire just as the first rocket caught up with him. The explosion blew him off his feet and tossed him through the air. As the ground flipped beneath him, he saw both angels drop and his men move to finish them off. He hit the ground hard just before the other rocket found him.

Daniel’s game of cat and mouse was beginning to take the wind out of him. He’d managed to hit Gabriel solidly twice now (three, counting the wing shot), and scored three other near misses, all without being hit himself. But, he cautioned himself, one would be all it took to get through his armor. Daniel didn’t have the leeway that Gabriel enjoyed. He had to end this.

If his sense of direction was correct, he had very nearly led Gabriel in a circle leading back to the bunker. If he could get to some reinforcements...

Daniel left his hiding place and took off at a run. Gabriel spotted him and followed close behind.

Ricardo was doing fairly well.

His group had confirmed the destruction of eight angels so far and they were hard at work on a ninth. They had the lone angel pinned down, and it was just a question of whittling down its defenses.

As Ricardo stepped back to supervise, he heard a familiar voice screaming his name over the comm channel. He turned and saw Daniel running a zig-zag pattern towards him, a one-winged angel with gold markings hot on his tail and firing wildly.

Ricardo quickly had half his men cease fire. “General Cho’s in trouble!” he shouted.

As one they turned and took aim at Gabriel. Ricardo heard Daniel’s voice again. “As soon as I find cover, blast him!” Daniel shouted, sounding very out of breath. Ricardo nodded and relayed the orders to his men.

Gabriel was no fool. He saw what was sizing up against him, and he was prepared. The instant Daniel dove to the ground, Gabriel switched targets and fired on Ricardo and his men just as they fired on him.

Daniel rolled over on his back just in time to see several grenades impact on Gabriel’s armor, blowing it apart. The fire from the explosions reached high into the afternoon sky, and Gabriel was no more.

Daniel turned to wave thanks to Ricardo. He found only a smoking crater where his friend

had stood. Daniel stood and began to lurch over to it when a badly damaged angel appeared from behind the crater and tried to fly.

Daniel destroyed it, then collapsed to his knees.

The battle wore on for a while longer, but after Gabriel's destruction, the outcome was never really in doubt. Late that afternoon the last angel in San Diego was destroyed and the bunker fell into the hands of the Underground.

Relatively speaking, Daniel's attack was a stunning success. At the end of the day that would long be remembered at the First Offensive, just over half the angelic population of Earth had been destroyed. More than two thirds of the human attackers had perished to buy such a victory. In New Delhi, more than ninety percent of the resistance fighters perished before destroying the angels, in the end just running unarmed and unarmored at the armored angels until the angels' weapons ran out, eventually ripping the angels apart through sheer force of numbers.

Around the world, the survivors rejoiced, then prepared to do it all again.

Daniel sat on the scorched ground outside the captured bunker, staring at Gabriel's charred helmet in his hands. Around him, the members of the Underground celebrated their victory in the late afternoon sun. Daniel heard footsteps walking towards him and looked up to see Jack's smiling, if filthy, face. Daniel nodded and frowned.

Jack plopped down on the dirt next to Daniel. "So you've seen?"

"I have," Daniel said. The reports from the other commanders had come in just over a half-hour before.

"You know," Daniel said, sitting back and thinking, "when the Greek general Pyrrhus defeated the Romans at Asculum, losing most of his forces in the process, he was reported as saying, 'Another such victory and I must return to Epirus alone.' I know how he felt."

"This isn't a Pyrrhic victory, Daniel."

Daniel laughed, a bitter sound. "Isn't it?"

"Look around you," Jack said. "We won."

"Won what?" Daniel snapped. "We lost two thirds of our forces to take out only half of the angels. Now, you can do the math if you want, but that almost never works out."

"So we'll get more people," Jack said. "After today the whole planet knows the angels can be beaten, and while we can replenish our numbers, they can't."

"So I get the privilege of sending millions more to their deaths. Wonderful."

"That's the wrong way to look at it, and you know it, Daniel. Look out there," Jack said, sweeping his arm around the carnage of the battlefield. "You had just as much of a chance of buying it today as anyone else, yet you survived. So did I."

“Ricardo and Manuel weren’t so lucky.”

“True,” Jack said, nodding. “And they’ll be missed. You have to understand that people die in war.”

“I know,” Daniel said, and he threw Gabriel’s helmet as far away as he could.

“But Daniel,” Jack said as he put a hand on Daniel’s arm, “people *live* in war, too. You may not believe this, but everyone here today was here of their own accord. The Underground has no conscript soldiers. Those that died today died while fighting for something they believed in. Maybe I’m just a romantic old soldier, but I think dying for something you believe in is a pretty good way to go. Honor the people that died today by honoring what they chose to die for.”

Daniel was silent for a long moment. “Jack?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Why me?”

“Why you what, exactly?”

Daniel laid back in the dirt, placing his hands behind his head. “How did I become ... whatever it is that everyone thinks I am? Everyone looks to me to be this great leader, but half the time I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

Daniel sat up again and looked at Jack. “Sometimes I just want to scream ‘Don’t you people know I’m just making this up as I go?’, but I can’t. I just have to keep going and hope I don’t make some horrible mistake.”

Jack smiled. “That’s why you’re the leader. Daniel, nobody knows what they’re doing all the time, and no one expects you to have all the answers. But we trust you to make the best decision, and we follow where you lead. Try letting yourself lead us, quit hamstringing yourself with doubts, and you’ll be fine.”

Daniel shook his head. “You were a leader of Navy SEALs and a major metro area SWAT team. Why do you follow me?”

Jack grinned and got to his feet. “Because whether you know it or not, whether you believe it or not, you’re the best damn leader of men I’ve ever seen. You inspire. You ennoble. Millions of people will throw themselves into battle against almost certain death if you say it’s necessary. I could never be what you are.

“Sir.”

Jack offered a quick salute, then walked away. Daniel watched him go, then turned his attention to the setting sun and thought about tomorrow.

**Dark Angel**

Daniel soon found that tomorrow would have to wait.

Before the sun had completely set, one of the Underground fighters (whose name Daniel was chagrined that he didn't remember) came running up to him.

"Sir! Come look!"

Daniel sprang to his feet with much more energy than he thought he had. Without a word, he followed the young soldier into the bunker.

"It's right this way, sir," said the soldier, leading Daniel quickly through a labyrinth of corridors.

"What's your name, soldier?" Daniel asked.

"Simmons, sir."

"What's so important, Simmons?"

Simmons led Daniel into a brightly lit room. "This," he said.

On the far wall, Daniel was amazed to see a gleaming white and empty suit of angelic armor.

Fifteen minutes later, Daniel was alone in the room with the armor, Jack and Manuel's successor, Julia Cohen.

"Well, people," Daniel asked, "what do we do with this?"

"The way I see it," said Cohen, a former university history professor, "we have no choice but to disassemble it for study. The more weaknesses we can find in the design, the easier it will be to exploit those weaknesses in the future."

Daniel started to reply, but Jack cut him off. "No," he said sharply. "This is too valuable a weapon to just let someone rip it apart and hope we can figure out a weak spot. We have to test it, figure out how to use it, then save it as our ace in the hole."

"And in the meantime," Cohen countered, "we pass up this opportunity to let our fighters get a better idea of what we're up against."

"If we want to win, yes," Jack nearly shouted.

"That's enough," Daniel said, and both Jack and Cohen fell silent. "You're both right, and you're both wrong. We will study the armor, from the inside, but we aren't going to disassemble it. It seems to me that we can divine the weaknesses of the armor more effectively by putting it to use than by dissecting it." Daniel walked over to the armor and ran his hand over its sleek lines.

"Excellent idea, sir," Jack said, earning him a poisonous gaze from Cohen. "I'll find someone to start putting the armor through its paces right away."

"That won't be necessary," Daniel said, turning back to them. "I can't very well ask anyone under me to do something I'm not willing to do myself, can I?"

Jack did not at all like the look of Daniel's smile.

The testing officially began early the next morning. With the help of Jack and a few technicians, Daniel struggled to put on the armor.

The armor was divided essentially into two parts. The first, inner layer was a neoprene-like bodysuit lined with electrodes. Naming it the "wetsuit", the technicians had surmised that it was responsible for transmitting and interpreting the neural impulses of the wearer.

Over the wetsuit fit the powered exoskeleton. Even without the muscle-mirroring armor plates, the exoskeleton weighed more than five hundred pounds. While it was presumed that an angel, with their far superior physical strength, could suit up alone, a human required several assistants to put on the suit. Daniel felt like a knight of the Round Table preparing for battle.

Much to everyone's surprise, as soon as the exoskeleton came in contact with the wetsuit, the circuit completed and Daniel was able to move that part of his body with minimum effort. He put on the final glove and his helmet with no outside assistance at all. They had still not managed to locate the power supply, but it was apparently very efficient and always available.

Preparations finally complete, Daniel trudged out of the bunker and into the mid-morning sunlight. The lawn was still in ruin from the previous day's fighting, but Daniel still tried to find a patch of ground free of grass to begin testing. No sense burning what little's left, he thought.

Daniel took a look around and tried to familiarize himself with the helmet's displays. The interior of his visor contained a heads-up display, much like those used in the cockpits of fighter jets. Some of the readouts, like airspeed and altitude, were meaningless on the ground. However, he did have access to information about his groundspeed, range to whatever object was directly in front of him, and the condition of his weapons. He noted that his suit was fully armed and fueled with zero damage.

Before he took to the air, Daniel decided to test the physical abilities of the suit while still on the ground. He walked over to the wrecked and burned out hulk of a truck at the edge of the lawn.

"I'm going to try a strength test," he said to the techs. They nodded and made notes. Daniel reached down and sank his armored fingers into the metal of the exposed frame. Bending at the knees and lifting with his legs, Daniel lifted the two ton vehicle and held it over his head. It was heavy, but not dangerously so. Daniel figured the suit was roughly one hundred times stronger than a human, maybe ten times stronger than an angel. He relayed his findings and tossed the truck aside.

He'd been keeping an eye on the speedometer inside his helmet. Now was the time to put it to the test. "I'm going for a run," he said. "I'll be back soon."

Picking a street relatively free of debris, Daniel took off at a run. It was rough going for the first few steps, then the wings folded back again on themselves to reduce the wind resistance. Daniel picked up speed rapidly, and soon found himself exceeding 50 miles per hour through the streets of San Diego, covering more than a dozen yards with each bounding stride. He doubled back and returned to the bunker, nearly running over the technicians as he tried to

stop.

The next step was to try to fly. "If I'm going to fly," Daniel said, "I need a destination." He turned to Jack. "What were the coordinates for the Care Center east of L.A.?"

Jack shook his head. "Daniel, don't—"

"Come on, Jack, you were the one that said I needed to trust my instincts, remember?"

"You haven't tested a single weapon!"

Daniel turned and raised his arm to point at the van he'd tossed aside. A rocket flew out of Daniel's arm-mounted launcher and blew the van to pieces.

Daniel turned back to Jack. "The coordinates?"

Jack stared at what was left of the truck, mouth open. "How did you—"

"Targeting is automatic. Firing is voice controlled. I'm just glad it's programmed in English. Probably a holdover from the days when the immortals weren't allowed to speak their own language.

"The coordinates?"

Jack nodded and told Daniel what he needed to know. Daniel then motioned for everyone to stand back.

"I obviously won't be able to transport anyone to safety," Daniel said as he spread his wings, "but with everything else the angels have to worry about right now, I doubt they have the time or resources to track down the people I release. I'll keep my radio on, and I'll let you know how it works out."

Daniel ignited his engines. "I'll be back soon." Without another word, Daniel rose into the sky and flew north over the horizon.

Daniel had to admit he was starting to understand what the angels saw in all of this.

Cruising three hundred feet above the desert floor at over four hundred miles per hour, Daniel did a barrel roll and let out a little whoop of joy. He'd grown up reading comic books about superheroes that could fly, and had often daydreamed about what that might be like, but even his wildest dreams hadn't prepared him for this. The sparse cactus and tumbleweed of arid southern California sped past and underneath him in a blur, as did the occasional very confused jackrabbit. Daniel did another barrel roll.

The in-flight guidance of the armor was remarkably simple. The throttle was voice controlled, and the maneuvering handled by reacting to his body movements. Raise the right shoulder while dipping the left, bank to the left. It was a lot like swimming through the air.

Once Daniel got the hang of the "controls", he poured on the speed and zeroed in on the coordinates Jack had given him. According to the readouts on his HUD, he should be coming up on the Care Center any minute now...

There!

The low-slung, stark white and very medical-looking buildings were practically identical to the Care Center south of L.A. Daniel had attacked not so long ago. Daniel saw no movement as he flew overhead, so he quickly throttled down, banked hard left and came back in for a closer look. His landing was a little rough, but passable.

At first Daniel thought the Care Center may have been abandoned. There was no sign of movement or any evidence that anyone still walked its dusty streets. On closer examination, many of the buildings bore powder burns and a few even had chunks of stone torn out of them. There had been quite a fight here. The only sign of life left in the entire complex was a thin plume of white smoke crawling out of a nearby chimney and dissipating quickly in the desert wind.

Of course, Daniel thought. The reports from the newly established Los Angeles Underground had been sketchy at best, but it seemed likely that the fledgling division of the Underground would strike here on the First Offensive rather than at Heaven itself. Chances were good that Daniel was a day late if he planned to liberate the patients here.

“About time someone else showed up,” said a voice behind him.

Daniel turned to see an angel in a grimy gold uniform step out of the doorway to one of the larger buildings. The angel approached Daniel and wiped his hands on a dirty rag.

“Are you the only clean up crew we’re going to get?”

Daniel nodded.

“Wonderful,” the angel continued. “I guess these upstart rebels have Michael more worried than I thought. Oh, well. We’ve been loading bodies into the incinerator all morning. We lost our only suit in the battle yesterday, so it’s been pretty hard work. We’ve still got...” The angel trailed off. “Nah, it’s easier to just show you. Follow me.”

Daniel fell into step behind the angel and followed him into the building. When his eyes readjusted to the dim lighting after the solar glare outside, Daniel struggled to repress a gag.

There were bodies everywhere. They were stacked like firewood along the walls of the giant room, and laid out in neat rows on the floor. Some of them obviously died in battle, but more than three quarters of them wore the white coveralls of Care Center inmates. Hundreds of lifeless eyes stared at Daniel as he followed the angel to the furnace at the far end of the room. Three more angels stood near the furnace and threw body after body into its fires.

The angel looked over his shoulder at Daniel. “Ever worked a Care Center before?”

Daniel shook his head.

“This is the final destination for most of the humans that come here. When they’re no longer useful for experimental purposes, they’re brought here, put to sleep, and disposed of. We don’t have the time or resources to give them a mass burial, so we just burn them. We four are the only survivors of yesterday’s attack, and Michael can’t spare the manpower to restaff this place and make keeping it open cost efficient, so after we dispose of the bodies I guess we’re just going have to return to Heaven until this rebellion garbage blows over. Thanks for helping us out, by the way. Without armored strength, this would have taken us all day...”

The angel stopped talking when he turned to glance at Daniel and found the armor’s

weapons trained on him and his compatriots.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” Daniel said. “I’m Daniel Cho, leader of this ‘rebellion garbage’ and operator of a captured suit of angelic armor.”

The angels said nothing.

“Outside,” Daniel said, motioning to the door. Daniel never lowered his weapons as he followed them out.

“So what now, Cho?” asked the angel that had spoken to Daniel. “You going to kill us in cold blood?”

“You mean like you did the prisoners here?”

“Hey, man,” the angel replied, “we were just following orders. Personally, I like humans.”

Just for a moment, Daniel started to lower his weapons. Then he heard it. The distant and very distinctive roar of angelic armor in flight. The instant Daniel glanced up to be sure, his captives scattered.

Damn!, he thought to himself. Those bastards were just stalling. He should have realized that the armor the first angel mistook him for would show up eventually.

Daniel ran to the south end of the camp, catching up with one of the four angels he’d lost and smearing him against a building. As he ran, he called up the radar display in his helmet, which he’d turned off earlier because he found it distracting. Dumb move, he noted.

The angels were still over two miles away, and flying at high altitude. There were five of them, according to his radar, and Daniel wasn’t stupid enough to take them on. Flying as low and fast as he could, he took off to the south and hoped his own radar signature would be lost in the ground clutter.

He wasn’t followed.

Daniel arrived at the San Diego bunker early that afternoon and told his story. He then took the armor into a back room and shut the door.

Two hours later, he called for someone to help him suit up. When he emerged from the bunker, everyone stopped whatever he or she was doing to look.

The armor was painted a deep, flat black that seemed to swallow up any light that hit it. Daniel stepped out onto the lawn, an avenging dark angel, and addressed his troops.

“The tests have been successful. I will wear this armor as I lead you into combat. I’ve changed its color, not only to differentiate it from the enemy, but as a symbol of those we have already lost. Too many of us have perished already for Michael’s dream of Order, and as I stand before you today I vow that this insanity will end!”

Daniel Cho raised an ebony gauntlet over his head, and led the battle cry in San Diego.

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## Freedom of Speech

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As the setting sun cast long shadows across Heaven, Michael paced. The cleanup crew he'd sent to shut down the east L.A. Care Center had just reported in. Cho had a suit of armor! The situation had quickly gone from annoying to intolerable. At first he hadn't believed Cho's little resistance movement to be a serious threat, but the previous day's events and this new information had forced him to reevaluate that assessment.

Damn!

As he had done so many times in the past twenty-four hours that he'd lost count, Michael wished Gabriel was there to advise him. His friend didn't have Michael's gift for strategy or organization, but he was a cunning warrior and often saw things Michael did not. Now that Cho had forced Michael to view this situation as a legitimate military engagement, he direly needed a warrior's point of view. But Cho had taken that away from him too.

Michael nearly put his fist through the wall, badly denting the golden metal. Damn!

More politician than warrior, Michael had spent most of the day assessing his losses and trying to come up with a way to put a positive spin on them. The Underground's victories of the previous day were no secret, and public opinion was rapidly turning against him. The time when he could dismiss the Underground as bumbling malcontents had passed. If he didn't treat them as a respected and dangerous enemy now, he'd seem the fool in comparison. But he couldn't speak to the humans directly. His image was still too hot for such obvious spin doctoring. He still had one ace in the hole.

"Susan!"

Moments later, Susan Richardson entered Michael's throne room, notepad in hand. "You summoned me, my Lord?"

"Yes," he said, walking to the window and trying to look as regal as possible. "We need to make a statement about yesterday's rebel insurrection. I want you to tell the people that the angelic losses were nowhere near the rumored levels, and that most of the rebels were destroyed and/or humiliated. Assure them that I am still in complete control, and that while the rebels were stronger than we originally anticipated, they are on the verge of destruction and we are very near to capturing Daniel Cho."

"Are you, my Lord?" Susan asked.

"Am I what?" he answered, turning to face Susan.

"Are you close to capturing Cho?"

Michael stroked his chin. "I believe so. We know he's in San Diego, or was there yesterday. Azrael is assembling a strike force that should be ready to wipe out his petty rebellion in a matter of days. More than that you don't need to know. Go. Relay my message."

Susan bowed and left the room, leaving Michael alone with his plans.

Susan took a deep breath as she entered the "broadcast studio", a small room in Heaven with automated cameras and her newsdesk.

This was it. She had taken steps a few weeks before to ensure that when the time was right no one could cut into or block her newscast. Her tampering had gone undetected, but she knew she could only use it once. Now was the time.

She locked the door and seated herself at the desk, turning to the control console mounted just out of sight of the cameras. She flipped a few switches, toggled over to her secure satellite feed, and looked into the dark eye of the camera.

Showtime.

"This is Susan Richardson with a Heavenly News Bulletin.

"As many of you know, the resistance movement known as the Underground attacked the angels in a worldwide strike just over twenty-four hours ago. I've been instructed to tell you that while the angels suffered very few losses, the damage done to the Underground was devastating, and that their leader, Daniel Cho, will soon be in angelic custody.

"I'm supposed to tell you all that, but I can't. It isn't true, and I'm not going to lie for them anymore."

Michael stared at the monitor, mouth agape. "What does she think she's doing?" he breathed.

Only Azrael had the nerve to speak up. "I warned you leaving public relations in the hands of a human could be disastrous. It would appear your 'mouthpiece' has grown a mouth of her own."

Michael lifted Azrael off his feet and threw him across the gigantic throne room. "Communications!" Michael screamed.

"Yes, my Lord?" came a harried voice over the intercom.

"Why is she still on the air?"

"We don't know, my Lord. We've tried to cut her off, but the controls aren't responding. I believe she has us blocked at the source. We can't stop this broadcast."

Michael bellowed as he stormed out of the room.

"I've learned things over the past year and a half that no human was ever supposed to know," Susan said on the screens of televisions around the world. "Until now, I've never had the opportunity to tell you what I've learned, never when it would have done some good. I'm sorry it's taken so long, and I'll get right to the point.

“Michael is the greatest threat to the human race that we’ve ever encountered. He’s Stalin, Hitler, Genghis Khan and every other evil dictator in human history all rolled into one. The only difference is that if we don’t stop him now, while we still can, his reign will never end.

“Many of you have seen friends and loved ones with genetic illnesses or congenital defects shipped off to Care Centers. It’s time you knew these Care Centers are actually Nazi-style death camps, where those that don’t measure up to Michael’s standards are ruthlessly exterminated.

“Michael is engaged in a program to ensure the genetic purity of the human race. While Satan strove to improve us through a chaotic survival of the fittest, Michael wants to improve us by imposing an orderly and merciless plan of weeding out those he deems unfit to survive, regardless of the contributions they could make. Under Michael’s reign, Beethoven would never have existed. Neither would Steven Hawking, or anyone born less than physically perfect.

“Michael’s plan is to kill anyone that doesn’t meet his genetic standards of purity. He’ll kill your babies just after they’re born if they don’t measure up. He’ll kill you too, if you can’t produce perfect offspring in three tries, no matter how perfect you may be yourself.

“We can’t allow this to continue. The world unity the angels have brought isn’t worth an eternity of slavery and death.

“The Underground is our only hope. Far from the hapless renegades Michael has painted them as, the Underground is a well-organized, top-notch military organization. Their leader, Daniel Cho, is a great hero and a good friend, and if any human can bring Michael down, Daniel’s the one. I’m sorry, Daniel, that I didn’t believe you when you told me these things yourself. I was blinded by Michael’s accomplishments, and now I’m paying the price.”

A loud thundering noise began off camera, like someone pounding on a door. Susan glanced away, then faced the camera again.

“I’m running out of time.

“The angels can be beaten. In yesterday’s attack, countless brave men and women lost their lives, but nearly half the angels were destroyed. Another good fight like that and we can destroy them forever. But the Underground needs people. I urge you to seek them out and help mankind destroy these inhuman monsters!”

The pounding ceased and a door flew through the air in front of the camera. Michael strode into the room, looking furious.

“Shut up!” he roared.

“They can be beaten!” Susan continued, standing up and leaning into the camera. “Michael is scared! Daniel has him on the ropes! Gabriel *died* in yesterday’s attack, fighting Daniel’s personal troops! The Underground knows how to win, but you’ve only got a few days until Azrael’s strike force is ready to attack! Please! For your children, don’t let this go on!”

“Shut up!” Michael screamed again, putting his hands on either side of Susan’s head.

A tear ran down Susan’s cheek. “Daniel,” she said, “I’m sorry...”

With a primal scream, Michael twisted and ripped Susan Richardson’s head away from her

shoulders and threw it across the room. Crimson blood fountained up from her neck and drenched his face and golden shirt before her body collapsed across the newsdesk. Michael sneered into the camera and wiped the blood away from his face with his sleeve. He turned at last to the control panel next to Susan's chair.

"Stupid bitch," he muttered as he flipped a switch, and television sets around the world went black.

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## Liberty or Death

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Daniel walked around the bunker in a mild state of shock. Susan's final broadcast had a huge effect on people. Michael was finally revealed for what he truly was, and the people of Earth had decided not to tolerate him any longer. As he walked, Daniel nodded to so many faces he didn't know. Overnight, the membership of the San Diego Underground had nearly doubled, and he'd received word from other commanders reporting similar or better situations.

Finally, Daniel heard a familiar voice.

"How you feeling, sir?" Jack asked as he fell into step at Daniel's side.

"I honestly don't know," Daniel answered. "Susan was one of my best and oldest friends. We'd been through so much, and I really don't believe I would have survived to tell the world about the immortals without her. But when I see what her sacrifice has bought us..." Daniel waved his arm around to all the new recruits.

"Yeah, I know," Jack said. "She's a hero."

"And a martyr," Daniel added. "And the shitty thing of it is, I know how to use that to our advantage as well, when the time is right."

"So what do we do now, sir?"

"Just before her death, Susan mentioned Azrael and some kind of strike force. She said they'd be ready to move in a few days, but I'm betting now that their cover's blown they plan to move much sooner. We have to be ready before they are. I bet we have no more than twenty-four hours to mount our Second Offensive and destroy Heaven, or we'll be too late to be effective. How's the training going?"

Jack sighed. "As well as could be expected. The vast majority of these people are civilians, with no military or police training at all. With some of them it's all we can do to get them pointing the grenade launchers in the right direction."

Daniel smiled. "The heroes of the American Revolution weren't professional soldiers either, Jack. I'm betting the passion of people fighting for their lives and their futures will outweigh their lack of technical savvy."

Daniel stopped and looked around, seeing the people around him not as unseasoned

civilians or even as individuals, but as a growing, highly-motivated army. "Round up the other local commanders and set up the communications links to the others. We've got an assault to plan."

Michael sat in his darkened throne room and sulked. As loathe as he was to admit it, even to himself, the situation with Cho and the humans had indeed become a war, and he was losing it. His reconnaissance satellites showed heightened activity at many suspected Underground bases, and many of his lieutenants had reported a sudden drop in the visible population. Michael knew where all those people had gone, and what they were doing.

He was stupid to deal with Richardson while on the air, but there was nothing he could do about that now. In a fit of rage, he hadn't thought the situation through, and now his image was forever tainted to this generation of humans. If he won this war (and he had to at least accept the possibility that he might not), he'd probably have to exterminate the adult human population and start over with the children. Such a waste.

He reached over and brought up Azrael's latest report on one of his monitors. At least this was good news. The strike team would be ready far sooner than expected, and they were set to strike at noon the next day. Michael glanced at the clock. Twenty-five hours. Just over a day and Cho would be out of his hair forever. The other rebels didn't concern him if their ringleader was removed. Cho was the catalyst; he'd been at ground zero since it all began with the discovery of Batarel. Without him, the rebel house of cards fell apart, and they really became the directionless bumblers they were before his arrival. Michael slumped in his throne and stared into the darkness.

Twenty-five hours.

Daniel and the other leaders of the Underground spent most of the day planning the following day's attack. Throughout most of the world, the Second Offensive would be a replay of the First Offensive, if more decisive and impassioned. Both sides knew what was at stake now, and neither would yield while still breathing. It promised to be quite a fight, but Daniel was confident it would be successful.

In southern California, the situation was quite different. No one had attacked Heaven directly in the First Offensive, but that's exactly what Daniel had to do. They'd have no air support, the crutch of American military strategists since World War One, and from Daniel's perspective it looked and felt like a much older type of conflict: a castle siege.

Heaven's defenses were formidable, but not impossible to breach. Daniel attributed that to Michael's arrogant underestimation of the human race. It was really Michael's only weakness, and Daniel planned to exploit it to maximum efficiency. While the doors were too heavily defended, Daniel's force should be able to blow a hole in a wall with the weapons they'd cannibalized from the bunker.

Daniel stood before thousands of people in the makeshift auditorium, a theater they'd commandeered. He gestured to floorplan schematics of Heaven on the briefing screens. "Once we're in, destroy anything that moves. It's an unfortunate fact that Michael still has a human

guard force inside Heaven that's loyal only to him, but I doubt you're going to have time to determine whether or not your opponent is human before they try to blow you away. Anything you see that isn't part of the Underground, shoot it.

"Unfortunately, this is a no surrender, no retreat situation for both sides. Aside from any humans inside who manage to surrender before we open fire, neither side can afford to back off in this one. It's going to be a bloody, prolonged fight that won't stop until either all of us or all of the angels are dead. It's never easy to invade an enemy fortress, particularly one so vital to defend, but it can be done. As some of my Mexican compatriots enjoy pointing out, Santa Anna eventually took the Alamo."

Daniel stepped away from the briefing screens and stood center stage. "A lot of good people have died to get us this far. Ricardo Jones and Manuel Nogales led many of you into battle, and sacrificed their lives to our cause. Susan Richardson paid with her life to spread the truth about the immortals, and many of you are here now only because she cared enough about what was at stake to risk everything she had, everything she was. We owe it to these heroes that have gone before us to finish the fight they started.

"In 1775, the British army had landed in Boston, and despite ten years of protests by the American colonists, the British rule was growing more severe by the day as the King tried to control a people he knew nothing about, people who were separated from him by a three month ocean voyage. There was talk of a war for independence, but most of the leaders of the day favored the current peace, believing they had no hope against the British army in a declared war. In the midst of this stagnation was a man named Patrick Henry. In a speech delivered on March 23, 1775, he implored his fellow Americans to go to war with the British. To him, liberty was far more valuable than peace and maintaining the status quo. If I may read the last bit of his speech, I think you'll recognize the immortal words at the end."

Daniel pulled a piece of paper from his uniform pocket, unfolded it and began to read. "Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

The theater shook with the shouts and applause of the Underground, but Daniel quieted them and continued on, the paper discarded. "What we fight for tomorrow morning is more than Patrick Henry ever dreamed possible. We fight for liberty, yes, but a liberty like no human has ever known. Should we win the day, we will be the first humans in the history of our race truly free to control our own destiny. For thousands of years, allegedly free men have been influenced and steered by immortal hands. We fight to end this! Should we lose, we will know not only our own deaths, as individuals, but the death of humanity as we know it. The death of our children, should they not meet Michael's standards. The death of our fellow humans, should they dare overstep the narrow bounds Michael sets for them. The death of art, the death of free expression, the death of the human soul. We can not, will not let this happen!"

Daniel raised his arms high above his head. "Liberty or Death!" he shouted.

"Liberty or Death!" the crowd responded.

“LIBERTY OR DEATH!”

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## Second Offensive

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In the pre-dawn darkness the next morning, Daniel's troops assembled outside Heaven's eastern wall. They'd taken two massive energy cannons off the roof of the bunker and loaded them onto flatbed trucks. These cannons were currently trained on a single section of the wall.

Jack and Daniel stood next to one of the cannons. Jack was clad in police riot gear, like most of the Underground fighters, and Daniel wore his black suit of armor.

“This feel a little easy to you?” Daniel asked.

Jack nodded. “The thought had occurred to me,” he said. “But at this point, I'm willing to accept a little good luck and believe we're taking them by surprise.”

Daniel walked to the edge of the flatbed and peered up the side of the mammoth gold building. “I don't like it,” he said. “Michael's not this stupid. Arrogant, yes, but not stupid. He knows we're coming. He's got something up his sleeve.”

Jack joined Daniel at the edge. “Whether he does or not, it's really academic at this point. We're here.”

Daniel paused for a moment, then nodded agreement. “Right. Let's do what we came to do.”

Daniel walked back to the men controlling the cannons and gave them some final instructions. Then he keyed the amplifier on his suit and addressed his troops.

“You all know what to do. Good luck.

“On three.” He nodded to the cannon operators.

“One.”

The resistance fighters tensed, preparing.

“Two.”

Over two thousand eyes focused on the golden wall, ready to burst through it at the first opportunity.

“Three!”

Both angelic energy cannons opened fire, and soon the metal of the wall began to twist and warp. Daniel thought he heard something else over the whine of the cannons, a deep rumble maybe, but he wasn't sure.

Suddenly, the tortured wall gave way and the interior of the angels' stronghold was open to

them. The cannons shut off and Daniel lead the surge forward. Too late, he heard and understood the rumbling noise he had hoped he only imagined.

He stopped and looked to the sky. From the rooftop soared angel after angel, more than two dozen in all. They waited until more than half the humans were through the huge hole in the building, then began to dive.

It was a trap. Daniel and his troops had no choice but to run headlong into the building, where a prepared force no doubt waited for them. There would be no escape, no possibility of retreat, and Daniel's fighters would have to fight in front and behind.

Damn! Daniel thought. How could I have been so stupid? Such introspection would have to wait. By the time he and Jack finally crossed the jagged threshold into the building, the battle was joined.

The fate of humanity was about to be decided.

At the same moment Daniel's forces began their invasion of Heaven, other Underground troops around the world launched attacks on their local targets. As expected, the battles were more heated than in the First Offensive, and the angels were better prepared.

Heinrich von Braun was in a panic.

Michael had informed them that the traitors in the Underground would likely attack during the night, but most of the night had passed without incident. Heinrich was certain the rebellion had had a change of heart, or lost their nerve. An attack against the angels was foolhardy and counterproductive. Surely they saw that. Their lies and fake newscasts would collapse under their own weight, and peace would be restored.

Then someone blew a hole in the east wall, and Heinrich's hopes for a peaceful resolution to the conflict were dashed.

He'd rushed with the other guardsmen to the conflict, but he wasn't prepared for what he saw. Dozens of bodies lay on the floor and there was blood on most of the walls. Just before Heinrich turned a corner, the man in front of him disintegrated in an explosion of gore.

Heinrich turned and ran. He didn't think of himself as a coward. He was falling back to a more defensible position. Yes, that was it.

He ran so fast, he didn't see the angel until it was too late. He slammed into the hulking metal armor and caromed into the wall. The angel stopped, reached down and picked him up.

"Thank you, my Lo—"

"Where are you going?" the angel demanded. "You are a Guardsman, are you not?"

Heinrich nodded feebly. His knees had turned to rubber.

"The fight is that way!" the angel shouted, half throwing, half shoving Heinrich back the way he came.

Heinrich was at a loss. He didn't want to disobey an angel, but what he'd seen...

“Go!” the angel commanded.

Heinrich went.

Everything will be fine, he thought as he grew closer to the sounds of combat. I’m well armed, highly trained, and God is on my side...

Heinrich’s next step took him into the path of a grenade meant for an angel, and he never knew what hit him.

The storming of Heaven was slow and bloody going.

By dawn, Daniel and his troops were completely inside the massive complex and had taken out dozens of angels and more human cannon fodder than they cared to count. It had cost them nearly a third of their force. Michael’s pincer movement had been defeated by the Underground’s rear echelon, but at a terrible sacrifice. Their invasion finally complete, a significantly smaller assault force found themselves inside the home of the enemy.

Once inside, the resistance split and followed predefined routes Daniel had mapped out for them in advance. The going was easier then, but it remained a bloody, foot by foot fight as territory was gained and grudgingly held.

That didn’t concern Daniel. He, Jack and an elite strike force cut through the angelic opposition with no thought of holding the territory they passed through.

Daniel had bigger fish to fry.

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## Turning the Tide

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Around the world, the human forces fought for more than just their lives. In China and India, the Underground overwhelmed the angels by sheer weight of numbers. In Europe, the angels fell prey to dazzling cooperative tactics staged by people who had previously been at war with each other for centuries. South and Central America saw displays of ferocity not witnessed since the time of the Aztecs and Incas.

Bit by bit, the angels fell.

Daniel was so near his goal he could taste it, but the opposition was getting tougher.

Daniel, Jack and the others were roughly two hundred meters away from Michael’s throne room. It may as well have been two hundred miles. Only one corridor led to the massive chamber, and that corridor was filled with armored angels, led by Azrael himself. The angels had opened fire with a furious onslaught of firepower the moment Daniel came into view, forcing the rebels into a side corridor.

"I get the impression Michael doesn't want to see us," Jack observed.

Daniel managed a grim smile through his faceplate. "Noticed that, did you?"

Daniel hazarded another peek around the corner, prompting another barrage of missiles. The unguided projectiles missed and impacted on the wall at the end of the corridor.

"At least they aren't coming to get us," Daniel said. "I'll bet they have strict orders not to leave Michael's door."

He turned to Jack. "Any thoughts on how to use that to our advantage?"

Jack shrugged. "Logistically, they're sitting ducks. We have them pinned down in a closed area where they can neither advance nor retreat. We have them right where we want them."

"Except that the instant we poke our heads around this corner and attack, we get blown into a million pieces," Daniel said.

Jack smiled. "No battlefield situation is without its flaws."

Daniel stopped to think for a moment. "How long do you think you guys can keep them occupied?"

"Doesn't look like they're going anywhere. Why?"

Daniel stood up and looked down the corridor they were in, away from Azrael's troops. "Because I just remembered there is another way into Michael's throne room. It has a big bay window, and I can fly."

Any hint of mirth disappeared from Jack's face. "You can't be serious. He could have just as many armored angels inside as out here. They'd tear you apart."

Daniel started to walk down the corridor. "That's a chance I'm going to have to take. Keep them busy, and don't let on that I'm gone. With any luck, I'll be able to take them from behind when I'm done with Michael."

Jack shot Daniel a look, but didn't argue with his superior officer. "Yes, sir, General.

"And good luck," he said to Daniel's retreating form.

Once Daniel had disappeared from view, Jack addressed the strike force. "What are you doing there on the floor?" he asked. "You heard the general."

With great care, the humans began firing on the angels.

Elsewhere, entire angelic strongholds began to fall.

The angels had no answer to the weakness the Underground had exploited so successfully the first time. By attacking everywhere at once, the Underground didn't allow the angels the opportunity to consolidate their forces. Small, isolated patches of angels grew steadily smaller as the fighting wore on. They took their toll in human life, of course, but it often seemed that for every human destroyed, two more took his place. The angels were losing, and the outcome of the battle became more certain by the minute.

Still, the human victories would mean little if Michael and his forces held on to Heaven.

Daniel stood on the roof of the great building, wings extended. The morning sun sat low in the sky, casting long, hazy shadows over the Los Angeles cityscape. The fighting was well inside the building now, and the city looked surprisingly peaceful.

Standing there in the stillness of the morning, Daniel took a moment to center himself, reflecting on all the events that had conspired to bring him to this place. It seemed a lifetime ago that he was just a workaholic EMT with no social life, but really it had been less than four years. Who would have guessed then that now he'd be the leader of millions, standing atop the world's center of government clad in powered armor not made by human hands, and preparing to do battle with none other than the archangel Michael?

Daniel shook his head. A stranger life I have never known, he thought to himself. He stepped to the edge of the roof. Michael's throne room was directly beneath him.

Time to embrace my destiny, he thought, then ignited his engines and took to the air.

Michael sat alone in his throne room, encased in armor and watching the course of the battle on his monitors. He'd argued with Azrael that the armor wasn't necessary, with a legion of his best troops stationed at his door, but the other angel insisted. Michael was hot and uncomfortable, but he endured.

He was also beginning to worry. He had spotted Cho some time ago in that blasphemous black armor in the corridor outside his throne room, but while Cho's fighters and Azrael's continued to exchange fire, Michael hadn't actually seen Cho in quite a while. The instant the fighting died down a bit he'd have to radio Azrael.

Over the noise of combat from his monitors, he became aware of another sound, a deep rumbling. It grew louder and louder until it drowned out everything else.

"Azrael!" Michael called, but it was too late.

With a terrible crash, Cho shattered the bullet-proof glass of the bay window and swooped into the room. He banked sharply to avoid hitting the far wall, then landed light and neat at the foot of Michael's throne.

"Now we settle this," the human said, and trained his weapons on the leader of the world.

## Apocalypse

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Responding to Michael's call, Azrael and his troops burst into the throne room. They found Michael and Daniel circling each other, weapons raised and no more than six feet apart. Azrael cursed. He couldn't fire on Daniel for fear that the collateral damage would harm Michael. So

the angels watched.

Shortly after the angels filed in, so did Jack and his men. The angels either didn't notice or didn't care. Jack held his fire for the same reason Azrael did, and the standoff continued. Jack activated a small video camera mounted on his left shoulder. He had a feeling Daniel would want these events broadcast.

"You may as well give up, Cho," Michael said. "Even if you destroy me, there's no way you're making it out of this room alive. Without you, the resistance will fall, and my legacy will continue."

"That's where you're wrong," Daniel said. "If I fall, another will take my place, then another, then another. And none of them will follow you."

"You rose to power on charisma and the fear of chaos. The people of Earth now know there are far worse things than chaos, and your charisma isn't what it used to be."

Michael scoffed. "Is that what you think?" he asked, continuing to circle Daniel warily.

"I've been the guardian of mankind for over one thousand centuries," Michael went on. "No one knows the human race better than I do, or what's best for it. Mankind will follow me because it knows no other way."

"I can still remember when you made your first tool, or when you discovered fire. I can still speak the first human language, and I can still remember all the ancient religions. I've been present at nearly every significant event in the history of your race. I was present at the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. I was in New Mexico to see the detonation of the first atomic bomb. I sat in Mission Control during the first moon landing. I decide who wins your wars, I decide which treaties get signed, I keep the world running smoothly."

"So don't tell me mankind will simply do without me. You never have before, and you won't now."

"You've been at all the significant places in history?" Daniel asked.

"Yes."

"Nazi Germany?" Daniel asked.

Michael nodded. "For all his flaws, Hitler really understood the value of order. If only he hadn't developed that irrational hatred of the Jews. It was a very difficult decision, letting him lose the war."

"Yet you don't share his weaknesses," Daniel said, noting the tiny red light on Jack's camera.

"No, I love the entire human race."

"And your death camps?" Daniel prompted. "Do you love the people you've ruthlessly exterminated?"

"They don't count," Michael said. "They're defective. They drag down the gene pool. Humans can never achieve their full potential if these misfits are allowed to reproduce and pollute their genes."

"That's where you're wrong," Daniel said, his voice hardening. "Ludwig von Beethoven was deaf, yet his music has moved and inspired millions. According to you, his existence was a mistake, and he should have been exterminated."

Michael stayed silent.

"For someone who claims to know humanity so well," Daniel continued, "you don't understand us at all. We achieve our full potential by overcoming adversity, including biological adversity. Many of mankind's greatest specimens have had some kind of physical problem. It was overcoming that obstacle that gave them the strength of character to go on and do great things. You would deny us this. By removing those that aren't already perfect, by controlling and breeding us like farm animals, you inhibit our growth. You're trying to purify our genes at the cost of our souls."

"You sound like Satan."

"He went too far in the other direction, but he made a lot more sense than you. You're a terrible guardian, Michael, and we don't need you anymore."

With a bellow of rage, Michael lunged at Daniel. Black and white armor struck with a clang, and chaos ensued.

The instant Daniel and Michael collided, Jack opened fire on Azrael. If Daniel won his personal battle, Jack didn't want him to have to fight his way out. The first volley of fire hit the angels by surprise, and several of them went down from the impact. Jack and his men immediately dove for cover as the angels returned fire. One of Jack's men disappeared in a red mist, but the others kept firing. Two angels went down, gaping blackened holes in their armor.

And the battle continued.

Michael was stronger than Daniel had expected.

The armor made them more or less equally matched in terms of leverage and firepower, but Michael remained standing through some exchanges that would at the very least have knocked Daniel down.

Michael took a swing at Daniel, who ducked as the powerful armored arm arced over his head. Daniel took advantage of his position to leap up and forward, ramming his shoulder into Michael's midsection. The angel staggered back, then regained his composure.

"You can't win, Cho," he shouted over the explosions of their fighting troops. "Believe me, I've seen your kind come and go a million times!"

"Maybe," Daniel answered. He noticed that Michael was standing directly between him and the broken bay window.

"Maybe not!" he shouted as he ignited his rockets and charged. He slammed into Michael's chest, picked him up, and carried both of them out the window and into the morning sunlight.

Jack was actually starting to believe this could work.

He was down to three of his men other than himself, and everything in the room had been reduced to rubble (including the floor in some places), but the angelic opposition was down to only Azrael and two others, all heavily damaged.

“Throw down your weapons, humans,” Azrael shouted, “and we might let you live.”

Jack poked his head out from behind the remains of Michael’s throne, which he’d been using for cover. “You don’t exactly look like someone in the position to make such an ultimatum,” he shouted.

Azrael answered with a rocket, which, if Jack’s count based on Daniel’s armor was correct, should have been his last one. The weapon detonated harmlessly on the wall behind Jack, and Jack gave the signal to his men for a blast of simultaneous fire.

On cue, four humans popped up from their hiding places and opened fire. One of the angels returned fire, killing the man to Jack’s right. The four grenades launched by the humans hit their targets, and all three angels went down. Only Azrael managed to struggle back to his feet.

Jack stepped out from behind the ruined throne and walked slowly towards his adversary. Azrael raised his rocket launcher towards Jack.

“Don’t bother,” Jack said. “You and I both know you’re out.”

Azrael shrugged, then launched his final rocket.

Jack dropped to the floor just in time to feel the heat of the rocket’s exhaust on his back. He then heard two explosions in quick succession, one behind him and one in front. When he looked up, the Angel of Death was gone and smoke slowly curled from the barrel of the man to his left.

It was all up to Daniel now.

Two metal titans clashed in the skies over Los Angeles.

Held aloft by back mounted wings and rockets, the two figures, one black, one white, dived and banked and collided in midair, only to separate and do it again.

“Curse you, Cho, fall!” Michael screamed.

Daniel answered by falling back and launching a rocket, which Michael only barely avoided.

Daniel reversed direction and charged Michael once more. The angel made no move to dodge, and instead met Daniel head-on. The collision could be heard from the ground, even over their rockets, and both combatants, man and angel, were visibly shaken.

Daniel recovered first and quickly ducked under Michael’s field of vision.

Michael shook it off and looked for his enemy. “You can’t hide from me up here, Cho!” he shouted.

"Don't intend to," said a voice very close by and behind him.

Before Michael could turn around, Daniel seized one of the angel's metal wings and ripped it away from the suit of armor. Michael began to spin out of control. Before he really knew what was going on, the angel was spiraling rapidly towards the ground. Daniel followed with much more grace and control.

Michael survived the impact with the ground, landing in a vacant lot, but he didn't land well. His right leg and arm were both shattered, and though they began to heal almost immediately, they'd be quite useless for a few minutes.

Daniel had no intention of giving him that long.

Daniel landed a few meters away from Michael's struggling form and trained his remaining rockets on him.

"It's over, Michael," he said.

"NEVER!" the angel screamed, and loosed all his remaining rockets against Daniel. Daniel backpedaled furiously, but he couldn't evade all of the massive barrage. Three of the rockets impacted squarely on his armor, and he fell to the ground.

The diagnostic readouts in his helmet told him more than he really wanted to know. The armor's power was down to nearly ten percent, barely enough to move its own massive bulk. Most of the armor plating was weakened to the point of uselessness, and on top of all that, Daniel's right leg was broken.

As Daniel tried to sit up, he noticed Michael was already getting to his feet. With the condition of Daniel's armor, the angel could easily tear him apart with his bare hands. Daniel couldn't give Michael the opportunity, but he only had two rockets left. He had to make them count.

Still sitting and dragging his broken leg, Daniel began to pull himself backwards, away from Michael.

Michael shook his armored head. "Oh, no you don't," he said. On his good leg, he began to lurch after Daniel.

"What were you saying about it being over?" Michael taunted.

Daniel said nothing, but continued to pull himself away from the approaching angel. Closer, you arrogant son of a bitch, he thought. Come closer.

"You thought you knew so much," Michael continued. "You had the incredible audacity to believe you knew better than I what was best for the human race. Pathetic.

"You have no idea what's really going on. Everything that has happened on this planet over the last four years has happened because I willed it. I was the one that kept the demons just far enough away from you that you could get your story to the press. I manipulated Satan into tipping his hand before he was ready, letting him fall into my trap. I engineered the collapse of your national governments, knowing you'd have no choice but to embrace my rule. Everything has happened exactly as I intended, and I'm not going to let one insignificant human stand in the way of my master plan."

Michael was very close now, almost close enough to reach Daniel with his good arm. Almost, Daniel thought.

“But now it ends,” Michael said. “First you die, then your inconsequential rebellion. I only hope that now, at the end, you realize which of us was truly right.” Michael began to reach down towards Daniel.

“I do,” Daniel said, raised his arm, and launched his final two rockets.

Both hit Michael square in the chest, knocking him away from Daniel. The concussion of the explosion knocked Daniel flat on the ground, but not before he saw Michael’s armor blow apart.

As the ringing in his ears began to fade, Daniel became aware of the sound of cheering human voices, coming from the direction of the giant golden building that had until very recently been the seat of all earthly government. The angels had been defeated.

It was over.

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## The Dawn of a New...



Mister President, they’re waiting for you.”

Daniel Cho thanked his aide and checked his tie in the mirror one last time. Not too bad, he thought. Very presidential.

Daniel had had a very busy six months following the fall of Heaven and the end of the Angelic Jihad. Despite his other flaws, Michael had succeeded where Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and Napoleon had failed. He united the entire world under one banner, one government. When the angel died, he left a vacuum of power in his absence that threatened to plunge the world again into chaos.

Once again, Daniel had stepped into the fray. Opposing vocal and powerful proponents of a return to nationalism, he claimed that the idea of a central world government was valid, so long as no single person ran it. Daniel conceived, championed, and eventually sold to the masses the idea of a worldwide representative democracy, patterned after the governments of the United States and Canada. The Terran Republic slowly took form, with the former sovereign nations of the world now functioning much as the states of the former United States. Each sent their representatives to a central world Congress in Geneva. A bicameral legislature took form, but they still needed an executive branch.

Daniel won by a landslide, opposed only by power hungry niche players who failed to win the trust and confidence of the masses that Daniel enjoyed. With Jack Harris as his vice president, Daniel was elected to lead the people of Earth just five and a half months after Michael’s destruction. His term of office would be five years, with the possibility of a second five year term. After that, he would have to step down.

Daniel wasn't sure he was ready, but he doubted anyone sane enough to do the job correctly ever was. If he wanted the job for his own sake, he shouldn't have been allowed to do it.

Still, he thought a lot about those that preceded him, or tried to. Not a day went by that he didn't think about Satan and Michael, and what they tried to accomplish.

Satan wanted a world of utter chaos, total Darwinian survival of the fittest. Only through struggle and blood, the demon had said, could mankind strive to be something better. Mankind under his rule would have been reduced to paranoid barbarism, with only the strongest and most ruthless living to fight another day. Barbarians had little use for art or culture, and under Satan most of the finer aspects of humanity, the things that separate humans from animals, would have disappeared.

Michael, on the other hand, put a great deal of emphasis on civilization, cooperating with others instead of fighting them. However, the angel also took it too far. Michael decided to strengthen the human race by breeding out the qualities he arbitrarily decided were unfit. While his ideals seemed nobler on the surface, Heaven quickly deteriorated into a sterile, merciless institution, no better than a thousand dictators throughout the history of mankind. Pure, unquestioned order was no better than pure chaos.

Still, Daniel thought, in their own ways, each had humanity's best interests at heart. Both sought to improve and better the human race. Angel and Demon both wanted the same thing: the continued existence and improvement of humanity.

The very same goal which Daniel now faced.

Daniel turned away from the mirror and walked out the door. It was a sizable walk to the outdoor display stand where he was to give his inauguration speech. Several aides had offered to write a speech for him, but he preferred to "wing it", speaking from the heart. He still had no idea what he was going to say. Flanked by security men, Daniel huffed up the stairs to the walkway that led to the display stand. He was still getting used to the Swiss mountain air in Geneva.

Over the last month or so, Daniel had begun to understand his two immortal foes a little better, and he developed a growing understanding of where they went wrong. Both Satan and Michael had valid philosophies, on the surface. Satan was right; humanity had made its greatest advancements in times of great stress. Michael was also right; it was order and community that made humans people instead of animals.

The problem was that each went too far. Too much of anything is never a good idea, Daniel mused. The angels and demons lacked balance.

Balance had become a very important concept to Daniel recently, so much so that he decided to make the symbol of the Terran Republic the Tai Chi Tu, the Chinese Yin and Yang symbol. Two opposing forces, each containing the seed of the other, in perfect balance. Light and darkness. Activity and rest. Order and Chaos.

Humanity needed Satan's chaos to strive, to develop, to change. Without some degree of chaos, society would become static, unable to adapt to changing conditions.

But humanity also needed Michael's structure and order, so that the changes induced by

chaos would have a solid foundation to build upon. Without order, chaos would be a destructive force rather than an agent for necessary change.

Both immortals were right, and both were wrong.

Suddenly, as Daniel heard his introduction and walked out onto the display stand, billions of eyes watching his every move, Daniel had his speech. After clearing his throat he began, his voice determined and strong.

“The destiny of humanity lies between Heaven and Hell.”

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