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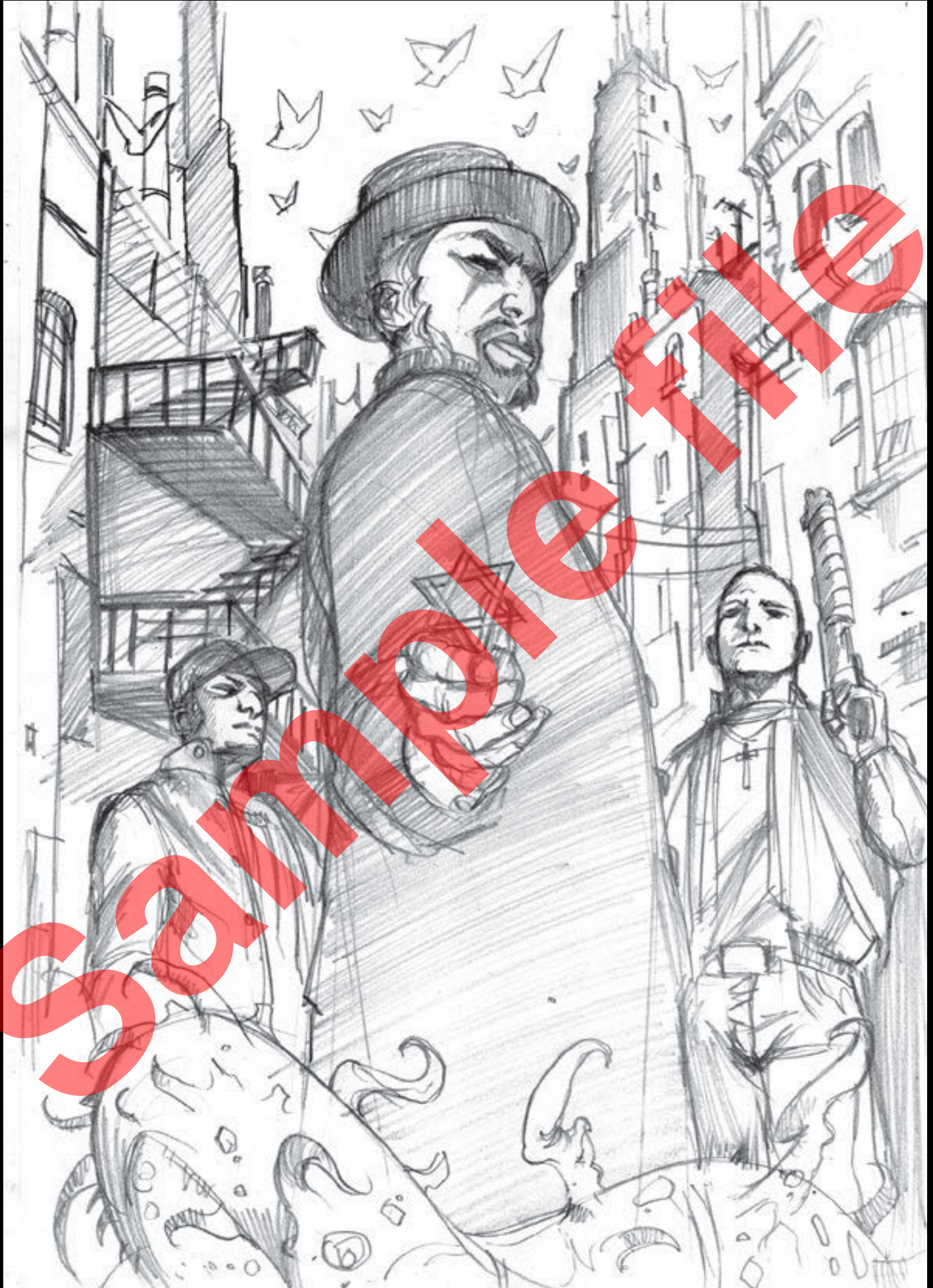
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SAVIORS DESTROYERS™

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INTRODUCTION

Demons are everywhere and the cursing of them universal.
— Tertullian

Demons have been a part of cultural consciousness for millennia. Whether we see them as relations to “Satan” or simply cruel, invasive spirits, they rear their ugly heads in more than one culture’s mythology. There is a key antithesis to the demons, however, an opposite who walks in their wake — the *exorcist*. Exorcism was practiced by early Greeks, Africans and Egyptians, was pervasive throughout Eastern culture (and still is) — and obviously, it was harnessed by the Hebrews and Christians. It was the job of the exorcist to cast out dark spirits, to fight demons wherever they might tempt the hearts of men. At one point in Judeo-Christian history, it was common to exorcise all children at birth to close the doors to potential temptation (there is the stain of Original Sin to contend with, after all). A lower caste of early priest, the *exorcistate*, was created to deal with demons in all forms.

But then, over time, the practice waned. Enlightenment occurred. Why hire exorcists when we don’t really believe in demons anymore? The Earth is round, gravity exists, and demons are just a figment of the imagination, right?

Wrong. Demons are out there. People have just forgotten. But there are also those men and women who still take up the cross and banner and rail against demonic influence. They are modern-day exorcists, rising from the anonymous ranks of housewives, construction workers, computer programmers and clergymen. They have seen something they cannot abide, and now they wish to *cast the demons out*.

This book is meant to give both Storyteller and player perspective on the opposite side of the Demon spectrum — the demon hunter.

THE MODERN DEMON HUNTER

There was a time when exorcising evil spirits was a matter for priests and practitioners of the arcane arts; lengthy liturgies and arcane tomes were created to channel the will of the exorcist to drive a demon from the body of its mortal host, banishing it to the darkness whence it came. If someone had reason to suspect that a neighbor or a loved one was tormented by an unclean spirit, there were people who could be called upon to help.

That time is centuries past. Faith in the unseen is not what it once was. The arcane arts have largely been lost to the mists of time, and the Church is now a reflection of society rather than the other way around. Holy men and women care more for raising funds to expand their fine churches and to clash with those whose idea of salvation differs, no matter how slightly, from their own. The liturgies are forgotten, moldering away in the dim recesses of papal libraries. And while there are still priests who purport to exorcise evil spirits from the faithful, the practice is actively discouraged by Church elders who seek to modernize the image of their religion. The 21st century has no place for belief in demons, these wise men say.

Modern demon hunters are not specially trained agents of the Church, nor devotees of ancient mysteries. They are ordinary people who are faced with a vision of Hell itself. In one form or another they stumble onto the truth: Demons are real, and they walk the Earth in human form. What sets these would-be exorcists apart from their fellow mortals is that they do not shrink in terror from the revelation they receive. They decide to fight back. Using whatever means available, from baseball bats to Bibles, modern exorcists combat the demons in their midst, destroying their host bodies and banishing the spirits to the Abyss or engaging in battles of will to force spirits from the world. There is a price to be paid, however, even in victory. Warring with demons leaves indelible scars upon an exorcist's soul, and sooner or later even the strongest minds break under the mounting weight of horror, frustration and pain. Worse still is the subtle, insidious peril of temptation. Who knows better than an exorcist the gifts that one of the fallen can bestow? Many demon hunters yield to promises of knowledge and power, often with the best intentions at heart, and find themselves hopelessly enslaved to the very monsters they have sworn to fight.

Those exorcists who survive their first brush with the fallen understand all too well how much the odds are stacked against them, but the alternative is more terrible still. Better to fight and die than sit by and watch the whole world go to hell.

These hunters are factory workers, librarians, teachers — and, yes, the odd priest. They have stumbled upon the truth and try to do something about it as best as they can. They have limited knowledge, limited resources, no friends in high places, nor access to military research labs. They have families, house payments, impacted wisdom teeth and serious drinking problems.

They fight demons because they have no other choice. Most die in the process. Those are the lucky ones.

THEME

The themes of **Demon: Saviors and Destroyers** are equal parts heroism and hubris. Exorcists are in many ways a dark reflection of the fallen. Whereas some demons try to rise above their madness and pain in a heroic struggle for redemption, exorcists can descend into horror and violence out of a sense of heroic self-sacrifice. Both paths often lead to tragedy, consuming demon and exorcist alike in a paroxysm of destruction that affects everyone around them.

Exorcists believe in what they do. Their motivations may differ, but they begin the fight believing their cause is just. They struggle not only for the sake of family and friends, but for the future of the entire human race in a thankless, anonymous battle against ancient and terrible foes. They must often abandon their friends and families, sacrifice their savings and throw away hard-earned careers in order to carry on the fight.

The longer the struggle continues, however, the more they become corrupted by their own actions, not to mention by the temptations of the spirits they hunt. Many times they believe they are above the petty desires that cause so many others to succumb to the fallen, but this hubris is oftentimes their downfall. Others lose their grip on sanity without ever realizing it, becoming monsters more terrible than those they crusade against. Nearly as many exorcists die at the hands of their compatriots as they do in battle against the fallen, and more than one group of demon hunters has been torn apart from within, betrayed to the enemy by one of their own.

MOOD

The mood of **Saviors and Destroyers** is one of desperation and grim determination. Many exorcists believe that the end of the world is at hand. Some feel that they can turn things around if they stop enough of the demons. Others believe the battle is already lost but want to go down fighting. Few have any illusions about the course they've chosen — most likely they will die in a grimy alley, friendless and alone, or spend the rest of their lives in a padded cell. They're the sort

of folks who save the last bullet for themselves and who vow to kill their buddies before they let them fall into the enemy's clutches. But if they're going to die, then by God they'll have an escort on the way to Hell.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is divided into several chapters, each of which is designed to explore and explain a specific area of the game. Remember, though, that in a storytelling game the most important "chapter" is your imagination. Never let anything in this book serve as a substitute for your own creativity.

Chapter One: These Are the Last Days presents a number of possibilities why men and women from all walks of life encounter the fallen and find the courage to try and send them back to the Abyss.

Chapter Two: Fighting the Good Fight explores the day-to-day dangers that exorcists face in their struggles against the angels of the Abyss, as well as the extreme tactics they are sometimes forced to employ. This chapter illustrates the danger that many demon hunters face when it comes to adopting the ways of the "enemy" for the sake of tipping the scales in their favor.

Chapter Three: No Rest for the Wicked describes the ultimate fate that awaits many exorcists in the battle against the damned. For many demon hunters, death comes to the lucky. Madness and enslavement are constant risks, as is imprisonment by mortal authorities that view exorcists as deranged criminals.

Chapter Four: Taking up the Cross provides guidelines and tips for creating exorcist characters as antagonists or protagonists in your **Demon** chronicle, as well as systems for researching and performing different types of exorcisms. A brief list of holy items that demon hunters can use against the enemy is also provided.

Chapter Five: Alone in the Dark contains exorcist character profiles that you, the Storyteller, can use for inspiration or include as characters in your chronicle or story.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The grim struggle against the forces of Hell is a favorite subject of both fiction and nonfiction books, as well as a variety of movies. The following sources provide excellent (and often frightening) insight into the harrowing battle between humanity and the infernal.

Recommended books include:

Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans, by Malachi Martin. This harrowing book presents five alleged cases of

modern-day possession in chilling detail, and the efforts of those who attempted to exorcise them. An excellent source for research on modern exorcisms, this book contains the Catholic Church's complete Rite of Exorcism.

The collected works of H. P. Lovecraft. Probable suspects include *From Beyond*, *The Whisperer In Darkness* and *The Dunwich Horror*. The reason Lovecraft's work is so evocative in the context of **Saviors and Destroyers** is that his text focuses on the grim struggle of ordinary humans against ancient and unknowable forces. His characters often lose their sanity, if not their lives, in the process.

Possessed, by Thomas B. Allen. This account of the 1949 possession that inspired *The Exorcist* details the experiences of Father William S. Bowdern and his attempts to remove a demon from the body of a 14-year-old boy. The events described aren't as overblown as those portrayed in the movie, but if anything the story is even creepier.

You Come When I Call You, by Douglas Clegg. Children who encounter a demon in their youth ("The Desolation Angel") live with the depredations of said demon throughout their lives. Some never escape its influence, while others manage to oppose it.

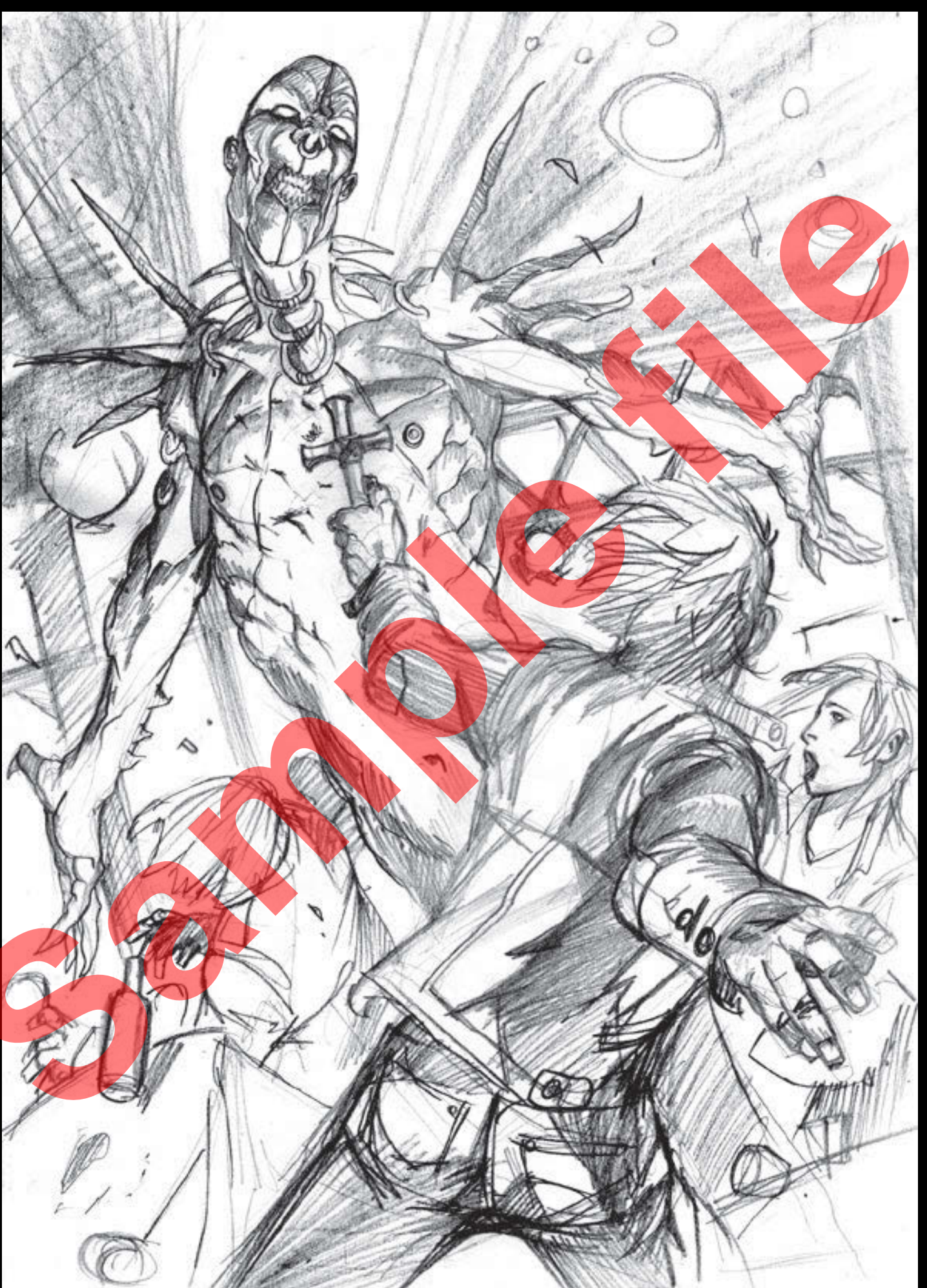
Recommended movies include:

The Exorcist. The classic 1973 movie with George C. Scott and Linda Blair, a tense, terrifying (if at times overdone) story of a holy man's struggle against the damned.

Possession. This Showtime original movie is another adaptation of Thomas Allen's novel, starring Timothy Dalton. Not as flashy as *The Exorcist*, but this movie does a better job of highlighting Father Bowdern's struggle to maintain his faith even as he attempts a modern exorcism.

Frailty. This dark and disturbing movie tells the story of a man (played by Bill Paxton) who believes he's been chosen by God to battle demons on Earth. As the movie unfolds, the audience is kept guessing as to whether Paxton's character is truly insane or if the demons he sees are real.

Stigmata. Gabriel Byrne plays a Jesuit priest who investigates cases of supernatural occurrences for the Catholic Church, and finds himself involved with a young American woman who shows signs of stigmata — representations of the wounds Christ received on the cross. Though the source of the possession isn't what one initially suspects it to be, this is an excellent source of inspiration for exorcists working within the Byzantine intrigues of the Church.



CHAPTER ONE: THESE ARE THE LAST DAYS

...When anyone is dying, the house is filled with devils. They come out and try to ruin the soul of him who is dying, by fearful temptations. Holy water, blessed by the Church, can send away the devils.

— St. Alphonsus

BEARERS OF THE WORD

Dear Rachel,

I sleep with the lights on every night. But it doesn't make me feel any safer.

I'm sorry. That's all I really want to tell you, to tell someone how sorry I am for all that happened and for all that I let happen. I would ask you to remember me in your prayers, but I expect that by the time you read this, it will be too late for that. After all I've done, I myself can no longer pray to G-d with any confidence. Perhaps after reading my story you'll understand why.

Some time has passed since I wrote those last sentences, Rachel. I thought I heard a scratching at the door to this filthy room. I've pushed the dresser and the table against the door and I'm now crouched on the floor on the far side of the bed as I write this. The amulet

I inscribed with the Ineffable Name is wrapped tightly around my arm and I feel the cords biting into me through my shirtsleeve.

I realize now that I never really appreciated my home. Even during my trips to Baltimore and Jerusalem, I never felt such homesickness. So often in the last few days I've closed my eyes and placed myself on Taylor Street. Young boys line up for the morning bus to the yeshiva, whispering Torah passages they memorized the night before. The women in Klein's market chat and laugh while shopping for the Sabbath. Old Mr. Nussbaum sits perched like a crow on the bench in front of the shiebl, the small synagogue across the street from his home. He's rocking back and forth in prayer as he waits for his brother, who was never early to the synagogue in his life. Even Father and Mother, lost to me so many years ago, stroll down the perfect Taylor Street of my memories.

But recollections are not enough to grant me sleep at night. If anything, they keep me awake. Jacob said

being alone was the secret soul of hell. I thought I knew what he meant, but I had no idea. Tomorrow I will meet a man who, they say, hunts evil spirits like a wolf hunts rabbits. I hope he can protect me from this thing I carry in my head. Most likely he is just another charlatan.

I used to wonder if I would ever get to meet Jacob. My age, the son of Mother's sister Lisa... when I was a boy I imagined he was a sort of alternative version of me, having adventures out in the world while I prayed and studied Talmud in Brooklyn. My mother was not born a Chassid, as you may know, but was a baalat teshuvah, a Jew who, through the grace of G-d, has returned to a pious way of life. She often spoke fondly of Aunt Lisa and her children. For a while she held out hope that they would become returned ones like her. But when they emigrated to Tel Aviv, she gave up that dream.

When I found Aunt Lisa's letter in the morning mail that day, I didn't even recognize the return address. I can almost convince myself that if I hadn't opened that letter, events would not have unfolded as they did and I would right now be sitting in Rabbi Brown's den, comparing translations of the Book of the Pious. But that is foolish thinking. In truth, we're all fish in G-d's net. We're free to swim this way or that, but the net is so large that it makes no difference.

My aunt's letter made me weep. I wanted to tear my collar. I suppose I knew that such things happen in this world. But the letter made it real. For someone Jacob's age — my age — to know such suffering, this was a shock to me. It happened in a refugee camp, where Jacob's unit was sent to enforce a curfew and arrest dissidents. Jacob was the only one of his fellows to survive the attack.

This condition which they call "post-traumatic stress syndrome" is a terrible thing, Rachel. Jacob's body seemed healed well enough when he was discharged from the hospital. But he was not the same boy who had enlisted in the army just nine months earlier. He took no pleasure in being alive, had no interest in the world around him. He stayed in his room all day, barely touched his food and would not join in conversation or prayers. After several weeks of this, Aunt Lisa and Uncle David decided it would be best to get Jacob away from Israel, away from the daily talk of bombings and bloodshed.

Jacob seemed to show some glimmer of interest in this idea, and his parents were relieved when he made contact with a friend who was attending graduate studies in America. And so the arrangements were made. Because Jacob would be staying in Brooklyn — his friend was attending Columbia — my aunt in her letter asked if I wouldn't look in on him from time to time. Could I refuse such a mitzvah? This meant leaving the neighborhood, of course. But that was nothing to me, I who had traveled across the country and overseas. I had even worked in Manhattan for three years before

moving in with Rabbi Brown. What was a walk of some dozen blocks compared to that?

It was no trouble finding his apartment building. I had always prided myself on my ability to get around on my own. And it shames me to admit that on that day, my mind was filled more with such pride than with seeing the beauty and holiness in everyday things. Jacob was more warm and cordial than I expected. I had barely explained who I was and why I was visiting him before he invited me in and offered me the most comfortable seat in the small apartment. I was somewhat taken aback, expecting him to be as depressed and morose as he had been described in the letter. We talked for two hours, not of what had happened to him, of course, but pleasant small talk, family news. It was a most comfortable afternoon.

When I asked him if he wanted to come back with me and see where I lived, he was enthusiastic about the idea. This also surprised me. So many non-Chassidic Jews are less than interested in — sometimes even hostile, too — the doings of the Chassidic courts. I told myself that he was probably curious the way a museum-goer is interested in looking at fossils. It was wrong of me to ascribe such ignoble motives to another, of course. Perhaps if I had not indulged in such sinful thoughts I might have been more alert to Jacob's motives... perhaps.

Before we left his apartment, I helped Jacob pack up some of his belongings for storage, some cooking utensils, clothing, odds and ends he didn't need now that he was moved in. I was glad to help. We placed several items into a cardboard box, which Jacob then laid atop a large wooden chest. "I wasn't completely honest with you," he said, jokingly. "It's mainly this chest that I need help with. It's full of my roommate's belongings — books and such. It's very heavy. He was kind enough to pack them away to make room for me, so I told him I'd take care of moving it. I hope you don't mind."

Together we wrestled the large trunk into the hall and to the elevator. I am not physically strong. I had the impression that it was Jacob who was bearing the bulk of the load, and my role was just to help steer the weight in the proper direction.

The cellar was as dank and unkempt as the upstairs had been clean and modern. I remember a cobweb attached itself to my face as we stepped from the elevator, but I couldn't push it away because my hands were full. It was maddening.

"So where is your roommate today?" I asked, hoping to distract myself from the itch of the cobweb. As soon as I said it, I worried that it sounded like a complaint, as if I was wishing the roommate was moving the chest instead of me.

"Oh," Jacob answered, "he's around. He keeps a low profile. Perhaps you'll meet him another time." He was holding the forward end of the chest, facing me and

walking backward. I could barely see where we were going — there was just a single, bare yellow bulb illuminating the cellar — but Jacob had no trouble navigating. “Let’s put this against the wall here,” he told me. I nodded, certain that I could not bear the chest any further. It was very hot in the basement, and I was anxious to get out of the dark and back up into daylight.

I cut off my payos today, have I mentioned that? It took me a week to work up the nerve. I tried everything to hide them but in the end I had to cut them off. I’ve had the sidelocks my whole life, and sometimes in idle moments I find my fingers reaching for them.... Tomorrow I will shave my beard. I must change my appearance as much as I can. If it is true that the outer reflects the inner, then perhaps superficial changes will do more than disguise me. Perhaps they will transform my soul, and the soul of my soul, so that those who hunt for it will not find me.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Rachel,

I’m sleeping out of doors for the first time in my life. It is terrifying. The dogs barking all the time. Are they getting closer? I’m so tired. More later.

I’ve had some sleep now.

There must be others like me, Rachel. Others who’ve seen things as I have seen. I am trying to find some, but it is exhausting. I’ve read tracts and scholarly articles written by learned, holy men. I’ve haunted libraries and listened to lectures and speeches. I’ve inquired subtly at mikvahs and synagogues. I’ve even visited rundown bookstores and tawdry shops that sell trinkets and poultices to the ignorant. I’ve considered placing a carefully worded advertisement in one of the religious newspapers. Only time will tell if these methods will yield results. But time is one thing of which I have little to spare, I fear.

But I was telling you of the day I first met Jacob. I took Jacob to Rabbi Brown’s townhouse. It only made sense to do so; it’s on the outskirts of the neighborhood and we came to it first. The rabbi was not home but I introduced Jacob to Mrs. Brown. She was somewhat reserved, though not impolite. She has not been outside of the neighborhood for decades and I believe she was uncomfortable meeting an outsider, even a Jewish one. Jacob did not seem disconcerted, even though she would not look him in the eye, and he knew enough not to offer her his hand to shake. He complimented her on the cleanliness of her house and modest way in which it was decorated.

The warm April sunlight made the sidewalks gleam like fresh bread. Jacob had many questions. I pointed out the neighborhood landmarks. I told him who lived where, showed him the market, and the park where Rabbi Brown and I and his other students often met for informal discussions. We passed several people that I

knew, but they seemed almost shocked to see me with a stranger. Most of them simply nodded at me and kept walking. At first Jacob seemed to be enjoying the visit, but after a time I noticed a change come over him. He seemed to become slightly pale. He asked fewer questions. He was walking more slowly. I thought of his time in the hospital and wondered if he was getting tired.

I was about to say something, but we rounded the corner at Fifth and Bleeker. The synagogue came into view and I wanted to point it out to Jacob. But as soon as we set foot onto Bleeker, Jacob’s body jerked like he’d been electrocuted. He doubled over, almost falling to his knees. I grabbed him by the shoulders to keep him from toppling.

“I’m — not well...” Jacob moaned to me. He muttered something else in words I couldn’t hear.

“Do you want to rest?” I asked him.

“No,” he told me. “No... go back.”

I helped him walk and we limped back toward the Rabbi’s house. We had gone barely a half a block when Jacob seemed to recover. He was pale and sweating, obviously uncomfortable and clutching his stomach. But he was able to walk on his own. “I’m sorry,” he said to me. “I should not have exerted myself. I’m not fully recovered from my injuries.”

“It’s my fault,” I said. “I should not have taken you for such a long walk. I should have known...”

“It’s all right,” he waved away my concerns. “I’ll be fine. Perhaps we could stop at your place and I could catch my breath.”

So we returned to my room in Rabbi Brown’s house.

Jacob stayed for several hours and we talked. He seemed very interested in the community and in my studies. I told him how Rabbi Brown had taken an interest in me after my parents had died, and how one day, G-d willing, I would become a rabbi. I told him how the Rebbe himself had once praised my diligence as a student, though this was a prideful thing to say. He asked about our court and when it had been established, and I told him how the sixth Rebbe and his family came over from Warsaw in 1940, bringing only the clothes on their backs and their most precious possessions: scriptures and writings that were still preserved today.

After that, I did not see my cousin for several weeks. I was preparing for an examination on The Toledoth, and I had to spend many late hours studying. Also, there arose at that time growing concern within the community as to the health of the Rebbe. He had not been seen in public for over a month. Rabbi Brown explained that the Rebbe had taken ill with a chest cold, which was not serious but that required him to spend much time resting. It was better, Rabbi Brown said, that the Rebbe make a full recovery before exerting himself. After some initial concern and worry, we had all come to accept this



situation. But now that his illness had drawn on for several weeks, anxiety levels began to rise. Not that Rabbi Brown wasn't a respected and well-liked elder in the community. But not to see the Rebbe, to hear his voice and touch his coat, this was a hardship on us all.

Then, one afternoon I went out to pick up some groceries for Mrs. Brown. As I walked to Klein's, I felt a sudden urge to visit Jacob. I found myself wondering how he was and feeling guilty that I hadn't looked in on him. I decided to keep walking to his apartment and pay a quick visit, then pick up the groceries on the way back. It seemed the right thing to do — in fact, I felt that I had no choice but to go there right away. And so I found myself at his flat. When the elevator brought me to his floor, I was surprised to see two police officers waiting on the other side of the elevator door. One was a woman; I looked to the floor and made room for them to pass.

Jacob did not seem surprised to see me. It may surprise you, Rachel, but I can remember every word of our conversations. I've been exercising my memory since a very young age, you see. At age 11, I could recite all 613 mitzvot in Hebrew and English.

"Jacob," I asked him, "how have you been? Are you feeling all right?"

"You don't read the papers, do you, Reuben?" He was sitting across from me, in the center of the couch, arms outspread along the top of the sofa.

"Only the *Algemeiner Journal*," I said.

"Well, it seems that Charles has disappeared."

I wasn't sure what he meant, and he could tell by my face. He explained. "My roommate. Nobody's seen him for three weeks. His parents are sick with worry. He simply went out one night and never came back."

"Is he... I mean..." I couldn't think of what to say. "Do you think he's all right?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's not," Jacob said flatly. Then, with more concern in his voice, he added, "I mean, people don't just vanish for that long and then turn up okay."

I thought about the police at the elevator. "Is that why the police were here?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Did they say anything to you?"

"No. Not a word." In my mind I was praying.

"That's good," Jacob said. "Perhaps they didn't realize you were coming to see me."

"I don't understand."

"Did I tell you that Charles — that's my roommate — Charles was an Arab? I'm sorry, I mean is an Arab."

"No, you didn't. Jacob, you don't seem yourself. Are you...." I wanted to ask if he was having some kind of recurrence of the mental problems that had followed his injury, but I couldn't think of how to phrase it.

“An Arab,” he went on. “Arab-American, of course. His family’s been in the U.S. for five generations. They’re not even Muslim — secular agnostics, he used to call it. We laughed about it back in school. It never mattered to us. We are educated people. Of course, that’s not what the police are thinking.”

“The police?” I felt as if my brain was thickening like gravy. His words seemed to be slowing down my thoughts.

“Yes. They see an Arab and a Jew living together, and one of them disappears, who do you think they suspect? For the murder?”

“Murder?” I wanted to jump out of my chair, but I couldn’t move. “Murder? They think — they think he’s been murdered? And they think you did it?”

“Not in so many words. They don’t come out and say it. But they think it. I know they do.”

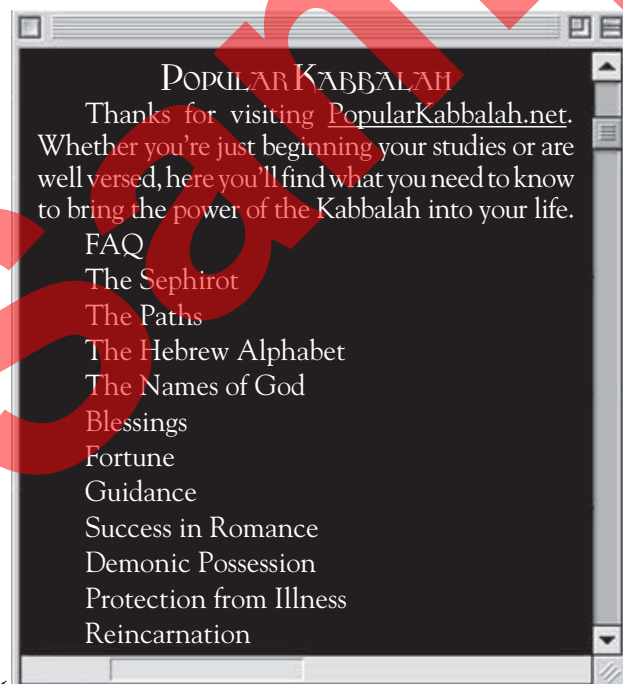
“Jacob, we should pray together. Come with me and have dinner at Rabbi Brown’s tonight. He’ll know what to—”

“I don’t pray!” he shouted, his face suddenly twisted like an animal’s. The next moment, he was calm again, almost tranquil, his eyes half closed and his body limp against the couch. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. Here you are, living the life of the pious, and your own relative blasphemes in front of you. What you must think of me....”

“It’s... all right,” I said to him. “I know you’ve been through a lot. You’re not completely healed. But we must remember that the sparks of G-d’s light are everywhere, even in the darkest of times.”

“Reuben,” he said to me. “I need to show you something.”

And we went into the basement.



REVELATIONS

Dear Rachel,

It will be hard for you to understand the events I am now preparing to recount. That is as it should be. I, who experienced it would give anything to have the memory replaced by the sweet numbness of ignorance. What I saw on that day was never meant to be seen by human eyes. After witnessing it for myself, I realize that if even one such thing is able to walk our Earth for a brief time, we are far, far from the day of Redemption. Perhaps there are not prayers enough to make this world sufficiently clean to bear the footsteps of the Messiah.

Jacob led me down to the basement without explaining why. The room was even more hellish than I remembered. The only light was from that dingy orange-yellow bulb that hung from the ceiling like a corpse on a noose. From the corners of my eyes the walls seemed to be covered with rust and blood. Jacob led me through the maze of lockers and stacked boxes until we reached his trunk, the one we’d carried weeks before.

“Open it,” he said.

I didn’t understand. This made no sense to me. Why were we here? It was so hot, and I in my black suit.

“Go ahead,” he told me, sounding like a parent exercising limited patience with a backward child. I opened my mouth to ask a question, but decided instead to comply. I recalled that the chest had been closed with a padlock, but the lock was absent now. I released the latch and lifted the lid.

I couldn’t make out the dark shape that filled the chest. Suddenly a circle of light spread across it; Jacob had produced a small flashlight. A thick, gray blanket was draped across the contents of the chest, there were some lumps or shapes visible but I could not tell exactly what was beneath.

“I don’t know what I’m looking at, Jacob. What is this about?”

“Under the blanket.”

I reached for the blanket; for some reason I didn’t want to touch it more than necessary, so I found an edge and carefully peeled the blanket back. There was more blanket beneath, perhaps part of the same cloth. I found another edge and pulled it back as well. More blanket. I searched for a corner, and my fingers brushed against something that made me pull back as if I had been bitten. It took several seconds for me to realize what I had felt. Cobwebs? Fur?

No. It was hair.

Jacob came close, shining more light around me. I could see, now, where the edges of two blankets came together. From between that crack, a thick lock of hair extended, brown as a mouse, several inches long. It was lying across the blanket and curved like the meander of

a river. I had touched human hair. And as I stared, the bulges and lumps beneath the blanket resolved themselves into a single shape, one that my mind simultaneously identified and refused to acknowledge.

"Ayn o milvado..." I started to murmur.

"None of that," Jacob said, slapping me lightly across the back of my head. I pushed myself back from the chest. I tried to stand but my legs would not obey me.

"Why...?" I moaned. "Oh, Jacob, why..."

"Because I need your help," he said to me.

"Jacob, you're ill. You need to... you need help. We'll contact the authorities, they'll help you—"

"You'll contact no one. You're in this with me now."

"With you? What are you talking about?"

"You're an accessory. Your fingerprints, Reuben. They're all over that trunk now. And remember the cutlery you helped me move? Your prints are all over those as well. You helped me kill him, Reuben. That's what I'll tell them, if you don't do as I say."

"But... you... it isn't true!"

"What an absurd thing to say. It will be true, because I'll make it true. You think the police would listen to you? Look how you dress, how you live. They practically consider you to be the member of a dangerous cult. They'll never believe you didn't help me kill this Arab. Now stop your sniveling, and I'll tell you what you're going to do for me."

DECISIONS

When I left Jacob's basement I could scarcely breathe, and my heart was thumping like a hammer. I had been in the house with a corpse. I had touched a corpse, defiled myself. My cousin was clearly insane. And a murderer. I could not think. I, who could quote whole pages from In Praise of the Besht at age eight, could not make my brain work. And it was as if I had forgotten there was a G-d in Heaven. I wandered the streets, not knowing where I was, until suddenly I found myself in front of the mikvah. This calmed me somewhat. Clearly, I thought, G-d had led my footsteps here. I entered the bathhouse, forcing everything out of my head but the details of the ritual. I let the prayers, the cleaning, the immersions crowd out all thoughts in my head. And by the time I was finished, I knew what I had to do.

Of course, those who knew me would never believe I was a murderer. But if I were arrested, put on trial... it would be a terrible blow for us. We were a small community, among the smallest of the Chassidic courts. I had worked in Manhattan in the garment and diamond districts. I had traveled out of state, even once to the Holy Land. I knew very well what the outside world, the gentiles, even other Jews, thought of the Chassidim. If Jacob carried out his threat it would bring unwanted shame and attention to our community. As harmful as poison in a well.

The Rebbe, of course, could have advised me. Unquestionably, he would have the answers. But he had been too ill lately to see anyone. Some even whispered he would soon be called away. And even had he been healthy, it was unlikely he'd have been able to interrupt his studies and his duties on short notice. So I had no choice. I had to go along with Jacob for now. I would get the book he wanted and it would appease him, keep him from doing any more harm. And then I would have the time to talk to Rabbi Brown, perhaps even to the Rebbe. They would know what to do. And in a day or two the authorities would come for Jacob and all would be sorted out.

You see how my pride led to my downfall? Instead of putting my trust in G-d, I grasped onto the supposed logic of my own scheme and used it to pull myself from the terror I had felt in the basement.

I made an excuse to Rabbi Brown, telling him I was working on my commentary on the fourth commandment and needed some references kept in the book repository at the Temple. I lied to him, to his face, under his own roof. Rabbi Brown accepted my story at face value and excused me from supper early. Walking to the Temple, I felt like I carried a millstone around my neck. My mouth was dry and my hands were sweating.

I don't think Rabbi Brown realized that I knew where the key to the back room was kept. But I had seen him retrieve it from its hook behind the filing cabinet many times. And no one would question my presence in the library. No one would even know I had entered the back room where the writings of our greatest teachers were kept. It would be an easy theft.

Just as Jacob had told me.

So there I was, outside the Temple. Waiting. Trying to make myself go in and commit the sinful act. Would I kiss the book before I took it, or after? G-d was watching me. And...

The Rebbe. I chanced to glance up at his window, on the top floor of the tall brownstone across from the Temple. When he had first taken ill, people had gathered beneath his window every night hoping to get a glance at him. But he had not appeared, and Rabbi Brown had said that it would be better to spend the time in prayer than in a vigil. So, save for myself, the corner was deserted.

And tonight the Rebbe was there. I saw his silhouette in the window. Was he watching me?

Was he watching me betray him?

Jacob's door was open when I returned. "I'm back here," his voiced called, barely louder than a whisper. "Come in." I walked through the short entryway into his living room. There was a single lamp lit.

"Pardon the mess," Jacob said. The room was a shambles. The couch was turned over, the coffee table in pieces. Books and papers were everywhere. A bottle