

Chronicle of Death

Book one of

Chronicles of the Horsemen

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Vincent C. Poinet

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Book one of
Chronicles of the
Horsemen

Prologue

*The First Seal to break, and lo!
The trumpet of realms sounded a first time,
to shatter peace across all worlds.
In the cold countries of the Phusikon,
hail and fire mingled with blood.
As a third of their green was burnt up.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 1:05 –

Alexander stepped outside and entered a scene that looked like it came straight from hell.

The street he stood in was cluttered with broken masonry, damaged cars and dust that clung to his clothes as he walked. As he turned his eyes skywards, he could no longer see the gothic spires of Leuven's town hall, nor the weathervane of St. Peter's church, or the sole tower marking the university library. All of them had been levelled to some extent, leaving Leuven's skyline a gaping wound. Yet even that gloomy sight was not as disturbing as the cloying miasma that permeated the air – the sickeningly sweet smell of blood that had soaked the cobblestones. Alexander gagged and put a handkerchief in front of his nose, his stomach churning.

'Gods,' Breanna said from beside him. She wasted no time covering her face as well, leaving only her icy blue eyes visible as she looked around. 'The smell is even worse than last time. I thought the medics had collected all the bodies?' Which she would know; she had worked as a volunteer these past few weeks, trying to find people beneath the rubble who could still be saved.

'Evidently not,' Alexander said, his voice smothered by the handkerchief. His gaze fell on a pair of men dressed in the colours of the Belgian emergency services, carrying an empty stretcher between them. Ambulances couldn't drive through the littered streets, so the medics had to hoof it. Breanna's eyes lingered on the two men, following them until they disappeared around a corner. Then she turned back to Alexander, staring intently at her best friend.

'We should go and help them.'

'You know what your mother said,' he answered, though privately he wanted to help as well. 'We have to go to class, now that the university has reopened – no shirking lessons. We can go and help when we're done.'

‘Don’t have to remind me,’ Bre grumbled, taking her flip phone from her pocket and waving it beneath his nose. ‘I’ve gotten like five gazillion messages from mum, saying just that.’ The phone chirped and she sighed. ‘Five gazillion and one.’

‘She means well,’ Alexander said. ‘Both of them do.’ Bre’s mother was a hospital nurse, which was where she had gotten her caring streak. As for Alexander’s mother... ever since his father had died in a car accident when he was little, his mother had been a little overprotective of her only son.

Breanna snorted at his words. ‘Honestly, Lex, your mother must feel pretty vindicated right now. For as long as I can remember she’s been drilling us to be ready for every possible emergency. And now we’ve got one, and what an emergency it is! A mysterious earthquake happening simultaneously across the globe, the media hunting conspiracies, all experts stumped as to the cause...’ Bre shook her head. ‘Honestly, we’re lucky that we were here when that quake struck. If we had been at home, she might have actually chained us to a table leg.’

‘As your mother will do, Bre, if we don’t go to class right now,’ Alexander reminded her. ‘Come on, or we’ll be late.’ She nodded and the two of them began to move, manoeuvring their way through the debris while trying not to breathe too deeply. But even with his eyes fixed straight ahead Alexander couldn’t help seeing things he really didn’t want to see. Like the rusty spots of dried blood that were liberally staining the rubble. Or the fear and suspicion in the eyes of the few people that they passed along the way. The looting that had followed the earthquake might have stopped for now, but people were still wary of each other.

‘Aliens,’ Breanna said, nodding in stark conviction. She bumped his shoulder, or tried to; she sometimes forgot that she was a good head taller than him, her limbs all willowy grace, whereas Alexander’s stature was more reminiscent of a buff male pixie. ‘That’s the only explanation for it; it’s got to be the little green men, the bastards.’

‘Proof at last,’ Alexander snorted, dodging the elbow that came towards his face. They both liked science fiction, although Alexander was more into old school authors like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells whereas Breanna preferred more modern stuff. They had always gone to great lengths to find proof of extra-terrestrial life in ordinary things, like Breanna accusing her fifth-grade math teacher of being E.T. after the woman had gone to the hairstylist. Which had gotten her in detention, of course. Multiple times.

But this... this wasn’t funny. Even now, three months later, the entire world was still suffering the fallout of this unexplainable disaster. Public life was barely functioning; even the university had only reopened three days ago. And the memories... Alexander still awoke at night, his pulse racing as he recalled the way things had started to shake. And how people had started getting hurt. He and Bre had gotten through it with only a few minor scratches and bruises. Many others hadn’t been so fortunate. Judging by the dark circles around Bre’s eyes, she hadn’t gotten much sleep either, kept awake by the same torturous thought: the many people they hadn’t been able to save.

Such dark, gloomy thoughts roamed freely through Alexander's head as he and Bre made their way through the ravaged city, helping each other clamber across the larger obstacles in the road. They were panting a little as they arrived at the Monseigneur Sencie Institute, one of the university's many campuses. It was an ugly squat building made entirely of brick, but it had made it through the earthquake largely unscathed. Several dozen students were milling around in front of the building, their conversations hushed. Multiple people nodded to Breanna – she was a well-known figure in their year – but none of them tried to speak to her. It seemed that distrust reigned even amongst their peers.

'Breanna!' A rugged-looking brown-haired boy in a black leather jacket detached himself from a group of students and walked over with a cheeky grin. 'I'm so glad to see you here,' he said to her, ignoring Alexander completely. 'How are you doing? It's been ages since we last got together!'

Breanna gave him a brilliant smile that would melt any boy's heart – and which Alexander knew was completely fake. 'I'm sorry, Theron, but I've been busy. I'll call you when I have time. Until then...' She blew him a kiss, then moved on before he could reply, leaving him gaping after her.

'So was that the guy you spoke of?' Alexander said in as neutral a tone as he could manage once they were out of earshot. 'The one from the millennium party you went to?'

'Hmm? Oh, no,' Bre replied absent-mindedly. 'That was the one from the faculty club. You know, several months ago? Guy's been trying to smooth-talk his way into my pants ever since. Not going to happen,' she added, before Alexander could muster the courage to ask. 'I don't like the way he acts towards you.'

'Um... thanks?'

'No problem,' she said. She brushed away a few stray hairs that had escaped her braid. 'You're my best friend, and whoever I date, I expect them to mind you, not just act like you're not even there.' She looked at Alexander and gave him her genuine smile – the one that made him feel like he had suddenly forgotten how to breathe. She put a delicate hand on his shoulder, her fair complexion a stark contrast to his caramel-coloured skin. 'We're a package deal, you and I.'

He returned her smile in kind, trying very hard not to show how her words felt like a blow to the chest. How he felt like, in a way, she didn't see him any more than Theron did. When he looked into her eyes, he saw sympathy and pity at the way others often treated him. He didn't want to see that. He didn't want her sympathy or her pity. He just wanted her to really see him.

It became too much for him, so he let his mind escape to his Room.

His Room was the same as it had always been. Small, but cosy – a kitchen, though a somewhat unorthodox one. It was a strange combination of his mother's preparedness, his preference for rational organisation and Breanna's creative enthusiasm. The result

was a kitchen that had a spare for everything, especially things that were not needed, in labelled wooden drawers painted in a riot of bright colours. The front of the fridge was painted the same, though the paintings that lined the four walls were more elaborate. Their dyes kept shifting and drifting from one semi-formed shape to another, like waves adrift on a sea of canvas. The faded greys, blacks and teal blues were a perfect reflection of his current mood. He didn't bother looking at them. Instead he headed straight for the middle of the Room, where a wooden table stood, loaded with cups of coffee, tea and pieces of toast. The smell of it immediately put him at ease. It smelled like breakfast together, like comfort. Something he would sorely need, as the hardest part had yet to come. He sat down in a chair and studied the cards on the table. 'Right then,' he murmured, 'what have you got for me this time?'

There were three of them. The first one was a pretty good rendition of Leuven in the throes of a disaster, the flames that burned its buildings actually moving. It showed destruction on a scale that made him cringe, though the second one was worse by far: a skeleton with a scythe striking down hordes of men. The way the people were standing, in tight lines, made it look like they were strands of grain being reaped. He winced and moved on to the last card, though he already knew and dreaded what it would be. It was a common card, the Queen of Hearts, remarkable only because the queen had Breanna's face. Alexander sighed. This card looked the most ordinary of the three, but he was not fooled: this card would be the hardest to beat.

His sadness for Leuven. His compassion for the dead. And his love for Breanna, destined to remain unanswered. All of them burdens on his soul.

Alexander reached out and envisioned a box, as he had been taught – as he had done many times before. After a moment, it flickered into existence – a small box of plain wood with hinges and a lock made of silver. He unlocked it, then braced himself and took hold of the first card. As soon as he touched the shifting flames, he was overcome by sadness so profound that it almost drowned his mind. He gritted his teeth and tried to put the card into the box. It resisted, vibrating and pressing back against his hand as if trying to escape. After a second's struggle, he managed to put the card in the box. While he kept it stuck to the bottom with his left hand he took hold of the death card with his other. The depth of his compassion almost made him cry, but this was not the first time he had done this. It was not long before the second card joined the first.

The third card was the most troublesome, as he had predicted. It fought him every inch of the way. It felt like he was trying to move a brick wall with one hand while keeping the other two struggling cards in the box. And while he fought, he was forced to confront all the pain and heartbreak his feelings for Breanna caused him. This time he cried for real – for all that was and never would or could be. Then, with a massive heave, he flung the card with the others. He slammed the lid shut. The box protested. It vibrated so hard that the whole table was shaking with its fury. But as soon as he put the key in the lock and turned it, everything settled down. The box stopped moving, and

a change came over the Room. It looked brighter, a light illuminating the earlier gloominess, even though there were no doors or windows through which the sun could shine. The paintings also seemed brighter, with more vivid colours.

Alexander sighed and leaned back in his chair, feeling wrung out. Then he left his Room.

‘Come on, Bre,’ he said, his wan smile betraying nothing of the feelings he had just locked away. ‘Let’s go to class.’

Meanwhile, in another realm entirely, Gabriel left the Council chamber and entered a sparsely lit atrium. A dozen advisors scurried aside to let him through. They had stood in clusters, whispering amongst each other, their wings shifting restlessly on their backs. These were amongst the most capable of their respective kinds, each an administrator or Archon in some choir or another. But now they were clucking like a bunch of startled pigeons. As Gabriel walked amongst them, he saw several whose eyes carried dark shadows of grief and concern – *Ecclesii* whose kin had been wounded or killed in the recent disaster. Whenever one of them noticed him, they tried to pull themselves together, straightening their posture and plastering a look of readiness and cool efficiency on their faces. Gabriel understood why they were doing their utmost to cover their weakness; Archangels had killed for less. Today, however, he let it slide. He simply walked to the end of the room, his boots tapping softly on the marble floor, accepting the way his lesser kin moved out of his way as his due. Anything to placate an Archangel.

The walls were richly decorated with murals, their frames lined with orichalcum gold. He didn’t care to look at them; art in Ecclesia was all the same, depicting the heroism of angels as they fought their savage ancestors in glorious combat. Usually with some humans in the corner, bowing and scraping as they begged the *Ecclesii* to protect them. *Four billion years of civilisation, and we still create the same art*, Gabriel observed wryly. ‘Endora,’ he said, crooking a finger.

Silently, one of the advisors detached herself from the rest and followed him. The two of them walked through a long hallway. They walked past wide-open balconies that interspersed the wall at regular intervals. The gaze of the Cherubim guards stationed there followed them as they walked. Gabriel could feel their eyes between his shoulder blades, burning with the haughtiness and vindictiveness that only their caste possessed. It did not matter that he was ranked above them, or that he was fully capable of killing them while scarcely lifting a feather. They were the right-hand troops of Michael himself and behaved every bit as prideful as their patron did. And yet their arrogance was not entirely misguided: they cut quite a dashing figure as they stood guard, completely motionless with their hands folded across the pommel of their swords. Multi-coloured wisps of light

danced across the silvery armour that covered them from head to toe, leaving only their folded wings bare. Only Cherubim and Archangels were allowed to wear Ensouled armour. Gabriel could not resist reaching out with a tendril of his innate light, brushing it down the breastplate of one of the sentinels. For one jarring moment, he felt the torment of the human souls residing within the armour, silently screaming out in pain and outrage at the way the Cherubim kept them trapped. Their agony was so immense that Gabriel was forced to withdraw. *Human beings in their rightful place*, he mused. He smiled acerbically at the foul look that the Cherubim whose armour he had stirred was giving him. Then he focused back on the situation at hand. 'Report.'

'The choirs are confused, my Lord.' Endora walked one step behind her patron as befitted one of her station. As First Archon of the Principalities, the angel caste of scouts and spies, Gabriel had ordered her to gauge the mood in the city. 'Ecclesia has never before seen an earthquake, much less a global one. The choirs look to the Archangels for leadership.'

Gabriel nodded. That was as it should be. 'You didn't mention the reports of our scouts abroad, did you?' The content of those reports troubled him. The implications of the recent disaster occurring on other worlds as well would be dire.

'No, my Lord.'

'Good. Michael wants things under wraps for now. At least until we have things firmly in hand.' Endora curled her lip in distaste at the mention of Michael but was wise enough not to speak out against him within earshot of the Cherubim. 'Does he think this is it? The Reckoning?' She spoke the words with an equal amount of anticipation and dread. Gabriel knew how she felt. If the Reckoning – that fated time of upheaval – was really here, he was not sure if he was ready for it. He had too many plans yet to make, too many schemes to hatch, a great many things still to do.

'He seems to think so. It fits the portents. Our Principalities at the Pearly Gates have reported that the Seal there is broken. And that is not the only sign. Michael says the Scripture...' Gabriel trailed off, scowling. He detested the Scripture. It was perhaps the most potent tool in Michael's possession that kept his fellow Archangels in check: knowledge of the future. Without it the other Archangels, Gabriel included, would have plotted to usurp Michael's power at least a dozen times over. As it was they feared that the Scripture would predict their move. 'Anyway, he has commanded us to start preparing.'

'How so, my Lord?'

'Uriel has been sent to prepare the regular armies for war while Raphael travels to the Gilded Halls to coordinate the Malachi. Once the second Seal breaks, they're to invade Phusikon and reap as many human souls as they can.'

That was not the only reasoning behind Michael's orders, as Gabriel knew all too well. Michael was dividing the Archangels so they could not conspire against him.

'Why the Gilded Halls?'

‘Michael seems to think he can finally subdue our... prisoners... there.’

Endora snorted. ‘That oily fop against those three?’

‘Don’t underestimate Raphael,’ Gabriel admonished, though privately he agreed with her. Raphael *was* a fop, the way he always dressed in vibrant clothes. And his demeanour was definitely oily. He was always smiling that knowing smile that never quite reached his eyes. Those eyes were cold, calculating and utterly without mercy. No, to underestimate Raphael would be a big mistake. He might not be the best warrior amongst them, but in politics he had no peer. ‘I’m sure that sly fox has some tricks up his sleeve.’

Endora’s wing twisted a little, much in the same way a human would shrug. ‘And what are we to do, my Lord? What are our orders?’

He grinned a predatory smile. ‘We’re to step up our hunt for the Claywalker. Michael has given us free rein. We can deal with him however we like.’

Endora’s teeth glittered as she mirrored his sentiment. ‘That’s brilliant, my Lord. I’ll order more Principalities to Phusikon immediately. They’ll...’

Whatever else she was going to say was lost as a deep tremor rippled through the building. Everyone but Gabriel was thrown off balance. Dust fell off the trembling walls and was stirred up even more when the angels flapped their wings to regain their balance. Even the Cherubim, with their near-mythical grace, were unable to keep their footing. When Gabriel looked through the window, he saw the tremors spreading throughout the city, causing havoc and destruction with ever-increasing ferocity.

‘Was that...’ Endora panted when the shocks had finally abated and she had gotten back to her feet. ‘Was that the second Seal?’

‘It has to be,’ Gabriel replied. He flapped his wings to clear them of dust. ‘Well then, I guess the way to Phusikon is open now. Raphael and the Malachi can get on with hunting and harvesting human souls, and we can step up the hunt for our quarry.’

‘The humans won’t be ready for this,’ Endora murmured.

‘No, they won’t,’ Gabriel said, his mind already turning to what would happen if he managed to catch up to the infamous renegade. It would not go smoothly. Times of great upheaval were about to follow for all the races. There would be blood. There would be carnage. But above all there would be death. Lots and lots of death.

Gabriel couldn’t help but smile at that.

Part I

*And then the Second Seal broke,
the trumpet to sound again.
The fiery ones from the mountains,
descended towards the Phusikon.
To be welcomed by a pale horse
and the name that sat upon him was Death.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 1:18 –

Chapter 1

Breanna was on fire.

Every single fibre of her body was screaming out at once, a symphony of red-hot agony that renewed itself each time she inhaled. She groaned and blinked, trying to order her thoughts. They felt muddled and slow, her head throbbing as if a horse had kicked it. She tried to move but found that she couldn't. Something heavy pressed down upon her back, pinning her against the jagged, uneven ground. What little air reached her lungs tasted dusty and stale, and a sweet, coppery tang coated her tongue. She tried to spit it out, but her mouth wouldn't obey her. Her eyes wouldn't focus properly either, only showing the world in a blurred red haze that kept tilting. When she lifted her hand, the effort nearly caused her to faint again. Finally she relented, her face slick with sweat. Clearly she wasn't going to get free on her own. She would just have to wait until someone came for her. *If* someone came.

As if evoked by that thought a sound suddenly pierced the ringing of her ears. She heard a series of garbled noises that her thumping head couldn't translate. They paused for a moment, then resumed, faster. Voices? Footsteps, perhaps? The noises stopped once more, and Breanna gasped as she felt the weight lifted from her back. A wave of dizziness struck her as her lungs expanded, and she took deep, nourishing breaths. Then she felt a slight pressure between her shoulder blades, an icy touch brushing her spine. She sighed in relief; it was as if someone was rubbing a wet sponge across her injuries, clearing them and renewing her. Her ears popped, and the agony retreated until it was just a dull throbbing in the back of her head. She allowed herself a moment to bask in the feeling of wellbeing. Then she tried to get to her knees. But as soon as she moved, the world started spinning again. A hand settled on her shoulder, steadying her. 'Easy, lass,' a voice said. The words were laced with a reverberating Irish accent that sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. 'Yer still only partially healed – ye don't want to be overdoing yerself.'

She blinked and looked up at the blurry figure in front of her, trying to see who had saved her. She squinted, though it caused her headache to increase. She saw a middle-aged man with skin as white as his hair, dressed in a black leather cape and Hessian boots. He looked like he had been riding a horse. For one second, she just looked at him, uncomprehending. Then recognition struck. 'Professor Baine,' she tried to say, but her tongue was lolling around in her mouth like a bad-tempered eel, slurring the words beyond understanding. Of course it was him – who else dressed like that? She had been about to attend one of his classes on Early Modern Social and Political Movements. The memory sparked others, a series of disjointed images. Professor Baine on the dais, about to start his lecture. The water in her bottle vibrating, faster and faster until everything shook. She

remembered looking up and seeing cracks spiderwebbing through the ceiling. And she remembered the terror in Lex's eyes as the floor began to give way...

Lex! The thought caused her to jump to her feet. Immediately she doubled over and threw up. Then Baine was there, steadying her again. 'Remain calm, ye daft oaf,' he grumbled at her, fixing her with a reprimanding glare. She wiped her mouth, noting somewhere in the back of her mind that the professor's eyes had a weird colour. She had always thought them blue, yet now that she saw them up close, they seemed almost purple. 'Where is Lex?' she tried, but only a dull cough left her mouth. She spat, trying to clear it, then tried again. 'Where is Lex?' She felt like another weight was pressing down on her back, cutting off her breath. Lex had been right beside her. If something had happened to him... She balled her hands into fists to stop them from trembling.

'Ye mean yer eternal pal, Alexander Stevens?' Baine said. 'He's alright – a few bruises, but otherwise, he's fine – better than yerself.' He tightened his grasp on her shoulder. 'I'll get ye to him, so he can take care of ye.' He half-carried, half-dragged her forward. At first, it was slow-going, and Breanna saw stars each time she put a foot forward. But Baine's touch had a soothing effect on her. By the time they had extricated themselves from the rubble, she was almost standing on her own. She inhaled, savouring the first breath of dust-free air in what felt like forever. Then she looked around.

She was standing at the edge of the brick courtyard through which she and Lex had entered the Monseigneur Sencie Institute. It was lined with trees and bicycle racks, most of which were knocked askew. The courtyard itself was full of people laying on improvised beds made of coats, cradling various injuries. A handful of harried-looking students were moving between the wounded, providing first aid and patching up wounds with torn-up shirts and whatever else they could find.

'Bre!' One of the makeshift nurses stood up and ran towards her, nearly knocking her to the ground as he pulled her into a hug. 'Thank God,' Lex whispered, his voice unusually rough. 'I don't know what I would have done if you had been... if you hadn't...'

She smiled into his dark curly hair – his head didn't reach past her shoulder. Lex was alive. He was alive and he was with her. The world was alright again.

Alexander hugged Bre, soaking in her presence in his arms and allowing his frayed nerves to relax a little. He had been in a near-panic for hours, worrying about her as the recovery teams dug through the ruined building. He kept telling himself that they would find her. If they hadn't needed every able man to see to the injured, he would have gone searching for her himself.

'When I didn't see you there, I thought...' Bre said, breaking the silence that drowned out everything but the two of them. Alexander frowned. Her words were unfocused and slurred.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied, gently cupping the side of her head, looking for signs of swelling. There didn’t appear to be any, but the problem could be internal. He tilted her head so that he could look into her eyes. They were red and barely focused. ‘Professor Baine here carried me out.’ He nodded to Baine, who grunted in reply. The man had let go of Breanna as soon as Alexander had hugged her, causing her to almost collapse in his arms. The professor turned around, his black cloak swirling around him as he went off to search for more survivors.

‘I’m fine,’ Alexander said again. ‘You, on the other hand, are not.’

‘What are you talking about? I’m right as rain.’ Bre pulled away from him, turning towards the field of wounded. ‘These people need my help. I...’ She started to tilt to the side and would have fallen if Alexander hadn’t caught her. ‘You’re not well, Bre,’ he said gently. ‘Your head took a serious blow – it needs to be checked out.’

‘No, I need to...’ she protested, trying to wrestle out of his grip. But before she could, one of the other relief providers intervened. ‘Do you need any help?’

‘Yes, actually.’ Alexander said. He gestured for the man to take hold of Bre’s other shoulder, trapping her between them. ‘I believe she has a concussion – we need to get her to the triage post at the Great Market.’

‘No problem,’ the man replied. ‘Been walking that way a lot today. I’m Koen Finet,’ he added. ‘I teach a class at the university.’

‘I know, professor,’ Alexander said, nodding to the man as they dragged Bre through the streets. ‘I took your course last year, together with Breanna here. Settle down,’ he added sternly to his best friend, who was struggling like a bad-tempered tomcat. ‘Your mother taught us better than that. If it’s a concussion, it needs to be treated immediately. Otherwise, all sorts of nasty complications might occur. I am not going to be the one to explain to her why you’re in a coma.’

‘Fine,’ Breanna grumbled reluctantly, ceasing her struggles. ‘Can you at least explain what happened?’

‘Another global earthquake,’ professor Finet said before Alexander could reply. ‘Just like the last one.’

‘Just like the last one? You mean it happened everywhere again?’ She blinked, then turned to Alexander with an alarmed expression on her face. ‘Lex, what about our mothers? What if they’re...?’

‘They’re not,’ he said. He could feel her sagging in relief. ‘Calling them was the first thing I did. It took me hours. The phone lines are jammed with people trying to see if their loved ones are okay.’ He shivered, remembering that cold feeling in his chest when he heard the dial tone of his mobile – wondering if there would be a response on the other side. Wondering what he would do if there wasn’t. ‘Anyway, they’re both alright, Bre.’

‘Thank God,’ she murmured, her head lolling. Alexander was glad that her mind was too hazy to notice the grisly mess they were navigating through. This second quake had felled buildings that had only wobbled during the first wave, littering the streets with even more

wreckage. Small pools of nauseating red leaked through some of them, causing the air to smell even worse than before. But even that was not as bad as seeing the broken ruins of people's bodies. It cut Alexander to the bone as they passed a woman staring vacantly into the air, her chest caved in beneath a big piece of masonry. He forced himself to look away, feeling tears streak freely down his cheeks. He had to focus on Bre now, he told himself; once he got her checked out, he could help the others to his heart's content. As he crossed eyes with professor Finet, he saw the same red-rimmed hollow stare that he imagined his own to be. He forced his feelings of horrors and revulsion in little boxes in his Room and kept walking. By silent agreement Alexander and the professor stepped off the main road and took a faster route across Alfonds Smets Square, a small plaza that was blissfully empty. This had been the location of Bre's favourite coffee bar, but the place was now dull and lifeless, the grey tiles covered in dust.

'Alright,' Breanna murmured, looking up at the sky with a frown. 'Perhaps my head *does* need checking. I'm pretty sure I'm hallucinating.'

'What do you mean?' Alexander turned to her, slightly alarmed. Was her concussion getting worse? People were known to die from them.

'Well,' she replied. 'I'm seeing stars shoot, like, right towards us. But that can't be right, can it?' There was a pleading edge to her voice, as if she was really hoping he would tell her it wasn't true. When Alexander looked up, however, he could also see streaks of golden light shoot across the afternoon's sky, growing steadily bigger. 'Um... Bre? That's not a hallucination.'

'Well, that's good,' she mumbled. 'Thought I was going...' The lights struck the ground in front of them before she could finish the sentence. Alexander pulled her and professor Finet down and out of the way. Oddly, he felt no heat from the falling stars, though the first one had missed him by a hair's breadth. Then the dust settled and he realised that *that* would be the least strange thing occurring that day.

Chapter 2

Several men stood in front of them, if they could be called men at all. Alexander's first impression was that a couple of ancient Greek statues had somehow sprouted wings. The closest being, standing almost face to face with them, looked like a man carved entirely out of white marble, his skin so pale that it was almost translucent. His muscles were perfectly proportioned and looked like they could not possibly be confined by the strange clothes he was wearing. All of them were wearing studded leather vests, like those an ancient medieval foot soldier might have worn, but with slits at the back to accommodate their grey and dappled brown wings. Despite the drab-coloured clothing and the dust that clung to them, Alexander's overall impression was one of inhuman poise and gracefulness. The way they stood was almost catlike, their wings folding neatly against their back. Their faces were alien: too narrow and angular to be human, with small lips and high cheekbones. All of them displayed the self-contained demeanour of a king. It made Alexander feel like a coarse, unwashed peasant. The angels' hair – for what else could they be? – were a pale blonde, but Alexander could not tell if that was an indicator of age or because they were born that way. Their faces were smooth, with only a few lines, making them look about thirty human years old. But the cast of their eyes belied that. They were strange, bright gold and shaped like those of a hawk, and they displayed something Alexander had only ever seen in the elderly. A worldly confidence of having lived a long life.

Concussion or not, Bre was the first to recover. While Alexander and professor Finet just kept staring, open-mouthed, at the huddle of angels, she managed to slip from their grasp. 'Hi,' she said, holding her hands to her side to indicate that she meant no harm. 'Um... Welcome to Earth, I suppose.'

Leave it to Breanna to make the introductions.

The angels, aliens - or whatever they were – completely ignored her, turning instead to each other. They conversed in a fey language, their voices sounding like the shrieking of birds. They looked somewhat confused by their surroundings, taking in things like the brick walls and the glass windows. One of them even kneeled to trace the pattern of the cobbles as if perplexed by it.

However, that confusion quickly turned to anger when Breanna, being her usual self, poked the lead angel in the chest, as if to check if he was real. The being turned his head to her, his yellow eyes flashing with fury and contempt. In a flash of movement his hand struck out and grabbed her by the throat, lifting her from the ground like she weighed nothing.

The sight of Breanna in the grip of the bird-man shook Alexander out of his stupor. 'Leave her alone!' he yelled. He struck out with all the force he could muster, hitting the creature squarely in the jaw with his good arm. It felt like hitting cold stone. The angel stumbled slightly, giving Breanna the opportunity to free herself. She collapsed, coughing and rubbing her throat. Professor Finet grabbed her and pulled her out of the

creature's reach. The angel seemed more surprised than hurt by the attack. He regained his balance and casually brushed his cheek. The skin wasn't even bruised where Alexander had hit him. He looked at Alexander with a mixture of anger and genuine curiosity, as if he couldn't quite figure out why the little boy had slapped him. His companions were not so sanguine. They hissed at him and made threatening movements with their spears. But before they could attack him the lead angel's hand shot out again, now wrapping itself around Alexander's throat as if determined to squeeze the life out of him.

Alexander gasped; he felt *something* invade his head. Inside his Room a tendril of white-golden light suddenly broke through the walls of his mind, shaking the place on its foundations. Once inside the tendril shot towards him like a spear of avenging light and burrowed inside him, infiltrating his body, taking control of every fibre of his being. It left him helpless, a stranger inside himself. In the real world he could no longer command his own muscles; his legs buckled beneath him, leaving him dangling from the angel's grasp. He could still see and hear what was going on around him, but only in a blurry sort of way. He couldn't do a thing. Whatever the angel had done, it had left him a prisoner in both his physical and mental body. He vaguely wondered whether this was what it was like to be a ventriloquist's dummy. The part that was still himself shivered in revulsion. Then the tendril dug in even deeper, invading his identity, the very core of who he was. His Room disappeared, old memories flashing in its stead. All the times he went with Bre to their favourite restaurant. The countless hours they had spent doing their homework together at his mum's place, or simply playing together in his room. All the youthful shenanigans they had gotten into, like the time they had managed to build a pyramid of wooden chairs to reach the shelf where his mother kept the chocolate cookies. At his father's gravestone as a mere child after the burial, when most people had gone away, and a young Breanna had put a hand on his shoulder, understanding that mere words wouldn't console him. He also heard things: fragments of conversations from his past, the voices of Breanna, their mothers and other people talking all at once, making it difficult for him to focus on what they were saying. He also saw flashes of other memories – memories he didn't recognise. Memories of flying, of the wind carrying him on his wings across a snowy mountain range, a spear in his hand, yelling out his hatred and fury. And above it all, he heard screaming, but he didn't know if it was Breanna or somebody else, or if it was himself. He felt himself slipping, his identity somehow ripped free of the moorings of his body, and...

'No!'

A voice suddenly broke through Alexander's addled mind, followed by a high-pitched shrill of pain. He was in his Room once more. The tendril was shuddering, withering, and shrivelling in front of his mind's eye, giving him back the command of his own faculties. In the physical realm, he found himself lying on the ground, enveloped in Breanna's arms. Tears streaked her face, and she winced in pain. Her concussion must be

getting worse if she had pushed herself to catch him. Alexander was weeping himself, or so he thought. He brought up a trembling hand to wipe his cheeks; they came back slick with blood. A more thorough examination taught him that he was bleeding from his eyes, ears and nostrils – no doubt an effect of whatever the angel had done to him.

But why had he stopped?

Alexander looked up and saw the angel standing over him, a puzzled expression on his face as he touched the tip of the sword protruding from his chest. The blade was stained with what looked like watered-down honey. The same liquid flecked the angel's lips as he spoke with obvious difficulty. 'Who... who dares?'

'He speaks English!' professor Finet exclaimed.

'Of course he does,' a voice said from behind the angel. It was a very strange, reverberating voice, like a choir of hundreds murmuring as one. 'He just harvested the knowledge straight out of your friend's soul. As he would have harvested everything, had I not intervened.' The blade retracted, letting the angel collapse to the ground.

For a moment, he just lay there, his vacant expression no different than those of the dead humans in the streets. Then, without warning, a white-hot flame suddenly burst from the corpse, blinding Alexander, Breanna and the professor and causing them to jerk back instinctively. The corpse burned for just a second. When they looked again, there was only an unrecognizable charred husk and a heap of smouldering armour.

'They do that,' the eerie voice said. 'An angel's soul, torched to oblivion in death by the very spark that animated them in life. No afterlife for the likes of them.'

Alexander's eyes searched for the source of those words. As he saw who had saved him, his mouth fell open in astonishment.

The being before them was as foreign as the angels, who backed away before the stranger. On a basic level their saviour looked human enough: a slender man of average size, dressed from head to toe in black, from his woollen shirt to his shiny shoes. He looked as if he had just come from a funeral; he could even pass for the undertaker himself. The man's sickly pallor certainly seemed to support this, as did his white, closely cropped hair. His skin was even paler than the angels, and a little translucent; Alexander swore he could see the outline of his skull. A bright blue light came from within the man's body, as if he had swallowed a lantern. The blueness coiled and floated gently inside of him, like a gas adrift, illuminating their surroundings. The luminescence was reflected in his eyes, which were fiery pools of stark blue light, without pupil or iris. In his bony hands he wielded a glowing sword.

'Aliens,' Breanna mumbled from behind her hands. 'Why did I ever wish for aliens?' Alexander couldn't answer her, tongue-tied as he was. Professor Finet was frozen as well, his eyes opened so wide that they seemed apt to leave their sockets.

'We're not safe yet.' The blue man shifted his stance with inhuman grace as he faced the remaining angels. 'There is nothing here for you,' he said to them in his oddly

reverberating voice – as if a whole choir of people was speaking in unison, instead of one. He lifted his sword in a defensive posture. ‘Leave here or die.’

The angels weren’t inclined to obey him. Their faces contorted in hatred at the sight of him, and the smouldering fire behind their eyes told Alexander that they planned vengeance for the death of one of their own. As one they changed the grip on their spears, lowering them in the direction of the being who Alexander had just nicknamed “Blue Boy” in his mind. Time seemed to elongate as the two sides stood facing one another, the silence stretching so deeply that Alexander could hear the frantic beating of his own heart. Then the angels struck, all five of them stabbing their spears at their rescuer in a cacophony of wing flapping and high-pitched shrieks.

Faster than Alexander could see, Blue Boy dodged all five spears, melting in the space between them at inhuman speed. The blue coils inside him swirled faster as he pressed the flat of his blade against one of the spears and redirected it sideways, right into the folded wing of an angel. The creature squawked in pain and tried to pull his spear back.

That was a mistake: Blue Boy shifted into the gap in the angel’s defence and lashed out with just the tip of his weapon, piercing the angel’s chest with surgical precision. When he withdrew his blade, it was slick with a yellowish liquid. The angel sagged, but Blue Boy didn’t wait for him to collapse completely. Instead, he kicked his dying enemy, sending him falling in a tangle with a couple of his comrades. After a second, the angel died in an explosion of light and the two he had fallen on cried out in pain.

Blue Boy did not pause to admire his handiwork. In movements so fast that Alexander only saw them as a series of blurs he pivoted sideways and just barely intercepted a spearpoint that would have pierced his armpit had it struck true. Instead, he threw the tip upwards with his blade and moved inside the female angel’s guard. Before she could recover, he took his weapon in both his hands and struck horizontally, decapitating her in one fluid motion. The brutality sent a shiver down Alexander’s spine, but Blue Boy looked unperturbed as he watched both parts of the angel burn to cinders. He took a step back so that he once again stood in front of Alexander, Breanna and the professor.

The three remaining angels fought more warily now, their thirst for revenge quenched by their fast losses and the burn wounds two of them had sustained. They spread out, attacking Blue Boy from three sides. Each time he tried to go for one, the other two stabbed, forcing him to retreat. Their movements were as fast and graceful as his; it made for a mesmerizing if brutal display. Bursts of gold and blue danced before Alexander’s eyes.

The angels’ wings turned out to be a big advantage: they could fold them around themselves to shield their bodies from Blue Boy’s blows, even if they came back battered

and slick with yellow blood. Or they flapped them to create gusts of wind that threw their attacker off balance.

Nonetheless, their defender held his own. He managed to catch one of the angels by grabbing the tip of his wing, then whirled him around until his back was pressed against him. In one fluid motion Blue Boy grabbed the angel by the throat and twisted, casually breaking the angel's neck. The sound echoed across the square far too loudly in Alexander's mind. Blue Boy hastily threw the corpse away before it could ignite, but it forced him to leave an opening. One of the two remaining angels had figured out that the man was guarding the three humans and used it to his advantage. He slipped past their rescuer's defences and raised his spear towards Koen. Blue Boy quickly turned around and intercepted the angel's weapon, cutting the shaft in two and throwing him to the ground.

But in doing so he had left himself wide open to attack. Before Blue Boy could twist around again, a spear pierced him in the back. Blood sprayed Alexander's shirt as the spear burrowed straight through his defender's chest. When he looked down, he saw that it was as red as any human's blood.

Blue Boy grunted, then whirled his sword around to stab the angel in the gut. He collapsed as he did so, and the angel fell on top of him. Blue Boy cried out in pain when his enemy combusted. But when the flames died down, it turned out that he was, incredibly, still alive. His clothes were burned in several places, revealing nasty scorch marks all over his body, and his sword had disappeared, but he was still standing.

Alexander noticed movement out of the corner of his eye: the angel whose spear Blue Boy had cut was still alive as well, shaking his head groggily as he rose from the ground. Blue Boy had seen it too. He tried to push himself up, but his arms gave out, and he fell again.

Alexander shivered as those unnerving pools of light that were Blue Boy's eyes found him. 'I can't let them fall into the enemy's hands,' he said softly, as if he was apologizing for something. Then he pushed himself up and spread his arms wide, enveloping him, Bre and professor Finet in a tight embrace.

'Get out of here!' Blue Boy said to them. 'Get them to safety!' Before Alexander could ask what he meant, he felt something shift, and he was suddenly catapulted back into his Room.

The place still felt unsteady after the angel's attack, kitchen cups and cards scattered chaotically across the floor of his usually so organised mind. The figures in the paintings shifted faster than usual, showcasing his panic. The hole where the tendril of light had broken through was still there, though it seemed to be shrinking, like blood clotting a wound. As he looked up at it, a card suddenly fell through the gap. He frowned and rose from his chair. What the... He stared at the card in confusion. The cards in his Room were supposed to symbolise his thoughts, so what was this? He hadn't thought

this one, that much he was sure of. Before he could think on it, more cards followed: ten, twenty, fifty... His mind was flooded by a torrent of cards raining down the hole and shooting across the Room. Before long they covered the floor as well as the table.

There were so many cards, in fact, that Alexander started to worry that they might drown his mind. But as soon as he thought that, the torrent diminished and then stopped altogether, leaving him with hundreds of cards. He shivered. Whatever these strange cards were, they were not of his mind. Most of them lay still, but he thought he could see one or two quiver from the corner of his eye. He thought he could even hear a few of them speak to each other – murmuring so softly that he couldn't be sure that it wasn't his imagination. He was trembling; he didn't know what this invasion was, and he was afraid to touch these cards. He breathed deeply, once, twice, to get himself under control. Then he closed his eyes and left his Room...

... only to find that the voices were waiting for him in the real world. He could hear them whispering in his ears – fragments of voices saying things he did not understand and could not make sense of. Dozens of them, in dozens of languages, all talking at the same time. They made such a racket that he clasped his hands over his ears to shut them out, but to no avail.

‘Get out of my head!’

Bre's cry distracted him from the assault upon his sanity. He looked around at Blue Boy. Their defender lay sprawled at their feet, looking no different from any ordinary corpse without the blue light to energize him. His eyes were glassy, his irises a common blue now. Curiously, his clothes had disappeared, leaving him stark naked. Next to him, Bre sat with her hands over her ears, her teeth bared in a snarl. ‘They won't stop!’ she yelled to no one in particular. ‘Please make them stop!’ Professor Finet was rocking back and forth, weeping softly. Then, before Alexander could say or do anything, the professor jumped up and ran away, abandoning the two of them.

‘Lex!’ Breanna moaned. ‘They just keep talking! The voices! I can't make them stop!’

‘You hear them too?’ he yelled. He couldn't hear himself over the flood of voices in his mind. ‘I...’ He did not know what he was going to say. Suddenly, movement caught his eye. He turned around. The last angel was walking towards them with a malicious grin on his face. The bird-man held the severed head of his spear as a dagger and pointed it in Breanna's direction.

Alexander had reached his limit. The earthquake. The angels. The assault on his mind. Their mysterious saviour. Now these voices. It was all too much. He wanted it to stop. He would make it stop. Without knowing what he did, he lifted his arm and pointed at the angel who stood poised to kill Breanna. ‘LEAVE US ALONE!’ he bellowed. His voice echoed across the square as if it was accompanied by hundreds of others, all speaking in sync with him. The grin vanished from the angel's face as he was suddenly

thrown backwards as if struck by an invisible force. He hit the brick wall of one of the shops with such force that he self-combusted.

What... Alexander looked down at his finger, wondering what had just happened. As he did so, a red-hot spike of pain bloomed in his head. There was a coppery tang in his mouth, and his eyes were weeping blood again. The last thing he heard was Breanna crying out his name. Then his thoughts collapsed in on themselves and his mind went blank as he entered oblivion.

Chapter 3

Koen Finet ran.

He ran as he had never run before, swooping through the streets filled with debris, from shattered stone to broken bodies to the dust clouds that obscured his view. Whatever the obstacle in his way, he ran past blindly. His legs almost seemed to move of their own accord, his muscles rippling with a grace and fluidness that he had never possessed before. He was going so fast that the streets blurred together. And yet, for all that speed, he could not outrun the voices in his head.

He still heard them: a chorus of dozens, nay, hundreds of voices, all speaking at once in a dissonant jumble. In that wholesale cacophony he could occasionally distinguish a voice long enough to hear what it was saying, but the words made little sense to him. They just went on whispering, shouting, weeping, grunting, or whimpering in a dozen languages without any regard as to how he responded. It was as if he heard only one end of a conversation. *I'm not going mad, am I?* he wondered as he entered a building and ran up the stairs so fast that he seemed to fly. *Please, let it not be that!* He stopped in front of his apartment door, the change in velocity so abrupt that he nearly tripped over his own feet. He groaned for a moment, cradling his head in his hands. He felt as weak as a toddler, his head throbbing and his legs swaying beneath him. It was a challenge to unlock his apartment door, but once he managed to do so, he ran straight for the bathroom.

Need aspirin, he thought. He could barely hear himself over the din in his head. *Need Valium or something stronger. Whatever it takes to GET THEM OUT!* His hands were shaking as he opened the medicine cabinet. Shaking so hard, in fact, that he dropped the pills in the sink. He closed his eyes for a moment, holding the edge of the sink to keep himself from collapsing. Then something gave way beneath his fingers. He looked down at the sink in confusion and disbelief. A piece of white ceramic had just crumbled beneath his fingers like paper. His whole arm was lit up from the inside, outlining his muscles and veins in a pale blue light. *This cannot be*, he thought wildly, holding his arm as far away from him as possible. *What is happening to me?* He could almost hear his sanity shattering. He would have liked to believe that he was dreaming, but his nightmares were never this bad. He gasped as he felt the headache worsen suddenly. A sickening taste filled his mouth. Tears were falling from his eyes, but when he touched them, they were red and hot.

Alarmed, he turned towards the mirror above the sink. A desperate sound escaped his lips as he saw his reflection. Oh, he looked mostly like himself: a tired, fifty-five-year-old man with short brown hair that showed the first odd strands of grey. But his eyes... They used to be grey, but now they were illuminated from within by a blue gleam. And they were bleeding, blood dripping down his cheeks. When he subjected himself to a panicked examination he discovered blood in his ears and mouth as well. Just like what

had happened with his former student, Alexander Stevens, when that creature attacked him.

It was too much. He was only a simple history professor, for heaven's sake! He could not endure this madness. His legs collapsed, and he sank down on the tiles of the bathroom floor. Then the flood of voices washed over him again, drowning his thoughts in a deluge of whisperings. For one blessed moment, he lost all sense of himself.

Then the pain came, and he screamed.

Alexander was sitting in a small boat, huddled between soldiers in grey-green fatigues. The boat looked old, as did the metal helmets the soldiers wore. He realised he was wearing the same uniform and was holding a gun in his right hand. He tried to drop it in distaste but found that he could not. Somehow, his hand would not obey his command. His entire body felt strange – too large, too bulky. When he looked at the other soldiers, he realised that he was taller than he used to be.

Someone in the group asked him something, and his head turned towards the speaker, even though he had not meant to. 'A wife,' he replied. 'Five months along now. My parents are watching over her while I'm overseas.' Words that he had not meant to say. Wherever he was, he was not himself but a passenger in someone else's life. He was a prisoner, powerless. One of the men rose – the sarge, Alexander knew, though he could not tell how. He could only listen as the man started speaking. Something about fighting for one's country and driving Germans off the coast of Normandy. Before the sergeant could finish his speech, a wave of nausea hit Alexander and the world tilted sideways...

... and catapulted him back into his Room. He lay on the ground, groaning. A card was lying in front of him. It was not one of his but one of the foreign ones that Blue Boy had deposited in here. Alexander looked closer, careful not to touch it. The card showed a sturdy soldier in fatigues, smiling as he had his arms around a woman. He found that he knew her name, just as he knew the man's name. Private Edward Hayes, 4th Infantry Division in the American Army. He had never returned to his wife.

How do I know all this? Alexander wondered, looking at the card near his feet. Faint whispers seemed to emanate from it. The man was dead and buried. And yet, somehow Alexander felt like he knew him almost as well as he knew himself. As if he had been him.

Suddenly he sensed another presence in his Room. A strange, luminescent wisp was floating aimlessly about half a meter away from him. Its harsh golden light reminded him of the probe that the angel had forced into his Room. A remnant of that energy? He tried to back away, certain that he should not let it touch him. But then he realised that he was standing in a field of Blue Boy's cards and knew that touching

them would be almost as bad. He backed away carefully, trying to avoid both the cards and the wisp. Centimetre by slow centimetre, he retreated.

All of a sudden, the wisp shot forward and wrapped itself around his arm like a ribbon.

The beggar was sitting on the side of the cobbled street, his grey clothes hanging from his thin body. No one looked him in the eyes, either too busy or disinterested to acknowledge his existence. There were only a few coins in the cup he held in his hands. His stomach growled, but he ignored it. It was something he had become quite adept at. It had been several days since the baker had sold him that leftover slice of bread. And it would be several more before he had money enough to buy another.

A horse-drawn carriage turned up the street, rattling at top speed across the uneven stones. Its draperies were closed, but one could recognise nobility by the coat of arms that hung from its sides. People hastily moved aside, knowing full well that anyone rich enough to drive such a vehicle was not overly concerned with hitting people. The beggar tried to move as well, but he was a fraction too slow. He cried out in pain as the wheel ran over his left hand...

Koen gasped and grasped his left hand. He distinctly remembered his fingerbones shattering, but as he checked them, they were fine. He was fine.

He shivered. He was still in his bathroom, lying on his back like a turtle. He tried to figure out what had just happened, but his thoughts hurt; it was like a massive spike had been driven through the back of his skull. *I must have had a seizure of some kind*, he thought.

Except that he had never been prone to fits. And they usually didn't leave somebody lying in the remains of a sink that they had broken with their *hands*. He studied his hands again. They seemed ordinary – not a hint of blue light in them.

He forced himself to rise, then checked himself in the mirror again. Overall, he looked fine. That was the strangest thing. He still vividly remembered the all-consuming hunger and the crushing of his hand. And yet, he looked alright. The only signs that something was wrong were the bloody smears from his nose, ears and eyes. The blood had already dried up. He looked at his watch and noticed that about three hours had passed since he had succumbed to the seizure – or whatever it was.

He took a sponge and dabbed at his face, grimacing as he felt the crusts of dried blood loosen. 'What's happening to me?' he asked his reflection, but it failed to answer. He snorted at himself and left the bathroom, carefully tiptoeing around the books and other items that had fallen over during the earthquake. He went straight

to his liquor cabinet and filled a glass with his favourite brandy. Then he moved over to the leather fauteuil in his sitting room and started to think.

He was forced to conclude that it had all started after the attack. It was then that the voices had started – voices that he could still hear. He downed generous mouthfuls of the brandy, but the drink couldn't drown them out. He drained the glass, then rose to take the bottle. He closed his eyes as he put it to his mouth, savouring the taste of Scottish cider at the back of his throat.

... and he looked through another set of eyes. He stared down the shaft of the spear in his hands at the knights that charged straight towards him...

Koen hastily opened his eyes again and leaned back heavily in his chair, shaking his head in frustration. What was happening to him? He did not understand any of this – not the voices and not these visions. And certainly not the burst of strength he had experienced as his arm had flared up with blue light. He took another sip, marvelling that the cider didn't even touch his headache.

He considered for a moment looking for medical help. It was obvious that something was wrong with him, mentally if not physically. But he was certain that any psychiatrist would just diagnose him with schizophrenia. And he was pretty sure that was not the case. The episodes did not feel like dreams or hallucinations. They were far too coherent, too logical for that. They felt more like... like memories. Like there was a whole bunch of people in his head, talking to him, trying to draw him out of his body and into their life. He nodded to himself. That made sense. Well, kind of. Not really, but it was the best he could come up with. But how did the sink fit into all this?

Whatever the case, it was clear that the medical arts could not help him. Besides, they would be too busy dealing with the fallout from this second earthquake. No, he would have to figure this out on his own.

He put the bottle to his mouth again but paused before taking another sip. Instead, he put the brandy back on the table and rose to fetch a notepad and pen. He seated himself again, placing the writing utensils next to the bottle. He wondered if what he was about to do was wise. But the fact was that he didn't have enough information, and he knew only one place where it might be found. He inhaled deeply, trying to steady his nerves. Then he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes again.

For a moment he saw nothing but the back of his eyelids. Then the voices claimed him and dragged him under once more.
