

Doors

by
Eric Kay
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CHAPTER 1

"I hate this job," Kilian said aloud as the pack on his back shifted again. Sure, being a weed sprayer had its good points, but after two summers, long hot summers, Kilian had forgotten them. The heat was the easy part. The mosquitoes and the smell of the chemical took awhile to get used to, however. He took one last draw from his cigarette, blew the smoke at a rather large mosquito, then flicked the butt into the river. As he shifted the weight of the heavy pack one more time he thought, "One good thing is, I'd never get this strong flippin' burgers."

The two guys Kilian worked with, Jesus and Jason, were nice enough, but he never saw them. The only thing he did see was the river and occasionally some Leafy Spurge. Spurge was his sworn enemy. Because of it, and the community service time he needed to work off, Kilian walked the Gunnison River. It fed ranch after ranch with irrigation water, and it was Kilian's job to rid it and its canals of this noxious weed.

Kilian passed a head-gate, then stopped and removed the heavy pack from his shoulders. The chemical was mixed with water for spraying, making it less flammable. Kilian was sure he had two gallons too many, but at least, with the water mixed in, he wouldn't blow himself up when he smoked.

"I still can't figure why Jesus makes me carry so damn much chemical," Kilian said to no one. "I guess he just doesn't like me." Which made sense, few people really liked Kilian. He was a bit of an outcast, and usually, he didn't seem to mind. He pushed his sandy brown bangs from his eyes.

He set the pack against a small tree then sat in its shade himself. He rubbed his wiry shoulders. It was after lunch and Kilian was feeling a little sick to his stomach. Lunch had that

effect on him. So, he stretched out under the tree and tried to sleep it off. That was one of the nice things about this job. He was usually miles from anywhere, so getting caught sleeping never posed a problem. With that thought, Kilian closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

"Someday we will break through. I can feel it, Menicks, someday," the Master said to his second.

"Whatever you say, my friend. If our fathers and grandfathers couldn't do it I don't see how we will. But, if you insist. I still have hope," Menicks replied.

"I see hope in the readings and dreams," the Master continued. "They told us we would be banished to this black Hell, and they tell us of the signs that foretell our escape. Then revenge shall be ours."

"You are the Master Dreamer, and in that I have faith. The dreams and readings have told us to set the traps. Now, we must wait and see what those traps produce," Menicks finished as they left the candle-lit cavern. "It is time for us to go worship, my friend."

CHAPTER 3

Kilian woke and looked at his watch. He felt better but he had slept far too long. He would need to almost jog to make it to the bridge by quitting time now.

He slung the tank on his back, fastened the hip belt and took off down the river bank. He knew he could make up time in at least two places by cutting across in spots where the river made sharp turns. That was the thing most people didn't understand. The river may only flow so

many miles from point A to point B but the distance in between could be ten times as long if the river was so winding. Of course, the Gunnison had to look like a snake contorted in pain.

CHAPTER 4

"Pretty slow for a Monday, my young friend," Jesus said as Kilian came puffing up the hill next to the bridge. "Tomorrow you can walk that section again, without the nap, and we'll see what you find."

Jesus, a short but well built Hispanic man of middle years, had worked this job for too long. He knew his sprayers and what they could do, because he had been one himself. Most of the time, if a sprayer was a little late, Jesus didn't mind, but Kilian was more than a little late this time. Jesus also knew that if a sprayer was out of breath, they had hurried and not done a good job, so it was only fair that Kilian had to walk the same section tomorrow. That didn't mean he had to like it, though.

CHAPTER 5

Late that night, Kilian passed into a soundless dream. All about him were gray figures and a black background. He tried to speak but could not hear his own voice. The figures moved around him, all with huge bright eyes. They picked him up and carried him to a deep pit. As Kilian felt the sensation of being cast into the pit, he shouted and the sound of his scream woke him.

He lit a cigarette with trembling hands and sat back in bed.

CHAPTER 6

The next day, Kilian took off from the truck after lunch. He knew where he had to be and by when today. No napping. He did not remember his dream until well into the afternoon. He had been walking along a high bank, through some tall Timothy, when his foot, hitting the hard soil, made a hollow sound. That was strange. He stomped again. Booom.

The sound intrigued him. It also caused visions of his dream to leap into his mind's eye. He grew frightened but did not know why. He walked quickly away.

"Probably some old car, some old rancher buried there," he muttered over his shoulder.

(HAVE Jesus explain rip-raff later)

By the time Jesus went to pick Kilian up, late that afternoon, Kilian was already at the bridge, breathing easy. He liked it when Jesus drove and dropped him off. Kilian's truck was old and didn't need the extra wear and tear.

He was also glad to be at the bridge early because it allowed him time to check out the flag-girls on the road construction crew. The one on the near end of the bridge had caught Kilian's eye before.

"Tough walk?" Jesus asked.

"Not bad. Saw a rattler though. Kinda spooked me," Kilian said.

"You didn't run again did you?" Jesus asked seriously.

"Na, just gave him lots of room and kept lookin' for Spurge," Kilian said to finish his lie. He didn't know why he lied; it just felt better than the truth. He had lied to his bosses before, another time wouldn't make much difference. Changing the subject, he said, "Check out the curves on that stretch of road," pointing toward the flagger.

"Nice, ahh, flag," Jesus said with a wink as he got back inside the pick-up.

"Yea, nice flag," Kilian said, catching his meaning.

That night, Kilian had the same dream, but the only sound he heard was the hollow pounding that his foot had produced that afternoon.

CHAPTER 7

Work soon became drudgery, and Kilian was constantly haunted by images from his dreams. He knew napping was a poor gamble, but he couldn't seem to get any sleep during the night. The dark figures were constantly after him in the silence. He would hear Jason, the other sprayer, thumping on a chemical barrel and the sound would send him to his dream world.

One afternoon, over a week since he first heard the sound, Kilian was walking a deep canyon. It was an easy stretch so Kilian took his time. The river was still high, and Kilian knew that walking alone was dangerous so he was cautious. He would try to think about the flagger to keep his mind off his dreams.

He stopped at the far end of the canyon as the ground surfaced again. He set his pack down and looked around to try and find a good spot to relieve himself. Under a large Aspen tree, Kilian found his spot.

When he stepped down off a rock, into the shade, he heard the sound again. This time he did not walk away. He did his business then began to investigate. There was only a small space that produced the sound. Kilian dug around as best he could but the ground was dry and hard and he knew he had to get going.

He gave up for the time being, slung his pack on, and continued his walk. The thought of the sound never left his mind. For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, the sound echoed through his brain. That night he did not dream because he did not sleep. He kept pouring over his thoughts and actions, trying to figure out what it could be.

CHAPTER 8

The next day was very windy and the Sprayers could not work. They cleaned out the truck and serviced it, but the wind did not let up. Jesus let them off well before noon. That was all the time Kilian needed. He grabbed a shovel and jumped into his old Ford pick-up.

The easiest place to get to would be the first place Kilian had heard the sound. By using a dirt access-road that paralleled a canal, Kilian got within a mile from the spot. He took the shovel from the pick-up bed, knocking over a gallon can of herbicide, and hiked off toward the river.

He came to the river quickly and was soon tapping around its bank. Boom, boom, boom. That was it. In the silence following, Kilian swore he could hear answering echos. A chill ran through him.

He began digging. The ground wasn't as hard and dry this close to the river, and the shovel cut through it easily. Kilian dug down several feet before hitting something. It was close to an hour, however, before he could tell what it was.

A large iron door, similar to that of a root-cellar, presented itself. Why would such a door be all the way out here? Who put it here? Why was it buried? What was inside? It seemed Kilian had no answers. He continued digging. Soon he had both doors completely unearthed.

He propped his arms on the shovel and wiped the sweat from his brow. A large old-fashioned lock held an iron bar secure across the doors. Kilian examined it. Once he dug most of the dirt from it with his pocket-knife, Kilian saw that it was rusted almost completely through. He smashed it open with the shovel. Boom, boom, boom. Again came the echo.

Kilian became too excited to really think about what he was doing. He pulled out the bar and threw back the heavy doors.

A strong burst of stale air rose to meet him. Even though the sun was high overhead, Kilian could not see far into the hole. He looked into the blackness, and he thought of his dreams. This was the place.

"I pray you will join us, young sir?" came a hollow voice from the darkness.

CHAPTER 9

Kilian now stood with his back to a cold stone wall. He was afraid to move because he knew that if he did he might never find the wall again. The thought of floundering around in the dark scared him the most. He had been drawn into the hole by the voice. Before he realized what he had done, it was too late. He had walked in almost a trance until now, and now he did not know where he was.

"My name is Menicks. You are...?" came the voice in front of him.

Kilian took a second to clear his throat. "Kilian," he stated.

"It is my pleasure to meet you, Kilian. Who sent you to us?" Menicks asked.

"No one. I found you myself," Kilian replied, somewhat surprised by the question. Kilian then told Menicks the story of hearing the echos and his eventual arrival.

"Fascinating. You say you came here almost by accident? That is fascinating. The elders work in odd ways sometimes. Well, while you are here, you may as well be comfortable. Is there anything you desire?"

Kilian thought for a moment. "Yea, can I get some light?"

"Actually," Menicks replied, "that's about the only thing I can't get for you. We live in total darkness. We have, since your kind banished us to these caverns."

"How about showing me the way out then?" Kilian asked.

"Sorry again. Philgre will want to talk with you soon," Menicks replied.

A little angry and even more frightened, Kilian said, "Well, how about a wall or something to hold onto in this black hole, so I don't fall on my ass?"

"Take my arm." Menicks offered his arm. Kilian felt around then took hold of the long skinny appendage. He let Menicks lead him slowly into another room. "Take the chair in front of you. There is a table there also. The Master will be with you shortly," Menicks explained, then left the room.

Kilian longed for light. As he propped his elbows on the table and rubbed his straining eyes, he smelled nicotine. He reached into his pocket, took out his lighter and lit it.

A small room came into view. It contained a table with two chairs, one of which he occupied, and a large set of shelves containing books. Kilian started to get up to look around but a strong draft blew his lighter out. Before he could relight it, someone came into the room. Kilian could hear them breathe as they pulled the chair out and sat.

"Hello, Kilian. My name is Philgre and I am what you may call the leader here," a deep, penetrating voice echoed from across the table. "What brings you here?"

Kilian realized, as he began to speak, that he had been holding his breath. He exhaled loudly. "I don't know. Where the hell am I?"

"You are in my domain. My people live underground. We have since your people banished us into this hell," Philgre said in a calm, educated voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never even heard of you before," Kilian replied.

Philgre sighed deeply. "It doesn't surprise me. 'Out of sight, out of mind' is what they used to say. Then again, they did think we were out of our minds. My guess is that if you looked or asked, there would be people who remember hearing of us; they may not want to, but they remember," he concluded.

Kilian was at a loss for words. Being afraid was one thing but he was certainly not prepared for this. *Who are these people*, he thought, *and what do they want?*

"Well, let me explain them one at a time," came Philgre's reply to his thoughts.

Kilian sat stunned and listened to the tale.

"We, at one time, were just like you. We could see in the light, we lived above ground and we loved life. My people were mostly poor. Some lived in shacks, even caves but, the only real differences came in what your people called our religion. We were what you called 'witches' and people shunned us because of it. Two hundred years since Salem, and your people were still in the dark about witchcraft. Now my people are in the dark, so to say, because of that ignorance.

"Almost a hundred years ago to the day, your people banished us to these depths. Some who were sent with us, were not even followers. They had simply been accused.

"I'm sure they felt we would die soon after, but we did not. We survived. We struggled, had faith, and continued practicing our art. It has saved many of my people from illness and insanity. It took a long time for our minds and bodies to adjust to this world. Now, we are masters of it.

"So you see, we are bitter, but we have a right to be. Lives have been taken or ruined. They cannot be replaced at any cost. We seek only a second chance, to live above as you do and experience life under the sky.

"That is who we are and what we want. But, the issue of your role has not come up as of yet. Tell me, Kilian, do you believe in magic?"

"I guess so, I mean I never really thought about it, why?" Kilian asked.

"We are a gentle people who have been wrongly punished. It has only humbled us that much more. We are a simple people and the only magic we do is the magic of nature. We can make love potions, cure illnesses, and sometimes make or stop the rain. We would love to make it rain again but we need your help. We will not hurt you. Will you help us?" Philgre asked.

Kilian thought long and hard about this. The entire situation was almost funny it was so outlandish, but there was something else, maybe fear, maybe curiosity, that nagged at him to continue and hear Philgre out. "What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"You need only direct us once we surface. You have already opened the doors. We will need shelter, clothing, and food on the outside. We have forgotten how to provide for these things in your world. We would struggle above as you have below."

Kilian could certainly relate to that. He had nothing to lose, really. The new question was, what could he gain?

Again, as if reading his mind, Philgre spoke. "I told you of love potions. I will offer you our best. Is there one you desire, or maybe you are ill?"

Oh yes, this was better than anything he could have hoped for, ignoring the comment about illness. Trying to sound nonchalant, Kilian said, "Yea, I could probably find somebody to use one on."

CHAPTER 10

He didn't know why, but they had believed him. He couldn't believe how such a short time, in such complete darkness, could affect him, but it did. As he jogged back to the pick-up, he pinched himself. No, it was real.

He had agreed to make the proper arrangements, and in return he would receive the potion, or whatever it was, that would bring that hot little flagger chick to her knees. He began to jog faster.

The rain had stopped and most of the ground had drunk its share. As Kilian drove back to town he began to think about the best course of action. Several places were available but he knew he had to keep a low profile. Money was not a problem, or so Philgre had assured him.

As he rounded the last bend into town, Kilian saw a sign that gave him an idea. Just out of curiosity, he would see what the library had to say about witches that had lived in this valley a hundred years ago.

CHAPTER 11

He pulled his work shirt off and tossed it to the floor. He sat on his bed and opened the history book he had discovered in the library's dusty back shelves. He wasn't good in libraries so it had taken a while of floundering before he found it.

There they were. In 1895, 66 people were condemned to death by being placed into a "covered culvert" or so the book said. They were believed to be witches who had sold their souls to Satan for supernatural powers. No trial was held but proof on the subject was collected and voted upon by the town council. In a unanimous decision, the council sent the people "many miles from the town limits" and put them in a large hole. The council decided that, "if them goat worshipin' witches liked Hell so much, they'd [the council] just send 'em there." Everything that had anything to do with these people was also sent into the pit. It was then sealed from above and covered with earth.

"Damn," Kilian said sympathetically as he thought about how it must have felt to be condemned in such a way. He knew what it felt like in that hole.

Lost in thought, Kilian drifted off into undisturbed sleep.

CHAPTER 12

Kilian had done it. He felt good, even though he hadn't called in sick to work and only been home once in three days.

There were only twenty-five of the original sixty-six left. Some had been able to procreate, others could not. He had found an abandoned ranch house by the river that would be perfect for them. It would be a little cramped, but it would suffice. It was stocked and ready to go. Kilian had even stolen three flat bottom boats and a couple rubber rafts.

Kilian went back to the door. He simply stomped his foot near the spot and it re-opened. He had brought a flashlight but it was too bright for the denizens of the caves to stand.

"I need to talk with Philgre. Can you lead me to him?" he asked a figure that had come to greet him.

"Right this way, master Kilian. Was your journey successful?" Kilian recognized the voice as Menicks's.

"Yes," he stated simply.

Menicks led him to the small room where he had met Philgre before. "Wait here, young sir. The Master will be with you momentarily."

When Kilian heard the door shut he clicked on the flashlight. He was in a room that resembled a study of some sort. The table, where he sat, took up the center of the room. Large stone book shelves covered three of the dry walls completely.

Kilian began to stand so he could investigate the books, but as he did his light began to flicker. He smacked the head of the flashlight. As he did, the light went out and the door opened.

"I am glad to see you have returned, my young friend. What news do you have for me?"

Kilian filled him in on the details and told him of the arrangements that he had made.

"I even listened to the weather forecast. Tomorrow night will be cloudy with a new moon. It won't get any darker than that," he finished.

"You have done well, Kilian. As a reward I offer the potion you requested," Philgre said as he placed a small vial into Kilian's hand with cold boney fingers. "She must drink this entirely. It may be mixed with water but nothing else." Kilian tucked it safely into his pocket. "This is a

powerful spell, my young helper. Make sure this is a woman that you truly want. Once you administer it, you will feel its power take hold.

"Go now, and thank you for our freedom."

Kilian left the hole gladly. It was still a beautiful summer day and he felt like the king of the world. Figuring out how he was going to corner the flag girl was his first order of business.

CHAPTER 13

The after-shave still stung as he walked across the bridge. She had just finished work and she was starting for her car. "Damn she walks well," he thought.

"Excuse me," he said as she closed her car door. She rolled down the window and smiled. She did that well too. "I work for County Weed Control and I've seen you up here several times." He swallowed hard. Why is this always so tough? "I was just wondering, if you might like to go out with me sometime?" He almost stuttered as he looked at the ground.

"Sure," was her reply.

He didn't think he heard her correctly. She just smiled.

CHAPTER 14

She was beautiful. He couldn't believe she was here with him. An older woman, curvaceous as the river, here with him. He just couldn't get over it. He hadn't even given her the "juice" yet.

They went to dinner, at the only restaurant in town. He hoped she would excuse herself to "powder her nose," and she did. It dissolved almost immediately.

The waitress came to the table before she returned. Kilian told her that they would need a few more minutes. He winked at her like it meant something and she walked away as if she knew what.

He could tell when his date had reentered the room. Men stopped talking; heads turned. Kilian just smiled. She sat down and returned his smile. They made small talk and she took a long drink of her water. Her eyes lit-up immediately. Her cheeks flushed and she looked at him with a fire that spoke volumes.

They ate quickly, paid the check quickly, and quickly left for her house. She lived in a trailer close to the river. As Kilian got out of his truck he took a deep breath and listened to the calming murmur of the river. He could smell the chemical in the back of his truck. He looked at the darkening sky, then followed her inside.

He was drenched in sweat. The night seemed to have grown hotter. He knew she had. She was insatiable. They were both out of breath when he heard a scratching sound down the side of the camper. The wind had kicked up a little, so Kilian figured it was a tree branch.

"Did you hear that?" she asked him as she collapsed next to him on the white sheets.

"Yeah, what was it?"

"Don't know, and don't care," she smiled as she climbed back on top of him. "You have the darkest eyes I have ever seen."

CHAPTER 15

The entire group had pulled together quickly. They'd had a long time to prepare. Groups came from every tunnel, chatting about the night.

"Okay my wards," Philgre began, "this night we get what we have dreamed about for a century. Our fathers and grandfathers may have been passive but we are a new generation. We have built a world underground, but it was never our rightful home. Tonight we take what is ours.

"The fool, who was prophecy only a short time ago, has become reality and already served us well. We shall not forget him. Our Master has rewarded us. We shall reward our fool!" At this last statement he laughed deeply. The sound echoing through the door into the night. "Let us go forth!" he shouted, and the throng followed him as a roll of thunder answered their cries.

The wind and scratching continued but other distractions played for the couple's attention. Suddenly, Kilian saw an orange glare flash across the far wall of the bedroom. He stopped what he was doing and pulled the sheer curtain away from the window to get a better look.

The restaurant and school were engulfed in flames.

Something in the back of his head told him the cause. Oh, what had he done? He felt helpless at first, then angry. If he had been double-crossed or used in any way, he would certainly have something to say about it.

He climbed out of bed and began to dress. He had to be sure.

"Where are you going, lover?"

"I have something to do," he told her.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," she replied quite seriously. Her tone made him look up at her. The look on her face was stern. He wasn't sure he was going to be able to get away easily.

"Either you stay with me, or I go with you," she said with her eyes narrowing.

He tossed her pants to her. "Let's go."

"Good, it will give us a new place to try. Where are we going, anyway?" she asked as she slipped on her jeans, not quite as serious.

"You'll find out when we get there. Hurry up."

She finished putting on her boots and they left. He wanted to confirm his suspicion before he did anything else, so they headed for town. The fires continued to light the night sky. That was the odd thing. If they couldn't stand the light so much, why did they start fires?

The night was still cloudy and both buildings sat very close to the river. All they had to do was climb out of the boats he had stolen for them, light the fires, and run back to the river. His anger began to build.

He felt a hand on his thigh. He pushed it away. She put her hand in his crotch. He pushed it away. He had too much to think about. She made a noise and he glanced at her. She had taken off her T-shirt.

"Not now, dammit. We got too much to do," he shouted. She paid no attention to him.

She looked at him with a look of pure seduction and said in a low voice, "You have the sexiest chocolate eyes I have ever seen." It was all he could do to ignore her.

He skidded to a stop outside the store. The pop machine light illuminated the small parking area.

"Get me a Pepsi," he demanded. She replaced her shirt then jumped out of the truck and began to dig the money from her jeans. Kilian floored the truck and sped off toward the fires. "Goofy woman."

He couldn't find any clues around the buildings and with the commotion going on around them, he was afraid that he would be forced to volunteer for something. He went back to the truck and began to think. Where would they strike next?

There had been a lot of people in the restaurant; all had survived as best as he could tell. The school had been deserted. If they were out for revenge, the restaurant would make sense, but why the school? Was it because it was a center for learning or was it something against the children? Either way, what would be a likely next target?

He heard another explosion. It was the library. He turned the key quickly and drove toward the now flame-torn building. The library was on the other side of town, but the town wasn't that big.

The road ran across the river right before the turn-off to the library. He slowed the truck and looked over the guard-rail. The truck was high enough that he could see a small dark raft floating under the bridge. It was them! They must have split up to hit as many places as possible. They weren't going after certain places, they were going for them all!

The question was what to do now. Kilian knew he couldn't catch them in the boat. But he could get back to the old ranch house before they did. He whipped a U-turn and headed out of town. Within minutes he pulled off the road onto an abandoned dirt track. It crossed the slough and ran along the river for over a mile. It was rough going, and before he could see the house he

pulled off into the brush. The truck couldn't be seen unless someone stumbled over it. Kilian continued on foot.

The anger in him began to build again. He now knew they were responsible and they had set him up. He hated being used, it infuriated him. He had been set up from the beginning. The promises, the stories, the potion had all been exactly what he wanted to hear.

In the darkness, he stumbled through the brush and trees. He had walked this stretch before but always in the daylight. He knew the house was along the next bend. He could make it out through the trees. The fire's glow lit the sky and the reflection danced on the dirty windows.

Kilian was angry. It had sustained him this long, but now doubt began to creep into his thoughts. "What do I do now?" he whispered to himself. "Search the house," came to him almost as quickly.

Kilian slipped quietly through the brush and around to the cleanest window. The crickets were loud; he could even hear the river. The sound of his own blood flowing, however, almost deafened him. He gently rubbed the dust from the outside of the window. He could see little to nothing. He would have to go in.

He crept to the small porch, put his ear to the door, and turned the knob. The musty smell of the cabin met him as he entered. Reaching into his pocket, he removed his lighter and flicked it.

A sudden scurry startled him. "Just a field-mouse," he reassured himself. He then realized that the mouse was the only living thing inside. For that matter, it was just about the only thing at all. All of the things he had stocked the cabin with were gone. Other than that fact, it looked as if

no one had ever been there. A place to stay above ground had all been part of the masquerade, as well.

Kilian ran back to the car as fast as he could. His anger had reached a new height. It carried him along and gave him the courage he needed. He knew what he would have to do now. He started the truck and turned around.

He was responsible for unleashing these things. The anger he felt engulfed him and nothing else seemed to matter. He flew back to the road and almost broadsided a truck and horse trailer probably trying to escape. In his rearview mirror, Kilian watched as another building exploded, either a liquor store or a church; it was hard to tell at this distance. "Light my fire," played quietly on the radio.

He headed back to the door.

CHAPTER 16

It took several seconds for his eyes to adjust, but he plowed through the brush blindly. A fall or scrape seemed like nothing now. The sound of his heart, pounding in his ears, drowned out even the sound of the river. Heat lightning lit the eastern sky.

Kilian almost fell into the hole before he realized just where it was. He slid down into it and quickly realized his flashlight did not help at first. He stumbled through the darkness and slowly his light began to reflect off the damp stone walls. Kilian heard a loud crack of thunder outside.

The opening tunnel enlarged into a great chamber. The ceiling was relatively low, but the walls seemed to extend forever. Kilian followed the nearest wall to the right. A series of doors

began to show themselves. The first three looked as if they were used solely for storage. The fourth door opened into an office, Philgre's office.

The small room contained a table with two chairs, both of which were pushed in, and a large set of shelves containing books. Kilian looked to the first shelf as a strong draft blew across his face.

He could not read some of the titles; some books had no title. All were bound in thick leather covers. The top shelf contained at least two dozen books all of identical shape, size, and color. They were marked with numbers and placed in order.

Kilian removed the first heavy volume. The first page read, "A journal of the Ordeal of Our People." Kilian turned the page and began to read.

We have been banished. The non-believers have placed us in caverns, miles from town. We will surely die if we are not careful. Our magic will help us but there is only so much we can do. We were able to carry only a few small supplies and belongings. As our brothers and sisters die, they will sacrifice what is left for the good of the rest.

Kilian realized that the covers of these books were tanned hide but were much too soft to be leather. The ink was not black either but a curious red-brown color. He understood what those sacrifices were. The chamber suddenly grew cold. His flesh crawled.

Kilian tossed the book down on the table and removed another from the middle of the shelf. The dates showed him over thirty-five years had elapsed. He read:

Our life has purpose now, meaning. It took a great deal of time to prepare for the ceremony but all we seem to have is time. Our Father has rewarded his children, not only with prophecy but with power. The darkness has become light, with the new light we flourish. The Master of Darkness has taken us into his care. We will get out of this hell someday and we will be prepared.

Kilian flipped a few pages and continued reading.

...as always. The sacrifice went well, and that's one less mouth to feed this year. All of Bethina's children whine too much anyway. One thing is certain, Bethina will never look upon The Place in the same way. Only our Master could transform a small pit in a large round room into His Church. He does work wonders!

It worries me, however, that we must return there so frequently. I do not understand why, only that my people will die if we do not...

That was the answer Kilian was looking for.

He dropped the book on the floor and left the small room. He continued to follow the wall to the right. He passed several other "offices" and began to see sleeping quarters more frequently. He did not see any other living creature, though.

He soon came to another tunnel. He looked down as far as he could but could see little. Kilian took a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it. "Got any better ideas?" he asked himself in a whisper. He took a long drag from the cigarette, relieved himself on the wall, and took off down the tunnel at a jog.

Three cigarettes and far too many twists and turns later, Kilian found what he was looking for. A large gilded door opening into a large circular tabernacle. A sickening sweet smell greeted him at the door. The center of the room contained a large wooden table with a hole in its center. Below the table was another hole in the floor. Kilian approached and shined the light through the table and down the hole.

He pulled back in horror.

Inside the hole lay a tiny skeleton. He prayed that it was not a child's, but he knew better. The thought of it revolted him, and he left.

He knew, if this room was used as much as it was, it must be more easily accessible. He lit his lighter and placed it in front of the door. He had approached the door from the right. That left the center and left-hand tunnels to explore. He hurried down the center one.

Within minutes he stood in a huge cavern. He looked back and could still see his lighter. He hurried back and got it, then returned to the cavern. If his guess was correct, and his sense of direction was not entirely wrong, he could follow the left wall and return to the beginning tunnel.

Kilian heard distant thunder. Looking up, his beam revealed another, closed door, in the ceiling. Could that be the other door that he had not dug up? If it wasn't, how many doors were there? This thought startled him. If there were more, how soon would it have been before someone else had found one? What was this place?

His thoughts were cut short by another roll of thunder. Kilian turned off his light and waited a second, another, another. His sense of direction had not failed him. He saw the answering lightning in front of him. As he switched on his flashlight again, the thunder rolled.

"It must be storming pretty good out there," he said as he flicked his cigarette butt into the darkness. He found the opening door and was amazed that he could see light going out but hadn't coming in. He was soon back at the pick-up.

The sky seemed almost alive. The thunder shook the truck and the lightning was bright enough to almost read by. But, no rain fell.

CHAPTER 17

Kilian needed a plan. He lit his last cigarette and leaned against the truck in thought. The smell of ozone permeated the air. Kilian exhaled a cloud of smoke that was quickly whisked away by the breeze.

He yawned as a veiny bolt of lightning lit the sky. The herbicide containers caught his eye. If they could ignite his world and blow it to smithereens, why couldn't he do the same to theirs? Fight fire with fire. He began to grow less angry and more excited. This was revenge!

If he did it right he could even get the room they worshipped in. That way he could kill them all, once and entirely!

He crushed out his cigarette, grabbed his sprayer, and quickly emptied it on the ground. He removed its nozzle and replaced it with a much wider, more soaking spare that he had in the glove compartment.

"Thanks Jesus, for making me take my own truck," he said aloud to the sky. He then began filling the now empty tank with non-diluted chemical.

With the tank filled to capacity, and its lid taped tight for extra safety if he fell, Kilian carefully strapped it on. He then shoved a six-foot length of rope and a couple of emergency

flares into his shirt, and grabbed two more gallons of chemical. He also took a bag of filter masks.

He lowered the sprayer and extra cans of herbicide into the hole, jumped in and strapped them on again. He turned his flashlight on, knowing it would take several feet before it made any difference.

The tank was heavy and he was tired, but the anger, excitement, and thought of final revenge kept him going. Kilian started a deep line as he entered that continued over everything that looked flammable. He pulled things out of the storage closets, the bedding from the sleeping quarters, and even the books and shelves from the offices, out into the main cavern.

The smell from the straight chemical began making him light-headed as he threw the second, now empty, gallon of chemical away. He grabbed his sprayer handle and continued the line down the tunnel to the round room.

He soaked the table, walls and floor with chemical, then continued down another tunnel. Periodically, Kilian heard the sound of distant thunder and wondered if he was below another door. It amazed him that these things hadn't escaped before.

He may have been responsible for their escape this time, but he assured himself, as he went back for the last of the herbicide, they would not have the last laugh. He grabbed a new filter mask and continued his spraying.

CHAPTER 18

Kilian sprayed all he had through the system of tunnels and let it sit long enough to build a strong base of fumes. He had even covered the door with a tarpaulin to hold in as much as possible. He emptied all of the chemical from the truck into the hole.

As the sun began to peek over the mountains, Kilian pulled back the tarp, moved back as far as he could, lit the flare and threw it into the hole.

The explosion went off immediately.

All around him, Kilian heard, felt, and watched pillars of flame erupt from the ground as the other doors ascended into the brightening sky.

As the fires from underground and from town continued to burn, Kilian laughed. The rain began to fall.

EPILOGUE

The townspeople had fought at first. Then they ran. The toothy grins and bulging eyes of the "things" were too much for even the most courageous. The town's destruction was almost complete, as the sun began to rise.

Another series of explosions, from a distance, made everybody stop and take notice. The ground shook.

Suddenly, as if the "things" had not been enough, hideous demons with wide eyes and flaming skin slid from the ground. The townspeople could not move, paralyzed by fright, but the creatures ran.

Their running was to no avail, however. The demons caught them and pulled them back into the ground, screaming and fighting as they were devoured.

When the last of them had returned to the earth, an eerie quiet set upon the survivors of the town. Nothing seemed to move, not the wind, not the children, not the trees.

As it began to rain, Kilian wiped the sweat from his forehead and laughed out loud. He felt a deep sense of relief. He then turned the truck around and headed back for his Pepsi.