
ENTER ORION

Heart of the Diable

CHAD STEWART



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*For my friend Nic,
who, I think, was more excited
for having this book published
than I was!*

Chapter One

ESCAPE FROM THE JUNGLE

The tree branch came back and slapped Bosco in the face which drew a thin line of blood across his forehead, but he barely noticed as he pushed on.

In front of him Dr. Peterson pumped his legs furiously, looking back every now and then. Bosco could see the fear in the man's eyes.

“Keep going!” Bosco yelled, pushing him on.

The brush was thick and cumbersome as the two charged through it. Peterson slipped and almost lost his footing, but Bosco was there, grabbing him by the back of the shirt and almost lifting him off the ground as he hoisted him up so he could get his feet under him again.

Bosco could hear them coming, but didn't know exactly how far behind they were. Suddenly he grabbed the doctor and pulled him to the side, down a slight embankment and under the shelter of some shrubs; a small creek flowed through the area. He pressed a finger to his lips, indicating that Peterson should be quiet. Peterson nodded as they both struggled to get their breathing under control.

It was difficult. The two of them had been running for their lives for what felt like an eternity. Their hearts pounded and their breathing was fast and labored.

As they crouched there they could hear their pursuers closing in on them. Someone would issue what seemed like a command in Spanish and others would respond. Unfortunately Bosco couldn't understand Spanish, and Peterson's understanding of the language was basic. The one person in their group who could have helped them interpret was missing. They had no idea whether she was even still alive.

Sweat dripped from the big man's brow as he steeled his expression; he knew he had to push the fear he felt deep down for Peterson's sake.

They sat in silence for what seemed forever. The ruffling of the bushes got louder and louder as their pursuers got closer. Peterson looked as though he was about to scream out when one of the men jumped down the bank of the river and landed mere feet from them. Bosco automatically reached for his combat knife, then silently berated himself when he remembered he'd lost it in the last fight. He reached over to Peterson's belt and pulled the ancient looking dagger from it. The blade curved back and forth as it came to a razor sharp point six inches from the hilt. The handle was made of bone and housed strange writing all up and down it.

Peterson glanced at the movement—a flicker of fear in his eyes—then looked at Bosco and shook his head quickly back and forth, indicating for him not to use the dagger.

Bosco considered Peterson's plea then put it away in the empty sheath at his back. The dagger didn't fit perfectly, but because it was smaller than his original knife he was able to house it securely enough so it wouldn't fall

out. He looked around instead and saw a large rock on the ground beside him. He picked it up and slowly peeked his head out of the bushes. He saw the man walking to the side, cutting across where they were hiding. He crouched back down and waited until the mercenary got closer.

The man, tall and muscular with olive skin, short black hair, and numerous tattoos all over his neck and arms, called out something in Spanish to an unseen ally in the forest. The reply that came back seemed a little ways away, but Bosco wasn't sure if that was the case, or if the thick forest was muffling the man's voice and he was closer than he thought. The big man knew he would have to take his chances. What other choice was there?

He waited until the man came a couple steps closer, then he sprang out of the underbrush, grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and came down with the rock—smashing it into his face which sent him crumpling to the ground to make a splash in the creek. The man's nose shattered from the blow. Bosco was so efficient that the man didn't even have time to scream out.

Peterson crawled out of the bush, his mouth gapping open. "You just ... you ... he ...," he stammered, unable to find the words to use to describe Bosco's actions.

"I know you're not used to this kind of field work Doc, but you'll appreciate it when we're out of this mess."

Peterson looked at him in stunned silence.

"He's still alive," the big man reassured as he stooped down in order to grab the man's weapons, "I think ..."

Before he was able to unsling the rifle from the mercenaries' arm he heard crashing coming through the forest toward them. Then he heard the distinctive sounds of darts being launched from the rifles that were now trained on them. The shots sounded more like puffs of pressurized

air than the loud concussive bangs of bullets. Bosco dove to the side, taking Peterson with him as two darts landed in the ground where he was standing just a moment earlier; one sunk into the guy that Bosco had just attacked.

The two of them scrambled around as three men, who were standing on the edge of the bank of the river were fumbling to reload. “Agarralos! Agarralos!” one of them cried.

Bosco grabbed Peterson by the arm and dragged him into the thick Amazon forest again. A couple more shots flew, but the two had made it back into the cover of the trees. Their legs pumped furiously as they tried to distance themselves again.

Bosco looked to the side and saw another group of men jumping logs and ducking low branches as they tried to close the gap.

“We’re not gonna make it!” Peterson yelled.

“Just keep running!” Bosco screamed back.

More darts flew.

Bosco felt one graze his ear. He kept running. After a moment he glanced back to see that Peterson was leaning on a tree a few yards behind. The older man looked up, held out one of his arms for a moment, and then his eyes rolled back into his head as he fell over. Bosco’s eyes went wide when he saw the dart sticking out of the back of the man’s shoulder. He could hear the mercenaries coming, but couldn’t see them yet.

He turned and sprinted toward Peterson. As he closed in, one of the mercenaries rounded the tree that Peterson was just leaning on a moment earlier. Bosco didn’t even slow. He leaped into the air, pulled his arm back, and arced it around with lightning speed, catching the surprised man right in the side of the head. The man’s head slammed

into the tree and he tumbled away, knocked unconscious by the blow.

Bosco hit the ground and rolled as a dart whizzed by him. He saw two more attackers coming on. One levelled his gun and fired. Bosco somehow managed to dodge that dart, but he knew another one would be coming in if he didn't act fast. He ran right for the one who had just fired, knowing that he was going to have to reload. He screamed as he came in. The mercenary looked up and seemed stunned as the large man barrelled in. He put up his arm to defend but, being half the size of the charging soldier, didn't have a chance.

Bosco put his shoulder down and slammed the man in the chest. The mercenary went flying into the air and disappeared into some thick bushes fifteen feet away.

The other man fired his weapon but missed; the dart soared by as Bosco turned to meet the attacker. He smiled wickedly as he stalked toward the mercenary. This one seemed more composed and weathered than the other and just returned the smile as he threw his rifle to the side and produced a large knife. He waved it menacingly in the air and said something in Spanish as he came to meet the advance.

Bosco knew he had to end this quickly as he heard others coming. He took a risk as he stalked in without slowing. The mercenary made a half-hearted swing with the knife, almost as if he was trying to scare Bosco into slowing down. That was exactly what Bosco was hoping he would do. With a hand expertly trained through years of practice, the large man grabbed the mercenaries' knife hand by the wrist and shot his other hand up and punched him hard in the face. A resounding crack was heard as the man's head rocked backward and his body went limp.

As the mercenary fell to the ground, Bosco grabbed the knife from him, slipped it in his belt and ran to collect Peterson.

“Come on man,” he said to his friend. “It’s okay. I’m gonna get you out of here.”

He hoisted Peterson up and across his shoulders—his muscles bulging with the effort—and started to run as fast as he could. He could hear the older man moan every once in a while as he was jostled around. He knew these mercenaries wanted to capture them alive. Bosco also knew, however, that he and Peterson wouldn’t remain alive once the mercs acquired the dagger and whatever information they could. This disturbing thought propelled him to run even harder.

He could hear the other mercenaries gaining on him, but was now also able to hear moving water not too far from where they were.

His legs pumped as hard as they could. He started to feel burning pain radiating throughout them as the lactic acid built up and they began to tire. Every fallen tree he leaped over caused that much more discomfort and drained the energy from him that much more. But he knew he had to keep going. He had to keep going for Peterson, himself, and for the mission.

Just as he felt as though he would collapse he burst through the tree line. He could see the edge of the cliff that led down to the water below. He knew that if he could just make it there they might have a chance. The thought of escape spurred him on. Half way to the edge he heard someone come through the tree-line. He glanced back to see two mercenaries moving at lightning speed toward them.

With every ounce of energy he had left he pumped his

legs, sucking every bit of strength out of them as possible! With a feral growl he expended the last of his power and leaped from the edge. He and Peterson flew through the air, legs and arms flailing as they went. The drop was further than he expected.

As Bosco thrashed through the air he felt a sharp sting in his leg. He had been hit by one of the tranqs!

His vision began to blur and his body started to numb as he plunged into the cool water below.

Chapter Two

TORTURED MEMORIES

Derek tossed and turned. Beads of sweat glistened on his shaven head. He scrunched his eyes tightly and appeared to be in distress. Every once in a while he issued a grunt as his face screwed up as though he was experiencing a painful moment. In truth he was reliving a memory in his dreams; one that he just couldn't shake. Night after painful night he would toss and turn and relive the horror of the death of his wife, Samantha, again and again.

It had been two years since she passed away but for Derek the feelings were still raw. He had seen psychologists and Doctors, but nothing they prescribed helped. It was as though every night he went to bed he would be back in that place and time, transported there by some wicked force that wanted to torture him again and again—and the moment seemed just as real as the day it happened. He saw her beautiful face; the way she smiled at him, and tried to reassure him that everything was going to be okay. Her piercing blue eyes bore into him as the feeling of helplessness washed over him again: he couldn't save her!

His eyes fluttered open which he always took as a blessing even though the much needed sleep flew from him. He turned his head to see the lights of the city. It was raining. Drops sprinkled down on his window and the sound of the rapping on the glass made it almost soothing. He could hear thunder and saw a flash of lightning.

Derek pulled the covers from him and sat up on the edge of the bed. He cupped his head in his hands and sat there for a long while—tears moistening his eyes. He refused to twist around and stare at the empty spot on the bed where Samantha used to lay with her silky brown hair draped over the pillow. The reliving of the reality of her being gone was still too painful. She always looked so peaceful when she slept.

Another crack of thunder jolted him from his thoughts. He wiped away the tears that had formed in his eyes, arose from bed, and limped over to the window. His leg throbbed. He had a large bruise from where he had taken a nasty kick while bringing in his bounty a few days earlier. The suspect obviously didn't want to go quietly so Derek had to "persuade" him that it was in his best interest.

He stared out at the lights of New York. At one time he used to enjoy them, though he was always concerned about the rampant crime rate. Now, he could see nothing. He could only hear Samantha reminding him that the city wasn't as bad as he thought.

Derek closed his eyes. "It's bad now, Sam," he whispered.

Derek put his hands on the cold window. He then leaned his forehead on it and closed his eyes. Memories came flooding back and he started to cry. His sorrow turned to anger as he bawled up his fists and slammed one of them on the window. As he sobbed he slid down the

glass to his knees. The pain was worse than any physical pain he had ever felt.

Despite his tough physical exterior he felt helpless and alone.

When he opened his eyes he noticed the dim light that came through the clouds over the city. He wasn't sure how long he had been at the window for, or if he even dozed off in that position, all he knew was that a new day was dawning. It was strange, but Derek felt as though new strength had been given to him with the realization that he had made it through another day.

Just one more day, he told himself.



Bosco managed to stay conscious, though he could feel that the tranquilizer was fast at work. He figured that the dart must have just grazed him, and that his adrenaline was working hard to fight off the effects of the substance. Being two hundred and sixty pounds of solid muscle must have helped as well! He grabbed for Peterson and pulled him above the water and the two of them floated down stream. In the distance he could hear a commotion up on the ledge and just knew that the mercenaries were coming to collect them.

They floated down the river a ways and rounded a few bends. It took every ounce of energy he had left just to keep him and Peterson above the water. Every bend they went around brought them further away from the mercenaries and gave Bosco more confidence that they might get away. Eventually they made it to a slower moving spot and he managed to pull the two of them to shore.

After they got on the land Bosco immediately checked to see if Peterson was still alive. Thankfully the man was still breathing. Bosco let out a sigh and collapsed on the ground, trying to get his breath. It wasn't long before he heard what sounded like a vehicle coming toward them from a distance. Quickly, he scrambled in the direction of the sound. A few hundred yards from the river's edge he stumbled out onto a dirt road and saw a small truck heading toward him. He knew it was a gamble as it could have been a mercenary vehicle, but he had to try. He began waving his arms like a maniac as he attempted to flag it down.

The truck came to a stop. Bosco immediately rushed to the window and saw a middle aged couple looking at him skeptically.

"My friend needs help!" he explained. The couple looked at one another.

"No hablamos ingles."

"English? Do you speak English?" he asked.

"Lo siento, señor. No entendemos." the woman said.

"I don't know what you're saying," Bosco replied, frustrated. "My friend is going to die if you don't help us! Come! Come with me," he exclaimed as he motioned for them to come.

They looked at him warily.

"Come on!" he cried emphatically and darted back into the forest, hoping they would follow.

By the time he collected Peterson and started to carry him out he saw the man come through the forest toward them. When he saw Peterson, and the state he was in, he ran over and helped Bosco.

As soon as they got into view of the truck again the girl spouted something in Spanish and rushed out to help. She

opened the tailgate as Bosco and the other man helped Peterson into the back.

“Gracias,” said Bosco as he climbed into the back with Peterson.

The man nodded as he closed up the tailgate. “Hospital,” he said.

“Yes! ... I mean ... Si!”

A moment later the truck was speeding down the dirt road with all haste.



Derek pulled the cup of steaming coffee from the Keurig machine. He loved coffee. He always felt that it was one of the greatest blessings that humanity had received, especially for the sleep deprived. As he took his first sip his phone rang. He grabbed it off the counter and saw the name that came up on the display: “Jake Richards.”

“What does *he* want?” he said to himself. He was tempted to just decline the call, but something inside of him told him that he should answer it.

“Hullo. Derek speaking.”

“Hi Derek, it’s Jake.”

Derek stayed silent for a long while. This was the last person in the world he wanted to talk to.

After the long pause Jake stated bluntly, “Brianna’s missing.”

Those two words rocked Derek back. “What do you mean missing?”

“She was on a mission and it went south. Dr. Peterson and Bosco were with her too. Peterson’s in a hospital in

Cartagena Colombia and we don't know where Bosco is. We need your help."

"I don't need to go after Bri. She's not like Sam. Sam needed me to protect her. Bri ... Bri's just as wild as I am. She can handle herself."

"Not this time, Derek," Jake replied. "Bri's in deep. And she's in trouble."

Normally Derek would have refused without question. The last thing he wanted to do was to work for Orion again after all they did to him. But he couldn't turn his back on Brianna. Not now, not ever. He felt a spark ignite in his soul. The deadness he felt started to wane. He knew he needed to help Brianna with all that was left in him.

"Can we meet?" Jake asked.

"Are you in New York?" Derek asked even though he already knew the answer to that.

"Why don't we meet at American Coffee on 5th like we used to," Jake said. "It will be like old times."

"It will never be like old times!" Derek yelled into the phone. "Don't even suggest that. You sad excuse for a man!"

Jake was quiet for a moment. "Sorry old friend," was all that he could say.

Derek fumed! He held Jake and Orion responsible for the death of his wife. No matter how much they tried to explain the circumstances surrounding her death he wouldn't hear it. He couldn't hear it. Jake tried and tried to clarify it, but Derek didn't believe a word he said. Derek would always hold them responsible.

"American Coffee it is then," Derek grunted. "One hour," he said as he hung up the phone.

Derek threw the phone back down on the counter and

rubbed a hand over his smooth head. *Why is this happening to me?* he asked himself. “What are you into Brianna?”

After Samantha died he vowed to never again have any further contact with the Orion Group. Now it seemed as though he had no choice if he wanted to know more about Brianna’s situation. He just knew that he was going to get drawn back in, and he hated it! He hated how the group used people even though they claimed it was for the benefit of people. To him it seemed like an “ends justified the means” pragmatism that he despised. He knew there was a way they could help people without sacrificing others—especially kind, compassionate, beautiful, women like his dear wife. And now, it sounded as though Samantha’s sister, Brianna, was being laid upon the alter of the “ultra-righteous” Orion Group!

After contemplating the turn of events for a few moments, he gathered up his phone, keys, threw on a baseball hat, and headed for the door. Just as he was about to close the door behind him, he took one long look back into his apartment; the apartment that housed so many memories of his life with Samantha. *Maybe I should just move and be done with it*, he thought to himself bitterly. *Maybe that could be the first step in moving on?*

Others had suggested that to him before, but he never took them seriously. In truth, a part of him didn’t want to move on. But he knew there was no way he could go back, and that was the part that tortured him.

He shook his head as he closed the door. *Maybe he needed to close other doors in his life*, he thought as he walked away. *Maybe if he did the torture would end.*

Maybe.

Chapter Three

COFFEE WITH AN OLD “FRIEND”

American Coffee on 5th was exactly as Derek had remembered it. It wasn't just a coffee shop, but also expanded to offer breakfast and some lunch options. Since his break with Orion he never came back to this place. He wasn't really sure why as he believed the coffee here was the best he'd ever had, and he couldn't bring himself to think he was that petty as to blow off the best coffee around because he had a few meetings here with Jake. No. It was probably just him being too busy, so he told himself.

As he walked in he noticed a number of people seated at the various tables, enjoying their coffee, breakfast, and conversation with those they were with. There was something about just hanging out with friends and enjoying a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, Derek wasn't here to catch up with a friend.

He and Jake had been work partners in the past with Orion. At first they both started as field agents but Jake wanted more. He started to ascend the ladder of the orga-

nization while Derek was more than content to work in the field; he didn't believe office work was right for him.

Interestingly enough, it was his work with Orion that was the cause of him meeting Samantha. He was investigating the creation of a bio-chemical agent that could potentially accelerate someones natural healing ability. In theory this compound could be used to cure any number of diseases and limit the amount of time someone spent in the hospital due to medical or traumatic incidents. Samantha was one of the lead doctors on the team that was developing it, but unfortunately their research came to be noticed by another group known as Tower Six who wanted to use and modify the research to create a weapon: a soldier with the ability to withstand so much more injury than is currently humanly possible and still keep going. That was also Derek's first encounter with Tower Six.

If he thought Orion was secretive, Tower Six was so much more. This organization came on Orion's radar about twelve years previous, and they seemed to have the same interests as Orion: the discovery of technology from a variety of fields—including ancient sources—that they would be able to manage and distribute as they saw fit. The difference was, however, that Orion claimed to be a philanthropic organization who would use the tech for the betterment of humanity. Being a completely privately funded organization who has done a pretty good job at keeping the operation "under the table" since their inception which, apart from a few people at high levels in the organization, no one is really sure of the timeframe.

They recruit the best talent from a number of fields, pay their operators well, and insist on absolute secrecy. Derek learned that they only say as much as they have to in order to get the job done—no more, no less. That was

always a sore spot for him. Being an inquisitive person by nature, asking questions and seeking for answers always came natural to him. He butted heads a number of times with people who had moved from operations to overseers about the motives, actions, and results of certain missions he went on. The same old answers always came back that Orion knew what they were doing and how they planned to help humanity with the tech they acquired. These answers—which were really no answers at all—helped to foster skepticism in Derek; a skepticism that he didn't like. Thankfully he had found Samantha.

She always saw the best in people and, for some reason, in him as well. She was his beacon of light, his sound reason, his voice of conscience. Without that, Derek was afraid of what he was capable of, of what he would do, of what he would become.

He glanced through the shop and saw Jake, the older man, well dressed, with greying hair, and an air of confidence about him. *He hasn't changed a bit*, Derek thought to himself as he strolled over.

Jake looked up and smiled. He always had a way of disarming people with that innocent, flashy, smile. Derek felt as if he would be pulled in by it, but resisted in letting his guard down for even a second.

“Derek!” Jake called as he stood to greet the man. He held out his hand, but Derek didn't take it. An awkward second went by and then Jake retreated but his smile never diminished. “How are you old friend?”

“Alive,” came Derek's curt reply.

“Good. Do sit down. I already ordered for us,” he stated as he took his seat again. “It was three eggs, over-easy, on whole wheat toast, with a side of freshly cut fruit, wasn't it?”

Derek was shocked that he remembered all that. It had been almost two years since they parted ways and he could still remember what he ate for breakfast when they went out.

“Impressive,” said Derek as he sat.

Jake continued to smile as he picked up his cup and sipped from it. “I’ll get right to the point,” he stated.

Derek sat forward, listening intently.

“Orion sent Brianna on a mission to Colombia. Because of her field expertise, her training in the Spanish language and culture, and her scholastic interests and achievement, we felt that she was the perfect candidate for the job.”

“Which was ...?” Derek asked.

“I’ll get to that in a moment,” stated Jake as he took another sip of his coffee. His eyes flicked over Derek’s shoulder. Derek glanced back and saw the waitress coming.

“Just your house blend with two cream,” he said.

“Interesting ... You’ve deviated from your usual,” replied Jake with a smile.

“I like to keep everyone on their toes.”

Jake merely grinned, took another drink, and continued. “The job took Brianna into the Amazon: a recluse, relatively unexplored, spot.”

“Of course,” said Derek sarcastically. “These things never happen in well known open places.”

Jake laughed. “What would be the point of hiding something of value right in the open? Where’s the fun in that?”

Derek wasn’t amused.

That didn’t seem to bother Jake as he just continued on with his story. “So, as I was saying, we lost contact with Brianna and her team about a week ago. The only word

we received was an e-mail from Bosco on a secured server that said Dr. Peterson was in the Saint Maria's Hospital in Cartagena, Colombia and that we were to expect an express package."

"You sent Bosco?" Derek asked. "It must have been high risk for you to send that kind of muscle."

"We had our suspicions that there was a potential for conflict and we wanted the best to protect our operator." Jake paused. "In truth, it wasn't strictly a high risk operation," he continued. "At least it wasn't supposed to be, but when Bosco contacted us he mentioned that Tower Six was involved somehow, and a mercenary group from the area."

Derek's face went stern at the mention of Tower Six. "This ... whatever it is you're looking for, must be pretty desirable for Tower Six to be involved."

"It is."

Derek waited for Jake to continue. He was sure that Jake was searching for the exact words to say that gave some needed information, but didn't reveal everything. "It's called the Heart of the Diablo," Jake stated. "Or, if you prefer the Spanish as the locals call it: 'el Corazon del diablo.'"

Derek leaned forward resting his arms easily on the table.

"The legend speaks of this heart—a crystal actually—as having healing properties," Jake explained.

Derek let out a laugh. "I've seen some different things in my work with Orion, but this one sounds like a fairytale."

"We didn't think it was worth the effort to pursue either, thinking it was probably just some old story, until we discovered this." Jake pulled a satchel onto the table, unclasped it, and retrieved an ancient looking dagger with

a blade that curved back and forth as it extended. It had some writing on the bone handle which looked like Spanish. On the blade was a picture of what looked like a crystal which was etched into the metal.

Derek took the dagger and inspected it.

“Whoa! What’s that?” came the shocked question from the waitress as she brought the meals over.

“Oh ... it’s nothing,” Jake replied. “Just a souvenir I picked up from one of the pawn shops in the area,” he lied.

Derek was always amazed at how well Jake was able to spin a tale, or tell an outright lie, without even thinking about it. This was one of the reasons he learned to be on his guard around the crafty man. He shook off the thought and continued inspecting the dagger. He couldn’t read some of the words as they appeared to have been worn off over time, but he did recognize one word from his limited knowledge of Spanish: “llave,” which meant “key.”

“You see it don’t you?” asked Jake as he started to dig into his breakfast. “It talks about a key.”

“All I see is the word key in Spanish. I have no idea what the rest of it says.”

“Yes, but Brianna did.”

That piqued Derek’s curiosity.

“You see,” began Jake, “when we came into possession of this item Brianna seemed to be the perfect one to lead the investigation into its origin and meaning. We gave her a team of likeminded experts and they concluded that it either was a key, or would lead to a key, that would point us straight to this Heart of the Diablo that this thing talks about. The inscriptions—what’s left of them anyway, and what we could piece together from urban legend and folklore—speak about this crystal and its ability to heal.”

“And you believe folklore and legend?” Derek asked, trying to inject some doubt into Jake’s story.

“You know that we’ve ran investigations on much less information and have been right a good portion of the time,” Jake reminded.

Derek had to concede the point.

“And what do you want from me?” he asked.

“Come come,” Jake said as he put down his fork and knife. “I would have thought you smart enough to piece that together when I called,” he teased.

Derek did know why Jake had called. He just wasn’t willing to admit it to himself until he heard the older man say it to him.

“You were the best operative we’ve ever had, and your wife’s sister is in trouble. I thought for sure you would want to help out.”

Derek could feel the anger boiling within him. “Don’t ever lecture me! And don’t ever mention my wife again! You dirty her name when you speak it! Because of you ... because of Orion ... ” He couldn’t get the last of his sentence out as he started to choke up. Others looked over to see what the commotion was.

Jake just sat there, stone faced. Then his cold exterior seemed to melt away. “Sam was my friend too,” he said in barely a whisper daring to say her name again despite Derek’s warning. “I don’t expect you to understand, or even accept an explanation from me, but now’s not the time to talk about dear Sam.” He appeared as though he was choking up too.

Derek was surprised by his show of emotion; something that Jake never allowed to surface.

“But Brianna needs us now,” Jake finished as he sat back in his chair. “I know you don’t want anything to do

with Orion again. And I know that you're hurting. I get that. But I don't want to lose another operative ..." he paused. "I don't want to lose another friend."

This show from Jake took the wind out of Derek's sails. He knew he shouldn't trust the man, but he couldn't help but be touched by his seemingly sincere concern for Brianna. It was a side of Jake he had never seen before. Was it real? He didn't know. The only thing he knew is that he didn't want to lose Brianna like he had lost Samantha.

"When do we leave?"

Chapter Four

THE VILLAGE

The next day the two men were on a plane headed to the Colombian city of Cartagena.

Derek reclined in the large seat as he looked out the window. He and Jake were the only passengers on the small private aircraft that soared at a cruising altitude of thirty thousand feet. The plane's jet engines hummed. Derek found the sound soothing as he let himself relax into the cushioned chair.

Jake pulled back the curtain and walked into the passenger cabin where Derek was, two glasses of red wine in his hands. He sat down across from Derek and handed him a glass. "All the arrangements are set," he said as he leaned back, bringing the glass to his lips. "I've made contact with the Prep-house and made sure they have the supplies we need."

Derek nodded as he sipped back the flavourful drink. The smell reminded him of the wine that Samantha and he used to relish when they were cozied up together just enjoying time with one another. The pleasant memory turned painful as he pondered it. It was as though he was

enjoying the deep luxurious fragrance of a beautiful rose then happened to prick his hand upon the thorns which tainted the experience. He pushed the memory away.

“After we get to Cartagena and get settled in I’ll take you to see Peterson. He’s apparently not in great shape, but maybe there’s something he can tell us that will help us find where to start looking.”

“You mean to tell me that you don’t know where Brianna and her team were heading in their search for this artifact?” Derek asked indignantly.

“You know how we work Derek,” replied Jake. “We give our operators flexibility when pursuing their objectives and because of that we don’t always know exactly where they are unless they are able to check in. Unfortunately, Brianna and her team weren’t able to do that before they got into trouble.”

“And why didn’t Bosco mention something in his e-mail to you?”

“I don’t know,” Jake replied coldly. “Maybe you can ask him that yourself if he’s still alive?”

There was a long awkward pause, then Jake leaned forward and said, “Listen. I’ve told you as much as I know which, unfortunately, isn’t a lot. I’m hoping we can clear some of this up when we see Peterson.” He took a sip of wine. “I know you’re concerned about Brianna, but we just need to keep our heads about us and look at the facts. It does no good for us to keep getting into arguments about the circumstances. The sooner we realize that what has happened has happened and there’s nothing we can do about it, the sooner we can make productive strides forward.”

Derek looked hard at the man. He didn’t trust Jake, but

he knew following the plan was the only way to help Brianna.



After landing and checking into the hotel, Jake and Derek headed right for Saint Maria's Hospital. Jake made sure he brought his satchel which contained, among other things, the dagger Bosco had sent to him. Again, Derek marvelled at how easily it was for Jake to just almost nonchalantly package and smuggle an ancient artifact from one country to another! His skills were astounding.

The hospital was in what was called the new town development. Cartagena had seen such amazing growth in the last fifty years and there were now two totally distinct sections of the city: Old Town and New Town. All the ancient Spanish forts, colonial buildings, and such were in the Old Town which bordered the Caribbean coast and was the place where the tourists spent most of their time. As they drove through the streets they came to an Old Town section close to the coast line where they saw numerous cruise ships coming and going, most likely heading through or coming from the Panama Canal. The road turned again into the city proper and, after making their way through congested streets, they came to the hospital.

It was a large modern-looking building with vehicles lined up in rows filling the parking lots. The two men, after parking the car and heading through the entrance, made their way to where they were informed Peterson was. Before being able to see the man, the young Spanish doctor requested to have a meeting with them. She was

fairly short, with long brown hair, and dark eyes that revealed knowledge and experience that was beyond her apparent years.

“Your friend is not in good shape,” she said seriously in her thick Spanish accent.

“What do you mean?” Jake asked.

“He’s not in his right mind. He’s delusional and keeps muttering almost incoherent words and phrases,” she explained. “I think your friend is lucky to be alive. He sustained some trauma to the back of his head, had some sort of tranquilizer agent injected into him, and aspirated on water which could have put him into respiratory distress. Thankfully the distress never turned into respiratory failure.”

Jake and Derek looked at one another, then Jake turned to the Doctor and asked, “How did he get here?”

The doctor flipped through his chart for a moment. “It says here that he was dropped off by some bystanders.”

“That’s it?” Derek asked.

“That’s it,” the doctor replied. “There’s nothing else in the file. Sorry. You can see him, but only for a few minutes as I don’t want any more strain on him than is necessary as we’re trying a new round of treatments that I’m optimistic about.”

Jake nodded and the two men were led down a long hallway and into one of the patient rooms. As soon as they entered they saw the older man lying in his bed with the upper half of his body slightly elevated. He appeared to be muttering something in hushed tones.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” the Doctor said as she closed the door behind the men.

Derek and Jake approached their friend. Peterson didn’t seem to notice them.

“Dr. Peterson,” said Derek as he came to the man’s side. There was no acknowledgement from the injured man. “Dr. Peterson,” Derek said again.

“Peterson!” Jake chimed in. “John! Can you hear us?” Peterson looked over for a moment and then straight ahead again.

Derek and Jake shared concerned looks.

“I’m not sure we’re going to be getting anything out of him,” Derek stated.

Jake unslung his satchel, reached inside, and produced the dagger. Peterson’s head shot over and looked at it curiously. He reached for it. Jake let him touch the handle but made sure to keep a steady grip on it. Dr. Peterson moved his hand along it slowly as though he was analyzing the writing and inscriptions.

“Llave,” he suddenly said. “Llave,” he repeated.

Jake looked to Derek.

“Key,” Derek whispered. “Just like on the dagger. What’s the key Peterson?”

Peterson nodded his head vigorously. “Llave!” he said again, this time in an excited tone.

“Does he mean this is the key?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he just remembers that the item here has that inscription on it, or he just read it from the handle?”

“En el pueblo,” Peterson said suddenly. “En el pueblo,” he said again as he didn’t get a response from the two right away.

Jake looked again at Derek.

“I think it means ‘In the village,’” Derek replied, trying hard to recall those Spanish lessons he took years earlier.

“You’re right,” commented the doctor as she came back into the room to stand beside Derek. “Those are the

first coherent words he's said since he's been here. What does it mean?"

Derek and Jake both shrugged.

"Well, whatever it means, I'm just glad he was able to say something," she said with a smile. "You have another five minutes and then I'll have to ask you to leave," she stated as she turned for the door again.

Jake reached in his satchel and produced a tablet. He opened up one of the apps and then placed it in front of Peterson. It was a map of Colombia.

"What was that word for village?" Jake asked.

"Pueblo?"

Peterson looked up at Derek. "Pueblo?" Derek asked, pointing at the tablet.

Peterson looked to the map. He looked at it briefly then gazed off toward the window.

"Pueblo?" Jake asked again and moved the tablet back into his view. "Pueblo?"

Dr. Peterson stared vacantly. Jake gently cupped Peterson's face in his hand and moved it to look at the tablet again. "Pueblo?"

Peterson stared at the screen and Derek noticed that there seemed to be a look of recognition on his face, however faintly. In that moment of recognition the older man placed a finger on an area that was in the middle of the Amazon. "Pueblo," he said in a soft voice. Then he looked up at the men and said, "Ten cuidado. El llave ... ten cuidado ..."

Jake glanced at Derek. "What does that mean?"

Derek shook his head a little. "I think he said beware, or take care. Something like that"

Jake stared at the confused man for a moment then

took the tablet and marked the location. “I think we have our bearings. I mean ... I hope we have our bearings.”

The look on Derek’s face was one of skepticism. The location was quite a ways away from Cartagena, and, if Peterson was wrong, they might be putting their lives in jeopardy for nothing.

“What?” Jake asked, as though he sensed hesitation in Derek.

“Nothing,” he replied. “We don’t have anything else to go on which means we’ll have to trust Peterson, even though he, at the current moment, may not be the most reliable source.” He looked from Peterson to Jake. “You seriously didn’t know where Brianna and her team were headed?”

“We had a general idea, but the communication wasn’t the best and we lost track of them. We honestly thought the worst had happened. Then Bosco sent us the e-mail—”

“And you realized that at least some of your operatives might be able to make it home,” Derek interjected.

“Something like that.”

“Ok gentlemen, it’s time to leave Mr. Peterson so he can get some rest,” they heard the doctor say as she entered the room again. “I’ll let you know the minute there’s any change in his condition.”

Jake smiled and nodded. “Thanks for all your help doctor,” he said.

“Is there any family we should be contacting?” she asked.

“No,” replied Jake. “He doesn’t have any close relatives, at least not ones that we should contact until we know what his long-term state is going to be. It might be best if we transport him back to the U.S. and then we’ll let them know as we’ll have more to tell them at that time.”

She smiled and nodded as she walked over to Peterson's bedside and started adjusting his IV.

Derek glanced over at Jake. He didn't know Peterson that well, but he was sure Jake wasn't telling the truth. He knew Jake wanted to keep this under wraps as much as possible before letting anyone know about the older man's condition. He was sure that Orion also wanted to fabricate an air-tight story about what happened to him. They were good at deflection, which is one of the reasons they were able to keep their operations off the radar of the FBI, CIA, CSIS, SVR RF, Mossad, MI6, and other agencies that deal in information, covert ops, homeland security, and investigations.

Derek just shook his head as he followed Jake to the door. Before they left he took one last look at Peterson, who was normally a man full of intelligence and articulation, but was now a shell of his former self. He pitied the man.

"Get better John," he said.

Dr. Peterson looked over, and Derek could swear that there was a hint of recognition behind the older man's blank stare. They were about to leave when he said, "Mateo."

"What was that?" Derek asked, walking back over to him.

"Mateo," Peterson repeated. "Mateo."

Derek look over at Jake and the doctor, confused. "What does that mean?"

"Mateo is actually a Spanish name," the doctor piped in. "Maybe he's trying to tell you of someone he met?"

Jake grabbed Derek by the arm and started to pull him away from Peterson. "I think it's time we left," he stated, giving him *that* look which said that it was imperative that

they took their leave. Derek didn't resist as he walked through the door with Jake.

After a moment of silence, as the two men strolled to the elevator, Jake stated, "You know, Brianna is quite fond of you. She implied more than once that she has deep feelings for you."

Derek glanced over and saw a slight grin on Jake's face. "Brianna's a good friend, and the only feelings we share are feelings of friendship for one another. It's a mutual bond of loyalty to my wife's ... Sam's ... family," Derek replied. "Nothing more."

Jake shrugged at the comment. "Okay, if that's what it is. I'm just not so sure Brianna feels the same way."

"Enough!" Derek snapped back as he glared at the man.

Jake held his hands up defensively. "Okay, okay."



"So what do you think this key is?" asked Jake as they approached the car.

Derek thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. It could be the dagger, but that wouldn't make sense as to why he said, 'In the village' would it? Unless he meant that the dagger is the key and that it has to be taken to the village."

"The other question we have to answer is: Is the village the place where Brianna and the others tracked this 'Heart of the Diablo' to? or is the village where Brianna is?"

"Or this Mateo guy?" Derek added.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Jake stated as he unlocked the doors to the car. "You'll just have to go and discover the truth for yourself."

Derek didn't at all miss the reference to just himself. "You're not coming?"

"No of course not! I have other engagements to attend to. But I am giving you a guide."

"Who?"

"His name's Samuel. I'll introduce you at breakfast in the morning," Jake said as he climbed into the drivers seat.

"So it's just me and Samuel?" Derek asked, allowing a little frustration to show through. Usually on cases like this where there wasn't much information to go on, and potentially a lot of risk, a little larger team was dispatched to handle it.

"Our resources are limited right now," Jake explained.

Derek gave Jake an inquisitive look. "Limited?" he asked sarcastically. "You can afford the private jet, the wine, and Peterson's hospital bill, but you can't afford any more operatives!"

Jake shrugged innocently.

"So that's why you conscripted me again," concluded Derek. "You don't have enough people to go around."

"Not really. We conscripted you because you were one of the best we've ever had. And that's the truth."

Derek wasn't convinced, but if he wanted to know what happened to Brianna then he'd have to play along.

Chapter Five

THE PLAN

The blow across the face was enough to send the cowering man flying to the side and toppling to the ground. The others that watched the display of force backed up a step as the large man who had issued the blow began to pace back and forth in rage.

“Why was it so hard to catch these little nuisances?” he yelled in Spanish. “All you had to do was catch the girl, bring the men to me, and retrieve the dagger!”

The men stayed silent, knowing that the first one to speak up would get a brutal backhand. The man who had been slapped to the ground was beginning to stir. As the large man paced back and forth he came near to him and kicked him hard in the face. There was a loud crack as his nose splattered, blood sprayed freely from it, and he collapsed back to the ground.

“Does anyone else want to fail me again?”

“No Mateo,” came a whimper from one of the men in line.

“Is he the only one?” Mateo asked loudly.

“No,” came a weak reply.

“What?” he asked forcefully again, feigning to not have been able to hear the weak replies.

“No!” came the resounding cry.

“Good. Now get out of here and search for the girl.”

As the men filed out a single continual slow clap issued from the side. Mateo turned to see Lance leaning against the wall smiling. Lance was a shorter man with a shock of wild blonde hair. He was caucasian, wore loose fitting jeans, a beige t-shirt with a leather vest overtop, and a pair of hiking boots which were cinched up tight.

“That was a great display of firm leadership mate,” he said with a thick Australian accent as he started to walk over to Mateo.

“What do you want?” Mateo asked in accented English.

“Oh nothing. It’s just that Tower Six is here to assist you in your ... hunt.”

“We don’t need your help,” snapped Mateo. “Our deal was that you would provide us with intel and money and we would carry out the task. Then we would both share in the rewards that will come to us when we find the Diablo. But you were supposed to be a silent partner, remember?”

“I know mate. But it has been decided that the investment we have fronted is in need of securement via our assist.”

Mateo came right up to Lance and growled.

“Now now, there’s no need for that friend,” said Lance as he walked right around Mateo without even flinching. He strolled up to the poor man on the floor and glanced down for a moment before turning and addressing Mateo again. “If you won’t accept our assistance in securing our investment, we’ll have to pull out of our agreement. Then

you'll need to repay every last cent you borrowed, mate. Have you got the cash to pay us back right now?"

Mateo glared at the cocky Aussie.

Lance smiled. "Well, then you have no choice but to accept our help. Besides, we know where the dagger is." Mateo seemed to loosen up a bit at that statement.

"All you have to do is find the girl. If you do that then this will turn out good for both of us," Lance stated as he walked back towards Mateo. He stopped briefly to look up into the big man's face. "Believe me when I tell you that I know you have the ability to do that task. If you don't complete it then we will have a problem."

Mateo wanted to punch the man in the face with all his might, but he knew that he couldn't. Not now that Tower Six had entered the arena. *Maybe later*, he told himself. That thought brought a smile to his face as he watched Lance exit the building.



Samuel was a shorter middle-aged man who was balding. He had a slim build and wore everyday average clothing. He had a cheery disposition and a smile on his face. Derek liked him the instant he met him. His energy was contagious.

"Your English is pretty good," Derek noted as he shook Samuel's hand.

"I studied at the University of British Columbia in Canada," the man replied. "My actual major was English and I was able to get a degree in education. The only issue that came with me learning English in Canada is that I've picked up some of the Canadian slang such as saying 'eh' a

lot.” He chuckled to himself. “After that I moved back here to become an English teacher.

Derek laughed. “So how did you get mixed up with this guy then?” he asked in reference to Jake.

“Oh that’s easy. After I got my degree I realized that there was no way I was going to be able to pay it back with the salary I was making here, so I moved to America in search of work and somehow Orion found me and needed a translator who spoke Spanish and English. It was a pretty easy choice from there eh.”

“You’re sending me into the Amazon with a school teacher?” Derek asked Jake, a little more contempt entering his voice than he intended. “No offence Samuel,” he apologized as he turned again to face the man.

“Don’t worry about Samuel,” Jake stated confidently. “He has other skills than just translation, and Orion made sure to put him through our field training program. Samuel will be an asset for you in more ways than just fluent translation.”

That seemed to put Derek a little more at ease. He knew that Orion was very selective of their operatives. “So why didn’t Samuel here go with Bosco, Peterson, and Brianna if he’s a native of Colombia, has all this extra training, and on the payroll of Orion?” Derek asked skeptically.

“Samuel was occupied on a different task and couldn’t be spared,” Jake replied. “Besides, Brianna’s Spanish is top notch, and with Dr. Peterson and Bosco I figured there wasn’t anything they couldn’t do.”

There was an awkward silence as Jake just realized what he said. “Apparently I was wrong,” he finally admitted. “But it wasn’t because of their inability, or some deficiency on their part, but rather due to unforeseen factors.”

The explanation didn't sit well with Derek. He had this feeling that there was something Jake wasn't telling him.

"Anyway, shall we go over the plans?" Jake said, trying to divert the awkwardness.

As they ate breakfast Jake explained what he thought the best approach would be. He pulled out the map and showed Samuel where this presumed village that Dr. Peterson said was supposedly located.

Samuel looked intently at the map and digested it. "The jungle is a dangerous place," he stated as he looked at where they had to go. "El diablo," he whispered. He chuckled and took another bite of his breakfast.

"What was that?" Derek asked.

"Oh ... I said el Diablo. The Devil."

"Why would you say that?" Jake asked.

"Because this is one of the parts of the Amazon that no one goes because of el Diablo. A great evil lives there. Anyone who has ever gone there has never come out."

Derek and Jake looked at each other.

"Then why did Dr. Peterson say there was a village there?" Derek asked.

"I don't know. All I know is what urban legend tells me, and since there is no one alive who has claimed to have gone there and returned, I have to believe there is some truth to it eh."

"Does that bother you?" Jake asked.

"Not really," replied Samuel. "I have seen some pretty strange things and I can't live my life being afraid of urban legend."

That brought a smile to Derek's face. He was really starting to like this guy. "Can you get me to this area?" he asked.

"It shouldn't be a problem. We'll fly into this village

here,” he placed a finger on the map. “And then we’ll see if we can’t find a trail or something that will lead us to where this Dr. Peterson said we should go.”

Derek looked at the map in silence for a moment. “You know ... it’s possible we’re going on a wild goose chase.”

“Wild goose.” Samuel chuckled. “I really like these English idioms.”

Derek cracked a smile for moment, then got serious once more. “Dr. Peterson was not in his right mind when he gave us this information. What if he was imagining something that wasn’t there?”

“That’s always a possibility,” replied Jake. “But what else do we have to go on? Bosco is still missing and, for whatever reason, was prevented from giving us a location. Unfortunately, even the best communication technology has major challenges when you’re in such a desolate area like this,” he pointed at the map. “It would be nice if we knew where he was.”

“I know where he is,” replied Derek, which drew a surprised expression from Jake.

“Do tell.”

“He’s gone after Brianna.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know Bosco. He wouldn’t leave someone behind, and if he did because of necessity, he would have a plan to go back and get them.”

“Interesting conclusion,” Jake mused as he sipped his coffee.

“So when do we leave?” Derek asked.

“The final preparations won’t be completed until tomorrow. I know we can’t waste anymore time, but it is unavoidable if we are going to have everything we need,” replied Jake.

“Okay,” replied Derek. “But every moment Brianna spends out there is a moment closer to her not making it home.”

Jake shifted a little in his seat. “You know ... we might have to entertain the idea that she’s not with us anymore.”

“Until I can confirm that, we are going under the pretence of a rescue mission not a recovery mission,” Derek replied with a seriousness that left no room for misinterpreting his intent.

Jake merely nodded.

“So I’ll meet you guys at the plane tomorrow,” stated Samuel. “I’ll go in early to make sure all the equipment is there and tested.”

“Agreed,” said Jake. “We’ll be there by 05:00. Does that sound good Derek?”

Derek nodded. He wanted to leave as soon as possible, but he understood the need to have the proper equipment and preparations before heading on an operation like this. He had been on so many of these over the years but this one had higher stakes than normal. He couldn’t believe that Brianna was dead. He wouldn’t believe that.

Chapter Six

A TEST OF SKILL

Derek swiped the key-card through the reader, allowed the light on the keypad to flash green, and opened the door. The room opened up into a large main area which had a couch, TV, coffee table, end table, desk, and small kitchenette. The door leading to the bathroom was off to the left, while the one leading to the bedroom was through the main living area and off to the right. He was always amazed at the financial resources that Orion had in order to be able to put their operatives up in such lavish accommodations. Between this, the private jet, and the wine, it made Derek wonder about Jake's statement that resources at Orion were tight. *Tight compared to what?* he thought as he entered the room. *What isn't Jake telling me?*

He threw his hat, the satchel Jake had given him which contained the dagger, tablet, a few other helpful items, and key-card onto the coffee table, turned on the TV, and headed for the bathroom. He turned the cold water faucet on at the sink, cupped some water with his hands, and

splashed it onto his face. The cool refreshing water felt so good on his warm skin.

As he looked up in the mirror for a second, movement caught his eye. His eyes went wide and his heart skipped a beat. He moved to the side just in time as a fist flew past him and smashed into the mirror; a huge crack appeared along its length. He tried to swing around, but was grabbed on the back of the neck and was pushed down, smashing his head into the counter.

Pain shot through his face as he hit the granite. He managed to turn his body just enough to get his right arm up in order to deflect the next incoming attack. He was still in an awkward position, facing sideways as opposed to head-on, but it was the best he could do at the moment with the force that was being applied to him by the unknown assailant. He barely blocked two more blows with his right arm and took a punch in the ribs while he grabbed for the blow dryer that was hanging on the wall. Derek pulled the hair dryer from the wall and managed to turn enough in order to smash the attacker across the side of the head with it.

The assailant stumbled back. Derek knew he had to get out of the close quarters and took the opportunity to stagger out of the bathroom. He spun around the corner to the main room and tripped on his way out; the dizziness from the shock to his head having an affect on him. He rolled and came up in a shaky stance as he tried to get his bearings. He felt the warm blood ooze down the side of his face; his head throbbed from the blow, but his vision began to come back into focus.

The attacker came out a moment later, wiping some blood from the corner of his mouth with his thumb. He was about the same height as Derek, was wearing jeans,

and a dark blue tank top which showed his heavily muscled arms. He had olive skin, dark eyes and short dark hair. His facial features appeared to be of asian decent.

He smiled as he adopted a martial stance. "So you must be Derek Vico," he stated as much as asked. "I've heard so much about you. I hope this fight's not a disappointment."

Derek shook his head, partly to shake off the rest of the dizziness he was feeling from having his head smashed into the counter, and partly because he had no idea who this guy was. "Sorry man, but I don't know you," he said sternly.

"Oh well. That doesn't matter," the attacker replied nonchalantly. "I was sent here for one thing."

"And that is?" Derek asked out of reflex.

"The dagger of course!"

When he mentioned the dagger Derek reflexively glanced over to the satchel sitting on the coffee table mere feet away. The attacker smiled and moved as fast as lightning toward it. Derek roundhouse kicked him in the chest before he could reach the bag. The attacker managed to sidestep and roll with the blow enough for the strike to merely glance him. It was enough to put him off balance though as he stumbled to the side.

He got his balance quickly and came in at Derek with a flurry of blows, each one expertly deflected. Derek returned the strikes with counter strikes of his own, but the Asian deflected those. The two pressed one another with blow after blow, neither one gaining an upper hand and each showing their skill in hand-to-hand combat. The attacker disengaged after a cunning parry which put Derek off balance and leaped up on the coffee table. Derek regained his footing quickly and came in with a kick,

thinking to sweep his legs from him. The Asian leaped and flipped over Derek, landing perfectly on the other side of him. As he hit the ground he shot his leg out at mid level. The action happened so fast that Derek couldn't quite get his arm around in time to completely block the kick. He took a glancing blow to the side which pushed him into the table. The attacker swung his other leg around in a round-house motion. Derek ducked the attack, but was met with a palm thrust to the chest that he couldn't block which sent him sprawling backwards and over the table. He hit the hard wood and crumpled to the floor after bouncing off the couch.

The thief grabbed the bag and tried to spin for the door but Derek sprung up faster than the man expected and slammed him into the wall. Derek took a backhand, but returned that with a well placed punch to the ribs. The attacker grimaced, but shook it off and kept fighting. They grappled with each other, slamming one another up against the walls; grunting and groaning as they delivered and accepted blows.

The assailant smashed Derek against the door and tried a number of times to knee him in the side. The seasoned warrior summoned every ounce of energy he could and lifted the attacker into the air and tossed him away. The Asian looked shocked as he left the floor and flew backward through the air. He hit the ground on his back and rolled into a standing position. When he was upright again he was faced immediately with an angry Derek who slammed him in the chest with a powerful spartan kick. The man went flying back into the glass patio doors that led to the balcony. The glass shattered as the attacker flew through it and into the railing. Derek stalked toward him relentlessly.

The Asian looked around quickly, slung the satchel over his shoulder, grabbed the railing, and leaped. Derek ran onto the balcony to see the man land a floor lower onto another balcony.

“What’s going on?” he heard Jake scream from the door.

Derek looked back quickly to see Jake standing in the doorway. “He’s got the dagger!” he yelled back, then grabbed the railing and sailed over it.

“Derek!” Jake yelled as he ran to the balcony.



Derek could see that he was gaining on the attacker. The thought came into his mind that he should be more careful, but he pushed it aside and pursued the thief recklessly.

He leaped onto one balcony just as the door was opening. The young woman who was coming out onto the patio yelled as she saw Derek land on the platform.

“Sorry,” he said as he jumped onto the rail and leaped away to the next one. As he flew through the air he could hear the woman shriek. He managed to grab the railing of the platform below and then leaped immediately to a lower patio opposite the one he was on.

The attacker jumped to the next lower patio, grabbed that railing, and leaped over. He looked back after he landed. Derek was flying through the air at him.

Derek landed on the outside of the railing, reached out, and just missed the attacker as the man leaped away. Derek lost his footing and grunted as he barely managed to hang on. He felt the tissue in his arm stretch. The attacker, on the balcony adjacent to him now, looked over and

smiled as he leaped away again, this time lower. Derek let go.

He fell to the next floor and grabbed that railing. His arms screamed at him and one of his hands went numb as he landed. After a moment he managed to pull himself over. He ran across the balcony and launched himself from it to the one below where the attacker just landed. Before he could get to him the man jumped again to a lower floor.

Derek followed.

The two repeated the chase down the hotel three more times; each leap put Derek a little bit closer until he managed to time his last jump just right as he landed on the inside of the railing. He saw the attacker right in front of him about to leap from the balcony. He ran over and attempted to grab the bag that was hanging from his shoulder, but couldn't get a hold of it as the man went over the railing. The struggle for the bag put the Asian off-balance and he fell fifteen feet to the ground. He landed hard but rolled which helped him mitigate the damage from the impact.

Derek leaped over after him.

The attacker glanced up. Derek saw the look of surprise on his face as he flew through the air. He quickly side-stepped and bolted away. His legs pumped hard as he ran toward the street. All the traffic was currently at a standstill. He charged right up to a man sitting on a Ducati motorcycle, grabbed him by the neck, and threw him from the bike. Before the bike went down he jumped on it and sped off between the idling cars.

Derek was up almost as soon as he landed. He saw the Asian take off and spotted another bike: an Aprilia RSV. "I need your bike now!" he yelled as he sprinted toward the guy. "Entender!"

The man looked shocked. Derek grabbed the guy forcefully and threw him from the bike. He landed hard on the ground and started spouting off in Spanish as he tried to get up.

“No comprende!” Derek yelled back as he revved the engine, then took off.

The thief wasn't that far ahead as the traffic was making it difficult for him to take off at top speed. Still, he weaved and dodged in and out between the vehicles. Derek went into the lanes on the left while the attacker took the lanes on the right. The operative kept glancing over to see how he could weave in to where the thief was while he was trying not to hit any of the slow moving vehicles.

The traffic eventually eased up as the road led to a major highway. They took the onramp and opened it up. Derek's bike roared as he accelerated and switched gears. The two raced down the highway hitting a hundred miles per hour ... one twenty five ... one fifty ... two hundred. The world was a blur as it whizzed by. Cars almost seemed as though they were standing still as the two of them whipped passed.

Something inside Derek told him again that he was being reckless but he didn't care. Since Samantha's death he took risks that he never would have before. He felt that life was barely worth living without her and he didn't care anymore whether he lived or died. He just couldn't bring himself to end it by his own hand, and since he knew that Brianna needed him, he would fight on, albeit recklessly on the edge.

He had a mission to complete and he knew the reckless behaviour would help him to do whatever it took to bring it to its end. And if he lost his life in the process ... then so be it as it would end his torment. It was probably better

that way. His heart wrenched inside him though as he thought about his need to stay alive for Brianna.

The Asian zigged and zagged, occasionally glancing back when he had a straight stretch.

Derek was right there, pacing him. He put his head down and opened up the throttle which put him within arms reach of the thief as they hit a long curve in the highway. They both leaned into it but started to drift into the oncoming lanes due to the speed they were going. As they rounded the bend cars and trucks started to swerve and honk their horns, trying to avoid the suicidal bikers. Derek darted between the vehicles narrowly missing them. The Asian went onto the shoulder, jammed on the brake which put him into a skid, then swerved back into the right lane and hit the accelerator. His bike roared, popped up into a short wheelie, then took off at lightning speed.

Derek managed to swerve back into his lane and sped off again in pursuit. The two men raced across the hot pavement of the highway cutting in and out. A few miles down the Asian suddenly swerved to the right and took an off-ramp. Derek pursued.

They swerved around a few vehicles, narrowly missing them by mere inches. Derek managed to pull up beside his attacker and tried to force him down by kicking at his bike. The thief kept his balance and responded by throwing his fist out at Derek. The blow glanced harmlessly off Derek's shoulder. They separated for a moment as they had to whip around another car then came back at each other again, kicking and punching. Both riders managed to somehow stay upright despite their closeness and the speed at which they were going.

The crazed operative saw the bag hanging around the thief's right shoulder. He let off the accelerator for a frac-

tion of a second which slowed him down enough to be able to steer around him to the right, then he twisted the throttle again, putting himself close enough to the back corner of the thief's bike and in striking distance of the bag. He grabbed it.

The thief tried to kick at Derek but the strikes weren't effective. Derek pulled harder as the man struggled to get free. Sirens rang out behind the two. They glanced back and saw two police cars coming up fast.

"Let go!" yelled the Asian as he looked over at Derek.

"No! You're not going anywhere with that dagger!" Derek shouted back, his face full of fierce determination.

The Asian glanced around desperately, then released his right hand from the throttle for a fraction of a second and slipped the bag off. The move cost him some speed. As he drifted back beside Derek he locked the operative with a hateful stare. Derek knew the thief wouldn't dare try and dislodge him from the bike now that the cops were in close pursuit: the Asian couldn't risk not being able to retrieve the bag as the police would be right there. Mere inches apart, he took one last look at Derek then darted away, swerving around some cars and down a side street.

Derek swung the bag over his shoulder, glanced back at the cops for a second, then tucked his head and twisted the throttle after gearing down. The bike roared again and took off. The sirens quickly becoming distant sounds as he raced through the streets.

Chapter Seven

DEREK'S PAST

“**W**hat was that?” Derek yelled at Jake when he saw him in front of the hotel as he pulled up on the bike. He just left it where it was, not concerning himself at all that he had stolen it. He knew Orion, with their connections, would make sure that this incident wouldn’t get traced back to any of them.

Jake merely shrugged. “Obviously someone has intel on what it is that we’re doing and, from the look of him, I would suspect that he was from Tower Six. As I stated before, they are somehow involved.

“We received information that they might make an appearance. They obviously want the dagger and are desperate to get their hands on it.”

“Thanks for stating the obvious, Tips!” Derek burst out.

“Listen, I don’t know why you’re so excited about this?” Jake stated, trying to defuse the volatile man. “You performed beyond our expectations, *and* you retrieved the item. All-in-all I’d say your first encounter was a success.”

Derek merely glared at the man and shoved the bag into Jake's chest. "Here! You keep this thing for tonight."

"But ... but ... ," Jake stammered as Derek walked by him heading for the door that led back into the hotel. "I'm not a field operative anymore!" he hollered. "What if they come back?"

Derek waved his hand dismissively without saying a word.



Derek stood in front of the shattered glass of the patio door. He managed to get most of it out of the room and onto the deck. The cops wouldn't be coming to question him anytime soon as he knew that Jake would handle it. He chuckled. *Ya ... lack of "resources,"* he thought to himself.

He replayed every aspect of the encounter in his mind as he looked out onto the city. The sun was beginning to go down and the warm breeze from off the Caribbean ocean filtered through the streets and into his room. The smell of the warm salty air was calming. Derek could feel the beads of sweat forming on his shaven head.

As he thought harder on what had happened mere hours ago he wondered why this guy just didn't use a gun or a knife, or any weapon for that matter? If he really wanted the dagger that badly he could have just shot Derek and been done with it. The attacker had ample opportunity to do just that and make off with the item. Even if he just wounded Derek so he couldn't fight, and then searched around for the artifact, seemed like a much smarter move than a test of hand-to-hand skill. It just didn't make sense unless the guy was either overconfident

in his abilities or he just enjoyed beating people senseless. Maybe there was another reason but Derek couldn't figure it out, and the throbbing of his head was distracting him from thinking too deeply on the subject.

He made sure all the locks were set on his door before jumping in the shower. The last thing he wanted was another encounter from Tower Six tonight. In truth, he knew that if Tower Six wanted to pay him another visit the locks would be merely an inconvenience for them anyway. But Derek really didn't care.



“Okay, well this is going to be a problem,” Lance said to Brighton, in his thick Australian accent, as the two of them walked down the hall which led toward the helicopter hanger.

“I almost had it,” Brighton chided himself. “But that guy is crazy!” He paused to collect his thoughts. “I take calculated risks, but my first experience with Derek Vico is that he either doesn't care about his life or he's just really confident about his skill.”

Lance snorted and waved at Brighton dismissively. “Almost isn't good enough,” he said in a cold tone as he stopped and turned toward the young Asian. “You should know as well as anyone that Tower Six doesn't look kindly on failure. And since Vico doesn't care for his own life it should be easier to take it from him.

“Maybe you weren't focussed enough on the *actual* mission?” Lance questioned.

Brighton was silent, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at the Aussie.

“What? You got something to say mate?”

“Oh, I know about your desire to *test* yourself against this man. And quite frankly I find it ridiculous. I hope, for your sake, that you get your priorities straight and make sure that you don’t fail again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” answered Brighton coldly after a moment. How he hated having to answer to Lance! He hated everything about the arrogant, self-interested man, who lacked every semblance of honour.

“Good,” said Lance as he started down the hall again. “We’re just going to have to intercept this Derek Vico before he has a chance to find the girl. When we do, then we will take the relic from him.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Brighton dared to ask.

“With our friend Mateo of course,” replied Lance with a chuckle.

“Savage,” Brighton grunted under his breath.

“Maybe. But he can be an effective savage; a tool on the field in order to help us achieve our goals. A means to an end.”

Brighton couldn’t deny the man’s logic. Still ... conceding the point didn’t deter his desire to smash Lance in the face! His better judgement resisted that desire, however.

The hall opened up into a hanger which housed three Helicopters. One looked as though it was ready to take off.

“Remember, mate, the dagger at all costs,” Lance said to Brighton. He clapped him on the shoulder and turned away.

“You’re not coming?” Brighton asked.

“Not this time. I have other things to attend to, but I’ll try and monitor your progress from here *if* communications hold out.”

Brighton didn't have a good feeling about that.

Lance must have sensed his uneasiness. "Don't worry," he said. "We just launched a new Cube Sat. It's top of the line with sensors that will be able to detect you anywhere, even in the thick Amazon." He smiled, as if that was supposed to take away all of Brighton's apprehension.

Brighton still didn't like it. He knew that missions succeed or fail due to communication or the lack thereof.

He didn't have a good feeling at all.



Derek took a look at the equipment that Orion provided for the mission. It was all top of the line—from the AR-15's to the Toughbook laptop with satellite link, simplex and satellite radios, and a Glock 17 9mm handgun.

"All good?" asked Jake with a knowing smile.

"It'll do."

"Great! Then I won't delay you two any more. Remember, radio us when you get to town before you head to the location and again when you find the village Peterson was talking about, or if anything significant happens.

"And oh ya," Jake said as he turned back to face the man. "Just a heads up, the communications were a little spotty just before Brianna and the others went missing. I don't know if it was a problem with their equipment or what, but we upgraded your gear so you shouldn't have any of those issues. I just thought you would like to know."

Derek nodded. That didn't ease his concern he had for Brianna. He prayed that she was still alive; that he wasn't too late to save her.

“Adios amigo!” said Samuel as he climbed into the cockpit of the single engine plane. Their course was going to take them far to the south—just south of Bogota—and into a small town which was close to where Peterson had indicated on the map. They would then hike deeper into the Amazon, into the more desolate parts of southern Colombia. Despite the large population of Colombia there still remained much of the Amazon that was untouched. These were wild areas where few went. It was a perfect place for mysteries of the past to remain uncovered. Uncovered until groups such as Orion or Tower Six decided it was time to pull back the curtain of time and reveal their secrets.

Derek climbed in after Samuel. “Wait, where’s the pilot?” he asked as he saw Samuel put on the head set and start flicking switches.

“You’re looking at him eh,” he replied as he continued his pre start-up checks.

“I thought you were an English teacher?”

“I am. I’m an English teacher who can fly a plane eh.”

“Those weren’t skills taught you after you were recruited by Orion were they?” Derek asked.

“No. I learned to fly before all that,” replied Samuel with his infectious smile.

“Oh ...” Derek moved into the copilot seat. “You any good?” he asked.

“It depends.”

“On what!” Derek exclaimed.

Samuel just smiled and fired up the engine.

“Come on man! You have to give me something.”

Samuel chuckled to himself as they taxied out of the hangar and onto the tarmac.



The flight seemed pretty smooth during the first two hours. Samuel kept checking his map with the landmarks he had planned out for the flight just to make sure they were on the right track. He would make an adjustment every now and again. Derek just let him do his thing as he tried to enjoy the beautiful countryside below. He had never been to Colombia before—on a mission or even just for a vacation—and was really glad that his Dad insisted on him taking Spanish all through high school and into college. Even with his training though, he still had to work at communicating properly as he didn't get much practice conversing with it.

“So how did you get involved with Orion?” Samuel asked, breaking the long silence and pulling Derek from his reflections.

He didn't really want to answer that question. Derek sat back and stared out the window, his jaw clenching. He would rather those last ten years disappeared from his life.

Samuel pressed again.

Derek closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he weighed his options. He could continue to ignore Samuel or he could get it over with as fast as possible. He opened his eyes and glanced at Samuel as he answered. “It's kind of a long story.”

“That's okay. We've got nothing but time eh.”

Derek sighed. “Do I really have to tell you about this?” he asked, resignation resounding in his voice.

“Yes.”

“When I was about six—“

“This story goes that far back!” exclaimed Samuel in surprise.

“I told you it was a long story.”

“Oh ... this is gonna be good eh,” Samuel said with a smile.

“Whether it’s good or not I don’t know,” explained Derek. “All I know is that it’s a story; others can judge its merit.”

“Whoa! That’s deep.”

“Do you want me to tell this or not?” an exasperated Derek asked.

Samuel remained quiet and nodded eagerly.

“Good. As I was saying, when I was about six my mom was murdered in front of me.”

Samuel gasped.

“My Dad wasn’t home at the time. I only managed to escape because my Mom hid me under the bed. I could hear the screams and struggle; she was fighting back with all her might, but it wasn’t good enough.” Derek paused. He could see that Samuel was on the edge of his seat.

“When my Dad came home he found his wife lying in a pool of her own blood. I was too scared to come out, and I didn’t want to see my mom’s body all mangled. When it was happening all I did was lay under the bed cupping my ears to try and drown out the sounds. I don’t know how long I was there for, but my Dad eventually found me. The next few months were a blur with them asking me questions about the crime, therapists trying to help me, and still trying to be a normal kid in school. In truth, however, I was never normal again.”

“What did you and your Dad do then?”

“We never went back to that house again,” Derek stated flatly. “We moved to a different city, Dad got a different job, and we tried to move on.”

Samuel waited in silence for Derek to continue.

“It was a rough go for the first couple of years. I was angry and expressed that anger on anyone that was around. I didn’t make any friends at all. And who could blame them? No one wanted to hang around a kid that could explode at any moment without any warning at all. I felt that nobody understood me, and I relived the moment my Mom died every night for three years.

“Then one day my Dad came and picked me up after school, which was really unusual, and said he found something that I would be interested in. We drove to the inner city and stopped at what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. He parked the car and we went into what, I guess, was the main door.

“As soon as we swung the door open I heard a flurry of activity coming from within the building. I also saw numerous mats that were used for sparing laid out. All around the place were, what appeared to be, set ups for urban gymnastics. It was the coolest thing I had ever seen.

“Kids of all ages were using the equipment with older trainers. There were also people—men and women—that appeared to be training groups of kids in all manner of martial arts.” Derek paused, collecting his thoughts.

“As my Dad and I walked in he caught the attention of one of the martial arts trainers—an older Asian man with a sleek build and darkish greying hair. He came over and shook hands with my Dad. Dad called him Master Haruki.

“He was a serious man who walked around at first looking me up and down. I didn’t know what to think. I was quick to find out that he had a heart for troubled kids who had been through trauma that no one should ever endure. He took me in and channeled my anger and rage and helped me to focus it through the discipline of martial arts and urban gymnastics. He did such a good job that I

ended up competing in numerous competitions, both in martial arts and urban gymnastics, and managed to win quite a few top trophies.

“I trained hard every single day. I went there after school and on weekends, and then I started to go there before school. If my Dad couldn’t take me then I would bike, it didn’t matter the weather. I was driven to battle the demons that haunted me. Eventually the screams of my mother lessened; the flashbacks became increasingly less until they went away altogether. The best part was that after a few years the nightmares stopped.

“After a couple years of college I joined the Navy Seals for a time, which is where I got my firearms and tactical training from.”

“Wow,” that’s quite the story,” Samuel remarked. “So how does Orion fit in to this?”

Derek turned to him and struck him with a look that said, *Come on, you can’t figure that out?*

“You know just as well as I do that Orion always has their feelers out for prospective candidates that will help them in their obsession of collecting modern and ancient tech with the, so-called purpose, of helping mankind,” Derek replied.

“These missions aren’t the safest. Their scholars and researchers are often in need of protection and help completing them by guys like myself,” he explained.

“Too true,” Samuel responded, then his eyes suddenly went to the dash where he looked at the GPS unit Orion had provided them that had every aircraft within a five mile area on it.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asked as he noticed the sudden confusion in Samuel’s eyes.

“There’s another aircraft on this screen which is heading right for us.”

“And that’s a problem how?” Derek responded, not really understanding.

“I checked the flight plan over and over again, and there aren’t supposed to be any aircraft in this air space today.”

“Maybe someone just flew off course,” Derek surmised, but his conclusion was brought to a thundering halt when they saw, what looked to be a military helicopter swoop in front of them then turn to the side revealing the side mounted 50 cal gun aimed right at them. Sounds of gunfire echoed in the cockpit as holes appeared in the engine compartment.

Smoke started billowing from the plane as Samuel banked away from the helicopter. He tried to maintain altitude, but it was clear he could not.

They were going down.

Chapter Eight

BEING HUNTED

The engine roared angrily as thick smoke billowed from its housing.

“We have to go now!” Derek yelled as he unbuckled his harness, grabbed Samuel by the shoulder, and headed for the back of the plane.

He quickly snatched one of the equipment bags then threw a parachute to Samuel whose face was white as a ghost. “Put it on!” he yelled.

Samuel fumbled with it for a moment but managed to slide it onto his back. Derek looked around and saw that the AR-15s had been thrown to the other side of the plane with the other equipment bag. He launch himself over to that side of the craft as it started to tilt to the right and down. He landed hard as the rifles and gear started to slide off to the side but managed to grab one of the rifles just before it fell out of reach. The bag slid away.

Bullets came ripping though the cabinet. He and Samuel instinctively hit the floor.

“Get to the door!” Derek yelled. Samuel nodded his head furiously as he began to crawl toward the exit, trying

to stay as low as possible. The plane jerked as it hit a pocket of updraft which launched Samuel off the floor about a foot and then slammed him down hard. The jolt actually brought him closer to the door and he was able to reach the handle. He looked back at Derek who had not yet donned his parachute.



Samuel grabbed the latch of the door and looked to Derek who was trying to right himself as the plane hammered him back and forth. “Do it!” he yelled.

Samuel hesitated as he looked to the latch and back to Derek. The operative had somehow managed to now get into an upright position.

“Do it!” Derek scream again.

Samuel pulled the latch and, as he was being pulled from the plane, he felt something grab the strap on his chute. The wind ripped into his face as he plummeted for the ground. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed that Derek was hanging onto him. He had looped an arm through one of the straps on the chute. His body and legs were flailing widely behind them as they descended.

Samuel went to pull the ripcord but Derek grabbed his hand. “Not yet!” he yelled as they soared toward the earth. He pulled himself in toward Samuel and managed to somehow get his legs around him so that he was hanging onto him from the side.

They were falling and twirling. At one moment Samuel would see the sky and then the ground below, and the sky again and then the ground.

“What are you waiting for!” Samuel yelled at him.

Samuel heard the chopper coming in, but couldn't

pinpoint it as he tumbled. He started to scream as he saw the Earth fast approaching and then Derek pulled the chute. It spread out quickly and caught the air, slowing their decent drastically. Derek grunted with the sudden jerk and pressure that was applied to his arm. They were a mere few hundred feet from the ground. Samuel's heart felt as though it would beat out of his chest.

Samuel looked over Derek's shoulder as they continued their descent. The helicopter was hovering a few hundred feet away and he just knew that, at any moment, he and Derek were about to get riddled with bullets from their .50 Cal. Derek tried to reach around his back with one hand and grab his AR-15 but couldn't reach it.



“*W*hat are you doing!” yelled Brighton to the pilot.

“We have orders from Lance to take the plane down and recover the dagger at all cost,” came the pilot's cold reply.

Brighton had the same orders, but he didn't want to see a man like Derek Vico die like a chump, being shot up with no way to defend himself.

He pulled his gun and held it to the pilots head.

“What are you doing?” the pilot yelled.

“Get your hand off that trigger,” Brighton demanded coldly.

The pilot paused for a moment, then grudgingly complied.

“Good. Now that wasn't so hard was it?” Brighton asked as he holstered his pistol once more.

The pilot sneered at him. “Wait until Lance finds out that you let them go.”

“Oh but he’s not going to find out is he?” Brighton asked threateningly as he put a hand on the back of the pilot’s neck. “Not if you value your life Joseph, and that of your wife Maria.”

Joseph shot his head around and looked at the smiling man. “How do you ...”

“Oh I know more than you’d like to find out,” Brighton replied. “Don’t worry, we’ll find Derek and his friend, and when we do we will complete our objective.”

“What’s going on?” The gunner shouted from the midship of the helicopter.

Brighton’s cold eyes bore into Joseph as they stared at each other for a moment.

“Sorry, but I had a problem with the forward guns and didn’t have enough time to swing you around for a shot before they landed,” Joseph lied.

Brighton nodded. “Now let’s put down where we’ve inserted Gerald with Meteo’s men and continue the hunt.”



The helicopter hovered their menacingly for a moment longer that felt like an eternity, then disengaged. Derek watched as it went away and felt the trees under him as he and Samuel crashed into the thick Amazon forest.

They smashed through the trees and tried to shield their faces from the slapping branches. Eventually they came to rest as their shoot tangled up in the mass of thick green boughs.

Derek worked feverishly in order to cut away the para-

chute straps from his friend. “We have to move!” he said to Samuel. “They’ll be coming for us!”

Samuel tried the best he could to help and eventually he was free of the straps. The two men carefully made their way down through the thick branches of the massive tree. When they made it to the ground Derek took stock of the supplies they had which were limited. He pulled out the handgun from the bag and tossed it to Samuel. “You know how to use this?” he asked the man.

Samuel pulled out the magazine to check if it was loaded then put it back and cocked it. “Oh ya.”

Derek smiled. “School teacher hey?”

Samuel gave him a knowing smile.

Derek pulled out the ToughBook, fired it up, and checked to see if the GPS was working on it. It was. He pulled up the map of where they were. They crashed quite a ways from the town they were to land in, but he figured they could make it there in a couple of days at a forced march. While he had the signal, Derek quickly pulled up the e-mail and scribed a quick message to Jake, but when he pushed send an error message came up stating that the signal was lost. Even the map he had just pulled up a moment earlier went down.

Derek sighed and tried again. No response. He rebooted and tried again. Nothing.

The frustration was evident on his face.

“Are you having problems with the laptop?” Samuel asked.

“Maybe a little,” Derek replied as he closed the Book. “But we’ll be okay,” he said reassuringly.

“It’s really too bad we were only able to grab one of the gear bags,” he explained.

Unfortunately they only had two extra mags of thirty

rounds each for the AR-15 and three extra mags of nine rounds each for the Glock 17. He tossed an extra mag to Samuel who put it in his pocket.

He went back into the pack and dug around furiously. Eventually he looked up at Samuel. “We’re a little less okay. We don’t have the radios,” he said seriously. “They were in the other bag with the extra ammo and rations.”

Samuel nodded. “Which way?” he asked.

“North East from here,” Derek replied. “It’s gonna take us a couple days and we have limited rations.”

Again, Samuel nodded. “We’d better be going then, before they show up.”

Derek pulled the AR-15 around to his front and opened up the Book again. This time, after a few moments, he managed to get the signal from the Sat. He reached in his pocket for his phone. He keyed in the link between the ToughBook and phone quickly, before he lost the connection again, so that he could use the signal coming from the enhanced laptop. He then closed up the ToughBook, put it back in the pack, slung the bag onto his shoulders and engaged the maps app. He studied the map for a few moments, memorizing the rough route and making note of certain landmarks, then bounded off through the thick brush. Samuel hurried in behind him.



*J*ake grabbed his coffee and walked over to the young woman, Nicole, who was busy typing away at her computer. She wore a headset and was sitting behind three different monitors, each one displaying different data and view points of the Amazon.

The rest of the room was full of activity as other oper-

atives moved between monitors or chatted on their headsets. Some computers showed displays of Arizona in North America. Another was of Egypt.

Jake marvelled at how many different operations were going on. Things were just getting weirder and they were stuck in the middle of it. That's the way Jake liked it though.

He shook himself from his thoughts and focused on what was happening with Derek and Samuel. "Where are they now?" Jake asked.

Nicole pulled up another screen which looked like a satellite link setup which displayed southern Colombia. "That's weird," she said as she went about typing on her keyboard.

"What?"

"Sorry sir, but they were just here a moment ago but now I don't see the plane on the monitor anymore," she replied.

"Could it be a technical issue? Did you get a warning message about their signal?"

"It could be a technical issue but that's doubtful as there is nothing preventing us from getting a solid signal. There's no inclement weather or any astronomical disturbances. And no, I didn't get a warning about signal disruption, but that's not surprising as the plane was equipped with an older device that isn't fitted with that kind of tech."

"What about the signal from the Book?" Jake asked as he put his coffee down and moved closer to the screen.

She started typing away and suddenly a blip came up over thirty miles away from where they were supposed to be. It seemed to be moving toward the destination.

"What are they doing there?" Jake asked.

“Maybe they had trouble with the plane and had to land somewhere else?” the woman surmised.

“Maybe,” Jake replied unconvinced.

“Should we dispatch an extraction team?” she asked.

“No. We don’t have the resources right now,” he replied as he glanced around the room again, noting the level of activity. “Try and contact them on the radio.”

“Amazon Ops team, from Colombia base one. Come in Ops team.” There was no response. She repeated the call. Again, no response.

“Keep trying. I’ll notify the Ops Director,” he said as he pulled back from the screen.



Derek moved through the thick brush easily. He obviously had experience with this kind of back-country hiking. Samuel surprised him a little with his ability to keep up. He was obviously in better physical shape than he appeared to be in. They dipped down into lower areas, then came up through higher spots, jumping streams, moving like men possessed through the thick jungle. They knew they were going to be in trouble if they didn’t move as fast as they could, and they had lots of ground to cover with limited supplies. It was pretty clear that they were going to have to spend at least one night out in the jungle without the proper gear to do so. They knew they would just have to make it work.

The forest teemed with life! Everywhere they looked they saw strange bugs, small animals of all sorts, and even an Iguana that was close to six feet long!

They traveled for hours, looking at the map every so often just to make sure they were on the right track. They

made small corrections once in a while, but essentially stayed on course. A few hours into the day they stopped and Derek found a certain vine as they rested by a river. He pulled his knife and cut a three front section off, then tipped it to his mouth. A moment later water began to flow.

“How did you know how to do that?” Samuel asked.

“Youtube,” Derek replied with a smile as he handed the branch to Samuel. “You didn’t know about this?”

“I don’t spend much time in the jungle.”

Samuel took a drink. “Look at that!” he whispered when he pulled the branch away from his mouth and pointed to what appeared to be three pinkish dolphin heads coming out of the water and looking at them. “Those are river dolphins,” he said excitedly.

Derek looked up to see them just before they dipped back under the water. It was quite the sight; another one for the memory books. “We need to get going,” he said suddenly, bringing them back to reality. He wasn’t exactly sure they were being followed, but just had that feeling. The feeling of being hunted.

Chapter Nine

THE BOY

“Get down!” Derek whispered as loud as he dared. He and Samuel hit the ground fast, as heavily armed men fanned out around them. As they laid in the moist dirt, they could hear the men moving through the dense brush all around. They were severely out-gunned, and Derek knew they weren’t going to last long in a head-on battle with this group.

“How did they find us so quick?” Samuel dared to whisper to Derek.

Derek shook his head, unsure of the answer to that question. *Maybe it was just bad luck*, he thought to himself. *Or ... maybe they were dealing with someone cleverer than they thought?*

He couldn’t be sure, but he thought there were about ten or fifteen of them. As they laid there, Samuel glanced over and his face went pale. Derek noticed the look on his friends face and gave him an inquisitive glance. Samuel just shook his head and tried to act as though nothing was wrong. The operative looked down to where Samuel’s eyes were tracking before he looked away and saw a Goliath Tarantula starting to climb onto his leg. He sucked in his

breath as the thing lazily continued to meander onto him. Then a heavy foot landed right beside Samuel's head on the other side. Derek shook his head slightly, indicating for Samuel not to move. The heavysset man stood beside Samuel for a moment as he looked around. The underbrush was so thick that they couldn't quite make out the man's upper body features. Derek heard movement to the other side but remained as still as a dead man.

Eventually the man moved on from beside Samuel, and the movement all around seemed to get more distant the longer they laid there. The spider reached Derek's back and the man tucked his head down and looked toward his friend. Samuel found a stick nearby and grasped it tightly. Derek's face was turning white, but he dared not move. He could feel the long thick legs of the Tarantula moving its way across his back. The spread on its legs was massive!

Samuel shook his head slightly, indicating to Derek not to move. He then leaped up quickly, stick in hand, and hit the massive arachnid from the man's back. The thing flew a couple of feet away and rolled onto its back. Samuel pulled out the small knife he was carrying in a sheath on his belt, leaped over Derek, and plunged it into the creature. It's legs curled up and it wiggled around a little as it's large pincers snapped together wildly as it died.

Derek jumped up and shook himself off. He tried to remain low as he still wasn't sure if any of the mercenaries they encountered were still around. He turned and saw the huge creature laying on the ground with Samuel's knife sticking out of it. He shuddered. Spiders were one thing he couldn't stand.

"It's a good thing it wasn't a wanderer," Samuel stated as he pulled his knife free and wiped the blade on the ground. "At least we can eat this guy eh?"

Derek almost threw up at the thought! “You’re serious!”

“Oh ya. These spiders are considered a delicacy by some, and we haven’t had much to eat since yesterday. We should count this as a blessing.”

Derek almost threw up again!

“Trust me. You’ll be wondering why you haven’t eaten spider before,” Samuel stated with a smile.

That smile suddenly turned to a look of concern as Derek noticed Samuel glance passed him. Derek knew that look and realized there was something behind him. He spun around as fast as he could just in time to see one of the mercenaries come around a large tree about ten feet away. It was a miracle the man hadn’t heard the two talking as Derek realized that he was just as surprised as he and Samuel were.

The man started to raise his rifle, but Derek was there first, pulling it to the side. Before the mercenary could call out, Derek shot out his other hand and hit the man in the throat. The mercenary choked from the power of the blow and couldn’t say a word. Before he could do anything, Derek punched him across the jaw. The powerful strike sent the man to the ground in a heap.

Derek and Samuel both went down and lay silent, trying to hear if anyone else was coming. They heard nothing except for the ambient sounds of the jungle.

After they were sure no one else was around they got up. Derek searched the mercenary and took anything of value off him: his rifle with a couple mags of rounds, a combat knife, pair of binoculars, and ... a few rations. Derek took the rations and smiled as he showed them to Samuel. Samuel was busy preparing the spider meat to take with him. He merely shrugged. “Your loss.”

The operative continued his search of the man and found, in one of the guys pockets on his combat vest, a picture of Bosco, Peterson, Brianna, and himself.

“Whoa. These guys are serious,” Samuel said as he came and looked over Derek’s shoulder.

“Ya. The problem is that they’re not from Tower Six,” Derek said grimly. “These guys must be locals who are working for Tower Six ... that mercenary group Jake spoke about.”

“How do you know that?”

“That’s easy. Tower Six agents are a lot better trained and they have better weapons than this guy,” stated Derek matter-of-factly.

Samuel conceded the points.

“Obviously Orion is looking for something that has interested others, and they somehow have intel on those who are involved,” Derek said, concerned about this revelation. “The thing that troubles me the most is their knowledge of my involvement.”

He turned to Samuel. “I can see them having the time to gather the data on these three,” he said, holding out the pictures. “But I just got involved a few days ago and they already seem to know far more about me than they should.”

“Do you think there’s someone working on the inside that could have provided this intel?” Samuel asked, an edge of concern evident in his voice.

“I don’t know,” Derek replied. “But we can’t discount any possibilities.

“That Tower Six agent I fought at the hotel knew more about me than I would have liked.”

“What? What Tower Six agent?”

Derek shook his head slightly. "It's a long story Sam," he replied.

After a moment he shook himself from the disturbing thoughts. "I think it's probably best if we take a little detour to the North in order to get us out of line with these guys if they come back to look for their friend," he said, looking off in that direction. "We should detour, then rest for a couple of hours."

"And eat?" Samuel asked eagerly.

"Yes, you can eat your spider if you want."

"What about this guy? Is he ..."

Derek shot Samuel a surprised look. "We're not going to eat him! Besides, I think he's still alive ..." He nudged the mercenary with his toe.

"What? No! I wasn't saying eat him!" Samuel protested. "I just wondered if he was alive!"

Derek grinned. "I know. Let's tie him up."

Samuel sighed as Derek laughed, then he started pulling the guys laces off his boots so he could use them as rope without even thinking. Derek noted it with interest. *Teacher my butt!* he thought to himself with a smile.



The girl ran as fast as her feet would carry her. She rounded the corner and slid under the building that was propped up at the corners by thick wooden pillars. There was just enough room for her to squeeze under and hide. She tried to calm her breathing as she heard the sound of the men come around the corner. They slowed up when they entered the alley.

The three heavily armed men walked slowly down the

alley. The girl could see their boots—they were so close!. She tried to scurry back toward the center of the building without making too much noise. One of the men suddenly stopped. He knelt down and started looking under the structures.

"Que haces?" ("What are you doing?") asked one of his friends.

"No se. Pensaba que ella estaria aqui." ("I don't know. I just thought she could be under here,") he replied, using the same enunciation of the language as his friend.

His friend laughed. "Idiota! Ella no se queja alla!" ("You're an Idiot! The girl's not small enough to fit under there!") he said as he came over and smacked him on the head.

A moment later they were off. The girl knew it was good fortune that she was as small as she was for fourteen, and that the one mercenary obviously had bad perception skills! After she waited for a moment longer she squeezed out from under her hiding spot and ran back the way she had originally come. She rounded the corner, ran down the street, and darted behind another building and into the nearby makeshift shed that was in the back of the yard. She knew she would be safe in there—at least for a while anyway.

She produced the small loaf of bread she had been carrying under her shirt and knelt down beside the woman that lay on the cot. She pulled the woman's auburn hair away from her forehead and put her hand there. She noticed that her temperature had diminished quite a bit. She pulled the cool compress that was soaking in the bucket just to the side of the cot and, after wringing it out, placed in on her head. She then pulled a piece of the bread apart and tried to feed some to the woman. Surpris-

ingly the woman took it in small nibbles even though her eyes weren't open yet.

The girl hoped that the man who was helping them would return soon with the medicine he promised to acquire. She knew she stopped the infection from the wound, but still needed the medicine to help the woman fully recover before they could move on.

No. They had to make it to the Temple. It was essential to get there now that the events which she knew would come to pass were in motion. They needed each other.

They needed the people which the auburn-haired woman promised would come for her.



To be completely truthful, Derek was surprised that they made it to the village without any more contact from the mercenaries who were looking for them. It was as though they just disappeared.

The village was small and primitive compared to North American standards. There was a small runway which was supposed to be the landing site for their unfortunate aircraft. There were a few dirt roads leading out of the village which told them that it wasn't totally secluded. The buildings were all made of wood and they had a central market.

As they walked down the main road and into the market they were accosted by the multitude of vendors trying to sell their wares. Samuel conversed, in Spanish, with a few of the vendors and bought food, rope, and a few other small items.

As he spoke to them he inquired about Brianna and showed a picture of her to a few people who didn't seem to

know anything. They walked around the market for an hour, buying goods and inquiring about Brianna. Derek made sure he kept an eye out for any of the mercs they encountered earlier. He was starting to feel really exposed as he was clearly the only “white” guy in town. Not only that, but he was the only white guy packing an AR-15! This was bad and he realized it probably wasn’t the best move he’d ever made. His whole presence there screamed, “Hey! I’m a white American packing heat in the backwoods of the Colombian Amazon! Why don’t you shoot me!”

As he was having his disturbing thoughts he suddenly felt a tug on his arm. He flinched and looked over. Standing there was a boy of about ten.

“Ven aca,” he said as he started to walk away.

Derek had no idea what to make of it. He knew that the kid told him to come with him, but he hesitated for a moment, until he saw the boy walk around a corner. He knew that he didn’t want to lose him, so he called to Samuel and started following the kid.



“*W*hat are you doing? Wait!” Samuel called after him. He was in the middle of a transaction when Derek took off. He hurriedly gathered up his things and sped after his friend.

He came running around the corner. Derek was going into a side door with some kid. He ran up and grabbed Derek’s arm. “What are you doing?” he whispered loudly. “This might be a trap!”

“I know, but we’ve been asking around for more than

an hour with no progress. This could be what we're looking for," he replied.

"Or it could be our deaths," stated Samuel emphatically.

"What's life without a little risk?" Derek replied with a smile.

Samuel shook his head. "I don't like this Derek."

"Your objection is noted, but I'm heading up this mission and I say we're going in. If you don't like that then maybe you can wait out here and spot for me?"

Samuel shook his head again. "No. You need a translator remember? You wouldn't make it two feet without me."

Derek smiled again and walked through the door.

As Derek entered the small house, Samuel took one last look around. If he had been a little more perceptive he would have noticed the old woman watching him a little too closely from behind the corner of another building.

Chapter Ten

TO THE NEXT VILLAGE

The young boy led Derek and Samuel through the small house and into a room on the far side. Derek had his rifle in front of him, ready for any sign of trouble. He wasn't sure what was happening here, but, as he told Samuel outside, he felt it was the best chance they had so far in finding Brianna. As they came into the room they saw an older man sitting in a chair, reclining, and listening to some music on an ancient-looking radio that was placed on a table next to the chair. When he saw the two enter he sat up and looked to the boy, concern evident on his chiseled features.

The boy quickly spouted something off in Spanish.

"He's explaining to the old man that we're looking for the red-haired girl, Brianna," Samuel interpreted.

Immediately the aged man stood up on shaky legs and approached the strangers. He rattled off again in Spanish.

"He say's his name is Joseph. And asks us if we would like to take a seat at the table." Samuel motioned to the other side of the room where a small table sat with four rickety looking chairs placed around it.

Derek nodded and followed the old man to the table. As soon as they sat down the young boy left back through the door.

Samuel introduced himself and Derek to the man as they took seats at the table. He asked if he could help them locate their friend. Derek listened intently, only able to pick up a word here or there despite his training in the language which, at this point, seemed almost pointless as the dialect was so different from what he was used to. This made him really appreciate the crisp translation that Samuel provided.

Samuel turned to Derek after Joseph had just finished explaining something to him. “He says that Brianna *was* here and that she escaped with the big man and the Dr., and also with a young girl name Llave.”

“Key?” Derek asked. “Just like what Peterson was saying in the hospital.”

“What?” asked Samuel.

“In the hospital when Jake and I saw Peterson he said Llave. I thought he was talking about a physical key.”

“Apparently not,” replied Samuel. “He must have been speaking about this girl. Her name means ‘key’”

“Well it get’s weirder,” continued Samuel, “This girl is said to be some sort of guardian for this Heart of the Diablo.”

There was a long silence as the two of them thought about what he was saying, then the old man started speaking again.

After he was done, Samuel started to explain. “He says that this girl is in a long line of Llave’s that have protected them from this Diablo as they have guarded the whereabouts to the place where the thing is. The girl is the youngest one they have ever had in the last four hundred

years. He says that usually they grow to adulthood before taking over from the previous one, but the last one died suddenly which made it necessary for this girl to take over."

"That's nice and all, but all I care about is finding Brianna," Derek replied. "That's why I came here."

"But Brianna came here to find The Heart, and the more we know about what we're dealing with I think the better off we are," Samuel stated. "We should listen to the story as it may give us more insight into what Brianna was thinking when she went after this thing."

Derek looked from Samuel to the old man and back again. "Okay, then humour me. Ask him how they decide who is supposed to be the next 'guardian?'"

Samuel asked the old man and, after he responded, turned to Derek. "It's some sort of mystical thing. I guess they just sort of know; they have some sort of intrinsic knowledge of where to find this place. And ..."

"And what?"

"They manifest some sort of power or ability that's not normal; it's supernatural."

Derek laughed a little. "What? You mean like magic?"

"Something like that," Samuel replied. "There's more to the story, but he isn't telling me what it is."

"Well this should be good," Derek said. "I've seen some weird stuff while working with Orion but this should be really entertaining."

"I'm just telling you what the old man is saying," replied Samuel.

"*You* don't believe this do you?" Derek asked seriously. "We're wasting our time! We should be out there looking for Brianna!"

"We will find her," Samuel reassured. "As for the story

... I don't know what to believe," he stated quietly. "There is still lots we don't know, and there are vast reaches of the Amazon that are still relatively unexplored. There might be something out there that we haven't seen yet."

"Well let's see what the old man can make of this," Derek said as he pulled his pack off and retrieved the dagger from it.

As soon as he brought the dagger out the old man jumped back—letting his chair tip over and tumbled to the ground—as he started rambling about the Diablo. Derek looked over to Samuel for a translation.

Samuel shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. He's rambling on about the Diablo ... a great evil being unleashed ... and the death of millions."

Derek put the dagger away. "Well, what we do know is that the Diablo is the Spanish word for the Devil, so ... the rough understanding here is that somehow this dagger has the potential to unleash a Devil or *the* Devil—whatever the legend states—who will then go forth and slaughter millions.

"Did I get that right?"

"Ya ... pretty much how I took it," stated Samuel as he tried to get Joseph to calm down.

"Tell him that we'll do everything we can to stop that from happening. Even if I don't believe a word of it."

Samuel was about to speak but Derek cut him off by saying, "Strike that last part."

"Ya, I got that," Samuel replied sarcastically.

He was about to speak again when Derek butted in, "And ask him where Brianna took the girl."

He nodded and, just before he spoke, Derek urged, "And hurry up. We're kind of on the clock."

An exasperated Samuel shook his head and blurted out

all that to Joseph before Derek could butt-in again. Joseph began answering the questions. The conversation was just winding down when the young boy came running through the door screaming, “Vienen! Los mercenarios vienen!”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth they heard a loud crash from the other room. It sounded like someone just kicked the door in. Derek steeled his expression, raised his AR-15, and stalked toward the door.

He walked with a sense of purpose into the other room without even slowing. He saw three men entering the house with rifles drawn. Before they could respond Derek brought his rifle up quicker than they could react. Bang! Bang Bang! Three shots, three hits. He shot the first one in the shoulder, the second in the leg, and the third one in the gun arm. The three mercenaries went down hard, screaming in pain, and holding their injured areas. Another man ran into the room and fired. Derek didn't even flinch as his shot went just wide. He trained his rifle on the man and pulled the trigger. The mercenary took it in the shoulder hard. The impact spun him around and he went down after hitting the wall.

Out of the corner of his eye Derek saw movement from just outside the window. He turned and was about to fire through the wall, but stopped himself. He wasn't sure if it was another mercenary or someone else and he didn't want to take that chance. In that moment of pause gun fire riddled through the wall at him causing Derek to dive down. Bullets sailed passed, barely missing the man. He could hear screams as everyone else in the house dove for cover. Luckily no one was hit from the barrage.

The gunfire suddenly stopped and Derek scrambled over the writhing bodies of the men who he put down,

knocking their guns away from them as he went, and sailed out the door, not slowing even an instant.



The old man, who was curled up on the floor, looked at Samuel laying across from him and stared in disbelief. “Tu amigo tiene un deseo de morir,” he said, which Samuel understood as: “Your friend has a death wish.”

Samuel just nodded his head slightly, then ran over to the injured men and collected their weapons. The boy who came in and warned them came over and helped.



Derek ran quickly outside. As he went he looked around briefly to see if there was anyone else on the other side of the street. He didn’t see anything. He spun around the corner without even slowing. A rifle came up inches from his chest. Derek used the barrel of his rifle to parry the other man’s gun to the side. The gun went off sending the bullet into the side of the building. The operative continued the motion and stroked the butt of his rifle across the man’s face. He went down.

By this time some people were scrambling, making sure they were out of harms way.

Derek bent down and pulled the gun away from the unconscious attacker. As he did, he noticed a small girl look at him, then suddenly her eyes glanced just beyond him. Like a bolt of lightning he spun around and to the side. A shot went off as he moved, just missing him. He let off two

quick rounds; one hit in the leg and the other in the arm of his attacker, both on the man's left side of his body.

He glanced around to see if there were any more attackers. There were none he could see, or none that showed themselves.

Derek went in the house in order to see if his friend was okay. Samuel grabbed him and pulled him outside quickly.

"What's going on?" Derek asked as Samuel dragged him down the street.

"We have to get out of here quickly," he replied, appearing to be in a panic. "The local police will be here soon, and it's hard to say whose side they're on. There's a good chance that they're being paid off by these thugs, and we don't want to be around when they show."

They ducked into a side alley and hid behind some boxes.

After a moment of silence Derek finally said, "How's the old man and his family?"

"They're okay ... thankfully. But we need to hope that those mercenaries don't take it out on them for talking to us."

"Well how can we help?" Derek asked.

"There's nothing we can do for them now. They chose to help us and probably knew there might be some consequences, so now we're just going to have to accept that."

Derek thought about it for a moment. He was about to head back, but Samuel grabbed his arm. Derek looked at him. Samuel just shook his head solemnly. "They'll be better off if we just get out of here," he said to Derek.

"Okay," Derek replied in resignation as he sat back down. "Tell me you have an idea as to where Brianna and this girl are?" he asked expectantly.

Samuel smiled. “I got more than just an idea! I know where we need to go. The old man shared it with me just before all hell broke loose back there.”

Derek smiled back. “Then by all means, lead the way,” he said with a wave of his hand.

“The first thing we need to do is get out of this village without being shot. There’s no telling how many mercenaries are here, or in the vicinity.”

“Leave that part to me,” Derek said as he got up and stalked down the alley.

Samuel followed closely behind. The two men came to the opening of another street. Just a few more streets over was the edge of the jungle. From there they would be able to take their bearings again and head to where Brianna had supposedly gone.

In truth Derek was concerned that they might be too late as Brianna was more of a scholar and scientist than an adventurer. He held onto hope though. He didn’t know what he would do if he lost Brianna as well. There wasn’t a romantic attachment there, but rather a love of friendship as he got to know Brianna quite well when he and his wife were together. The two sisters loved each other deeply, were the best of friends, and Derek felt privileged to have known them.

Derek signalled for Samuel to follow him as he dashed across the street. They ran between two buildings and stopped again when they got to another street. After making sure that all was clear they ran across that one as well, between a couple more buildings and into the jungle that laid beyond. Once under the safety of the trees they crouched down and Derek pulled out the ToughBook. The computer came to life but when Derek tried to pull up the GPS an error flashed across the screen indicating that he

lost reception. He tried again. Another error. He let out a growl as he closed the system and rebooted. After a moment it came to life again and the GPS came up without issue.

He sighed.

“Everything okay?”

“Ya. Where too?”

“We need to head up the river to the next village,” Samuel explained as he traced his finger along the map on the screen, indicating the path they needed to take. “It’s about a days hike away. Joseph told me that Brianna, Bosco, and Peterson took the girl there as they were fleeing from the mercenary band.”

Derek closed up the Book and while he was putting it away Samuel said, “I noticed that you shot those guys in non-vital areas.” Derek didn’t say anything. “Why didn’t you kill them?” he pressed.

“I’ve seen enough death,” the soldier replied. “There’s already too much of it in our world. I don’t need to add to the count.”

“But they wouldn’t have shown you the same mercy,” Samuel reasoned.

“I know, but I’m not them.”

He turned to his friend and smiled as he pulled out his phone, which was still attached to the small battery pack they were given as part of their gear when they took off, and reoriented the map as to where they needed to go next. “Come on. It’s gonna be dark soon and we need to put as much distance between us and this village as we can.”

Samuel smiled back and fell into line behind his friend.

Derek was really starting to like Samuel as he got to

know him. The darkness that had encompassed him the last two years was starting to clear a bit as he began to live again.

Could he have a life without Samantha? he thought. *Could there be purpose again?*

Chapter Eleven

MERCENARIES

The little village along the river's edge seemed peaceful and quaint. It was a little smaller than the one they had just come from, had far less bustle to it, and was definitely further from more modern civilization. By all accounts it looked like a piece of preserved history nestled in a small corner of the Earth, almost untouched by the outside world. *Almost* untouched, as Derek and Samuel noticed that the villagers wore more modern clothing, had bicycles, a couple of beaten up old cars, and some simple machines: a couple of old chain-saws, a dilapidated tractor, and a some gas powered generators. A few kids were in the field just North of the village playing with a soccer ball.

Despite the quaint nature of the village Derek wasn't taking any chances due to the events from the day before down river. A number of women and children dotted the banks of the river apparently going about their daily chores. Derek noted that there was a towering structure that seemed to be at the center of the village, but he couldn't quite make out what it was. He looked to Samuel

thinking that his friend would know, but Samuel merely shrugged and shook his head. Derek kept forgetting that they were in a remote part of the Amazon, a place that even Samuel had never traveled to before, and that their knowledge of the area was extremely limited.

Samuel nudged Derek's arm. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

Derek cocked his ear to the side. All he heard was the faint sound of the woman talking by the river. It sounded like they were speaking ... Spanish! Derek looked at his friend in surprise.

Samuel smiled. "Yep. Spanish. And the dialect is very close to my own which won't make it a problem."

"That probably explains some of the more modern aspects of the village," Derek surmised. "They have contact with outsiders somehow. There's probably some trade flowing up and down the river which they must be able to access from time to time."

"Look over there!" Derek pointed toward the river further upstream from where they were, noting that there were, in fact, a number of boats docked along the bank, some of which even had outboard motors.

The early morning sun beamed across the horizon. It was hot! Derek just appreciated the fact that there were plentiful trees which formed an impressive canopy to keep the direct sunlight off them if they so desired to get a little relief from the sun—however limited in the humidity of the place—under the shade. The two men waited patiently as the village continued to come to life. What they really wanted to see was how many, if any, of the mercenaries were there.

As more of the villagers began to go about their daily work Derek and Samuel suddenly spotted the mercenaries.

Men with rifles, sidearms, and camouflage clothing finally emerged from one of the buildings at the East edge of the village.

“How many do you count?” Samuel asked.

Derek was silent for a moment. “So far I see six,” he finally responded.

“That’s not too bad.”

“That’s all I see in the open though,” Derek cautioned. “There’s a couple things we don’t know yet. Is Brianna hiding or has she been captured? If she is in hiding then where would that be? And ...,” Derek didn’t want to even think about the last question he had, but he knew he had to potentially come to grips with it, “... is Brianna even still alive?”

Samuel nodded grimly. “So how are you suggesting we go about getting that information eh?” he asked.

Derek smiled at him, then started moving through the thick brush that was alongside the village, heading toward one of the mercs who was now walking by the edge of the river by himself.



“Sir, we got another hit on the coordinates of operative Vico’s Book,” Nicole said as she continued to pull data up on her many screens.

The signal had, unfortunately, been intermittent; a fear that Jake had when he first planned this mission. He thought it was best that he didn’t tell Derek that they might have problems tracking them. The man had enough to worry about and Jake was confident that Orion would be able to overcome any obstacles to the issue and extract the team if they needed too. He only hoped he

wasn't wrong about his confidence in Derek's resourcefulness.

Jake hurried over and leaned in, trying to see where exactly they were. He noted that they started moving beyond the first way-point: the town they were originally supposed to land in. As he recalled they were quite a ways away from it and marvelled that they got there so quickly. Jake smiled as he remembered that when Derek had a goal in mind he was like a man possessed.

"Why does the signal keep cutting in and out?" Jake asked.

"It could be for a number of reasons," Nicole responded. "But the most likely reasons are because of the remoteness of the region, the positioning of our satellite, and the atmospheric disturbances due to weather fluctuations—cloud cover etc—that's common in the area."

Jake nodded. "I guess they're on their own for a while," he said, mostly to himself. "At least until we can free up the resources needed to go and get them."



"*H*e says he doesn't know what happened to Brianna," Samuel said as Derek continued to hang onto the merc's shirt.

Derek hadn't physically harmed him at this point, but was hoping that intimidation would be enough to loose his tongue. Unfortunately, the man remained defiant and even spat in Derek's face.

"I have a better idea," he stated as he wiped the spittle from his forehead.

Derek clamped his hand over the man's mouth and dragged him further into the woods and to the bank of the

river. He then hanged him head first over the bank with his face towards the water, and made sure his hands were still tied securely behind his back so he couldn't fight them.

Derek faced him against the current and then submerged just his face in the water that then went right up his nose. The man kicked and struggled then Derek pulled him back up again.

"What are you doing?" Samuel whispered urgently.

"I'm getting information."

"It looks like you're waterboarding him," Samuel replied.

Derek looked at him knowingly.

"Isn't that considered torture?"

"Ya, but it's far more effective than any other method," Derek stated confidently. "There's no real danger of him dying, it doesn't permanently harm him, he would tell on his own mother after a couple of dunks, and it will take that chip off his shoulder. Trust me. If he knows something he'll tell us. If not, I'll know right away and there's no harm done."

Sure enough, after two dunks they managed to get out of him that the mercenary band was still searching for the girl, but hadn't seen her in about a week. Derek did the mental math and realized that the timeframe matched up with what Jake had explained to him. After the threat of another dunk they were able to determine that there were ten mercenaries in the village and a couple of Tower Six agents.

They asked what that huge stone building in the center of the village was and found out that it was a temple dedicated to the guardians of Diablo. That's all the man knew. By this time he was a whimpering, cowering mess. The two men pulled him onto the land

and secured him to a nearby tree and made sure that his mouth was gagged.

After taking anything of value from him they moved silently back towards the village.

“I think we need to make our way to that temple thing,” Samuel whispered as they got to the edge of the village.

“I agree,” Derek stated. “If this girl is said to be some sort of guardian then, if I were her, that’s where I’d be.”

“What are we going to do about the mercenaries?” Samuel asked.

Derek smiled at him. “Take any of them out that we can as we head to the temple without being seen.”

Samuel steeled his expression and nodded. “What about not killing them?”

Derek shrugged. “I try not to if I can help it, but unfortunately this is a contact sport and it’s bound to happen eventually.

“Remember, you’re not just an English teacher,” Derek said with a smirk.

Samuel smiled.

Derek motioned for Samuel to follow him, then darted to the side of the nearest building. They crept along the side of it and peeked around the corner. The mercenaries they had seen earlier had all moved on to other places which was going to make this tricky as they didn’t know their whereabouts anymore. The other thing that made this challenging was the fact that the village was now in full swing and people were going about their business all over the place.

Samuel turned around and looked the way they had come. There, at the tree live, was a woman staring at them from the edge of the woods. She was carrying what

appeared to be a bin of clothes back from the river. He placed a finger over his lips. After a moment she just simply moved on as if nothing was out of place. Samuel visibly sighed as they really didn't know if the villagers were friendly to the mercenaries or not.

Derek slapped him on the shoulder. "Come on," he said as he darted to the side of another building. They went around that one and had to pull back quickly as one of the doors came flying open. Out walked a fairly heavy set man that was clearly with the band of mercs. The man looked away from where Derek and Samuel were crouching. Derek looked down and grabbed a large rock. As soon as the door to the building shut he rose up and smashed the man on the back of the head with the force that would take anyone down. The man grunted as he crumpled face first into the dirt.

The two men quickly grabbed his legs and dragged him back around the corner so he couldn't be easily seen. After stripping his weapons from him, tying him up, and gagging him, they made their way to the next building. They continued toward the temple unhindered by sneaking around the next couple of shacks that served as homes for some of the residents of the village. Derek could see that they were only a couple hundred yards from the temple grounds. The problem was that there was quite a bit of open ground from the last of the houses to the temple yard.

"This isn't good," Derek stated as he surveyed the area between where they were and the temple yard. "I don't like the openness of this area."

"What are we going to do?"

"Unfortunately, I think there's only one thing we can do," responded Derek solemnly. "How fast can you run?"

Samuel's face went pale.

"Don't worry," said Derek unconvincingly. "I'll cover you."

"Ya, but who's gonna cover you eh?" Samuel argued.

"I'll figure that out. Don't you worry."

"Every time someone says not to worry is when I worry," replied Samuel.

Derek patted him on the back and then pushed him into the open. Samuel shot him a shocked expression. "You better start running," Derek said to his stunned friend. Then they heard some shouting and Derek knew Samuel had been seen!

Samuel took off!

Derek took a couple deep breathes then stepped out from his hiding spot and looked first where he had heard the shouting. He saw a man on top of one of the houses aiming his rifle toward Samuel. Bang! He shot the man in the shoulder. He heard more scuffling and shouting as he saw more appear. He took three more quick shots and downed two more men; the third was able to dive for cover before Derek's bullet hit him.

He started to back toward the temple with his gun up. Any time another mercenary came into view he took a shot which caused him to scatter for cover. He knew he couldn't keep this up much longer as the reinforcements would eventually be great enough to outgun him. He shot a few more times hitting another merc, but then had to reload as his mag was out of ammo. The mercenaries took the opportunity to open up fire at him. Derek turned and sprinted in a zig-zag pattern toward the temple grounds. Bullets landed everywhere around him as he ducked and turned, darted left then right.

He dove behind a low rock wall as bullets sprayed all

around his position. He looked toward the temple and saw that Samuel had made it to the yard which had a bunch of stone statues of different creatures littering the hillside that led up to the temple gates. Some were animal shaped; some were shaped like giant insects and arachnids, while others were in the form of humans. Samuel managed to hide behind a large statue of a man with his hands spread out before him. He looked out from behind it. Derek was pinned down.

Derek saw Samuel pull the rifle he had taken from one of the mercenaries they stripped and started firing back. The mercenaries scattered again. He didn't hit any of them but it did give Derek time to scramble out from behind the wall and make it to the yard. He dove behind a statue that was directly beside the one that Samuel was behind.

"This is fun!" yelled Samuel to Derek.

Derek laughed as he peeked out from behind the statue and fired a couple more shots. He noticed the mercenaries closing in on their location. He was getting ready for a volley of bullets but then the assault seemed to stop and was replaced by shouting.

Samuel looked at Derek. "They seem to be scared about entering the temple yard," he said to his friend.

"Why?"

Samuel shrugged.

Derek peeked out from behind his cover and saw someone shouting orders at them to keep moving forward. They protested. As they did so the man who shouted the orders pulled out a hand gun and shot one of the men pointblank. The others backed up for a moment and then started toward the temple yard. Derek counted six of them. They seemed to gain courage as they approached

swiftly, ducking and weaving as they went. Derek popped up and fired off a few more shots trying to ward them away.

“Come on! We need to keep moving!” shouted Samuel.

Derek couldn't agree more as he started to run through the yard toward the temple in a crouched position. As they moved they suddenly heard screams of terror from behind. They both looked back, and what they saw drained the blood from their faces. One of the mercs was being held up off the ground by one of the human-looking statues that had, only a moment earlier, been stationary! It snapped the man's neck and then threw him away as though he had been merely a rag-doll.

Another merc fired at the moving stone-man and shattered its arm. It turned its head toward the man and then jumped off its pedestal. The man screamed and shot a few more times but his gun ran out of rounds. The stature swung out and clipped the man in the head with its solid stone hand. The mercenary flew away.

Derek didn't know what to think of the scene as the other creatures started to come to life before their eyes. They turned to run, but there, standing in front of them was a living jaguar statue stalking toward them and growling. To Samuel's right was, what appeared to be, a large angel with huge stone wings spread out behind him. In his hands he held a massive stone sword.

The yard was suddenly filled with living stone creatures of terror!

Chapter Twelve

STOLEN

Derek dived to the side and rolled as the jaguar pounced. It landed and skidded into a large rock. The force of the blow chipped one of its ears off. It shook its head as though the impact injured it somehow. Derek turned and fired a shot, hitting it in the side which scattered fragments of the creatures back into the air. The thing roared and leaped. If it was hurt it didn't seem to notice as much as it should have. Derek rolled again as the thing landed where he was. He tried to turn and get another shot off, but the creature swung its head around and batted the end of his rifle out to the side. He managed to pull the rifle back and used it to block the massive maw of the beast as it came in for the kill.

The thing bit down on the rifle, its stone teeth dug into it. The jaguar started to shake wildly and it was all Derek could do to hold on. He knew he was in trouble.

Derek let go of the rifle as he pulled out the small handgun he had taken from one of the mercenaries they stripped earlier. The creature continued shaking the rifle then threw it aside. Derek placed the gun on its neck and

unloaded the mag. Small shards and dust sprayed everywhere, covering the operative. His eyes screamed in protest as they began to water and his vision blurred, yet he continued firing. The beast roared. Derek screamed. The thing tried to strike but Derek was somehow by pure luck able to move his head to the side just in time.

It thrashed about as he maneuvered his body so he could climb out from under it. One of its claws raked his arm. He managed to pull his arm to the side enough so that the thing didn't hit him full force, but it still drew three lines of blood. He screamed as pain shot through his arm. He emptied the last couple rounds into the things head as he pulled himself the rest of the way out from under the creature.

The thing's head hung weirdly on its body as more than half its neck and a good portion of its face was blasted off. It snapped its mouth and tried to stalk back in to attack Derek, but he easily leaped out of the way and grabbed the twisted mess that used to be his AR-15 from the ground. He gripped it like a baseball bat and swung it as hard as he could. His corded muscles flexed as he smashed the jaguar right across the head taking it from the body. The thing leaped around wildly, not knowing where the man was. Derek started heaving the gun down on its body with fury until he had smashed it to pieces. Each blow took a little more of the creature and also a fair portion of the gun. By the time he was done there was nothing left of the rifle and the creature was a pile of rubble.



Samuel barely managed to get out of the way of the massive sword. It hit the ground with such force that pieces of dirt and rock flew everywhere. He knew that if he took one hit from the stone weapon he wouldn't be getting up ever again. He fired a number of times. Each shot that hit the creature blew little pieces off the stone giant, but not enough to stop it.

He heard screams and gun fire from across the yard but didn't have time to look and see what was happening. He imagined the worst for the mercenaries who were entangled with the stone monsters on that side of the yard. He just hoped they would hold out long enough for him and Derek to either dispatch of their foes or be able to get out of harms way. He knew they couldn't handle more than a couple of these things, if at all.

He leaped to the side again as the sword came in. The creature, for being such a large thing—and the fact that it was made out of stone—moved surprisingly fast. Samuel fired again and again until his mag was empty. He reached for another one, but had to duck the massive sword again. He looked down for a moment in order to grab the mag and when he glanced back up he saw the back of a huge stone hand coming for him. He tried to move out of the way but it was too late. The hand slammed into his chest and sent him flying into the air. The shock of the hit caused him to lose his grip on the mag and blasted the wind from his lungs.

As he landed his rifle went flying from his hands. He tried to shake the dizziness from his head; he fought to stay conscience as the darkness threatened to overcome him. He saw the massive blurry form coming toward him. His chest hurt as he struggled to take in air. Then

he saw it! The form of a huge foot coming down upon him.



Brighton looked on as the battle raged. He and Gerald sat at the edge of the temple yard East of where Derek, Samuel, and the mercenaries were fighting for their lives. Gerald levelled his sniper rifle and put Derek in the crosshairs. Brighton grabbed the top of the rifle and forced it down. He looked at the man and shook his head solemnly.

“But he has what we need,” Gerald protested.

“I know, but he doesn’t deserve to die that way,” came Brighton’s cryptic response. “Besides, we still need to go and get it, even if you kill him.”

Gerald conceded the point.

“You stay here,” Brighton continued. “I’ll clear the yard and grab what we came for while he’s distracted.”

“But what about the statues on this side of the temple?”

Brighton smiled back at his fellow Tower Six agent. “That’s why you have the big gun,” he said with a laugh. “Don’t let me down.”

With that, the nimble man jumped the small stone wall and agilely made his way across the uneven ground. Half way across the yard he glimpsed movement from the corner of his eye to his left. A second later he heard the sound of Gerald’s rifle. He got sprayed by fragments of stone and dust as the creature—whatever it was—shattered in mid air. The close call didn’t even slow the seasoned soldier as he kept moving at the same pace.

He jumped an empty stone pedestal and landed in a

low depression in the land which gradually made its way up again. As he moved out of the gully he noticed a stone warrior coming toward him from the side. It was surprisingly fast as it moved to intercept him. He pulled his sidearm out and readied for a fight as he continued to run. He aimed and was about to open fire as he ran when he heard the distinctive shot of the sniper rifle again. He covered his face from the spray of stone and dust as the warrior's head exploded. He moved passed the thing and heard another shot which shattered the entire body of the creature. Still he ran.

A smaller spider creature that was about the size of a Great Dane tried to rush him. It too was hit by the unseen sniper which sent it flying into the wall of the temple. It tried to get up but before it could it was hit again and again. Dust and stone shot into the air.

Brighton silently thanked Gerald for being dialled in. He wasn't very far from his target now and, as he ran with all his might, he holstered his gun and pulled out a long curved knife.

A smile crested his face as he focussed in on the pack that was strapped to Derek's back.



Derek's breathing came in long laboured heaves as he turned to see Samuel get batted to the side by the giant angel. He didn't have time to recuperate as he saw the situation his friend was in. He moved to run over when he suddenly felt a violent tug on his back which threw him to the side and down into a small gully. As he rolled back to his feet he noticed immediately that the pack he was wearing was torn free. He spun to see the Tower

Six agent he had chased in Cartagena standing there holding his pack and smiling.

“You’d better do something about that or your friend isn’t going to make it,” Brighton said with a laugh as he pointed toward where Samuel and the angel were; all-the-while holding out the bag teasingly.

Derek issued a growl of frustration as he knew what was in that bag, then he turn and ran like a man possessed. He knew he couldn’t fight the agent right now *and* help Samuel—so he ran. The angel lifted its massive leg in order to slam its foot down on Samuel’s head. Derek bolted and leaped onto a large rock that jugged out of the ground beside the angel, thinking to get more momentum. He kicked off the stone and flew into the side of the creature. The impact was enough to put the angel off balance. Its foot came down and just missed his friend.

Derek landed hard and rolled to the side. His shoulder throbbed from the impact. The angel came around and swung its massive sword down at the crouched man. The agile operative managed to leap to the side as the blade smashed into the ground. He looked around for something he could use to fight off the monster but there was nothing. He ran around the creature and tried to help Samuel get to his feet.

“Come on Samuel! We have to move!” he yelled.

Derek managed to take a quick glance as to where the mercenaries were and saw that the creatures had almost dealt with them in grim fashion. The sword came in again. Derek put up his arm reflexively and received a jolt that shot all the way up his arm and sent him and Samuel flying again. He was sure that he heard a crack and the pain was immense!

They both laid there for what seemed to be an eternity,

then they realized the angel was standing over top of them, waving its sword menacingly as if getting ready to land the final blow.

Derek tried to get himself up by using his good arm. He didn't know what the creature was waiting for as he and Samuel were sitting ducks. He also noticed that it was now eerily quiet. He looked around and saw that all the creatures that were left were now approaching them, having dispatched their combatants. Derek knew they were doomed.

He looked to his friend who was trying to stand, then he readied himself for the final blow, but none came. The other creatures surrounded them and the angel stayed at bay and even lowered its sword. A moment later they saw a young girl approach and Derek couldn't mistake the auburn hair of the woman who was with the girl.

It was Brianna!

Chapter Thirteen

LLAVE AND BRIANNA

“**A**re you sure it was wise to let Vico live?” asked Gerald as he stood up and slung his rifle over his shoulder. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pack of gum. He motioned for Brighton to take some, but the man merely waved off the offer.

“I mean, he is kind of standing directly in the way of what the mission is,” Gerard continued.

Brighton merely shrugged.

“You know ... from everything I’ve heard about this guy is that he won’t stop until he finds you. You kind of painted a target on your back.”

“I’m counting on it,” Brighton replied with a smile as he tossed the bag on the ground. He crouched down and unzipped it. He pulled out the ToughBook, a couple mags of rounds for the AR-15, one mag of rounds for the sidearm Derek was using, and ... the dagger. Brighton looked up at Gerald and smirked.

Gerald scoffed, rolled his eyes, and turned to leave. “You should have killed him.”



The girl, who appeared to be about fourteen, approached and said something to the creatures who retreated and went back to their platforms and became motionless statues once more.

“Bri!” Derek yelled as he stumbled over to her.

She wrapped him in a warm hug and kissed him on the neck. Tears moistened Derek’s eyes. Brianna pulled back a little to look at her friend; tears flowing freely down her cheeks. “I never thought in a million years that they would send you,” she said to him, half smiling, half crying.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” he replied as he grimaced from the pain in his arm.

The young girl came over to them and touched Derek’s arm. The pain instantly subsided and he could move it again. He was sure that it *was* broken, probably in multiple places, but now it just throbbed a little.

Derek looked at her curiously.

“Sorry, this is Llave,” Brianna explained.

“It is good to meet you,” the young girl said in a thick Spanish accent as she brushed her long dark hair away from her eyes.

“She can speak English?”

“Si. I can señor. I learned it from some Americans who came to our village about five years ago. They stayed for a few years then moved on after that. Me and some of my friends were so interested in them and their language that we tried to learn everything we could.”

“You speak it really well,” Derek commented, surprise still evident in his voice.

Samuel stumbled over at that moment, breaking up the

conversation. “Okay! What was that!” he shouted, arms open, surveying the carnage.

“Those are Golems,” Brianna explained.

“What! Gol ... what! That didn’t just happen!” the perplexed man continued as he started to spout off in Spanish, then blushed a little as he noticed the young girl staring at him.

“I’m with him,” Derek put in. “That was something out of a sci-fi movie. I don’t know what you’re into Bri, but it appears to be over your head.”

“It’s good that you’re here then,” the young woman responded with a smile. “You can help us find what we’re looking for.”

“What? No. I came to take you home. We’re not finding anything,” Derek blurted.

“Well, I’m not leaving without completing the operation I was on.”

Derek looked at her long and hard. She was just as stubborn as her sister Samantha; maybe even more so with that red hair of hers. He thought that maybe after they had some rest and a proper conversation that maybe he would be able to talk her out of it. Part of him hoped that would be the case while the other part knew she would not budge in her position.

Samuel just shook his head.

The girl came over and took Samuel by the hand. She smiled at him and began to lead him away from the courtyard and into the temple area.

Derek fixed Brianna with a serious look. “You have a lot of explaining to do,” he said as he draped an arm around her and followed Samuel and the girl.

The girl led them into the inner temple where there were worn carvings of ancient scenes all over the walls

which were also covered in creeping vines that clung to the stone. There was no roof, just walls. Insects scurried out of the way as the group made their way through the wide corridor and into an open area where a small fire had been lit.

They sat down by the fire.

“Okay, start talking,” Derek said as he got into a comfortable position.

“Wait! Before we relax,” Samuel blurted. “Are we going to be safe in here? I mean ... we just saw huge stone statues come to life! And no one has yet given me an explanation for that!”

“Samuel does have a point,” Derek replied. “I’ve seen some weird stuff in my life, but I’ve never almost been killed by a living statue.”

Brianna smiled softly. “Llave is what is called a guardian. She has some ... special abilities. These abilities help her with her job of keeping the Heart of the Diablo safe from those who would awaken the demon.”

Derek and Samuel looked at each other. It was hard for Derek to continue to be skeptical after the encounter he just had and the apparent healing of his arm. “This sounds like you’re about to explain a horror story,” he remarked.

“It’s more than that,” replied Brianna. “It’s a horror reality.”

That comment sent chills down Derek’s back.

“And what about the stone giants with bad attitudes eh?” Samuel put in, still sounding exasperated and shocked about what had just happened.

“As I said before, those are known as Golems. They protect this place when a guardian is present. When no guardian is here they are just immovable stone statues. Honestly, I’m just as shocked as you guys are. Llave here

told me that we would be safe inside the courtyard and temple, but I didn't really believe her until I heard the commotion outside and came to see what was happening. And it's a good thing for you we did. I just wish we could have gotten here earlier. It was too close."

Derek nodded his agreement as he rubbed his arm which was still a little sore from the blow he sustained by the stone angel, but doing much better since the young girl touched it.

"And what about my arm?" he asked, looking toward the girl. "I know it was broken, but when she touched me I felt the pain subside, and now it just throbs a little but seems to be completely useful."

Brianna smiled. "I told you that she has some special abilities. I don't think she even realizes to what extent her abilities will manifest themselves. She healed me too."

"Healed you? How?" Samuel asked.

"I actually got shot by one of Mateo's men when we were running. We had become separated from Bosco and Dr Peterson and I took a bullet in the side. I knew I was going to die if I didn't get proper attention. Thankfully the bullet passed right through me, but I was still in danger of infection until little Llave here healed me somehow. It wasn't immediate, but she pushed the infection out and soothed the pain, then my body recovered fairly quickly after that.

"We hid in one of the villager's houses for a couple of days. Mateo's men were everywhere, but she smuggled food in for me and kept us hidden. There were a couple close calls with Llave and the mercenaries, but she managed to evade them every time. Once I was strong enough to move we made a break for the temple because she said I would be safe there. Sure enough none of the

men ever came near this place because of the stories they heard about the moveable stone monsters.

“It might have been a different story if they knew we were in here, but we managed to sneak out and grabbed food without anyone noticing. I’m sure they would have brought the whole force with them and would have surrounded the place and blew the statues to pieces if they knew we were here. But thankfully that didn’t happen.”

“But why are Mateo and his men after you?” Samuel asked.

“It’s because of the thing Llave guards.”

“This Heart of the Diablo?” interject Derek.

Brianna nodded.

“So why is this thing so important for these guys to get their hands on it? And why is Tower Six involved as well?” Derek asked, groping for answers.

“It’s because this artifact has the power to raise a demon which, the legends say, can only be controlled or managed by someone who has the Calvera Oscura Dagger and the Carmesí Tablet. Once they have the powers of this demon at their disposal it will mean the death of thousands, if not millions, of people.”

Brianna readjusted a little and continued. “The demon first arose about four hundred years ago—so say the legends—and wreaked havoc all over South America. It called upon all its demonic powers and resources to raise all manner of unnatural creatures to fight for it. Finally, it was put down by a foreigner from Asia named Jiang Ling who had, at his disposal, powers of his own with which he fought the creature. And he too called allies to his side, but they were people—twelve of them to be exact—who he trained and helped to develop their own powers. They were called guardians.

“These guardians, along with Jiang, were able to put down the demon and his hoard but at a great cost. Jiang and eleven of his guardians perished in the conflict. The remaining guardian managed to seal the demon in a temple and place a protective ward on it which was designed to hold it forever.”

Derek shifted uneasily as she recounted the story.

“We actually don’t know how much of the story is true and what has been fabricated, but the fact that Llave here exists and has these strange abilities lends credence to the tale,” Brianna stated.

She cleared her throat before continuing. “Everything I’ve read about it suggests that the demon—the Diablo—rose when a strange stone was discovered in the jungle. No one knows what it was or where it came from, but whatever it is, it’s the thing that is powering the Diablo, and that, I believe, is what everyone is after.”

Brianna paused for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts so she could explain the situation more clearly. “Bosco took the dagger, even though I insisted that it stay with Llave, but he saw our situation as desperate and didn’t want Mateo to get his hands on it. His plan was for all of us to make it out but we got separated.” She began to tear up as her head sank down a little.

Derek placed his hand on hers for comfort. “Bosco did make it out.”

The woman’s head shot up when she heard those words.

“—And Peterson,” Derek added.

“What about the dagger? Did they have it?”

“Yes they did,” Derek replied as he removed his hand from hers. “And he gave it to us. Or rather, sent it to us.”

Brianna stood up a little straighter. “What do you mean, sent it to you?”

Derek paused for a moment before continuing. He was trying to work out in his mind how he was going to break the news to Brianna that he just lost the dagger. He figured the best way would be to give her the whole story. “Bosco didn’t come back. He mailed us the artifact with a note telling us where to find Peterson.”

Brianna sat back again.

“Peterson was at St. Mary’s in Cartagena in pretty much a vegetable state except for the fact that he kept saying Llave, and was able to give us a rough idea as to where you were at on a map, which is how we ended up here.”

Brianna sighed in relief. “So you don’t know where Bosco is?”

“No.”

Well, can I see the dagger?”

“Actually—” Derek began.

Brianna’s face went pale. “What happened? You didn’t bring it?”

“No. Samuel and I brought it back with us as we were instructed to do so by Jake.”

“So then where is it?” Her voiced was starting to take on an accusatory tone.

Derek squirmed a little, trying to find a good way to break the news to his friend. “I had it,” he said sheepishly. “It kind of *just* got stolen from me during the fight we just had with the Golems.”

“What!” Brianna blurted as she stood up and started pacing. “Taken by who?”

“An agent from Tower Six,” replied Derek.

“So what do we do now?” Samuel asked.

“We go after them,” Brianna declared.

“What? No!” stated Derek “I came here to get you home, and now that I’ve found you we’re getting out of here.”

“But we can’t just let Tower Six and Mateo acquire this power,” Brianna argued. “Not when there’s a chance we could stop them.”

Derek was shaking his head.

“I’m kind of with Derek on this one,” Samuel interjected. “If we have to tangle with a whole host of mercenaries, Tower Six, and now possibly a bunch of weird stuff like those golems out there, then what chance do we have?”

“It’s not about our chances,” Brianna replied. “It’s about doing the right thing. We need to do the right thing for Llave,” she continued as she pulled the girl close. “And we need to do the right thing for the innocents who are going to get hurt because of our inaction.”

Derek and Samuel were silent for what seemed a long time. “But I can’t let anything bad happen to you,” Derek said softly, tears rimming his eyes.

Brianna smiled softly. “You might not be able to stop that Derek, but unless you come with me you’ll never know if you could,” she said, further convicting Derek.

“Samantha would want you to do this,” she continued. “You couldn’t protect her from every danger and you can’t protect me. We’re both big girls who will choose our own path.”

Derek stared at her, not sure what to say. He felt as though a knife was being driven through his chest.

“I know you want to drag me back and keep me in your past. But the past is gone. Sam is gone. Are you really

willing to let all of these people suffer because you can't move forward?"

The man felt lost. He felt selfish in the face of such courage. He didn't want to lose her like he lost his wife. Despite the lack of contact he had with her the last couple years, she was still his friend. And she was right about Samantha wanting him to help. Those words stung. They stung because they were true. All he could do was nod that he would help. He turned to Samuel. "You don't have to come Samuel. You've done more than enough and I can't ask you to go on this mission any further."

Samuel smiled back and shook his head. "No. You can't get rid of me that easily," he replied with an exaggerate shake of his finger. "You're stuck with me eh!"

It seemed to all of them that they now had a common purpose. Derek just hoped that it didn't end in any more death.

Chapter Fourteen

TROUBLED PAST

According to the girl the ancient city they were headed to was called, Ciudad guardianoin. In English it translated to Guardian City. This was where the twelfth guardian supposedly imprisoned the creature. After the imprisonment, the guardian and the remaining residents who survived the battle abandoned the city. The darkness that fell over the place, even though the demon had been put down, was too much for them to endure. Over the years people had tried to stay clear of this part of the jungle. Anyone who ventured near the city had never been seen or heard of again.

It was because of this that no guardian after that time had ever seen the city before, even though they all knew where it was. Llave explained it to them as though there was an intrinsic ability to navigate there—like it was built into their very soul. Others merely stumbled upon it to their peril and, due to those recorded disappearances, some had been able to get a rough location of where it might be.

Derek figured that Tower Six knew where this place

was, and that the records of missing people were probably how they discovered its location. Now that they had the dagger he was sure they were heading right for it. He knew that they had to move fast if they were going to beat Tower Six and Mateo. Derek also knew, however, that they had a major advantage: Llave.

As they moved through the thick brush Derek made sure to stay close to their young guide in order to make sure nothing happened to her. He managed to grab a rifle from off one of the mercenaries that unfortunately came in the path of the golems. It was the only rifle that wasn't damaged too badly in the fight. He also had his sidearm still, but all the extra rounds were in the back pack that was stolen from him. Samuel only had the Glock Derek had given him from before, and each of them also had their combat knives.

The operative wasn't too thrilled with their lack of combat resources as he knew they were heading into a fight with men who were far better armed than they were. The thing that really bothered him was that he had no idea how many men they were up against. So far he only knew for sure of one of the Tower Six agents, but he was pretty confident there were more. Mateo on the other hand seemed as though he had quite a few men at his disposal. Derek knew they were going to have to play this smart.

Knowing that they didn't have time to wait they left after a short rest. Before they departed, Derek checked his phone and noted that the battery was down to eighteen percent, and that the link between it and the ToughBook had been severed. Without the gear which was in the pack he wasn't able to charge his phone and, therefore, use any of the navigation options—even though those probably wouldn't work without the ToughBook boosting the signal

anyways. The other issue he had was that the ToughBook was supposed to be the tool he was going to use to signal to Orion where he was when he got to the city, and now that option had evaporated as well.

Well, I guess we'll just have to figure something else out, he thought to himself as he turned the power off on his phone in the hopes of conserving some of the battery power.

They exited the temple area from the other side—away from where the battle had happened a few hours earlier—and made sure there was no ambush set up before heading through the thick forest. They traveled through the afternoon and into the night. It was fortunate that Brianna had been able to gather up some much needed supplies before Derek and Samuel showed up. She was able to get a hold of three flashlights with extra batteries, a couple sleeping bags, matches, and some scant but sufficient rations that they figured would see them through this ordeal if they portioned them out carefully. Llave and Samuel were also very helpful at finding certain berries and plants along the way that were edible. These they packed carefully and stowed as they went.

Eventually Derek was forced to recommend that they camp for the night. There was not even a hint of disagreement from the rest of the crew as everyone was exhausted.

After they found a good spot to settle Derek went about making a fire. Samuel and the others helped by collecting kindling and larger logs for them to burn. It took a while due to the humidity of the area, and the lack of dry fuels, but eventually Derek got the fire going.

“So how are you doing?” asked Brianna as she sat down on a log beside Derek. The others were collecting more wood which made it a perfect opportunity for them

to talk alone. She picked up a nearby stick and started poking at the fire, causing burning embers to shoot into the air.

Derek shrugged.

“I missed talking to you,” she stated softly.

Derek knew she was referring to the silence he exhibited a few weeks after Samantha’s death. Eventually he cut off all communication with everyone he knew. Brianna tried and tried to get him to open up but he just wouldn’t and finally cut off all contact. He knew that was when she must have thrown herself fervently into the work that Orion had lined up for her.

“Did you talk to your dad?” she asked, probing more. “You know, he’s always been there for you.”

“I know,” Derek replied as he stared into the fire.

Silence.

“I’m really glad you’re here. I missed you. Maybe we can go out and get something to eat when this is all over?”

Derek nodded slightly but remained silent.

Brianna shifted uneasily. “You know, what happened to Samantha wasn’t your fault,” she stated bluntly.

“I know. It was Orion’s,” he said through gritted teeth.

“No it wasn’t,” she argued. Derek shot his head around to look at her, almost in disbelief. “She knew the risks and still agreed to the mission, just like you.”

“You don’t know anything,” Derek shot back as he turned his head to stare into the fire again.

“Actually yes I do, you arrogant, pig-headed, man!” she responded angrily. “I spoke to Samantha before she died and she wanted me to understand that Orion was not to be blamed for her contracting that disease.”

“Ya, she told me the same thing too,” Derek replied, unconvinced.

“Then why didn’t you believe her? She took all the standard precautions she normally would have but this disease was different.”

“A fact that Orion knew, or at least, should have known!” Derek stated, raising his voice.

“That’s one way you can look at it, if you want to continue to be bitter and untrusting your whole life. Or you can trust that they made a mistake, and so did Samantha.”

Derek cupped his head in his hands.

“That’s the problem with being human Derek,” Brianna continued, “we make mistakes. And sometimes really bad things happen when we do, but that can’t be helped.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “Samantha wouldn’t want you to live this way,” she said softly. “She would want you to live your life to the fullest; like you did before.” She reached over and hugged him tightly. Then kissed him on the neck with her soft, full, lips.

Derek would have been a liar if he told himself that he didn’t like the kiss, but he knew he couldn’t let it continue. He couldn’t love her like he loved Samantha and didn’t want to hurt his friend. He reached over and gently pushed her away. “We’ve been over this Bri,” he said softly, referencing the time just after Samantha’s death before Derek cut himself off from everyone. There was a chance then that they might have had something together, but Derek knew he couldn’t. His eyes revealed the hurt and pain he had bottled up inside.

Brianna stared at him as her expression became hard, then she got up and moved away to the edge of the forest. She stood there, staring into the dark with her back toward the man. Derek watched her; his eyes moistened with tears.

He was torn up inside. He wanted to believe Brianna that Orion and Samantha made a mistake which caused his wife to contract the disease that ultimately took her life, but he wasn't sure he could. He didn't understand it completely himself; his emotions were raw. He was so angry and he felt he needed to blame someone—that *someone* had to pay. He wanted to move on, but he wasn't sure he could. He also prayed that Brianna would move on with her life as well. He thought she had, but now—”

He wiped the tears from his eyes, stood up, and walked into the woods opposite Brianna.



Samuel came back, dropped off his bundle, and looked around. “Where’s Derek?” he asked.

“He’ll be back in a minute,” Brianna replied coldly as she turned around and stared off into the woods where her friend went.



Derek had everyone up and going the next morning before sunrise. He knew, even with their advantage of having the girl leading them, that they were in a race with Tower Six—a group that didn't accept failure. He had little doubt that Tower Six would pinpoint the location of the city quickly, and, because they had what they needed, there was nothing keeping them from their objective.

Despite the fact that Llave was only fourteen, she managed to keep the pace that Derek was setting. He was up front with her, driving everyone on while she made

slight course corrections. Samuel and Brianna were hard pressed to keep up, but they both knew the consequences if they didn't and so they pushed themselves on.

About six hours after they broke camp they burst through an edge of the tree-line and came out onto a high cliff. They could hear the rushing sounds of water and looked on as they saw a waterfall far to their left; it's smooth constant flow crashed down below, continually filling the river at its base. To Derek it looked just like the rest of the forest, but Llave told them that Guardian City was down there.

She pointed to the side of the waterfall. "I know you can't see it from here but the city is down there hiding in plain view."

Derek, Samuel, and Brianna strained to see what she was pointing at, but saw nothing but forest.

Brianna looked down at Llave. "I don't see anything," she stated.

The young girl smiled. "I will show you."

She walked to the edge of the cliff, looked around for a moment, and then moved to the right. She appeared to be looking for something. The others gave her room as she walked the edge of the precipice, then turned and smiled at Brianna as she knelt down a few feet from the ledge. She moved her hand across the ground, then thrust it in under some grass and weeds. She appeared to grab something, then turned her hand to the right. The others heard a distinctive "click" sound and then saw a section of the ground fall away. It was a door.

Llave looked up and smiled. Derek came over, pulled out a flashlight, and shined it into the hole. He saw a stone stairway that lead down into the cliff side. The first landing for the stairs was about ten feet from the top of the hole.

“Well, it’s probably a lot better than trying to climb down,” he said to the others as he jumped into the hole. As he looked down the staircase he noticed that there was a small amount of light emanating from somewhere down the tunnel, and he could feel a gentle breeze coming up from below. He carefully felt out the first couple stairs with his foot as he started to descend. It seemed solid.

The others jumped in the hole after him and followed closely behind. The stairs appeared to be cut directly from the stone and were far from even in their sizes and slope. As they descended they could feel the cool refreshing air rush passed them.

Derek moved carefully along the rocky stairway. He reached a section where he could see some light protruding from the wall closest to the cliff. He could see that there were small holes in certain sections where the wall appeared to be thinner than elsewhere. He put his hand to the wall and pushed on it. A large chunk of it came free and slid into the chasm below opening up a five foot wide section that was eight feet high in the wall.

Bri grabbed Derek’s arm. “It’s probably best if we don’t touch the wall.”

Derek nodded his agreement. The others joined them and stared. They were well above the jungle floor.”

“That’s crazy!” Samuel exclaimed.

Derek was quick to move everyone on again, just in case a larger section of the wall decided to break free.

The climb down was slow, with a couple of close calls as Samuel and Brianna slipped on some of the uneven stairs. Thankfully, there was always another person close by to grab them before they went down.

As they neared the bottom the sound of the waterfall got louder and louder. The more they descended the

louder it got, until the sound was almost deafening. They also noticed that the tunnel they were in was growing darker, and the air was more humid and colder. As they continued on, droplets of water started to come down at them from the ceiling. Derek looked to Llave and the young girl merely motioned for him to continue.

Eventually the rocky staircase came to the bottom and the tunnel continued on. The sound of the waterfall started to grow more distant again as they carefully walked through the passageway. After plodding through the dark dank tunnel for ten minutes they could see light starting to peek through the sides of the tunnel again and they could feel the warm breeze of the air from outside come rushing through at them.

The tunnel widened as they went, and lush vines were seen layering the sides of the passage, becoming thicker and more abundant as the group continued on. They could hear birds and other wildlife, and the passage brightened up as they rounded a corner which opened into the jungle once more.

They stepped out into a clearing that was about twenty feet wide and thirty feet long. The edges of the clearing immediately thickened up into a jungle tree-line. Llave walked ahead of everyone and went right to the edge of the clearing. Derek stayed beside her. She peered into the tree-line for a moment then chose a path through and disappeared into the jungle. Derek followed. Samuel and Brianna looked at each other for a moment—concern etched on Samuel's face, while trepidation and excitement was on Brianna's—before following.

They traveled through the dense brush until Llave came to what appeared to be a thick treed wall that had a large hole blown in the side of it. Derek moved ahead of

her and investigated the hole. “This hole was made not too long ago,” he said as he turned to face the others. “Mateo and Tower Six has definitely beaten us to the place.”

He shined his light inside and saw a large courtyard area with numerous stone statues that looked as though they had been blown apart. Derek noticed fresh shell casings littering the area, and a hint of the smell of gun powder hung in the air. “It looks as though they had some resistance,” Derek noted.

Llave turned to Brianna. “This place is called Guardian City for a reason, and maybe not the reason you think.”

“And that is ...?” Samuel prompted.

“There are things inside which are meant to keep the Heart of the Diablo safe from those who would take it. There are ... horrifying things,” Llave informed.

“Yeah, but we’re with you, so we’ll be okay, right?” Samuel asked.

Llave looked at him gravely and then shook her head. “I am only the key to the heart. I am not the one who directs the demons.”

The others glanced at each other, all sharing silent concerns, then Derek walked into the courtyard. He noticed a large stone door that had been opened. The door had intricate carvings all over it, most of which had shown some weathering, but were remarkably preserved due to the jungle enclosure that had grown around the place over the hundreds of years it had been here.

Brianna went up to the door and moved her hand across some of the carvings. “Enter Guardian and shape destiny,” Brianna read to herself as she looked at the carvings. Derek came to stand beside her. “Feed the beast to keep and awaken the heart,” she continued.

“What does it mean?” Derek asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, whatever it is, it doesn’t sound good,” Samuel stated, nervousness creeping into his voice.

“There’s only one way to find out,” replied Derek as he looked through the door.

“There’s no way you’re going in there without me,” a deep voice sounded, startling everyone in the group.

Derek spun around, pulling his gun, and aiming it back toward the entrance. He immediately brought it down when he noticed the large black man, Bosco, standing in the entrance. He looked terrible! His jeans were filthy, his shirt had rips throughout, and his face and arms were caked with mud and grime. He looked even filthier against the backdrop of his white gleaming teeth that shone forth from his infectious smile.

“Bosco!” Brianna yelled out as she ran for the big man and leaped into his arms. He wrapped her in a huge hug. “I thought I’d never see you again!”

“It takes more than that to kill me,” he replied, still sporting his massive smile.

Derek and the others came over to greet the man.

“It’s good to see you my friend,” Derek said as the two clasped hands and then pulled each other in for a big hug.

“This is Samuel and—”

“Llave,” Bosco finished for him as he bent down and put his hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “It’s good to see you again,” he said softly.

Llave wrapped her arms around the man’s neck.

“What happened to you?” Derek asked after Bosco stood up again.

“It’s a bit of a long story,” he said as he got more serious. “I knew that Jake would send help after he received

my message but I couldn't risk Mateo and his men finding Peterson. So, after I dropped him off at the hospital, I allowed them to find me so I could lead them off Peterson's trail. They almost got me a few times.

"I managed to overhear them talk about moving out again, and I figured they were heading back to where Peterson and I had escaped from. The only thing I could think of was that they were going after Brianna and Llave, so I chartered passage down the river on a fishing boat and came to the village. I missed you there but managed to track you and here I am."

"How come you didn't come back for Bri sooner?" Derek questioned in an accusing tone.

"Because I knew Brianna would keep herself and Llave safe until I got back to them."

"How could you be so sure?" Derek stepped closer to Bosco as he asked the question.

Brianna put a hand on Derek's shoulder.

"Because I trust in her ability," came Bosco's confident reply, moving forward as if to assert himself. "And I knew she had help from the villagers ... and from Llave."

Bosco stepped around the man and walked toward the door. "And now we are here," he said, deliberately changing the subject. "And it appears that we are playing catchup with Mateo and Tower Six."

The others stepped up beside him.

"Well ... who wants to go first?"

Chapter Fifteen

GUARDIAN CITY

The calmness of the place sent a chill down Derek's spine. He had been in many strange places in his years of work with Orion, but this place was different. Buildings of all sizes stretched out in front of them and to each side. Even though they could primarily see what was immediately in front of them they could tell that this city was massive. The main street they came in on from the gate was wide with buildings on each side.

They looked up and saw a huge canopy of branches a couple hundred feet in the air which stretched across the entire city forming a roof which cloaked the city from the outside. Light shone through the many cracks in the uneven branch-roof which helped to bathe the hidden city in a soft low light so as to give it a constantly dim appearance in the daytime. The air was still, and it was quiet. Real quiet. There wasn't even the sound of birds as there was just outside the city. In the midst of all the decaying buildings the air remained fragrant by the thriving green cocoon that enclosed the ancient civilization.

The group looked around in amazement at the spectacle.

“What’s that?” Samuel asked as he pointed down the street and up into the air.

The others looked and saw the top of, what was most likely, a massive building far off in the distance. Its top stretched into the sky and almost touched the enclosing branch-roof.

“That has to be the temple,” Brianna stated enthusiastically.

“Si. It is,” replied Llave.

“Well at least it doesn’t appear to be hard to find,” Samuel stated. “But it does look like it’s quite a ways away.”

“We better get moving then,” Bosco said as he started walking down the street. The others quickly followed suit.

They walked down the main road. Huts and buildings made of stone and wood were constructed in no discernible order along the roadway. Some were closer to the road while others were further away. Amazingly most of them were still standing, probably due to the the natural enclosure that enveloped the ancient place which kept the elements at bay.

“Is it just me, or is it weird that there isn’t any wildlife at all?” Derek asked. “You’d think that, even though this place is hidden, there would be *some* creatures living here.”

“That *is* strange,” Samuel responded, turning a quizzical look at Llave.

“It’s because no life can survive in the city while the Diablo is here,” she replied in a soft voice.

“Why are we going in here again?” Samuel asked.

“This place is starting to creep me out,” Bosco put in.

“It’s just now starting to creep you out?” asked Samuel incredulously.

Derek chuckled and kept moving, leading the party through the main road. After a few more moments the road opened into a large courtyard that had numerous stone statues strewn throughout. They were small square statues with faces inscribed into them. In the middle of the courtyard there was a large statue of a muscular looking man with clawed hands and a set of rams horns protruding from his head. His arms were open and his head was poised to the earth. In one hand he held a giant spear that was pointing toward the sky. Brianna knelt down and ran her hand over the dusty surface of one of the smaller stone carvings.

“There’s writing on this one,” she noted. “I think it’s a name.”

Derek bent down and looked at a different one. “This one has writing on it too.”

“And so does this one,” Bosco said as he picked it up. It wasn’t as heavy as he thought it would be, and was surprised that it wasn’t fixed to the ground somehow.

“I think this is a cemetery of some sort,” Brianna stated.

Bosco dropped the stone.

“A cemetery?” Samuel asked. “It’s the weirdest cemetery I’ve ever seen.”

Brianna continued to look over the ancient stone. “You have to remember that this is a culture from antiquity, and that their society and ways were far from anything that we are used to.” She looked at the statue in the middle of the cemetery. “This is probably their god which they worshipped. It’s probably the Diablo.” She got up and

moved gingerly around the cemetery looking at the different graves. “This is interesting.”

“What’s that?” Derek asked.

“These graves are set out in no discernible order, but they appear to be big enough to house whole bodies.”

“And that’s weird why?” asked Samuel as he moved up beside her.

“Well ... these Pagan cultures normally cremated their dead, but the size of these sites tells me that these people were buried.”

A chill ran up Derek’s spine.

Brianna moved to the base of Diablo. “He looks as though he’s receiving worship from the dead. See how his arms are open and his face is toward the graves? I’ve seen Pagan deities getting veneration from fearful worshippers in books and depictions as I’ve studied these cultures but they have always been alive. This is different. How can someone gain worship from those who are dead?”

“Maybe it’s a spiritual worship, or something like that,” Derek stated.

Brianna bent low and looked at the base of the statue. There was strange writing across the aged stone. “It could be a necromantic culture and worship structure?” she commented as she brushed some of the dirt away.

“What does it say?” Derek asked as he noticed it too.

Brianna bent in closer and brushed more of the dirt off. “It’s a pretty old dialect,” she replied. “I think it says, ‘Rise my slaves. Rise ... avenge.’ It’s ... it’s pretty archaic. I could be wrong. The language is hard to make out.”

She stood and turned around to face the others. Suddenly Derek could see all the blood drain from her face and she stood transfixed in horror, looking beyond him and Samuel.

When Derek saw the look and whipped around, gun leading. The shock of what he saw standing right behind Bosco struck him like lightning and almost caused him to drop his gun. Bosco's eyes went wide as he saw the looks that were coming at him from his friends.

He spun around and let out a cry of shock as he stumbled back and fell to the ground. There, standing in front of him, was a man with a rotting face, ooze dripping from his mouth, and white pupil-less eyes staring blankly. The living corpse opened its mouth in a wicked growl, showing rotten teeth that ended in cruel points. The smell of acrid flesh suddenly filled the air.

The corpse leaped for Bosco. Derek fired. The shot tore a chunk of flesh from the man's jaw but the thing seemed to barely notice. Bosco managed to just get out of the way as the creature plunged its clawed fingers into the ground where he had been a moment earlier.

"What is that!?" Samuel shrieked, fear emanating from every word.

Bosco turned and backhanded the thing across the face as it rose up. Its face twisted to the side, then slowly came back around. It opened its mouth wide and hissed, ooze spraying from its ugly face. The big man tried to scramble away.

Derek was about to run over and help his friend but was stopped in his tracks as he heard Brianna shriek from behind him. He spun and saw two more of the ugly creatures clawing their way out of the earth. He looked to the right and left and saw more movement in the earth. He wasn't sure how many of the monsters were coming forth, but he knew he definitely didn't want to stay to find out. "Quick!" he shouted. "We need to get away from here!"

Samuel ran over and grabbed Llave by the hand and started running toward the main road again.



Bosco narrowly avoided another strike from those wicked looking claws and managed to get to his feet again. As he came up he kicked the creature in the face as hard as he could. The things neck cracked as it jolted to the side but it still came on. The big man pulled out his handgun and shot the thing three times in the face. Pieces of its skull shattered and splintered but still it came on.

He looked to the side and saw more coming up out of the ground. He also saw Samuel and Llave heading for the road and Derek and Brianna facing off with two more of the monsters.

The thing lunged again and he easily deflected the strike as he came around and smashed it on the head with the butt of his gun. It stumbled and fell to its knees. Bosco screamed as he Spartan kicked it in the chest. His foot went through the creature, spraying green ichor all over the place. As he followed through with the kick he forced the thing back and heard a huge crack as he folded it in half. The creature roared and tried to strike out with its arms. As they came flailing up Bosco used his left foot to stomp down on its right arm and fired three shots into the things other hand, blowing it apart. Still the creature flailed, growling and hissing, but was unable to do anything. Bosco quickly pulled his foot from the monster's chest and jumped to the side so the other clawed hand couldn't get him when he released it from under his foot.

He shot the thing in the head multiple times, shattering its skull. Only then did it stop moving.

“You have to blow their heads apart!” he yelled to anyone who might be listening. In truth, he wasn’t sure that this was the only way of taking these creatures down, but it was a start though.

He looked back to Samuel and Llave and saw that three creatures were running towards them, then he looked again to Derek and Brianna who were still facing off against the two he had seen earlier. He shook his head in disbelief as he saw more earth being moved from around the cemetery as more of the monsters continued to come forth.

He heard something coming at him from the side and instinctively swung his arm around, smashing the newest attacker solidly across the face and sending it spinning to the ground. He knew Derek had a better chance at getting out of this than Samuel and the girl did so he sped off at full speed toward them hoping to get there before the creatures did.



Samuel ducked a clawed hand as he ran, pulling Llave along. The move caused him to trip over one of the tombstones and land hard on the ground. Llave, unfortunately, tumbled with him and let out a shriek as she went down.

Samuel turned over and saw the first creature coming at them. It leered over Llave, growling and hissing, but then turned toward him instead; its dead eyes boring into him with absolute hatred and hunger. He tried to scramble

away. He could smell its rotten breath fill the air. It quickly pulled its arm back to strike but then a shot rang out and its head lurched to the side. Bang! Another bullet sailed in destroying one of its eye sockets. It turned its ugly head and hissed as Bosco ran toward it with all his strength, yelling as he came in. The big man leaped into the air, pulled a machete from its scabbard that hung on his belt, and came down on top of its head. The blade cleaved the monsters head in half, being driven right down to the jaw. Bosco then kicked it in the chest which sent it tumbling to the ground where it flailed about gurgling its green ooze all over.

“Come on!” he yelled. “Sam, get Llave to safety!” He saw the other two creatures running for them, leaping nimbly over the uneven ground.

Samuel sprung up, grabbed Llave, and started running for the road again. Bosco got between them and the creatures. He fired two shots into each one, trying to slow them down, then turned and ran to catch up with his friends. He glanced over to see Derek engaged with one of the monsters.

“Come on Derek,” he whispered under his breath as he ran.



Derek ducked a swing from the creature. He was surprised at how agile they were. As it came in again Derek struck first, driving his knife into its chest and letting off a shot point blank in the head. Pieces of skull shattered as its head lurched backwards. But still it came on.

Derek quickly holstered his gun, blocked the next swing with his hand, and went in close, grabbing the thing by its

rotting clothes and hoisting it into the air. He saw another one quickly approaching, bounding toward them over the many grave stones. Derek shifted the weight onto his back foot and then lunged forward, launching the creature into the air to slam into the one that was coming in fast. Both monsters went crumpling to the ground, but Derek knew they would be up quickly.

He turned and saw Bosco bounding away with Samuel and Llave toward the main road. He knew they couldn't make it to them that way as there were too many of the creatures cutting off their escape.

"Come on!" Derek said as he put his knife away, pulled out his gun again, grabbed Brianna's arm and darted to the side, narrowly dodging a clawed hand from one of the creatures who climbed around the statue of the Diablo.

Brianna shrieked as another monster intercepted them. Bang! Bang! Bang! Derek fired into the creature's face. It stumbled. Derek hit it to the side as they ran, jumping over the flailing creature. He close-lined another one as it came in. More and more were coming up from the graves. He and Brianna zigged and zagged, twisted and turned, trying to cut a path back around to where the others were.

He stomped on the head of another creature as it tried to surface. The thing's skull made a crunching sound as the force of Derek's boot shattered it and sprayed green fluid all over the ground.

"There's too many!" Brianna screamed as they ran. She ducked as a hand reached for her. The creatures were surprisingly fast.

"This way!" Derek yelled as he tugged her to the right.

They came around a lone tree that sprouted high into the air and Derek shoulder checked one of the monsters

out of their way. They had made it around and were starting to head in the same direction as the others.

Derek stopped for a moment in order to plan his way through the field of monsters. “Come on Bri. This way!” he yelled as he started to plow through the creatures, knocking them aside as they ran.

He glanced up to see that his friends were still in the fight, running for their lives. He and Brianna made good ground as they charged toward the others. They were only about thirty feet away when he suddenly heard a huge cracking sound and saw Samuel, Llave, and Bosco fall from sight with some of the creatures disappearing with them into the ground.

Chapter Sixteen

SURVIVAL

“**L**lave! Brianna screamed out as she saw the girl disappear.

“Quick! This way!” Derek yelled out to her as he quickly veered away from the broken ground.

“Llave!” she screamed again as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Bri! There’s nothing we can do for them right now. We have to trust that they’re still alive and we need to get out of this ourselves.”

Brianna wiped her face and nodded. More creatures were closing in on them.

“We need to make it to one of those houses,” Derek stated as he sidestepped another creature and backhanded it to the ground. Thankfully the monsters were lighter than a normal person which gave the weight of his strikes more effect when he connected. The stupid beast flailed around trying to right itself as the two friends sped away.

“Look out!” Brianna screamed as another one came flying in from their left. She reached down and grabbed a large rock as the creature barrelled in.

Derek turned just in time to see Brianna leap on the creature and slam it in the face with the rock which sent it tumbling to the side. He grinned briefly at the woman, then looked around and saw another dozen of the things coming in from all angles.

Brianna grimaced as one managed to get behind her and rake her with its dirty claws. Derek spun and punched it in its ugly face, shattering its jaw and spraying green ooze all over his arm; a little bit landing on Brianna's face.

"We have to move fast!" he said to her, concern evident on his face. "You need to stay close!"

The creatures were coming in fast. Derek started to run for the nearest exit of the courtyard, Brianna close behind. Three of the beasts tried to block their escape but Derek shouldered through them, sending them sprawling. He took a few hits for his effort but knew they needed to get out at all cost.

He roared as more came to block their path. More shots rang out as he unloaded his gun. Creatures flailed and faltered, some reaching out desperately for their prey only to be batted to the side by forceful blows.

Brianna sidestepped another monster; it skidded into the dirt, overbalanced by its lunge. More of the ugly things pushed other flailing monsters out of the way in order to get to her.

Derek spun around and grabbed her by the arm, turning her roughly as they veered to the right. She almost tumbled but managed to keep her footing. They ran with all their might. They could hear the hiss of the creatures scrambling after them. Two more ran in front to block their escape but Derek let go of Brianna's arm and plowed through them which sent them spinning to the sides. He was breathing heavily as he sped on and felt that his energy

was depleting. He knew they needed to make it to some shelter soon.

“Quick! Over here!” Brianna yelled as she started to head for what looked like a small dwelling. She ran in front of Derek and led the way.

They made it to the road, crossed it, and ducked inside the building. They somehow created more distance between them and the creatures as they barreled through the opening. Derek spun and noticed that there wasn’t a door, just an opening. He looked out and saw the creatures coming. All he could see was about six of them that continued the pursuit; whether or not there were more he didn’t know.

He looked around and saw that they were in a large square room. There were crumbled pieces of stone strewn throughout that might have been ancient furniture—he wasn’t really sure, nor did he have time to check. To the right was another door which led to another room, and in the center at the back of the room was a set of makeshift stairs which went up.

“Come on,” he said as he went for the stairs.

The stairs were uneven stone slabs that wound up and spiralled. The top floor of the building had one main large room and two large windows that let the dim light from the outside cascade into the chamber.

They could hear the hissing and growling of the creatures at the floor below. Brianna ran to the window. “There’s more coming!” she whispered as loudly as she dared.

“Get to the side Bri!” Derek yelled as he took up a position to the side of the door and readied himself for a fight.

Brianna gripped the stone she grabbed from the graveyard and darted to the other side of the door. There, they

waited as the sounds of the creatures grew louder. A few moments later one of the ugly things burst through the entrance. Derek shot it in the side of the head twice. Fragments of its skull sprayed about with the green ichor. It stumbled to the end of the room as another came through, then another, and another.

Brianna levelled her stone on the head of one of the creatures with all her might. It stumbled to the side where Derek hit it repeatedly with the butt of his gun. Another one tried to climb over its fallen comrade and strike out at Derek, but the man was too quick and blocked each strike easily then elbow smashed it in the face. The thing rocked back and fell at Brianna's feet. She levelled the stone onto it again, and again, and again screaming as she did.

Derek grabbed the next one that came through the door by its ragged shirt that barely hung on its wretched body and shot it three times in the head before it knew what was going on. With it still in his grasp he turned it around quickly pushed it over toward the window where the first one that was through the door was still trying to get up. The rotten creature he held tried to get its dirty hands up in order to claw him but Derek managed to keep it at bay and pushed it hard into the one that had just gotten back to its feet. With a strong shove Derek threw them both out the window. They sailed through the air and landed on the hard ground with a crunch.

Brianna screamed out. Derek whipped around to see one of the monsters on top of her and two more coming through the door. He shot one in the face, but that was the last shot he had in his mag. He knew he didn't have time to reload as the creatures were coming in too fast so he pulled his knife from its sheath and charged in.

The first creature swung wildly at him, but he easily

blocked that attack with his free hand and jammed the knife into the thing's throat, spilling green fluid freely from the wound. Then, with the knife still imbedded in the creature's neck he grabbed the thing's head and tore the knife through the brittle flesh and bone, ripping the monster's head from its neck. Before it fell to the ground Derek grabbed it and pushed it into the other beast that was coming through the door. That creature snapped and clawed and raked at its headless comrade, trying to move it aside so it could get at the man.

Brianna screamed again as she tried to defend herself from the attacker. Derek glanced over and saw the other creature trying to bite at her. She was barely holding it at bay as she feebly tried to hit it with the rock; her arm being stretched out at an odd angle which prevented her from getting any momentum.

Derek gave the creature he held a sudden powerful shove. The movement caused the one behind it to lose its footing and they both tumbled down the stairs as he let the thing go. He quickly turned and grabbed the other monster off his friend, hoisted it easily in the air, and ran to the window, tossing it through.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he turned and saw Brianna pulling herself from the ground.

"I ... I think so," she responded, almost in a daze. "Did we get them all?"

Derek looked out the window and didn't see any movement in the courtyard. The sounds of hissing were gone as well. All he saw through the window were a couple of the undead creatures twitching about the ground, unable to right themselves due to their now broken frames. Suddenly he turned and looked toward the door. He pulled his gun

again, slid the empty clip from it, and reloaded with a fresh one.

“What is it?” Brianna asked, scrambling away from the door.

“Don’t you hear that?” he asked as he walked to the door with purpose. He didn’t even wait for her to respond before silently descending the stairs. “I’ll be right back.”

A few seconds later shots rang out from down stairs. A moment after that Derek came back through the door. “Now they’re all gone,” he said with grim satisfaction as he came and sat beside his friend.

Brianna had tears trickling down her soft cheek. “What about Llave and the others?” she asked weakly.

“We’ll go and see as soon as the two of us have a quick break. We’ll be no good to them if we aren’t in any shape to help.”

Brianna nodded as she wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

Derek reached over and gently pulled the small back pack off Brianna’s shoulders. He rummaged through it for a moment and produced a small first aid kit. He looked over Brianna and cleaned up every place she had been clawed. She stared blankly as he went about his work.

“Hey. You okay?” he asked gently.

She nodded slightly, but Derek worried that the ordeal was almost too much for her.

“It’s going to be alright,” he reassured as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

Again she nodded, then weakly replied, “What were those things?”

“I don’t know. But one thing is for sure: they weren’t natural.”

“I mean ... I saw what happened when you guys first

found us when you were attacked by those stone creatures, but this was different. I ... I ... never thought I would be so scared in my life at seeing something that was ... was not normal. I don't even know how to process it." She put her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes.

"How are you even able to handle what just happened?" she asked Derek, looking up at him with those beautiful blue eyes that reminded him so painfully of Samantha. He quickly looked away before Bri could see the pain inside of him.

Derek merely shrugged. "It comes with the job. I've seen some strange things in my life—in my work with Orion—but I do have to admit that fighting creatures that are clearly in the realm of the undead was definitely a first. I know you normally don't do field work. It's just something you learn to deal with I guess."

Brianna smiled weakly at him as she reached up and put her hand on his. She leaned over slightly and put her cheek against his hand then gave it a soft kiss. "I'm glad you're with me," she said softly.

He pulled his hand away and cleared his throat. "We should be going," he said, trying to take control of the situation once more.

"Not until I've cleaned you up," Brianna stated firmly as she took the first aid kit from him. "Now take off your shirt."

Derek's face went red. "Why?" he blurted.

"Because I see the blood seeping through your shirt where you've been clawed and we need to make sure those cuts don't get infected."

Derek hesitated for a moment, not thinking that this was going to do anything to diminish the thoughts he had of his wife's sister, then complied.

Brianna was right. He had taken at least five nasty looking hits: three on his chest and abdomen and two on his back. “You don’t think these will cause us to turn into zombies do you?” Brianna asked as she cleaned him up.

Derek laughed. “This isn’t a movie! I think we’ll be fine.”

“But how do you know?” she pressed, quite seriously. “We’ve never seen anything like this before. Who knows what the effects of their attacks could be.”

That sent a chill down Derek’s spine. “Alright Bri, how about we make a deal then?”

Brianna stopped patching him up for a moment and looked him in the eyes. “I’m listening.”

“How about if either of us starts to show signs of being turned into zombies then the other one kills them?”

“That’s pretty morbid!” she exclaimed, shocked by his coldness. “I was thinking about maybe each of us risking our lives to find a cure, or something like that.”

“Like I said, this isn’t a movie which may not have a happy ending,” Derek replied seriously.

Brianna stared at him for what seemed an eternity then leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips. Derek pulled away and pushed her to arms length.

“We can’t Bri,” he said softly.

Her expression was pained. “I know. I just can’t help myself. I love you Derek. I would do anything for you,” she whispered.

“I would do anything for you, too, Bri. You’re like a sister to me.”

Bri pulled away, her expression going cold. “I don’t want to be a sister to you,” she said.

Derek didn’t know what to do. He moved over and wrapped her in a warm hug and just held her for a

moment. He didn't want to give her mixed signals, but trusted that he was really clear on his stance with their relationship and knew he had to rely on that.

She didn't pull away but instead asked, "Are we going to be okay?"

"We'll make it out of here," he said. "I promise." He didn't know how he could speak with such confidence. In truth he was scared—not for himself but for her and the others. And because of this fear he didn't know how he could speak with such boldness except that he knew he had to. He had to for Brianna and the others and ... for himself. He needed to hope beyond all odds that they would find a way out of this even though the facts seemed to be against them.

"Come," he said as he stood up. He grabbed her by the hand and helped her to her feet.

"Let's go get the others," he said as he pulled his shirt back on.

Chapter Seventeen

DIVIDED

Bosco felt himself fall through the air as the ground gave way. He reached out and grabbed Llave, pulling her in close and tucking his head as they tumbled. The young girl screamed. The big man felt pain erupt in his arm as something slammed into him as they flew through the air. Then something glanced off his head sending a wave of dizziness through him. He grunted under the blows then felt the wind being blasted from his lungs as he landed on solid ground on his back. Llave bounced from his grasp and rolled away.

Bosco winced and wheezed, trying to get the precious air back into his lungs. He turned to the side and heard a loud hiss. He tried to back away but a clawed hand came flashing out of the dust and raked him across the face drawing four lines of blood. Another hand flashed out but this time Bosco managed to get his arm up and blocked the attack. Then the thing's ugly head emerged from the settling dust, mouth open wide, baring its dirty fangs. Tears were starting to well up in Bosco's eyes from all the dust and he wasn't sure he was going to be able to

back away in time before the thing bit down onto his neck.

It came in, then its face exploded as a plank of wood smashed into it sending it sprawling to the side.

“You okay?” Samuel asked as he threw the plank away and bent down beside Bosco.

“Ya ... I think so.” The weary man said as he slowly sat up and checked himself over. “I don’t think anythings broken,” he stated.

Llave came over and knelt down beside the injured man. She placed her arm on his and he instantly felt a warmth running through him and all his aches began to dull into nothingness.

The big man stared at her—an inquisitive look upon his face—as she smiled at him. “I didn’t know you could do that,” he stated as he felt his face and noted that the scratches weren’t as painful or as deep as they had been.

“There is a lot you do not know,” she stated cryptically.

That brought a questioning look to the man’s face, but before he had a chance to ask her what she meant by that she interjected, “I am glad to help. We have to gain the dagger and find el diablo.” She turned to Samuel. “Do you need that I heal you?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m good. Thanks for asking Llave.”

She smiled and nodded. Then they heard it! Sounds of more hissing, and it was close!

“Time to go, eh?” said Samuel urgently, helping Bosco to his feet.

“Ya but to where?” Bosco asked.

They looked around quickly and noted that they had fallen at least twenty feet. Bosco knew they were lucky to be alive. They were in a building of sorts underneath the

ground of the courtyard. The hole they fell through must have been part of the roof structure that gave way. And unfortunately the hole it created was in the center of the roof which made climbing out not an option.

Close by, the rubble started to shift and the hissing was getting louder.

“I think more of those things fell in here with us eh,” said Samuel nervously.

“Ya and it doesn’t look like we can get out that way. There’s nothing to climb.”

“What about Derek and Brianna?” Samuel asked. “Maybe they can find some rope or something and haul us out?”

“We don’t even know if they’re still alive,” Bosco stated evenly. “And we can’t stay here.”

A clawed hand emerged from the rubble, then another, and another.

“We need to go now!” Bosco exclaimed. “Llave, you’re supposed to know this place right?”

Llave tugged Bosco’s arm to the side and pointed. “Over there!”

The big man looked to where she was pulling him and pointing. He saw an open doorway in the gloom. Quickly he pulled out a flashlight from his pack. “This way!” he said as he illuminated the room.

Samuel bent down and grabbed a large piece of splintered wood before following.

Together they scrambled over the debris and out of the room, leaving the hissing behind.



Derek and Brianna crept through the graveyard as stealthily as they could. Everything seemed to be quiet, but they weren't going to take any chances. They came to within a few feet of where the others had fallen. Derek stopped suddenly and held his hand out to stop Brianna.

"The ground is soft," he whispered. "We can't get closer without risking us falling in as well."

He thought for a moment then motioned for her to stay where she was. Gingerly he paced around the edge reaching out with his foot and applying a little pressure in order to see how solid the edges around the hole were. When he got back to Brianna he shook his head solemnly.

"It's no good. There's no way for us to get to where they fell through without risking *us* falling through."

"What are we going to do?" asked a panicked Brianna. "We can't just leave them!" she exclaimed louder than Derek liked as he waved his hand downward indicating for her to keep her voice down. Brianna immediately hushed and glanced around.

Derek was silent for a moment. "Give me the bag," he finally said.

Brianna unslung the bag and handed it to him. He opened it up and grabbed the bundle of rope they had. "Here. Tie this around your waist," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Because you're lighter than I am and I think I might have a way for us to at least look into that hole and see if they made it," he explained in hushed tones.

Brianna nodded and tied the rope around her slender waist. Derek came over and helped her get the fit right so she wouldn't slip out of it if things went bad.

“Now, what I want you to do is lay flat on the ground and inch your way over to the hole. When you get there use the flashlight to check and see what’s down there. Got it?”

Brianna nodded and slowly knelt down and sprawled out as flat as she could. With her head slightly up she started inching toward the hole. Derek backed up with the other end of the rope and braced himself just in case more of the ground gave way. He leaned against a stone column that had vines growing up around it.



Inch by inch Brianna crawled. The dirt was moist and fresh, its smell would have been refreshing if it weren’t for their circumstances. She was only a few feet away and could feel the ground softening up more. She reached out and the ground lurched down. She froze, letting out a little shriek.

“You okay Bri?” Derek asked.

“Ya. It’s just getting soft out here.”

“Do you want to come back?”

“No. I can do this,” she replied, strain evident in her voice.

She spread out more, in an attempt to distribute her weight as evenly as she could, then started slowly again to move forward. The ground didn’t give way and she made it to the edge. Brianna leaned her arms over and shined the light down into the darkness below. She saw rocks, wood, and other debris strewn throughout but didn’t see her friends anywhere. She noticed that she was looking down into what appeared to be another building that was

under the graveyard. There was definitely no way down from where her and Derek were.

She knew she had no choice and hollered out, “Bosco! Samuel! Llave!” Her voice echoed through the ruins and she held her breath hoping that she wasn’t about to disturb something else down there.

The moments ticked by and nothing stirred and her heart sank as she feared the worst had happened to her friends.

“Do you see anything Bri?” came Derek’s loud whisper.

“No. Nothing,” she said as she turned her head to face him.



Derek shifted his weight in order to get a better hold on the rope when he suddenly heard something from the side.

“Behind you!” Brianna screamed.

Derek turned his head just in time to see one of the beast coming at him, claws leading. He just managed to duck the blow as the thing slammed its hand hard into the stone column beside him.

He glanced over to see that Brianna tried to turn and head back, but part of the floor gave way and one of her legs fell through. Derek was pulled to the side by the tug on the rope.

The creature came at him with its other hand. Derek managed to block the blow, grabbed the thing by its dirty shirt, and slammed its face hard into the column then threw it away from him as hard as he could. The thing landed on its back but quickly tried to right itself.

Derek hastily wrapped the rope around his arm a couple more times. The other monster barreled in, hissing as it came.



Brianna tried to crawl toward Derek, but could feel the floor starting to give way. She looked around for something she could grab. Just to the left there was a thick vine running along the ground. She grabbed at it, hoping that it would help her get back to Derek.

Derek blocked left and right, barely keeping the second monster at bay. “Come on Bri!” he shouted.

“I’m trying!” she yelled back in exasperation. “Give me a break!”

“Give you a break! I’m the one trying to keep your skinny little butt from falling to your death!” He grunted as he took a hit in the shoulder.

“Thanks!” she yelled back, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

She grabbed hold of the vine and started to pull. It seemed solid enough, then some of the ground around the vine gave way and both her legs fell through. She let out a scream as she grasped it tighter.



Derek looked back quickly to see Brianna slunk halfway through the hole. Then he glanced to his right and saw the other creature—the one he had knocked to the ground at the beginning of the battle—coming in fast again. “Oh come on!” he yelled in frustration as he blocked a few more strikes.

He ducked again, grabbed the creature by the head and smashed it into the column. Its skull exploded, spraying green ooze all over its surface. It slumped to the ground just as the other one came rushing in again. Derek managed to get his leg up in time to kick it back, but the force wasn't strong enough to push it very far and it came in again.

Derek swung around the column in order to avoid the strike. The thing stumbled passed but was able to quickly turn on the man again. He blocked two strikes and was about to return the blows when he heard Brianna scream again. He glanced over to see Brianna slip from view.

He slammed hard into the monster as the rope pulled him toward the hole putting them both off balance. In desperation he reached out for the column with his other hand. The monster stretched out to grab him but Derek, with a handhold on the column, spun his foot into the face of the creature. The force of the blow sent the monster flying back. It tumbled through the air and hit the edge of the hole then fell from view.



Brianna's stomach rose quickly as she slipped from view and fell through. The rope tightened up and yanked at her waist causing a burning pain to erupt in her side as the rough braid rubbed against her. The shock of the impact caused her to drop the flashlight which bounced off two rocks then tumbled to the side, sending its beam of light off to the far end of the chamber's wall.

She spun helplessly, dangling fifteen feet above the debris. She reached with her hands and was able to grab a hold of the rope. She could still hear the fight going on

above ground and prayed silently that Derek was going to be able to get them out of this.

The rope jerked down a little then stopped. Tears rimmed her eyes and she let out a moan because of the pain she felt in her waist. The young woman tried to lift herself up in order to alleviate the amount of pressure the rope was placing on her, but her arms strained with the effort. She just wasn't able to lift her body weight up high enough for the pressure to be relieved enough to make a difference. Another jerk of the rope caused her to let out a shriek as she looked up. Dirt fell down on her as a piece of the ground gave way and one of the creatures tumbled through. She screamed and put her arms in front of her face as the thing hit her while it was falling. It tried to grab onto the young woman but wasn't able to orient its body in time as it fell. It landed on the rocks and debris below with a sickening crunch.

The few moments the young woman dangled there seemed like an eternity as she slowly spun on the end of the rope in the dark. She grabbed the rope tighter and gritted her teeth to stave off the pain when she finally felt herself being pulled up. As Brianna neared the top she reached out and grabbed the edge of the hole with a shaky hand. When her eyes crested the surface she saw Derek pulling on the braided cord with his strong arms. He had wrapped it a half turn around the column and was using it for leverage and a brake.

Brianna scrambled out of the hole and clawed her way to where Derek was. He kept the rope taught until she was out of harms way, then he slumped down, exhausted. Brianna crawled over and wrapped him in a huge hug. "Thank you," she whispered softly into his ear.

The man was so tired from the exertion he merely nodded and smiled.

“What did you see?” he finally asked after getting his breath back.

“Not much,” Brianna replied sombrely. “There was debris everywhere and I couldn’t see anyone. I thought I saw at least one exit from the room, but I couldn’t get a good enough look before all hell broke loose.”

She started to tear up.

“Hey. It’s not your fault,” Derek comforted her as he put a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll find them.”

“How do you know that? They could have been buried.”

“Or ... they could have escaped and are headed toward the temple,” Derek countered.

“I thought *you* were supposed to be the cynic,” Brianna stated.

“Well, you know me—I’m full of surprises.”

In truth, Brianna knew that Derek had become cynical through his experiences with Orion, but hoped that deep down inside he wanted things to turn out for both of them.

“Yes you are Derek Vico,” Brianna replied. “So what’s the play now?” she asked as she pulled off the rope and lifted her shirt to inspect her side.

Derek looked toward the temple. “If I know Bosco he’ll continue on with the original plan and get to that temple at all cost.”

“But what if they didn’t make it? We can’t go on without Llave. We’ve already lost the dagger and now her. Without the dagger *and* her I don’t know what we’re going to do, or how we’re going to handle what else we’re going to face.” Brianna stated, bringing some realism to the situation.

“We’ll have to figure that part out if it comes to that,” Derek replied. “For now, we have but one option. We have to continue. We can’t let Tower Six get the heart.”

“But how are *they* expecting to get to it if they don’t have Llave?” Brianna asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe they think that the dagger will be enough? I mean ... they have been doing this thing, for the most part, without the kid. After they failed to get her back at the village, but managed to grab the dagger, they’ve pretty much left us alone. One would think that they at least would have laid out some traps for us so they could get Llave, but they haven’t.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Brianna responded. “Everything that I’ve read on the Heart seems to suggest that we need Llave as she’s the key. Except—.”

“Except what?” Derek ask.

Brianna thought hard for a moment. “Except the writing that we saw on the door at the entrance to the city: ‘Enter Guardian and shape destiny. Feed the Beast and awaken the heart,’ it said. The way it was written suggests that the guardian, Llave, might not be who we think she is. Or at least it implies that she has a big part to play in what happens here and now in this place.”

Derek was silent.

“Come on. We have to get moving,” he finally said as he turned and stared through the gloom at the ominous temple in the middle of the city.

“I have no idea what lies ahead,” he stated. “But whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not going to be good.”

Chapter Eighteen

THE DAMNED

The light from the flashlight only illuminated the area about twenty feet in front of Bosco and the others. He moved the light from side to side and up and down as they went because the place was far too big to illuminate the whole of the passageway they walked down. He didn't know what to make of this. He didn't think that ancient cities normally had lower levels to them. But then again, this was the first ancient city he had ever been in.

The walls were made of stone and the floor was hard-packed dirt. As they walked he noticed that the walls were covered with carvings.

"What do you make of this?" he turned and asked Samuel.

"I don't know."

Suddenly Llave stopped and ran her delicate hand across the surface of the stone.

"What is it?" Samuel asked.

"It's their story," Llave replied. "It tells of their civiliza-

tion and how they worshipped the Diablo until the guardians came.”

“So we’re in some sort of ... library?” Bosco asked.

“Probably a hall of history or something like that,” Samuel replied.

“It’s a pretty big hall just for some carvings,” observed Bosco.

“Is there anything else you can tell us about this Llave?” Samuel asked as he ran his fingers along some of the etchings on the wall.

Llave looked to the scenes depicted on the stone and then started to move along the corridor. Samuel and Bosco followed along.

There were numerous images that appeared to depict human sacrifices upon alters which appeared to be made of bone. The whole carving unnerved Bosco. As he walked along he saw one that seemed to display the cemetery they barely escaped from and, underneath it, was a large room which had a massive alter. On that alter were a whole multitude of victims that were tied to it. Next to the alter was a person with their arms upraised as though offering the people to the Diablo. The next scene showed a sacrifice and it looked as though there was something being transferred from the victims to the Diablo who was standing in the middle of the cemetery. The Diablo looked as though he was receiving power from the unfortunate souls.

“Hey Llave, what do you make of this,” Bosco asked as he pointed to the carving of the Diablo receiving something from the sacrificed worshippers.

She looked at it for a moment, then responded, “Diablo must feed.”

Samuel’s face went pale.

“Okay that’s some creepy stuff!” exclaimed the big man. “We gotta get outta here.”

He was about to move when he heard a scuffling sound coming from down the passage the way they had just traveled. They all froze.

Quickly, he shined his light down the passage. Nothing was there. He moved the light back and forth, trying to get the whole scope of the large tunnel. As he was bringing it back he saw one of the undead monsters from the graveyard charge into the lighted area of the flashlight, hissing as it came.

Samuel stumbled backward and let out a yelp as the thing sped in. He quickly collected himself and hoisted the piece of lumber he picked up from the debris pile and swung. It connected with the thing’s face which sent it sprawling to the side. Two more burst out of the darkness running recklessly toward the group.

Bosco threw the flashlight to Llave, whipped out his gun, and shot the first of the crazed creatures three times in the face. The shots made it falter as pieces of its skull were blown from its head. The extra time gave Bosco what he needed to swing his powerful leg around and roundhouse the creature in the ribs which sent it flying in a heap to the other side of the passageway. When he came back around the third creature raked him in the arm with its dirty claws.

The big man grimaced, but accepted the blow as he continued to come around and punched the ugly thing square in the face. Its head rocked back and there was a sickening crack. Bosco then placed his gun right on its chest and pulled the trigger. It twitched weirdly and fell back a step, but tried to come forward again. Bosco

spartan kicked it with all his might which sent it flying and falling to the ground several feet away.

He looked over at Samuel to see the man beating his assailant again and again with the plank. Llave stood back trying to give the two men as much light as possible. Bosco then put his gun away, pulled out his large knife and came down on the creature, severing its head with one blow. The creature twitched a couple more times then lay still.

“Samuel!” he yelled at his friend who was in a frenzy, hitting the creature over and over again. “I think it dead ... again,” he said sarcastically.

That was enough to bring Samuel back to his senses. He stood up straight and composed himself. “Right. Right,” he replied as he took a deep breath.

“We have to move,” Bosco insisted as he grabbed the light back from Llave. “Thanks kid.”

“Right,” Samuel said again.

“Are you alright?” Bosco asked, concern evident in his voice.

“Yes. Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be? We've only been attacked by people that were supposed to be dead a long time ago. Why wouldn't I be okay? That's completely normal after all!” he exclaimed.

“It's okay man. I know it's been a weird day but we really have to keep moving.”

“To where?” asked Samuel in exasperation.

“Well. I figure that this corridor might lead us to the temple.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If my estimates are correct, we are going in the same direction as the temple. Also, the fact that this place is tied to the sacrifice and worship of the Diablo suggests that

these places are connected,” Bosco replied. “Besides, we really don’t have any other choice do we?”

Samuel nodded.

“Then let’s go,” the big man said again as he started down the passageway once more.

Llave and Samuel followed closely, leaving the gloom of the alter-room behind them.

As Bosco led them through the tunnel he noticed that the carvings stopped and the walls became plain again.

“Why are there no carvings on these walls?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Samuel. He turned to Llave and asked, “Why do you think there no carvings here?”

She looked at him with her dark eyes. “Because the carvings are supposed to induce fear as the people who were led through here were shown what awaited them at the end. Diablo sought to induce as much fear as possible before the souls were harvested as it made the feast more powerful and enjoyable.”

Samuel was quiet.

“That’s sick man!” exclaimed Bosco.

“Ya. And very evil eh. I don’t think we realize what we got ourselves into.”

“Well, whatever it is, it needs to be stopped,” Bosco declared with determination. “We can’t let Tower Six unleash this kind of evil. Or worse: harness the evil.”

The thought of that was terrifying.

Suddenly Bosco stopped and pulled his gun as he heard a deep guttural growl come from somewhere down the passage. “Did you hear that?”

“Ya.”

They held their breathes, not daring to make a noise as they listened intently to see if they could hear it again. There it was.

Samuel looked to Bosco. Bosco took a step back and held out the light.

A form started to come into view, almost materializing from the shadows. As it took shape from out of the darkness he could see a huge hulking mass which stood about eight feet tall, ripped with muscle. Its head was completely bald and it only had small slits where its eyes and nose should be. Its mouth was large and wide and showed rows of sharp fangs.

“El Co Habris,” Ljave whispered.

“What was that?” Bosco asked urgently.

“What did you say?” Samuel asked the girl.

“The damned,” Llave responded. “That is what they are called in the ancient tongue.”

Chapter Nineteen

THE TABLET

After the incident in the graveyard the city seemed even more quiet than it was when they first came into the hellish place. Derek was used to being out in the jungle where the sounds of life were in abundance, or looking out over a bustling cityscape with its flickering lights, movement, and varying noises. This city, however, was dead. It was dead to natural life; all except the canopy of trees which surrounded the ancient place keeping it hidden from the world outside.

Derek suddenly stopped and cocked an ear to the side. Brianna looked at him curiously. “Do you hear that?” he asked.

She paused and concentrated for a moment. “I think it sounds like rain,” she said after a moment. “Really really faint rain.”

“I think it is,” Derek replied as he looked to the canopy of trees and branches that covered the ancient city. “I think it’s raining outside.”

A moment later the rain could be heard more clearly as

it pelted the tree-roof in torrential waves. Then a crack of thunder was faintly heard.

“Okay, that’s pretty cool,” Brianna admitted with a smile. “I mean ... it’s pretty cool for a ‘death city’ and all,” she said jokingly.

Derek managed a slight smirk. He really appreciated Brianna’s optimism. It reminded him of his wife. And why shouldn’t it? They were sisters after all. Maybe that was the reason he was finding it hard to be around Brianna. She and Samantha were so alike, and yet they were so different. Samantha was calm and soft-spoken. Brianna was energetic and outgoing. Samantha was tender and gentle. Brianna was more wild and aggressive; not in an unkind way, but rather she was always trying to live each moment to the edge which often got her into trouble whether it was in word or something that she did that could be considered unwise.

Derek enjoyed Brianna’s presence, but he loved the calming nature of Samantha. He had his own fire and impulses to constantly watch and manage, and Samantha’s nature helped to counteract that fire when he needed it to.

“Hey. You okay?” he heard Brianna ask him which jolted him from his thoughts.

“Oh ... ya. I’m just trying to keep focused. You never know what’s coming at us next,” he lied.

Brianna slipped her fingers between his and gave him that smile that knocked most guys off their feet. “Then we’ll face it together,” she said.

Derek gave her hand a squeeze and let go, ignoring the stab of guilt at the sad look Bri gave him.

Suddenly gun shots rang out in the air. Derek grabbed Brianna and pulled her down and to the side. They both

looked down the road. The shots were far away toward the temple.

“Do you think Bosco found a way out?” Bri asked.

“Come on! Quick!” Derek shouted as he sprang to his feet, unholstered his gun, and ran to the side of the closest building. Brianna followed closely. More shots rang out as they hurried down the road, ducking down side streets and shuffling past open doorways, always keeping a wary eye as they moved across the openings. As they moved closer they could hear screams and shouts accompany the gun fire.

They made it a fair way down the road before the shooting and sounds of battle stopped. Derek paused for a moment, straining to see if he could hear anything. It was quiet, except for the rain that could still be heard pounding down on the tree-roof.

After a moment he motioned for Brianna to follow him. He took a few steps but stopped suddenly as he felt a light tug on his arm. He turned to look at his friend. Brianna motioned with her head, indicating that she had seen something in one of the doorways they were at. It was a small brick building with a window and doorway. There were no doors or shutters on the openings.

“What is it?” Derek whispered with urgency.

“There’s something in here,” she whispered back as she pulled out her flashlight and shone it though the dark opening. Before they went in she unslung the backpack, and pulled a small brown book from a side pocket. The book was bound with an elastic and had frayed edges.

“It’s my field journal,” Brianna explained before Derek could ask the question.

“Oh ... okay. Why are you pulling it out now?”

“This building looks familiar. I mean, it looks like something from my studies of the place.”

She pointed to the inscriptions above the door.” These are markings of the high priest’s house,” she explained.

Derek looked back to the where they had heard the sounds, then back to her. He was torn. He knew they had to catch up with Mateo’s men and Tower Six in order to try and get the dagger back. “We don’t have time for this,” he insisted.

“It’ll only take a moment,” Brianna replied as she went into the room. Derek reluctantly followed.

“As I mentioned, I think this is the house of the high priest, or some sort of sacred place.”

The room was small and square. In the center was a stone pillar that looked like an altar. There were carvings and drawings all around it. Brianna knelt down and wiped some of the dust away from it. Derek went back to the door for a moment and glanced down the road, making sure nothing was coming, then came up beside his friend.

“Can you read it?” he asked.

“Just a little,” she replied. “I think it’s a ritual that’s used to give this Diablo power through human sacrifice.” She opened the small journal and started thumbing through the pages.

“Great,” Derek said with a roll of his eyes. “It’s always about the human sacrifices with these people isn’t it! Why can’t they ever sacrifice to the plant gods! Or the earth gods!”

Brianna chuckled at his sarcasm as she flipped through the pages. She stood up and scanned the rest of the room with her flashlight. She let out a slight gasp as her light scanned across the corner of the room which illuminated a human skeleton which was propped up in the corner.

Derek stood up beside her and looked to where she was shining the light. “What’s that in its arms?” he asked as he

started to approach the ancient figure. It was holding onto something small and round. Derek stooped down and blew some of the dust off the object. It looked like a stone plate with carvings all over it. It was about six inches in diameter and half an inch thick.

“What do you make of this?” he asked Brianna as she approached.

She stooped down and looked at it for a moment, then flipped through her book some more. “I don’t know. It could be part of their worship.” She reached over and grabbed it. “No. Wait a minute. This is it!”

“This is what?”

She held her book up to him and showed him a drawing which looked eerily similar to the stone tablet they were holding. “This is the Carmesí Stone. Or rather, the Carmesí stone tablet.”

Derek was quick to put his hand on hers. “Are you sure we should be disturbing it? I don’t want a recap of what happened in the cemetery.”

“I think it will be okay,” she replied. “I’m pretty sure we are going to need this somehow, or in some way.”

Derek removed his hand and nodded. Brianna tugged the stone plate free. The skeleton’s arms crumbled into dust and his head fell forward and tumbled from its fragile neck. Both of them sucked in their breath and waited, almost expecting something bad to happen. Nothing.

“Come on. We have to go,” Derek said with urgency as he rose to his feet, pulling his friend with him. Quickly, they darted from the room and started to head back down the road to the temple.

Brianna tucked the tablet into her pack as they went. “Even if we don’t get the dagger back, we can use this to stop the Diablo.”

Derek gave her a quick glance and nodded.

They moved through the silent city and came to a large intersection. Derek stopped and knelt down, not wanting to move into the open just yet. He noticed in the middle of the intersection a large fountain with a massive statue in the middle of it. The statue was similar to the one they had seen in the garden with a huge man-like creature that had large curved horns coming from his head. It had a large axe in its hands. Around the figure were statues of women who clung to the man as they looked up to him.

“Man. This guy was seriously narcissistic!” Derek whispered. “He needs some serious humility.”

“Maybe he did get humbled?” Brianna responded. “After all, he’s not around anymore.”

Derek shrugged. He looked around the large area and noticed three men, all of which were just alive a few moments earlier, lying in contorted positions throughout the area. The bodies, though mutilated, had their skin pulled back tight against their skeletons which made it look like they had been dead for years. He also noticed five masses—bodies of creatures—lying around in pools of black liquid. They almost looked like large dogs with massive heads and sharp curved fangs.

“I think we found what Mateo’s men ran into,” Derek stated, pointing to the creatures.

Brianna nodded, but didn’t say anything.

Derek pulled the mag out of his gun and checked to see if he had any bullets left. “Come on. They’re not that far ahead of us,” he said as he motioned for Brianna to follow him.

They slowly walked into the opening. Derek looked around nervously. Normally he would have been more confident about walking into a potential ambush, but this

place was different. He was different. Before, he didn't care if he lived or died. Since coming on this mission, it was as if he had started to live life again. He no longer wanted to die, especially in a city that already felt like a grave. He was used to fighting men, not creatures that seemed to come from the pit of hell. This whole place had rattled him and he found it hard to keep his head in the game.

The other thing that troubled him was the pressure he put upon himself to keep Brianna safe. He wasn't attracted to the beautiful young woman the way she was obviously attracted to him, but if something happened to her it would be like losing his wife all over again, and he knew he couldn't bare that.

They slipped up beside the edge of the fountain. Derek looked up at the statue and shook his head, wondering what he got himself into. "This guy was crazy," he whispered to himself.

Brianna put a hand on his shoulder and smiled weakly. Derek glanced over at her, then a shocked expression splayed across his face as he saw a large shadow descend from behind the girl.

"Look out!" the man screamed as he grabbed her and dove to the side.

A large black dog-like creature landed where they were a moment early, crashing into the side of the fountain and spraying pieces of broken stone everywhere. It had a massive muscled body with large black bat-like wings sprouting from its back. It growled and howled as it landed. Derek spun around and shot it in the face three times. Small points of blood appeared as its head twitched to the side from the impact of the bullets. It slowly turned its head toward the two and growled.

“Move! Move!” Derek yelled at Brianna as the two of them scrambled to get away from it.

The thing lunged and snapped, just barely missing Derek as he spun out of the way. Brianna cleared the fountain and distanced herself from the creature.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The shots hit, but didn't seem to do much more than anger the creature. It snapped again. Derek spun just out of the way. He could smell its acrid breath and could feel the heat from its maw as he barely dodged out of the way. As he moved he shoved his gun up under the thing's jaw and fired: bang, bang, click. He was out of rounds.

The two shots went into the thing's jaw. It howled and retracted. Derek took the opportunity to dive to the side, over the edge of the fountain. He popped the clip out of his gun and pulled another one out. Before he could slide it into the gun the creature snapped again which forced him to duck. Pieces of stone shattered from the fountain as the thing hit it with incredible force. Derek slipped the clip into the gun, launched himself forward, spun and fired twice. One shot went to the side while the other hit the thing just below the eye. It flinched back a moment then turned and howled; spittle from its mouth sprayed out as it did so. Derek shot again. The bullet hit the inside roof of the creature's mouth, but that didn't stop it from coming forward. Derek barely managed to dive over the edge of the fountain again. He spun and stood, readying to fire when his breath was blown from his lungs as the creature swung its massive paw into the man hitting him in the chest. The force of the blow threw Derek into the air and back ten feet. He landed hard.

He tried to shake the dizziness from his head as he pulled himself up. He knew the creature would be on him

in an instant and refused to let himself die like this. His vision cleared as he stood, but what he saw next caused his heart to sink. Another creature descended in the distance, scooped up Brianna in its arms, and flew away.

“Brianna!” Derek screamed desperately as he saw his friend disappear into the air toward the temple.

Chapter Twenty

FIGHT WITH THE DAMNED

“Get behind me,” Bosco said to Llave and Samuel as he pulled a large knife from its sheath.

The creature stalked forward toward the trio. Instinctively, they took a step back.

“No way,” Samuel replied. “You’re going to need all the help you can get against this thing.” He held the large plank he had extricated from the debris earlier out in front of him.

Bosco nodded. “Kid, get behind us. Samuel, follow my lead.”

Llave stood there unmoving. “Ponte detras de nosotros!” Samuel motioned to her as he spoke. The young girl finally snapped out of whatever trance she was in and took a few steps back as Samuel and Bosco stepped forward to meet the creature.

“You must be taken to the master,” the creature said in a low guttural voice. “He desires to feed.”

“Whoa! You speak English!” Bosco spouted.

“My master gives me many abilities,” the thing replied with a toothy smile.

“Well, you can tell your master that we’re not interested in being dinner.”

The thing nodded and crouched down as though it was getting ready to pounce. “I was hoping you would say that,” it growled.

Before it could rush toward them Bosco pulled the trigger. The bullet went into the thing’s chest. A small line of blood trickled down where the fresh wound was. The creature glanced to where it was shot for a moment and then looked up to Bosco and laughed a low throaty laugh, almost a growl. Bosco shot again and again. One bullet grazed its skull, the other entered the other side of its chest. It acted as though it barely noticed the shots as it roared and leaped forward.

Samuel went left and heaved his plank around, slamming the thing on the side of the head. A resounding crack was heard throughout the passage as the board connected solidly. The thing flinched a little but continued to come in. Bosco took the opportunity to shoot again, point blank in the chest, then he spun his knife around and stuck it in the beast’s side. The creature howled as the blade went into its flesh, but still it came on. It swung its arm around and connected with Bosco’s arm that held the gun. The force made the big man lose his grip on the weapon and it went spinning away to the other side of the passage.

Samuel retracted and swung again hitting the creature across the back. The plank hit solidly, splintered, and broke in half. The creature swung its other arm around and connected with the back of its hand across Bosco’s head. The blow sent the man flying and spinning to the side. It then whipped around and grabbed Samuel around the throat with its massive hand. Samuel hit the creature’s arm, trying to loosen its iron grip to no avail.

It hoisted the man off his feet as though he weighed little more than a few pounds. Samuel could feel the life being squeezed from him. He gasped, trying to access the precious air he so craved. The beast pulled the squirming man in close. The terrifying fangs glistened with saliva. Samuel's eyes went wide in horror as he was drawn closer to the knife-like teeth. The thing opened its mouth wide and Samuel knew his life was about to end. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the horrifying creature sink the teeth into him in his last moments of life, when the creature suddenly flinched and howled. The grip he had on the man loosened and Samuel popped open his eyes. Bosco was standing under the thing's arm with his knife protruding all the way through the thing's bicep. The big man pulled the blade out, spraying bright red blood all over, as Samuel fell to the ground. He laid at the feet of the creature clutching at his throat, still trying to suck in the much needed air.

"Come on then!" Bosco shouted as he backed up and crouched into a ready stance. He spun his knife around and held out his other hand defensively. "Let's do this!"

The thing turned and smiled again, holding its wounded arm. Before advancing it lifted one of its massive legs and slammed its booted foot down into Samuel's chest.

"No!" Bosco yelled as he charged.



Derek fired again, and again, and again as he walked toward the dog-beast. The expression on his face was grim, etched with determination and resolve. The thing flinched with each shot and even retracted a step or two, then it roared and came in, its

massive maw open wide and coming for Derek's head. The man sidestepped at the last moment, swung his gun arm around and shot the thing in the side of the head again and again and again until the magazine was empty.

The creature seemed to lose its footing as blood flowed freely from the newly inflicted wounds. Derek knew he had hurt it. He took the opportunity as it stumbled to leap up on its back and pulled his knife from its sheath. He stabbed down hard on the back of the thing's neck, aiming the blade up, trying to shove it into the back of the beast's skull.

The creature howled in agony and began to buck. Derek lost his grip on the knife as he was thrown from its back. He hit the ground hard and rolled, trying to absorb the impact. The thing flailed and howled. Derek had to move out of the way quickly so he wouldn't get stepped on by the massive creature. After a few more seconds the thing let out one more shriek then fell to the ground in a heap. Derek had to dive to the side again as the huge beast came crashing down.

It took the man a second to collect his thoughts as he stared at the monstrous creature. He shook his head then leaped to his feet, grabbed the knife out of the back of the thing's neck, and ran off toward the temple. He desperately hoped that Brianna was okay, but he knew his hope was against all reason. Despite that, he ran as fast as he could down the road, hurrying to whatever fate might be awaiting him.



Bosco came in swiping his knife across the midsection, but the creature was faster than he had expected and back-stepped the strike. The big man tried to reverse his momentum but the creature back-handed him before he had the chance. He flew to the side with horrifying force. His eyes watered from the blow and the sting of the hit caused him to almost swoon as he hit the ground hard. He knew he had to get up. He knew he had to get up fast! But his head spun as he bordered on the verge of consciousness.

He let out a grunt as he climbed to his hands and knees. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the creature stalking toward him. Behind it he could see Llave standing off to the side against the wall. As he glanced up he saw Samuel writhing on the ground and holding his chest and neck. Bosco knew he had to win this. He knew that he was the only chance they had to survive.

Bosco grasped the knife tightly in his hand and shook the dizziness away. The beast neared. When it was within striking distance the big man quickly spun around and swiped the blade across the beast's thigh. He then reversed his grip on the knife and spun the other way, slicing across the back of the monster's leg right behind the knee. It screamed out and turned with Bosco's movement trying to strike out with its massive fist, but the man was too fast.

The creature's leg buckled as the tendons in the back of its leg were severed. Bosco threw the knife up and grabbed it with his other hand as he stood and lunged toward the monster, thinking to plunge it into the thing's neck. The beast agilely got its arm up just in time. The blade sunk into its forearm up to the hilt. Time seemed to slow at that moment as Bosco stared at the creature. The

thing moved its arm aside so that the man could see its grinning face.

Bosco's heart pounded as he realized he was in trouble. He yanked on the blade but lost his grip as the monster pulled its arm quickly to the side with the knife still stuck in it. The thing turned and lashed out with its other hand. Bosco ducked the arm, barely getting out of the way, and responded with a Spartan kick to the face of the creature. The creature's neck lurched back from the blow. The thing shook its head, blood now dripping from the slit that should have been its nose. It roared and lunged for Bosco with its fanged mouth. Bosco jumped to the side, narrowly dodging the attack. He could smell the acrid breath of the creature as it snapped at him; saliva spraying into his face.

The man gave the creature two quick jabs across the face but, faster than he realized possible for the big beast, it snapped its head back and caught him in the nose with the hard part of its skull. Bosco felt the sting of the blow as he was launched back. He felt the threat of unconsciousness coming upon him again, but he shook his head, desperately fighting to stay awake. He heard the roar of the creature at the outside of his senses and knew that it was coming for him. He stumbled back as quick as he could, trying to get some distance between him and the monster. His blurred vision was beginning to clear and he could see the form of the beast shambling toward him, only being able to move as fast as its one good arm and leg could carry it.

Bosco looked around desperately for something he could use against this minion of death but there was nothing. He continued to back away but the creature was gaining ground. As he moved he felt something behind him. It was the gun! He grabbed it with his hand just as the

creature leaped for him. It opened its maw wide as it came in. The big man reached out with his left hand, grabbed the beast under its jaw and slid himself toward it, hoping to get under it so the vicious bite would overshoot him. As he did he spun his right hand around and placed the gun in the thing's neck. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Click. The bullets sank into the creature's flesh, spraying its blood all over.

Bosco winced as the full weight of the monstrous beast crashed down on him. He desperately held the thing's flailing maw at bay as it continued to try and sink its cruel fangs into him. Bosco screamed as he closed his eyes and held the thing's head aside with all the strength he could muster as it flailed and its life blood poured all over him. The muscles in his corded arms bulged and the seconds seemed like an hour. Then, without warning, the creature was still.

Bosco pulled himself slowly from the monstrous mess. He wiped the blood from his face then extracted his knife from the thing's arm. He looked over to where Samuel was and saw that Llave was by his side. He staggered over to the two and knelt down beside his companion. Samuel was still holding his neck and chest. His breathing came in laboured gasps but was slower than it was a few moments earlier.

"He's dying," Llave stated matter-of-factly. "And there is nothing I can do. He is too far along."

Bosco looked at the man with a grim expression on his face and grabbed his hand.

The look in Samuel's face told Bosco that he knew what was happening to him. A tear streamed down his face as he stared up at the big man. He grasped Bosco's hand

tightly with his then, after a moment, sucked in one last time, exhaled and went limp.

A tear cut a line through the blood on Bosco's face making it look as though he were crying blood as he stared down at the man. He looked at Llave as he wiped the tear from his cheek.

Suddenly he felt as though he was near an electrical current and the hairs of his arm closest to Samuel stood up. He flinched back and looked at the dead man. A light blue shimmer encompassed his body, brightened for a moment, then sank into the ground. Samuel's skin stretched and sucked in tight making him to look as though he was a skeleton wearing skin.

"What was that!" Bosco blurted as he scrambled away quickly.

"It was the Diablo feeding," came Llave's cryptic response.

"His what!"

"If someone dies in this city, then his life-force is pulled into the Diablo which gives him strength," she replied. "If enough life-force is given to the Diablo then it will rise again."

"Don't you think that would have been important to tell us before we came here?" Bosco yelled at her.

"I wasn't really sure if the life-force could be drained from anywhere in the city or just from under the cemetery," she replied calmly. "Remember, señor, I have never been here before."

"Ya but you're the guardian. You're supposed to know this stuff!"

Llave stared at the man with an emotionless expression.

Bosco got the feeling that she wasn't telling him everything he needed to know, but decided that he wasn't going

to get anything more from her. He knew he needed Brianna for that.

“We’ll talk about that later. Right now we have to go before more of these ... whatever you said these were ... the damned, show up.”

He collected their supplies then took one last look back at the body of Samuel before he turned and walked with Llave down the dark passage toward the temple.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE CHILINGRA

Derek ran with all his might. As he did, he kept looking up trying to see if he could spot the winged creature that had taken his friend. There was nothing. His heart pounded as he jumped over boulders and turned down streets, making his haphazard way toward the spiring temple in the center of the city.

He rounded one corner and saw two more of Mateo's men lying dead in the street. Again, their bodies looked as though all the moisture in them was sucked out as their skin was pulled tight against their frames. There were also five large bulbous masses of creatures that laid still on the cold ground in different spots on the road. A cursory look at the men revealed that they were stripped of anything that could have been remotely useful: guns, radios, food, etc. He figured they were probably looted by the other men in Mateo's company. When Derek regarded the creatures that were slain his first thought was that they appeared to be some type of spider: an otherworldly spider. The sudden sight caused him to slow up a bit and glance

around, hoping that there weren't any more of the things around. As he jogged down the street he noticed shell casings strewn all over, and the smell of gunpowder hung in the air.

This was quite the fight, he thought to himself as he surveyed the area.

Having passed the scene he picked up his pace once more and sped on. He rounded two more corners and came within view of the temple. It stood about three hundred yards in front of him. There was a large open area between him and the temple. Again, there was a large statue to the Diablo in the courtyard. *This is bad*," he thought to himself. *Everywhere these stupid statues are there's always trouble.*

Behind that, there was a massive set of stone stairs that were about twenty feet wide and climbed thirty or more feet up the side of the temple to a large door. Immediately, Derek noticed that the door was open.

He warily looked around to see if he could spot Brianna or the creature that had taken her. There was nothing. His heart sank and his thoughts spun, imagining the worse for the young woman.

Before entering the large open area, Derek glanced around, trying to discover any potential threats. He didn't like the openness of the place. If something was out there he would be completely exposed and vulnerable. But he had to get to that door.



“*L*et me just shoot him so we can get out of here.” Gerald said as he looked through the scope of his rifle.

“No,” Brighton replied coldly.

“Of course not,” Gerald replied dryly. “Why would you let me kill the only man that stands between us and completing our mission and get out of this hell hole of a place.” He put his rifle down and watched as Derek cautiously entered the courtyard.

Brighton smiled and patted his partner on the shoulder. He slipped behind Gerald and started making his way off the building.

“Idiot,” Gerald whispered to himself as he looked around warily, sweat dripping from his brow.



Derek quickly crossed the courtyard to the statue. He looked everywhere he could think that there might be an ambush, but spotted nothing. He worked his way around the massive statue and noted that he was only about fifty yards from the base of the stairs. After taking a couple deep breaths and focusing his mind he darted out from behind the statue and ran with all his might. He was almost there when he saw something come out of the corner of his eye. He tried to slow his momentum and spun to the side just as a knife went flying across his field of vision. He finished the spin and came up with his gun drawn.

Standing twenty feet from him was the Asian holding his own gun that was drawn right at Derek.

“I could have shot you, but I didn’t,” Brighton stated matter-of-factly. “Or I could have had my friend do it for me.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because that would defeat my purpose,” he replied cryptically.

“Which is ...?”

“To see how I stand up to you in hand-to-hand,” Brighton replied with a smile as he spun his gun up, held out his other hand, palm forward, holstered the weapon behind his back, then held out his empty hand unthreateningly.

“And what if I just shoot you?” Derek asked coldly.

Brighton laughed. “Then my friend will have no choice but to shoot you.”

“You do realize we’re in the middle of a city plagued with undead creatures and a growing evil that threatens to consume all in its path,” Derek asked.

Brighton nodded.

“And ... you want to do this now?”

Brighton grinned wickedly.

Derek was silent for a moment, sighed, then holstered his gun. “Fine,” he said as he pulled his knife from its sheath. “I really don’t have time for this, but it sounds like there’s no way around it. There’s something not right in your head.”

Brighton smiled and produced another knife which he spun around as he approached Derek.



“*T*his is stupid,” Gerald said to himself as he watched the two men pull knives and start walking toward each other. He wasn’t at all comfortable in this place of “death” and wanted to be done with this mission as soon as possible. He hoisted his gun up and put Derek in the crosshairs. He slowly began to squeeze the

trigger but suddenly a crack of pain erupted across his face. The gun lurched to the side letting the shot fly harmlessly away.



Derek looked passed Brighton and to the top of the building where the shot rang from. Hope renewed in him as he saw Bosco fighting up there with someone. Brighton also glanced back and saw the big man fighting with Gerald, then to Derek. Derek smiled as he quickly pulled his gun again. Brighton also pulled his gun and dove to the side as Derek let two shots fly. They narrowly missed the man. Brighton fired too as he began to speed toward the statue but the shots, made blindly, went wide of their target. Derek fired two more times but the Asian was too quick and made it to cover.

Derek turned and ran for the stairs, thinking to get some distance between him and his attacker. Three bullets landed around him as he weaved while making his ascent. When he made it to the platform that the door was on he slid, turned, and ducked down. He saw Bosco throw the man from the roof. The big man then picked up the other man's rifle and aimed it toward the statue. Suddenly he saw the Asian run like a mad man from the statue. He headed for one of the side streets. Bullets rang out as he weaved and turned. The rounds landed all around him, narrowly missing the speeding man. The last bullet hit the wall of the building beside the Asian missing his head by mere inches and spraying chunks of stone into the man's face as he slipped into the dark street beyond the courtyard.

Derek waited a moment just to make sure the

encounter was at its end. All was quiet once more. He looked over and noticed that Bosco had disappeared from the top of the building. As the operative came back down the stairs he noticed Llave coming out of one of the connecting streets. When she saw Derek she ran toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Derek was stunned by the affection and didn't know what to do. He patted her awkwardly on the top of the head.

"It's okay," he said.

"Where's Brianna?" she asked, letting go of his waist and looking up at him.

Derek's face went deadly serious again. "She was taken," is all that he could say.

"Taken by who?"

"It doesn't matter," Derek responded. "But we'll get her back." Even as he said the words he didn't believe them. He knew that Brianna was gone forever, but he had to keep up appearances for the team.

Bosco finally emerged from the side street around the building he had just climbed down. He walked over to Gerald's limp body and began stripping him of his equipment. He finished just as Derek and Llave approached.

"Where's Samuel?" Derek asked as soon as he noticed his friend missing.

Bosco shook his head as he stood to face Derek. "He didn't make it."

Those words stung as he heard them. He didn't know the man that well, but he couldn't help but feel a profound sense of loss. He knew they were on their way to becoming great friends, but now that path was no longer available to them.

"There's something else I need to tell you," Bosco

stated seriously. “When Samuel died the ground literally sucked up his very life-force.”

“His life-force?” Derek responded, shocked at the statement. As he asked the question he noticed a blue shimmer come from the fallen man Bosco had dumped off the building. In an instance the ground had absorbed the glow and the dead man’s skin pulled tight. Derek jumped back a step.

“See! Just like that,” replied Bosco as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “The moment Samuel passed on, his body shimmered with a blue light, then it went into the ground and his skin tightened around his skeleton and ... dried him up like this?”

“When I asked Llave about it she said that the life-force of everything that dies here is given to the Diabolo.”

“I guess that explains why the men I saw killed by the creatures in here looked the way they did. They looked ... dried up like you said.”

“Ya, and that’s not the whole story.”

“There’s more?”

Bosco nodded. “When we were under the city we ended up in some sort of ritual chamber where this Diabolo would sacrifice dozens of people at the same time and suck their life-force up through the ground and into the cemetery.”

He paused for a moment as if trying to collect his thoughts. “I don’t think that cemetery was actually a cemetery. I think it was a feeding ground. A feeding ground that has allowed this thing—whatever it is—to stay alive for hundreds of years.”

Derek was silent, trying to digest the news. “How did you two get out of there?”

“The tunnel came to a large stone door that we

couldn't open because, as Llave told me, it only opens from the inside. She was able to direct us to a ladder that lead up here instead. Just behind that building." He pointed over to the building he had thrown Gerald from.

"Well ... we better get going," Derek stated as he turned and began walking toward the temple.

The others hurried to catch up and they all ascended the stairs together. Derek scanned the area as they went up, making sure the Asian wasn't going to show up with more of his friends. All was quiet.

The opening was twelve feet high and eight feet wide. The large stone doors that once prevented any from going into the temple were wide open. Lit torches lined each side of the passage that led into the massive stone edifice, illuminating the way in a soft flickering glow.

"That's not too creepy," stated Derek dryly.

"Man. This whole thing has been creepy," declared Bosco.

"You've got a point there," said Derek as he approached one of the open doors and scanned the ornate carvings which presented itself there.

It was more of the same kind of pictograms they had seen up to this point. Bosco went to the other door and looked it over. "Llave, can you make any sense of this?" he asked.

The young girl came over and passed her fingers over the hard stone. "It is more of the same," she stated. "It speaks of the worship of the Diablo."

"What about this one?" Derek asked, pointing to a spot on the door that was right in the middle. It was a circular diagram with strange symbols and writing contained within the circle. "I've seen this one before."

Llave came over. "Where did you see this?" she asked.

“Bri and I found a tablet like this in one of the buildings we were in after we got separated from you guys.”

“You found the hut of the Chilingra,” she stated.

Derek and Bosco stared at her blankly.

“The Chilingra is what you might call the Shaman, Witch Doctor ... Priestess ... something like that. She was the woman responsible for leading the worship of the Diablo, and this tablet she carried protected her from the wrath of the Diablo and his minions, and allowed her to focus the energy that was drained from the Diablo’s sacrifices so that it could be used properly by him. Without this the energy would be unstable and unharnessed.”

“So the energy it’s getting right now when someone dies is raw energy?” Derek asked. “It’s not useful until it had this Chilingra to help it?”

Llave nodded.

“So you’re saying that the Diablo needed someone to help him control his powers?” Bosco restated.

“Yes.”

“Then what would stop this Priestess from just betraying the Diablo and not help him retain his powers?” asked Derek, intrigued by this line of reasoning.

“Because the chilingra willingly gives him her soul when she dies. A willing soul is more powerful than a reluctant one. In return, she can have anything she wants while she lives: money, love, power ... possibly even immortality. She has but to name it.”

“So then what happened to the last Chilingra that helped out the Diablo?”

“Legend says that when the guardian imprisoned the Diablo he also killed the Chilingra which stopped the ability for her to harness the power and feed the Diablo in

the way that made his power absolute and focussed,” Llave replied.

“Then what happened to this tablet?” Derek asked, concern brimming in his voice.

“No one knows.”

“So we’re good then?” asked Basco optimistically.

“No, we’re not,” Derek stated. “Bri found this thing.”

Bosco’s face went pale. “Are you sure?”

“Ya. Pretty sure. Why would the guardian leave this thing untouched in the city?” Derek asked.

Llave just shrugged. “I do not know,” she confessed.

“Well that’s helpful,” snapped Derek.

“Hey man. That’s not necessary,” replied Bosco, trying to calm his friend.

“I’m sorry but come on! Llave here is supposed to know all about this stuff but she can’t explain why this ‘death tablet’ was just sitting in one of these huts. Now Brianna has it and, if she’s still alive, this thing could be used to bring this Diablo back and wreck the world! Does that just about sum it up?”

“What do you mean: *If* she’s still alive?” Bosco asked. “I thought you were sure she was?”

“She got taken by a giant flying bat-dog creature from hell. I don’t know if she’s alive,” he confessed. “I ran after her but they disappeared. I don’t know where she is. They flew in the direction of the temple so I assumed it took her here.”

“Maybe it kept her alive because she has the tablet?” Llave suggested.

“We can only hope,” Derek stated as he turned and walked away.

Bosco slung the sniper rifle he had taken from Gerald over his shoulder, cocked his hand gun, and followed the

man into the flickering lights of the passage that led to the Diablo.

Llave looked at the door again for a brief moment. A grin crested her delicate features as she turned and followed the men into the heart of the temple.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DEVIL HOUNDS

Derek led the way through the rough passage. The floor sloped down slightly and was made of worked bricks of stone that were interlocked together in no discernible pattern. They were all different shapes and sizes and looked as though they were cemented together with some sort of mortar. The torches on the walls flickered in the breeze that came down the passage from the open door.

“What are we expecting in here kid?” Derek asked as he looked to Llave.

“I don’t know exactly,” she replied.

“You don’t know! How come you don’t know? You’re supposed to be *the* Guardian.”

“Hey man. We went over this already. Take it easy on her,” Bosco interjected. “She’s just a kid.”

“Ya. Sorry,” Derek replied in exasperation.

After a moment of silence Llave said, “I know that the Diablo will protect himself with any creature he can. That is all I know for sure. I knew the way to the city, but not the layout of the city or the temple.”

“Convenient,” replied Derek sceptically.

“What are you saying man?” Bosco asked.

“Nothing. Maybe this place is just getting to me. Let’s keep moving.”

The trio walked for about a hundred feet until the passage opened up into a large circular chamber. Lit torches also lined both sides of the room. The room was empty and on the the other side was another passage that continued on through the temple.

Derek was about to walk into the room when Bosco grabbed his shoulder. “Let me go first,” he said as he moved passed his friend. “You guys stay here while I check it out.”

“Is that really necessary,” Derek started to say when Bosco entered the room.

As soon as his foot hit the floor on the inside of the room they heard a scraping sound where the man was standing. Bosco—eyes wide with concern—pushed Derek back hard and leaped further into the room.

Derek lurched back from the powerful shove and fell into Llave, pushing her to the ground as a solid stone door came slamming down, blocking off the entrance into the room. She shrieked as she hit the hard floor.

“No!” Derek screamed as he moved forward and slammed his hand into the immovable door. “Bosco!”

He waited for a moment, straining to hear if the man was yelling back. A long moment passed. Suddenly Derek could hear a loud grinding sound as though another section of the temple was moving. The grinding was followed by screaming and gun fire.

“Bosco!” Derek yelled again. Then he jumped to the side as he noticed movement to his right.

Another door slowly slid open revealing a tunnel that

led up and around. There were no torches illuminating this passageway and a soft breeze poured in from somewhere beyond.

A moment later the gun shots and screaming died out from behind the wall. Derek stood in stunned silence for a long while looking from the wall that Bosco was trapped behind and the newly opened passage.

“What are we going to do señor?” Llave finally asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t think we have much choice,” Derek replied as he grabbed one of the torches from the wall. “Stay close kid.”

The passage was smaller and narrower than the one they had just come down, and the stonework wasn’t as clearly defined as it had been in the main tunnel. The ceiling was also lower, sitting at about seven feet. The incline in the passage was steep at first then levelled off as they rounded a corner that wound left.

They moved slowly and carefully through the tunnel. Derek kept the torch out in front of him as far as possible trying to illuminate as much of the passage as he could. He held his gun in the other hand and did a mental calculation of the bullets he had left: eleven.

As the tunnel veered right a larger gust of wind came rushing through which threatened to blow out the torch. Fortunately the wind only lasted for a moment and the dying torch sprang back to life after it had passed. The air was cooler and more humid in this part of the temple. Despite the evident change in climate, it still smelled musty and rustic, like that of an old book that had been disturbed after laying dormant for many years.

Derek was trying to make a mental map in his head as to where they might be in relation to the size of the temple

given his view of the structure from the outside. He was thinking that they were now on the West side as the entrance was facing South and they had turned left after entering the tunnel. He figured they probably walked right overtop the room where Bosco disappeared. The thought of his friend's screams and the gun shots still haunted him.

Those thoughts were abruptly halted when the tunnel suddenly opened up into a large—almost cavernous—area. There was a small walking ledge that was about three feet wide which led around a circular opening to a continuing tunnel on the other side. The chamber was about twenty feet wide with the ceiling being too high for them to see in the range of the torch light, and there was a gentle breeze coming from somewhere up there beyond the expanse of the light. The ledge was on the left of the chamber and the edge of it ended abruptly in a sloping—not a shear—drop down into ... they had no idea as they couldn't see the bottom. In the middle of the chamber was a large metal rod that stretched from, what appeared to be, the top to the bottom.

“Wasn't anyone in antiquity concerned with safety!” Derek exclaimed in exasperation as he saw the ledge. “Seriously! Why do they never build railings on these places!”

If Llave was even a bit amused at Derek's rant she didn't show it, but just kept the same sober expression she had for most of the journey so far.

“Tough crowd,” Derek murmured to himself. “Alright. Stay close to me and hang onto my shirt.” He would have used the rope if it hadn't been in the backpack Brianna was carrying when she got scooped up. *This will have to do*, he thought to himself.

She nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

Carefully, Derek inched out onto the stone path. It seemed solid enough. He walked slowly, feeling the gentle pressure of Llave's hold on his shirt. He looked back for a moment and noticed that she had one hand on his shirt and the other on the wall of the chamber.

There was another sharp blast of air from somewhere above which again threatened the torch, but still it held.

As they reached the halfway point Derek heard something from the tunnel on the other side of the room. It was a low growl. He froze as his heart began beating faster.

He squinted his eyes to see if he could see anything in the adjoining passage as the torches range only dimly lit that area. Out of the darkness he saw the head of a large creature emerge that resembled a wolf. But its ears were far larger, its snout narrower, and its fangs longer. Its fur was dark grey and had patches of it missing in sections that revealed raw flesh, bone, and sinew. As it moved further into the light Derek could see that it had patches of fur and skin missing under one of its eyes and at the end of its snout.

It drooled great drops of blood as it approached.

When it placed its first massive paw on the stone walkway Derek almost fell over from the stench of rotting flesh.

"Diablo Perros," Llave stated as she saw the thing in the light of the torch.

"Devil Hound," Derek whispered to himself.

It snapped as it came closer. Derek and Llave backed up slowly, trying to get some distance between it and them when they heard another growl come from the other way. Derek whipped his head around and saw another one coming onto the walkway from the tunnel they just came through.

Derek knew his options were limited. No. He knew he only had one option. He levelled his gun with lightning quick speed and let two shots fly into the face of the first hound. Chunks of skin and bone flew free from its face as it flinched from the impact.

The other one howled and leaped at the man. Derek dropped the torch, spun and went down on his back as the thing soared at him.

Llave screamed, being caught in the middle. She slid as far out of the way as she could without getting too close to either hound.

He instinctively shot twice then kicked his leg up in a spin motion as the thing came down. His foot connected with the side of its head as he spun. The momentum sent the creature just over the reach of the walkway, and Derek spun onto his stomach. It snapped at him as it fell away into the darkness.

The other one came charging onto the walkway with surprising dexterity. Derek tried to spring to his feet but knew he was in a vulnerable position. The hound opened its maw wide as it came in, but before it was able to make it to the man Llave jumped in front holding up her arms.

Derek thought the thing must have been confused as it halted its crazed charge for moment and appeared to consider the young girl in front of it.

The moment passed as quickly as it started as it growled and came in again. It swatted Llave with its huge paw. The girl lost her balance and fell from the ledge. Derek dropped his gun in a moment of desperation and reached out and grabbed at her. The gun clinked off the stone then fell from sight into the darkness.

All he managed to get with the great effort was the sleeve of her shirt, but it somehow held as she swung and

hit the side of the cavernous wall below the ledge. Derek was now on one knee, straining to hold the girl while looking, wide eyed, as the creature came in again.

He noticed the torch beside him. He ducked a snapping maw as he grabbed it and swung it around, hitting the creature on the side. Instantly, the beast burst into flames as soon as the flames touched its rotting form. Oh it howled! It began thrashing and Derek was afraid it was going to launch itself on him, igniting him. But it didn't. Instead it turned and ran from the chamber howling as it went. A moment later the howls ceased.

Sweat poured from the man's brow as he held onto the girl. His grip on her shirt was slipping. He dropped the torch again and quickly swung his other hand around, trying to grab at her. The movement caused him to lose his grip on the shirt. His other hand swung around and just missed her reaching hand.

Derek looked into the dark eyes of Llave as she descended into the darkness. Her screams echoed in his ears as she plunged beyond his reach.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FEW OPTIONS

Derek could hear the pounding of his heart as clearly as he would if it were a drum. The image of the girl falling into the bowl-like chasm was burned into his mind. He hoped beyond hope that somehow the slope of the rock wall would slow her descent into ... into what? He had no idea what was at the bottom of that pit.

He was sure it was nothing good.

He slowly rose to his knees. A tear streaked down his cheek. How could this have happened? First Brianna, then Samuel, Bosco, and now Llave. They were all gone!

He curled his fists in rage and gritted his teeth. After a moment he reached over and grabbed the torch as he stood up, still staring into the chasm.

“Don’t worry Bri,” he found himself saying. “I’ll finish this. I’ll finish this for all of you.”

He turned toward the tunnel the Devil Hound ran down, pulled his knife out of its sheath, and swiftly moved on. As he came around the first curve in the passage he

saw the remains of the fiendish dog laying in a heap. The smell from its rotted burning flesh filled the air and almost caused the man to gag. He placed a hand over his mouth as he stepped around the creature and carried on.

The passage went right again then suddenly stopped at a junction of three tunnels. Above each tunnel was a strange carving. The first one looked like a carving of the Diablo. It was strikingly similar to the form of the statue they had seen in the cemetery. The second passage had strange writing that looked familiar to what Derek had seen earlier in some of the carvings on the door to the entrance of the temple, but he had no idea what they meant. And the third passage had, what appeared to be, the same carvings on it of the tablet that Brianna had taken from the house down on the street.

“The Chilingra,” Derek whispered. “That was what Llave called the Priestess who possessed this tablet,” he remembered allowed.

He looked back and forth at the symbols in the torch light. The passage which had the Diablo carving over it appeared to be sloping down. The one with the strange writing went straight; at least for the extent the torchlight could penetrate into the tunnel. And the one with the Chilingra’s tablet carving sloped upward.

Well, Derek thought, Llave did say that the Chilingra was the only one that was somehow able to keep from being killed by the Diablo. Maybe there’s something up there that can help me?

“It’s worth a shot I guess,” he decided out loud.

With that he entered the passage and began swiftly moving up the sloping tunnel. It turned left and then right. As he came around the right bend he saw light coming into the tunnel. The passage climbed for another fifty feet and opened up into a large circular room. In the

middle of the room was a large round stone table that had a metal rod sticking out of it that went right to the roof which was twenty feet high and domed. The rod also appeared to penetrate down into a hole beneath the table.

That must be the rod I saw down below, he reasoned to himself.

Derek felt a cool breeze waft in from four large windows in the stone room that were about fifteen feet wide and ten high. One was open to the North, one to the East, one to the West, and the last one to the South.

As he walked into the room he could see the span of the city below. There was light coming through, but he could clearly see that dusk was descending upon the outside world. Even from inside the gloominess of this hidden city he could tell roughly what time of day it was, and he knew it neared nightfall.

He went to the table in the middle of the room and noticed that it had carvings on it. It only took him a moment to realize that these carvings were the same as those which were on the tablet of the Chilingra. He looked from the table and reached out and touched the large metal rod that went from here through the roof. He looked it over. It didn't appear to be anything special. As his eyes went from the rod to the south-facing window he noticed something in the distance. It looked like another rod coming from where they entered the city. He could barely see it, but it spired high enough into the air, and the vantage point he now stood at, helped him to notice it in the distance.

He walked slowly toward the window and, as it became more clear, he realized that it was coming from that first statue of the Diablo they saw when they were attacked in

the cemetery. It was the spear he was holding up high into the sky!

His thoughts were suddenly ripped from his contemplations when he noticed movement down in the temple courtyard. It was teeming with a horde of creatures! From this distance he couldn't make out exactly what monstrous beings were starting to congregate, but he knew that his only way of escape, if he had to, was now cut off.

He moved right up to the window in order to get a better view, but jumped back when he saw a huge insect-like leg wrap its ugly appendage around the window.

He readied his knife as the beast came into view. It had a huge bulbous head, with six eyes and wicked looking serrated pincers. Its other legs—all six of them—pulled the rest of the creature through the window. It made a loud clicking sound as it moved and snapped its pincers. Its head darted weirdly from side to side as if it were trying to take in the whole room and didn't have any peripheral vision to accommodate its wishes. Its body was black, long, and thin and appeared to be hard like that of an exoskeleton.

Derek backed up, all the way to the table. His heart pounded faster as the adrenaline began to course through his veins. He was about to turn and run around the table and head for the passageway door when the creature—almost as though it sensed what he was about to do—leaped to the side, sprang off the wall, and landed right in front of the door, cutting off the man's escape.

"Damn!" Derek yelled in frustration.

The thing leaped again, faster than Derek imagined that it could, landing beside the table and lashing out around it with one of its pointed legs. Derek ducked as the

leg came in and struck the table. Chunks of stone came flying off the ancient relic.

Derek slashed its leg with his knife but the blow didn't appear to do any damage. It struck again. He managed to sidestep but its leg caught a piece of the man's shirt which tore a long strip in the dirty garment. Again Derek slashed at the leg. This time the creature pulled its appendage away as though it got stung.

Hope renewed in the man as he realized the thing could be hurt. It followed him around the table, rearing up on its other four legs and trying to strike out with its front two. Derek barely managed to avoid being sliced by the living blades as he moved around the table.

He didn't know where to go from here. He glanced at the doorway a few times as he fended off the attacks but he knew that making a break for the exit was suicide. It struck out again and again. He ducked, dipped, weaved, and managed to block a few strikes with his blade again, but knew he couldn't keep this up for long.

He had spent most of his life learning how to fight. But that training was for people. He was ill-equipped and ill-trained for this kind of combat!

His mind buzzed with possible solutions to his current problem, but none of them seemed particularly promising. He thought about trying to work his way closer to the creature and strike at its unarmored head, but that would put him within striking distance of those wicked pincers and he didn't see how that was going to end well. He also thought about trying to get under it and hope that its underbelly was soft, but if it wasn't he would certainly be doomed. A break for the passage would definitely get him skewered and a leap out the window was not appealing to the man.

The clicking intensified as the creature attacked and Derek could feel himself tire little by little.

It smashed into the table again which forced Derek out into the open floor of the room. Before he could get back to it the thing blocked his escape and forced him back toward the south facing window. It lashed out at Derek's head and caught his cheek as he dodged out of the way which drew a thin line of blood just below his left eye.

Derek felt the sting of the blow and gritted the pain away.

That one was close! he thought as he ducked again and dove to the side.

At this point the window was looking like his only option. He waved his knife at the creature, hitting one of its legs which caused it to recoil slightly, then leaped upon the sill. He glanced back and noted that the horde of creatures was still assembling. He also noticed that the outside of this part of the temple had uneven ledges and rocky outcroppings, but none of them looked very promising for him to make an escape out onto. When he looked back he had to jump one of the serrated legs that was shooting out toward him.

He was really glad that he didn't see any more of these creatures outside where he was. If he had, he knew it would be game over for sure.

He blocked one the creature's strikes by kicking his leg out and intercepting it. Then he launched himself into the air, twisted and turned to avoid more slashing legs, and landed back on the sill in perfect balance. He was about to lung forward at the creature when a piece of the sill broke free, causing him to slip.

That moment of imbalance was all that the thing needed. It turned its ugly body and lashed out in a

sweeping motion with both front legs. They came in hard, hitting Derek across the chest which sent him flying.

His shoulder caught the edge of the rocky opening of the sill. Derek grunted as his body spun from the impact and he spiralled out the window.

Chapter Twenty-Four

AN UNEXPECTED TEAMMATE

Dirty clawed fingers reached for Bosco. He fired a few rounds of the rifle from the hip by pure reaction. Chunks of skin and bone flew away from their undead bodies, dropping them to the ground, yet still more came on, climbing over the fallen.

The suddenness of being trapped in the room by himself and the onslaught of the creatures, startled the big man and he let out a yelp as they came on. He was soon out of rounds from the rifle and pulled out his hand gun.

Shot after shot after shot rang out in the circular chamber as he fought for his life. The claws raked at him, drawing thin lines of blood across his arms, chest, and face. He gritted his teeth as he felt the fresh wounds being opened on his flesh. One creature came in for his eyes, but Bosco sidestepped and knocked its arm out wide at the same time. He shot it three times in the head before it went down. He then turned and backhanded another one in the face. Its head made a sickening crack, but still it reached for the man.

Four more shots emptied the magazine in his gun.

He thought he could hear Derek screaming for him from behind the stone door but the only answer he could issue was one of rage at the creatures as he lashed out at them with his knife.

The press pushed him back to the other side of the room. He knew he didn't want to be backed against a wall so he tried to maneuver himself toward the other passage they had seen when they first approached the room. The small door that had opened to the left where the creatures flooded in from was definitely not an option for him to escape out of. He ducked and turned, swatted hands away, and smashed some of the ghoulish creatures across the face when their dirty fanged mouths got too close.

He knew they were unthinking creatures and would never be able to understand why he was moving to the other side of the room which meant that they had no thought of cutting off his escape. Instead, they just climbed over each other, trying to get at the fresh meat that was before them.

They continued to press in on him. There were eight of them left, all snarling, clawing with their fingers, and snapping at him with their mouths. He found it difficult to get free while they were so aggressively coming at him. Bosco knew that if he turned to make a run for it they would pile on top of him and it would be the end of the line. He also knew he would be done for if he didn't get out of there as he was starting to feel the fatigue set in from the fight.

He had to act. He had to act now!

The one closest to him swung its arm around, but wasn't nearly fast enough for Bosco who ducked under it. With the speed that came from years of training, the big man grabbed the arm up high as he ducked the swing and

continued to spin the creature around. With his other hand he grabbed it in the small of the back, bent it down as he crouched, then extended his legs with his arms in a locked position and easily hoisted the creature into the air. Before the others could reach forward to attack him Bosco threw the creature into them, knocking some to the ground, and others to the side.

The momentary distraction was all he needed. He turned and bolted for the door. His legs pumped hard as he ran for his life. He rounded the corner to the passage and glanced to his left. The blood drained from his face as he saw one of the creatures coming for him, arms outstretched, acrid drool spilling down its mouth. Even in its undead state Bosco recognized the creature. It was Samuel!

He turned his head away from the horrific sight and tried to pump his legs faster but, without warning, something smashed into his face. The force of the blow rocked his head backward and sent his feet flying out from under him. Pain rocketed through his head as he felt himself falling and landing hard on the cold stone floor.

His vision blurred and came in and out as he laid there, trying to shake off the dizziness; trying to will himself to stay conscious. As he attempted in vain to get up he saw, through his blurred vision a dark form looming over him. It reached down and grabbed the front of his shirt. He attempted to grab onto its arm, but there was no strength left in him. The thing put its face close to his as it held him there, then Bosco realized his doom as the darkness overtook him.

It was one of the damned!



Derek managed to grab hold of a rocky ledge just outside the window he was thrown out of. Sharp pains shot through his fingers as he hung on with all his might. His legs scrambled beneath him trying to find any foothold he could. Fortunately, the temple was roughly made with pieces of stone jutting out at all different angles. And his foot managed to find one such piece that was large enough to allow him leverage to take some of the weight off his hands.

He breathed a little easier when he got the foothold, but his trouble wasn't abated yet as the insect creature leaned out the window and started thrashing two of its legs toward the battered man. One strike from a barbed leg narrowly missed Derek's left hand. Pieces of stone came flying off the temple where the thing struck which blew small pieces of dust into his eyes.

His eyes watered from the debris. It felt as though someone had put sandpaper in his eyes! He knew he couldn't hold out against the onslaught much longer. Derek sucked his breath in waiting for the killing blow. But the blow didn't come. Instead, through blurring vision, he saw the insect suddenly retreat back into the room at the same time he heard gun fire.

There were sounds of battle. The creature shrieked as more gun shots rang out.

"Bosco." Derek whispered to himself as his hope that he would survive was renewed.

He tried to pull himself up to the windowsill so he could see what was happening, but his hands and legs were trembling too much from the exertion.

He heard a few more shots then the creature lunged for the window, but as it crested the sill two more shots rang

out. Green blood sprayed from the things head—some of it dropped down on Derek as he hung there—then it slumped onto the windowsill, motionless.

He looked up and saw that the thing was being moved away from the window to slump back on the inside of the chamber. Then a hand reached down and grabbed Derek by the arm. Derek managed to exert enough strength to leap from his perch and grab onto the man in the window. With some effort he was hoisted back into the temple.

He laid there on the ground, his breath coming in great heaving gasps, then managed to look up. He saw the face of the Asian staring back at him and smiling.

Derek fumbled to get up and pull away from the man.

“It’s okay man!” Brighton said with an upraised hand. “If I meant for you to die just now you’d already be dead.”

Derek didn’t know what to say. He was stunned and confused.

“I saw what was coming toward the temple after we got separated from our fight and knew I didn’t want any part of it. The problem was that I couldn’t get out as there were too many of them,” Brighton stated matter-of-factly.

“And I’m supposed to care why?”

“Because I didn’t come back to kill you.” There was a long pause between the two men. “I figured that the only way I was getting out of here was *with* you. Your friend killed my man which limited my options.”

“What about Tower Six? Aren’t they coming to extract you?”

Brighton smiled, an almost mischievous smile. “That’s not how Tower Six works. They’re quite a bit different than Orion and ... yet they are the same in many ways.”

Derek thought about that for moment then asked, “How do I know you won’t kill me when I’m not looking?”

Brighton laughed. "I already showed you that I could have let you die but I didn't." He paused for a moment then looked Derek in the eyes. "I give you my word as a soldier that we will meet in combat again, but it won't be here in this place. We'll meet again at a future time. *If* we get out of here. I promise. Which means we have to make it out of here together."

Derek was silent. He didn't know what to think. This seasoned fighter before him seemed to have something to prove by killing him which unnerved him, but, given their battles in the past where this man could have just killed him with a gun but didn't, he was inclined to trust what he was saying. This Asian had some kind of twisted code of honour and a strange fascination with some sort of martial contest between them.

All Derek could do was nod and hold out his hand. Brighton smiled wide and grasped Derek's hand firmly. "My name's Brighton," he declared.

"I'm—"

"Derek Vico," Brighton finished for him. "Yes I know."

A chill went down Derek's spine. *What is up with this guy and how does he know who I am?* he thought to himself.

Brighton stood up and pulled Derek to his feet. He looked at the gun he had in his hand and popped out the clip. "I'm out," he stated. "You got anything left?"

Derek looked toward the window where he dropped his knife. Fortunately it landed on the inside of the room. He picked it up. "This is all I've got."

Brighton pulled his knife from the sheath in his boot. "Me too," he said with a smile as he held it up. "It's better than nothing," he stated with a shrug. "Okay, so where are we going to look first?" Brighton asked.

"Well ... if I'm right about this, then I think the Diablo

chamber is back down that hall. I saw a passage with a symbol that I think indicated where it led too. Just like this passage led to this place; a place where the Chilingra performed her ceremony.”

“Wait. What ceremony?”

Derek walked to the window again, being careful to make sure nothing else was going to come leaping through. He pointed out to the courtyard. “See that rod?”

Brighton nodded.

“I think that is some sort of channeling device that’s connected to this place.” He turned and pointed at the rod that went from the table down the hole and up through the roof. “Down there, underneath that graveyard, is a place of ritual sacrifice where dozens of people would be sacrificed at a time. And my partner, Bosco, told me that when someone dies in this city, their life force—soul—whatever you want to call it, gets drained and given to the Diablo.”

Brighton shuddered as he listened to Derek’s theory. “So you’re saying this thing eats the souls of others?”

“I think it’s more like it absorbs them. In any case, this symbol on the table is carved above the door to the passage that led here, and my friend Brianna found another small tablet with the same carving which the girl Llave said was an item that the Chilingra (some sort of priest or shaman) would use to channel the energy into the Diablo. It also protected them from the wrath of the Diablo. I think this room is where they would pull the energy in mass quantities from the ceremonial mass sacrifice down there and feed it right to the Diablo which is at the bottom of this temple somewhere.”

“This is unnerving,” Brighton commented.

“Yes it is. But the point is that the symbol over the passage that led here was the same as the tablet the

Chilingra used. If you remember when you came up here that there were two more passages at the intersection. The one has a carving that I didn't recognize, but the other one had the carving of that statue down there of the Diablo. Which is why—"

"You think that passage leads to the Diablo chamber," Brighton finished for him.

"Exactly," Derek stated as he walked toward the exit to the chamber. "We need to hurry before those creatures out there come swarming in."

"Oh, don't worry about them," Brighton replied. "I got the door closed before they could get to the entrance and I jammed it shut just in case."

"Good. I trust you still have the dagger you stole."

Brighton's face went serious. "No I don't. I gave it to one of the men I was traveling with. He seemed to know what he was doing with it. I was merely the hired gun—an insurance policy for Tower Six's investment."

"Well ... that's probably going to be an issue," replied Derek. "That dagger was something that we apparently needed, and the young girl I was with, Llave, was supposed to know more about this place than anyone and how to stop the Diablo."

"What's the plan then?"

Derek smiled to his new partner—his temporary partner. "We wing it," he said as he motioned with his hand toward the passage.

Brighton smiled and nodded as he picked up another torch from its bracket off the wall and brought it to life with his lighter. He lit another for Derek and handed it to him then turned down the way they had come. Derek followed closely behind as they exited the Chilingra chamber. He just hoped his theory was correct. He also hoped

that he wasn't being naive trusting a man who had tried to kill him twice.

He pushed that dark thought aside as he knew he had to concentrate all his energies on finding the Diablo chamber. If Brighton decided to double-cross him then he knew he would have to deal with that when the time arose.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE PATH TO THE DIABLO

They both stared up at the carving in the stone for what seemed a long while. Derek almost felt as though the Diablo was staring at him, taunting him, daring him. He knew there was no other choice but to take this path, wherever it lead. He knew he had to walk this road—for Brianna, Bosco, Samuel, Llave.

A tear rimmed his eye with the image of Brianna being taken away by that demon bat-hound. But he quickly choked it back, his face becoming a visage of determination. He clenched his fists tightly and allowed the anger he felt to well up in him.

“Are we doing this?” he heard Brighton ask, the sound of his voice ripping him from his thoughts.

“Ya. We’re doing this. And we’re going to send this Diablo back to the hell-hole it came from.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Brighton exclaimed.

The two of them exchanged a knowing look before they both turned and walked down the passage, the fires of determination being ignited in their eyes.

They hustled down the slope which eventually spiralled to the right. The light of the torches danced off the walls as they went. They hurried as fast as they dared, not knowing if there were going to be any more traps awaiting them. At each turn they stopped for a moment and listened before rounding the corner.

“I think we’re about halfway down the temple by now,” Derek whispered. “At least that’s what it feels like.”

“It’s hard to say,” replied Brighton. “The slope is pretty uneven and choppy. I know we’re headed in a generally downward direction, but my senses are all off.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter. As long as we’re headed down.”

Brighton nodded and was about to move around another corner when Derek stopped him. A loud scraping sound to the left of the tunnel, just around the bend reverberated off the walls. Derek quickly back-pedalled with Brighton in tow, trying to keep their torches from illuminating the area around the corner, giving their position away.

When they were a safe distance back Derek grasped his knife tightly and crouched into a fighting stance. His heart pounded faster as he listened hard, straining to hear if he could recognize any other sounds. It was hard as they were now twenty feet away from the bend.

The one thing Derek saw while crouched against the wall was that the passage beyond suddenly illuminated. Derek shook his head as he knew another door had opened up and something was coming through.

His fears were realized a moment later as they heard heavy footfalls step into the passage and a large shadow displayed itself on the wall at the bend. The torchlight began to get brighter.

“Here, hang onto this for me,” Derek whispered to Brighton as he handed him his torch. “I’ll be right back.”

Brighton stared at him in disbelief. “You don’t even know what’s coming!” he whispered back as loud as he dared.

“I’m about to find out,” he replied as he got up and started to move silently down the tunnel. As the light got brighter he quickened his pace. He knew he had to time this right. The light got brighter and brighter and Derek ran faster and faster through the darkness.

A large hulking form emerged from around the corner, walking easily with a torch in one hand and a three foot long sword in the other. Its head was bald, its face flat with small slits for a nose. It had large eyes and horns that curved out of its skull and stretched back. Its body was heavily muscled and it wore a loin cloth around its waist and a dirty rag for a sash around its chest and abdomen.

Derek didn’t care that the creature was seven feet tall with an impressive form. All he cared about was putting it down!

He let out a roar as he leaped into the air and plunged his knife into the thing’s upper chest on the left side of its body. The creature was stunned as it got knocked back from the blow and fresh blood started to flow from its wound.

Derek didn’t stop there. He pulled the knife free and jumped back which elicited a roar of pain from the beast. He then jumped and spun around extending his leg which connected squarely into the thing’s face. He heard a resounding crack as his foot broke its jaw. It stumbled back and turned from the blow. It dropped the torch as it went to one knee, completely disoriented from the attack.

Derek roared again as he lifted his right leg thinking to

come down upon the creature's head with an axe kick, but the thing got out of the way, rolling back and came up in a kneeling defensive stance.



“Damn!” Brighton whispered to himself as he saw Derek go around the corner in a rage. He started toward him, but stopped suddenly. He felt a chill go down the back of his neck.

He spun around and the blood drained from his face as he looked into the dead eyes of Gerald! Where there used to be strong living hands there were now skinny boned hands with long dirty claws at the end. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes were swollen and there were no lights inside. He smelled of death. His mouth opened and filthy drool spilled out as he hissed and came toward his old friend.

Brighton jumped back as Gerald swung out at him. He could hear more raspy hisses coming down the passageway toward him. The next time Gerald came in, Brighton blocked the strike with his torch arm then came across with his knife, severing the hand cleanly from him. The Gerald-beast retracted his arm and came in with his other one. Brighton dropped the torch and blocked and, as he did so, he spun his arm around Gerald's and pulled up on it securely locking it in place. He roared as he plunged his knife into the neck of his ex-friend. The thing howled, or at least tried to, but all that came out was a gurgled sound as his eyes rolled back into his head and he dropped to the ground. Brighton held onto him as he led him to the floor, staring at what had become of his friend.

More creatures came bursting into the lighted area and

slashed out at Brighton. He took a hit on the arm, but managed to dodge out of the way of the other attacks. He rolled back and jumped to his feet in a ready stance. The first came in but the seasoned warrior was too quick for him as he sidestepped and drove his knife through the back of the thing's neck. He followed through on his movement and spun around fast as lightning to take the next beast in the head.

He then reversed his momentum and slashed a third across the neck. The fourth came in but Brighton was quicker as he dropped down, grabbed the torch, and swung it around, taking the thing in the chest which sent it against the wall and ignited its rotting clothing and flesh. The creature went up in flames as it howled and shrieked.

It came for the man, but Brighton jumped back and spartan kicked it in the chest which sent it into two more ugly creatures. They both ignited and started flailing around setting others aflame.



Derek blocked as the creature threw a punch at him, then he side stepped the thrust from the monster's blade, narrowly getting out of its way, as it came in for his chest. He issued three quick punches with his left hand into the hulking beast's side, but they seemed to do little to the heavily muscled creature.

It roared and swung its arm catching Derek in the side of the face. The blow rocked him to the side and into the wall. He shook off the hit and ducked as the sword came in. It sparked off the wall as he rolled under it and came up to stab the creature in the side. The monster swung back trying to knock Derek away again, but the man was

too agile and easily dodged the strike. Derek came in again and stabbed three more times, opening fresh wounds from which blood flowed freely.

The creature took a lazy swing at Derek with its sword. He easily ducked it, caught the thing's wrist with his free hand, then swiped the knife across the back of its arm cutting a deep line through the muscle. The beast screamed out and reflexively let go of the sword which clanged off the stone floor.

Before Derek could find another angle of attack the beast roared and backhanded him. The heavy blow sent him flying across the passage to crash hard into the wall. The wind was blown from his lungs and the shock of the hit caused him to drop his knife.

The thing lunged at him with its mouth open, revealing its long sharp fangs. Derek's eyes widened as he saw it coming for him. He ducked and rolled to the side just before the creature snapped down where his neck was just a moment earlier. As he rolled he spun his body around so he would be facing the thing when he came out of it, but he didn't count on how quickly the creature had turned and the poor momentum he got from his dive. It leaped for him again and he knew his positioning was off.

He felt the warm breath of its foul mouth, and smelled the stench of death. Derek tried in vain to get a hand up in time in order to block the coming death strike. Just before the creature clamped down on the man with its powerful jaws its head jerked weirdly to the side and its eyes twitched slightly as it fell short of its target. Derek had to leap again to avoid being piled on by the beast as it fell. He bounced off the ground and landed on his stomach.

Fearing that the thing would pounce on him at any moment, Derek quickly got to his hands and knees and

turned his head. There, standing over the creature was Brighton. He knelt down and pulled his knife from the monster's neck and wiped the blade on his pants. His face carried a grim expression.

"We have to get out of this hellish place," he stated as he came over and offered Derek a hand up.

Derek accepted the help up and stood to look Brighton in the eyes. He couldn't make this guy out. Here was a man bent on killing him in hand-to-hand combat who had just saved his life.

As if reading his thoughts Brighton smirked. "Don't worry. We're going to finish our fight later, but for now I need you to help me ... us, get out of here. There's going to be no fight if we're both dead."

Derek stared at him for a moment without saying a word. He then walked over and picked up his knife and the creature's sword. "Shall we then?" he asked, motioning for Brighton to keep heading down the passage.

"Do we continue on the passage we're on, or do we go through the door this thing came out of?"

"Let's take the main passage," responded Derek as he took up the lead. He glanced for a moment down the dark side tunnel, but moved on down the main passageway.

The two continued cautiously down the tunnel. It rounded one more turn to the left then dropped at a steep slope downward. They stopped just at the top as they peered down into the gloom.

"We must be close to the bottom by now," Derek commented. "You ready for this?"

"Ya," came Brighton's confident reply. "For all we know there's nothing down there."

Derek looked at the Asian with an uplifted brow. "You really believe that?" he asked dryly.

“No, not really. But it makes me feel better.”

Derek laughed.

Brighton took a step down the passage but Derek grabbed his arm, causing the man to glance at him.

“Before we do this I need to know what your deal is?”

“What deal?” Brighton responded, feigning innocence.

“We don’t even know each other and yet you are bent on ending me. Why?”

“This really isn’t the time Vico,” Brighton replied coldly.

Derek didn’t miss the not-so-subtle use of his last name. Brighton pulled his arm away from Derek’s grasp and turned back down the tunnel without another word.

Derek stared at the man as he moved down the dark passage. He bit his lower lip and clenched his fists. The last thing he needed as they were going to face who-knew-what was fighting beside an arrogant jerk whose goal was to take him out.

But what choice did he have?

None. And that reality was the thing which disturbed him the most.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DECEIVED!

The two men reached the bottom of the passage which turned right and ended in a large wooden double door. The door was about ten feet high and rounded at the top to form an archway. The handles were made of steel, were thick, and shaped like bones. The door had another depiction of the Diablo. The scene had him standing high while humans were kneeling before him in a worshipful posture. Beside him stood a woman that held up a knife and had a tablet hanging from her neck. The woman being depicted had her hands out to the Diablo as if she was inciting worship of the being.

Derek and Brighton stared at the image for a long while.

“This looks like a cheery place,” Brighton finally commented. “And why do the handles always have to be shaped like bones?” He looked over at Derek who stood there staring at the scene emotionless.

Derek reached for the handles and was about to push when he felt a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you think we should be cautious about this?” Brighton asked.

Derek looked at him, anger flashed in his eyes, then he turned and pushed hard. The doors creaked and groaned as they began to open.

“Okay then,” Brighton replied, removing his hand from Derek. “The direct approach it is.”

Derek strode into the room, ready for a fight. He wanted to end this, and he just didn’t care about caution anymore. This Diablo creature had taken much from him, and he was out to punish it.

He took three steps into the room and stopped in his tracks. His eyes were fixed upon the scene before him.

The center of the circular room housed a large stone table with a rod that came down through the middle of it from the ceiling. At the far end, housed in a large alcove in the wall was a giant mummified creature. Its rotting bandages bound its form tight within their grip. Through the bandages at the top of its head protruded two large horns that curved out behind it. The bandages were missing around where its eyes were supposed to be which revealed two deep dark sockets. In the center of its chest was a slight red glow that almost seemed to be pulsing, getting brighter then softer in a rhythmic cadence. To the right and left of the room were passages without doors leading out.

Derek moved his gaze from the giant to that of the man, just to the left of the creature, that was tied to the wall with his hands over his head by a thick rope. It was Bosco!

“Bosco!” he screamed out as he started to run over to him.

“Derek!” Brighton yelled after him. “Be careful. We don’t know what else is in here.”

The warning didn’t stop the man from going swiftly to

his friend. As he made his way there he noticed that there were what looked like a dozen other men tied up as well around the circular chamber.

Bosco opened his eyes as Derek approached. “Dude! How did you survive?” he asked as he started fumbling with the rope to see if he could find a way to undo it.

“You ... need ... to get out of here,” Bosco replied. His face had stained blood running down it and onto his shirt and it looked like his nose was broken.

“What are you talking about man. We’re gonna get you out of here.”

“No! You have to go before she comes back,” Bosco demanded. “She’s not what she seems.”

“Who are you talking about? What are you talking about?”

“He’s talking about me,” came a sweet reply from the passage to the right.

Derek turned his head and saw a woman enter the room. The blood drained from his face as he looked upon the auburn hair and beautiful form of Brianna. She wore the plate around her neck and fondled it with her right hand, tracing her finger around it slowly as she stepped into the room. In her left hand she held the hand of Llave who walked alongside her wearing a mischievous grin.

“What? I don’t understand,” said Derek in confusion.

“She’s been playing us,” Bosco explained. “This was her plan all along. She want’s to wake the creature.”

“How could this be?” Derek asked, still rebelling against the idea that Brianna could be behind all of this.

“It’s really quite simple,” Brianna stated. “You know I’ve always wanted you, Derek. I’ve made no secret about that. And I think you want me. You just won’t admit it. So I’m going to make you see reason.”

Derek shook his head, feeling as though he was in a hellish nightmare. It was true that Derek had always resisted Brianna's advances after his wife had died. He just couldn't bring himself to love another, and the fact that she was Samantha's sister made it that much harder. Anger began to rise within him. "And this Diablo is going to help!" Derek screamed back in protest.

"Yes! You see, I am the new Chilingra and he will give me what I want as I hold his soul in my hands because of this tablet and of course this," she said as she pulled out the dagger.

"And dear Llave here," Brianna continued, "is actually a collector not a guardian. She brings people here in order to feed the beast and keep it alive until a suitable Chilingra would come along and resurrect it."

Derek flashed an angry look at Brighton who had come up along side him.

"Don't look at me. I was just supposed to get the knife and, as I already told you, I gave it to the Columbians I was traveling with so they could use it to access the city and temple. How was I supposed to know she would get it from them? Besides, you guys were the ones who had it first."

Derek silently conceded the point as he looked back to Brianna and Llave who were slowly closing the gap between them and the two men.

"But what about Samantha? What would she think of this?" Derek blurted, trying to think of some way to bring Brianna back to sanity.

Brianna laughed. "You still don't know," she declared. "Of course you don't." She spoke almost as though she was speaking to herself. "It was me who made sure that the little princess was exposed to the deadly disease that took her life while we were on assignment in Italy."

Derek took a step back. It felt as though he was shot in the stomach by a Fifty Cal round. Brighton put a hand on the man's shoulder in order to steady him.

"But ... how could you ..." the man stammered.

Brianna flashed a wicked smile. "It's really quite simple," she replied. "Samantha had something I wanted and so I made sure she couldn't enjoy it anymore. The only problem was that you never really warmed up to me after. I thought for sure that, after a period of mourning, you would come around but you never did."

Derek was shaking his head in disbelief as he heard the horrific admission.

"Even now, in this situation, you push me away," she continued.

"I came here because of you," rebutted Derek.

"Because you love me like Sam? Or just because we're friends."

"You know I love you ... just not like that. Samantha was the love of my life and I don't think I can ever love like that again."

"Always so dramatic!" Brianna yelled in response. She balled up her fists and her face went red.

"You can end all of this, Derek. The fate of the world is in your hands. All I'm asking is for you to love me. Is that too much?"

Derek glared at her. "You killed Sam. You've hurt Bosco and tried to kill me. You're willing to destroy the world! How do you expect me to fall in love with a monster, Bri?"

"The Diablo will give you everything you want," Llave interjected. "We just have to wake him."

Brianna immediately calmed and nodded. "You're right collector," she replied as she gave Llave a quick smile.

She pulled the tablet from her neck and held it high in one hand and the dagger in the other.

“Quick!” Derek yelled. “Free them!”

Brighton exploded into motion, running first to Bosco and cutting through the rope with his knife. The big man slumped down as he came free from the wall. Then Brighton moved to the next man in line and started working his ropes.

Derek sprinted toward Brianna and Llave. The young girl stepped in front of Brianna and issued a scream that tore through the air. It was so loud that it caused Derek to slow his approach and cup his ears. It started out as a high-pitched yell that would shatter glass, then transitioned to a low guttural, feral, roar.

“I am ready Chilingra!” she yelled in a low demonic voice after she ended her scream, then turned to face Brianna.

Brianna stared at her for a moment with a somber expression painted across her delicate face, then plunged the dagger into Llave’s chest. The girl twitched as her life’s blood began spewing forth. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to Llave.

The young girl smiled. “It is my ... pleasure ... to serve ... the demon,” she gasped as she slumped to her knees.

Brianna dipped down, grabbed the girl by the shoulders and lowered her to the floor. Derek stared on in disbelief. He knew he needed to do something as he sensed that the situation was about to get way worse, but he didn’t move. The shock of the scene before him overpowered the man.

Brianna put Llave down and raised her dagger and tablet as she began chanting in a language that Derek had never heard before. Blue energy began to be pulled from

Llave as she breathed her last and went limp. The energy swirled around Brianna as she stood up.

Derek stared at his friend, stunned by what he saw! *How could this be happening?* he thought to himself. Then he heard what sounded like battle cries coming from the other side of the room through the arched doorway. He glanced over and saw creatures filtering into the room, undead, the damned, demon hounds, and one of those giant bat-winged dogs from outside.

At the site of the oncoming creatures, Brighton picked up the pace in freeing the men who were tied to the wall. As each one came down they huddled back against the wall and began looking around for anything they could use as weapons.

Brighton glanced to his knife in disbelief. “What are we gonna do now!” he yelled to Derek.

“Whatever we can!” The man screamed back.

“With what! All I have is my knife!”

“You wanted to see how good you are. Now is your time to find out.”

Brighton sighed and shook his head. “At least you have a sword,” he commented as he sped toward the hoard that was moving into the room.



Bosco felt around his belt and pants for anything. He was hoping beyond hope that they didn't totally disarm him when he was knocked unconscious. The only weapon he found was his small boot knife that was four inches long. It looked like a letter opener in face of such powerful enemies. “Oh come on!” he said in frustration as he stood again. The room spun a bit as he got up

and the pain in his face and neck almost caused him to swoon, but he shook it off.

He saw the hoards piling into the room. The other men who were tied up with him staggered around trying to find something they could use to defend themselves. They didn't look like they were in much better shape than he was. He glanced over his left shoulder and his heart sank as he saw the creature in the wall and the glow within its chest pulse an ominous red hue.

"What the hell have we gotten ourselves into," he whispered to himself as he staggered slowly toward the monsters that were pouring in.



Brianna smiled wickedly as she continued her chant. The blue energy that swelled around the plate and dagger suddenly shot into the mummified creature and the red glow within it started to pulse faster. She stopped chanting for a moment and looked right at Derek. "You will be mine," she stated as her eyes became pupilless and turned the same shade of blue as the swirling mystical energy.

"I don't think so Bri," Derek stated with finality as he began stalking toward her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE BROKEN TABLET

Derek stepped forward then stopped. He looked to Brianna who was continuing to channel the energy from Llave into the creature. His mind screamed out in protest against what he knew he needed to do. The knuckles on his hands turned white as he gripped the sword and knife tightly. A tear streaked his eye and his teeth ground within his mouth as he clenched his jaw. The woman before him seemed so entranced in her work that she didn't notice the man before her as she continued to chant on.

Derek stepped forward again, straining with every movement. He heard the battle rage on behind him. Men screamed as they were torn apart by the beasts that charged in. He lifted his sword. He was mere feet away from the woman who was his friend. The sister to his wife. The killer of his wife! With the determination of a man possessed as judge and executioner, Derek Vico swung his sword at the auburn-haired woman as tears rained down his cheeks. The blade came in fast and true—a perfect strike aimed at the neck of the woman—but,

just before it rang home, a streak of blue energy came forth from the dagger and tablet. The searing energy struck Derek in the chest and sent him flying through the air. He crashed hard on the stone floor. The knife clanged to the ground a few feet away, but he managed to keep his grip on the sword.

His chest ached. And small wisps of smoke ascended from his tattered shirt.



Brighton ducked the clumsy swing of one of the undead creatures. As he came up he reversed the grip on his knife and stuck it into the throat of the ugly thing. It tried to turn around in on him, but he quickly retracted the blade and sidekicked it into the path of one of the hellish dogs that was coming in on him. The dog grabbed the creature in its maw and shook it around for a moment then flung it to the side before leaping toward him.

Brighton was ready for the attack and slid under the pouncing dog, knife high. The blade cut into the beast, splitting its belly open wide. The thing yelped and tried to turn back on the man when it landed, but couldn't find the strength to do so before Brighton was on it, finishing it off with a series of jabs from the blade.

He heard the screams of some of the men and turned to see two of them fall under the heavy blows of one of the large bull-headed creatures; the same kind of monster that Derek had fought in the tunnel earlier. The men's broken bodies landed hard on the stone and, as they did, he saw some blue energy swirl around them for a moment then spin up and toward the mummified creature. The energy

entered it and he could see the thing begin to move from within its alcove.

“Dam!” he whispered to himself as he realized that the creature was siphoning the life energy from those who were dying.

He ducked another blow and shoulder checked the undead man who had attacked him, knocking it down. He shook his head in disbelief as he noticed that the creature was one of Mateo’s men he had been with earlier who had died out in the city when they first arrived. Meeting Gerald out in the passageway and now this confirmed to him that, despite his efforts to block the entrance to the temple, some of the creatures from outside had made it in here.

“We don’t have much time!” he yelled to Derek who was just climbing to his knees after being thrown back from Brianna. “More of these things are coming!”



Bosco punched one of the dogs hard across the face as he heard Brighton. The dog spun its head back on the man and got a dagger in the eye. It yelped and pulled its head away. Bosco leaped upon its back and wrapped one of his big arms around its thick neck and squeezed with everything he had in him. The thing growled and shook wildly as he stabbed it repeatedly in the neck. Bosco fought to maintain his hold as he knew the danger he would be in if he let go.

The thing raised a massive paw and raked the man on the arm with its sharp claws, drawing thick lines of blood. He gritted his teeth and growled as he felt the burning pain erupt in his arm. But still he held on.

The beast thrashed around trying to free itself from the

killing grip of the large man and the bite of his dagger. Bosco felt himself tiring and he knew it was only a matter of time before another creature made it to him and found him vulnerable. He had to end this now. He dropped the dagger to the floor and wrapped his other arm around the thing. Its fight renewed and it thrashed even more. Bosco took a few more scratches of the deadly claws, but still he held on. He roared as he squeezed with all his strength. The corded muscles in his arms flexed and veins popped.

The hellish dog tried to growl but nothing came forth as Bosco's grip was like iron. He could feel the beast slow and the struggle lessen. With the strength of a giant he screamed out one last time and pulled up violently on the creature's neck until he heard the distinctive snap he was looking for. The demon hound went immediately limp.

He pulled himself off the creature, panting heavily from the intense exertion. He stumbled to the side and went to one knee. He looked around at the chaos which erupted and knew that the fight was far from done. He just didn't know how much more he had in himself. Shaking his head and clenching his jaw in determination, the big man retrieved his dagger and stumbled toward the nearest battle.



Derek heard Brighton as he shook the dizziness from his head. He knew he had to get the dagger and tablet from Brianna but he didn't know how he was going to do that. He looked over at the Diablo and saw that the thing was beginning to move!

"Is this really happening?" he said to himself as he got up and quickly retrieved his dagger. He looked around at

the anarchy which had erupted. The men they had freed from the wall were fighting valiantly but were being overpowered. He knew they couldn't hold out for long, and feared what would happen if the Diablo awoke. He was living a nightmare!

For the sake of them all, he had to do something.



Brighton executed a spin kick that took another undead creature down. Then he dodged two strikes that were coming in at him and blocked three more. The years of training were being tested to their limits, and his movements were more sluggish and imprecise than normal, but Brighton fought the physical strain with every ounce of his being. With every block or dodge he fought through the physical demands required of him and kept the creatures at bay. He struck out with either his knife, fists, or feet when the opportunities presented themselves. With every strike he took another beast down, but more kept coming.

He glanced around when he had a short reprieve in the battle and noticed that two bull-headed creatures were still standing and taking down his allies with brutal force. Brighton sighed as he knew he would have to face off against those things if they were going to have a chance. With one last look around to take in the scope of the battle he sprinted toward the nearest one.

As he sped toward it he leaped over bodies and spun around men who were battling with the undead creatures, some of whom used to be their companions before they were transformed into these horrifying forms. He knew he didn't have time to stop and help and had to trust that

some of the men knew how to handle themselves. He had to hope that they would be able to keep the monsters at bay while he tangled with one of those bull-headed creatures.

He came running in and, as he got close, the thing noticed him and turned to meet his charge. It swung its sword at the man, but Brighton was ready for the attack and slid under the blade as it passed through the air. He slashed the creature behind the knee as he slid by, then leaped to his feet, turned with incredible speed and kicked it in the other knee with as much force as he could. He heard a snap and saw the knee buckle in a weird angle. The beast hollered out and crumpled. It stabbed at the man with its sword. Brighton sidestepped the blade, spun closer into the creature, and jabbed his knife into its elbow. The knife went through the beast's arm and Brighton let go of the handle, leaving the blade in place. The creature roared in pain and dropped its sword. It tried to grab the man with its other arm but Brighton easily turned the arm away with a perfectly timed block, then side-flipped to the left, landed in a crouched position which put him within grabbing distance of the knife that was sticking out of the thing's arm. He grabbed and yanked the knife free and stabbed it under the monster's chin and through its throat. The creature gurgled as it fell back onto the cold stone floor.

Brighton looked around quickly to gauge the situation. It didn't look good! Half of the men they had rescued were either dead or dying, Derek appeared to be having trouble with Brianna, and the giant mummified creature was moving more than he liked to see.

He reached down and picked up the creature's sword, took a deep breath and charged off to the next group of

monsters, hoping that Derek would find a way to stop the madness.



Derek racked his mind trying to think of how he could get close to her without setting off her “guard” again. He thought about when he tried to strike Brianna the first time and recalled seeing a momentary surge; a light pulse that seemed to emanate from the tablet and dagger at the same time before it lashed out and struck him. He realized if he timed it just right then he might be able to get through the defences. With that thought in mind he sheathed his knife and exploded into motion toward the entranced woman. Fifteen feet from her he dropped his sword and barrelled in, looking at the upraised artifacts and not directly at Brianna. Five feet from her he saw it: the pulse! As soon as the energy surged Derek threw himself back, into a slide. The pulse shot out from the artefacts. Derek felt the heat of the light beam sore through the air just above his head. He instinctively closed his eyes to protect them from the sudden intensity of the light.

As he slid he felt himself slam into Brianna and opened his eyes just in time to see her tumble over him and lose her grip on the tablet. It soared through the air. Brianna screamed as she watched it fly from her grasp and shatter on the hard stone floor.

The energy emanating from the plate and dagger immediately dissipated into the air. Derek quickly spun over, leaped at the stunned woman, grabbed her wrist, and twisted the dagger free from her hand. She knelt there weeping.

“It’s over Bri,” Derek said as he placed his other hand on her shoulder.

“It is for all of us,” she whispered back. “That tablet was the only thing I had that would have given me any power over the creature. I was going to let you and Bosco live, but now he’ll kill us all.”

“What do you mean!” Derek screamed at her as he turned her face toward his; the blue lights in her eyes had disappeared.

“As I mentioned earlier: the Chilingra’s only defence against the Diablo was the tablet. That’s the only thing that would keep it in check as it had the power to destroy him permanently. But now that option is gone and he’s going to kill everyone.”

Derek stared at her, stunned by the revelation.

“He was going to grant me the power to make you love me,” she said in a quiet, almost desperate voice.

“I do love you,” Derek replied softly. “Just not in that way.”

An unearthly roar broke through the air eclipsing the sounds of battle that raged on. Derek snapped his head around, jarred by the sound, and saw the mummified creature stepping out of its alcove. The blood drained from his face as he saw the massive beast waking from its slumber.

He turned back to Brianna. “How do we stop it?” he asked desperately.

“We can’t.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE DIABLO

“**W**hat do you mean we can’t!” Derek screamed at the young woman, desperation creeping into his voice. “There has to be a way!”

Brianna sat back and wiped the tears from her face and shook her head. “None that I know of,” she replied with resignation.

Derek shook his head, unwilling to accept that statement.

“Unless ...” Brianna mused.

“Unless what?”

“If you’re able to plunge the dagger into the Diablo’s heart you will feed it too much life-force—its own life-force—directly at once without channeling it first through the tablet which should cause it to overload and die from the surge.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Not really. It’s just a theory,” she stated. “One of the reasons the tablet was used was to help channel the energy through a medium first. When people die in this place their energy goes from them and they turn into undead crea-

tures because only some of their life-force is given to the Diablo. When I stabbed Llave, I was able to give all of her life-force to the Diablo as I used the dagger but channeled it through the tablet which moderated the transfer. Her energy was able to supercharge the creature and bring it back. The people and creatures who died in the city were merely keeping it alive until we could jumpstart it by sacrificing the Collector. That's what Llave's mission was: to keep it alive until we could get all the pieces together and wake it. She needed the dagger, tablet, and me to help her do that."

Derek looked at her in stunned silence.

"In theory," Brianna continued, "if you killed the Diablo with the dagger by stabbing it in the Heart then his life-force would come into the dagger and then back to him."

"It would be too much for him to handle," Derek reasoned.

Brianna nodded. "But there might be a risk," she added. "Getting that close to the creature when the transfer of energy happens could harm, or even kill, the one who is closest to it at the time."

Derek looked around and saw the battle rage on and the Diablo finishing its climb out of the stone tomb. "There's no other choice," he declared as he gripped the dagger tighter. "I'll have to take that risk."

"No! You can't," the woman screamed at him, tears again streaming down her cheeks.

"There's no other way Bri," Derek stated with finality as he stood.

"Please!" Brianna yelled with desperation as she grabbed for Derek's pant leg.

The man pulled away and retrieved his sword. With

sword in one hand and dagger in the other he began stalking toward the twelve foot tall creature that was now fully emerged.



Bosco smashed another monster in the face shattering its fragile skull. Black ichor sprayed onto the man's arm. He looked behind him and saw that the Diablo was now fully emerged from its stone tomb. It ripped at its bandages revealing dark leathery skin, long sharp claws at the end of its hands, and a bull-like head with long horns that protruded from the top of its head and curved back behind it. Where there used to be black empty holes for its eye sockets, there was now small angry yellow flames. It had large solid-looking hooves with two cloves for feet. Its legs and body were heavily muscled and on its chest was a golden tattoo of the same symbol they had seen on the Chilingra's tablet. The center of its chest pulsed rhythmically with a dull red hue.

"What the hell!" Bosco exclaimed when he saw the beast.

The momentary distraction cost him as a nasty claw raked him across the shoulder from another one of the zombie-like creatures. He fell back from the blow as pain shot through his arm. Then he gritted his teeth, growled, and charged in, bull-rushing the thing. It flew through the air and onto its back. Bosco leaped up and came down on the supine creature's head smashing it into the stone floor. The thing twitched then went still.

Bosco looked around in order to take in the evolving situation. Only two of Mateo's men were still alive. The Asian he had seen earlier outside the temple seemed to be

fighting alongside them now to devastating effect. Llave was laying all-to-still on the hard floor, Derek was stalking toward the Diablo, and Brianna was trying to climb back to her feet. One of the Damned and a number of the undead were still standing and fighting.

Bosco was surprised that he was still able to fight. He was exhausted and hurt. The only thing keeping him in the battle was the sheer will to survive. He vowed that he wouldn't end up like Samuel, or any of these creatures they now fought.

With that thought racing through his mind he took a deep breath and stalked toward the nearest group of monsters who were attacking Mateo's men. Every step he took brought a new surge of pain, but the big man shook it off and went into the fray determined to win!



Brighton roundhouse kicked another creature sending it flying to the side. He looked over and saw Bosco limp into another fray. Glancing over, he saw Derek approaching the Diablo. He turned his head back as he noticed the other one of those large bull-headed creatures stalking toward him. He hoped that Derek had some sort of plan to take care of the Diablo as they wouldn't last long against something of that size with few weapons at their disposal.

With a sigh he ran toward the bull-headed creature. More of the undead beasts came lunging at him but he easily dodged their attacks and lashed out at some of them as he went by, knocking them down and taking them out of the fight momentarily.

He didn't know how much longer they could keep this

up. They were down to five men that were still fighting off the onslaught. He only hoped that more of the vile beasts wouldn't suddenly emerge from the open passageways to the chamber as they were still outnumbered at least three to one from the first horde that broke through.

As he neared the huge bull-headed creature he put his sword up and blocked the incoming slash of the creature. He knew the thing was strong and so he rolled to the side with the parry and spun around to flank the creature. As he did he slashed the thing on the thigh, drawing a thin line of blood across its leg. It howled in pain and pulled its body aside, following the movement of the Asian.

It spun its sword around in a high arc over its head and down. Brighton barely managed to dodge out of the way before the blade came in. He was surprised with how quick such a large creature was. He spun again and swung his blade for the creature's waist, but the thing managed to get its sword across just in time to parry the blow. It pushed Brighton's sword aside when it blocked; the strength of the parry almost knocked the man off his balance, but the mercenary was too skilled for that, and moved with the blow which helped him to maintain his footing.

The beast came on in a flurry. The suddenness of the blows put Brighton back on the heels of his feet as he defended from the assault, but the man managed to find the rhythm in the attacks and paced his attacker. He patiently waited as steel clanged against steel in order to see an opening in the attacks so he could counter.

He moved left and the creature followed. A few of the blows were a hairs breadth away from their mark, but Brighton wasn't concerned with the nearness of the strikes as he gauged the movements of his enemy. He only hoped that more of the undead creatures wouldn't enter the fray.

He was lucky so far as they appeared to be busy attacking the other men in the room. Not that he didn't want to help the others, he just knew that, unless he defeated this last massive beast, there would be no hope that they would get out of this alive. He could help the others once this creature was destroyed.

A continual ring of sword against sword echoed through the chamber as the fight heated up. Brighton blocked an attack, then rolled to the right. He blocked another one then spun to the left and under another sword swipe. Brighton now had the creature's attack routine figured out and waited until the thing executed two opposite side swipes—left and right—then, as it had done three other times before following through with its momentum, performed an overhand chop. Brighton blocked the left and right swipes, but when it carried through with the overhand chop instead of blocking like he had done before, the agile man spun to the right, just narrowly dodging the blade. As he turned he let one hand go of the handle of his sword and grab the knife out of his sheath. With lightning speed he came out of his spin and drove the knife into the thing's chest three times, hoping that the beast had lungs and a heart.

The creature roared as the knife tore through its flesh. Its eyes went wide as it stumbled back. Brighton spun the sword above his head with one hand and swiped it across the thing's throat. The creature dropped the sword and fell back to the floor. It gasped a few times then fell over and went still.



Derek approached the Diablo. The thing snapped its head around to glare at the man with its angry flaming eyes. “Your soul, and the souls of all these here are mine,” it roared in a deep guttural voice.

Derek was shocked that it spoke to him in English and glanced to Brianna as if silently asking for an explanation. The woman must have understood what the momentary look meant. “It gains the knowledge of the ones it consumes the energy of,” she said as she began to stand on shaky legs. “It would have learned that from some of the men who perished coming into this place.”

Derek nodded and looked back at the creature. “I think I’ll hang onto my soul if you don’t mind,” he responded resolutely. “You, on the other hand, are going to lose everything you’ve gained in the last few hundred years.”

The monster laughed. It was a deep throaty laugh; a mocking laugh. “We will see, Derek,” the beast said. It grinned nastily as it spoke with Samuel’s voice.

Derek rocked back. “Samuel,” he whispered to himself. The thought of his friend being killed and his energy being given to this ... this monster only enraged him more as he began to move slowly around the beast, gauging how he would attack the monster.

He only took a few steps before the beast came lunging forward with one of its clawed hands. Derek sidestepped, barely getting out of the way. He swung his sword reflexively as he did so. The blade cut a line on the creature’s forearm. The Diablo retracted its arm and looked at the cut for a moment. Dark fluid flowed from the wound. It looked at Derek and smiled as the cut seemed to mend up right before his eyes.

Derek was stunned! He had never seen such power

before. The creature must have sensed his uneasiness as it lashed out with all its furry, coming at the man with both hands flailing wildly yet under a semblance of control.

Derek dodged and ducked. He got his sword up twice as well in order to parry some of the blows. Each time he did so he was knocked back by the shear force of the strikes. It was only his years of training that allowed him to keep his balance and dance away from the deadly attacks.

The Diablo swung around with its left hand and scored a hit on Derek's right shoulder as he tried to duck under the attack. The strike stung and had him spinning away, but he managed to roll backwards into a summersault and back onto his feet just in time to sidestep the next attack. As he turned he continued the spin and slashed out with the dagger down on the beast's bicep when he came around. He then disengaged back in order to put more room between him and the Diablo.

The Diablo screamed and withdrew its arm as light smoke rose up from where the dagger had bitten into its flesh. Derek looked to the dagger then back to the creature who was holding his affected limb and staring hatefully at the man.

Derek smiled and charged in.



The big man screamed as he took the full force of the raking claws across his face. Blood poured from the many wounds that were upon his body. He grabbed the beast by the head and held its nasty fangs at bay as it tried to bite for his throat. He held on as the thing snapped and hissed, then suddenly the monster was pulled from his grasp and soared through the air to land a few feet

away with a crunch of its brittle bones. Bosco turned and nodded at the young South American—one of Mateo's men—then turned back again readying to fight off other undead creatures that were advancing on their position.

There were so many of them! His heart sank as he stepped forward to meet the oncoming charge. He knew his life was about to end, but he stepped forward anyway. He determined then and there that they would have to beat the last breath from him.

He would die fighting.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

SACRIFICE

Brighton spun, weaved, and danced through the creatures with his deadly sword and knife, taking down an undead monster with every strike. His arms and the left side of his face were covered in black ichor. He was standing in the midst of a pile of undead bodies, and it wasn't until he had a moments reprieve from the fight when the last of his opponents was down that he realized he had been cut by dirty claws more than a few times.

He looked down to see his shirt shredded on the right side and felt the sting of the cuts across his abdomen. He also felt a burning pain on the back of his left shoulder and noticed a thick line of blood dripping down his right forearm, making small lines across his wrist which twisted down around his hand and onto the handle of his sword before dropping to the ground.

“Damn!” he exclaimed as he quickly sheathed the knife that was in his left hand, stuck his sword in the back of one of the downed creatures so it would sit upright, and tore a piece of his shirt off. He then found the cut on his upper

right arm that was flowing freely and wrapped the makeshift bandage around it, trying to tie it the best he could with his one hand and teeth.

When he was done he glanced around and noted that Derek was in full fight with the Diabolo. There was also one more large battle raging on at the other side of the room, closer to the entrance where the creatures had flooded in from. Thankfully there were no more of the monsters pouring into the room at this point, but there were still at least ten more to deal with. He also noticed that the only ones still standing were one of Meteo's men, himself and ... Bosco who was in the midst of holding back the remaining creatures.

As he looked at Bosco a hatred began to boil up within him. He thought for sure that the man would be dead by now, but there he was, fighting on.

The pragmatist inside of him shrugged as he realized that the more enemies Bosco took down the better it was for him. He sighed as he pulled his sword from the corpse and started jogging toward the fray.

Yes, he thought. It was good for Bosco to still be alive ... for a few more minutes anyway.



Bosco intercepted one of the creatures as it went for Mateo's man, paying him back for the help he had received from him just a moment earlier. The two fought like wild animals who had been caged. They knew they had to if they hoped to survive. In truth, however, Bosco could feel his endurance waning. He was breathing heavily, pain racked his body from the many wounds he

had received, and the blood loss was starting to have a nasty toll on the fighter.

He glanced over at where Derek was engaged with the Diablo, then he brought his focus back to the fight at hand, narrowly dodging another clawed hand. He smashed the creature in the face and heard crunching bone as the thing went down. He retracted his hand and looked at his swollen, bloody, knuckles. He knew he couldn't punch much more with this hand as the pain coursed through it and up his arm. Something had to have been broken.

Another creature dove at him and barrelled him over and to the ground. It thrashed at him with its deadly fangs. Bosco felt pain in his left shoulder as the thing bit down, tearing into his flesh. He screamed and grabbed the thing by its scraggly hair, yanking it back as hard as he could. Then he repositioned his legs and, with every ounce of strength he could muster he twisted over and flipped the creature onto its back, placing himself on top. With the fury of a dragon he screamed out as he stabbed down on the thing repeatedly with his small boot knife until it stopped squirming.

With great effort, the exhausted man managed to stand up. He could hear that the fighting was starting to dwindle and held out hope that he and his friends were winning. Thankfully, the South American that was fighting beside him was able to keep the other few monsters they were engaged with busy while he caught his breath.

As he turned to survey the battlefield and see just how many more creatures they were up against he flinched back as the Asian was mere inches from his face; a stone-cold look was upon his face. Then he felt the burning sensation erupt in his stomach as the man drove his sword into him.

Brighton grabbed Bosco's shoulder and pushed harder,

driving the blade clean through and out the other side. He brought his face right up to the side of the dying man's ear. "It's not business," he said in a cold tone. "It's personal. It's for Gerald, the man you dropped from the roof and made me fight when he came back as one of these hellish minions."

Bosco reached up and grabbed Brighton's shoulder weakly, unable to say anything. He knew now that he wasn't going to make it out of this hellhole. He flinched as the Asian pulled the blade out of his stomach. The big man stared around for a brief moment, tears welling up in his eyes as he felt the darkness beginning to overcome him. Then he fell back as the ground swallowed him up into blackness.



The Diablo roared as it came in at Derek. The man was almost caught flatfooted, not expecting the creature to move with such speed. Almost. Derek, due to his great agility, managed to bend back under the attack and spin to the right. He somersaulted in order to put more distance between him and the creature. As he came out of the roll he extended his right leg and used it as an anchor to help him turn so he could meet the next incoming strike.

He moved to the side and sliced the Diablo's arm with the dagger again. The creature took the hit and swung its arm back with speed and force. Derek was unable to get fully out of the way before the thing struck. He took a hit on the shoulder which threw him ten feet away. He landed hard on his back which blasted the wind from his lungs.

"No!" he heard Brianna scream.

The Diablo laughed. “Without the tablet I owe you no favours, and you’ll get no special treatment from me. Chilingra. Your friend has a strong soul and I’m going to enjoy devouring it!”

“But you can’t survive without the use of the tablet to channel the energy,” Brianna screamed desperately.

The thing laughed. “Foolish girl! When I first came forth they made the tablet in order to control me as I had to listen to the one who wielded it. Now that it’s gone, I can unleash my full power upon the world!”

“What have I done?” the young woman whispered to herself.

“And now your friend will be my first feast!”

Derek shook his head as he tried to get up, but before he could the thing wrapped its massive hand around his throat and easily hoisted him into the air. He stabbed it in the arm repeatedly with the dagger trying to get it to relinquish its iron grip on him. Black smoke rose from the cuts, but the creature stubbornly held on.

It pulled Derek in close. He could smell the acrid breath coming from the horrific monster and saw the glistening fangs as it smiled wickedly at him.

“You’re about to die Derek Vico,” it stated matter-of-factly in its rough demonic voice.

Derek’s eyes went wide at that proclamation. Fear gripped him like never before. It was in that moment that he realized—perhaps for the first time in a long time—that he wanted to live. He needed to live! It’s what Samantha would want.

Derek clenched his jaw in determination and steeled the look in his eyes. With lightning speed he swung his legs up and kicked the Diablo under the jaw with as much force as he could. The blow loosened the grip it had on his

throat. He stabbed the hand again with the dagger. This time the Diablo let him go. He plummeted to the ground and the creature stumbled back. He landed on the floor in a crouched position. Before the monster could react he sprang up, dagger leading, aiming for the glow in the thing's chest.

Just before the dagger was driven home the creature reacted by bringing its left arm up and intercepting Derek's arm. The dagger was knocked away from the thing's chest, but drove home in its shoulder.

The creature screamed and pulled back from the blow, spinning as it went. It swatted Derek with its right arm as it spun, throwing the man to the floor. The dagger was pulled from its shoulder and flew from Derek's grasp, clanking to the ground as he rolled and bounced across the cold stone floor.

"No!" Derek heard Brianna scream as he tried to shake the dizziness from him.

He desperately attempted to get up, knowing that the creature was going to be on top of him soon, but his body wasn't responding. He closed his eyes tight and opened them again, trying to get his vision to focus. The room spun as he was on the verge of unconsciousness.

He looked up and saw the shadowy form of the monster coming near him.



Brighton turned to see Mateo's man take down another undead creature, then the man looked at him and then to the fallen Bosco at his feet. Brighton could tell from his eyes that there was conflict there. This was one of the men he had teamed up with on their way to

the city and they both had one mission: stop Orion and take the Heart at all cost. Now, there was reticence there. They were fighting on the same side for survival, but Brighton had just killed Bosco in the heat of the battle.

The look only lasted a moment as another creature came in at the South American and he had to defend himself. Brighton turned to slash down another incoming enemy. There were only five more of the things left now which gave Brighton confidence for the first time during this fight that they might make it; but only if Derek could take down the Diablo. He glanced over as he heard a huge roar and saw that Derek was now on the ground at the feet of the beast.

Options whirled around in his mind at that moment. Would he help Derek? Or would he use the opportunity to flee? Five more creatures stood between him and the door. Maybe it was about time to leave and take his chances outside?



Tears streamed down Brianna's eyes as she watched the life being pummelled out of Derek, the man she loved. As Derek's body skipped across the floor the dagger bounced away from him and landed within reach.

Anger began welling up inside her. *The demon promised me Derek and now he's taking him away from me!* she screamed in her mind. *Well, if I can't have him, then neither can the demon!*



Derek saw the form of the massive clawed hand descending upon him. He was up to his knees by now and instinctively put up his hands to block, but realized there was nothing he could do against such a beast. The claws raced toward his face with lightning speed. Derek closed his eyes, waiting for the death blow to come. A moment drifted by but he didn't feel the strike that should have taken his head from him.

He opened his eyes and saw that the hand had retracted as the monster was hunched over now on its knees. And there, under the creature, was Brianna with the dagger plunged into its chest. The thing shuddered as the woman held on stubbornly.

The Diablo grabbed onto her with its massive hand, claws shredding her skin as it did so. Instead of blood coming out of the wounds the blue mist seeped out and into the Diablo. Her very life-force was escaping. She screamed in agony, but held stubbornly to the blade as it sunk deeper into the chest of the demon.

"No! Bri!" Derek yelled. He tried to get up but then collapsed down to one knee. His body wouldn't respond to his commands. Tears rimmed his eyes as he watch Brianna right in front of him and there was nothing he could do.

The Diablo shrieked and hollered. The energy transfer was too much ... too potent ... too quick. The creature began to emanate a bright blue. Then it started to pulse brighter and faster ... brighter and faster ... brighter and faster ...

Suddenly the creature issued a deafening shriek and vaporized into streaks of blue energy that flew in every direction. The force of the concussive impact blew Brianna away and into Derek. The two tumbled a few feet away.

After they stopped rolling Derek opened his eyes. Brianna lay still beside him. Her face was pale. Her deep green eyes stared at him, but there was no spark within them anymore. Her once beautiful auburn hair had turned white.

Derek heard a commotion coming from the exit to the right. He turned his head to see blurred shapes entering the room. He had no fight left in him.

Darkness overcame him as he collapsed to the floor.

Chapter Thirty

“ORION WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU.”

Derek could hear the scream. It was Brianna. Everything was dark, but he could hear the scream and then ... there was nothing.



He managed to open his eyes slowly. All he saw at first was white. It was light. But coming from where?

He closed his eyes again and opened them. Images started to become clear but he couldn't make sense of them. He should be laying on the cold stone floor of the temple, but he wasn't. Instead he felt softness and warmth. He turned his head to the right and saw what looked like hospital equipment. He glanced down at his arm. There was an IV sticking out of it.

The images were still blurry and his mind spun as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. At best he should be on the cold stone floor; at worst, he should be dead.

Where was the Diablo? Where was Brianna? Brighton? Bosco?

“Derek. Derek,” he heard a familiar deep voice calling to him.

He moved his head back to the left and saw Jake looking down at him. By this time his vision had cleared. He could now see that he was in a hospital room, hooked up to monitors and an IV. The sun shone brightly through the window. It seemed like forever since he had seen the sun even though it was no more than a day.

“Brianna?” Derek asked weakly. “Is she ...?”

Jake shook his head solemnly. “Her and Bosco didn’t make it I’m afraid.”

Tears welled up in the man’s eyes.

Jake put a hand on Derek’s arm to comfort him. “We barely managed to get you out alive. It was good that we arrived when we did. It’s all thanks to you. Without you activating the signal before you went into the temple we never would have been able to find you.”

“Signal?” the man asked weakly.

“You know. From your ToughBook.”

Derek shook his head. “I lost that to ... Brighton.”

“Who?”

“Brighton. The agent from Tower Six. He stole my bag. He must have activated the signal when he saw things going south in the city and then left the computer outside the temple,” Derek reasoned.

“Why would he do that,” asked Jake, intrigued by the comment.

“I guess he knew he needed help to get out of there. Where is he?”

“We didn’t find any Tower Six agents when we arrived

in the room,” Jake replied. “Maybe he was killed in the fight?”

Derek shook his head. “No. He made it out. He needed you to clear the way for him and when you did, he split. I’m sure of it.”

Jake was silent for a moment. “It *was* a hell of a fight. Unfortunately you and one of Mateo’s men were the only ones still alive by the time we got there. If this Brighton character survived he must have taken off just before we came in.”

“She was the one who brought us there,” Derek stated after a moment, trying to process the information Jake was giving him.

“What do you mean?”

“Brianna somehow got caught up in what the Diablo could offer her and she betrayed us.”

Jake leaned back, seemingly shocked by the revelation. “We had no idea,” he replied.

“Did you know that it was her who killed Samantha?”

“She killed her sister!” Jake exclaimed, as though it was an unbelievable claim. “How? Why?” he sputtered.

Derek shook his head. “Something to do with the virus she was working with.” He paused, trying to find the best way to answer the next question. “It was about me,” he told Jake. “She was obsessed with me and would do anything to have her way; even killing her own sister.” Derek clenched his fists as more tears streamed down his cheeks.

Jake just stared down at the man as if he didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said in barely a whisper.

“Sorry for what?” Jake asked.

“I was so angry at you and Orion for killing Samantha

when it wasn't your fault. I should have listened to reason, but I didn't."

"There's no need to apologize," Jake stated. "You were hurting and we all knew why. I can't imagine going through what you did with Samantha."

Those words brought a level of comfort to Derek that shocked him. He had held onto his bitterness for so long that it was his driving emotion, and now hearing that Jake understood despite Derek's harsh words and actions toward him and Orion brought a measure of closure to the man. But now Brianna was gone as well. He had never loved her the way he loved Samantha but still, she was his friend. And now she was gone.

"It's okay my friend. You rest now. We'll take care of you. Orion will take care of you," Jake reassured him with a pat on the arm and a warm smile before he turned and headed for the door.

Derek laid there looking up at the ceiling; the only sound in the room was that of the rhythmic beat of his heart on the monitor. It was just him now and his thoughts. He went down there to save Brianna and he couldn't do that. They had all died: Samantha, Brianna, Samuel, and Bosco. Why did he survive? What was his purpose? What was the point of it all? The thoughts continued to race through his mind as he stared at the ceiling and listened to the monitors beep away.

Jake's last words came to him as he laid there: "Orion will take care of you."

He closed his eyes as he started to drift off to sleep once more and there they were again—those words: "Orion will take care of you."



Jake closed the door behind him as he exited the room.

“How’s he doing?” came the predictable question from the man sitting in the chair in the hallway. He wore a dark suit with a red tie. His curly blonde hair was neatly cropped, and his dark eyes sparkled with intrigue as he asked the question.

“Not bad,” came Jake’s nonchalant reply.

The other man raised an eyebrow. “Come on,” he stated as he rose from the chair. “You have to give me more than that.”

“He’s recovering.”

“And?” the man prompted.

“He’ll come back.”

“Are you sure about that?” The blonde haired man got very serious as he asked the question.

“One hundred percent,” came Jake’s confident reply.

“How can you be so sure?”

Jake started to walk down the hallway and the other man followed. “Because I gave him a little something extra in his IV which will make him susceptible to persuasion and suggestion,” he replied with a bit of a laugh. “He’ll come back to Orion. Of that, I am sure.”



The slap across the young man’s face rocked his head back. It stung, but he dared not cry out. The large Columbian loomed over him with a look of disgust in his eyes.

“How could you have come back with nothing?” he screamed in the scared man’s face. “I sent an entire

platoon of my best men and nothing!” He turned and paced away.

“It was horrible,” the young man dared to whisper. He still had the images of the undead creatures in his mind, and the sight of that monster: the Diablo forever imprinted upon his memory.

“What did you say?” the Columbian, Mateo, asked as he spun around.

The young man shook his head, but dared not reply.

Mateo stormed over to him and backhanded him. The man crumpled to the ground with the blow. He kneeled down and picked him up by the collar and was about to punch him in the face when he heard a commotion outside: gun fire. Lots of gun fire, and screaming. It sounded as though a war had just erupted on his doorstep. He dropped the man as his eyes went wide.

“How did you escape?” he yelled at the man. “How did you ...” he started to ask but was cut short as the door flew open and six men carrying rifles and wearing body armour stormed into the room.

Mateo rose slowly with his hands in the air. One of the soldiers came over to the young man and helped him to his feet. “You did good Hernan,” he said.

“Who are you? What is this?” Mateo demanded. “You have no right ...” he began to say but was abruptly stopped when the man who helped Hernan up backhanded him across the face. Then two men came over and held him firmly.

“We have every right,” the soldier said as he walked right up to Mateo. “We make the rules, not you.”

“Who are you?” Mateo asked as he spit out some blood onto the kevlar vest of the man who struck him; a look of disgust splayed across his face.

“I am inconsequential,” the soldier replied. “But my employer is not,” he said as he turned to leave the room.

The two men holding Mateo began to drag him along. He looked with hatred upon the young man, Hernan, as he passed by him.

“You coming Hernan?” the soldier asked, turning to look at the young Columbian. “You’re new life with Orion has just begun.”



“I thought you said that the Cube Satellite was good enough to be able to detect where we were?” Brighton said accusingly.

“Well apparently the technology wasn’t as sound as we thought it was,” Lance replied. The Australian smiled wryly as he poured himself and Brighton a drink. “Besides, you managed to make it out okay.” He handed one of the glasses to the Asian.

Brighton took the glass and drained its contents in one gulp. “It wasn’t easy. It took me three weeks to make it back to any place where I could call in. *And*, I had to use Orion to help me get out of there.”

“Yes, yes, yes. I’m sure it was harrowing,” Lance replied, showing a total disinterest in Brighton’s perilous adventure.

Brighton wanted to leap at the man and throttle him right then and there, but he knew that would be a big mistake, as Lance was a high ranking operative within the Tower Six organization, and taking action against him would be like signing a death warrant. No. He would let the sleight pass. Besides ... he wasn’t worth it.

“Do you have anything of interest by way of salvage

for this entire operation?” Lance asked as he swirled the contents of his glass around, inspecting the golden liquid.

Brighton knew he had to produce something if he wanted to continue to be respected and trusted within the organization. After all, Tower Six did treat him quite well and he definitely didn't want to jeopardize that standing with them.

“I didn't get the heart if that's what you're asking.”

“Pity—”

“But ...” Brighton said as he pulled the dagger from a sheath at his back. “I did manage to walk away with this.” He flashed it in front of Lance.

Lance smiled as he saw the artifact. “This may come in handy,” he said as he took the dagger from Brighton. “Not bad. Not bad at all my friend. Angel will be please.”

The mention of Angel sent a shiver down Brighton's spine. He had never met the woman, but the mere mention of her name always carried with it fear and great respect.

Her reputation acquired it.

EPILOGUE

“So, what do you make of it?” the older scientist asked his younger coworker.

The young man picked up a piece of the shattered red crystal with a set of tongs he took from the tray of tools beside his work station. It was one of the larger pieces of crystal he had laid out in the pan before him.

He brought it under the lighted microscope and examined it intensely. “I don’t know yet. It doesn’t appear to be made out of any known elements we have on Earth. It’s physical and chemical structure and make up are ... different.”

“What do you mean *different*?”

“Well, it’s not like any other crystalline object I’ve seen,” the younger man replied.

“How so?” asked the older scientist, intrigued by the observations.

“Because it appears to have been alive.”

A shocked expression played across the older scientist’s face as he tried to process the revelation. “What about the

demon, this ... Diablo? Were you able to determine anything about him?"

The young man shook his head. "Not much I'm afraid. There wasn't much left of him after the fight. But ... I did manage to find a small piece of the cloth he was wrapped in and did some analysis on that."

"And?" the older man asked, curiosity mounting in his voice.

"And I have discovered that the genetic code we got off the cloth indicates that this thing *used* to be human."

"Human?"

"Ya. At one time this Diablo was a human," the young scientist replied.

"How do you know that the DNA you found isn't from someone else? Maybe from the person who wrapped up the creature?" asked the older man.

"Because I found trace elements of the same DNA in-bedded with the foreign substance of the crystal."

"What are you talking about? Is this like a symbiotic relationship?"

"I don't know," replied the young man as he sat back in his chair. "I don't know ... yet."



Jake shook the droplets of rain from his trench coat as he entered the main entranceway of the large mansion. Once he had taken it off he handed the coat to the tall gangly servant who had answered the door upon his arrival.

"Master Kace is in his office just outside the main parlour waiting for you," the servant said in his refined manner of speaking.

Jake nodded as he walked through the entranceway and into the hallway to the left of the large spiral staircase that led to the second floor. He had always admired this house: the house that was leant to them by their benefactor. There were only a few top ranking agents within the Orion group who were allowed access to this headquarters of the group, and Jake was one of those. It took the man a long time of loyal service and sacrifice in order to make it to this level, but he believed it was all worth it. The objectives of Orion were always worth it. At least that's what Jake kept telling himself. Reasoning it out this way always made the borderline ethical actions he sometimes had to do more acceptable to him and allowed him to sleep easier at night.

He guided himself effortlessly to Kace's office and found that the door was open. He stepped inside to see a younger man with neatly cropped brown hair and a thin dark beard sitting at the desk behind a computer screen. The desk was covered in ancient-looking books. Some were opened, and others had multiple different coloured post-it notes sticking out of their pages in no discernible order.

The man looked up and smiled as he noted Jake coming into the room. He stood from his soft leather chair and extended his right hand. "Good to see you Jake."

"It's good to see you too Kace," Jake replied as he grasped the man's hand and gave him a firm shake.

Kace walked out from behind the desk. "Why don't you take a seat while I get us a drink," he said as he motioned for Jake to be seated at a chair at the other end of the large office. Over there were two chairs and a small table beside a large bay window. Tons of sunlight filtered into the room through the large windows.

Jake walked over and sat down. He looked out the

window and admired the large grounds that the house was built upon. There was a small pond to the left and small groupings of trees sprinkled throughout the yard; some large and some smaller.

Kace returned a moment later with two glasses of red wine.

“Thank you,” Jake said courteously as he swirled the wine around for a moment then brought the glass to his lips. The wine was sweeter than most reds and had hints of cherry and apple in it. “Mmmm, that is good,” he commented.

“I thought you might like that,” Kace replied with a smile as he sat down in the other chair. “I take pride in knowing what my top agents like.”

“But how did you find out?”

Kace looked at Jake with a coy expression splayed across his face. “Come on Jake. We both work for an organization that craves knowledge above all else. You more than anyone should know that we have our ways.”

Jake conceded the point as he took another sip of the tasty substance.

“Now, you’re probably wondering why I requested this meeting since you know that I’ve already read and signed off on your report about the Heart of the Diablo,” Kace stated.

“Maybe a little,” came Jake’s reply.

“There are a couple reasons why I wanted to see you in person. First, I wanted to personally congratulate you on successfully bringing Derek Vico back into the fold. We desperately need a man of his talents working for us.”

Jake nodded and smiled.

Kace let out a laugh. “It was masterful! The way you managed the situation in making the introduction of Llave

and Brianna after discovering the powers the Chilingra could have over the Diablo when you discovered that ancient text.

“How did you know she was going to consider using this opportunity to get the tablet in order to harness the power of the Diablo to make sure she could have Derek?”

“It was easy,” Jake replied as he put his glass down on the table. “I showed her.”

Kace’s eyes went wide. “What!”

“Ya. I knew she wanted Derek as a lover but that she couldn’t have him even after her sister died. I even knew that she was the one who killed Samantha on that mission. She confided as much in me, so I told her I would help her. I saw a woman who was broken and so I exploited that.”

Kace sat back in silence with a stunned expression on his face.

“I knew we needed Vico back, so we planned the mission. Her going missing during it was only supposed to be a ruse, but when she actually did encounter problems, it just added more merit to the mission.

“I had intel that Tower Six was going to move in on the same subject, Llave, and planned it to the best of my ability to have Bosco protect the asset and the artifact: the dagger.”

Kace sat back. “Did Bosco and Peterson know what the end-game was?” he asked.

“No. Of course not,” came Jake’s adamant reply. “I try and keep a closed deck if you know what I mean.”

The sly man took another sip of wine. “It actually worked out better than I thought when Peterson and Bosco escaped. With the doctor in a catatonic state in the hospital and with the dagger, Derek had no chance of figuring out that we were playing him.”

Jake sat back and smiled at his ingenuity. “The best part was, as Derek told me when he finally recovered, that Brianna confessed to him about killing her sister in order to have him. This definitely helped to convince him to come back. That ... and the IV cocktail I administered to him at the hospital.”

Kace chuckled then became serious once more. “But Bosco, Brianna, and Samuel all died which means we lost three good agents to gain one. And the one we gained almost died as well. Don’t you think that was irresponsible?”

“No,” Jake stated casually. “We lost three good agents and gained an indispensable one. An indispensable one that I had faith would survive. And he did.”

“That’s quite the assessment about Mr. Vico. How are you going to back up that claim?”

“You’ll see. Derek will not disappoint,” Jake reassured. “Bosco was a fighter, one that can be replaced. Samuel was a translator. Again, someone we can replace. Derek is more than both of them.”

“And what of Brianna?”

“She will be missed,” Jake said soberly. “But we have other more promising researchers in our ranks.” He paused for a moment to take a sip of his wine. “She will be missed but replaced.”

“Well ... I hope you are right about Mr. Vico,” Kace stated as he stood up and started for the desk.

“We also got the Heart: an artifact that I believe will become invaluable in the coming years,” Jake added as he too rose and followed the man to the desk.

Kace nodded his agreement.

“Now, on to more pressing business,” he declared. “Trina from Trichem called and is in need of our services

to help them find a stolen chemical that could be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Oh?” Jake said, intrigued by where Kace was going with this. “What kind of chemical?”

“It’s called Genesis.”

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