

... a gripping, thought-provoking tale that evokes a strong response within the reader, both on an emotional and an intellectual level. It is a dark fantasy that takes the reader on both an adventure-filled ride, but also a spiritual exploration... Action abounds in this thriller... Baxter's prose is better than many in the genre... consistently solid and well-crafted... I found it a gritty, entertaining read that made me think. If you like your speculative fiction a little on the dark side, RealmShift is for you.

David Wood, author of Dourado and Cibola

Twice, ensconced in a tram, reading this tale, I missed my stop... Alan Baxter introduces us to a mystical world, a shadowed realm with forces beyond comprehension or principle... Baxter writes with conviction; he writes differently rather well. Physical and dimensional conflict is one of the best features of the tale. Effortless script makes gullible the reader... Prose flows smoothly, almost poetic. RealmShift is a novel I am loath to put down. A most surprising read. Quite a ride.

Eugen M Bacon, TCM Reviews

...fast-paced and engrossing... a book that was thoroughly enjoyable. 4 ½ out of 5

Linda Davis, clubreading.com

...entertaining and thought-provoking ...I enjoyed it immensely... an interesting blend of speculative fiction and thriller.

Julie Ann Dawson, Gloomwing

RealmShift has a strong foundation in an unusually coherent fantasy cosmology... This is a substantial dark fantasy novel written in clear, effective prose... seamlessly constructed with a plot that picks up speed slowly but then barrels towards its conclusion... Baxter shows glimmers of unusual talent in his world building and prose style.

Ed Kane, POD People

A fast-paced storyline that holds the reader right from the start ... nifty devices galore, from RealmShift to the Balance ... and a no-nonsense storytelling approach that lets the unfolding action speak for itself.

Van Ikin, editor 'Science Fiction'

... always on the move it explores an interesting mix of mythologies... a rich novel.

Infinitas Books

Also by Alan Baxter

MageSign

The long awaited sequel to *RealmShift*

Available now from Gryphonwood Press

ALAN BAXTER

REALMSHIFT



Gryphonwood

RealmShift © 2005, 2006, 2010 by Alan Baxter.

Third Edition, 2010

Published by Gryphonwood Press

www.gryphonwoodpress.com

Cover design by Alan Baxter Copyright © 2008

Cover Image – crystal skull by Donn Salt

<http://www.donnsalt.com>

The moral right of Alan Baxter to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

<http://www.alanbaxteronline.com>

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American copyright conventions.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 13 : 978-0-9825087-4-9
Printed in the United States of America
First worldwide printing: 2006

This book is dedicated to the memory of those beloved family members that had to leave too soon, through no desire of their own.

Steve, the greatest brother

&

Gloria, a wonderful mother

Torrential rain. The sky crying tears of shame to wash the filth from the streets of the cramped, choking city below. An impossible task, the filth ingrained in the buildings, roads, windows. And in the hearts and souls of the people, everyone huddled in their selfish little boxes of material illusion.

Raindrops chased each other down the window pane, an endless race to the dirty stone windowsill. Zig-zag left, right, left, always down. The drops sound a repetitive tattoo on the glass, strangely soothing in spite of itself. The sky outside a solid leaden grey, like some great hand has closed the lid on a best forgotten box of horrors. Too dark for the time of day, mid-morning. The towers of the city stark and black, almost silhouettes against the slate sky.

Several stories below neon light on shops, bright blue, pink, green, shimmered reflections on the tear soaked road. Little people like ants, hiding from the pouring rain under umbrellas and newspapers, protecting their designer suits and expensive hairstyles, preserving the image. Shiny, hard shelled cars slide up and down the road.

Thunder rumbled overhead, like the embarrassed god of this city clearing his throat as he averts his eyes. Isiah sighed as he stared out into the weeping morning, the glass misting, fading away, his eyes sliding up once more to stare at the dead weight of the clouds. He could sense the impatience building in the figure behind him. Sighing again he turned. He couldn't see the figure too clearly, shadow masking the bulk of it. Unlike normal shadow, more like black light. And it was a bulk, malevolence exuding from its very presence, the only things really visible were two red, glowing eyes. A typical manifestation, the believer's image personified like many others, yet unique in its own way. Isiah could sense various other images shimmering and shifting behind, within, but this was the one he was dealing with now.

He took another breath and looked directly into those pulsing eyes. 'You can't have him.' His voice was matter-of-fact, tired.

A wave of pure anger, tangible, swept the room. Its voice did not use the space between them to get to Isiah but boomed straight into his head. He hated that. Vaudeville. 'We are already enemies, Isiah. Why make it worse?' The voice sounded like worms crawling through the rotting flesh of the dead, amplified by hollow skulls.

Isiah looked down, slight shake of the head. 'I suppose the expression "Patience is a virtue" is lost on you, isn't it? Do you want to fight me for

him now? You know he'll eventually have to come to your Realm, you'll get him in the end. But I'll find him first and he'll work for me.'

There was an audible hiss and whine of heat bowing metal, a crackle of wood and fabric burning. The voice contained such fury, such impotent rage. 'You are a thorn in my side, Interferer. It may not be worthwhile fighting you here but the race is on. I will send my Hell to your world, Isiah. I will harry your every move.' The figure hunched, muscles tightening as it leant forward dramatically to point one black, taloned finger at Isiah. 'And one day I will piss in your eyes as I watch you burn.' A dark flash of light revealed sloping brow, horns, taugt, shiny, black skin, then nothing but the cloying smell of sulphur. The carpet and floorboards were burned away, the pipes beneath grotesquely twisted like silver-grey candles left in the sun. Isiah picked up his tattered leather jacket, glanced once more at the burnt floor, and left the apartment.

He had been living here for some time now, no particular reason to move had arisen. It wasn't often that he got a job so close to home. It made him think of news reports on commercial stations, neighbours with shocked faces, I never thought it could happen here!

Stepping from the building Isiah pulled the collar of his jacket tight against the stinging tears, headed for the station. There were rather more etheric methods of travel open to him, but he preferred to travel like humans, mortals. It kept him in touch. He could not think of himself as either human or mortal any more, but it was important not to lose contact. He had been human, centuries ago.

After a short walk he arrived at the station and trotted down the steps leading underground, shaking the water from his dark hair, pushing it back from his eyes. Leaves and plastic packets gathered up in the corners, bright graffiti battled for supremacy on the walls. People jostled all around him, hurrying, heads down, insular. The ever-rolling human tide. As he came out into the ticketing area the metallic smell was a relief after the stairs, but the air was stale, processed.

He watched all the grey people, dividing up, tumbling through the turnstiles like cattle. Ticket in, *click*, ticket out, next. A guard leaned laconically against his little plastic booth, staring mindlessly at the crawling crowd, absently chewing on gum.

Isiah stepped up into the end of the nearest queue of commuters, slowly bumped his way along to the gateway. A slight gesture, mental pressure, and the electronics were overridden. The turnstile clicked open and he stepped through. No one noticed. No one ever did.

Walking toward the stairs, he caught the scent of sulphur thick in the

air, though knew only he smelt it. He smiled crookedly, *So it begins*. He started down the stairs, scanning with eyes and mind. There. Bottom of the steps, in among the shadows. He couldn't see it clearly, but its presence was unmistakable. Minion. Demon. Sent as promised, a little piece of Hell on Earth.

He could sense the malevolence in its aura, but also its mischief, joy at this opportunity to wreak a little havoc in the mortal plane. He would have to be careful. The commuters, bustling, jostling, would not be able to see it, but they would see him. See him react if it attacked, like a lunatic swatting at invisible flies. He could move fast, faster than the mortal eye could follow, but he would have to deal with it quickly, draw no attention.

As he processed these thoughts, it moved. Like a streak of black lightning, from the shadows into the harsh, fluorescent light, laughter like insane childrens' minds snapping in dark corners. As it flew up the stairs he stepped with supernatural pace to the right, left arm thrusting out, palm flat. He struck the Minion full in its grotesque, slimy, fang-crowded face, deflecting it violently into the wall. With a crunch like stamping on dry twigs, it slammed into the tiles and dropped to the floor, draped across three steps. As it raised its head, eyes swimming randomly, Isiah gathered a handful of raw energy, released it with a flick. Evil squeal, black smoke and a smell like burning rubber. A couple of commuters looked up, surprised, Where did you come from? Then looked away again.

Isiah paused for a moment, confused. That was pointless, only one. No threat at all, just a hindrance. It made him think of the little sharpened stars used by Japanese assassins. Shuriken. Nasty little thrown weapons, not really designed to do any damage, just distract, confuse the enemy, make an opening for the killing blow.

He stepped onto the platform as a train hissed to a stop. With a mechanical sigh of resignation the train doors slid open and he stepped aboard. Sitting on the hard, dirty fabric seat he contemplated finding a quiet corner in order to use a rather less mundane mode of transport. It was only a couple of stops. He let a field of energy build up gently to put off any more nasty little Minions that might be sent. Make them think twice before attacking. A small, balding man with glasses like milk bottle bottoms and an oversized, threadbare suit in the seat beside Isiah shivered as the energy field built up. He glanced up and shivered again without knowing why. Isiah looked down at him over his shoulder with no expression. The little man's eyes widened slightly, owlish behind thick lenses, at Isiah's black eyes and he moved over an inch. He made a point of ignoring Isiah, studying the material of his trousers intently.

The journey went along quietly for several minutes. Then a shimmer in the air, like heat haze, caught Isiah's eye. Simultaneously, he sensed the shift between Realms and a slimy, taloned demon stepped into view. Some mortals would be able to see these evil interlopers, but not many. This was another private visitation, its effect intended to be public, not its appearance.

It grinned maliciously, a forest of black teeth like miniature sabres. It sat there, just a couple of feet away, staring. Isiah let energy gather in his hand, raised an eyebrow to the demon. It raised one gnarled, black finger to its dripping lips, bile green eyes glittering. It leapt backwards, landed in the lap of a fat black woman sitting opposite and melted away into her stomach. Dirty trick. The woman scratched absently at her rotund abdomen, staring into space.

What would it do? Obviously sent to cause some havoc, slow him down. Why did this one have to believe in God and the Devil? All Heaven and Hell, demons and angels, it could all get so damned complicated.

The woman turned her head slowly to look directly at Isiah. He saw the flash of madness in her eyes a moment before she leapt, screaming like a banshee, hands stretched out for his throat. People all around jumped, looking to see what the fuss was. Definitely a dirty trick. He could not simply destroy her in a carriage full of people. With the demon using a human, he had to move at human speed too. Everyone was going to see this fight.

He let her hands get almost to his neck, then grabbed her wrists, one in each hand. Twisting at the waist, he stepped up out of his seat and turned her into his place, using her own momentum. She hit the seat with a heavy thud, fingers writhing like little snakes, long, red nails glittering in the fluorescent light. Isiah could hear the demon laughing maniacally within her. Her foot flew up between his legs. He turned in his knee, deflecting the blow against his thigh.

Other commuters were beginning to sidle away, heading for the doors as the train began slowing into the next station, but helplessly staring, fascinated. No offers of assistance, no one helping to hold her down. Just watching, What a remarkable thing I saw on the train today! Isiah's attacker was writhing under his grasp like a giant, round eel, still wailing, lips flecked with spittle, kicking wildly. It was getting harder to hold her down without hurting her.

As the train came to a halt at the platform he reached into her mind with his own and grabbed the demon in a psychic headlock, their minds a

mirror of their bodies. It screamed, its cry mingling with hers, one inside his head, one outside. As the doors slid open, he twisted again, throwing the woman by her wrists from one side of the carriage to the other, superhuman strength, tearing the demon from her mind as she flew into the wall between the seats and the door. There were gasps and exclamations from the other passengers as her banshee wail stopped dead with a rush of breath. With a mental blow, Isiah crushed the demon away to nothing, its crazed laughter fading.

He stepped from the train and walked toward the exit sign, chuckles and hushed conversation from the commuters around him, Poor fellow, How embarrassing, I hope he didn't hurt her. Not his problem. This was really going to be a pain if it continued.

The city downpour was refreshing after the cramped confines of the underground. After a ten minute walk Isiah looked up, squinting against the rain, at a dully glowing sign. *O'Malley's Pool Hall*. Pushing the door open, he stepped into the building, suddenly enveloped in artificial heat and light.

He climbed the steps leading up to the first floor slowly, letting his mind gently scour the large room above before he reached it. Smoke, beer, mixed emotions, depression, hostility, competition. Not a great deal of joy.

There were several tables, a dozen or more, with little crowds around each one. Lots of denim, leather, hair, tattoos. There was a thin crowd at the bar. An undercurrent of clinking glasses, converging conversations, the solid *thock* of cue ball on colour, all overlaid by the sound of Dire Straits piping out from a juke box through cheap speakers. Shadowy faces floated in the corners, under faded prints of cars, motorcycles, bikini girls.

Isiah walked towards one of the nearest tables, the players pausing to watch him approach. He quickly scanned their thoughts. It was obvious which one they looked to as a leader. Bald head, shaved, long beard, more tattoos than skin, arrogant stance and expression. Mean. Isiah nodded as he approached. Mean didn't.

'You guys know where I can find Samuel Harrigan?'

The painted one shrugged, shook his large head. 'Never 'eard of him.' He wasn't lying. The others shook their heads too with sneering expressions.

'Okay. Thanks.' He felt them watching him as he walked away. He approached another table, more of the same people around it. Modern tribes. There was no obvious leader in this group. He stopped, not looking at any one in particular. They paused playing to look back.

‘Anyone know where I can find Samuel Harrigan?’ He felt it immediately amongst the general shaking of heads. There. He was shaking his head, but thinking of Samuel. He knew him well. Isiah stepped around the table nearer to this one. ‘You sure?’

The man looked left and right, confused. Isiah leaned forward, the table light illuminating the left side of his face. The pool player tensed a little inside as he looked into Isiah’s black, bottomless eyes. ‘Where is he?’ Isiah’s voice was deep, threatening.

The pool player looked to his friends again, then back at Isiah, trying not to look into those eyes. ‘I don’t know, man.’

Isiah put a little psychic pressure on, made him feel like something was squeezing his brain. Something was. ‘Where is he?’

The pool player’s eyes widened, his adam’s apple bobbing as he tried to swallow. Isiah sensed a big man to his right step forward. Hostility. ‘Leave him alone, pal.’ The man’s voice was like gravel in a wooden box.

Isiah didn’t take his eyes from the one in front of him. As Dire Straits faded from the room the susurration of conversation seemed to swell slightly. ‘Step back friend, and I won’t hurt you.’ Isiah’s presence was powerful, his confidence obvious. A pause. Piano began to float in the air. Isiah concentrated on the heavy, not really listening, but he recognised it. There was a long moment of discomfort as the man tried to decide what to do. Of course, it was Queen flooding the air. The big one stepped back a little, uncertain. The one in front flicked his eyes to his friend, back to Isiah. His head was beginning to hurt. He started to blink rapidly.

Isiah leaned slightly nearer to him, penetrating the small man with his onyx eyes.

‘He’s at home. His apartment. At home. I’m sure....at home.’ He was telling the truth. Isiah picked up an image of Samuel, finishing a beer, stubbing out a cigarette, ‘See ya later, Ralphy, I’m heading home.’ *Good. Now I know what he looks like.*

‘Address?’

A minute later and he was walking back down the stairs to the street.

He felt the fight coming as soon as he turned past the end of the alley after the pool hall. A big shift in Realms, rolling mental shockwave, smell like cordite and a coppery taste, as different worlds briefly merged. He saw the haze of RealmShift in the street ahead. *He’s trying to expose me, get me in a fight out in the open.*

There were muffled popping noises as, one after another, they began to appear. Too stupid to know that they were supposed to make a public fight Isiah knew that they would chase him down. He turned back into

the alley, running at supernatural speed. Skidding to a halt, he spun around in time to intercept the first of them as it leapt, a flying mass of teeth and claws.

Isiah twisted, pistoning out a powerful punch. There was a satisfying crunch of bones as it tumbled away and hit the ground with a wet thud. He gathered in a rush of energy, compressed it, and leaned forward in a stance to brace himself. He put both hands out in front and let it fly, full into the faces of the next wave of shrieking, slavering abominations. There were dozens of them. A bright fan of raw energy, blue, crackling, pulsed from Isiah's hands. There was a hissing and wailing, a smell of burning, then the rest were on him.

He fell over backwards under the weight of the stinking, slimy horrors, biting, clawing. Hot stinging slashes sprang up on his hands and face. Now he was really angry. With a yell from his repentant soul he tore them to pieces with his hands and his mind, throwing them left and right, ripping them limb from limb. Grabbing them from the air as they leapt, slamming them into the ground. Wave after wave he repelled, desperately keeping his ground. Then it was over. He rose to his knees, panting for breath, gingerly feeling the depth of the gashes in his face, hands, arms. His jeans and jacket were soaked, reeking of the detritus of the alley and the demons fetid slime.

He drew in a deep breath, pictured the flesh of his face and hands in his mind, began reknitting the skin, speeding up the cellular activity. The cuts and gashes slowly filled in, the burning pain subsiding.

A sound caught his attention, to the right. He spun around, energy crackling around his outstretched hand, ready for another attack.

'Ss'okay mishturr. I'm leavin' okay?'

Wino. Eyes wide in terror, a half empty bottle hanging loosely, forgotten, in one hand. The wino hurried off down the alley, back bowed, staggering slightly from left to right, and turned into the street. Isiah stared after him for a second, then turned his face up to the leaden sky, rain pattering his eyelids, cheeks, lips. Cool and soothing. He raised his hands up to either side, letting the rain wash the slime and ichor away. His breathing settled. Thunder pealed overhead, a deep throated, rumbling growl.

He had had enough of this, these shuriken were getting more offensive. He sat back on his heels, closed his eyes. He slowly let his spirit slip free from his body, flew the astral sky swiftly to the address he had been given. He located the building, looked around. There was a small alley. No one would notice him appear there, under the fire escape steps.

He retracted his spirit back to his body like it was on elastic, opened his eyes. No one else had appeared, the wine was still gone. He closed his eyes again and began to travel.

Picturing the fire escape in his mind, he let his entire body lose cohesion, molecules separating, becoming one with all matter, merging space. The familiar, slightly nauseating feeling washed over him as he stretched, opened. Then a sensation free blackness, no temperature, no sound. Not a lack of sound, like a silent, empty room, but no sound. It didn't exist, in between. Neither did light. Molecular absence. Just thought, pure consciousness, unfettered. Briefly he was in two places at once, then only one again. Light rushed through his mind, molecular collisions permeated his entire being. Then a heavy, tense feeling as his body reformed. He opened his eyes, looked at the fire escape overhead, the road out front. No one around. Good.

He hurried around to the front door of the apartment block and went inside. He climbed the stairs at a faster than human pace, not bothering to wait for the elevator. As he rounded the landing to the fifteenth floor, Samuel's floor, he felt divinity in the air. He walked slowly up to Samuel's front door and it swung slowly open.

There was a mixed rush of sensations from the single-room apartment beyond. There was the stench, both nasally and psychically, of death. The walls and floor were red with blood, the light in the room a pinkish shade from a blood spattered bare lightbulb. Bon Scott screamed from the speakers of a mini stack system. Apparently he was on the highway to hell.

The counterpoint to the death and carnage was the serenity permeating the air. Holy energy coming from the figure crouched on the floor in the middle of the room, bending over a blood soaked corpse. The crouching figure was large, muscular, wearing only loose fitting, white linen pants and buttonless shirt. Long blond hair tumbled over his shoulders and back. Large wings shimmered over him, only really visible if you didn't look directly at him, like pale stars in a night sky.

'Hello, Isiah. Shut the door would you.' His voice was smooth and velvety, calming to the soul.

'Gabriel. Must be important for him to send you down.' Isiah walked up beside the blond one and crouched down. With a mental flick he pressed the stop button on the CD player, sudden silence.

Gabriel looked up, slightly sheepish. 'I quite like that band.'

Isiah raised an eyebrow. 'Want it back on?'

Gabriel shook his head, looking back at the corpse. Isiah watched him,

pained at the sadness in his face. After a moment he turned his attention to the mess on the floor. It was the body of a young woman, mid-twenties at most. She was naked, laid out on the floor with her legs apart and her arms out to her sides. There was a gaping cavity in her chest, ragged. Her heart was gone. Through the blood covering her, Isiah could see other wounds, cuts and bruises. Her face was frozen in pain and fury.

No matter how used he got to killing and death, it was always the young women, killed by violence, that tore his heart the most. Staring at her broken, violated form images of Megan rose in his mind. The only person he had ever allowed himself to love, so many centuries ago. His beautiful Megan and her violent death, the trigger of his supernatural existence.

Looking into this corpse's staring eyes Isiah said, 'You know her?'

Gabriel nodded, not looking up. 'She was a good one, we needed her. Too late this time. So unpredictable sometimes, these humans.' He caught Isiah's eye. 'It was your boy.' Statement, not accusation.

'I've had a bit of trouble catching up with him. He seems to be a pace or two ahead of me at the moment.' Gabriel nodded again. 'What are you going to do about this one?' Isiah asked.

'Like I said, it's too late. I'll have to get on to someone else. She had work to do for us, but there's time to find another.' Gabriel sighed. 'We fight in Heaven, Isiah, you know that, but humans seem capable of such a remarkable degree of brutality.' His eyes were sad. 'Get this one will you? Make him do what's needed, then finish him forever.'

Isiah smiled. 'That's the easy part. Your fallen brother wants him so badly he's making my life hell, if you'll pardon the pun. Samuel's managed to avoid him. That's what this is.' Gabriel raised a questioning eyebrow. Isiah pointed to the ragged chest wound. 'The missing heart. Samuel's using ancient magic, blood rituals, to avoid Satan. He 'sold his soul' in classic tradition, now thinks he can dodge the deal and get away with it. Trouble is, it seems he can.'

Gabriel looked back at the young woman's body. With a gentle gesture of his hand her face relaxed, eyes closing. Her countenance settled into something close to serenity. Looking up again, 'Why'd he make the deal in the first place?'

Isiah made a wry face. 'That's where it gets complicated. Samuel thinks it would be just grand to be immortal; he's been devoting his entire life to its pursuit.'

'Right,' Gabriel said with a little laugh, 'What a fool.'

Isiah nodded, smiling. 'Maybe if he had any idea he might find a more

fulfilling pursuit. Anyway, he makes a deal with Satan – “Show me the secret of immortality and you can have my soul.” He thinks Satan won’t spot the flaw. How can the Devil ever get his soul if he’s immortal and will never die?’

Gabriel was gently shaking his head, his eyes lowered. ‘Why do so many think they can outsmart my dark brother?’

Isiah shrugged, took a deep breath. ‘So your dark brother then tells Samuel that there is an ancient Mayan crystal skull in South America that will impart immortality to him, go get it. Satan’s just playing with him of course, cat batting a mouse, but our unpredictable mortal throws a spanner in the works. He decides to use some twisted voodoo divination technique to see if Old Nick’s lying to him or not, starts mixing up his deities. Typically trusting. The divination reveals Death waiting in South America, Samuel thinks it’s his death and panics.’

Gabriel raised a perfect eyebrow. ‘Not his death?’

‘No, that’s the rub,’ said Isiah, smiling with one side of his mouth. ‘The death he saw is one that’s really important to us. Not his death at all. That’s the irony. He’s the one that has to do the killing.’

Gabriel nodded, beginning to see the point. ‘So now Samuel the Satanist has panicked and gone into hiding, which means he won’t be going to South America, which means he won’t end up killing the one out there, right? Upsetting your precious Balance?’

‘Exactly. But the real screw is that old Sam’s done a great job of dodging Satan, he’s really pulled it off using this old blood magic. So now Satan’s really pissed and wants to consume him instantly.’ Isiah shook his head, heaved a sigh. ‘Told you it was complicated.’

Gabriel nodded, lips pursed in thought. ‘It always is. So you have to find Samuel before Satan does and get him to South America to kill this one, before my brother catches up to you both?’

‘That’s right. And there we come full circle; he’s one pace ahead it seems.’ He nodded toward the blood soaked corpse.

Gabriel thought for a while, gently stroking the bloodstained cheek of the dead young woman. Eventually he asked, ‘Why has this one in South America got to die?’

Isiah shook his head slightly. ‘I’m not exactly sure yet, you know how vague the Balance can be with me sometimes. The future existence of quite a powerful spirit depends on it. If Samuel doesn’t kill this South American asshole then the asshole will end up killing a woman from the United States. It’s her we’re really protecting.’

The angel nodded. ‘It’d be interesting to know what spirit it is. And

how this woman can prevent all its faithful from losing faith.'

'I guess I'll get privy to that in the end. Somehow she does something that keeps people believing in the spirit. If we don't get this right in South America, another one bites the dust; a little less balance in world.'

'Can't you cut out the middle man?' asked Gabriel, standing up. 'You know, get whoever this woman believes in to put in a little "divine intervention"?''

Isiah shook his head. 'It's never that easy, man. The woman doesn't believe in anything at all, neither does the South American guy. Pure atheists, the pair of them. No way to get to them through deities. That's why Samuel's so important, but it's all gone pear shaped.' Isiah's eyes narrowed and a slight smile appeared at the corners of his mouth. 'Don't fancy finding this South American guy for me do you? Bright lights, bit of a burning bush?'

Gabriel smiled, but it held little humour. 'You know I can't. They have to believe first. I don't exist for him, whoever he is.'

Isiah stood up, gripped Gabriel's shoulder. 'I know, I know. Guess I'll have to carry on hunting for Samuel the Fool.'

Gabriel nodded. 'I got my own religion to preserve. You know, God's work.' Isiah grinned. The angel paused, thoughtful, then looked at Isiah, his face troubled. 'Where do they go when they die, Isiah?'

Isiah cocked his head to one side. 'Who?'

'People like your American woman. People who don't believe in anything.'

'I really don't know, Gabriel. I can go anywhere that anyone believes exists, but if someone doesn't believe in anything....maybe they don't go anywhere; just cease to be.'

Gabriel frowned, a heart wrenching sight on such a beautiful face. 'Doesn't bear thinking about. Cover your eyes.'

Isiah put up his hands, turned his back. 'See you later, Gabriel.'

'Yeah. Good luck.' There was a flash of light, pure white and so bright that Isiah could see the bones of his hands for an instant, then darkness. The aura of death swamped Isiah's senses again as the serenity drained from the room, pale pink light slowly resolving everything back into focus.

Isiah rubbed his eyes gently, looked around. *Where are you Samuel?*

As he sifted through items on an old, scratched wooden desk, his mind wandered, back through time faded centuries. He remembered what Gabriel had said, 'So unpredictable sometimes, these humans.' He had been one once, an unpredictable human. That's what got him into this

position. So very long ago, a lost Englishman, wandering the Highlands of Scotland. He had not had any belief either. And his lack of belief had set him on a path of immortal, unbelievable destiny. But he knew that didn't happen to everyone. He wondered how much his rage back then had had to do with it. All so long ago, yet still painful. His beautiful Megan, his love. Then the violence and the rage.

Something on the desk caught his eye, broke his reverie. It was a dagger of some kind, bone handle, three sided blade. For stabbing rather than slicing. There was a small carving of a snake's head on the pommel, the whole thing about ten inches long. It was relatively clean, but he could sense the history of it, brutal, murderous. He closed his eyes and let his mind gently merge into the dagger, his consciousness slipping between the molecules, mentally tasting the energy preserved in the weapon, its history. After barely a second he let go with both mind and hand, eyes snapping open, the dagger dropping to the carpet with a heavy thud. He stared vehemently at the dagger as it lay on the carpet, his eyes cold. There was so much death ingrained into it, so much pain and suffering. It was an old weapon, possibly older than Isiah himself, and had been repeatedly used to murder. Ritual sacrifice.

He picked it up from the carpet and laid it back on the desk. Now he had merged with it once he could feel its evil, rising from it like a bad smell. It was not the weapon used in the killing here in the apartment, but it still imparted one small clue; Samuel had left a very valuable and powerful tool behind. That either meant he was in a terrible hurry or not thinking clearly. Or both. Isiah drew raw energy into his hand and released it at the dagger. The energy crackled in between the particles of the evil weapon and split it into infinity, sending every molecule back into the ether from whence it had come so long ago, vaporising the vile thing completely.

He stood back from the desk, looking around himself, *Must be some clue, somewhere.* Then he saw it. There was a small red light blinking gently on an answering machine, an electronic heart, rhythmically beating. The machine was splattered with slowly congealing blood, half obscuring the light. He crouched by the small table with the telephone and answering machine, a small pad and pen and a resin cast of a naked woman doing impossible things with a ram. The young woman's blood coating the figurine made it even more obscene. Isiah frowned at the sight of it. A small gesture and it went the way of the ancient dagger. He pressed the *Play* button then wiped his finger on a dry patch of carpet at his feet.

A mechanical whirr, tape rewinding, a beep, then, 'Samuel, it's Dave.'

Half whispering, Hollywood conspiracy voice, the sound slightly obscured by blood in the speaker. ‘Shit, I hope you haven’t left yet. Errm...’ Pause, beep, click.

Isiah’s frown deepened, not much help there. Just as he was rising to his feet, another beep. He dropped back onto his heels. ‘Samuel, Dave again.’ Less of the conspiratorial whisper, more desperate now. Isiah had to smile, Sam and Dave, Soul Man. ‘Listen, you might have already left but you might not, just out. Milk maybe. Fuck it, I dunno. Anyway, this is important. That bloke came around to my shop again and he was pissed, man. I mean, like furious, dude. He started yelling and shouting, and throwin’ stuff about. “Where is he, where is he,” he kept yelling. He smashed my life-size Alice Cooper, man! Fuck, Samuel, that was unique, a fucking one-off, you know?’ Isiah grinned, *There’s the clue*. Dave took a deep breath, then, ‘Man, you gotta sort this out, alright. Get ‘round here!’ The phone went down with a bang. Beep, click. The tape stopped, rewind.

Outside it was still raining as hard as ever. There was a telephone booth on the path right outside the apartment block door. Isiah stopped for a moment, looking at it thoughtfully. After a second he picked up the receiver and dialled the police. When the dispatcher answered in her practiced, mechanical way Isiah gave the address of Samuel’s apartment and told her to send someone there, a girl had been murdered. He heard the dispatcher asking for his name as he hung up. He turned and started to walk toward the nearest record store he could think of.

Isiah pushed open the door of Black Heart Records & CDs and stepped inside to the sound of powerful guitars and pounding drums. He had to smile. Outside it was all concrete, neon, glass, but in here you could forgive a person for thinking they had just stepped into Count Dracula's private study. Everything was painted black except for a huge goat's head on white on the ceiling. Black lace decorated the ends of the numerous shelves of records, CDs, tapes, videos, DVDs. A large rack of T-shirts dominated the end wall, prints of demons, war, murder. Above the T-shirt rack two huge broadswords were crossed on the wall, a horned skull hanging from the centre of the cross. Hundreds of posters, each encased in black edged plastic, stuck out from the wall like a dark fan.

The death metal track that Isiah had no hope of identifying roared from speakers in every corner, lightning fast guitar, growling, demonic vocals, bass drum like the heart of a frightened mouse. A man of about twenty five or so stood behind the large glass cabinet that doubled as a sales counter, dressed all in black. He looked at Isiah from under long, unkempt hair, nodded slightly when their eyes met. Isiah would have to get a lot closer to actually talk to him.

He walked up to the counter. It was full of vicious looking chrome knives, pipes and bongos of all shapes and sizes, a dozen different rolling papers, fabric patches, studs, lighters. The required possessions of the dedicated metalhead. The guy behind the counter attempted to smile. 'Help you?'

Isiah nodded. 'I'm looking for a store that has a life-size Alice Cooper.' He was impressed at the straight face he managed to maintain.

The shopkeep looked a little confused. 'You wanna buy a life-size Alice Cooper?'

'No. I'm just looking for a store that has one. Maybe a display piece.'

'Oh, I see. Man, I thought you were some kind of freak! Life-size Alice fucking Cooper! Hang on a minute.' Chuckling to himself, the young man yelled through a heavy black curtain behind him. 'Barry'll be out in a second. He might know.'

Isiah nodded. 'Thanks.' He amused himself watching the young man roll a cigarette while subtly head banging at a furious rate, dropping the tobacco more than once. After a moment Barry appeared. He looked exactly like the young man, only a good ten years older.

'What can I do for ya?'

'I'm looking for a store. I think it's a record store. It has a life-size

Alice Cooper on display.’

Barry thought for a second. ‘I’ve seen that somewhere. You sure it’s a record store?’

‘No.’

‘Oh. Well, I know I’ve seen one somewhere.’ Barry grinned broadly. ‘Good ol’ Alice, eh!’ He scratched absently at his chin.

‘I think the owner’s name is Dave,’ Isiah offered. He was rewarded as realisation dawned on Barry’s thin face.

‘Shit, yeah! Of course. It’s not a record store, it’s Dave’s sex shop. Knew I’d seen it somewhere!’ Embarrassment quickly flashed across Barry’s face as he realised what he’d admitted to. He carried on quickly. ‘Me and Dave used to drink together sometimes. He pops in here sometimes for CDs and shit. His shop’s called The Toolbox. Is that what you mean?’

Isiah smiled. ‘I guess so. Where is it?’

The rain and traffic noise was a strange attack on the senses as Isiah stepped from the gloomy, pounding depths of Black Heart Records & CDs. The music hammering his ears had become background noise once he had decided to ignore it and it had the added advantage of blotting out the sounds of the city. Coupled with the imposed darkness, the sweet smell of the young man’s tobacco, the bizarre décor, it had all seemed quite pleasant in a twisted way. In some respects Isiah envied those men their simple security.

He looked around for somewhere quiet, somewhere to sit for a minute and astrally check out the Toolbox before travelling to it. There was a bar directly across the street. The gents in there would do fine.

Isiah walked through the scratched wooden doors of the pub and was met by the familiar and slightly comforting smell and warmth that bars all over the world seem to share. The odour of beer and cigarette smoke, perfume and cologne. People sat around with glasses of beer and wine, packet snacks, sad faces. Few people that frequented bars before lunchtime were particularly happy. The soft carpet slightly sticky underfoot, Isiah headed for the doorway marked by a sign with a picture of a pointing hand. He pushed open the door marked Gents and was met with the smell of detergent, bleach and piss. He walked straight to one of the cubicles at the back, choosing to ignore the dishevelled young man under the sinks pulling his belt tight around his left arm.

Sitting down on the toilet seat Isiah pushed the bolt into place and leant back, closed his eyes. He let his astral body slip free of the physical,

paused briefly to look at himself in the 'real' world, like he was sleeping. He checked the junkie under the sink; he was in his own world, concentrating on his task. Satisfied, he flew out through the wall of the pub into the street, then off at fantastic speed to the address of the Toolbox.

He arrived in seconds at a door with a red neon arrow pointing up the thin flight of stairs, Adult Book Exchange. He went up the stairs, jumping easily over a fat, greasy individual coming the other way. He hated to pass through people in this state, he always learned too much about them when that happened. Upstairs the shop was empty apart from a small man behind the counter who was attempting to superglue a man-size manikin together. Isiah smiled and shot back to his body.

As his eyes flicked open he noticed two things immediately. One was the ecstatic groan of the junkie under the sinks as he banged his score. The other was a lot more serious. A massive wave of RealmShift building fantastically fast. *He's trying to catch me weak!* There was always a risk in leaving your body unattended. Realising he was just in time to avoid a serious fight, Isiah quickly gathered his will and travelled from the pub. As his body dematerialised he heard and felt a roar of pure rage, Lucifer coming back for another shouting match. Close call. That junkie was heading for a hell of a ride.

He knew he was taking another big risk, but what choice did he have. Arriving on the stairs leading up to the Toolbox no one was around to see him appear out of thin air. Breathing a sigh of relief he walked up into the shop. The man behind the counter looked up, putting the manikin down out of sight. He nodded, slightly nervous. Isiah returned his nod and began wandering around, browsing, thinking about the best way to approach the subject.

The place was a remarkable treasure trove of all things sordid. It was lit with a number of low-grade ruddy bulbs, an attempt at atmosphere. There were magazine racks through the middle of the shop, loaded with glossies, books, videos, DVDs. Around all the walls were glass shelves carrying all forms of sex toys and associated paraphernalia, dildos, vibrators, love eggs, leather straps, whips, masks, a hundred different brands of amyl nitrate and a million other products that Isiah did not want to even consider the purpose of. But he couldn't help smiling slightly at some of the packaging and pictures.

Gently shaking his head he approached the counter. 'Dave?'

Dave's face ran through a remarkable range of expressions in just a couple of seconds, surprise, suspicion, fear, confusion. 'Yeah. What can I

do for you?’ Apparently he had decided to settle on confidence. *Bad choice.*

Deciding that intimidation would get him the quickest results Isiah leaned forward over the counter, trying to ignore the selection of plastic vaginas staring up at him through the glass top. He towered over the hunched shopkeeper, his black eyes like tunnels threatening to suck the small man into oblivion. ‘I’m looking for Samuel Harrigan.’ His voice was quiet but its effect was instant.

Dave visibly deflated, shoulders slumping. His breath slowly escaped in a lengthy sigh as he looked down at the floor. ‘Oh, fuck.’

Isiah sensed his sheer despair, almost felt sorry for him. ‘Where is he?’

Dave looked up, eyes red and tired. He held out both hands, palms up, in an act of submission. ‘I have no fucking idea man. Please don’t bust up my shop.’

Isiah leaned slightly closer. ‘Your shop can’t tell me anything. If I’m going to bust something up, it’ll be you. Where is Samuel Harrigan?’

Dave began to tremble, eyes brimming. His voice was weak, shaking like his body. ‘Shit man, please don’t hurt me. I wish I’d never met the bastard. I promise you, I don’t know where he is.’

Isiah knew he wasn’t lying so decided to try a different approach. ‘Why don’t you tell me about your relationship to Sam?’

Dave pulled forward a stool, slumped down onto it. He took a deep breath and rubbed his hand over his saggy, stubbly face. Taking a packet of Marlboro from under the counter he shook a cigarette loose, gripped it between yellow teeth, lit it with a shaking hand. His lighter was a Zippo with a pair of pewter breasts glued to the front.

Dave took a long drag on the Marlboro, drew it deep into his lungs, took another as he blew the first out of distended nostrils. He looked up and said, ‘Sam first came in here a year or two ago. He used to like videos of a more... uncommon nature. I got all kinds of sexual activity on film but Sam liked more, he like a little violence with his porn. I said I could get pretty much anything he needed.’

He paused, trembling. Isiah leaned forward a little more. ‘Go on.’

Dave took another long draw on his cigarette. ‘Well, me and Sam began quite a profitable business relationship. I got in all kinds of nasty shit for him and he paid top dollar for anything I found. He couldn’t get enough, and the nastier the better. I couldn’t watch half of what he liked, man, the fucker is really sick.’

Isiah ground his teeth, breathing deeply. *Let him talk.*

The ash fell from the end of Dave’s cigarette before it reached the ashtray, his hand was shaking so much. ‘Well, we kinda became mates. I

knew he was a real fucking weirdo, I mean weird beyond the norm, you know? Anyway, occasionally we'd go out for a beer after I closed up, or have a game of pool, that sort of thing. Pretty normal shit.

'That was until about a month ago. He came in one day and said he had a new business venture under way and would I do him a favour. Like I said, he's worth good money to me, so I says "Sure, what's up?" He tells me he just needs somewhere to meet people, can he use the back room here. It's like a store room, but there's plenty of space, you know?'

Isiah nodded. 'So what happened?'

Dave ground out the butt of his Marlboro with stubby yellow fingers, the nails chewed back so far they were almost gone. He took another from the pack, lit it with his Zippo, ran his thumb gently over the pewter breasts. He looked up at Isiah, his bloodshot eyes vague. 'A couple of times he met with this dodgy looking guy out back. They would be in there only an hour or so each time, then leave. That was it. That happened three times, I think, then Sam fucked off. I haven't seen him since.'

Isiah was trying to imagine a person that Dave would consider dodgy looking. 'What about the man he met with? Seen him since?'

Dave nodded sadly, grinding the heels of his palms into his eye sockets, ash floating from the cigarette onto his black, greasy hair. Looking up, his eyes redder than ever, he said, 'Yeah. That's the problem.'

Now we're getting somewhere. 'Explain.'

'He's been back a few times asking me where Sam is. Last time he came in I said I still didn't know where Sam was and he started busting shit up, shouting and yelling, telling me I'd be dogmeat if I didn't tell him what was up.' Dave pointed to a number of broken shelves in one corner beside the counter, stock neatly tidied on the floor beneath. He chose not to mention his Alice Cooper.

Isiah nodded. 'So did he give you any way to contact him should Sam show up?'

Dave reached under the counter again, pulled out a scrap of paper, handed it to Isiah. 'I don't give a fuck any more, man. Just try and fight it out amongst yourselves will ya. All I did was let the bastards use my storeroom. I don't need this shit.'

Isiah looked at the scrap of paper. It had a name, Baker, and a phone number written on it in neat pencil script. He looked at Dave again. 'What else do you know about this Baker?'

Dave shook head. 'Absolutely nothing, man. He's a swarthy bloke, like maybe Italian or Greek. He always wore real sharp suits, shiny shoes. Tall guy, probably as tall as you. He always arrived after Sam got here and left

before Sam did. That's it.'

Isiah nodded again, took a flyer advertising a live sex show from a plastic rack on the counter. 'All right, Dave. Got a pen?' Dave handed him a chewed Bic. Isiah wrote down the number of his apartment, handed it to Dave. 'Now you call me if Sam shows up, not Baker, understand?'

Dave shrugged. 'Whatever.'

Isiah leant forward again, took a handful of Dave's shirt, lifted him up a little by it. Dave stretched his head back, his eyes fearful, trying not to look at Isiah. 'If he comes here and you don't call me I will know and I will make you sorry.'

'All right, man. I'll call if he comes here, I promise.'

Isiah dropped the little man back onto his stool, stuffed Baker's number into the pocket of his leather jacket and headed toward the door. Looking back from the top of the stairs he saw Dave lighting another cigarette, rubbing his hand through his greasy hair. He was looking forward to the rain.

Isiah loved the rain in many ways, but it always made him melancholy too. It had been raining that day in Glen Coe, so many years ago, centuries ago, when he had first met Megan. He was a young, mortal man, lost and wandering, no family, no faith, no cares. Then he and Megan had fallen in love and he knew happiness for the first time ever. Except her father had hated him for his English birth, had nearly killed him when he discovered their secret place. They had run away together, their love too strong to deny, and for a time their happiness had continued. Until the violence came.

Isiah found himself standing in the rain, staring into nowhere. He had brought himself down thinking about his past. It amazed him how much it still hurt to think about Megan, over five hundred years since. Why did the memories keep surfacing now? It couldn't be just the rain. He had long ago promised himself that he would never let anything like that happen again. So far he had kept that promise.

Trying to shake off his bad mood, he looked around for somewhere quiet to travel from. It was time to get back to his apartment, think. And ring this Baker, see what light he could cast on the situation. He saw a café just down the street a few doors. That would do. He wondered with a smile as he walked toward the neon fronted sandwich bar how many people he had freaked out by entering their cafés or pubs and never leaving again. He wondered how many people actually noticed. Very few no doubt. It was amazing how little people tend to notice. Especially if they don't like it or don't want to believe it. The human mind can be a

remarkably versatile device for protecting the psyche. Sometimes not always for the best.

Isiah pushed open the glass door, Open 7 Days, and went inside. A small Asian man behind the counter looked up and smiled like Isiah was his long lost son. 'How can I help you today, sir?'

Isiah gestured vaguely toward the back of the café. 'Use your toilet first?'

The man's smile, impossibly, broadened. 'Of course, of course.'

Isiah nodded his thanks and headed deeper into the café. This one would notice. Five minutes and he'd worry a little. Ten minutes and he'd be angry about the junkie banging up in his café, but too scared to chase him out. Fifteen minutes and his worry would overtake his anger. He would find an excuse to come into the toilets to check, bucket and mop in hand perhaps. Once inside he would look around, scratch his head, bemused. He would think about all the little things he had done that might have made him miss the strange man's exit, serving a customer, checking the oven, getting the mop. Shaking his head, he would leave, go back to the counter. An hour later he will have forgotten all about it, maybe mention it to his wife in passing tonight. Impossible, unnatural, remarkable, but not his problem.

Inside the cool, dripping toilet, strong smell of bleach, Isiah quickly looked around. No one about. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and travelled. As the heaviness swept over him again he snapped open his eyes, spun around, scanning the apartment with eyes and mind. Nothing.

Looking with a pained expression at the melted floor where Satan had vented his rage, he wondered how he would explain that one to the landlord. It was a mess, but with some time and concentration he might be able to reconstruct it. He didn't want to consider how it might be affecting the plumbing.

It had been a long day, and it wasn't over yet. Isiah sighed and collapsed into a high backed armchair that had become something of a friend to him. It was old and worn, the arms threadbare, the seat sagging and lumpy, but he had spent many hours relaxing in its dubious comforts and had grown to appreciate what it stood for. A time to breath, reflect.

But not right now. He had to stay on the trail while it was still relatively warm. Sam had been at his apartment not too long ago. The corpse of the young woman had not been there long, probably only last night she had been alive and well. Isiah imagined Samuel chatting her up in a pub or club somewhere, convincing her to come back to his place.

He derailed the train of thought quickly. If he was going to have to

work with Sam, guide him to his destiny for the sake of the Balance, then he would have to try to stay emotionally uninvolved.

Stuffing his hand into the pocket of his leather jacket, he groped around for the scrap of paper with Baker's number on it. Baker. Swarthy bloke, maybe Italian or Greek. Not many Italians or Greeks called Baker. Pretty unimaginative alias really. He wondered if Baker had used the same alias with Sam, or another one. Possibly even his real name, though that seemed unlikely.

With a mental shrug Isiah put down the paper on the arm of the chair and reached for the phone. He dialled the number. After a second or two it began to ring, once, twice. Halfway through the third ring it was picked up but no one spoke. Isiah smiled, waiting. Suddenly it became an audio staring match.

After a few seconds more there was an annoyed intake of breath. 'Yes.'

Isiah waited a second longer, enjoying the juvenile buzz of it all. Then, 'Baker?'

'Who's this?'

'You called Baker?'

'Who the fuck is this?'

'Someone who wants to talk to Baker.'

There was a grunt, annoyed. This wasn't Baker. There was a muffled conversation, just a few words, then a scratching sound as the phone was passed from one person to another. A second later, 'Baker.'

'Hello, Mr Baker. I wonder if I might arrange to meet with you.'

'First you explain who the fuck you are and how you get this number.'

Isiah had the feeling that this really was the Baker he wanted. The accent was there. Not broad, but there. Dave was an idiot. Isiah had an incomparable experience of the various races of humans in the world. He had studied martial arts with the warrior monks of ancient China, philosophy with the sufis of old Persia, magic with the shamans of the Americas and hundreds more. But it did not take his remarkable knowledge to place a middle eastern accent over a Mediterranean one. The guy must look different enough too. Maybe Isiah was just more used to human diversity. Dave had probably never been further than the outskirts of town in his life. Isiah decided it would be best to come as clean as possible with this one, keep him on side. 'I believe we have a common interest, Mr Baker. I got this number from a sleazebag called Dave.'

There was angry exhalation at the other end of the line. 'I know who you mean. Why did he give you this number?'

‘He’s a prick,’ Isiah said, matter-of-factly. ‘Besides, I threatened to rip his lungs out, and he’s a coward too.’

There was a humourless laugh from Baker. ‘True enough. What is this common interest of which you speak.’

Bombshell time, note the reaction. ‘Samuel Harrigan.’

Isiah could almost feel Baker stiffen, he imagined his expression, confused and angry. ‘We will meet. Royal Hotel Bar, two hours.’

‘One hour,’ Isiah replied with conviction, keep the advantage. ‘I’ll know you. Be there on time.’ He hung up before Baker could reply. He had no idea how much of a player this Baker was, but whatever the situation he had to keep the upper hand. Piss him off enough to gain some respect, but not enough to make an enemy.

He sat back in his armchair, closed his eyes, breathed a long, tired sigh. He knew the Royal Hotel. He would get there early, make himself comfortable before Baker arrived, but he still had some time. Baker would probably try to assert himself by arriving late, he seemed the sort.

For a short while Isiah sank into a calm meditation, resting body and mind. Just a quick recharge while he had the chance. But it was not long before he opened his eyes again, knowing that he really could not afford to relax too much. There was something that he could do in the time before his meeting that might give him a better idea of Baker’s place in the scheme of things. The more he knew the better, after all.

He closed his eyes and swiftly left his body, flying across the city to a dingy basement under an old, broken down warehouse. He slipped through the thick stone walls into a large, dank room. Six people were there, sitting around a scratched table. They seemed to be arguing. The one Isiah was looking for was at the head of the table, smiling as the others squabbled. He looked up to the ceiling, where Isiah’s astral self was hovering, raised a gnarled hand in greeting. Isiah smiled and snapped back to his body.

As he appeared in the dark, damp basement room the raised voices of argument tailed away, everyone turning to face him. Some of the men bore stunned expressions, others smiled. The old man at the head of the table stood, smiling broadly, and came around to shake Isiah’s hand. To most people this old man looked like a well dressed gentleman, elderly but distinguished. Respectable. To Isiah’s eyes the hand he shook was thin and skeletal, the nails long and black. The man’s head was nearly hairless, the skin and flesh of his face drawn, little more than an animated skull. He looked like a centuries old cadaver which, in truth, was what he was. His long, viciously sharp canine teeth glinted in the light of the single bare

bulb as he smiled.

‘It’s been a long time, Isiah. What have you been up to?’

Isiah was glad to release the cold, bony fingers. ‘Not a lot. You?’

The old vampire laughed, his head rocking back. ‘I wonder if we’ll ever tell each other our business.’ He gestured for Isiah to take a chair.

Isiah sat, deliberately not looking at any of the others around the table. His brief scan had revealed three more vampires among the five of them. The other two were mortals. They knew they were surrounded by vampires and were scared, but seemed quite used to it.

‘You, er... You know this guy, Vincenzo?’ one of the other vampires asked.

Vincenzo shot him an acid look. ‘Silence.’

Isiah felt the vampire shrug, lapsing into a begrudged quiet.

Vincenzo looked back to Isiah, his smile returning. ‘You don’t often grace us, my friend. What can I do for you today?’ He indicated a bottle of whiskey on the table.

Isiah gently shook his head. ‘No, thank you. I was wondering if you might share some information on someone I have to deal with shortly. I know very little about him, but perhaps you might be able to help.’ The old vampire nodded, gesturing for Isiah to continue. ‘Well, he calls himself Baker. He’s of middle eastern descent, but I’m not sure where exactly. He’s into the gangster thing, but he strikes me as pretty small time, not on anything like the scale of your operations I’m sure.’

The old vampire smiled again. ‘You flatter my petty crime wave, Isiah.’

Isiah openly laughed. ‘A petty crime wave, as you call it, that is worth millions and has been ongoing for, what is it now, two hundred years?’

Vincenzo chuckled. ‘My family is indeed old, however we stray from the point. I believe I may know who you mean. There is a man of middle eastern descent in this city that sometimes calls himself Baker, sometimes Johnson and sometimes Ahmed Akhtar. His real name is Ben Abdul Hussein and he is less than small time.’

Isiah stood up, nodding his thanks. ‘I’d like to stay and catch up, Vincenzo, but my time is rather limited.’

Vincenzo stood also, extending his hand again. ‘As is always the way, no? I’ll see you again soon?’

‘Of course. Thanks for your help. May I use your bathroom?’

Vincenzo smiled that chilling smile again. He obviously enjoyed smiling a great deal. ‘Until next time.’

Isiah headed to the end of the dank room. He trotted up worn stone steps without looking back. At the top of the steps he ducked into a filthy,

dripping toilet. He seemed to spend a lot of time in other people's bathrooms, rarely for their intended purpose. This time he wanted to use the toilet so that he could be behind a locked door while he briefly left his body. They were friends, but they were still vampires.

Putting the seat lid down he sat and closed his eyes. He knew now what he had suspected. Baker was no real threat, not likely to be a problem. All he had to do was convince the would-be mobster to tell him what he needed to know. Now he needed to find a quiet place to arrive in the Royal Hotel.

A moment later he returned to his body, safe in the knowledge that room 403 was vacant. He would wait here and gather himself a little, take every opportunity for a breather. He knew Vincenzo wouldn't mind.

He could hear the vampires' voices from the safety of the toilet, echoing off the stone. 'And then what?' one of them was asking, laughter in his voice. The previous argument seemed to be over.

'The poor sap is standing there, over the body of this chick, and there's blood everywhere. Man, he looked furious, fists clenched and all that! And he looks up and he yells, "I'll fucking kill you!" and he came running at the two muggers and started slamming, one, two, three! Those guys didn't stand a chance, man!

Another voice joined in. 'You just sat and watched all this go down? The girl gets whacked and then the guy beats the two muggers to a pulp?'

'Yeah. I'm just sitting up there on the rooftop, looking down at the show! And he did more than beat them. He killed them, with his bare hands, like an animal. When I dropped down and took his blood, it was like drinking a boiling river, man! Beautiful!'

There was laughter all around as Isiah shuddered. Then that other voice again. 'Man, never hurt a girl when the guy that loves her is standing right there. There's no fury like that in the world.'

There were lots of murmurs of agreement and laughter, but they faded to Isiah, lost as his memory overwhelmed him. He had been thinking repeatedly of Megan today and had no idea why. Every once in a while the pain would rise again, even after all this time. His beautiful, wonderful Megan, over five centuries ago. His Scottish bride.

Never hurt a girl when the guy that loves her is standing right there. There's no fury like that in the world. It was just such a fury that had set the rest of Isiah's immortal path. When he was a different man, a mortal man. An Englishman named Edward. He had been alone and bitter before he met her, then, for the first time in his life, he had been happy.

It was not unusual for English soldiers to pass by Edward and Megan's home in the Highlands. Always feuding, the English ran Scotland by force, treating the Scots like animals. But the soldiers always passed by on the ridge some distance away. They had no reason to come down into the valley and Edward was pleased that they were left alone. Megan would shiver when she heard the sound of distant hooves, and Edward would put a hand on her knee or hug her tightly, trying to squeeze out the memories of the injustices she had endured before at the hands of the English.

Then one morning as the watery autumn sun was lifting the night's rain from the loamy ground, the sound of hooves came thundering right beside the house. Megan stood kneading dough for bread and Edward could see the terror in her eyes. He put aside the tools he had been cleaning and went to her. 'It's all right, love,' he said quietly, kissing her cheek, but his heart was pounding furiously in his chest. The horses had reined up outside and they could hear raucous English voices bantering with each other.

'What's this then, eh? Pretty little home in the middle of nowhere.'

'Yeah, I've seen it before down here and thought it must be the home of some warty old witch, but that's not what we were told in the village, now is it?'

Edward kissed Megan again, feeling her lips tremble beneath his. 'It's all right,' he assured her again, but he didn't believe himself.

The English outside were playing with them. 'A young man and his beautiful wife we were told, were we not?'

'Indeed. Quite comely she is by all accounts.'

'Quiet and harmless, please leave them alone, we were told!'

'Leave them alone? Well, that's assuming they meet their taxes!'

Megan drew her breath in with a hiss as Edward strode toward the door. 'Edward, no!'

But Edward could no longer bear the taunting or the fear and knew that sooner or later he would have to face them. It might as well be now with some dignity remaining to him. If it was taxes they wanted then he would find the money somehow. He grasped the door handle and, with a deep, quavering breath, pulled it open. Directly outside the door stood a soldier, unshaven and brutish. He wore chain mail and a tarnished breastplate and his hand rested on the rounded hilt of a short sword. His face split into a yellow toothed grin as the door swung open and in a blur his hand shot upwards, drawing the sword from its scabbard with a sharp

metallic hiss. The blunt pommel of the hilt filled Edward's vision then a bright light exploded in his head.

He could hear distant, wavering noises, laughing and cursing and Megan screaming. He realised that he was on the floor and tried to get up onto all fours. His head pounded, agony coming in short, sharp stabs behind his eyes. Then rough hands grasped his shoulders and he was dragged to his feet. An ugly, scarred face leered into his own, the mouth working but Edward could make no sense of the words. His body felt like a half-filled wineskin, his vision swimming and blurring.

He felt his arms pulled up behind him and then a burning sensation in his wrists. He tried to struggle but had no strength and realised that he was being tied to one of the low roof beams of their small home. As his vision swam he could see Megan being held by two men, kicking and screaming, her hair like fire around her head, eyes wild. He tried to reach out for her but his wrists were firmly tied and he hung painfully from the thin beam, his feet dragging on the dirt floor. He tried to stand and each time his knees buckled, his body weight yanking painfully on his raw wrists as he yelled incoherently.

As his vision began to clear he could see that there were four soldiers there, laughing and shouting. One of them threw their small table out of the way, clearing a space on the floor of their home. Then he turned and took hold of Megan, trying to force her to the ground. She screamed and spat, clawing at his face. With a sneer of disgust he slapped her across the jaw, her hair whipping up as blood flew from her lips. Edward screamed, straining at his bonds, kicking at the ground. He found his voice and began to yell. 'Leave her alone, you bastards, leave her alone! What gives you the right?'

He could see terror in Megan's eyes looking up at him as she was thrown to the floor. The soldier began tearing off her dress as the others held her down. Megan's head whipped from side to side, her screaming a piercing wail. Edward pulled frantically at the ropes binding his now bleeding wrists, the whole house shaking with his efforts. 'No, you bastards, no! Leave her alone!' His words became incoherent shouts as he thrashed against his restraints, threatening to tear the house down.

Then the soldier was forcing himself onto Megan, laying over her as she screamed. With an evil grin one of the other soldiers stood up and came over to Edward. He dodged left and right as Edward tried kick him and grabbed a handful of hair. 'Best you don't watch too much of this, eh?' Edward writhed and kicked, tears streaming from his eyes. He spat at the soldier holding his hair. With a twist of his mouth the soldier pulled

back his free hand and balled up a fist. There was nowhere for Edward to go as the fist came flying towards his face.

There was heat and a hissing, crackling sound. Edward's throat felt raw and he began to cough. Suddenly he snapped open his eyes. 'Megan!'

The house around him was wavering walls of flame, thick, dark smoke roiling above him. Megan lay on the floor in the middle of the room, her dress shredded, her face bloodied. She was very still. 'Megan! Oh, no, Megan!'

Edward began thrashing against the ropes again. The heat was unbearable, the smoke threatening to choke him, the whole house burning furiously. With a crash of coals and flames the beam that Edward was tied to gave way, one burning end crashing to the floor. Edward staggered behind the fallen beam, dragging his tied wrists together. Becoming dizzy from the heat and smoke he managed to pull his wrists to the burning end of the beam and the red hot wood seared through the rope. He howled with pain as his hands and wrists were scorched and blistered, but the moment he was free he stumbled across the room, falling on his knees.

Megan's dress was torn open down the front, her legs bare, underclothes ripped and blood stained, revealing her battered, cut chest, raw thighs. Her face was bloody, eyes bruised and puffy. Edward began frantically smoothing her blood soaked hair, chanting her name quietly between sobs like a mantra. She didn't move or breath.

He looked into her eyes, open and glassy and gently closed the lids. He leaned back with her head cradled in his lap, and bellowed her name at the heavens. The heat of the burning house began to bake his bare skin, but he barely noticed.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as sections of the house began to collapse. The muscles in his jaw twitched as he ground his teeth together, the wrenching pain of loss threatening to tear his heart from his chest. He had taken her from her home, from her family. He had thought that he was enough to make her life worth living, that she was right for him, what he deserved after the life he had had. And now this. His beautiful Megan.

More of the house began to fall, burning timbers crashing down around him. Staggering to his feet he was battered by burning debris and instinct took over. Crying and shouting meaningless noises he staggered from the burning wreck of his home, crashing through the flaming door and rolling over and over on the damp loam outside. After a moment he shakily found his feet and stood watching his house burn, a funeral pyre for his Megan. Unable to watch any more he hung his head, tears pouring from his eyes and he repeated her name over and over again. On the soft

ground he could see the tracks of the soldiers horses, from where they had come and leading off toward the ridge when they had left again after destroying his life.

Slowly a red veil of rage slid down behind his eyes. His chest settled, the tears stopped flowing. Taking a deep breath down into his lungs he turned toward the ridge and began to walk. His stride was long and determined, his back straight, head high. Within a hundred yards he was running, following the tracks of the horses hooves in the wet grass.

He ran for more than an hour, not noticing the distance or his fatigue. Coming down the lee of a stony ridge, he spotted four horses tethered to some scrubby trees. He stopped, chest heaving, and stared down into the vale. There, sheltering against a rocky outcropping, were the four English soldiers, lounging on the grass around a small fire, talking in loud, carefree voices. Edward clamped his teeth together, refusing to let the tears rise. He strode down towards the men.

Their conversation was a muted muttering to him. All he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears, all he could see was the red wash of rage and the leering faces of the English soldiers that had raped and murdered the only person he had ever truly loved, or that had ever really loved him.

The leader of the soldiers was the first to notice him, striding towards them with hate in his eyes, his face the scowl of an avenging angel. The leader stood up, his face a combination of disbelief and sudden concern and fear as Edward stepped over two of the other soldiers. He placed his hand firmly against the leader's chest before he could react and floored him with a mighty shove. As the man fell, Edward reached out with his other hand and grabbed the hilt of the short sword in the soldier's belt, pulled it free as the man toppled over backwards.

The other soldiers were just beginning to scramble to their feet as Edward reversed his grip on the sword, grasped it tightly in both hands, blade pointing to the prone leader. With all his might, he plunged the sword downwards, the point slamming into the breastplate and chain mail covering the soldier's chest, punching through with barely a moment's resistance and slicing in between ribs and muscle. Edward felt the blade stab through to the chain mail covering the man's back. The soldier's eyes bulged as he curled up around the blade, screaming. His scream began to gargle as blood bubbled up his throat and speckled his lips. Edward released one hand from the hilt of the sword, rammed his fist into the leader's face, knocking him back onto the grass. At the same time he yanked on the sword, ripping it free with a wet sound of protest, blood

spraying up from the gaping wound. He spun around, transferring the sword to his right hand as the other three soldiers converged on him, their own swords drawn, their faces betraying shock and fear.

The next few moments were a blur. He was lost in a berserk frenzy of melee, swinging the sword around himself wildly, stabbing, slicing, punching. He felt hot lines spring up on his arms, chest and face as the soldiers scored hits on him, but he felt no real pain, no emotion, no fatigue.

Suddenly there was silence and he realised it was because he had stopped screaming. A wave of tiredness washed over him, his arms felt like lead. He slowly collapsed onto his knees, the sword dropping from numb fingers. As his vision began to clear he looked cautiously around. The soldiers lay about him on the blood soaked grass, all of them dead, their bodies leaking blood from dozens of wounds. Edward's arms and hands were running in gore, he could feel blood dripping from his face. He had no idea how much of it was his own. Falling forward, his forehead on the grass, the tears came again. He stayed that way, kneeling amongst the massacre, for a long time.

Isiah snapped open his eyes, gasped in a quick, short breath. The dripping toilet was otherwise quiet around him though he could still hear Vincenzo and his men talking, laughing in the other room. He had let himself drift away. Dangerous. The images from his past were still fresh in his mind as he stood up. How many people had he killed since then? So very long ago. And why were these thoughts washing through his mind again now? He hadn't thought of those events for some time. Never hurt a girl when the guy that loves her is standing right there. There's no fury like that in the world. It was a fury that had made him what he was now.

There was something about this job, something that gave him an icy feeling inside if he thought too much about it. To coin a phrase, he had a bad feeling about this one. Perhaps that's what was making him so melancholy, so nostalgic. Besides, he was so tired of this, his life, his mission. His unrequested, undesired almighty job. Would he ever be with Megan again? Was it even possible?

He checked his watch. Might as well go, only a few minutes until Baker was supposed to arrive. It would probably be a lot longer than that until he actually did show. Isiah looked around himself, slightly concerned. It had been quiet for too long. Where were Satan's little shuriken?

Letting his will and energy build he let his body break apart and travelled in his unique way to the empty, sterile hotel room he had

checked out. As he arrived he looked around at the polished sink, the neatly made bed. With a noise of appreciation he scooped up the two complimentary chocolates, one on each pillow. He popped one into his mouth, pocketed the other one for later. It wasn't stealing, they were free anyway. Perks of the job. Unlocking the door from inside, he stepped out into the hall, checking that no one was around. He quietly closed the door, locked it with a quick mental twist, made his way down to the bar to wait for Baker.

Carlos Villalopez ground his teeth, staring at the wood and straw roof of the hospital mission, cursing his weakened condition. Father Paleros sat on a little wooden stool beside him, his calm, benevolent face relaxed, his eyes looking lovingly into nowhere as he spoke. The words were an incoherent drone in Carlos' ears, deliberately ignored, but he knew what they were all about. Every day the same speech disguised in different fables, varying anecdotes.

Carlos lay on an old, unsteady army camp bed, the thin wire pressing uncomfortably into his back in a dozen different places through a thin, filthy mattress. The Central American heat and humidity made him sweat, his back and buttocks raw with bedsores, flies continually hassling him, mosquitoes feasting on his naked skin. His lean, muscular body was taut with discomfort and frustration.

He endured this most recent effort on the part of the priest to convince him to embrace the love of God, repent his evil past. He didn't hear the words, his mind too full of images of the agony and suffering he would subject this bastard priest to when he was strong enough.

For nearly three weeks now he had been lying here, recovering. Ignoring the moans of sweating people in beds on either side, concentrating on his own anger at this confinement. The first week or so had been a blessed morphine haze of bizarre hallucinatory dreams and childlike confusion, making the pain a second hand experience.

Hard to believe it was that long since he had been partnered with that idiot. Standing there in the camouflaged compound of one of the many groups of people he dealt with.

'What do you mean, a partner?'

The grizzled old veteran had laughed, shrugging. 'It's in the contract, Carlos. There are outside interests in this.'

'But who is he, Paco? What does he know of the area, the terrain, the enemy?'

Paco raised a placating hand. 'He's going to be there simply as added firepower. You'll retain control of the whole operation. He'll follow your orders.'

Carlos spat. 'Fuck, Paco, I work alone, you know that. I don't want to work with anybody else and I don't need any additional firepower. This is a covert extraction, for fuck's sake.'

'I know, Carlos, I know. But they're the ones with the money.'

Carlos sneered. 'I don't like it.'

Paco shrugged. 'You want to walk away, then walk away. I can find somebody else for the job. Not as good as you, sure, but there's lots of people out there that would jump at this kind of money.'

Carlos stared at the ground, his jaw clenched in frustration. It was a lot of money. And it was a pretty straightforward job. Maybe this extra person could be ordered to just keep out of the way. 'Who is the guy anyway?'

Paco smiled. 'The guy is on their payroll, but he's merc. I guess he specialises in working for them. He's a German and doesn't speak Spanish, so we'll have to communicate in English.'

Carlos barked a humourless laugh. 'This just gets better!'

They walked across the complex, bright in blistering midday heat. Corrugated sheds stood around them, jeeps and ATVs parked under camouflaged tarpaulins, busy people moving around with hard eyes and harder faces. There was a cabin on the far side of the compound, raised on short brick stilts, with armoured, blackened windows. Paco swiped a card at the door and pushed it open for Carlos, following him through. A huge man sat in the chair opposite Paco's desk. He jumped up as they came in, grinning enormously. He wore jungle fatigues, heavy boots, khaki vest top. And a bandana, red, tied at the back. Carlos winced internally, *Shit, thinks he's Rambo.*

'Carlos, this is Karl, your partner for the job. Karl, Carlos.'

Carlos shook Karl's hand, shooting Paco a withering look for the sarcasm evident in his voice. 'What the fuck is this guy?' he asked in Spanish.

Paco smiled, his eyes mischievous. 'Please, Carlos,' he said in English, 'our friend speaks no Spanish.'

Karl nodded emphatically. 'Yes, I must apologise for my lack of understanding with Spanish, though I understand we both have very good English, yes?'

Carlos nodded, though he refused to smile. For that matter, he rarely smiled anyway. 'Yes, I understand we do.'

Karl beamed again. 'Excellent. I am very much looking forward to working with you. I have heard a lot of your past successes. I have wanted for some time to meet you. Ha, we even have the same name, in our own languages!'

'Well, so long as you can take an order, to the letter, with no questions of any kind, then we'll get on fine.'

Karl grinned again, though a little less enthusiastically. 'Of course.'

Paco broke the tension. 'Let's go over the brief of the job, gentlemen.'

The next couple of hours were spent studying maps, blueprints, personnel records. All highly confidential, all supposedly safe from the hands of people like Carlos.

The one thing that became apparent throughout was that this Karl idiot had very little real experience. And that made him dangerous. It took a long time to get good in this game. It took hard training, experience and more than a little luck, but Carlos was no fool. He knew that luck was something that developed too, like a sixth sense. No way did Karl the gung-ho Hollywood mercenary have that kind of experience and that made him luggage as far as Carlos was concerned.

Karl was a self-professed dog of war, his experience lying in quelling uprisings and coups, firepower on a big scale. He had fought and killed, but had no sense of the subtle side of war. Guerilla action, infiltration, extraction, assassination.

They left early the next day, a chopper taking them a long way north. They dropped only a few kilometres from the site, low and fast. It made for a heavy landing, but it meant a lot less walking through the jungle. Following the directions the parent agency had given them to locate the compound Carlos had set out at a forced pace, giving Karl a taste of the level of professionalism he was working with now. Almost immediately the giant German had begun rambling.

‘Why do you think they need us to get this guy out?’ he asked.

Carlos shrugged. ‘What the hell does it matter? We’re getting paid for a service.’

Karl made a small noise of affirmation. ‘I guess. But you’d think they would ransom him, no?’

Carlos spun around. ‘How the fuck do I know? Maybe ransom isn’t an option and they’re just going to kill him. It makes no difference. Save your breath in case you need it for fighting.’

Karl, leaning back slightly from Carlos’ tirade, just nodded.

It wasn’t long before the fenced compound could be seen, flashes of chainlink and prefab buildings through the trees. Carlos brought his rifle round to his front, resting it carefully by its barrel in his left hand. Karl did the same with his lovingly maintained AK47.

‘Keep low, slow, and follow me,’ Carlos said. ‘We’ll breach the fence there,’ he pointed, ‘and cut in behind the building by the jeep. Do you remember the plans we saw?’

Karl nodded. ‘Sure. We should be able to access the brig from behind the second building?’

‘Exactly.’

Carlos crept forward, watching everywhere at once. They got to within about thirty feet of the fence and he stopped, pausing to listen, look, feel. He pointed to his right, *Might as well make some use of this idiot.* 'Circle around a little. Check that there's no line of sight from that window.'

Karl nodded, circling slowly, his AK47 half raised.

Suddenly Carlos got an itch, the hairs on the back of his neck raising. Something didn't feel right. He looked around, and there it was. Almost invisible, certainly invisible to an amateur like Karl. A disturbance in the leaf litter was enough for Carlos to instantly recognise the danger. 'Karl, don't move!' he hissed, and Karl went straight into commando mode, ducking and rolling, swinging his beloved weapon to his shoulder as he came up on one knee. Right on top of the land mine.

The moment Karl started to move, Carlos leapt for the cover of the trees. As he rolled down amongst the tree trunks, desperately trying to get away, there was a concussive crack and pain lanced throughout his body. He felt white hot metal tear into his thigh and something slammed into his ribs, a thousand other pieces of shrapnel peppering him all over. Then something cracked behind his right ear, his eyes suddenly blinded by searing white pain. Somehow he managed to keep staggering several paces before he fell, his survival instincts telling him to get away from the site of the explosion. If he survived the blast he certainly didn't want to be found by the people from the complex, who were undoubtedly rushing out straight away to investigate. He managed to roll in under some heavy leaves before he blacked out completely.

After a week of morphine induced bewilderment he had realised that he was in a mission hospital. It had taken him another week at least to piece together the events that had put him there, but he remembered enough now. Vague memories of voices shouting as they discovered which mine had blown. Discussions as to who the guy might be whose legs were in three different places and whose guts were spilled across two metres of ground. It didn't occur to them that he might have had a partner, it seemed, and that was fine by Carlos. Then a couple of boys from Paco's outfit had come along that night, presumably after Carlos hadn't communicated before dark like they had arranged. It must have been late, but he couldn't remember any conversation. Too much blood loss, shock. They had found him, dragged him to a jeep and dumped him outside the mission hospital. He didn't blame them for that. Standard procedure, risks of the job. The people he was employed through this time, just like all the others he freelanced for, had neither the money, resources or inclination to have facilities for anything but the most minor

medical emergencies. The people that worked for them were like machines and if a machine got broken, well, they weren't mechanics. It was evidence of the respect they had for Carlos that they had even gone so far as to find him and deliver him to medical aid.

And now here he was.

It was a shame that Karl was blown into mincemeat, he would never get the opportunity to exact any revenge on the bastard. It was bad for his reputation, a mission botched so badly. He had told Paco that he worked alone, and would stick to that rule from now on, no matter the money.

Now an eight inch gash in his leg was healing, his broken ribs re-knitting. Headaches from the shrapnel had pretty much stopped. They were going to take out the stitches in the next day or two. The doctors couldn't believe he had survived, but now they knew what a tough bastard he was. It would take more than some action man to finish Carlos Villalopez.

In a day or two he would be strong enough to leave. He could get together his gear, reset his life. And come back to kill this fucking priest that wouldn't leave him in peace. The patronising, superior bastard, with his great advice and constant coercions to reach out for the love of God. What God? There was no God in the life of Carlos Villalopez, no Devil or Virgin Mary or Baby Jesus. There was Carlos and nothing else. He looked out for himself. He killed with incredible expertise and he loved to do it. All he lived for was that buzz, as the bastard stares into your eyes as his life drains away, or his body dances like some perverted marionette as slug after slug of red hot metal slams into him. This priest with his holy lectures would understand the meaning of pain, the limits of suffering, before Carlos sent him into a black pit of death to learn that there was no God, no afterlife. Just this life, this world and the pure beauty of the kill.

This priest was like all the others. Like all of them at the Church orphanage with their uncompromising childcare. The glory of God, the lessons of Jesus, the stinging cane across young buttocks, the invasion of his innocent, uncomprehending flesh. He remembered the leering faces, the glazed eyes. Their foul hypocrisy, their twisted morals. How could there possibly be an all-powerful, benevolent god that would let his earthly representatives do these things? He had hurt himself at night to tear away the memories, while he imagined ways of hurting them back. Making them suffer.

In his mid-teens, hardened and strong, he had left a legacy of blood and struck out, becoming one of the most efficient, ruthless and successful men in his field, feared and held in awe by all his peers.

He clenched his fists as the priest droned on. His grip was getting stronger. Day after tomorrow and he would be out of this stinking mission, maybe the day after that. As the priest laid his hand on Carlos' brow, saying a prayer for his salvation, Carlos sucked in a deep breath, hearing his teeth creak together, the muscles in his jaw twitching spasmodically. Patience, patience.

Isiah stepped from the lift into the lobby of the Royal Hotel and paused to get his bearings. He stood on a marble floor, marble pillars all around stretching up into the high, glass ceiling of an atrium that was the main entrance. A huge chandelier hung from the domed glass so far overhead, like glittering diamonds reflecting the evening sun. It would be dusk soon.

An enormous desk to Isiah's right, far bigger than necessary, buzzed with a small horde of immaculately turned out staff, ready to patronise a person at a moment's notice. Yes Sir, Of Course Madam, hand stretched out for mandatory tip. False smiles on false staff, all to please the false patrons of this artificial paradise.

Isiah hated anywhere like this, but the advantage was the complete anonymity it afforded. Baker probably liked the place, thought it was impressive. Isiah knew nobody would pay them a second glance, and that was fine with him. Although he had attracted a couple of double takes and turned up noses due to his shaggy hair and leather jacket, his rugged face and strong boots. They would probably dismiss him as a rock star, undeservedly wealthy. He could never take these people seriously. If he didn't see them for the joke they were it would drive him mad. He could never fathom why they didn't see the joke too.

The marble floor became thick, spongy carpet as he entered the bar. Leather chairs and couches stood all around, surrounding highly polished tables, marble of course, with wrought iron legs. The bar was an experiment, it seemed, in just how much chrome and mirrored glass could fit into a limited space. The overall effect was disorienting.

He took a stool at the end of the bar, caught the barman's eye. A clean shaven man of about thirty or thirty five was sitting a couple of stools down, his suit sharp, his Rolex glittering. He glanced at Isiah. Isiah gave him a broad grin and a slight wink. The man quickly looked away and studied his drink. Probably had no idea how to interact with someone that didn't have an appointment.

The barman came over, put down a frilly edged paper coaster on the bar. 'What can I get you?'

Isiah smiled warmly. 'Beer.' He had been looking forward to a cool beer since he had agreed to meet Baker in a bar.

The barman didn't move but stood looking quizzically at Isiah, like he didn't understand. Isiah stared back. After a couple of seconds it became a little uncomfortable. Isiah raised an eyebrow, tried again. 'Beer?'

The barman looked slightly impatient. 'Of course, sir, but what kind. We have beers from all over Europe, America, Asia, light beers, dark beers, cold filtered, ice...'

Isiah held up a hand, interrupting the inventory of the bar's stock. 'Why don't you surprise me?'

The barman stared for a second longer, then turned to the nearest fridge of the half a dozen or so lined under the bar behind him and took out a bottle. He swung the bottle opener up from his belt with a practised flick of the wrist and popped the cap. With his best smile, he placed the bottle on the pointless little coaster. 'Glass?' he asked, his tone of voice suggesting that he didn't expect for a second that Isiah would want one. Isiah smiled and shook his head. The barman nodded knowingly and turned to serve someone else.

Isiah picked up the bottle, looked at the label. Elephant Beer. He took a long draught from the thin neck of the squat little bottle. The beer was cold and refreshing, and strong. It would do just fine.

An old man played a piano in the far corner. A big, white grand piano on a raised dais. Isiah could not recognise the tune exactly, but he was pretty sure it was Bach. The old man played extremely well, even though no one seemed to notice. It made Isiah a little sad to think that the old man's talent was going to waste. Such talent took a lot of dedication, required hours of practice and was quite simply one of the purest human achievements possible. Yet this poor old man was reduced to prostituting his ability for these uncaring idiots who would probably consider hours of piano practice every day a considerable waste of time.

Still, it was nice to relax, drink the beer, let the music wash gently over him. As he sat there, he could not help his mind wandering back to his previous thoughts. His first killings, brutal and rage-filled. That massacre in the Scottish Highlands.

He had had no idea how long he had sat on the blood soaked grass among the dead soldiers, head in his hands. He was brought round by a chill in his bones, the familiar, light Highland rain misting gently over his bare arms. He had raised his head. Immediately it began to pound and he felt the burning ache of wounds on his face, arms, hands. There was a gash across his chest but he couldn't feel that at all.

He sat staring at his blood stained palms for a long time, feeling light headed from exhaustion and blood loss. Eventually looking around himself, he saw the carnage that he had caused. The four soldiers lay around him, twisted and grotesque in death. He felt nothing. He knew he was glad they were dead, but it did nothing to ease the pain of his loss. Megan was dead too, and nothing would bring her back. He felt neither vindicated or relieved, just empty.

He staggered to his feet, fell back onto one knee, tried again. He stood, swaying slightly, for a few seconds, unsure what to do. Without thinking about it he began to walk. He stumbled back up towards the top of the ridge he had come down, head hanging. He walked for a long time, seeing and feeling nothing but the tatters of his life trailing out behind him. He didn't notice the grass become shale, the heather give way to slate and rocks. Suddenly he came to an unsteady halt, his feet on the very edge of a cold, deep precipice. Raising his head he saw a mist filled valley before him. Rocks jutted out all the way down to the shingly valley floor hundreds of feet below, the grass and heather spreading out again a few yards from the base of the cliff.

His mind was empty of all thoughts except the face of Megan, cut and bruised. All he could feel was the pain of losing her. His heart pounded with wrenching beats, his head felt stretched as though it would explode, his very soul ripped apart by his grief. Tears began to course down his cheeks and he stepped off into thin air, desperate for the hard agonising death of the sharp rocks below, expecting nothing but an end to everything.

The second he stepped off his stomach lifted, turned to water. Wind instantly rushing past him at a ferocious rate, whipping his tears from his face, the ground rushing up towards him at a terrifying speed, sharp rocks reaching up like hard, grasping hands to embrace him. His heart felt like it had stopped beating, his breath trapped in his lungs, the wind drying his eyes and teeth. He was vaguely aware of his arms and legs flailing, beyond his control. He felt more than saw colourful spots preceding blackness begin to slide into the edges of his vision and wondered if he would pass out before he hit the rocks below.

Then he felt himself begin to slow down. The second he noticed himself slowing the blackness in his vision receded and bright, white light flooded all his senses. He could hear and taste brightness at the same time as it blinded him. Then silence, stillness, nothing.

He looked at his body, arms and legs hanging, supported as if by water, and realised that he was not blind. All around him was bright white

nothingness, but he could see himself clearly enough. He held up his hands. The blood was gone. So were the wounds on his arms and chest, the pounding in his head. He felt a profound sense of peace, heard not a sound but the gentle hiss of his own breath. He was neither warm nor cold, no longer wet or tired.

He rolled onto his back, let his head fall backwards, but it was supported as if on an invisible cushion, like he was laying on the softest bed that moulded to whatever position he chose to adopt. The only thing that prevented him from panicking was the utter peace he felt. Immediately he thought of Megan, yet strangely even that didn't seem so painful. All he could feel was his immense love for her, washing through him in waves, but no sorrow. He could feel her love for him, surrounding him, embracing him. He closed his eyes. *Am I dead?*

He felt a sense of presence. All around someone, something, was with him. Intangible, yet undeniably there.

YOU ARE NOT DEAD.

The voice was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. It seemed both male and female, soft and silky, clear and perfect. It sounded inside his head and outside at the same time, in his ears and his mind. It sent shivers up his spine. It even sounded a little like his own voice. Had it read his mind?

'Where am I then?' he asked, his voice quavering.

NOWHERE.

'What?' He felt lost and helpless despite the peace and safety pervading his being. There was a gentle chuckling from the other, a light crystalline sound, pure joy. Edward involuntarily smiled, infected by it. 'Who are you?'

YOU COULD NOT POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION. DID YOU REALLY WANT TO DIE?

'I jumped, didn't I?'

YES. BUT WHERE DID YOU EXPECT TO GO?

'Nowhere, anywhere. I don't care. I just wanted to end the pain. I can't live without Megan.'

ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?

'What do you mean?'

IT HURTS, LIFE SEEMS SO POINTLESS, BUT IS RUNNING AWAY SOLVING ANYTHING?

Edward became angry. 'I've spent my whole life running away and nothing changed. Then I stopped running and I loved and nothing changed.' Tears ran down his cheeks. 'My whole life has been death and

killing, and now I've killed too and Megan's dead and...'

AND?

He took a deep breath, tried to calm down. 'And I've had enough.'

BUT YOU ALWAYS SURVIVED.

'Yeah, I survived. Pure and simple. Like an animal survives. Like a wolf survives a harsh winter. Then finally I found a reason to carry on, only to have that torn away from me. It's not fair!'

LIFE IS ANYTHING BUT FAIR.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

SIMPLY A TRUTH. LIFE IS NOT FAIR.

'That makes it just fine that Megan was brutally raped and killed?'

JUST AS FAIR AS THE FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF THOSE ENGLISH SOLDIERS WILL CONSIDER THEIR DEATHS.

Edward was incredulous. 'What? They were evil, rapist bastards!'

AND AS FAR AS THEIR FAMILIES ARE CONCERNED, YOU'RE A BARBARIC, MURDERING HEATHEN. NOT FAIR, IS IT.

Edward could say nothing. He ground his teeth, waiting. He couldn't argue a point like this, there was no right or wrong. He knew he was justified, on a personal level. For himself, for Megan. He knew those men deserved to die, and anyone who knew the whole story would agree with him, but this other was right too. Two sides to every story.

There was a sound like a gentle breeze and he realised it was the other laughing again. 'What now?'

YOU HAVE A REMARKABLE MIND, RATIONAL IN THE FACE OF THE GREATEST ADVERSITY.

It *had* read his mind! 'A curse.'

MAYBE.

'What of it?'

YOU HAVE NO BELIEF OF ANY KIND, DO YOU?

'Do you blame me?'

BELIEF IS A MATTER OF FAITH. FAITH LENDS SUBSTANCE. BELIEVE IN SOMETHING STRONGLY ENOUGH AND IT WILL EXIST FOR YOU.

'But how can anyone believe in anything without some evidence?'

THAT'S THE CATCH, ISN'T IT? BUT THERE ARE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE COMPLETELY IN THINGS THEY HAVE NO PROOF OF WHATSOEVER. EVEN THE MOST CYNICAL USUALLY HAVE SOME DEEP SEATED BELIEF. THERE ARE NUMEROUS DEITIES AND SPIRITS GUARDING

OVER THEIR FAITHFUL IN THIS WORLD.

‘What do you mean “there are”?’

THE MORE PEOPLE THAT BELIEVE, THE MORE POWERFUL THEY ARE, BUT IF ONE PERSON BELIEVES COMPLETELY IN HIS OWN GOD, THAT GOD EXISTS.

‘All these gods really exist?’ Edward was incredulous.

IT MUST BE HARD TO ACCEPT, THOUGH IT IS TRUE.

‘All right, so it’s true. So what?’

WHERE WILL YOU GO? YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING.

‘I don’t care.’

HAVE YOU ANY IDEA HOW HARD IT IS TO CONTROL PEOPLE THAT HAVE NO BELIEF?

‘You control people? What are you?’

PEOPLE ARE LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES, FREE TO DO AS THEY WILL, BELIEVE WHAT THEY WILL, BUT THERE MUST BE A BALANCE.

‘A balance?’

THERE MUST ALWAYS BE BALANCE.

‘And you’re the balance?’

IMAGINE IF EVERYONE IN THE WORLD BELIEVED IN THE SAME THINGS. IMAGINE THE POWER OF THE LEADERS OF THAT BELIEF. WHERE WOULD THE DIVERSITY BE? THE FREE WILL? IMAGINE ONLY ONE DEITY OR PANTHEON IN TOTAL CONTROL. WHEN THAT BALANCE NEEDS TO BE MAINTAINED, PEOPLE NEED TO BE GUIDED.

‘And that’s what you do? *Guide* people who would upset your balance?’

Edward was beginning to see the point, but the scope of it all made him dizzy. Until now he had only heard rumours of other races in other lands. He was not a classically educated man and all this was just too much. But he was beginning to understand.

YOU REALLY DO HAVE A POWERFUL MIND.

‘So why are you telling me all this?’

YOU KILLED FOUR MEN TODAY. ONE OF THOSE MEN WAS IMPORTANT IN MAINTAINING A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF BALANCE. YOUR UNPREDICTABLE ATTACK HAS UPSET A DELICATE COURSE OF EVENTS.

‘So why didn’t you step in? Reach down and *guide* me?’ Edward knew he sounded sarcastic, scathing.

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO TAKE A DIRECT HAND IN THE AFFAIRS OF HUMANS. THEY MUST BE GUIDED BY THEIR

DEITIES, OCCASIONAL MOMENTS OF DIVINE INTERVENTION, REVELATION, INSPIRATION.

'I see. And you order those deities when to intervene?'

NOT EXACTLY. BUT CLOSE.

'And I had no deity to intervene?'

CORRECT.

'So you had no power over me.'

YOUR KIND IS UNCOMMON, THANKFULLY.

'And now you want me to believe in something, have somewhere to go?'

That chuckle again. YOU CANNOT CHOOSE TO BELIEVE IN SOMETHING THAT EASILY. BELIEF IS A TENUOUS THING AT BEST. BUT THE RULES CAN BE BENT, SO TO SPEAK. VERY FEW END UP DYING WITH NO BELIEF OF ANY KIND. MOST END UP GOING SOMEWHERE. YOU ARE A RARE CATCH INDEED.

'A catch?'

YOUR PAST LIFE IS OVER EDWARD. YOU WILL BE ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL HUMANS EVER TO TREAD THE EARTH, AND YOU WILL BE KNOWN SIMPLY AS ISIAH.

Isiah was staring blankly past the aged piano player, the Elephant Beer slowly warming in his grasp. He took a deep breath, then a long draught of beer. All so long ago. The Balance had not given him any choice, no option to simply disappear into oblivion. He was too rare an opportunity for that. Ever since he had been wandering the Earth, guided by the Balance to guide those who had no belief. Keeping the Balance.

It had afforded him the most unique of existences, but to this day he had no idea if it would ever end. He had grown more and more powerful, developed physical and mental talents unrivalled, sometimes unheard of. He had been places that only existed in people's faith filled minds, had met entities that escaped rational explanation, but he was tired.

He sat up straight, mentally shook himself. No time for melancholy. As he shook off his reflective mood three people entered the bar. Two of them were typical hired gorillas, bulky, muscular bodies stretching the seams of designer suits, heads more suited to butting than thinking. They walked either side of a smaller man, though still tall. He was thin, rakish, olive-tanned skin and slick, black hair. He too wore the designer suit, with crocodile shoes and silk shirt. Isiah quickly let his mind drift over them all, scanning their thoughts. The two gorillas were concerned almost

exclusively with violence, fighting, although one was particularly moved by a young blonde in a tight cocktail dress leaning against the bar. The one in the middle was definitely Baker.

Isiah raised a hand, caught Baker's eye. He looked at the watch on his raised hand. Twenty five minutes late, pretty good guess. Baker saw the gesture, walked casually over to the bar. The two gorillas stopped a pace or two back and stood leaning against a marble pillar trying to look both inconspicuous and menacing at the same time.

Isiah smiled, reached out his hand. 'Hello, Mr Baker. Glad you could come.'

Baker shook Isiah's outstretched hand firmly, but his dark eyes were cold, flinty. 'You're lucky I did. Who are you and how do you recognise me?'

'Never mind that now. We need to talk about Samuel Harrigan, and we need to talk fast. I believe we are both trying to locate him. The more time we waste, the further away he can get.'

'Very well. As I am so anxious to find him. What is your concern with him? Are you a policeman, perhaps?'

Isiah genuinely laughed. 'Shit, no. Far from it.' He had to get Baker on side. That would require convincing him that he himself was based on the wrong side of the law. 'Quite the opposite really. I believe you and I have more in common than you realise, Mr Baker.'

Baker raised an eyebrow. 'Oh? How so?'

Isiah knew he was taking something of a risk, but the brief scan of Baker's mind had revealed a certain amount of concern regarding drugs. With time and effort Isiah could pluck all the information he needed directly from Baker's brain, but that was hard, and unpleasant for all involved. Besides, he didn't like to work that way. He liked to take snippets of information and work with them, play the human side of the game. It was more real that way. 'I'll be honest with you, Mr Baker. Samuel owes me a certain amount of leisure pharmaceuticals. I'd really like to find him soon.'

Baker smiled softly. Isiah felt him relax somewhat. *Good.* 'Go on,' Baker said.

'Well, I know that Sam sometimes met people at Dave's shop. He's met me there before. So I went and convinced Dave to tell me who else he had met with in the hope of gaining some information as to Sam's whereabouts.'

Baker nodded. 'I too require knowledge of his whereabouts. Perhaps we should combine our efforts in searching for him.'

‘A good idea. Why do you seek him?’

Baker turned and waved to the barman. He looked at Isiah. ‘Drink?’

Isiah held up his nearly empty Elephant Beer bottle, showing Baker the label. Baker shrugged, turned to the barman. ‘Two Elephant Beers.’

When the barman had gone Baker said, ‘Samuel Harrigan owes me a lot of money.’

‘Oh. What for?’

Baker seemed to think about this for a moment. Isiah kept his face relaxed. *Come on, trust me.*

Baker took a swig of beer, then, ‘He had plans to travel. He had done some business with me before and came to me for help. He said that if I advanced him a sizeable sum of money to finance his trip, he would return with a large amount of merchandise for me. A relatively short term investment on my part.’

Isiah bit his lip to prevent himself from smiling. This guy stood there pretending to be a big shot, yet he would advance a scumbag like Samuel a whole lot of money on the promise of some drugs. At least now he knew how Sam planned to afford a search of South America, looking for the crystal skull of immortality that Satan was teasing him with. Cheeky son of a bitch. He made a point of maintaining control, this Baker could be useful yet. ‘And then he disappeared with your money?’

Baker nodded once sharply. ‘Exactly. There are certain codes of ethics in our business, are there not? Samuel will pay dearly when I find him.’

‘Indeed,’ said Isiah, thinking, *You complete idiot.* ‘Well, I have your number. I suggest that I give you a number on which to contact me. If either of us should hear anything, or get any clues, we ring the other. Pool our resources.’

‘Of course. I can see you are an honourable man, Mr...’

‘Smith.’

‘Of course.’

A few minutes later Isiah was strolling toward the Gents, planning to use his usual escape route. What he had learned from Baker was really not much to go on, but at least he had a better idea of Baker’s relationship with Samuel and a better understanding of Samuel’s plans and movements. Any information, however insignificant it seemed, could be of enormous help. No wonder Vincenzo had laughed when Isiah had asked him about Baker’s status. Truly a mouse among the most vicious cats.

Isiah pushed open the heavy, leather covered door of the gents and went inside. He was immediately annoyed by the presence of an old man

in a neat hotel uniform standing by the sinks. Isiah gave him a nod, went over to the urinals. He would have to find somewhere else to travel from.

It only took a few moments to find a quiet corner down one of the hundreds of corridors in the huge hotel. He checked around, then travelled, glad to be getting out of this alien, artificial palace of excess.

As soon as he arrived in the lounge of his flat, right beside the old, threadbare armchair, he knew he was not alone. He spun around, gathering a huge ball of raw energy in his hand. There. In the darkened corner, under a little triangular shelf holding a vase of long dead flowers, was a demon. Twisted and ugly, all lumpy, slick skin, sharp black teeth. Isiah raised his hand preparing to release the energy, send the little bastard straight back to Hell.

The little demon quickly danced from one foot to the other and back again. ‘Wait, wait,’ it cackled, its gleeful voice a gurgling, throaty sound. ‘I have news for you! A message especially for you!’

Isiah was suddenly concerned, he thought these little shuriken had been quiet too long. ‘What?’

‘Satan just thought you might like to know that we have the human Samuel Harrigan! We got him, we got him!’ The slimy horror danced about, laughing like a lunatic.

With a roar of rage, Isiah threw crackling energy directly at it, engulfing it briefly, before destroying it completely. It vanished with a shriek of pain, the smell of burning quickly filling the small apartment.

Isiah sat down hard in the old armchair, dropped his head into his hands. ‘Fuck!’ So much for Baker helping him to find Sam. He didn’t want to consider what he would have to do next.

To read on, get your copy of **RealmShift** now.

See www.alanbaxteronline.com for details

Thanks for reading!