

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD & EVIL
Glenn Kleier © 2010

Chapter Seven

PRINCESS JULIANA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, ST. MAARTEN
ISLAND, CARIBBEAN, NEXT MORNING

Angela raced out of the little terminal, hailing a cab. The driver stowed her bag, she slid into the back seat, and they rattled off.

She handed up a scribbled address, no idea where on the island it was, unable to locate it on Google Earth. The cabbie shook his head, dreadlocks wagging, eyes meeting hers in the mirror.

“No-no, M’um. Pretty missy like you don wanna go dere.”

“Just take me, please. And hurry.”

All she wanted was to grab Ian and go.

She’d tried to phone Father Lucien back yesterday, only to get an answering machine telling her she’d reached “a monastery where quiet is valued and silence a virtue.” Invited to leave a message, she hadn’t. And though convinced she was making a fool of herself, she’d done as the frantic monk had begged, redeyeing to Miami, island-hopping here.

Her cab exited the airport down a narrow peninsula, crossing a causeway to the main island. White sand beaches lined with palmettos, scent of salt off the breakers, puffy clouds in a bright, balmy, sapphire sky.

How she would have loved a vacation here. Never been much of anywhere outside California. No money when she was younger, putting herself through school after Dad took off. No time lately. She swore under her breath.

They passed through a seaside tourist trap into the island’s interior, reggae playing low on the radio. Hilly, scrub brush, sedge grass, small trees, cacti, sheep, goats, the occasional shack. As Angela recalled from a brochure on the plane, St. Maarten was a tiny place. Forty square miles divided in two, France controlling north, Holland south. And not a single running river.

Topping a hill, she saw below a picturesque town of pastel-colored clapboard houses and stores squeezed onto a bridge of land between ocean and large lagoon. Phillipsburg, a sign read. Her driver threaded its narrow streets and they headed back inland.

What was Ian up to that could be so dangerous? Had he sneaked away here to avoid her? Or to chase some new spiritual phenomenon? Probably both. She swore again.

Shacks began to appear along the roadside, cobbled together of rusted, corrugated metal and warped plywood. The inhabitants, all black, milled about barefoot in ragged clothes. Worse by far than anything East L.A. had to offer. Angela's heart went out to them. She could just imagine how upsetting this must have been for the sensitive Ian.

The cab slowed and the driver switched off the radio, turning nervous eyes to her.

"Bad place, M'um. You sure you wan be doin' dis?"

She hadn't come all this way to turn back.

Mumbling, the man exited the highway and they jostled down a gravel road strewn with trash, scaring off seagulls and other scavengers. Angela assumed they'd reached the far side of the island, and soon they arrived at what looked to be an old industrial quarter. Corroded storage tanks, warehouses and other buildings bleached chalky in the sun.

The cab halted in front of two warehouses that abutted one another. An address on the door of the first matched the one Lucien had given her, no signs of habitation but a few cars parked near the second warehouse. Angela swallowed, gave her driver a \$100 bill, and told him to wait.

* * *

Concealed behind a third-floor window of the second warehouse stood a black man in jeans and ink-stained T-shirt, 9mm Uzi in hand. He grew agitated at the sight of the cab, alerting men operating machinery behind him.

Suddenly the cab door opened and out stepped a most beautiful woman! Slender, in blouse and skirt.

The man gasped. Two associates appeared at his side, one also with a gun. Their jaws dropped, too.

"Você tá zoando?" The unarmed man murmured. Then scowling, he motioned to a stairwell, and the two armed men rushed down.

* * *

Angela held close to the cab as she surveyed the dismal surroundings, all quiet, no movement.

What has he gotten himself into this time?

But she was determined to see it through. She started for the warehouse—stopped by a loud screech. A door to the adjoining warehouse flew open, discharging two black men with guns, faces menacing.

“Mas quem é que vocês são?” one snarled at her.

She didn’t understand, but it wasn’t French or Dutch.

The sound of crunching gravel made her turn, and she panicked to see her cab speed off, showering her suitcase with dust. You’re a psychologist, she reminded herself, you know how to deal with intimidation . . .

Grabbing her bag, she called over to the men, “I’m late for a meeting, they’re expecting me.” And hurried on.

They shouted back, “Pare!”

She ignored them, willing the door open. It was, and she slammed it behind her, finding herself in a dingy, ill-lighted stairwell. She climbed, relieved to hear no pursuit.

At the top was a windowless door, no sign, number or bell. She placed an ear to it. Strange beeping and voices. Not Ian’s, no one she recognized. Two men and a woman speaking English, each with different accent. Asian? Russian? French? She could make out only phrases.

“Seven degrees . . . Eee-ee-gee zero . . . Cardio zero . . .”

She tried the knob. Locked. Then gave the door a rap, and the voices ceased as the beeping continued. But no answer. She banged her fist, shouting with authority, “I’m here to see Ian Baringer! Let me in!”

A pause, and she heard the Asian-sounding man at the door, voice tense, “Private property. You trespass. Go!”

“I know he’s here—let me in or I’m calling the police!”

Muffled talk, argumentative. Then the Russian accent, “That’s it—terminate!”

More argument. Finally the door cracked, a man of slight build peering out. Asian, late thirties, medical gown, surgical mask dangling round his neck, eyes squints of fear.

“Who you?”

“Ian’s fiancée.”

Farther back in the room, the woman’s voice, “Luc Dow, you idiot! What ze hell you do?”

The Asian turned and Angela took advantage, plowing past into a large, open space. Bare, save for a nucleus of electronic equipment and pole lights clustered around an operating table, bundles of duct-taped cables snaking across the floor. Haloed in the lights was an older man with beard. Sixties, perhaps. Beside

him, a younger woman, light-hair pulled back in a braid. Both wore medical gowns, staring at Angela from behind surgical masks.

She approached them, spying on the table a body wrapped in blue plastic pads dripping condensation, IV tubes everywhere. A male form, skin morbid gray, dotted with electrodes that hooked into a wall of monitors—heart, respiration, EEG—none registering activity.

Not an operation. Autopsy.

And then she saw the dead man's face . . .

Hysterical, she rushed the table, but sturdy hands grabbed her from behind.

"You want see him alive?" the Asian warned. "Stay back!"

She tried to swing around, claw out his eyes—but his grip was too strong.

"You've murdered him!"

"He is not dead," the older man said. "Yet. But you mustn't interfere."

Disbelieving, Angela looked to Ian. Serene and pale like some toppled Greek statue. She'd seen death before.

"You're lying!"

But if they weren't . . .

The man and woman stood waiting. Desperate, Angela saw no choice, giving in, and the Asian released her. He regarded her warily for a moment, then joined his comrades, and they began to remove Ian's wraps.

"Refrigerant pads," the Russian told her, flipping a switch to set a nearby apparatus humming. She saw a transparent tube filled with blood exiting the region of Ian's groin, connecting to the machine and re-entering his body at the same point. "Heart-lung pump. As we circulate his blood we warm it, adding pure oxygen."

On one of the monitors a temperature gage began to edge up—8 degrees centigrade, 9, 10 . . .

The woman injected Ian with various fluids via the IVs. "Stimulants," she said.

Angela observed all in riveted horror.

Once the temperature reached 27, the Russian withdrew electrical paddles from the front of another machine, rubbing them together. The woman removed electrodes from Ian's chest, applied a lubricant, and the man positioned the paddles near Ian's heart, calling, "Clear!"

Angela held her breath and cringed.

Boom!

It was as if the current entered her. She jolted too, grimacing as his body arced on the table only to collapse into stillness. Moaning, she watched the man recharge the paddles to send another volt surging. Again Ian bucked—this time a blip on the monitor's flat line. Then another! Another! Quickly followed by stronger spikes!

Angela breathed again, feeling faint.

"He has the constitution of a horse," the Russian said, taking a handkerchief to his brow. "Mark five minutes, twenty-three seconds."

The woman recorded in a logbook, and Angela brushed past, sobbing, dropping to Ian's side, taking his hand in hers. It felt deathly cold. He was still unconscious, but she thrilled to see color return to his face.

The strange team continued its work, checking vital signs, administering unknown substances through IVs, and Angela glared up at them.

"What the hell is going on!"

The Asian calmly replied, "NDE."

Near Death Experience. Angela was familiar with the phenomenon, though she'd never investigated it. Not uncommon in cases where individuals seemingly die, life functions ceasing, only to revive a short time later. She presumed Ian's intent was to sneak through death's door to confirm the existence of the Afterlife, expecting to be resuscitated before it closed permanently.

The damned fool. No wonder he hid it from me!

Stifling her outrage, she spoke to him soothingly, squeezing his hand, feeling it grow warmer. He remained unresponsive—though he groaned when the woman removed the tubes from the vessel in his groin. And again when she closed the incision with a few stitches. Angela found the intimacy of the procedure repugnant.

"Who's in charge here?"

The older man dropped his surgical mask. He had an intelligent bearing. Average height; gray, bushy hair and beard; fair complexion; eyes dark and close-set.

"Dr. Emil Josten," he said, "formerly of the Kharkov Institute for Cryobiological Studies. These are my colleagues, Dr. Yvette Garonne, Université Pierre et Marie Curie. And Dr. Luc Dow Hodaka, Universität Würzburg. We specialize in the science of suspended animation."

Angela felt a flush of anger. "You call this science? Experimenting with a man's life? This is criminal! This is, is—Mengelean!"

Josten remained calm. “I assure you, our work is perfectly legal here.”

“And that makes it right? What about brain damage! What about Ian’s mind!”

“Ze risks not so great,” Garonne said. Angela turned to see her scribing figures on a chart. “Even outside ze lab, sometime people survive death forty minute, no complication.”

Josten added, “Frigid-water drownings, for example. We’ve simply taken a natural occurrence and refined it. Improved the odds.”

“Much improve,” Hodaka said, gesturing to the array of equipment and pharmaceuticals. “Thanks to Meester Baringer.”

Angela was no less appalled. “How many times has he done this!”

“Once before,” Josten said. “A three-minute test earlier this week. We were prepared for ten today—before you interrupted.”

“And you can be damn thankful I did. You could all be facing murder charges!”

Garonne snatched Ian’s hand from her, checking his pulse. “No. More ze assisted suicide. Also legal here. Regardless, he sign ze paper for liability.”

“Did he waive your medical ethics, too?”

The woman turned to her, raising a brow. Light blue eyes, golden skin. Pretty. And she held herself as if aware of it. “Under ze circumstances, eet would be unethical not to help heem. He was determined to do zis, no idea how. If he deed not find us, he would have keeled himself. And thanks to heem, we advance our technique. What we learn weel save lives.”

“Not at the expense of his,” Angela snapped. “Once he’s recovered, I’m taking him home!”

Garonne bent close to Ian’s face, drawing back his eyelids, flashing a penlight. Then with wry smile, she sniffed, “Not zis man. Not after what he claim to see . . .”

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Previously in the story:

Since losing his parents, seeing them give their lives to save his, Ian Baringer has obsessed over the question of an Afterlife. He must know if he'll be reunited with them someday as religion promises. And he's found the means. An extreme gambit to steal across death's threshold and, if all goes as planned, to see his mother and father and return alive.

The mad scheme succeeds in part—Ian accesses the Great Beyond—only to learn that his beloved parents are damned to the Pit of Hell. Frantic to see them at all costs, determined to enter the labyrinth of the underworld, Ian is forced to bargain passage with a shady spirit guide—the hulking demon, Zagan. Ian must complete the journey before his soul fully hardens, or he'll lose his life.

And now with the sinister Zagan leading, Ian sets off across the vast and murky plains of Limbo, embarking on what he fears will prove the most foolish endeavor in the history of human folly . . .

Chapter Eighty-eight

THE REALM OF THE DEAD, OUTSIDE OF TIME

. . . Ian had to trot to keep Zagan's grueling pace, puffing as the temperature rose, sweat stinging his eyes, unable to wipe it away, his skin strangely immaterial here. They were on an increasingly downward slope, orange glow brighter, and Ian heard the sound of dull droning. Like a distant hive of bees.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Erebus. The in-between place."

The name held no meaning for Ian.

From behind came a soft, high-pitched whine that quickly developed into a loud cry, and Ian turned to see the dim shape of a soul skirt by. A man, tone of his cries deepening as he passed. He streaked off to the horizon, followed periodically by more such

cries and shapes, some close, some remote, all hurtling in the same direction.

Ahead, Ian could make out the edge of the night—an irregular precipice where steam and orange light emanated from below. The cliff stretched away right and left out of sight, nothing but black sky beyond.

Zagan slowed as they approached, horrible screams echoing up the other side. But unlike the previous cries, which seemed in terror, these sounded full of agony.

Ian hung back, fearful. “What’s down there?”

“The Mill of Purgatory.”

Behind, more screams, and Ian looked to see the soul of a young man in gray robe tumbling toward them, quickly overtaken by an older man in darker robe sliding feet-first on his stomach, clawing the ground with his fingers. And then zipping by both, a middle-aged woman in an even-darker robe, screeching like a banshee.

One after the other they shot out over the precipice, squealing in panic as they fell from sight. More souls flew by as far as eye could see, and Ian realized that the drone he’d been hearing was actually the cumulation of countless shrieks resonating in the vastness.

Another man—portly and goggle-eyed, curled in fetal position, robe black as soot—zoomed within range of Zagan. The demon swiveled and lashed out with a foot like a soccer player, catching him neatly from behind, booting him far out over the edge as the poor soul yelped in pain.

Zagan sniggered, “He goes to join your parents in the Pit.”

Before Ian could voice his anger, a sudden movement at the precipice locked the words in his throat. Fluttering up over the rim were delicate fingers seeking a handhold. Pale, battered, bruised, fingernails torn and bleeding. Then the contused, panting face of what Ian realized was once a pretty young woman. Cheeks bloodied, hair matted and straggled. Though surprisingly, her robe was pure white.

As if with her last strength she dragged herself atop—only to halt at the sight of Zagan’s huge legs. Ian watched her gaze rise, her eyes widen with dread, and she moaned, “Oh no . . . No!”

Zagan silenced her with a foot to the face, shoving her back over the cliff, her wail fading.

Again Ian’s anger flared—cut short by the demon reaching down, grabbing his arm, hoisting him in the air. He suddenly found himself planted on Zagan’s shoulder, perched like a parrot

on a pirate, head awl. Then, reacting to the monster's hot breath on his leg, he lurched, slashing his calf on a tusk.

"Hold fast!" Zagan ordered, and crouching, he launched out over the edge.

Ian yelled, clinging with both hands to one of Zagan's horns. The chasm seemed bottomless, and he shut his eyes. But it did no good, lids transparent. As they plummeted, he was astounded to see bat-like wings unfold from depressions in Zagan's back, spreading wide to brake their fall, nearly costing him his grip.

They settled into a glide, floating down past ledges that projected from the cliff face. Like giant steps, each ledge extended farther than the previous, reminding Ian of Dante's levels of Hell. And in the manner of that epic, the ledges exacted ever-harsher penalties on plunging souls.

The trajectory of a soul, Ian realized, corresponded to the darkness of its robe/weight of its sins. Those with lighter-colored robes, signifying slighter sins on their souls, moved at slower speeds, arcing closer to the cliff, landing on the upper levels, sustaining only bumps and bruises.

Heavier sinners, however, were propelled farther out, striking progressively deeper ledges, suffering harder impacts, heads smashing, bones cracking, entrails splaying.

Ian felt sickened. But as he saw, this was only the beginning. At each level the fallen souls were met by bizarre demons, hodge-podges of human, animal, vegetable and mechanical parts, straight out of a Bosch painting.

Some creatures raked in the remains, dusting them with a white powder. The victims then reconstituted and rose up shrieking, making a frantic attempt to scale the cliff. Only to be snared and pulled down by more chimeras armed with gaffs and grappling irons, who then tortured them with an array of medieval-looking weapons that lay scattered about the ledges.

The tortures appeared to burlesque offenses the souls had committed in life. One man was being spanked with a flaming belt by a troll who ridiculed his intelligence. Another gnomish demon had a woman's tongue in a pair of red-hot tongs, chattering at her like a gossip, hot breath scorching her ears.

Ian recalled Niemand's claim that Dante and Bosch had never ventured past Purgatory, and he saw how they could have acquired their Hellish inspirations here, peeking over the cliff above. His heart went out to these poor wretches.

Zagan pointed to the white powder, shouting over the cries, "Angel Dust to bleach their robes. If a soul gains the top, it's free to

make its way to Heaven . . .”

They continued their descent, down, down into the Abyss, following those souls with the blackest robes.

Eventually Zagan landed at the bottom with a thud, impact cushioned by his powerful legs, sloughing Ian off. Other souls arriving here, however, experienced the full force of their falls from grace, walloping the surface at terrific speed, splattering into pulp.

Zagan used his wings to screen himself, but Ian suffered a bloody shower, shielding his eyes to no avail. If insensitive to the touch of other souls, he was obviously not impervious to their gore.

As his eyes cleared, Ian saw they'd arrived on a desert-like escarpment. A flat, barren stretch that continued for some distance, beyond which the orange light glowed brighter. The air was stifling hot, and Ian asked nervously, “Is this Hell?”

The demon's answer was a scornful snort of steam.

Around them, more Bosch-esque creatures worked the grounds, some with squeegee-like appendages, scraping the mush and crumpled black robes into piles. The souls re-assumed their bodily forms but Ian saw no bleach this time. And before they could fully recover, other demons arrived to drive them across the sands, flailing with arms that ended in barbs and cat-o'-nine-tails. The victims howled, staggering on, robes shredded, streaked with blood.

Zagan shook clean his wings, retracted them, and joined the grim procession. Ian followed—only to be stopped by a burning slash across his shoulder. One of the caretaker monstrosities had discovered him. A squat, pig-faced being with short arms and long, tentacled fingers that flailed down, cutting deep, raising nasty, stinging welts.

Ian cried out, recoiling, covering up, scrambling to get away. But the creature kept after, scourging mercilessly, and in desperation Ian reached out and grabbed a bundle of tentacles. Ignoring their poison, he pulled the demon to the ground and pounced, venting his pent-up anger, loosing a barrage of punches, beast squealing as Ian bloodied its snout and broke off a tusk. It felt wonderful.

But it was short-lived. The creature's cries roused its comrades, who descended in a rage. Ian was pulled off, about to be minced when he heard a voice thunder, “Belay. This soul is mine . . .”

Suddenly he was snatched up, shaken hard until his tormentors dropped off, then set back on his feet. Dizzy, bitten, beaten, whipped, stung and clawed, he'd never known such pain.

But Zagan spared no sympathy, sending Ian along with a

shove, snarling, “Keep up!”

Ian hobbled away, bloody slices of flesh hanging from his arms, demons yammering behind. He felt his courage ebb, tempted to turn back.

If this is only Purgatory, what must Hell be like?

It seemed Zagan read his mind, looking down to sneer, “You’ll heal soon enough.”

In fact, the cut on his leg from Zagan’s tusk had already mended, if leaving a wicked scar. And to quit now might well cost him the monster’s protection—or cause it to tear him apart in rage. Mustering his courage, he trudged on . . .

The heat continued to climb, and eventually Ian could make out an end to the escarpment. The sky beyond was like a fiery dawn, split by a towering mushroom of black clouds rent by lightning. The air rumbled, filled with sulfuric fumes that made him wheeze and cough.

Drawing closer, he saw the exhausted marchers being herded into queues—countless lines stretching off side-by-side. Souls slow to assemble were seized by demons with vicious, crab-like claws and thrust in place. This time Ian stuck close to Zagan.

The purpose of the queues was soon evident. At the end of each stood three, muscular, bug-eyed ogres. One would grab the next hapless person in line and tear away its robe, tossing the scrap onto a pile. Another would apply a white-hot branding iron to the left shoulder, marking it with Roman numerals from I to VII. Many shoulders, Ian saw, bore multiple brands. The last ogre would then impale the soul on a pike, loft it high in the air, and sling it naked into long, metal troughs of boiling oil.

The troughs were elevated slightly on trestles to allow for fires beneath, running like infernal aqueducts toward the edge of the escarpment. Demons straddled at intervals, using poles with hooks to snag the souls and move them along. No sooner could a mouth reach the surface for a gulp of air and a scream than it was thrust back into the cauldron. More devils attended the fires, fueling them with the discarded robes, which burned hot as sin.

The thought of his poor parents enduring this filled Ian with despair, and he stumbled along after Zagan in a daze.

They followed the bubbling flumes at length to the brink of the escarpment, where finally the souls were netted and cast onto the ground, parboiled and steaming, lobster red. Here they fell under the dominion of Dark Angels arriving via stairs from the orange brilliance below—now blazing like a minor sun.

These devils resembled Zagan, though Ian saw none as big, or

with horns, teeth or tail as long. They approached the fresh-cooked souls, snatched them in their talons, and dragged them teetering toward the cliff, each soul getting its own Dark Angel.

Ian trailed Zagan into the migration, sticking close, seeing some devils eye him and growl to one another. He suspected they took exception to his robe and the uncured state of his soul. But for now at least, Zagan's presence seemed to ward them off.

At the rim Ian felt a blast of hot wind, squinting out at an ominous sight. Far below, a vast, desolate crater with giant volcano at its core in full eruption. Zagan announced, "The Valley of Gehenna."

Ian gasped. Hewn into the crater's walls were countless stairways spiraling down, funneling souls from every direction, creating a monstrous coliseum of the damned.

At the bottom the stairs became trails, leading toward the volcano, which belched great plumes of gas, fire and smoke. Lava erupted from the cone, heaving and seething down one slope, forming a molten flow that wrapped the mountain like a moat. Where it met itself again, the lava created a maelstrom, sucking and boiling and disappearing in a fiery vortex.

Zagan pointed. "The River Styx."

They joined the exodus, winding their way down under blazing sky. Ian cowered from the heat, ducking his face, and he noticed that unlike everyone else here, he cast no shadow. A welcomed sign his soul had yet to harden . . .

They marched on, and at length Ian could make out below what was absorbing all the traffic. Heat aside, he felt a shudder.

There was an opening in one side of the volcano. A cave at its base, perhaps fifty feet high and three times as wide, gaping insatiably, black as pitch.

Ian needed no pronouncement from Zagan.

The Mouth of Hell.

It lay across the molten river, which was broad and without a bridge. Instead, passage was accomplished by barge-like ferry boats powered by oars. The ferries worked nonstop, overseen by Dark Angles that pressed souls into service as galley slaves. For the trip across, the boats were crammed to the gunnels with souls and devils. On the return, devils only.

But there were too few boats. Masses of terrified souls and short-tempered devils were backed up along the shore, jostled tightly together. In the dust, heat, frenzy and confusion, some souls made the mistake of bumping into devils, incurring blasts of their steamy breath.

Ian trembled, gaping across the river to the source of the misery and mayhem. Above the Cave's crooked mouth he saw a message carved into the rock, repeated in many languages. And drawing nearer, he could make out its foreboding words:

GATE of the DAMNED

Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here

* * *

excerpted from:

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