

Assassin

Chapter 1

Hell

I approached the gate slowly, my heavy, measured footsteps alerting the guards long before I came into view. Exactly as intended. No one leaves Hell without permission. It was many ages since anyone had tried, despite the desperate agony of most of those entombed here. The guards were always watchful, and if I came upon them swiftly and silently, there was the danger that they might react with all of their force before I was recognized.

Danger is perhaps too strong a term. Even acting together, the thousands of demons that guarded this, the inner of the seven gates of Hell, could have inflicted little damage upon a seraph such as I. My credentials were well known—and feared. I had once been one of the elite bodyguard who surrounded the very throne of God, the Great Enemy. I wielded the power to extinguish stars or to shatter planets. However, to be attacked by the gate guard would be embarrassing and would mean a loss of face. In Hell, reputation and image were judiciously guarded assets. There were many beings here who bitterly resented my position and status. If one or two of the most powerful ones were emboldened just a little, they might dare to challenge me.

The captain of the guard folded his leathery wings against his body as I approached. The hundreds of pairs of eyes that covered those wings, his many limbs, and his dark body, had been darting in all directions, seeking, searching for any creature foolish enough to earn his displeasure. However, as he caught sight of me, all of his eyes widened in fear and fixated upon me. I could read terror in every eye. Beads of sweat had started on his forehead, and the multiple forelimbs that held weapons and whips trembled, despite his best efforts to control them. He knew who I was; he knew my reputation. Fear was the currency of Hell, and I was rich in my ability to inspire it.

The captain bowed low as I was surrounded by the thousands of demons under his command—all of them silent, all of them trembling, all of them wondering what could be so desperately important that I was being sent forth.

The captain spoke low and with respect. “My lord, we have been ordered to let you pass. May Lucifer’s favor be upon your mission.” He stepped backward and indicated that the gate should be opened.

Hundreds of his minions leaped at the speed of light to great capstans. Straining every muscle in their huge bodies, they started to turn the capstans. With an ear-splitting groan, the mighty gate started to shudder and then move. Slowly the enormous gate moved open, and I stepped forward, passing through the dark and oppressive portal. I had gone but a dozen steps along

the path, before it ended precipitously. A sheer drop into an infinite pit lay before me. I stood at an opening in the side of the bottomless pit, a shaft that continued downward forever and was several miles wide. The walls of the pit were totally smooth; without crevice or crack. They could not be climbed. The next gate lay in the opposite wall of the shaft, more than a thousand miles above my head. Without the power of flight, that gate was completely inaccessible. Most of those enslaved here could not fly; their movement was limited to crawling and cowering. No one attempting escape had ever managed to get as far as the second gate.

I stopped at the edge. Rapidly, my wings formed and began to unfurl. I stepped forward. I fell perhaps twenty feet before my opening wings held me; with one powerful beat of my wings, I ascended.

I took my time; I needed to think. As the chief assassin of Hell, I was saved for the most important, the most desperate, of missions. And I had not been called upon for almost four hundred years. Despite the constant and intensive battle that Hell was in—the battle for our very survival—I was considered too important to risk, too highly skilled, too great a prize to our Enemy if his forces could damage or destroy me. If I was being used, this mission must be of the most desperate importance.

I had been called a short while before to attend one of Hell's most able field marshals, a being both monstrous and awe inspiring. He had a well-deserved reputation for brilliance and depth of strategic thinking. He had once commanded a legion of Heaven's army, and he knew the Enemy's ways and forces better than most. As I abased myself before him, his piercing eyes shrewdly scrutinized me.

"Rise, Nemesis," he curtly commanded. "A situation has arisen, a problem that requires your unique expertise."

I waited expectantly. I had a reputation for success, but something told me that this mission would be far from easy or straightforward.

Yet the task he laid out before me was ludicrously simple. "You are to go from here to the battleground in sector 1C of earth, and you are to kill a human baby."

Hell had millions of demons who could manage such a straightforward task. Why use me for such demeaning work? Was this a calculated insult? What machinations had my many rivals worked for me to fall from favor and be subject to this insult? Another part of me felt relief that the task was easily manageable. I could complete this pathetically simple mission with ease and keep my reputation intact. However, a deeper part of me was intrigued. Something about his manner told me that this was far from straightforward; something deeper was afoot.

Disconcertingly, he seemed to read my thoughts. Softly and dangerously he said, "No, it won't be easy. The child is likely to be guarded."

I was reassured that this was not an insult, but I was even more puzzled. Who was this child that the chief assassin of Hell was tasked with his removal?

“Is this child likely to grow into a prophet or teacher, a priest or king? And what are the forces likely to be guarding him?” I asked.

He hesitated a moment, as if debating the wisdom of continuing, but eventually decided that it was necessary to at least partly enlighten me.

“If allowed to live, the child may be all of those things, and much, much more. In answer to your second question, we have detected some enemy activity. Our scouts have encountered an angelic task group in his vicinity, and we anticipate that any attempt on his life will be met with force. Some of my colleagues wished to overwhelm the child’s defenders with several legions of our warriors. However, such a force would be detected, and my argument has prevailed that a single fast-paced assassin is more likely to succeed.”

I felt the first gnawing of uncertainty in the pit of my being. Hell sent out legions when a pitched battle with the Enemy was expected; clearly, in this case, such a move was being watched for. So, I was being sent in single-handed where a force of tens of thousands of our warriors was not expected to succeed.

I kept my features and my voice calm as I asked, “Where in sector 1C will I find this child?”

The field marshal gave me directions as an image of my target’s location formed in the space between us. As he talked, my mind automatically adjusted to measure everything in earthly dimensions of time and space.

The field marshal dismissed me with a parting warning. “Nemesis, forces will be available to cover your withdrawal should you succeed; however, beware of meeting old acquaintances on your trip.”

I was mystified by his oblique statement. Whatever could he mean? Were other assassins being sent out from Hell? Was I in a race to see who could kill the child first? Was this perhaps some form of training exercise? Again, I wondered if one of my many rivals had managed to rise in prominence and had persuaded the field marshal to arrange an exercise where he—this unknown interloper—could compete against me. However, one does not question a field marshal of Hell. I had been dismissed, and, bowing, I retreated from his presence.

My review of these recent events was interrupted by my senses screaming a warning of approaching danger. I glanced up and saw in the distance that the guard within this section of the pit was awake. A dozen winged demons had spotted my ascent and were rushing down to check me out. They approached to within a dozen miles, and then, recognizing me, they stopped suddenly in midair and bowed low. Evidently, all of the guards had been warned of my

egress from Hell. Several hundred miles beyond them, I discerned the second gate.

I speeded up my ascent, and within a fraction of a second, I was alighting on the ledge that was indented from the perfectly smooth side of the bottomless pit. Before me a great gate of iron stood closed. In front of the gate, the captain of the gate guard, flanked by his lieutenants, bowed low. I strode forward, ignoring his stuttered greeting. He hurriedly gestured to his minions, and the second gate slowly started to grate open.

Beyond the gate stood the cavern of the lake of fire. The cavern was filled from edge to edge with a burning lake of fire of tremendous temperature. The surface of the lake boiled and writhed. Spouts of liquid flame hundreds of feet across leaped into the air, then, colliding with the low roof of the cavern, crashed back into the lake. Even the power of flight was of little use here, as the cavern roof was low, and the boiling lake continuously burst upward to touch it.

Few of the creatures trapped below could hope to survive the billions of degrees of temperature they would find in the lake. But I bowed my head and concentrated. A perfect sphere of pure energy began to form around me. Within a millionth of a second, I could have stood in the center of a star and been perfectly safe, perfectly cool. However, I let the sphere form for almost a thousand times longer, for I knew the tremendous forces and temperature my shield was about to be subjected to. I now stood in the center of a perfect sphere, its brilliant radiance illuminating this end of the cavern for hundreds of miles ahead with a pure white light that would have blinded any physical creature. I stepped forward, my feet touching the circumference of the sphere below me. As I walked, the sphere rolled forward along the jetty leading away from the gate to the boiling, bursting lake, hotter by far than any star in the universe. As I reached the end of the jetty, my sphere dropped onto the surface of the lake and floated. As I continued to walk steadily forward, the sphere rolled forward also, and so I crossed the lake of fire. Often my sphere was blown about by surging waves and fiery spouts. Always the current was against me, flowing toward the heart of Hell. However, I persevered, and, eventually, dimly far ahead, I spied another jetty. I rolled my sphere onto the edge of the jetty, and with a thought, dissolved it. I strode forward and stepped into a chamber cleft into the side of the high cliff that formed this end of the cavern. The tunnel in which I found myself zigzagged back and forth, and I came eventually to the third gate.

Once again, I was expected, and as soon as I was seen, the gate began to inch open. Around me I could feel both the fear and the interest of the gate guard. Hell has many beings. However, few are seraphs. My angelic order was especially high, especially powerful, and of the seraphs within Hell, I alone had served in the elite bodyguard that surrounded the very throne of the Great Enemy. I was the only one of that elite force of angelic beings who had rebelled. The guard knew that something tremendously important was afoot if I was being sent on a mission.

So, I passed from gate to gate. As I passed through the penultimate gate, I found for the first time that the guard was equally balanced between those who looked to prevent escape from Hell and those who guarded from attack by our Enemy. A winding tunnel led from the penultimate gate to the outer gate. The tunnel was intersected by numerous ambush points and strongholds from which our forces could sally forth in the event of an attacking force breaching the outer gate and advancing down the tunnel. Eventually, the tunnel ended in a vast cavern.

As I had anticipated, Cerberus, the huge watchdog of Hell, stood guard in the center of the cavern. I watched silently as he constantly shifted form. At one moment, he morphed into a giant snake, his mighty coils filling most of the cavern as his cold reptilian eyes glittered in the dull light. Then, he shifted again, passing rapidly and silently between many forms before settling into a giant with four faces, four wings, and eight limbs. The faces—human man, eagle, bull, and lion—reflected the aspects of his predatory nature. But, no, he shifted form again and stood before me as a monstrous many-headed dog, growing until he filled half the cavern. Three giant canine heads turned in my direction and snarled defiance. Huge teeth gleamed in gaping mouths that dripped froth and saliva. He crouched, bayed at me, and stepped toward me, and then changed back to his earlier form of a four-faced giant.

“So, Nemesis, you go forth again.” All four faces spoke as one. The voices were different; each one chilling. The face of the lion snarled and roared the words; the face of the bull bellowed them, full of pent-up rage and fury; the eagle face screeched the words harshly and shrilly; the human face spoke the words calmly, with just a hint of sarcasm but also undertones of interest.

For the first time since I had left the field marshal, I found a being who was not so overcome with fear at the sight of me that he was incapacitated by it. Cerberus treated me with caution, but he gained confidence from the knowledge that even if not my equal, he was close enough that a clash between us was not certain to end in my favor.

“We all serve, Cerberus, each of us in our different way. You guard here; my role is out there.”

Cerberus nodded and slowly moved to one side of the cavern to let me pass.

I exited the cavern across a narrow bridge spanning the huge chasm that lay between me and the outer of the seven gates of Hell.

I crossed the bridge and came upon a scene of frenzied activity. A constant stream of our scouts, heavily armed, were issuing out through the gate. A full-scale alert was on, and the specialist legion of scouts barracked near the outer gate was being sent out in force.

The captain of the gate guard was harassed and busy. He gave me a salute and indicated the gate that stood open. Through the wide-open gate, I could see thousands of winged warriors patrolling just outside. They flew

protectively around the open gate like sentinel wasps buzzing around the entrance to a nest.

“Expecting trouble?” I asked the captain.

He certainly looked troubled. Uncertainty was etched into his features.

“I hear rumors,” he said.

“Such as?” I asked.

“Something unexpected, something startling, something that we could never have predicted.” Concern and wonder were evenly mixed in his voice as he spoke.

“Enlighten me,” I commanded.

The captain was too experienced to incur the displeasure of Lucifer, master of Hell, by talking out of turn. He paled, but his answer, when it came, was delivered in an even voice.

“My lord, it is best that you find out when you get out there,” he said, and, bowing low, he turned back to his duties.

I stood at the edge of the gate. Once again, wings formed on my back. This time I was in a hurry. I darted at the speed of light out from the last gate of Hell. I had started my mission.

Chapter 2

The Passage

The warriors aggressively flying outside the outer gate scattered in all directions as I arrowed through them. Once through their ranks, I altered my trajectory upward and rapidly accelerated. Within a tiny fraction of a second, I was doing many multiples of the speed of light, though it was hard to measure speed here, as I flew through a gray uniformity.

I accelerated further. Within a hundredth of a second, I was speeding at many thousands of times the speed of light. As a being who could choose to exist in either the physical or spiritual realm, I was only subject to natural laws, such as inertia, when I chose to be. I accelerated further; soon I was traveling at many million times the speed of light.

For an hour, I flew upward, always heading in the same direction. I saw no other being in that time. In the deserted region of the damned, I flew alone.

Eventually, through the grayness, far ahead and way above me, I could see a shimmering barrier: the boundary between the physical universe and the domain in which Hell was located.

I approached the barrier; it spread for billions of light years in every direction. I turned parallel to it and flew alongside it, searching for a portal.

Almost immediately, a deep unease started to stir deep within me as beside me, the barrier sparkled and hummed. Creation sang many songs. For the first time in four hundred years, I heard music. The music was strangely beautiful; melodies danced and swirled through the song of the barrier. However, the music was torment to my soul. The barrier, though not sentient, sang a song of praise to its Creator. I shut my ears to the sound. I hated to be reminded of him, of what once had been, of what I once had been.

I searched for a portal. They never occurred in the same place more than once, and never existed for more than a few thousandths of a second before merging back into the barrier. Eventually, I spotted one forming millions of miles behind me. As it was just beginning to form, I had ample time to loop around, arrow back the way I had come, and arrive at this entrance to the physical universe.

I did so, decelerated to a dead stop, and pushed gently against a thin, pulsating fluid membrane that covered the portal and separated me from the physical universe. It yielded, and I stepped through into this new dimension.

My internal discomfort increased as faintly and distantly I could hear millions of songs. There were several hundred billion galaxies in the universe; each galaxy contained on average a hundred billion stars. Each star was singing. Each song from each star was separate; however, the songs joined and merged like individual instruments in a vast orchestra so that each galaxy had a distinct and separate anthem. Here, far between the galaxies, the songs were fainter, but my finely tuned ears could still detect millions of different melodies. Every galaxy was singing anthems of praise to its Creator.

I ignored them and started on my way toward the spiral galaxy in which the planet earth was located. Because of the urgency of the situation, I was forced to travel at millions of times the speed of light. However, this was dangerous. At this speed, I could run upon enemy scouts or patrolling units, with little warning. It was highly unlikely that I would come upon any single being, or even a group of beings, that could give me serious trouble, but, unless I could account for all of the enemy force very quickly, one or more of them would escape and summon help. I then would have little choice but to abandon my mission or be eventually overwhelmed.

By chance, I had entered the universe at a point no great distance from the galaxy I wanted, and within a few hours, I was approaching its outer edge. My journey had been marked by an absence of contact with any of our forces or those of the enemy. So far, my mission was unfolding exactly according to plan.

I passed within a few million miles of the first star on the outskirts of this galaxy. It traveled a lonely orbit far from any of its fellows. It was so far out from the center of its galaxy that I doubted it would complete one revolution around the distant center in its life-time. Its sole companion, a barren ball of rock, orbited closely. The planet's proximity to its giant burning companion resulted in a scorched and sterile world.

I traveled on. Soon I passed through the center of the galaxy and on toward the spiral arm that held the planet that was my target. Immediately as I passed into this arm of the galaxy, I encountered trouble.

I was passing through the corona of a giant star that burned so hot, its light passed into the ultraviolet end of the spectrum, when passing fast across my field of view, a platoon of powerful angels swept at right angles to my direction, far ahead of me. I immediately darted closer to the surface of the star and watched the group scouting with a disquieting thoroughness. My attention was caught by the standard-bearing angel traveling immediately behind the leader of the group. The standard-bearer was powerfully built and well armed. However, it was the standard he carried that caught my attention. He was carrying a pennant that identified the group as belonging to the 279th Legion. I may not have been on a mission for four hundred years, but my intelligence studies were bang up to date. Only two days ago, that legion had been garrisoning the Crystal galaxy halfway across the universe. Why were they here?

I stayed for a few moments longer, until the enemy group had passed, and then I moved forward again, but more cautiously now. I was concerned at encountering the 279th Legion so far from where our intelligence had placed them. What was so important that an enemy legion had been moved halfway across the universe to guard this region? Was this the only unit that had been moved, or were there others?

This question was soon resolved. Over the next few hours, I encountered scouting groups from seventeen other enemy legions that should have been posted elsewhere in the cosmos. This spiral arm of this galaxy was full of enemy troops, and the frequency of encounters with enemy units was rising rapidly the closer I got to my target.

I traveled circumspectly now. I cloaked my presence as far as I was able, seeking to blend in with natural phenomena, such as radiation or gravity. Despite my experience and abilities, it seemed certain that I must be detected before I reached my target.

My curiosity and mystification increased by leaps and bounds. Was this enemy activity linked in any way with my mission? It seemed too much of a coincidence for there not to be a connection, but the Great Enemy's armies were not redeployed for human babies. Surely, there must be some other explanation.

As I was musing, my senses noticed something else. There was a silence ahead of me. The stars in this region had stopped their song. The quietness was disconcerting. Normally, I would have rejoiced at this development. How all the inhabitants of Hell hated songs of praise to the Enemy! But something about the silence seemed to speak of wonder and awe, as if the stars in this region had become aware of something so profound, so awe inspiring, that they had stopped singing, in wonder and amazement. What was going on?

Perhaps my attention was taken up too much with this question, for I suddenly became aware of a distant movement at the very periphery of my senses, and with a sickening dread, I knew that I had been spotted.

I looked more intently, and through a tiny gap between the overlapping glare of several stars, I saw an enemy scouting group wheeling around in my direction and accelerating rapidly.

I counted quickly and saw about two hundred angels in the scouting group coming my way. They held perfect formation, and the skill with which they moved as a unit indicated long experience and well-honed abilities.

However, even at this distance, it was clear that the unit consisted only of enemy angels; there were none of the higher angelic orders of seraphs or cherubs. Confidence that I could defeat this small group surged through me, but could I account for all of them? Probably not. Some would get away and bring down greater forces upon my head. I made my decision in a split

second. The time for hiding and circumspection had passed. Now it was time for action.

I accelerated rapidly, heading directly for my target. It mattered little if they knew where I was going if they were unable to stop me. I was certain I could outrun them as well as outfight them.

I was close to my target now; already the star that brought life to my target planet was within my vision.

Options rapidly formed in my mind. I could choose to gain mass and hit the planet at many multiples of the speed of light. The resultant impact would likely shatter the planet or at least destroy a continent. However, by choosing to gain mass, I would make myself inherently vulnerable to the impact, and that decision was one of self-destruction. I rejected it. I could choose to turn the planet's star supernova and incinerate the child and the whole human race, but the planet earth was vital to our plans as well as those of the Enemy. No, the only viable option now was to bore in, fight through the defenses, and kill the child.

My swiftly forming thoughts were interrupted by the faint notes of an angelic trumpet sounding far behind me. The scouting group that first spotted me had sounded the alert.

I looked behind me. Through the rush of the chase, I could just make out the identifying insignia of the small group that pursued me. Looking harder, I could see the features of the group's leader. I knew that he must have identified me as a seraph, but he still strove to close the gap, even though he must have known that to succeed would spell certain destruction for himself and his small group.

I looked ahead. I could see rising from the planet earth powerful bands of thousands of defending angels alerted by the trumpet sound. Would I be able to fight through them? Thankfully, there was still no sign of any major angelic beings that could equal me in strength and power. I was by far the most powerful angelic being that I could see in the vicinity.

I swerved violently toward one of the moons of Jupiter and decelerated sharply. The pursuing group would overtake me in a nanosecond. I waited a tiny fraction of a second and then darted behind the moon. I was hidden for an instant from the pursuing force. I concentrated, and in the hand of the middle arm on my left side a dark javelin appeared. While out of their sight, I flung the javelin directly at the moon. The moon exploded with a blinding flash just as the pursuing force was rounding it to catch me.

Not waiting to see how many of my pursuers survived, I darted back toward my target planet. As I flew, my features and my shape changed. I assumed the appearance of the leader of the scouting group that had been pursuing me. In my right hand, a golden trumpet formed, and, lifting it to my lips, I gave

a perfect imitation of the trumpet sound that a moment ago I had heard behind me.

I rapidly headed toward the defending force. I lifted the trumpet to my lips and sounded the alert again. I was closing in on the defending force at tremendous speed. Good; that would give them less time to think. As the gap closed, I shouted, "A demonic army approaches!"

I could see the leader of the group closest to me battle with tremendous indecision. He thought he recognized me. I knew that my appearance perfectly matched that of the angel leader who had been chasing me. Also, I was warning them of a danger that they had been expecting. However, I was heading in toward the target at tremendous speed, and we were now very close. The circle of the earth filled half the sky below us. Caution won, and he signaled me to stop. In a billionth of a second, a battle-ax formed in my left arm, and I decapitated him. I lifted my right arm, and from the palm of my hand, a shaft of pure white energy shot out and disintegrated the four angels who were following him.

I put my head down and dived straight down through the remainder of the group, toward the small country that sat at the right-hand edge of the middle sea. Time seemed to slow down now, as it so often did when I reached the critical point of a mission. Tens of thousands of angels were closing in on me from behind and from all sides, but I had caught the enemy unaware; ahead of me, only small groups of a few hundred angels were rising to block my path.

The enemy general had badly miscalculated. In seeking to guard against a move by our armies, he had put too many of his forces far out. I had evaded these by stealth, and now, like a tiger, I had sprung from cover and was upon my prey.

Already my tremendous speed had eaten up much of the distance, and I could see the small town of Bethlehem below me. The street plan was exactly as described in my briefing, and toward the left-hand corner of the town, I could see the stable attached to the small inn where my target lay.

I decelerated slightly. At this speed, there was a real danger of overshooting the target and passing clean through the planet before I could correct. I knew from the sound of pursuit behind me that I had only one chance at this.

I changed my appearance again, becoming a seraph in all his glory. Blazing brightly, I angled down toward my destination.

Ahead of me, a group of five hundred angels suicidally charged me head-on. I brushed their attack aside with ease, destroying more than two hundred of them as I passed through, my arms a blur of weapons and energy. However, something in the back of my mind warned me that the defenders possessed a kind of desperation that I had never before encountered. Still, I had reached

my target, and there were few defenders ahead of me now. Getting out again might prove problematic, but I was certain that I could kill my victim.

Nothing could stop me now.

Chapter 3

Old Acquaintances

Twenty miles up and diving fast, my confidence rose as the distance decreased. None of the pursuing forces looked like they could catch me in time. Behind me, more trumpets sounded, but few defenders now stood between me and the stable. They came head-on in small groups and were easy to swat aside. Several times, my opponents managed to land blows, but I was a seraph, and the angels opposing me simply did not have the power to seriously damage me. True, some damage was done, but such was the power within me that the wounds healed almost as soon as they formed.

Five miles to go, and there was nothing between me and the target. I examined the inn and stable at leisure. Both appeared to be mean, run-down buildings. Who was this child? So important that the Great Enemy moved armies to defend him; and yet, so unimportant that he was residing in a derelict stable. Nothing about this mission made sense. Still, I had all but accomplished it, and perhaps some answers would be forthcoming when I returned to Hell.

Four seraphs erupted from the stable.

My senses went into overdrive. I was diving at high speed toward four major enemy units.

Things went rapidly from bad to very much worse. I recognized them. All four were seraphs from my old regiment. Super powerful beings who formed a bodyguard around the throne of our Great Enemy, God himself.

This was impossible, simply impossible. That unit was never seen outside the presence of the Great Enemy. They could not, repeat *not*, be guarding a human being, no matter how important.

I was totally and utterly bewildered, but self-preservation dictated that I keep my senses and think fast. A heavenly army at my heels, and four superbeings closing in on me from ahead, the field marshal's cryptic comment about meeting old acquaintances was suddenly all too clear. I was in serious trouble.

I shot a beam of supercharged energy from my bottom left arm toward the seraph on the left-hand side. He dodged it with contemptuous ease, and shining weapons suddenly appeared in all of his hands. I jinked right at a sharp angle, with the intention of meeting the right-hand seraph first. My aim was to meet each one individually rather than take on the group as a whole. If I could disable one of my opponents, the odds against me would decrease.

The group smoothly moved to meet me as a coherent whole. With a sick dread, I recognized that I had reacted as I had been trained to many millennia ago by officers from the very unit I was now facing. They would have no trouble defeating me if I reacted so predictably.

The odds against me were overwhelming; however, I still had one advantage. They must defend that stable. Whatever, whoever, was in that building was of absolutely vital importance. I was going to gamble that, come what may, they would defend its occupant, no matter the cost to themselves.

I focused all my strength, and, steadying myself with all six wings and pointing all six arms together, I shot six beams of concentrated energy at the stable roof. I was now at almost point-blank range, a mere two miles away. I simply could not miss. The power I was blazing down would cut through thousands of feet of rock in a fraction of a second. A glowing crater many miles deep would be left where the inn and stable had stood a second before.

The seraph to the left of the group sacrificed himself without thought or hesitation. The weapons in his hands disappeared as he dived into the path of the beams. A shining pulsating disc started to form between him and me as he strove to create a shield. However, he simply did not have time to build it to sufficient power. I had wrong-footed the group. They had not anticipated that move. My beams cut through his shield, shredding the pulsating disk. It caught my opponent square on and blew his torso apart. However, his sacrifice was not wasted, as all of the energy I had shot forth was absorbed by his body, and the stable stood unscathed.

I dived hard and fast to the left. With a sharply barked command, the group of three remaining seraphs facing me split. Two continued to close in on me; the third took up position as a guard, hovering just above the roof of the stable. All three now bore shining shields of energy.

I issued a single shot from one of my arms directly at the stable. The defending seraph blocked it with ease and sent back a beam directly at my head. I steepened my dive, and, accelerating sharply, I dodged his beam. Heading straight down, I dived through the surface of the planet, without a sound.

Still without mass, I was able to pass through solid rock with the same ease as I had passed through the planet's atmosphere. My senses were hardly affected by the change in medium. I knew exactly where the stable was and where my opponents were.

I hoped that the two seraphs who were hunting me would chase me halfway through the planet and then be caught off guard if I doubled back quickly enough. If I could get between them and the target, I would only have to overcome the one remaining seraph, and then I would be on my victim.

I looped around and started to head back to the stable, this time from below and slightly to one side.

However, my opponents were not so easily fooled. One of them did indeed overshoot me, but not nearly as far as I would have liked. The other, the leader of the group, decelerated sharply, and we met face-to-face.

To my horror, I recognized one of my old officers. I could see from the expression on his face that he also recognized me. I saw in his eyes a cold determination to kill me.

I formed a dark flaming sword for my upper right hand, and I swept it at his head. He stepped backward, maintaining his position between me and the stable. In one of his hands, a sword also formed. However, his was blazing with a pure white light. The blades met with a resounding clash. My arm and my shoulder were badly jarred, my blade badly notched. His weapon seemed unaffected, as did he. Weapons were appearing in his other hands as he closed in on me.

Deep within the rock of the crust of the earth, tens of miles below the town of Bethlehem, we fought. My opponent and I circled each other warily. Each of us feinting and dodging as we sought a slight advantage that would allow a disabling blow to be landed.

Far below us, I perceived the second seraph having skidded to a stop, was returning at tremendous speed. I was running out of time.

I formed battle-axes for all my hands and grew rapidly in size. I hoped to land a telling blow against my old officer, while my rapidly increasing size gave me a reach advantage. However, as I grew, my opponent chose to shrink. Whereas I was now several hundred feet tall, my opponent had shrunk to a fraction of an inch. However, he still wielded the full power of a seraph, and he had a much bigger target now to hit than I did. I coordinated the swing of two battle-axes as I tried to hit my tiny and fast-moving enemy. The axes converged at high speed. The enemy seraph shot a beam of energy at the shaft of one ax and hit it cleanly; my battle-ax fell apart before it could connect. He blocked the blow of the remaining ax with a shield. Despite the size difference, we wielded almost equal power, and it seemed that, indeed, he was slightly the stronger. He made a sudden dart at my head. I backward somersaulted away through the rock and shrank rapidly in size to match him.

The second enemy seraph had reached us, and I now found myself caught between the two of them. I turned to face each of them side-on, three arms facing each. However, both they and I knew that I was now at a serious disadvantage.

For several minutes, we fought deep underground, the rock beneath Bethlehem resounding with the clash of weapons. As the fight progressed, I became more and more hard pressed. The power and speed of their blows were phenomenal. My strength was beginning to fail. My arms, legs, and wings started to feel heavy. I was blocking their blows now only at the last moment.

I had one last card to play. I changed weapons in two of my hands on my left-hand side. The battle-axes disappeared, and in their place, a long heavy broadsword appeared. Grasping the hilt in both of my free hands, I swung the long sword at the midriff of the seraph on the left. He darted backward, giving me a fraction of time and space on one side. I continued to swing the long heavy broadsword around in a long arc. At the same time, I leaped toward the seraph on my right. As I did, I time-traveled as far as I was able to. Seraphs were unique among the angelic groups in that they had a limited ability to tinker with time. Our Great Enemy alone could manipulate time without restraint, being able to direct and change time as he chose, but we seraphs could time-travel for fractions of a second. No more. We had been trained to use this ability only under orders—and even then, only in extremis, as it could unravel the very fabric of time and space, and that could have far-reaching consequences in physical dimensions such as this one.

I stepped forward in time by one-quarter of a thousandth of a second. The seraph on my right saw me start my leap and registered that my broadsword was now closing in on him. The next thing he knew was that I had instantaneously completed my leap, and he had no hope now of getting out of the path of my weapon.

He lifted his shield and at the very last moment managed to interpose it between my sword and his head. However, his shield was just a fraction away from his face, and he had no time to brace himself for the blow. His shield was forced back at tremendous speed into his forehead. He was momentarily stunned, and I darted past him, upward and away from my two opponents as fast as I was able to accelerate.

I no longer had any intention of getting into the stable. The odds against me were just too heavy. During the minutes we had fought underground, the enemy army would have reinforced the area tremendously. I had real doubts as to whether I would even be able to fight my way out. I hoped that they would be so concerned with defending the stable that they would fail to press the engagement home as firmly as they should if I tried to run for it.

However, I still aimed to emerge from the ground just a few miles from the stable. I would try a few shots as I blasted past, in the hope that I might be able to get a lucky shot on target.

I emerged from the earth into the atmosphere at just under the speed of light. Not far behind me, the two enemy seraphs charged after me. I rapidly scanned my surroundings, as I had been trained to do. The skies now were thronging with hundreds of thousands of angels. At many points in the night sky, I could see major enemy units. Dozens of seraphs from my old unit were now present, and purple light trails in the night sky spoke of dozens more arriving. My hopes of escape dwindled to zero. So, this was it: capture or destruction. Well, I would go out on a high; I would make one more attempt on the target.

I focused my attention on the stable building. *Oh! Lucifer be praised!* I could not believe my good fortune. During the minutes I had spent underground, the

young family inside had decided to go to the door of the stable. Perhaps to get a breath of air, for it must have been stuffy and smelly in that low building, surrounded by the animals. Or, perhaps it was to greet a motley collection of farm workers or shepherds who were approaching the building. Whatever the reason, I had my first clear view of the target, and just the faintest possibility of a shot on target if I could aim carefully enough between the three seraphs and a powerful angel standing between the family and myself.

I examined my victims as I maneuvered for the shot. The young man was tall, bearded, and broad shouldered. The joy and happiness on his face almost, but not quite, replaced the fatigue that hovered there. The mother was dark haired, slight, and so very, very young. On her face, too, were joy and hope and a great deal of exhaustion. She was carrying the baby.

I saw the baby. My world stopped. I saw him. I saw the Great Enemy's Son in the form of a human child. The Creator of the universe, the sustainer of all worlds and domains, the Great Enemy's Son. The One I had once served and once loved above all things; the One I had hated and feared for so long now.

Suddenly, nothing made sense, but everything was explained: the reason why I was sent, the reason why the Great Enemy had armies out this night, the presence of my old unit here in a mean little town on this pathetic little planet.

Without realizing it, I had stopped in midair. I gazed in wonder at this amazing, this inexplicable thing—that our Great Enemy's Son, who had called billions of galaxies into being with a few words, was now a mortal being, a tiny baby helpless in his mother's arms.

I did not sense or hear the seraphs who closed in on me. At the last moment, I registered the swiftly closing blur of a sword pommel as it crashed down on my head. Then, everything was blackness.

Chapter 4

Memories

Perhaps I dreamed, or was it a memory? Yes, I think so; I remembered. Long-buried memories, unbidden and unwanted, came back to haunt my unconsciousness.

I remembered long ago, before the rebellion. I remembered a day in Heaven.

I was on guard duty. A ceremonial duty, for there were no enemies then, no wars or conflict of any kind. A group of four of us marched, resplendent in our uniforms, deeply content, deeply happy.

Our step was fast, but our march was long, as we had a great distance to travel through the breathtakingly beautiful countryside of Heaven.

A sparkle of light caught my eye. I kept my face fixedly pointed forward, per regulations, but shot a glance over to my left. The light was dancing off a beautiful mansion. It was one of a small hamlet of mansions dispersed among beautiful gardens surrounding a glittering lake; each house was unique, yet sumptuous and palatial beyond description. I guessed that this particular one had more than a thousand rooms.

In one of the rooms nearest to us, hundreds of friends had gathered for a dinner party. They gathered around small tables, chatting happily. I saw some friends I recognized; they were just walking away from one table to another, on which a different type of cuisine stood waiting for them. Another group approached the table they had just left; just before they reached it, the table was miraculously covered again with fresh food. I smiled to myself and remembered that God was watching here, as he watched throughout Heaven and throughout his vast domains, and that he loved to bless.

Underlying the excited chatter, my ears could make out the most enchanting music. I scanned the room for musicians and then realized that the music was coming from a fountain of gold pumping forth glittering water. The fountain stood in the center of the room. As the water emerged from the fountain, it sang songs of praise to God. As the water fell back into the gold basin beneath the fountain, it formed itself into myriad shapes and danced to the music of its own song. Beautiful and complex patterns and shapes evolved in deep harmony with the lilting melodies and harmonies that filled the air.

My friends at the party had stopped to admire some of the large pictures that graced the walls within this large banquet hall. They stood in front of one that displayed a sunlit glade in a dark forest. Small furry creatures danced in the sunlight as it filtered through the dark-green leaves of the trees. Then, the

image changed, and now they viewed an azure-blue sea rolling white breakers onto the golden sand of an unspoiled beach. The picture changed again, and they gazed upon snow-capped peaks surrounding a lake of the deepest cobalt blue. The picture changed again, and they looked upon what appeared to be an enchanted forest, where brightly colored fireflies of many different hues illuminated a summer night. I saw rather than heard one of my friends shout out a suggestion, then, grabbing the hands of one of his neighbors, he dived into the picture. I guessed that he was starting a game of Odyssey. He and his friend would be given a few moments' start, and then others would dive into the picture after them. The picture, of course, was also a portal, and Odyssey was a game of chase and seeking across multiple worlds. Eventually, they would step out of another picture and back into the room to resume their feast.

The room was passing out of my field of view as our group marched on. Just before the building disappeared from my sight, I saw it grow to one side as another room was added. Such was the love and creativeness of God that every few days, the rooms within that building would change and evolve. New rooms would appear, each filled with beautiful things and new treasures. God knew those he loved, and the changes would always be in harmony with their deepest, unspoken wishes. Some citizens in Heaven kept rooms the same for long eons of time because they liked that particular room just as it was. No word was spoken, but God knew. Other citizens enjoyed a constant change. It was probably true that most of the citizens of Heaven had never completed the exploration of their homes.

As we marched on, we passed the last of the buildings. Soon afterward, my senses were caressed by a beautiful perfume. We came to a small forest of fragrant trees that spread either side of the highway. The trees were in blossom, and we were met with a profusion of color and scents. Each tree had a different color of blossom. Crimson, amber, blue, gold, aquamarine, cyan, and many other colors delighted our eyes. Each tree also gave forth a slightly different scent. These blended together delightfully, but such was the quality of the senses God had given us that we could detect and enjoy thousands of different fragrances within the overall perfume of the forest.

As we marched underneath the trees, a number of snowy-white birds that had been perched on the branches flitted down and landed on our shoulders. As they gained a free ride, they sang and discoursed with each other while seeking also to make us laugh out loud by telling us the latest jokes and witticisms that were circulating. We of course maintained our professional military discipline and never did we respond with even a smile. Yet we appreciated their friendly conversation and would laugh at their jokes later. Laughter was a constant companion in Heaven. How could it be otherwise? We were all so happy, so loved, so secure.

We could hear the sound of happiness from all directions. As we rounded a corner, a large clearing in the forest of blossom trees emerged, and there, upon the springy emerald-green turf a large group was playing a fast-paced ball game. Sudden rushes from one team were met by desperate defense from the other. The advantage moved from one team to the other in quick succession.

However, all played with evident good humor and deep companionship. Occasionally, players from different teams would collide at high speed, but never a cross word was heard or a frown seen—only laughter and smiles.

A gentle breeze softly rustled the leaves on the trees. I took a deep breath. The air was clean and fresh and deeply invigorating. Each breath was a delight; the very air was stimulating. Just breathing in Heaven was a joy, an ecstasy. The act of respiration alone brought happiness; such was the quality of the air, the light.

We marched on. In the distance we could see a tall building that straddled the highway. This building was our handover point. We would be relieved here by another team from our regiment, which would march back the way we had come.

Eventually, we marched under a broad archway that soared over our heads. The building ran on a long distance before the highway emerged into the open again. However, it was not dark inside the building, as numerous broad windows and archways allowed the pure clean air and bright light to enter freely. We were suffused by a golden glow as the light reflected off the solid gold bricks of which the building was constructed. Numerous pillars supported the building above. On each pillar was carved the emblem of a unit from Heaven's armies.

We headed for the pillar that bore the emblem of our regiment. Waiting by the pillar, we could see our group mirrored. Four seraphs stood smartly at attention, waiting for us. By their side stood a lieutenant, watching our approach. We could feel his eyes watching our bearing and appearance, critically assessing the state of our uniforms and the quality of our marching. We all wanted to earn our officer's praise. We had recently completed a demanding exercise against another of Heaven's elite units and had come to recognize the qualities of this officer, who was brave, resourceful, and calm.

A bright white light emanated from the group. Seraphs were known as the blazing angels who had a particular glory and quality that came from serving in close proximity to God himself. It was impossible to be near him without it affecting your appearance. The light reflected from the gold pillar behind the group threw them into silhouette, showing in dark profile the broad chests, slim waists, two legs, six arms, and six wings of our colleagues. Despite the light, our attention was caught by one particular member of the group.

Gillwain was the most junior soldier in the regiment. He had only completed basic training recently and was still very uncertain of himself and of his place. Once or twice, he had proved a liability on the exercise we had just completed. His blonde head would often be seen pointing at the floor as he dealt with his uncertainty about fitting in with such a powerful and elite fighting force.

However, today he was different. He held his head high. He was bursting with an infectious joy and happiness that was rubbing off on everyone around him. He seemed to have forgotten about his insecurities and uncertainties. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten about himself entirely; such was his lack of self-

consciousness and uncertainty. Perhaps the biggest change in him was the fact that he blazed with a glory that surpassed all of us. He surpassed the brightness of the lieutenant. I was sure that he would outshine the commanding officer of our regiment. I longed to know what had happened to have changed him so radically but thought I could guess.

We reached the regulation distance from our relieving group and snapped to attention. Satisfied, our officer nodded and commanded, "At ease." This was followed a moment later by a command directed solely to our group: "Dismissed." We broke rank and moved to one side to let our friends and colleagues complete their duty. In perfect step they marched off, accompanied by the lieutenant.

Seeing another seraph from our unit passing, we hailed him and asked him what had happened to change Gillwain so radically.

"Oh, Gillwain had a bad day yesterday. The lieutenant had him up before the colonel for some of the mistakes he made on the training exercise. Particularly his failure to spot the ambushing force that caught us as we entered the Red galaxy. That rankled with the colonel, and he made it pretty clear that Gillwain had better shape up or ship out of the unit."

"So that made him happy, did it?"

"No, it made him miserable, but then our Lord came looking for him and spent a long time chatting with him. Gillwain has been doing somersaults for sheer joy since then."

So, our guesses had been correct. Unaccountable and unbelievable as it was, our Master and Creator, the Son of God and the second person of the godhead had taken the time to search out a lowly seraph and had encouraged him. This should have been utterly unbelievable. Kings do not seek to help lowly private soldiers, but many of us could tell similar stories.

Perhaps it was thinking of the Creator again so shortly after I had seen him that had brought about this unbidden reverie. Regardless, those thoughts marked the boundary of my memories. With a rush, I came back to consciousness and found that my situation had not improved.

Chapter 5

Tartarus

For a long moment, the blissful happiness that I had known in those days stayed with me. Like the warm glow of a summer's evening that lingers on into the first minutes of the night. Then, later memories came flooding in. My happiness dissolved, only to be replaced by hatred and bitter resentment.

With consciousness came an awareness of my immediate situation. I was chained, held face downward and carried bodily by a group of seraphs. My former colleagues were taking no chances.

The sergeant in command warned his team to keep a tight hold and to watch me closely. With a start, I recognized Gillwain's voice. So that was what had triggered the memory. My unconscious mind had recognized his voice.

I lifted my head and examined him. In addition to earning his sergeant's stripes, Gillwain had grown in physique and stature. He was confident and self-assured. There was an obvious competence about him now, and I had no great hopes of any mistakes occurring today that would be in my favor.

Bitterly, I thought to myself that he could have saved his breath in warning his team to be careful. I recognized the chains that bound me. These had not been placed on me by angelic hands but at the command of the Great Enemy himself. He spoke, and the chains had appeared. These chains could not be broken; neither could they be slipped off. I was not going anywhere.

We were in a long corridor that sloped slightly downward. Far behind me, I could see powerful barred gates. Close ahead of me, I could see a similar set of gates. With a sick dread, I came to the conclusion that I was in the worst possible place. I was entering Tartarus, the prison into which the Great Enemy had placed many of the most powerful angelic beings who had rebelled against him.

The marching footsteps of my guards bounced off the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. Apart from that, there was a deep silence. The walls were made of adamant, the hardest, most solid material in all creation. Nothing could reach through adamant; certainly not sound. Billions of times tougher and more durable than diamond, adamant was utterly impervious to assault. Long ago, as part of our training, we had practiced throwing beams of energy at a small boulder of adamant. Energy blasts from our steadily strengthening arms that would have vaporized normal rock simply bounced off the boulder. After making repeated attempts to inflict as much damage as we could, our officer took us up to the boulder and had us touch its surface. To our astonishment it was not

even warm. I thus knew these walls could not be blasted through, even if I spent the rest of eternity focusing all of my fantastic energies on one small spot.

We reached the next gate. I had no idea how many gates we had passed through before I regained consciousness. No fallen angel, however mighty, had ever broken out from Tartarus. I had no way of knowing whether to expect two gates or two hundred.

Gillwain rapped on the door. For a moment, nothing happened, then an answering series of raps faintly came back. Gillwain rapped again. I now realized that he was sending a coded message. A moment's delay, and then smoothly and silently the door opened.

We passed from the corridor into a well-lit room. The room was obviously a guardroom, full of the familiar sights, sounds, and smells of a group of angelic soldiers on guard duty. To my surprise, I suddenly experienced a piercing shaft of melancholy as I felt homesick for the life I had left so long ago. Hell was lonely. Real friendship and comradeship could not be found in Hell. Oh yes, there were temporary alliances and loyalties, but these were based on fear and self-interest, ready to be dropped in a moment if circumstances changed.

Four giant soldiers waited in the room. As we entered I examined them closely. If these were to be my jailers, I wanted to know every detail I could about them. Every strength and every weakness needed to be recognized, recorded, and analyzed in detail over the long eons that undoubtedly stretched before me. Just possibly, I might get a chance to use such knowledge to my advantage.

The four giants were all cherubs. They were even bigger and more powerful than Cerberus, and there were at least four of them here. How many more might be guarding this prison?

With genuine good humor and grace, they welcomed the group of seven seraphs who had brought me this far. The cheerful greetings that emanated from Gillwain and his group made it clear that the warm feelings were reciprocated. If this meeting had taken place in Hell, both sides would treat the other group with disdain and contempt. Only the fear of reprisals from even greater beings would have kept the conflict between them from escalating into open combat.

"So, who have you brought us this time, Gillwain?" asked the shortest but broadest of the group of cherubs.

I saw that he, too, was wearing sergeant's stripes.

Before Gillwain could answer, I let out a string of expletives and insults.

"Touchy, isn't he?" the lead cherub commented drily. Placing a large hand on my shoulder, he hauled me upright to my feet.

I was amazed at his strength and wondered briefly how I would fare in combat against him or his fellows.

The cherub manhandled me across the guardroom, with disconcerting ease, as one of his colleagues took a key from a silver hook by the door at the far side of the room.

The key was changing shape with a rapidity that even I found difficult to follow. As it morphed through billions of shapes per second, I guessed that it was changing in sequence with the lock into which it was about to be inserted. That would make manufacturing a second key impossible, and I surmised it would also make it impossible to pick the lock.

The key fitted smoothly into the lock, and the second cherub opened the door, which, like the previous one, moved smoothly and silently. However, the slowness with which it moved indicated its weight and density. The sergeant pulled me through the door, and two of his colleagues followed behind us.

We found ourselves in a mirror image of the earlier corridor. Blank walls, floor, and ceiling bounced our footsteps back at us. We reached a farther door, and one of the cherubs rapped a series of knocks upon the door that was so fast and complex, it almost merged into one continuous sound. Nevertheless, part of my brain had memorized the sound, and I knew that I could reproduce it with such accuracy that I could even mimic the tone caused by the shape of the cherub's knuckles as they rapped against the door. Doubtless, though, this would be of little value to me. I had no doubt that the code used for this access would be instantly changed and never used again.

After a moment, there came an answering series of raps, and then the sergeant responded with another code. After a moment, the heavy door started to open. Immediately, my amazingly sensitive ears could hear distant and faint shouts of rage and screams of frustration, curses and cries, as the beings chained below gave vent to their anger.

We travelled along further corridors. Eventually as the door was opened at the end of one of them I was greeted by a cacophony of noise. I was bundled forward. Despite the gloom, I could see a number of large chambers placed at regular intervals off this new corridor, separated from the corridor by thick bars of adamant. As we continued forward, the hundreds of eyes on the cherubic guards who stood outside each cell watched me carefully as part of their surveillance of all that went on around them.

As I was hustled past cell after cell, I was greeted with curses and cries of hatred from the prisoners within. Occasionally, I was recognized, and the insults became personal. I might as well have been back in Hell; I could certainly feel the hatred and despair that were so familiar there.

Many of the cells had multiple inhabitants, some single occupants. I was struck by the power and strength of those imprisoned here. I knew that the Great Enemy had imprisoned most of the strongest rebels here. However, I had

forgotten how powerful they were. Suddenly, I was afraid of being placed in a cell with others. What horrors might await me here at the hands of those who should be my comrades?

To my relief, I was bundled into a single cell. My chain was clipped to a ring in the wall, and the barred gate of adamant was shut behind me.

My eyes adjusted to the gloom. Across the corridor, I could see a large and powerful angel standing up against the bars of his cell and watching me intently.

“Nemesis, what news of the worlds outside?” he called over.

I recognized Zeraphane. Once a marvelously talented being who had no equal as a poet, painter, and writer in the courts of our Great Enemy. Rumor had it, his talents were so prodigious that if he had turned his inventiveness to war, he would have been a great asset to Hell in our battle with the Enemy. He was about as powerful an angel as it was possible to be before crossing over the line to become an archangel.

I quickly updated him, describing the many battles and changes that had taken place since we had rebelled and fallen. His keen mind quickly absorbed what I was telling him, but his face was impassive as he assessed the implications of my tale.

Only when I reached the end, only when I told him what I had seen at Bethlehem, did his face register open shock. Urgently, he asked me to repeat what I had seen at the door of the stable. I retold exactly what I had seen before me: the fact that the second person of the Trinity had taken on human form, and that the fullness of the Great Enemy now resided in a baby’s frame.

For a long moment, he was silent.

Others in the cell next to him had overheard us, and a shocked silence gradually spread down the corridor as the news was passed from cell to cell. All those who were here found it almost impossible to comprehend.

Indeed, that the being who had created all worlds should become a creature of dust on one tiny planet was simply incomprehensible. However, I knew that if anyone could make sense of this, it would be Zeraphane.

Finally, he looked at me with a directness that was disconcerting. He spoke slowly and distinctly.

“Long ago, I lost hope here. I recognized that we had lost before we had begun. How could we have hoped to successfully rebel against the Great Enemy? Those of us who were the most powerful had been imprisoned here with ease by our Enemy, and those of you who still fought on in Hell had not the power to win. All of us together had not the power to win. But, suddenly, there is hope. I do not begin to understand what he is doing, but I know this: if he has become a man, he can be beaten. If he is tempted and falls, then our Enemy has lost.

He will have done wrong, he will have sinned, and then he will no longer have the right to call himself God. He will still have the power, but he will have lost his righteousness. And then, the rebellion becomes legitimate. Maybe, just maybe, we will someday get out of here.”

Chapter 6

An Unexpected Turn of Events

Long years passed. How I hated my confinement. How the forced inactivity and time to think made the internal battle that I lived with every day rage ever more deeply within me. Since the rebellion, I had swung violently from hating the Great Enemy with a passion to bitterly regretting my decision to rebel and to leave his service. I had never revealed my inner torment to anyone, but a thousand times a day, every day since the rebellion, I had suffered a bitter conflict within myself as I argued deep within me as to whether or not I had done the right thing.

My reasons for rebelling were simple. I deserved better. My talents were not recognized as they should have been. I should have been an officer. Why should others be recognized and not I? Once the idea had been planted, following a whispered conversation, it had taken root and grown. Further conversations in furtive meetings had increased my growing resentment. Promises of more and more glittering appointments in the new kingdom that was to come fueled my ambition and my ever-growing pride. I had confidence in our leader. Lucifer led the worship in Heaven. His talents and strength were legendary. He blazed with a brightness that outshone any seraph. He was one of only a handful of archangels, the very highest of all of the angelic beings. He seemed to know who was susceptible to his suggestions and his plans. These he favored with a secret smile, the promise of great things to come when he reigned and God was deposed.

Yet, even then, I knew that the rebellion was wrong. Before these ideas had taken root, I had been utterly happy and fulfilled. Part of me struggled with my growing pride and avarice; the deepest, best part of me had never wanted anything to do with this mutiny.

In the days leading up to the revolt I had wavered; but in the end, I had gone along with the tide of events. Once we had shown our hand, I was committed to the cause. For a short while, I had thrown myself headlong into rebellion. However, after we had been thrown out of Heaven, this terrible inner battle of regret and indecisiveness had erupted and never completely gone away. At times, I exulted in my status in Hell and my hatred of our Enemy. But there were many, many times when I could not believe what I had done, when I would have given anything to return to my original allegiance and to the happiness I had known then. However, I had taken that momentous step, and now there was no going back.

There was no hope, and, gradually, I sank into a growing apathy and listlessness. The routine never varied; the days merged into one another without change. There were no new additions to our number, and,

consequently, we had no news. The guards did not enlighten us as to what was going on outside. Occasionally, wild rumors swept our cells. Our hopes would be raised by stories of great victories by our armies, but nothing ever came of the rumors. The lasting effect was only our increased hopelessness and cynicism. Deep down, we all knew that if Hell had had the power to rescue us, the attempt would have been made long ago. We were on our own.

One day, my bitter thoughts were interrupted by the sound of marching feet. The marching steps grew closer and stopped outside my cell. With dull curiosity, I slowly looked up and shot a look of contempt at the group that silently gazed in at me.

The three cherubs stood there impassively. They were the same cherubs who had locked me in this cell long years before. I hated them and longed to fall upon them and tear them apart. My hatred made me forget any thoughts of self-preservation or even common sense.

The sergeant favored me with a long look of interest, and then he unlocked the cell.

The cacophony outside sank to a whisper. The inhabitants of every cell were dumbfounded: cells were never unlocked. Their wonderment turned to amazement as the sergeant marched boldly into the cell, grabbed me by the shoulder, and hauled me outside. Exactly as I had arrived years before, I was manhandled back down the corridor between the cells.

On every side, my fellow prisoners were now becoming crazed. Nobody had any idea what was happening. Had Judgment Day arrived? Was it a case of the last one in being the first to be judged? Were interrogations about to begin? But what would be the point of interrogations? Surely, the Great Enemy already knew more than we could ever tell.

Once again, I found myself amazed at the strength of my captor, and my hatred was now tempered by a growing uncertainty and fear. Suddenly, I missed my cell; in an instant, it had become in my mind a sanctuary, a place of safety. How I longed to go back there now, though just a few minutes ago, I would have given anything to escape it.

We passed through long, empty corridors and heavy, solid doors.

Eventually, we came again to the guardroom, and here, to my amazement, I found Gillwain and his squad of seraphs waiting for me.

Gillwain unfurled a scroll. It glowed and glittered with a brightness that hurt my eyes. I recognized that brightness and guessed with a sick certainty what message it must contain.

My spirits plummeted, for the brightness meant that that scroll had been in the presence of the Great Enemy himself. I reckoned that it was safe to assume that for me, Judgment Day had indeed come. The Great Enemy had passed

sentence on me for having had the audacity to try to harm his Son and had sent a party to carry out my execution.

Conflicting emotions whirled in a chaotic stream through my head. Part of me felt a cold, choking terror. I was created an eternal being. What form would death take for me? Would I be forever suffering the pains and anguish of death, without any hope of release? Another part of me was glad the waiting was over. Deep down, I had known that victory would never come for us. We had indeed lost before we even began. If I was the first to be punished, I could at least accept that my actions in trying to harm the Great Enemy's Son justified that. In fact, I almost felt a sense of pride at having incurred his special dis-favor. Surely, the warriors would sing of me in Hell. Yet, another part of me was overcome by a surging, raging hatred against the Enemy. He led me to this. It was his fault. Why had he not recognized me as I deserved?

Gillwain began to read. "Nemesis the seraph, by order of God Almighty, you are released. You will be escorted from this prison and then be free to go."

The room was silent. I felt stunned. Part of me felt a crazy desire to laugh out loud. Instead, I drew myself upright and cursed each of them roundly. Their faces hardened, but they took no steps to stop me. Eventually, I ran out of invective.

Still silent, Gillwain blindfolded me and led me, still chained, through long corridors and many doors and gates. Eventually, we stopped, and Gillwain removed my blindfold.

I stood blinking in the light. I had become accustomed to the gloom of the dungeon in which I had been kept. Ahead of me, I could see open spaces. We stood the far side of the last gate. As I stepped forward, my chains disappeared, and I was reminded that the Great Enemy was watching me. I cursed him. For the first time in many years, I formed wings upon my back, and, stepping lightly into the air, I floated upward.

I grinned briefly down at Gillwain and then soared away at high speed. In an instant, I found Gillwain and his team around me. I accelerated. They matched me. I accelerated fast and hard. I found that I could not shake them. Then, having made their point, they peeled away, and I was alone.

I reveled in the freedom that I experienced: freedom to move without restraint, freedom from the confines of my cell, freedom from the constant anxiety and fear that had been my relentless companions for so long.

My spirit rejoiced, but my mind was dumbfounded. In the long ages since the rebellion, no fallen angel had ever been released from Tartarus; nor had the possibility of release ever been discussed. So why was I free? Perhaps wiser heads than mine could decipher the reasons why, when I returned to Hell; but, first, I had to get there.

Tartarus was in a domain that was separate from other spiritual realms. To return to Hell, I would have to find a way back. However, I had no idea where to start.

In the normal physical universe, I could have arrowed out of the atmosphere and into space in the merest fraction of a second, but here I seemed to be bound to fly just a few thousand feet above ground; it took great effort to gain height. The landscape seemed to go on for tens of thousands of miles with very little change. I knew that I was not on a planet in the physical universe, as there was no curvature to this world.

A deep and profound silence cloaked this world. No wind blew across the undulating valleys and hills that patterned the landscape below me. Not even a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the millions of oak-like trees that grew in vast profusion as far as the eye could see.

I flew on steadily. I was in no hurry to return to Hell. No one there would be pleased to see me or glad of my return. In my absence, others would have fought and jockeyed for my position. I had no doubt that upon my return, I would have many vicious and difficult fights ahead of me to regain my former position. If I failed, my successor would delight in making my life a misery. However, I had nowhere else to go, so I flew on.

Beneath me, the land began to rise. The rounded hills and hidden valleys still dominated the landscape, but now the trees were changing to alpine species. Ahead of me, I could see snow-covered peaks; behind these and disappearing into the distance, I could see even higher mountains. Faintly in the far distance, a glittering ribbon revealed a waterfall that emptied a mighty river over a precipice thousands of feet high. The faint noise of the falling water was the only sound to disturb the profound silence that cloaked this world.

I flew on. I was so low now that I could see my shadow traveling across the white sparkling ground beneath me as snow-covered mountain peaks replaced the rounded hills and valleys. I climbed steadily. Far in the distance, I could see a ring of soaring snow-covered peaks that seemed the highest point in this domain.

It seemed harder and harder to fly upward, but I persevered and eventually came parallel with the tip of one of the giant peaks that formed the ring of mountains. I edged over the peak of the mountain, almost brushing the snow and rock, and lazily circled downward. The greenness of the great valley far below me indicated how far the valley floor was below these frozen peaks. A sapphire-blue lake twinkled up at me from the center of the valley.

A small island stood at the very center of the lake, and upon the island a green tor rose sharply upward. My eye was caught by a square tower built of gray and weathered stone, set at the very top of the tor. I circled slowly down toward the tower. This was the only building I had seen in this domain, other than the prison of Tartarus itself, and I guessed that the tower contained a portal that led away from here to other domains within the Great Enemy's creation.

Eventually, I alighted upon the green grass of the tor, at the base of the tower. I walked around the tower in a few dozen steps, examining it carefully as I went. The sound of my footsteps was the only noise to be heard in the midst of this deep and timeless silence. The island, the tor, and the tower seemed heavy with age, as if this place had been here for uncountable ages. On one side, a stout wooden door faced me. There seemed to be no movement of the air here, no birds or insects, yet the heavy wooden door was weathered and worn, as was the stone of the tower. I reached out to an iron handle in the shape of a ring that felt heavy in my hand. I turned it and pushed gently against the door. It swung open with a slight groan that indicated long lack of use. I guessed that Gillwain and his team had entered this world by another route. Something told me that I was the first traveler here in a long time.

I stood at the open door as my eyes rapidly adjusted to the gloom within. The square tower was neither wide nor long. I had just walked around it in a few dozen steps, but, standing at the open door, I could see ahead of me a long corridor that seemed to stretch for mile upon mile into the distance. There was no obvious source of light; nevertheless, a gentle glow suffused the corridor as it stretched away, seemingly to infinity.

I walked slowly into the corridor, hesitating momentarily as along both sides of the corridor, at regular intervals, stout wooden doors similar to the one I had just opened stood shut. I guessed that each door led to a different domain, a separate universe, perhaps, in the Great Enemy's all-encompassing creation. I tried the door to my left. It was locked to me. I tried the door to my right; it, too, was locked. I shrugged and walked boldly forward, guessing that, somehow, I would be told when I reached the right door.

I walked steadily forward for several hours. I passed many thousands of stout wooden doors. What wonders, what worlds, what universes stood on the other side of each door? As I walked, I felt smaller and smaller; I had not realized that the Great Enemy's creation was so vast. His power was brought home to me afresh.

Then, ahead of me on the left-hand side, I noticed that the gentle glow within the corridor was brighter and more pronounced around one particular door. The door itself was identical to the thousands of others I had passed, but I had no doubt that this was the one I was meant to take. I tried the handle, and it turned slowly. With a creak of protest, the door opened, and I stepped through. The door closed behind me, completely of its own accord.

I momentarily lost my sense of orientation as I found myself in the gray and featureless uniformity that made up the domain in which Hell was located. I turned around rapidly, but there was nothing behind me, no sign that a door had ever been there.

I unfurled my wings and set off in no particular direction. I was disoriented and had no idea which direction to take, but I was confident that I would eventually find my way back to Hell.

I had been flying for little over an earth hour when, far in the distance, I spied another flying figure. It came toward me, and I recognized one of our scouts. I flew steadily toward him. After a few moments, I saw him pull up sharply, scrutinize me, and dart off in another direction.

Well, at least I knew which way to go now. I turned in the direction he had taken, following him at a leisurely pace. My time of freedom was coming to an end, and I prepared myself for the rigors of Hell.

Chapter 7

A New Assignment

I continued flying in the direction the scout had taken. All too quickly, my keen eyes could discern in the far distance the rising battlements and towers of Hell. As I drew closer, I could make out more detail. A large force of warriors issued forth from the gate. Had I come back in the middle of an alert? Had our Great Enemy infiltrated forces this close to the very gates of Hell? I turned in midair and carefully scanned the vast gray spaces behind me; however, no movement disturbed the gray uniformity. Whatever the reason for this emergency, it was not the appearance of an attacking enemy army.

I could make out more details now. A full legion was present, deploying in a defensive arc ready to meet an attack. At its center, in full armor, stood the field marshal who had sent me on my mission years before. Flanking him on either side was a squad of cherubs.

With a start, I realized that I was the threat they were preparing to face. I had not expected a warm welcome, but neither had I anticipated that I would be treated as an outright enemy.

I drew closer, slowly came to a halt in midair, and hailed the field marshal.

“Greetings, Excellency. I have returned from my mission.”

For long moments, the field marshal did not speak. In fact, across the whole of the legion facing me, there was a distrustful silence that seemed an accusation in itself. His answer, when it came, was scathing.

“You failed, Nemesis. He is still alive. But, even worse, I am no longer sure of your loyalty. No one but a traitor and a turncoat would be released from Tartarus.”

So that was it. The excellent intelligence system that served Hell so well had learned that I had been imprisoned in Tartarus, and now that I had reappeared, they wondered if, perhaps, I had bought my release by switching sides. They obviously feared that if I gained access to Hell, I could use my well-honed skills to assassinate key leaders of our kingdom.

Given the twisted logic and paranoia that characterized the reasoning that went on in Hell this was an unsurprising conclusion. Part of me could even sympathize with their dilemma.

Another part of me wondered crazily if, somehow, they could have read my mind and been aware of the raging battle that surged so often within me, of

the times I did indeed wish to return to the Great Enemy. Yet all of us knew that return was surely impossible, and reason told me that they could not discern my thoughts, or they would have destroyed me long ago.

For a moment, I tried to construct a convincing lie that would account for my presence and could not easily be disproved. In a split second, I considered thousands of variants of stories based upon a successful escape, but none of them sounded plausible even to me. Eventually, I was left with the one alternative I hated but had no choice but to use: I told the truth.

“I do not know why I was released, but I have not betrayed you.”

Another long silence. The field marshal was considering my words and, I guessed, doing some calculations that measured my potential future worth against the risk that I was indeed a traitor. There would be no consideration of past successes; loyalty and gratitude did not exist in Hell.

Two factors were on my side. First, one of the commonly held beliefs in Hell was that it was impossible for us to change sides. No one from either side had attempted to defect since the great rebellion. We were constantly told by Lord Lucifer that the Great Enemy would not accept us if we tried to return to him, and all of us had accepted this. Second, if I had managed to change sides, the spiritual realm would have been full of this news. Our excellent intelligence system would have picked it up, and the field marshal would have known for certain that I was treacherous.

The field marshal was in a quandary. It was simply too risky to allow me back into Hell, but if he ordered my destruction, my services would be lost, and I would take many of his warriors down with me. He knew that this might be the very reason that the Great Enemy had released me: to invite him to destroy his own forces. A kingdom that fights itself cannot stand.

The field marshal’s words were slow and deliberate when he addressed me.

“Nemesis, I have a new mission for you. The child you tried so unsuccessfully to destroy is now a man. We have not stopped working toward his destruction, but now we are aiming higher. We seek our Great Enemy’s destruction through him. If we can cause this man to do wrong, to sin in just one small matter, the Trinity will have lost its claim to holiness. All of our efforts are concentrated on this one aim. Day and night, our best minds are working on plans against this man. Not for a moment do our tempters give him rest. Your new assignment is as a bodyguard to our forces assailing him. We hope that, one day, we can catch him exhausted or distracted, and then cause him to stumble. When such a moment comes, we want you to ensure that he receives no help in that time from any angelic being who might try to strengthen him or give him respite. Remember, we only need him to slip once, and the war is won. Now go.”

Ruefully, I recognized that the field marshal had cleverly thought out the perfect strategy for resolving his dilemma. First, I could do no damage in Hell

if I were banished far away from it. Second, I could indeed be useful by keeping help from the man for a few moments when he most needed it. For, a few moments might indeed be all the time we needed. Finally, I knew that I, too, would be watched to see if my actions revealed my true loyalties.

Without further comment, I turned and flew away, heading once again for the battleground on earth.

Inwardly, I raged against the Great Enemy. He had cleverly turned my own side against me. In releasing me, he had known exactly what he was doing, and now I was an outcast with no place to go back to.

Part of me considered just flying on, seeking some bolt-hole in some part of creation where I would serve no one but myself. However, such disobedience to the field marshal's orders would turn every hand against me. Eventually, I would be hunted down by one side or the other. No, I must obey these orders, humiliating and irksome as they were, and prove my loyalty. Part of me could not deny the logic of what the field marshal had said. The war could be won in a moment this way, and perhaps, just perhaps, I could be the one who would make it happen. Oh, I would be the hero then. Hell could not deny me after that. Best of all, I would be the one to bring the Great Enemy down. I exulted for a long time in these thoughts, savoring the idea of his humiliation. However, another part of me was staggered at the risk our Enemy was running. By doing this, he had given us a real opportunity to destroy his kingdom, to destroy his claims. What possible prize could be so important to him that he would run the risks that he was running? Could any human being resist the best tempters in Hell for day after day, year after year? We only needed one little slip. Surely, we must stand a good chance of winning now.

As before, I found a portal and entered the physical universe. This time I traveled more circumspectly. I traveled slowly, moving across the physical universe over several days. Always keeping a low profile, always keeping a close watch for enemy forces, I gradually moved toward planet earth.

This time I did not have the benefit of a briefing from Hell's intelligence, but I found the situation returned to what I would call normal. There did not seem to be the enemy activity around planet earth that I would have expected.

Taking no chances, I entered earth's atmosphere over the southern ice cap and dived rapidly toward the ice. From there, I kept close to the surface as I slowly moved nearer to my target. As far as I was aware, I was not spotted this time. Just after dawn, eight days after my dismissal from the gateway to Hell, I entered the Roman province of Galilee.

The last time I had come to earth, our senior commander for this province was a demon named Croncus, one of Hell's high flyers. This had become a fairly quiet sector, but it had once been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting between us and the Enemy. We anticipated that it would become important again in the future.

Silently, I alighted on the ground and concealed myself in the shadows of some low, flat-roofed buildings. I was totally invisible to physical eyes and, apparently, also invisible to the junior demon ambling along a few feet away.

It was the work of a moment to grab him by the throat, lift him off his feet, and hold him a few inches from my face.

“Where can I find Croncus?”

For a few seconds, pure fright prevented him from replying. The shock eventually gave way to recognition that I was one of his own. This in turn was replaced by the terror of being in the grip of such a powerful being. Loyalty and comradeship do not exist in Hell, and he well knew that I might torment or destroy him simply because I felt like it. Such practices were common in Hell.

“M-m-m-my I-I-I-lord, Croncus no longer reigns here. He has been replaced by Lord Draxen.”

Draxen was the second-most powerful being in Hell, junior only to Lucifer himself. The fact that he commanded here underscored how serious Hell viewed this situation. Clearly no effort would be spared to gain the victory. It was obvious that we would never get a better chance.

The pathetic worm I gripped by the throat hung limply, terrified that I would harm him if he incurred my displeasure in any way. He told me where to find Draxen and sobbed with gratitude when I flung him to the ground and stalked away.

I traveled slowly, rehearsing what I would say and considering what I might find. I had accepted my new circumstances and decided that I would serve to the best of my ability.

Eventually, I saw ahead of me a low hill, upon and around which there was a vast throng of fallen angels. As I approached, I identified more than fifty of the best regiments in Hell from the jaunty flags and pennants held aloft by a ring of standard-bearers, just below the crest of the hill. I knew that Draxen would be in the center of that ring, surrounded by his subordinate generals and aides.

As I approached four powerful demons leaped from the base of the hill and formed up in close escort around me. Their leader led me to a point halfway up the hill, below the ring of standard-bearers, and indicated that I should wait there until summoned. From the few words he used, I gathered that I was expected.

Draxen kept me waiting for hours as he debated at length with his subordinates. I used the time to critically examine my surroundings. There was an atmosphere almost of carnival about the hill. Clearly, morale had soared sky-high; there was a real sense in the air of approaching victory. Everybody sensed the underlying excitement of being at a turning point in the war. The consensus was that the Enemy had played his hand too far. In becoming a man, the Great Enemy's Son had swapped his aces and kings for a hand of twos and threes, and this

time he would be beaten. No one seemed quite sure about why he would do this, but such was the excitement that infected them that they gave little thought to what he intended or where it might lead.

Everybody seemed freer and more relaxed. The upbeat mood created by this unique occurrence was temporarily overriding the normal tendency for bullying and sadism that characterized relationships in Hell. I ruefully recognized that things would soon revert to normal. If we won, perhaps things would get even worse as everyone jockeyed for position in a victorious kingdom where everything was up for grabs.

An aide-de-camp eventually approached me, and, giving me a cursory bow, he indicated that I should follow him. Affronted by his lack of respect, I glared at him dangerously. He seemed completely unfazed by this, safe for the moment in Draxen's protection.

We walked between the standard-bearers and climbed the hill. A path opened for us as we approached Draxen. The last individuals moved aside, and we were just a few feet from Draxen himself.

I looked up at him through the gloom. Despite the brightness of the day, he was surrounded by a gloomy twilight as the light around him dimmed perceptibly, seeming to die in vitality and power as it approached him. He was a huge and dominating figure. His presence was terrifying. Everything about him spoke of danger. The very air crackled with the power that radiated from him. Only three archangels had fallen in the rebellion. One was Lucifer himself, another was Draxen, and the third remained in Hell. Lucifer was undoubtedly the stronger, and from the first, Draxen had professed his loyalty and served faithfully. Nevertheless, none of us were under any illusions. One day, there would be a showdown between the three of them. Draxen and one other were the only beings in Hell who came close to Lucifer in power.

Draxen surveyed me coldly, then, seeming to come to a sudden judgment, he spoke.

"Nemesis, I received a message from Lord Lucifer about you. He tells me you are either a traitor or an enigma. One day soon, you must tell me as much as you can about Tartarus. For the moment, you may be useful to me. Serve me well, and I shall reward you."

I was flattered but also fearful. Draxen had decided that I would be a useful ally in his unspoken struggle against Lucifer. However, friendship with Draxen meant inevitable enmity with Lucifer. So far, Hell had avoided civil war. Everyone was kept in place by the fear of reprisal. The ongoing war against our Great Enemy also bound us together, but, deep down, all of us sensed that our kingdom could slide into conflict. It was a kingdom founded on fear and self-interest, and these are never strong foundations for something that will last.

To my surprise, I recognized Croncus in the ring of subordinates that waited on Draxen. Croncus kept his features composed, but I could guess the bitterness

and rage that whirled within him. I would have thought that Draxen would have dismissed him from this sector as soon as he took over. Perhaps Draxen hoped to win him over to his cause also, but it seemed a high-risk strategy. I could imagine how Croncus must resent being replaced as the chief in this sector, how he must hope for an opportunity to prove that this was a mistake.

Draxen lifted an enormous arm and summoned another being who stood respectfully waiting to one side.

“Nemesis, you are to support Grob here as he seeks the destruction of our Enemy.”

I surveyed my new colleague with interest. Short and slight, Grob looked singularly unimpressive. However, I knew that he was the chief tempter in Hell and that he had been used with spectacular success to bring down many humans who had previously served our Enemy well. He was as successful in his field as I was in mine. It came as no surprise that he would be leading the attack on the man.

Draxen dismissed us from his presence, and, bowing, we stepped backward from him. Once we reached the ring of impassive standard-bearers we turned and walked side by side down the hill.

We must have made an interesting sight: Grob short and puny, while I was tall and broad. However, for this mission, Grob was the boss, and all around us knew it. Surprisingly, Grob made no mention of this; nor did he attempt to put me in my place. Instead, he just started to talk intelligently about the situation.

“His name is Jesus. He has just reached his thirtieth birthday. Unmarried, he works in his stepfather’s carpentry shop in the village of Nazareth. We were kept away from him by angelic warriors until his thirteenth birthday. Since then, we have been hitting him nonstop. So far, nothing. He has not cracked or wavered. We still don’t know what he is doing here or what he hopes to achieve. He is unquestionably the Son of God, but while we can see that, he appears as a normal human being to the rest of the human cattle who live here.”

“How can he be both God and man?”

“He was conceived by a miracle wrought by the third member of the Trinity. Joseph the carpenter married Mary, Jesus’s mother, despite my best efforts to persuade him to have her stoned. Nemesis, I have worked tirelessly on that family, but with little result. Both the father and mother receive significant protection from enemy forces; Jesus, much less so. It seems to be the Enemy’s intention that we should be given free access to him. Jesus is operating under every disadvantage, and he is not using his divinity to help him. He is fighting us as a man and ... so far, he is winning.”

These last five words were spoken ruefully, and I caught an insight into the frustration that Grob felt. He had been giving one human being his undivided attention for seventeen years and gotten nowhere. Usually humans would fall

to temptation within a few minutes, and Grob was our best. After a moment's reflection, Grob continued.

“There is a truce operating here between us and the Enemy. We are allowed free access to Jesus to tempt him and discourage him, but we may not try to kill him. If we try, then the agreement will be off, and he will be surrounded by so many of your old colleagues that we will never get near him again. So, don't try anything against him, Nemesis. You won't succeed, and you'll only ruin our chances to trip him up and thereby win the war. However, if ever he weakens, even for a moment, then I will shout for you, and you must keep help away from him—whatever it costs. The future of all universes, worlds, and domains will depend on what happens in that moment.”

Chapter 8

Water and Wilderness

Grob led me toward the Jordan River. When we reached the river, Grob alighted on the land and led me forward on foot. After a short while, we came upon a depressing scene at a gently shelving beach. A strong and muscular young man dressed in camel-hair garments and a leather belt was addressing a group of expectant listeners. He was bearded and had long curly brown hair. Despite his unkempt appearance and strange garments, his words were vibrant with power and authority.

He was telling the crowd that it was time to get right with God; to live their lives for God and not for themselves. Most important, he was telling the people that he was just the forerunner of someone infinitely more important. The Messiah was coming.

I thought ruefully that I knew all too well who that must be.

Grob surveyed the group.

“The weirdo in the strange clothing is named John. The populace call him John the Baptist, as that is what he does. He preaches repentance and changed lives, and when people are convinced of the need to turn to our Enemy, he baptizes them as a sign of their commitment to live differently. Unfortunately, he is having some real success. We are losing souls we thought safe, and this is only the warm-up act. The real problem is still waiting in the wings.”

I knew enough of the history of this region from previous intelligence briefings to understand that, from time to time, servants of our Enemy would appear to turn the people back to righteousness after years of faithful service to our cause.

I suggested to Grob that we should deal with John as we had dealt with other prophets in the past, tempting them into sin or inciting some human in authority to kill them.

Grob looked annoyed. “What do you think we’ve been doing while you were vacationing in Tartarus? This human maggot is as committed to our Enemy as any human I’ve come across in the past. He sins rarely and treats most temptations with contempt. I’m working on the second option, and I hope that—”

As Grob’s voice trailed off in midsentence, I knew the reason why. I felt it too. Suddenly, the spiritual power in the immediate area had started to rapidly

increase and was about to go way off the scale. I recognized the presence of our Enemy. In one sense, the Great Enemy's presence was everywhere. However, this was different. The Great Enemy was in the near vicinity and coming very slowly closer. The sensation made me want to squirm, to fly away, to remove myself from the holiness that I hated so much.

Just coming around a bend about half a mile away, I saw another young man come striding strongly toward the river. He was about thirty years of age, of middle height, of average build. His face was bearded; his hair short. He was neither particularly good-looking nor plain. He was just average. Nothing about him stood out. Yet from him pulsed out in waves of glory the presence of our Great Enemy. I recognized unmistakably the second person of the Trinity. This was the Great Enemy's Son in human form. He was shielding his glory. The human vermin could not see it at all; even spiritual beings were only allowed to see a fraction of the majesty that was his. If he allowed his glory to fully shine out, then nothing in this universe either physical or spiritual would be left alive.

He walked up to John. The crowd around John continued to chatter. They had no idea who this was. They failed to recognize their Creator.

I shared my surprise with Grob.

"Grob, I would have expected him to be taller, stronger, better-looking. He looks so ordinary."

Grob shot me a look of contempt, clearly unimpressed by my lack of understanding.

"If you had paid proper attention to your intelligence briefings, then you would be aware that it was foretold that there would be nothing about him that would be particularly attractive. He is giving himself no advantages. People will come to him because of what he is and what he says, or they won't come at all."

Jesus attached himself to the rear of a short line of people waiting to be baptized by John. Despite the fact that he was the Creator of all, he seemed to have no intention of claiming his position or standing on his dignity. I knew enough about Grob's work to know that this was a very bad sign. If Jesus had no self-importance and no concern for his reputation or image then we had already lost many of the points at which we could attack him.

The line ahead of Jesus slowly shortened until he was next in line to be baptized. As he walked down into the river, I saw recognition flash across John's face, followed by confusion.

As Jesus walked out to meet John in the river, John said loudly enough that those on the bank could hear, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "This is necessary to demonstrate that I am committed to fulfilling all that my Father requires of me."

So, John baptized him. Placing a strong arm around Jesus's shoulders, he lowered him into the river until he was fully submerged, then lifted him again to his feet. As Jesus emerged from the river, the sky suddenly split in two, and the two parts were rolled aside. Shining clear and bright in the gap created was part of the glittering outer wall of Heaven. Bright banners flew from the ramparts, and I could see soldiers from the Great Enemy's armies patrolling the wall. A shining bird flew from within the wall and descended toward Jesus, eventually alighting on his shoulder. Waves of spiritual power pulsed from the bird. Here was the third person of the Trinity.

At that moment, an awful and majestic voice spoke from Heaven. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

I turned to flee. I saw Grob doing the same. This was too much, the three persons of the Trinity all in close proximity. I covered my face with two wings to avoid being exposed to the awful glory that I expected to break out at any moment.

However, as I turned, I sensed rather than saw the heavens closing again. As I looked back at the scene in the river, I found that the shining bird had disappeared and that John and the crowd were standing stunned as Jesus started to walk back to the riverbank. I watched warily as he climbed up out of the river and picked up the robe that he had discarded when he stepped into the water. The crowd and John watched in silence as Jesus graced all of them with a smile and then turned away from the scene.

Jesus strode steadily away from the river; Grob and I followed. There was a determined set to his jaw, and resolution was written across his features. He did not slow his pace or deviate from his course; he walked steadily from the river toward the wilderness. He walked for hours. Around him the countryside became more and more rugged. Vegetation grew sparser. A few stunted bushes and the odd tuft of coarse grass was all that was able to exist out here. The landscape was stark: steep ravines, jutting rocks, and above it all, the merciless sun beating down without respite.

He walked steadily on into the wilderness until he reached an area that was particularly stark and devoid of all human life.

The area was crawling with our forces. Hundreds of demons sat on rocks or lounged around the area. As Grob and I approached, they sprang to attention, although most were busy shooting glances at Jesus.

Grob had them line up and then gave them instructions.

"Lord Lucifer has instructed us to break him. You are here because you are the best. All of you have worked for me in the past. All of you have a first-class reputation for tempting, destroying faith in our Great Enemy, ruining

mental well-being. We anticipate that he will voluntarily stay in this area for forty days, as part of his submission to the will of our Enemy. You've got thirty-nine days to get results. If he starts to waver and angelic forces attempt to support him, call for Nemesis here, and he will buy you a short amount of time to finish with him. But, remember, you must get him to fall in that moment. You won't have long once fighting has broken out with enemy forces. If you succeed in breaking him, you will be promoted to a better place in Hell, and you will be richly rewarded. If you fail, you will be given to the tormentors back in Hell for them to do their worst to you for forty years. Now, are there any questions before we begin?"

One demon braver than the rest eventually asked the obvious question: "If he is here for forty days, why do we only have thirty-nine days to work on him?"

Grob smiled chillingly. "We have something very special planned for day forty. But, remember, if we do get to day forty, you will be screaming in Hell on that very day—and on every day for the next forty years. So, get it right, and break him before then."

Grob clapped his hands, and, immediately, three or four demons began working on Jesus, while the rest got into small groups and started to plan. They discussed everything known about Jesus and considered every weakness common to the human race.

The next thirty-nine days passed slowly. Jesus was worked on relentlessly by Grob and his team. Jesus never wavered, never showed any weakness. He got almost no sleep during this time, and no food, although he was able to drink from a brackish stream. As the days progressed, the efforts of his tempters became more and more frenzied. The horror of what awaited them if they failed acted as a powerful spur to their work.

On day thirty-eight, an attempt at escape was made by one of Grob's team. Just after finishing his shift of tempting, he had walked a dozen steps away from Jesus and then darted at high speed away from the surface of the planet.

Grob merely nodded at me, and I formed wings and sped after the demon. I caught up with him in less than a second, close to the planet Neptune. Seeing that he could not outrun me, he dived fast and hard for the surface of the largest of Neptune's moons.

We closed rapidly with the moon, and a moment later, we started to encounter the faintest wisps of atmosphere that clung to this tiny world. A gossamer wisp of a cloud made of nitrogen drifted ahead of us, and my fleeing opponent darted through it, desperate to find the faintest scrap of cover. My senses were now locked onto my fast-moving target. With calm detachment, a part of my mind noted that the target was now firmly acquired and locked, and I could disintegrate him at any time with a shot of energy from one of my hands. Simultaneously, a separate part of my mind noted that the atmospheric

pressure on this tiny world was only 15 microbars and that the surface temperature was a mere -235 degrees Celsius.

I briefly considered ending this immediately by vaporizing the would-be escapee, but I knew that Grob—and, more importantly, Draxen—would want me to bring him back alive so that others could witness the torment that would befall him.

This moon was crisscrossed with deep ravines and crevices. The demon reached the surface and plunged into one of the deep ravines. Accelerating as fast as he was able to, he twisted and turned, heading along the narrowest part of the canyon.

As I followed him, I realized what he intended. He knew that I was faster than he was but also larger. He had chosen an escape route that twisted and turned and at points was exceedingly narrow. His smaller size allowed him to slip through more easily, and he hoped to compensate for my greater speed by finding an environment where he could rely on his maneuverability to give him an edge. I mentally congratulated him on his good sense but realized that he understood little about the abilities of a seraph. I could choose to cancel my mass entirely and simply fly through the solid rocks that jutted out from the sides of the ravine, or I could choose to shrink. I selected this option and shrank rapidly to a few inches across. From my perspective, I was now in a wide and roomy thoroughfare and saw my much-larger opponent desperately twisting and turning his body as he tried to slip past the jagged rocks that stuck out of both sides of this narrow and twisting crevice.

Suddenly, the ravine opened out and my opponent had a fraction of a second to gather his wits and look behind him. Initially, he failed to spot me, as I was now much smaller. Thinking that I was no longer behind him, he twisted his neck and looked upward to the night sky above. Desperately, he searched for me, and I saw elation pass across his features upon finding that I was not there. He thought that he had lost me. Then, some instinct made him look behind him again, and he saw my bullet-like ebony form barreling in on him.

Horror passed clear across his features, and, looking forward once again, he accelerated further, desperate to get away. Suddenly, far ahead of us, I detected that the canyon ended abruptly as a sheer cliff face. I reckoned that my opponent, with his duller senses, had not yet detected this. For a few fractions of a second, he continued to accelerate as he twisted and turned in the ravine. Then, suddenly, I detected an almost imperceptible stiffening of his body as his senses finally made out the cliff face he was closing in on at high speed. To his credit, he did not immediately pull out of the ravine. Instead, he continued to accelerate as before, trying with all his might to conceal from me the rapidly closing rock wall that lay ahead of us. Once again, he had underestimated my abilities and assumed that my senses were no better than his own. I guessed that he hoped I was still unaware of the danger that lay ahead of us in the permanent night of this twilight world and that I might crash into the cliff if he were able to pull up in time. Sure enough, my opponent suddenly soared upward, a mere hundred feet away from the cliff. I, who had

been expecting the move, had no problem following and once again shaved off some of the distance between us.

Realizing that I was still behind him, he changed tactics, and, still ascending, he accelerated to his utmost extent. Simultaneously, he canceled almost all of his mass so that the gravity of this small world would not drag him back. However, I still detected a slight turbulence among the thin gases that made up the atmosphere and realized that he was of such a lowly order of demon that he was unable to cancel his mass entirely.

By now, I was enjoying myself; this was proving to be an entertaining interlude. For this reason, I continued to close in on him at a leisurely pace, interested to see what trick he might pull next.

My opponent zoomed up through the thin atmosphere and again entered space. This time he headed straight for the giant blue-green world that filled three-quarters of the sky above us. As the gravity of Neptune began to pull upon him, I sensed him gain mass quickly as he sought to use the gravity of the giant gas planet to accelerate him further.

We entered the planet's atmosphere. I still continued to follow at a leisurely pace, gradually closing the distance between us. As we drew ever closer to the planet's surface, we entered a region of high winds. My opponent changed his shape, flattening himself out into a sail and rapidly reducing his mass. Immediately, he was caught by the 1,200-mile-per-hour winds that raged over this planet and whipped off in a horizontal direction. However, I was beginning to tire of the game and decided that it was time to draw things to a close. Consequently, I started to close in fast on my opponent. In apparent desperation, he changed his shape once more, this time into a large teardrop. Gaining mass, he dived hard and fast into the liquid hydrogen sea that circled much of the planet.

I followed. As he hit the sea, he changed his shape into a thin, undulating ribbon, and he simultaneously changed his color into the light blue of this hydrogen sea, trying to blend into the liquid. However, it was simplicity itself for my senses to detect him, and I drew parallel to him. Realizing that further flight was impossible, he changed back into his normal shape and drew forth a dark mace that flamed dully with short tongues of flame.

I smiled chillingly at him, amused at his courage in deciding to fight. However, it was time to return. Consequently, I formed a fine-meshed net of pure energy, which I threw unerringly over his head. The net, though now separated from me, was still under my command, and it immediately tightened closely around my opponent, pinning his limbs against him and making further resistance impossible. I scooped him up by one end of the net, and the merest fraction of a second later, I was landing next to Grob, back in the Judean wilderness.

Grob had wasted no time following this first attempt at flight, and I found a battalion of our crack troops surrounding the area. There would be no more escape attempts.

The whimpering, pleading escapee was handed over to a squad of troops from this security battalion and sent, along with a hurriedly composed report, back to Draxen's headquarters. I saw the sidelong glimpses of horror that the other tempters shot in the direction of their former colleague as he was carried off, screaming and begging, to the horrors that awaited him.

Grob snarled at them to continue work, and, despairingly, his minions returned to their duties. Watching them, I realized that they were now desperate. Fear was written on all of their faces. I doubted the wisdom of this policy of motivation by fear. I suspected that the tempting was now rapidly falling off in effectiveness. The tempters were so hurried and obsessed with fear that they no longer planned or thought out their approaches with any subtlety. They simply kept on at Jesus, hoping that he would finally stumble through sheer exhaustion. True, he was gaunt now, through lack of food and lack of sleep, but he still showed no signs of weakening. Despite the fact that he was divine he was not using these powers in this conflict. He seemed determined to resist by using his human strength. Amazingly, he was winning.

Day forty dawned with the crack of whips, as Grob's tempters were rounded up. This time there was no attempt at either escape or resistance. The demons could see that they were surrounded by warriors and knew that resistance was futile. They cursed and spat as manacles were put on their limbs, but they were dragged off to Hell with surprisingly little trouble. By the time the sun had cleared the horizon, Grob and I were left alone with Jesus.

"What now Grob? Your minions have done their best, and failed. What comes next?"

Grob made no reply but simply pointed toward the sun. I looked, and, there, sitting on the surface of the star, was Lucifer, reclining on the star as if in an armchair. He had obviously decided to advertise his arrival to all the spiritual forces in the area, although, doubtless, the human filth would be unaware of his presence.

Suddenly, he darted from the star toward the earth, with a speed that was disquieting even for me, one of the fastest of the denizens of Hell. As he flew toward the planet, he shrank so that he never appeared to be any larger, even though he was rapidly coming closer. By the time he reached Jesus, he was the size of a man.

As Jesus was the only human being present, Lucifer became visible. As he alighted on the ground, Grob and I fell to our knees and bowed our heads. After a suitable period, I raised my eyes and examined the scene before me.

Lucifer gave a mocking bow. "Greetings, my lord. I trust that my servants have proved entertaining."

Jesus merely looked at him appraisingly.

Lucifer wasted no time as he launched into his opening gambit.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.”

A clever opening shot, as he sought to raise doubts in Jesus about whether he truly was the Son of our Great Enemy, while simultaneously reminding him that he was all too human and, now, physically starving.

The answer came after a moment’s consideration.

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that shall come out of the mouth of God.’”

The faint smirk that was playing on Lucifer’s face was wiped clean in an instant. By showing that his focus was on his Father, Jesus had responded in the worst possible way, from Lucifer’s point of view. Once again, Jesus had chosen to fight as a man rather than use his divinity. Any of the human cattle could quote scripture, and Jesus had just demonstrated how effective it was.

The two opponents regarded each other appraisingly. Despite his exhaustion and starvation, Jesus seemed to be fully in control of himself. Lucifer was in an interesting position. He simply did not yet know what our Great Enemy was up to. Clearly, a major initiative was underway. The Creator had taken material form and become part of his creation. The Lord of all universes and domains had become a tiny creature made out of carbon on an insignificant world in an unspectacular galaxy. But why? What was he trying to achieve? He had voluntarily put himself in an impossibly risky position, becoming a frail creature open to temptation, who, if he should sin just once, would fatally undermine the godhead. What could be so important to warrant such a risk? Was it really possible that our Enemy valued the humans so much that he would risk all in the hope of freeing them?

Suddenly, Lucifer clapped his hands. The dust beneath Jesus’s feet immediately rose up and carried Jesus high into the air. Lucifer assumed the persona of an archangel, and, unfurling brilliantly shining wings, he rose smoothly to fly parallel to Jesus. Grob and I were unsure whether to follow, but Grob decided to chance it, and we flew a suitable distance behind the pair. They flew at high speed to Jerusalem. Jesus seemed to be quite unconcerned about this sudden and unexpected turn of events. His confidence in his Father was unnerving.

The pair alighted at the highest point on the roof of the temple at Jerusalem. The dust underneath Jesus’s feet gently deposited itself on the roof of the temple. I wondered if Jesus experienced any feelings of vertigo. The position was precarious, and the drop terrifying for a creature unused to flight. However, he gave no sign of it. Nor did he seem to feel any need to talk to Lucifer. He regarded him silently, waiting patiently for whatever would unfold.

Despite Lucifer having taken all of the initiative, I began to feel that it was actually Jesus who was in charge of the situation.

Lucifer pointed downward and spoke. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Clearly deciding to fight fire with fire, Lucifer also quoted scripture. He continued to hammer home his central point: prove to yourself and everybody else who you really are.

Jesus swayed slightly, and I guessed that his human nature must be feeling exposed in such a precarious situation. However, if Lucifer's sallies were making any progress, Jesus seemed to be dealing with his doubts remarkably well. When he spoke, he was calm and collected.

"It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Lucifer frowned. It was clear that he was making no progress, and he was going to lose a lot of credibility in Hell if he was seen to fail. He was probably beginning to regret having gotten personally involved.

Lucifer clapped his hands again, and the dust that had previously carried Jesus here reformed underneath Jesus's feet, once more carrying him into the air.

This time we set off east southeast and flew much farther. We eventually alighted on the highest mountain peak on this planet. At almost thirty thousand feet, the air was thin, and the temperature biting cold. Desolate snowy peaks soared in all directions, but from our vantage point, we looked down upon them all. Jesus began to shiver in the tremendous cold and gasp for air in the thin atmosphere, but he made no comment. His only reaction was to wrap his robes more tightly around him.

Lucifer clicked his fingers, and the horizon to the east suddenly became a giant screen that burst into life. On that screen miles wide and thousands of feet high, Lucifer showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He showed the countries, he showed their wealth, he showed the people.

When Lucifer spoke again, he was at his most inviting. "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me."

I could not help but admire Lucifer's nerve. He was in effect saying, "If the humans are so important to you, then you can have them, but I will be God."

For the first time, Jesus showed annoyance.

"Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Lucifer blanched. He hated to be called Satan. Plus, Jesus had given Lucifer a direct command, and much as he disliked it, he had no choice but to obey.

Grob and I were also quick to remove ourselves from the scene. I looked back over my shoulder as we flew away. Bright angels were descending from above to attend to Jesus.

It was clear that Jesus had won the first round in this fight. Lucifer had lost considerable face, and Jesus had made a powerful point by fighting throughout as a man rather than as God. I was relieved that Lucifer had disappeared from the scene, having flown away in a different direction. He would not be safe to be around for a considerable amount of time.

Grob and I flew back to Judea. I did not know how Jesus would return but guessed that, with the resources of all creation at his disposal, it would not be taxing.

When we returned, we would be debriefed at length by Hell's intelligence, and further conclusions would be drawn as to what our Enemy was doing here. The only bright spot about this whole debacle was that, with every encounter, we were learning a little bit more about our Enemy and his Son. It did not occur to me at the time that this was part of his purpose.

Chapter 9

The First Followers

Half an hour before dawn, I stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, actually a freshwater lake. The night was dark; there was no moon, and a thin covering of cloud high in the night sky effectively obscured the stars.

Out on the lake, fishermen toiled, pulling up nets. It was clear that they were tired and dispirited. Sound carries well over water at night, and even the human cattle, with their pathetic dull senses, could have heard the grumbling of the men in the two boats. Peering through the sides of their little vessels, I could see that they had no fish in the bottom of the boats. Little profit for them if that was all the gain for a night's fishing. I peered down into the lake. Strangely, although large numbers of fish were present, they seemed unusually savvy this night: the fish were keeping well clear of the net. I thought no more about it at the time, as less than two miles away, Jesus was walking toward the lake. Grob accompanied him, trying to persuade him that he should encourage his human appetites more. What was the point of becoming a man if he did not enjoy the things that humans enjoy? Where was the harm in living a life of experience where he tried for himself the things that enticed his creatures so much? Wouldn't he understand them much better if he experienced some of these things for himself? In response to all this, Jesus just smiled to himself and quietly sang a hymn of praise to our Enemy.

Two hours later, the lakeside was getting busier. Jesus had been spotted, and crowds of people were converging there: some with problems and sicknesses they wanted him to resolve; most, simply to hear him teach.

The fishermen on the lake had given up on a bad job. They had pulled their boats up out of the lake so that only their sterns still lay in the water. The fishermen themselves sat in a small circle on the shore, washing and mending their nets. They, too, were listening to the amazing teaching of this new rabbi.

More and more people kept arriving, crowding around Jesus and jostling each other in their desire to get closer to him, to hear more of what he had to say. Slowly and imperceptibly, he stepped backward, ever closer to the water, as the crowd edged forward. It was clear also that those at the back of the crowd were having problems hearing him on account of the noise made by those in front of them.

Eventually, Jesus held up his hands and motioned for the crowd to wait for a moment. He then turned and walked over to the group of seated fishermen. Jesus talked to the burly and bearded fisherman who seemed to be the natural leader of the small group.

“How about lending me your boat so that I can address this crowd without ending up with wet feet?”

The burly fisherman, who was named Simon, grinned and said, “Sure. Can you pay?”

Jesus smiled back and replied, “Sorry. I don’t have a penny to my name.”

Simon grinned more broadly and said. “Sounds like you could be a fisherman too. Don’t worry about the money; you can borrow the boat. We’ll even row you out.”

Simon motioned to his friends, and they walked over to one of the boats. Together, with Jesus, they manhandled it into the water. Simon jumped in and reached over to lend a hand to Jesus. Jesus grasped his hand and nimbly climbed up over the prow. Simon and his friends positioned themselves around the open boat, and, unshipping their oars, they rowed out about fifty feet across the lake.

The individuals within the crowd now had a fairer chance of hearing Jesus as they spread out along the water’s edge. For the next two hours, Jesus taught them. The crowd listened, enraptured. Eventually, Jesus concluded, and the crowd began to drift away.

Jesus then did something that seemed to surprise Simon and his friends as much as it did Grob and me.

Turning to Simon, Jesus said, “Push out into deep water, and let your nets down for a catch.”

Simon jerked his head around in surprise. “I guess that you’re not a fisherman after all. I thought everyone knew that you catch fish at night, not in the middle of the morning. Besides, Rabbi, we were fishing all last night and caught nothing.” Simon held Jesus’s gaze for a moment, then, more slowly and softly, he said, “But because you say so, I’m going to let down the nets.” Simon seemed almost as surprised as his colleagues were by what he had just said. Nevertheless, they rowed out farther across the lake and let down their nets.

I rose about two hundred feet into the air in order to get a better view. What I saw amazed me. Every fish in the lake was swimming at maximum speed toward the lowering nets. As they reached the nets, they swam straight into them, jostling each other in their desperation to enter. Within a few seconds, the fishermen could feel the unbelievable weight of the catch. Calling quickly to their friends who remained on the shore, they shouted to them to launch the other boat and come and join them in lowering their nets. Within minutes, their friends were lowering the nets from the other boat, and the fish in the lake were desperately trying to enter that net also. Soon, both boats were starting to sink from the sheer weight of fish, and the fishermen struggled to raise the nets.

Simon suddenly secured the rope he was trying to haul in, and, falling on his knees in the boat, he fell down before Jesus and said, "Sir, I'm a sinful man. Please leave. I can't handle this holiness."

Jesus replied, "There's nothing to be afraid of. From now on, you will catch people into God's kingdom, not fish into your nets. Come and follow me."

With a great struggle, they managed to get the boats back to shore, and, abandoning the boats, their nets, and even the fish, they left that place and followed Jesus.

Three days later, Jesus announced that he had been invited to a wedding and that the invitation included any of his friends who wished to attend.

The new disciples were quick to agree to attend the celebrations, and, accordingly, the group set out for the small town of Cana. Grob and I dogged their heels. Along the journey, Grob worked hard to undermine the disciples' fledgling faith in Jesus. He stressed the folly of abandoning their livelihood in order to follow this rabbi. How much money had already been lost that could never be recouped? How were their families coping without them? If they stayed away too long, would their families even want them back?

It was early days, and the disciples were excited and expectant. Consequently, Grob made little progress. However, Grob was an experienced tempter, and he knew that better opportunities lay ahead.

The small group entered Cana early in the afternoon. Jesus hailed a passerby and asked for directions to his friend's wedding celebration. The passerby pointed up a narrow street, giving rapid instructions as to the way to go. Jesus and the disciples thanked him and then continued on their way

In a short while, the group reached the entrance to a courtyard. From within came the sounds of happy conversation and laughter. Jesus told the gatekeeper who he was, and the group was admitted inside. As Grob and I entered at the rear of the group, I saw a woman approaching Jesus. With a mild sense of shock, I recognized her as the woman who had stood at the doorway of the stable thirty years ago when I was trying my best to kill her and her child.

Jesus warmly greeted her. "Mother, I am glad to see you. Is everything well with you and the family?"

"We have all missed you, Son. I am glad that you could come today. Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

Jesus introduced the disciples one by one. I found the whole experience nauseating, but Grob was all attention, listening carefully and storing away every word for possible use later.

Mary then introduced Jesus and his group to the master of the banquet, a friend of the families of both the bride and groom. This man had been asked to be

master of ceremonies for the day. He warmly welcomed Jesus and the disciples and showed them to where they would sit. It was clear, from where Jesus and his group had been placed, that they were fairly low on the list of relative importance of those present. I caught Grob's eye, and we both grinned. An unintentional insult, no doubt, but, nevertheless pleasing for all that. This couple had invited God to their wedding and had put him in one of the least-important places available. Somehow, this summed up everything that we hoped to achieve with these humans.

Strangely, Jesus seemed quite unperturbed by where he had been placed and was soon chatting happily with those around him. It was clear that others thought him excellent company. He showed a genuine interest in them and was careful to include everyone in the conversation. Soon, the happiest sounds of laughter came from the corner of the courtyard where Jesus was.

The celebrations continued throughout the remainder of the day. The bride and groom and everyone else present were overwhelming in their insignificance. Their conversation was banal in the extreme, their lives meaningless, their thoughts barely above the moronic. What possible value did Jesus see in these creatures? How could he be so interested and happy in conversation with them? He who had called all things into existence, whose intelligence, if it could be measured, had been beyond any scale that could be devised by archangels, who had known all things, who had sat above eternity and viewed simultaneously all worlds, universes, and domains in all time frames past, present, and future—how could he bear to converse with these cretinous creatures of dust?

As the afternoon turned slowly into evening, I noticed a worried-looking servant approach the groom and a whispered conversation take place. As with everything else that day, the matter was banal. The party had run out of wine. I could guess at enough of this man's culture to surmise that this would be embarrassing for him and his new wife. They would always be remembered as the couple who ran out of wine at their wedding. However, to me, a being who had been instrumental in toppling empires, this was of no significance.

I watched the groom quietly slip away from the table to follow the servant out to where the wine was kept. Within a gloomy storeroom that was adjacent to the courtyard, two servants were upending the last of the wine jars, desperately trying to eke out a few more dregs of wine.

The servants asked if they should try to buy wine elsewhere.

The groom hesitated a while then ruefully shook his head. "No, I have no money to pay for it. These celebrations have taken all the money I possess."

The servants looked sympathetic and shrugged their shoulders. It was clear to them that there was no option but to tell the party that the wine had run out.

The groom turned and wearily headed back out to the courtyard. Worry was written clear across his face. He was about to start his married life with a situation that would embarrass not only his wife and himself but also both their families.

As he emerged into the courtyard, he was so preoccupied that he almost collided with Mary, Jesus's mother. She saw the concern that was written large across his features and asked him what was wrong. Embarrassed, but truthful, he confessed that he had not had the money to order a sufficient amount of wine and that the party had now run out. She squeezed his arm encouragingly and advised him to return to his seat and say nothing for the moment. He looked askance at her, but something about her manner seemed to convince him; he slowly nodded his head and went back to his seat.

Mary waited a moment and then skirted the outside of the party as she walked quietly over to where Jesus sat with his disciples and several new friends. Evening was drawing on now, and servants were beginning to light torches set into the wall of the courtyard at regular intervals. There was still light in the sky, but the sun was setting, and the evening was growing cooler. Doubtless, the party would be breaking up soon. Who would want to stay once they learned that the wine had run out?

Mary managed to catch Jesus's eye, and she beckoned him to come over to her to talk privately. He made brief apologies to the people he was talking to, and then he rose and walked over to his mother.

They stood a few yards from the nearest people, but Mary still spoke in a low voice, anxious to avoid any unnecessary embarrassment for their hosts. "They have run out of wine."

Jesus said nothing for a moment, just looked at her steadily. Then, he said, "Mother, why are you involving me in this? My time has not yet come."

Mary returned his gaze and said, "But you will help?"

Jesus nodded.

Mary then walked over to the chief servant, who was trying to placate a guest who had been asking for more food for some minutes. He seemed glad to be able to escape for a moment from the irate guest and talk to someone else. Mary pointed to Jesus and told the servant to do whatever her son told him and the other servants to do. I guessed at this point that Mary must have some connection to the bride and groom. She was certainly not just another guest, as the chief servant seemed to recognize her and seemed happy to obey her instructions.

Jesus walked over to the chief servant, and, putting an arm around the man's shoulders, he asked if he would show him what was in the storeroom. As they walked toward it across the courtyard, someone could be heard calling for wine. I saw the groom and his new bride exchange worried glances.

Grob and I both started to converge on Jesus and the chief servant from different points within the courtyard. Our duty was to stick with our target. If we were ever to obtain the smallest opportunity to trap him, we were going to be ready for it. However, I was mystified. Why was he bothering to get involved? What possible interest could he have in helping out some insignificant little creatures of dust on one of trillions of planets in just one of his universes? Surely, he was not actually going to do anything. What possible advantage could there be in it for him?

Jesus and the chief servant entered the storeroom, with Grob and me close upon their heels. I was sure that Jesus was fully aware of our presence, but he seemed content to allow us to accompany him.

The chief servant showed Jesus the stack of empty wine jars that had been used throughout the day. Jesus looked thoughtful and gazed searchingly around the storeroom. At one side of the room, six large stone jars stood untouched.

“What’s in those?” Jesus asked, indicating the six jars.

The chief servant replied, “Nothing. Normally, they would hold water. We use them for anyone wanting water to wash with. Each of those jars holds about thirty gallons. When all six jars are full, there’s about 180 gallons there.”

Jesus looked steadily at the chief servant and then said, “Please, would you and your colleagues first fill those large jars with fresh water, then fill your serving jars from one of those large water jars. I would then like you to go up to the top table and fill everyone’s wine cup, starting with the master of the banquet.”

The chief servant looked at him with wide eyes that rapidly narrowed as he frowned. “Look, there’s no need to unnecessarily embarrass the bride and groom. It’s bad enough that they’ve run out of wine; they’re going to be the butt of jokes and ridicule for years to come. Serving water is only going to make things worse. People will see it as an insult, and it will only serve to make things more embarrassing all around. It’s better if we just tell the master of the banquet that the wine has run out, and he can send everyone home. Let’s not make this thing worse than it needs to be.”

Jesus merely looked at him calmly and steadily. Something about his manner seemed to convince the chief servant. Perhaps, somewhere deep in his spirit, he distantly recognized the authority of the voice that had spoken to him. Whatever the reason, he shrugged his shoulders, and in a loud voice, called out for his fellow servants to join him. “Amos! Josiah! Baruch! Hosea! Get in here, and bring your serving jars with you.”

Within a few moments, the other servants had assembled in the storeroom and were listening incredulously as the chief servant outlined what they were to do. One or two seemed disposed to argue, but the chief servant was not

inviting discussion. Something about his tone of voice told them that it would be better if they just did as they were told.

The servants rapidly filled the six large water jars from a pool fed from a spring in an adjacent courtyard. Outside, they could hear more members of the party calling for wine, and the good humor of their requests was beginning to be edged with impatience. However, it takes time to collect 180 gallons. The servants were hot and tired when, sometime later, they had the six water-storage jars filled to the brim. Throughout the time taken to fill the jars, Grob worked relentlessly on Jesus, stressing just one theme: that he was deluded in thinking that he was different from any other man, and that he would embarrass himself, his hosts, and his family if he tried to help and proved himself to be nothing more than a madman.

The chief servant hesitated, shot an appraising look at Jesus, and told the servants to fill their serving jugs with water and then to go and take up positions ready to serve the top table. The servants looked at each other, exchanging glances, but no one argued. Each of them filled a serving jug with water and walked out of the storeroom. The chief servant followed them.

I checked out the six large storage jars. Each contained fresh water. I emerged from the storeroom and checked out the serving jars of each of the five servants as they approached the top table. Each jar contained water. It looked as if Jesus was about to make a king-size fool of himself.

The five servants took up position behind the top table. The chief servant stood behind the master of the banquet, and with only a slight tremor in his voice, asked if he wished for more wine.

“At last! I was beginning to think that we had run out of wine,” the master of the banquet joked.

A number of slightly embarrassed chuckles broke out across the courtyard, showing that most of the wedding guests had thought exactly the same.

The groom, who sat to one side of the master of the banquet, looked surprised. Confusion and embarrassment chased each other across his features. He knew that there was no more wine, so what was about to be served to the master of the banquet? He now regretted having listened to Mary, his relative. It would have been better to have come clean when he first found out that the wine had run out. He could have made a joke of it. Whatever might have happened would not have been as embarrassing as the next few minutes promised to be.

Jesus stood just outside the storeroom door. His arms crossed, he leaned back against the wall. He looked the picture of composure and peace. Grob worked on him without respite, trying to sow seeds of doubt and confusion. Every few moments, Grob darted about forty feet into the air in order to look across the courtyard to see what was in the contents of the chief servant’s serving jar. So far, it had stubbornly remained as water.

From my vantage point, I could see clearly into the chief servant's serving jar. He was holding it so that the master of the banquet could not see what was in it. He looked up and shot a final glance at Jesus, then, with a slightly trembling hand, he poured some of the contents of his jar into the wine cup that was before him.

The water within the tilting jar touched the lip of the pouring spout. The moment that it crossed from the spout into free air, it changed. No discernible process of change was observable, even to my brilliantly fine-tuned senses. One moment, the falling molecules were water; the next, they were wine. A steady stream of glistening wine poured from the jar into the cup. The wine shone with life and vigor, and across the courtyard, spread a most beautiful bouquet that perfumed the evening air.

The master of the banquet sniffed the wine approvingly and then sipped slowly. Delighted, he drank more deeply. He held his empty cup out to the chief servant and asked him to refill his cup. He then emptied the second cup. The chief servant nodded to his team, and they began to serve the other occupants of the top table. It was clear that everyone across the courtyard was itching to taste this new wine whose fragrance they could savor on the evening air.

The master of the banquet leaned across to his left and clapped the groom on the back. Both wonderment and admiration were in his voice when he spoke. "Look, lad, everyone else serves the best wine first, when people are still sober enough to appreciate it. You have saved the best wine until now, and this was well worth waiting for!" Holding his cup up again, he asked the chief servant for another cup.

Grob sidled over and spoke confidently, although the concern in his features belied what he said. "Okay, so he can do conjuring tricks. If this is as far as it goes, I don't think that we've got too much to worry about."

I said nothing, but my thoughts were a turmoil of conflicting emotions. I remembered afresh that I had once served this prince of Heaven and seen his constant kindness and care for others. Inside me, the usual battle that raged burned more furiously, as part of me recited my grievances against him. Simultaneously, another part of me marveled once again at the wonder of this prince of Heaven who had all power at his disposal, and yet cared so deeply for his creatures.

Chapter 10

The Disquiet Grows

It was mid-morning, and, as usual, crowds of needy people were mobbing around our man. How monotonously alike the human vermin could look at times. Dozens of dusty people, all clamoring for attention, all desperate to have their needs met. Despite their differences in age and gender, there seemed little to distinguish between them this day. How I despised these mortal creatures of carbon who had such limited abilities. They could not dart between galaxies or converse in thousands of languages, their intelligence barely registered on the angelic scale, and they could not even change their shape. Why did our Enemy place such value upon them?

However, despite their lack of abilities, there was one area in which they excelled: their sense of pride and self-importance was enormous. Given the slightest opportunity, they would immediately look down on others of their own kind. Today was no different. Most of the individuals in the crowd shot disgusted glances at a leper who stood about a hundred yards away. He was careful to approach no closer to the crowd, and if anyone who was not paying attention began to move in his direction, he was quick to ring a bell and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" When they heard this, many of those present would shout at him to keep away from normal people. Their faces clearly showed how much they despised this individual who was at the very bottom of the social scale. I was delighted to see this, just as Jesus was dismayed by and sorry for it. Nothing cuts individuals off from God more effectively than pride. Those looking down on someone else have no opportunity to look up and see the One who is above all.

The leper hovered at the prescribed distance, his enforced isolation meaning that, throughout the morning, he never exchanged a single word of conversation with anyone. He received plenty of abuse in that time. Once, a child threw stones at him, even though the man was being scrupulously careful to keep his distance from everyone else, just as the law of these people demanded. His leprosy killed off more than skin and nerves; it killed off all chances of receiving compassion or kindness, and even politeness, from others. In every sense, this man was a wretch cut off from the rest of humankind. Only another leper would ever be willing to be near him.

Around midday, the heat from the scorching overhead sun beating down was enough to deter those who simply had idle curiosity. Those with genuine needs had already received healing from Jesus. Would he never tire of helping these creatures? The leper waited until the last person petitioning Jesus had gone away, rejoicing, before he started to stumble forward at a slow pace. I could see that the leprosy had eaten away much of one foot and badly affected the other. I guessed that this pathetic stumbling was the best

this man could do. Surely, he was not going to try to come close to Jesus. He knew that this was against the rules of his people. Did he really think Jesus would stand here and wait for him to approach? Surely, Jesus would turn on his heel and walk away? Who would want this half-decayed human scarecrow anywhere near him?

To both my surprise and the leper's, Jesus made no move to walk away. On the contrary, he moved toward the man at a fast walk. The disciples started to mutter among themselves, and one even cried out a warning. Jesus paid them no heed. He just walked toward the man, nothing but compassion and concern on his face. The disciples stayed put. Clearly, they did not relish an encounter with this poor wretch.

As the leper approached, Jesus must have seen the dead flesh on his arms and legs. He could not fail to notice the missing fingers and badly deformed feet, showing that some of his body was already lost, past any help.

The man came to within three feet of Jesus and fell to his knees. Clasping his deformed hands together, he implored Jesus for help, crying out, "Lord, if you want to, you can make me clean."

The disciples stood transfixed, their faces frozen, their mouths open. Only the leper and Jesus had mobile faces: the leper's etched with misery, and Jesus's with compassion.

The disciples gasped as something even more outrageous happened. Jesus reached out and touched the leper's shoulder. His voice was warm and calm, the sound of his words speaking peace to the man. "I do want to. Be clean."

Instantaneously, certainly faster than my finely tuned senses could discern, the man's flesh transformed from deathly white to a healthy, glowing pink. Worse, his hands and feet were whole again: his fingers had miraculously returned to health and wellness, his feet were once again complete and strong.

The man looked down at his hands, clearly amazed. He clasped and unclasped them, moving his restored fingers before his wide-open, astonished eyes. Looking behind him, he reached back and fingered his feet, wriggling his toes in the dust. He then stroked his fingers over the pink, warm flesh of his arms. Looking up in openmouthed awe, he stammered his thanks.

Jesus kindly said to him, "In order to be accepted back into society, you need to get the all-clear from the authorities. Go and show yourself to the priest. Present the required offering so that he can testify that you are healed of your disease. Then, please don't talk about this all over town. Simply let your cleansed and obedient life, not your words, bear witness to what I have done."

A few days later, Jesus was teaching in a nearby village. The crowds had jumped in size over the past few days. Clearly, the leper had failed to keep quiet. Today, there were two hundred people present. Jesus had been invited

to teach in the largest house in the village. The house was a single story high, with a flat roof. The largest room could probably comfortably hold thirty-five people standing (if all the furniture had been removed). Today, all the furniture had been removed, and forty-eight people had crammed in to hear Jesus. He stood against one wall, with just a few feet of clearance in front of him, faced with a wall of tightly packed people. Outside the window and around the house, the remainder of the crowd milled, desperate to hear what this exciting young rabbi was teaching. Many among the crowd were Pharisees and religious teachers. They had come from every village and town around, even as far away as Jerusalem, to hear this young teacher. Predictably, they had managed to get the best places present, and all of them were among the people jammed into the room in which Jesus taught.

Grob was busy. For once, he left Jesus and the disciples alone, focusing his efforts instead on the religious leaders crammed into the room. His message was simple. They had studied for years to attain their positions as religious leaders. Who was this young upstart Jesus to attract such a following? Surely, if he were preaching the truth, he would have followed a conventional path of study just like they had. Clearly, he was suspect. All they had to do was to listen carefully, and they would spot the flaws. Once they had unmasked him, the crowds would surely follow them. ...

With nothing to do, I darted out of the room for a moment. I could not see that I would be needed in the next few seconds, and I had already told Grob that part of my job was to periodically check the environment for possible threats to our cause. In reality, I found the presence of Jesus disquieting at any time and much more so when he was teaching about his Father.

Outside, I encountered a strange sight. Four men were carrying a fifth man on a type of hammock. Each of the four able-bodied men held a corner of the hammock. All five men were young. I guessed that they were a group of friends. For some reason, the fifth man had thin and wasted limbs. It appeared that he was unable to voluntarily move anything below his shoulders. I wondered idly if he had suffered a broken neck and been paralyzed. If so, his friends had stuck by him for some time, because the thinness of his arms and legs indicated that he had been in this condition for months, maybe years.

This strange group repeatedly tried to get into the house. However, it was almost impossible even for an able-bodied man to shoulder his way through the crowd that was jammed around the doorway, all jostling forward in order to hear better. Four men carrying a stretcher between them had no chance. Seeing that they were making no progress, the group moved to the window of the room in which Jesus was teaching. Clearly, they had in mind to pass their friend in through the window, but, once again, they were frustrated. The crowd clustered around the window seemed in no mood for moving. Short of using physical force, the four men were not going to get any closer. In desperation, they tried to return to the doorway again. Once again, they were forced back.

I darted back through the wall of the house. I had been away minutes rather than nanoseconds, and Grob might be angry enough to report me to Draxen for dereliction of duty. However, he had warmed to his theme of raising resentment and suspicion in the religious leaders and gave me barely a glance when I made sure that I got within his line of sight. Satisfied that he would not notice at the moment if I were present or not, I drifted back out of the room through the nearest wall.

An altercation had just started between a large, thickset man standing at the back of the crowd by the doorway and the four men carrying their friend. In their attempts to worm their friend a way into the house, they had jostled the large man, who was now berating them fiercely. The four friends backed away, carefully shielding their friend both from the glaring sun and the glaring man. They retreated about thirty feet from the house and lowered their friend to the ground. They then stood in a row, regarding the house and the crowd, clearly perplexed about what to do next. Seemingly from long practice—as no discussion or instruction was given—they aligned themselves between their friend and the hot sun, so that their shadows would fall over him and protect him from the searing heat.

They debated about waiting until the end of the day and then trying to gain a meeting with Jesus once the crowds had thinned. However, one of them did not join in the conversation. He was regarding a set of stone stairs that ran up the outside of one wall of the house.

Suddenly, his face brightened, and, turning to his friends, he said, “We cannot get through the crowds. How about if we get through the roof?”

For a moment, his friends looked at him with open amazement and incredulity. Then, slow grins appeared on each of their faces as the outrageousness and brilliance of the idea hit home. My finely tuned ears easily picked up their conversation. They knew that the flat roof would be made of compacted dirt over wooden rafters. If they could find some tools, they could be through it in just a few minutes. They could always offer to repair the damage later. The important thing now was to get help for their friend. On the basis of the stories they had heard from Simeon’s uncle, who had told them about the miraculous healing of his cousin, a leper until meeting this rabbi Jesus, they were willing to gamble that their stunt might just be worthwhile.

They told their friend to cheer up, as they were going to get him to Jesus. After all, if he could heal a leper, why would he not be able to help him? The man on the stretcher grinned weakly up at them and quietly said that no one could cure him of what really ailed him.

The four friends exchanged glances, then they lifted the hammock on which their friend lay and carried it to the foot of the stone staircase that ran up one wall of the house in which Jesus taught. The staircase was only wide enough for one person to walk up, so it was with a great deal of difficulty that the four friends edged their burden up to the flat roof of the building.

Once they reached the top, they glanced around the village that lay about them, regarding it anew from this fresh angle. The sun beat down, and a fly buzzed dozily around them in the beating heat. Below them, they could hear the rise and fall of Jesus's voice as he taught the people. The roof muffled the sound, preventing them from making out distinct words. However, occasionally, bursts of laughter came up from the crowd below as this amazing teacher made a witty observation or remark on the world in which they lived.

One of the friends hurried down the stairs and returned a few moments later with some gardening tools that he had located nearby. I sank down through the roof to show Grob that I was attending to my duties, but he was engrossed in raising resentment in a fat elderly Pharisee listening to Jesus in rising irritation as his inherent resentment of the abilities of this dynamic young teacher was further inflamed by Grob's goading. Grinning, I slowly levitated back through the roof to watch the more interesting spectacle overhead. Clearly, Grob was too engrossed in his duties to be aware that I was not attending to mine.

The four friends set to work. Carefully, they started to dig through the dried, compacted earth until they reached the wooden planks beneath. So far, apart from some unusual noises from overhead, there was nothing to indicate to those below what was going on above them. However, once the thin and aged planks were exposed, the group began to break through them with force.

I sank again through the floor. Now there was pandemonium below as the crowd in the room realized that the roof was about to come in on them. A little while earlier, people had been fighting to get into the room, now they were fighting to get out. Initially, a stalemate ensued as those within pushed against those outside who were still trying to edge inward. However, the cries from within that the roof was collapsing eventually penetrated the collective consciousness of those outside, and then they rapidly fell back from the building. By the time the four friends had broken through, the room was largely empty, apart from Jesus, who stood gazing upward calmly, an amused and intrigued expression on his face. As people saw that the roof was not collapsing but that a hole had simply been made in it, they started to shoulder their way back into the room, anxious to see what would happen next.

When the hole was large enough, the four friends above lowered the paralyzed man with the aid of ropes that they had attached to each corner of the hammock. Carefully, they lowered him to the floor, although he ended up lying on a mound of earth and broken bits of plank from the roof his friends had just destroyed.

The owner of the house was irate; calling the four friends madmen and lunatics.

However, Jesus regarded the man on the hammock calmly. He then said the most surprising thing. "Friend, I forgive your sins."

The effect of this statement was profound. The man on the hammock jerked his head; such was the shock of the words upon him. Then, slowly, a profound look of peace stole across his features.

However, the religious leaders and Pharisees were scandalized by these words. Angry mutterings broke out at several points around the room as several of them complained that this was blasphemy, as no one could forgive sins save God alone.

It would have been impossible for any human being to be able to distinguish the words spoken, as the mutterings were low. Nevertheless, Jesus seemed aware of what they were thinking.

He went on to say, "Why all this whispering? Which is simpler: to say 'I forgive your sins' or to say 'Get up and start walking'? Well, just so it's clear, I'm authorized to do either or both. ..."

He then turned to the paraplegic and said, "Get up. Take your bedroll, and go home."

Without a moment's hesitation, the man on the hammock sat up, pulled his legs under him, and rose to his feet. Despite the thinness of his wasted arms and legs, there seemed no lack of strength in him. He punched the air and shouted in delight, then leaned over, rolled up the hammock, complete with the ropes attached by his friends, and left the room, thanking God and thanking Jesus.

The awestruck faces of his four friends peering down through the hole in the roof mirrored the awestruck expressions of most of those in the room. Everyone was amazed, and several people loudly proclaimed that they had never seen anything like this before.

Across the room, Grob was loudly cursing Jesus and loudly cursing our Enemy.

However, I had just had the most startling thought flash across my mind. For the briefest, tiniest moment, a question had flashed through my consciousness. I quickly buried the thought and outwardly joined Grob in his cursing and insults toward Jesus, but, inwardly, I was shaken by the thought that had occurred to me. I had wondered if it were possible that Jesus could forgive me as he had forgiven this man.

Chapter 11

Living Water

Grob was in a foul temper. It was at times like this that I despised him most. Despite his puny size and lack of strength, he had a raging temper that would have been appropriate for a giant. It was amusing to see this physically weak specimen shaking with the tremendous anger that boiled inside him. From time to time, I made sympathetic soothing noises, but only with the intention of annoying him further. It was one of my ways of reminding Grob that I was not his creature; rather, I was obeying orders to assist him at this time.

The cause of Grob's displeasure was the unraveling of one of his plans to trap Jesus. Grob had instructed his minions to get the Pharisees to record the number of people that John the Baptist and Jesus's disciples were baptizing. The Pharisees would then announce this in mocking tones on street corners. Despite the mocking tones, Grob's real aim was to create an atmosphere of competition between John and his disciples, and between Jesus and his followers. If all went according to plan, one party would be filled with pride, and the other with resentment. Both emotions would, of course, throttle the relationship they had with our Enemy, and they would then become ineffective.

Unfortunately for Grob, Jesus had realized pretty quickly what was afoot and responded by leaving the area. In effect, he was saying, "It's over to you, John." Now he and his few followers were many miles away, heading back toward Galilee.

We were currently passing through the territory of the Samaritans, about to enter a village called Sychar. Jesus's disciples were a little tense. From Hell's intelligence briefings, I knew that Samaritans and Jews did not get along. Jews tended to look down on Samaritans, and the Samaritans, who had this made clear to them in a thousand different ways, resented the fact bitterly.

It was getting close to noon, and the sun beat down out of the heavens, baking the small group that walked toward the village. The area seemed pretty quiet. Most of the pathetic human rabble were sheltered inside, away from the heat of the sun. Small eddies of dust gusted fitfully across the road, driven by a sporadic breeze that only seemed to add more heat to the day. Apart from this, there seemed to be no movement from the village.

One of the disciples suggested that Jesus go and sit down at a well that could be seen off to one side of the road, while he and the other disciples went ahead into the village to see if they could raise some life and, hopefully, buy some provisions.

Jesus thanked him, saying that he had wanted to visit the well, as it was an important landmark in these parts, having been dug many years ago by Jacob, one of the patriarchs of the Jewish race.

Grob decided to follow Jesus on this occasion, so we tagged along as he followed a path toward the well. Jesus was clearly tired, and once he reached the low wall surrounding the well, he sat down, relieved to take the weight off his feet.

I grinned at his weakness. What madness had prompted him to lay aside infinite energy and power to become a creature of flesh that could know such frailty? Grob darted in immediately, eager to sow doubts in his mind. If he were indeed the Son of God, how could he experience such frailty?

I left Grob to it and started to look around the dusty horizon. I saw the disciples knocking at a door in the village. From within, came a gruff voice demanding to know who it was and what they wanted. I listened to their reply, but my attention was caught by something that was happening at the other end of the village. Furtively, a door was being opened from within a small house, almost a shack, that lay toward the edge of this village. The gloom within the shack was a stark contrast to the blinding whiteness of the noonday light. Nevertheless, my senses had no problem detecting that peering out through the crack in the doorway could be discerned the face of a youngish woman approaching middle age. The wariness in her eyes and the care with which she had slowly opened the door spoke clearly about her desire to remain hidden, to avoid being seen. Carefully, the woman scanned the street through the tiny gap in her doorway. Seeing that no one else was present, she opened the door wider and took another look around. Then, leaning out of her doorway, she carefully scanned her surroundings for a final check. Finally, satisfied that she was indeed alone, she leaned back into the house, took up a large water jar, and walked rapidly out of the house, pulling the door closed behind her.

She scurried along a well-trodden pathway from the village toward the well where Jesus sat. Her behavior was unusual. Generally, the women in this part of the world collected their water early in the day, before the sun grew so hot that it would bake all the moisture out of their bodies while they physically toiled to draw the heavy water and then carry it back home. From the way that she had behaved earlier, clearly not wanting to be seen, and from the fact that she was collecting water at noon when she could be sure that no one else would be present, I guessed that this woman was an outcast in her own village.

As she approached the well, Jesus looked up at her and smiled. When she smiled warily in return, he said, "Please, would you give me a drink?"

The woman was taken aback. Perhaps she had grown used to being ostracized and ignored by everybody. Or, perhaps it was because she could tell that Jesus was a Jew by his attire, and Samaritans knew that Jews considered it beneath their dignity to converse with the despised Samaritans.

Her next words confirmed that it was indeed the latter explanation that accounted for her amazement.

“How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God, and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman looked puzzled. For the first time since I had first beheld her, there were signs that she was relaxing, losing, for the moment, the long-ingrained habit of being on the defensive, of waiting for the inevitable insult that would add a further scar to her heart, chip away one more fragment of her confidence and self-respect. She put down her water pot and looked quizzically at Jesus, her head to one side, and her hands on her hips.

“Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and the well is deep. So, how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it—he and his sons and their livestock—and passed it down to us?”

Jesus looked her in the eye, and, pointing down the well, he said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be a spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

Delight and expectation shone on the woman’s face. “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again.”

Jesus’s next words surprised both Grob and me, as they seemed to take the conversation off in a seemingly unrelated direction. However, the effect upon the woman was even more surprising.

“Go. Call your husband, and then come back.”

The woman blanched. The color drained from her face almost as quickly as her eyes widened. An almost imperceptible tremor passed through her fingers. For a moment, her face reflected the conflicting emotions that obviously battled within her. However, eventually, truthfulness won. Lowering her head, she said, “I have no husband.”

Jesus nodded almost imperceptibly, and he spoke gently. “That’s nicely put. You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t actually your husband. You have spoken the truth.”

The woman’s eyes widened again. She was quick to try to steer the conversation to a different subject.

“Oh, so you’re a prophet. Well, while we’re on the subject of religious matters, tell me this. Our ancestors worshipped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?”

The last word was spoken with venom, but Jesus only smiled at her, refusing to be drawn into any sort of conflict. “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there at Jerusalem. God’s way of salvation is coming though the Jews, and the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

Something deep within me squirmed. How uncomfortable it was to hear these words of truth. How they resonated deep within me, reminding me of what I had once known all too well, the delights, the ecstasy, of being abandoned to God in worship and truth.

The woman, however, had forgotten her anger of a moment before. With wonder, she replied, “I don’t know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming and that when he arrives we’ll get the whole story.”

“I am he,” Jesus said. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the disciples who had returned from the village, carrying food for their lunch. The woman took the opportunity to withdraw. Her face reflected the confusion and excitement that danced within her like moths around a new bright flame. In her emotion, she forgot her water pot and hurried back to the village.

As was often the case when people met Jesus, the encounter left her changed, different. Whereas a few minutes earlier, she was desperate to avoid being seen and preferred a life of isolation, now she ran up to the first door she came to and hammered urgently upon it. From beside the well, I watched as the door was opened by a thickset, short man with a grizzled short beard. He looked surprised to see who it was and rudely asked her what she was thinking, interrupting his midday rest. From farther within the house, came the angry exclamation of another woman, presumably his wife. “It’s *her*, the harlot. Close the door on her! What will our neighbors think?”

However, the woman from the well seemed unfazed by this hostile reception. In her excitement, she spoke so quickly that the words almost jumbled up against one another.

“Come and see a man who told me everything that I ever did, who knows me inside out. Could this be the Messiah?”

The man and his wife came out of the house and peered over toward the well. Other people were coming out of their houses, attracted by the commotion. Within minutes, the whole village was stirring as the noise and excitement increased. A sizable crowd gradually collected around the well, and, despite the midday heat, Jesus taught them about his Father in Heaven.

Chapter 12

One Problem Removed

Grob and I walked through the main entrance to the palace of King Herod, the puppet ruler of this part of the Roman Empire. We were invisible to the guards, all of whom were completely unaware of our presence. Grob lingered for a moment by one of the soldiers. Not only could the man not see us, but his senses were so dulled by the evil he himself had done that he could not sense the much greater darkness that stood next to him. I grinned widely, delighted to find such a competent disciple of Hell. Grob recognized the man and informed me that he had been present many years before at the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem, when Hell had sought to kill the child Jesus. We favored the man with smiles he could not see, and walked on, Grob had promised me an afternoon's entertainment, and, already, I had found something to cheer me.

We walked across a mosaic floor made of the finest marble. Rich tapestries hung on the wall even in this, an outer chamber, and servants hurried to and fro, anxious to do their king's bidding. I nodded approvingly. This was a king I could understand: Lord it over those who are your subjects, fleece them, and live in luxury. If any of them cross you, kill them. This king understood the principles on which real kingdoms were built, unlike this so-called Messiah, Jesus, who viewed himself as a servant of these human maggots. If love reduced you to that, I, for one, could well do without it.

Grob led me through the spacious building. He seemed content to follow the layout of the building, using corridors and doors rather than simply heading directly to where he wanted to go by passing through solid objects. We headed gradually lower, so that, eventually, we arrived at the stout door that led to the dungeons twenty feet below ground level.

Two guards stood outside the locked and bolted door. They looked bored, probably counting the hours until they got off duty. Through the stout door, faint sounds of sobbing could be heard.

Grob and I passed soundlessly through the door. As I regarded the gloomy corridor ahead of me, flanked by dark and stinking cells, memories of the time I had spent in Tartarus stirred within me. I grinned, rejoicing in the misery I knew the inhabitants of these cells felt.

In the cell to our immediate right, an old man sat hopelessly on the floor, sobbing aloud. I wondered how many months or years he had been there. Had his family starved in the meantime? Had they been sold into slavery? Had they already perished? Few of his features could be seen, but his

huddled frame cried aloud the misery and pain he felt. My grin widened. Grob had been right: this was an enjoyable afternoon.

A junior demon lounged halfway down the corridor. He, too, looked bored and listless. He was watching a group of a dozen tough, angelic warriors, who were guarding the occupant of the end cell on the left. However, when he noticed our arrival, he straightened immediately and then bowed low to Grob and me.

“My lord Grob, things are developing as I reported. The prisoner and that lot are behaving as normal.” He indicated the group of angelic soldiers at the end of the corridor.

I looked carefully but failed to recognize any of them. However, their bearing and weapons spoke of a very competent group indeed. Despite the fact that the group contained none of the higher angelic groups of seraphs or cherubs, I had a feeling that this lot would give a good account of themselves in a fight. Nevertheless, at present, both sides were under orders not to initiate hostilities. The truce held. Our Enemy seemed content to let us tempt his Son and his servants, as long as we made no physical attempt to harm them.

Who was the prisoner these angels were guarding? I stepped forward to better see who was in the far cell. Immediately, the group drew weapons and arranged themselves to meet any attack. I stood stock-still and watched, careful to make no moves that could be interpreted as hostile. I might be able to account for this group after what would be a tough fight, but, if I broke the truce, this place would be swarming with enemy forces within seconds. Besides, Draxen would have my hide.

In the cell was John the Baptist. He knelt in prayer, but the rigors of the last few months in this cell could clearly be seen. His clothes were torn and soiled. His beard and hair were matted with dirt, and what could be seen of his arms, legs, and face bore evidence of some very rough treatment, possibly torture. He seemed, however, to be at peace. If not for the evident serenity in his features, this would have added to the pleasure of the afternoon. I decided that it was time I knew what was going on. Grob seldom took time off from his duty of tempting Jesus; something important must be going down.

“Okay, Grob. So far, I have enjoyed our outing, but what happens next?”

“Come and see,” he replied. “Some of my subordinates are working out a plan I developed to remove one of the problems that have plagued us.”

Grob started to drift upward, passing through the ceiling of the corridor and onward through a storeroom, eventually, coming gently to a stop in a well-lit and airy chamber on the west side of the building. A gentle breeze wafted in, carrying the scent of flowers from the palace gardens. The room itself was also full of flowers and rich furniture. On a couch in the center of the room, two women sat, their heads close together as they talked in whispers despite being alone.

Both were strangely alike. They shared similar features, though one seemed to be in her thirties and the other a teenager. I guessed they were mother and daughter, or perhaps aunt and niece. They were similar also in that their faces both bore the stamp of cruelty and selfishness. This was much more pronounced on the face of the woman, but the young girl already bore evidence in her features of the choices she was making in her life. Both were dressed alluringly in provocative and skimpy costumes.

The woman spoke forcefully. "Salome, you are my daughter. You *will* do as I ask of you. You must ask the king for the head of John the Baptist as the reward for your dancing. Do not fail me in this, or you will regret it."

Her daughter pouted and replied haughtily, "I want gold, silver, and precious jewels from the king. Why should I squander my reward on helping you to settle old scores? Why do you hate that man anyway? Isn't it enough that he has been chained up in the dungeon here for months? No one can hear his preaching there. Just leave him to rot."

The face of the woman contorted in rage and fury as she remembered the offense that had so enraged her.

"He criticized *me* in public! *I*, Herodias, the queen of this land. No one does that. No one, I tell you. Anyone who crosses me regrets it. He must die, and he must be seen to fall to my vengeance so that others will take note and fear doing the same."

Salome seemed to be on the point of refusing.

Undeterred, her mother swiftly continued, "If you do this for me, I shall reward you. And I can be as generous as the king. Look, you remember that ruby and emerald necklace that you so admire. It is worth a king's ransom, and it will be yours if you do this for me. Fail me, Salome, and daughter or not, you will make me your enemy. But do this for me, and I will not forget your loyalty."

Reluctantly, Salome nodded.

Her mother smiled, as did both Grob and I.

"Right, Daughter. Return to the throne room immediately, and tell the king what you want. Remember, he said in front of all his nobles that he was so pleased with you, he would give you up to half his kingdom. Now speak up good and loud so that all can hear. Give him no room to wriggle out of his promise."

Salome rose and started to walk out of the room.

Grob darted past her, and I followed him. We quickly came to a sumptuously appointed room. The room was dominated at one end by a throne on a dais. A youngish man approaching middle age sat on the throne. He was turning to

fat, and his chubby jowls, multiple chins, and swiftly moving eyes all seemed to speak of weakness and indecisiveness. He seemed to be covering up his uncertainty by speaking quickly and loudly to the assembled nobles, who sat or lay around the room on low couches. It looked as if an afternoon of entertainment was taking place. A singer was just departing the room, and the king and the noblemen had all clearly been feasting and drinking. None of those present, save the entertainers and guards, were sober.

Grob, invisible and inaudible to all present, except me, sauntered contemptuously to a point just in front of the throne and offered a mocking bow.

“Nemesis, behold the great King Herod.” Grob placed mocking emphasis on the words *great* and *king*. He then turned to me. “This is a man who does not know his own mind. At one moment, he displays admirable qualities, such as cruelty, violence, avarice, and greed. At other times, he has an unfortunate tendency to want to listen to what that lunatic John in the dungeons has to say. Nevertheless, today, I hope to put an end to that weakness.”

I make it a rule to avoid questioning those who command me. It usually annoys them and detracts from the professional image I deliberately cultivate: namely, that I am a silent force of destruction. However, I had worked with Grob for some time now, and I still hoped to have a part in the destruction of the much bigger prize of Jesus, the Son of our Enemy. So, I decided to air the question that had been nagging in my mind for the last few minutes.

“Grob, what of the truce? I want to see John dead as much as you do, but, if you kill him, won’t the truce be broken? And then, you may lose your free access to tempt Jesus. Surely, bringing down the Christ is the main prize?”

Grob’s good humor vanished in an instant, replaced by a snarl of rage. For a moment, I thought he would fly at me, puny though he was; such was the blaze of his temper.

“Don’t question my plans, Nemesis. You are here to serve me, and don’t forget it. I’m the brains here; you’re just the brute force.”

With extreme effort, he controlled himself. Calmer, he then continued, “You forget that we are using human agents here. Our Enemy gives them free will to do either good or ill. He is always reluctant to interfere with their precious independence. He may allow them to move against John and even to take his life.”

I decided to rile Grob a little, to underscore the point that there was nothing he could do to me and that, besides, he could not afford to lose my services.

“In the past, we have incited humans to attack Jesus, and our Enemy has not allowed those attacks to succeed.”

Grob shot me a dangerous glance, but he did not explode into the further rage that I had expected. Rather, he seemed to give the question serious consideration.

“Jesus is different. Our Enemy is working on something there that we have not yet completely fathomed. However, we have been able to incite humans to kill prophets before without interference from the Enemy. It will be a salutary lesson for these human maggots to see a servant of the Enemy die. Besides, if there is any evidence of a move by our Enemy to rescue John, we will pull back.”

At that moment, Salome entered the throne room, greeted by a slightly mocking but good-natured cheer from the assembled noblemen, all of whom were at various stages of drunkenness.

Herod looked at her admiringly. Salome returned his gaze directly, even invitingly. I wondered if her mother, Herodias, realized what a dangerous rival her daughter had become to her own position and plans.

Herod leaned forward on his throne and spoke in an oily voice to the girl who stood provocatively before him.

“Well, Salome, your dancing delighted all of us. I promised you up to half my kingdom as a reward. Now, tell me what it is that you want.”

“I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Herod blanched and involuntarily gripped the arms of his throne as he sought to come to terms with what he had heard. He had been anticipating that the girl would want some trinket, or, perhaps, that she would join in his game of seduction by asking for time with him. Instead, she had presented him with a problem that could cost him his throne—and would help to cost him his soul.

Deep down, Herod knew that John was a true prophet. Despite our success with him, Herod still harbored some respect and fear for our Enemy. Killing John would mean throwing the gauntlet in God’s face. In addition, John was respected by the people. They might rebel. However, he had promised the stupid girl, in front of all his subordinate nobleman, that he would give her up to half his kingdom. How could he retract that promise now, or value John as worth more than half his kingdom, without losing their respect?

A growing silence took hold in the room as the noblemen wondered at the dastardly request of the girl. They themselves grappled with its implications. A few felt sorry for the king caught in this dilemma. Most were glad to see him so caught and thought him a fool for making such a promise to a gold-digging harlot.

After a few minutes’ silence, during which time Herod could be seen grappling with the problem, he glared with hatred at the girl and said, “Tell your mother her request is granted.”

He then turned to his chief minister and ordered that John be executed and that his head be brought on a platter to the girl.

Grob sighed in mock sympathy and said, "I think that little romance has received a setback. Now, let's see what is happening with John and whether the Great Enemy will move to save him."

Once again, Grob chose to amble along corridors and stairs rather than just dart down through the floor. We arrived at the door to the dungeons at the same time as Herod's chief minister, who had collected a squad of four soldiers on the way.

Before the door opened, my finely tuned senses saw clearly through to the spiritual beings within. A glittering messenger was just landing. I recognized him. One of Gabriel's fleet-winged messengers. So, our Great Enemy had decided what course to adopt, and orders were being issued. I reached out and pulled Grob behind me. If the angelic guard team around John were about to go on the rampage, then Grob's only hope was to have me buy him a few moments to make his escape while I fought the well-trained squad ahead of us.

Grob saw the sense of what I was doing and positioned himself to make a quick dash for it if necessary.

The messenger stayed just a moment, showed a written message to the squad commander, and then once more unfurled his broad gold and blue wings and soared away through the palace superstructure, into the blue expanse of the sky.

The door swung open, and the chief minister, the soldiers, Grob, and I entered the dark, dank corridor.

The angelic guard team now stood quietly around John. Was this a trap? Or, had they been ordered not to interfere? I was reluctant to form any weapons, for fear of initiating open combat.

The chief minister walked boldly down the corridor, quite unaware of the fact that his life hung by the merest thread. If our Enemy had given the command, then nothing and no one could rescue him from the fate that awaited him.

He entered the cell.

The angelic guard team did nothing.

The minister roughly told John that the king had ordered his execution and that he had come to carry it out.

The angelic guard team did nothing.

Two soldiers grabbed John by an arm each, which they pulled straight out behind him. A third pulled John's head forward by his hair, while the fourth drew his sword and positioned himself at one side.

The angelic guard team did nothing.

The soldier with the sword struck. John's head was severed clear off his body. It bounced on the floor and was retrieved by one of the soldiers.

The angelic guard team did nothing.

Grob emitted a soft sigh of relief and pleasure.

All of the members of the angelic team looked in our direction. Their expressions promised a future meeting, a future reckoning for today's events. At a sharply given command from their squad commander, they darted upward and away, returning to their unit.

Grob was well pleased with the day's events. "We have got his cousin, Nemesis. Now let's see how he deals with this."

With a cackle of demonic joy, he darted out of the dungeons, heading back toward his main target, Jesus.

I watched the blood seeping out of John's torso for a moment. As usual, the inner battle raged within me. Part of me was horrified at what we had just done, and I wondered what reckoning our Great Enemy would one day have with me for the events of this day. I had once again given him just cause to punish and destroy me. I ruefully reflected that now I was even more committed to my path of rebellion, though within I felt ever more wretched because of it.

Chapter 13

Fish, Bread, and Water

News about John's death spread fast. King Herod wished to bury the news as fast as John's body was buried. Queen Herodias, however, was anxious to make sure that her many enemies and opponents heard about John's fate and understood that he had fallen to her vengeance. It would be a brave individual who would dare to stand up to her now. However, even without the queen's help, the news would have traveled fast: the people held John to be a true prophet, and his murder by the royal house was a scandal that would set tongues wagging for weeks to come.

One of John's disciples told Jesus the news the day after John's death. Jesus looked tired and saddened by what he heard. This time he seemed to have no foreknowledge of the events that had occurred. However, with patience and gentleness, he continued to help the crowd of people who thronged around him.

Jesus now had twelve close companions—his disciples—chosen to accompany him on his travels and help him with his work. These struck me as a motley collection of losers and nobodies. Their names were Simon (whom Jesus had renamed Peter) James, John, Andrew, Phillip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, another James, Thaddeus, Simon (nicknamed the Zealot), and Judas Iscariot. All of these men were with him today.

As the day drew to a close, the last needy people went away after receiving help. Jesus called his disciples to follow him as he walked steadily out of town. He walked into the night, followed by his disciples.

Grob divided his time between Jesus and his disciples, seeking to sow seeds of doubt and fears for the future.

The group walked steadily into the night, eventually reaching the lakeside. This was a spot well known to Andrew and Peter.

Campfires blazed at several points, and the aroma of warm bread and cooking fish filled the air. Andrew hurried over to the largest fire, where he was cheerfully greeted by the fishermen. Andrew and Peter, James and John had often worked from this point, and many old friends were present. The fishermen rearranged themselves around the fire, making room for Jesus and the disciples. Overhead, the night sky glittered with bright twinkling stars. The air was still and chilly, and the sound of happy laughter and chatter carried far out over the lake. After a few hours, the men huddled down in their cloaks around the dying fires and slept.

A few hours later, the first gray streaks of dawn were painting the sky. Jesus was already awake. He walked around silently, thinking and praying. Gradually, his disciples and the fishermen began to stir. Soon, the whole group was awake, stretching and yawning around the still-glowing embers of the previous night's fires. Jesus asked if his group could borrow a boat to take them over the lake. The fishermen were quick to agree, as they had planned anyway to spend the day mending their nets. Within a few minutes, the disciples were pushing the smallest of the boats out into the lake. The air and the water were both still, and the noise of the boat moving into the lake sounded loud in the early morning. As there was no wind, the disciples shipped out the boat's oars and rowed strongly out from the shore.

After three and a half hours, the boat was approaching the far shore. The day was turning out fair, and the disciples had thoroughly enjoyed being back on the lake and handling a boat again. Judas was on the tiller, and Jesus and the disciples were rowing. It was Judas, therefore, who first spotted the small groups of people dotted at various points along the lakeside. His exclamation caused the other disciples to stop rowing and twist around in their seats to see what was happening.

Grob and I, hovering above the boat, could clearly see that, in fact, thousands of people were dotted in small groups around this side of the lake. The people helped by Jesus yesterday had guessed that he must have crossed the lake after leaving them, and they had walked through the night to find him again. Grob was silent, but I guessed that he was furious. People were being increasingly drawn to Jesus, and now they were willing to walk long distances, all through the night, in order to hear him. It only needed one more crucial step, and then there was a real danger that humankind might start to return to our Great Enemy in large numbers. The crucial step that we feared so much was that people might not just listen to Jesus but actually start doing what he said.

It was with a sense of shock that the disciples realized how many people were waiting for them. The boat had been spotted, and the groups were starting to converge at the point where the boat must land. A collective groan filled the boat as the disciples gave vent to their frustration at having lost their time of rest. However, Jesus's face was full of compassion. Did he never have a moment of weakness? Would he ever think of himself, just once? We only needed one instance of selfishness, and victory was ours—but that moment was forever elusive.

The boat grounded on the shore, and Jesus and the disciples pulled it up onto the narrow beach. Jesus strode away from the boat, and, walking to a grassy knoll a few hundred yards from the shore, he immediately began to teach the people about his Father in Heaven.

Grob started to work flat out as he darted from person to person, trying desperately to stop them from listening. If he could just cause their attention to drift for a few moments, they might miss hearing something that would break our hold over their lives. However, despite Grob's best efforts, he seemed to

be having little success this morning, as people were riveted by the message that Jesus was giving. Worse, more and more people were arriving every moment.

With nothing to do, I could not help but hear what Jesus said, despite my efforts to tune him out and think of other things. To my discomfort, I found that the words impacted me, just as they were clearly impacting the human maggots, now massing around Jesus in the thousands.

Jesus told them that his Father truly loved them and wanted to be their friend. He reminded them that the tyranny of self-interest was what caused almost all their unhappiness and hurt. He said that if they would just return to their Father in Heaven and let him fill their lives with freedom and love, they could find eternal life—true life here and now—and that this would continue forever, as they continued on a soaring ride of adventure with the most exciting personality that could be found anywhere.

I squirmed as part of me testified deep inside to the truth of what Jesus was saying. I had known God the Father as I had known Jesus the Son, and I knew from experience that life in their service was a glorious adventure with never a dull moment. I also remembered the happiness that I had known then, when I was not enslaved by the shackles of self-interest and self-importance, which now held me in their thrall.

It was with a sense of relief that I heard Jesus stop talking. Immediately, the crowd surged forward as individuals desperate for Jesus's help ran, stumbled, or hobbled toward him, anxious to win his attention and assistance. Somehow, these people seemed to have no fear that Jesus would rebuff them or that he would prove unable to help them. Faith was strong in their hearts, and, as always, they were not disappointed. Jesus was all too willing to help them. Many people did not even get to speak to him. In their desperation, they reached out to touch his clothing or to grab hold of him prior to addressing him. And such was the power of our Enemy that they were instantly healed of the problems that beset them. I saw the familiar and deeply depressing sight of blind people suddenly able to see, deaf people able to hear, tumors and heart disease vanishing in an instant. In short, whatever these people had wrong with them was simply put right instantaneously.

By midafternoon, the crowd peaked in numbers as the last people arrived at this side of the lake. There were 5,067 men present, plus women and children. Some individuals and small groups had drifted away, but most seemed rooted to the spot, mesmerized by what they were seeing and hearing. Many of those present had had the foresight to bring food with them, but most had not brought enough, and the day was now far advanced. There was no place close by where people could buy provisions, and now, at various points across the crowd, the sound of young children crying with hunger was interrupting the sound of happy and excited chatter that formed a constant background buzz.

By now, the last people requiring help had seen Jesus, and several of the disciples, taking advantage of the lull in people wanting to talk to Jesus, approached him.

“Master, you must send the people away, as there is no place here for them to buy bread.”

Jesus looked them steadily in the eye and said, “You, give them something to eat.”

The disciples looked shocked. A stunned silence followed.

Eventually, Phillip spoke, breaking the silence.

“To feed this multitude would take eight months’ wages. We don’t have that sort of money, and even if we did, there are no shops where we could buy provisions.”

Jesus simply smiled at him. Grob immediately scowled. Experience was reteaching him what he had once known all too well in Heaven. The Son of our Great Enemy was marvelously inventive and unpredictable. He was still the great Creator, and his creativeness made him a devastatingly dangerous opponent to our cause.

Off to one side, Andrew was kneeling down to talk quietly to a young boy. Standing, he took the boy by the hand and approached Jesus and the other disciples.

“Master, this young lad is willing to contribute his evening meal to feed this crowd, but all he has is five small loaves and two fish. I guess that it is a start, but it won’t go far with such a multitude.”

Jesus smiled broadly at the young lad. “Are you really willing to give me your food?”

“Yes, Rabbi.”

“Then, today, you are going to have a meal that you will remember all your life.”

Jesus took the small bread rolls and the two fish and broke some chunks off, which he gave to the small lad. The boy smiled back at Jesus and gave his thanks, but he was clearly puzzled, as Jesus had returned most of his meal to him, not kept it for others.

To my horror, and Grob’s also, we saw what none of the human cattle had yet spotted. As Jesus tore off part of a loaf or divided the fish, the missing section was immediately re-created and reappeared exactly as it had been before. No sooner had he divided the loaf than it was whole again. He divided a fish, and immediately it was re-created whole.

Jesus tore off more bread and fish and handed the pieces to the little boy. The boy was now amazed. He had now received back more than he had given Jesus in the first place, and Jesus still held the five loaves and two fish that he had originally given him.

A third time, Jesus gave the boy bread and fish. The boy now started to laugh in delight and amazement. At last, the disciples woke up to the fact that something amazing was happening. The boy laughed his thanks to Jesus and darted back into the crowd to find a space to sit down and eat his greatly increased meal.

Jesus asked the disciples to get the people to sit down in groups of about fifty. This took a while. Jesus then resumed tearing off more bread and fish. He handed it first to one disciple, then another, asking them to pass it out to the crowd. Jesus continued to hand out the fish and bread. The crowd ate, and the people were satisfied. When everyone had been fed, Jesus insisted that the disciples clean up. James and John returned to the boat and collected a number of baskets used for storing fish. The disciples went around each group, collecting fragments of fish and bread. By the time they had finished tidying up, they had collected twelve large baskets of scraps.

Having now had all their needs met, the crowd began to drift away, well fed, satisfied, and happy. Family groups formed small parties that strode off into the cooler air of the late afternoon, anxious to be able to return home or find lodgings before night fell. Their excited chatter carried in the still air as they recounted the day's amazing events. Ominously, more and more people were now talking about Jesus being a great prophet. Worse, we heard one individual speculate about whether he could be the promised Messiah.

Seeing that the end of the day was approaching, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him. He asked them to sail the boat over to the other side of the lake while he dismissed what remained of the crowd. The disciples looked puzzled. If they sailed the boat across the lake, how was Jesus to follow them?

"Master, how will you get across? It's a long, long journey to walk around the lake. What will you do, and where will you go?"

"I wish to talk to my Father this evening, here in these hills. Don't worry about me, I shall return to you at the right time."

The disciples knew, almost as well as Grob and I did, that Jesus spent many hours alone with his Father. They were still puzzled as to how he would rejoin them but evidently decided not to question him further.

Jesus stood, and in a loud voice, he blessed the people and wished them a peaceful and pleasant night.

All around us now, people were leaving. The cheerful voices of the disciples could be heard as they launched their boat out into the lake. The crowd good-

naturedly began to slowly make their way away from this accursed spot where Jesus had demonstrated, once again, both his love for these people and his power. For such a large crowd, they dispersed surprisingly quickly. The disciples, too, were making good progress out on the lake. There was no wind, so they could not use the sail, but they rowed steadily, and they handled the boat professionally.

Before long, Jesus was left alone, apart from Grob and me. Jesus took one last look, first at the crowd, then at the disciples, and then he turned and began climbing up the mountainside. He strode forward strongly, eager to commune with his Father.

Grob indicated that we should follow. With reluctance, I walked behind him. How I hated to be near Jesus when he prayed. How strong the presence of our Enemy became during those moments. How desperately painful it became to remain anywhere in the vicinity.

So, we climbed up the mountainside as late afternoon merged seamlessly and silently into early evening. As we climbed, it became cooler, and the first puffs of wind began to come off the lake. I walked alone, as Grob had gone on ahead so that he could whisper temptations and doubts to Jesus. As always, Jesus seemed unperturbed by Grob's continued assaults. His face was serene, excited even, as he anticipated time alone with his Father.

Eventually, we came to the spot that Jesus had chosen, and, after taking one last look out over the lake to ensure that the disciples were safe and another look down the mountainside to see in the distance the last stragglers from the crowd wending their way home, he knelt to pray.

Jesus continued to talk with his Father for hour after hour. For what seemed an eternity, we waited there. Every moment was a torture to us, as we felt again the presence of all three members of the Trinity communing with one another in infinite love and wisdom. I marveled as I remembered that, once, their presence was my highest joy. An effervescent spring of comfort, love, excitement that I and every other citizen of Heaven was utterly satisfied by but always wanted more of.

Eventually, Grob could stand it no longer, and, yelling curses, he darted away from the mountainside. He decided then to go and work on the disciples. In a nanosecond, we were circling the boat.

The wind was now gusting strongly against them. The disciples looked weary, and most of them were pretty damp from the spray dancing over the bow to spatter onto their backs. It was dark, and the disciples had still only reached the middle of the lake. Miles of hard rowing lay ahead of them.

Grob alighted in the boat next to Peter and began to cast doubts and resentment into his mind. He pointed out that Peter would at least have some profit from being out on the lake at this time if he were working for a living. He reminded Peter that he could have been paid good money for a lot less

hardship. Why serve this false Messiah, Jesus? After all, he was only a man like everybody else; these claims to be the Son of God were just megalomania.

Grob was getting into full flow and seemed to be gaining ground. Peter looked troubled. Grob noticed this and increased his efforts. He therefore chose to ignore me when I called him from twenty feet above the top of the mast. I called again, but Grob decided to make the point that he was in charge and could ignore me if he chose. I ceased calling and simply watched the spectacle unfolding on the other side of the lake.

Jesus had finished praying and had descended the mountainside. He walked across the shore and out onto the lake. However, he was not walking into the water but walking upon it.

I decided to leave Grob in ignorance. If he should report me to Draxen for dereliction of duty, I would point out that I had tried to inform him, but he could not be bothered to reply. The thought did not occur to me that so many of Hell's schemes failed because of such petty bickering and disputes among beings who always had half an eye on self-interest and, further, had a natural tendency to disputes and falling out.

Jesus came within a quarter of a mile of the boat about forty-seven minutes later. Grob was now working on Andrew, expounding a similar story to that which he had given to Peter, who now looked miserable and doubtful. Grob had his full attention on Andrew, who, at this stage, was proving to be more resistant to Grob's suggestions than his brother had been.

Therefore, it was as much a surprise to Grob as the rest of the disciples when Bartholomew gave a sort of half-choking scream that jerked everyone back to full attention from the semistupor that the disciples had sunk into as they continued to labor at the oars.

Bartholomew was pointing off to starboard at the striding figure who looked as if he were about to pass the boat by.

The disciples were quick to revert to the stories of their childhood, as several exclaimed in unison that they could see a ghost. Doubtless, wild thoughts of fisherman colleagues who had been lost in the lake passed through their minds.

Jesus heard the commotion in the boat, and he stopped in midstride. Turning toward the disciples, he called out, "Don't be afraid; it's me." He then turned and strode directly toward the boat.

Peter stood in the rocking vessel and called out, "Lord, if it is you, then bid me to come out to you on the water."

Grob groaned and put his head in his hands. The good work he had been doing on Peter was all gone in an instant and was more than undone. This

incident would lay the foundations for a significant increase in faith on the part of all the disciples.

Peter, with joy and wonder in his eyes, stumbled across the pitching boat until he reached the starboard side. Grasping the side of the boat in both hands, he swung one leg out over the water and stood on the top of a passing swell. The wave held his leg. He then swung the other leg over, dipping as he did so, as the swell of the wave passed beneath him, and he found himself standing in a trough. He stepped away from the boat.

The other disciples watched him, wide-eyed and openmouthed. This was beyond their experience, beyond their understanding. Peter walked away from the boat, toward Jesus, who continued to walk forward to meet him. In addition to joy and wonder, I could now read love and excitement written large across Peter's features. This day had grown steadily worse and now was turning positively sinister. Men displaying the sort of abilities that belonged rightly to spiritual beings turned creation on its head.

Peter strode forward boldly. He had an uneven gait, as the waves were passing at right angles to his path of progress. First one foot, then the other would rise as a wave passed beneath him; then one foot would fall, followed by the other, as the trough followed. Peter had been a professional fisherman and seemed to be largely untroubled by this. Perhaps he was used to the natural rhythm of the waves, or perhaps he was so caught up in the moment that nothing would have mattered. Regardless, he walked forward strongly, as if he had been doing this all his life.

With a snarl, Grob darted from the boat and was at Peter's side in a moment. Grob was desperate to nip this in the bud before any more damage was done. How could these disciples doubt after this?

"Look at the waves, idiot! You're walking on the water! Don't you realize that what you are doing is impossible?! You're just about to go to the bottom; you don't have a boat!"

Peter heard. His bold and steady gait vanished. He forgot that Jesus was striding toward him, now just a few yards away. He looked, instead, at the white-topped water flowing beneath his feet. He felt the wind in his face and tasted the salt in the air. Casting a wild look over his shoulder, he saw the boat now a few hundred yards away. Desperate, he reached a hand out toward it. His faith gone, he began to sink. Not as fast as a man normally does in water, but the water seemed to become less solid beneath him, and he slid through what had been a resistant surface a moment before.

As the water reached his waist, Peter cast his eyes back to Jesus and yelled, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus was now just a few feet away from him, and, bending forward, he caught hold of Peter's wildly waving hand. There was no sign of Jesus lifting Peter, but the moment he caught Peter's hand, either Peter's faith returned, or

Jesus's faith was enough for both of them. Peter stopped sinking, and he smoothly rose out of the water at the same speed as he had previously been sinking.

"Thank you, Lord," he said with a gasp.

Jesus smiled at him and gently chided, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Hand in hand, they walked to the boat. The disciples continued to stare openmouthed and wide-eyed at the pair of friends as they reached the side of the boat and climbed in.

Immediately, the wind dropped away to nothing. I drifted down to the surface of the lake. In the boat, the disciples were now openly acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God and worshipping him. It had taken them a while, but, despite Grob's efforts, they had become convinced of Jesus's identity.

Grob's face was thunderous, but he was silent. He seemed to be beyond words; such was his frustration and fury.

I, too, was beyond words, but for entirely different reasons. I remembered how, long ago, I had joined with countless others in worshipping the Son of God. I felt overcome with a piercing shaft of desire to once again return to those days. How I envied these disciples the opportunities that they had. How I wished to return, but, surely, that was impossible. Wasn't it?

Chapter 14

A Legion Defeated

We watched as the disciples, excited and animated, rowed to a beach on the lakeside, where they were able to pull their boat ashore. Jesus urged them to rest, and, obediently, the small group hunkered down around the boat. It was still dark, and before long, the physical exhaustion that lay upon their bodies caught up with them, and the group slept.

Grob decided to disturb their sleep. To introduce nightmares or night terrors to one or two of the disciples in order to exhaust them further. He was walking over to Simon when he was stopped in his tracks by my sharply shouted warning as I detected enemy forces rapidly closing in on us. Grob rapidly darted back to my side as Gillwain and his squad of seraphs landed upon the shore.

Gillwain gazed speculatively in our direction and then dispersed his team in a ring around the sleeping group. Three of the seraphs stood out on the lake; three were posted inland. Gillwain himself knelt before the sleeping Christ and worshipped him. Grob and I found ourselves shepherded outside the ring. No violence was offered, but I received the distinct impression that if we didn't voluntarily move backward and away from the sleeping figures, we would be forced back. Clearly, our Great Enemy had decided that, at least for tonight, his Son and the disciples would be allowed to sleep undisturbed.

Grob was vocal in his insults to Gillwain's team. He resented being kept away from his target and loudly proclaimed that they were only behaving this way because they knew their man was about to crack under the strain. No one present, including Grob, actually believed this, and no one bothered to answer him.

Jesus and the disciples slept until dawn. This was insufficient for their physical needs, but they were all men accustomed to rising at first light, and the dawn chorus acted as an effective wake-up call.

From outside the ring of watchful seraphs, Grob and I observed them rise.

Jesus and the disciples shared a scanty breakfast, then they left the boat and started to walk inland. Gillwain and his team remained, but Grob and I were allowed inside the ring. Grob took advantage of his restored access by hovering at the side of Jesus, trying to persuade him that he could still serve his Father and live a little as well. Why not do so? There was no harm in having land, possessions, servants, and a life of ease. There was plenty of time to serve his Father after he had ensured that his own needs were met.

As far as I could see, Grob was making no more progress than he usually did. Again, I experienced mixed emotions. Part of me wanted to see this Messiah come crashing down to our level. To see him weaken and fall. However, another part of me felt growing respect for this human who, though divine, never used his divinity to help himself. Quite the contrary. Instead, he always fought us as a man, but one who had never weakened yet, never faltered or wavered, never been anything but noble and selfless.

As my thoughts consumed me, I slowly fell behind the group. So, I was a little behind the others when, suddenly, my senses detected a dozen fast-moving targets closing in at high speed, coming up through the mantle of the earth. They were still a thousand miles beneath us, but they were traveling at a speed that would see them exit the earth's surface and shoot past the disciples at a distance of less than fifty feet in under a nanosecond.

Gillwain and his team all seemed to register the incoming threat at the same time as I did. As their reaction was similar to my own, I reckoned that none of us were sure which side the incoming force was on.

I shouted a warning to Grob, suggesting that he get out of harm's way; meanwhile, I would investigate what was closing in on us. As Grob darted up and away, I heard Gillwain shout orders to his team, which rapidly split into two groups. Two seraphs dived straight down, heading for the rapidly closing force, while the rest closed even tighter around Jesus and the disciples. Weapons and shining shields were rapidly appearing in their hands as they braced for the anticipated assault.

I shot through the crust of the earth, intending to investigate the incoming threat and cover Grob's withdrawal if the attack should prove hostile to our cause. Within the tiniest fraction of a second, I was closing in on the tightly knit group of twelve targets, at a speed that exceeded that of light. As I dived, I formed weapons and selected the first six targets that I planned to engage simultaneously. Below me, I could see that Gillwain's two team members also bore shining weapons.

However, I had barely traveled more than half a mile down when a sharply shouted threat from Gillwain gave me cause to reconsider my actions.

"Nemesis, stay where you are! If you follow my warriors any farther, we will engage you as an enemy combatant."

I was still unsure what was going on; however, the thought of being responsible for breaking the truce and thereby incurring Draxen's displeasure was an even greater threat than the prospect of facing Gillwain. Therefore, I slowed to a rapid halt, barely five miles below the surface, and watched events unfold below me.

The incoming group was now only eight hundred miles below the surface. My sense of perception identified the group closing in on us as belonging to one of Hell's best legions. The Thirteenth Legion was renowned for its offensive

spirit and skill in battle. It was a tough and tenacious unit that justly deserved its hard-won reputation as an elite fighting force. The squad that was closing in looked like a reconnaissance group from this legion, scouting for a larger battle force.

The leader of the group flew a few hundred yards ahead of his troop. I wondered if he intended to attack the group of humans that walked on the surface of the planet a few miles above us. If so, was the truce over? Was it possible for such an assault to succeed? What implications would this have? Would this spark all-out armed conflict with Heaven? Why had Grob and I not been briefed about this move?

While these thoughts were running at high speed through my mind, my senses detected further movement coming up through the center of the planet. Below me, in all its awful majesty, I saw the massed ranks of the elite legion moving forward in an inexorable and unstoppable stream. About six thousand heavily armored warriors poured forward in a disciplined surge that would be difficult to deflect or defeat.

I awaited the clash between Gillwain's two seraphs and the scouting group, which I gauged would occur within the next quarter of a nanosecond. That would be no contest: the scouting group would be history unless they veered away now. However, the clash between the rest of the Thirteenth Legion and those two seraphs might prove to be more of a contest.

However, when the scouting group reached a point about two hundred miles below the incoming seraphs, they jinked sharply to one side and headed for a point about three miles ahead of where Jesus and the disciples were heading. Below me, I could see the Thirteenth Legion alter course to follow its scouting group. The whole legion seemed to be converging on a single point just beyond a low range of hills that lay ahead of Jesus and his disciples.

Peering up toward a point just beyond the highest of the low and rounded hills, I could perceive beyond them the shambling figure of a human being. Into his tortured frame the whole legion was pouring and taking up a defensive stance. It was clear now what was happening. Jesus had proved to be entirely successful at delivering the human vermin from our clutches when they were oppressed by one demon or just a few of us, but how would he cope when presented by one of Hell's premier units fighting as a coordinated force? Obviously, someone had decided to put this to the test, although why Grob and I had not been briefed remained a mystery.

I was sure that Jesus was aware of what was happening in the spiritual realm, but he gave no sign of it to his disciples. He strode forward strongly, directly toward a gap in the low hills that lay ahead of them.

Gillwain had recalled his two seraphs and added them to the ring of defending warriors around the group of humans. I darted back to rejoin Grob, who had been bundled outside the defensive ring. Grob and I followed the disciples, though we were wary now, as it was clear that this was a potential flash point.

We realized that this area could become a battleground at any time. Would the Great Enemy match the deployment of the Thirteenth by bringing in one of his own legions? If so, would our side reinforce with more warriors, thereby raising the stakes? It was possible that this area could rapidly become the battlefield for all the armies of Heaven and Hell, and Grob and I would be right in the middle of it.

Twenty minutes later, Jesus and the disciples were more than halfway to reaching the gap in the hills. A winding road led upward from where they were to the gap. Along this road, headed toward them, walked the tortured figure of the man now possessed by more than six thousand demons. The disciples were aware of the shambling figure walking toward them in a jerky and spasmodic manner. Even their dull and myopic eyes could make out that from his arms and legs swung the tattered remains of the chains with which he had previously been bound. I guessed that this man had been possessed by our forces for some time; other humans had likely tried to chain him to limit the harm he could do while driven to desperate and evil acts by our forces. This had clearly accomplished nothing. With the superhuman strength of which he was capable while possessed, he had burst the chains and been impossible to subdue. If he could do that with just a few demons inhabiting him, what would he be capable of with the whole of the Thirteenth Legion now in residence?

I anticipated that seven seraphs should be more than a match for the legion facing them, although it was clear that any attempt by the seraphs to drive the Thirteenth Legion out of the man stumbling toward them was certain to result in the death of the human. The man's body was likely to be spattered over much of the planet during the ensuing battle.

I wondered if Jesus was thinking along these same lines, as I saw or heard no communication between them. But, suddenly, Gillwain jerked his head around, looking incredulously at his king, as if he had received a totally unexpected order. He signaled to his squad, and in an instant, they shot away rapidly, heading off the planet.

Jesus obviously intended to deal with this threat on his own. I could not deny that he never sheltered behind anybody else or shirked facing any danger.

For the briefest moment, a memory flashed through my mind. I remembered the day of the actual rebellion in Heaven. Lucifer, through careful planning, had managed to position many of his forces close to the center of Heaven, near to the very throne of our Enemy. Our orders were to storm the throne room, dispose of any defending forces, and kill or capture the Great Enemy himself. We would then proclaim Lucifer the new God as he assumed the throne. We reckoned that once the inhabitants of Heaven saw Lucifer enthroned, they would accept the fait accompli, regardless of how much they disliked it.

As I was a trusted member of the elite bodyguard that surrounded the very throne of the Great Enemy, I had a key role to play. In the first opening

moments of the rebellion, following Lucifer's signal, I was to open the doorway of the throne room to the wide plaza that lay to one side of it. My task was to then hold the open doorway against my former colleagues while other rebels rushed in.

As my treachery was not suspected, I was able to kill two of my comrades in the first moments. They were not expecting trouble and perished under my energy blasts. However, things went badly for us very quickly after that. The other members of my regiment had reacted more quickly and skillfully than expected, although I, of all beings, should have anticipated this. I was rapidly thrown back and out of the throne-room doorway. Despite my best efforts, I found myself fighting four of my comrades, and I was pushed backward, clear of the doorway and down the golden steps leading to the plaza. The door was slammed behind us, and I found myself fighting savagely for my survival. For a few moments, things looked like they might have still gone our way, as the rebels had thoroughly infiltrated the area, and tens of thousands of heavily armed beings suddenly poured into the vast plaza from all sides.

The wide plaza was crisscrossed by sparkling energy beams as mighty beings fought and perished while the lordship of eternity was contested. The odds tilted back against us as the archangel Michael, at the head of three elite regiments, suddenly appeared on one side of the plaza and fell upon the flank of our force.

For a while the battle surged back and forth across the plaza. How desperate we were to get into that throne room to be face-to-face with our Enemy. How bitterly we fought, and with what desperate efforts we strove to avoid being forced back.

The memory receded, and the here and now re-emerged. Once again, we had the opportunity we had fought so hard for long ago. Our Great Enemy's Son stood alone, facing one of our best units, and he had voluntarily dispensed with his bodyguard.

The demon-possessed man stumbled a few steps closer, then came to a complete halt. Jesus, followed by his disciples, walked firmly toward him. Jesus's face was marked by compassion; the disciples' faces, by fear. They could see the broken chains, the marks on the man's body where he had cut himself; they could also feel the demonic power now emanating from the man in waves.

Jesus stopped about six feet away from the man. He said nothing in either the spiritual or physical realms. He simply stood there. For a while, nothing was said or done by any of the players in this tableau. The scene could have been carved in stone. However, while nothing appeared to be happening in the physical realm, the spiritual realm was a frenzy of activity. The Thirteenth Legion was cracking. Troopers were throwing down their weapons and falling to their knees. Officers, desperate to restore order, were liberally using whips and even weapons to try to drive their subordinates back to duty. However, nothing was working. One of Hell's best legions was falling apart in front of my

eyes. When faced with our Great Enemy's Son, the demons that had won such a reputation as an elite fighting unit were simply giving up and falling down before him.

I ruefully reflected on the thoughts that had run through my mind a few moments before when I remembered the original rebellion. What madness it had been to even try to get into that throne room in Heaven. Our Great Enemy had no need to even defend himself. When facing him, the rebels were unable to continue.

Suddenly, from the rear of the man's head, a series of dark shapes seemed to detach and dart away. Grob and I exchanged a rueful glance. We had seen the commanding general of the Thirteenth and his senior officers fleeing the scene. They had completely lost control of their unit. The troopers would no longer obey them; they were no longer under their control. The last loyal warriors were now throwing down their weapons and falling either on their faces or to their knees.

The man, too, fell to his knees in an unconscious parody of what the beings possessing him were doing.

Shouting at the top of his voice, he said, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me."

The massed ranks of the Thirteenth Legion were speaking through the man, begging Jesus not to order that they be punished, not to send them back to the Abyss.

Jesus commanded them to identify themselves.

They did so, all the time pleading for mercy.

On a nearby hillside was a large herd of swine, feeding. The demons begged to be allowed to enter the swine. Jesus gave them permission, and, like a dark cloud, the legion lifted from the man and settled upon the herd of pigs. However, it did them little good. Maddened, the swine rushed down the hillside and into the lake, where they perished.

The man who had been possessed by our forces blinked, fully aware and alive for the first time in years. Jesus put an arm around his shoulders, and, together, they walked forward, heading into the town that lay a mile ahead of them.

The swineherds, who had seen the destruction of their pigs, ran on ahead into the town and spread the news. Consequently, when Jesus reached the edge of the town he was met by a deputation that asked him to go away. They looked in wonder at the man who had been demon possessed for years. They all knew that he could not be controlled, that he had often broken iron chains and wandered, naked and suffering, among the tombs outside the town. They saw him now in his right mind again and made whole, but this Jesus was a

threat to them. He could be expensive to have around if delivering people meant a loss of livestock. So, they asked Jesus to go away.

Grob and I grinned. The first bit of good news we had received that day.

Jesus was always a gentleman, and he received the decision with calmness and politeness. He and his disciples returned to the borrowed boat by the lakeside and prepared to sail away. The man who had been demon possessed now wore a newly received change of clothes. Nevertheless, there was little here for him save bad memories, so he asked if he might go with Jesus. Jesus smiled at him but told him, rather, to go home and tell everyone how much God had done for him.

I saw Grob grimace. This had been a bad day for Hell.

It was also a bad day for me. The bitter hatred I had nursed in my heart against our Great Enemy was being challenged. The more I saw of this Jesus, the more I respected him. I kept remembering afresh the God who I had once admired and loved, and I was finding that he had not changed. I tried desperately to quash these feelings, to deliberately remember my grievances against our Great Enemy, to destroy these green sprouts of admiration for this human being that were sprouting in the rocky hard ground of my innermost being. As I remembered my grievances, my anger flared again, and these unwelcome thoughts withered and died. However, deep down, I knew that things were changing within me. With a sick certainty, I knew these thoughts would be back, as they always were.

Perhaps it was seeing my colleagues throwing down their weapons; perhaps it was seeing the succession of miracles. Most disturbing of all, perhaps it was seeing the justice, the truth, the mercy, and the compassion that characterized everything that this man, this prince of Heaven, did. Exposure to him was changing me, further awakening a part of me that I had long striven to kill and bury. I shuddered at the thought and shut the whole issue from my mind. I was avoiding the issue for the moment, but I knew that my peace of mind would never be settled until this matter was resolved.

Chapter 15

A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman

Still dealing with the disquieting thoughts that kept intruding, unwanted, into my mind, I watched as Jesus and the disciples returned the borrowed boat. The fishermen were glad to see their boat back, but they seemed even more pleased to see old friends and new.

Grob took this opportunity to report back to Draxen. Knowing that Draxen would keep him waiting for a long time, he anticipated being away for a few hours. He left me with strict instructions that I should stay on watch and observe. Normally, I could take Grob or leave him. Friendship and companionship were foreign concepts to the denizens of Hell. However, this time, I regretted his departure. I needed Grob's familiar presence and hatred of the Great Enemy to counter these unwelcome thoughts within.

Even before the disciples pulled the boat ashore the news was traveling that Jesus had returned to this area. The news spread fast, one person telling another who then would hurry off to inform friends with sick relatives. Other people were informed along the way. Consequently, Jesus and the disciples had hardly been able to walk the width of the beach, after returning the boat, before a mob of people streamed in from all directions.

Prominent among the people trying to push to the front of the crowd was a short and slight man who, by the quality of his clothes, was someone of importance. However, what distinguished him this morning was that, even among a crowd of people who were all desperate, his desperation and determination shone through. Although he was shorter and lighter than many of those who were also trying to push forward to get to Jesus, he struggled through the jostling, pushing crowd, gradually moving steadily closer to the ring of people who were face-to-face with Jesus.

Eventually, he got to the front, and, squeezing through a small gap, he reached his goal. Having caught Jesus's attention, he fell to his knees and begged Jesus to come and heal his daughter, as she was dangerously ill—near death, even—and she needed his help. One or two others within the crowd, who were near enough to hear his plea above the hubbub of the mob, spoke up on his behalf. An elderly couple quickly informed Jesus that this man, Jairus, was president of their synagogue and had helped them in the past. This intervention clearly pleased Jesus, who put a hand on their shoulders, smiled at them, and healed both of them of the problems they had come with. He then informed them and Jairus that, of course, he would help the young girl.

Jairus led the way, pushing a path through the crowd. There were now 238 people crowding around Jesus. The group slowly moved along the road as Jairus and Jesus slowly edged forward. However, there was an eddying swirl around one edge of the circular crowd that milled around Jesus. From my vantage point, 163.256789 feet above the crowd, I could see an elderly woman trying to edge through the crowd. Most of the people she encountered had their backs to her. Despite her frailty, she pushed and wormed her way through them, gradually moving forward. Often, people would turn to object, but then, seeing that she was an old woman, they would just mutter angrily but allow her to pass.

As people edged aside for her, she was able to move forward through the crowd toward Jesus, despite the fact that she was physically weak and frail and could not compete with those who were stronger and willing to push and shove to get to Jesus. She was gradually getting closer, but Jesus had moved ahead of her; she was now approaching him from behind.

The woman was now just a few feet behind Jesus. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the elderly woman was closing the gap. She tentatively reached out a hand, stretching her trembling fingers toward him. Jesus had been touched by dozens of people as he walked along, but the moment the tips of the old woman's fingers brushed the back of his robes, he pulled up short and began to look around him. The elderly woman, too, had stopped. Standing stock-still, she had wrapped her arms around herself and was rocking to and fro, a blissful look upon her face.

Jesus asked in a surprised voice, "Who touched me?"

No one came forward.

The disciples looked askance at Jesus. Clearly, his question made no sense; they continued to look at each other.

Finally, Peter hesitantly said, "But, Master, we've got crowds of people on our hands. Dozens have touched you."

Jesus insisted, "Someone touched me. I felt power discharging from me."

The elderly woman now had burning cheeks. Clearly, she realized that she would soon be spotted, so, trembling, she came forward, knelt before him, and blurted out her story. She had suffered from an illness for twelve years; she had spent all her money on various doctors, but no one had been able to help her. But the moment that she touched Jesus's robe, her bleeding had stopped, and she knew, in that moment, that she had been healed.

In her excitement the woman talked and talked, telling and retelling her life story. Exactly 21.876259 minutes passed, and Jairus grew increasingly agitated and concerned. He couldn't stay still as the woman told her story. He paced around and around in a small circle, desperate for the woman to stop

talking and for Jesus to resume his journey to where Jairus's daughter lay at the point of death.

Eventually, the woman ceased speaking.

Jesus smiled at her, and, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, he said, "Daughter, you took a risk of faith, and now you're healed and whole. Live well; live blessed!"

The hubbub among the crowd increased, the mob clearly excited by this latest demonstration of power.

I was silent. Usually, upon witnessing one of Jesus's miracles, I would give vent to my frustration and anger, filling the spiritual environment with voluble invective and curses. Today, I was silent as conflicting thoughts whirled with ever-growing force through my being. Part of me hated Jesus, hated this woman, and hated this crowd of idiotic peasants. However, once again, a small part of me, deep within—a part of me I wished did not exist—felt growing admiration for this man Jesus.

From the direction in which Jairus was trying to lead Jesus, three men came hurrying forward, dejection and concern written large on their features. Seeing the multitude, they guessed that this was their destination, and they hurriedly started to push through the crowd and toward its center.

As Jairus was now near the front of the crowd, he quickly saw them, and as he registered their dejected features, his face turned ashen. He clearly knew them, but he gave them no greeting; instead, he stammered, "H-h-has she ... ? H-h-has she ... ?"

The three men stood facing him. None of them replied, but their downcast eyes and sorrowful demeanor answered Jairus's question eloquently enough.

Eventually, one of them lifted his eyes to look Jairus in the face. He gently said, "Your daughter is dead. There is no need to bother the Teacher anymore."

Jairus groaned, and he started to collapse as his legs gave way. Pity and horror were reflected in the faces of those around him who were close enough to have heard what the messenger had said.

However, Jesus was the only one to react helpfully. He reached out, caught Jairus, and then said something totally unexpected. "Don't be afraid. Simply believe."

For a moment, Jesus held Jairus up, then, as Jairus looked into Jesus's face, he seemed to recover both strength and composure, and, standing firm again, he once more led Jesus forward. People within the crowd busily whispered to each other the sad news that Jairus had received. Consequently, this time, as Jesus and Jairus and the disciples moved forward, the crowd made no move

to follow. Collectively, they seemed to realize that pressing as their problems were, this man had to bear a greater sorrow and deserved first claim on Jesus's time.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John strode steadily ahead, with Jairus leading the way. Jairus seemed to alternate his speed. For some distance, he would hurry forward, almost at a trot, only to then lapse to a slow walk as realization hit him afresh of what he had just lost. Jesus and his disciples compassionately matched their speed to Jairus's, keeping pace with him as he headed home.

As Jairus reached the outside of his house, he came to a shuddering halt. From within came the sound of professional mourners who were raising a loud lament. Clearly, someone had wasted no time in calling them in.

Jesus and the disciples were a few feet behind Jairus, and as they drew level, Jesus placed a hand on his shoulder.

Jairus swallowed, squared his shoulders, and walked into his house.

Invisible, I followed behind the last of the disciples.

Inside was pandemonium. Clearly, within the two or three hours since the child died, word had spread fast. The house was full of family friends and relatives. Above all the noise of their subdued conversations could be heard the wailing and laments of the professional team of mourners who had been hired for the mourning period.

Jairus eased a way through the crowd of people, all of whom wanted to talk to him, wishing to give their condolences and express their sympathy. Eventually, Jairus reached the entrance to a side room, in front of which a crowd of people milled. Jairus shouldered his way into the room, people finally moving aside when they realized it was he. As he went forward, he beckoned Jesus and the disciples to follow.

I drifted through the wall and gently levitated until I was floating horizontally, about six inches below the ceiling. The room was full of people, all facing a low couch that was pushed up against one wall. On the couch lay the body of a child about twelve years old. The paleness of her features and the absence of breathing testified to the fact that life had departed. My senses were far superior to the human parasites present, and I could detect what they could not. The heart was still and cooling, blood was beginning to pool in the lower regions of her body, and some of the most sensitive tissues in areas such as her brain had already started the process of decay.

Along the wall opposite the bed, six professional mourners raised a constant lament. Various relatives and family friends were jammed in between them and the bed. Alongside the bed itself, a middle-aged woman, whom I assumed to be the child's mother, knelt silently. Her tear-ravaged face bore testimony to the wild grief that had consumed her earlier. However, now she was silent, gently stroking the dead child's hand.

Jairus moved slowly forward until he was standing immediately behind his wife. He made no sound, but his shoulders shook as silent sobs racked his body. However, if he had cried aloud it was doubtful if he could have raised the volume level in the room, as the noise from the professional mourners, as well as from all the friends and relatives jammed into the room, was deafening.

Jesus had now edged forward through the doorway. It was clear that he was not impressed by the cacophony within. In a stern voice that cut through the chatter and wailing, he said, "Why all this busybody grief and gossip? The child isn't dead; she's sleeping."

Immediately, the veneer of grief and mourning shown by most of those present was stripped away. They responded with sarcasm and abuse. No thought was any longer given to Jairus or his wife, or even the dead child. They were only concerned with making fun of this new visitor and heaping abuse upon him.

Just a short while ago, I, too, would have filled the air with insults and mockery. However, I was becoming increasingly wary of this man, this prince of Heaven, who, here on earth as he once had done in Heaven, was demonstrating that he was innovative and all-powerful. He was dangerous because he refused to be tied down to a role or outlook, or even to the limitations of time and space. I wished even more strongly that Grob was present. I was uncertain whether to leave my post in order to recall him. Ultimately, I decided that, on balance, it was best to simply follow Grob's instructions to observe until he returned.

Jesus did not respond to their insults with insults of his own; he simply ordered them out of the room. As he spoke, the very air seemed to crackle with the authority that lay behind his words. Somehow, deep within themselves, those who had mocked him a moment before now recognized the authority he had. A quiet and subdued group filed out of the room.

Jesus was left with Peter, James, and John, and Jairus and his wife. Jairus and his wife looked at him, unsure as to what to make of this strange rabbi who had entered their home and their lives, and who was behaving so unexpectedly, so strangely.

Jesus walked over to the bed on which the child lay. He took one of the child's gray and cold hands in his own hands. He smiled down at her and said, "My little lamb, I tell you, get up."

I watched, shocked, as physical laws that had operated since the Creation sped into reverse. Blood that had already begun to pool in the bottom half of the child's body defied gravity and surged back to her heart, which began to beat as soon as there was sufficient fluid within it. Cells that had begun to die blossomed again with life. Color flooded again into the girl's cheeks, and her

chest rose as she took her first breath. Her eyes flickered open, and the first thing she saw was Jesus looking down at her.

Jairus and his wife cried out with joy and surged forward to take their daughter in their arms.

Jesus stepped back from the bed, and, signaling to his disciples, he started to withdraw. However, as he left, he called back to Jairus, saying, "Don't forget to give her some lunch, as she must be hungry."

Chapter 16

The Withered Hand

As a rule, I loathed the Sabbath: the day that worshippers of our Enemy honored him and spent a little more time thinking about him. Yes, we worked hard to undermine it, to submerge in tradition and formula any sincere attempt by individuals to draw near to our Enemy. However, despite our best efforts, far too many were affected for the good by time spent in our Great Enemy's presence. In far too many instances, the Sabbath drew individuals infinitesimally closer to the One who cared for them.

It therefore came as an unpleasant surprise when Grob announced that we would be spending part of the day in the synagogue. I refrained from arguing, but Grob saw the thunderous look on my face. He must have been in an upbeat mood, as, far from snarling at me to obey orders, he humored me and explained that he had set a trap for our man.

"We need to try to draw more of a wedge between Jesus and those who are outwardly religious but inwardly sympathetic to our ideals. I have planted the idea in the mind of a certain synagogue ruler to trap Jesus into acting in a way that will collide with their religious traditions."

This sounded intriguing, and it was with something close to anticipation that I arrived with Grob at the door of the synagogue that Jesus and his disciples were about to attend. In fact, I could see the small group of Jesus and his disciples walking steadily toward the synagogue a few hundred yards away.

Grob and I entered the small and peaceful building. Already, it was filling up. As soon as I entered the building, I felt uncomfortable. The presence of our Enemy was here, and I hated to be anywhere that was dedicated to him. However, Grob was busy receiving a report from a squat and ugly demon who had been whispering in the ear of the synagogue ruler as we arrived. Grob's smile widened as he listened. Finally, he dismissed the demon with a wave of his hand and took a good long look around the room.

I sauntered over toward him. The squat demon who had been talking to Grob scuttled backward away from me, clearly nervous in the presence of a seraph, even one who was on the same side as himself. Grob, however, seemed to be enjoying himself, which surprised me, given that we were in a building where our Enemy was worshipped, filling up now with people intent on doing the very thing which we hated. I followed his gaze and saw a small knot of Pharisees talking in hushed tones to the synagogue ruler.

"See those humans, Nemesis?" Grob said. "Well, all of them, at one stage, seriously sought to know our Enemy and to serve him well. Following a

strategy that I advised, we have worked on their lives until this point where our Enemy's Son will walk into this building in a few moments, and they won't even recognize him. Better yet, they will be working to trap and discredit him."

I said nothing, knowing that in this expansive mood, Grob was bound to continue.

"It was really very simple. We just had to convince them of their own importance. Gently dropping hints about how they were leaders of others, how exalted a position they each deserved, how much better they were than people who were not religious leaders. As they came to admire themselves more and more, they thought of our Enemy less and less. Now look over there."

Grob had swiveled around and was looking at a middle-aged woman who was imperiously gazing around the building.

"That's the synagogue ruler's wife. We have worked hard on her too, and what fertile soil we found in her life. Look at the pride in her gaze. She is so convinced of her importance and the importance of her husband and family. She is so sure of her superiority over everybody else here. If only we can foster this attitude in others, we can be sure of victory. When they are looking at themselves with satisfaction, you can be assured that they will never look to our Enemy."

Grob's gaze drifted slightly, and his smile slipped suddenly, replaced by a deep frown.

Once again, I followed his gaze and found myself looking at a short, thin woman who was approaching middle age. She looked tired and worn, and she had chosen a seat near the back of the building where she would not be noticed. Everything about her seemed to whisper of poverty, of lack of influence, of no importance. In short, a nonentity. I was puzzled at why Grob should be put out by someone who clearly was of no importance whatsoever and who could hardly be a threat to our plans.

Grob seemed to guess my thoughts and enlightened me as to the cause of his displeasure, his voice edged with venom.

"Unfortunately, we also have a few who require more work. That piece of excrement is named Susannah. I received a report yesterday on all the members of this synagogue, and she is the worst. She has developed those worst of traits in a human: humility and love. Years ago, she stopped living for herself, and now spends her time seeking our Enemy or serving others. Over the last ten years, she has given a home to three orphans and shares with others the meager portion she and her family have. I tell you that when humans stop just listening to what our Enemy tells them to do and actually start to do it, they become dangerous. And, like all dangerous vermin, they should be exterminated. If I had my way—"

Grob stopped, interrupted in the middle of his rant by the sound of Jesus and his disciples arriving at the door of the synagogue. As usual, they sounded happy, and echoes of their laughter preceded them into the building. Grob was at once businesslike and professional as he darted to the place where Jesus and his disciples would sit and checked to make sure that everything was ready.

It was at this point that I first noticed the man with the withered hand who had been placed strategically where Jesus could not fail to see him. The man was young, not long out of his teenage years, but life had already etched deep lines of sorrow and pain on his face. His right hand was withered, just half the size of his left hand, clawlike and clearly of little use to him. The threadbare garments that he wore and the gaunt nature of his face and frame told of the poverty to which his affliction had reduced him. I guessed that gainful employment would be hard to come by with such an affliction. It probably also brought loneliness. What woman would want such a man for a husband? So, no wife and no children for him, just the misery of eking out a living by begging for alms.

As Jesus entered the building, the synagogue ruler shot a stern glance at the man with the withered hand, who had clearly been ordered to keep his hand on display. Recognizing the message of the glance, he moved his garments aside to make the claw more visible.

Jesus and his disciples had now entered the building and were being guided forward by servants of the synagogue ruler. They were taken to the vacant spaces near the front of the building and asked to sit there.

The moment Jesus entered the building, the feeling of oppression that I always felt whenever the presence of the Enemy was around increased. As Jesus began to pray, the feeling intensified dramatically, and, unthinkingly, I started to step backward, away from Jesus and the source of my discomfort. Grob snarled at me to stay where I was, and I reluctantly obeyed.

Thankfully, the synagogue ruler called the congregation to order and started the service. He then launched into a long discourse about the importance of the Sabbath and how no work should be done on that day. No work whatsoever, for any reason. He repeated this theme over and over again, and then, turning to Jesus, he asked him to stand and join him at the front of the synagogue, facing the congregation.

As Jesus walked forward, an expectant hush fell on the crowd. They had heard of this miracle worker, this amazing man who said the most amazing, the most radical things. They wondered what things they might see today, what might happen.

Unbidden, a sudden memory came back to me of my days when I used to serve this king, and I found myself mentally agreeing with them. Life around him was never boring, never predictable, always some new adventure beckoned. ...

With an inward snarl of rage, I shut the door on those memories. I must not let such thoughts gain any further ground. Those days were gone.

Jesus reached the front of the building and stood next to the synagogue ruler. He faced the crowd, and there, directly in his line of vision, was the man with the withered hand.

In a smooth and silky voice, the synagogue ruler asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

The trap was a good one. If Jesus healed the man, they could accuse him of working on the Sabbath. However, if Jesus failed to heal the man, they knew the pain that would cause the man, and, deep down, they knew it would be the wrong thing for Jesus to do. They were sure that Jesus would help this man, giving them a new accusation to throw in his face; that was why they had set up this little charade in the first place.

Jesus responded in a conversational tone, asking, "If any of you had a sheep and it fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't you pull it out straight away? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep!"

Then, looking directly at the man with the shriveled hand, he asked him to stand up in front of everyone.

As the man stood, the silence in the building became absolute. The tension increased palpably. Looking around the building, I marveled at how transparent most of the human cattle were. Their faces betrayed their innermost hopes and emotions more eloquently than they could have put those feelings into words.

Most seemed to be on the edge of their seats, expectantly awaiting the events, hoping for a miracle, a demonstration of power that would set tongues wagging here for months to come. Oh, services on the Sabbath day had never been this exciting before. They reveled in the expectation of seeing a wonder, a miracle performed, and they had also picked up on the antagonism felt by the synagogue ruler toward Jesus. They wondered whether the main course of a miracle would be followed by the dessert of a heated argument between Jesus and the synagogue ruler.

A few, like Susannah, seemed to be able to think beyond the immediate excitement, and to feel the pain and despair in the life of the man who now stood before them, displaying his withered hand but still holding it protectively at his side. The compassion in their eyes spoke of their hope of deliverance for this man.

More people, though—especially the Pharisees, and the synagogue ruler and his wife—had outrage written all over their faces. So, Jesus had dared to answer back, and, instead of acting like a senseless stooge who would walk blindly into their trap, seemed to know what they were thinking. In fact, he had

already challenged their values by pointing out, correctly, that they would help one of their own animals but objected to help being given to this man.

Last of all, I looked at Jesus. He was harder to read, but I could still see the emotions on his face: anger and deep sadness at those in the synagogue who objected to him helping someone on the Sabbath. I was beginning to learn what made Jesus angry. He displayed unbelievable patience with the human rabble. He received coarse and cruel insults many times a day. Despite having the power to dissolve this universe in a moment, he did not even answer back when people insulted him, just calmly accepted their insults. Nothing they did to him seemed to disturb him. However, if one of the human maggots deliberately hurt another, or just neglected to help someone else, that angered him. If one of them deliberately got in the way of another reaching out to our Great Enemy, that seemed to particularly rile Jesus.

Jesus spoke again, breaking the profound silence in which even the human cattle could have heard a pin drop.

“I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?”

Then, looking once more at the man, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.”

The man obeyed. He tentatively moved his hand away from his side, away from the protective position close to his body where he had hidden the hand for years. As he did so, the sore redness of the hand, the crooked nature of the claw, became fully apparent. Then, faster than the human cattle could follow it, but clear to my sight, the hand began to grow. Bones straightened and strengthened. Supple pink flesh appeared and flowed over rapidly appearing muscles and veins. In less than a hundredth of a second, the hand was healed, made identical to the man’s other hand.

Silence reigned for a further second, then a collective gasp filled the building, followed a moment later by absolute pandemonium, as tradition was thrown to the wind, and everyone began talking at once.

Jesus smiled at the man, who, with joy written large on his features, came and knelt at his feet. He stammered out his thanks to Jesus as tears of joy coursed down his cheeks.

The synagogue ruler and the Pharisees immediately drew into a collective huddle, casting murderous glances in Jesus’s direction. Despite the hubbub that filled the place, Grob and I had no problem hearing their conversation, although none of the humans could have heard the whispered threats and bitter accusations made against Jesus. One theme became clear: they wished Jesus dead and were beginning to lay out plans about how they might achieve this.

Although both Grob and I were sickened by the mercy and kindness shown today, Grob, in particular, was satisfied with the outcome.

“Today’s work has been done, Nemesis. We have planted some seeds today that will grow into something that may be very valuable in the future. Now we can leave.”

I took one last look around the building. Waves of hatred and anger flowed from the group of Pharisees at the front of the building, who, by now had started to berate the disciples. Jesus and the healed man were talking together and walking toward the exit. Susannah and several others were moving toward the exit, also obviously hoping to talk with Jesus.

As for me, I was glad to leave this place and its disturbing memories behind me.

Just a few days later, we were once again confronted by the endless compassion of Jesus, along with his limitless power.

Jesus and the disciples were walking down the street. The air was fresh; a slight breeze was blowing in off the Mediterranean Sea some miles away. It ruffled the clothing of the group of men who strode forward, invigorated by the freshness of the air, the sparkling blue of the morning sky, and the bright sunlight.

A few hundred yards ahead of the group of Jesus and the disciples, a beggar was sitting by the roadside. His clothes were threadbare, almost rags, and his body emaciated. He held out a bowl to those passing by, begging for alms. Hearing an increase in volume as Jesus and the disciples approached, he turned his face in their direction, crying out louder, “Have pity on a man blind from birth.” His eyelids flickered open, revealing cloudy and misshapen eyeballs. I guessed that for some reason his eyes had not grown properly while he developed in the womb. And now he was paying dearly for that misfortune.

Simon the Zealot spoke up, saying, “Master, who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

Jesus grimaced slightly but replied gently, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s light.”

He then walked over to the man and knelt down beside him.

Grob growled beside me. “The little rat doesn’t even have complete eyeballs. How’s Jesus planning to heal his sight?”

Jesus cupped the man’s face in one of his hands and gently turned his face so that he could see the problem more clearly. He grinned slightly, as if

remembering, and moved his other hand to his own mouth. He gently spat onto the end of his fingers and reached down into the dust on the ground. He started to form a sliver of clay from the dust and his spittle.

Suddenly, I realized that he was remembering, as indeed I was now as well. Both of us had been here before. Long years ago, I had been on duty at his side, in close attendance while he formed the first human being from the dust of this newly created planet. He had formed individual organs and built the man with infinite care. I knew that he could have created the new being whole and perfect with a word of command, but then, as now, it was clearly a work of love that prompted him to spend such time and trouble on the object of his care.

Once the carefully shaped sliver was formed, he eased it gently into the man's eye socket on the left-hand side of his face. As he moved his fingers away, I could see that the clay had molded to the man's eyeball and transformed into the translucent material of a human eye. In fact, the man's whole eyeball now looked clear and normal. Jesus repeated the action, forming a second sliver and creating a second perfect eyeball.

He then said to the man, "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam."

One of the disciples, James, took the man by the elbow and steered him toward the nearby pool.

As they walked, Grob wasted no time trying to convince the blind man that nothing would happen, that the man who had put clay onto his eyes was nothing more than a dangerous lunatic or a sadist with a sick sense of humor.

However, in obedience, the man went forward, and, guided by James, he stopped at the edge of the pool. Kneeling down, he gripped James's arm with his right hand and scooped up water with his left hand. He splashed this across his face.

As the water fell away, the man suddenly shouted, "I can see! I can see!"

Grob darted back from him in disgust.

I, however, was no longer surprised; no one was beyond Jesus's care, and nothing seemed to be beyond his power. Somehow, today's events seemed to sum up all that Jesus was doing. He had come so that everyone, everywhere, could pass from darkness into light, from being blind to seeing. How bitterly I despised myself at this moment. I who had once seen clearly but, through pride and greed, had voluntarily become blind. Would it ever be possible that one day I, too, might see clearly again?

Chapter 17

The Storm

Storm clouds scudded overhead, hurried along by the rapidly strengthening wind. The last light of the day was dying here on the eastern Mediterranean, and the clouds would have been tinged pink by the setting sun, were they not black, boiling, and threatening. I hovered a hundred feet above the surface of the sea. Below me, the whistling wind flicked foam from the white caps that had formed on the surface of the heaving waves. However, this was just the edge of the storm. The focus of the storm was further to the east, approaching the Sea of Galilee. This evening, a clandestine attempt was being made on the life of Jesus.

Grob hovered a few feet to one side. His string of curses and profanity was bitter and persistent. I tuned out his stream of invective and thought back to less than two hours before, when we had been summoned to Draxen's camp.

To our surprise, we found that Draxen was absent, summoned for an unexpected meeting with Lucifer. In his absence, Croncus had called an emergency meeting and argued powerfully for the immediate destruction of Jesus and his small band of disciples. To our growing surprise, we found several key figures in the group powerfully supporting Croncus. It became clear that Croncus had been planning this for some time. The support he now volubly received came from demons who owed him allegiance and were willing to gamble everything on the success of this bold move. If the plan were to succeed and Jesus were to be removed, Croncus would receive great acclaim in Hell, and Draxen might find it difficult to move against him. However, if he failed, Draxen's vengeance would be terrible.

Grob argued long and hard for adherence to the current plan. If Jesus could be tempted into sin, our Great Enemy himself would then be undermined. The rewards would be infinite, and the plan was worth following. We should persevere.

Croncus replied that Grob had not succeeded up to now, nor would he succeed. Jesus would not sin; he would build our Great Enemy's kingdom on earth, bringing all men back to himself. This would undo all that had been achieved since the original fall of man. This was our worst fear, as our intelligence considered that if our Enemy should achieve this goal, the war was lost.

The meeting was finely balanced. The fear of Draxen and the hope of bringing down our Enemy balanced against the glittering rewards of removing the hated figures of Jesus and the disciples, and also winning great renown in Hell. If Croncus had not already stacked the meeting in his favor, Grob's

arguments might have prevailed. However, by the narrowest of margins, the group came down in favor of an immediate strike.

Grob played his last ace in an attempt to deflect the group from the madness of the act they had decided upon. He pointed out that a strike would mean abandoning the truce and that, in addition to incurring Draxen's wrath, we would end up fighting against enemy forces that would defend their Lord. Pointing to me, he asked them how they planned to cope with hundreds of similar seraphs arriving in full force.

Croncus had clearly anticipated this point, as he immediately mapped out a plan to destroy Jesus and his small band of followers by using natural forces. He argued for the whipping up of a sudden storm as Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee—a journey that was anticipated in the next hour. As the strike would not involve a direct attack using demonic forces, the truce would technically not have been broken.

Grob laughed in his face at this hairsplitting and pointed out that, even if no additional forces were called in, Gillwain's squad would protect their Lord, and seven enemy seraphs were a major force in themselves and would doubtless attack the demonic forces forming and focusing the storm.

Croncus's eyes glittered dangerously, and I reckoned that Grob had made a dangerous enemy. His voice like ice as he played his master card, Croncus pointed out that Gillwain and his team had left their station shortly after we had left for this meeting and that Jesus and his band of disciples were without any angelic support at this time.

Having made this point, Croncus ordered the plan to be put into effect immediately. As the meeting broke up, Croncus strode out ahead of the rest of us and issued orders to three powerful demons who were waiting just outside. They immediately leaped into the air and headed west.

A few hundred feet away, Draxen's aide-de-camp also arrowed out of the camp, heading fast for the stratosphere. Clearly, he was leaving the planet to inform Draxen of this rebellion by Croncus.

I shuddered involuntarily. If Croncus failed, Draxen would exact a horrific revenge.

Grob urgently called me, and we darted into the sky, following the three demons who had headed west toward the Mediterranean Sea. I wondered if Grob intended to order me to take out these three demons before this madness could unfold. However, when we caught up with them two hundred miles out over the sea, Grob seemed content to watch as events unfolded.

The three demons formed a line about 150 miles long. They hovered in the air, fifty miles apart, and began to form the storm. Within twenty minutes, the storm was gaining real power.

Grob and I hovered side by side, watching the events.

The sudden cessation of Grob's cursing called me back to the present. I looked over at him, noting that, even though we were a hundred feet in the air, small beads of spray were being carried on the now-howling wind between us. Grob indicated that we should set off to the east, and I guessed that he wanted to see what was happening on the Sea of Galilee.

We darted east at close to the speed of light. Within a fraction of a second, we were circling a small boat in which Jesus and his disciples were sailing west.

The storm had not yet hit, but sudden gusts of wind, the outriders of the coming maelstrom, were starting to make small, choppy waves on the inland lake. The disciples were relaxed and happy, laughing and joking as they enjoyed being back in an environment where they felt comfortable. Jesus was in the stern of the boat; exhausted from days and nights of service to others, he was trying to catch a few minutes of sleep.

Though some of them were experienced fishermen, the disciples had no inkling yet of the monster storm that was about to break upon them.

On a hillside to the west, Croncus and his lieutenants stood watching events unfold. Apart from this group, Grob and I were the only other spiritual beings present. No angels or demons were in the vicinity. Gillwain and his team were absent, just as Croncus had said.

Peter and Andrew were joking about the sudden gusts of wind that kept catching the sail adversely. With good-natured shouts of laughter, they lowered the sail between them, and, calling to their fellows, they shipped out the oars. The disciples began to row the boat with the steady practiced strokes of fishermen. Matthew, however, kept missing his stroke, to the great hilarity of his friends. Jokes about tax collectors were being passed back and forth, and Matthew seemed to know a few jokes about fishermen too. They had no idea how little time they had left to live. Despite their skills, they would not be able to keep their little boat afloat in the maelstrom that was about to arrive.

Grob and I were a mere fifty feet above them, and from our vantage point, we could see boiling black clouds on the horizon. I estimated that the storm was traveling at close to three hundred miles an hour now. No natural storm could move with this rapidity or display the violence that was forming in its black heart.

Within a few minutes, the wind had changed from gusts to a constant adverse blow. The black clouds were also just becoming visible to the disciples.

Peter shot a worried glance at the horizon and turned to say something to Jesus.

Andrew saw his glance and quickly spoke up. "Leave him be; he wears himself out caring for others. Besides, we can handle a bit of bad weather."

Peter looked doubtful. "I've not seen anything like this before. Look how fast those clouds are moving. We're stuck out here in the middle of the lake, and we're not going to get to either shore before that thing hits us."

Peter issued a quick command, and the disciples began to row with renewed vigor. However, they continued to head west, straight into the storm rather than away from it.

I reckoned that was a mistake, but it would make little difference. Either way led to a watery grave within the next half hour.

Within fifteen minutes, the wind had begun to howl, and spray was dashing over the boat. Despite the strenuous rowing of the disciples, the boat was now making little headway. I could sense the fear of the disciples. Both the experienced fishermen and the others knew that they were in real trouble. Overhead, the first boiling black clouds were passing above them, and sheets of lashing rain cascaded down in curtains, further drenching the already-soaked disciples. The clouds blotted out the last of the light, and a premature and heavy darkness closed over the small group of men who were fighting for their lives.

A few minutes later, the boat was pitching violently. Waves crashed over the bow. As water poured in, the boat lowered perceptibly into the lake. Thunder crashed overhead, and lightning flashes provided the only illumination for the disciples still straining away at the oars. Matthew, Thomas, and Judas were bailing for all they were worth. Nevertheless, the boat was beginning to sink.

I glanced up at the hillside a few miles away. Croncus was grinning widely; he obviously believed that his plan was coming to fruition, anticipating the rewards that might be his in the near future as Draxen was humiliated and he was lauded as the hero who had removed the problem of Jesus the Messiah.

I looked carefully in all directions. I expected at any moment to see Gillwain and his team returning, or another powerful angelic force arriving with a vengeance. However, there was no angelic team coming, and I could not see how even a powerful force of angels or seraphs could turn off the storm in time. Even if they took out the three demons over the Mediterranean, the storm would continue to rage for hours until the power within it was dissipated.

Through all of this, Jesus continued to sleep, even though the water in the boat was now washing around his feet, such was the terrible exhaustion that he lived with day and night.

The disciples were now desperate, and Peter, although breathless, yelled out to Andrew, between the crashing of the thunderclaps and the howling of the wind, to drop the oar and wake Jesus.

Andrew, let go of his oar, which, within seconds, was washed clear of the boat. He tried to stand but was thrown to the deck. Opting to crawl instead, he initially made no progress, as the boat pitched violently against him. Then, suddenly, the boat pitched the other way, and Andrew was thrown bodily, close to where Jesus still lay asleep, his head resting on a cushion that by now was wet through.

Andrew reached out an arm and shook Jesus, crying out, "Master, Master! Wake up! Don't you care that we are about to die?"

The terrible exhaustion that held Jesus was slowly shaken off as he struggled awake. However, he quickly gathered his senses and rapidly took in the situation. He looked rapidly around the boat, checking that all of his dearly beloved disciples were safe. Then, displaying considerable skills of balance, he climbed to his feet.

Grob darted in and tried to sow seeds of fear and terror in a man who had just awakened into a desperate situation. However, I watched Jesus's face and saw only serenity and peace there.

Ignoring Grob, Jesus spoke calmly to the wind and waves. "Peace, be still."

Immediately, the wind dropped to nothing, the thunder ceased, and the waves subsided to a rapidly diminishing swell. Normally, waves and winds from such a storm could not stop that suddenly, on account of the physical laws involved. However, in this instance, I could see the molecules in the water and air straining to bring everything to a complete halt, as the very atoms and molecules recognized the voice of their Creator and strove to obey his command.

I looked up. On the nearby hillside Croncus looked shocked and gray. His plan had fallen completely apart. By looking through the curvature of the earth, I could see the three demons two hundred miles away over the Mediterranean, still working on forming the storm, but their efforts no longer produced any results.

The disciples turned white and strained faces in Jesus's direction. Gratitude and awe were mixed as they whispered, "Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?"

At my side, Grob was actually grinning.

"Looks like we're back in business, Nemesis. Oh, I wouldn't like to be Croncus at this moment. Oh no, I wouldn't."

Chapter 18

The Transfiguration

The silence of the black night was pierced by an ear-splitting scream. It carried on and on, finally fading into a series of sobs. A few moments later, the screaming began again. A small boy of about eight years of age was running from the center of the village, screaming as he ran. It was an hour before first light, and the boy was wearing nightclothes. His face was contorted in terror and horror; so much so that it had become a rigid mask that was a grotesque parody of a small boy's face. The child ran with unerring directness toward one of the wells in the village. As he ran, he made no attempt to step over the branches and stones that lay in his path, or even to avoid larger obstacles, such as the low walls that occasionally lay at angles to his path. His feet were bruised and bleeding, but he paid no attention to his wounds. Twice he bounced off walls but seemed impervious to the pain of the glancing blows.

The boy was pursued by a middle-aged man. The man was breathless and past the age when he could run at this speed, but desperation and love lent the man speed. He was gradually closing in on the child. Seeing the boy heading for the well seemed to spur the man on to even greater speed.

I understood now that the boy intended to throw himself down the well. He was just a few seconds away from self-destruction. The man understood this also, and with a superhuman effort, he dived forward and managed to grab one of the child's ankles. The child pitched forward, landing just inches from the edge of the well. Despite the transition from running to being thrown on the ground, the screaming did not change in tone or volume.

The man was sobbing now, partly through shortness of breath and partly from sorrow and despair. He pulled himself into a sitting position, and, taking the child in his arms, he rocked him to and fro, crying out repeatedly, "My son, my son."

Grob and I stood at the edge of the small village, enjoying the unexpected entertainment. The village was adjacent to a hill called the Mount of Olives and was important to us for two reasons: Jesus was expected to pass through it today, and, for some reason, Draxen was here. Grob urgently needed to confer with Draxen to get permission to implement another plan. However, when we traveled to Draxen's camp, his aide-de-camp had informed us that Draxen was taking some time off and could be found at this village. Accordingly, Grob and I had come here. We kept our purpose in mind; the entertaining episode was merely a diversion, enjoyable though it was.

Things quickly grew more intriguing. A dark mist suddenly began to ooze out of the child's mouth. The child's father saw the mist and regarded it with horror and loathing. The mist drifted slowly away from the boy, heading in our direction. The child's father quickly lost sight of it in the dark night, and he bent his head down toward his son, who was now quiet. The child was blinking in confusion, having no idea how he had gotten from his bed to his current location. He would have been more fearful, but his father's presence reassured him.

In an instant, we ceased to enjoy the diverting amusement. Both Grob and I recognized what the source of the dark mist must be, as it crackled with power and energy. Darker than the night, it absorbed any energy around it. It began to swirl and solidify. Assessing the waves of power that were now beating toward me, I knew that we had found Draxen.

Within a fraction of a second, Grob and I were abasing ourselves before the terrifying figure who towered above us.

Draxen was in a dangerous temper. His recreation had been interrupted by our arrival and such a mood made him unpredictable and extremely hazardous.

Just being close to Draxen induced a nameless terror in me. Despite my skills and power, I knew that I was no match for this monster. Fortunately for us, Draxen needed us. Failure to bring Jesus down would undermine his position in Hell; in addition, it would almost certainly mean that the war was lost. Grob was still his best hope to achieve victory. Plus, Draxen saw me as a potentially useful ally in his unspoken maneuvering with Lucifer for future dominance in Hell.

Grob quickly sketched out his latest plan for trapping Jesus. Draxen listened with barely concealed impatience, then, hissing his permission for Grob to proceed, he stalked off into the night.

Grob and I exchanged relieved glances, grateful to have survived the interview unscathed.

Three hours later, we saw Jesus and his disciples approaching the village. To our surprise, the group split before entering the village. Jesus, Peter, James, and John headed up the hillside, and the rest of the disciples entered the village.

This promised to be a most interesting morning. Jesus had given the disciples authority over fallen angels. However, Draxen was still in the vicinity, and, though fallen, he was an archangel. Within the hierarchy of Hell, he was second only to Lucifer in power. A clash between the disciples and Draxen was a distinct possibility, and Jesus would not be there to bail them out if Draxen decided to play rough.

However, Grob summoned me to follow Jesus, so we rapidly closed in on the group of four men now climbing the hill. Grob immediately fell into step with Jesus, whispering temptations and doubts.

When the group reached the summit of the hill, Jesus went forward alone and knelt to pray.

Grob scowled, but his expression soon transformed into a broad smirk as he saw Peter, James, and John lounging around on the ground rather than following their Master's example. Ninety minutes later, the disciples were almost asleep in the warm morning sunshine, but Jesus prayed on.

Grob turned toward me and began giving me instructions. In the midst of this, both of us were suddenly bowled over and thrown about a hundred feet down the hillside.

I was unable to see what was happening, as my eyes were screwed tightly shut against the incandescent brilliance that was beating upon me. Even with my eyes tightly shut, the extreme brightness was burning my eyes. I had stood in the center of an exploding supernova, but its brightness was nothing compared to this. However, by far, the worst thing about it was the presence of our Enemy. It was as if I were back in Heaven. I was in the immediate presence of our Great Enemy, and I hated it. It was torture. I had not been this close to the streaming glory of the Enemy since before the rebellion.

Shielding my face with four of my hands, I gingerly looked between my fingers, my eyes narrow slits. Jesus was transformed. He was blazing with glory. His face was brighter than lightning; his hands and feet gleamed like bronze superheated in a forge. His very clothes streamed out majesty.

He was talking to two humans. They, too, pulsed with glory, but they did not approach the majesty of Jesus. With a start, I recognized Moses and Elijah. Both Grob and I had been involved in operations against them hundreds of years ago. What were they doing here now? Why had Jesus resumed the glory that he had in Heaven? Was this the start of a major initiative by his armies?

Approaching him was a glowing, pulsating cloud. From the cloud, the voice of our Great Enemy boomed out.

Peter, James, and John were jerked awake; they looked on in amazement and utter shock.

Peter reacted first, and predictably. He opened his mouth and started speaking. Not for the first time, he spoke before he thought, and his words were facile.

"Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you like, I will put up three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

I doubted Peter recognized it, but, despite his lack of thought before speaking, he was still exhibiting an ability that was common to the inhabitants of Heaven. He had obviously never met Moses or Elijah. Both were born hundreds of years before Peter was born, and there were no pictures of them in existence. Nevertheless, Peter knew in his spirit who they were.

Seemingly in answer to Peter's inane comments, the voice of our Great Enemy boomed again from the glowing cloud.

"This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Upon hearing this, the disciples fell to the ground, clearly terrified.

Jesus looked back at them and, immediately, concern for them became apparent upon his features. He smiled at Moses and Elijah and gazed longingly and lovingly toward the glowing cloud. Then, he turned and walked back to the disciples. As he did so, Moses and Elijah and the cloud all gradually faded from sight and then disappeared.

Jesus walked up to the disciples, who were hugging the ground, their faces hidden in the dirt.

Jesus gently touched them on the shoulders and arms, saying, "Get up. Don't be afraid."

The disciples sat up, dazed, greatly relieved to find themselves just with Jesus.

I sympathized with them. I too was vastly relieved that the terrible episode was over.

Thirty feet away, Grob lay on the ground, stunned. His eyes were glazed, and he was clearly out of it. I rose shakily to my feet and staggered over to where Grob lay. Pulling him to his feet, I turned and set off down the hill, dragging him along behind me. Duty was over for the moment.

By the time we reached the village, Grob had recovered enough to be able to walk unaided.

In the village the disciples were proving to be disconcertingly useful. From some, the help was practical. Judas and Bartholomew were handing out money to those who needed financial help. Matthew, Phillip, and Andrew were working to repair the roof of an old couple who could neither undertake the repairs themselves nor afford to hire anyone else to do it. However, several of the other disciples were praying for people. To our horror, we could see that miracles were happening. The fact that Jesus was not with them did not stop the disciples doing wonders. They were beginning to learn how to serve our Enemy and work with his power all by themselves.

I expected Grob to dart among them in order to undermine their confidence and sap their faith. However, to my surprise, I saw him move to one side, stand still, and look appraisingly at a strange pair that was moving slowly in fits and jerks toward the disciples who were praying for people. The pair was, in fact, the same two we had seen before dawn: a middle-aged man and his eight-year-old son. Despite the fact that the man was much larger and stronger than his young son, it was only with the greatest difficulty that he was able to drag the boy forward. The boy was foaming at the mouth and fighting wildly to avoid an encounter with the disciples. He displayed a strength far exceeding his age and size. Several times he managed to almost fight clear of his father's strong arms.

When the child was within twenty feet of the disciples, he suddenly changed tactics, lunging for his father's throat. His father was taken completely by surprise when the boy's small hands went around his windpipe. With demonic strength, the boy began to throttle his father. The boy's face was contorted, his eyes glazed and bulging.

Thomas and Thaddaeus quickly elbowed their way through the crowd, and each grabbed one of the boy's arms. The child, snarling with hatred and rage, intensified his hold. I saw the surprise on the faces of the two disciples as they tried to break the boy's hold and experienced the superhuman strength exhibited by the small child. It was only with difficulty that they eventually managed to pull the boy's hands clear of his father's throat and wrestle him a few feet back. The red-faced and choking man recovered his breath, while Thomas and Thaddaeus fought to control the wildly fighting boy.

All the disciples were now converging on the boy. From the look on their faces, I could tell that most of them could feel in their spirits the extreme darkness that faced them. They sensed the cold malevolence of the being that confronted them, and something deep within them quailed and shrank from the encounter they were about to undertake.

The crowd was now forming anew around the disciples and the boy. They were familiar with the child and the extreme behavior he displayed when moved by the evil spirit within him.

Some local Pharisees and teachers of the law were present. In the past, they had tried to exorcise this spirit and completely failed. They awaited this encounter with interest. They would be glad to see the boy released from this awful predicament, but they had no desire to see the disciples succeed where they had failed.

It was Matthew who spoke first.

"Spirit, I command you, leave this child."

From the child's mouth emerged a mocking and dangerous laugh that was all too familiar to Grob and me. Draxen mocked them, his laugh cruel and confident.

Andrew tried next. He was answered by a string of profanity that a child of eight could never have learned or understood.

Phillip made the next attempt. He was the first to command the spirit in Jesus's name.

Grob and I exchanged glances. This had always worked for the disciples in the past. Few spirits were foolhardy enough to incur the Great Enemy's wrath by disregarding the authority inherent in the name of his Son. Draxen, however, was not prepared to budge and seemed willing to see this through to the end, no matter how high the stakes.

Next, Thaddaeus tried.

From the child's mouth, a dark, deep voice began to speak. Draxen addressed the disciples by name. He described in detail the tortures that were found in Hell. He promised to snatch them down to Hell and to inflict these, and much else besides. He also threatened their families. He listed the types of beings who were at his command and promised that they would be visiting the disciples and their families that night.

In turn, each of the disciples tried to exorcise Draxen, and each completely failed.

The temperature around the child began to drop markedly as Draxen started to pull power from the surroundings into himself.

I began to wonder how far this would go. It would be the work of a moment for Draxen to kill the disciples, but how would our Enemy react to that? I wondered if we had reached the biggest potential flash point since the original rebellion.

My training kicked in, and I began a thorough scan of the environment to detect if there were any other angelic or demonic forces in the immediate vicinity. If a major battle was about to break out, I wanted to know the disposition of forces.

There were no spiritual forces closing in on us, but I could see Jesus, Peter, James, and John descending the hillside.

For the next half hour, the conflict between the disciples and Draxen continued. Draxen stopped short of harming the disciples. He seemed content to mock them and demonstrate to all present the limitations of their power over him.

The boy no longer struggled but stood still as Draxen mocked and threatened the disciples. Despite the heat of the day, there was a very faint covering of frost on the ground surrounding the boy; such was the temperature drop effected by Draxen's power.

The boy's father seemed to shrink in on himself as he saw the inability of the disciples to free his son. He had known for days that Jesus and the disciples were heading this way, and he had focused all his remaining hopes on them. However, it was evident that, despite the disciples' best efforts, Draxen was completely unmoved by their attempts.

When the boy's father saw Jesus entering the village, he grabbed his son by the arm. Forcing his son through the crowd, the man headed in Jesus's direction.

At first, Draxen made no attempt to resist. His first thought was clearly that the boy's father had completely lost hope and, in his despair, was pulling his son away from the disciples. He therefore moved freely at first, but, once clear of the crowd, he saw where the man was headed. Draxen then began to fight madly once again.

Jesus saw. He saw the father, he saw the boy, he saw Draxen. He saw the disciples, who, instead of following the boy and his father, had been drawn into a furious row with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, all of whom were gloating at the disciples' failure.

As Jesus walked toward the boy and his father, the boy viciously kicked his father's legs and suddenly broke free. He started to sprint away at a speed excessive for any human being, let alone an eight-year-old child. He had covered perhaps a hundred yards when Thomas darted away from the group of disciples, who were still arguing with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. With a low tackle, Thomas managed to bring the boy down.

The boy's father limped back toward Thomas, and, together, they managed to subdue the boy again.

The other disciples continued their furious row with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, only becoming silent when Jesus reached them and asked what they were arguing about.

An embarrassed silence ensued, finally broken by the boy's father.

"Teacher, I brought you my son who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever the spirit seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Jesus shot the disciples an annoyed look. I guessed that he was neither impressed by the disciples' lack of faith nor pleased that, when the boy so clearly needed help, they had instead focused on a row with the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

"Bring the boy to me," Jesus said.

I sensed Grob stiffen beside me. Draxen was the most powerful fallen angel on the planet, but he was about to meet Jesus. What would be the outcome between this clash of a titan and the Creator?

Once more, the boy yanked himself free of the restraining hands of both Thomas and his father, and then he threw himself to the ground and went into a convulsion. The boy thrashed around on the floor, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus talked to the boy's father in gentle tones, his calmness and composure acting as a balm to the father's distress.

"How long has he been like this?"

The boy's father replied, "Since early childhood. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, please take pity on us and help us."

Jesus raised an eyebrow quizzically. "If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately, the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!"

Jesus turned his head and looked at the boy. "You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

Draxen screamed with rage, convulsed the child violently, but, ultimately, he emerged from the boy, having no choice but to obey.

The boy lay still, all but lifeless. He looked so much like a corpse that many in the surrounding crowd loudly exclaimed that the child was dead. However, Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet. As the boy stood, the color flooded back to his face, which once again had the soft features of an eight-year-old child. Jesus handed the boy back to his father, who swept his son up into his arms.

Grob and I exchanged glances. The contest between Draxen and Jesus had proved to be no contest at all, and Draxen was smarting with humiliation. We had been reminded twice this day that Jesus was fully divine. He wielded infinite power and authority.

Chapter 19

A New Dawn

The terrified rider spurred his donkey on through the blackness. A thin crescent moon and scattered stars shone fitfully through scudding clouds, and little light reached the ground to aid the fretful rider as he took appalling risks, hurrying his laboring animal along at a dangerously fast pace. The road was uneven and frequently intersected with ruts and potholes. Both man and donkey were infected with panic. While their mission was urgent, this was not the reason for their fear. Around and above them, a group of twenty demons swooped and soared, whooping loudly. Neither the man nor the beast could see or hear them, but something deep inside both the rider and his donkey sensed the evil near them. This perception transmitted itself as a nameless panic that saw both of them hurrying blindly through the darkness, seeking the sanctuary of the town that was now just a short distance ahead of them.

I stood on the flat roof of a small building on the edge of the town, watching as they approached. A few minutes before, I had left Grob laboring away, trying to put a wedge between Jesus and his Father. Grob had been working for many hours in a concentrated effort to reinforce the message that the Great Enemy was at ease in Heaven while Jesus bore all the risk and discomfort. As far as I could see, Grob was getting nowhere, and the slightly strained and pop-eyed expression on his face spoke volumes about his frustration at his inability to make progress. Bored and with no contribution to make, I went to the roof and watched the torment of the approaching man.

Briefly, I considered joining the fun but rapidly dismissed the idea. It was beneath my dignity for me to join in.

Gillwain was hovering in midair about a hundred feet away. With a softly spoken command, he sent two of his team out to protect the man on the donkey. The demons tormenting the man and his beast saw two seraphs approaching, and scattered. The seraphs took up station on either side of the man, scanning warily for any interference. I felt Gillwain's eyes upon me. He clearly wondered if I would try to intervene, but he need not have worried. What was it to me if twenty of my colleagues lived or died?

The man and his donkey both visibly relaxed. Somehow, they sensed the friendly and comforting presence of the powerful angelic beings guarding them. Although still in the dark and far from the few flickering lights that could be seen in the town, they slowed down to a sensible walk and covered the last half mile at this more relaxed pace.

The man rode his donkey into the town and asked a passerby where he could find Jesus the Teacher. I watched with slightly more interest as the man

tethered his donkey and approached our building. He hammered on the door, calling loudly for admittance.

Below me, I heard people moving around, and then the sound of the door being pulled open. I recognized the voice of Simon the Zealot as he asked who wanted Jesus, and why.

A despairing thought passed briefly across my mind as I recognized that Simon was changing. A few months ago, he would have reacted differently: the visitor would have been met with far more hostility and downright aggression. The character of Jesus was rubbing off on the disciples. They were being changed, and all our efforts to stop the change were failing. What would happen if Jesus could somehow touch the lives of every man, woman, and child on the planet?

I allowed myself to sink through the roof and gently floated down to the first floor, in time to see Simon leading the visitor up to the room where Jesus was resting. Before Simon could knock, the door opened, and Jesus stood in the doorway, almost as if he had been expecting this meeting.

Jesus looked tired. Dark bags under his eyes spoke of long days and sleepless nights. He got little sleep. At night, he either prayed to his Father or resisted doubts or temptations suggested to him by Grob. However, as always, Jesus was a model of kindness and patience to his visitor, despite the fact that his body must have been crying out for rest.

“Jonathan, it is good to see you. Come downstairs and have a bite to eat and something to drink. You have obviously come here in a hurry, and you must be tired.”

Jesus seemed to know this man, but I was certain that he had not met him in the last three years. Was this another occasion when his divinity peeked through and a flash of knowledge came to him, unbidden?

The man himself looked slightly confused, as if uncertain as to how Jesus could know him. But, as so often happened with people, he warmed rapidly to Jesus’s friendship and became voluble and friendly. He retraced his footsteps downstairs, and Jesus personally put together a meal and set it before him.

Gillwain had also entered the room, passing soundlessly through the wall. I saw him look in disbelief at the disciples as they lounged around in the next room, chatting and eating. They were aware of their Master preparing a meal for the visitor but were not moving to help.

Over his meal, Jonathan explained that he had been employed by Mary and Martha in Bethany. The women had sent him to deliver an urgent message to Jesus. Their brother, Lazarus, was seriously ill, and they asked Jesus for help.

The disciples began drifting into the room at this point. Peter brought up the rear, his beard was flecked with crumbs from the loaf of bread he had been eating. They at least had the grace to quiet down as Jesus talked to his visitor.

“Jonathan, please take a message back. Tell the sisters and Lazarus that they are sure of my love and that I will be with them at the right time.”

Turning back to his disciples, he said, “This sickness will not end in death. It will be used for God’s glory, and God’s son will be glorified through it.”

Grob had silently entered the room, hovering behind me. Having listened to the last few exchanges, he sped out of the room, heading in the direction of Bethany.

I followed at a more leisurely pace, but it was still merely a fraction of a second before I alighted in an upper room in a large house. This was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

In the dimly lit chamber, a middle-aged man lay writhing on a couch. His forehead was covered with sweat, which had dampened his clothes. He mumbled incoherently, lost in the depths of a raging fever that left him racked with pain and bereft of sense. Occasionally, a few words became intelligible, but they were pure nonsense. The delirium that gripped the man prevented any clear or rational thought. I knew little of the ailments that affected humans, but even I could see that Lazarus was seriously ill.

A woman knelt on either side of the low couch on which the man lay. Lazarus’s sisters made an interesting contrast. Martha was the elder by several years. Her dark hair was already flecked with gray. She was more thickset than her sister and wore her hair pinned up on her head. Mary was much younger; she wore her hair loose and was beautiful. However, both sisters wore a similar expression: worry and hurt, with just a hint of fear.

Grob barked a command at me to find a demon who could diagnose human illness. I saw from the gleam in his eyes that he was planning ways to exploit this situation to the fullest.

A moment later, I alighted near the outskirts of Draxen’s entourage. I was a well-known figure by now, and my arrival elicited little comment. I managed to catch the eye of Draxen’s aide-de-camp and passed on Grob’s request for a demon able to diagnose human illness. The aide-de-camp clicked his long and elegant fingers, beckoning deep within the crowd.

An emaciated figure emerged from the group and rapidly approached. The demon who came and stood before us was skeletally thin, wore a harassed expression, and shot several nervous glances in my direction. He bowed briefly to both of us and waited for instructions.

The aide-de-camp introduced him. “Nemesis, meet the Mortician. We call him that because he specializes in causing illness in humans. He can diagnose this malady for Grob and introduce several new ones if required.”

Without further comment, he turned and started back to his duties. He had gone a few steps when he stopped. Looking back, he added a barbed comment. "Remind Grob that the years are passing. If we can get a result this decade, Lord Draxen will be grateful."

Grimacing in reply, I briefly considered suggesting that he go and try his luck at getting the Man to sin but concluded that eternity was too short to waste words on his stupidity.

I commanded the Mortician to follow me, and we headed back to Bethany.

The scene had not changed since my departure.

Indicating the man lying on the couch, Grob demanded a diagnosis. As usual when feeling that he was on the path to success, Grob became more direct and commanding.

The Mortician approached the couch.

Even in his fever, Lazarus seemed to sense the darkness approaching him. He cringed. His sisters mopped his brow and fussed over him, but I was sure that they, too, felt our dark presence in the room.

The Mortician examined Lazarus and then returned to us. "He has a severe case of typhoid fever. It will prove to be terminal. He will be dead in forty-eight hours."

Grob exploded. "Idiot! I already know that this will not lead to death. Now, get back there and do your job."

"My lord Grob, the diagnosis is correct. I am never wrong about such things. Why do you believe that this man will not die?"

Grob glared at him as he spelled out his reason with a slowness that was calculated to insult. "Because the Son of our Great Enemy has said that this sickness will not end in death and he is never wrong about anything."

The Mortician stood his ground and calmly replied, "Then, my lord Grob, he must be intending to heal him, because, if no action is taken, this man will be dead within two days."

Grob seemed to ponder this, waving the Mortician away. He then moved to fly from the room, beckoning me to follow.

We returned to Jesus and the disciples. They were still downstairs, and the sound of happy laughter greeted us as we approached the building.

Grob scowled. He hated the rare occasions when Jesus received a moment's respite or relaxation.

I felt a moment's surprise. There was no sign of Jesus preparing to leave for Bethany. I thought I could have predicted Jesus's actions by now. In the past, a request for help always seemed to be answered straight away. I would have predicted that if he had received a cry for assistance from a complete stranger, Jesus would have responded as soon as it was practicable, no matter how tired he was. So, why was he not hurrying to help when a friend was in need? Perhaps he was thinking of his disciples. An extra night's rest would prepare them for the trip back to Bethany.

"I guess that they'll be moving out in the morning," I ventured to Grob.

He looked thoughtful but made no reply.

Grob slithered across the room and began whispering in Jesus's ear. Jesus gave no outward sign of his weariness at the constant temptation to which he was subjected. On the outside at least, he seemed relaxed in the company of his disciples and Jonathan. The little group radiated happiness and good company.

I retreated to the edge of the room to observe. Maybe, just maybe, tonight would be the night that Jesus would finally crack, and Grob would need me to prevent any help from reaching him. However, I was beginning to doubt that Grob would ever succeed. Jesus had no thought for himself at all. That made me wonder if he could ever be beaten.

After a few hours, the group finally dispersed for the night. Grob never left Jesus's side, repeating in many subtle forms the constant idea of the personal dangers of going back to Judea. Oh, if only one of Grob's suggestions could really take root! Full-blown fear would then blossom in Jesus's life and cause him to compromise just a little. We only needed the tiniest of cracks, and victory would be in our hands.

The next morning brought further surprises. Jesus made no move to lead his group back to Bethany. He seemed quite content to stay where he was. The day was interrupted many times with people coming to Jesus with various ailments. Some of the problems were as minor as a toothache or earache; others were far more serious than the people realized. However, all of them received the help they needed. All of them were healed of the problems they came to Jesus with. In addition, they all received something more. They found a true friend who was interested in them. Often, Jesus would talk to them about something that seemed completely unrelated to their request for help. However, a few moments' conversation with Jesus would reveal the deep need that person had in that problem area.

How Grob raged as he saw the help these people were receiving. However, neither of us made a move to try to do anything to damage those people. We knew that Jesus would not allow this and that any attempt would find both of us in Tartarus.

Twice during the day, we flew to Bethany and found things developing as the Mortician had predicted. Lazarus was failing fast. He was becoming weaker, and his sisters were becoming more and more concerned. Toward evening, Jonathan returned, and the sisters were buoyed up by Jonathan's repetition of what Jesus had said. They visibly relaxed when Jonathan recounted that Jesus had said Lazarus's sickness would not end in death. Despite the evidence in front of their eyes, they believed what Jesus had said, and the joy and relief in their eyes reflected the sudden lightness in their spirits.

As we returned to Jesus and the disciples, I questioned Grob about why Jesus was behaving so differently than usual.

"Is it possible that Jesus has gotten it wrong this time? He said that Lazarus's sickness would not end in death, but even I can see that Lazarus is dying. What does it mean if Jesus starts making mistakes? Is his divinity being submerged by his humanity?"

Grob grinned at me and said, "Perhaps, Nemesis, perhaps, but what I am really hoping for is that all my efforts to breed fear in his heart are finally paying dividends and that he has concluded it is just too dangerous to go back at this time. If he compromises and fails to help Lazarus for fear of his own safety, that is a sin, and we've got him. The next few days promise to be interesting."

I felt a thrill of anticipation course through me. Had we reached the decisive moment? Was victory really within our grasp?

The next day developed along similar lines. Jesus helped many people, but he made no effort to go and help Lazarus.

Grob and I made a dozen trips to and from Bethany.

Lazarus continued to die. For a long time, his sisters seemed secure in their belief that Lazarus would not die, but by eight o'clock that night, it was clear that Lazarus had little time left. The sisters became increasingly distressed. Their constant lament was that if only Jesus would come, everything would be all right.

However, Grob and I knew that Jesus was not going to arrive now.

At 8:17 p.m., Lazarus died.

The sisters were heartbroken.

Grob and I rejoiced. Jesus had failed. He had said that this illness would not end in death, but Lazarus was dead. How Grob and I exulted as we heard the despair and disillusionment in the sisters' voices as they tried to make sense of their world falling apart. They were as hurt by Jesus's failure to come and help them as they were by the death of their brother. Both events completely devastated them.

Grob spent the next hour putting further doubts and bitterness into the minds of both sisters. We then returned to the house in which Jesus and the disciples resided. We found them lingering at the dinner table. Jesus showed no sign of knowing what had happened. How would he react when the messenger arrived from Mary and Martha in a day or two? He had been proved wrong, and he had failed his friends.

Grob went to report to Draxen, instructing me to remain and observe what happened during his absence.

I watched as the group broke up for the evening and Jesus went to his room, where he prayed to his Father. How I hated this duty. I could feel the peace and serenity in Jesus as he prayed. Worse, I felt more and more strongly the presence of our Great Enemy in the room. Within a few seconds, I could stand it no longer and fled the room. Let Draxen do what he wished if Grob should report me; I could not stay in that room.

Half an hour later, Grob returned. He was in a party mood. He was so happy that he overlooked my dereliction of duty.

“Nemesis, what a party I have just attended! Draxen and our forces are celebrating the beginning of Jesus’s end. He has been proved wrong. We will ensure that news of that spreads. Let people see that he is not infallible. Let people see that he has failed his friends.”

Not daring to interrupt Jesus as he communed with his Father, Grob waited patiently for him to finish before he recommenced the assault upon him. There was a spring in Grob’s step now; he was refreshed and rejuvenated by the turn of events. Grob was feeling so confident that he dismissed me for the evening.

“When the messenger arrives from the sisters, we will hit him hard, and then you may be needed. Tonight, you may rest.”

I spent a cheerful hour taunting Gillwain and his team about the failure of their Lord. None of them seemed inclined to discuss the matter. They treated my exultant comments with calm indifference. Presumably, they did not believe that Lazarus was indeed dead, because they, too, had heard Jesus state that this sickness would not end in death. They would get a rude awakening when the messenger arrived.

At dawn the next day, I reported again for duty.

Grob continued to celebrate. His party mood lasted until Jesus and the disciples gathered for breakfast.

Partway through the meal, Andrew mentioned casually that he wondered how Lazarus was feeling this morning. I was watching the group carefully: how disillusioned they were about to be. They had all heard Jesus say that this sickness would not end in death, but Lazarus was dead. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Grob swell with anticipation and excitement. How he hated this

group of humans. What fun he planned for them! He would tear their peace of mind to shreds while they grappled with the failure of their Master. One or two of the other disciples nodded their agreement with Andrew's comments. They, too, were wondering how Jesus's friend fared.

Jesus calmly said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him up."

So, Jesus thought Lazarus was still alive! He was proving fallible in all sorts of areas at present.

Grob grinned more widely and leaped deftly onto the table to whisper something in Thomas's ear, preparing him for the denouncements that were to come later when the messenger from Mary and Martha arrived.

Andrew looked puzzled. Turning to Jesus, he said, "Lord, if he is sleeping, that is good for him. It will help him to recover. Why would you want to wake him up?"

Jesus said, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake, I am glad that I was not there."

I saw a flicker of uncertainty flash across Grob's face. Suddenly, the taste of victory didn't seem so sweet.

So, Jesus was aware that Lazarus was dead.

Grob visibly tensed and moved rapidly away from the disciples to whisper something to Jesus.

Jesus ignored him and continued to talk to the disciples, saying, "After we finish this meal, we will start our journey to Bethany."

An hour later, Jesus and the disciples left for Bethany.

The journey followed what had by now become a familiar and sickening pattern. Jesus's reputation had spread, and people often recognized him and his group as they approached small hamlets and villages. The inhabitants would quickly spread the word, and before he had a chance to exit the village, someone would be asking him to help a sick relative or assist with resolving someone's troubles. Grob had told me how hard he worked trying to suggest to Jesus that he should brush these requests aside and get on with more important work, but helping these people seemed to be what was really important to Jesus. To Grob's despair, Jesus seemed incapable of impatience with people who needed his help. No matter how tired he or his disciples were, no matter how late the hour, he always seemed willing to help. Consequently, the journey was slow. It was four days after Lazarus's death that we finally entered the outskirts of Bethany, where Mary and Martha lived.

Grob was nervous about what might happen next but was reassured by the fact that Lazarus had been dead so long. Shortly before we entered Bethany, Grob

had summoned the Mortician and sent him ahead to examine Lazarus's corpse, which by now was securely in the tomb. The Mortician's report on the decay of Lazarus's corpse had cheered Grob considerably. I had listened to the conversation, which described how far Lazarus had decomposed in this hot climate during the preceding four days. Clearly, there was little left that would be of any use in sustaining life. Jesus might try to impart the spark of life, but there would be nothing to receive it. No brain, no lungs, no liver, no heart—just rotting flesh. Grob and the Mortician exulted in the destruction worked by death and decay in those four days.

As we approached the gateway to Mary and Martha's home, a crowd of mourners preceded us. Martha stood at the gate to greet them, but, seeing Jesus and the disciples approaching, she gave her apologies to the group, directed them to the house, and hurried forward to meet Jesus.

Her opening words were full of sadness, and both Grob and I rejoiced to hear them. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Unfortunately, she added almost immediately, "But, even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask him."

Grob scowled at this. How he hated faith in Jesus. Could this stupid woman not yet see that Jesus had failed her? She had asked for his help, and he had not come until it was way too late.

Jesus took Martha's hand and said gently to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Grob's scowl deepened. The reminder that death was not the end for the humans always put him in a bad temper. All of us who had rebelled against the Great Enemy quaked at any mention of a resurrection or what he planned to do at the end of time. However, this conversation, which was already painful, was about to get worse.

With growing confidence and the first stirrings of hope, Martha replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Stars spanned across my returning vision as I lay facedown in the dust of the road. In my peripheral vision, I could see Grob also facedown in the dust, and beyond him, Gillwain and his team. I knew that every spirit in this world would be in a similar position at this moment. Jesus had uttered another statement starting with the words "I am," and as he pronounced that dreaded and wonderful name of our Great Enemy, his divinity had flashed through for the tiniest moment of time. He had carefully shielded the humans from seeing this, but those of us in the spirit world had been hit with a tiny flash of the glory that Jesus shared with his Father. No exploding supernova could compete with the power of that force, and every spiritual being, without exception, had

involuntarily thrown himself facedown as the power and majesty of the godhead had been revealed for the most fleeting moment.

Groggy, I climbed back to my feet, reaching out a hand to aid Grob to rise also.

Martha, who was as unaware as the rest of the human cattle regarding what had just occurred, continued to speak. Her words hit Grob and me with the force of punches.

“I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

To our dismay, we perceived that it was with a light heart and radiant features that Martha now turned away to go and get her sister.

Jesus and the disciples slowly followed her. They had almost reached the house when Mary came rushing out to meet him. When she reached Jesus, she fell at his feet, but the accusation in her voice was clear.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Grob grinned at this. He was still unsteady, but he was clearly delighted to hear the bitter accusation in Mary’s voice. Better still, she burst into bitter floods of tears, and the mourners who were with her also began to sob and wail.

Jesus regarded all of them. His face was a picture of compassion and understanding, and, to my amazement, I saw tears form in his eyes and run down his cheeks. I nudged Grob, who was standing beside me.

Grob’s grin widened and he said, “Things are looking up, Nemesis. If he was in control of this and could do something to help, why weep? He knows that this one is beyond him, and he is weeping because this time he cannot help.”

I had seen Jesus’s face a moment before and was far from sure that this was the reason for his tears, but I held my peace. However, I gathered my strength and carefully mapped out in my mind where Gillwain and his team were at the moment. Perhaps Grob was right and this was the time when we would get our best chance to make Jesus stumble. I was confident that I could buy Grob a few fractions of a second before Gillwain’s team overwhelmed me.

It was with an emotional voice that Jesus asked, “Where have you laid him?”

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied and led him toward the tomb.

Jesus now wept more openly, clearly moved.

Some of those standing there said, “See how he loved him.”

Predictably, others replied, “Could he who has opened the eyes of the blind man not have kept this man from dying?”

Grob's spirits were rising; things were going our way. Jesus seemed to be out of his depths, and people now had a real accusation they could level against him.

The group moved slowly toward the tomb. Mary continued to weep, as did many of the mourners. How I loved a funeral. Death was such a powerful ally against the humans. In the face of death, how could they have faith in our Enemy? The only thing that spoiled the moment for me was the calm face of Martha, who seemed to know something that nobody else did. Yet, even Jesus was weeping today. Surely, she could see that this one was beyond him.

The group reached the tomb, which had been sealed with a large heavy stone. The air was heavy with the shouts, groans, and sobs of the assembled people. Jesus had ceased to weep and now seemed fully himself. Well, he had arrived too late. Lazarus was well beyond help. It had been four days: he was beyond healing; his corpse was no longer human, just rotting flesh.

Jesus stood there, and after a while, the volume of the mourning subsided just a little.

Jesus turned to Martha. He smiled at her and said conversationally, "Take away the stone."

Immediately, the group stood in shocked silence.

I shot a glance at Grob. His face was ashen, and he kept repeating to himself with quiet emphasis, "It's been four days. There is nothing left."

Martha was wide-eyed but fully in control of herself. As usual, the practical side of her nature shone through in times of crises. "But, Lord, the corpse will stink. He has been dead four days."

Jesus gently reminded her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

It was with a radiant face that Martha motioned to the servants that they should move the stone. I had an awful feeling that I could guess what was coming, but Martha knew and was already rejoicing.

Six servants labored for more than fifteen minutes to roll the stone upward out of the groove in which it lay. I estimated that it weighed approximately 1.286489 tons, and such a weight was difficult for these puny humans to manage.

In those fifteen minutes, Grob was desperately trying to undermine Jesus's faith in his Father.

Around us, the human crowd seemed stunned by the turn of events. Some muttered angrily about desecration of the grave, but most seemed content to see what this miracle worker would do next.

Mary stood dry-eyed now, holding her sister's hand, waiting like the rest to see what would happen. Hoping but not really daring to hope.

As the servants gradually managed to roll the stone to one side, the group slowly edged backward as they were hit by the stench of decay from within the tomb.

As the stone was finally wedged in place a few feet from the open door to the tomb, Jesus looked up to Heaven, and in a voice loud enough for all to hear, he prayed to his Father.

"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I say this for the benefit of the people here, that they may believe that you have sent me."

Then, in a loud voice, he called, "Lazarus, come out."

I peered intently into the tomb. On a shelf inside the tomb lay the silent corpse. When Jesus finished speaking, the chest of the corpse rose as Lazarus took a breath. Then, without hesitation, Lazarus sat up, swung his legs off the shelf, and, still bound in the shroud that had been wound around him, shuffled out of the tomb.

Jesus said to the servants, "Take off the burial garment, and let him go."

Hesitantly, clearly afraid, they approached Lazarus, and, unfolding the shroud, they released him.

Lazarus was laughing but collected himself enough to say, "Thank you, Lord."

It was clear that he was fully well, fully alive. In fact, he was clearly bursting with health and vitality. With a cry, his sisters ran to him. There was an uproar as the crowd pressed forward, desperate to miss nothing of these earth-shattering events.

Grob grabbed my arm and, with a snarl, indicated that we should leave and report back to Draxen. He looked ill, old, and beaten. Nothing seemed impossible for Jesus. If he could beat death after four days, he would be able to do it at any time. What could stop the people flocking to him now? Grob clearly had little left.

Suddenly, I knew with a certainty that Jesus was not going to trip up. Grob had tried. Grob had failed. Something else was needed. Something else would need to be done. If Jesus continued like this, the kingdom of our Great Enemy would be established in power, and where would we be then?

We turned, and, darting into the air, we headed for Draxen's camp.

Chapter 20

The Coming of the King

Grob and I stood transfixed. Gazing upward we saw an awesome sight filling the early morning sky. Ranks upon ranks of glittering angels were descending from above to land between the temple in Jerusalem and where we were, near Bethpage and Bethany. As they landed, they took up positions on either side of the road. The landscape began to glow with glorious multicolored hues as the brilliant colors of the angels' wings illuminated everything around us. Among the multitude of angelic beings present, I identified three archangels, including Michael and Gabriel, and there were hundreds of seraphs and cherubs.

Our forces were pulling out of the area fast. No one had any idea what was going down, but, clearly, the Great Enemy was pouring enormous force into the area. Simple prudence and self-preservation directed that we make ourselves scarce. However, our Great Enemy still seemed willing to make an exception in the case of Grob and me, and no attempt was made to harm either of us or to move us out of the area. However, I suspected that we were now the only fallen angels within a hundred-mile radius, and I felt very exposed—and very nervous.

The disciples, as always, seemed oblivious to the amazing things that were going on around them in the spiritual realm. They were unaware of the tens of thousands of mighty beings alighting from the heavens. Perhaps they perceived a sense of infectious happiness or excitement in the air, but their dull and idiotic senses could detect no more than that. Watching Jesus closely, however, I was sure that he knew exactly what was happening. A slight smile remained on his face as he observed the arrival of thousands of beings whom he knew and loved.

Just then, he turned to Andrew and Phillip. "Please, would you go to the village ahead of you? There, you will find a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you what you are doing, say, 'The Master needs it and will return it shortly.' They will then let you borrow the animal."

Phillip and Andrew marched boldly off, attributing their uplifted spirits to the fresh breeze and bright sunshine that were so evident this morning.

Grob nodded in my direction. I drifted along after the two disciples as Grob slithered up to Jesus and resumed the campaign of temptation.

The village was not far away, and within half an hour Phillip and Andrew were walking hesitantly into the village. Their jauntiness had largely disappeared

now that they were entering the village and the thought of removing someone else's colt was looming large before them. They turned a corner, and, there before them, tied to a rail, a young colt stood, looking bored. The colt was large and powerful for his age, and there was a wicked-looking glint in his eyes that boded no good for the two disciples.

Andrew decided that there was nothing to be gained by putting off the action that he must perform. He rapidly shot guilty glances in all directions and then walked quickly to the rail and began to untie the colt. At first, the colt did nothing but stand there looking at Andrew, and then, without warning, he aimed a well-directed nip with his teeth in Andrew's direction. Andrew had sized up the nature of this ill-tempered beast and darted out of the way. Phillip came hurrying up to help, and the colt swiveled rapidly and directed a vicious kick from his back legs in Phillip's direction, while simultaneously emitting an enormous bellow of rage. One of the colt's hooves smacked with a sickening thud into Phillip's left thigh. Phillip let out a scream of pain and rolled away, clutching his leg. Andrew now had both hands clutching the colt's bridle, trying desperately to control, and if possible, quiet the madly struggling and angrily braying animal.

I never ceased to be amazed at the ability of the disciples to make a mess of even the simplest instructions Jesus gave to them. Why did he have such patience with these pathetic, inept creatures of dust? It would have been the work of a moment for an angel to have completed this task without trouble, but these disciples had to turn it into a disaster.

Not surprisingly, people came running out of nearby houses, including three from the house to which the colt had been tied. One of the men hefted a cudgel. Ominously for the two disciples, several people were shouting, "Thief! Thief!"

Within half a minute, Phillip and Andrew were surrounded by seventeen irate villagers, several of whom carried rough-looking weapons. A slight but seemingly important man, from the deference given him by the others, asked them what they thought they were doing in taking other people's property.

Phillip had now returned to his feet but was still clutching his leg.

Andrew had turned pale, and in a very unconvincing voice, he stammered, "Th-the M-M-Master needs it, and he will return it very shortly."

Suddenly, recognition dawned on the face of the man who had addressed them. "Hold on. You two are with Jesus of Nazareth, aren't you?"

Andrew nodded rapidly.

The man continued, "I could never repay Jesus for what he did for me. If he needs my colt, then it is his for the taking. Go with my blessing."

The crowd of people around the disciples visibly relaxed and moved aside to let the disciples pass. With Andrew pulling on the bridle and Phillip pushing as best as he was able to, the disciples slowly moved off with the bad-tempered and protesting beast.

As they went the colt's owner shouted one last instruction. "Oh, I'd watch that one if I were you. No one has ever attempted to ride it yet, and it has a wicked temper."

Phillip muttered under his breath, "Now you tell me."

After a considerable struggle, Phillip and Andrew managed to drag and push and cajole the bad-tempered and obstinate beast back to Jesus and the other disciples. Jesus regarded them with a wry smile on his face, but the other disciples were not so restrained. Loud guffaws greeted the two returning disciples, and several pointed questions were raised as to which of the three was the donkey (a colt being a young donkey).

The colt was further unsettled by the raucous reception it received, and it began to struggle and kick madly, braying loudly. Several of the other disciples ran forward to help, but this seemed to enrage the animal further. Despite the strength of several men being applied to the animal, nothing could subdue it.

Seeing that the situation was not exactly under control, Jesus sighed and walked forward. He said not a word but simply laid his hand on the donkey's neck. For a moment, nothing happened, but then one of the bulging angry eyes of the beast fixed on Jesus's face, and the donkey suddenly calmed down completely. A deep and perceptible peace came upon the animal. Disturbingly, I was sure that there was a sense of recognition in the beast's eye. Somehow, it knew and recognized who this way. Somewhat shamefaced and amazed the disciples stepped back from the animal, who was now nuzzling Jesus's hand that caressed its nose and face.

Jesus asked if there was a blanket that could be placed on the donkey's back, as he was going to ride on it into Jerusalem. Phillip and Andrew exchanged glances but said nothing; they believed the donkey to be positively dangerous, but there was no denying that now it was quiet and docile. Some of the disciples laid their cloaks on the animal's back, and Jesus climbed onto the donkey.

The beast stood quietly and then peacefully trotted forward in response to Jesus's prompting.

The disciples followed behind, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

The shout was taken up by tens of thousands of angel voices as Jesus began to ride along the road into Jerusalem, between the ranks of mighty angelic beings that lined either side of the road. The disciples continued their shouts

of praise, quite unaware that they were just one small part of a vast orchestra of praise that was resounding in Jesus's honor.

There were crowds of people ahead of Jesus and the disciples who were entering Jerusalem ahead of them. They were pilgrims who were coming to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. As they heard the disciples' shouts behind them, they stopped in their tracks, and then they, too, began to line either side of the road as they recognized Jesus, who was from their home territory of Galilee. Many of them ran to nearby trees, and, tearing off branches, they ran back to the road and began to take up the disciples' cries of praise. Others ran to nearby pools and reed beds, where they plucked reeds, and these they lay in the road so that the donkey could walk over them.

As we reached the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the disciples and the crowd all began to shout more loudly and excitedly. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven! Glory in the highest!"

People were now laying their cloaks and palm fronds on the road for the donkey to walk over. Despite the hubbub and the tumult of the crowd, the donkey, which had never been ridden before, walked along peacefully and contentedly.

However, not everyone was happy. There were some Pharisees among the crowd, and they angrily forced their way through the multitude until they were walking next to Jesus. Furious, they demanded that Jesus rebuke the disciples and tell them to hold their peace.

Jesus turned, looked at them, and quietly said, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As Jesus said this, ninety thousand angels raised a great cheer of joy and delight.

Grob shrank from this noise and moved closer to my side.

I, who had heard galaxies, stars, and planets all singing praise to their Creator, knew that Jesus was stating nothing but the literal truth.

Jesus continued along the way, and, eventually, he entered this ancient city that was central to our plans and the plans of our Enemy. Once within the city gates, the hubbub brought fresh crowds running, and the situation became even more tumultuous. As Jesus approached a side street, he deftly turned his donkey down it, and his disciples followed. Such was the confusion and uproar behind him, with pilgrims thronging into the city and city dwellers rushing down to check out the commotion, that he was actually able to withdraw unnoticed. The wild celebrations continued on the main thoroughfare, unabated. People continued to party, unaware that the object of their celebrations had withdrawn himself.

Jesus dismounted from the donkey, and, turning to Phillip and Andrew, he asked them if they would kindly walk the donkey back to its rightful owner,

with his thanks. The donkey nuzzled Jesus's hand, reluctant to be parted from him. However, as Phillip and Andrew approached, the wicked gleam appeared once again in its eyes. It clearly remembered them and intended that the trip back should be memorable. Phillip and Andrew noticed, and they looked at each other askance. However, Jesus had noticed too, and, bending forward, he whispered into the donkey's ear. The beast calmed again immediately, and now docile and gentle, it allowed Phillip and Andrew to lead it away.

Jesus and the remaining disciples then walked forward into the city, with Grob and me in close company.

Chapter 21

No Condemnation

The first rose-colored sunlight was delicately lighting the tops of the buildings in upper Jerusalem as Grob and I drifted silently above one of the narrow side streets leading to the temple. Jesus, up before dawn, was striding purposefully down the street, toward the temple courts, his firm footsteps sounding unnaturally loud in the relative quiet of this time of day. A few minutes more, and a large part of the population would awaken, and the day would start in earnest; but, for the moment, the city still slumbered in peace.

As Jesus approached the outer precincts of the temple, he greeted the temple guards on duty with a quiet but cheery salutation and walked on into the temple courts. The three guards on duty nodded silently in reply but made no comment. However, once Jesus was past them, one of the guards beckoned to a street urchin who had been sitting hidden in the shadow cast by a wall of a nearby building. The urchin came hobbling over to the tallest of the guards and stood waiting expectantly. They made an interesting sight. The thickset and muscular guard, in addition to body armor, wore a warm cloak against the early morning chill. He stood looking down with contempt and disdain at the emaciated child who stood before him, shivering in the thin rags that only partly covered his body. The man handed over a small copper coin, called a mite in common parlance, and, pointing toward the west, gave the beggar child directions in a low voice.

Grob and I could clearly hear every word, despite the fact that we were a hundred feet above them. However, we already knew what was being said. Another of Grob's plans was about to unfold: another attempt to trap Jesus into discrediting himself. Grob had carefully placed the idea of the trap in the minds of certain Pharisees and teachers of the law a few days before, being careful to ensure that, of course, they gave themselves credit for thinking of the idea in the first place.

The child hurried to carry the message he was entrusted with, although, on account of his disability, he could not actually travel quickly even for a human being.

Grob had already explained the intricacies of the plan to me, instructing that, at this point, I should follow the child to ensure that there were no unexpected turns of events that might cause the plan to unravel. Meanwhile, he would work on the crowd around Jesus, ensuring that they were well prepared to witness Jesus stumble and that they would react with condemnation when he did.

I remained invisible but allowed myself to gain the tiniest fraction of mass. My total body weight was less than that of a bird's feather, but it was heavy enough for me to drift along in the light breeze, which, today, was fortuitously coming from the east. I gently sailed through the early morning sky as I kept pace with the urchin below.

The urchin headed west, through streets that were still in shadow, as the steadily rising sun was not quite high enough to shine directly down them. There was more noise now. People were stirring from their night's rest. The boy hobbled past shuttered houses. Near one, a dog barked, startling him. However, he pushed on, undaunted; he knew that he was fortunate to receive payment for such a simple task. All that he had to do was to go to the house of Jeremiah, the teacher of the law, and tell him that the young rabbi, Jesus, had entered the temple courts. The child knew no more than that. He had no idea of the part he was playing in this plot developed by Grob's brilliant mind and approved by Draxen, a being he could not even imagine.

A few more minutes of the boy's painful walk brought him level with the street where Jeremiah lived. The sun had climbed higher as he traveled. It was now clear of the horizon, and its strengthening rays were bringing the first caress of warmth to the urchin's back as he stumbled forward. He turned left, onto Jeremiah's street and into shadow again, as this street lay at right angles to the rays of the early morning sun.

Jeremiah's spacious, grand house was one-third of the way down the street. The boy approached the imposing building and knocked tentatively and nervously on the sturdy door. The occupants were clearly expecting him, as a small flap that served as a peephole was immediately thrown back and the boy was asked what he wanted. He had not finished stammering out his message before the door was flung open and Jeremiah himself stepped out into the street. He put his hand against the child's shoulder, and, pushing hard, he sent the boy tumbling away from his doorway to sprawl in the dusty street a few yards away. Without giving the beggar a second glance, Jeremiah beckoned to those behind him in the house, and a procession of people who had clearly been waiting for this moment emerged.

In the lead were several important Pharisees and teachers of the law; friends of Jeremiah and enemies of this upstart teacher, Jesus, whose radical views were proving to be so unsettling for the population and such a threat to their own position. Behind them came half a dozen male servants. In their midst, half dragged and half carried, was a young woman.

The woman's face bore testimony to both her exhaustion and her despair. She knew that she was embarking on her last journey. She knew that she was being taken to her death. Last night, she had been caught in the very act of adultery, and the law of her people was unequivocal on this matter: she would be taken to a public spot, condemned, and then, all those around her would throw stones and rocks, battering her to death. The manner in which she had been caught the night before made her wonder if she had in fact been set up. How strange that these eminent religious leaders had suddenly burst in on her

and her lover. How strange, too, that they had seemed to know her lover and had let him go. How strange that she had been held overnight in the house of such an important man and that all the other religious leaders had stayed overnight, talking into the late hours about some sort of confrontation they anticipated tomorrow. However, she could not begin to fathom why they were behaving so strangely. Her mind was filled with the choking terror of imminent death. How long would it take to die by stoning? How many blows would she take before she lost consciousness? How much pain awaited her in the next hour? Unbidden and desperately unwanted images shot through her mind as she began replaying in detail a stoning she had witnessed a year ago. The woman involved had been older, and she suspected that perhaps this woman had been innocent, falsely accused by her husband, who wished to settle old scores and to be rid of her. The woman had taken perhaps ten minutes to die. She had screamed for much of this time, her features obscured in a mask of blood within the first minute. ...

Flying slowly above the group, I could feel her choking terror. I basked in its glow, gradually drawing closer to the group holding the woman as I fed off the fear pulsing out of her. How this fear reminded me of Hell, where everyone was afraid. In Hell, there was always someone more powerful and more dangerous than you, and just waiting, and oh so willing, to inflict pain and torment.

The group hurried toward the temple courts, anxious to begin the confrontation as soon as possible. Jeremiah and the other teachers of the law, and the Pharisees, strode out proudly at the head of the group. They gave no thought to the woman they were dragging to her death. Their minds were full of visions of the humiliation they anticipated Jesus would face when they put him in an impossible position. Better yet, they anticipated the glory they themselves would receive from their peers when acknowledged as the ones who finally outwitted the young teacher from Galilee who had proved so clever and so unnervingly direct in the past.

As they approached the entrance to the temple courts, Jeremiah nodded to the temple guards, who moved respectfully to one side to let the group pass. None of the onlookers could guess that Jeremiah had met with this group less than twenty-four hours before and given them money to inform him when Jesus was present in the temple courts.

As the group entered the temple courts, people began to gravitate in their direction. A struggling, sobbing woman nearing the edge of hysteria was difficult to ignore. By the time Jeremiah and his group reached the edge of the group crowding around Jesus, he had a group that was at least half as big as the other crowd listening delightedly to the words that Jesus was saying.

Jeremiah started to roughly force people aside as he made a way for his group to reach Jesus. At first, people seemed inclined to argue, then, noticing the religious garb of these men and the fact that the fineness of their clothes marked them out as men of wealth and power, they thought better of it and moved aside. Within a few moments, Jeremiah had reached the front of the circle surrounding

Jesus, who, in good humor, sat on the edge of a small stone bench, teaching the people about his Father in Heaven.

Without any attempt at courtesy or good manners, Jeremiah loudly interrupted Jesus by rudely yelling out, "Teacher, there is something here you need to see!"

With that, Jeremiah looked behind him and beckoned his servants to bring the woman forward. They pulled her, still resisting, toward Jeremiah, who harshly grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her into the center of the crowd.

Once in the center of the circle of people, the woman stopped struggling. The fight seemed to go out of her as she recognized the hopelessness of her position.

Jeremiah spoke loudly and slowly so that all could hear and there could be no mistake.

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do *you* say?"

I glanced at Grob, who stood close to Jesus. Our eyes locked briefly. I saluted him with a small smile. The trap was a good one. We knew, as did these teachers of the law, how much Jesus cared for people and would seek to help them every chance he got. However, if he tried to save her, we could accuse him of undermining the law of Moses and, thereby, having no legitimacy for his teachings. If, however, he said she should be stoned, the crowds who hung on his every word would see him as no different from any other religious teacher, and then he would lose some of his mystique. Better yet, how it would pain him to sentence one of those he loved to death, just as it pained his Father, our Enemy, to order the destruction or punishment of any of those he loved.

An expectant hush fell upon the crowd as they, too, saw the dilemma in which Jesus was caught. Whatever he said was going to cause him difficulties. Besides which, there was a near certainty that they were about to see the execution of this young woman. The moment crackled with electricity and tension.

Jesus was silent. Was he thinking? Was he finally stuck for an answer? We suspected that the reason the Christ had come was to rescue the human rabble from the sentence of death that hung over all of them. Grob had planned that, by manufacturing a collision between this aim and the requirements of our Great Enemy's own law for the punishment of sin, we might be able to catch Jesus between an irresistible force and an immovable object. We would also discredit him with the masses. Come what may, we could not lose on this one. Oh, it was a brilliant plan.

Looking again, I could see that Jesus was starting to write in the dust that lay over the pavement in the temple courts. However, try as I might, I could not decipher the words that he was writing. They seemed like random letters. For

someone who seemed never to waste an action or a moment, this was most unusual.

Jeremiah and his group started to get impatient.

“Well, Teacher, let’s have an answer. Do you agree with Moses or not?”

“Are you going to deny the law, Jesus of Galilee?”

“Come on, Teacher, it’s easy enough. She was caught in the very act of adultery; there can be only one sentence.”

Unperturbed, Jesus continued to write for a few moments, then he straightened up, and, his tone conversational and calm, he said to Jeremiah and his group, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Then, without further ado, he bent down again and started to write some more.

I saw Grob gently float up into the air as he looked down in puzzlement at what was being written. I darted up to his level and peered down intently, trying to decipher the strange writing that Jesus was producing in the dust. Despite the fact that he was writing with his finger in dust, the letters and words were beautifully modulated, neat and well formed. However, they were a strange mixture of different alphabets and characters. All the characters of all the known languages of the world were present; however, all were intermingled in a crazy jumble, so that not a single word was recognizable or decipherable. For perhaps two or three minutes, Grob and I peered down, trying to decipher what was written, but without success.

Looking at the faces of those surrounding Jesus I saw that most of the people also appeared to be puzzled. Clearly, they were also unable to decipher what was being written. Others were quietly grinning to themselves as they recognized how cleverly Jesus had turned the tables on those who had tried to trap him. However, the expressions of Jeremiah and his group were most revealing, as their faces burned with shame, embarrassment, and horror.

With a bellow of rage, Grob commanded me to read aloud what was written in the dust, to spell out each word.

“Sffhtwy drttz Qwyddg Szzjklds.”

“Enough!” Grob commanded. “I read Npwgjjk Zhphp JJklormydg Sjsyyo.”

Grob continued, “Don’t you see, Nemesis? He has done to us what he did to humankind when we tried to set up the first world government at Babel. He is confusing our ability to understand communication. We each read the letters written differently, but I wonder if it is perfectly clear to those for whom it is intended.”

With a flash, I understood Grob's meaning. Was it possible that Jeremiah and his group could individually read quite clearly what was written about each one of them personally but not what was written about the others? The onlookers and Grob and I were not permitted to read at all, as none of it related to us. If this was the truth, Jeremiah and his cronies probably did not realize that Jesus, in his kindness, was protecting their privacy and reputations. They probably thought that everyone could read as clearly as they could what was written about them. Alternatively, did everybody, including Jeremiah and his group, just see seemingly random letters, as Grob and I did? Was the writing significant at all?

One by one, Jeremiah's group began to quietly drift away, shamefaced and shocked. The oldest went first, followed by the youngest. Puzzled, the onlookers also went. It looked as if Jesus had finished teaching at the moment, and the show seemed to be over.

Eventually, Jesus was left alone with the woman. She still stood silent, unmoving except for a subdued shaking that never quite left her.

Jesus finished his writing and gently wiped the words and letters away. Straightening up, he looked at her and said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"N-n-no one, sir," she shakily replied.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now, and leave your life of sin."

The woman stood stock-still, seemingly unable to believe the turn of events. I could sympathize with her, as Grob and I were stunned, unable to believe how neatly Jesus had sidestepped our trap.

The woman gave one last look of gratitude to the man who had saved her, and turned to leave.

At this point, Grob completely lost his self-control. Possibly, he was smarting from the humiliation he felt at his plan falling apart so easily. Or, perhaps, it was because he felt he could not explain another failure to Draxen. Then again, maybe it was because he could not bear the thought of this woman making a new start in life. Whatever the reason, he started to scream at Jesus. Giving voice to his defiance, Grob vowed that he would tempt this woman into continual sin and would see her dragged down to Hell.

Jesus gave no sign of hearing Grob, ignoring him as usual and rising to leave the temple courts.

Grob started to stride after the woman, with the intention of immediately making good on his threats. With a gesture, he commanded me to follow. For once, he seemed to have lost sight of his mission. He was leaving Jesus alone and, instead, focusing on destroying the woman.

We had taken perhaps a dozen steps and almost caught up with the woman. Jesus was walking away in the opposite direction. Grob was reaching out for her, about to whisper his first suggestion into her ear. Around us, the temple courts were full of noise and busyness. The strong walls rang with the bustle of worshippers coming and going.

Suddenly, all was silent save for the keening of a thin wind. The woman had disappeared. Jesus had disappeared. The temple courts had disappeared. The mellow light within the temple courts had been replaced by the harsh glare of three suns that beat down out of a turquoise sky. Grob and I continued to stride, but now, we were on a glacier, on a world of ice. Apart from the keening of the thin wind in an atmosphere of pure argon, there was no noise, no life. With a start, I realized that we were no longer on planet earth.

Grob and I stopped suddenly and exchanged a worried glance. With no obvious action, Jesus had sent us to a different world, possibly a different universe. Where were we? Would we ever get back?

Looking up into the achingly bright sky, I squinted past the glare of the three ultraviolet suns that stood in the heavens and searched the sky for a recognizable star map. It took only a few moments for me to realize that we were no longer in the same galaxy. I started to run through my memory the trillions of combinations of star maps as they would appear from different points in the universe. The task was simplified as the presence of three stars in close proximity limited the number of possible locations enormously.

It was with a feeling of relief, almost gratitude, that I realized we had been transported only five thousand galaxies away. True, we were a long way from earth. Even at my full speed, it would be close to eight hours before we could return to our duties, but at least return was possible.

"We're on Cygnus 5, Grob, in the Tororean galaxy. We've a long way to go before we get back, so I suggest we leave immediately."

Grob sighed with relief but was quick to point out that he could not travel at the speed I could. He commanded me to carry him and to be quick about it.

Scooping him onto my shoulders, I shot straight up from the glacier and out of the thin atmosphere of the planet.

Neither Grob nor I exchanged any words on the journey. I resented carrying him and resented the fact that he had gotten us into this mess in the first place. Grob was clearly rerunning the events of the morning in his mind. It struck me that Jesus had given us a clear message not to target that woman unfairly. She deserved the same chance as everybody else to get her life right with God. Grob and I could have easily been transported to a cell in Tartarus had Jesus had a mind to do so.

I realized afresh that this job was not without risks. Jesus had made no attempt to hinder us as we tempted him, but it was only his patience and mercy that made him do that, not a lack of power. He was God, and if he wanted to, he could do anything he wished with us. It was with a dull ache of worry for the future that I continued to bear my burdensome colleague back to the field of conflict.

Chapter 22

The Final Days

The next evening, Jesus and the disciples made their way out to the village of Bethany. A dinner was being given in Jesus's honor that night in the home of Simon the Leper, only now he was an ex-leper. An outcast after the leprosy emerged, he'd left his big house and his wife and children, forced to sleep in the open and beg for scraps. Life as he had known it was over, but then, he met Jesus, who took pity on him and healed his leprosy with a word. Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, was attending the party, and his sister Martha was handling the catering arrangements.

Jesus and his disciples entered the building, after a warm welcome from Simon, who was clearly delighted to see them. The room was buzzing with excited chatter as they were greeted by the many friends present. After a while, Jesus and the disciples managed to find their places around the table and settled down.

At this point, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, entered the room. She was carrying an alabaster jar of perfume. She approached Jesus, and, weeping, she opened the bottle of perfume and poured about a pint of pure nard onto Jesus's head. The beautiful fragrance permeated the room. Everyone present sat silent, clearly amazed and impressed by what Mary had done.

To one side of the room, Grob was working on Judas; as he did so, Judas's face hardened. Suddenly, he spoke up. "Why all this waste? That perfume was worth over a year's wages for an ordinary man. The perfume should have been sold, and the money given to the poor."

Grob grinned. Both of us knew that Judas had little care or compassion for the poor. However, he was in charge of the communal funds given to Jesus for the needs of himself and the disciples, and he had been stealing from them for a long time. He resented the fact that he had missed out on this opportunity.

The silence in the room deepened. Everyone present was shocked by Judas's attack on Mary.

Jesus intervened. "Why are you giving this woman a hard time? She has just done something wonderfully significant for me. You will have the poor with you every day for the rest of your lives, but you will not have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, what she really did was anoint me for burial. You can be sure that wherever in the whole world the Message is preached, what she has just done is going to be remembered and admired."

Suddenly, hatred and fury flared across Judas's face, and as soon as attention had moved away from him, he slipped out of the room.

Grob was delighted with this. "I think we are making progress here, Nemesis. Follow him, and report back to me on his movements and actions."

I followed at my leisure. The night was dark, with low, scudding clouds obscuring any light from the stars. However, Judas hurried forward with determination to carry out his purpose. Within minutes, he had left the outskirts of Bethany and was hurrying along the familiar road to Jerusalem. Robbers and footpads were known to frequent the roads at night, but Judas seemed to give them no thought. I smiled to myself as I thought that, tonight at least, he was perfectly safe. No robber would get near him. I would see to that. Waves of anger and rage surged from him at regular intervals, like poisonous waves surging out of the bitter sea of raging hatred that now consumed his heart. I marveled once again that these humans, feeble and limited creatures that they were, could have such a capacity for hatred and anger, especially toward one another.

We reached Jerusalem. Judas wasted no time but went straight to one of the main gates into the city. Predictably, at this late hour, all the gates were shut and barred. However, two Jewish soldiers sat on a low bench next to a small side gate that was adjacent to the main gate. Their job was to guard the gate. In the event of any serious trouble, they would sound the alarm, and a squad of Roman soldiers, who were the real masters here, would quickly arrive to deal with whatever emergency had arisen.

Judas approached them, resolutely at first, but then increasingly more hesitantly as he realized that the entrance to the city was closed and he might be denied admission.

The two soldiers saw him approaching and rose wearily to their feet. One of them addressed Judas. "The gate is closed. Come back at daybreak."

In an oily voice, Judas replied, "I need to see the high priest. It's urgent. I understand that you gentlemen should be rewarded for your inconvenience in opening the side gate for me."

The two guards looked at each other and grinned. "It's rather late, sir. The price of entry is quite high at this time of night."

Judas reached into a leather bag he carried at his waist and carefully extracted a few copper coins. He placed these in the hand of the guard closest to him.

The guard smiled at him, then simply stood there with his hand extended.

Judas shook his head and said, "I'll be returning this way tonight. If you should open the gate for me once more on the way back, then I'll pay the same again as I've already given you."

The guard looked at his colleague, who nodded. Turning back to Judas, the guard smiled and said, "That'll do nicely, sir. We'll be looking out for you. Remember, we're always happy to be of service."

The guards then rapped on the door and shouted for their colleagues inside to open up. The sound of a heavy wooden beam being moved sounded loud in the quietness of the night. A dog started to bark.

Judas waited impatiently, and, once the gate was opened, he darted through without a further word. Once inside the city, he pulled his cloak close around him and kept his face low, anxious to avoid being recognized. He hurried along darkened streets, keeping to the shadows and remaining out of sight as much as possible.

We were still some hundreds of yards away from the high priest's house when we encountered the first guard posted there by Hell. I scanned the area rapidly and noted three more guards within view: one hovering about fifty feet in midair; two others on the roofs of nearby buildings.

The guards struck me as being brutal but not overly bright. I guessed they were posted on the perimeter of the defenses around the high priest's house to do little more than give the alarm before perishing if an angelic strike force should attack. The really capable defenders would be closer in, surrounding the high priest himself. Of course, once, the situation had been reversed, and angelic warriors had guarded the high priest and the temple area. But many years had passed since those days. Now our forces were very much in evidence.

As we reached the large and imposing side door to the high priest's residence, I could feel the rage and bitterness inside Judas surge in intensity. I assumed that he was reliving in his mind the rebuke he had received earlier. His anger made him forget his earlier caution of staying in the shadows to avoid being seen; now he hammered on the door. The reply came quickly. Clearly, the doorkeeper was awake and ready this night. A peephole was snapped open, and an angry voice demanded to know what the panic was about.

Judas replied, "I need to see the high priest urgently."

The doorkeeper laughed aloud. "Do you think that the high priest will see every worthless supplicant who comes knocking on his door at night? Clear off before I call the temple guard."

With that, the peephole was slammed shut.

I realized afresh the value of Grob's skills. It would be the work of a moment for him to put into the doorkeeper's mind the need to open that door. It was the merest fraction of a nanosecond before I was back at the party in Bethany, at Grob's side and requesting his help.

Grob was annoyed at being interrupted from his role in raising doubts and temptations in the disciples, but he was secretly pleased to have me asking him

for help. With considerable complaining, he accompanied me back to Jerusalem. We traveled rapidly, and Judas was still standing at the door, exactly as I had left him only two-tenths of a second before. His face started to register the anger he felt at such treatment, and he quickly raised his hand to hammer on the door once again. In the meantime, Grob had arrowed through the door, without a sound, and was busy working on the doorkeeper.

A few seconds after Judas's knuckles had hammered once more on the door, the peephole was opened more slowly, and in a quieter voice in which curiosity and perplexity were mixed, the doorkeeper asked, "What do you want with the high priest anyway?"

Judas said, "I can help him with a problem that has been vexing him for three years now."

Almost against his better judgment, the doorkeeper started to pull back the bolts and bars with which the door was secured. He swung the door open and motioned for Judas to enter.

Once Judas was inside, the doorkeeper secured the door once again. He then led Judas down a gloomy corridor, lit only occasionally by small lights set at distant intervals into niches chiseled high up in the corridor's walls.

Three times along the corridor, we met powerful demonic guards. However, these were both more capable and more intelligent than the beings found in the outer defenses. They recognized both Grob and me, and, bowing low, they allowed us unhindered passage.

Eventually, the doorkeeper led us to another door. The door itself was made of the finest cedar wood, inset with decorative carvings. Flanking the door were two bulky demonic guards.

Pacing up and down outside the door was one of the high priest's servants. The doorkeeper approached him, and, apologizing for the intrusion, he indicated Judas and said that this man wanted to see the high priest. As he said these words, his confidence melted away, and he seemed to be wondering what madness had prompted him to allow this unknown man entry.

However, with a start, the senior servant recognized Judas, and in an intrigued voice, he said, "Do you bring a message from Jesus to the high priest?"

Judas shook his head and answered in a low voice, "Much better than that. I can help the high priest resolve the problem of Jesus of Nazareth."

The servant gave him a lingering look, then said, "Wait here." He then quietly opened the door and slipped through.

A few minutes later, he returned and motioned for Judas to follow him. Through the open door could be heard the voice of the high priest calling the meeting to order.

Grob and I followed the servant and Judas through the door. We entered a roomy and well-lit chamber. Three long tables sat in the room, arranged in the shape of a large U. About thirty men sat around these tables. I recognized all of them from intelligence briefings. At several points around the room, some of Grob's minions worked on these important and influential men.

Caiaphas, the high priest, spoke up. "Well, Judas Iscariot, my servant tells me that you have come proposing to solve the problem of Jesus of Nazareth. So, what exactly is it that you are offering me?"

Judas waited a moment, savoring the fact that he was the center of attention, that he had all these important and influential men waiting on his every word.

When he eventually spoke he was calm, confident, and even arrogant. "It is common knowledge that you want Jesus of Nazareth dead."

One of the men around the table heatedly bellowed, "You dare to address the leader of your people in such a way?"

However, Caiaphas held up a hand to silence him, and, looking at Judas, he said, "Please continue."

Judas repeated, "It is common knowledge that you want Jesus of Nazareth dead." He swiftly continued, "Your biggest problem, however, is the people. They hang on his every word, and you know that, if you try to seize Jesus openly, you are going to spark a riot. That's all the excuse the governor is looking for to clip your wings further."

This time, several people around the table bridled, but no one said a word. They all recognized the truth of what Judas was saying; they had been discussing this very subject just minutes before Judas entered the room.

Caiaphas remained calm and simply said, "So, what do you propose?"

Judas grinned wolfishly and said, "I can lead your temple guards to him at a time and place when he is alone. No crowds to riot; no witnesses to tell what happened. You cannot find anyone else with the access to him that I have, someone who holds his confidence."

Caiaphas quietly said, "I want all of them: your fellow disciples also. No one is to escape."

Judas grinned even more widely. "Suits me, but, of course, there will be a price."

"Of course," Caiaphas said drily. "Shall we say, thirty pieces of silver?"

Judas hesitated.

Caiaphas continued, "With such a sum, a man can do a lot and of course, the funds would come with our gratitude. That can open more doors and give you more opportunities than the money can."

"All right, thirty pieces of silver it is," Judas said grudgingly.

Caiaphas held his gaze for a moment, then waved him airily away. "Then be about it quickly. This man Jesus is dangerous enough. We want results now, this week, before the feast."

Judas turned on his heel and started to stalk out of the room. He had gone but a few strides before the incisive voice of the high priest stopped him in his tracks. "Why? Why are you betraying him?" Judas swiveled on his feet and merely said, "I have my reasons." Caiaphas nodded, and Judas turned once more and exited the room.

Grob and I followed at our leisure. We could afford to take our time, as humans were so slow. Before we left the building, we could hear the excited chatter of the high priest's cabal as they celebrated their good fortune.

Judas hurried back through the night. I followed him as he left the city and took the road once more to Bethany. Now that his mission was accomplished, his anger and rage had subsided somewhat, and he was nervous about being on such a lonely and isolated a road so late at night. I reflected that he should be nervous, given the course of action he had just embarked upon, but the reason for his nervousness should be very different.

It was well past midnight when Judas finally stumbled past the first houses that lined the roadway as it entered Bethany. A few stars were now showing, and, by their faint light, he got his bearings and made his way toward the building where the party had been held, and where he assumed that Jesus and the disciples would be spending the night.

The building was dark and silent, and I wondered if the door would be barred and Judas would spend the night on the porch. However, someone had obviously noticed that he had gone missing, and the door was unbarred and opened silently to his touch. A single oil lamp burned fitfully inside, and by the dim and flickering light of its fitful flame, the sleeping forms of the disciples could be seen. Judas quickly lay down among them. For more than an hour, he lay there, unable to sleep, probably rerunning in his mind the events of the evening. Eventually, he dozed off into a fitful and disturbed sleep.

I stood there, motionless, throughout the few hours until daybreak.

As the cock crowed to greet the dawn, the disciples shook themselves awake. Several of them asked Judas where he had gotten to last night. Judas recounted a story that he had concocted about going out to give money to a poor beggar man he had spotted the previous evening on their way to the party.

Jesus said nothing, and Judas studiously avoided his gaze.

Chapter 23

The Last Supper

The Day of Unleavened Bread dawned bright and clear. This day was important to the Jews, as it was the day before the festival of Passover, the commemoration of their rescue by God from their slavery in Egypt many centuries before. It was customary for families to eat a Passover meal together on the evening of this day.

Early that morning, Jesus turned to Peter and John and asked them if they would prepare the Passover meal for all of the group.

I turned to Grob, unsure as to whether he would have me follow Peter and John or remain with him. Grob hesitated a moment before shaking his head, so I watched as the two disciples departed.

It was some hours later that Peter and John returned. They found Jesus and the other disciples in a large courtyard within the city, teaching the people.

When Jesus finished his teaching, the two disciples approached him, and Peter said, "Master, we have done as you commanded; everything is ready for you this evening."

Jesus thanked them and then turned back to the task at hand, as another group of needy people came shuffling toward him, anxious for both his help and the comfort of his compassion and love.

The merest flicker on the edge of my vision had me whirling around faster than conscious thought. In my upper left hand, I formed a bow. Within the smallest fraction of a second, it solidified into a dark ebony curve. My bottom two hands were full of arrows, and in my upper right hand a single arrow formed, which I fitted to the cord of the bow. I sighted along the flaming missile as I targeted the rapidly approaching figure bearing down upon us. Then, as I recognized one of the assistants of Draxen's aide-de-camp, I relaxed. I turned the weapons I had just formed back into pure energy and rapidly reabsorbed them through my fingers.

The assistant eyed me wryly as he approached Grob and bowed low. Although his senses would have barely registered my actions—such were their speed—he had correctly concluded that he had been the briefest moment away from destruction. Good, it would give the worm something to think about: in the future, he might be more careful when approaching his betters if he realized the consequences that could befall him by failing to treat them circumspectly.

At least he was sufficiently respectful when he addressed Grob. “My lord Grob, you are commanded to attend upon the archangel Draxen immediately.”

Grob nodded and dismissed the assistant. He would delay leaving for a few seconds to make clear to this junior demon that he, Grob, was of such importance that he did not need to jump at Draxen’s command. However, all three of us knew that Grob had better move pretty smartly. Accordingly, a few moments after the messenger had turned and flown away, Grob beckoned to me, and, together we sped into the air and headed for Draxen’s underground lair.

Five miles below Jericho, a vast natural cavern had formed in the crust of the earth. The cavern was bigger by far than the city above. Several millennia ago while on a surveying expedition, one of our scouts had found the cavern, but we had found no use for it until now. Just recently, it had been pressed into service as Draxen’s new headquarters.

The cavern was stark and without light. The floor, roof, and walls were all of jagged rock. There were no agents, such as the action of water or wind, to create smooth surfaces here. The heat of the earth’s mantle ensured that the temperatures within it were always high. There was, of course, no air or natural light. However, to creatures whose home was Hell, this was of little consequence.

In the approximate center of the cavern, a stone table had been chiseled out at Draxen’s behest. It was rectangular with curved edges and stood at the height of my thighs, although to most of the beings here, it was above waist height. Around the table, a thousand dark spiritual beings stood. The figures were motionless and completely silent, on Draxen’s orders.

Grob and I stood on the north side of the table. The tension in the chamber was high.

Draxen gazed around the table, meeting every eye and peering intently into every face. Every being around the table was afraid to meet his eye, and equally afraid not to. Draxen himself seemed distrustful and ill at ease. A moment later, we found out why.

A fanfare erupted outside one of the low dark entrances to the cavern, and through the darkness swept an even deeper darkness. Lucifer entered the room. Waves of dark power rippled out from him.

Lucifer spoke. “For three years now, we have expended considerable resources and effort in attempting to tempt Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, into disobedience to his Father; or, failing that, to limit the influence he can have on the human rabble here. For reasons of poor local leadership—or, perhaps, for some other reason—these objectives have not been met.”

Lucifer paused after this and looked accusingly at Draxen, who bridled at the ill-concealed insult but made no attempt to defend himself.

Lucifer continued, "Following recent developments involving the resurrection of a dead human and clear indications that Jesus is having real success at removing people from our control, I have decided that we will bring this charade to an end. We will incite the humans to kill Jesus, as we did with John the Baptist. If we succeed, we will have removed a major problem; if we do not succeed, we can at least disrupt whatever plan our Great Enemy is working out. As nothing seems to have been achieved by the leadership here, I have become involved myself over the last few days. This very night, we will put the final parts of our plan into operation."

Grob bravely but foolishly asked permission to speak. I knew that he was going to argue against this change of plan. Obviously, so did Lucifer, as he hissed at Grob to be silent. Grob was not so foolish as to persevere, and he quickly subdued himself.

Lucifer dismissed us, and we silently trooped out of the chamber, bowing low as we did so.

Hurrying back to duty, we were informed by one of Grob's assistants that Jesus and his disciples had just entered the house where Peter and John had been earlier in the day to arrange the Passover meal. Grob was clearly nervous now, and so was I. Neither of us dared to put into words what each of us were thinking, but the way ahead seemed madness. Granted, we had made little progress so far, and, yes, more and more people were being released from our bondage and turning to our Great Enemy. However, even if the previous strategy had made little progress, at least it made sense. To go all out for Jesus's destruction seemed to invite open warfare with Heaven. A war we had little hope of winning. Worse, because of our duties, Grob and I would be right in the middle of the opening round.

The last sliver of the sun had just slipped below the horizon. Night was coming. As we traveled, I saw thousands of junior demons scurrying through the city like a black tide, hurrying to prepare our forces for the actions that were to come and to work on those humans who were susceptible to our influences and who might prove useful to us in the coming hours.

We reached the house and glided through a wall. I was constantly scanning in all directions. I expected an angelic assault team to hit us at any moment. Surely, the Great Enemy would recognize the moves we were making, and then the truce would cease and his response would come with a vengeance. However, the night was calm, and there seemed to be no angelic activity at all.

We gently levitated until we emerged into the room where Jesus and his disciples sat around a long table. Jesus sat in the middle, and the disciples surrounded him: five of them on one side, five on the other, and one at either

end of the table. None of the disciples looked comfortable, and several seemed to be angry, though they kept silent.

Another of Grob's assistants hung bat-like from the ceiling in one corner of the room. Seeing Grob and me appear, he righted himself and hurried over to report to Grob. He described with amusement how the disciples, true to form, had been arguing once again about who was most important. Further, although everyone was now seated at the meal table, none of them had been willing to take upon himself the role of a servant and perform the humble task of washing the feet of those at the table, a customary practice before a meal. Normally, Grob would have been delighted at this, eager to have all the details so that he could examine every angle to find new ways of attacking this troublesome group of humans. Tonight, however, he seemed distracted, and waved his assistant away.

Having made his report, the assistant bowed and hurried away. I guessed that he would not get far before being found by one of the messengers hurrying through the city informing all our forces that we were now on a full-war footing. Within moments, he would be dispatched to join one of the fighting legions that were constantly arriving from Hell. I suspected that he would make a poor warrior, but we would need every weapon, every soldier, in the fight that I surmised was coming. I wondered if any of us would survive the night.

Through the open window a cool breeze blew. Dusk was settling in, and it was just as well that the owner of the house had thoughtfully arranged for several lamps to be placed at strategic points around the room to provide a warm and comfortable glow. How long had it been since I felt comfortable? How long had it been since I was at peace? With a rueful honesty, I could not deny that I had known nothing of peace or comfort since I rebelled against God. As time went by, I had become ever more wretched. These last thirty-three years had brought matters to a head. The part of me that had hated God and longed for his humiliation had been challenged by what I had seen of Jesus. Tonight, I was appalled at the thought that in the extremely unlikely event of us getting close to success, I would not want anything to happen to Jesus. I no longer knew exactly where my loyalty lay. I would be unhappy if we failed, but if we succeeded, it would be even worse: the green shoots of hope that had stirred within me since meeting Jesus would die with him. The last glimmers of light within me would be snuffed out, and only total blackness and an empty, raging despair would be left.

My thoughts were interrupted as Jesus got up from the supper table, took off the outer robe he was wearing, and put on an apron. Then, he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of his disciples. An embarrassed silence filled the room, and several of the disciples looked shamefaced.

Grob guffawed, the tension within him released. Here was the second person of the Trinity dressed and acting like a lowly servant. This was sweet victory. I, however, was silent. At last, I was beginning to understand that God was demonstrating to all of his creation that true greatness lay in what you were and what your relationship with God was, not with empty titles or hollow

positions. I found myself respecting Jesus more and more. His humility only underscored his true greatness.

After he had finished washing their feet, Jesus took off the apron, put his robe back on, and went back to his place at the table.

Then, he said, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master’, and rightly so. That is what I am. So, if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you must do. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.”

Jesus continued, “You’ve no idea how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering. It’s the last meal I’ll eat until we all eat together in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus paused and then added, “I have something hard but important to say to you. One of you is going to betray me, hand me over to the conspirators. One of you here at this moment, eating with me.”

A stunned silence followed. Judas looked shell-shocked: so, Jesus knew! However, his stunned reaction went unnoticed among the other disciples, who were also shaken by what they had just heard, but for very different reasons. The disciples looked around at one another, wondering who Jesus was talking about.

Suddenly, the room was full of voices, as, one after the other, the disciples asked, “It isn’t me, is it?”

Jesus said, “It’s one of the Twelve, one who eats with me out of the same bowl. In one sense, it turns out that the Son of Man is entering into a way of treachery well marked out by the scriptures—no surprises here. In another sense, the man who turns him in, turns traitor to the Son of Man—better never to have been born than do this.”

Peter quietly motioned to John, who sat next to Jesus, and whispered, “Ask him who he means.”

So, being the closest, John whispered, “Master, who?”

Jesus quietly said, “The one to whom I give this piece of bread.”

At that moment, a dark horror came over me. A deep darkness had entered the room behind me. I knew that feeling. Seldom in Hell had I been in his immediate presence, but every time I had, I experienced the same shrinking within my innermost being that came whenever I was in the presence of Lucifer. Lucifer had entered the room silently behind me.

Turning slowly, Grob and I abased ourselves.

As Jesus handed the piece of bread to Judas, Lucifer entered into Judas and took possession of the man. Looking up from the floor, I saw the face of Judas change and harden as the supreme darkness entered his soul.

Jesus calmly and directly said, "What you must do, do. Do it and get it over with."

I was unsure which one he was addressing—Judas or Lucifer—and concluded that he was probably addressing both of them.

Judas rose and, still holding the piece of bread, left.

I doubted that the other disciples realized what was going on. They probably thought that, as Judas was in charge of the funds, Jesus was asking him to buy something for the Passover feast, or was directing him to go and help the poor.

I relaxed as Lucifer left the room, now firmly in possession of Judas. For a few moments, the room was still fairly quiet, the disciples still shaken by Jesus's earlier statement that one of them would betray him. Then, one made an oblique reference to some act he had done earlier in the week, and the disciples were off again, arguing about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom. Grob clapped his hands with glee.

Jesus had been telling these men that he was about to endure terrible suffering, and all they could think to talk about was which of them was the most important. What sort of friends and followers were these?

But it was with his customary patience and gentleness that Jesus intervened, saying, "Kings like to throw their weight around, and people in authority like to give themselves fancy titles. It's not going to be that way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior; let the leader act the part of the servant."

He paused, adding, "Who would you rather be: the one who eats the dinner or the one who serves the dinner? You'd rather eat and be served, right? But I've taken my place among you as the one who serves."

Jesus then told them to pack up. The disciples seemed to have finally gotten the message, and all of them played a part in cleaning up and tidying the room.

The disciples quietly left the building. Jesus lingered a moment to thank their host, then hurried out into the night, leading the disciples toward the Mount of Olives. As he went, he said to them, "Before the night's over, you're going to fall to pieces because of what happens to me. There is a scripture that says, 'I'll strike the Shepherd, helter-skelter the sheep will be scattered.' But after I

am raised up, I, your Shepherd, will go ahead of you, leading the way to Galilee.”

Peter broke in, “Even if everyone else is ashamed of you when things fall to pieces, I won’t be.”

Jesus said, “Don’t be so sure. Today, this very night, in fact, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.”

Peter blustered, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you.”

All the other disciples loudly proclaimed the same.

Chapter 24

Arrest

Jesus and the disciples crossed a small water course called the Kidron Brook and then came to a garden called Gethsemane. The night was now dark. There was a full moon, but numerous clouds high overhead blocked the light it provided.

Grob and I were the only two spiritual beings in the immediate vicinity, although my finely tuned senses could detect the sounds of the hundreds of thousands of demons who were being marshaled into battle groups for tens of miles around. Of Gillwain and his team there was no sign. I found myself secretly hoping that the whole of my old regiment would show up. If they did, I wondered on which side I would fight in the battle that must inevitably break out this night. However, the forces of Heaven made no appearance. The night was dark in every sense and growing rapidly darker.

Jesus asked eight of the disciples if they would stay where they were and pray for him. Then, taking Peter, James, and John, he went a little farther into the garden. He turned to the three disciples who remained with him, and said, "I am overwhelmed with a terrible sorrow that is crushing the life from me. Stay here and keep watch with me."

He then went a little way farther on, knelt down, and began to pray fervently. Grob and I watched him. The anguish Jesus was experiencing was clear on his features, and after some minutes had passed, he was flat on the floor, his face on the ground. He prayed quietly, but the anguish in his voice was evident. "My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But, please, not what I want, but what you want."

After a while, he stood up and walked back the few paces to his disciples. To his obvious dismay he found them fast asleep. He said sadly, "Can't you stick it out with me for a single hour? Stay alert; be in prayer, so you don't wander into temptation without even knowing you're in danger."

He then left them a second time and returned to the place where he had been praying. Once again, he knelt in prayer. For a while, he prayed silently, but the pain was evident in his expression, and sweat started to run down his face. The sweat ran as freely as blood, and I began to understand that he was wrestling with a tremendous decision. I could only guess what that decision was, but I reckoned that, above all, he wanted to do his Father's will; nevertheless, his human nature was screaming at him to run away from it.

Once more, he spoke aloud. "My Father, if there is no other way than this, drinking this cup to the dregs, I'm ready. Do it your way."

Once more, he went back to the disciples, and, yet again, he found them asleep. He looked sadly at them but let them sleep on. He returned once more to his prayers.

For the third time, he prayed, and then, once again, he went back to the disciples.

He said, "Are you going to sleep all night? No—you've slept long enough. Time's up. The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hand of sinners. Get up. Let's get going. My betrayer has arrived."

At that moment, the disciples heard what I had been hearing for the last ten minutes. A crowd of thugs approached the garden. Judas led them. He had originally taken the band of ruffians lent him by the high priest to the upper room where Jesus and his disciples had celebrated the Passover feast together. Finding that his prey had gone, Judas guessed where Jesus and the disciples might be, and then he had led his band here to the Garden of Gethsemane. Within a few minutes, the crowd of more than fifty men came into sight, illuminated by the lanterns and flaming torches that many of them carried. Most of the group carried cudgels and swords. They were obviously looking for trouble, and the disciples hurried to stand behind Jesus.

Jesus, who did not seem surprised in the least by this development, went out to meet the group of thugs. The threatening group started to draw menacingly around him, disturbing the quiet of the night as they muttered threats, curses, and insults. The disciples were hustled backward. They looked scared and uncertain. None of them moved to defend their Lord. Jesus, however, seemed quite calm and unafraid.

Boldly he asked them, "Who are you after?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

Jesus replied, "I am he."

Again, as he said, "I am," the smallest fraction of the glory and majesty of his divinity shone through. As before, I found myself thrown to the ground by the power of his splendor. For once, he allowed the human maggots around him to see a little of that glory, and the crowd of fifty-odd threatening men were bowled over by the brightness and power of the tiny amount of his splendor that he had allowed to stream through. For a moment, there was silence again in the garden, as stunned the men lay motionless on the ground. Then, groggily, they came back to consciousness. Part of me was silently urging Jesus to walk rapidly away at this moment. However, he waited patiently for the group of ruffians to climb to their feet. As they regained their feet, the thugs shot each other worried glances. Who were they dealing with here? I reckoned they would possibly have wavered and broken at this point were it not for Judas loudly urging them on, threatening to inform on them to the high priest. Even that might not have been enough, but, at this point, a vast crowd

of Grob's minions came pouring into the garden, hurrying to whisper encouragement and exhortation to the wary and quiet thugs. It was the work of but a few moments for Grob's tempters to have effective control of the crowd, and, once again, they became menacing and dangerous.

In the spiritual realm surrounding me, the air was heavy with the threatening presence of Hell's best legions as they moved into position all around the garden. Above it, below it, and all around it, was the cream of our armies. The night became darker and more threatening. I recognized Draxen shouting commands and instructions. Where were Heaven's armies this night?

Jesus was fully aware of all this spiritual activity, but he gave our forces barely a glance. He kept his attention focused on the group of thugs who once more surrounded him. For a second time, he asked, "Who are you after?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

Jesus answered "I told you, that's me. I'm the one. So, if it's me you're after, let these others go."

The disciples had been passive, stunned by the development of events, but, suddenly, Peter came alive. Yelling furiously, he pulled out a sword that he had concealed beneath his cloak, and then he leaped forward. No warrior, he swung the sword wildly and blindly into the crowd ahead of him. It was perhaps fortunate for those around him that he did not know how best to use the weapon, for he was a large and strong man. Nevertheless, his slashing weapon found a target, barely missing cleaving open the skull of a man in the crowd. The blade chopped off the man's ear and left a gaping wound on the side of his head. I recognized the tall and gangly man who was now screaming and staggering backward, holding his hands to his gaping wound and looking in horrified disbelief at his ear, which now lay on the ground. It was Malchus, a servant of the high priest.

Jesus issued a stern order to Peter. "Put back your sword. Do you think for a minute I'm not going to drink this cup my Father gave me?"

Then, bending down, he picked up the ear, and, touching it to the wound on the right side of Malchus's head, he healed him.

A number of gasps filled the air as those around Malchus marveled at the miracle they had just witnessed. However, the air was heavy with the presence and power of evil, and there was no going back now.

Jesus spoke again. "What is this, jumping me with swords and clubs as if I were a dangerous criminal? Day after day, I've been with you in the temple, and you've not so much as lifted a hand against me. But do it your way—it's a dark night, a dark hour."

Incited further by the demonic prompting that was all around them, the gang of thugs seized Jesus, and, manhandling him roughly, they bound his hands

together behind his back. At this, the disciples scattered, horror and despair written all over their faces. I could not account why the gang of thugs let them go. Certainly, urgent shouts of command came from Grob to his minions that they were to prompt the human mob to arrest the disciples also, but the thugs hesitated, and the disciples ran fast.

I was horrified by this turn of events. Did these cretins not realize they were manhandling the Son of God himself? Yet, this evening seemed to belong solely to the forces of night. There was no help coming for Jesus. The heavens were shut.

The crowd roughly shoved Jesus forward and started to leave the garden, heading back toward the city of Jerusalem.

The crowd hurried Jesus along. Even these men of violence could sense the darkness and evil of the night, and they wanted to finish their mission and get back to lighted rooms and the presence of more people. However, that did not stop them from repeatedly kicking at Jesus's legs as they shoved him forward along the poorly lit path.

Grob was clearly experiencing mixed emotions as we followed along behind the group. Such was his hatred of Jesus that he could hardly contain the pleasure and glee he felt at the rough treatment that Jesus was receiving. Then, every few moments, the realization hit him that this was one of the Trinity who was being manhandled, and he would shoot a fearful look around, anticipating the full weight of the Great Enemy's armies descending. However, the skies were empty of anything save our forces. I knew that Grob must be as mystified as I was. The situation was inexplicable.

Eventually, we reached the home of Caiaphas, the high priest. The area was teeming with our forces. The walls around his courtyard were lined with dark warriors set at fixed intervals. They scanned the skies repeatedly, clearly expecting an attack. The skies above us were equally crowded, as bat-winged warriors from our armies patrolled the skies.

Jesus was hustled through the courtyard and into the buildings of the high priest's residence. Avoiding the crush of spiritual beings crowding around the group, I stepped through a wall and found myself in a lighted chamber. A group of animated men sat around the room. There was an air of excitement about the group, and the gleam of anticipation shone in their eyes. I recognized the senior religious leaders of the Jewish nation. Most of them had been present a few days earlier when Judas had come to them with his plan to betray Jesus.

A respectful knock sounded on the door at the far end of the room. Caiaphas nodded to a servant, and the doors were swung open. Jesus was shoved into the room, followed by the mob that had arrested him. Judas had by now disappeared. Caiaphas harshly addressed the leader of the mob and told him in no uncertain terms to clear his rabble out of his presence, save for half a dozen guards to ensure that the prisoner did not attempt to escape. I noticed that Jesus already had an ugly bruise on his temple and that he was limping.

However, his characteristic peace and graciousness had not deserted him, even at this time. The leader of the mob respectfully bowed his head to the high priest, and, indicating that the half dozen men closest to Jesus should stay, he led the rest of the mob out of the room and closed the doors behind him.

An excited chatter broke out across the room. Caiaphas held up his right hand, and the murmuring was instantly silenced. He glared vengefully at Jesus, clearly savoring these moments. In a smug voice, he ordered, "Bring in the first witness."

A thin, balding man entered the room and stood respectfully in front of Caiaphas, who started to ask him questions. At first, the man seemed confident; he recited an answer that he had clearly been coached to say. It was clear to me and everyone in the room that he had been prepared, but it was equally clear that he had not learned his lessons too well. He soon started to stumble and contradict himself, and his composure vanished. There was no cross-examination on the part of the defense, but it was embarrassingly obvious that this man was a corrupt witness. As the man's nervousness grew, he started to jumble up the answers he had been taught, until it was clear that he was talking nonsense. By the laws of his own people, he should be subject to punishment for lying under oath, and, realizing that he was in a precarious position, he began to panic. Caiaphas, recognizing that even in this rigged courtroom the proceedings were in danger of descending into farce, angrily ordered the man removed.

A succession of witnesses followed. It was clear that not a single one of them was genuine. They had all been prepared in a hurry, and even though no one in the room was trying to expose the lies that they were delivering, the extent to which they contradicted each other and even themselves made it clear that the proceedings were rigged. Increasingly, Caiaphas shot murderous glances at two of his subordinates, who were seated some distance from him, on his left. I guessed that these were the men he had ordered to fix the witnesses. Well, clearly, they had done a poor job, and equally clearly, they were in trouble, as the proceedings had been revealed to be fraudulent. The high priest himself was in danger of being exposed as both a crook and a fool.

Jesus, however, said not a word. As always, there was a sense of calm, peace, and serenity around him. This only seemed to infuriate the high priest even more.

Eventually, after two particularly dismal witnesses whom he had been foolish enough to call in together and who could not agree on a single thing, Caiaphas lost his patience and decided to try to incriminate Jesus directly, here in the courtroom, even though everyone knew this to be against the law.

Standing suddenly, he ordered the last two witnesses removed. Then, leaning forward over the table, he fixed his eyes on Jesus. His face was red, the veins in his neck bulging, as he glared at Jesus. Spitting out the words with venom, he said, "What do you have to say to these accusations?"

Jesus was silent; he said nothing.

Caiaphas tried again. "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?"

The irony of the situation struck me. Grob had spent years trying to find a situation that would trap Jesus in an impossible position, and Jesus had neatly sidestepped every attempt. Now this human who was in such a temper that he could not think straight had stumbled, unthinking, onto a perfect trap. If Jesus simply said nothing, the case against him would collapse. Caiaphas would not be able to continue this farce any longer. However, if Jesus did say nothing, Caiaphas would have one less opportunity to recognize Jesus for who he was. In effect, by speaking up, Jesus was allowing himself to be condemned to death, in an attempt to save the very man who was seeking to have him murdered. Once again, I marveled at the courage and nobility of this man Jesus.

Jesus did not hesitate but spoke up loudly, in full hearing of all present. "Yes, I am, and you'll see it yourself: the Son of Man, seated at the right hand of the Mighty One, arriving on the clouds of Heaven."

Caiaphas took a sharp intake of breath. He then theatrically took hold of his own robes and ripped them apart. He yelled loudly, "Why do we need witnesses to accuse him? You all heard him blaspheme! Are you all going to stand for such blasphemy?"

A chorus of angry shouts filled the room. "Death! That seals his death sentence."

Relief and triumph briefly chased each other across the high priest's features. "I agree: this man must die. It is unfortunate that we do not have the authority to kill him ourselves, but I am sure that we can get the Roman governor to agree to his execution. We shall leave for the governor's palace before dawn." Then, looking at the half dozen thugs who still stood near the door, he spoke up again. "This man has blasphemed the living God. There is no reason why you should treat him gently."

Grinning wolfishly, the mindless ruffians closed in and grabbed Jesus by his arms. As they did so, several of the prominent men around the table stood and walked up to Jesus. Two of them spat in his face, and one slapped him. Obviously, they were settling old scores. The truth and honesty of Jesus had revealed all too clearly the bankruptcy of their so-called righteousness.

Jesus was bundled from the room. I guessed that he was in for a rough time, and, clearly, so did Grob. He was suddenly nervous and suggested that I should check outside. Things were escalating out of control.

I smoothly accelerated out of the room, passing without a sound through the wall I had entered and emerging once more into the main courtyard of the chief priest's palace. I quickly scanned the skies. The only change that I could

detect was that even more of our forces were now in evidence. Hell must have been emptied of almost every fighting unit she possessed.

Guessing that a careful watch would be kept far out across the galaxy—and beyond—for the first sign of a move by Heaven’s armies, I saw no point in scouting on my own. Doubtless, the alarm would be sounded at the first sign of an enemy force. I switched my attention to what was happening immediately in front of me.

Somehow, Peter had managed to get himself into the courtyard. I was surprised to see him, considering the panic that all of the disciples had been in just a short time earlier. However, once again, he was in trouble as one of the high priest’s servants seemed to have rumbled him.

A servant girl was looking hard at him as he stood warming himself close to a fire. She loudly accused, “You were with the Nazarene, Jesus.”

Peter stiffened and violently cried out, “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Then, before the girl could say anything else, he hurried away and went out to the porch. As he reached the porch, a rooster crowed.

The girl was not to be put off, and she followed him and began telling the people standing around, “He’s one of them.”

Peter blustered and denied it again.

The girl placed her hands on her hips and angrily denounced him, but, seeing that no one made a move to support her, she eventually and reluctantly returned to her duties.

However, her words had sown seeds of doubt in the minds of those who stood around. Furtive whispers broke out among a group of men, and soon they moved forward to crowd around Peter.

One of them spoke up. “You’ve got to be one of them; you’ve got ‘Galilean’ written all over you.”

Peter got really nervous and looked around him, wild-eyed. He roughly pushed his way through the group of men surrounding him. As he did so, he swore repeatedly and claimed never to have set eyes on Jesus. Just then, the rooster crowed a second time. With a start, Peter stopped walking, and I remembered Jesus’s words to him just a short time earlier: that before the cock crowed twice, Peter would deny him three times. Peter’s face crumpled, and he began to weep bitterly as he hurried out of the courtyard. No one made any move to stop him or follow him.

I went in search of Grob. I found him hovering above another small inner courtyard that was close to the inner room in which Jesus had been originally tried. Jesus was in the center of the square yard. A hood had been pulled

over his head, and he was being repeatedly kicked and struck with fists and sticks. Savage cries of "Who hit you Messiah? Prophecy to us" filled the night air. Grob oscillated between looking down exultantly and anxiously scanning the sky as he waited for Heaven's vengeance to fall.

To the east, the sky was lightening as the dawn approached. Someone else must have been watching for the dawn, as, at this point, one of the high priest's senior aides entered the courtyard from a side door and commanded that Jesus be brought back inside: the high priest and his party were ready to leave for the governor's palace.

Immediately, Grob's nervousness reached new heights. "We'll be walking into an ambush. Enemy forces must be waiting for us. They're not just going to allow this to go down. Go and check out the governor's palace, and check out the temple area too while you're about it; the high priest may decide to go there also."

I decided to check the temple area first. I soared up to about thirty thousand feet, scattering a regiment of our Ninety-Second Legion as I went. I grinned briefly to myself, seeing the rage on their commanding officer's face as I sent his impeccably ordered troopers flying helter-skelter in all directions, as they sought to avoid me. If he wanted to make an issue of it, he could always challenge me to meet him in open combat. I knew, of course, that he would not be so suicidally stupid as to ever contemplate such an action.

From the vantage point of this height, I scanned the area minutely, using every one of my thirteen senses. One thing caught my attention. The harried figure of Judas Iscariot was entering one of the side doors to the temple, which looked as if it had just been opened to him. I slowly drifted down, knowing that it would take the slow-moving human many seconds to get through the doorway and walk to one of the areas of the temple where officials would be working at this time of the early morning. I drifted soundlessly down through the roof, and, silent as an invisible mist, I moved through the stonework, emerging unseen and unheard through the ceiling of an inner room just as Judas entered. He made an interesting sight: his features were haggard, his hair wild and disarrayed. When he spoke, his voice was tight with tension and inner pain. In short, he was the perfect picture of a human being racked with guilt and regret, which I guessed was exactly what he was.

Distraught, he almost sobbed the words as he said, "I've sinned. I have betrayed an innocent man."

Two assistants of the high priest faced him. They had been present when he agreed to betray Jesus, and they knew exactly what was happening now at the high priest's residence. They were completely unconcerned by Judas's agony.

With smug composure, they replied, "What do we care? That's your problem."

Judas gave a strangled cry, turned on his heel, and hurried out of the room. As he passed an open doorway into one of the temple's inner courts, he threw the thirty pieces of silver he had been holding into the room. Then, he hurried out of the building and into the night. Something about his manner told me that he would be joining us in Hell very shortly. I was sure that he would be taking his own life before this night was over.

I carefully but rapidly searched through the building. Having satisfied myself that the site was clear of enemy forces, I also checked out the Roman governor's palace, with exactly the same results.

I returned to Grob within six minutes of leaving him; 99 percent of the time taken had been spent observing Judas.

The high priest and his entourage were now preparing themselves to leave for the palace of the Roman governor. Jesus stood in the middle of the group. The hood had been removed from his head. His face was a mass of bruises and caked blood, he was missing a front tooth, and his hands were securely bound behind his back.

Caiaphas, realizing that to take a prisoner before the governor in this state hardly reflected well on himself, brusquely ordered one of his attendants to take a cloth and a bowl of water and wipe away the blood from Jesus's face. Once that was done, the high priest led the way from his palace.

Chapter 25

The Roman Governor

The sky to the east was lightening as the high priest's party approached the Roman governor's palace. I had chosen to walk at the rear of the procession. The pathetically slow humans crawled along at a snail's pace toward their destination, and now I gently levitated twenty feet from the ground as the high priest came to a halt in front of a Roman centurion, who, from the deference given him by the Roman troops present, appeared to command the palace guard.

Looking as if he were sucking on a lemon, the high priest asked if the Roman governor would see him. Clearly, he hated making any request of the detested occupying powers.

The centurion politely asked the high priest to wait while he informed Pontius Pilate, the governor, that the high priest wanted an audience.

A few minutes, later the tramp of marching feet was heard by the human cattle, and they pulled themselves upright as they prepared to meet the governor, who was proceeded by a detachment of a junior officer and a dozen legionnaires. Clearly, Pilate felt none too secure here, and the moment that he and the high priest set eyes on each other, the mutual antipathy between the two men was evident.

Pilate must have been a powerfully built man in his youth. His broad shoulders and barrel chest were still evident, but rolls of flab now covered his waist and rear. He looked like a prizefighter gone to seed. His hair was sparse and brushed across the bald patch that crowned his head. His face, however, did not entirely match the pugnacious appearance that his body must have once held. In particular, there was a weakness about his chin, and his eyes perpetually shifted, darting back and forth, as he constantly assessed the situation around him. His eyes flickered without recognition or interest over Jesus and the high priest's attendants. Only when they rested briefly on the high priest did a spark of reaction appear. The distaste and dislike that Pilate felt for the man appeared for the merest fraction of a second and then vanished again.

Nevertheless, Pilate made an attempt at civility when he asked Caiaphas what he wanted.

The high priest either made less of an effort to be civil or, perhaps, was less skilled at the game than Pilate. For, when Caiaphas spoke, the dislike and distaste in his voice were clear to all present. "I have brought a notorious criminal who deserves the severest punishment."

Pilate made a visible effort to retain his patience and composure. He replied, "What has he done? What charges do you bring against this man?" Once again, he looked over at Jesus. This time his glance rested on Jesus a moment longer, but it was clear that Pilate considered him of little importance.

The high priest's reply was brimming with impatience and frustration. "If he hadn't been doing something evil, do you think we'd be here bothering you?"

Pilate just sounded tired when he replied, "You take him. Judge him by your law."

Caiaphas almost spat out his reply; such was his frustration and rage at having to ask for anything from Pilate. "We're not allowed to kill anyone."

There was silence for a moment. Pilate looked speculatively at Caiaphas and then at Jesus.

This time there was a hint of impatience in Pilate's reply. "So, tell me, what is he supposed to have done?"

Caiaphas replied, "We found this man undermining our law and order, forbidding taxes to be paid to Caesar, and setting himself up as the Messiah king."

The first two claims were lies. Pilate seemed to guess as much, since a look of weariness passed across his features. The look of weariness increased as the high priest's group all started to follow their leader in firing accusations at Jesus. Jesus, however, said not a word. He just stood there, and all about him reigned the customary sense of peace and composure that had marked his life through all the time that Grob and I had dogged his steps.

Pilate was surprised by Jesus's demeanor. He looked over at Jesus and asked, "Don't you hear that long list of accusations? Aren't you going to say something?"

But Jesus kept silent.

I could see that Pilate was impressed, really impressed. He lifted a hand to stem the flow of increasingly heated accusations from the high priest's group, and, signaling Jesus to come forward, he led him a little way into the palace, out of earshot of the Jews. The Roman soldiers surrounding Pilate watched Jesus warily, despite the fact that he was bound and offered no threat to Pilate.

Pilate, however, seemed relaxed as he asked, "Is this true that you're king of the Jews?"

Jesus replied, "Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you this about me?"

Pilate said, "Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priest turned you over to me. What did you do?"

"My kingdom," said Jesus, "doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king."

Pilate regarded him appraisingly; Jesus certainly had his attention now. Seeming to make up his mind, Pilate led Jesus back to the high priest's group.

Pilate then said, "I find nothing wrong here. He seems harmless enough to me."

At this, Caiaphas exploded. "He's stirring up unrest among the people with his teaching, disturbing the peace everywhere, starting in Galilee and now though all Judea. He's a dangerous man, endangering the peace."

At this point, Pilate spotted a chance to end this time-consuming charade. "So, he started in Galilee, did he? Well, then, I guess that he's probably a Galilean. King Herod is king over Galilee, and he's here in Jerusalem, so I advise you to take him to His Majesty."

That said, Pilate turned on his heel, and, signaling to his escort, he walked back into the building.

Caiaphas could hardly contain himself at this turn of events; however, seeing that there was nothing to do now but to go to Herod, if he wanted Jesus executed, he angrily signaled to his group, and they roughly shoved Jesus forward, turning in the direction of Herod's Jerusalem residence.

Grob paled as he realized the significance of what Pilate had just said. What if Herod also refused to take action against Jesus? Hell was now committed to one course of action. Tonight, we must get the human maggots to kill Jesus. We could take no action against him directly. This plan would only work if the humans did our dirty work for us. Grob called his best tempters to him and quickly arranged a fallback plan. If Herod failed us also, Hell would play its last card: we would incite the mob against Jesus.

Grob swiveled in midair, in the merest fraction of a second, and, clapping his hands, he ordered every one of his subordinates to get out and start working on the crowd. He then flitted to the shoulder of the high priest and whispered the plan to him. The high priest, thinking these ideas were his own, beckoned to one of his entourage, and in a low whisper, he ordered him to get every available man, rouse a mob, and get them to call for Jesus's death. Caiaphas told his assistant that he could raid the temple treasury for bribes if need be: just get a crowd baying for Jesus's blood.

Grob's demonic assistants flew off in several directions, while one of the high priest's assistants trotted off in another.

The party of humans then set off again in the direction of Herod's mansion.

Eventually, we reached Herod's sumptuous Jerusalem residence. The demonic guards around the building were so busy gazing upward in exultation at the power of our armies that they were not paying proper attention to their duties. However, when they saw who the prisoner was within our group, they sobered up pretty quickly. The realization hit them that if God should act within the next hour, they would be right in the path of his wrath.

Caiaphas was quickly recognized by the human guards who surrounded Herod, and he and his group were immediately admitted to Herod's presence.

Herod seemed to have grown even more dissolute in the relatively short time since I had last seen him. His bloodshot eyes darted rapidly about in his fleshy, weak face, and the aroma of alcohol emanated from his body through his sweat. However, he seemed delighted to see Jesus, shouting aloud to his attendants that, at last, he was going to see the miracle worker face-to-face.

As Jesus was shoved into the center of the room, Herod signaled to a servant to pull a seat from the side of the room and place it a few feet in front of Jesus. Herod excitedly took this seat and immediately began firing questions and demands for a miracle. Jesus said not a word. Herod kept this up for a few minutes, his questions and demands gradually slowing down and getting farther and farther apart as he realized that Jesus was not responding. Suddenly, he burst into a rage and launched a tirade of threats and abuse at Jesus, intermingled with promises that if Jesus would just do a miracle for him, he would have him released. I saw Caiaphas bridle at this, then immediately relax as he realized that Herod's promise was completely worthless and that he had no intention of keeping his word. However, Jesus said not a word, just looked at Herod steadily with what seemed to be sadness in his eyes. I knew enough about Jesus now to realize that his sadness would be for the man who sat before him, who was so far from God and what he could have been. I was sure that, even now, Jesus had not a thought for himself.

Seeing that his threats and bullying had gotten him nowhere, Herod reacted like the spoiled child he was and resorted to personal insults. Not willing to waste this opportunity, Caiaphas reminded him that Jesus was being called king of the Jews by the people, but that, of course, was Herod's title. As he spoke, Caiaphas offered a low bow, seemingly of respect, but even as he did so, his eyes revealed the contempt he felt for Herod.

Reacting predictably to Caiaphas's goading, Herod's face turning a shade of puce as his temper soared. Calling for his guards, he suggested that, as the "king of the Jews" was visiting them, they should treat him as the royal visitor he was.

One of Herod's ministers left the room, only to return with an old robe of Herod's. He draped it around Jesus's shoulders, then led the rest of Herod's retinue in offering mocking bows and giving long and sarcastic salutations. Herod sat guffawing in laughter. Jesus, however, just stood there impassively.

Eventually, Herod tired of the game, and, waving Jesus away, he addressed Caiaphas. "Take him back to Pilate. I find no fault with him."

Caiaphas looked fit to explode, but, seeing that he had no choice, he signaled to his retinue and turned to leave.

Jesus, still bound, was roughly shoved out of the room as the high priest's group began to retrace their steps back to the governor's palace.

I reckoned that only the intense hatred that Caiaphas felt for Jesus would explain how Caiaphas could bear to go back to Pilate yet again.

Eventually, we arrived at the governor's palace once again. As our column came to a halt, Caiaphas, his voice tight with tension and frustration, asked the same centurion for an audience with the governor.

The Roman officer bowed his head deferentially and ordered one of the guards to pass the word that the high priest requested an audience with His Excellency. However, everyone present caught a glimpse of the smug grin that passed briefly across the officer's face before he smothered it.

Caiaphas saw the grin just as clearly as everyone else did, and his temper rose even more.

Eventually, Pilate emerged once more through the palace door, flanked by a squad of tough-looking legionnaires. This time Pilate made less of an attempt to be diplomatic; the impatience on his face was clear for all to see as he took in the same scene he had surveyed less than three hours earlier.

Caiaphas swallowed and began, "Your Excellency, I—"

Pilate cut him off. "You brought this man to me earlier as a disturber of the peace. I examined him in front of all of you and found there was nothing to your charges. And neither did Herod, obviously, for he has sent him back here with a clean bill of health. It's clear that he's done nothing wrong, let alone anything deserving death. I'm going to warn him to watch his step, and then I will let him go."

Grob looked ashen as he heard the governor's words. He immediately whispered in the high priest's ear, and then flitted to the governor's shoulder and began to work on him.

Caiaphas spoke in a low and threatening voice. "This man *is* a disturber of the peace. If you don't do something, you are going to spark a riot, for the people will not want him released."

Pilate's face registered open disbelief. He had a pretty clear idea by now that this whole charade was occurring because Caiaphas was envious of Jesus and wanted him out of the way.

"Well, let's put it to the test, shall we?" said Pilate. "We'll ask them directly."

Pilate signaled for Caiaphas to proceed into the palace. It was clear to all present that Pilate intended to address the people immediately, from the balcony on the far side of his palace, asking them whether he should release Jesus.

Caiaphas smiled, delighted that Pilate had fallen into his trap. "No, Your Excellency, it would be an act of defilement for me to enter your palace during this holy feast. I will join the people in the square and hear your decision from there."

Pilate scowled. He guessed correctly that the high priest wanted to sway the crowd. What he didn't know was that the result was already rigged, as, for the last three hours, the high priest's men had been assembling a hired mob.

For the tiniest moment, Grob was indecisive as to whether to stay with Jesus or Caiaphas. Suddenly, he decided, commanding me to stay with Jesus while he focused on the high priest.

Caiaphas swiveled on his heel and stalked away haughtily.

Pilate watched his retreating back, distaste now written clearly on his face. He then turned and led Jesus into the palace.

Returning once more to their earlier conversation, Pilate asked, "So, are you a king or not?"

Jesus answered, "You tell me. Because I am king, I was born and entered the world so that I could bear witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice."

Pilate said, "What is truth?"

At this point, Pilate came to a pair of stout wooden doors. One of his attendants hurried forward and opened the doors, and the party stepped through, onto a wide and deep balcony overlooking a large square.

Pilate walked majestically to a podium set in clear view of the square below. A crowd was already present, the usual numbers swelled by the visitors to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. The noise from below suddenly rose. The sound of anticipation filled the air as the crowd realized that the governor was about to make an announcement. People started to push from the sides of the square, surging forward to hear the governor better.

Pilate waited a few moments, taking care to stand tall and majestic in front of the crowd, then he sat down in a strategically placed chair that was raised on the highest point of the podium. Raising his hand for silence, he addressed the crowd.

The noise from the crowd dwindled as they waited expectantly.

Pilate began, "Loyal subjects of Rome, I have been brought a prisoner for judgment. I find nothing wrong in this man. It's your custom that I pardon one prisoner at Passover. Do you want me to pardon the 'king of the Jews'?"

Clearly, the high priest's men had done their work, for several strong voices shouted, "Not this one, but Barabbas."

Pilate looked surprised and then angry.

I recalled that at an earlier Intelligence briefing we had been informed that a rabble-rouser named Barabbas had been arrested and put in prison for armed insurrection and the killing of some Roman soldiers.

Pilate's face hardened as the crowd slowly picked up on the shouts and started to chant Barabbas's name.

At that point one of his attendants drew near and bowed his head, waiting to be acknowledged. Pilate curtly nodded for him to advance, and the young Roman secretary stepped forward and bowed as he presented Pilate with a scrawled note. "A message from your wife, Excellency."

Pilate nodded and waved him away. He unrolled the small scroll of paper.

I moved to one side to read what was on the paper, jostling aside two of Grob's junior demons, who stood in my way. They darted away like scalded cats, clearly still terrified of me and my reputation.

The message on the paper was brief and to the point: "Don't get mixed up in judging this noble man. I've just been through a long and troubled night because of a dream about him."

Pilate sat still for a while as he took in the contents of the message.

Below him, the noise from the crowd continued to grow.

Holding up his hand for quiet, Pilate tried again. "Which of the two do you want me to release?"

The crowd yelled back strongly, "Barabbas!"

"Then, what do I do with Jesus, the so-called Christ?"

The crowd shouted, seemingly as one, "Nail him to a cross!"

I gently levitated a dozen feet. The sky above me was thick with bat-winged warriors. The square below me was teeming with the dark and slithery forms of demonic tempters, who seemed to outnumber the human beings present. I floated back down as Pilate spoke again.

“But, for what crime?”

The crowd now roared, “Nail him to a cross!”

Seeing that he must do something if he was to avoid a riot, Pilate called one of the Roman officers present and gave orders that Jesus was to be scourged. He then rose imperiously and announced to the crowd that his court was now in recess, but that he would address them again within the hour.

The soldiers roughly shoved Jesus through the doorway. Grob and I followed. We passed through the corridor through which we had come earlier. Three-quarters of the way down, we took a side passage that terminated in a steep flight of steps. At the bottom of the steps, we came to a stout iron grille. One of the soldiers produced a key, unlocked the grille, and we stepped through.

We entered a gloomy space. The low ceiling barely cleared the heads of the tallest soldiers present. At the far end of the room, a bright rectangle showed where a doorway led through to a small courtyard. This doorway, too, was protected by a locked iron grille. The most senior Roman soldier told the others to wait and went off in search of an officer. We waited a few moments. No one spoke. In the background, we heard the sounds of the search for the officer. Eventually, he was located, and a tall, broad-shouldered centurion entered the room, followed by the soldier who had gone in search of him. As soon as the centurion arrived, I could feel the tension in his troops increase markedly. I knew enough about human psychology to recognize that this tension was not prompted by a desire to please a respected officer but by the fear of a sadistic bully. The man’s face seemed to confirm the assumption. His narrow eyes stared darkly out of a fleshy, porcine face. In his hand he idly carried a small cudgel. I could see on this instrument the shreds of skin and droplets of blood from numerous victims.

The centurion played idly with the cudgel as he inspected his latest victim. “What have we got here, then?” The soft menace in his voice was unmistakable.

The senior soldier present furnished the reply. “The governor just sent him down to us. The rabble-rouser claims to be king of the Jews. We’re to scourge him, but the governor wants him alive and back within an hour.”

A shadow of disappointment flashed across the centurion’s face. The knowledge that the governor had an interest in this prisoner constrained what he could do. Above all, he must ensure that the prisoner did not die on him, as

if he did, the centurion could end up here himself. As many, many prisoners did die under scourging, he must be careful.

“He’ll get him back alive ... just.” The centurion then started to bark out orders for the entire company to be called together.

Men came hurrying out from numerous side rooms and passageways, emerging into the courtyard. My phenomenal hearing could detect their muttered cursing and invocations; clearly this officer was thoroughly detested by his men.

The centurion nodded savagely in the direction of the courtyard, and Jesus was bundled out to the waiting troops.

The centurion followed idly, then said, “Right, boys, your afternoon’s entertainment has arrived. We’ve got here the ‘king of the Jews.’”

His men caught on quickly, hearing his mocking tone, and started to whoop and offer low bows to Jesus.

The centurion gave them a few seconds and then continued. “The governor wants us to make His Highness here welcome, as only we can do. So, he’s all yours, but he stays alive, *right?*”

His men nodded, taking careful note of the clear threat in the centurion’s voice as he made his final point.

The centurion turned on his heel and stalked off. It was beneath his dignity to watch the preliminaries.

The senior soldier now took charge. “Marcus, our royal visitor needs a crown. Who ever heard of a king without a crown? Go and see what you can find—oh, and get him a royal robe while you’re about it.”

The soldier named Marcus grinned and hurried off, anxious not to miss too much of the fun.

The senior soldier looked across at a few of his fellows and then continued, “You two, get his garments off him, particularly that underrobe—it’s too good to be ruined.” Turning to Jesus, he said, “Once you get here, you are of less value than your clothes. Besides, we need some recompense for our time and effort, and your clothes will buy our wine this evening.”

As the two soldiers pulled Jesus’s garments off him, another came up and, without any command, blindfolded him. Clearly, the group had done this on numerous occasions and knew the routine. Once they had blindfolded him, they began to slap him around. Two or three of them had vicious-looking cudgels similar to the one their officer carried. The first blow from one of these to Jesus’s head sent him staggering; the second knocked him to the floor. Not being able to see the blows coming made the torture all the worse, as there

was no opportunity to prepare for a blow. Some of the soldiers started to shove Jesus from one group to another, sending him sightless and reeling between them. Another put the butt of a spear between Jesus's feet as he was pushed across the courtyard, sending him crashing to the floor.

After ten minutes of this, Marcus returned, to be greeted by cheers from his comrades as he held up a purple robe and a mass of thorn briars. He loudly announced, "Your Majesty, your servant returns with your robe and crown."

Several of his fellows grabbed Jesus and held him steady as Marcus slipped the robe over his shoulders. He then wrapped the thorn briars tightly around Jesus's head. The senior soldier motioned with his hand, indicating that the blindfold should be removed. Marcus untied it. The senior soldier then led the others in mockingly bowing down to Jesus, loudly acclaiming, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

At this point, the centurion returned. He now carried a vicious-looking scourge instead of the cudgel he had hefted earlier. "Let's not keep the governor waiting, then. It's time we introduced His Majesty here to the scourge. Flavius, you give him forty, but he's not to die, you hear?"

The centurion turned to a short, thickset man whose bulging muscles spoke of his great strength. Putting his face only inches away from this man's, the centurion spoke again, slowly, distinctly, menacingly. "If he dies, Flavius, then so do you. Got it?"

Flavius nodded and took the scourge from his officer.

Several soldiers bundled Jesus across the courtyard to a post that stood in one corner. Jesus's wrists were shackled to the post, and the soldiers drew back and stood in a semicircle.

Flavius flexed his muscles and licked his lips, casting a nervous glance at his officer. Then, he concentrated on the task at hand. Visually gauging the distance to Jesus's back with obvious expertise, he swung the scourge in a wide arc and brought it down with a menacing whistle.

As the scourge raked across Jesus's back, the metal pieces plaited into each of the numerous tails of the whip gouged out strips of his flesh, leaving open bloody furrows in their wake. Jesus screamed. Flavius struck again and again, expertly targeting different parts of Jesus's back and altering the angle of the stroke to inflict the maximum pain. Soon, veins were exposed as the flesh around them was stripped away. Jesus gasped for breath as he tried to retain control of his senses and emotions in the midst of this hellish nightmare. At the twenty-seventh lashing, he lost consciousness and slumped to the floor, his arms pointing up at a weird angle, as his wrists were still shackled to the post.

Flavius paled and looked over at his officer, who shot him a murderous glare as he walked over to check if Jesus was still alive. If he were dead, the

governor would have his hide; however, he did his best to hide his concern from his men as he lifted Jesus's head by the hair, and, amid the blood, searched for signs that he was still alive. Satisfied, he ordered one of his men to empty a pitcher of water over Jesus's head. As the cascading water washed off Jesus's head and shoulders, he showed signs of regaining consciousness. The centurion kicked him viciously in the ribs and ordered him back to his feet. As Jesus complied, the centurion nodded to Flavius, and the scourging began again.

I stood amazed at the courage and strength and nobility of Jesus. He could dissolve this universe with a word, yet he simply stayed here, taking this torture.

After the thirty-fifth lashing, I could clearly see the white of bone as a rib was exposed. Jesus's back was now like a plowed field, with blood and gore liberally smeared across his back and running down his legs.

Finally, the fortieth stroke was delivered, and the Roman centurion nodded to the senior soldier, who had brought Jesus to the courtyard, instructing the soldier, "Return him to the governor, and inform His Excellency that his orders have been carried out."

As they went to untie Jesus, he lost consciousness again, and they dragged his inert body by the upper arms as they carried him out of the courtyard.

I followed, still keeping a vigilant watch for any possible attack by heavenly forces. We ascended through the palace, using the same route we had earlier when we descended.

Perhaps, as testimony to this matter's importance to Pilate, he was already waiting by the double doors when we arrived. Upon seeing Jesus's wretched condition, Pilate nodded, satisfied. I guessed that he was banking on Jesus's pitiful condition playing well with the crowd. Pilate had no wish to condemn an innocent man, and, besides, he was determined not to be outmaneuvered by the high priest.

Pilate stepped boldly out through the double wooden doors and, once again, took his seat at the podium. The crowd had swelled in numbers, and it responded with a roar as he took his seat.

The high priest and many of his officials were present in a group in the square below, and Pilate locked eyes with them as he let the crowd roar on for a few moments longer.

As before, Pilate held up his hand. again. Grob closed in on him and whispered in his ear, but it was obvious to all of us that Pilate wanted to let Jesus go.

The noise from the crowd died in volume as Pilate spoke up loudly. The acoustics of the place allowed all those below to hear his voice when he said,

“I present him to you, but I want you to know that I do not find him guilty of any crime.”

Pilate beckoned, and two Roman soldiers half carried, half dragged Jesus out onto the balcony between them. He was wearing the purple robe and the crown of thorns. By now, the thorn briars had started to make Jesus’s head swell up, and he was having difficulty seeing out of his eyes. Blood and sweat ran liberally down his face, and he left a trail of drops of blood on the floor behind him.

Pilate announced, “Here is the man.”

As he said this, deep inside, I somehow felt that Pilate was saying something more profound than he realized. It was as if this were an announcement made from on high. I looked across at Grob, but he was salivating with pleasure at the sight of Jesus’s battered frame. My colleague’s face registered nothing upon hearing the words Pilate had just uttered.

The crowd roared in reply, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

It was clear that the high priest was leading the crowd.

In frustration, the governor looked at him directly and shouted down, “You take him. You crucify him. I find nothing wrong with him.”

Even above the hubbub of the crowd, the high priest’s voice could just be made out when he shouted, “We have a law, and by that law, he must die because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

Pilate paled at this and looked sideways at Jesus. For the first time, genuine fear could be seen on his face. He signaled to the two Roman soldiers who were holding Jesus by the arms to bundle him back inside; without any ceremony this time, Pilate got up from his judgment seat and hurried inside after them.

Once inside the doors, Pilate walked up to Jesus and demanded, “Where do you come from?”

By that point, Jesus had recovered enough to be fully alert, but he gave the governor no answer. Instead, Jesus just looked at him calmly.

In frustration, Pilate said, “You won’t talk? Don’t you know that I have the authority to pardon you, and the authority to—crucify you?”

Jesus replied in a steady and measured voice, “You haven’t a shred of authority over me except what has been given you from Heaven. That’s why the one who betrayed me to you has committed a far greater fault.”

At this point, I could sense a change in Pilate; I was sure that Grob and the others could sense it too. Before, Pilate had wanted to let Jesus go; now he was determined to do so.

Pilate walked outside. The determination in his stride and the square of his shoulders sufficiently demonstrated what he was about to do.

Grob, realizing that he was about to lose everything, squawked in alarm and darted out of the building and down to the high priest. Grob whispered in Caiaphas's ear, putting it into his mind to play his best and last card.

Caiaphas lifted his arms, and the crowd respectfully quieted down. Before Pilate could speak, Caiaphas shouted defiantly, "If you pardon this man, you're no friend of Caesar. Anyone setting himself up as 'king' defies Caesar."

Pilate stood stock-still by the side of his judgment seat, and then his shoulders slumped. He recognized the truth of what Caiaphas had just said. Pilate was convinced that Jesus was innocent; more than that, he suspected that he was dealing here with something way beyond the ordinary, something indeed to do with eternity and God. Nevertheless, he now had to make a choice: offend God, or offend Caesar.

He sat down heavily and beckoned for the guards to bring Jesus out once again into the view of the crowd.

He then said, "Here is your king."

The crowd chanted their response: "Kill him, kill him. Crucify him."

Pilate answered, "I am to crucify your king?"

Caiaphas, who hated Roman rule and everything it stood for, shouted back, "We have no king but Caesar."

Pilate sat silent for a long moment and then summoned his secretary. The secretary hurried off on Pilate's mission and returned a few moments later, bearing a bowl of water. He stood to one side of Pilate, holding the bowl out to him. Pilate pulled back the folds of his toga and plunged his hands into the bowl of water, washing them pointedly before the crowd.

"I'm washing my hands of the responsibility for this man's death. From now on, it's in your hands. You're judge and jury."

The crowd was clearly delighted. Many, many voices could be heard calling out, "We'll take the blame. We, and our children after us."

Then, Pilate rose heavily. So that the crowd could hear, he loudly ordered that Barabbas be released and that Jesus be whipped again and then crucified. And then, Pilate walked tiredly into the building.

For a few seconds, the Roman soldiers left on the balcony did nothing, waiting for the governor to leave before taking Jesus downstairs. However, once Pilate had sufficient time to vacate the area, they dragged Jesus away, to the cheers, hoots, and catcalls of the crowd below. Jesus made no attempt to resist them, but they were giving him no opportunity to move under his own volition, half carrying, half dragging him through the doorway.

We followed the same route as before. The centurion was waiting in the courtyard with Flavius and a dozen others. Clearly, he had heard the outcome and was delighted to find that this prisoner was entirely in his power now, as so many unfortunates had been over the years. As Jesus came back into view, the centurion sauntered across the courtyard, and, catching hold of Jesus's beard, he dragged him off his feet by it. He twisted and pulled and managed to rip some of Jesus's beard out of his face; such was his savagery. He flung Jesus toward the scourging post and ordered him chained again. He then told Flavius to scourge him again, and to make it far worse than before. Grinning, he announced, "You really want to die now—believe me, you do—so really I'm doing you a favor."

The scourging routine began again. Flavius was a real expert at his trade and knew exactly how to land the scourge so as to inflict maximum pain and suffering.

Several times, Jesus fainted under the extreme agony; several times, they revived him. Eventually, the scourging was completed.

The centurion curtly ordered Flavius to take four other soldiers and crucify Jesus, and then he stalked off. His fun was over until his next victim appeared.

I reflected that little did he realize what he had just done, but all of us were guilty this day, and I was involved too.

Chapter 26

Crucifixion

Flavius pointed to four of his comrades, who reluctantly moved forward in response to his orders. Torturing the prisoners involved a bit of fun for a few hours, but crucifixion duty meant long hours—possibly days—at the foot of a cross, waiting for their victim to die. Two of the soldiers roughly pushed Jesus ahead of them, while their two comrades hurried off to collect helmets, armor, and weapons for all of them.

We exited the courtyard via a strongly constructed door and entered another larger courtyard. In the far wall, there was a wide gate that led outside the palace complex. Against the wall to one side of this gate, the rough crossbeams of several crosses had been stacked.

Just then, a shout carried across the courtyard. Flavius and the others immediately stiffened to stand at attention. Another centurion was striding toward them, followed by a detachment of ten soldiers and two prisoners. This centurion was entirely different from the last one I had encountered. I could recognize another warrior when I saw one. This man was a shrewd, tough fighter, and the light of a keen intelligence shone in his eyes. It was men like these who had allowed Rome to conquer other lands and create a vast empire.

“You soldiers wait,” he said. “I have two more prisoners here who are to be crucified. These two are rebels, and their erstwhile colleagues might want to stage a rescue attempt, so we’ll do all three together. Then, if there is any trouble we’ll have more men available to deal with it.”

Flavius and his colleagues saluted and pulled Jesus back, away from the pile of crossbeams, so that the centurion and his detachment could go first. I knew enough about the tricks of soldiers to recognize that they wanted the centurion at the front of this little column and themselves at the back, so that his eyes would not be upon them.

The two malefactors were pushed forward so that they came to the pile of crossbeams. They were then roughly ordered to take up their crosses. These men were still in good shape. Both bore bruises and abrasions around their faces, where they had been beaten by their captors, but they had not been scourged. The two men looked in horror at the pile of crossbeams. The stark realization of the horrific death that they were about to undergo hit home. The taller man suddenly lost control of his bladder and wet himself; such was his terror. The Roman soldiers, who had seen this so often, made barely a comment, just prodded them both with spears. The shorter man, with an ashen face, shuffled forward and strained to lift the forty-pound deadweight of

the crossbeam. Eventually, he got it up on his shoulders, and, grunting, moved backward. His taller companion was prodded forward. He turned to the centurion, begging for reprieve, gibbering in his terror. The centurion merely pointed back toward the crossbeams, wasting not a word in reply. Seeing that there was no hope, the malefactor turned again, and he, too, took up his cross.

Now it was Jesus's turn. He was swaying on his feet. Many men would already be dead after enduring two scourgings, and Jesus himself was more than half dead. He had lost a great deal of blood, and his body was in shock after enduring such a savage ordeal. He struggled to pick up the beam. He was barely conscious, and he had difficulty coordinating his movements and getting his fingers to grasp the wood. Eventually, he managed to get a grip on the beam, and he, too, strained to lift the forty-pound deadweight. At last, he managed to lift it, stumbling backward beneath the weight. Then, he settled it across his shoulders, moaning as the rough wood settled down on his open wounds.

The centurion cast a professional eye, first, over his three prisoners, and then, over his small detachment of troops. Seemingly satisfied, he moved to the front of the column and shouted a command for the gate to be opened. Two soldiers who formed part of the palace guard hurried to open the stout wooden gates. Wasting no time, the centurion ordered his column to move the moment the gates started to swing open.

I drifted to the back of the column and was not surprised to see Grob and several of his best tempters swoop in low over the palace walls and land next to Jesus. They began to fling temptations and doubts at him as he stumbled forward under the killing weight of his cross.

Outside the palace gates a crowd was waiting. As the gates opened, the noise from the crowd surged. To the humans, it must have seemed an incoherent torrent of noise, but my supersensitive hearing could detect each individual voice. Eleven members of the crowd were family or friends of the two rebels who were being crucified with Jesus. They shouted encouragement and promises of vengeance on the hated Romans. There were some who were followers of Jesus, people he had helped, mainly women; perhaps the men were too scared to come. They wailed and wept as they saw the battered and bloody figure of Jesus emerge through the gate, struggling to carry his cross. However, the vast majority was made up of the rented mob that the high priest had assembled earlier. Upon seeing Jesus, they shouted out their hatred and invective.

As the column moved closer to the crowd, several stones came whistling in Jesus's direction, and many of the people spat at him once they had managed to edge near enough.

The centurion ordered his small detachment of troops to surround the prisoners and keep their weapons handy. The crowd, seeing the soldiers get

a grip on their weapons, pulled back slightly. No one had any desire to end up where these three unfortunates were.

The group slowly moved forward. Jesus was in a bad way. He stumbled repeatedly, his strength almost gone; the crossbeam on his back was a crushing weight. Suddenly, he fell. He lay winded for a moment, then, struggling, he tried to rise, but he had lost so much blood that it was obvious he would not make it. However, he kept struggling.

The rear of the column stopped, and the centurion, who was keeping an alert eye on the progress of his mission, came hurrying back to see what the delay was. Summing up the situation in a moment, he cast his eyes around those nearby and settled on a fit-looking man in early middle age. The centurion forcibly placed a strong hand on this man's upper arm. "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

The man looked scared, as well he might. He stammered out a reply. "My name is Simon, sir. I am from Cyrene. I was just coming into the city from the countryside and got caught up in this hubbub."

"Well, Simon, I've got a job to do, and you're going to help me do it. See that wretch there on the floor? He's too weak to carry his cross, so you're going to do it for him. It's not too far; just up that hill. Do it well, and you won't end up on a cross yourself."

Simon had no choice but to obey, and as he looked down at Jesus, I thought I saw a spark of compassion in his eyes. Two of the Roman soldiers lifted the crossbeam off of Jesus's back and placed it on Simon's shoulders. Then, they roughly pulled Jesus to his feet and shoved him forward.

Jesus staggered but managed to keep his feet. As he stumbled forward, still trailing blood, swaying from exhaustion, I remembered the hundreds of miles he had strongly walked the countryside, through the towns and cities, preaching and helping people.

Behind us, a crowd of people followed. Most of the rented mob had fallen away now, and the majority of those who followed were women who wailed and wept at what was happening to Jesus.

At last, we reached the crest of the hill they called Golgotha. A number of holes had been dug in the ground beforehand, where the crosses would be raised, and the main shafts of several crosses were piled on the hilltop.

The centurion called a halt. From long experience, the legionnaires closed in rapidly and grabbed their three victims, knowing that the moment of decision had arrived for the three prisoners who must realize that this was their last possible opportunity to make a break for freedom.

The two rebels both struggled desperately. The shorter one filled the air with curses and threats; the taller one began to sob and beg.

Jesus alone stood calm and silent.

Unbidden, something that had been mentioned in an intelligence briefing months before came into my mind: some verses from a prophet named Isaiah, who had written them hundreds of years ago:

He was like a lamb being led to be killed.
He was quiet, as a sheep is quiet when its wool is being cut.
He never opened his mouth.
Men took him away roughly and unfairly.
He died without children to continue his family.
He was put to death.
He was punished for the sins of my people.
He was buried with wicked men.
He died with the rich.
He had done nothing wrong.
He had never lied.

But it was the Lord who decided to crush him and make him suffer.
So the Lord made his life a penalty offering.

Was the prophet, perhaps, writing about Jesus? If so, was this all part of some plan? Or, alternatively, had Heaven's calculations gone badly wrong this time, and was Hell about to pull off the biggest coup of all time? At this point, I remembered my duties and scanned the skies carefully, yet nothing save our armies could be seen. Mystified—but, for the moment, relieved—I turned again to what was happening in front of me.

The soldiers, perhaps out of compassion, but more likely because it was standard procedure, offered their three victims a mild painkiller before crucifixion. This was in the form of a drink, and from its smell, I thought that it contained myrrh. They offered it to Jesus first. He sipped it, then, realizing what it was, he quietly handed it back. The two rebels, however, drank greedily—anything to dull the horrendous agony that was to come.

Three of the squad of soldiers then selected one of the rough, long pieces of wood that would form the vertical shaft of a cross. Three-quarters of the way up the shaft, a wide groove had been gouged out to make room for the crossbeam to be hammered in. The soldiers laid the shaft down, and, taking the crossbeam from Simon of Cyrene, they hammered it into the groove, using a large mallet. The centurion told Simon he could go, but, in fact, he only went as far as the crowd of onlookers who stood about a hundred yards away. There he stayed to see what would happen next.

The two soldiers who were holding Jesus bundled him down so that he was stretched out on the completed cross that was still lying horizontally on the ground. A third grabbed his shins and held his feet over the wood of the

central shaft. I doubted the soldiers had ever encountered a victim like this before, as he made no move to fight them. He simply was silent.

The centurion nodded to a fourth soldier, who, from a satchel slung across his shoulder, extracted three large nails. Picking up the mallet that had been used earlier to fix the crossbeam, the soldier held one of the nails in his left hand, positioned above Jesus's left palm. Jesus looked straight up at the sky, although his head was now so swollen from the tight band of the crown of thorns that he could not have seen too clearly out of the slits that were his eyes. The soldier raised the mallet and brought it down with sickening force on the head of the nail. Jesus screamed as his hand exploded in blood. Again and again, the soldier raised the mallet and hammered home the nail. As the nail widened rapidly from its sharp point, the wound in Jesus's hand was forced wider and wider, and the agony increased more and more.

Having finished hammering home the first nail, the soldier moved over to Jesus's right hand. The other soldiers held him firmly down, but I was sure that by a supreme effort of will, Jesus kept his right hand steady. The soldier nailed this hand also to the crossbeam. A rope was then tied around the crossbeam and Jesus's upper arms to help support his weight once the cross was raised. The soldier then moved down to Jesus's feet. Placing one foot over the other, he put the third nail into the flesh of Jesus's foot and then proceeded to nail both his feet to the shaft of the cross.

At this moment, another Roman soldier arrived, breathless from having hurried up the hill from the governor's palace. He snapped to attention before the centurion and said, "Sir, the governor has commanded that this sign be attached to the top of the cross of the prisoner Jesus of Nazareth."

The centurion nodded.

The sign, written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, read: "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."

The soldier with the satchel took the sign from his colleague, and, withdrawing a fourth nail from his satchel, he hammered the sign home, a foot above Jesus's head.

The centurion, satisfied that all was in order, nodded again, and more soldiers moved forward. Half a dozen of them raised the cross toward the vertical and dragged it toward the hole that had been prepared earlier. They lined up the shaft with the hole and dropped it in.

The fall was horrific in its effect. Jesus's hands and feet ripped as the nails pulled through them, and from the angle of his arms, I wondered if his shoulders or arm bones had been pulled out of joint by the force of the drop. I suspected that this was the case and he was now suspended by tendons stretched to snapping point. The agony must have been unbearable, and Jesus screamed again, long and loud.

The wounds in his hands and feet would be constantly widened and wrenched open from now until the moment of his death. Much of the agony of crucifixion came from the position of the arms, pulled up and back at an unnatural angle, making it extremely hard to draw breath. The only way to breath easily was to lift oneself up on the cross. This meant pushing up against the nail in the feet while also pulling up against the nails in the hands. Victims would be forced to do this every few minutes in order to get any breath into their lungs. Eventually, their strength would fail, and they would die of asphyxiation; but, every minute until that time came would be torture.

The crowd began to edge forward now. Some of the senior priests and teachers of the law were there, quick to throw their insults. "He saved others, but himself he cannot save." Others said, "Let this Christ, this king of Israel, come down from the cross now; then, we'll believe in him."

One of the two rebels who was crucified with him decided to add his invective to that which Jesus was already receiving. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebel rebuked him. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we're getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then, he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, today, you will be with me in paradise."

The centurion signaled to some of his men, and, together, they set off back toward the barracks. Flavius and his fellows waited until he was a suitable distance away, then they settled down on the grass a few yards from the foot of Jesus's cross and started to play dice for his clothes, deciding that his under robe was of too high a quality to be torn up into equal parts and sold for drinking money.

I waited, watching Jesus's agony. Grob spent long periods perched on the crossbeam of the cross, trying at this last hour to raise resentment in Jesus at the situation that his Father had put him into. He seemed to be having no more success than he had for the past twenty years. Eventually, Grob took a short break and darted down to discuss tactics with some of his subordinates.

While watching them as they gathered in a huddle, I noticed an almost imperceptible dimming of the light. Glancing up at the sun, I expected to see a cloud passing over it, but, with a start, I realized that the sun itself was growing fainter.

Grob and his subordinates were too engrossed in their conversation to notice, and, predictably, the human rabble were too dull and myopic to realize that anything was going on. But, looking upward to the sky, I saw consternation among our senior commanders as they, too, realized that the sun was dimming. Clearly, then, this was not something that we were responsible for; it must be an act of God.

A whirl of thoughts rushed through my mind. Had God decided to turn off the sun, and thereby destroy life on this planet, as punishment for the murder of his Son? Or, perhaps even worse, maybe all life, including mine, was about to end. Jesus was the Creator, and if he should experience death in any form, would all other life then die also? Would his creation perish with him?

I waited for a long two seconds, realizing that I could do little other than observe events. One of Grob's lieutenants eventually looked up at the sky, searching, like I had, for a cloud passing over the sun. Realizing that there was no cloud there, incomprehension passed briefly over his features. He continued to stare at the burning orb for a few microseconds longer, then started to choke with alarm as he realized that the sun was getting dimmer and dimmer. Overhead, all was now confusion, our forces darting around like scalded cats. Not knowing what was happening or what to do, they took refuge in darting to and fro across the sky, brandishing weapons.

I waited for almost a minute longer. Suddenly, one of the humans noticed the dimming light. The human, too, instinctively looked up toward the sun, expecting to see a cloud passing in front of it. Puzzled that he could not see one, he blinked and looked away, but, a few seconds later, he looked again. Nudging one of his fellows, he asked him if he had noticed the light dimming. Others immediately took up the theme as people started to discuss the dimming light. Within a minute, they were alarmed. Within two minutes, they were terrified, and pandemonium was breaking out around Golgotha, matching the panic in the skies above.

Dogs were barking madly in the city below, and birds were flying hither and thither, completely disorientated by this unexpected phenomenon. The sun was now a dull orange globe, the sort of sun you would expect to see on the horizon at dusk, but it was only midday, and the sun was high in the sky.

In the crowd, women screamed, and men gasped in terror as the sun continued to dim.

Soon, the sun was a pale disk that gave almost no light. The people now were in a deep twilight. Finally, the last light from the sun died altogether, and everything was in complete darkness.

Deep groans and cries of horror broke from the crowd. The Roman soldiers were proving to be no tougher than the general population when faced with the totally unexpected and incomprehensible. Flavius shouted at them to remain at their posts, but the panic in his voice was all too clear. Looking up into the sky, I noticed that even the stars appeared to have been extinguished. A deep heavy darkness covered everything. My senses were such that I could still see, despite the absence of physical light. Looking down into the city, I could see absolute chaos there as people stumbled around in confusion and blind panic.

Approximately twenty minutes later, I saw emerging from the nearest city gate the centurion who had brought Jesus out here earlier. He was leading a squad of legionnaires who were marching out to Golgotha, each of them bearing a flaming torch. Clearly, this was one tough, professional soldier who was going to check on his responsibilities and his troops, no matter the amazing circumstances of the day. Jerusalem now was pinpricked with lights, and torches blazed around the governor's palace.

The three figures on the cross were silent now. Talking was a luxury they could no longer afford for anything but the most important utterances. They were already starting to feel the exhaustion of having to keep pulling themselves up to breath. Apart from their labored gasps for breath and the groans of agony that escaped them, they were largely silent.

The crowd in front of the cross was largely silent too. Cowed by the dark that had come so unexpectedly and miraculously in the middle of the day, they spoke little. The sound of weeping from the women who had followed Jesus was the main sound that came now from the group.

It therefore sounded louder than it actually was when Jesus groaned aloud four words: "Eloi, Eloi, Lama, Sabachani."

I knew all of the languages of the world, and so I knew that this meant, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I, for one, could not answer that question. It mystified me why God would abandon his son like this.

Silence reigned again.

Sometime later, Jesus spoke again. Through desiccated lips, he groaned, "I thirst."

One of the soldiers reached across to a sponge that was lying on the ground, presumably left there from a previous crucifixion. In the light of the flaming torches, he brushed the dust off it and then took a jar of cheap wine vinegar. Pouring this liberally over the sponge, he placed it on a pole and lifted it up to Jesus. Jesus drank from the sponge, which was then withdrawn.

A few moments of silence followed, then, lifting his head skyward, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then, he died.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, a low rumbling began to shake the earth. It grew and grew in intensity. Dogs began to howl again in the city. The shaking intensified. It was an earthquake. Clouds of dust rose into the air as the ground buckled beneath our feet. The crowd started to scream and yell again as they fell heavily to the ground. Gradually, the rumbling then died away as the earthquake ceased.

Chapter 27

The Journey Downward

The dust rose high into the air, and, in slow eddies and swirls, it started to settle back down to the ground. As I watched the particles of dust, I noticed that the light was slowly returning, gradually gathering brightness. To begin with, there were no individual beams of light—just a diffused glow that seemed to have no single source but that, nevertheless, grew steadily in intensity. Then, suddenly, a single shaft of sunlight pierced the darkness. The beam grew steadily wider and wider. First, the three crosses were illuminated; then, all of Golgotha; and then, rapidly, the surrounding countryside and the city of Jerusalem, until the light had returned to normal for this time of day.

For a long moment, there was a stunned silence from all those gathered there. The human rabble stood with open mouths, shaken by the intensity of the earthquake that had just passed. Nature was silent: no dogs barked, no birds sang, no wind blew. Even the tens of thousands of fallen angels that crowded around the hillside were shaken and silent. None of us had expected this. The source of all life had died. We had won the war, but none of us could quite believe it.

Suddenly, a single bird started to sing again. The spell was broken, and the silence shattered. The human rabble all began speaking at once, and our forces began to cheer, over and over again, louder and louder as the rejoicing started.

Seemingly, of all that vast crowd, I alone was silent. He had died, and the seed of hope that was within me had died with him. I had dogged his footsteps for three years now. At first, I had hated him with an intensity that went beyond words; but, over time, I had changed. I could no longer deny it. I had seen such beauty and nobility within him. When he had been the prince of Heaven, I had sung about those qualities often. Over the last thirty-six months, I had seen for myself those qualities clearly revealed once again. When he was exhausted, thirsty, hungry, and hurt, he was no less perfect than when he had sat enthroned, glorious, in the courts of Heaven. Never had he been selfish, never had he turned anyone away, never had he stopped loving either the human rabble or his Father in Heaven. I had seen that, as a man, Jesus exhibited the glory and the nature of God even more clearly here than he once had in Heaven. Here, the glory of God was not shown in waves of streaming glory or in infinite power; rather, it was shown in consistent goodness, patience, and love. The very frailty of human flesh showed up the value of the true nature of God, much like a plain frame can sometimes show off the glory of an exquisite work of art better than a glittering gilt one can. At first, I had despised the physical weakness shown by this mortal creature of dust and could not understand how God, who was all-powerful, could allow

himself to be limited by the confines of a human body. Now I realized that the very act of making himself so vulnerable displayed the true strength and honor and nobility of God in a way that I and others would never have seen otherwise.

So, we had won: we had brought physical death to one of the Trinity. I should be rejoicing, I should be cheering with the rest; this was what I had hoped for and dreamed of for millennia. Deep within, however, I felt despair. I was grieving. Somewhere along the line during these last three years, I had come to see him as my hope. I had dreamed that he who seemed to be the answer for every problem that was brought to him could be my answer too. I thought that he might set even me free. Now I knew that those dreams were false, and, for better or worse—probably much worse—my fate was bound up with the rest of the inhabitants of Hell. Deep within, I shuddered. Did those cheering fools around Golgotha not realize that once the war was over, the real viciousness would begin? Hell's inhabitants would fight each other for the infinite spoils that were now just waiting to be gathered by those who proved to be the strongest.

My thoughts were interrupted by activity around the central cross. The spirit of Jesus was descending from the cross. The cheering intensified as Lucifer rapidly alighted on the ground and offered a mocking bow to the spirit of Jesus, who now stood at the foot of the cross.

I watched Jesus with sorrow. What horrors awaited him now? However, I was struck as I watched, by the composure of his face. Many times during my career as the chief assassin of Hell, I had watched the spirits of men in the first few moments after death as they realized that they were separated from their bodies and were now in the realm of the dead. The shock of finding themselves in their new surroundings was always replaced by choking terror and horror as they caught sight of myself or my colleagues. No human could control or contain themselves in such circumstances, even when confronted by the most junior of demons. However, here was Jesus exhibiting his customary calmness and composure, looking Lucifer directly in the eye.

Lucifer noticed this also, and for a moment, amazement showed itself in his features. He marveled, in fact; however, this was chased away a moment later as a ruthless anticipation surged into his face. Doubtless, the master of torment was already planning the horrors to come for his avowed enemy. However, he controlled himself, and he was at his most charming and urbane when he addressed his former master.

“It looks as if Hell has a new inhabitant. You are, of course, most welcome; although, if you don't mind me saying so, few will wish for your company. I don't think that we have ever received a soul as unrighteous and filthy as you.”

This sally was greeted by howls of laughter from the tens of thousands of demons who were now jostling each other in an effort to see better. A party

mood was gathering force, and all were rejoicing as the realization of victory hit home.

For once, Lucifer was speaking the truth. Jesus's soul was blacker and far more besmirched than any other we had ever encountered. I could not account for this, as I knew from what I had seen and from what Grob had told me that Jesus had never sinned once during his life. I wondered if the prophecy I had recalled earlier had indeed been written about Jesus and that he had actually borne the wrongdoing of the whole human race.

Lucifer waited for the laughter and merriment to die down a little before he continued smoothly.

"You will be my guest until your Father decides whether he wants to bargain for you. I know how much you love each other, and I'm betting that he will be willing to swap his throne for the pleasure of your company once again. Until he reaches his decision, you are, of course, welcome to reside in my kingdom. I can promise you the time spent there will be entertaining—at least for me."

Lucifer extended his hand and courteously indicated that Jesus should proceed before him.

The demons that thronged around the hillside moved hurriedly aside so that a path opened up in their midst.

Jesus did not grace Lucifer with a single word. Instead, he simply met his gaze, completely unfazed, then turned and walked in the direction indicated.

Lucifer glared at Jesus's back. He had doubtless expected that, once Jesus found himself at his mercy, he would turn into a cowering, pleading wreck, just as every other lost soul had done since the fall of man.

However, Jesus seemed to be just as much the master of the situation as he always had been. Did he not know about the horrors ahead of him? Did he not realize that the torments of Hell were infinitely worse than the physical suffering he had already endured, and that they went on and on forever?

For a wild moment, I considered returning to my old allegiance, right then and there, to ignite the blazing glory of a seraph that I could still command for short periods and to take out as many of these fallen angels as I could before my attackers overwhelmed me. Perhaps I could buy Jesus a few moments' grace from the horrors that awaited him. Reason reasserted itself quickly. I would doubtless be overcome by sheer weight of numbers, even if some of the dark and mighty beings, such as Lucifer and Draxen, were too busy to take part in my defeat themselves. If I was fortunate, I would be destroyed in the conflict; if not, I, too, would be taken down to Hell and, there, endure horrors that were beyond thought or description.

Where were the forces of Heaven? Why had Jesus been abandoned? Did they not care about the horrors he had already endured and the much greater horrors to come? The desperate unfairness of it overwhelmed me. Always in Heaven, and always upon this planet, Jesus had lived a life of total obedience and devotion to his Father; but here he was, despised, cast aside. Suddenly, I remembered my own reasons for rebelling. I had been concerned about not being made an officer in my unit. How trivial and petty and unimportant that seemed now. Could I really have rebelled for such a minor reason? Why? Promotion could have always come later, and probably would have come later. Why did I forsake this king for such a petty reason? For a moment, I almost released a wild burst of laughter at the stupidity and crassness of my earlier thinking. I stopped myself in time. I must not give myself away.

Then, to my horror, I realized that for long minutes, I had been so wrapped up in my internal musings that I had given no thought to what those around me would think when they did not see me rejoicing with the others. Had anyone noticed? Were the informers already receiving their reward for unmasking me? I consoled myself with the thought that everyone was so wrapped up in the celebrations of the moment that they probably would not have noticed, and, even if they did, they might just have assumed that I remained the silent agent of destruction that rarely showed any emotion. Still, I had been careless; I must remain more vigilant from now on. Dangerous times were ahead, and I had no hope or help now save myself.

My thoughts were interrupted by the approach of Draxen's aide-de-camp. "Nemesis, a debriefing session is being held in Hell for all those involved in our operations against the Son of our Great Enemy while he was on earth. Lord Draxen has instructed that you are to return to Hell immediately to attend this."

I nodded silently, turned, and departed.

The rejoicing demons moved aside as I strode through them.

I knew from previous missions that just adjacent to Jerusalem was a valley called Gehenna. It was a noxious place. The city inhabitants burned their garbage there. However, it hid a darker secret. There was a pathway in that valley that led down to Hell. Most of the lost souls from this region had taken that route down to the dark kingdom.

I approached a small hillock within the valley. One side of the hillock had a small but sheer cliff face where, long ago, part of the hillock had slipped away in a landslide. As I walked toward it, the outline of a gateway faintly appeared on the rock face. Rapidly it strengthened until the outline was clear and strong, and then, with no discernible sound, the two doors that made up the gateway silently swung inward of their own accord, and a dark passage lay ahead.

Three times I had walked this path before with human souls dragged down to Hell by demonic guards. The lost human souls had screamed, moaned, and

wailed as they were herded downward by cracking whips, the points of jabbing weapons, or the blows of cudgels and clubs.

I descended. My eyes gradually made out more details of the passageway ahead of me as the walls began to emit a dull red glow from the tremendous heat within them.

Eventually, the passage leveled off, and I walked the final part of my journey on the level. As I approached the end of the passage, the heavy stone door that terminated it began to grate open of its own accord. As it did so, the dust within the passageway swirled upward as a blast of scalding and noxious fumes entered the passageway. At first faintly, but then louder and louder, a torrent of noise cascaded upon my ears. The distant screams of torment and horror from lost souls forced through the outer gate of Hell carried back to me; the sound of the brutish warriors standing guard a thousand feet above my head on the battlements of Hell resounded on my ears. Above them, I could hear the leathery flap and screamed curses of the winged warriors as they flew through the red glow of the dark sky. I walked forward through the gate, beneath the mighty portcullis, and ruefully reflected that, once more, I was ensnared in the loathsome dungeon of Hell.

Chapter 28

Denounced

I had not gone far into Hell when I found myself passing the officer who commanded the outer gate. Could it only be thirty-three years since I had last spoken to him? So much had happened since that last encounter, so much had changed within me.

Upon seeing me, the officer flew over, bowed his head, and said respectfully, "My lord Nemesis, I have been commanded to find you and to request that you await your coworkers over here."

He was slightly too respectful in his approach. I realized that I was back in Hell, where fear ruled and obsequiousness was the norm.

Yet, looking back later, I marveled that I had not been more suspicious and aware.

I followed him, and he led me past the side of the barracks and onto the parade ground. We marched to the very center of the large open space. At present, it was deserted.

The officer bowed low and asked me to remain here at the center of the parade ground while he collected the others.

This struck me as a slightly strange location, but I had become accustomed to receiving what were, frankly, stupid orders that pandered to the whim or vanity of some senior officer or another.

For a long while, I waited. This, too, I was used to. The parade ground was deserted save for me, but from many parts of Hell I could hear merriment and partying as victory in our long war was celebrated.

The attack, when it came, came fast. The first wave came in from all directions: veteran troopers of the Twenty-Ninth Legion. These demons were from one of the heavy units that formed the backbone of Hell's armies. The ground shook as a multitude of hulking brutes poured around the sides of several of the barrack buildings, screaming their battle cries. I was faced with a seemingly impenetrable mass of armored giants bearing a forest of halberds, maces, and battle-axes, closing in on me from all sides.

My shocked senses had little time to react, but I was not the chief assassin of Hell for nothing. Almost without rational thought, my training kicked in, and I began to fight.

Forming throwing knives for my top-most right and left hands, I sent them spinning through the air to land unerringly in the throats of the two brutes who were closest to me. As the knives slammed home, the demonic warriors were thrown backward, gore exploding from their throats. The moment the knives left my hands, I shrank rapidly and darted forward and down. As my two victims were propelled backward under my attack, I was close to the ground, darting through the gap between them, now a mere fraction of an inch in height.

I swerved and dodged between the pounding legs of my attackers. One or two spotted me and made wild slashing movements in my direction, but most were so intent on charging forward that they were oblivious to my presence as I darted around and past their ankles.

I heard a sharply shouted command as some officer finally reacted and tried to reassert order within the situation. The charging soldiers slowed and began to look around them. I immediately zoomed upward. As I reached the chest height of my massive opponents I fired energy blasts from my arms in all directions. More than eighty troopers perished as I blasted up and away from them, firing multiple beams of energy into their bodies.

It was clear to me that I had been denounced. I calculated my chances in an instant and knew that I had no hope. I would never get out past the outer gate. My destruction was certain, so I had nothing to lose. I would take as many of my erstwhile colleagues with me as I could.

Most of the troopers of the Twenty-Ninth did not have the power of flight. Hulking, heavy brutes, they fought solely on the ground, and, once past the height of their reach, I had evaded their attack. However, as I scanned the skies, following what my training dictated, I was unsurprised to see wave after wave of winged demons swooping in on me from every direction.

Despite my small size, I was spotted, and waves of fiery darts were sent arrowing in toward me. I accelerated sharply straight up while simultaneously forming a shining shield of pure energy. However, the winged warriors were now almost upon me, and so I grew rapidly and formed scimitars for each hand except the one that still held my shield.

My first opponent drew level with me. I feinted with a scimitar at his face. As he moved his long sword to block my blade, I slashed with another scimitar and severed one of his wings. He tried desperately to correct, leaning heavily over to one side to stay in the air while defending himself against my slashing blades. He was seriously disadvantaged, and it was the work of a moment to feint once again with a blade toward his torso, while another of my scimitars lopped off his head. His head flew one way, his body plummeted down in another, and the leathery wing I had severed a moment before floated down between them.

But now, I was in danger of being overwhelmed as hundreds of winged warriors crashed in upon me. I dodged and twisted, striking out powerfully in

all directions as I fought to stay alive. Dozens of my attackers fell to earth. However, for every attacker who fell, several more took his place. It was clear that the order had gone out that I was to be destroyed—whatever the cost. Some part of my mind meticulously kept track of the forces opposing me, and I had now identified elements from three of our best legions. Was it possible that I was facing three full legions in this attack?

Inevitably, more and more blows were beginning to land upon me. At first, the power within me was sufficient to heal the wounds formed almost as rapidly as they were made, but, as time progressed, I found my limbs were growing heavy and slow. Now wounds were being formed quicker than I could heal them. Already, one of my six wings had been seriously hacked about when eight of my attackers had focused their attention upon it while I fought more than seventy others who were directing their attacks against my body. All eight had perished under my blows, but the damage was done, and my internal resources were now so stretched that I could not spare energy to heal the wing. Instead, I diverted what remained of my recuperative powers to deal with the hundreds of wounds being formed upon my body.

From below, hundreds of fiery arrows were coming up at me in waves. The aim of the troopers was far from perfect, and many of the arrows slammed into the winged warriors hemming me in from all sides. However, despite the fact that many of these were perishing under the waves of arrows, their officers still ordered them to close with me at any cost.

I absorbed another of my scimitars back into my lower right hand and formed a second shield, with which I tried to block the worst of the arrow storm that was coming up at me. I was so tightly hemmed in by the wave of warriors above and around me that I could not force my way through them. By now, I had destroyed more than a thousand opponents; but, no matter how fast I killed my attackers, more arrived, as their officers ordered them to attack me regardless of the cost.

It was clear to me that I could not allow things to go on as they were. I now had two wings out of commission and two more quite seriously damaged. In a short while, I would lose the power of flight, and then I would fall to the heavy infantry of the Twenty-Ninth Legion that waited below me.

I had been on enough missions to know that I must get out of my present position, which was completely impossible. Something might possibly turn up if I could just get out of this killing place.

I suddenly raised the tempo of the fight, striking out rapidly in all directions. Just as I hoped, the intensity of the attack lessened for a moment as the warriors around me fell back slightly. Immediately I changed my shape, reabsorbing my wings and turning into a rapidly spinning serrated disk with a razor-sharp edge. My shape gave me a limited ability to hover and move without the need for wings, but it was a risky strategy, as a warrior could strike at the flat middle part of the spinning disk that I had now become and pierce right through me.

Again as I hoped, the crush of opponents around me edged backward, away from the sharp edge of the flat spinning saw that I had become. Even better, their officers reacted exactly as I hoped they would, ordering their warriors to guard against any attempt by me to try to reach the outer gate.

The majority of warriors facing me moved between me and the gate to guard against this possibility. Changing shape again, I resumed the form of a seraph with scimitars and shields. I faced toward the outer gate, as if I were trying to reach it. However, I took one of my shining shields of energy and threw it spinning into the crowd of warriors attacking me from behind. The shield, though separate from me, was fully under my control, and just as it passed through the thickest part of the crowd, I exploded it.

The force of the explosion was tremendous, and more than one hundred of my opponents were destroyed. Broken limbs, bodies, and shattered weapons were flung in all directions. Wasting no time, I turned and darted through the sudden gap that had formed for the merest moment behind me. A few stunned demonic warriors had survived on the edges of the explosion, and as I blasted past them, I formed lances and picked off several of them.

It was with a feeling of relief that I saw open space before me, although I was now heading in the worst possible direction: deeper into the pit of darkness. However, that relief was short-lived, as ahead of me on the horizon, I could see the winged forms of thousands of demonic warriors called into the fight.

Directly ahead, I identified one of Hell's premier aerial fighting units. The warriors in its ranks were all handpicked, personally selected from the best of the best of Hell's regiments. All of them bore shields on which were recorded their victories over angelic warriors. I counted several whose shields recorded forty or fifty victories.

There was no way out. Forming battle-axes (my favorite weapon) and two shields, I crashed into the unit facing me. The next few moments were a blur as I fought better than I ever had before. I dug deep into my memory and training, and, once again, the skies of Hell started to rain broken and damaged warriors as I extracted payment for my destruction.

But, no matter how sharply I twisted and turned, there were simply too many attackers, and my wings were once again cut to ribbons. A few more moments, and I had one good wing left and one that was just serviceable. The end had come. I blocked a vicious spear thrust toward my throat, but, in doing so, I had to momentarily leave my last good wing unguarded. A battle-scarred veteran of a hundred successful conflicts darted in and slashed his sword across the wing that was keeping me aloft. Even as I began to fall, I swiveled in midair and cleaved him in two with a battle-axe. However, I could no longer control my direction or height, and I plummeted toward the ground, the two halves of my last opponent falling with me.

I hit the ground hard. Winded, I lay there for a second, then shakily found my feet, expecting that the winged demons above would be all over me. However, to my surprise, they just swooped over my head, shouting their battle cries.

Mystified, I looked about me and saw the reason why. A squad of a dozen cherubs stood waiting a mere half an earth mile away. Their leader was Cerberus.

Cerberus gave me a sinister smile, and when he spoke, he did so with relish. "I have waited long ages for this day, Nemesis. Your death will be slow, painful, and humiliating."

While I had forsaken hope, a detached, calculating part of my brain was still looking for angles, ways in which I could turn the situation just ever so slightly to my advantage. Seeing the depths of Cerberus's hatred gave me an idea.

I started to insult him at length. I wanted to goad Cerberus into taking me on in single combat. I had no chance whatsoever against a dozen cherubs, but if I faced just one to begin with, I might preserve my life a little longer.

So, I belittled his courage. I recounted some of the better stories that I had heard about him, and Hell never had a shortage of tales denigrating others. Foolishly, he allowed me to talk, his features hardening and his rage boiling hotter and hotter within him. Finally, when I goaded him about his inability to face me in single combat, he wildly shouted to his squad that they were to leave me to him, and then he rushed toward me, forming weapons as he did so.

While Cerberus had foolishly allowed me to talk, I had gained time, during which I had healed all the wounds on my body and recovered some of my strength. I had not had time to repair my wings yet, so, for now at least, combat for me would be ground based.

The ground shook as this giant pounded toward me, covering the half mile between us in the tiniest fraction of a second. His hands now held a variety of weapons. I had never fought a cherub before, and I was intrigued to see that Cerberus had returned to the form that he had once had in Heaven long ago: a four faced being. The four personalities present within him each chose weapons that matched their nature. In the limb closest to the face of the bull, Cerberus held a mighty mace, heavy and studded. In the limb closest to the face of the eagle, Cerberus held a rapier, which he was moving with dexterity and tremendous speed. The limb closest to the face of the lion held a sword, and the limb closest to the face of the man held a javelin, which he threw toward me at phenomenal speed.

I was once more fighting for my life. I changed shape, and for a millionth of a second, became a flat puddle that lay on the floor. The javelin sparkling with energy flew harmlessly above me, and, once it was past, I immediately returned to my normal form, standing squarely in front of Cerberus. I noted

that even before I regained my normal shape, Cerberus had already formed another javelin in the hand that had just a moment before released the last one. However, realizing that he was now too close to use this weapon effectively, he immediately changed it into a spear.

As he closed the remaining distance between us, I continued to taunt him, inflaming his rage even further. I kept one hand hidden from his view, and in it I formed a strong net of energy. At the last moment, just as we were about to collide, I sidestepped smartly to his right. The awesome mace that was the closest weapon to me smashed down through empty space, where I had stood a moment before, and gouged into the earth. At this point, I threw my net over his head and jumped backward while commanding the net to tighten. Even as I jumped, I formed a dark, thin rapier for my hand closest to him, and then I lunged forward in midair at the face of the lion. However, to my surprise, Cerberus managed to block my thrust with his own rapier, and he let out a thin scream of triumph from the face of the eagle, even as the face of the bull bellowed in fury as he dug his mace out of the ground.

Despite my lunge, I was still traveling backward, and even before I landed, I had formed throwing knives for all six hands and sent them spinning through the air at tremendous speed. My net was still tightening around Cerberus's upper torso, and he found his arms pinned to his sides, even as the knives spun toward him.

Cerberus leaped skyward and flattened his shape, and five of my blades sped harmlessly beneath him. But I had anticipated that Cerberus might try to avoid my attack in this way, and so I had angled one knife upward as I threw it. To my satisfaction, this slammed home with a bone-jarring impact into one of his legs. All four heads bellowed pain and rage. The first successful strike in this conflict belonged to me, and I knew that this would inflame Cerberus's rage still further.

Cerberus changed shape again and became a long, thin needle, I tried to tighten my net tighter, but it slipped down his elongated shape and fell harmlessly to the floor. I turned it back into pure energy and recalled it to my lower left hand.

I continued to face and circle my dangerous opponent, but, changing shape again, I lengthened one arm to allow me to pick up a handful of pebbles from the ground. Then, while taunting Cerberus, I kept flicking pebbles at high speed into the bull face that sat upon his broad shoulders.

Within a few moments, the success of my strategy was becoming apparent. The bull face began to bellow louder and louder in rage, and its eyes started glowing red as it lost the last fragments of its self-control.

I suddenly jumped forward toward Cerberus, shouted a challenge into his bull face, and then, just as rapidly, darted backward. As I hoped, that was sufficient to lure him into a rash attack, and he lunged after me. It was

simplicity itself to sidestep this, and, forming a long, thin rapier, I landed the point of the blade deep into another of his lower limbs.

Cerberus formed a long, heavy broadsword, and, whirling around, he tried to decapitate me. But I had anticipated this and already jumped back safely out of range.

The four heads on Cerberus's broad shoulders made an interesting contrast: the bull face continued to rage and bellow threats and profanities; the other three faces regarded me appraisingly, with a greater degree of caution.

Suddenly, the towering and broad form of Cerberus began to shudder, and then, to my amazement, it began to split, as the four personalities within him became separate and distinct. I found myself facing four separate opponents. Each of the four beings who faced me had one face from the four that Cerberus had previously borne: one a man, one an eagle, one a lion, and one a bull. I wondered if, perhaps, the other three personalities within Cerberus had decided that the bull was too great a liability. Whatever the reason, I was now facing four opponents, all heavily armed and all closing in on me as they attempted to encircle me.

The four warriors facing me grinned in unison as they saw the shock on my face. The way in which they grinned exactly together was uncanny and unnerving. I had not realized that cherubs could split into four like this. However, seeing the chilling grins on the four faces made me decide to put on a demonstration of my own. I had recovered some of my strength, and now, although I should have saved that energy, I once again ignited the blazing glory of a seraph and shone with an ever-increasing brightness upon the center of this battleground.

The grim red dusk that substituted for daylight in Hell was replaced around me with a blinding white light. The lion-faced figure moved stealthily behind his bull-faced compatriot, no doubt hoping to shield himself from the brilliant incandescence that I was blazing forth. As he did so, I noticed a gossamer-thin shadow move between them. I checked myself—they must not see me searching—but, yes, between each of the four distinct figures gossamer-thin shadows floated. There was an infinitesimally thin filament between each of them. I realized with a start that I was not faced with four entirely separate fighters but with one in four distinct forms: this was just another shape-changing trick. Surely, I could use this to my advantage. The obvious thing to do seemed to be to cut one of those filaments and see what happened.

I closed with the man-faced opponent. He stepped backward nervously, wary now of what new trick I might pull. However, as I anticipated, his three compatriots closed in on me, trying to position themselves to attack me in the flanks and at my back. Forming short swords for my hands, I tried to tempt them to close further, by avoiding the use of any weapons with a long reach. Amazingly, they failed to wonder why I should make such an obvious tactical mistake, and, obligingly, they closed in.

I kept up a display of focusing on the man-faced opponent as I forced him backward. Then, as my other three opponents came within striking distance, I struck. As fast as I was able to, I swapped the short sword in my lower left hand for a scimitar honed to razor sharpness. As I did this, I tweaked time as strongly as I was able to and stepped forward in time for the longest amount of time I ever had: a whole hundredth of a second. As I did this, I leaped between the lion-faced creature and the eagle-faced creature and swept my scimitar down at the gossamer-thin filament that linked them.

It was to Cerberus's credit that, despite the time-travel trick I had performed, his reactions were so fast that he was able to partly block my strike. The lion-faced being, seeing at the last moment what I intended, swung his curved and wicked-looking blade forward and to one side to deflect my blow.

The tip of my blade struck the edge of his weapon and exploded in a shower of light as both weapons shattered under the impact. However, such was the force that I had put behind the blow that, despite the tip of my weapon being destroyed, the ragged-edged remnant of the blade carried on downward and severed the gossamer-like thread that linked the eagle and lion-faced creatures.

A harsh scream erupted from the eagle-faced creature, and the lion being roared with anguish. In a blur of motion, Cerberus coalesced before my eyes, the four distinct warriors facing me hurtled back together at fantastic speed. Almost faster than I could follow, Cerberus returned once more to his normal form; however, it was clear that now he was in serious trouble. The man face and the bull face still regarded me with a mix of hatred and loathing from his broad shoulders; however, the eagle head and the lion head both hung inert, their eyes and mouths closed. Feathers from the eagle head started to flutter to the floor, and several of Cerberus's limbs hung as useless and dead as the two heads. He limped strongly now, dragging two dead lower limbs. In short, he was finished.

I was sure that he would be too proud to call for help, so I looked for the best angle to close with him and finish him off. Then, suddenly, I heard a voice I remembered all too well, and I knew my fate was sealed.

The field marshal who had sent me on my mission to murder the young Christ child thirty-three years ago was now giving orders for my destruction. Such was my concentration on fighting Cerberus that I had not noticed his arrival, but now, he was barking out staccato commands for the remaining eleven cherubs in Cerberus's squad to close in and destroy me.

There could be no further escape. Most of the wounds on my body had healed, but my wings were still in tatters. I simply had not been able to spare enough energy to repair them. Even if I could have, the skies above me were thronged with winged warriors. There was nowhere left to run.

The ring of cherubs around me closed in swiftly, fear of the field marshal's wrath exceeding their fear of me. I ruefully reflected that with odds of eleven

to one, so it should. Once again, I formed a mix of shields and battle-axes; then, there was no more time or room for thought. The world dissolved into a blur of slashing blades and weapon thrusts. Amid the whorl of flashing weapons, I occasionally glimpsed a face seemingly frozen in time as my opponents sought both to survive and to destroy me. I fought with my usual brilliance, but there could be only one outcome against such odds. For long moments, I held all eleven of them off, far longer than I could have been expected to; then, a crashing mace descended with devastating force upon one of my arms. The arm snapped with a sickening sound. The limb hung useless, a worthless appendage that impeded my fighting ability. A few moments later, a long blade sank deep into one of my legs, paralyzing it.

All my remaining limbs were now heavy with weariness. My reactions were beginning to slow, and, a moment later, a blow toward my midriff came close to finishing me off, as I only managed to interpose a shield at the last moment. It distracted me as I tensed for the impact, and I was slow reacting to a sword thrust toward my throat. Realizing that I could not block this blow in time, I twisted at the last moment so that the blade bit deep into my shoulder rather than my throat. Immediately, I knew with a sick despair that the blow was a telling one, as all my arms on my left side were suddenly paralyzed. A fraction of a nanosecond later, a long swing from a broadsword crashed deeply into my legs. Cutting deeply, the blow almost severed one leg and badly damaged the other. I crashed to the ground. In an instant, my opponents were all over me, pinning my limbs as various blades were held to my throat and chest.

The field marshal wasted no time. "Well, what are you waiting for? Kill him."

I tensed for the killing thrusts, but, almost immediately, a deeper, darker voice spoke. "No, he shall suffer torment for tens of thousands of years before we even think of allowing him the release of death."

My skin crawled as I recognized the chilling tones of Draxen. As I lay on the ground, his dark visage came into view, towering above the heads of the cherubs surrounding me.

He planted a broad foot across my throat. With a low growl, he said, "You pathetic worm. Did you think we had not recognized your change of allegiance? You picked a loser, Nemesis. He is here in Hell with you, but your betrayal of our cause will cost you dearly."

I was dragged to my feet by strong hands. With devastating power, Draxen landed an enormous and heavy fist in my face, then, contemptuously, he turned away and stalked off.

Chapter 29

The End of All Things Old; the Start of All Things New

My limbs were shackled, and I was dragged through Hell. As I was pulled along, I was liberally kicked, and blows rained down upon me from those who had previously quaked in my presence. My humiliation and imminent horrific fate seemed to add to the holiday atmosphere that was now in full swing through the dark lands.

Eventually, we reached the center of Hell. My escort handed me over to a new party. It was with difficulty that I concealed a shudder as I recognized the group as belonging to the guards who guarded the torture chambers in the dungeons of Hell. The stories about them were legendary, and none of those stories were good. There was an anticipatory gleam about their eyes as they grabbed my chains and dragged me along.

We reached a roughly hewn stone entrance. My senses were assaulted by a cacophony of desperate screams and broken pleading emerging from the entrance. The volume waxed and waned, almost as if coming from one victim, although I knew it must be emanating from countless throats. Periodically, the roar of a furnace was added to the maelstrom of noise, and a dull red glare punctuated the darkness.

I was pulled rapidly down a series of rough stone steps, my head bouncing off each step. I was dragged through a series of strongly held gates and a maze of passageways. This was one part of Hell that I had never visited before. I'd had no reason to in the past; no sane being had any desire to visit these dark and loathsome dungeons.

Eventually, I was dragged into a roughly hewn stone chamber off to one side of a small passageway. The squat and powerful demonic torturers clustered around a stone table in the center of the chamber rushed forward, and, grabbing my chains and my body, they bundled me face up onto the stone table. They then quickly bolted my shackles into a number of stone rings that were set around the rough tabletop.

I had been gathering my strength again in order to make a last desperate attempt to escape—or, failing that, to hold out for as long as possible against the horrors that were to come. However, to my despair, there was a quality about the table that started to drain my strength and power. My torturers gathered around me but made no move to harm me yet; they knew that my power was draining away. They also knew that, every minute they waited, I

could hear the screams and sobs and animal like moans echoing around these dark dungeons from tens of thousands of other unfortunates. They knew the value of those minutes, as fear and dreadful anticipation did their work for them.

More long hours hours passed. My torturers were patient, although I doubted they had ever waited this long before. Probably, they had never had so powerful a victim before. It took many hours for the table to drain my strength. However, they knew that fear and anticipation can be more effective allies than pain and agony; besides, if necessary, they had all eternity to complete their task.

I felt a rising panic as the last of my strength was drained away. Within an hour, I would be unable to move my head or limbs. I would be completely helpless in the hands of these experts in inflicting agony. All the stories that ran through Hell of the tortures to be found here danced through my consciousness. I had always been self-confident because I had always been strong. Now I knew weakness, and with it came fear such as I had never known before.

I noticed that the chief of the torture crew played constantly with an old stone knife. I wondered how many countless victims that knife had cut open during the countless ages since Hell had been founded. How many screaming, pleading wretches had seen that knife slowly opening up their bodies to wave upon wave of ceaseless agony upon this butcher's table?

I felt that I was choking on my panic. The temptation to plead, to try to offer some bargain, to ingratiate myself with my torturers was already strong and threatening to overwhelm me. So far, I had remained silent and seemingly unconcerned, but, inside, the turmoil and desperation grew. I could see no more options, no way out.

The sudden sound of an approaching demon almost made my cry out; such was my state of mind. He entered the low, dark chamber.

The chief torturer flared at this interruption and was about to bawl out the intruder—or, more likely, inflict some violence upon him—when, with a start, he realized that the junior demon who had entered the chamber bore the uniform of a herald and had obviously been sent by someone very senior in Hell indeed. Controlling his temper, the chief torturer asked what was wanted.

The herald replied that Lord Lucifer ordered every inhabitant of Hell to the vast amphitheater. All were to come, including the torturers and those under punishment and torture.

My torturers were dumbfounded. This had never happened before, but all of us could clearly hear the sound of other messengers passing from one torture chamber to another, repeating the same message. There could be no mistake. The air was filled with the cursing of my tormentors, but they were merely delaying the inevitable: no inhabitant of Hell would disobey a direct

order from Lucifer. At a nod from their chief, they pinned me down with powerful arms, and sharp weapons were held once again at my throat as my shackles were unbolted from the dark stone of the table.

I could hardly believe my good fortune. The last vestiges of my strength had all but drained away when the messenger arrived, and I had resigned myself to the desperate agonies that I knew must start at any time now. To be given a reprieve at this stage was more than I could have hoped for.

I was hauled to my feet and half carried, half dragged from the chamber into the passageway outside. The chief torturer followed, carefully keeping a short sword firmly pressed against the base of my neck.

We reached the great stone portal to the amphitheater and edged through, along with thousands of others. We found ourselves in a vast auditorium: the roof was many earth miles above us, and the circular walls were even farther away.

I had been here before. The amphitheater could seat many hundreds of millions of beings. Never before had I seen it at anything close to capacity, but today was different. The amphitheater was heaving with beings of all types, who poured in from the many wide stone portals.

My captors found a row of stone seats and pulled me downward by my chains. The vast cavern was dark and gloomy when empty, but now that it was full, the darkness seemed to intensify and grow ever more oppressive; such was the darkness of many of the beings who had entered. By now, my strength was starting to return. I reflected that I was marvelously made. This set me thinking about my Creator. Where was he? What was happening to him?

The crowd pouring into the amphitheater was beginning to thin now. The flood slowed to a stream, and then, eventually, a trickle as the last of the stragglers were hurried along by the whips of the guards bundling them through the still-open doorways.

Suddenly, a tumultuous fanfare broke out. Everybody looked over to one side of the amphitheater and saw that hundreds of demonic heralds were marching in. Some carried banners, and others blew trumpets.

The crowd fell silent. Then, suddenly, cheering broke out as Lucifer swept into the amphitheater, arrayed in all his glory as an archangel. I knew that he could not keep up that splendor for long, but this was his moment of triumph; doubtless, he would milk it for all it was worth.

The crowd cheered and cheered. The war had been won, and they lauded their victorious leader.

Lucifer walked forward slowly, graciously acknowledging the cheering of his subjects. Had he ever really expected to reach this moment? He had one of

the three members of the godhead captive in his kingdom, and, for the first time since the rebellion, he was in a truly strong position.

Lucifer stood basking in the adulation of the crowd. He seemed to grow in size, shining brighter and brighter as he displayed all the colors of the spectrum. Eventually, he held up his hand for silence, and, levitating upward, he took his seat on a great onyx throne that was set high up on the circular wall of the amphitheater.

As the cheering died down to silence, he commanded, "Bring in the prisoner."

A solitary trumpeter sounded a mocking fanfare that was deliberately off-key and contained wrong notes. The sound was tinny and almost lost in the vast amphitheater. The crowd picked up on this immediately, and, as Jesus walked calmly into the vast auditorium, the multitude erupted into hoots and catcalls.

For a long time, the shouted insults and screamed threats continued. Then, clearly by prearrangement, the massed ranks of the trumpeters sounded a long single blast. The crowd immediately quieted down, and a herald stood and called for silence.

An expectant hush fell upon the crowd. They did not know what was coming next, but, today, anything could happen. A surge of anticipation like a current of electricity was running through the crowd.

The herald spoke again. "Our new guest, Jesus of Nazareth, once known as the prince of Heaven, is apparently a most gifted preacher."

Loud *oohs* and gasps of pretend admiration burst from the crowd at this point, as the herald deliberately waited for a reaction.

He then continued, "Lord Lucifer thought that you might find it entertaining to listen to him, so he has graciously asked our guest to speak to you."

Jesus calmly and collectedly walked forward to the center of the auditorium. I watched Lucifer. He swelled like a bullfrog, savoring his moment of triumph. I guessed that he was congratulating himself on the brilliance of his idea in humiliating Jesus in this way. Oh, other humiliations would follow, but this was a brilliant start. It could not fail to be perfect. Jesus had been abandoned here by his Father. How could he not now be bitter and afraid and ready to denounce the Father who had led him to this? Jesus's denouncement of his Father would make Lucifer's decision to rebel appear legitimate, even farsighted. At the end of Jesus's broken admission of failure, both of himself and of his Father, Lucifer would ensure that he bowed in worship to him as lord of Hell. Then, his triumph would be almost complete. The only remaining step would be to bargain with God for the return of his Son in exchange for his kingdom.

Lucifer settled more comfortably on his throne and waited for Jesus to begin.

Jesus was a picture of composure, even peace. He surveyed the crowd and then began to speak. His was a lone voice in a vast auditorium, and he was surrounded by a baying mob of hundreds of millions of raucous opponents, but, once he began to speak, a profound silence quickly spread over his audience. His voice must have carried supernaturally, for all of us, no matter how far away, heard him with crystal-clear clarity. More than that, watching my fellow listeners, I knew that they were experiencing what I had experienced every time I had heard him speak on earth: Jesus's words had a truth and power that could not be denied. A deep and impressive silence settled over that vast gathering. The silence was so perfect that a dropping pin would have sounded loud.

Every word that Jesus spoke resounded in my heart like a tidal wave of reality and truth crashing into my innermost being. His listeners were now silent and transfixed. This was no case of mass hypnotism; rather, each of us knew that we were faced with the ultimate reality. The moment that he started to speak, we no longer had any illusions that he was a prisoner here. We knew that we were once more in the presence of God. Every word that he uttered had more meaning, more reality, than Heaven or Hell, time or eternity. Each word had a value that exceeded that of the universe and would last far longer.

Everybody's attention was riveted on Jesus, but I cast a glance over at Lucifer. The scowl on his face and his hunched body spoke volumes about how much he was suddenly regretting his decision to have Jesus address the inhabitants of Hell. He kept underestimating Jesus. He expected him to be a pleading, cowering wreck ready to denounce his Father, but here he was, cool and collected, seeming even now to have perfect trust in his Father, and perfect peace in himself.

Jesus spoke first about Creation. He reminded his listeners that he had created all things: things eternal, things temporal, all spirit and matter. He had designed and created all. He reminded us that he was the legitimate Lord of all because he had created all.

Lucifer scowled more deeply but then began to look increasingly uncertain, as the growing realization dawned that he was no longer the master of events here. To begin with, Jesus had refused to be cowed, had shown no fear, had exhibited a peace and confidence that was unnerving. Now he was speaking with an authority that told Lucifer deep in his spirit, as it told all of us, that we were in the presence of the one in charge of all things.

Jesus spoke more. He spoke about redemption. He reminded us that when mankind first fell, God had foretold that a redeemer would come. One who would rescue them from their slavery to self, to sin, and to rebellion against God. Jesus told us about his love for every man, woman, and child. He who saw all times and places simultaneously knew every tear that would be shed, every moment of loneliness and hurt and sorrow. And he had decided to rescue every one of them who would be willing to come to him for salvation.

It was God's perfect plan of redemption that Jesus, his Son, should come to earth and live as God had originally intended all men and women to live: free of sin, free of self, alive to God. He would then lay down his life as a sacrificial offering, voluntarily taking the punishment for all the wrongdoing of all the people of the world. By doing that he would fulfill God's just decree that wrongdoing must be punished. If any of the humans would come to him and accept him as Lord of their lives, he would have already borne their punishment and be able to put them back into a right relationship with his Father. This was why he had been so besmirched and filthy with sin on the cross: he had willingly borne people's sins for them, willingly borne the punishment that was due as well. That was why his Father had turned away from him as he bore the sins of the world and carried God's judgment against them. Those who came to him he would never refuse and never cast out. Whatever they had done, however bad it was, he had paid far, far more than enough to put things right. The blood he shed, and the price he paid, would make them clean, and he would receive them into God's family.

He then spoke about the joys that were to come for the sons and daughters of men who would come to him. An eternity of bliss, adventure, excitement, and growth would be theirs from that point on as adopted children of God.

Lucifer now looked ashen. He seemed to have shrunk in on himself as the realization hit home that he had lost the war—conclusively, comprehensively, completely. God had foreseen everything, had known all from the beginning, and had planned and carried out the redemption of all things. Lucifer's master stroke in killing Jesus had been his undoing. The highlight of his campaign had been no more than him playing out the part that God, in his infinite wisdom, had predestined for him.

At this point, Jesus looked directly at Lucifer and demanded the keys of Death and Hell.

Lucifer sat wide-eyed and gasping. He had always dreaded the moment when God would settle accounts with him. He had hoped to avoid it, but here it was, just at the moment when he thought that victory was actually his.

For a long moment, Lucifer sat motionless, a growing look of horror spreading over his features as he realized that he could not disobey the command that he had just been given. A tremendous battle was raging within him. You could see that he was desperate to disobey the command given by the Son of God, yet slowly and surely his hand moved to his belt and retrieved the symbols of authority that had long ago been given to him by God. He rose and descended to Jesus, then, clearly against his will, he knelt and handed the keys to Jesus.

There was complete silence in the vast auditorium, then, a low rumbling could be heard and felt, coming from all directions. It grew and grew in volume until it filled the air. The foundations of Hell were shaking, and the shaking and noise was intensifying. Suddenly, the shackles on my wrists, arms, and legs

burst asunder. Throughout Hell, I could hear the sound of gates of bronze, iron, and stone bursting open or being shattered into thousands of pieces.

Jesus turned and started to leave.

Lucifer, still on his knees, managed to gasp out, "Seize him!"

But it was far too late for that, and all of us realized it.

Jesus now blazed again with the glory he had always had in Heaven.

Throughout the vast auditorium, the hundreds of millions of beings present fell to the floor as they shielded their eyes from the blazing glory.

I was sure that Jesus did not intend to use his glory as a weapon; it was just that, once more, he was shining with the righteousness and holiness that were rightfully his as he returned to his Father, the plan of salvation complete.

No one attempted to obey Lucifer's instruction. No one could.

The rumbling and shaking continued. Large cracks were appearing in the walls of the amphitheater, and the air was full of dust. But, for the first time ever, Hell was full of freshness and light.

Jesus walked out of the auditorium through one of the portals. The guards at the open doorway were lying face downward, trying to shield themselves from the awful glory and holiness that was passing them by.

My captors were huddled on the floor, trying to shield themselves, but my chains had fallen off, shattered, and I was free.

I rose and followed Jesus at a distance, shielding my eyes as best I could. Without thinking, I found myself doing what once I had done in Heaven. I formed all six wings—which, by now, had fully recovered—and, with two of them, I shielded my face; with two, I covered my naked feet; and I kept two for flying, should I need to.

I followed him at a distance. To my amazement, I saw flowers rapidly growing and blooming where he had trodden. Flowers in Hell! Who would have believed it? The flowers were of amazing colors and fragrances, and all seemed to glow with an inner light as they sprang up in profusion in the footsteps that Jesus left.

Jesus passed through Hell. As he reached the gates that had survived the shaking, they swung open smoothly and silently. The gate guards were mostly absent. Most had been called into the amphitheater to hear Jesus; the few that remained on duty either fled or were huddled on the floor, cowering from the intense holiness and righteousness that was passing by them.

I moved as close behind Jesus as I dared. I just knew that the safest place in Hell—in fact, the *only* safe place in Hell—was the spot as close as possible to Jesus.

We reached the gate that opened onto the bottomless pit. The heavy gate swung open as we approached, and Jesus walked through the open portal. I followed, unable to get too close, yet fearful of being too far behind in case the gate should close upon me, or some powerful being who had recovered should come upon me silently from behind. Having passed through the portal, Jesus turned suddenly to the right and passed out of my view. I was mystified. The last time I passed this way, it led only to a sheer drop. I followed, and, as I passed through the portal, I looked up along the shaft of the pit and saw that, following the heavy earthquake that had shaken Hell, a circular ascending path had emerged from the previously perfectly smooth sides of the pit. This path ascended in a corkscrew manner. Jesus walked along the path. Again, I followed. When we reached the next gateway, the gate swung open of its own accord; of the gate guard, there was no sign.

Soon, we reached the edge of the lake of fire. As we entered the vast cavern in which it raged, the water was surging and bursting against the roof and walls of the cavern, just as it always had. However, the moment that Jesus entered the chamber, its fury subsided. For the first time, I saw the burning sea become silent and still; its heaving waves subsided, first to swells, and then to a flat calm. For a moment or two, all was still and calm; then, the sea began to roll apart, leaving a path through its center. Cliffs of burning liquid stood on either side of a narrow path as the sea bunched itself up on the left and right. To my amazement, as I looked down the narrow path that stood between the cliffs of burning liquid, I saw on the rocky ocean floor, revealed for the very first time, a paved path of gold. The path stood waiting; clearly, it must have been laid long ago when Hell was first formed. Was it possible that, when God created Hell, he had laid that path for his Son with this very moment in mind?

We walked along the path of gold. I was a long way behind, but I was sure that Jesus was aware of my presence, just as he had been on earth. However, he made no move to stop me from following him. Looking slightly to one side of Jesus—I could not look directly at him—I noticed that from the walls of the burning sea, living figures of flaming liquid stepped forth, separating from the walls. These figures bowed low to the passing Lord of Heaven as the sea took shape in the form of living creatures and worshipped its Creator.

We came to the vast chamber in which Cerberus had once stood guard. It was empty now, but it sparkled with reflected light as Jesus walked through it. I noticed that the walls had a certain beauty that I had never seen before. The heavy, fetid, choking stench that characterized all of Hell had been replaced by a fresh breeze. At one moment, the breeze smelled of summer meadows; at another, of a sea breeze. Flowers continued to bloom in Jesus's wake, springing up wherever he had trodden, and these, too, had a beautiful and lingering fragrance. I realized that just the transient presence of Jesus was

turning this, the most desolate, detestable, and horrendous place, into paradise. I reckoned that the beautiful sights and smells would die once Jesus left Hell; but such was his beauty, nobility, and glory that it was impossible for his surroundings not to be transformed into an outpost of Heaven. I realized afresh that all that was beautiful, and, ultimately, good was found in God alone.

We passed the parade ground where I had been ambushed earlier. The bodies of my fallen opponents had been carried away, but discarded weapons and broken armor were still much in evidence, scattered around the battlefield.

The lofty walls and overpowering battlements of Hell towered above us as we approached the final gate. Some guards were still on duty here, but as they saw Jesus approaching, they threw down their weapons and standards, and fled.

The mighty portcullis rose of its own accord as Jesus approached, and we walked through. We had not gone far past the gate when the rumbling and shaking began again. I hurried rapidly on, as the towers that flanked the outer gate began to tremble, then shake, then rock violently. I glanced behind me and saw the towers collapse in a heap of dust and falling masonry. The gates of Hell had fallen.

I stood transfixed for long moments as the rubble bounced and rolled before finally settling into two huge mounds. The battlements of Hell still stood on either side of the fallen gate towers, but, at many places along the walls, I could see mighty cracks and fissures.

I did not know how long I must have stood there in amazement, but, when I turned again, Jesus had gone. There was no sign of him. I stood there in a quandary. For a while now, I had thought no further about what I was to do, other than instinctively deciding to follow Jesus. What should I do now? I could not go back to Hell. They had already identified me as a traitor. Now that I had followed Jesus out of Hell, I must be at the top of their list of targets for destruction. Clearly, I must leave here quickly, before Hell's forces recovered and came searching for me.

I hurried onward and, once again, found the doorway through which I had last descended into Hell. Normally, there was only one direction to travel in this passageway: downward. But I needed a rapid exit, and I gambled that, since the gates of Hell had fallen, the passageway might be usable for an upward journey. As I reached the doorway, I noticed that it still stood but had clearly been damaged by the heavy earthquake. The mighty stone door was partly open and cracked across. I was pretty sure that Jesus could not have come this way, as the trail of flowers that blossomed in his footsteps did not extend here. With a start, I realized that I had been so preoccupied with events around me that I could not recall when I had stepped off the trail of blooms.

I put my shoulder to the partly open doorway and pushed with all my strength. For long moments, it resisted me. I realized with a growing despair that I was exerting all my strength, and, still, the door would not budge. Then, just as despair was threatening to overwhelm me, the door moved slightly. It was a small amount, but it was enough for me to turn sideways and squeeze through the space.

I hurried onward and upward through the dust that swirled in the fetid heavy air. Repeatedly, I glanced behind me, anxious lest I be overtaken. I was a fugitive now. I came at last to the doorway at the other end of the long tunnel that led to the valley of Gehenna, outside Jerusalem. To my relief, I found that the door opened easily enough, allowing me back onto the planet earth.

I wasted no time and was about to leave the surface of the planet at high speed when my attention was caught by two bright angels descending from Heaven. It was against all my training and experience, but the events of this day were so momentous that I decided to go and see what was afoot, as I was sure that it must be connected with Jesus. So, using my skills in concealment to the utmost, I moved toward the point where they had landed, and then I silently closed in on them.

They stood at the doorway to a tomb, similar to the one I had seen in Bethany, where Jesus had raised Lazarus. The two angels stood on either side of a large and heavy round stone that had been rolled across the entrance to the tomb. I noticed that across this stone a chain had been placed, and a wax seal indicated that the stone must not be removed, on the authority of the high priest. The chain snapped, and the seal fell into the dust, as the angels effortlessly rolled the stone away. On the ground, huddled in terror, a squad of soldiers from the temple guard looked on, wide-eyed and terrified. Having rolled the stone away, the two angels bowed deeply and reverentially to whomever stood inside, and moved away. A brilliant incandescence burst forth from the open tomb. The guards on the ground choked in terror and shielded their eyes as they tried to burrow into the ground; such was their awe.

Jesus strode forth, out of the tomb, streaming light in all directions. He glowed like the noonday sun, only much, much brighter. It was difficult, but I peered behind him into the now empty tomb. The shelf where his body had been laid was now empty, save for his neatly folded burial garment. Jesus stood once more on earth, in the power and strength of his resurrection body.

Suddenly, all the arguments and indecision within me ceased. I knew where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. I had followed Jesus around for three years. In that time, I had seen a perfect example of the ultimate in nobility and courage and truth. I knew now that God was all that was claimed of him, and much, much more. His service was the ultimate destination; he himself was the ultimate prize. I did not know what would happen to me, and I no longer cared. Let God punish me, destroy me—whatever. All I wanted was to be right with him again, to ask his forgiveness, to repent of my terrible stupidity and wickedness. I still did not know if I would be accepted, if it were possible for

me, a fallen angel, to return to him. But this I did know: whatever was right and true and good, Jesus would do it, and if he could show mercy, he would do so. But whatever he decided, whatever he did, it was better to be under his sovereignty than to chart my own course.

I stepped forward, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster, until I was running to him. I threw myself down on my knees, at his feet, and, with my head bent and my heart free at last, I declared, "My Lord, My God."

