

HERETIC

Book One of the Templar Chronicles

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Background

Centuries after the Knights Templar were presumed destroyed at the hands of King Phillip and Pope Clement V, the Order resurfaces as a secret militant arm of the Vatican, tasked with defending mankind from the supernatural.

Of the Orders' enemies, the greatest are the Fallen, supernatural beings that claim to be fallen angels and are devoted to wreaking havoc on earth. It was contact with one of the Fallen that led to Cade Williams becoming a Templar.

When Templar commanderies come under attack, it is up to Cade Williams and his Echo Team to determine who is behind the assaults and why.

Major Characters

Knight Commander Cade Williams – The protagonist of the story, Cade is a former member of the Boston Special Tactics and Operations Team who, in a chance encounter with the supernatural, lost his wife. The same encounter scarred him, body and soul, and left him with supernatural abilities of his own, including the power to cross into the world of the dead. Cade is now a member of the Templar Order, where he leads one of nine specialized combat teams known as the Gladii Christi, or Guardians of Christ.

Cade's special abilities:

- **The Sight:** The ability to see into the land of the dead through the eye that was destroyed by the Adversary's magick. An eye patch covers his damaged eye, but does not prohibit the Sight.
- **The Talent:** The ability to read recent psychic impressions or emotions left on objects through the touch of his hands. Cade wears gloves at all times to protect himself from unwanted readings.
- **The Gift:** The ability to "step beyond" into the world of the dead, a realm of existence just beyond our own.

Sergeant Duncan Maguire – Current head of the Preceptor's guard detail, Duncan conducts himself strictly by the Order's Code. There is no gray for Duncan – everything is right or wrong, black or white. His sudden appointment as a member of Cade's combat unit, where nothing is black and white, will cause him some difficulty.

Sergeant Matthew Riley – Weapons and demolitions expert, highest ranking enlisted man under Cade’s command.

Sergeant Gavin Jones – Communications and technology expert for Cade’s squad.

Marcus Daniels – Preceptor for the northeast region of the United States. Nominal head of all Templar activities that take place within that geographical region. Daniels is also the head of the Custodes Veritatis, a secret group within the Templar organization that is tasked with protecting and preserving the mystical relics under Templar control.

The Council of Nine – A group of nine mystics led by a powerful necromancer that is currently in service to the Adversary.

The Necromancer – Leader of the Council of Nine, the Necromancer has agreed to work for the Adversary in exchange for a greater degree of power. The Adversary uses the Necromancer and his allies to find and retrieve the Spear of Longinus for him.

The Adversary – One of the Fallen who is determined to locate and obtain the Spear of Longinus, the Roman lance that was used to pierce the side of Christ and is supposed to give the bearer unlimited power. The Adversary is Cade’s sworn enemy and his wife’s murderer.

Tone/Theme/Format

While at its heart a horror novel, this work is intended to rise above that genre and capture a more widespread audience. Full of combat and action-oriented situations, it combines traits more commonly found in thrillers, such as *THE ICE STATION* by Matthew Reilly and *RELIC* by Preston and Child, while at the same time easing the reader into an acceptance of the dark fantastic that is at its core. The theme of the work focuses primarily on Cade’s need to avenge the death of his wife at all costs, a dark emotion that pushes him into the gray zone between right and wrong. Balanced against this is Duncan Maguire’s strong belief in the righteousness of the Templar mission and his constant attempts to bring Cade back from the edge.

Chapter Outline

Prologue

A freelance operative in Europe makes a phone call to his employer in the United States. The operative reports that he has examined both the object in the Vatican and the similar object in the Hofberg Museum. He is quite certain that both of them are fakes. He concludes his report, receives confirmation of the wire transfer for his fee and then hangs up the phone. Moments later he is dead, the victim of a freak accident; an unmanned car leaps the curb and runs him down. Across the Atlantic, the former employer also hangs up the phone. There is no longer a need for the open connection now that the loose end has been resolved.

Chapter One

Cade Williams, former SWAT officer and now commander of a Knight Templar Gladii Christi combat squad, squats behind a refuse-filled garbage dumpster and watches his target, a dilapidated house on the east side of Bridgeport, Connecticut. He and his team are on an unsanctioned mission, but that knowledge does not seem to trouble any of them. When he feels the time is right, Cade gives the signal and the squad quickly assaults the home in classic law-enforcement style. Less than three minutes later the half dozen bodyguards within the structure are dead and Cade is interrogating their leader in the kitchen. When the subject begins to go into what seems to be convulsions, Cade calmly shoots the man in the head. The team departs as swiftly as it had arrived, the only evidence of them having been there is the rapidly cooling bodies they leave behind.

Chapter Two

That evening Cade dreams of an encounter with a supernatural being he calls the Adversary. It is a repetitive dream, one he suspects is a glimpse of an event he will live out at some point in his future. Unlike his previous dreams, this one is interrupted before its usual end. Instead of falling in defeat beneath the martial skills of his foe, Cade finds himself standing in a desecrated cemetery where the graves have been opened and their contents strewn across the grounds. Before this odd turn of events can reach a conclusion, he is awakened by a phone call summoning him to a meeting with the local Templar regional commander, Preceptor Marcus Daniels.

Chapter Three

The Preceptor and his protective detail, led by Sergeant Duncan Maguire, arrive at the meeting site; one of the local commanderies in Rhode Island. At some point during the previous evening it came under attack from unknown assailants. It was discovered that morning with its gates breached and its personnel missing amidst signs of a heavy firefight.

Cade arrives and Daniels explains that he is putting Cade and his combat team in charge of the investigation. Cade is given access to every resource the Order can provide so that he can find the perpetrators quickly and deal with them decisively. Due to the fact that Cade's team is one man short, the Preceptor orders him to add another man to his unit. Based on a gut reaction that he is more than he appears, Cade selects Maguire.

Chapter Four

Cade's squad begins their investigation of the site. They interview the knights who first arrived on the scene and direct the forensic investigators that arrive shortly thereafter. As the afternoon wears on, a fresh report arrives – there has been another attack, this time at a commandery in Ohio.

Chapter Five

The squad heads for Ohio on one of the Order's executive jets. Cade reviews Duncan's file and learns that gut reaction to the man was correct –

Maguire has the age-old power of "laying on hands" or healing with his touch and the strength of his faith. Cade inwardly acknowledges the challenges this will impose on his unit, but he still feels he has made the right choice. Cade lets Duncan know that things run a bit differently in his unit, a statement that leaves the by-the-book Sergeant feeling a bit uncomfortable.

Chapter Six

Cade decides to lie down and rest while he has a free moment. He is quickly asleep and dreaming. This time he "remembers" his first encounter with the Adversary, a confrontation that ended with the death of Cade's wife. When he awakens, he is convinced that his wife is standing in the doorway of the airplane's compartment, calling his name, but when he flips on the light he finds no one is there.

Chapter Seven

The group behind the attacks is a cabal of sorcerers known as the Council of Nine. Led by the Necromancer, the group is systematically hunting down the Templar strongholds, searching for a certain mystical relic. This relic, the Spear of Longinus, is believed to be the remains of the lance that pierced the side of Christ at the crucifixion. Carrying the Lance is supposed to make the bearer undefeatable in battle. The Necromancer reports to the Adversary on their progress and on the fact that Cade has been brought into the situation as they had planned.

Chapter Eight

The Echo Team squad arrives in Ohio. There, they discover the same situation as in Connecticut – missing Templars amid evidence of a serious confrontation, but this time there is an added detail. The small Templar cemetery on the east side of the grounds has been ransacked, the graves torn open and their contents strewn about. One in particular seems to be the epicenter of the

strange activity. While the team stands guard, Cade uses his Talent on the grave and “sees” the attempt to reach the spirit of the man who’s body lies within. Cade orders his men to find out everything they can about that long dead knight.

Chapter Nine

Cade and his men are awakened in the pre-dawn hours by one of the local knights. The missing Templars have been found. Resurrected as revenants with a hunger for human flesh, they are currently ravaging a small town an hour’s drive away. Cade’s squad immediately goes into action. Contacting the Preceptor, they arrange to pose as federal agents with the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team. By the time they arrive on site and meet up with the local law-enforcement officers, their cover is secure. Cade assumes control of the operation, capturing several of the risen Templars for examination and dispatching the rest with brutal efficiency.

Chapter Ten

While Cade is marshalling Templar resources to deal with the resurrected knights, the Necromancer is using the diversion to attack another commandery, this time in upper state New York. By now most of the bases have been put on alert, however, and the unexpected arrival of a squad of visiting knights in the midst of the attack causes events to go against the Council. The Necromancer retreats, without being able to reach his true objective.

Chapter Eleven

Cade is still dealing with the clean-up in Ohio when he receives the report of the attack in New York. Knowing the opportunity to close in on his nemesis is too good to miss, he leaves the remaining tasks to the locals and jets off to New York with his team. Assuming control of the New York site, Cade has his team begin interviewing the witnesses. It is soon clear that the Necromancer’s primary target was not the knights themselves, but one of the graves in the cemetery, just as it seemed to be in Ohio. With his team standing guard Cade attempts to use his Talent once more, only this time he is actively rebuked by the spirit of the dead knight.

Chapter Twelve

Cade orders his men to get some rest and retires to his room. There, he uses his Gift to step through the mirror into the Beyond. He makes contact with the spirit of the dead Templar. He learns of the Custodes Veritatis, a secret group within the Order tasked with guarding its holy relics, and that the Council is seeking one object in particular.

Chapter Thirteen

Unable to sleep, Jones begins to systemically search the Templar intranet, searching for some information that can tie the two graves together. By breaking

into several restricted databases he discovers that several of the men interred at the various sites all have the same gap of time missing from their service records, a time when the only indication in their files is that they were training though for what or where is not identified. After that, the men disperse to several duty stations. Curiously enough, one of them is listed as having served on the same combat team as Billings. When Jones checks with his teammate he discovers the entry to be false - Billings has no recollection of the man who supposedly served with him. Jones believes he has found the link and quickly references all of the Order's other members against the same time period. He is left with a list of 20 knights that all have the same time-gap in their records.

Chapter Fourteen

Cade re-crosses the Barrier, determined to confront the Preceptor with what he has learned, but discovers upon his return that the commandery is once again under attack. He quickly rejoins his squad in their efforts to fight off the horde of ravenous spectres and revenants that are attempting to swarm over the walls. For the first time, Cade gets a good look at the sorcerers directing the battle and through his special Sight he detects the taint of the Adversary on the Necromancer. The investigation suddenly becomes personal.

Chapter Fifteen

Jones' illicit database search touches off a few alarms. Before the squad can leave the commandery to confront the Preceptor, Cade receives a phone call from the leader of the Custodes Veritatis, Nigel Stone, asking for a clandestine meeting in his home a few hours drive away. Stone is concerned about a possible mole in the order and asks Cade to keep the meeting between the two of them for the time being. Cade agrees. He settles Jones and Billings into a nearby hotel and takes Duncan with him to the meeting as backup.

Chapter Sixteen

The two Templars arrive at Nigel's home later that evening. There they discover signs of forced entry. Entering the home, they find fresh blood and the mutilated corpse of a man they assume to be Stone. Knowing their enemies are still at least one step ahead of them, Cade takes the risk of using his Gift to reveal what happened to Stone. The scenes of torture and pain that he witnesses are enough to send him stumbling out of the house into the rain, blinded and horrified by what he has seen.

Chapter Seventeen

Cade regains control of himself outside of Stone's home, only to find that he and Duncan have been surrounded by several members of the Council of Nine who had been lying in wait for them. Knowing they have little chance of surviving a confrontation on their own, they quickly retreat into the house behind them. This proves to be no better, as the revenants and spectres the Council is controlling quickly breach the entrances. Desperate, Cade radios Billings, tells him the situation, and orders him to confront the Preceptor if he does not return

in 24 hours. Cade then grabs Duncan and brings both of them through the Barrier into the Beyond.

Chapter Eighteen

Due to Cade's exhausted state, brought on by carrying another into the Beyond, the two Templars get lost while seeking an egress point. They spend most of the night wandering around, until a cloaked figure leads them to a safe passage back to the real world. As Cade's steps through the barrier, he catches a glimpse of their benefactor's face - in horror, he realizes that it is his wife. Once back in the living world Cade and Duncan find themselves in a deserted home on a country road. They find a payphone and call their teammates for a pickup. When no one answers, they decide to hitchhike back into town to see what has become of their teammates.

Chapter Nineteen

While Cade and Duncan are wandering around the Beyond, Billings and Jones have their hands full with a second group of revenants that had been dispatched to their hotel in order to eliminate them. The knights manage to fight their way free and head out of town where they discover Cade and Duncan hitchhiking by the roadside. Cade is withdrawn, uncommunicative, as he struggles with the knowledge that while his wife may be dead, she is certainly not at rest. This knowledge flies in the face of everything he has believed for the last five years. Finding the Adversary now becomes more important than ever, as he recognizes that his enemy is likely the key to understanding what has happened to his wife.

Chapter Twenty

The next morning Cade and his team barge uninvited into the Preceptor's office and confront him with what they know. The Preceptor admits that he is in charge of the Custodes Veritatis and that he suspected it had something to do with the assaults, but stands behind his decision to give out the information on a need to know basis only. He had hoped that Cade's team could zero in on the culprits before further damage could occur. Obviously, new measures are now required. Daniels informs them he believes the Council is after the Spear and that plans are being made to defend its location. Cade's team is assigned to that defense.

Chapter Twenty-One

That afternoon Cade reviews the defenses of the commandery where the Spear is being safeguarded and is confident in their capability to withstand an attack. Twenty-four hours pass with no action. Exhausted from the constant action, Cade decides to rest in order to conserve his strength. He is awakened by the shade of his wife, who warns him that the outer defenses have already been breached - from the inside. Cade and his squad rush to secure the Spear, only to find that they are too late. The squad assigned to guard the Spear lies dead on the floor and the Spear itself is missing. To make matters worse, Cade

and his team discover the Preceptor and his aide lying injured in a darkened corner of the room. Both men are near death.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cade orders Duncan to do what he can to save the Preceptor while the others tend to the aide. Duncan calls forth his healing ability, but the Preceptor's wounds are too severe and all Duncan can do is stabilize him for a few moments. In that time, the Preceptor reveals that the aide is the traitor - Daniels discovered him leading the Council's soldiers through the commandery.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Billings manages to stabilize the aide as his wounds are not as serious as they first appeared. Against Duncan's wishes, Cade drags the traitor across the barrier into the Beyond, where he interrogates him mercilessly until he forces the knowledge of the Council's headquarters from him. He leaves him behind in the Beyond as punishment for his sins. When Cade returns to the others, Duncan confronts him but is prevented from physically attacking Cade by the presence of the other squad members. Knowing he is now fighting against the clock, Cade assembles the squad and heads for the Council's sanctuary.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The team assaults the Necromancer's stronghold. While the battle rages around them, Cade and Duncan move deeper into the estate, searching for the Necromancer and the Spear. At last they find them in the old chapel with the Adversary looming in the shadows.. A fierce conflict ensues, with Cade and Duncan managing to wrest the Spear away from the Necromancer in time to prevent the Adversary from taking control of it. Doing so, however, allows the Adversary to escape in the process.

Prologue

Niall O'Connor watched those around him intently. It was early evening, and the Vienna streets were still crowded, which could make spotting a tail difficult. He was a veteran of this kind of operation, however, and so he took his time, carefully examining his surroundings. When he was certain he hadn't been followed from the museum, he stepped into the phone booth on the corner and shut the Plexiglas door behind him. Ignoring the mounted public telephone, he removed a satellite phone from his pocket and dialed an overseas number from memory.

The phone rang several times before it was picked up. O'Connor could sense someone's presence at the other end, could hear the sound of breathing, but nothing was said, not even hello.

Into that silence, O'Connor said, "It's done."

"And?" The voice was deep and liquid, like water running over gravel.

"The Hofberg object is a fake."

Another long moment of silence. Then, "And the other?"

O'Connor thought back to the long hours he'd spent in the Vatican Basilica; the endless lines, the quiet hope of the faithful, the majestic beauty of the cathedral itself. He'd walked beneath Michelangelo's Dome and examined the pilasters, the four square columns that supported it, paying particular attention to the great statues of the saints - Andrew, Helena, Veronica, and Longinus - that rested in niches within them.

There was power in the cathedral, great power. He'd sensed its ebb and flow as it reacted to the faith of those inside; in some fashion almost every object within the building had glowed with traces of it. Even the statue of St. Peter, its right foot worn smooth after generations of caresses by the faithful, had glistened with the faintest of auras though it wasn't known to be anything more than an ordinary sculpture.

The greatest concentration of power had clearly been beneath the Dome. Three of the four statues that he'd examined had blazed with it, a result of the True Relics each of them contained, relics that were easily discernible to a man of his particular talents.

But the statue of Saint Longinus, the one supposedly containing the remnant of the Holy Lance, had not. It was barren, bereft of the same spark of Divinity that so encased the other statues and their contents.

"That's a fake, too," he said.

"You're certain?"

"Yes. I'd stake my reputation on it."

"Very well. Return to us, and we will begin the next phase of the operation."

"As you wish."

O'Connor closed his satellite phone, put it back in his pocket, and stepped out of the phone booth. Night had come, the Vienna air grown cold and still. He pulled the collar of his greatcoat closer about his neck, glancing around again as he did so. When he was satisfied that he was still alone, he walked to the end of

the street, gazing in contempt at the closed iron gates of the Hofberg palace as he passed. Reaching the intersection, he paused for a moment to light a cigarette, waiting for the traffic signal to change. When it had, he stepped out into the street, confident in the performance of his mission and already dreaming of the ways in which he would spend his exorbitant fee.

The smile of expectation still on his face, he didn't see the city bus surge through the intersection against the light, didn't see the wide front grill bearing down on him until it was far too late.

O'Connor's body bounced off the unyielding surface of the speeding vehicle, flipped high into the air and came crashing back down several yards away. From where he lay broken and twisted in the gutter, his dead eyes stared through the windshield of the vehicle at the empty driver's seat.

Across the Atlantic, in a darkened room, a grey hand reached out in the half-light and finally replaced the phone, severing the connection.

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As the SUV turned in through the torn and twisted wrought-iron gates that had once guarded the entrance to the estate, Knight Sergeant Sean Duncan looked out the window at the destruction around him and knew the rumors were true.

The devil had indeed come to Connecticut.

The damaged gates were only the first indication.

The marble statue of the angel that had stood watch over the entrance to the commandery now rested on its back in the middle of the drive, one wing still stretched wide, the other crumbled into fragments a short distance away. Its stone eyes gazed unflinchingly at the sky above as if searching for repentance. In the grass just beyond, a group of knights were laying out the bodies of those who had fallen in defense of the gate, the long rows designed to make it easier for the mortuary team as they sought to identify each corpse. Duncan crossed himself and said a quick prayer for the dead men's souls. Farther on, past the lawn, the still-smoking remains of a Mercedes sat in the cul-de-sac before the manor house, the once-fine leather seats cooked to a crisp and melted across the steel springs beneath.

He'd seen his share of combat; it came with the job, but he'd never heard of a Templar commandery being attacked directly. The Holy Order of the Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon, or the Knights Templar as they were once commonly known, existed in secret, away from men's prying eyes. The

days when the Order guarded the route to the Holy City had long since passed, the general public was no longer even aware of their existence. Finding the base should have been difficult, assaulting and overwhelming its defenses nearly impossible.

But someone had done both.

According to popular belief, the Templars had been destroyed in the 14th century when the Order was accused of witchcraft and the Pope had burned their Grand Master at the stake for the heresy. In truth, the Order had gone underground, hiding its wealth, disguising its power and managing to remain a viable independent entity right up through the end of the First World War. A treaty with Pius XI was followed by a reversal of their excommunication, and the Templars were reborn as a secret military arm of the Vatican. Their mission: to defend mankind from supernatural threats and enemies.

There were thousands of members worldwide, organized into local commanderies. These in turn were gathered into continental territories, each led by a Preceptor. The Preceptors reported to the Seneschal, who in turn answered to the Order's Grand Master, the individual who governed the entire order from its Scottish base at Rosslynn Castle. While the Order was primarily allowed to run itself, it was still an arm of the Vatican. Over the years the Holy See had appointed three cardinals to interact with the Order's senior leaders to help guide the group along a path that did not conflict with the Pope's wishes.

The commandery in Westport, Connecticut, known as Ravensgate, was one of the largest on the East Coast. Only the Preceptor's headquarters in

Newport, Rhode Island, dwarfed it. The grounds consisted of thirty-eight acres of rolling green hills bounded on all sides by woodland, putting their nearest neighbors more than two miles away. The manor house was enormous; forty seven rooms, from the firing range in the basement to a chapel in the north wing.

And now it was in ruins.

The driver pulled to a halt next to the smoldering car, and Duncan stepped cautiously out, his hand on the butt of his weapon. The smell of scorched leather and gasoline washed over him, though the stench of burning flesh he'd expected was mercifully absent. As the rest of his protective detail took up position around the vehicle, Duncan continued to assess the scene. He glanced once more out over the lawn at the work crews and then he turned his attention to the manor house itself.

The damage here was no less extensive. The windows had all been blown out; the odd pieces of glass that remained in their frames reflected the rising sun with little flashes of brilliance here and there, but not a single pane remained intact. The front door was smashed, its splintered pieces still hanging haphazardly in the frame. Bullet holes pockmarked the entryway and surrounding facade. There was a three-foot-long crack in the marble steps leading up to the door. The sight of it made Duncan's blood run cold. *The amount of force it must have taken . . .*

Despite the destruction, there didn't appear to be any immediate threat, so Duncan passed the signal to the driver in the car behind him. A moment later the

rear door opened, and Joshua Michaels, Preceptor for the North Atlantic Region, stepped out.

Duncan was the head of the Preceptor's security detail and ultimately responsible for the man's safety in much the same fashion that the Secret Service watched over and protected the president of the United States. He'd held the post for the last three years; the first for Michaels' predecessor and the last two for Michaels himself. It was a highly respected position and one that gave Duncan significant insight into whatever current matters the Order was involved in.

Right now that meant finding out who, or what, had attacked them so viciously.

The Preceptor had chosen to be on-site for the investigation, and they'd quickly made the trip from Rhode Island. A temporary command center had been set up inside the manor house, and it was from there that Michaels intended to oversee the activity.

Duncan took his position at the Preceptor's side, the rest of the team forming up around them. As one they mounted the steps and entered the manor house. Inside they were immediately met by a group of officers, who led them to a room down the hall. As they walked, one of the local commanders brought the Preceptor up to speed, his low voice the only sound other than the clump of the men's booted feet.

A video-conferencing unit had been assembled in the corner of the command center and, upon arrival, Michaels headed directly to it. A technician activated the link, and a moment later, Cardinal Giovanni's face filled the screen.

"What can you tell me, Joshua?" the older man asked.

"Not much yet, I'm afraid, Your Eminence. As you know, the commandery was attacked at some point during the night. Our best guess puts the event in the neighborhood of 3:00 A.M., though we'll be able to narrow that down some once the mortuary team has had the chance to do its work.

"The intruders breached the gates, then struck directly at the manor house. We've been unable to determine if they were after anything else aside from the destruction of the commandery, but it's still early yet. We should know more as the investigation continues. The site's been secured, and the bodies are being tended to. At this point we've yet to find a single survivor. It's starting to look like we're not going to either. Whoever they were, they were thorough."

The cardinal's response was drowned out as the connection momentarily faltered. The Preceptor simply went on, wanting to get the worst of it out of the way and on the table quickly. "Based on what I've seen and learned so far, I'm going to hand the investigation over to Knight Commander Williams and his team."

The cardinal visibly recoiled from the camera in surprise. "*The Heretic?* Are you certain that's wise?"

"I am," the Preceptor replied. "He's absolutely ruthless. He can't be bribed, he can't be tempted, and he won't stop until he's discovered who or what

is behind this attack. His men are all combat veterans, with the experience and firepower necessary to deal with anything they might uncover, human or otherwise. If the situation is as bad as I'm beginning to believe, I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have leading the investigation."

Listening in, Duncan wasn't so sure he agreed. While Williams was technically a member of the Order, having gone through the investment ceremony just like every other initiate who petitioned for membership, he and his Echo Team unit operated more like freelance operatives than true Knights of the Order. Where members of other units were selected and rotated regularly by the regional leaders, Cade handpicked all of his men, and they stayed with the unit until death or injury forced them out. Where other units answered up the chain of command to the Preceptors, Echo Team reported directly to the Knight Marshal, only two steps removed from the Grand Master himself. They had a reputation for bending the Rule, the laws by which the Order operated, and of occasionally following their own agenda. Rumors swirled around Commander Williams like the tide. He'd been accused of everything from practicing witchcraft to speaking with the dead. He was both feared and revered, depending upon to whom you were talking. His nickname, the Heretic, was a result of that fear and the belief among some that he was nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing, destined to corrupt the Order from within. Duncan tended to agree with them.

But this wasn't his call to make.

The cardinal's expression clearly showed the dissatisfaction he had with the idea, but like a good general he let his people on the ground make the

decisions. Reluctantly, he nodded in agreement. "Very well. Keep me informed of your progress."

"I will. Good night and God bless, Your Eminence."

With a hand raised in blessing, the other man said good-bye and the television screen went dark.

Once the connection had been cut, Duncan didn't hesitate. "With all due respect, sir, I think you are better off putting one of the other teams on this. Williams might be more trouble than he's worth."

The Preceptor turned to face him, shaking his head in disagreement. "I know he can be difficult to work with, Duncan, but it's his very independence that can benefit us here. Whoever did this knew not only the location of the commandery, but also how to take it by surprise. Without, I remind you, a single word of warning escaping to the rest of us. That takes more than overwhelming force, it takes detailed knowledge of who and what they would be facing."

"You believe they had inside knowledge," Duncan said, giving voice to the suspicion that he'd been harboring ever since he'd heard of the attack. "You're bringing in the Heretic because of his lack of political connections then."

"Correct, though that's not my primary reason for using him. I'm convinced that Echo Team is the right choice for the job. They're veterans; they know what they're doing. We're going to need the many years of knowledge and skill that they'll be bringing to the table."

Based on what he'd seen outside, Duncan couldn't argue with that.

“Last I’d heard the team was on a two-week leave. Track down Commander Williams and get him here ASAP.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Duncan moved to carry out his orders, he wondered just how bad things were going to get.

2

Williams was at that moment in an alley in one of Connecticut’s rougher neighborhoods, watching the front of a two-story dwelling just up the street from his position. The smell of garbage from the Dumpster he was using for cover was heavy in the early-evening air, though Cade had gotten used to the stench.

“TOC to all units. You have compromise authority and permission to move to Green. I say again, Green.” The bone-mike was pressed securely against his lower jaw, the high-tech device carrying his words clearly to the rest of his team though they were spoken in no more than a whisper.

“Five. . .”

He pictured the assault group sitting in their specially modified Expeditions half a block away, the breaching rams in their laps. He knew they were concentrating on the sequence to come; who gets out first, who hits the door first, how to say “drop your gun” in Spanish.

“Four. . .”

His thoughts jumped to the sniper teams on the adjacent rooftops, his eyes and ears since this assault began. He knew their preparations intimately, from the way they slid that first bullet into the breach with their fingertips, needing the reassurance of feeling it seat properly, to the thousands and thousands of rounds they'd fired, learning the way the weapons reacted to heat and wind and weather.

“Three. . .”

He knew that his sharpshooters were aligning their bodies with the recoil path of their weapons, pressing their hips against the ground, and spreading their knees shoulder width apart for stability. He knew what it was like to stare through a Unertl ten-power scope at the target, watching, waiting for the moment. He'd been there himself, too many times to count.

“Two. . .”

Discipline was the name of the game, and in Cade's unit, it was the only game being played. The stakes were too high, the consequences too horrible for it to be anything but deadly serious.

“One. . .”

His men took out the two guards standing near the front door from 250 yards away, the impact of their .308 caliber rounds knocking the targets backward into the tall grass on either side of the front stoop with barely a sound. As the bodies hit the ground the Expeditions slammed to a halt out front, the rest of Echo Team swarming the house. The front and back doors fell victim to the

breaching rams, flash-bangs quickly following, then Cade's men were inside. Brief, sporadic gunfire reached his ears, then silence.

Cade held his breath.

"Echo-1 to TOC. Structure is clear. Objective is secured."

"Coming in," Cade replied. He would have preferred his usual position on one of the entry teams. He was the type of commander who led by example, not from the sidelines, and staying behind as tactical operations command had been a test of his patience; but his concern over their target's ability to detect his presence had won out over his need to be involved in the action. The need for stealth was over. Signaling Riley, his second-in-command, Cade emerged from cover and strode briskly forward.

He swept up the steps and entered the house, ignoring the snipers' victims lying in the uncut grass on either side of the porch. As he moved swiftly through the lower floor he passed four other bodies, all young Hispanic males, each lying in a rapidly expanding pool of blood. He had no sympathy for their wasted lives; they were on the wrong side of this conflict, and the unflinching hand of righteousness had finally caught up with them. If anything, he was simply pleased that there were four fewer gangbangers on the city streets. It was the man that his team held captive in the kitchen that truly mattered to Cade. Everything and everyone else beyond that was just a means to an end.

Juan Alvarez was seated in the middle of the room in an old chair, his arms pulled back between the steel posts supporting the seat back and his hands secured together with a set of nylon flex cuffs. Wilson and Ortega stood a

few feet to either side of the prisoner, their HK MP5s at the ready and aimed in his direction.

His pistol still in hand but pointed at the floor, Cade crossed the room to stand in front of the prisoner. Alvarez looked as if he had just been roused from sleep; his normally slicked-back hair was in disarray, and all he was wearing was a pair of hastily donned jeans. His usual air of smug superiority was still in place, however.

Cade fully intended to change that.

Alvarez had been under surveillance by Echo Team for the last three weeks. During that time it quickly became clear that the Bridgeport police were correct in their suspicions; Alvarez was indeed the primary conduit for the movement of heroin through Connecticut and into the rest of New England.

Cade didn't care about the drugs.

He wanted Alvarez for a far more personal reason, and he wasted no time getting to the point.

"Where is he?" Cade asked.

The prisoner gave him a look of disdain, and a stream of rapid-fire Spanish poured forth from his mouth. Cade understood enough to know that it was more a commentary on his mother's background than an answer to his question.

Shaking his head in resignation, Cade nodded to Riley.

The larger man stepped forward and gripped the back of the prisoner's chair, holding it tightly.

Cade moved closer, placed the barrel of his pistol against the prisoner's left kneecap, and, without another word, pulled the trigger.

Blood flew.

Alvarez screamed.

Riley held the chair firmly in place against the man's struggles.

Cade waited patiently until the screaming stopped. Then, softly, he said, "I don't have time for this. I asked you a question. I want an answer. Where is the Adversary?"

This time, the answer was in English.

"Drop dead, asshole. I don't know who you're talkin' about."

Expressionless, Cade shot him in the other leg, shattering the man's right kneecap.

Alvarez writhed in agony, his muscles straining against the pain. Riley's arms tensed, but that was the only outward sign of the increased effort he exerted to hold the prisoner securely in place.

Over the wounded man's cries, Cade shouted, "Tell me where he is!"

The prisoner lapsed back into Spanish, cursing his interrogator vehemently; but he did not acknowledge Cade's demand. His blood flowed down his legs and began to pool on the cracked linoleum beneath his feet.

Cade snorted in disgust and motioned Riley out of the way. The sergeant lost no time in following orders.

Cade raised the gun and pointed it at the prisoner's face. "Last chance."

With that, Alvarez went abruptly still. His eyes lost focus, as if listening to a voice no one else could hear, and his face went slack. Out of the corner of his eye Cade caught Riley looking at him quizzically, but he kept his eyes on the prisoner, watching him closely and didn't respond.

Without a change in expression, Alvarez began to shake. His head twisted from side to side erratically as it shuddered atop his neck, darting this way and that like a hyperactive hummingbird. His mouth opened wide, stretching impossibly far. It seemed as if he was screaming, but no sound issued forth. Finally, with a loud pop, his lower jaw dislocated itself.

Cade calmly watched, his gun unwavering from the target.

The shaking intensified, the legs of the chair skipping and bumping against the tiles, leaving little skid marks in the blood pooling beneath Alvarez's feet. A strange squealing sound came from his throat. Alvarez's eyes bulged from their sockets, and blood ran freely from his ears.

Still, Cade stood and waited.

It was only when a widening crack appeared in the center of the prisoner's forehead, a crack that dripped a substance far darker than blood, that Cade reacted.

With a twitch of his trigger finger, he put a bullet through Alvarez's skull.

The prisoner and his chair went over backward to lie still on the blood-stained tiles.

In the silence that followed, no one moved for several long moments as they waited to be certain the thing that had once been Juan Alvarez was good

and truly dead, then Cade gave the signal, and the team went instantly into motion. One of the men panned the brass from the floor while another checked to be certain no one had left anything behind that might betray their presence in the house. Thirty seconds later the team was filing out the front door and climbing back into the Expeditions, with Cade and Riley taking open seats in the lead vehicle.

Less than five minutes after entry the team was on its way, leaving behind seven bodies to lie cooling in the darkness.

Later that night.

He stands alone in the center of the street, in a town that has no name. He has been here before, more than once, but each time the resolution is different, as if the events about to transpire are ordained by the random chance found in the motion of a giant spinning wheel, a cosmic wheel of fortune, and not by the actions he is about to take or has taken before.

He knows from previous experience that, just a few blocks beyond this one the town suddenly ends, becoming a great plain of nothingness, the landscape an artist's canvas that stands untouched, unwanted.

This town has become the center of his universe.

Around him, the blackened buildings sag in crumbling heaps, testimony to his previous visits. He wonders what the town will look like a few weeks from now, when the confrontation about to take place has been enacted and re-

enacted and reenacted again, until even these ragged shells stand no more. Will the road, like the buildings, be twisted and torn?

He does not know.

He turns his attention back to the present, for even after all this time, he might learn something new that could lead him to his opponent's true identity.

The sky is growing dark, though night is still hours away. Dark grey storm clouds laced with green-and-silver lightning are rolling in from the horizon, like horses running hard to reach the town's limits before the fated confrontation begins. The air is heavy with impending rain and the electrical tension of the coming storm. In the slowly fading afternoon light the shadows around him stretch and move. He learned early on that they can have a life of their own.

He avoids them now.

The sound of booted feet striking the pavement catches his attention, and he knows he has exhausted his time here. He turns to face the length of the street before him, just in time to see his foe emerge from the crumbled ruins at its end, just as he has emerged each and every time they have encountered one another in this place. It is as if his enemy is always there, silently waiting with infinite patience for him to make his appearance.

Pain shoots across his face and through his hands, phantoms of the true sensation that had once coursed through his flesh, from their first meeting in another time and place. Knowing it will not last, he waits the few seconds for the pain to fade. Idly, he wonders, not for the first time, if the pain is caused by his

foe or by his own recollection of the suffering he once endured at the enemy's hands.

He smiles grimly as the pain fades.

A chill wind suddenly rises, stirring the hairs on the back of his neck, and in that wind, he is certain he can hear the soft, sibilant whispers of a thousand lost souls, each and every one crying out to him to provide solace and sanctuary.

The voices act as a physical force, pushing him forward from behind, and before he knows it he is striding urgently down the street. His hands clench into fists as he is enveloped with the desire to tear his foe limb from limb with his bare hands. So great is his anger that it makes him forget the other weapons at his disposal in this strange half state of reality.

The Adversary, as he has come to call him in the years since their first, life-altering encounter, simply stands in the middle of the street, waiting. The Adversary's features are hidden in the darkness of the hooded cloak that he wears over his form in this place, his mocking laughter echoes clearly off the deserted buildings and carries easily in the silence.

The insult only adds fuel to Cade's rage.

Just as he draws closer, the scene shifts, wavers, the way a mirage will shimmy in the heat rising from the pavement. For a second it regains its form and in that moment Cade has the opportunity to glimpse the surprise in the other's face, then everything dissolves around him in a dizzying spiral of shifting patterns and unidentified shapes.

When the scene solidifies once more, he finds himself standing in a cemetery. Large, carefully sculpted angels adorn the nearest of the gravestones, with only the word Godspeed carved beneath them. Older, more decayed stones decorate the other burial plots nearby, but he is not close enough to see the details etched there.

A sense of urgency grips him in its bony fist.

It forces him into motion, and he sets off across the lawn, winding in and out between the stones, letting that feeling guide his passage until he sees a small plot set off from the rest by a white picket fence. In the strange twilight, the rails of the fence gleam with the wetness of freshly revealed bone. The coppery tang of blood floats on the night air.

As he moves closer he can see that the earth on the other side of the fence has been freshly disturbed. A grave lies open, a gaping hole in the peaceful sea of green grass that surrounds it, filled with a darkness deeper than that of the night sky above. This intrusion of the landscape and of the sanctity of the place draws him closer still, pulling him in toward it the way a fly is coaxed into a spider's web.

He stops just short of the small fence and gazes down into the darkness of the grave.

Unable to see clearly, he places one hand on the fence and leans forward, straining to get a better look.

Something moves down there, a furtive motion.

Beneath his hand the fence begins to twist and turn, tumbling him forward toward the darkness of that open grave, just as two eyes gleam hungrily from that inky murk . . .

Cade awoke in the darkness of his bedroom, his heart pounding and his body slick with cold sweat. He lay still for a moment, gathering his breath, and reached out for the phone in the second before its shrill ring pierced the silence of the bedroom.

“I’m on my way,” he said into the receiver, then hung up before the startled novice placing the call could explain the reason for the late-night summons.

He does not need that information.

The dream has already told him everything he needs to know.