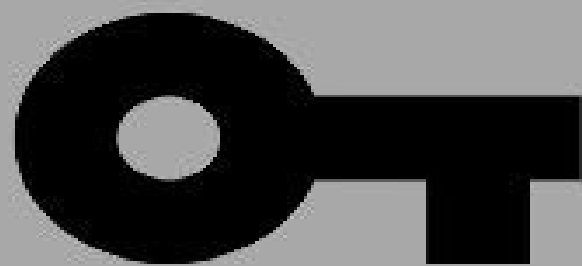


The Dark

Key

Graeme Winton



THE DARK KEY

by

GRAEME WINTON

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Chapter 1

“You’re a demon,” said a face with crimson eyes and a cruel grin.

“What... do you mean?” asked Matthew.

“Hell’s about to erupt into your life!”

It was a bright Sunday forenoon when Matthew Wilson opened his eyes. The sun light, which shone

through his bedroom window, was alive with a million specks of dust. He gaped at the familiar debris of a morning after a night spent drinking. His clothes lay in crazy patterns on the floor near to the discarded foil containers of the take-away which had been half-eaten.

He wrenched himself out of bed and made his way to the toilet while pledging to abstain from boozing—for a while at least. He stared at his reflection in the mirror and decided he had suffered too many Saturday nights pass by in an alcoholic haze. It was time to improve his health, so he decided, after breakfast, to take a long walk along Arbroath's cliff top pathway.

After showering and shaving Matthew headed downstairs into his neat but small kitchen and made coffee. He decided not to have something to eat as his stomach felt tender due to the eight pints of beer he had consumed the previous evening.

He read Saturday's newspaper and attempted to forget about his physical health. The columns were filled with depressing facts about conflict and famine, which didn't improve his state of mental health. So he gave up reading and decided it was time for the walk.

The day was perfect; the sun burned a golden path across the sea to the horizon. Autumn had turned the leaves on the trees and bushes into a burst of colour. The azure water lapped onto the rocks at the base of the ancient sandstone Cliffs.

He thought of his girlfriend, Jane, and the way they had argued the night before over a trivial matter. The entire thing ending up with her storming off in a taxi threatening never to lay eyes on him again. It was time for a break; he needed excitement in his life.

As Matthew walked round an inlet known as 'Dickmont's Den', a wind got up which made him shiver and caused goose bumps to appear on his bare arms. He rolled down his shirt sleeves and buttoned the cuffs.

He strolled on as a flock of seagulls fleeing inland, their cries piercing the tranquillity of the spot, interrupted his thoughts. The wind became stronger, and the sea whipped up into a mass of manic, white stallions. Waves crashed off the rocks, and large strands of seaweed thrashed back and forth like lost souls struggling to escape a frothy hell.

Dark threatening cumuli, which appeared from nowhere, drifted past and released a light, but penetrating rain which soaked Matthew through to the skin. He had dressed for a sunny day now a distant memory.

The high winds caused him to battle along the path and, as he passed the rock formation known as the Pulpit, Matthew stopped in his tracks and stared in amazement. On a cliff stack in front of him, which threatened to break away from the mainland, six hooded figures chased another hooded figure. He realised they were monks. But what were monks doing here on the cliff tops?

The chasing monks wore black robes with golden cords around the waist while their prey bore a shabby grey habit. Rather than run they appeared to drift over the path which ran the length of the stack. The high winds had no effect on them. The closer he got, the more surreal the scene became. Meantime, the weather became worse, there was no way the monks could stay on the stack in that strength of wind.

Closer and closer the six got to the single Monk until it looked as if they would run out of path. Matthew crawled to the stack path, but wasn't sure what he was going to do.

As the six pounced on the grey monk he turned around and looked straight into Matthews's eyes. His face ghostly pale with black sockets where the eyes should have been. Matthew felt tentacles of coldness reach down into his soul and wrench ancient memory from his subconscious.

There was a flash of lightning, and the water in front of the stack erupted deluging the surrounding rocks with seaweed. From the sea there arose a shimmering white column of light accompanied by a sinister growling noise.

Matthew watched agog as the flailing figure of the grey monk went rigid when surrounded by the other monks. Then they leaped into the column with another face turning to stare at him... a white face

with blood red eyes.

After the monks disappeared down the column, the entire thing collapsed into the water, and the wind lessened, and the sea calmed down. The sun then flowed through the clouds illuminating the cliff top.

Matthew felt himself transfixed to the patch of grass on which he stood. Even though the air temperature had risen, he shuddered. He scanned the surrounds, but realised there was no one else about to witness what he'd seen. Everything had returned to normal that's if there had been anything abnormal. Could it have been a daydream or illusion? He walked to the edge of the stack, peered down the cliff, nothing seemed out of the ordinary; the seagulls had returned and were breaking the settling peace with their cries. Time to head home and re-examine his decision to lay off drinking, he mused.

The walk back along the cliff path was uneventful, which was just as well because Matthew's nerves were strained. He passed couples out exercising their dogs. "Where were you a few minutes ago?" he said, to himself.

In his house, Matthew turned on the central heating even though it was still sunny and warm. He went into the kitchen and opened the fridge door. He found two cans of beer which he rescued from the cold. In the living-room, he opened a tin then sat down on his newspaper strewn settee and took a long slug of ale.

In his mind he retraced the events of the day: adverse weather blowing up from nowhere, phantom monks at the cliffs; one of them looking at him, and giving him a strange feeling, and then the whole group disappearing down a tower of light. Who would believe him?

Matthew finished the can and felt better. Then he phoned Jane to patch matters up with her, but he was put through to her answering machine, so he left a message and hung up the receiver.

After supper and a shower he retired for the night as it was back to work the next morning. In bed, he found it difficult to sleep; he kept running over the events of the day and the dream from the previous night.

He fell asleep and dreamt of walking through a dark cave which seemed to wind on forever. Matthew thought for a moment he heard foot steps, but when he glanced back, there was only darkness. He pushed on, further and further into the cave which reeked of the sea.

A hand grabbed his shoulder, and he spun around with his heart racing. Behind him hovered the grey-robed monk with its gaunt eyeless face. Matthew woke up with a start, he was sweating and realised he was shaking. He leapt out of bed and glanced around the room—there was nothing only his limited amount of furniture.

He strode into the bathroom and drank water then told himself to calm down. He returned to bed and slept the rest of the night.

The following morning he woke up and looked out of the window. The day was overcast and cold looking. After showering and dressing he headed downstairs for breakfast. The kitchen was freezing; he had left the small hopper window open.

His fridge was empty except for an old piece of pizza, so he skipped breakfast. He grabbed his jacket and made his way to the front door. Outside, he was about to lock the door when he had to go back in and check to see if he had switched off the bathroom light and ventilator. He headed upstairs cursing the obsessive-compulsive disorder that plagued his mind. Matthew was not only limited to checking if electrical items were off, but to doing things over and over again for fear that if he didn't do them something would happen to either himself or his family.

With the bathroom light out and the front door locked, Matthew headed off to work, and walked along streets slick with rain. The wind made him shiver as it blew about small bits of litter and leaves like confetti thrown at a wedding. He was glad to reach the warm confines of the library.

The day saw the usual stream of people borrowing and returning books. The draw of the internet on the library's free computers brought in many students and others who required machines.

At lunchtime Matthew strolled into the reference department and unlocked a glass case full of local interest books. He selected one with press cuttings from 1950 to 1985. Flicking through the pages he happened upon a clipping entitled: 'Ghostly Monk seen at Cliffs'. It was about a man, John Douglas, who was out walking his dog in 1964 near Dickmont's Den when he saw the phantom of a monk in a grey habit rise from the cliff edge. The ghost moved along the top before disappearing. Another cutting a few pages on, read: 'While picnicking at the popular Deil's Heid area of Arbroath Cliffs, a family happened to see a ghostly monk appear. The apparition stared out to sea from the cliff top then disappeared'. Matthew had seen enough, he wasn't going mad. Others had seen an apparition. But, for a shorter time than he had in the same location: the Deil's Heid was the next prominent stack to where he saw the event.

After another boring afternoon at work, Matthew went home via the Abbey Inn. There weren't many at the bar just a few old men nursing half pints. Two women from the library sat at a table in a corner. He bought a pint and headed over to join them.

"Hello there ladies."

"I thought a good boy like you would go straight home," said Sandra, a trim, blond-haired 20-year-old.

"Hey, not so much of the good," he said as he sat and took a sip of his drink. "Mondays, what can you do with them?"

"Yeah, I know what I'd do with them," said Mandy. She was a more senior assistant with long, black hair, streaked grey, and startling blue eyes.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said to them.

"Oh, go on then handsome," said Mandy.

"Have you read anything about ghosts out at the cliffs?"

"You'd better not drink anymore of that," said Sandra as she pointed toward his pint.

"There's an old story about a piper and his dog disappearing into a cave at Dickmont's Den," said Mandy. "The dog got out of the cave without a hair left on its body. They say on a windy day nearby you can hear the pipes."

Matthew looked at his pint glass as he turned it. "Anything else, say... about monks?"

"Monks! said Mandy. She put one finger on to her chin. "The only strange thing I remember on the point of monks was a story I heard a long time ago about some of them at the Abbey leaving the order and practicing black magic, whether it's true or not is anybody's guess."

Matthew finished his drink and bought another one for his work colleagues, said his farewells and left the pub. Outside the sky had cleared, and a full moon lit his way. He passed by a chip shop which advertised the best suppers in town. He was hungry, so he decided to buy fish and chips to take home.

Inside, the shop was warm, and the odour was heavenly. The fryer was a big man with a greying beard. "What would you like?" he asked.

"A fish supper."

"You look like you've had a hard day or a hard weekend."

"Yeah... you wouldn't believe it!"

At home he ate his supper in silence still going over the events of the previous day in his head. The telephone rang.

"Hello," he said into the receiver.

"It's Jane," was the reply, "I want to talk."

"So do I!"

"I'll come over after I've finished the shift."

With that he replaced the receiver, sat down and looked at the clock above the fireplace and thought, ten past eight; she'll be here at ten.

Matthew lay down on his threadbare settee and dozed. He awoke with the sound of rain on the window; strange, he thought, the sky had been cloudless when he entered. As he listened, the patter on the glass seemed to say his name. He shook his head. He must hear things. But the more he listened the more convinced he became he heard his name.

The letter box rattled making him jump. Just the wind, he thought. A musty damp stench entered the room. It reminded him of a cave. He went over to the curtains, pulled them open, and there in front of him was a dark, hooded figure with bright red eyes staring through the glass.

“Oh my God!” Matthew shouted as he tugged the drapes shut.

“Matthew,” hissed an unworldly voice, “you’re next.”

He ran into the hallway.

“Matthew,” hissed the voice through the letter box—which opened-millimetre by, spine chilling, millimetre. He tried to look away, but found his attention drawn back to the front door. Another pair of crimson eyes transfixed him through the open letter box.

“We will take you; you’re the last,” said the voice.

The house shook as if in the grip of an earthquake. The tremors built in intensity until Matthew felt sure the windows would break. He ran to the phone and picked up the receiver, but there was no dialling tone. Things in his living-room flew. A coffee mug narrowly missed him and crashed into the wall beside the moving television set.

The shaking seemed to last an eternity. Someone outside will see this, and telephone the police, he thought, trying to calm himself. Then it was over—the shaking eased.

Matthew thought rationally: these entities were trying to scare him; they couldn’t touch him. As he thought this, the musty smell evaporated—they had gone! But he didn’t have the courage to look out the window. He made his way into the hall and edged toward the front door. He crept closer and closer with his heart thumping. The door flew open.

“Aargh!” he shouted.

“What’s up with you?” Jane asked.

Chapter 2

In the column of light, Jonas knew where he was going with these black-robed monks. An end to it all after aeons of walking in the void between dimensions. He had been neither in the physical world nor in a dimension of light; able to see humans in one and spirit groups in the other, but he could not interact with either.

Down he went or at least it seemed like descent; he could have been ascending. One thing he noticed was the malevolence of the power grip these demons had on him. His mind seemed encased in metal. He had allowed them to get too close. In fact, he was tired of hiding.

How long had he dreamed of this escape... this closure? He thought of his life in the material world. His devotion to one true god, who had deserted him a long time ago, and left him in prison between existence and non-existence. His sin was to love outside the limits of his chosen path. The life of a monk had not been for him. At the beginning all had been well with abbey life. Human urges are things that never die away however, no matter how devoted you are to God. On a physical level touching is a primal thing which people use to comfort one another. Oh, how Jonas had missed the touching of his youth through these devotional years. The human body, not meant for abstinence from fornication, with hormones and sperm was a distraction.

The woman he had sinned with; a fisherman's daughter called Mari. She was the most beautiful thing Jonas had ever seen. Her hair was long, blond and fell around her shoulders. She had an infectious smile which made his heart skip a beat.

He saw her one day when he slipped out of the Abbey grounds and headed for a stroll through the streets of old Arbroath.

"Hello," she whispered, while passing by.

Jonas was taken aback, because the monks were not spoken to by the locals, and the monks did not speak to them, but he couldn't resist replying.

"Good day," he said.

After this brief encounter Jonas went out of his way to bump into her even when he was due for duties or prayer at the Abbey. At night in his bed in the bleak dormitory his thoughts were of Mari—her ethereal beauty filling his dreams. Oh, had God sent this woman to test him if so He had done a good job.

They met wherever they could, at the cliffs, out in the fields. If prying eyes saw them talking the consequences for both were dire. And talk they did, for hours on end covering as many subjects as they dared. Jonas had discovered the way to laugh again helped along by Mari's zest for life.

One evening in late summer they walked in the fields west of Arbroath. The sun was setting, and a wonderful fragrance of honeysuckle permeated the air. Jonas stopped Mari and held her hands as the red sunlight danced on her blond hair. He pulled her to him and kissed her.

They lay in the long grass and caressed each other. Jonas felt repressed primal urges arise. He desired this woman. With that he pulled open her blouse revealing pert breasts tipped with cherry red nipples which he kissed and licked while Mari moaned. She pulled up his habit and grabbed his manhood, which was erect. She worked her hand up and down the shaft. Jonas gave out a sigh of pure pleasure. He pulled up her dress, parted her legs and pushed his penis into her core. He thrust back and forth

while she grunted and put her legs around his body. Then his seed gushed into her, and she laughed. They then rolled over and over giggling before coming to a halt and releasing each other, to lie bathed in sweat and gaze at the sky.

She erupted into an evil laugh. “You naughty monk.”

“I don’t care anymore,” he replied.

“It’s time we got back before we’re both missed.”

“I want to stay here with you forever.”

Then they rose and walked back to the town hand in hand.

The white column faded, and Jonas found himself in a dark cave, a thing he didn’t expect. The black-robed monks had gone, along with the power grip. There was distant chanting filling the cave. Jonas recognised the mantra, and drawn on through the cave toward, it chilled his soul. It can’t be, he thought, the Black Dimension wasn’t a cave where he once walked in the physical world.

The day Mari had told him she was pregnant with his child he sought refuge in a cave along the cliffs wondering what to do. If the truth had become common knowledge, he would have been thrown out of the brotherhood, and Mari would have been rejected from the local community. It was this cave. The structures were the same. Only now he was passing through them as opposed to walking around them. The chanting! Oh the chanting! He now realised what to expect in this... his personal hell.

Chapter 3

Matthew collapsed back onto the hallway wall, slumped down and sat on the floor with his head in his hands.

“Oh, it’s only you,” he said.

“You know how to flatter a girl,” said Jane, shaking her head. “What’s the matter?”

“Don’t ask.”

She wandered into the living room, her hips swaying from side to side.

“What the hells happened here, have you been having a party?”

He decided that rather than have her storm out he would have to tell her the truth, so that’s what he did. He told her of the events at the cliffs, what he had discovered at the Library and the happenings of minutes ago.

Jane sat and stared at Matthew for a moment unable to comprehend what she had just heard, then she asked: “Are you feeling all right? You’d better lay off the booze for a while.”

“I’m telling you that’s what happened, I haven’t been drinking... well not much.”

“You’d better tell the police or somebody.”

“Oh yeah, that would be wise... excuse me officer I saw ghosts out at the cliffs, then they appeared at my place! I’ve taken enough of a risk confiding in you,” scoffed Matthew.

They tidied up the house and opened a bottle of wine which Jane had brought.

“Okay let’s say I believe you,” she said, after sipping her wine. “What are you going to do now?”

“I’m not sure. I must find out more about these black monks. Oh, and I’ll be sleeping with the light on from now on, unless you’d like to come and hold my hand,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Not so fast boy, you’ve still got some making up to do.”

The following day, at lunch time, Matthew again headed into the reference department of the library. He searched through old volumes of Arbroath’s History looking for anything to do with monks. There was information about the founding of the Abbey and daily life in the brotherhood, but nothing of renegade monks.

After a while Matthew’s boss entered. A tall, balding man in his late forties, Brian Jones had been head librarian for four years.

“What’s this Matt, overtime?”

“Nah, just looking for information.”

“Must be old, looking through these things,” Brian said, pointing at the books.

“Yeah, it’s about monks at the Abbey.”

“There are older volumes in a store in the basement, I’m sure some of those are on the Abbey,” said Brian.

Matthew closed the volumes he had open on the desk in front of him and put them back in the glass case. He then walked through to the main desk and grabbed the keys for the stores, which were on a hook under the computer shelf.

The hinges groaned as Matthew opened the door with ‘Books’ written on it in black felt pen. He switched on the light to reveal a small dusty room with two racks of ancient books with faded brown covers. Where do you start? Matthew thought. Most of the volumes were to do with eminent town’s people and nothing to do with the monks.

Further along the shelf he came across a book called ‘A History of Arbroath Abbey 1100—1300’

which contained articles on the first monks establishing themselves at the Abbey but not much else of significance. The second volume however, 'A History of Arbroath Abbey 1300—1500', proved to be more interesting. One article read: 'In the year of our Lord 1424 six monks were burned alive at the stake. Their sin was to have taken money and valuables from local people for the Abbey with the assurance of salvation. The Abbey, however, never received anything'.

Jeez, they didn't muck around in those days, thought Matthew.

He thumbed through the rest of the book, but nothing caught his eye. He knew there was more, but lunch time was over so he placed the books back, switched out the light, locked the door, and started up the stairs. He returned to check if he had put the light out. If he didn't check, the bulb could be on for weeks. He opened the door to find... darkness.

"There you are... satisfied?" he asked himself.

The next day, Wednesday, was Matthew's day off; so he headed to the Abbey, where he introduced himself to the curator, Ronald Cunningham, an amiable lad, interested in all things historical. Matthew told him he was doing personal research into the Abbey and would appreciate any help.

"What periods are you interested in.?"

"Just the one—the fifteenth century," replied Matthew.

"Well, I'll take you to our library."

They walked through the modern visitor centre, which was empty except for an elderly couple looking at the post cards. They entered a room in the back which looked out over the Abbey graveyard. The books were much the same as the one's in the basement of the General Library. This was no dusty room, however, it was immaculate, and the books were in glass cases. Ronald opened one case and looked along the shelf before choosing a volume.

"There you are Matthew—take as long as you want—I'll be out front." With that he closed the case and left.

The book in front of Matthew was entitled 'Aberbrothock Abbey Vol Three'. It contained much of the same material as the others he had looked at: monastery life, the lay out of the Abbey. He had to scrutinise every page, and after what seemed like hours he hit pay dirt. An article on a group of monks being ceremonially disrobed and cast out of the order for straying from the path and pursuing an alternative religion. It said they had left the Abbey to seek forgiveness and were eight in number.

Matthew read the last part again. Left the Abbey—yeah right! Wait, a minute... eight in number! Either the book was wrong or two monks escaped the burning. What this meant he wasn't sure. He skimmed through the rest of the volume. Finding nothing of consequence he closed it and returned it to the case.

He was about to turn toward the door when another book caught his eye. The cover was maroon with an overlaid intricate golden pattern. He lifted it out from its resting place.

Inside, the old tome wasn't printed but written by hand with fountain pen, or a quill. There were small multi-coloured drawings at the head of every chapter, and the sentences were well placed out. The old prose, tested Matthew, who had only encountered it once before at school. He read for about an hour before his eyelids grew heavy. He was about to doze off when he came across a piece about the monks at the Abbey being of a particular order. They were Tironensian Monks, but also called the Guardians of the Key. Matthew looked through most of the rest of the book, but couldn't find more of relevance. He returned the book to its place on the shelf and closed the case.

At the front desk Ronald was serving three Japanese visitors, who were buying Declaration of Arbroath T-shirts. After they had left Ronald asked him if he had found what he was looking for.

"Yes and no... or maybe, oh I don't know! Anyway, thanks for letting me look through the books."

"Anytime," replied Ronald.

"There is one thing, have you heard of the Key?"

“Yes the monks were the Guardians of the Key, but to my knowledge no one knows where the Key is or what it’s for.”

“Could I go into the Abbey and have a look around?”

Ronald smiled. “Sure, that’ll be four pounds.”

The Abbey looked great. It was ruined through local people taking the stone work for their own purposes after the monks left. The South Transept dominated the area known locally as the Round ‘O’ it had a large, round, glassless window and came to an eroded point, which pierced the brooding October clouds as they rolled by, propelled by the icy north wind.

The last time Matthew was in the Abbey, was on a school trip. Shameful he thought as he lived in the town. He walked along the nave, which would once have been flagstones but was now grassed over, and passed the stone bases which would have supported the main columns. He came to the grave of King William the Lion. He stopped for a reverent moment before turning around and looking back at the main part of the building. He wondered what the Key was for. A shiver ran down his spine as the face of the grey-robed monk exploded into his mind’s eye.

It was time to go, the Abbey was becoming eerie rather than awe inspiring. Matthew made his way to the main gate and stepped back into the twenty-first century.

Chapter 4

Drawn through the cave toward the chanting, Jonas thought of the time he spent in the void. He watched people in the physical world and dreamed of going there once again. To feel the fresh air on his skin. To stroll along a country lane, smell the honeysuckle in bloom, and listen to the birds call to each other on a summer evening. The sensation of pleasure and pain he missed. All these years in his inter-dimensional prison Jonas longed for the touch of another human being. But he had to carry the burden, for if he didn't there would be no human world.

He had searched for Mari the long months of her pregnancy. But he never found her. He even thought of going to find her home. But how could he? He couldn't ask local people where she lived. The scandal would have destroyed both their worlds.

Then out of the blue she appeared to him, in the otherwise deserted Chapter House, with babe in arms and spoke to him with a gravelly voice. "Jonas, this is your son," she said, "this is David."

He gazed at the boy who had dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes.

"Where have you been?"

She laughed while transfixing him with a cold stare.

"Oh, poor Jonas for all your righteousness, you're blinded by human emotion and sensuality," she hissed.

With that she turned around and left. He ran out of the door after her but she had gone. He searched along the Cloister, but there was no one about.

Why had she been so cruel to him? The cold stare that froze his being, and that rasping voice, it was as if she wasn't quite... human. But that couldn't be—could it? The day they made love she was so gentle and loving. But there was that evil laugh when they had stopped caressing. Then there was her family. She had told him about how her father had worked long hours fishing in all weathers, and her mother looked after her two brothers and three sisters. But he had never seen her walking or standing with anyone, she appeared as she had today.

Anger and frustration welled up in Jonas. It was as if reality, his sheltered reality, had ripped apart. What had it all meant? What could he have done? He couldn't have confided in anyone for fear of scandal and rejection, he had to carry on and keep the matter concealed. He had to appear pure to be the next abbot.

The chanting was growing louder the further into the cave he went. Jonas could make out an eerie red glow eating up the darkness around a bend. He could sense the collective consciousness of the dimension invading his thoughts, he had to resist and stay focused on pure thoughts for as long as he could. At least until he could contact the one person who could help.

Jonas saw the circle of black-robed monks. The chanting of their demon worshipping mantras was becoming deafening. He could feel their evil thoughts, like gnarled roots, about to tighten around his mind. The source of the red glow was a symbol in the centre of the ring. At the rear of the cave was a

huge altar dug out of the sandstone. In front of it there was a hooded figure sitting in a big ornate chair.

Images of his son flooded his mind. The day he saw him, seventeen years after Mari had taken the baby and vanished, he noticed the boy had none of his features; in fact he didn't look like her either.

Jonas was then abbot and received David in the privacy of his chambers.

"Father dear, I've come back to see you," David sneered.

Jonas got up out of his seat and closed his study door.

"Afraid they'll find out you have a son. Tut! Tut! It's okay, I'll tell them I was looking for spiritual guidance and had to see the abbot," he giggled.

"Where have you and your mother been?"

"We've been away," replied David, as he fixed Jonas with an icy stare.

"I've taken your name... I'm now David de Longford. It has a certain ring about it, don't you think?"

"I need to ask you to leave I have business to attend to," said Jonas, pointing to the door.

"Oh I won't be leaving, you know what I'm here for Father dear."

"I have no money; it all belongs to the Abbey."

A depressive heaviness descended over him, and he had to sit down as his legs shook.

"Don't treat me like a fool, I want the Key," growled David.

"I don't know where ."

"Oh, but you do. I know the secret of the hiding place is passed down to successive abbots."

"Look you must leave," Jonas said, angered by the pleading tone of his voice.

"I see I'll have to do this the hard way. I've probed your mind but you seem to have placed a block in the way," said David.

The surrounding air tightened around Jonas and he rose out of his seat. Up he went as he spun. When he was near the ceiling he spun, faster. He could feel the blood rush through his body and surge into his skull.

"You will tell me," he heard David say in his mind.

"Tell him," every fibre in his body screamed! "I must not, I must not, must think pure thoughts!"

Faster and faster he spun. He was about to pass out when the spinning stopped, and he was returned to his seat. He sat there for several moments feeling dazed. Then, David kneeled before him with tears in his eyes.

"Father please forgive me. Oh, what have I done?"

David rose and ran out of the room. Jonas stood up, but had to sit down again due to dizziness. After a short time he rose again and raced to the door, only to find a monk, Brother George, standing there.

"I heard noises, so I came to see if you were all right."

"Yes fine, I stood up too fast and lost my balance," said Jonas. "But I'm okay now, thanks for your thoughtfulness," he continued.

Chapter 5

It was a wet night in the ancient French town of Chartres. The wind swept the rain along Rue du Massacre. There were few people on the dark streets; those that were out hurried about their business.

Down a narrow alley sat an old cafe called Le Moine. Inside, the walls were stained brown with nicotine; in fact most things were brown with nicotine. The linoleum tiles on the floor, which were once black and white, were now black and brown. Some curled at the edges. The tables and chairs looked as if they were out of some nineteen sixties museum exhibit.

At the bar sat a regular with half a bottle of Pastis in front of him. He was talking to the barmaid about French patriotism, but she was more interested in the soap opera on the old television in the corner above the toilet door.

They watched as the dark clad members of the club filed through the door at the back of the bar. They met every Tuesday in the basement. Different clubs used the room, and the owner didn't much bother as long as they paid.

Behind the locked and bolted door downstairs, the brethren donned their black habits and pulled up their hoods. All except for Jacques Rancourt who stood and watched as they unlocked a cupboard door and brought forward an altar. He had been approached to join the Order and had accepted. He felt as though it was the right thing to do; it was as if his whole life had been leading up to this. The man who had approached him was Judge Didier Grondin a well-respected official of the local community. He had hinted at being able to help Jacques with his career. He watched them set out a sculpted bronze idol of a grotesque female-like figure as he donned a black habit given to him. Jacques stood in the centre of a circle drawn in chalk on the floor.

The brethren gathered around the inside periphery of the circle. Then one of them approached Jacques and blindfolded him after which another placed a goblet full of red wine in front of him. He then heard a familiar voice.

“Welcome brothers. Oh brethren of the Order of the Gate.” It was Didier Grondin, thought Jacques although before he had never heard him speak with such power.

“We are here to initiate brother Rancourt tonight,” continued the voice.

“Yes master,” said the men in unison.

Grondin chanted words which meant nothing to Jacques, he assumed they were Latin. The others joined in, softly at first, but then gaining strength. This continued for some time, always increasing in volume and then speed.

The next thing they did would have disgusted Jacques if he could see. For the brothers raised up their robes, pulled out their penises, and masturbated, while chanting. The mantra chanting got faster and faster until it stopped, and they ejaculated into goblets placed in front of them. They then took their goblets and poured the contents into the cup before the initiate.

“Brother Rancourt, do you swear allegiance to the Goddess Hel, and to merge your eternal soul and

your body with ours,” said Grondin. His voice sounded like it could start an earth quake.

“I do,” said Jacques.

“Then drink the fluids of life and death.”

Jacques was handed his goblet, he raised it and drank the contents. The chanting began again; different this time and at a slower pace. As he drank Jacques thought, fluids? Surely he meant fluid as in the red wine for the blood of Christ in Christian communion, and this tasted like red wine... frothy red wine!

The new brother then had the blindfold removed and took his place in the periphery of the circle with the rest of the order. He joined in with the chant which was again increasing in volume and speed.

Jacques glanced around; the others were in a trance. Grondin was kneeling in front of the altar with his head swaying from side to side. Jacques, to his horror, noticed that the Master’s facial features were distorted. His eyes were crimson and his skin had taken on a sallow complexion. Jacques looked away in revulsion. But he couldn’t resist another look. When he glanced back Grondin’s face was normal. It must have been a trick of the light, or something to do with the wine, he thought.

After the meeting broke up Grondin told Jacques that he would be contacted about the next meeting and what was expected of him. He then approached another brother.

“We need to talk Georges.”

Georges Lagrange was Grondin’s right-hand man. He was a big well-built man with short cropped red hair.

“What’s up?”

“The time has come, you must go to Scotland, and take Alain Caron with you,” said Grondin. “I’ve been contacted by our brothers behind the veil. They know who and where the new carrier is and they’ve paid him a visit. But could do nothing but scare him...you know how they are,” he continued.

“But if they have Jonas does it matter.”

“Yes, he could have contacted this person before they got to him,” said Grondin.

“I’ll leave the details, tickets and money at the usual place,” he continued, while moving away.

With that they disrobed and locked the altar away. Then the brothers filed out past the bar maid and the regular who had now finished his bottle of Pastis. Grondin put 30 Euros on the bar as he was leaving.

Outside, the wind was still blowing the rain along Rue du Massacre as Didier Grondin buttoned up his coat and disappeared into the night.

Chapter 6

On Thursday morning Matthew woke up to the sound of a fog horn drifting up from the harbour. He gazed out of the window into thick fog. All he could make out were the spectral shapes of trees and parked vehicles. The glass was sodden with condensation; big drops of water were racing one another down the pane.

He dressed and headed downstairs. There was the usual assortment of junk mail and charity letters lying waiting for him on the mat behind the front door. He grabbed the letters and threw them onto the small telephone table in the hall.

He drank coffee while watching the morning news. Depressing images of starving people in Africa made him promise himself to donate something to Oxfam. At least the weather forecast was cheering: the fog was to give way to a bright sunny day on the east coast.

Matthew left his house and walked down the misty street. The street lights were still on due to the fog and cast an orange glow. An engine ignited behind but he didn't see any vehicle pass by, which was unusual because he lived in a cul-de-sac. As he turned into Carnegie Street, he was certain he heard the steady hum of an engine. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as he quickened his pace. When he reached Ernest Street, he was almost running. Matthew looked back still convinced he heard an engine close by. When he returned his gaze forward, he crashed into a man.

"Hey watch where you're goin'."

"Sorry!" Matthew said picking up the man's work bag.

At work he was uneasy and brusque with people. During lunch time Brian, the boss, came through to the common room.

"Matt, there's two gentlemen to see you. They've got Home Office badges and are official looking. I've shown them into the reference department, it's empty at the moment," he said.

With some trepidation Matthew walked into the room where the men were. When he saw them, sitting at a reading desk, his adrenaline surged. They were clean shaven, and both wore dark suits. And, something more worrying: they were big. They reminded him of the bouncers that stood at fashionable pub doors at weekends.

As he approached them, the bigger of the two men rose from his seat.

"Mr Wilson... Matthew Wilson?" he asked.

"Yes that's right," replied Matthew, "what can I do for you?"

"We're from the Home Office, here's my card."

Matthew took the card, embarrassed by his trembling hand, and studied it. The card looked official but then again he had never seen a Home Office card. It had a government stamp over the man's photograph. His name was Roger Hamilton.

"This is my associate - Jonathon James," Hamilton said, nodding toward the other man.

“We’re investigating... this is delicate... strange phenomena,” he said, taking his card back out of Matthew’s hand.

“What like the X-Files or something.” Matthew scoffed.

Hamilton moved closer to Matthew and stared into his eyes.

“Mr Wilson I am serious,” he said, sending shudders down Matthew’s spine. “Have you seen anything out of the ordinary?”

There was something about the way he talked which Matthew couldn’t fathom. Ah yes, there was a slight French accent.

“No, I haven’t seen anything strange I’m afraid, and now I must get back to work.” Matthew said turning to leave.

“One moment Mr Wilson, if you see something please telephone this number.” Hamilton said, handing Matthew a yellow card.

Matthew walked out of the room with his mind churning. What was he mixed up in here? First ghosts, and now those two. They knew he had seen... things.

Chapter 7

The telephone rang in Didier Grondin’s study. He drifted in from the hallway and answered it.

“Hello... Didier Grondin.”

“It’s Lagrange.”

“What’s new my friend?”

“We made contact, and he says he has seen nothing, but I’m sure he’s lying.”

“What do you want done?” Lagrange asked after a pause.

“Nothing, only keep an eye on him. If he goes anywhere out of the ordinary follow him; you know what we want and what to do.”

Didier sat back in his big leather swivel chair. At last it was all coming together, he thought, after all these centuries. It was just a matter of time before Jonas’s mind opened to the consciousness of the Dark Dimension.

All the time Jonas eluded them by hiding in the void between dimensions. It was all for nothing. The Key would soon be in his hands, the key to unlocking the gate which would allow a greater enslavement of humanity on this forsaken planet. All religions being swept away in a glorious triumphant day... if he allowed it!

He stood up and strolled over to his drinks cabinet where he picked up a bottle of brandy and poured the brown liquid into a tall glass. After taking a sip, he walked back to his desk and sat down. He picked up a remote control and pressed a button. The soothing sound of Rachmaninov’s Third Piano Concerto filled the room. He then swivelled around and gazed out of the large window into his well-kept garden. Big, grey clouds swept across the sky and darkened the study.

With the alcohol coursing through his veins he thought of the other members of the Order. They knew they were chosen because of their dark souls and that their master drew power from them to supplement his demonic powers from the Dark Dimension. Some were incarnations of earlier members, but could he trust them?

Sometimes, in his lighter moments, he wished to be free, but he knew it could never be. With what was to be, wasn’t it better to be part of the glorious New Order?

Rain began and rattled on his window. He glanced out and sought solace in nature—nature the divine. He drank the rest of his brandy and gave out a long, low sigh.

Chapter 8

In the cave again, Matthew was floating above the rocky path, moving on toward an eerie red glow. This time the grey hand pulled him down to ground level.

“Don’t be scared,” said the hovering apparition in front of him. “I’m Jonas de Longford. This is no dream, we have to meet - the time is short. You must come to the cave at the inlet past the Deil’s Heid stack.”

Matthew tried to speak but, although his lips were moving, he found he could not utter a word. He awoke, it was cold and dark. He glanced at his bedside clock; it was ten after two.

With Jonas’s words fresh in his mind he arose and dressed in the dark. Then he descended the stairs without putting on a light for he was certain the two men who came to talk to him at his work were watching the house.

He searched through the hallway cupboard, finding a flashlight which illuminated the space. He then slipped out the back door and climbed over the garden fence and set out for the cliffs.

The early morning was still, but cold. Matthew could see his breath arise in front of him like some escaping phantom. He left the welcoming glow of the streetlights and made his way into Victoria Park, into the dark.

The moon was a curved slither. He stumbled along the path at the top of the park, not using the torch, preferring to save the battery power for the dangerous journey ahead.

The park pathway eventually became the cliff top path. Matthew could hear the roar of the waves washing over the rocks below as he switched on the torch. He kept to the inside of the path being thankful it wasn’t windy.

After a long and often stumbling trek, on the wet slippery verges Matthew could see the dark mass of the Deil’s Heid. So where was the inlet? He shone the torch along the cliff top, and, then after a moment he knew where to go.

As he entered the black maw that was the cave, two pigeons erupted and flew out, raising his blood pressure, which was way past normal. He moved further into the cave shining the torch all around making shadows move on the craggy walls.

The cave smelled damp, and there was the sound of running water from somewhere up ahead. Matthew was losing his nerve and contemplated leaving when...

Chapter 9

Scotland 1424

Anatole Saucier and Xavier Rousseau were hiding in a barn. An angry crowd of town's people were on the rampage looking for the monks who had cheated them out of money and jewellery. They had slipped out of the Abbey when news had spread that the eight brethren who had been collecting were devil worshippers.

The mob marched up to the Abbey and demanded the Abbot hand over the suspects. When he refused, the people crashed through the main doors and searched the grounds. They found six of the eight cowering in a store under the Abbot's House.

When the mob got closer the two renegade monks broke out of the barn and made for the safety of a copse on the far side of a crop field. There they took off their grey habits, donned clothes they had stolen and hid in the tall grass.

Later that day they were shocked to hear screams coming from the main square of the town. They could make out the spiralling smoke from six fires. Anatole threw up and sobbed. He then felt a rage so uncontrollable surge through his body.

"They'll pay for this," he barked, "when the gates open they'll pay."

Under the cover of darkness the two left their hiding place and made their way to the sea. After which they followed the shore to the cliffs where they walked along the top path. They descended a steep path at an inlet and entered a cave.

Xavier lit brush he had picked up and made into a torch on the way down, and they headed to the rear of the cave. They stood before the stone altar where Hel had persuaded them to join her cause. Then, pushing part of the structure to one side, they filled their pockets with as much money as they could from a concealed chest.

After making their way back along the shore, past Arbroath, they headed south avoiding main thoroughfares. But the night was moonless making their stealthy journey hazardous. Many times one of them stumbled and fell, slowing their progress.

The next day, tired and hungry, they walked into Dundee. An inn on the High Street provided them with food and ale.

As they sat in the shadows at the back of the place the pair pondered their future.

“We must head for Edinburgh,” said Anatole.

“Agreed,” replied Xavier, “we’ll be safer in a well-populated area.”

Two well-heeled men came and sat opposite them.

“Six monks burned at the stake in Arbroath,” said one as he took a drink of ale.

“What’s become of this world?” said the other to no one in particular.

“I don’t know,” replied Anatole.

“Makes you want to find a new religion.” Xavier said with a grin.

“What do you mean?” The two men said in unison.

The question was left hanging in the air. An atmosphere of uneasiness then transcended the back of the tavern.

After a night in a room at an inn the two runaways purchased horses from the stables on the High Street and set off for Edinburgh.

Anatole and Xavier arrived in the Scottish capitol after a two day ride. They sold their horses at a stable in the Grassmarket below the leviathan that was Edinburgh Castle. Then, finding a tavern, they bought food and ale, then sat at a table, weary after their long journey.

After they rested the two monks asked the landlord if he could tell them where lodgings could be found. He directed them to another tavern down the street, owned by his brother, who would find them a place to stay.

The night was full of people weeping and yelling as they walked along a dingy alleyway led by the shifty looking brother. He took them up two flights of rat infested stairs to a pine door that had seen better days. After handing over a week’s rent the pair entered. Inside, the room was damp and dirty.

“It’s only temporary, and it’s cheap,” said Xavier, shrugging his shoulders.

In the early hours of the morning the front door erupted, and amid flying splinters three big men rushed into the room. They shook Xavier and Anatole out of their beds then punched and kicked the two dazed monks.

“Where’s your money?” one of them roared.

Anatole pointed to their clothes.

“Take it... take it all!” cried Xavier, “just leave us alone.”

But after he said this, he was head butted and fell, bleeding, to the floor.

The thugs emptied Anatole and Xavier’s pockets and fled out of the shattered doorway.

With a groan Anatole pushed himself up off his bed. He went over to where Xavier was lying and bent over him.

“Xavier, are you okay?” he said as he raised his friend’s head.

Xavier let out a cry of pain as he regained consciousness. Anatole helped him up, and they both sat down on one bed.

“What have we done to deserve this?” Xavier cried, as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

A jug of water sat on a small table in the corner of the room which they used to clean their bruises. They then slumped on their beds and lay in the dark until the first rays of sunlight shone through the grimy window.

“What do we do now?” Anatole asked Xavier

“We find the Landlord.”

With that they dressed and went to the tavern. But it was closed, and no one on the street knew where the owner stayed.

“Where can we find work? Xavier asked a passer-by.

“They’re always looking for people at Leith Docks,” was the reply.

After a long walk the two monks, who were thirsty and hungry arrived at the port. There were several

sailing boats in the harbour. One, a big ship, was loading up. They asked the man who was doing all the directing if he required any Dockers.

“No Dockers needed, but we’re looking for some deck hands,” he replied.

“Where’s she going? Anatole asked.

“Bordeaux.”

Chapter 10

Matthew felt his legs shake as the spectral form of Jonas de Longford appeared in front of him. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of the gaunt, ashen face, the black eye sockets, and the lipless mouth.

Matthew dropped the torch, sending the beam darting around the cave like a manic spotlight.

“These men who pursue you are very dangerous.” Jonas said.

“Who are they?” Matthew asked surprised at how confident he sounded.

“They are of the Order of the Gate and are after one thing...”

“The Key,” interrupted Matthew.

“Ah yes I forgot, you have been doing some checking. Yes the Key, and they will not stop until they find it.”

“Is the Key for some mysterious door?” Matthew asked, “and why are you able to talk?” he continued.

“So many questions my dear boy.”

“The Key is...” Jonas said as he faded.

“Jonas! Jonas!” Matthew shouted.

In frustration he picked up the torch and shone it around the cave as if this would bring the phantom back. He moved further into the cave shining the torch into any crevice. On and on he continued, passing a small spring which flowed out of a crack in the wall, following the main path to the rear of the cavern. He rounded a bend and halted as the beam of the torch picked out an altar carved out of what was the back wall of the cave.

“It’s where the Order worshipped their demon, or Goddess as they called it,” said Jonas

Matthew jumped around with the hairs standing on the back of his neck.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I am at the moment in one of the dark dimensions. What you would call hell. You must understand many dimensions, both good and not so good surround the physical world. Light planes being good and closer to the earth; the dark planes further away. The reason you can't see any of this is due to limited human perception.”

“The day you saw me being chased I was placed in an energy grip and brought here. It is taking most of my mind power to support this shape in front of you and, fend off the mind probes of the entities here.”

“What entities?” Matthew asked, wishing he hadn't.

“The black-robed demons you saw were once humble monks like me. The demon Hel, one who takes female and male form, led them astray. They are chanting, trying to take my mind. Once that occurs all will be lost, so, although it runs at a slower rate in the dark dimensions, the time is short.”

“I don't understand—why did they wait all this time?”

“Ah, that's because I eluded them by choosing to walk between the veils. You see, my young friend, between the dimensions there is a place known as the Void. I hid there after I took my life. I did that when I realised what I had done, and what the demons wanted. Anyone with a black-heart could not touch me in there.”

There was a shimmer in his ghostly form. Jonas pressed on, and said: “But because of my love for the physical world, I passed through the veil and walked once again on the earth. It was on one of those occasions the demon monks caught me.”

“They wanted the Key. But what was it you did?” Matthew asked.

“Because of a weakness for the pleasures of human sensuality. Hel seduced me in her physical form, which she can maintain for a limited time only. And I brought forth demon seed into the world as a boy child, who years later tried to take the Key.”

“The Key is for the gates of the Dark Realm! It's not the actual artefact itself that's the problem, it's what's written upon it. Many aeons ago the Powers of Light used it to close a portal to the Dark Realm, Niflheim, which lies beyond the dimensions. Conversely the Key can open the portal. Hel's from there, but she walked the dark dimensions. Do not confuse the two; the Dark Dimension is the place where malevolent human souls walk; Niflheim is where demonic entities exist, a place not governed by the laws of our universe and Godless.

“I don't see why I'm tied up in all this?”

“Through the centuries pure-hearts guarded the Key. That's why trust has been put in the abbots of the guardian monks. But I have wavered, and that is why I have taken the burden with me into the void, to stop this occurring again.

There was a prophecy which said there will be one, descended from pure—heart and demon that will destroy the Key and this is where you come in my friend. Because Matthew, you are a direct descendant of mine, you are the only one who can destroy the Key. You are of pure-heart and demon seed, which the generations have diluted, that still persists in small amount.”

Matthew pondered on all this for a moment and then asked: “Why didn't these... Powers of Darkness take the Key?”

“Because the guardian abbots would have rather died than reveal where the Key was, and as long as they remained pure the Powers of Light ensured protection from darkness.”

“Can't these demons just read minds and find out where the Key is?”

“No, people's thoughts are their own. Demons can talk to you inside your head, but they can't read your mind.”

“If this demon can only keep human form for a while how did she give birth to a baby?”

“Ah this also puzzled me until I was in the void where I discovered that she saved the seed from our coupling. Then in her male form she seduced a local woman thus beginning the line that has led, through the centuries, to you my young friend.

“What of your son, did he try to take the Key again?” Matthew asked.

“No, because after he left I made the conscious decision to hide it and not come back. I did not want another monk to suffer as I had.”

“He is demon seed, but also pure-heart.”

“David is mostly demon and the pure-heart tainted he inherited from me.”

The darkness in the cave seemed to gnaw away at the torch light as the batteries grew weak.

“I pronounced Brother George as the new Abbot and gave him a sealed letter to be given to David, after a period, outlining what I was doing.”

“So David wouldn't approach him for the Key,” said Matthew.

“Yes, I also sent a similar letter to the Pope, and then set off on a journey telling no one where I was going.” Jonas flickered, “so now you know the facts and how important it is that you succeed.”

“Where is the Key?” asked Matthew, astonished at how he had asked the most important question.

“I paid for passage across the North Sea to Bruges. Then went on to an abbey in the Maas Valley where the abbot was a Tironensian monk and a trusted friend. On the return journey over the sea, after much hesitation, I jumped into the water and...drowned, thus completing my mission.”

Jonas paused. “Now you must complete the task before you. Take great care, the enemy are cunning. I fear by now the Key might be in the wrong hands. It is in Su...,” but he disappeared again before he could finish.

Matthew stood with the fading light of the torch for a while. But, as it seemed Jonas's powers had weakened and he would not return, he turned toward the sound of the waves from the mouth of the cave and left.

With Jonas's words ringing in his ears he climbed the steep path up the cliff and set off for home. He made his way along the cliff top path. It was still dark, and the torch had given up its fight for life. But he had to quicken his pace, had to take risks, the path ahead would be just as tricky.

Chapter 11

France 1424

The twenty foot waves crashed onto the deck of the ship, The Orion, which was carrying Xavier and Anatole to Bordeaux. The day had been fine when they left Leith but the winds had strengthened as night had fallen. After midnight a full-blown storm unleashed itself on the hapless vessel.

The two monks were below in the hold with the rest of the deckhands. Anything that wasn't secured slid or rolled around the deck. The sound of the wind around the rigging above was deafening as was the break of the waves on the deck.

The crew couldn't walk around for fear of stumbling into each other or even worse-a bucket of slops. Men were lying in their bunks trying to sleep to take their minds away from being seasick. There was an almighty bang, and a huge crack appeared in the hull. Water came rolling into the hold. Men screamed in panic and, being disoriented, ran in all directions searching for the stairs. Luckily for Anatole and Xavier their bunks were beneath the stairs so it was a case of pulling

themselves up the steps by the handrails, which was difficult due to the water spilling down from the deck as the hatch was hanging open.

When they were out on deck, there came another crash as one of the main masts smashed onto the deck beside the bow.

“Abandon ship!” men yelled, as they lowered small rowboats over the side. But the waves were so ferocious that the small vessels flipped over and were swept away.

A huge wave crashed over Xavier and Anatole sweeping them close to the side; they grabbed hold of the rigging to prevent them from going overboard.

Then, with the ship sinking fast, a giant crack appeared under where the mast had fallen, and the bow disappeared below the sea. Xavier and Anatole were tossed into the raging water as the ship lurched backward and sank.

The savage winds carried away the cries as the two monks clung to a part of mast which had drifted toward them amid the swirling sea. The water was icy and had numbed their limbs. Anatole looked up and saw the heavens moving up and down. He prayed aloud, something he swore he would never do again. Xavier joined in, shouting over the howling wind.

After what seemed like hours, with the winds dropping, Anatole saw a star bouncing on the waves. The cold must have numbed his brain, he thought. But the star got bigger and bigger until it turned into a ship.

“Xavier! Xavier!” Anatole shouted. “Look, we’re saved.”

The two frozen men were pulled from their watery hell.

The French ship, La Blanc Colombe, made its way into Boulogne Harbour with an extra cargo: two drying and happy monks—thanks to the cognac which the crew had supplied. Any signs of the storm had long since abated, and the sea was now calm.

After the ship docked, the pair shook hands with their rescuers and made their way into the town. The crew gave them extra clothes and a few coins to see them on their way.

In a tavern with two foaming tankards of ale in front of them the monks pondered their future.

“I have been thinking Xavier, with being saved by praying out there I would like to go back to the monastic way of life,” said Anatole.

“Yes, I agree,” said Xavier, taking a drink from his tankard.

A maid brought ham and bread over to their table.

“But where do we go?” Xavier asked, after she had gone.

“We would need to change our names in case news of what happened in Arbroath has reached France,” he continued.

“How about going back to Tiron; back to the abbey beside Chartres?” Anatole said.

“Yes, back to where the Order came from, that’s it Anatole, that’s where we’ll go.”

They finished their ales and ate the food, then headed out into the night. They came across a tavern which advertised rooms, so they used the last of their money and bedded down for the night before setting out on foot to Chartres.

The Journey took the best part of a week, following the coast west and then heading inland toward Paris. They slept in barns or outside in hedgerows and woods. Berries and wild mushrooms, they knew were safe passed as sustenance. They had to beg, however, when there was no food.

“My feet have very painful blisters,” said Anatole as they walked along a dusty track beside a wheat field.

“Mine too, but I look upon it as my penance for straying from the path.” Xavier said with conviction.

When they knocked on the Abbey gates they were tired, hungry and filthy. Xavier told the monk who answered that they were pilgrims who had come from afar to join the Order. As the gates closed they were asked to wait.

After a while the monk came back, and escorted them to the lavatorium in the cloister to wash. Then, in the refectory they were given bread and cheese. In the Abbots House Gregory the Abbot introduced himself.

“Brother Marcus tells me you want to join the Order.”

“Yes,” replied Xavier, “we have travelled from England. My name is Robert, and this is John,” he said, pointing at Anatole.

“Why this abbey, there are many in England?”

“Because we both have family ties in England and we thought it would be better for them and us if it were France,” answered Xavier.

“Do you understand what it is to be a monk?” Gregory asked.

“We are both practising Catholics and prepared for monastic life,” said Anatole.

“Very well, you understand you must give up all possessions.”

“Yes, we have done this,” said Xavier.

A trial of three weeks will be given to you and then, if all is well, you will be installed as novices.”

After the talk they were shown around the Abbey, then appointed beds in the dormitory and given the grey habits of the Order.

“Well Anatole, I'm better now I'm back in the confines of an abbey,” admitted Xavier, when they were alone.

“Yes, we're back on the righteous path,” agreed Anatole.

Chapter 12

The rising sun was casting violet light around the fringes of a loured cloud as Matthew unlocked the backdoor and entered the warmth of his house. He ran upstairs and pulled clothes out of drawers, he then pushed them into a black holdall. Wait, a minute! Where was he going? What of his work? The Maas valley, that's in Holland, yeah that's right - Maastricht, he thought.

At half-past eight Matthew phoned the library. “Brian its Mattie here, listen something's come up, I must go away for a few days.”

“Okay Matt. Anything I can do to help?”

“No, but thanks, it's a sick relative in England.” Matthew lied.

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that; we'll see you when you get back.”

Next, he thumbed through old travel brochures he had lying on the shelf under the coffee table. With his fear of flying another option was to take the ferry.

He booked himself on the next available crossing from Newcastle to Amsterdam which was, the next day at six PM.

Matthew then phoned Jane. "Hi, listen Jane, I'm going away for a while."

"Eh! Where are you going?"

"Remember what I told you on the events at the cliffs, and the attack on my house."

"Oh yeah, your ghosts," she scoffed.

"Yeah well, it's more serious now, and I must go to Holland."

"Holland!" Jane exclaimed. "I'm coming," she continued.

"No, it will be dangerous."

"I'm coming," she affirmed. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," he sighed, "if you must come meet me at the railway station at half-past eight in the morning."

Matthew phoned the shipping company and booked Jane onto the ferry. He then went upstairs to resume packing and have a shower. On the way up the stairs he was thunderstruck. What about the men observing the house?

In his bedroom he paced back and forward. He decided he would head into work and make things look as normal as possible. So he dressed and then headed off trying to look as if he had slept-in.

At the library he knocked on Brian's door.

"Brian I'm taking the sleeper to London tonight so I thought I'd come into work."

"Good to see you Matt, but you didn't have to bother if you needed to pack or something."

"Nah that's done... thanks, anyway."

After work Matthew walked up Ponderlaw Street, then turned right and walked through a passage into Bellevue Gardens, which was a residential scheme of late nineteen sixties bungalows. Number seventeen was a well-kept detached house with a low privet hedge which surrounded a neat garden. The pathway along which Matthew walked looked as if it had been swept twice that day. He went round the back and knocked on the door. After a short while a small plump woman with old fashioned curlers in her hair answered.

"Hello Mum."

"Mattie, come in; what a pleasant surprise."

"Is Dad in?" he asked as he walked through the kitchen into the hall.

"He's in the living-room as usual."

"Hi Da," Matthew said, taking a seat looking out the large rear window over a perfect back garden.

"Matt, it's good to see you son."

Bob Wilson was a retired bricklayer. He had the typical weathered facial skin of a man who had stood outside most of his working life.

"How's it going?" Matthew asked.

"Oh, fine."

"Do you want a cup of tea Mattie? Betty Wilson asked.

"Nah, just a flying visit Mum."

"Always just a flying visit," she sighed.

"Dad, Mum, this might sound stupid, but I've been having vivid dreams."

Bob glanced at his wife with worry in his eyes. She returned the look with a 'tell him' nod.

"I wondered when this would start," said Bob.

"Then it's true; about the line?" Matthew quizzed.

"I don't know about any line, but when I was younger than you are now, I was told I would have

dreams where a man or woman would come seeking my help. At first it scared the you know what out of me; my mother told me to forget about it, but they kept coming back year after year, some nights I'd wake up screaming."

"Yes, but Mattie you must try to do the same," pleaded his mother.

"It's a bit late for that now because the dreams have come alive."

"Oh no!" she cried.

"Matthew, listen son, don't you do anything daft... I mean it son," stressed his father.

"I won't, I'll forget about it," he lied.

"Before she died, your grandmother told me I would pass the dreams on to you, that'll be the line you're talking about," said Bob.

"I'm going off on a short break with Jane to London."

"Good idea, I like that girl; you two should get married," said Betty.

As he walked along the pathway, he glimpsed a black Citroen parked down the road. It's them, they wouldn't bother my parents? he thought. Nah, anyway my old man would have those two for his breakfast.

Chapter 13

The phone rang as Matthew wiped a small space in the condensation on his front window. He peered out, but couldn't see any strange cars in the glistening, frozen street.

"It's Jane here," the receiver said as he held it to his ear.

“Good morning,” said Matthew.

“Everything still on Matt?”

“Yeah, the trains at ten to nine, I’ll see you at the Station.”

“Okay, bye.”

He glanced at his watch it was ten to eight; the taxi was coming at twenty past, so he rummaged in the hall cupboard and found a holdall similar to one he had packed. He folded it down as best as he could and stuffed it into the holdall which contained his things. He headed upstairs and brushed his teeth. Then he surveyed the house to see if everything was off, which it was, but Matthew, being Matthew, had to check.

The taxi arrived on time. Matthew got in and asked the driver to take him to the bus station. As the cab turned into Culloden Road he looked out of the rear window and watched a black Citroen follow. He wondered why the police or anyone else in a place like Arbroath hadn't noticed these men. Perhaps they were like ‘The Men in Black’, he thought, as a wry grin crossed his face.

At the bus station Matthew paid the cabbie and took his bag from the boot. He walked over to the seat next to the passage which led to the back of the building. Setting his bag down he pulled out the folded one. He then nudged the other round the corner and placed the now inflated empty holdall on the seat. He checked his watch as he sat down - it was twenty-five past the hour. The black Citroen pulled in and parked at the passenger pickup point facing the stance.

At half-past eight Matthew stood up and went down the passageway to the toilet leaving the empty bag on the seat. The gent’s was out of view from the pickup point. On the way he picked up his full holdall and ran out of the back.

Jane was standing by the front door as he arrived at the railway station.

“You’re late,” she said.

“Sorry, last minute business,” he replied.

They went into the ticket office, and Matthew bought two single tickets to Newcastle. He then gave the clerk a further ten pounds.

“That’s for you, if two men ask where we’ve gone to, tell them... London. We’re eloping - they’re Jane’s brothers,” he said with a wink.

They then went down to platform one to wait for the train where there was a large party of people with cases, talking about going off on holiday. Matthew looked at his watch, it was twenty to nine

In the cooling Citroen Lagrange glanced at the time.

“Eight-forty, that’s ten minutes he’s been in the toilet; something’s wrong,” he said as he opened the car door.

He ran across to the gents’ toilet and threw open the door, then walked over to the cubicle.

“He’s gone!” Lagrange said to Caron, who was now standing behind him.

They ran out to the seat where Matthew had been sitting, and Lagrange grabbed the holdall.

“Empty,” he growled.

“Where’s he gone?” Caron asked.

“The Railway Station!” Lagrange shouted.

The London train slowed down as it approached the platform. Matthew checked the time on one of the big, black clocks that hung over the platform. It was leaving quarter to the hour. The train came to a halt, and an eternity passed, for Matthew, before the automatic locks released and passengers leaving the carriages opened the doors.

Once they were off, Jane stepped on board followed by Matthew, who glanced up the stairs. Was that shouts? Oh God! he thought.

They then sat down at a table facing each other, on the platform side of the train. It’s just the Station Master, he thought.

After another eternity the click of the automatic locks brought relief to Matthew, and he lounged back in his seat.

“You okay Matt?” Jane asked. “You look stressed,” she continued.

Matthew was about to answer when he heard the clatter of shoe leather on metal coming from the direction of the stairs. And, as the train pulled away, Hamilton and Jones ran up to the door just in front of where they were sitting. Hamilton thumped his fist on the glass, then stood and stared at Matthew as he passed.

“Who were they? Jane asked as the train picked up speed.

“It’s a long story.”

“Well we’ve got a spare couple of hours,” she said, grinning.

France 1424

Xavier and Anatole settled back into monastic life. The daily routines of services, some beginning as early as two- thirty in the morning, were refreshing for their souls. Glad to be back in the sheltered environment of an abbey, away from the sinful world the two novices attended to basket weaving chores and helping out in the garden. They also helped in the kitchen at times of feasting.

Abbot Gregory left them to get on with their duties and their studies. He asked nothing of their background as with other novices. He was a trusting monk and took people at face value.

After six months of blissful abbey life, the two monks were one night in the, otherwise empty, Warming House. They were sitting chatting by the fire when there was a knock at the door. Anatole stood up and made his way across the flagstone floor. After opening the door he stepped back in horror!

“Oh lord, ww... what are you doing here,” he said in a wavering voice.

Into the room strode Hel in the form of Mari with blazing red eyes. Xavier fell onto his knees and prayed.

“Get up,” she said, as the door slammed shut by itself.

But he kept on praying, louder and faster. He rose, with his knees still bent, until he was staring into her eyes. He looked at the floor and shook. Hel broke out in a wicked laugh.

“You pathetic fools, did you think you could just walk away from me,” she croaked.

“But we strayed from the path and are now repentant,” whimpered Anatole.

“Repentant! I’ll give you repentance,” she growled.

Xavier rose further up toward the ceiling and then flew backward, crashing into a wall cupboard sending the contents flying. He tried to move, but found he was pinned to the smashed shelving. Meanwhile, Anatole heard the word betrayal being repeated louder and louder in his mind.

“Let him down!” Anatole shouted, as he found he couldn’t move either.

The large axe the monks used for chopping up wood for the fire rose to head height and then flew with blinding speed at Xavier. It severed his head, which then fell to the floor with a sickening thump.

Anatole vomited as Xavier’s headless body levelled out and spun at excessive speed, spraying blood around the room. After a moment the body slowed down and fell, twitching, to the floor. Hel turned toward Anatole, covered in blood and vomit. “Now take yourself from this place and found an order to usher in the new world.”

Anatole nodded without looking. He was trembling so much his legs were having difficulty supporting the rest of his body.

Summoned by other monks concerned by the noise, Gregory ran into the room and gazed at the sight of the headless body, and the blood splattered walls.

“What’s this... what have you done?” he roared at a dazed Anatole, still staring at the floor.

Anatole looked up slowly, the evil he thought he had rid himself of came flowing back.

“You self-righteous fucker to whom do you think you are talking?” screamed his mind.

“I have done nothing,” he said, looking around the room for Hel, but she had vanished.

“How did this happen?” Gregory asked, his voice taking on a fearful tone.

Anatole fixed Gregory with an icy stare.

“The Goddess has returned,” he spat.

“Oh you must go... and go now,” said Gregory. “You must never return!”

Anatole stormed out of the Warming House and ran to the dormitory where he pulled off the stained habit. He then retrieved his old clothes from under the bed and put them on and left. Then kicking open the front door of the Abbot’s House he ran in and plundered a chest full of coins, which were collected

as rent from the Abbey lands. He then walked out of the Abbey; out into the darkness.

Chapter 15

Georges Lagrange took a deep breath and pressed the button for the stored number of Didier Grondin on his mobile phone.

“Hello, Grondin,” said the phone.

“Lagrange here.”

“What’s new?”

“He’s on the move; he’s going to London.”

“Good, and you’re following I take it.”

“Well... he’s given us the slip.”

“Georges.” Grondin drawled with rising anger.

Grondin paused for a moment. Train from Arbroath to London should take eight hours.

“Right Georges you and Alain drive to Aberdeen dump the hire car off and get a flight to London.”

“And Georges, no matter what it takes, meet that train and follow our man.”

A simple matter of following this boy, and they had fucked it up, he thought. Had he to think for these fools all the time.

Grondin paced back and forward, his face red with anger. A small vein on his right temple throbbed. “Deep breaths... got to build a bridge over this. Georges is a good man he’ll make amends; he’ll bring back the Key, and then I will be in control of such power. I will have the destiny of mankind in my hands,” he said to himself.

He walked over to the window and stared at the beech hedge moving in the wind as if an invisible giant was swaying it from one end. Grondin then watched, in amusement, as a sparrow hawk pecked away at a shrieking blackbird held captive in its powerful talons.

He thought of how he despised Hel for killing his friend Xavier, then giving him powers, which he accepted at first, but had then become burdensome. Ah but that was her mistake because he would make her pay for the murder. The other dark entities he had been in touch with would make sure of that. These demons or gods whatever way you want think of them, seem to have a great plan for the earth and its dimensions - good or bad. It took a human possessed of such powers to think of himself and that’s what he planned to do.

Chapter 16

Matthew wondered about Jonas as he gazed at the scenery rolling by the train window. How long could he hold out, with failing strength, against what were the forces of evil? Although time moved at a slower rate, it wouldn't be long before these demons invaded his mind, he thought. God only knows what pressure the poor, old guy was under. All the things he's been through—a person shouldn't have to go through that, monk or no monk!

Jane brought him out of his reverie.

"This is like being in a spy novel," she said.

He had told her about the men watching the house and the meeting with Jonas in the cave. Matthew also told her of the importance of the task ahead.

"It's no fictional story, this will be, dangerous."

"I still find it hard to believe you actually talked to a ghost." Jane said with a twinkle in her eyes.

"So do I, but it was as I'm speaking to you now, although sometimes he wavered. To be honest, Jonas was like one of those holograms you see in sci-fi films, just a bit more frightening."

"And the Key, where is it?"

"It's in an abbey, in or around, Maastricht."

"So we're just going to march into an abbey and demand a religious artefact," Jane said.

"Yeah that's a point," he said, stroking his chin. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he continued.

A trolley appeared through the carriage door with an attendant attached, who was swinging from side to side as he walked.

"Teas! Coffees!" he shouted.

"Two teas please," said Matthew.

"Would you like a sandwich or something Jane?"

"Yeah, cheese please."

"And two cheese sandwiches." Matthew said to the attendant.

After eating, they sat drinking their tea and looking out the window.

"What happens if this Jonas can't hold out to these... these demons?" Jane asked.

"Well then, I assume the position of the Key will be revealed to them," replied Matthew. "And just as Jonas spoke they must be able to contact this Order of the Gate as they're called," he continued.

"And if they find it before us?" Jane asked, raising her eyebrows.

"I don't know what will happen, but I don't think we'll like it."

The train entered the northern suburbs of Newcastle, and the announcement for the city was made over the public-address system. The passengers, including Jane and Matthew, who were leaving, stood up and collected their belongings. They then made their way to the exits.

Newcastle Station was a blur of people rushing here and there as the pair headed to the bus pickup point for the docks at North Shields.

"The first bus isn't until three o'clock," said Matthew looking at the timetable.

"Let's put the bags into Left Luggage and have a look around Newcastle," said Jane.

"Okay," said Matthew, who hated walking around shops.

Saturday afternoon in Newcastle, like any town or city, was a hive of activity; people parading from shop to shop chattering to each other. Matthew had decided they looked like they didn't have a care in the world. Why was this key thing loaded on to his shoulders? These people were unaware about what

was happening. Would they care if they found out? Probably not, they would just leave it to the government to sort out. Well, maybe that's what he should have done and left well alone. But what of Jonas and his sacrifice for humankind? No, he had to go on, he had to see it through to the end, one way or the other, he thought.

When they returned to the railway station, it was still too early for the bus so they went for a coffee. They made their way into the Centurion Bar, a huge tiled room, which reminded Matthew of old Victorian toilets.

A group of men stood at the bar and shouted obscenities at a large television screen to the side of the bar which was showing a football match. At the other end of the room a party of women who wore white T-shirts with '4-OH' on the back sang and giggled.

Matthew bought two lattes, and then he and Jane sat on an old settee beside a redundant fireplace.

"I must admit Janey; I'm having second thoughts about all this."

"Oh, you'll be all right. After all you've got me with you," she said as she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

It rained as the bus wound its way through the streets of Newcastle. Matthew and Jane were sitting upstairs with a few others who were going on a return cruise to Amsterdam. The mood was a happy one, despite the weather, due to the pubs around the railway station. The bus went round a bend and the ferry appeared,

"The King of Scandinavia; doesn't it look great?" said Jane.

"Yeah, I suppose," was the reply.

After throwing their bags on the beds in their cabin, which was small but adequate, Jane and Matthew went for a look around the ship. There were bars, restaurants and shops over four levels. Other passengers were teenagers, who walked around in gangs drinking alcopops.

The pair stood outside on an upper deck and looked at the twinkling lights of Newcastle as the boat cast-off and headed along the Tyne toward the sea. The night was cold but at least the rain had stopped.

"There's dancing tonight Mattie, let's enjoy ourselves." Jane said putting her arm around his waist.

"Okay, that sounds fine," he said, as he put his arm around her shoulders. It was a good idea to forget about the task in hand, at least for one night, thought Matthew.

They walked into the crowded Columbus Club just as the bingo was finishing. A group dressed as sailors popped cheap champagne bottles and shouted 'ahoy' to anyone who passed by.

"This looks like a laugh, said Matthew, dragging Jane to a table beside the dance floor. He ordered drinks from a passing waiter as they sat. A band set up and played music from the eighties.

Jane stood up and grabbed Matthew's hand. "Right, come on you, let's get in the swing."

They danced on and off for hours, leaving the bar at two o'clock.

Outside their cabin they embraced.

"That was great Janey I feel better..." Jane pulled him into the cabin before he could finish.

The next morning they docked at IJmuiden and the passengers, cars and trucks flowed off the ship. The day was overcast, but shafts of sunlight sliced through the dark clouds. A bus laid on by the ferry company took Jane and Matthew into the centre of Amsterdam. At first there were fields, then houses, which gave way to factories and high-rise office buildings as they passed through the business area of the city.

Matthew recognised the centre from pictures and television, with its narrow houses and canals. "It looks great, doesn't it?"

"Just like on the telly!"

The pair left the bus beside the network of small streets that made up The Red Light District. The bus then swept away with the remaining passengers, leaving Jane and Matthew to cross the busy Prins

Hendrik Kade. Cars, trams and bicycles impeded their way. They found a crossing and then entered Centraal Station.

“I want to go see Amsterdam,” whined Jane.

“No time,” said Matthew, looking at the large time table in front of them.

“Ah here we are - Maastricht, come on Janey let’s go.”

Chapter 17

France 1424

It was a moonless night as Anatole walked along the dust track, which led through a forest on the way to Chartres. He could hear the howl of wolves in the distance as the wind rattled the leaves on the sycamores. The canopy of stars sparkled as Anatole picked out the constellations of Ursa Major and Draco; they seemed like old friends - lights in the eternal darkness of the universe.

When he reached the thickest part of the forest, the darkness was almost complete, as the trees blotted out most of the sky. Suddenly a star that had fallen from the sky was coming toward him along the track. Bigger and bigger it became until at about one hundred metres from where he was standing, it took on the shape of a wolf - a wolf with red eyes.

Anatole jumped back as the wolf roared up in front of him and turned into a green-skinned Mari. The air around the demon was putrid and made Anatole sick.

“I’m glad to see you too,” said Hel,, in a deep booming voice.

“Why don’t you leave me alone?” said Anatole wiping his mouth.

“Because you and your miserable soul belong to me; anyway, I give you a gift,” growled the beast.

“I want nothing from you,” hissed Anatole.

“Oh but you do. I know in the dark recesses of your mind you crave power—dark power.”

“Why would you give me power?”

“I need a human: an immortal human to grab the Key when it becomes available- as it will. I need a dark-hearted human to do the steps required to cleanse this world. But heed this human, try to deceive me and I will crush you, powers or no powers.”

Anatole rose into the air until he was about level with the tree tops. Then he gazed at the stars which had surged toward him. One by one they flowed through him; the whole process became faster and faster until Anatole passed out and fell to the ground.

When he came round the complete darkness had returned, and all was quiet save for the wind in the trees. He jumped up and looked all around, but Hel had gone along with the foul stench.

As he resumed his trek to Chartres, he discovered any tiredness he had before the encounter with Hel had gone. In fact he felt better than he had done for years. Not only could he hear the slightest rustle of the leaves, but he could hear insects scurrying around in the undergrowth all around him. He could also hear sheep bleating even though he was in the middle of the forest. The darkness could not prevent Anatole from marvelling at the vivid green of the sycamore leaves, and the bright yellow of the little primroses along the side of the track. His sense of smell had also become acute, particularly the mixture of the damp earth and the blooming gorse which gave off an intoxicating aroma he had never noticed before this.

After another hour of walking, the trees thinned allowing Anatole to see the first red streaks of dawn

spread across the eastern sky. He quickened his pace wanting to be in town by mid-morning, which would give him most of the day to find accommodation.

In the distance the two spires of Chartres Cathedral rose out of the morning mist as Anatole passed through a farmyard surrounded by scurrying hens. Although he had blisters on the soles of his feet, he had no pain; his thoughts were focused on Chartres.

He pulled his hood over his head as he passed a garrison of English soldiers on the edge of town. The chill morning air gave Anatole an appetite, heightened by the enticing aroma wafting out of the boulangerie on Boulevard de la Courtille. He purchased two freshly baked loaves from the owner—a balding, plump, jovial man.

“I’m new in town.” Anatole said. “I was wondering if you knew of any place I could stay for a few weeks?” he continued.

“Where are you from?” asked the baker, stacking loaves on the counter.

“I am of French origin, but have lived in Scotland for many years. I have returned to seek my relatives.”

“Your relatives, they came from around here?”

“Yes, but before I can continue, I must earn money.”

“Can you bake?”

“Yes,” lied Anatole.

“Well you look an honest man. I have a spare room which you can have for a while for helping me in the shop. And if it works out, I will pay you.” “What do you say?” said the baker, “my name is Bernard Dudouet,” he continued, holding out his hand.

“Roger Beauchamp,” said Anatole, shaking the man’s hand, “and yes I accept.”

Bernard’s wife, Collette, gave Anatole the attic room in their three storey house above the shop. It was small but clean, with a single bed and a cupboard. The view from the window was of rooftops dwarfed by the cathedral.

The Dudouet’s had a son: Pierre, who wanted to be a baker, but due to his inability to get up at four in the morning had settled for a job as a carpenter. Michele, the couples daughter, was a lively girl just a shade off being pretty, but made up for it in personality. She was a few years older than her brother and was an avid reader.

Anatole worked hard in Bernard’s bakery, rising at four every morning and not finishing until six in the evening. He served the customers, cleaned the shop and stocked the fire for the ovens. As for the baking; Bernard soon realised Anatole had done little if any at all.

Anatole ate with the Dudouet’s in their large dining room. The talk was of the English occupation and how, someday, Chartres would be free again. Pierre despised the English, and there was talk of him going off to fight for France, but his mother quelled him with her gentle but firm feminine ways.

Bernard and Anatole would sit up late into the night drinking and talking on Saturdays—the shop being closed on Sundays. Anatole had to be careful not to let his guard down, which became harder with every beer. Lying to the man was a great pity he thought because he liked Bernard and found his views on life refreshing.

One Sunday Anatole went into the cathedral after the morning service. The sheer size of the place was overwhelming; the massive columns of the nave rising into the vaulted ceiling like a great stone forest. Gothic stained glass windows both round and arched were wondrous; this was architecture of the finest quality. Also the labyrinth-laid into the floor—the route to Jerusalem for pilgrims unable to go to the holy land.

A midday sun shone through the Rose Window on the south transept creating an intricate pattern on the cathedral floor as Anatole strolled further into the building. The smells of must and candle wax; the murmur of people praying gave him a sense of uneasiness as if he should turn around and leave.

He felt a growing revulsion take hold of his being and pulled up the hood of his tunic so his face was concealed. He staggered as dizziness so great surged into his head. Falling forward, he crashed into the back of a section of pews sending several toppling. As he hit the ground he threw up and then ejaculated—the produce of which ran down his right leg.

The din made the few who were praying stop and stare at the unfolding events. A great wind swept through the cathedral and made any loose material flap and blow out all the candles.

Anatole shook as he picked himself up amid the strewn pews. His only thought was to run to the entrance; which he did with as much effort as he could muster.

As he ran past the Rose Window, many of the sections exploded into thousands of shards, which then fell inwards onto the flagstone floor with a horrendous crash. The placid praying pilgrims looked up and shouted obscenities as Anatole disappeared out the open portal.

That night lying in his bed in the small attic room Anatole was awoken by an evil presence. The entity swirled around the atmosphere before taking the shape of a robed human figure.

“I am Loki of the Dark Realm. I know you desire greater power to... let us say defend yourself from Hel. I am here to instruct you how to get this,” he said with a hissing voice.

“Why would you help me defend myself from Hel?”

“Let’s say I’m doing it for selfish reasons,” said Loki with a grin. “What you have to do is to gather the souls of dark-hearted people who are departing the physical world. But know that not all souls are the ones you seek. The true natures of many souls are hidden by the build-up of emotions from many incarnations. This is your destiny—you are the Dark Soul Gatherer!”

“What are the selfish reasons?”

“She tricked me into staying with her when the portal was being sealed up, by feigning love. So I stayed, and she laughed in my face.

“She’s your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t she go through the portal?”

“Because she wished to remain in these miserable dimensions to have dominion over the pathetic human souls.”

“Why did you wish to return to the Dark Realm?”

“Because it is where I belong. Not all of us wish to walk these dimensions.”

Loki laughed, and then said: “Such irony: I wish to return and many, I have felt from the other side, wish to enter!”

Chapter 18

The sun shone from a cobalt sky as the Maastricht train pulled out of Centraal station. The early morning clouds had cleared away on the strengthening wind.

Matthew and Jane settled in their rear facing seats. They had breakfasted, at the station cafe, on croissant and cheese washed down by large lattes. The carriage was empty save for another three passengers who looked to be heading home after a hectic night in Amsterdam. One of them—a boy of only sixteen with multiple tattoos on his arms - sat down and fell into a snoring sleep.

The train pushed its way through the city suburbs: miles of wooden family homes, which then gave way to open fields.

“I want to see fields of tulips and windmills,” said Jane,.

“First, this is October and not the season for tulips, and second we’ve just left the city, give the windmills a chance,” said Matthew.

The carriage door hissed open, and the guard entered. He tapped the sleeping youth on the shoulder and asked for his ticket. The boy jumped out of a substance induced dream and tried to focus on the official.

“Oh yeah,” he said, and he handed over his ticket for inspection.

The guard checked the other passenger’s tickets before inspecting Jane and Matthew’s, after which he left with another hiss. Almost immediately the loud snoring began again. Matthew looked at Jane, and they both laughed.

The train pulled into Maastricht station at two twenty; two and half hours after leaving Amsterdam.

“Well that’s it Janey we’re here,” said Matthew, stretching and yawning.

“What do we do now? Jane asked, while rising from her seat.

“Well, tourist information would help, then we’ll get something to eat—I’m famished.”

Leaving the station they headed along Stationstraat and then turned right along the busy Wilhelminasingel where, according to a porter, there was an information office.

“I see it,” said Jane, pointing ahead.

The glass doors had stickers advertising boat trips on the Maas River. They opened to allow Matthew and Jane into a blue carpeted room with swivel holders full of postcards and leaflets. At a desk

swamped by paperwork sat a well dressed woman.

“Can I help you?” she said in unaccented English.

“Yes, we’re looking for an abbey in the area which begins with s.” Matthew said.

The assistant tapped away at her computer keyboard, then clicked her mouse.

“There’s Susteren Abbey...”

“That’s it!” interrupted Matthew.

“How do we get there?” he continued.

“It’s half an hour from Maastricht, you could go by train or bus, but...”

Matthew didn't allow her to finish; he led Jane by the hand out through the opening doors.

"Thanks!" he shouted over his shoulder

"Wait!" the assistant shouted.

This stopped Matthew in his tracks. The doors didn't know whether to stay open or close because he stood on the rail along which they ran. Jane however made up their minds for them by tugging him back into the office.

"It would be a wasted journey because, the only thing that remains of the Abbey is the Romanesque church," resumed the woman.

"Ah!" Matthew said. "That puts a different complexion on the matter."

"The French closed the Abbey in the eighteenth century," said the assistant.

Matthew scratched his head. "That would have been around the time of the revolution."

"So where'd any artefacts from the Abbey have ended up?" Jane asked.

"It looks like you are in luck," the assistant said, "most of them are at the Basilica of Saint Servatius here in Maastricht," she continued.

"Where's the Basilica?" Matthew asked.

"About two kilometres from here; if you head along WyckerBruggstraat to the river you'll see it in the distance.

"Thank you very much," said Matthew.

"Why the interest?" The assistant asked, handing them a leaflet on the Basilica.

"We're theological students," lied Jane.

As they crossed Saint Servaas Brugg Matthew gazed up at the impossibly blue sky; although it was October the only clouds in the sky were high cirri producing a rippled effect. Below, a cruise boat passed by filled with gaping tourists.

"I'm hungry; I fancy something foreign to eat," said Jane.

"There's a McDonald's over there," Matthew said, pointing across the river.

"Perfect," said Jane.

The couple entered the plastic heaven that was the modern restaurant of quick foods. They purchased hamburgers and drinks and then sat beside the window - which gave an outstanding view of the river.

"It closes in half an hour," said Jane, looking at the leaflet on the Basilica.

"It'll have to be tomorrow then," Matthew said, filling his face with a double hamburger.

That night they booked into a hotel on Helmstraat which overlooked Vrijthof Square: the main area in front of the Basilica.

Chapter 19

France 1425

“Those English! They have invaded our country; brought hunger and death, now they wreck our sacred cathedral.” Anatole heard a customer say as he swept up in the back shop.

“What happened?” Bernard asked.

“An English swine smashed the Rose Window and knocked over pews.”

“Mon Dieu! Nothing is sacred.” Bernard said with anger.

“How do you know he was English?” another customer asked.

“Oh come on my friend, would a Frenchman do such a thing,” said the first customer.

Such patriotism thought Anatole with a smirk on his face as he worked. Perhaps there was a way he could exploit it.

Bernard came through to the back shop shaking his head.

“Roger, the English have been destroying the Cathedral; it breaks my heart.”

“Deplorable, someone should sort them out,” said Anatole.

“If I had a thousand good Frenchmen, I'd throw those bastards out,” spat Bernard.

“Would you Bernard; would you do that,” Anatole said, fixing Bernard with an icy stare.

Bewildered, Bernard jerked his head back from Anatole while raising his eyebrows.

“I am a simple baker with a family to provide for, my friend.”

“But these foreigners are your masters, and as you say they are now wrecking your sacred place of worship. What will happen to your baking if the crops fail as they have done in the past? Will they bring flour from England?”

“It is not up to me, I am not a fighting man,” said Bernard.

“Then who is it up to my friend? You are a Frenchman; first you say you'd throw them out, then you say you are not a fighter. Is this what most French say? Is this why you now have an English king on the throne? What of the brave men who have died.

The sound of the shop door opening saved Bernard.

“I must go, when you're finished that there's washing up to do,” he said.

He didn't like to antagonize his friend, but he was just sowing seeds—just sowing seeds! Anatole reflected as he started the washing.

Chapter 20

After a buffet breakfast, Jane and Matthew left the hotel and walked over Vrijthof Square. They gazed at the massive bulk of the Basilica in front of them. Rust coloured leaves were being blown around in the chill wind as they followed Vrijthof round to the entrance at Keizer Karelplein.

The entrance portal was an ornate arch depicting Christ with Saint Servatius and the twelve apostles. "Great sculptures," remarked Matthew, as he stumped up the entrance fee of seven Euros.

In the Quad they passed the huge Grameer Bell resting on the ground before they entered the nave of the church.

"Wow!" Jane exclaimed.

"It's beautiful," said Matthew.

The columns and vaulted ceiling were painted white which made the nave look clean and pure. To the right and left there were many small side chapels. The pair marvelled at the Rose Window on the west choir depicting Christ as the sun of justice. Opposite this was the presbytery with a statue of Saint Servatius using his staff to kill a dragon; the dragon symbolizing the denial of the divinity of Christ.

Matthew looked at Jane and grinned. "Let's go down into the crypt?"

"Nah! You're all right."

"It's where they buried the saint in three hundred and eighty four." Matthew said looking at the leaflet.

"He's almost as old as you then." Jane remarked with a grin.

The treasury was what they had come to see, however, and they weren't disappointed. After passing through black, ornate metal gates they entered white vaulted rooms where the exhibits were in well-lit glass cases. Central in the first room was a golden bust of Saint Servatius said to contain the skull of the great man. Other exhibits were relics encased in silver or fabrics. The next room contained the most precious exhibit: the 'Noodkist' which was the shrine of Saint Servatius.

"Can't see no key," said Jane. "If it was here we'd have no chance of getting hold of it," she went on.

"Ach! I knew it wouldn't be here; we need to find someone who knows something about it."

There was a Priest doing work on an exhibit at the back of the room. Matthew approached the man with Jane following him.

"Excuse me Father my name is Matthew, I'm a theology student from Scotland. I'm interested in the artefacts brought to the Basilica from Susteren Abbey in the eighteenth century."

The man raised his head from his restoration work. "The early exhibits in the next room are from

Susteren.”

“I was wondering if you knew what happened to a particular key artefact.” Matthew said, trying to look nonchalant.

“I’m sorry I don’t know of any key from Susteren. Some of the material from the Abbey went to other places I understand. If I have time I might do some checking for you. What’s your surname and address?”

Matthew gave him the information and thanked him for his help, then he and Jane left.

“Well that didn’t help much, said Jane as they left the Basilica. “What do we do now?”

“I’m not sure; I must do some thinking. Let’s get something to eat.”

In the treasury office Father Lens lifted the receiver of the telephone and dialled a mobile phone number.

“Hello.”

“Father Lens here, from the Basilica.”

“Ah yes Father, what can I do for you?”

“You told me that there would be a boy coming and asking about the Key.”

“Yes.”

“Well, he was here just five minutes ago. I told him I didn’t know of any key.”

“What’s his name, and where is he staying?”

“Matthew Wilson, and there’s a girl with him; they’re staying at Hotel du Casque on Helmstraat.”

“Thank you Father.”

Chapter 21

France 1425

One night Anatole went to a tavern where he had heard the clientele were of the anti-English persuasion. He purchased a tankard of ale and went to sit in a dark corner of Le Moine. The air had a stench of urine with heavy overtones of sweat. The sawdust on the floor was dark grey in colour and looked like it had lain there since the start of the century.

There were a few men at the bar standing laughing and slapping each other on the back. The tables were empty save for a group sitting across from Anatole.

They greeted him amiably, and he greeted them.

“A new face in the tavern, said a man, who was big and balding.

“Where are you from friend?” asked another, who was thinner and had more hair.

“I am from Tiron but have spent time in Scotland,” answered Anatole.

“What brings you here?” the big man asked, “it can’t be the company,” he went on. This produced a round of laughter within the group.

“I come back to support France in her hour of need,” stated Anatole.

The group of five men stared at Anatole thunderstruck and then looked around the inn.

“Brave words friend, but what can you do on your own—throw yourself at the garrison on the edge of town,” said a ginger-haired man with a beard, producing another round of laughter.

Anatole went over to their table and sat. “Do not mock me, I am serious,” he said, fixing the man with a grim stare. “I will talk plainly for it seems I am among men of my ilk. I am for a free France, and I am prepared to fight for that liberty. The throne of France is for a Frenchman. For this cause I propose to form an alliance.”

“You throw caution to the wind Sir. What if we are English spies? Also, if we are, as you say of your ilk, what if you are an English spy?” the big one proposed.

“Then one of us is undone, but if not, unite with us against our common foe? I have nothing to hide, my name is Roger Beauchamp I work for Bernard Dudouet the baker,” said Anatole. “If you are interested I will be back here the day after tomorrow. Now I bid you goodnight gentlemen.”

With that Anatole finished his ale and left the tavern.

The next day while stocking the fire under the oven with wood, Anatole heard Bernard come through to the back shop.

“Bernard, remember what you said the other day about wanting to rid France of the English.”

“Oh now Roger, I spoke in the heat of the moment.”

“Will you come with me to meet some friends? Just to talk that’s all.”

“As I told you I am a family man.”

“Bernard, nothing will happen to you, I promise,” said Anatole, fixing the man with an honest stare.

The next night Anatole and Bernard entered the tavern. The smell of urine was overpowering in the half-lit environment. There were a few people sitting at tables murmuring into their beer. The pair bought two ales and sat at a table where what had once been a candle was now a knotted blob of wax with a small yellow flame in the centre.

“What now?” Bernard asked, looking around.

As Anatole was about to answer, the front door opened, and in walked the five men from the other night.

“My friends!” shouted Anatole.

The men went over to where they were sitting and shook hands with them; Anatole introducing Bernard.

“Ah yes the baker, I recognise you,” said the ginger-haired man, “My name is Francois.”

The landlord brought tankards of ale over to the table for the new arrivals after a nod from Jean, the big man.

“I’m glad to see you. Have you thought over what I said the other night?” Anatole asked, lowering his voice.

“Yes, and you’re right it is time to fight back in our own way; even if we can just free Chartres,” said Francois.

“Good, then let’s drink to that.” Anatole said, lifting his tankard.

“What do you propose,” said Jean, after they had drank.

“We will meet somewhere every week.”

“What about here,” said Jean, “I’m sure Albert won’t mind,” he continued, nodding toward the landlord.

“Okay, and if everyone agree's we’ll call ourselves the Alliance of Friends,” said Anatole, acknowledging the nodding heads.

“Names are all very well, but what are a few patriots going to do against a garrison,” said Bernard.

Anatole eyed his friend. “Our tactics will be to stir-up the locals and harass the English as much as possible.”

Just then Albert the landlord came over to the table and whispered a few words to Jean.

“We have a problem,” Jean said, after Albert had gone. “There’s a certain gentleman been hanging around the place all day. Don’t all look at once, but he’s sitting at the table in the corner,” he continued.

“I recognize him he is English or at least a collaborator,” whispered Bernard. “When the garrison needs extra bread over and above the stuff they make themselves I get roped in to supply it. That man was in their mess talking to officers when I made a delivery.”

The man, who was of scruffy appearance, gathered something was wrong, and headed for the front door.

“We’ve got to stop him,” shouted Francois.

Anatole ran out of the door after the spy with the others following. As he stood in the street, he could hear the collaborator’s footsteps running to the right of where he was standing.

On and on the spy ran with Anatole gaining on him. He took a fleeting glance backwards and realising he would get caught he slipped down a side street. He had gone fifty metres when he crashed into—nothingness. It was as if he had run up against solid air. He turned to see the silhouette of a man with red eyes standing at the top of the street. He turned back and tried to push on but to no avail. A

wooden post wrenched itself free from the ground; the pointed end rose until the stake was hovering horizontally at about a metre and a half above the ground.

The spy let out a spine chilling scream as the stake flew at blinding speed into his chest, splattering blood over the cobblestones. He looked down at the post sticking in his chest, and his legs wobbled. He then collapsed dead onto the road.

The rest of the company ran into the side street and stood horrified at what they saw.

“Mon Dieu Roger, did you do this?” asked Jean, fighting to recapture his breath.

“Merde! What do we do now?” Francois asked no one in particular.

“We meet next week as planned,” said Anatole, “now get rid of the body,” he went on.

“Yes...mon ami,” Jean said, giving Anatole an understanding look.

Chapter 22

Matthew chased Jane up the deep, red carpeted stairs of their hotel. He stopped at the top to catch his breath as she ran to their room door on the first floor.

She giggled, then in a mocking voice said: “You must get more exercise Wilson.”

“I’d like to get more; if only you’d let me.”

Jane became serious and said: “You know my views on that; I’m an old fashioned girl; I want to get married.”

“Yeah don’t I just,” murmured Matthew, as he opened the door.

“Hey there’s a note,” said Jane pointing to the floor.

Matthew picked it up and read it.

“It says if we want answers to our questions we must go to Chartres in France and seek one called Henri Diebolt. And it says, oh Jesus, be careful great evil is there.”

“Who’s it from?” Jane enquired.

“It doesn’t say.”

In the room, he looked out of the window. Across the street there was a figure sitting in a black Audi A6 Allroad staring up at him over the top of a partially opened tinted window. Matthew jumped back, but kept his eyes on the figure.

“What’s up Mattie?” Jane asked.

He turned to look at Jane. “There’s someone out there looking up here.”

“Let’s see,” she ordered, pushing him out of the way, “I can’t see anybody.”

“Just there in the Au...that’s strange it was there a second ago!”

“Was it one of the men who were watching you back home?”

“No, there was something different about this person; even though I couldn’t see his face I knew he meant me no harm.”

“What do you reckon then?” asked Jane.

“Well, there’s not much more to be gained from hanging around here, so I reckon in the morning

we'll find out about getting to Chartres.”

Matthew and Jane took the train to Liege in Belgium and then caught the Eurostar to Paris, which took just over two hours; the train pulling into the vast grandeur of the Gare du Nord at quarter past one in the afternoon.

The pair left the station and walked out into the buzz that was Paris.

“What now Mattie?” Jane asked.

“We'll have to take a taxi to Gare Mont Parnasse. But first I'm thirsty, let's go over to that cafe,” he said, pointing over the street.

It was a warm October day. The sky was azure with high cirri clouds in between which were white streaks of plane contrails. They sat at an outside table at the Café de la Gare.

“A beer and a white coffee,” said Matthew to the waiter who had appeared.

“Grande bere?” The waiter asked.

“Qui.”

The waiter brought back the biggest beer Matthew had ever seen.

“I hope you're thirsty, said Jane.

The train to Chartres took an hour, and as it sped round the final bend the pair could see the two spires of the cathedral pierce the golden rays of the setting sun.

“Well, here we are on the next step of our European tour.” Jane said, as she stood up and grabbed her luggage.

Chapter 23

France 1432

Twelve hundred English soldiers, ready to defend, stood behind the metal studded wooden gates of La Porte Guillame Chartres. Around the city walls longbow men were in position; other soldiers kept watch over the mass forces of the French, who had surrounded the hilltop city.

The citizens welcomed the French army. And the English instructed that there would be dire consequences for anyone seen helping the enemy.

“The other entrances have been secured Sir,” said Sir Rupert Bowers, a young officer.

“Good, as long as those damn gates hold we should be okay,” said Sir Humphrey Shaw, the garrison commander - a rugged man who had seen many campaigns.

“We're well prepared for a long siege Sir. We have ample food and plenty ammunition. The only problem will be supplies of fresh water. Rationing must be introduced.”

“Yes, the longer the better from our point of view. It will give the reinforcements time to get here.”

A shout from the battlements confirmed that the French were moving bowmen and small cannon into position.

“Instruct our bowmen on the battlements to fire at will, at the men moving and loading the cannons,” ordered Shaw.

“Yes Sir,” said Bowers, as he turned and moved away.

The French bowmen were positioning themselves in the fields and scrubland just close enough to get in a shot. Four cannons were being pulled to just outside the main gates.

The English opened fire on the men pulling the cannons into place; the sky was full of arrows. In return, the French tried to give cover by firing back at them.

As this exchange was taking place a group of French soldiers moved away from the main body of their army pulling a trebuchet. They crossed land fast and took up position well behind the cannons, just out of the range of the English bowmen. As the English picked off the men who were positioning the cannons, others ran up to take their places and the weapons eventually were placed.

“Their cannons are in place Sir, despite our bowmen killing many of them,” said Bowers.

“You must stop them firing those cannons Bowers and try to push them back,” ordered Shaw.

“They’re bringing a trebuchet up behind the cannons Sir.”

“I’m not sure how long the doors will stand up to cannons and a trebuchet. We must try to buy ourselves some time.”

The bowmen on the battlements around the doors were doubled and began a relentless onslaught on the cannon loaders. Although many French were killed around the cannons they got in a few shots, which smashed into the walls wide of their target.

The trebuchet team worked to get the giant slingshot into working order, but they had misjudged the distance the longbow men could achieve.

With the air full of English arrows, the French pulled back; tugging their cannons and the trebuchet back out of range. Shouts of joy erupted from behind the city walls.

“Sir, they’ve pulled back, we’ve repelled the first attack,” said Bowers.

“Yes, maybe we can buy some time, if we keep at this.” Shaw said.

Soon silence crept around, broken only by the groaning of dying men. The stench of gunpowder drifted away in the breeze replaced by the smell of wild flowers. Suddenly, there was a wriggling sound around the doors, which became louder and louder. The large bolts which held the hinges together were working themselves loose and soon they dropped on to the dusty ground.

For a moment the doors just stood as if being supported by an invisible ogre. Then they fell backward, crushing the English soldiers at the front of the column. The rest ran back in fear; many being trampled in the panic.

The figure of a man in the shadows of a side street close to La Porte Guillame slipped back into an open door. His red eye colour changed back to blue/grey.

For an instant the French officers stood, with unbelieving eyes. They came to their senses, however, and ordered the charge—the gates to Chartres were now down!

The French cavalry clattered over the fallen doors; slashing and stabbing the shocked English soldiers, who tried to fight back using pikes. But when the French infantry surged through the gates, outnumbering them by five to one, the end was nigh.

The English were pushed back further and further into the city—the advancing French trampling over English dead. The archers on the walls—their advantage gone—shot aimlessly into the turmoil and in turn were picked off by the French bowmen.

When the remaining English troops reached the cathedral Sir Humphrey Shaw gave the command to surrender. And thus Chartres was back in French hands.

“We’re free” shouted François

“Yes thanks to Roger,” said Claude.

“What do you mean? It was the brave French army.”

“Yes my friend, but I saw Roger out on the street when the gates came down; I don’t know how he did it, but he brought the gates down.

“Then he is a hero!”

“A hero—yes, but also a very dangerous man.”

Chapter 24

The hotel on Boulevard Chasles was small but well kept. Matthew and Jane had a twin room on the second floor, which had a fine view of the cathedral. The owner, a Monsieur Theobald, was a stocky man with a thick, black moustache. He was a chain smoker; one draw almost finishing his current cigarette.

“You are on holiday in Chartres—yes?” he asked, as he pulled a beer in the tiny bar.

“Yes we’re on a study holiday: looking at religious artefacts,” said Matthew.

“Well in that case you’ll find plenty up at the Cathedral to keep you happy.”

As Matthew moved away from the bar with his drinks he said, “I know this is a long shot. But, would you know a Monsieur Diebolt who lives in or around Chartres.”

“No, the name rings no bells, as you English say.”

“Actually, I’m Scottish.”

“I know; I pull your leg—yes.”

They both laughed as Matthew sat down beside a puzzled Jane.

“What was all that about Wilson?”

“Och, nothing. He doesn’t know anybody called Diebolt.”

After another few drinks the pair said goodnight to Monsieur Theobald through an atmosphere thick with cigarette smoke, and then they climbed the narrow staircase to their room.

Inside the warm room, Matthew gazed at the well-lit cathedral out of the window.

“That’s an impressive sight Janey.”

“Mmm,” replied Jane, engrossed in a French game show on the television.

As Matthew switched on the kettle, the telephone rang.

“Hello,” said Matthew.

“Mr Wilson this is reception I have a call for you.”

“Okay.”

There was a click and a male voice came on the line.

“Mr Wilson?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Henri Diebolt. I would like to arrange a meeting with you. Will ten o'clock tomorrow morning at the Cathedral be okay?”

“Yes.”

“Until then.”

Jane rose from the bed and made her way to the en-suite. “Who was that?”

“That was our Monsieur Diebolt, and we’ve to meet him tomorrow at the Cathedral.

After a wonderful French breakfast of baguette and ham washed down with thick, black coffee, Matthew and Jane headed off to the Cathedral. The day was clear but cold as they walked up Boulevard Chasles toward Place des Epars. The wind played around the rooftops before wrapping itself around the spires of the Cathedral. Matthew shivered making him glad he had packed his fleece.

After negotiating their way through the small streets, they stood before the gothic masterpiece that was Notre Dam Cathedral.

Inside, the only people around were the custodians.

“This place is awesome,” said Jane.

“Yeah takes some beating, eh?”

“Hey look at this,” Jane said, as she walked round the Labyrinth.

“That’s the famous Labyrinth. It was for Christians who couldn’t get to the Holy Land.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they walked around it in ever decreasing circles until they reached the centre which symbolized a pilgrimage to Jerusalem - I think. Oh, I’m not big on this stuff.”

A monk in a grey habit came strolling down the nave; head bowed and hands clasped. He stopped beside Matthew. “Mr Wilson?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Abbot Henri Diebolt.

They sat down amid the masses of empty pews.

“My abbey is about ten miles north east of Chartres,” said Henri looking at them with deep, soulful eyes, “it is small and very old.”

“Who’s the man with the black Audi?” Matthew asked.

“He’s...an associate. What you seek is not here.”

Matthew stared at the man. “Well there’s not much point in us staying then.”

“Please, you must hear my story. The artefact was here, at my abbey for almost one hundred years—guarded by my predecessors.” Henri paused for a moment. “You’ve heard of Saint Servatius—yes?”

The two listeners nodded their heads.

“Well, while working in Tongres, now in modern day Belgium, he went on a pilgrimage to Rome to visit the tomb of Saint Peter, and while there he had a vision where Peter came to him and told him that sinful Tongres would be invaded and ordered him to Maastricht. The vision revealed the hiding place of the Key. Servatius took the Key and guarded it as the Powers of Darkness were getting close. He was

then warned that this was not the key for heaven and it must not fall into the hands of evil.”

Henri looked up and took a deep breath as if he was drawing the rest of the story from the air. “Servatius journeyed to Maastricht where he remained until his death. The Key was guarded by his followers and their descendants until an order of monks took it with them to Tiron in France in the twelfth century. There they joined the order that were invited over to Scotland by King David the First. You will of course know of the temptation and seduction of Abbot de Longford?”

“Yes. What happened after the French closed Susteren Abbey?” Matthew asked.

“The Key was secreted away to Aren Abbey where I am now the abbot.”

“Where it remained for one hundred years?” Jane asked.

“Yes, with the growing unrest leading up to the First World War, the decision was made to secure it in a bank vault with only successive abbots knowing the access number. London seemed to be the safest choice at the time, so it was deposited in the Bank of England.”

Matthew ran a hand through his hair. “Is it still there?”

“No, after the war there was a young Dutch abbot who wanted it back on Dutch soil, so he had it transferred to a bank in Amsterdam. Where, to my knowledge, it remains to this day.”

“You’ve got the access code—right?” Matthew asked.

“Wrong. The Dutch abbot, Christiaan die Voech, was a very pious young man. He claimed to have had a vision where Saint Peter came to him and told him he was responsible for the security of the Key. He believed it was his birth right because his name, die Voech, means ‘the guardian’. Right up to his death he never released the details of the whereabouts of the Key.”

Henri looked at the two young people as they digested the story. “Well that’s you up to date with what I know, and I wish you well with the rest of your task. May God be with you?”

Henri stood up and walked back the way he had come.

Matthew jumped up. “Wait, a minute! How do you know all this? And what do we do now?”

“I would go to Amsterdam if I were you,” Henri said, over his shoulder.

Outside the Cathedral a large Audi with dark, tinted windows watched Matthew and Jane leave.

Chapter 25

Jonas watched Mari as she came toward him, her blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders as she walked. He was back in the fields outside Arbroath; it was a warm summer’s day, and the birds were praising it through song.

Mari took him by the hand, and they walked through the field of grass and wild flowers. She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand as she giggled. He in return ran his hand along her bare arm; her skin felt soft like velvet.

She stopped and turned toward him and then kissed him on the lips. She then stared into his eyes. He was mesmerised by her. He knew what was going on, however; so he screamed, “I must resist—but oh, it’s becoming...”

And Jonas was no more. The Dark Dimension absorbed his consciousness. As a consequence the chanting in the cave reached fever pitch. The hooded figure stood up, walked into the centre of the circle and threw back the hood.

Mari rose into the air and spun while emitting a high pitched shriek. Her features became distorted; her skin became sallow and her eyes turned to a deep red. The transformation was complete when her hair became straggled and she had grown in size to two and a half metres.

The shrieking became a terrible howl which when merged with the loud chanting shook the Dark Dimension and alerted any souls within as to what had happened.

Didier Grondin woke up and sat bolt upright in his bed with his heart pounding. He stared into the darkness and smiled. They've found out where the Key is, he thought.

He got up quietly so as not to arouse his slumbering wife and made his way through to the study. He switched on the wall lights, chasing the darkness away. It was cold in the room; he shivered as he sat down at his desk. He stared at a painting on the wall. It was of children playing in a harvested field. The sun was bright and shining out of a deep, blue sky. In his mind he could hear the laughter of the children running and hiding behind the bales of hay. The painting always brought out a profound sadness in him. What had happened to the humanity he loved so much when he was young? Now the sun was replaced by darkness.

Hel materialized before him as Mari. He looked at her with loathing in his eyes.

"As you will be aware, we can now trace the Key," she said.

"Good, it has been a long time coming."

"Poor old Jonas took it to Sustern Abbey in Holland," she said with a grin, "so now you can do the rest, and don't try deceiving me; as I have said, vengeance will be dire."

After she left his eyes burned. "Vengeance will be dire," he said. Once he had the Key vengeance would be his—revenge for Xavier, he thought.

Grondin switched on his computer, went straight onto the internet and looked up Sustern Abbey. It had been beside Maastricht, but all that now remained was a church. When the French closed the Abbey the artefacts moved to The Basilica of Saint Servatius.

Time to get those two fools in London mobilized, they were outwitted by that young brat in Scotland, but huh...that wasn't hard to do, Grondin thought.

Signing off from the internet he picked up his phone and pressed Lagrange's number. It rang for a while before it was answered. "Yeah," growled Lagrange.

"Georges, I know it's three in the morning," he said, looking at his watch. "I need you and Alain on a plane in the morning for Amsterdam, where you'll hire a car and drive to Maastricht. I'll meet you there in the afternoon."

"So I take it we know where the item is now?"

"Yes, we can now trace it."

He hung up and sat back in his chair. He stared at the same painting on the wall, but this time there was no sadness.

Chapter 26

France 1451

Bernard Dedouet lay in his bed staring out of the window at the sombre, grey sky. His face was pallid, and he was sweating. The fever that gripped him refused to let go. Anatole entered the bedroom carrying a bowl of soup. "Bernard you must try to eat this it will give you strength."

"Roger, come and sit with me for a while."

"Of course."

“How’s the shop doing?”

“We’re doing fine. When you’re back on your feet again, we’ll do even better.”

Bernard grabbed Anatole’s wrist. “Listen here my old friend; I call you old, but look at you, it’s as if you haven’t aged a day since we first met. Anyway, we both know I will not make it through this fever.”

A bout of coughing interrupted him. He shook his head at Anatole’s offer of a drink of water.

“With Collette having passed away two years ago and Pierre killed serving his country against the English. I have only you to pass the business on to my friend.”

“What about Michelle?” Anatole asked, although he knew the answer.

“Michelle! I never see her—married to that Parisian upstart. No, I want you to have the shop and the house. The papers are sorted and I have sent money to Michelle she can have no more.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say nothing Roger you have been a loyal friend and a good worker. I know you helped to free Chartres. Now go, there is someone in the shop.”

When Anatole returned to the bedroom Bernard was at peace.

The next night at the scheduled meeting of the Alliance of Friends in Le Moine tavern, Anatole stood up and offered a toast. “To Bernard - a great Frenchman.”

“To Bernard.” said the friends.

“Now friends I would like to change the name of our club to the Order of the Gate. Why? Well, beyond a gate there is a new frontier—new optimism. That is what I now see for France my friends—new optimism.”

Chapter 27

As she sat and watched the French countryside pass by the train window, Jane said: “I may have to go back home soon. I’m running out of money, and I told them I’d only be away for a couple of days.”

“I’ll look after you,” said Matthew, “I phoned the library this morning and told them I would take the week’s holiday I’m due; they seemed okay about it.”

The train pulled into Gare Mont Parnasse. When it came to a halt Matthew and Jane left the carriage with an army of Parisian office workers.

They took a cab to Gare du Nord. The cabbie was a thin, long-haired man of Asian origin who manoeuvred his way through the rush hour traffic while filling the atmosphere with expletives. The giant facade of the north station, with its nine statues, loomed up at the end of Rue Denain as

Matthew looked at the meter and then counted out Euros for the driver.

At ten thirty the train to Amsterdam left giving them half an hour to have breakfast. Monsieur Theobald, back at the hotel in Chartres, only just made their checkout time, never mind any food.

Soon they were speeding through the north east on a blustery autumn day heading toward the Belgian border.

“I can’t believe it,” said Jane, “I’ve just left the fashion capital of the world, and I never looked in one shop.”

“Well, you said you haven’t got much money; just look at it as having saved what little you do have.”

“Yeah I suppose so, but I would have fancied a little window shopping.”

After an hour or more the train pulled into Brussels Midi. The passengers that left were well-dressed political types— some with personnel assistants. Not surprising, thought Matthew, as this was the hub of the European Union.

After over three hours of travelling over flat Belgian, then Dutch, countryside the train rolled into Amsterdam Centraal Station.

“Well, that’s us back to where we started,” said Jane. “What now?”

Matthew opened the carriage door. “You said you wanted to see Amsterdam—well let’s go.”

Stopping by a rack of brochures in the station Matthew picked up one advertising accommodation. “This one looks reasonable,” he said, pointing at a hotel.

“Is it far?”

“I don’t think so, not by taxi. Anyway its central and doesn’t look too pricey.”

They hailed a cab which took them through the maze of busy streets to Hotel Atlanta in Rembrandt Plein.

The room was small, but clean and had all the basics: kettle, television, hairdryer and a minibar. The view was of the square which looked resplendent in the dying sun. A huge screen on a building opposite advertised many things from football boots to lipstick. Rembrandt’s statue in the centre of the area peeped through the autumnal trees as if he were afraid to view what had become of his city.

The pair lay on their twin beds, exhausted, and watched Dutch television. Matthew fell asleep and when he awoke the old British sitcom ‘Are You Being Served’ filled the screen. He laughed at Mrs Slocum speaking Dutch.

Jane rolled onto her side and faced Matthew. “What’s the time Mattie?”

“Half past six.”

“Let’s go out on the town; have something to eat and a few drinks.”

“Yeah, I’d say we deserve it,” said Matthew, rolling off his bed.

After washing and dressing they left the room and descended the narrow staircase. The receptionist was busy typing behind the front desk. Matthew asked her if she could recommend a good place to eat. She told him there were many good restaurants around the square, but for more variety to head for the area around Liedse Plein.

Outside, the night was chilly, and the wind howled around the buildings.

“There’s an Irish pub. Let’s go in, I haven’t had a decent pint of Guinness for a while.” Matthew said, pulling Jane by the hand through the doors.

Inside it was warm, and there was a big screen showing a football match. A few men sat watching the game on the ends of their seats. Other clientele sat at tables in alcoves and chatted.

The Guinness slid down Matthew’s throat. “That was good,” he said, amazed at how thirsty he had been. “Where to now?”

“Hold on Wilson, I’m not finished yet, and I want something to eat.”

“Okay, once you’re finished we’ll look for the place the receptionist was telling us about.”

They walked hand in hand along leaf strewn streets. They crossed small humpback bridges over

canals until they came across Liedse Plein, which was a large square dissected by a busy road. Although it wasn't exactly a balmy summer evening, people were sitting outside being served by waiters.

"There looks like a lot of restaurants down that way," said Jane, pointing towards a street which ran off the square.

The pair settled for a small Thai restaurant with floating candles in dishes of water on the tables.

"Welcome," said the small waitress, while bowing and smiling. She had jet black hair and delicate, high cheek bones.

Cooked to perfection the food had plenty of crisp vegetables within spicy sauces. Jane drank white wine while Matthew went for a beer; settling for lager as there was no ale.

"This is great, just like being on holiday," said Jane.

"Yup, sure is."

They sat for a while after the meal watching the crowds pass by outside on foot and bicycle.

"You know what I'd like now," said Jane.

"What?"

"To see The Red Light District."

He stared at Jane with raised eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, let's go have a look."

They paid up and left the restaurant; then followed the crowds heading to Dam Square along Kalverstraat.

"Wow! The shops here look great," said Jane.

"Yeah great."

"Need to get the credit card out tomorrow." Jane said, eyeing Matthew.

After walking along narrow streets and tight alleys the vast openness of Dam Square came as a shock to the senses of Matthew. He put an arm around Jane's shoulders as they walked across the cobbled concourse. They laughed at the statue people, who moved mechanically when money dropped into their pots.

The pair walked down Damrak and took a right which landed them in the network of streets that was The Red Light District. The place was buzzing. There were bars, coffee houses and restaurants everywhere.

"Oh my God look at that, said Jane, pointing at erotic pictures in a sleaze shop window.

"And what's that for?" Matthew asked, nodding toward a massive dildo, "scratching your back!"

They strolled down a narrow street; passing by women who winked at men from behind glass doors. At the bottom they turned right and walked along the canal side. A church bell rang. Matthew looked over the water and saw the two spires of the building rise toward the stars. A beacon of light amid this sinful darkness, he thought.

As they crossed a bridge they heard loud rock music coming from a side street.

"Wow! Let's go there," said Matthew.

Inside, the pub was dark and smoky. The bar section was narrow and led to a larger seated area at the back. On the two large screens Lynyrd Skynyrd were in the death throes of 'Freebird'.

"A beer and a glass of white wine," said Matthew to the barman, who was a young rocker with long blond hair and a Metallica T-shirt.

"Could you put on AC/DC for me?" Matthew asked, after he got his drinks.

"Yeah, maybe later," answered the barman.

Matthew had acquired a penchant for early AC/DC by listening to his cousin's collection of Heavy Rock.

When he and Jane sat down at the back, Deep Purple were halfway through 'Smoke on the Water'.

“I like this place, it’s got atmosphere, said Matthew.

Jane rolled her eyeballs. “Yeah, I can smell the atmosphere.”

They both laughed and drank. Then Matthew headed back to the bar for more drinks. As he stood looking at the mass of CD’s and DVD’s on the other side of the bar, he felt a strange presence. A figure in a long, black coat with the collars up came and stood beside him.

“Beer,” said the newcomer, in a deep, rasping voice.

The barman dropped what he was doing and delivered a beer in front of the stranger; who then turned away from the bar, brushing past Matthew; who felt his legs go shaky as red eyes peered at him for a moment through the high collars.

“Yeah man, what can I get you?” asked the barman.

“Uh!... oh yeah, a beer and a glass of white wine,” said Matthew.

When he got back to his seat, the intro riff to ‘Highway to Hell’ boomed out and Matthew recovered from the encounter with the stranger at the bar.

“You okay?” Jane asked, “you look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I think I have.”

Feeling something in the back pocket of his jeans; he stood up and pulled out a letter.

“What the...!”

He looked around but couldn’t see the figure in the black coat anywhere.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Matthew went into the gents where there was a bright overhead light, and he opened the letter. It was from a friend asking him to come to New Amstel Books on Spuistraat at noon the next day.

Philippe Corbere strolled through the dark corridors which lead to his office. He had done well for himself since moving from Chartres to Paris. The Wine exports business had gone from strength to strength, and he had employed five of a staff as a consequence. He lived in a three storey house on Rue Mignon with his wife and two daughters. But no amount of life's fineries could extinguish the eternal fire which burned within his immortal being. Tonight he would welcome new members to the Order of the Gate and swell the numbers over and above the people who had followed him from Chartres.

As he entered the office Philippe was set upon by his assistant, Paul Duvalier, who handed him the usual list of orders and debtors.

"Sir, we must address these debtors to pay the suppliers."

"Yes, all in good time Paul."

Oh the tedium of human affairs—things that are of no consequence in the grand scheme of the universe, thought Philippe. He strolled over to the window and looked out over Paris—over a France that was changing, a France weakened by countless wars and left penniless by a despicable king who had the audacity to believe he was divinely chosen to lead the country.

That night Philippe entered the tavern on Rue Bourbon Le Chateau and greeted the landlord as he made his way through to the meeting room at the back.

"Good evening friends!" he shouted, as he opened the old pine door.

The landlord came in after him with a tray of glasses and three bottles of red wine.

"Thank you Robert," said Philippe, as the man set the tray down on a table.

The room was large and had a musty smell. The candles on the tables were in bottles and provided enough light for Philippe to analyse the faces.

"Thank you for coming my friends, and nice to see the new members, you are welcome."

Some of the members put glasses in front of everyone and filled them up.

"First a toast," said Philippe, "To France."

"To France," everyone said, as they raised their glasses and drank.

Philippe glanced around the room. "Now to business." He brushed his fingers along the table.

"I will speak freely as I know the new members have been vetted. As you know, too many wars has weakened France; some justified others not. We are told the nation's purse is now empty, and the King has the audacity to come to us, the citizens, for more money. Higher taxes my friends that's what's at stake. Turned away by the nobility and of course the clergy pay no duties, he is now looking for the money in your pocket."

There was a knock at the door; the landlord came in with more wine. He set the bottles on a table, took the empties and left.

"So, I ask you my friend's do you want to pay up, or be part of the new wind that's sweeping across the country? The age of enlightenment brings with it new opportunities for France in areas such as science and education. Gone are the old views on state and religion. We must grasp this with both hands. So, are you with me?"

Philippe raised his glass. "To a new France," he said.

"A new France," they all said, as they raised their glasses and drank.

"What would be our part in the making of this new France," said Valery Dube, a tall, thin man with a big nose and long, dark hair.

"There is a new force in the land known as the National Assembly. If you are with me, and as members of the Order of the Gate you will look for new frontiers, I urge you to take the oath and join them. Then together we can move into a new age where the rights of the citizen are respected above all." Philippe then filled up the glasses of the twenty five members - old and new.

The next day, Paul Duvalier knocked on Philippe's door.

“Yes come in,” said Philippe.

“There’s a gentleman to see you,” said Paul, popping his head around the door.

In walked Cesar Michaud a small, well-made man with a prominent brow which shaded his dark, brown eyes.

“Monsieur Corbere, I will get straight to the point, I have been instructed to come here to inform you of coming events. You will be no doubt aware of the growing unrest in Paris of the past few weeks.”

“Yes, I have heard from associates that something is going to happen.”

“The National Assembly, to whom I have given my oath, is meeting in Versailles. They have sent word they fear for their lives from Royal Army troops made up of Swiss and German soldiers. As a consequence they have instructed me and others to begin the citizen’s battle to take France.”

“I know there are troops at Champs de Mars,” said Philippe.

“Yes that’s where most of them are; but also in various places around the city.” Michaud paused for a moment. “Tomorrow we have organised a mob or what will resemble a mob, to attack the Bastille and secure arms and gunpowder for the struggle ahead. There are just over one hundred guards in the prison - mainly veterans. The main concern is the troops at Champs de Mars; although over an hours march away, they will stop us, if alerted early enough.”

Michaud stared at Philippe. “I have heard you, Monsieur, are a man with great persuasive powers as I look into your soul I sense that...” Michaud cried out in pain.

“Monsieur Michaud you will have nothing to fear from the soldiers at Champs de Mars. Now I wish you and your associates well, and long live the revolution,” said Philippe, as he stood up and offered his hand.

“Thank you Monsieur Corbere, and yes, long live the revolution.

Chapter 29

Paris 14th July 1789

Bernard Rene de Launay, governor of the Bastille, was having breakfast with an elected group of citizens when there was a knock at the door.

“Come!” he shouted.

Lieutenant Deflue opened the door and strode into the austere brick-walled office.

“Sir, the mobs have moved into the inner court. I think the decision to withdraw the cannons from the battlements was misconstrued as a reloading manoeuvre.”

“Hmm! I think gentlemen, that you are being seen as prisoners,” said the governor to the group, “I will come with you Lieutenant and have a look.”

The two men stood above the main gate and peered down at the swelling crowd which had surged up against the raised drawbridge.

“Surrender now and there will be no bloodshed. It’s not you we want,” shouted a big man from the crowd who was waving a pistol.

“This will get out of hand. Get most of the guard on to the battlements lieutenant.”

At around one o’clock a shot was fired; no one was sure from which side it came, but there followed an onslaught from both sides of the wall.

“Instruct the men to keep firing. People loyal to the king will send word to the Champs de Mars,” said de Launay.

“Yes sir,” acknowledged Lieutenant Deflue, “the mob appears to grow with every passing minute.” At three o’clock the chains to the drawbridge were cut. The structure crashed down killing some of the mob, but it allowed the crowd to rush up to the main gate. The fortified wood of the big doors creaked and moaned under the pressure. de Launay had to do something, and do it quickly, as it looked as if there would be no back up from the Champs de Mars.

A letter with terms for a mutual cessation of hostilities was passed to the mob through a slit cut in a side gate.

Earlier, at ten o’clock, across the Seine within the army encampment a cannon had swivelled around on its axis, much to the amazement of the guards on duty. When it reached a certain direction it stopped. Then a fireball shot out of the barrel and flew into a wagon containing gunpowder. The ensuing explosion ripped through the atmosphere blowing away nearby tents and setting fire to others. Soldiers ran screaming from the crater caused by the blast; many had serious burns, others dragged dead comrades away from burning debris.

“We’re under attack. Infantry, attach bayonets and assemble on the camp perimeter!” bellowed an officer.

Soldiers, some half-dressed, ran in all directions with muskets in hand.

“From what direction did the attack come?” General Jacques-Pierre Dubois demanded, as he stood outside the operational tent.

“I don’t know sir,” said a passing officer.

After a few moments an uneasy silence fell on the large camp. The only sounds were of burning wreckage, and the moaning of injured men.

“Can’t see anyone, said a young soldier, with his finger on the trigger of a musket pointed out at the surrounding parkland.

“Keep alert soldier,” replied an officer walking back and forward behind the line of troops.

Dubois paced about inside his tent. An officer marched a guard in, who then stood to attention.

“Sir, this man... saw one cannon move round and fire at the gunpowder wagon,” said the officer.

“Who moved it?” Dubois asked. There was silence. “Well, who moved the cannon - soldier?”

“No one sir,” the guard said.

“What?”

“No one sir, it swivelled itself.”

“Get this man out of here—and keep vigilant.”

Later, Dubois was sitting discussing events with General Valery Beaulis the commander of the Swiss troops and Dieter Mitter, General of the German contingent.

Sensing an evil presence, the three men turned and looked out the open end of the tent where they watched a dark figure approach at fast pace.

When he reached the start of the awning, two guards put their bayoneted muskets across Corbere’s path and shouted halt. Philippe waved his right arm, and the two guards flew twenty metres backwards through the air, landing on the turf with their necks broken.

The generals jumped up from their seats as Philippe entered the main part of the tent.

“Who are you?” Dubois demanded.

“My name is of no importance; what I have to say is.”

“I’ll have you shot for this,” shouted Beaulis.

“You’ll find that hard to do, now sit down, and listen,” said Philippe, pointing to their chairs.

“You will be aware of the little demonstration of my powers earlier.”

“It was you who blew up the gunpowder wagon?”

“Yes, and I can give you another demonstration if you like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Dieter Mitter, “what do you want?”

“In a while you will be asked to help the guard at the Bastille control a riotous mob.”

“We suspected this might happen and are drawing up plans to aid the Governor. We were finding it hard to motivate the French troops to fight their fellow countrymen. But now after hearing that a mob stormed the Hotel Invalides killing French soldiers in the process they are ready to fight for the king,” said Dubois.

Philippe’s eyes turned a deep crimson colour as he moved closer to the generals.

“You will do nothing,” he growled, “you have seen what I can do; act, and I will destroy you. Then I will move into your home lands and lead a path of destruction,” he continued, glaring at Mitter and Beaulis. “I have an army of people like myself at my disposal,” he lied.

The generals cowered in their chairs. They agreed there would be no aid for the Bastille.

“And now gentlemen I will take my leave, and one more thing; don’t double-cross me as vengeance will be swift,” said Philippe— his eyes turning back to normal as he headed out of the tent.

The mob laughed at the letter, and the firing continued with shouts of: “surrender now and join us,” from the crowd crammed into the inner court.

“I have a good mind to ignite the gunpowder and blow the whole place up including many buildings around about, said de Launay, to a shocked Lieutenant Deflue.

At around five o’clock de Launay was summoned to the battlements above the main gate.

“Sir, I think you should see this,” said Deflue.

The Governor turned pale when he peered into the inner court. There stood just inside the outer gates two large cannons aimed at the main gates.

“Right it’s over I’m afraid. Deflue, instruct the men to stop firing and wave white flags, then open the main gates.”

Disarmed, the royal guards were marched out of the prison. The prisoners were then released – all seven of them. De Launay was not to be so lucky – the mob pounced on him and hacked his head off. The horror then paraded around on a pike.

Chapter 30

France 1793

Philippe Corbere left Rombere's Tavern on Rue Bourbon le Chateau and began the long walk home. It was a warm May evening, and Philippe enjoyed the fresh air after the stuffiness of the bar. Passing by the Church of Saint Pierre he turned down an alley as a shortcut to the busy Rue Babilie. Four storey buildings on either side darkened the passageway.

Philippe's sharp hearing warned him of the approach of four citizen guards before they turned down the alley. he sank into a doorway.

"Are you looking for me?" he said, as they passed.

They stopped and lowered their muskets toward the voice.

"Citizen Robespierre has issued orders for your arrest Monsieur Corbere," said one guard.

There was a crack as the heads of two of the guards twisted round before they slumped to the ground. The other two pulled their triggers, but nothing happened. Their muskets then flew out of their hands and clattered as they hit the ground then slithered away as if they were alive.

The two men rose into the air as Philippe stepped out of the shadow of the doorway- eyes crimson. One guard screamed as he flew away at great speed and then was silent after smashing into the wall of a courtyard. The other, now horizontal at head height facing down, urinated with fear.

"Tell that God touting fucker Robespierre that I'm no counter-revolutionary and that he should watch his back," said Philippe; his face next to the guard's.

Philippe then walked on down the alley, and he then turned into Rue Babilie before the trembling guard finally fell on to the cobbled ground.

He strolled along the emptying street and thought of how Robespierre despised him, and had condemned the Order of the Gate as Satan worshippers. Jacques Hebert leaving the order and starting the popular Cult of Reason atheist movement had compounded the situation.

Since the King was tried and executed in 1792, Robespierre had aspired to be his replacement albeit in a republican sense. His terror squads hunted down not only counter-revolutionaries, but also atheists. Thousands of people were going to the guillotine because of their religious views and not their revolutionary opinions.

All this riled Philippe; after helping the revolutionary cause his people, atheists, were being persecuted by this madman. Something had to be done, he thought, and soon.

The next day as he entered his office Paul Duvalier told him there was a gentleman waiting for him in his room. Fearing a backlash from the previous evening Philippe opened the door with apprehension.

Cesar Michaud was staring out of the window at an overcast sky, his grey wig at a slight tilt.

"Monsieur Michaud," said Philippe, as he entered the room.

"Monsieur Corbere," said Cesar, as he shook Philippe's hand. "All is well I take it?"

"With business, yes," answered Philippe, "but I suspect you are not here on business."

"No. Monsieur Corbere, we have a mutual enemy do we not? This man is a paranoid individual who

kills people for, in his words, even thinking counter-revolutionary thoughts.”

“Yes I agree we have a problem.”

“I know you have your reasons for, shall we say, eliminating the problem, and we have ours: good people being executed. So once again I come to you, a powerful man, to ask for help. If the problem were to disappear, there would be many grateful people.”

“I will do what I can Monsieur Michaud, but there may be a price or maybe a favour needed.”

“But of course, you have my address.”

“Well, if that is all, I must get on – business... you know!”

The two men shook hands, and Philippe saw Cesar to the door. Then stood at the window, looking at the same overcast sky.

Perfect, he thought, it would seem Robespierre’s days are numbered – I will see to that.

It had been a long meeting, and Maximilien Robespierre was relieved to leave the building which housed the Committee of Public Safety. The majority of the members were for a more lenient approach to counter-revolution. There had been grumblings that many innocent people were being executed and this was counterproductive to the fledgling republic.

Along with two of his citizen guards Robespierre climbed into his carriage while instructing the driver to take him home. The driver, a figure in a long, black coat with the collars pulled up, nodded and took up the reins. Then with a crack of a whip the carriage, pulled by two grey mares, clattered its way along the empty street.

After speeding along several streets Robespierre realised they were heading in the wrong direction and ordered one guard to bring this to the driver’s attention.

The guard did this by opening the door and tapping his musket on the side of the driver’s seat. There was no reaction as the carriage sped on, drawing up in Place de la Revolution. The guards jumped out and pointed their muskets up at the driver. But there was no one there.

“I’m here,” said Philippe, standing behind them.

They turned around with muskets held at chest height, but found they could move no further than ninety degrees. Suddenly they realized – they were pointing their muskets at each other. But it was too late they blew large holes in one another; blood spraying out of their backs as they fell to the ground.

After a moment Philippe approached the carriage; there was a strong smell of excrement. “Come on out Maximilian, you have a date with Madam Guillotine,” he said, in a mocking voice.

After a few minutes with nothing happening Philippe shouted, “Come out!” The carriage shook for a moment. This roused Robespierre who stepped down from the settling carriage. He was then pulled across the square by an invisible force – the toes of his boots scraping over the cobbles.

With the guillotine looming he pleaded, “Stop this... oh stop this! I’ll give you anything.”

There was no reply as the blade rose and his neck placed in the groove. He tried to struggle free, but it was no good he was being held by a cast iron force. The last thing he saw as the blade sliced through his neck was a grinning face with crimson eyes which said: “You will follow me.”

The next day Philippe sat at his desk staring into space, uninterested in the paperwork in front of him. There will be a backlash, he thought, I must ready myself. Blame will land on the Athiests. But the problem is that I can’t be everywhere. Perhaps I can take a little of the heat off my brothers.

Two days after the death of Robespierre the Committee of Public Safety met; on the agenda was the execution and who was responsible. The committee comprised Robespierre supporters who, although they would never say so, were glad to see the last of him.

Midway through the meeting the ornate ceiling creaked and moaned. Small pieces of white plaster fell onto the members before, the whole ceiling came crashing down. The committee members could only look up in horror as oblivion sped toward them. The ceiling came to a shuddering halt just above head height. Hovering for a moment allowing the grateful men time to scramble out of the room before

it crashed into the floor

Outside, Philippe screamed in mental torment as the ground behind him opened. The figure of a man with black hair and a pallid face slowly rose out of the hole.

Philippe turned in horror, sensing power way beyond his.

“I could not let you kill these men Anatole. Robespierre was a madman; most of these men went along with him out of fear.” Philippe heard in his head.

“Who...who are you?” Philippe shouted.

“I have watched you kill in the name of French patriotism and now revolution. These people are playthings to you; you are no patriot. I know what you desire, and it’s the same thing my mother desires.

Mother, thought Philippe, of course this was Hel’s son.

“You have me at a disadvantage, you know my name, but I don’t know you.”

“You know full well who I am. I am David - son of Jonas – the man who killed himself to save the world from your kind.”

“My kind? But you are of demon stock. I have only limited power, but you... you are a powerful being.”

“I am a demon abandoned by a merciless mother and found sanctuary with humankind.”

“You say I’m not a French patriot. You are wrong this is my country.” Philippe said, turning round and extending his arm.

When he looked back both David, and the hole had gone.

Chapter 31

Matthew and Jane strolled along Spuistraat occasionally stopping to look in a window of the small shops tucked in between the cafes and bars which lined the city thoroughfare.

The New Amstel Bookshop was on the corner of a small lane which led to the Singel Canal. Despite the name, the shop facade was of an old style, and the faded white paint had flaked. The building was typical of Amsterdam: narrow and leaned outward at an angle.

“Are you sure we should do this Mattie? Jane asked looking up at the building, “I mean we’ve no idea who this character is; he might be some kind of psychopathic murderer!”

“I’m sure he means us no harm. It was him that was sitting in the car outside the hotel in Maastricht. He’s the guy we need to talk to for sure.”

Matthew opened the glass door and walked in with Jane following him. The wonderful aroma of brewing coffee filled the air. The shop was deceptively big inside, stretching back quite a way. There was even an upper floor, at the top of a set of narrow stairs.

The lower shop was empty save for an elderly woman flicking through some paperbacks. There were, however, voices coming from upstairs.

Matthew walked to the counter at the back where a tall, middle-aged woman with greying, fair hair stood, and drank coffee while she read a Carlos Ruiz Zafon book.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I was given this,” said Matthew, handing over the letter from the previous evening.

“Ah yes, could you wait here please,” the assistant said as she turned and headed into the back shop.

After a few moments she returned and asked them to follow her. They walked through a storeroom filled with bookshelves on one side, and towels and dishes on a long bench on the other. In the far corner was a green microwave oven sitting on the draining board of a sink. There was a strong odour of pot-pourri which fought with the aroma of the coffee for dominance.

From the storeroom they passed along a short hallway until the woman stopped outside a large mahogany stained door and knocked before entering. She waved Matthew and Jane into the darkened room.

Inside, the room was large, and had hardwood lined walls interspersed with paintings. There were no windows; the limited light came from wall-lamps. The furniture was of leather stretched over steel frames – built to be functional rather than comfortable.

“Please, sit down,” said a rasping voice from behind a large desk.

Surprised, Matthew and Jane looked in the direction from where the voice had come. What they saw was a darkened figure of a man sitting in front of a switched off computer surrounded by books.

“Thank you Aada,” he said as the assistant turned and left the room.

An uneasy silence descended on the room broken only by the constant ticking of a clock.

“Thank you for coming, and I’m sorry for the cloak and dagger stuff, but it’s necessary due to my appearance.” The man said as he brought the lighting up to reveal a face of sallow skin and red eyes below thick, black hair tied in a ponytail.

Jane drew her breath in, but Matthew didn’t blink an eyelid; he had expected it. He had come to expect such things in this shadowy world he now inhabited.

“I am David de Longford. My father was Jonas de Longford. Yes Matthew - I am one of your ancestors.”

“But you are a demon and tried to take the Key by force,” said Matthew.

“I still have demonic powers, but there is the human side, which over the years has intensified. The things I have seen...,” he paused for a moment and looked down at his desk. “The things I have seen have had a profound effect on me, and for a long time now I have pitied the human race.”

David gazed at the young couple before him. “My mother, the goddess, came in dreams while I was living with a family in Arbroath and persuaded me to take the Key. But my human side stopped me from doing any real harm to my father. He would never have revealed the whereabouts of the Key even on the point of death.”

“Where have you been all this time?” Matthew asked.

“I found out my father had been paying the family I was staying with to keep me - the money came from the Abbey funds. This gave me a greater understanding of the caring side of human nature and the love my father had for me. I despised my mother for bringing me into this world then abandoning me. When I realised what he was going to do, I followed him over to what we now call Holland. You see, I was being torn apart by love for my father on one hand and obsession for the Key on the other. I remained around the Abbey at Susteren for many weeks fighting with the demon inside. Then I returned to Scotland.”

David rose from his chair and admired one of his paintings. “When I got back home, there was a letter waiting for me; it was from Jonas outlining what he would do. This news turned my world upside down—now I had no father. I took a local woman, Catherine, as a mate and sired a child- Sarah. I lived as peacefully as I could working in the fields—I looked normal at that time, this appearance grew through the centuries. My father came in dreams from the void and told me where the renegade monks had stashed their ill-gotten gains. I took the artefacts and money; provided for my family and again left for Holland.”

“Sarah must have stayed in the Arbroath area, and continued the line that led to you,” Jane said to Matthew.

“I remained close to the Key to protect it if I could. I took work where I could while I still looked human. When the demon features dominated, I sold a few of the ancient books I found hoarded in Arbroath. That's what I do to this day: I buy and sell ancient religious books.”

“If, as you say, you have lived a long time, so must have the people born after you. Where are they now?” Matthew asked.

“The demon gene is recessive. Many of our relatives have and will live normal lives. You and I are the only ones to have what they call matching alleles.

“The Key left Sustern when the French invaded?” Matthew probed.

“Yes it was taken to Aren Abbey beside Chartres as you have been told by my associate Henri Diebolt. I moved to France where I encountered Anatole Saucier—a very dangerous man obsessed with gaining possession of the Key. He is the head priest of a group called the Order of the Gate. Have you

come across him?”

“I’ve encountered his goons; the living and dead varieties,” said Matthew.

“I see. He is what you would call my nemesis. We have crossed swords a few times. He has demonic powers given to him by the Goddess Hel, and has used them, under the guise of some moral cause or another, to spread evil. You must be alert; you will encounter him on your quest.

Chapter 32

Sarajevo, Bosnia 1914

The cavalcade of cars carrying Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, his wife, staff and certain dignitaries, passed along Sarajevo’s Appel Qui. They were on a visit to the city for the opening of a museum.

As the cars proceeded past a line of onlookers, a man threw a bomb at the Archdukes vehicle, but it bounced off the side and exploded under the following car. The resultant explosion crippled the car and injured twenty people. Other cars, including the one carrying the Archduke sped away.

The wrong car was demobilised in the attempted assassination of Ferdinand, and Gavrilo Princip stuffed the self-loading pistol he had drawn back into his jacket. He then walked down Appel Qui and entered a food shop beside the Latin Bridge where he sat gazing out at the crowds.

After leaving the shop he saw a car similar to the vehicle carrying the Archduke reverse out of a side alley. He realised in fact it was the Archduke’s car, and that the driver had taken a wrong turn. He ran toward the car, pulled out his gun and pointed the barrel into the car then, while maintaining eye contact with the Archduke pulled the trigger twice. The first shot passed through Ferdinand’s jugular, the second hit his wife, Sophie, in the abdomen.

As the driver stalled the car and jumped out screaming Princip ran off stopping to swallow a cyanide pill. He ran to the end of the street, then realising the pill was ineffective pulled the gun. He was going to shoot himself when a crowd of onlookers grabbed him and the gun, before he could pull the trigger.

Further back along the street at the rear of the crowd a figure in a long, grey coat turned around with eyes ablaze. Fabian Fortin put on a brown cap and headed toward the train station. He smiled as he walked; one of the newer, more reliable self-loading pistols he had supplied a terrorist group with had worked well.

Fortin had smuggled the weaponry across the Greek border and sold them to the head man of the Black Hand—a group of Serbian freedom fighters.

The train for Athens left the station at ten to three in the afternoon. Fortin settled down for the long journey. The world was a powder keg, he thought, as he gazed at the dry countryside, which sped past his window. What had happened that day should ignite it, and there would be great demand for the weapons he supplied, he mused?

At the Greek border several guards with rifles boarded the train and checked passports. Fortin handed over his, which had the name Christophe Belanger a Jeweller, born in Paris. The guard checked it then handed it back and moved on; fifteen minutes later the train moved away.

After settling up with a gunrunner in a taverna in the centre of Athens, Fortin made his way to the docks at Piraeus. He would take the night sailing to Bari in Italy.

Chapter 33

France 1914

Fabian Fortin climbed the stairs of the building in Chartres where he rented the upper hall for the weekly meetings of the Order of the Gate. Beethoven's 'Für Elise' was being played in the hall below. He shook his head and thought Ludwig would be turning in his grave if he was listening.

The evening sun, which shone through large gothic arched windows, illuminated the hall. The white plaster walls dropped from a roof supported by oak beams until they reached a pine panelled dado. Fortin greeted the other members as he pulled his habit from a canvas bag. He put the robe on and then helped to set up the wooden altar and draw a chalk circle around which the members now assembled.

"Welcome brethren of the Order of the Gate," he boomed.

"This week's meeting is held in the shadow of great darkness, for as you know the dogs of war howl outside our doors."

"We must ask the great Goddess: the opener of the gate, for her wisdom."

Fortin then began the gate mantra, which the other members repeated.

The chanting became louder and faster until Fortin stepped into the centre of the circle.

"All gathered here will remain true to our cause," he said, in an otherworldly voice. He scanned every member of the group with flame red eyes. "Your selection as members was not random. Your souls have been waiting for this time and will wait for the glorious future event. What is going to happen in the physical world will not detract us from our ultimate cause."

Silence then descended on the meeting as Fortin took his place back in the circle.

The chanting then began again until a brother handed out goblets of wine.

"The Goddess has spoken, now let's drink to her – to the Goddess," said Fortin as he raised his drink.

"To the Goddess," said the group, before they drank the wine.

Chapter 34

River Marne, France 1914

“Sir, the reserve citizen soldiers are here,” said Second Lieutenant Emile Girard, as he climbed down into the crudely made trench during a break in the bombardment.

Captain Serge Leblanc peered over the back of the trench and couldn't believe his eyes. In the distance a fleet of taxis were heading toward his position.

“What is this?” Leblanc asked.

“I believe it's due to the truck shortage sir,” replied Girard.

The black cabs pulled up a kilometre from the front and out of the second car stepped Fabian Fortin who wore, underneath a black greatcoat, the light coloured French uniform. He carried a rifle, trench knife and kit bag as did the rest of the troops alighting from the vehicles.

“Have you men had any training,” said Leblanc to the troops when they lined up in front of him.

“Yes sir, bellowed a Sergeant standing alongside the first line of men.

“Well, you will be assigned to the trenches along the front line. The aim is as you can see to halt the German advance through our country.”

German bombing began again as the new arrivals spread out along the trenches to the west of the river Marne. The French retaliated with big gun bombardment and machine gun fire, but were not as effective as the more accurate Germans.

Fortin lowered himself into his assigned trench and was immediately showered with earth as a shell exploded on impact a few metres away.

“Welcome to hell, said a soldier, reloading his rifle.

“I've come to do my patriotic duty,” said Fortin.

“Well, be my guest, said another soldier, making room at the front of the trench.

Fortin peered over the pock marked no-man's-land and saw the German trenches. Metal filled the air:

whistling then exploding. He rested his left elbow, which supported the rifle, on the piled earth and shot toward the German trenches.

The bombardment and shooting continued for hour after hour, occasionally stopping for short periods. When a trench was hit screams filled the air, and weary looking young men took away dead and dying men on stretchers to the hospital tent.

The young soldier who moved over for Fortin had just turned around to climb down off the earthy platform when a bullet tore through his body spraying blood out of his chest. Fortin caught him as he fell, stared into his eyes and detected darkness.

“Hell can’t be worse than this depravity,” the young man said.

“You will follow me,” said Fortin, with flashes of red in his eyes.

But before the transfer was completed a bullet hit his helmet, which knocked him over into the mud at the bottom of the trench. The boy fell on top coughing up blood over Fortin as he died.

Fortin pushed the body off and stood up, brushing mud off his jacket. These bastards will have to do better than that if they want to do some real harm to me, he thought.

The blanket of night hid the scenes of devastation, but the sounds of fighting kept on: the constant chatter of machine gun fire and the occasional ground shaking explosion. A million fast moving deadly fire flies filled the air.

At two in the morning Fabian Fortin stepped down from the platform to relieve himself when there was a loud whistling followed by a blinding light and terrible heat; then darkness... utter darkness.

He came too, what seemed like minutes later with wetness on his chest. Looking down there was a grimacing face staring up at him with dead eyes. He realised it was a severed head so he pushed it off and stood up. A direct hit destroyed the trench. There were body parts lying in the mud and a terrible stench. He looked himself over; and grinned when he discovered no damage.

There was something different, thought Fortin. The fighting had stopped; there were no sounds of shooting. Also the sky was lightening as dawn was breaking. Time to collect German souls, he thought, his eyes turning flame red and skin a greyish yellow. He then rose into the air with great coat, now in tatters, clinging to him. Over no-man’s-land he flew upright, a metre above the scarred and smoking ground toward the biggest of the enemy trenches.

A young German soldier on lookout quivered as he saw the dark figure with the red eyes of certain death approach. He alerted his comrade, and they took aim and pulled their triggers. But the rifles blew up in their faces killing them instantly.

As an officer appeared from a well-cut underground bunker to see what the commotion was, Fortin moved into the trench and hovered. The man rose into the air with flailing arms and then flew away over into no-man’s-land to die tangled in barbed wire.

All around Fabian Fortin German soldiers shrugged off sleep and, not believing what they saw before them, loaded their rifles only to find they shot each other. One soldier threw a live grenade at Fortin, but before it reached its target, it flew back at the dispatcher—exploding between his legs.

Fortin then moved along the trench, looking menacingly from side to side amid the scenes of confusion. On he flew, amid the smoke, over the back of the trench. Soldiers poured over the back of the trenches and ran toward him. One soldier carried a machine gun into position and blasted away, but he lost control and mowed down his own men. Even worse he could not release the trigger and was finally stopped by a bullet to the head from an officer.

The hovering Fortin had taken up a position a kilometre behind the German trenches and was now facing the advancing troops. A shaking ground threw the soldiers around as if they were dolls. The earth then opened and swallowed the artillery, leaving wheels and the occasional gun barrel protruding above the soil.

Over on the other side of no-man’s-land the French, puzzled as to what was happening, were

preparing to take full advantage of the situation. The troops were attaching bayonets and hooking grenades onto their belts.

A cry of 'vive la France' filled the air as the cream uniformed soldiers poured over on to no-man's-land and charged toward the German lines.

There was little resistance as the French jumped over the front of the enemy trenches and took up position at the back. They shot the vulnerable German troops, who were recovering from what they thought was an earth quake.

The French drove the Germans back over the river Marne; a decisive victory achieved by help from what was called, in some quarters, the Demon of Marne.

Chapter 35

The Somme, France 1916

The line of German reserves marched along the muddy road to Formelles—thirty five kilometres from the main Somme front-line. On either side there was desolation: the ground pockmarked, trees only stumps, and an evil smelling mist penetrating all things.

There was a dead officer lying by the roadside—the skull grinned at them as they marched past. More dead bodies lay entangled in barbed wire a short distance away on what was once no-man's-land between trenches. They were the enemy; British or maybe French; rats the size of small dogs were ripping them apart.

The boom of artillery fire sounded like distant thunder as they marched away. Many of them were under the age of twenty and only a few weeks ago were living ordinary lives. Dieter Weiss was different however; he was marching with a gleam in his eye. This was a return to the killing fields for him—this time on the other side under another name and nationality.

They passed the field hospital, with bandaged men lying outside and heaven knows what horrors inside. Next they marched past supply dumps and artillery, until halted by an officer who then sent them to the trenches to join the sixty first Bavarian Reserves.

A soldier with a drooping black moustache met Weiss and a few of the other reserves as they entered the main trench.

“I’m Corporal Hitler—you men are under me!” he barked.

British and Australian bombardment began at first light the following morning and went on for several hours. The Germans sheltered in their deep bunkers waiting for the ground to stop shaking for that would signal the end of the bombing, and the beginning of the ground offensive.

The Australians came first. Waves of them charged over no-man’s-land with bayonets attached.

“Man the machine guns,” shouted the officers as the Germans flowed out of their bunkers unhurt from the bombardment.

The rattle of machine gun fire filled the air as the first of the Australians were mown down. But still they came breaking into the German lines.

Dieter Weiss rose into the air and pulled out his large field knife as three enemy soldiers jumped over the front of the trench. He then spun at lightning speed—severing their heads. Hitler stood agog, until shaken from his reverie by other Australians entering the trench.

The hand to hand fighting continued along the length of the trench. The chattering of the machine guns began to fade due to Australian soldiers pouring into other German trenches.

An Australian bayonet pierced Adolf Hitler's chest as he turned around to face another onslaught. His assailant then plummeted through the air to his death near the trenches whence he came.

Weiss looked into Hitler’s eyes and said: “You will follow me.”

Hitler’s eyes flashed red as he stood up. He looked at the place where the bayonet had entered his body and there was no mark.

“Praise be to you my Lord,” he shouted.

“Why do you call me lord—I am no lord,” said Weiss

“I know who you are—you are the Anti-Christ. You heal me with your eyes.”

“I am not the Anti-Christ. I am one who waits for a new world.

I am surprised to see you are healed. Clearly you are not to depart this world at this time.”

The Germans repelled the Australians and took back the few trenches they initially lost. A makeshift stockade was erected to house the many prisoners.

The British attack came after the Australian defeat and continued along similar lines, but with less loss of life due to the creeping barrage method they used.

Chapter 36

Ypres, Belgium 1917

Dieter Weiss scanned the enemy lines from the concrete pillbox amid the German trenches around the Belgian village of Passchendaele. On top of the low rise hill he had a commanding view of the British and French in their dugouts.

Around this section of the Western Front Weiss fought for three months since being ordered there after the Somme. It had been a period of gain and loss for both sides.

The British had tried to advance on the German position in July only to be beaten back due to a high casualty rate and bad weather. The torrential rain had turned the shell scarred countryside into a muddy hell. Tanks and artillery had sunk into the ground. Duckboards had to be laid to allow troops to move around. Decaying dead bodies lay everywhere because it was far too risky to lift them for fear of being shot then drowning in the mud.

October had seen the arrival of the Canadians, and apprehension grew among the Germans, for the new arrivals were the most feared of the allied forces.

The allied push came on the twelfth when troops left the relative safety of their dugouts and slogged up the slopes toward the German lines. The machine guns opened, and the slaughter began again. Through grim determination and vast amounts of courage the allied troops, led by the Canadians, reached the German trenches.

Dieter Weiss reached for his field knife as the first of the enemy surged over the front of his trench. The knife felt good in his hand; it felt like it was full of menace.

The Canadian's rifles mysteriously jammed as they tried to shoot the trench bound Germans. Then a swirling tornado passed in front of them and, to their horror, and the Germans, their insides fell out of massive slashes across their bellies.

The next wave of allied soldiers found themselves thrust back down the slope by some monumental unseen force. The German machine gunners took advantage by picking them off before they could recover.

A figure standing on a neighbouring hilltop drew his attention as Weiss stood over his handiwork. The hill was just behind German lines. Whoever he was, he wasn't an enemy, or... was he? Weiss thought.

Within the bat of an eyelid David de Longford was standing right in front of Weiss—his eyes blazing red.

“You!” Weiss screamed.

“I've told you before Anatole these people are not your playthings.”

David flew backwards and crashed into a stunned soldier manning a machine gun. He picked himself up and dusted himself off, then walked toward Weiss. Suddenly he found he could move no further as if there was an invisible wall in front of him. David smiled and waved his hand, then walked.

“No... stay away,” squealed Weiss.

“I've seen enough, your part is over in this war.” David announced.

Dieter Weiss rose into the air, with flailing arms, and then shot away at blinding speed much to the amazement and horror of the on-looking Germans. When they turned to confront David; there was no one there.

On the seventh of November the allied troops took Passchendaele. Although the Germans still ringed the town, it was a major achievement—a victory at high cost.

Chapter 37

The slate grey 3.2 litre Audi eased its way into Maastricht's Keizer Karelplein and parked behind a dark, blue Peugeot 407.

It was raining as Didier Grondin tapped on the passenger side window of the Peugeot and then walked toward the entrance to the Basilica of Saint Servatius. Georges Lagrange and Alain Caron opened their doors and followed. Inside, they made their way to the treasury and approached a female assistant who was cleaning a glass display case.

“Can you tell me where the Head of the Treasury is?” Grondin asked, as he fought a growing nauseousness.

“If you mean Father Lens, he's in the Restoration Laboratory. But you can't go in...”

Grondin and his two colleagues hurried toward the laboratory with the assistant following them. They pushed the door open, walked in and shut it, leaving the assistant on the other side.

Father Lens looked up from the book he was studying.

“O heavenly Father!” he said, as he looked into Grondin’s eyes, which were turning red.

“Now Father go and tell your assistant that everything is okay.”

Father Lens got up off his seat, opened the door and said: “It’s okay Symonne carry on with the cleaning.”

“We both know why I’m here. So to save any unpleasantry’s why don’t you tell me where the Key is?” Grondin said, as Father Lens closed the door.

“Key, what key would this be?”

“Oh Father you disappoint me,” growled Grondin.

The priest rose into the air and his body became horizontal – belly down.

“Oh!” He cried, as he rose further and further until pinned to the ceiling.

“I’ll ask you once again. Where is the Key?”

The old man sensed a great pressure build up around him as a thousand devils, in his mind, screamed at him to reveal what he knew.

There was a gentle knock on the door.

“Grandfather are you in there,” said a young girl’s voice.

Grondin looked up at Father Lens with even more menacing red eyes and an evil grin.

“Okay, I’ll tell you the little I know just let me send her on her way.”

The priest opened the door onto a small, blond-haired girl with bright, blue eyes after being lowered to the floor.

“I’m busy just now Lisle, you go see your father across the Quad, and I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, all I know is of an abbot called Henri Diebolt,” said Father Lens after the girl had gone.

“And where do we find this Diebolt?” Grondin asked.

“Heavenly Father forgive me. He is abbot of Aren Abbey beside Chartres.”

“Chartres!” Grondin shouted, “you mean to say the Key’s close to where I live.”

“Oh I don’t think it’s there.”

“Don’t you? Well there’s only one way to find out,” said Grondin, as he made his way to the door.

“Oh, and Father don’t get handy with the telephone as I’m leaving Georges and Alain here for now,” he said as he opened the door. He then looked at Lagrange and Caron and said: “Keep an eye on him; I’ll phone you when I get there.”

With that he swept out of the Basilica, fired up his Audi and sped out of Maastricht.

Rain drops battered on his windscreen as Didier Grondin turned his car into the driveway which led up to Aren Abbey. The journey from Maastricht had taken over three hours of hard driving, but there were no signs of tiredness written on his face.

The rain eased as Grondin parked the Audi and walked up to the large wooden gates. He expected them to be locked, but he pushed one side open and walked into a dark courtyard. Before him at the far side was the main door to the Abbey; on either side there were cloisters hidden in shadow. He walked toward the main door when a monk in a grey habit approached.

“Can I help you friend?” asked the man.

“I have urgent business with the Abbot. please tell me where he is.”

“He’ll be at prayer, in the Abbots House. Have you an appointment?”

“I don’t need one,” growled Grondin with flashes of red in his eyes.

He then walked over to the only door visible in the cloisters. The monk walked after him.

“You must leave; you’re not welcome here,” shouted the brother.

Grondin pushed the door open and stepped into a smaller courtyard. He looked around and glimpsed a two-storey building hiding behind a wall with a small wooden gate.

“Ah yes the Abbots House,” he said, walking toward the building.

Greeted by a smoky, musty atmosphere, which made him nauseous after opening the front door Grondin looked around downstairs, but there was no one there. He then climbed the stairs feeling more unwell with every step. At the top of the staircase there were three doors on the landing. He looked in the first, it was the toilet. He looked in another it was an empty bedroom. The final door was ajar, and blue smoke was wafting out of the room.

“Stop!” shouted the monk who came running up the stairs.

Grondin pushed the door open then switched on the light. He then stepped in followed by the monk.

“Oh, heavenly Father!” cried the holy man.

Hanging from one of the high rafters with a noose around his neck was Henri Diebolt. There was a stepladder next to the body, which Grondin climbed until he came face to face with the dead abbot.

“Now why did you do this?” Grondin asked the pale distorted face. “Someone tipped you off about me. But who? Curses... de Longford!”

He climbed down the stepladder, then passed the whimpering monk and looked into the smouldering fire, which had spilled out on to the hearth.

“No clues left, eh!”

Grondin left the building and strode back through the two courtyards. He then left the Abbey grounds in heavy rain, found his car and raced along the driveway. Before he reached the main road, he pulled into the side. What now? he thought as he watched the raindrops run down the windscreen. He had to find these two brats. But where would he look? De Longford was pivotal. Where was he last seen? Ah yes... Amsterdam.

Grondin took out his mobile phone and called Lagrange. “Georges.”

“Yes.”

“It’s Amsterdam, that’s where these two interfering brats are, and I’ll wager that’s where the Key is. But we’ll need to tread carefully, because there’s an old enemy of mine there. You and Alain head through there, and I’ll meet you tomorrow.”

Didier Grondin then eased the car out onto the main road and headed for Chartres. He was much more satisfied now things had started to fit into place.

Chapter 38

Russia 1917

A cold wind blew over the land as a covered truck chugged into the small town of Tonos thirty kilometres from Petrograd. It was late October, and although it was five-thirty in the afternoon, it was already dark.

The truck came to a halt in the main square and a group of men led by a tall man with a beard walked up to the passengers door. He wore a big, grey coat and a brown, flat cap. The others were dressed similar to the leader.

Fabian Fortin emerged from the passenger door and approached the group.

“You are Lenin?” he asked the man with the beard.

“I am Vladimir Lenin, yes,” replied the man.

“Then I have something for you.” Fortin said, walking round to the back of the truck.

He undid the knotted ropes and pulled open the canvas coverings. Both men then pulled themselves up into the vehicle where several wooden cases lay on the floor.

Fortin grabbed a crowbar and levered off the lid of one crate.

“Are these what you want?” He asked Lenin as both men stared at the self-loading rifles.

Lenin lifted a rifle out of the box and weighed it in his hands, “it’s heavy.”

“They're Browning self-loading prototypes; the real thing's not due out until next year.”

“Ironic isn't it my friend? Capitalist rifles for a Bolshevik revolution,” said Lenin with a twinkle in his eyes.

“These guns will do the job for you. There are two hundred in twenty crates.”

Lenin nodded to his followers to empty the truck.

“Tell me comrade, why do you do this for us? The money is surely less than you could make elsewhere. Are you a Marxist sympathizer?”

“Your politics, as with anyone else’s politics, do not interest me. What interests me is your religion or rather your lack of it,” said Fortin, staring at Lenin with red eyes.

Unnerved, Lenin stepped back and paid the man. His gut instinct told him that this was not a man to trifle with, and the sooner he left the better.

“Long live the revolution,” said Lenin, as Fortin climbed into the truck.

“Yeah,” said Fortin, as his driver fired up the engine.

The truck did a U-turn in the square and then disappeared into the night.

Chapter 39

Petrograd, Russia
25th October 1917

The Winter Palace shivered in the frost of the autumn night. In front of the exquisite grandeur of the building amassed a vast gathering of Bolshevik revolutionaries. Led by Vladimir Lenin, these people were there to seize a better or fairer life.

Inside, protected by a battalion of Cossacks, a female brigade and a few cadets were the Provisional Government.

“Comrade Lenin, do we attack the palace?” shouted a big man with a self-loading rifle in his hands. There was no immediate reply.

By the River Neva not far from the palace, Fabian Fortin looked at his watch. “Come on then Lenin get on with it,” he said to himself.

Then, just after he said that one of the big guns on the battle cruiser Aurora, moored beside the palace, moved round until it was aiming at the building. Then with a blast that shook the frosty night, it fired a blank.

Fortin watched as the Bolsheviks charged up to and then into the palace. There was no resistance—the Cossacks, and the others had fled. The whole thing’s been staged, he thought. He turned away laughing, “yeah, long live the revolution!”

Chapter 40

At six-thirty in the evening the phone rang in Matthew and Jane's hotel room.

"Hello." Matthew said, into the receiver.

"Matthew, it's David de Longford here; there have been developments, and things are moving faster than I would have liked. Can you meet me at Bourbon Street Blues Club in Leidsekruistraat? It's not far from Leidse Plien. I'll be there at ten thirty."

"Right." Matthew said and then replaced the receiver.

The club was easy to spot due to there being plastic statues of the Blues Brothers on the roof.

"That must be it," said Jane as she pointed at the statues.

Inside, the club was more dark than just dimly lit. The tables, which were shelves, were on two walls of the room: the front and the left-hand side. On the right there was a long, old-fashioned bar. The whole club had an old-fashioned character. The stage took up the whole of the back wall and was fringed with red velvet curtains. A band of four musicians: three guitarists and a drummer were checking the tuning of their instruments.

There were forty people in the place, mainly couples and groups of men.

Matthew looked around for David but couldn't see him.

Jane pointed to an empty table along the left-hand side. "Let's sit there."

As they sat the band played the Muddy Waters song: 'Houchie Couchie Man.' A waitress appeared and asked what they would like to drink. "A pint of Guinness, and a Tia Maria and lemonade please," said Matthew, looking at Jane, who nodded her head.

David de Longford appeared out of the gloom and sat at their table. He was wearing his long, black coat and homburg.

A waiter delivered the drinks, and David paid for them keeping his hat well down over his face.

"Anatole Saucier knows you are here, and he will assume the Key is here as well," said David, as he tapped his foot along to Johnny Winter's 'Johnny Guitar'. "If he and his henchmen aren't here yet they will be soon," he continued.

"How do you know this?" Matthew asked.

"He visited Henri Diebolt."

"So he told him the story he told us."

"No because Henri hanged himself before Saucier got to him."

"What...?" Jane shouted.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Matthew.

"Saucier knows I'm involved, and he'll know I'm in Amsterdam. So you should go back to your hotel; checkout and then come to stay under my protection at New Amstel books. Oh shit! Excuse me?" David said, as he left his seat and walked up to the stage.

The band were playing Rory Gallagher's version of 'Bullfrog Blues', and the guitarist was making a hash of the slide solos. David climbed onto the stage and stood in front of him and asked for his guitar. The man took one look at David and handed the Fender Stratocaster over as he waved the bouncers away.

De Longford played the most exciting slide guitar finish to the song that the audience had heard, for they were on their feet at the end shouting for more. David coolly handed the guitar back and left the stage.

“I shouldn’t have done that, but I couldn’t resist it,” he said, when he got back to the table. “I’d better go now; remember, go and checkout and come over to the book shop. Take cabs and beware!”

“You must go to the bank tomorrow, get the Key and destroy it,” said David as he sat in his office with Matthew and Jane later that evening. “I’ll clear the way for you first thing in the morning.”

“Okay,” said a yawning Matthew.

“Let’s get some rest now,” said David, rising from his chair.

Chapter 41

Munich 1920

Dieter Weiss strolled into the Bavarian Beer Keller and sat at the end of a bench amid the drunken hustle and bustle of a Munich Saturday night. A waitress appeared from the throng around the bar, and he ordered a large beer.

The bar was of old design with oak beams which ran the width of the ceiling. Pinned to them were crests and photographs of places in Bavaria. Pine benches and tables ran the length of the room. The windows, six panes of obscured glass, had dark shapes passing back and forth behind them.

Many doors at the back of the Keller led off to private lounges, and through one of those doors appeared a man with black hair and a short moustache. Dressed in a light grey suit with collar and tie he approached a waitress and ordered more drinks. Then, turning around to return back to the lounge, he caught sight of Weiss sitting looking at him.

For what seemed like hours the two men locked their vision on each other oblivious to what was happening around them.

“My Lord.” Hitler said, after recovering from the shock and making his way over to the bench where Weiss was sitting.

“Sit down Adolf.” Weiss said in a low voice.

“I have been searching for you,” said Hitler.

“And now you’ve found me, or rather I have found you.”

“After Formelles you went to Ypres—yes?” Hitler asked, in his Austrian accented German.

“Yes, I was amid the mud of Passchendaele.”

“We fought bravely throughout the war, but the gods were against us. Now look at Germany: a super power on her knees; strife and unrest on the streets, rampant unemployment, and the economy in tatters. The military might is still there, it needs revitalised. The country needs a new leader; it needs a glorious new direction.”

“And this party of yours I’ve heard of will deliver?”

“Yes, with you in our ranks we will restore Germany back to where it belongs.”

“As I have told others I’m not interested in politics; not yours, not anyone else’s. I am however interested in your soul; you have the type of soul I require.”

“You frighten me my Lord. I am not ready to depart this world.”

“Yes I know. I am the priest of an order which would be of interest to you. Will you come along to a meeting and join?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good, we meet on Tuesday night in Nueller Hall on Schollerstrasse. Until then I bid you farewell.” Weiss said as he stood up and then walked out of the bar.

Hitler sat lost in thought until the waitress brought him out of his reverie by asking for payment.

“Of course,” he said, reaching for his wallet.

After paying her he returned to the back lounge; back to his friends, there was important business to discuss.

The chanting reverberated around the cavernous hall recently converted to a gymnasium. Light from candles placed around the floor pushed the encroaching darkness away.

Adolf Hitler stood blindfolded in the centre of a circle of thirty brethren. He had a golden goblet of red wine before him. Dieter Weiss, who had introduced the initiation ceremony, stood at an altar in a trance.

As the chanting got louder and louder the brethren took out their cocks and masturbated into goblets they had placed in front of them. As the chanting came to a halt the goblets were emptied into the initiates drink.

“Brother Hitler do you swear allegiance to the Goddess Hel and to merge your eternal soul and body with ours?” Weiss said.

“I do.”

“Then drink the fluids of life and death,” commanded Weiss as the goblet was handed to Hitler.

He took up a place in the circle after the blindfold was removed. He joined in the chanting, which seemed to be trying to wrench his soul out of his body. Looking up into the raftered ceiling he was sure he saw small, winged demons flying about in the shadows. When he lowered his vision again Weiss was standing in the middle of the circle – eyes crimson.

“Brothers, there are a few among us tonight who consider a new direction; that is for them to take. They *will* re-join us on our path to releasing the ancient ones, and creating a new beginning on the earth,” growled Weiss. He then rose into the air and flew over the group to take up his place at the altar.

The chanting, which had been low while Weiss was talking rose in volume again until it tailed off marking the end of the meeting.

“What was in that goblet? It wasn’t just wine now was it?” Hitler asked Weiss as they were leaving.

“The wine symbolizes life as in blood, while another ingredient: part of our bodies, symbolizes death. We are, if you will, the living dead of the Dark Dimension. This man will explain it in more detail,” said Weiss, putting his arm on the shoulders of a small plump man with spectacles and a feint moustache. “Adolf, meet Heinrich Himmler.”

Earlier, Joshua Levine climbed the stairs of the Nueller Hall. The chanting coming from the doors of the gymnasium had roused his curiosity. He had been late in leaving the chess club after doing some tidying up in the small function suite just inside the main outer door under the stairs. He put his hand on the handle of the double doors and tried to turn it, but it was locked. The chanting was becoming louder causing an increase in his curiosity.

He fetched a chair from the function suite and placed it in front of the door to the gymnasium. He then climbed onto it and peered through the small window at the top of the entrance.

What Joshua saw turned his whole life upside down. A man was flying upright through the air—no not a man—something with what looked like rotting skin and red eyes. The thing landed beside an altar behind a circle of hooded figures, which were the source of the chanting.

Oh my God, thought Joshua, a bunch of Satan worshippers. He stumbled back off the chair and ran down the stairs. He then unlocked the main door and ran out into the night air. Breathing deeply he tried to calm down, but images of what he had just witnessed thundered back into his mind’s eye.

After a while he walked of into the dark.

Chapter 42

Munich 1921

Dieter Weiss arrived early at the Nueller Hall for the evenings meeting of the Order of the Gate. He unlocked the main outer door, climbed the steps and entered the empty gymnasium.

While he was setting up the altar, the large street-side windows exploded into a frenzy of flying glass, and bricks ricocheted off the far wall.

“Shit!” Weiss shouted, as he ran out of the door, down the stairs and out on to the street. He was just in time to see Joshua Levine, and a group of other young Jewish men run away. He turned to inspect the damage and was confronted by a slogan daubed in red paint on the wall under the broken windows which read: ‘Satanists out’

Adolf Hitler arrived with Heinrich Himmler just as Weiss was about to re-enter the building.

“Do you know who did this?” asked Hitler, looking at the graffiti.

“Some Jewish kids; I recognised them from this neighbourhood.”

“Vermin,” said Himmler.

“They must have been spying on the meetings.” Weiss said.

Hitler looked at Weiss and said: “I’ll deal with this.”

“No Adolf, they’ve no idea what they’re dealing with—or maybe they do! Their time will come. I’ll have this cleaned up early tomorrow before news of this spreads.”

After the meeting Weiss asked Hitler to remain.

“I heard you’re now absolute ruler of the National Socialists.”

“You heard right my lord.”

“What’s your next move? Are you going to take over the country?”

“We will call for a Putsch to overthrow the central government. Germany needs a strongman to unite the people and make the country great again after that humbling surrender in 1918. We were sold out by politicians of the left, another lot whose time will come. I have no time for Bolshevism or Jewry; two evils determined to take over the world. This episode tonight has made me more determined to stop them.”

Chapter 43

Germany 1934

The telephone in Dieter Weiss's Berlin law office rang as he sat and watched leaves being blown around by a blustery wind. He swung round on his revolving chair and grabbed the receiver.

"Hitler here," said a harsh voice.

"Ah Chancellor, what can I do for you?"

"I would like to invite you to meet some people. Are you free tonight at seven?"

"Yes."

"Good, I will send a car for you."

Weiss swung back and continued staring out of the window. His reflection stared back at him and asked: "Who are these people he wants me to meet?"

At seven precisely a black Citroen drew up outside the building which housed Weiss's office. Weiss left the shelter of the outer lobby and opened the rear passenger door and then he slid along the well-worn leather seat.

"Good evening Sir," said the driver dressed in Nazi uniform.

"Good evening," replied Weiss.

The journey took fifteen minutes through the busy streets of Berlin, the car pulling up outside a red brick building known as the Rotes Rathaus. Heinrich Himmler in his black SS uniform greeted Weiss as he left the car.

"I'm sure you will find this interesting my Lord. These people point the way to the future for the Nazi Party."

"Ha! We'll see about that," said Weiss under his breath as he followed Himmler through the large outer doors and down a staircase to the basement.

In the candle lit chamber Weiss could make out the figure of Adolf Hitler amid a hoard of robed men. "Who are these people?" he asked Himmler.

"The Thule Society," answered the SS commander.

Ah yes, thought Weiss, the proponents of 'The Hollow Earth Theory' and people from Atlantis. Surely these top Nazi's were not taken in by all that?

"Do you wish to be initiated my Lord?" asked Himmler, donning a black robe.

"No, I wish to witness what transpires before I commit—surely you know whatever happens here will

stay with me.”

“Yes, of course.”

The altar, in the centre of the room, thought Weiss had strange items on it for a theoretical occult society. There was a human skull, a ram’s skull and a ceremonial dagger.

The Master of Ceremonies entered the chamber, and the brethren chanted Latin phrase. Weiss could sense a pulse of evil reverberate through the atmosphere. He thought, this is no theoretical occult society, these people are Satanists.

“All praise to the Master,” shouted the Master of Ceremonies.

“Praise to the Master,” shouted the hoard.

In the shadows at the back of the room Weiss had to stifle a laugh.

A door at the far side of the hall opened, and two brothers dragged in a young Jewish boy – his feet scrapping along the ground.

The boy was stripped and laid on the altar. The rams skull complete with huge horns was placed on his head. Paralysing drugs made his body seem as if he didn’t care; his eyes, however, told a different story.

“I give you this gift of life my lord, and ask for your continued guidance,” said the Master of Ceremonies, as he plunged the dagger into the boy’s heart.

The boy arched his back and emitted a strained cry as the life force ebbed from him. The Master of Ceremonies swayed his head as if in ecstasy over what he saw in front of him; it appeared as if he had absorbed the sacrifices energy. He spoke in a hoarse alien voice: “Brothers, the masters have instructed me to tell you to continue on the current path. The one among us – the new messiah – will lead Germany to glorious victories over all. You must crush any resistance and wipe the earth clean of those who are inferior,” the man paused for a moment. “There is one among us tonight who is an unbeliever and scoffs at our plans. But I feel energy... aargh!”

Weiss turned to face the wall, his eyes a deep crimson after strangling the man’s mind as the brethren ran to the aid of the slumped figure.

After the meeting Himmler approached Weiss, who was making his way toward the door.

“Will you join us?” he asked.

“I thought this society was about grail legends and hollow earth theories?”

“Oh yes, it is, we believe in many things. It's adapted somewhat– all for the good of the Third Reich.”

“Hienrich, don’t let impostors, psychopaths and conmen take you in. Will I see you at the next meeting of the order?”

Himmler stared over at Hitler. “Yes my lord,” he said, returning his gaze to Weiss.

Two weeks later at the Nueller Hall, Weiss was preparing the altar for the evenings meeting. The brethren were putting on their robes when, without warning the doors flew open and ten armed storm troopers strode in and formed a semicircle around the members.

“The Fuhrer orders this meeting to stop,” said a young Sergeant. “I am authorised to use force if needed,” he continued.

The members protested, but Weiss raised his hands. “Brothers, please go I will contact you all in good time.”

“Good riddance,” said Joshua Levine, who stood at the bottom of the stairs as Weiss descended.

So that was it: the Satanists had poisoned the minds of Hitler and Himmler against him, thought Weiss as he walked along the street toward his office. He had played a submissive role and let them choose their own path. There was another matter, however, that required attention.

Chapter 44

Paris 1938

Herschel Grynszpan walked up to the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath on the crowded street in front of the German Embassy and shouted: “This is for the treatment of my family and Jews everywhere.” He then shot him at point blank range – five times.

The guards from the embassy seized Grynszpan and pinned him to the ground, then held him there amid chaotic scenes until the police arrived and took him away

Grynszpan was beaten and questioned before being bundled into a small cell with a barred window and an old mattress on the floor.

The next morning when they returned to the cell the police were astounded to see a large hole where the window had been, and no sign of the prisoner. Meanwhile at Gare de l’Est Dieter Weiss boarded a train which would take him back to Munich.

Chapter 45

Germany 1938

Joshua Levine and his family were asleep upstairs in their Munich home when the front door burst open. Sounds of shouting and crashing reverberated through the house.

Joshua was punched in the stomach by a uniformed man as he ran down the stairs. After he found his wind he was shocked to see Nazi Storm Troopers smashing up his home and worse, some of them were climbing the stairs.

“Leave my family alone! Why are you doing this?” He bellowed, before he saw stars and darkness consumed him.

When he came round he was lying on the front lawn. His wife Gerda was trying to resuscitate her mother who was lying beside him.

“What happened?”

“Those bastards have taken David and Ruth,” she howled, “and I can’t bring mother round. Looks as if she’s had a heart attack with them pulling her from her bed and leaving her out here in the cold. When I was being pulled down the stairs, I saw you being hit over the head with a club and then kicked.”

Joshua stood up slowly, wincing from the pains around his body. The sounds of screaming and smashing filled the night as other Jews in the neighbourhood suffered the same treatment. He could see flames leaping from the synagogue several streets away.

“I must get the children back,” he shouted, as he ran along the street, wiping the tears out of his eyes.

“Joshua, wait!” Gerda screamed, but he had gone.

He ran after a truck from where he heard screams coming from the back.

“Stop, you murdering bastards!” he shouted at the top of his voice.

The truck stopped, and the barrel of a rifle poked through the drapes at the back. Joshua halted and stared in shock at the gun. There was a flash of light, then for the second time that night darkness engulfed him, but this time the light would not return.

Hours before, in a hall in the centre of Munich, where the elite of the Nazi party commemorated the

anniversary of the putsch. Josef Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister, having heard of the murder of Ernst vom Rath in Paris asked Hitler, the Fuhrer, to unleash the storm troopers.

Chapter 46

Berlin 1941

Dieter Weiss climbed into the black Citroen and sat in the back seat with Heinrich Himmler, who then gave orders to the driver.

“So kind of you to give me a lift,” said Weiss.

“You are welcome as always my Lord,” replied Himmler. After a pause he continued, “there appears to be something on your mind?”

“These attacks on the Order are, as you know, becoming more frequent. It appears we are an easy target for retaliation against your party; the Jews blame us for stirring up trouble.”

“What would you have me do? There has been much tit for tat going on behind our backs most of which we have sorted out.”

“Well, perhaps you could remove the problem.”

“What have you in mind?”

“The German army has taken Kiev, and it looks as if Moscow will fall soon. You are pushing the Bolsheviks east why not take the German Jews and put them in their place?”

“It’s not as easy as that; although the Red Army is being pushed back, there are vast amounts of Poles, Latvians and Ukrainians living in what is now German occupied territory. We have evicted Jews from their homes in these lands and replaced them with ethnic Germans. So if we move Reich Jews there what do we do with the locals who are in holding camps?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something Heinrich.”

“Your stop my Lord,” said Himmler, as the car slowed down.

“Yes, thank you.”

“My pleasure and I will look into your suggestion.”

All over Germany, from autumn 1941 to spring 1942, ordinary people were rounded up and put on crowded trains for the east. Families split up, old people thrown out of homes they had lived in all their lives. Children cried for their parents; parents cried for their children; brothers looked for their sisters.

As the trains rattled through Poland locals taunted the prisoners. “They’ll make lampshades with your skin,” they cried.

The overall problem was that the war with Russia was not going as well as expected and there were many Soviet Jews in holding centres. Many of these people were shot in cold blood to create space for the arriving Reich Jews. Other Jews were gassed in hermetically sealed vans adapted for mass murder. Eventually the difference between German and Soviet Jews disappeared, and people were killed arriving from the west.

Chapter 47

Poland 1941

Aaron Katz glowered at the Polish countryside from the crowded carriage of the train bound for Treblinka camp. There was a small wooden house set in the middle of a field of crops waving in the wind. The scene reminded him of a boat ploughing its way through a green sea, but did nothing to relieve the dread he felt.

“It looks bad for us my friend,” said Rudi Levy. He was a fellow Berliner who had also been held at a holding centre in southern Poland and then herded onto the Treblinka train.

“Yes, said Aaron, “it’s the children I feel most for—we’re old men.”

“Old or young it’s wrong. And the question has to be why? What have we done?”

“It’s because we’re born Jewish my friend,” said Aaron taking his head in his hands.

“But I am still passionate about my religion; nothing, or no one will take that away from me,” he said raising his head.

Rudi stared out of the window. “Last year I was a respectable lawyer with a good practice where I had been for twenty years. Then one day I was fired for negligence... negligence! Never have I been negligent. I tried for employment with other practices, but as soon as they saw my name or my face the door closed.”

“It’s been the same for all of us my friend, the Nazis have turned everyone against us. And now we’re on our way to beg for our lives,” said Aaron as he looked despairingly at a young girl crying.

“I don’t even know if my family are alive, before leaving Berlin we were separated. I won’t see them again and now as you say we will be...” Rudi couldn’t finish the sentence as his emotions overwhelmed him.

The train came to a shuddering halt and people were thrown forward with the resultant force. For a moment, mayhem reigned until the guards fired a few shots. Aaron looked out of the window for an explanation, but all he could see was - the Polish countryside.

The driver had pulled on the brakes and brought the train to a standstill and was standing looking at

the track where a section was missing when the Captain of the guards came running.

“What’s happened here?”

“I don’t know. The rails are lying over there,” said the driver pointing to some twisted metal in a ditch.

“This looks bad,” said the Captain as he turned to watch some of his men running along the side of the train. “Get back into the train!” he barked. But it was too late; a tornado crashed through the fence of a nearby field, and the men were thrown to their deaths.

David de Longford then stood in front of the Captain, hair flapping in the wind and eyes blazing red. The train driver crossed himself, then he and his fireman ran.

“These people are going no further.” David said.

“We’ll see about that,” said the Captain, levelling his rifle at the demon.

But, he looked in amazement as the tip of the rifle’s barrel curled. Then David waved his arm, and the soldier flew off to his death beside his men.

David walked slowly along one side of the train as rifles were pushed through opened windows and trained on him. The triggers were pulled, but no shots fired. Soldiers who held rifles crashed through the windows and fell to the ground with broken necks.

The passengers inside the train cheered as they gathered round the windows and doors.

“You can come out now,” shouted David, “You’re free to go. I don’t know where you’ll go, or how you’ll get there. But these are difficult and dangerous times for all.”

At first only a trickle of people stepped down from the carriages, but this soon turned into a torrent. Some looked for their saviour. Not being able to find him they went over to where the Nazi soldiers lay and spat on them, then drifted off in the direction the train had come.

When the former captives had left, the engine, still steaming, broke free from the carriages and rose into the air a few metres. The locomotive swivelled around ninety degrees then fell down on to the track, toppled over amid plumes of steam and acrid smoke while emitting a manic hiss.

Two hours later another train puffed along the track bound for Treblinka. The driver slowed the engine down and pulled his whistle as horror grabbed him when he saw the engine lying across the track. He then saw an image out of the corner of his eye and turned around to see David de Longford standing behind him.

“Oh fuck!” shouted his young fireman, at the sight of the demon.

“Leave now, and I will spare your lives,” said David, in his deep rasping voice.

The train came to a very definite halt-crashing into the back of the stationary carriages - as the two men leapt from the plate and ran off across the fields.

David flew onto the top of the first carriage and walked toward the rear of the train.

“Come out Nazis,” he commanded. “You’re going no further.”

After a while he heard shots. Anger grabbed him, and he emitted an eardrum piercing screech as the roof of the carriage peeled back. He then descended into the hell of guards shooting their prisoners.

“If you want someone to shoot, then shoot me,” he screamed.

The three guards levelled their rifles at him, but before they could pull their triggers, the butts flew up with great force and smashed into their jaws, knocking them down. Then the captives leapt onto the unconscious guards and kicked them to death as David left the carriage.

Outside, the people from the three other carriages were standing at the trackside cheering—the other guards having ran off after witnessing what had happened—as the others joined them. The train then groaned as it pushed further into the engine and the carriages in front until the two trains became a massive zigzag.

A teenage Jewish boy stared at David. “Why are you helping us?”

“Because I know the man who instigated the suffering your people are going through at present.”

“Adolf Hitler?”

“No, he’s worse; he’s driven not by political ideology, but by evil intent. He cares for no human being; they are his playthings until he gets what he wants.”

“Is he like you?” the boy asked, “I mean with the power you have.”

“Yes,” said David. “The power of the damned; now enough, you must catch up with your people-and take care.”

The next day another train appeared out of the early morning mist. Steam and smoke was being puffed out in great white clouds lined with dark grey, and dotted with red sparks. The engine sped on toward the block on the line and came to a halt centimetres from the back carriage of the previous train. Then silence reigned save for the hiss of steam.

David peered through the grimy glass of the carriages.

“Are you looking to save more of these pathetic creatures,” growled a soulless voice.

Chapter 48

Matthew and Jane entered the Abn Ambro Bank on Dam Square as the bells of the Royal Palace announced that it was ten in the morning. They walked over to the personal banking service desk and asked the receptionist for Mr Engelbrecht-as instructed by David de Longford.

After a moment a tall fair-haired man with pale, blue eyes appeared from behind a partition.

“You’ll be Mr Wilson and Miss Cargill?”

“Yes,” answered Matthew.

“I’m Rolf Engelbrecht,” the man said shaking both their hands. “I’ll need to see ID before we go ahead.”

They gave him their passports.

“Yes that’s fine,” the banker said after studying both of them. “Mr de Longford said you’d be here at ten prompt,” he continued.

He took them along a corridor with ornate columns spaced along each wall until they came to a secure door with a keypad next to the handle. After punching in a four digit code he opened the door and invited them through.

As they descended a clean, modern well-lit staircase the banker turned his head to the side. “We’re now going down to a secure vault.”

At the bottom of the stairs two armed guards stood before two large, round, secure doors. On the wall, in between the doors, was what initially looked like an automatic teller machine. But as Rolf bent

down to gaze into the small screen, Matthew and Jane together said, “a retinal scan!”

The red light above the screen changed to green and one of the guards spun the handle of the right-hand side vault. The door opened with a hiss. The pair then followed the official into the vault which contained secure drawers of various sizes, one on top of the other up each wall to a height of ten metres. The place stretched back half a kilometre and smelled musty, not old building musty more factory musty.

“It’s hermetically sealed and kept at a constant temperature. If only people knew what was under Dam Square,” said Rolf with a smile.

He pulled the mobile metal staircase a few metres along the left-hand wall of drawers and then applied the brake.

“Well here you are, number five hundred and seventeen,” said Rolf, handing Matthew the key.

Matthew and Jane climbed the steps as Rolf went off to chat with the guards outside the vault.

“Oh God here we go then,” said Matthew, as he pushed the key into the slot and turned.

The lock clicked, and the drawer slid out towards them. Inside there was a package of white cloth with brown tape wrapped around it. Matthew lifted it out, and with shaking hands removed the tape; then opened the cloth to reveal the Key.

“Heavens!” Jane said, “it’s so... ordinary.

“What did you expect, some sort of flashing green neon thing?” said Matthew.

“No, to be honest I didn’t know what to expect.”

The Key was fifteen centimetres long and made of dull, brown bronze, which had an even green patina; the action part of the piece was set at a right angle-common to many ancient keys. The handle section measured ten centimetres by three centimetres, ended in a ring and engraved with symbols similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Matthew stared at the symbols and felt something start to stir deep down in his soul, something very old; something very sinister. As he gazed at the Key, the thing from his past came thundering into his consciousness and tried to grab control of his mind.

“No!” he cried, as he wrapped the Key back in its cloth.

“What’s up with you?” Jane asked.

“Nothing. Let’s get out of here,” said Matthew, placing the package back in the drawer and locked it.

Rolf Engelbrecht ran up to the metal staircase. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, we’re fine,” said Matthew, as he descended the stairs.

“Mr de Longford said you would take the content of the drawer with you.”

“Another time.” Matthew confirmed.

Outside, in the fresh air both Jane and Matthew felt better after the stuffy confines of the underground vault. They strolled across the ever bustling Dam Square deep in thought.

Eventually Matthew said: “Let’s take a tram uptown.”

“Okay.” Jane said as she took hold of his hand.

The tram rattled its way through the crowded streets toward the Van Gogh Museum—its destination. The pair alighted a few stops short of the museum and strolled along a narrow street, then sat down on a bench facing a cemetery. After a while Matthew said: “That cemetery reminds me of the Western in Arbroath with its tall trees and stream that runs down one side. I used to think that if the souls of the recently buried people were good they would flow up through the roots of the trees. Then up the trunks and out along the branches to be waved free from the leaves in the wind - then ascend to heaven. But if they were bad, then they would seep into the stream, then into a river and flow out to sea and descend to hell.”

“What happened when there was a high tide?”

Silence descended over them for a while, broken by the caw of a raven that had landed on the

cemetery wall.

Matthew put his head in his hands. "God Jane, what am I to do?"

"Well, first of all let's move away from looking at that cemetery."

They wandered along streets filled with a mixture of clothes and book shops, until they turned a corner, and the large Vondel Park lay in front of them. The Sycamores and Horse Chestnuts behind the gates although still dazzling in their autumnal colours were losing their leaves.

Matthew and Jane walked past an empty playground with only ghost children on the wind driven swings. The wooden ponies on springs appeared to be racing one another to see who could find a real child first.

As they sat on a bench facing a large pond two tired looking joggers passed them by

"It's peaceful here," said Jane.

Matthew, gazed at the reflections of the trees in the water. "An oasis in the heart of the city."

A mist descended over the pond and drifted toward them. As it got closer, it became denser and darker until it turned into a black swirling mass a few metres from the water's edge.

Matthew froze when he saw hooded figures form from the mist – hooded figures with red eyes.

"Matthew," they hissed, "we can't touch you, but it's who we can lead to you, now we've found you."

"Fuck!" Jane shouted.

"Let's get away from here!" Matthew screamed, grabbing her hand.

They ran back along the empty path, past the playground glancing over their shoulders. The swirling mist was moving along the path. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, they ran through the park gates with the mist upon them. A black Audi screeched to a halt beside them and the back near-side door was flung open.

"Get in!" David de Longford shouted.

When they were in he gunned the engine, and the car sped away from the park.

"I take it these are the ghosts you saw back home in Arbroath?" Jane asked Matthew.

"Yep," he replied.

"Have you got the Key? David asked, while pulling up at a crossing.

"No, I couldn't take it—I didn't feel like it was mine to take and..."

"You felt the dark creep up on you," interrupted David.

"Yeah, said Matthew, looking at David knowingly in the rear mirror, "I need more time to think," he continued.

"You don't have more time. Matthew, you have to get the Key and destroy it."

"How do I do that—throw it into Mount Doom?"

"Take it to one of the many steelworks around the town and throw it into the molten metal."

They pulled up at the New Amstel Bookshop and entered the store. Matthew and Jane followed David through to the back and into his office.

"We'd better get ready to move, it's not safe here anymore. The truth is I don't think I'll be able to control Saucier anymore, he's become too powerful."

David's eyes turned a deeper shade of red as he stared, trance like, up at the ceiling. After a few moments he went over to his computer and brought up a screen which split in four. On one of the sections there was a man standing in a street. When David maximised the scene, Matthew and Jane recognised the street outside the shop. The man was dressed in a dark, grey suit with a light coloured overcoat. He had black hair and, most worryingly, crimson eyes.

"It's him!" Matthew shouted, "oh God! He's here!"

"And look there's the two thugs that tried to board the train at Arbroath Station," said Jane, pointing at the two figures who had entered the screen.

Chapter 49

Russia 1941

Operation Typhoon—the German plan to take Moscow—began again after a three week break for the winter rains, which had made roads impassable. It appeared as if Moscow was going to fall, but two reasons were to prevent this: Stalin, the Russian leader, stayed in the city thus providing a psychological bolster to the troops; and the weather.

The rigours of a Russian winter caught the German Sixth Army out. They had to defend themselves from Soviet counterattack in sub-zero temperatures. Frostbite at night meant that sleep was nigh impossible, which if achieved was accomplished lying in the open or when the snows came, lying in a dug out.

Why were the troops not prepared for the cold? Because Hitler had listened to the Occult Bureau set up by Himmler, which had predicted a mild winter that would lead to a great German victory.

Chapter 50

Poland 1941

David de Longford turned to see his mother, Mari, descend to earth.

“Mother!”

“You were expecting Anatole Saucier or Dieter Weiss as he’s known in this time period?”

“Well, yes. What are you doing here?”

She brushed her long, blond hair out of her eyes and over her scalp. “I came to see my son.”

“Don’t patronize me; you don’t care about anyone else but yourself. Where is Saucier or whatever he’s called?”

He looked into her eyes. He felt the urge to hug her and have a tearful reunion, but he knew what he saw wasn’t real. “Why did you come in his place?”

“Anatole told me something supernatural was happening here, and we knew it was of your doing, so I told him I’d deal with it.” She turned and gazed at the jumbled trains. “Why are you doing this David? Why do you defy Anatole and me? Come and help us retrieve the Key and usher in a new world.”

“This is wrong; these people are being killed through no fault of their own. Although, this time, Saucier is not doing the killing, he played a part in instigating it.” He looked across the fields at nothing in particular. “I could have nothing to do with any new world where there is no compassion.”

“Compassion! Why bother about compassion when limitless power is about to be ours? I care not for any compassion,” she said.

“I know that only too well—the way you abandoned me. I have much to thank humans for—not least for showing me love and caring.”

“Why couldn’t you be more like Anatole? He searches for dark souls for the new world.”

David focused on his mother. “You haven’t been listening have you? I will have nothing to do with you or your kind!”

Mari’s features changed to those of the demon Hel. She grew in height and emitted an evil stench. “You are my kind—you are demon!”

“Go, you foul beast! I am my father’s son!”

“I was wrong to come and try to reason with you; you’re as pitiful as these wretches you rescue.” With that she left David shaken and disturbed. He walked along the track past the mass of metal that was the trains with his mind full of images of his mother. Maybe he should have done what she wanted and taken side with them, he thought. After all, he’d repaid humans for their help; maybe now was time to take his rightful place as a demon and help them bring about this new world.

He walked for hours then sat down at the track side and watched the setting sun turn the western sky to gold. But he couldn’t stand by and watch humans being slaughtered.

Throughout the night David walked with his mind in torment not caring about where he was going. The stars gave way to the first rays of the rising sun as he passed a darkened village which showed no signs of life. He kept walking, and after a few kilometres the track passed through a dense wood. In the distance he could make out the shape of a station in a clearing. David realised he had reached Treblinka.

The crunch of boot on gravel made him turn. A group of people were making their way along the track. He left the railway and stood in the wood. As they neared, he saw four armed guards marching thirty prisoners toward the station. They must bring them in by truck to the village then along the track, he thought.

After they passed by where he stood David followed them, under the cover of the wood. When the group reached the station, the guards marched the prisoners onto the platform and then out of the station.

From the station he watched the tired people ordered through the opening gates of the camp. They were under the gaze of a guard behind a machine gun on top of a wooden tower.

He was amazed at how small the place actually was. Then a shocking thought hit him: space wasn’t required if mass murder was on the agenda and not captivity.

David moved closer to the barbed wire fence of the camp and watched the prisoners split into two groups: males and females. As the women were getting their hair shaved off the men were marched over to a corner of the field then ordered to dig a six metre long trench. Anger rose in him as the men were forced to stand before the trench and gaze at their grave as the guards opened fire and killed them all.

As the males slumped into the trench, the women cried hysterically; some ran toward the fence and a machine gun from the tower shot them. After this the rest of them stood in front of the trench and looked down upon the slaughtered men.

David could stand no more—he flew over the fence and landed behind the guards who were levelling their guns on the women. A wave of his arm sent the guards flying over the prisoners to land in the

trench—their necks broken.

The air filled with the sound of machine gun fire.

“Get in the trench!” David shouted to the women.

David gazed at the tower which shook, then toppled over and crashed to the ground amid a cloud of splinter filled dust. The commotion brought guards running out from their quarters with their rifles. As they raised their guns to take aim at David, the ground fractured and a large gash appeared and swallowed them up then resealed.

The commandant of the camp rushed onto the veranda of his office and ordered his dog—a vicious Alsatian, which ripped men’s genitals from their bodies—to attack David. But as the animal ran slavering toward the demon its head ripped from the body, which ran on for another second before keeling over into a bloody heap.

The commandant ran toward the gates, but got no further than a couple of steps before he flew into the air and turned upside down. Then David strolled up and stared into the man’s eyes. At the sight of the red eyes and the sallow skin excrement erupted out of the seat of the Nazi’s trousers and ran down his back.

“How does it feel?” David growled. “Instead of dealing death you’re now staring death in the eyes—for this is the last day you’ll be drawing breath,” he continued, as he circled the commandant.

The women pulled themselves from the trench and spat on the dead Nazis, who lay on top of their men.

“You’re free now. Get away from this place,” shouted David. He then turned back to the commandant. “What were you before this lot gave you licence to kill these people—a pathetic little man who dreamed of power?”

The Nazi then flew at blinding speed and smashed into one of the fence posts and then hung motionless, trapped in the barbed wire.

David then walked out of the camp convinced he was on the right side. The human race didn’t need demons from hell—they’d always been here in human form, he thought, walking past the body of the commandant hanging on the fence.

Chapter 51

Russia 1942

The Germans attacked all along the southern front and pushed the Red Army, whose moral was low, back. The Russians suffered a crippling defeat at the Ukrainian city of Kharkov where they had been surrounded. Blitzkrieg tactics, quick motorised attack, used to great effect by the Nazis had begun to tell on the Soviets.

As the German Army pushed further south east, confident victory would be theirs, Hitler split them in

to two after consulting the Grand Master of the Thule Society. He advised him that to capture Stalingrad from the inferior Soviets only half an army would be required. The other half, Group A, he advised, be sent to neutralise the southern oilfields thus stopping the vital flow of oil for the Russian war effort.

Group B, which comprised the mighty Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Division met stiffer Soviet resistance the closer they got to Stalingrad. Then in August they attacked the city which lay upon the west bank of the Volga River. The ensuing battle was tougher and took longer than the Germans expected. The street fighting was different to the battle field tactics to which they were accustomed. Also, they were suffering from poorly trained Hungarian and Romanian troops. The Axis Allies—used in the place of Germans were now on their way with Group A to the south.

After months of fighting the Russian winter was setting in with the first snows and sub-zero temperatures. The Russians, pushed back through the city, were surrounded on a strip of land next to the river which contained their headquarters. They, however, kept a grip of this piece of soil despite attack after attack from the Germans.

Stalin pulled off a master stroke to save the city and win the battle. He assembled infantry and tanks, brought in by rail from Moscow, sixty kilometres away. The operation was to encircle the sixth army concentrating on the axis allies on the flanks—the weakest points.

The offensive worked well, the Germans were caught off guard by the initial artillery barrage from behind them. Then after a few days of fighting, units of the Red Army linked up to enclose the Nazis.

The tightening of ‘the noose’ along with the worsening weather finally paid off for the Russians with the eventual surrender of the Germans. Hitler was livid and demanded the commander of the Sixth Army, General Paulus, commit suicide. But his Christian morals forbade him the right to take his own life.

While his troops were sent to frozen labour camps where most died Paulus went by heated train to a general's camp in Moscow. Only five per cent of the ninety thousand strong Sixth Army had survived.

After Stalingrad the Germans suffered defeat after defeat, and by 1944 were retreating out of Russia, forced back to German soil by a vengeful Red Army.

At the same time the allies forced the Germans back on the Western Front. The allies had successfully invaded France.

Chapter 52

David turned off his computer then turned to Matthew and Jane. “Follow me we must retrieve the Key.”

They went through a doorway, along a passageway that ended in a white, reinforced door which David unlocked then led them into a small backyard.

“Can you drive?” David asked Matthew.

“Yes.”

“You two take the Audi; I’ll take the motorbike.” David said as he unlocked the backdoor to his garage.

Inside, he pulled on his crash helmet then threw a set of keys to Matthew. He then pushed a few

buttons on a keypad on the wall, and the aluminium double garage doors rose.

“Get to the bank on Dam Square—park as close as you can. Don’t worry about a parking ticket. If I’m not there just contact the guy you saw this morning and get the Key—I’ll be in touch.” With that he fired up his Harley Davidson and streaked out of the garage.

Matthew unlocked the black Audi and shouted: “Quick Jane let’s get out of here!”

He started the car, revved the two litre engine then eased out onto Singel at the back of the shop. He never noticed a dark, blue Peugeot pull out and follow him.

David pulled up across from his bookshop as Didier Grondin was about to enter. He sounded the bikes horn then waved a gloved hand.

“De Longford!” Grondin growled, as his mobile phone rang.

“You were right the two kids are leaving in a black Audi,” said Lagrange.

“You two follow them, I’ve someone to take care of,” he said turning toward David, who revved his engine before he sped along the street.

Matthew turned right and drove along Paleisstraat he then crossed over a canal bridge then, hitting heavy traffic, he turned into Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal. He then parked the car not far from the Magna Plaza Shopping Centre.

The pair ran across the busy road dodging trams and cyclists, who rang their bells, then entered Mozes En Aaronstraat which led to Dam Square.

As they entered the bank Matthew looked around then glanced at the sky as if expecting an aerial attack.

“Could we see Mr Engelbrecht? Its Matthew Wilson and Jane Cargill,” said Matthew.

“We saw him this morning,” added Jane.

“I’m sorry he’s busy with a client,” said the receptionist.

A worried look spread across Matthew’s face. “Could you tell him its urgent business for Mr de Longford?”

The receptionist lifted her phone and dialled a number. After a moment Rolf Engelbrecht came forward to the desk.

“Mr Wilson, Miss Cargill, what can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but we need the item we inspected this morning,” said Matthew.

“Of course. Please come with me.”

They walked along the ornate columned corridor, and then after the official punched in the security number and opened the secure door, the threesome descended to the vaults.

Matthew’s imagination went into overdrive as they stepped down. He could see Grondin smashing out of the walls like a monster from a superhero magazine.

Engelbrecht looked into the small screen between the vaults and the red light above changed to green. One guard opened the right-hand vault then Matthew and Jane ran to the mobile metal staircase. They pushed it along to where drawer number five- hundred and seventeen was and climbed.

“You’ll need this” said Engelbrecht, dangling the key by its ring.

Matthew climbed the stairway and opened the drawer. He motioned for Jane to climb up beside him. “Could you take the package out Janey? Please don’t undo the wrapping.”

Outside the bank they made their way back to the car, running past bemused tourists who were queuing to enter the Nieuwe Kerk for an exhibition of Chinese Tapestry.

When they reached Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal Jane stopped to catch her breath.

“Jane, we must keep going!” Matthew said, as something caught his eye. “Oh God! Come on Jane—run!”

Bearing down on them were Lagrange and Caron. To escape them Jane and Matthew ran in front of a tram which rang its bell. When they reached the other side of the street Jane headed toward the car. Matthew looked back over the street at the two henchmen dodging cars.

“No time for that; quick follow me.”

The pair ran up the marble steps and into the opulent splendour of the Magna Plaza. A tuxedo was playing jazz on a grand piano on the main concourse as they ran onto the escalator.

Leaving the escalator they ran along the first floor glancing over their shoulders.

“In here,” shouted Matthew, as he ran into an American trivia store crowded with browsers.

Jane tapped Matthew on the shoulder as they stood next to people looking at T-shirts. “Mattie look—it’s our friends.”

Lagrange and Caron had entered the shop and were beginning a search.

Matthew and Jane left the shop through another door and dashed onto the escalator to the top floor and stood behind Japanese tourists

Lagrange looked up at the escalator as he left the American shop. “We have them now,” he said with a grin. “You go up after them, and I’ll force my way up the descending escalator,” he said, as he nodded to Caron.

Matthew and Jane cleared the escalator and then ran away from Caron as he was leaving the escalator and striding menacingly toward them along the upper shopping concourse. But the big figure of Lagrange blocked their path.

“Oh Mattie give them the Key,” said a trembling Jane.

Chapter 53

David de Longford was being chased through the streets of Amsterdam by Didier Grondin—both men ignoring any speed limits. David led him out of the city; his purpose was to get Grondin as far away from Matthew and Jane as he could. He knew Matthew could handle the two henchmen. He weaved around the traffic and kept just ahead of the Audi. The bike he rode could easily lose the car, but that would serve no purpose.

After leaving the city and heading for Alkmaar. David found himself stuck behind a wide load truck which was moving slowly along a two lane road. He tried to pass but, there was a lot of traffic coming in the opposite direction. Grondin took full advantage of the situation and gunned the Audi—overtaking several cars; causing oncoming vehicles to brake. He pulled in behind David and tailgated the bike. Grondin bumped into the mudguard/saddlebag section at the rear of the bike; each successive bump becoming more aggressive. David had to do something, so he swung out, but again the traffic was too heavy for overtaking. The Audi crashed into the back of the bike making David jerk back. After two cars passed, David swung out and looked ahead, there was an articulated lorry coming but it was a good distance off and slow moving. He glanced back—it was now or never as Grondin was mounting another attack and it would probably be the last. David yanked the handlebars out and pulled back on the throttle. The bike raced past the rear section of the lorry.

Grondin cursed as he watched the tail of the bike disappear from view. Then he heard the crash and saw the mangled motorbike under the braking on coming lorry as he passed. He's misjudged that, he thought.

After a further few miles Grondin pulled off the main road and then found a lay-by. He switched off the engine as he reached into the glove department and retrieved his mobile phone.

“What’s happening?” he asked Lagrange.

“We’ve got them trapped in the Magna Plaza, and they’ve got the Key.”

“Good, I’m on my way.”

Chapter 54

Berlin 1945

The battle for Berlin began in April with the separate Soviet armies of Marshal Shukov and Marshal Konev racing to be first to take the Reichchancellery, where Hitler was trapped. The Germans fought fiercely. Some were teenagers handed a rifle for the first time, but the mass armies of the Russians who were seeking revenge for the invasion of their homeland outnumbered them.

Weiss landed in the pockmarked garden of the Reichstag. He could make out the battered building through spaces in the thick smoke. Fighting was taking place inside—the Germans proving to be stiffer resistance than the Russians had expected. Although the Red Flag hung from a first floor window, the Nazis still held the basement and the upper floors.

There were figures standing around a bunker entrance so Weiss decided the easiest way in was down. He spun at great speed, and then he drilled through several metres of earth in the direction where his intuition told him Hitler was. Encountering concrete Weiss willed his atoms to disassemble and flow through the spaces between the atoms of the bunker roof.

Weiss appeared in front of a shocked Hitler; his atoms assembling again after their journey.

“You!” the Fuhrer shouted.

“Yes me.”

“You’ve come to gloat?”

“No.”

“These inferiors were not worthy of me!” Hitler shouted with fury in his eyes as he paced around his private study.

Weiss saw the body of a woman sitting on a settee in the corner of the room. He realised it was Eva Braun, and he noted the acrid odour of cyanide in the atmosphere.

“No Adolf, it was you who were not worthy of them. Why did you listen to fools and impostors who claimed to be what they were not? Why did you stop coming to my meetings and hear the truth? I am the real thing; you have seen what I can do. Look at me, do I appear any older from when we first met in Belgium thirty years ago?”

Hitler gazed at him with acknowledgement in his eyes. “I’m sorry my Lord I have been a fool, I have had my eyes blinded and my mind poisoned by, as you say, those fools. What happens now?”

Weiss saw before him a man who was a shadow of his former self; a man who looked drawn and tired. “You carry on with what you planned.”

“So you are not to be my saviour?”

Weiss emitted a snort of laughter. “I told you before; I am here for your soul. I want you to rejoin us.” With that Hitler took a pistol from his jacket pocket and raised it to his forehead—his hand shaking.

“I can’t do it my lord will you...?”

This man who had ordered the murder of many and caused the deaths of millions couldn’t pull the trigger on himself, Weiss thought. He looked into the Fuhrer’s eyes and said, with blazing red eyes, “you will follow me!” He then took the pistol; seated Hitler next to Eva Braun and shot him in the forehead. He dropped the gun next to the Nazi’s open hand and left the way he entered.

Chapter 55

Chartres 1945

Dieter Weiss, now Adam Cohen, left his rented rooms and strolled around Place Chatelet. The day was warm and sunny. Small white cumulus clouds drifted lazily across a light blue sky.

Cohen sat down at a street cafe and ordered coffee and croissant. Then, staring at the French national

flag, which hung from several windows on the street, his thoughts turned to his journey out of Berlin. The passport he had made up in the name of Adam Cohen, a Parisian Jew who had slipped out of a concentration camp, had worked well. Not that he was a Nazi of course, but as a non-German he could leave the country. Cars had been easy to steal and abandon in the post war chaos as he made his way through and out of the country.

He stayed with some brethren of the Order of the Gate in Paris. Since the spectre of Nazism was gone, not only the German variety but also the home grown type, the mood on the street was of joyous optimism.

After a few weeks in the capital Cohen had driven back to Chartres where he had lived off and on throughout the long years. The place looked the same as when he had left before the First World War, only the vehicles on the roads had changed.

As he drank his coffee and wondered what to do next, he noticed a newspaper lying on the cluttered table nearby; the headline read: Himmler arrested in Northern Germany. Cohen grabbed the paper and read the lead article. Heinrich Himmler-arrested in Bremervorde by British Forces, claiming he was a discharged Wehrmacht soldier. He was being held at a British Army camp.

Cohen jumped out of his seat, left payment on the table and ran back to his rooms. Half an hour later after two phone calls he was driving out of Chartres in his old Citroen—back to Germany.

He drove into Belgium, past Liege where troops inspected his passport at the border crossing on the road to Aachen, and then waved him by. Cohen then drove four metres and pulled up in front of a white barrier pole which stretched the width of the single track at a height of a metre. Two British soldiers stood at either end of the pole, rifles slung over one shoulder. A Sergeant knocked on his window and motioned for him to wind it down.

“Passport and papers please,” said the soldier.

Cohen handed them over.

“Just a minute sir,” the Sergeant said, walking toward the guard house.

After five minutes the Sergeant emerged from the building.

“Why do you want to enter Germany sir?” He asked.

“Some of my family were detained in concentration camps, and I have been told that two are still alive somewhere in Germany.” Cohen looked down, took a breath, then looked back at the man, “Sergeant, I must look for them.”

The soldier looked at the passport then at Cohen. “Very well sir, on you go and good luck,” he said, handing back the passport and nodding to the guards.

Cohen drove through a land scarred by war; some of the roads were impassable due to bomb blast craters. The German people he passed had weary, empty expressions on their faces. A war monger had seduced them promising pride and glory, but in the end delivering misery and death.

Chapter 56

Northern Germany 1945

Kolkhagen Internment Camp stood on the west side of the village of Barnstedt, fifteen kilometres from

the city of Luneburg in Lower Saxony. Cohen had found it, guided by the precise instructions given to him over the phone in Chartres.

He had parked his Citroen in a lane off the main road which led to the camp and watched the steady stream of military vehicles in both directions. He had to get into the camp—had to find out where Himmler was.

Cohen followed an army jeep which had just passed the top of the lane on its way toward Luneburg. To get into the camp, he would have to assume the identity of a British soldier and for that he needed off-duty personnel.

After a few kilometres the jeep turned into a street and pulled up at a large, red brick villa. Cohen drove past and parked then he watched. The front passenger door of the jeep opened, and a soldier with a rifle got out. He opened the rear passenger door and barked an order. A handcuffed, dishevelled man in a faded dark, blue jacket and trousers got out followed by another armed soldier and marched into the house.

Cohen, realising that this was where the British were interrogating top Nazi personnel, started the car and drove off.

As the birds heralded in a new dawn Cohen lowered the field binoculars from his eyes and rubbed them. The night had been a long one, watching the coming and going at the ivy clad villa of interrogation from behind a thorny hedge in a nearby field. As he was about to pack in his observation a Jeep pulled up, and two soldiers marched a short, plump man into the house. Cohen raised the binoculars to his eyes and was amazed to see that the prisoner was naked save for a grey blanket wrapped around him. He was even more amazed to recognise the face of Heinrich Himmler.

Cohen's heart beat faster. He had to get into the villa. But how?

As he pondered, a dark, brown car drove up to the house, and a figure in a white coat emerged. A doctor, thought Cohen—that's it!

As Doctor Alan Carstairs made his way to the door of the red villa he rose into the air. He began frantically to push up at the air as if this would stop his ascent. But he rose further and further into the sky until, in an instant, he was lying, crumpled, next to Cohen.

Chapter 57

Trapped on the top concourse of the Magna Plaza Matthew looked at one approaching man then the

other. The thug who came from the top of the up escalator seemed the lighter of the two. He grabbed Jane's arm. "Come on follow me!" he shouted. Then he charged at Caron, releasing Jane's arm just before impact. As he crashed into the man's body Matthew felt a surge of unlimited power flow through his system, and Grondin's man flew over the balustrade.

The screams of the falling Caron echoed through the building until they cut off as he smashed into the grand piano on the main concourse. The tuxedoed piano player screamed at the bloody site in front of him, and the stunned shoppers gazed on in curious disbelief.

"Let's go Jane!" Matthew shouted, as he looked past her at Lagrange who was running back to the escalator he had come up upon. He was planning to cut them off at the bottom of the up-escalator. Our only means of escape, thought Matthew.

"Your eyes Mattie—they're red!" Jane screamed, as she was being tugged along by Matthew. When they got to the top, a few shoppers were trying to board the moving stairs in the ensuing confusion. Havoc erupted as there were still people coming up the escalator. Matthew looked around the concourse. "Over there!" he shouted, pointing to a fire escape exit.

They ran to the doors, and Matthew shoulder charged them open. Lagrange was too occupied throwing hapless shoppers out of his way as he stormed down his escalator to notice that Matthew and Jane had taken an alternative route.

There was no one else on the stairs to hamper their progress as the two fugitives glided over the slate grey steps; the polished banister and the worn treads aided their quick descent. At the bottom they had to turn left, which took them onto the marble steps at the front of the main concourse and then out onto the street.

A tram loomed up in front of them.

"Let's take it Mattie." said a tired Jane.

They hopped onto the vehicle, at the rear, as the doors were closing. Mathew pulled Jane into the centre as the crowded tram moved. Any sense of relief the pair had, however, was short lived as the vehicle came to a shuddering halt.

Matthew looked toward the front of the tram, but could see no obstruction. He then looked to the rear; traffic which used the track area of the road while empty built up behind the vehicle.

Jane tapped Matthew on the shoulder and pointed toward the front. The driver was struggling with the controls. A rising dread within told him that the man's labours were futile. The screams of people from the pavement side of the vehicle made Matthew look out the windows of that side, past the other standing passengers. He saw a figure in a light coloured raincoat walk menacingly by confirming his fears. The figure glowered into the tinted windows of the tram with blazing eyes before walking around the end of the vehicle and coming up the side where Matthew and Jane were.

"Oh! Mattie it's that... that monster with red eyes!"

"Come on Janey." Matthew said, ducking down and motioning for her to do the same. He then took her hand, and they crept through the throng of frightened passengers toward the doors on the other side. When they reached them Jane pressed the emergency exit button, and the doors hissed open. Luckily for the pair many of the passengers around the door ran through the exit which provided them cover for escape.

Matthew and Jane ran toward the car, but when they cleared the back of the tram, they saw Lagrange standing by the passenger door. They ran on along the crowded street past curious spectators.

"Down here!" Matthew shouted, running into a lane lined with dark cafes and bars.

After they had run half a kilometre, they found that they could not move; it was as if heavy air had moulded itself around their bodies.

"Mattie!" Jane screamed.

Matthew painfully turned his head through ninety degrees, and out of the corner of his eye he could

see a grinning Grondin strolling toward them.

I've got to do something, Matthew thought. But what? Where's David? Why's Grondin the only one to return from the chase? He's not... but David's a demon!

Grondin was getting closer. Matthew couldn't turn his head back and round to face Jane to reassure her. What was he thinking? He couldn't reassure her. He could only watch helplessly as the confident Grondin closed in on them.

Chapter 58

Northern Germany 1945

Adam Cohen strolled up to the large villa where Heinrich Himmler was being interrogated. Inside the main outer doors stood two guards; one, a young man with a square-set jaw, asked for his Identity Card.

Cohen flashed the pass he had taken from the body of Doctor Carstairs. The guard looked at the photograph then at Cohen; a puzzled look crossed his face until Cohen stared into his eyes. The young soldier then just nodded him on.

Inside, the villa was in uproar, people were running back and forward between a front room and the kitchen at the back of the hall.

“What’s happening?” Cohen asked an officer.

“Ah doctor. Where’s Carstairs?”

“Called away I’m afraid.”

“Never mind; it’s Himmler, he’s taken cyanide. We couldn’t find it in his mouth.”

Cohen rushed into the front room and saw a naked Heinrich Himmler roll around on the bare floor boards moaning through gritted teeth.

“Everyone out,” shouted Cohen.

An officer looked at him quizzically. “But doctor…”

“Everyone!” Cohen said, as he pushed the officer and two soldiers out of the room.

He closed the door and went over to where Himmler was lying—amid plush red velvet lined furniture.

“My Lord,” said Himmler, before going into a fit of coughing. “I never expected to see you again; but I know why you’re here, and you’re too late—my soul will go to lie with my SS comrades in the Totenkopf Rings.” He rolled over coughing while holding his stomach. Then he rolled back again and his head dropped to the floor. Unconsciousness had claimed him as Cohen approached and lifted his head.

“That’s your choice Heinrich. Where are these Totenkopf Rings?”

Himmler’s eyes fluttered open then closed. “They’re safe in the ‘Realm of the Dead’,” he said breathlessly, before he passed away.

Cohen knocked on the door.

“He’s gone I’m afraid,” he said as he pushed through the waiting throng.

During the ensuing melee he slipped out of the house and nodded to the young soldier still in a trance.

On the way back to the car he tried to piece it all together. These Totenkopf Rings were given to SS personnel for bravery and commitment to the cause, he thought. The souls must pass into the rings when they’re killed or die—bizarre, but possible. The rings are material objects so they can’t pass into another dimension, he reasoned. So where was the Realm of the Dead?

Cohen drove into the centre of Luneburg and parked by Market Place, dominated by the white Town House. He wandered through the streets of tall red-brick buildings to the Ilmenau River; his mind millennia away wondering what to do next. He came out of his reverie with the sound of laughter. Off duty British service personnel filled a river-side bar. Cohen went in and bought a beer then sat at a table by the window. His reverie started again as he watched the river flow. On the other bank an old wooden crane stood gazing at the river. A conversation between two soldiers, who sat at the next table, interrupted his thoughts.

“I tell you Sid that place looked spooky from the outside. God knows what went on inside before they tried to blow it up,” said a tall, thin man with cropped red hair.

“That Himmler was a right bastard. They say he was murdering people and putting the bodies under the floor boards or something,” said a corporal with dark, brown hair and pock marked skin.

“Excuse me lads,” interrupted Cohen. “I couldn’t help over-hearing. Is that Wewelsburg you’re talking about?”

“Yeah. Not the sort of place you’d want to visit. Pity they didn’t blow the whole place up,” replied the soldier with red hair.

“How much did they destroy?” Cohen asked.

“Not much, a little fire damage to the inside of the North Tower. Those SS bastards didn’t have enough explosives to do a proper job before the Yanks got there.” The Corporal paused and took a sip of his beer. “The room with the marble mosaic thingy-they called it the ‘Black Sun’-was still almost intact when I was there. I didn’t get to see Himmler’s Crypt with it being sealed off and all. A Yank told me that the ashes of the SS big wigs were there.”

“Was there another name for the crypt?” Cohen asked.

“No, although shithouse would be a good one,” said the soldier laughing

I wonder if the SS called it the Realm of the Dead? Cohen thought. “Well, I must get back. See you again,” he said before supping the last of his drink.

The castle sat on a wooded hill above the small town of Wewelsburg in West Phalia. Cohen could see the towers rise above the trees on his approach. He had driven for three hours stopping only to refuel.

He parked his car around the back of an old farmhouse on the outskirts of the town and walked along the main road toward the drive up to the castle. The British Army had pulled out of the area, and any locals that were about simply ignored another stranger; after all they had been through Nazism, then liberation by American troops and, British occupation.

Cohen walked across the triangular courtyard of the castle then forced open the barred outer doors of the North Tower and walked into the damaged Obergruppenfuhrersaal. He stopped and gazed at the Black Sun set in the marble floor before heading out and descending the stairs to the crypt where he switched on the flashlight he brought. The concrete steps ended at a sealed metal door which had a bronze skull and crossbones in the centre. As Cohen approached, it shook until the heavy door opened.

Beams of pale light which shone through the windows high up the circular wall pierced the darkness and fell on the floor Cohen walked upon. The crypt had a concrete domed ceiling which he explored with the torch light. A wry smile crossed his face as the beam came to rest on a big concrete swastika in the centre. As he brought the beam down he noticed arranged around the periphery of the room twelve stone pedestals, which ringed a circular piece that resembled a pool.

Cohen shone the torch around the walls searching for a clue as to where the Totenkopf Rings were, but there wasn’t much else in the room. It had to be something to do with the pedestals, he thought. He shone the torch on each pedestal, but nothing seemed to stand out; he was about to give up when he noticed one structure wasn’t as dusty as the others. Cohen tried to push it, but it proved too heavy. Concentrating his mental energy; the pedestal swiveled out on a pivotal point to reveal a polished wooden box sitting in a recess.

Cohen lifted the large mahogany box out of its niche and set it down on the floor. He then released the catches and opened the lid. Inside, the box contained three compartments. There were two brass hooks on either side holding the front of the box. He released the small hooks, and the front swung down revealing twelve small drawers – four in each compartment. He pulled out one drawer by its gold handle and, two neat rows of rings stared up at him. Cohen picked up a ring at random and rolled it around his fingers. He closed his eyes and could feel the soul of the dead SS man. But this person wanted to be left alone—something Cohen had no intention of doing. He swivelled the other eleven pedestals and lifted out the underlying boxes. He then took out all the drawers and arranged them in lines across the floor. With the pale window light reflecting off ten thousand rings Cohen shut his eyes and began a mantra. After a few minutes he opened his eyes and said: “You will follow me.” For a moment nothing happened, and then he felt a great warmth flow through his limbs into the centre of his body. He cried out in ecstasy as ten thousand phantoms caressed his mind. Then a great wave of energy surged through his being—energy so raw he felt his soul being ripped out. When he regained his faculties, he shouted: “Nobody will stand in my way now – now I have such power!”

He put the drawers with the rings in back in the boxes and then the boxes back under the pedestals.

Cohen left the crypt, left the castle and then left Wewelsburg—on to rule the Dark World.

Chapter 59

The sense of helplessness in Matthew increased the closer Grondin got to the motionless pair. Desperation seeped through his mind. He had to do something. But what? The air was filled with the sound of the piano intro to David Bowie's 'Time' from a bar's sound system. The following lyrics, Matthew thought, were apt.

He could sense Grondin enter his orbit. He and Jane were like two flies caught in a web about to be eaten by the spider, he thought. Then, just as Grondin made a reach for the pair, the power which surged through Matthew's body before returned and, both he and Jane could move.

“Run!” Matthew shouted.

A startled Grondin could only watch as his prey ran away along the alley. But he regained his senses and flew after them at great speed. He came to a dead halt and couldn't move as a figure descended into the alley and landed between predator and prey. Matthew glanced back, and what he saw made his heart leap for joy.

“Slow down Jane. Look!”

Jane turned her head. “It's David—thank God!”

Matthew noticed, however, that keeping Grondin at bay was taking a lot out of David. In fact Grondin was moving. “I wondered when you would show up,” he growled.

David grinned. “Have you missed me then?”

“I knew I could only buy a little time to grab the Key, but that brat seems to be finding his latent powers. It looks like I'll have to do this the hard way.”

A thick, suffocating mist fell on the lane, blinding Matthew and Jane. Dark shapes moved through the fog, which swirled in their wake—not monks as before, but what looked like human heads with tails rather than bodies. David made a grab for a shape he thought was Grondin but all he clutched was mist. The name ‘Jonas’ echoed through the fog sending shivers down Matthews's spine.

The mist thickened around Matthew. “Jane! David!” He shouted, but there was no reply just the name ‘Jonas’ said over and over again. A figure approached him, and through the thickening fog he could make out a military uniform.

Matthew felt his legs quiver, for walking toward him was Adolf Hitler in full Nazi outfit complete with knee high leather boots. Fear paralysed him; he wanted to cry out; wanted to scream for help, but his vocal chords had stopped working. The figure with demonic, crimson eyes came right up to him and snatched the Key from his jacket pocket; he could do nothing about it. In an instant Hitler turned into a laughing Didier Grondin and then disappeared.

As the mist cleared Matthew looked around the alley – everything seemed to be back to normal. Jane ran toward him.” “Mattie, what happened?”

“It's Grondin—he's got the Key.

David approached. “Are you all right?”

“David! He's got the Key,” screamed Matthew.

“I know,” said David.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“Let's have a pint.”

“A pint!” Matthew and Jane shouted in unison.

Matthew eyed David. “I feel there's something you haven't told us. I mean why aren't you chasing Grondin?”

“Second question first: He'll be thinking I'm doing just that. As for the first question, well... the key he's got, it's a fake...a good fake.”

“What! Why'd you put us through all that then?” Jane asked.

“Because I had to make it look real—make it look as if we were protecting the real thing.

“So where is the real Key?” Matthew asked.

“What'll happen when he finds out he has a fake?” Jane asked.

“Whoa! Slow down. Let's go and have that drink then I'll explain,” said David heading toward Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal.

“Jonas had a replica cast,” said David, sitting with Matthew and Jane in a cubicle at the back of a bar where low lighting illuminated the tables. “He took it with him over to what is now Holland. Jonas then carried out the ultimate deception— committing suicide so that the Powers of Darkness could not make him disclose where the Key was.” Matthew stroked his chin. “So the monks that have looked after it since didn't know they were guarding a fake?”

“No, for the deception to work they had to believe they were dealing with the real thing.”

“So how did you find out the Key was a fake?” Jane interrupted.

“Ah well now, your boyfriend’s not the only one Jonas came to in dreams. Once he found out I had rejected my mother he told me the truth because he knew this day would come.” He took a swig from his pint. “You see, don’t you? He hoped that this deception would buy us time, which it will, to find and destroy the real Key. Also this is the way I found out how and where to get the Key...the false Key after the Second World War.”

“I don’t understand,” said Matthew.

“Well, Jonas told me where the Key was. You see, Christiaan die Voech committed suicide believing the Powers of Darkness were onto him. He walked the void where he met Jonas.

“But wait a minute won’t the Dark Dimension know the whereabouts of the real Key now that Jonas is part of it?” Jane questioned.

“Yes, well I can only assume that he passed the Key to an unknown and trusted pure soul to hide.”

Matthew took a long sip from his pint. “I don’t understand why someone like you or a monk can’t destroy the Key?”

“I can’t even look at the Key without overwhelming dark feelings; you remember what you felt when you saw the fake Key, well multiply that by a thousand! A monk will never destroy such a relic it needs someone with just the right amount of demon seed. Any other person just can’t be trusted.”

“So where is the real Key?” Matthew asked, taking a sip of his drink and looking around the bar.

“It never left Arbroath Abbey, but where in the Abbey I don’t know. Fortunately Grondin, when he finds out the key he has is a fake, won’t even know the real Key is in Scotland.”

“Back to Arbroath then,” said Matthew with a smile.

Chapter 60

“Brothers!” boomed Grondin, in the back room of Le Moine in Chartres. “I have called this special meeting due to a joyous development in our cause.”

He chanted an ancient mantra which the brethren, standing in a circle around him, followed. The altar-extended for the night’s meeting- had black velvet draped over it. A small mahogany box with inlays of gold on the lid and a jewel encrusted bowl sat upon the drape.

“Will brother Rancourt step forward?” Grondin ordered.

Jacques stepped into the centre of the circle. Grondin took his hand and led him to the altar. “If you do

this for me, I will look favourably upon your career.”

“Right,” answered Jacque.

What a pathetic small-minded fool, thought Grondin. But I need his pure soul. He then connected with the Dark Dimension. “Open the box,” he said, in a gravelly voice.

Jacque picked up the box and opened the lid. Inside lay a bronze key with a big handle. Rancourt gasped as he gazed upon the writing etched on the handle.

“Pick it up, and read it in reverse—right to left—it’s Latin,” said Grondin. He then watched Rancourt pick the key out of the velvet lining of the box and run his fingers over the etched letters. He read the lines as the other brethren chanted another archaic mantra, which became louder causing Rancourt to raise his voice until he was shouting.

As he uttered the last syllable a white noose was thrown over his head from behind and Georges Lagrange pulled it tight around his neck – choking the life from him. He dropped the key and tried to pull the rope from his neck, but this just succeeded in the noose becoming tighter. His limp body fell back onto Lagrange, who placed it on the altar.

The chanting carried on as Grondin plunged a dagger into the sacrifice’s heart. Blood spurted up and seeped over the body’s robe. Grondin collected some of the blood in the bowl and then placed the key in it. He then joined in the chanting while raising his arms and levitating a few centimetres.

“Now Great Master I have opened the gates to allow you and the ancient ones to enter the physical plane that is the Earth. You will regain your rightful place,” he boomed, as he rotated.

After a few minutes with nothing happening, he heard mocking laughter in his head. Hel said: “Old Jonas and my son are worthier opponents than you think.”

Grondin emitted a blood curdling scream as the truth dawned – the key was a fake.

Chapter 61

David de Longford escorted Matthew and Jane back to New Amstel books and told them to get packed while he made a few phone calls. First, he found out that his car was impounded by the police. He sent Aada, the shop assistant, to the car pound with a cheque to collect the Audi. Next he called the local office of DFDS, the ferry company, to book passage for three to Newcastle—as Matthew was still adamant about not flying. It was short notice but because it was off-season, and during the week there were free cabins on the ferry leaving that night. He booked two cabins and the car on board.

When Aada returned with the car David told her he would close the shop for a few weeks. He paid her an advance and advised her to stay away from the shop until he phoned.

After Aada left, he closed the shop and set the alarm. He then went into his private office and shut down his computer systems. After which he washed, changed and packed a few items for the journey—a

journey back in time, he thought.

The early evening traffic was heavy as the black Audi with its three passengers headed toward the docks at Ijmuiden. Cars were streaming out of factories and offices clogging up the route.

After a forty minute drive David parked the car outside the terminal, and they checked-in. Then he drove the car on board the Queen of Scandinavia amid refrigerated flower lorries heading for British markets.

Matthew and Jane dropped their bags in the cabin and went out on deck for a walk. The sun was setting as they stepped onto the well painted lower viewing deck.

“Back home then Janey?” Matthew said as he inhaled the salty air.

Jane planted both her fore arms on the wooden hand rail and stared at the final cars being driven on board. “Yeah, I’m looking forward to getting back.”

“But there’s still this matter to be resolved.” Matthew said with a dread rising from the pit of his stomach.

“Look there’s a bar up there. Let’s get a drink?” Jane said, pointing up to an upper deck where passengers were standing with bottles of beer.

They bought two bottles from a barman who took the drinks from a refrigerated old messenger push bike which was going nowhere. They then sat at a wooden table as a gust of cold wind swept across the deck.

“Do you think we’ll succeed Mattie?”

“Yes. With David on our side... yes.”

As the ship eased its way out of the docks and headed for the open sea Matthew and Jane booked a table for three at one of the three restaurants. Matthew asked for a darker part of the room—thinking of David.

At eight o'clock in a darkened corner of the restaurant the threesome sat with menu's in hand. A fresh faced young man with a shaved head came up to their table and told them he would be their waiter for the evening. They ordered a bottle of red wine and settled down to study the menu.

The restaurant was half full—with couples eating and chatting— their faces illuminated by candlelight. The sound of classical piano drifted in from a neighbouring lounge.

“I’ll have the lasagne,” said Matthew, as he stared out of the window at a passing brightly lit oil rig, which looked like a Christmas tree on legs.

“Fish for me,” said Jane.

“The bean salad for me, with garlic bread, said David.

“That all?” Matthew asked.

“I’m a vegetarian!”

“I never imagined a demon being vegetarian.”

“What? You thought I’d be like a vampire that ate meat dripping with blood.”

They all laughed as the waiter approached for their order.

After the main dish Matthew sat swirling the wine in his glass as the waiter left with the empty dishes. “Grondin,” he blurted. “Can he be destroyed?”

David stared at him from under his black Homburg. “He can only be destroyed by an entity from the Dark Realm. He has grown so powerful that I doubt that even Hel could finish him.”

Matthew swirled his wine more vigorously. “Why has she let him get so powerful?”

“Oh Mattie can we have a sweet? Jane interrupted.

“Yes,” he said, signalling to the waiter.

“That’s a good question I can only assume she left him to get on with it, then after a while she couldn’t stop him. She has been silent lately with what’s been going on—I don’t like it!”

After the waiter left with the sweet order Matthew asked: “Why was Grondin chosen as the Dark

Soul Gatherer?”

“It was his destiny; just as it’s your destiny to deal with the Key.”

At nine the next morning the Queen of Scandinavia steamed up the Tyne. The morning was bright with a chill wind that caressed the surface of the river

After docking, David drove the Audi out of the car deck and stopped at customs to allow for the passport check. He then picked up Matthew and Jane then left the docks and drove through the outskirts of Newcastle then onto the A1 for the journey to Arbroath.

Chapter 62

Didier Grondin strode along Amsterdam’s Spuistraat. He passed people sipping coffee at outside cafes enjoying the autumn sunshine. He stopped outside New Amstel Books and tried the door; finding it locked he stepped back and looked up at the darkened first floor windows.

Grondin concentrated his mental energies on the front door which shook before swinging open and setting off the alarm. He then turned his attention to the flashing box on the back wall of the shop, and the eardrum splitting noise died as the unit crashed to the floor.

Grondin went through to the back of the shop and finding an old pine desk with locked drawers he pulled the handles. With the locks broken he searched for a clue as to where David de Longford had gone. But finding only bills and receipts he gave up and strolled along a short corridor which led to a stained wooden door. He tried the handle, but the door was locked. He focused his mental energy on the door, but nothing happened. This is his inner sanctum, he thought. He again tried the handle. “Damn

you de Longford!” he shouted. There was a mental block around the room.

As he stormed out of the shop, he kicked over a rack of paperbacks, sending them flying. The books took a nose dive and slid along the polished pine floorboards before thumping into the far wall.

Grondin crossed the Singel Canal and passed the flower market where tulip bulbs were being sold to tourists. He then headed up the busy Leidsestraat before entering Leidse Plein with its street entertainers and aroma of brewed coffee. Turning along Stadhouderskade he passed the gates of Vondel Park where joggers vied with cyclists for precedence. The red brick masterpiece that was the Rijksmuseum came into view as Grondin crossed the road and strolled into Museum Plein. Children sailed model boats on a large pond and laughed in the sun. Boys played football on the parkland in front of the Concertgebouw.

“I’ve got to calm down, and this is the perfect place to do it.” Grondin said to himself.

“I have to start thinking logically.”

Two scenarios, he thought. One: Jonas didn’t know he was taking a fake over to Maastricht—that would explain why the Dark Dimension knew nothing about the fake. But who would have switched the keys without Jonas knowing? He didn’t buy it! Two: Jonas had the fake made and took it over to Holland. He must have hid the real one and then when he walked the Void the Power of the Light contacted him and the concealment was blocked somehow. Yes that had to be it. But it still didn’t answer the main question. Where was the real Key?

He pulled out his mobile phone and pressed in a number.

“Hello Schiphol administration, Jan speaking. How can I help you?” A voice said.

“Yes, I’m Inspector Hoogmoed, Amsterdam police. We are trying to trace the whereabouts of a David de Longford. He is wanted in connection with an armed robbery. We believe he has fled the country and have reason to believe he has gone to Scotland. Could you check passenger lists to Scotland over the last few days please?”

“Can you hold for a minute?”

After a few minutes of bad ‘supermarket music’ the receptionist came back on the line. “Sorry there’s been no one of that name travelling to Scotland from this airport in the last two days.”

“Okay thanks for your help.”

Grondin gazed at the modern facade of the Van Gogh museum. Of course, the ferry, he thought. He called DFDS ferries and ran through the same story. The assistant returned. “There was a Willum de Longford travelled to Newcastle two days ago.”

“Was he accompanied by anyone?”

“Yes. Mr Matthew Wilson and Miss Jane Cargill.”

“Thank you.”

De Longford must change his forename every so often, he thought.

Grondin then called the KLM desk at Schiphol airport and booked a seat on the next flight to Aberdeen, which was at nine-forty the next morning. He then phoned Lagrange, “Georges get yourself on a flight to Aberdeen—this time we’re going in for the kill!”

Chapter 63

France 1947

Adam Cohen, now Vincent Pontault, became a candidat libre to study psychology at the Sorbonne in Paris. He had been so persuasive at an interview with university officials they allowed him straight in without even checking his background.

He had moved in with two brothers of the Gate who had moved to Paris for work. They lived in a maisonette within a four storey building on Rue Mouffetard in the Latin Quarter amid bohemian cafes and bars.

His room in the attic was small, but adequate; the dormer window looked out over the rooftops toward the Eiffel Tower. The walls were a drab grey and in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. The only furniture in the room was a bed and an old pine wardrobe.

Just in from a lecture, Pontault threw his jacket on the unmade bed and stared at the Eiffel Tower in the distance. The sound of talk and laughter floated up through the warm June air and in through his opened window.

Pontault headed out in search of a little intellectual conversation and some sustenance. He descended the stairs and walked through the high-ceilinged living room, which the three men shared. As he

weaved his way around the old luxurious furniture Pontault felt a psychic tremor from the Dark Dimension pass through his mind, which brought him to a halt; for a moment he could see beyond the stars; he saw beyond consciousness, then just as it came it departed leaving him bewildered and confused. Hunger however, brought him back into the physical world. He descended the communal stairs and strolled out onto the busy street. Pontault entered a bistro and sat at a table in the corner of the room. The walls were made of hewn red sandstone blocks, and they had old pictures of Paris dotted around them. He attracted the attention of the busy waiter and ordered red wine and ‘the dish of the day’: filet mignon aux oignons.

A short man, and a dark-haired woman sat down at a table nearby and ordered wine. Pontault recognised the man; a bespectacled well-groomed person dressed in a dark grey suit, but couldn’t put a name to the face until he overheard the conversation on existentialism. Of course, he thought, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Pontault admired the theory, but he was living proof that one of the main premises was wrong. He was in the world to fulfil a purpose: to gather souls.

After finishing his meal Pontault introduced himself and asked the couple if he could join them. They were happy to allow him when he told them he was a psychology student.

“Of course.” said Sartre, pushing out a chair.

Pontault signalled for more wine and sat. “I have just begun a course in pathological psychology, but my main interest is in the evolution of the soul.”

“I hope you’re not offended, but you look older than the average student,” de Beauvoir said.

“I’m a mature student Madam and entered the university as a *candidat libre*.”

“And how do you find your studies?” Sartre asked.

“Interesting, but rather basic; I am keen to get on with my own studies on the human soul.”

Simone de Beauvoir looked at him with a smile spreading over her face. “Give it time, everyone has to start somewhere.

The waiter approached the table with a fresh bottle of red wine, sat it down and then left with Pontault’s empty.

“Will you allow me to be blunt Monsieur?” Pontault asked as he refilled their glasses along with his own.

“Yes, I would rather that you were,” replied Sartre.

“I find one fundamental of existentialism flawed!”

“And which fundamental is that Monsieur?”

“It’s the premise that the conscious being is not here to fulfil a certain purpose.”

“And what do you base this on sir?”

“Well... myself! I am here for a purpose.”

“What purpose would that be?” Sartre asked.

“Before I answer that will you allow me to put a proposition to you?”

“Yes, very well,” said Sartre.

“If I could take you on a trip beyond the stars; beyond time itself would you at least acknowledge that there is the possibility I am here to fulfil some purpose?”

Sartre laughed and looked at de Beauvoir while raising his eyebrows. “Yes! Yes!” Sartre said.

The laughter stopped as Sartre fell into a trance, and Pontault’s mind escorted Sartre's out past the stars; out to the dark dimensions. Sartre’s body emitted a strained sigh as his mind saw human-like shapes move in the darkness.

“Stop it! Release him.” de Beauvoir shouted to Pontault.

“Just a moment Madam; he will be all right,” he said, turning toward her.

She jerked her head back at the sight of Pontault’s red eyes and gasped, “*sacre bleu!*”

Then Jean-Paul Sartre emerged out of the trance and stared, bewildered, at Pontault, who grasped his glass from the table while laughing and then took a swig.

“So Monsieur, will you now take me seriously?”

“Yes,” said Sartre, nodding his head while looking at de Beauvoir. “I don’t know who or what you are Monsieur Pontault, and I don’t dispute something... something unnatural just happened to me. But, it still does not tell me you are here for some purpose,” he continued.

“If you would do me the honour of coming to a meeting of my group in Chartres next week; then all will be revealed.”

“Yes I will. And I will say one thing, you have me intrigued.”

“Until next week then Monsieur.” Pontault said as he rose from his seat.

“Madam!” He said, nodding to de Beauvoir.

De Beauvoir looked at Sartre with concern in her eyes after Pontault left. “Are you going to Chartres next week?”

“Come now my dear beaver. You know me? I am intrigued, I have to go.”

“Well just promise me you will be careful? You didn’t see his eyes when you were under the trance—they were red!”

“I promise.”

The sun was setting behind the clouds, sending golden rays like huge fingers onto Chartres as Pontault walked along Rue du Massacre toward Le Moine. He had arranged to meet Jean-Paul Sartre outside the bar at quarter to eight.

When he arrived there were several people sitting at the street tables enjoying the balmy evening. Sartre was sitting with one brother chatting and drinking coffee.

“I see you’ve met Alexandre,” Pontault said as he approached the table.

“Yes, and a man who knows his philosophy,” Sartre said, smiling at Alexandre.

Pontault looked into the bar. “Shall we go in gentlemen?”

The two men rose from the table and followed Pontault through to the back of the building.

“Evening Gaston,” said Pontault to the owner who was washing glasses behind the bar.

“Evening Monsieur Pontault,” he replied.

As they entered the back room Pontault noticed Sartre gaze at the altar with its bronze sculpted figure. He looked even more disturbed to see the men in the room don black habits.

Just after the meeting had started and the mantra chanting begun, Sartre made his way to the door. He turned the key and then the handle but found, try as he might, the door would not open.

Pontault approached the philosopher. “Why do you wish to leave?”

“Because I do not want to witness this... satanic worship!”

“We are here to usher in a new world,” said Pontault as the chanting rose in volume.

“Please open this door.”

“Very well. Will you wait in the cafe for me, and I will explain everything. Then you can do...well, anything you want.”

“All right, but I doubt if it will interest me.”

After the meeting had adjourned, and the brethren departed, Pontault joined Sartre at a table and ordered wine. There were a few old men sitting at the bar discussing the direction France should now head in the liberated world.

“Why did you really invite me here Monsieur Pontault?”

“Because as an atheist and an existentialist you were a challenge to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“As Christ was a gatherer of sins—I am a gatherer of souls. The Goddess I worship installed these

powers in me to prepare for a new world which will soon be upon us. The place I took you to the other evening is a dimension where the souls walk.”

“A spirit world,” interrupted Sartre.

“Yes, if you like.”

The owner put a bottle of red wine and two glasses on the table.

“Thank you Gaston,” said Pontault.

There was an eruption of laughter from the bar as Pontault poured wine into the two glasses.

“You have shown me a wonderful thing, but it does not prove that you are here to collect souls.”

Pontault looked at Sartre and took a gulp of his wine. “Let me see, who could I bring forward? Ah yes!”

Jean-Paul Sartre gasped as the face of Maxilian Robespierre appeared across the table from him.

“Or how about,” said Pontault, as Robespierre became Heinrich Himmler.

Sartre howled in anguish, “Oh stop, I’ve seen enough, they were bad people, and you’re evil. I’m going now!”

Pontault laughed as his own features returned. He took another swig of his wine.

“Go then you little man, and take your faulty theory with you,” he shouted.

When Jean-Paul Sartre returned to Paris, he discussed the matter with Simone de Beauvoir; they kept the fact that proof had arisen that the theory was flawed under wraps.

Chapter 64

USA 1953

Doctor Vincent Pontault drove his Buick along the side of the Hudson River into the town of Ossining as a heavy snow shower swept across the water. He parked his car in the lot of Sing Sing Correctional Facility and ran into the reception.

“Doctor Pontault to see Thomas Dowd,” he said to the receptionist, a short plump woman with frizzy, red hair as he put his identity card on the counter.

She looked down a list, and then said: “Doctor, will you take a seat in the waiting room please.”

He sat on a wooden chair and gazed at dancing snowflakes through a large plate-glass window. Pontault thought of how he had been asked to lecture and partake in research at many institutes around the world after publication of his exceptional doctorate thesis on clinical psychology. He plumped for New York because the Psychology Department had a research program going, which involved interviewing some of the most dangerous murderers in America often just before execution. Although he was on another continent from the Key the desire to gather more dark souls, and these were dark souls, was tempting.

Pontault opened the file on Dowd the department gave him. The man had bludgeoned his employer to death after finding his pay packet was a few dollars short. Of the two initial arresting officers one was beaten to death, the other was rendered unconscious. Dowd went into hiding, but was arrested at gunpoint.

A big prison guard ambled in, and said to the waiting room: "Doctor Pontault, will you follow me."

The guard took him out of the Administration Block and into a prison block. They waited outside a barred security gate until a thinner guard on the inside produced a set of keys and unlocked the door.

The large guard led Pontault along a clean corridor painted a light grey. The smell of disinfectant and polish was overwhelming reminding Pontault of mental asylums he had visited while studying in France. They passed through another security gate and stopped outside a door with a safety glass window. Pontault saw a figure sitting at a desk silhouetted by the sickly light which poured through a barred window on the wall opposite the door.

The guard knocked on the door, and the figure of another big guard came into view and unlocked the door. The two men entered the room which contained two wooden chairs and an old pine table covered in cigarette burns.

A man at the table raised his head and looked at Pontault with sad, brown eyes. He was unshaven and dressed in the blue overall of the inmate.

"Okay Doc you've got thirty minutes," said the guard who unlocked the door.

"So you're the quack who will get me an appeal?" Dowd asked.

"I'm here to assess you from a psychological viewpoint rather than a legal one."

After three half hour visits over three days Pontault declared, with the aid of his Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, that Thomas Dowd was indeed suffering from a personality disorder. Due to this there were mitigating circumstances for an appeal against the death sentence.

As he stood up to leave after the final session the guard who had met him in reception pushed him back into his seat and pushed his face into Pontault's. He could smell his bad breath and saw the intent in his eyes. "Listen Doc this son of a bitch is going to no appeal. He murdered a brother officer. Where he's goin', is to the chair."

He was tempted to break this man's neck, but that would be counterproductive as he would need to kill the other guard. And what good would that do? The wretch's soul was of no use, he thought. He killed because of a mental disorder not because of a dark soul.

Two months later Pontault was on his way back to Ossining, this time to see Rosemary O'Connell a serial killer from Brooklyn. In his mind he ran through the facts in the file that had been sent to his Washington Square office. She worked in a department store, no previous record, posed as a hooker to lure men to her flat where she killed them, dismembered the bodies then dumped the remains, in suitcases, into the East River. She killed five men over a period of three years.

Rosemary O'Connell gasped as Pontault walked into the interview room. He nodded to the female guard who had unlocked the door then sat down at the table.

"I'm here to assess you psychologically not..."

"I know you!" O'Connell interrupted.

"Legally, as was done before," he finished.

Pontault felt something tug at his soul looking at this woman as he started the psychoanalysis.

“You might as well know I’m a soul gatherer,” growled O’Connell.

“What makes you say that Rosemary?”

“That’s why I killed them—they were worthless pieces of shit. I wanted their souls.”

“Why did you want their souls?”

“I collect dark souls for a new world.”

The guards standing by the door chuckled.

“You ignorant fucking assholes!” O’Connell shouted at them as she stood up.

The female guard took out her baton and hit the prisoner on the backs of her knees while her male counterpart pushed the woman back onto the chair. O’Connell screamed and tried to get up again.

The female guard glared at Pontault. “Okay this interview’s over.”

As they pulled O’Connell out of the room, she turned to Pontault and rationally said: “I know who you are. Take my soul this time? I’ve collected others for you.”

Suddenly Pontault was in the trenches of the First World War. He could smell the earth, the urine, the blood and could feel the young soldier lying dead on top of him. The cursed bullet that knocked him over stopped the transference of the soul! The boy’s soul must have received something from him before he died, he thought.

Three months later Pontault received a letter asking if he wished to attend the executions of Thomas Dowd and Rosemary O’Connell. He wrote back declining the Dowd execution and accepting the O’Connell killing.

There were seven people including Pontault in the execution room. All were staring at the well-worn electric chair with its straps and electrodes.

The warden, John Wishart, a tall, thin man with combed thick, grey hair approached Pontault. “I heard you didn’t have much of an interview with this one.”

“Yes that’s right, but I’ll tell you, she wasn’t suffering from any mental disorder.”

“You astound me. That’s not what most reckon.”

Pontault was about to respond, but a barred door opened beside the electric chair, and O’Connell was led into the room from an adjoining cell. Her hair had been shaved off, and she wore a knee length blue cotton gown.

In the chair she waved away the approach of a priest, but whispered something to one guard who strapped her. The guard approached Pontault and asked him to follow. She took him to the chair and said: “You have one minute.”

“My Lord, I am ready,” said O’Connell

Pontault, with eyes ablaze, looked into her eyes. “You will follow me,” he said laying a hand upon her shoulder. He then took his place with the others.

One electrode was attached to her head and another to one of her legs. To aid conductivity a wet sponge was placed on her head.

The end for Rosemary O’Connell was quick. Pontault felt the power surge as six souls merged with his.

Chapter 65

USA 1960

Leaving the library one day Vincent Pontault spotted Professor Ed Thewell reading a book on

Demonology.

“Ed! I didn’t know you were interested in such things.”

The Professor raised his head and looked at Pontault over the top of his spectacles. “Yeah well, I keep an open mind; and it ties in with psychology I guess.”

“I’m getting numbers together for a night class on paranormal phenomena. Would you be interested? I have a research student and two others at the moment.”

“Oh I don’t know... well I guess it would be interesting,” said Thewell looking around the library.

“Good, its next Tuesday night at seven in the meeting room at the back of the main building.”

Pontault surveyed the four men seated in the room, “would any of you know a Demon if it stood next to you? Demons walk among you. You wouldn’t notice most of them because what you see is their human-like manifestation on the physical plane.”

“How do you know this?” asked Thewell, “I mean, you sound so sincere.”

Pontault scrutinized the faces in the room. There was Professor Ed Thewell, a man of vast psychological knowledge; John Wight, a research student involved in psychoanalysis who had an interest in the supernatural; Fred Troupe, an investment banker Pontault met in a bar in Greenwich Village who oozed a darkness; Jim Rodgers, a Physical Education teacher who approached Pontault while he lectured at a night class and expressed an interest in Demonology.

Pontault closed his eyes, and the class slipped into a collective trance. As he did with Jean-Paul Sartre, he guided their minds past the stars to the place where the laws of the universe were absent. The collection of minds roamed the Dark Dimension before being confronted by shadows coagulating into a form—a huge form that roared into each mind.

The class found themselves back in the meeting room as they came out of the trance. John Wight jumped up and ran out of the class knocking over two chairs.

Pontault looked at the three remaining faces. “Anyone else feel the need to run?”

“What just happened there?” Fred asked.

“Well gentlemen, we have just visited the Dark Dimension. The entity that took form and entered your minds was the Goddess or Demon Hel,” said Pontault.

Ed Thewell smiled. “I think you have some explaining to do.”

So explain he did, and in the process instigated the American Order of the Gate.

The resultant meetings grew in popularity, and two months after its instigation the night classes had thirty members, all of whom Pontault chose or admitted after meeting them.

Six months after the initial meeting Pontault was asked if he would consider conducting a meeting in Washington DC. He agreed to meet the potential brethren, and after a successful encounter, he set up a meeting once a month in a hall in Columbia Heights.

A year on, and there were two gatherings per week of thirty in New York and one meeting of twenty in Washington DC. Such a gathering in the capital did not go unnoticed, however, even with utmost secrecy. An unflattering article in The Washington Post ran with the headline : ‘Satanists Gather in the Capital’.

After reading the article Pontault wrote an anonymous letter to the newspaper stating that the meetings were not Satanical, but paranormal; just people interested in unexplained phenomena. Furthermore, he wrote, the meetings were carried out in secrecy to protect the identities of the members; safeguarding them from ridicule.

Vice President Lyndon B Johnson knocked on the door to the Oval Office and walked in. President Jack Kennedy was sitting gazing out of the window at the manicured south lawn of the White House.

He swivelled round in his chair. “Ah Lyndon!”

“Mr President!”

Kennedy threw the Washington Post over to the front of his desk where Johnson stood. “Have you seen this?”

“Yes I have Sir.”

“Jeez Lyndon we can't have Satanists meeting here right under our noses!”

Kennedy paused for a minute and stared into space. “We have enough stuff on our plate at the minute without this. We're Christians, elected by Christian voters. I can't let this go on, you'll have to lean on this—see if they'll go away.”

“Yes sir, I'll see what I can do, but we have known of Satanists in this country for a while.”

“Yeah, but now it's out in public and right here in Washington.”

“Okay, I'll get right onto it.” Johnson said, turning to leave.

“And Lyndon.”

“Mr President?”

“Remember, we're also democrats!”

“Sir.”

Jean Solway, secretary to the Chair of the Psychology Department of New York University, looked up from her typewriter. “You can go in now Mr Grosvenor.”

A stalkerly man with dark brown cropped hair stood up in the waiting room and walked over to the mahogany door with Professor Badeau on it in black letters. He knocked and waited.

“Come,” said a deep voice.

Antoine Badeau got up and walked round from behind his cluttered desk. “Mr Grosvenor,” he said shaking the man's hand.

“Professor Badeau.”

“You're with the FBI?”

“Yes, I'm with the National Security branch,” said Grosvenor, flashing his identity card.

“What can I do for you?”

“I've come to see you about Dr Pontault.”

“Ah, this'll be about the article in the Washington Post.”

“Well... yes.”

“Doctor Pontault is an excellent researcher and lecturer. He has a keen interest in the paranormal that's all Mr Grosvenor - not Satanism!”

“Yes sir! But there's no smoke without fire, and we have it on good advice that there are—shall we say—peculiar activities occurring at these meetings.”

“I will have a word with Dr Pontault.”

“We hoped that you would have more than a word. I've heard from on high that your budget next year could well be increased.”

“If I cooperate?”

“I leave it in your hands Professor.”

With that Grosvenor strode out of the office—nodded to the secretary and left.

Antoine Badeau stared at an autumnal landscape painting on a wall next to his desk. The painting reminded him of his Quebec homeland. He pressed the intercom on his desk. “Miss Solway could you find Dr Pontault and ask him to come and see me?”

Pontault pointed to the Chair's door, and Jean Solway nodded. He knocked and walked in.

“You'd better sit down Vincent,” said Badeau, placing a sheet of paper on a pile in front of him.

“Is something wrong Antoine?”

“I've just had the FBI in for a visit.”

“The article in the paper—right?”

“Yes, they want me to dismiss you... for an increase in budget.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing, hell I’m one of the brethren!”

Silence reigned over the two men, broken only by the sound of traffic from the streets below the window.

“I’ll stop the Washington meetings.”

“That’ll take some of the heat off for now.”

“Thanks for this Antoine. If there’s anything I can do for you?”

Over the following months Pontault kept as low a profile as possible going about his research and lecturing. He stopped the meetings in Washington DC and cut back the New York meetings from weekly to fortnightly.

After hearing nothing from the FBI for a year Pontault started the meetings in Washington again due to member pressure, but at a different location.

At the second meeting Pontault came out of a trance and gazed at the surrounding brethren. Their heads swung from side to side as they chanted the sacred mantra introduced to them by their master. Something was about to happen, he thought—he could feel it.

The doors to the hall burst open, and seven men dressed in dark suits strode in with drawn handguns. “FBI! The meetings over gentlemen!” shouted a tall man with a long, thin face broken by a wide, brown moustache.

“Why?” Pontault boomed.

“National security!” the tall man answered.

“National security? In what way are we a threat to national security?”

“I’m just carrying out orders. Will you now leave the building and go home. The meetings are suspended until further notice.”

The members disrobed while looking at Pontault, who thought of engaging the spokesman in an argument, but instead left the building and drove back to New York.

Pontault brooded on the Washington situation all the way back home. Worse was to come, however, for when he met Antoine Badeau the next day he heard that Agent Grosvenor had been back again, this time asking about the New York meetings.

Pontault sat at his desk and gazed at the falling leaves as they fluttered in the wind over Washington Square. The Kennedy administration was out to get him. Something had to be done. But what?

He heard on the radio that President Kennedy was on the re-election trail and was due in Dallas on the twenty-second of the month. There had been reports of fears that there might an assassination attempt by a sniper. The month before, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, had been jostled and spat on in Dallas, and there had been fears of a sniper.

Friday the twenty-second of November; Pontault stood in an excited crowd which lined Dealey Plaza in Dallas awaiting the Presidential motorcade; children in the arms of their parents waved miniature stars and stripes flags on sticks.

The first car to enter the plaza was a white Ford Sedan carrying four policemen. Then several police motorcyclists purred by. The second car was an unmarked police white Ford Sedan carrying the Sheriff and other lawmen. Then a dark, blue Lincoln Continental Convertible entered the plaza. In the front were two policemen one of whom was the driver. In the middle sat Texas Governor John Connally and his wife. On the rear left sat Jacqueline Kennedy, waving to the crowds. On the rear right was President Kennedy himself looking relaxed and happy.

As the car, with a police motorcyclist on each side, turned left into Elm Street Pontault felt an exaggerated heart beat from high up in the Texas Book Depository building. He looked up and saw the glint of a rifle barrel from an open sixth floor window.

A shot rang out and Kennedy slumped forward. He had been shot in the back and the bullet had passed through him and hit Governor Connally, who shouted: “Oh no! No! No! They mean to kill us all!” Another shot missed the car. Pontault could feel the sniper’s heart beat rise a gear. He will miss again, he thought. He went into a trance, and focused on Lee Harvey Oswald up at the depository’s window, but he was refocused on darkness behind a fence and a trigger was pulled which ended the life of the thirty-fifth President.

There was mass confusion at first as people could not believe what they had just witnessed. Then they cried and then screamed and then shouted as they realized the President had just been killed in front of them.

Pontault turned from the tragic scene and walked back to his car then drove north out of the city. As he settled down for the long journey back to New York screaming police cars sped past him in the opposite

direction, heading into a shocked city.

In a theatre claiming he was a patsy Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested. He was charged with the murder of John Franklin Kennedy. While Oswald was being moved from police headquarters to the county jail Jack Ruby, a Jewish businessman, shot and killed him in retaliation for the murder of the President.

Antoine Badeau stood looking out of his window at the brooding sky which threatened rain as Doctor Pontault entered his office.

“Vincent,” he said, still gazing out of the window.

“You wanted to see me Antoine?”

“Yes, I know where you’ve been these last few days.”

The statement hung in the air for a moment.

“Just taking care of a bit of business.”

“More than a bit of business!”

“Antoine, I had nothing to do with what happened in Dallas, but I know who did! Anyway, I want you to be my assistant; a number two sort of thing. You know the power I have; I meant it when I asked if there was anything you wanted.”

“Very well Vincent or should it be ‘my Lord’; I crave to be immortal like you.”

“You will have it, but remember there can be no turning back.”

“I accept that.”

The Johnson administration had no interest in Pontault and his meetings. Whether it was because of the war in Vietnam, or other matters closer to home was anyone’s guess. The meetings carried on in both New York and Washington unabated albeit in a clandestine manner.

Chapter 67

USA 1981

Vincent Pontault enrolled as a PhD student at the New York University Department of Politics. Psychology was no longer a driving passion. He knew the time was right for a move into politics.

Pontault was an acquaintance of Professor Neil Patrick, the Chair of the department, so acceptance was a formality

In his first year Pontault studied American Politics, international relations and political theory. He also joined the Republican Party after being introduced to Edmund Clarke, the Governor of New York.

Back in the Psychology Department, Pontault knocked on Antoine Badeau's door and waited.

"Come in Vincent," said a voice from behind the door.

Pontault opened the door. "Nice to see you as ever Antoine."

"How are the political studies going?"

Pontault took a seat studying the reflection of sunlight on Badeau's glass desk top. "Fine."

"Antoine, I want you to go over to France and rekindle the Order of the Gate in Chartres. Europe is after all where the Key is."

"You want me to leave everything and move to Europe!"

"Yes."

Badeau pursed his lips while gazing at Pontault. "Why don't you go? You're the Master."

"I have unfinished business here, but I will join you."

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Antoine, I don't have to remind you of your immortality and your allegiance to the Order." Pontault said, in a calm, but persuasive voice.

"Yes my Lord I will go as soon as you require."

"Adopt another identity because in the seventeen years since your immortalization you haven't aged – another reason its best you go to France."

Chapter 68

France 1981

The sun shone through white, wispy cirrus clouds as Antoine Badeau stepped down from the Corse Air International flight just in from Montreal. It's good to be in the home country; he thought as he walked into the Orly terminal and collected his bags.

A tall, dark skinned man with bushy, white hair approached him through the crowds of the busy

concourse. "You are Antoine Badeau?"

"Yes."

"I am Daniel Durand; Vincent Pontault asked me to meet you." He lifted a suitcase. "Will you follow me please?"

They walked out to the main car park and stopped at an old white Renault. Durand unlocked the car, and then he placed Badeau's luggage in the spacious boot.

As they drove through the leafy Parisian streets Badeau turned to Durand. "Are you one of the Brethern?"

"Yes I am, and have been for a long time."

"I am to restart the meetings."

"I know I am to help you."

They drove into the Latin Quarter and parked outside a four storey building in Rue Mouffard. As they climbed the communal stairs Daniel said: "I've lived here for many years. The room you're in used to be Vincent's while he studied at the Sorbonne."

Durand opened the front door, and they passed through the spacious living room. Antoine followed the Frenchman up a set of stairs until they faced an old, wooden panel door. Durand turned the handle, and the two men walked into a musty attic room. He opened the windows to allow fresh air in to chase out the mustiness.

Durand turned to leave. "I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks for this Daniel."

"That's okay; we're of the same ilk."

"Daniel, Vincent told me you could help me change my identity."

"Yes, I know people who can do this—for a price."

"Of course, I will pay—it has to be done."

"What name would you like?"

"Jean-Baptiste Charlot."

Antoine lay on the old bed in the attic room with the windows open listening to the sounds of night time Paris. He gazed up at the starry, late spring sky just visible through the orange glow of the street lights. Why Jean-Baptiste? He asked himself. The answer: because he had been having dreams featuring John the Baptist. He turned on his side and looked at the old oak wardrobe. Was he an incarnation of the saint?

The next morning he went for a walk through the Latin Quarter toward the Seine. Cafe owners were washing their windows. Waves of soapy water flowed across the pavements and dropped onto the roadside. The day was bright but overcast; a slight breeze caressed the white blossom on the cherry trees which lined the streets.

He passed a small church and felt a strange compulsion to go in. The heavy, dark wooden doors were open to allow early morning worshippers entry. Badeau climbed the few steps and then walked in. The smell of candle wax and polish greeted him, both mixed with the natural mustiness of an old stone building. Once his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, he could make out a high pulpit at the side of the altar. Lines of empty pews like soldiers on parade stood in the foreground. Gothic arched stained glass windows depicting biblical scenes broke up the side walls. The one that caught his eye was of John the Baptist baptising the Christ.

He sat down on a pew halfway between the door and the altar. There was no one else in the church—the silence was claustrophobic.

As Badeau was about to get up and leave he saw something move out of the corner of his eye—something in one window! He turned his head and gazed in wonder at the centre window of the three on the wall next to where he sat. The figure of John the Baptist was moving. In fact it had stepped out of

the glass and was taking on a three dimensional human-sized form as it descended through the stale atmosphere of the building. Badeau resisted the urge to scream and run as the saint hovered above the pew in front of him.

“Why do you bring darkness into this place of light?” The Baptist asked, in a hoarse voice.

Badeau looked around the church. “I come because I have been having dreams...I believe I am an incarnation of you.”

“My line reincarnates no more. I live in heaven – I have touched the face of God.”

A slight breeze blew in through the open doors and made Antoine shiver.

“You chose darkness, and by coming here you will be removed from the physical plane,” the Baptist continued.

“Me! I am immortal.”

“That matters not.”

“What about my master?”

“He has his destiny; his time will come.”

Badeau turned around sensing a presence behind him. A street urchin of no more than four years had sat in the pew behind him. When he turned back the Baptist had gone and the child was standing in the aisle next to where he was sitting.

“Come,” said the boy with one of his arms outstretched toward Badeau.

Every fibre in his body screamed: “Don’t take his hand!” But as he did, his soul left his body, and went toward the light. The lifeless body then slumped back on to the pew, and the child walked along the aisle toward the door and vanished.

When Pontault heard of Badeau’s death from Daniel Durand, he couldn’t believe an immortal had been taken. It must have been by someone or something powerful, he thought. He would need to be vigilant from then on.

Chapter 69

USA 1985

After gaining his Doctorate in 1985 Yale University hired Pontault as Assistant Professor of Political

Science lecturing and researching American Politics and International Political Economy. Promoted to Associate Professor in 1986 he was then promoted to full Professor a year later.

In 1989 Pontault, who had befriended Edmund Clarke through Neil Patrick, was appointed as Chief Legislative Assistant to newly elected Senator Clarke. After two years he stepped down from the position, and became White House staff member, and National Security Council Advisor.

Pontault stepped down from his position at the White House in 2000 to help Edmund Clarke with his presidential campaign. In 2001 the Clarke administration made him Secretary of State.

The Order of the Gate meetings continued through the years although remaining in an underground capacity. The membership however had grown to unprecedented numbers.

Chapter 70

USA 2001

President Ed Clarke stood up and walked around his desk in the Oval Office. “Vincent, I need your advice on something,” he said, as he leaned on the front of the desk.

Pontault sank back into his seat. “Of course Mr President.”

“We’ve known each other for a few years now. I value your advice as a friend and in an official capacity.”

The President walked back round his desk, and he then stared out through the centre window of the

three behind his seat. “The west’s oil supplies are dwindling as you know, and the Arab countries hold all the aces. If only we could lay our hands on the rich Iraqi oilfields. You have your finger on the international economy. What are our options?”

“Well there’s one option, but you’re not going to like it.”

“What is it?”

Pontault took a deep breath. “An attack on the USA!”

“We’ve been attacked before haven't we!”

“An orchestrated Arab terrorist attack on the American mainland... a false flag!”

“What! That’s crazy.”

“Think about it, the American public would be up in arms calling for revenge. All you then have to do is release information that Iraq is harbouring terrorists and there are suspicions they are developing nuclear arms. This will give us the justification to invade and topple the dictatorship in the name of democracy. The oil fields will then need to be protected.”

“I see you have it all planned out. What of the other world leaders? What of the security services?”
“The western countries will go along—it’s in their interests. The security services! Come on Mr President, you know this type of thing has happened before with or without the president's approval.”

“Can you do this Vincent?”

“Yes I can sir.”

“I don’t want to know when or where.”

“Yes Mr President. Do I get your approval?”

“Yes.”

Chapter 71

France 2003

Didier Grondin opened the cab door and climbed in. “Rue Mouffetard,” he said to the driver. He had just flown into Charles de Gaulle on the Air France flight from Washington. The journey was delayed due to an electrical storm over Dulles, but he felt elated to be back to restart the Order of the Gate in France.

As the cab headed into the centre of Paris, he thought of Daniel Durand who had died the previous year leaving him the house in the Latin Quarter. He also thought of Ed Clarke and how shocked he had been at his resignation. He granted his request for a new identity and a job waiting in Chartres.

It hasn’t changed at all, thought Grondin as the cab pulled up in front of the building. He paid off the

cabbie, climbed the stairs and entered the old house.

Walking through the cold living room with its ghostly forms of sheeted furniture Grondin decided it was time for him to intensify his search for the Key. He was powerful, and he'd gathered enough dark souls, but he was tired. Tired of searching out the darkness in mankind, tired of playing games.

Grondin sold the house in Paris and bought a large villa on the outskirts of Chartres. He took up the job as a local magistrate, organised by the American Embassy.

Chapter 72

Matthew gazed at the vast expanse of the Forth Rail Bridge while they drove over the neighbouring road bridge. "That sight is on a million biscuit and cake boxes exported around the world."

"Yeah that or the Loch Ness Monster, said David with a grin.

Dark, brooding clouds swept in from the unforgiving North Sea as the black Audi rolled down hill then negotiated the roundabout beside Elliot Golf Course. The car then headed into Arbroath.

"Where do you want me to go?" David asked.

"Jane, do you want dropped off at your house?" Matthew asked, turning his head round to face her from where he sat in the front passenger seat.

"Could you drop me off at Timmergreens Shopping Centre please?"

Matthew guided David to the centre where Jane checked she had everything. "Well, I'll see you boys tomorrow I guess."

She grabbed her bag out of the boot then slammed it shut before tapping the side of the car and then walking away.

"Where does she stay?" David asked, as they passed Keptie Pond with its mock medieval sandstone water tower standing on a mound exposed to all the North Sea threw its way.

“This is going to sound strange, but I don't know. I never thought too much about it; she just shows up at my house or we meet in the town.”

They drove the rest of the journey in silence with Matthew pointing the way.

“Is it wise to stay here?” Matthew asked, as they drew up outside his house, “Grondin’s henchman know I stay here and, it sounds a little soft, but now I see the house I don’t want to stay after that episode with the monks.”

“Is there anywhere else we can go?”

“Yeah my cousin Jake’ll put us up.”

“It’ll be all right to stay here tonight, but let’s go see him.”

“Right, gives a minute?”

Matthew opened his front door and entered. A shiver ran down his spine as he recalled the ghostly monks around the house. He switched on the central heating and then collected the pile of mail from behind the front door. After a quick survey of the house to check that everything was okay he got back into David’s car and guided him to Almerie Close.

Matthew pressed number thirty-five on the steel wall plate which had the flat alert buttons for the peach coloured building that rose above the pair.

“Yeah, hullo!” answered a metallic voice.

“Jake, it’s me, it’s Mattie!”

“Oh, hi mate!”

They heard a buzz then a click.

“Let’s go.” Matthew said, pushing the security door.

They climbed the stairs to the first landing where a well-made man with a shaven head and a black beard stood outside a maroon door.

“Where have you been hiding you toe rag,” he said, and then laughed.

“Good to see you too Jake,” replied Matthew. He then turned and pointed to David. “This is David, a good friend of mine.”

“Wow! You look like you’ve had too many nights out with this guy, Jake said, nodding in Matthew’s direction. “Good to meet you, come on in.”

Matthew sat on the lounge settee. “Where's Cath?”

“She’s away to yoga classes. She'll be back in an hour or so.”

“Jake, we need a place to stay. We hoped that you could put us up for a few days?”

“Sure, that’ll be okay. But what’s wrong with your place?”

Matthew looked at David. “We’ve got a little story to tell you.”

“Okay, hold it. I’ve got beer in the fridge.”

He disappeared into the hallway before returning with six cans of export.

“Right then,” he said, switching on the CD player, “You guys like AC/DC?”

“Perfect,” said David, as the opening riff to ‘Hells Bells’ filled the room.

Jake then handed each of his visitors a can and then opened one for himself. Then the two visitors unleashed the facts on to Matthew’s cousin.

“Wow man! I never thought I’d meet a real demon. I mean you watch films and listen to Metal Music, but David, you’re the real thing,” said Jake, shaking his head.

“Yeah well, let’s concentrate on finding the Key, and then we can carry on with the hero worship,” said David.

“Right I’ll stay off work and give you guys a hand.”

Matthew shook his head. “No, just carry on as normal for now.”

“We may require a strong pair of hands when these people we told you about show up.” David said.

“Okay. Well, just let me know.”

“Thanks Jake,” said Matthew, as he stood up and took a slug from his can. He looked out of the large sitting room window into a supermarket car park, where shoppers were loading up their cars with groceries.

Chapter 73

Didier Grondin watched as the city of Aberdeen appeared from under the clouds. The air stewardess’s sat down and strapped themselves in as the KLM flight from Amsterdam descended into north-east Scotland.

After collecting his bag, Grondin sat drinking insipid coffee in a cafe as he watched the arrivals monitor. The direct flight from Paris was on time and due to land at ten fifty-five.

Grondin threw his newspaper aside when he saw Georges Lagrange amble through arrivals.

“George! A good flight?” he asked walking toward his colleague.

“Hmm! Okay I suppose.”

“Let’s go hire a car and we’ll head south to Arbroath.”

Chapter 74

Matthew jumped out of his bed and opened the curtains to a day illuminated by a pallid, wintry sun. People were walking their dogs along paths lined by leafless trees in the park across the road. He dressed and then pushed open the kitchen door in search of some coffee.

“Grondin’s close,” said a voice.

Matthew spun round with thumping heart. David was sitting in the corner.

“Jesus David! You gave me a start.”

“We can’t stay here much longer—we’ve over slept.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Matthew said as he filled the kettle. “I was tired.”

“We best move down to Jake’s and plan our next move,” said David standing up, “I’ll get ready.”

A tall, thin, dark-haired woman opened the front door to Jake’s flat. “Hi Mattie; you’re looking thinner.”

“Hey Cath! You look great as usual. Meet David.”

“Hi David, come on in. Jake said you’d be staying for a few days. He’s at his work, and I’m just heading off to mine. There’s two spare bedrooms – just help yourselves. Hope you don’t mind the stuff lying about. The beds are free. I gave them an aire.”

“Thanks,” said David.

After Cath had gone the pair sat in the lounge.

“We should go up to the Abbey. I know the curator; he would let us look behind the scenes so to speak.” Matthew said.

“Not a good idea, Grondin will either be there or having it watched.”

“Yeah but, I’ve been thinking, he’ll try nothing until we find the Key.”

“I don’t want to take the risk of him getting to you.” David said rising from the settee. “Was there

anything in your dealings with Jonas that would show where the Key is?"

"I've racked my mind—I can't seem to come up with anything positive."

The door alert buzzer sounded making the pair look at each other. Matthew rose and went into the hall and then lifted the receiver. "Hullo?"

"Come on then, open up Wilson!"

"Janey!"

Grondin jolted awake and shouted: "de Longford!" The BMW driven by Georges Lagrange was just passing through the village of Marywell to the north of Arbroath. "Sorry about that Georges, I must have dropped off."

"We're almost there, anyway."

"As you've gathered de Longford's in town, and we've got to track him and his fan club down-pronto."

"So where do you want to go—to his house?"

"No, they won't be there. We'll go book in to that hotel you and Caron stayed in, and then I want you to go to the abbey and have a look for them. If they're not there, just keep an eye on the place."

"Where are you going?"

"I have an idea where they might be."

Matthew entered the living room and set mugs of coffee in front of Jane and David.

"So you guys going to the Abbey?" asked Jane.

"No Grondin's here, and he's waiting there for us," answered Matthew, who then turned to David.

"How about the cave at the cliffs where the renegade monks had their altar?"

"Yeah, I'd like a look out there. It should be okay as long as we're vigilant."

So, later that day, with Jane sitting in the comfort of Jake's living room, Matthew and David headed out along the cliff top path. The afternoon was windy, and showers of rain drifted in off the grey sea and soaked the cliffs

The pair descended into the inlet where the cave lay at the base of a conglomerate cliff. They jumped from the path onto the beach and entered the cave amid the foreboding shrieks of seagulls. Matthew switched on his flashlight which caused shadows to jump onto the walls.

They walked deep into the cave, rounding a gentle bend.

"Anything coming to you yet Mattie?"

"No, nothing."

After a moment they came to the back wall where Matthew shone the torch over the carved out altar. He picked out the seat covered in green moss due to a spring, which flowed down the wall from a fracture.

They searched about—tapping the wall area around the altar – but nothing revealed itself! Matthew stood on the seat and probed the ceiling, but to no avail.

"I think we'd better head back," said David, after an hour of searching. "This is fruitless!"

They made their way back to the mouth of the cave just as the waves were creeping toward the top of the beach, and leaving wide, frothy arcs in the sand as they withdrew.

Matthew couldn't help thinking he was being watched as they climbed the steep hillside path in the descending darkness. At the top he breathed a sigh of relief glad to be on the way back.

As they passed an overhanging piece of cliff a figure flew up and over the edge with jacket flapping in the wind and eyes ablaze. Grondin hovered over the path behind the two walkers. David sighed and turned around, but the figure had disappeared over the edge within the blink of an eye—satisfied with the knowledge that the Key had not been found.

“What’s up?” Matthew asked.

“Nothing—come on let’s get back.”

David browsed through the science shelves of Arbroath Library while Matthew had a meeting with his supervisor. After a while he wandered outside to have a look for Grondin.

“We’d better get back,” said Matthew, as he joined David.

When they entered the flat, Jake was sitting chatting with Cath and Jane.

“Hey, the two amigos! How’s it going chaps?”

“All right Jake. How’s yourself?” answered Matthew.

“Any luck?” Jane asked.

“Nothing,” said David, sitting down.

Jake stroked his beard. “Caths going for some fish and chips, do you guys want some?”

“Am I?” Cath said, frowning at Jake.

Matthew shook his head. “Why do you stay with this guy Cath?”

“Animal magnetism Mattie—something you know little about,” said Jake.

Saturday morning blew sleet and rain over Arbroath, which was eroding the glistening frost on the pavements.

“I know where the Key is!” Matthew said as he strode into the kitchen where Jake and David sat drinking coffee.

“What!” David shouted.

“It’s in the Sacristy.”

“How did you find that out?” Jake asked.

“I’m not sure! It must have been hidden in the depths of my subconscious mind and surfaced last night now we require it.”

“Like these UFO abductees who recall things under hypnosis,” said Jake.

“Yeah something like that—I guess.”

David stood up. “Well, where about in the Sacristy?”

“We’ll need a ladder,” said Matthew.

“You can’t walk into the Abbey with a ladder.” Jake pointed out.

“I know, we’ll head there tonight under the cover of darkness with a ladder and torches: agreed gentlemen?”

“Agreed!” David and Jake said in unison.

The full moon shone down promising an overnight frost as the foursome set off for Arbroath Abbey. Matthew watched as a group of people, heading for a night out, walked along the other side of the street laughing and joking. Time this was over—one way or another, he thought.

They walked up the gentle slope of the Outer Precinct toward the West Front of the abbey with the deserted visitor centre to their left in darkness. Matthew imagined hooded figures passing along the illuminated arches above the West Gate.

The group passed through the arches of the Gatehouse then followed Abbey Street round by the Abbots House. The South Transept dominated the background lit by a pale, white light, making it look like a huge one-eyed phantom.

“I stashed an extending stepladder in the hedge up here earlier on using Jake’s van.” Matthew said, leading the others into Abbey Green, a small park to the side of the main building. Matthew grabbed the steps and crept up to the perimeter fence. “We’ll keep the torches off until we’re well in the grounds — agreed?”

“Okay,” agreed David.

They climbed the part of the fence that wasn't hedged and then walked over the neat lawn toward the South Transept.

"All right, Mattie why do we need a ladder?" David asked.

"Because we need to access a doorway to a former treasury strong room in the upper reaches of a wall."

The group passed in front of the South Transept and entered the nave area.

"Should be okay to switch on the torches now," said Matthew, walking around one of the bases of the former columns.

A gust of wind blew laughter from a nearby pub as Matthew opened the well weathered, wooden Sacristy door and flashed his torch around. A shiver ran up and then back down his spine as he stepped over the threshold. Pale moonlight shone through a big Gothic arch window and fell upon the stone floor. David stepped in and shone his torch up onto the top far side of the right-hand wall. "There it is – there's the doorway to the treasury," he said holding the beam steady on the black rectangle.

Jake extended the step ladder and placed it on the wall under the doorway. He then climbed up, and the last Matthew saw of him was a pair of white trainers disappearing into the inky darkness. The laughter came again as Mathew climbed, but this time it sounded close at hand.

"Hear that?" David said, looking at Matthew out of the darkness, "Ghostly laughter. They used to imprison mad people in here." Great, thought Matthew as he climbed into the dark.

Once into the room he shone his flashlight on to the wall behind the door. "Right – one block in and two up from the floor. Ah, here it is!" He put his fingers on the block and caressed it as if feeling the textural quality of the sandstone. He then placed the fingers of both hands around the rock and teased it out. Centimetre by centimetre the block eased out under the increasing pressure of Matthew's fingers until it fell into his hands. He put the block down and shone his torch into the vacant, rectangular space. There was a small wooden box at the back. Matthew thrust his right hand in and retrieved the box. He blew a thick layer of dust off the lid and opened it to reveal the Key. It looked much like the fake: bronze with a green patina, however the etching on the handle was much clearer.

"Okay let's go," said David, gazing at the Key.

They descended the stepladder back to the cold flagstones of the Sacristy.

"Did you get it?" Jane asked. "Let's see it?"

Matthew opened the small, dark wooden box and exposed the most important key in the world.

Chapter 75

Detective Sergeant Jim Doyle leaned back on his chair and sighed, it was Saturday night and there wasn't much happening. Busy for Uniform but not for him, he thought. Detective Inspector Derek Watt, his boss, had taken the night off to attend a dinner party so he put his feet up on the desk, looked at the paperwork and yawned.

The phone on his desk rang.

"Hello."

"Jim?"

"Yeah."

"It's Margaret in the comms room, there's a call come in from Alan Bridges asking if someone senior would go to the Abbey to deal with a disturbance; as Inspector Brown and DI Watt aren't on duty that leaves you."

“A disturbance! Uniform deals with them.”

“Another unit responded to the call from a resident: John Hodges and Dale Whitton.”

“So, what’s going on?”

“He says he’s seen nothing like it. Can you go?”

“Okay—on my way.”

After seven years on the force DS Doyle had seen many things, but nothing could have prepared him for what awaited him in the Abbey grounds. He had went by foot as it wasn’t far and just as quick when Arbroath’s one-way system was taken into consideration. As he approached, he saw a police van parked at a stange angle beside the Visitor Centre.

He strode into the Abbey through the open West Gate just as a spine chilling scream pierced the air , which unnerved him, and made him halt. After regaining his composure Doyle walked over the nave and through an arch on to the cloister lawn. PC Alan Bridges appeared out of a group of people who were standing gaping at the proceedings. “Jim! Thank God! I don’t know what to do here.”

Doyle gazed in horror at a man hanging upside down in mid-air to the side of the South Transept; his cries were masked by the screams emitted by a two and a half metre tall woman with grey skin and blood red eyes.

A human male or what looked like a human male flew backwards through the air at startling speed. He cleared the perimeter hedge before he crashed into the Abbey Bowling Club building, which stood at right angles to the South Transept.

Doyle arched his shoulders as the body hit the small sandstone building. “Christ, no one could’ve survived that!” he shouted as he turned his attention to Alan Bridges. “We’ll need to call in armed officers Alan this is beyond us for fuck's sake!”

Chapter 76

Matthew realised with horror he had made a terrible mistake as he watched Jane’s eyes turn from human excitement to demonic lust.

“Hel!” David screamed as he jumped in between the pair and slammed the lid shut.

“Yes!” boomed the huge shape of the demon which Jane was becoming.

“Run!” David shouted as he grabbed Matthew, shaking him from his transfixion.

Jake, however, needed no such persuasion—he was out of the door and half way across the Cloister lawn. David slammed the Sacristy door shut after Matthew and he were outside. Then as they ran toward the Cloister, the ancient door shattered into a thousand shards, and Hel strode through the arched doorway.

Matthew and David ran over the lawn toward the perimeter hedge, but were finding it hard going. It was as if they were running through tar. Matthew came to a halt followed by David who turned his head

and saw Hel walk toward them in the glow of the streetlights. Then suddenly they were free; Jake had crept up behind the demon and smashed the stepladder into her back. He turned and ran, but was swept off his feet and turned upside down—to hang five metres off the ground.

“Jake!” Matthew screamed.

“You run with the Key; I’ll try to hold her off and rescue Jake.” David shouted to Matthew.

At this point four policemen, and several people came running in, among them the curator of the Abbey, just as David summoned up as much psychic energy as he could. He then sent Hel back through the air to crash into the South Transept.

Matthew ran toward the perimeter hedge, but halted in his tracks as dark hooded figures emerged menacingly from the ground. He turned and ran back to where David was trying to break the psychic link that held Jake in the air.

“What are you doing back here Mattie?”

“It’s because of them.” Matthew said, pointing toward the ghosts.

“They can’t touch you—remember.”

Hel shrugged off the broken parts of a wooden bench that had sat for decades at the foot of the South Transept. She then turned on David and sent him soaring over the hedge. The demon then approached Matthew.

Just as the creature was in striking distance Matthew flew backwards over the group of people on the lawn. The demon screamed and made her way toward him, sending the spectators running for their lives.

“Fuck! There’s no way this could get much worse—is there?” Matthew asked himself as the abomination approached. The answer came in an evil laugh which resonated around the Abbey grounds. The source was standing, dressed in dark clothes, in the glassless rim of the Round ‘O’ at the top of the South Transept.

Matthew felt himself being lifted off the ground and, despite trying to oppose the power, he flew up toward the grinning Grondin. Meanwhile the screams of Hel, who was being held down on the lawn, seemed as if they would destroy the Abbey.

Matthew looked on as he neared the black disk pierced by what looked like two red hot poker tips. He stood on the rim next to Grondin with a grip on the side as if his life depended on it— which it did!

“Matthew!”

I know that voice, thought Matthew as he turned his head.

“Jonas!” He shouted. But it can’t be, he thought.

“It is me; I have come to protect you and the Key.”

Matthew stared in wonder at Jonas—he looked so much alive— gone was the gaunt ghostly look; his eyes sparkled with love, so much so that Matthew wanted to hug him—to hug his ancestor.

“Give me the Key Matthew and I will look after it one more time,” said Jonas in a soft lilting voice. Mesmerised, Matthew took out the small wooden box from inside his jacket.

“No!” screamed David, who had recovered from the crash into the bowling club house and was climbing over the perimeter fence. But it was too late Grondin snatched the box and released the psychic hold on Matthew, who then fell forward. Fortunately David moved into position; caught him with a psychic net and then lowered him to the ground.

The Abbey grounds filled with the shouts of armed police moving into covering positions. They were guided initially by DS Doyle. Matthew noticed Grondin had gone, along with Hel and her minions. Jake was sitting on the Cloister lawn holding his head.

“Jesus, I fell for his tricks again!” Matthew said as he turned toward David.

David watched the police as they closed in and said: “No time for self-pity let’s go.”

In the blink of an eye Matthew and Jake found themselves outside the Abbey beside the Visitor

Centre. David had started walking along Hamilton Green.

“Where are you going?” Matthew asked.

“I’m sure I know where they are,” replied David.

Matthew and Jake ran after him.

They never noticed the figure that stepped out of the shadows and followed them.

Chapter 77

Jim Doyle had been approaching Jake to see if he was all right when he discovered himself next to the Visitor Centre outside the abbey. He took advantage of the situation by ducking into the darkened doorway when he heard the voices of the men he then recognised from inside the Abbey.

He trailed the three men unable to explain how he had found himself outside the Abbey. Then again he had seen many bizarre things he couldn’t explain that night.

The threesome turned right into Leonard Street and followed its length into Stanley Street heading east. Doyle pursued as close as he dared, watching the search flashlights and listening to the shouts of the armed police squad in the Abbey grounds. The three men led him into Springfield Park, and on toward the sea.

The sky clouded over, and an onshore wind blew a light rain into his face as the policeman followed his quarry along the hilltop path that led to the cliffs.

“Where the hell are these three going?” He asked himself after following them for twenty minutes along the winding path at the top of the sandstone cliffs when they suddenly disappeared over the edge.

When he got to the place where they had left the path he discovered a path which led down a steep hillside to an inlet with a pebbled beach. He made his way down the path cursing the fact the clouds had obscured the moon.

On the beach Doyle stared into the black maw of a cave and thought there's nowhere else they could've gone. So he climbed the waves of pebbles and entered the large rough arch.

As he moved through the suffocating darkness Doyle winced at the crunch of every footfall on the shingle. He had no desire to be captured by any of the creatures he had seen earlier.

The policeman peered into the black looking for some sign as to where the three men he was following had gone. On and on he crept with his hands out in front to give warning of some protruding rock face or something worse.

He doubted if the men had entered the cave and was considering turning back when he saw a red glow in the distance round a bend. His curiosity aroused, he pressed on. He couldn't recall this cave from a childhood of exploring the area during the school holidays. Most of the caves he explored were tiny compared to this monster.

As he approached the red glow a chant filled the air. Some mantra in Latin, he thought. Eventually he saw it: a circle of hooded monks. Their black habits were edged with red from the light, which emanated from a glowing circular symbol that seemed like it was cut into the rock of the cave floor; the man who had been standing in the Round 'O' presided over them. He stood beside an altar with a box and other articles upon it.

A shiver ran up the detective's spine. Devil worshippers, he thought. "God, this in Arbroath! I'm going to put a stop to this," he said to himself as he strode forward toward the circle. Suddenly he was grabbed from behind, and a thick cord thrown around his neck.

Chapter 78

Matthew nudged David as Georges Lagrange pulled Jim Doyle around the circle toward the altar. There was a thick, white cord around his neck, which Lagrange tugged, and his hands were tied together.

The pair, along with Jake were hiding behind a rock in the shadows.

"He was in the Abbey," whispered Matthew.

"He's a policeman—I saw him guiding the armed squad," said David.

Lagrange pulled the hapless detective toward the altar while his master opened the box next to which lay a bejewelled bowl. Matthew felt the little hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"What are they going to do with him?"

"It looks as if he's to be the pure soul." David answered.

"What?" asked a shocked Matthew.

"They can't perform the invocation without someone with a pure soul, and what's worse he'll be sacrificed."

"David, you can't let that happen." Matthew whispered as loud as he dared.

“I can’t do anything about it.”

“Why not?”

“Try moving?”

Matthew found that his whole body was paralysed.

“Now look up – your eyeballs can still move.”

What Matthew saw when he looked up froze his blood. Jane or rather Hel in the form of Jane gazed down upon them from a hovering position on the ceiling of the cave. She grinned at Matthew, who looked away.

“Pick up the Key human,” commanded Grondin.

DS Doyle did as he was told due to Lagrange tightening the cord around his neck.

“Now read the text on the handle in reverse–right to left!”

“It’s Latin–I can’t read Latin!” Doyle gasped.

“Read it!” Grondin boomed.

After a tug on the cord and a look into Grondin’s red eyes Doyle began to read. As he read the chanting increased in volume.

Matthew gazed at Jake and wondered what he made of all this.

The chanting reached a climax as the words the detective read came to a stuttering end. Grondin then picked up a dagger and made to stab Doyle, who turned, and diverted the blow, but was slashed across the arm. Lagrange hit him over the head, and Doyle fell, unconscious onto the floor–Lagrange allowing the cord to slip through his hands.

Grondin dropped the Key into the bowl and then raised Doyle’s wounded arm to allow blood to run over it.

Suddenly there was a growling noise as if the rock of the cave was angry at what had transpired. After the noise died away the rock melted, and blackness hissed out from all around like a dirty gas leak.

“Shit! What’s happening David?” Matthew asked.

“The ancient ones are breaking the ionic bonds that hold the molecules in the rock together. That’s how they will enter the world–they’re going to seep in between the atoms!”

“I am the resurrection and the life, he who believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” Grondin shouted, raising his arms and looking up into the disintegrating cave ceiling.

“The idiot still thinks he’s the Anti-Christ,” snorted David.

“So it looks like we’re beaten,” said Matthew, shaking his head.

“Not if I can help it,” said David as he raised his eyes up to Hel– now in demon form.

“Mother! Grondin means to betray you; he will keep the Key, thus exercising complete control over the dark ones.”

“You lie, he is under my control.” Hel boomed.

“Why did he keep you pinned down at the Abbey while he grabbed the Key?”

There was a snarl then a crash as Hel smashed into Grondin. The ghostly monks scattered–their hoods flapping back to reveal white skulls.

The two demons crashed around the walls, each caught in the others grasp while the rock was melting and spreading out from the altar area. More of the evil dark matter escaped to poison the atmosphere.

“Quick Mattie–we can move.” David shouted as he ran toward the disintegrating altar. He grabbed the Key and threw it to Matthew. “Read it!”

Matthew began to read it in reverse.

“No! Read it normally.”

As Matthew read the Key amid the scenes of chaos David picked up the bowl which contained the

blood of DS Doyle. When Matthew had finished David took the Key then placed it in the container. The black matter was sucked back through the inter-atomic spaces as the rock began to re-gel.

“I need your help Mattie!” David shouted as he pointed toward the wrestling demons. “Right now-minds together!”

The two men ran toward the demons and released a psychic blast which swept them into the re-gelling back wall of the cave. With a horrendous scream the two monsters joined the dark matter being sucked back into the Dark Realm.

David and Matthew collapsed on to the cave floor mentally exhausted from the psychic blast. The place was in darkness... natural darkness-normality had resumed.

A head appeared from behind a rock. “What happened?” Jake asked.

Matthew and David rolled around in laughter.

“Where were you? Matthew asked with tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I couldn’t look!”

“Well, we sent them through to the Dark Realm and locked the gate,” said David.

“Where’s the Key?” Matthew asked.

“I’ve got it—let’s get out of here,” replied David.

Just then a groan came from the direction of the altar.

“The copper!” Matthew shouted as he ran toward the sound.

He found DS Doyle lying by the altar; he lifted his head and noticed he had lost a lot of blood from the wound on his right arm. Matthew took out his handkerchief and tied it around the cut.

“Press hard here,” he said to the policeman as he helped him to his feet. They then followed David and Jake out of the cave and up the hillside on to the cliff top path.

“I won’t pretend to understand what was going on down there when I drifted back into consciousness, but I reckon you guys did us all a favour.” Doyle said, walking unsteadily along the path.

“What about the armed police back at the Abbey?”

“I’ll handle that-tomorrow.”

Back in Jake’s flat Cath ran to let the three hero’s in. “Well I take it the world has been saved?”

“Yeah,” said Matthew.

“You want to have seen these guys in action Cath,” said Jake.

“How do you know, you were hiding behind a rock,” taunted Matthew.

“Yeah well, I peeped around it occasionally.”

They all laughed after which Jake related the whole story to Cathy—accompanied by the cans of beer they had bought on the way back to the flat.

The next morning, Matthew woke up to find David putting things in his travel bag.

“Where are you going David?”

“Back to Amsterdam—I’ve got a business to run.”

“Yeah,” said Matthew, nodding his head. “Will you come back over some time?”

“Of course, I’m in Scotland quite a bit. Why don’t you come over to Amsterdam? You’re going to have plenty time, because it looks as if you’re in for a long life with that demon seed in you.” He took the Key out of his pocket, “this is yours,” he said, handing it to Matthew.

“What’ll I do with it?” Matthew asked, as he put the Key in his shirt pocket.

“It’s up to you—you’re the guardian. You can destroy it, or hide it again.”

“I can’t help thinking about Jane.

“Yeah well, Hel was a cunning adversary.”

Matthew saw David off from the car park outside Jake’s flat then checked to see if the Key was in his pocket for if he didn’t he feared something horrible would happen and he didn’t want that...again! After satisfying himself that the Key was safe, he headed home to a changed world—a world where he knew

more about himself.