



John continued reading: "Genesis, chapter six, verses five through seven: The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air, for I am grieved that I have made them."

John stopped and looked up. "Can we agree that the Fallen and Nephilim existed in Noah's time?"

Brennan shifted in his chair. "If you take the scripture literally, then we

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can agree. But I ask you again, what has that got to do with the suspected virus threat and the North Koreans?"

"Be patient," John said, holding his hand up. "Matthew, chapter twentyfour, verses thirty-seven through thirty-nine: But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be."

"Some would say that the Nephilim were wiped out by the Great Flood," the President said.

"They were, but the Fallen will be with us until the End of Days. They continue to have offspring who have grown as many or more in number today as they were prior to the Flood. We're told to pay attention to how things were in Noah's day." John stared hard into Brennan's eyes. "The Nephilim do walk among us, as do the Fallen. You have to believe me. I know. I've seen it firsthand."

"John, I'll concede that there's more than enough evil in the world..." Brennan wasn't certain he wanted to hear more. And he didn't want to keep sounding negative to John's theories, even though he had no choice. He glanced over at the desk and thought of the Top Secret folder.

"So you do accept that Satan's legions exist today?" John asked.

"You know I do. You and I share the same faith." He did believe it, but he still wasn't getting the connection to the biological threat.

"What are some of the signs of the Tribulation, the terrible times we will suffer before the Second Coming?"

The President thought for a moment. "Wars, famines, earthquakes."

"Right," John said. "And false messiahs. How many of those have we seen over the last generation? But these are only the birth pangs. The end is still to come. Also from Matthew twenty-four:

There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. An increase in false messiahs, an increase in warfare, and increases in famines, plagues, and natural disasters " John paced again before stopping directly in front of Brennan.

"Plagues. I don't think it's just the North Koreans behind Black Needles. I'm certain it's much bigger than that."

Brennan blinked, and a wave of uneasiness swept over him. He had to end this discussion soon before he was pushed into a corner. John was right, there were bigger things here. Things that could irreparably harm the reputation of the United States.

"You see where I'm going, don't you, Mr. President?"

Brennan didn't answer, but simply stared at John.

"Let me bring it all together for you. The Fallen and Nephilim are still at war with God today, and what is happening now was prophesied in the book of Revelation." He turned to another page in the Bible. "Revelation, chapter sixteen, verse two: And the first went and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon men which had the mark of the beast... I believe that refers to Unit 731's work. Revelation, chapter sixteen, verse three: And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the

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blood of a dead man. Could the sea be a reference to the Pitcairn?"

Brennan's throat and mouth went dry, and he found it hard to speak.

"Stop." His voice sounded to him like sandpaper on raw wood.

"Revelation, chapter sixteen, verses eight and nine: And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. Could the sun be the rising sun of the Japanese flag? Japan, where this disease originated? And does scorch men with fire refer to the raging fever brought on by Black Needles?" John closed the Bible and slipped it back in his pocket. "If all that isn't enough to convince you, Mr. President, then listen to one more quote from scripture."

President Brennan's throat constricted, as if a noose were tightening around it. I'm the President of the United States. How could I possibly betray my oath of office? But this... this theory of John's, if it were true, protecting the integrity of the United States would be no more than an insignificant trifling. The room suddenly seemed to lack oxygen.

This time John spoke from memory. "Revelation, chapter sixteen, verses ten and eleven: And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds."

Brennan sat forward. "What do you think it means?"

"It took me most of the flight to Washington to understand it. I believe it means that the North Koreans are using their own people as weapons. Helped by the Fallen, they are somehow infecting their people, then sending them out to deliver the virus to their targets. That's what I think it means by And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his Kingdom was full of darkness. They don't repent. They are like Japanese Kamikaze pilots or radical Islamic suicide bombers. But unlike those terrorists, these suicide bombers are carrying weapons that are undetectable, invisible. Their weapons are the germs inside them."

Leaning back, the President groaned, then muttered, "I need time to think."

Cotten stood. "But there isn't any time, Mr. President. The suicide bombers could be out there right now sitting next to innocent people in buses and airplanes, theaters or supermarkets, or schools—"

Brennan's head shot up as he saw a possible flaw in the theory. "No, that can't be. They'd have no way of controlling it. It would eventually infect their own countrymen as well."

"Maybe they have developed some kind of vaccine," Cotten said.

"Do you know how huge an undertaking it would be to inoculate the entire population of North Korea, not to mention their allies and all those in countries whom they don't regard as enemies," Brennan said. "And on top of that, how would they keep something that huge a secret? Impossible."

"Then Dr. Chung has found a way—" Cotten suddenly stared at John. "No

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one else got infected! That's it! That's why the people around Calderon and Thelma Sutton and the others didn't get sick. Dr. Chung has somehow engineered Black Needles so it can't be passed from man to man. Like the Avian flu, or at least the way we think the bird flu is transmitted. Man can get it from a bird, but can't pass it along—yet. The suicide bombers are like the birds. Someway, they cause the infection. This is how they can pick and choose their targets." Cotten slapped her palm to her forehead. "How stupid of us. She's a biochemist after all. That's what she does." She looked at the President. "Please, Sir, you have to intervene."

The President glanced back at the desk, his hands sweaty and his skin crawling. If they had any idea what was in that folder. "I'm sorry, but despite your colorful and imaginative argument, there's really nothing I can do. You have no proof, no compelling evidence. It would be worse than the Iraq WMD

debacle. We can't make such serious accusations on a whim. John, you and I both know you can interpret scripture a million ways from here to Sunday and back."

"Damn it, don't you see?" Cotten said. "The attacks could already be underway. And when mothers start seeing their children die horrible deaths, how do you think they will feel when they find out you knew and did nothing?"

Brennan rose. It was a terrifying scenario that John painted. But the likelihood that it was true was still remote. Regardless, it was the investigation that he feared most. That's what could open up a festering sore and cause irreparable harm to the United States in the eyes of the world. He had no choice.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Stone. Thank you both for coming to me with this. Your concerns are commendable. And I promise I will weigh each fact uncovered against your points, John." He motioned to the door. "The military escort will take you back to your vehicle."

"Steve," John said, calling the President by his first name as they walked to the door. "If you don't believe me, believe your heart and the word of God. Don't wait too long to act. There's too much at stake."

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President Steven Brennan collapsed in the armchair, blankly staring at the fire. After a few moments, he went to the desk, removed the folder, and returned to his chair. If he allowed this whole issue of Unit 731 to resurface, the hideous secret that had been hidden away for nearly an entire generation would raise its filthy head. All he could do was pray that John's premise was wrong, that he and

Cotten Stone would realize it, and that they would drop the matter. It might prove to be the biggest gamble of his life.

He opened the folder and scanned the intelligence assessments again. 1951. America was drowning in the Korean War. A miserable war in a miserable place. MacArthur's campaign had resulted in the loss of over 60,000 United

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Nations troops in North Korea, and the American people were in a frenzy anticipating the threat of "Yellow Mongol Hordes" marching into the homeland. Something had to be done. Brennan's eyes read and reread the October 1951

order.

#### **OPERATION CODE NAME-TAKE OFF.**

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff hand-delivered an order to General Ridgeway to begin experimental, limited germ warfare in Korea. It

was followed by a second JCS directive in February 1952.JCS# 1837/29 authorized larger field tests. The order was given verbally so there would be no paper trail, no archival evidence.

Brennan's stomach churned at the thought as he once again reviewed some of the horrific details.

Using much of Unit 731's research, the United States had dropped their standard ordinance bombs, but then followed in the last wave of planes with germ-laden bombs. After the air raid, the North Koreans converged on the site to rescue their injured. The germs were intended for the rescuers.

But it wasn't limited to germ bombs. It was even more hideous. Infected food was dropped on major populations to kill the hungry civilians.

It wasn't until the U.S. troops accidentally became infected that it finally ended.

Brennan closed the folder, wishing he could close the book on one of the country's blackest stains as easily. He knew that the government had been vigilant in keeping it covered up. Only one other time had it come this close to being exposed to the public. It was in 1953 when a germ warfare specialist from Camp Detrick was ready to blow the whistle. He was found dead in a hotel room. Suicide. His children never accepted that their father had taken his own life. Forty years after his death, the body was exhumed and reclassified a homicide.

Brennan stared at the presidential seal above the fireplace, then dragged himself to the bar and poured three fingers of eighteen-year-old scotch. He downed it in one gulp, knowing he was faced with the biggest question of all—

what to do about Cotten Stone and John Tyler?

## **JET LAG**

"We gave it our best shot," Cotten said to John, taking her eyes from the road a minute as they drove to Washington from Camp David.

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"But it wasn't enough." He leaned his head back against the seat.

"Maybe President Brennan just needs time to think about all that scripture you quoted before he reconsiders. It was a lot for him to take in at one time. I watched his face, his eyes, as you talked, and he definitely seemed to be grasping what you were saying. Near the end, he appeared downright nervous."

"Maybe," John said.

"You look tired. Why don't you use this time to rest a little? Jet lag has to be hitting you."

Without lifting his head from the headrest, John turned to look at her.

"I'm okay."

"Yeah, right. It wouldn't kill you to doze off while I drive. Then I won't feel bad about asking you to go with me to dinner when we get to the city." She grinned at him. "Go on. Humor me."

Cotten turned on the radio and found a station playing smooth jazz. The light piano and strings hummed along with the song of the tires on the road. A few minutes later she looked over at John. His beautiful blue eyes were closed.

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They checked in at the Washington Dulles Airport Marriott, both of their rooms on the second floor.

"Say in about forty-five minutes," Cotten said as they got off the elevator.

"I need to freshen up first. We can just grab a bite in the hotel restaurant if you like."

"Better idea," John said. "There's a great Japanese restaurant about two miles from here. Feel like sushi?"

"Perfect. I'll knock on your door when I'm fit to go out in public. How's that?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Cotten slipped her card key in her door lock then swiftly removed it. The small green light flashed on, and she opened the door. "See you in a bit," she said.

Over the years of reporting from every corner of the globe, she had gotten used to living out of a suitcase. Like always, she packed light and only clothes that didn't wrinkle.

Cotten pulled the long-sleeved, black jersey sheath from the suitcase and hung it up in the bathroom to steam while she showered.

Poor John, she thought, turning on the water and adjusting the temperature to a comfortable hot. She stripped and stepped in the shower, letting the water cascade over her from the crown of her head to her toes. He was ragged from the trip from Rome to DC.

He hadn't stopped since early this morning, and he hadn't added an additional six hours to a normal twenty-four because of the time zone difference.

After shampooing, lathering up, and shaving her legs, Cotten wrapped a

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towel around her head, turban style, and another around her body and got out of the shower. She stared at the steamed-up mirror. Someone who had stayed in the room previously had apparently steamed up the mirror during their stay and drawn a heart in the condensation. Like magic, the heart and the initials reappeared in the fog on the mirror. Maybe it was a honeymoon couple or a teenager missing her beau while she and family vacationed. There were hundreds of stories she could imagine.

Cotten dried her hair and got dressed. She didn't wear much makeup, just some blush, mascara, and lipstick. She smoothed the clinging jersey dress over her hips.

Satisfied she was ready, Cotten picked up her handbag and left the room, heading down the hall to John's.

She stopped in front of his door and knocked. When he didn't answer she knocked again and called his name. Probably had the television on and didn't hear her.

The door finally cracked open.

"John?"

He stepped out from behind the door, wearing his bathrobe.

"You take a nap, sleepyhead?"

"Yeah, I did. I hate to do this, but I think I'm going to have to beg off."

"Boy, jet lag really took its toll." Cotten stepped into the room, closed the door, and tossed her purse on the dresser. "Want me to order something from downstairs?"

"No, thanks. You go ahead. I think I'm going to call it a day. Sorry. I'm just whipped."

"No problem. How about if I bring you something back when I come up?"

"No, no. I'm fine. Breakfast in the morning?"

"You got it," Cotten said, retrieving her purse. "You call me when you get up." She gave him a hug. "See you mañana."

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Cotten sat curled up in the chair watching the SNN late news and sipping on an Absolut over ice she picked up at the bar. She had on her comfort pajamas—a lightweight sweatshirt, sweatpants, and socks. The black dress lay in a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed. One black heel on its side, the other upright, her stockings and bra next to the shoes. She was disappointed they hadn't gone to dinner, and she kicked herself for feeling that way. The poor man was exhausted.

She wondered if she had guessed right about Black Needles and the method it would be delivered. Had the attacks already started? Would Brennan see the light and launch measures to protect the country? She fully understood his hesitation. After all, it was only conjecture and speculation. But she knew that once the element of the Fallen was added into the equation, conjecture

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could easily become tragedy. Where would she and John turn next? Who else would listen?

The vodka warmed her, and she felt her body loosen the kinks it had acquired during the day. She was tired, too. Downing the last of her drink, Cotten set the glass on the nightstand and crawled under the covers. When she clicked off the TV with the remote, the room fell into darkness and almost as quickly, she drifted off.

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The sharp jangle of the phone ripped Cotten out of a heavy dream that she couldn't remember. She fumbled for the lamp on the nightstand and switched it on. The digital clock radio display read 3:47.

Cotten lifted the receiver. "Hello." Her voice was husky with sleep.

"Cotten?"

"John, what is it?" She sat up. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I think... maybe... I'm coming down with something."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sick."

Cotten swung her legs over the bed. "John, open your room door. I'm coming down."

She dropped the handset onto the base, grabbed her card key from her purse, and headed out the door.

John's door was ajar, and Cotten pushed it open. The bathroom light was on, but the door closed. "John, are you all right?"

A moment later the door opened and he stood illuminated by the bathroom lighting.

His eyes were red-rimmed and glassy, his lips void of color. She touched his forehead. "Jesus Christ, you're burning up." Her eyes caught a quick glimpse of pink in the sink and toilet.

Suddenly, he bent forward, covered his mouth with one hand, held his chest with the other, and coughed—a deep rumbling cough. Then he collapsed.

## OFFSPRING

Cotten and the Georgetown University Medical Center's infectious disease specialist stood outside John's hospital room.

"Has Cardinal Tyler been around any exotic animals?" the doctor said, peering over the top of his glasses. "More specifically primates? Chimps?"

Monkeys? Gorillas?"

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"No. Nothing like that" she said.

"Maybe visiting a mission in a remote area of Africa?"

Cotten shook her head. "He was recently in Eastern Europe, but there aren't any of those kinds of exotic animals where he was. What are you getting at?"

The doctor tapped his pen on the metal clipboard that held John's chart.

"What we believe is that this is some type of hemorrhagic virus—"

"Like Ebola," she said.

"Right. Typically, these types of viruses are transmitted by contact, though we don't know the natural reservoir, or origin of how they first appear in a human outbreak. They are believed to be zoonotic, animal borne, and from then on transmitted by contact with blood or secretions or objects that have become contaminated. But Cardinal Tyler's case is somewhat of an enigma. It doesn't appear he has transmitted the disease to anyone. To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure what we're dealing with here."

"What's the prognosis?" she asked.

"Not good, I'm afraid. We don't have any experience with this particular disease. We haven't been able to identify it. We can only surmise that because of the likeness in symptoms to Ebola, this disease will run the same or similar course. But we can't say for certain."

"People survive Ebola," Cotten said.

"True." He glanced at the clipboard.

She read his grave expression. "But it has a high fatality rate, correct?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing for him? You've got to do something." Her voice was sharp and rising.

"About all we can do is keep his fluids balanced, watch his electrolytes, oxygen levels, and blood pressure. Mostly just support therapy."

"What about an antibiotic? Can't you give him—"

"Antibiotics are not effective against viruses, only bacterial infections." The specialist pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I'm really sorry, Ms. Stone. But I promise you we are doing all we can."

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Cotten sat on the couch in the visitor's lounge. She stared blankly at an empty Styrofoam cup someone had left behind.

Hospitals all had that distinct mixed antiseptic and medicine smell, an odor Cotten associated with death. She hadn't really taken notice of those smells or what they conjured in her mind until after her mother's stint and eventual death in the hospital. And hadn't she heard somewhere that smell is the sense most profoundly tied to memory? And those memories provoked by smell are the most emotional laden? She felt positive that was true.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Cotten hoped she could catch a few

moment's sleep. She lay down on the couch, her mind spinning. It didn't take long for her to realize it was useless to try to sleep, knowing that John was just down the hall dying. Because of her. The Fallen's signature was all over this. John had been singled out as a target. She was sure of it.

She'd fought them before and won. Or at least thought she had prevailed—that goodness had prevailed. John was the goodness. Not her. Her heart pumped the blood of her father. It didn't matter that her father had repented. He was not human. And neither was she. At least not completely.

Cotten squeezed her eyes at the sting of tears and sat up. She needed fresh air. The odor of the hospital and the thoughts of John's condition, her father's legacy, and her mother's death—it was all too much.

She pulled her coat on and headed to the lobby and out the doors into the night.

The cold, fresh air hit her like a slap, and it felt good, not cluttered with sour smells and troubling memories and dark thoughts. Cotten breathed in a deep lungful and let it out slowly as she walked away from the hospital entrance. A few moments later, she stopped and stared up at the stars. "Haven't I done what you've wanted? Haven't I suffered enough for my father? I didn't ask to be conceived or come into this world. If life is a miracle, then everything that's happened is all your doing. Why are you punishing me? How can a compassionate, loving God... What else do you want from me?"

Her anger and frustration raged inside like torrid winds. "Maybe I have turned to the wrong—"

Cotten sobbed into her hands. "Why? Why?" Finally, she smeared the tears from her cheeks and wiped her nose with a tissue from her coat pocket. She stretched out her arms and turned in a circle. "I give up. You win!" she shouted, not knowing exactly to whom she called. Had God won or had the Fallen? She just wanted an answer, for someone to hear her pleas, and she didn't care who.

Finally spent, her energy purged, her will broken, she felt barren, like some empty husk.

The sudden chime of her cell startled her. Cotten shoved her hand in her pocket and pulled out her phone. Without even looking at the caller ID, she flipped it open. "This is Cotten."

The voice on the other end made her recoil.

## THE OFFERING

"Daughter of Furmiel?" said the voice on the phone.

Cotten held the cell to her ear, unable to speak. She felt weak and lightheaded. Finally, she formed the words, "Yes."

"You do remember me, don't you? It has not been that long."

She tried to swallow but her mouth was suddenly Sahara dry. His voice

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was easily identifiable. She'd heard it before. It was the voice of her immortal enemy, the Son of the Dawn.

"What do you want?" Her words sounded feeble and unsteady to her.

"What do I always want? I want what is good for you."

"No, you don't. You are what my father rejected."

"I am your family now. No matter how much you try to dismiss it, ignore it, pretend it is not true, you and I share the same bloodline. And I take care of my family. You are not meant to be just of this world. You have special gifts and privileges because of your father." He sighed. "It is regrettable that Furmiel was so weak. He could not take losing Paradise. No adaptation skills. And when his God did him such a great favor, he could not handle mortality. You, on the other hand, have proved yourself strong under the most pressing conditions. I am proud that you are part of my family."

"I'm not your family," she said with conviction. "My father repented and was forgiven."

"Oh, he repented all right. But do you think he was really forgiven? God played a cruel trick on your father. Do you not see that? Furmiel gave up his immortality. He surrendered your twin sister at birth, and promised you to Him. Your father did not even give you a choice. Did God take care of you? Did God make the drought end and save your family's farm?"

There was a pause, then the Old Man lowered his voice. "I do not understand humans. They believe that God is all-powerful, and so many worship Him without question. Doesn't logic follow that if God is all-powerful, then who do you think brought about the drought to begin with that threw Furmiel into a downward spiral? If He loves Man so, why does He allow pain and suffering?"

That just does not make sense to me."

Cotten felt as if she were losing her balance, that her knees were giving way. "Leave me alone. Don't do this to me."

"I would have left you alone, but I know you are hurting right now, that you are tormented and distressed. It pains me to know that. I care about you. And I still believe that deep in your father's heart he would want me to come to you now. He would want me to help

you in any way that I could. He would want me to relieve you of this anguish. Family members do that for one another. No questions asked. No hesitations. No matter past feuds. Daughter of Furmiel, I can help you. Will you not at least listen to what I have to say?"

Cotten didn't want to listen. She wasn't in the right frame of mind to argue or agree with anything, no matter what he offered. Her mind was too frayed. "I've got to go. Don't contact me again."

"Slow down. Take a deep breath. Do that for me."

"Please, leave me alone. Just leave me alone."

"You need to hear what I have to tell you."

The voice seemed to echo, as if coming from the cell and from behind her. She turned around to see a figure emerge from the darkness to stand only a few feet away, his frame now backlit by the distant hospital lights. Cotten

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lowered her phone and closed it.

"Why have you come? What do you want?" she asked.

The Old Man smiled. "You are confused. You have it all wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

"I came because you asked."

Cotten glared at him, shaking her head.

"I do not want anything," he said. "It was you who called out for help."

He paused while Cotten struggled to make the connection.

"Just a minute ago you cried out for answers. And who listened?" He stepped closer. "God?" His expression was that of a caring and consoling grandfather. "Look at me. I am the one who has come to your aid. Not God. You have had enough, have you not? Your cup runneth over."

Cotten tried to look away but was held transfixed.

"I never turn my back on one of my own."

"My father was what you call family," she said. "But not me. And he gave that up."

"It destroyed him. God did not come to his rescue, did He? The drought—

the loss of the farm—was the last straw for your father.

Furmiel finally felt the only way to end his suffering was to take his own life. First, he deserted me and the rest of his brothers and sisters, and then he did the same thing to you and your mother. Left you to fend for yourselves. You cannot compare yourself to him. The only part of him that resides in you is his blood. And that bonds you forever with me. You are Nephilim, and your God cannot change that."

"I don't know what I am. Half of this, half of that."

"If you would only acknowledge the truth, a great peace would settle over you. You would not have this turmoil. You are trying to live a lie."

The Old Man peered into her eyes. "You are a renowned journalist by choice and Nephilim by birth. I can make good use of those characteristics. But first, for your own protection, you must travel to a place that is safe. I want you to go to North Korea. Once there, I will start you on a journey that will bring you great fame and raise your stature to that of the global voice of a new world that is about to become reality."

"I don't need fame," Cotten said, wondering why he didn't think she was aware of the Korean connection to Black Needles? And what did he mean by referring to her own protection. "So why would I want to do that?"

"In the coming days, few places on earth will be safe. Despite your ties to me, you are not immune to the danger of the sickness that is about to strike so many. I always protect my family, and I want you to be in a place that is safe and secure. The second reason is that North Korea is about to become a world power whose dominance will be undeniable. You are destined to play a part in my future plans. I want you safely at my side to tell the world the story of

North Korea's great leader. It will be your first assignment in a long list of opportunities I will provide you."

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"Assignment? I haven't agreed to anything. I don't even know what it is I'm agreeing to. And even if I did, I don't think I'm interested."

The Old Man smiled. "I have a peace offering."

Cotten looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"If you come home, be who you really are, you will be pleased with your reward."

"You aren't hearing me. Money and fame don't matter to me. You should know that by now."

"Money and fame are not what I offer, although you will find those are waiting for you, as well. No, I offer something much, more precious."

Cotten gave a smug smile. "I can't imagine how you can offer me anything that would make me happy."

The Old Man raised a brow. "I offer you the priest's life."

## **DEATHWATCH**

Cotten stopped beside the Venatori agent posted outside John's room on the fourth-floor isolation ward of the hospital. "Any change?" she asked as she put on the protective gown over her street clothes.

He shook his head.

Cotten stared at all the precaution signs posted on the door, then put the mask over her nose and mouth, and pulled on the gloves. When she entered the room she gently pushed the door almost closed, leaving a crack wide enough to allow a slice of light to come in from the hall. She stood overcome by the reality.

Deathwatch.

She sat in a chair next to the bed and glanced at the monitor recording John's respiration and heartbeat, then at the IV pole on which hung several bags, slowly dripping their contents into his arm. She knew it was a futile attempt to save his life.

Cotten removed her mask, gambling on the fact that Black Needles could not be transmitted from one victim to another. John must have been specifically targeted by one of the bombers—a ploy to bring her to her knees. And if she was wrong and could contract the disease from him, it would already be inside her.

Hemorrhagic viruses set off such red alerts that sometimes she thought the medical profession couldn't see the forest for the trees. This was no typical virus, not Ebola or Marburg. This one had not naturally evolved. It was orchestrated. Why weren't they concentrating on the obvious? None of the documented cases indicated that this mysterious virus was contagious. The only exception was onboard the Pitcairn. None of those exposed to Calderon at SNN, and not even Jimmy Franks who lived with Jeff Calderon had become sick. No,

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this virus was like a handcrafted bullet with someone's name etched on it. And one of the bullets bore John's name.

The anger surged inside her as she massaged her temples. There was so much hate and rage building within her. No good person could have such feelings, she thought. And that confirmed the rightness of her decision. She was who she was.

"John," she whispered.

His ashen face matched the white pillow beneath his head. She wished he would open his incredible ocean-blue eyes so she could see them once again. At this point she would even settle for any sign that he recognized her presence and could hear her. But there was no movement, nothing.

"This is all because of me," she said. "All the bad things that have come into your life are because of me." Her voice strained and cracked as she unsuccessfully fought back the tears. Wiping them away Cotten looked at the ceiling and bit her bottom lip trying to compose herself. Finally her eyes traveled to John's face again, a face she had burned in her memory. Every line, every angle, every contour. If somehow she was stricken blind, she could still place her palm on his cheek and know it was him.

Cotten smoothed his hair away from his face and briefly touched her fingertip to his lips. "I am so sorry."

Her tears came again. "You mean more to me than anything in my life. I can't let you die. I won't, no matter what I have to do. I suppose I am glad you can't hear me because I know you would try to stop me. I only hope that you will be able to forgive me."

She paused, tilting her head and looking at John, drinking him in. Though she knew she could never have him, she loved this man with every fiber in her body and would do anything to save him.

Anything.

"John, you know who I am. You know my heritage, and that my father promised me to God in exchange for his redemption. I am the only blood enemy of the epitome of evil on Earth, and though they can't kill me because I am Furiel's daughter—one of their own—they will destroy me by destroying you. I have caused them too many problems over the years. They want to be rid of my interference permanently. I am tired, and I can't bear what is happening to you."

Cotten rested her face in her hands for a moment before looking back at him. "I can end this. Just as my father was given forgiveness and mortality for his repentance, I will be rewarded for my repentance with your life. All I have to do is give myself up to

my legacy, to the Darkness. No matter how much I strive to do what is good and right, in the end, I am Nephilim and nothing can change that. I have been given a choice. If I will return to my Nephilim heritage, then your life will be spared. It is a small price to pay. And when you get well, maybe then you will have peace, and maybe I will, too. I can't watch you die when I know I can stop it. I have tried to live up to my end of my father's bargain, but I've failed. I have brought nothing but pain and misery to those I care about the

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most. I can't do it anymore. Your life is too precious. You are the goodness in this world that I could never be."

Cotten bent over the rail and kissed his cheek. "I guess you might say I'm going home where I belong."

The door opened and pale light from the hall flowed in. A nurse entered wearing a white nun's habit, a mask, and gloves. She touched Cotten's shoulder and then checked John's vitals.

Cotten looked up at her with an expression that begged any news.

The nurse shook her head. "Pray," she said.

"Sister, I don't think God will listen to me."

"He listens to everyone."

Cotten looked back at John and touched her fingertips to his cheek.

"Perhaps you should also ask his patron saint to intercede for him with God."

"I don't know who his patron saint is. I didn't even know he had one."

"Cardinal Tyler's patron is Saint John of the Cross," the nurse whispered as she pulled the door closed behind her.

Turning back to John, Cotten wondered if she was beyond praying at this point. Why would God listen to her prayers? She was about to turn her back on Him forever.

She sat at his bedside for over an hour, coming to terms with what she was about to do. She had only one hope, and needed to talk to Ted tonight. Tomorrow might be too late.

As she rose to leave, a glint of reflected light caught Cotten's attention. Looking closer she saw links of a gold chain that disappeared beneath the neck of his gown. Cotten lifted the chain. The hospital staff had allowed John to continue wearing his gold cross. Being careful not to disturb the tubes and wires from the monitoring devices, she unhooked the clasp, removed the chain and cross, and slipped them into her pocket.

Cotten gave John a last look before leaving. As she went down in the elevator she kept her hand in her pocket palming his crucifix. Not until she was outside did she release it so she could make a call on her cell.

"Cotten, how's John?" Ted asked when he answered.

"No change," she said, working at holding back the tears.

"I'm really sorry."

"Ted, please don't ask any questions. I now know what I have to do to save John, and I need your help. I don't know how this will turn out for me, and that doesn't really matter. Please understand that. I'm going to tell you my plan and you have to promise to follow it through. No matter what I say or do later, you must do what I tell you now."

She fought to keep herself composed. What would she be like once she surrendered to the Darkness? Would she become evil? She had to make preparations now before that happened, and she had to be sure she could count on Ted. There was no one else. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Arrange for me

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to get clearance through the

State Department to travel to North Korea. Just say that the Communist leader has agreed to an exclusive SNN interview."

"I'll start the paperwork immediately." He sounded skeptical but didn't hesitate. "Anything else?" "Yes, one more thing."

## LAND OF LIES

The Air Koryo flight from Beijing approached Sunan International Airport from the north. Cotten watched the farmland and brown hills glide beneath as late afternoon turned to evening across the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Only a third of the 198 seats in the Russian-built Ilyushin IL-62 were filled, and she occupied her own row. Whether it was because of the low number of passengers or it was pre-arranged so she would not have contact with the other passengers, she didn't know.

Cotten was dead tired. She had only slept in small segments on the fourteen-hour flight from New York to Beijing, tormented by John's deteriorating condition and the decision she made that would save him. The overnight stay at the Sino Swiss Airport Hotel

was just as restless, for all the same reasons. Even with a high-level-approved visitor's visa, she was still made to sit in an isolated waiting room for most of the day in Beijing's Capital International Airport before the Korean flight took off for the five-hundred-mile trip to Pyongyang, an equally fatiguing experience. She dreaded seeing herself in a mirror, fearing she would resemble a character from a Tim Burton movie.

Cotten watched the modest terminal building roll into view, a three story, glass-front structure with a large portrait of the Communist Party General Secretary perched on top. Two bright red signs displaying the city name in Korean and English formed bookends on each side of the portrait. Once the jet had taxied to a stop, she prepared to deplane. Out her window she saw a dozen armed Korean soldiers forming a corridor between the plane and the building, keeping the passengers from straying. Cotten noticed a couple of military vehicles parked nearby. Mounted on the back of each were large caliber machine guns.

She was the last to disembark, and as she stepped off the stairway onto the tarmac, a man in a dark-green military uniform standing nearby said in a heavily accented voice, "This way please." He gestured toward a black Mercedes limousine parked a dozen yards away. Cotten had read in the State Department briefing papers supplied to SNN that North Korea had the largest fleet of state-owned Mercedes limos in the world. Stiff DPRK flags were mounted on both sides of the limo's front grill. A city police car, its emergency lights flashing, waited in front of the limo, another in the rear.

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The officer held the door open for Cotten, and she slipped into the back seat. He joined her, taking the opposite, backward-facing seat. He was short and thin, perhaps only five feet five. His close-trimmed hair was dark, and he wore rimless glasses on a round face. He sat straight with his knees together and his arms crossed, gazing intently at Cotten. He had to be wondering why she was getting the star treatment in a country with only one star. There was no attempt at introductions or conversation.

A moment later, Cotten heard a thump as someone placed her bag into the trunk and closed the lid. Then the sirens wailed and the three-vehicle caravan accelerated off the concrete through a security checkpoint and onto the main highway for the fifteen-mile trip south into Pyongyang.

The traffic was almost non-existent. An occasional commercial or military vehicle passed in the other direction along the four-lane motorway. As the Mercedes entered the city, the traffic increased, but only slightly. In any other major city, Cotten thought, it would be considered extremely light. She was told in advance what to expect, yet it still amazed her. In what the State Department documents called the Land of Lies, Pyongyang was the City of Ghosts.

With few cars, buses, and taxis, Cotten thought the city was almost beautiful in an eerie sort of way. The limo passed tree-lined boulevards and sprawling public squares built around fountains and statues. Lovely but deserted parks, walkways, and plazas lined the Taedong River as it flowed through the center of the city. The buildings were dark, and the stores all appeared closed. She even caught a glimpse of the USS Pueblo and the Pitcairn moored bow to stern near the city's center. The limo drove past the 150,000-seat stadium constructed in a failed bid to capture a portion of the 1988 Olympics. Cotten watched the huge bowl-shape structure drift by, a gloomy monument as empty as the soul of this sad nation.

They pulled up to the front of the pyramid-shaped Sungyong Hotel, an impressive tower extending 106 stories, one story taller than the tallest building in South Korea.

Led by her military escort, Cotten exited the Mercedes and entered the hotel's grand atrium. Rather than approaching the front desk, he halted her in the middle of the athletic-field-sized lobby.

"You are not allowed to leave the hotel without official approval and a government chaperone," he said. "You are not to take any photographs. Do not speak to anyone but an official from the DPRK. Remember that you are from an aggressor nation and do not have the same privileges as our visiting friends from the former Soviet nations. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Do not test our hospitality."

Cotten watched as the limo driver carried her bag to a nearby bank of elevators.

The officer motioned, and the three entered the lift.

"How many rooms does the hotel have?" Cotten asked.

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"Three thousand and one," the officer said after much hesitation as if he were revealing a state secret.

"But isn't it true that you only allow one thousand visitors into your country a year? What are the extra rooms for?"

His face reddened. With a huff, he said, "That is a matter of national security."

"Of course." Cotten shifted her gaze up to the floor indicator. They stopped on the fiftieth floor and exited.

The officer led her down a corridor to her room. He inserted a key—there were no magnetic cards used here. She stepped into a modestly furnished room with a single bed, dresser, and desk. A small TV sat on a corner stand. Thick black-out curtains covered the window. A large painting of the General Secretary poised atop a snow-clad mountain peak carrying the DPRK flag hung over the bed. He appeared to be leading a great army into battle.

Cotten turned to thank her escort just as the door clicked closed. The officer and driver were gone.

She wandered to the window and pulled open the drapes. The curtain rod slumped at one end, threatening to fall. What she saw was a sprinkling of street and traffic lights, a handful of vehicles, and a spotting of illumination from the windows of distant buildings. Night had enveloped Pyongyang like a cloak.

If she was about to make the journey into the Darkness, she had come to the right place.

## **SUPERNOVA**

After showering, Cotten slipped into bed and immediately fell asleep—the long trip finally catching up with her. Her dreams were filled with images of her father pulling the trigger of the gun he held to his head, her mother's face scored with lines of depression, and the spirit of her twin sister.

Suddenly, Cotten sat up wide awake. No light came through the window, the city slept in darkness. Feeling a presence in the room, she started to pull back the cover and search for the light switch.

"Stay," a voice said.

"Who's there?" she asked.

The voice had come from the direction of the window. The drapes were open but she saw nothing between her and the faint starlight beyond the glass.

"Daughter of Fumiel, I am pleased that you have come home to be with your family."

"I'm here to save the life of my friend. Being here has nothing to do with you." Her voice was shaky.

"You will soon come to understand that this is where you truly belong."

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"Tell me your name so I know what to call you."

"I have many names."

Cotten pulled the covers to her shoulders. "Then give me one."

"Light bearer."

"I don't see a great deal of light here tonight."

Suddenly the room exploded with white light—a supernova flash that momentarily blinded her. She was certain that the heat had singed her hair. As the light diminished, she caught a glimpse of a form standing beside the window.

The image faded back to darkness. But she had seen enough to know it was her immortal enemy, the Son of the Dawn. The Beast. Lucifer. Satan.

The ice-cold hand of trepidation slithered down her spine.

"Do you need more light?" the voice asked.

Still reeling, her eyes stung and teared, her mouth and throat parched.

"No," she managed to whisper. "That was quite enough."

"Good, then let's get on with our business."

## **TEMPTATION**

"Why did you come here?" the Old Man asked.

"You already know the answer." Cotten now stood in the darkness of the hotel room, still shaken from the blast of blinding light. Once it had faded, his form appeared like a shadow against the starlight flowing from the window.

"You must say the words."

"I'm here to consummate an agreement between us to save the life of John Tyler."

"More specific," he said. "What does our agreement entail?"

His voice was surprisingly benevolent and velvety. Perhaps he knew that it would be difficult for her if he was forceful. The serenity did make the words come easier.

"In return for sparing John's life, I will succumb to my heritage and accept my true identity, which was passed on to me by my father."

"What is your heritage—your legacy and identity? And as you tell me, be at peace with it. Surrender to it as you speak the truth."  
Cotten hesitated knowing that there would be no turning back. She choked as a lump of fear seemed to close off her throat. "In my veins flows the blood of the Nephilim. I am, and always have been, the daughter of a Fallen Angel. My soul belongs to the Darkness, to you."

"Very good. See, this is not so difficult. And do you agree to those terms?"

Cotten's eyes locked on his. "No," she whispered and swallowed hard.

"Not yet."

The Old Man cocked his head and orange embers glowed behind his eyes.

"Why not? I have given my word, my promise. What is your hesitation?"

"I don't believe you have power over life and death. How am I to know for

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certain that you can save John's life?"

"Perhaps you are correct when you think of it in the traditional sense. But you make it too simplistic, too black and white. The power over life and death can take many forms. I do not need the kind of absolute authority for which you speak. My ego does not feast on supremacy. But I do have the powers of suggestion, persuasion, and temptation. With those powers I can halt, even reverse the ravaging attack of Black Needles on the human body and rid it of the disease. After all, I had a hand in creating it. However I accomplish it should not be your concern. The end result will be what you desire."

"How do I know you won't betray me?"

The Old Man moved against the background of the starlight and Cotten thought he became transparent.

"You, Daughter of Furniel, are the centerpiece of my grand plan. Have you not figured that out? You are the last piece missing in my collection, the prodigal daughter finally come home. You will make our family complete."

He shifted again, and she was certain he was more mirage than solid form, like heat radiating off the desert highway. A wave of dizziness washed over Cotten, and she struggled for balance, concentrating on her task, looking past the Old Man and picturing John's deep blue eyes.

"I will need proof of life before I agree," she said. "I have to know that John is alive, that he is recovering."

"And how do I know that you will fulfill your end of the agreement?"

Cotten stiffened. Here was her stand, the chance she was going to have to take. "You don't."

"Then perhaps it is time that you see with new eyes so that you will not hesitate to consummate our contract."

Suddenly the room filled with a whirring roar, then a blustering hot wind and the crash of a violent thunderstorm.

Cotten stood naked atop a mountain. The gale blowing against her skin subsided to a warm and gentle breeze as if she were being wrapped in fur and satin, caressed by a million fingertips. She looked out over endless fields of gold and yellow flowers stretching from the base of the mountain to the horizon. Puffy clouds moved languidly across a sky so blue that it reminded her of tropical island waters. Birds soared among the clouds and butterflies darted from flower to flower. Total comfort, complete bliss, wanting nothing and needing only to enjoy the beauty and serenity of the scene.

"This place I will give to you, in all its perfectness, pleasure, and contentment," the Old Man said, standing beside her. "All your wants fulfilled, all desires come true, all needs satisfied, ecstasy beyond belief. Is that not the same as heaven?"

She said nothing and instantly found herself submerged in water. With no discomfort or panic, she breathed in the crystal clear liquid as it covered every inch, every pore, and every crevice of her body. Weightless, floating in a clear river of rapture, waves of pleasure undulated through her.

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A voice inside her head said, "Daughter of Furniel, this can be yours whenever you want it."

The water cascaded over her, draining away. Cotten opened her eyes to find herself sitting in a vast room filled with mountains of gold and jewels, more than what could possibly fill all the vaults and treasuries of the world. She reached down and ran her hand through a mound of diamonds. They ran between her fingers like ice crystals, the brilliance of their facets sparkling more than the stars of the night sky.

"You will never be in need of anything. All that you've seen will be yours by accepting who you are. Just say that you agree, Daughter of Furniel, and you will have everything I have shown you."

"It's not enough," Cotten said. "You know what I want."

"And you shall have it. I give you my word. The priest will live."

Suddenly Cotten was ripped from the vision back to the darkness of the hotel room. The gathering dawn silhouetted the Old Man's form against the window.

With a frail voice, she whispered, "I agree."

## **IN MY NAME**

Cotten felt a part of her melting away as she stood in the dark hotel room. She couldn't pinpoint what was happening, but sensed a cavity open within, a cold empty space inside her that had not been there moments before. The instant she agreed to the contract with the Old Man, some part of her evaporated into the darkness. It wasn't that the sensation was unpleasant or even objectionable, just different. The only word she could think to describe what she felt was hollow.

"So what happens now?" Cotten asked.

"Nothing." The Old Man's voice seemed to come from far away.

She wondered if he was still in the room with her or if he was speaking through her thoughts as he had during the strange visions.

Cotten slowly turned in a circle, searching for him. She wanted a clear image of this... this being to whom she had just given her soul. But he took no form that she could fix upon. "I still need proof of life," she said. "I have done what you asked. I want to be assured that you will do as you promised."

Almost imperceptibly, the voice whispered from behind her.

"Understandable."

Cotten spun in the direction of the voice. "What do I do next?" she asked.

There was no reply.

For an instant the air in the room turned icy as if a window opened and allowed in a winter draft. She glanced toward the windowpane and found it still closed. Just as quickly as it had come, the chill dissipated.

Cotten looked out through the glass, laying her palms on the pane. The

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pale golden blush of daybreak brought the first tracings of the city below.

After a few moments, she returned to the bed and slid beneath the covers staring at the shadows on the ceiling, wondering how she would live her life now that she—

She what? she thought. Nothing magical had stricken her when she said yes to the Old Man. Nothing seemed different other than that feeling of hollowness, but perhaps that was only the relief of knowing her mission was complete. Hadn't the Old Man realized before that it would not be the promise of riches that would influence her decision? The reason she had made the journey to Korea was to save John's life, and that was beyond any other promise he could possibly make.

So what was this all about, this going into the Darkness? It wasn't what she anticipated, what she feared it might be. As a matter of fact, it felt good knowing she had the power to save the only man she had ever really loved... other than her father. She drifted off to sleep feeling a great contentment.

But the contentment was quickly interrupted. Her dreams spiraled around her in short and terrifying vignettes.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling through a black tunnel.

Demons' faces flashed and disappeared. Echoes of hideous laughter, screams of terror. Flares of unspeakable acts of murder and torture that satisfied some incommunicable hunger in her— shocking splashes of aberrant sexual acts and bestiality that unexpectedly excited her.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Suddenly a blinding light snatched her up out of the tunnel until she ascended to wakefulness. She squinted into the bright sunlight that poured through the window.

"Bad dreams?" The voice came from near the window.

Cotten sat up, clutching the bed linens.

"Did I startle you?" the Old Man said, sitting in a chair by the window.

The glare of the sun made it hard for Cotten to look at him. She shaded her eyes with one hand and squinted. "I didn't expect to wake up and have someone in my room. Have I given up my privacy as well as my soul?"

He chuckled. "No. I was worried about you. So I stayed while you slept, to make sure you were all right. Your sleep did not seem restful. You tossed and even cried out once. But you see, nothing terrible has happened to you. You are safe."

The dreams flooded back in a series of quick bursts, mental explosions of still images. Cotten pressed two fingers to the space between her eyebrows. "My dreams were nightmarish. Demons and—"

"But as you see, they were only dreams. Just products of your

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imagination. Unfortunately, that is the result of the misinformation passed down through millennia. You have been programmed to expect what was in your dreams. It is what all mankind has been led to believe. God and His churches have essentially brainwashed generation after generation. And why? Because they fear you will see the light, the truth."

Cotten pushed up against the headboard, still trying to clearly see the Old Man's face. As in the night before, he appeared slightly luminescent and transparent.

He finally shifted so that half his face was visible, the other half still obscured by the glare. It was creased with age, his skin pale, and his ashen hair was neatly parted to the side. As was often said of older men who had a pleasing appearance, he was distinguished looking—an elderly Cary Grantish-type countenance.

"Did you expect red horns? A pointed tail and pitchfork?" He laughed.

"I don't know what I expected. Maybe."

"And a ritual with goat's blood and a pentagram." He leaned into the glare. "I let my legions play that game for their amusement. To be honest, I think it is so cliché."

"I suppose." Cotten found herself smiling, becoming more at ease.

"Do you realize that I am the one who single-handedly keeps God's churches, temples, and mosques in business? I am the best friend the religions of the world have. Without fear of me, they would collapse. Even though their notion of me is false. You see, I come to this world only by invitation—the proverbial Eve and the apple story. All that Eve and her children wanted was knowledge, then and now. Does that make someone evil? I think not."

"What kind of knowledge?"

"Simple truths. God wants you to be self-sacrificing, to believe it is better to give than to receive, to love your enemy, to turn the other cheek, to always be begging for Him to save you from despair. It pleases Him to always have you on your knees. In this way you remain subservient. I speak the truth. There is nothing evil about being productive, finding happiness, achieving success. Why should you not be self-loving and seek those things that bring you happiness?"

There is no need for groveling or believing yourself unworthy to eat the crumbs that fall from my table. That is how God wants you to be—helpless without him. I say be strong. Be efficient. Explore all the pleasures in life. Why spend a lifetime of self-imposed isolation from pure joy, depending on God for even the smallest fleck of happiness? That makes no sense." Again he revealed a portion of his face. "Even after all this time it remains astounding to me that mankind accepts such rubbish and continues to prefer self-inflicted suffering."

So this was all it meant? Cotten thought. Her heritage was simply the permission to allow herself to be happy? That didn't seem so frightful or evil.

"I do not expect you to accept all this instantly. You have spent a lifetime being programmed by God's religions. You do not even have to go to church for this to happen. It permeates and infiltrates your life every day. I realize it is a

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tremendous paradigm shift in your thinking."

"Yes, it is."

"Hear what is right and what is truth. It was your loving, forgiving Jehovah who sent his Angel of Death to murder all the innocent firstborns of Egypt on the night known as Passover. The wrath of a vengeful, spiteful, hateful God. That was done by your God's hand. Not mine. And let me leave you with something else to contemplate. Think of how many thousands have suffered and died in wars, all fought in the name of God. Never has there been a war fought in my name."

## **OUTBREAK**

"And in medical news," the SNN Headline News anchor said, "county health officials in Denver have reported over a dozen cases of extreme flu-like symptoms showing up in the emergency rooms of three major area hospitals. Those stricken with the yet-unidentified illness are complaining of high fever, vomiting, diarrhea, and some bleeding. Doctors are applying the usual antiviral

drugs including neuraminidase inhibitors, but are reporting no success with the treatment so far. The mysterious outbreak has claimed the life of a five-year-old girl in Aurora, Colorado, and local health departments are investigating."

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The roll-in voiceover said, "From Satellite News Network in New York, this is the Evening News with Charles Ross."

"Good evening," Ross said into camera one as he sat behind the anchor desk. "We start the broadcast tonight with reports of a suspicious flu-like outbreak showing up at clinics and emergency rooms throughout the country. What we first told you about yesterday as a number of cases in the Denver area is now spreading to other cities and communities. For the latest, we go to our chief medical correspondent, Robert Terrance, reporting from CDC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia."

"Good evening, Charles," said Terrance as he held a microphone and stood with the sprawling CDC complex in the background. "In a news conference that ended just moments ago, Dr. Charlotte Swan, director of the Centers for Disease Control, stated that they are investigating a number of reported instances of advanced symptoms of a flu-like sickness in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Chicago, Birmingham, Denver, and Houston."

The image switched to a briefing room inside the CDC. Swan stood at a podium. "We are working with local and state medical authorities to isolate and identify this new strain of influenza. Most important is to gauge how many

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people are affected and determine the source of the virus. Because we are in the earliest stages of the investigation there is nothing concrete to report yet."

In a video clip, Terrance asked, "Dr. Swan, there are rumors that the flulike symptoms you describe are actually more like those of Ebola or some other hemorrhagic virus. Is the CDC trying to downplay this in order to prevent panic?"

Doesn't the public have a right to know?"

Swan shuffled the papers on the podium, but didn't look down at them.

"At this point, there is no confirmation that this outbreak is a hemorrhagic virus. The CDC operates on facts, not rumor, and until we have evidence that this is anything other than what I have described, we will continue to proceed according to protocol.

That's all the questions I'll take for now." Swan stepped away from the podium.

The video switched back to a live shot of Terrance. "Despite the downplaying of the threat by the CDC, we've learned that over six hundred cases have been reported so far, with at least thirty deaths occurring over the last twenty-four hours. All are attributed to the outbreak. The victims range in age from four years old to sixty-two. So far, conventional treatments have had no effect on stopping or slowing down the deadly epidemic."

A graphic showing the names of states and the number of fatalities appeared.

Terrance said, "Earlier today, I spoke with Dr. Richard Minor, Director of Infectious Diseases at the Broward Memorial Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida." The image changed to a man wearing a white physician's jacket with a stethoscope hanging around his neck. "Dr. Minor, your facility was one of the first to report a case of this virus outbreak we're seeing across the country. Now that you know there are others being stricken with it, what are your concerns?"

There was a slight delay before the physician spoke. "We are definitely concerned by the speed at which this event is taking place. Two days ago it was non-existent. Now we're admitting an average of one new patient every hour. We're working around the clock to isolate and treat what we believe is a deadly new strain of viral infection. We hope to have some progress made soon."

Terrance asked, "These rumors of it being a hemorrhagic virus—is there any truth to that? Can you tell us more about what you are seeing in the emergency room?"

"Patients are exhibiting numerous ailments from general malaise and fever to more specific flu-like symptoms, and yes, we have seen signs of hemorrhagic viruses, including bleeding and limited kidney and liver function. It's too early to tell if the hemorrhagic symptoms are a late phase in the illness or something entirely different."

"We've all had the flu at some point in our lives, and we know what that's like. Can you be more specific regarding the symptoms of a hemorrhagic virus?"

"Sure. Hemorrhagic comes, of course, from hemorrhage, which means bleeding. Generally, the bleeding occurs both internally, leaking through blood

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vessels, and externally, from orifices of the body. It is rare, however, for victims to die from blood loss."

A double screen of Dr. Minor and Robert Terrance appeared. "Thank you, Doctor. We appreciate your time."

Minor nodded, and the screen became devoted to Terrance. "As the number of reports of infections mount, experts like Doctor Minor and Director Swan seem increasingly perplexed. For now, we can only hope they find a quick solution to this deadly medical mystery. From Atlanta, this is Robert Terrance reporting for SNN."

"Rob?" Charles Ross said. "Before we let you go, it occurred to me that the symptoms of some of these victims in your report bear a striking resemblance to the unfortunate gentleman who died after collapsing here in our Manhattan studio lobby a few weeks ago. If you'll recall, he came into our building very ill and asking to see Cotten Stone."

"I thought of the same thing, Charles," Terrace said. "Perhaps there is a connection. We'll watch it closely."

"Thanks again, Rob." Ross turned to camera two. "And speaking of Cotten Stone—a programming note. As tension continues to mount over the threat of nuclear weapons development in North Korea, our senior investigative correspondent, Cotten Stone, will be conducting an exclusive interview with the head of the Communist government of North Korea on her primetime special, *Inside the Darkness*, airing next Tuesday at eight, seven central right here on SNN. You don't want to miss that one."

## PROOF OF LIFE

Each morning at 7:00 am, rousing, patriotic music blared from loudspeakers throughout Pyongyang. Cotten awoke to the tinny sound of a marching band and quickly rose, showered and dressed. Today was the day—

she would be allowed to confirm that John was not only still alive but recovering from the Black Needles. She would receive proof of life.

By 7:30, she was waiting in the cavernous Sungyong Hotel lobby.

In the four days since arriving in North Korea, Cotten had only observed a handful of other hotel guests. When she was allowed to leave her room and go downstairs to eat, the restaurant was virtually empty, with only a spotting of Eastern European visitors and tourists. She saw few smiles from the hotel staff. They seemed to be obsessed with looking busy.

On the second day after her arrival, a guide had escorted her to a number of state museums and monuments around the city. The woman, a short, slim officer in the Korean army, never missed an opportunity to point out how wonderful it was living in North Korea and how her country had overcome the

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hardships of war crimes brought on by the imperialist aggressors.

In addition to the army guide, Cotten was always shadowed by a handful of security officers. It was hard for them to hide their presence. There was a small amount of foot traffic as she and her guide walked the immaculate streets and manicured parks. They would pass policewomen who directed a trickle of traffic and stores whose display windows were decorated with as many pictures of the General Secretary as merchandise.

Cotten learned that it was against the law for citizens to look foreigners in the eye or to speak to them, so she didn't bother to acknowledge or look at anyone on the street or in the museums they visited. The only eye contact was with those called the selected, trusted individuals who spoke multiple languages and often served as the guides and escorts.

Today, Cotten was met in the hotel lobby by her guide and four-man security detail.

"This way, please," the guide said, pointing to the front entrance. Outside, it was bitter cold under a cloudless blue sky. Cotten's eyes watered and stung at the bite of the icy air.

They walked briskly along An Sang Thae Street for a quarter of a mile until they arrived at a park surrounding a bronze statue of Korea's great leader and father of the General Secretary. The guide motioned to a bench near the base of the statue. "Wait there."

Cotten obeyed and pulled the collar of her coat up about her neck as she sat waiting. She breathed into her gloved hands, the warmth and humidity of her breath taking the burn out of her lungs.

After ten minutes of cold and growing impatience, she saw a figure approaching. As he got closer, she recognized the Old Man.

He sat next to her, binding his scarf around his neck. She noticed the vapor of his breath in the air.

"I do not particularly care for the cold," he said.

"I'm not surprised."

He made a sound that might have been construed as a laugh. "Do you know what I especially admire about you, Daughter of Furmiel? You spit in the face of anything that strikes out at you. Plus, you have an engaging sense of humor. A special gift."

"A survival tool." Until now, she had only barely glanced at him. She looked to meet his gaze. "Are you ready to fulfill your promise? I've said I'll do what you ask. But I must have proof of life. I need to know that John is alive, that he's getting well. You said you could spare his life. Prove it. Right now, I have no idea what's happening in the rest of the world. I haven't been allowed any outside contact in this godforsaken place."

Again the Old Man chuckled. "I like your description. It is truly a godforsaken country." He wiped his nose with a handkerchief. "Cold air shrinks the nasal passages."

"You're avoiding my question."

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"No, not at all." He pulled what appeared to be a satellite phone from a breast pocket inside his coat, flipped it open, and dialed a number. "I am calling your associate. He will confirm the condition of your friend that you worry so much about." He handed her the phone. "Keep it brief. The cost of these calls is exorbitant."

As she heard the digital processing of the call, she thought how absurd it was that the Old Man complained of phone costs. She could see her guide and security detail that waited at a discreet distance, shifting back and forth, blowing in their hands in reaction to the cold. It gave her a small sense of satisfaction that they were so uncomfortable.

After a few rings, Ted answered.

"I don't have much time," she said. "First, I'm fine. Second, I'm hoping that you've been able to keep up with things on your end. You know how much I'm counting on you."

The Old Man gave Cotten a suspicious look, and she tried to qualify her comment and make it seem more in line with what he expected to hear.

"I'm depending on you to tell me everything you know about John's condition. Don't hold anything back. It's imperative I know everything—good or bad."

"I have good news," Ted said, "maybe even a miracle. The doctors have tried a new experimental combination of drugs and it appears John is responding favorably. His fever has broken, he's conscious and alert, and his blood tests confirm that he has turned the corner, he's recovering. Other than being weak and tired, the symptoms seem to have reversed themselves and are receding. Very different from several days ago."

Cotten's eyes watered again, this time with tears of joy, not the sting of winter. "That's great news. Are you sure you aren't leaving anything out—any details that might upset me?"

"No. It's all good news. On all fronts."

Cotten glanced at the Old Man. "Thank you, Ted. You've made me feel much better. I have to go now and get ready for the interview. Everything is a go on this end." She snapped the phone closed. "So, are you satisfied?" the Old Man asked.

She handed him the phone. "Very."

## **DETOUR**

As evening approached, Moon sat alone in her office and watched the emails come into her inbox. Each of her satellite labs in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Japan, and the two recently relocated in the United States reported the results of the first wave of the Black Needles

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bombers. Of the five hundred men and women who carried the deadly virus out to the public, 482 had reported reaching their targets—many to multiple targets. The remaining were presumed dead or incapacitated. The plan called for the bombers to release the trigger virus into large indoor gatherings such as metropolitan shopping malls, schools, grocery stores, sporting events, libraries, airports, subways—places where people gathered as they went about their lives. The first attacks had been three days ago. According to the news networks, the symptoms had already started showing up in cities around the world.

Tomorrow she would give the launch code for the next wave of attacks—

these would be on basic services such as local governments and utilities, hospitals, police, first responders, and other law enforcement and emergency agencies. The bombers would simply walk into a police or fire station or city hall, ask a simple question, then cough or sneeze, and leave, touching door knobs, handrails, and any other obvious objects to contaminate.

The final assaults would come a day later. Those would strike government leaders in the United States Congress, the British Parliament, and the government centers of their allies. By the time the politicians and other leaders started showing the first symptoms of Black Needles, the general populace would already be in full panic mode as millions came down with the deadly disease. The media had already started covering it. Soon it would be a major disaster, bigger than 9/11. The entire world would freeze-frame with fear, terror, and paranoia. The threat of being exposed to the virus would paralyze every nation, making those not infected afraid to leave their homes. No one would risk going to work or sending their children to school. Commerce would shut down. Deliveries would not be made. Services would collapse. Emergency calls would go unanswered. Shock and terror would sweep through the imperialist aggressors as news of the deadly disease spread.

Moon smiled, knowing her time had finally come, her work was almost done.

She closed her laptop and rose, grabbed her overcoat and headed out of her office. She expected to sleep well tonight. Soon, there would be nothing left to do but watch those she hated most begin to fall to their knees in pain and suffering. Their deaths were inevitable.

She made her way through the winding halls, passing the different chemistry labs, cold storage systems, and surgical operating rooms until she emerged in the lobby of the facility. Moon nodded to the security guards and walked to the large glass doors leading out into the cold Korean night. One of the guards opened the door for her and walked a few steps ahead. In the twilight beyond she saw her limousine waiting as always with its dark-tinted windows and puffy clouds of condensation drifting from its exhaust pipes. The guard reached the vehicle first and opened the side door for her.

"Have a pleasant evening, Dr. Chung," he said.

Without acknowledging him, she slipped into the back seat. The bulky Mercedes pulled away from the facility parking lot and headed down a long road

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that passed a number of other government buildings. It was waved through the heavily guarded security gate and preceded onto the motorway toward the city. As the darkening countryside flowed by, Moon flipped on a small, personal spotlight overhead and made a few notes in her diary.

She thought of her parents and the many sacrifices they had made for her and their adopted country. Out of habit, she pulled the old photo from her pocket. Soon, your deaths will be avenged.

Moon continued making notes with the idea of someday writing a book on how she brought the world to its knees. She was convinced that historians would want to document how such a small, frail, elderly woman could have such an impact on the future of mankind. She tapped her pen on the pad and pictured the image of so many scientists reading her words and acknowledging her achievements. That's when she realized the car was slowing.

Although the smoked glass partition was in the up position, Moon could still make out the motorway ahead. A large box truck was stopped in the middle of the two lanes. Traffic was nonexistent this time of night, and it irritated her that she was being held up by such a trivial issue. Because of its cockeyed position across the highway, she assumed the truck had broken down. In the glow of the limo's headlights, Moon saw a man standing in the middle of the road waving his arms.

She pressed the intercom button on her armrest. "Go around him! No need to stop."

The driver held up his hand indicating that he heard her. He stopped the car and waved for the man to get out of the way.

She watched the stranger walk toward the car. There was something about him that disturbed her. His size. The long overcoat he wore. Something was wrong.

The stranger stood beside the driver's door and motioned for him to lower the window.

"This is holding me up," Moon said through the intercom. "Drive on." She heard the window go down.

The stranger's hand slipped under his coat. Something metallic emerged. A flash and muted thump. The driver's head slammed to the side. His body collapsed on the seat out of her sight. A spray of red coated the smoked glass.

"What is the meaning of this?" Moon screamed.

The man pulled the driver's body from the limo and dropped it onto the pavement. Then he slipped in behind the wheel and put the car in gear. The limo's tires squealed as the vehicle sped off.

Moon pushed the button on the intercom as if to shove it through the armrest. She was about to scream again when she heard the soft motor hum as the glass partition slid down. The driver glanced back at her. He had small, dark eyes, pasty white skin, a bulbous nose, and a bushy mustache. Obviously not Korean.

In English, she said, "Do you realize who I am?"

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"You are big shot asshole doctor," the man said as he smiled and exposed a set of tobacco-stained teeth.

"Who the hell are you?" Moon sat up straight trying to appear as menacing as she could.

"Colonel Vladimir Ivanov, former KGB, now retired."

## **THE BRIDGE**

Cotten had arrived only ten minutes before the Korean television crew. She watched them set up the studio lights and video cameras cluttering the already cramped bridge of the Pitcairn with equipment, reflectors, and tripods. When they were finished, the crew stood by, waiting for the arrival of the Korean leader. DPRK soldiers were positioned at the port and starboard outside entrances to the ship's bridge, with a handful of others on the aft and forward decks.

Sitting in a chair facing a much larger one that the General Secretary would eventually occupy, she studied the notes given to her by the Department of Information. Each question led to a further glorification of the General Secretary's accomplishments and his powerful leadership of the fourth-largest military in the world, the 1.2 million-strong DPRK army.

Over the next few hours, the ship's bridge would be the backdrop for the scripted interview covering every major event in the Korean leader's life. Cotten had agreed to paint him as a visionary of the Asian world and his country as a growing global power to be reckoned with. Naturally, he had composed the questions himself. Her job would involve nothing more than reading each one and allowing him to answer.

Cotten rose and went to stand beside the helm of the 165-foot ship. She looked out over the bow toward the rusting USS Pueblo docked a short distance farther up the river—a long forgotten and deteriorating victim of the Cold War. On the other hand, the

Pitcairn was still functional and well maintained. The General Secretary had chosen to keep it in proper working order to be used as part of the periodic military exercises along the Taedong River showcasing the power and might of the DPRK navy. It was also speculated that he wanted it kept in perfect condition in case he might decide to return it to Oceanautics as a gesture of his kindness and generosity.

As the hour of the interview approached, Cotten felt a fist in her chest. She wondered how much more stress her mind and body could take. What was about to happen here tonight would be her only chance to stop the global Black Needles threat. Failure meant the loss of thousands, if not millions, of lives. Her plan was thin and risky at best. At this point, she had no idea if it stood any chance at all. She hoped Ted was able to follow through with everything they

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had discussed, even though all she had been told was that the interview would take place on the Pitcairn in honor of the anniversary of its capture. There was no way of knowing if the plan had turned out to be feasible.

The approaching wail of a siren caused her to glance toward the shore. A small convoy of police vehicles approached along Pyongchan Kangan Street and stopped at the entrance to Pueblo Monument Park. In the middle of the procession was a black limousine. After it parked curbside, the doors opened, and the General Secretary emerged from the limo. Accompanied by a handful of assistants that walked behind him, he made his way under the glow of the park's lights. A few military officers exited the other cars and followed.

Because of the cramped quarters on the Pitcairn's bridge, the assistants and officers remained behind in the park. The General Secretary, along with a woman dressed in a green army uniform, moved up the gangway and onto the ship. Cotten returned to stand beside her chair once she heard the approaching footsteps on the metal deck outside.

Showtime.

With a dramatic flair, a soldier opened the steel door to the bridge. He bowed at the waist and waited for his commander-in-chief to enter. Cotten had to admit that the General Secretary exhibited an impressive air of confidence about him as he stepped onto the bridge. He was shorter than she expected and wore a plain crisp uniform surprisingly void of any rank, medals, or decorations. His heavy-framed glasses looked old fashioned, and the thick lenses made his eyes appear to bulge.

After taking in his surroundings, he moved beside the overstuffed leather wingback chair in the middle of the circle of lights. Two photographers who came with the original TV crew moved around him with endless shutter clicks and camera flashes.

The General Secretary's interpreter stood beside him. She was shorter than Cotten—her uniform consisted of dark green pants and a lighter green shirt and tie under a green blazer with red epaulettes. She held a notepad and a small English dictionary tight against her chest. Once the photographers had finished documenting the event from every angle, a silence fell over the bridge.

In what Cotten felt was a surprisingly thin voice, the General Secretary spoke for thirty seconds. When he finished, his interpreter said, "Dear Leader wishes to welcome the honorable and noteworthy television journalist, Cotten Stone, to this most significant exclusive interview."

He raised his hand slightly in acknowledgment to Cotten.

The interpreter went on, "Tonight, on the one-year anniversary of the capture of the imperialist aggressor's spy ship, Pitcairn, we will discuss the important issues dealing with our glorious nation and the future plans to reveal to the whole world how the great Democratic People's Republic of Korea will play a primary part in tomorrow and beyond."

The General Secretary nodded before dropping down into the big chair. Cotten took this as a sign she could sit, too.

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She heard the television crew confirm that they had camera speed and audio levels. When the interpreter indicated to her to begin, Cotten read the first question. "Dear Leader, please tell us about your birth at Baekdu Mountain and how it was heralded by the appearance of a double rainbow over the mountain and a new star in the heavens."

The interpreter did not bother to translate. Without hesitation, the General Secretary began an answer that took fifteen minutes to complete, interrupted often by the applause of the television crew and soldiers on the bridge who appeared on the verge of near rapture.

The next question dealt with his involvement in the Korean Children's Union and the Democratic Youth League. As before, the answer was lengthy. Number three covered his Marxist studies in college and his joining the Worker's Party of Korea after graduation. As he was finishing his reply, the door to the bridge opened. He paused and looked toward the sound, obvious irritation in his glare.

Cotten followed his gaze and saw a silver-haired woman enter, followed by a figure in a long overcoat who closed the door behind him. Cotten's eyes grew wide at the sight of Colonel Vladimir Ivanov.

The deck suddenly vibrated with a deep, throaty rumble as the Pitcairn's engines came to life.

The startled General Secretary shot a look at his soldiers, who appeared confused as if waiting for a command.

But before the soldiers could comprehend what was happening, Colonel Ivanov shoved Moon aside and swept an automatic pistol across the face of the interpreter with enough force to send her sprawling backward onto the floor, crashing into a cluster of lighting