

*A man with God-like powers
confronts good versus evil.*

THE DAY OF RECKONING

by C.H. Perry

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The Day of Reckoning

IN A WORLD OF CHAOS,
ONE MAN WILL STAND ALONE...



C.H. Perry

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The Day of Reckoning

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who have suffered injustices and have perished, sometimes horribly. May we not forget them and the terrible price they've paid.

Also to the freedom fighters of the world-past, present, and future. Through their sacrifices, they have made the world a better place to live in for generations to come. We should all be grateful for the tireless struggle they've endured to accomplish this.

Chapter One

Afghanistan 2016

The loud crack of thunder rumbled across the dark desert sky as if God himself was playing a cosmic tympani and blinding lightning bolts lit up the sky, turning it as bright as daylight for several moments before it was plunged into darkness once more. The lightning struck the ground in a rapid-fire freakish manner, one right after the other, as if Mother Nature herself was using a machine gun to attack the Earth. Jason Christianson ran in a frenzied panic with no other thought than to reach the safety of the rocks ahead of him to avoid being struck by the immediate threat that appeared to be hunting him down.

It was supposed to have been a calm, dark moonless night that would allow Jason to complete his mission without any obstacles. However, it was not meant to be...not on this night. The weather report had predicted good flying weather, but shortly after taking off, it had suddenly turned horribly violent and never let up during the whole flight and he had been blown off course when he exited out of the aircraft. So Jason was probably at least a mile away from his destination, which put him further behind his schedule.

Whether the sudden, strange change of weather was due to some desire by Mother Nature, Jason wasn't quite sure. It did appear to happen randomly, since the weather had been ok the days leading up to the current mission. It was as if this was an omen of bad things to come and he should have listened to his instincts. But orders were orders, and he was going to follow his, no matter the costs...even if it killed him, which really seemed to be a possibility at the moment.

He almost decided to abort the mission to begin with because everything was quickly going from bad to worse with each passing second. At the last moment, Jason decided he would make the best of it and jumped from the airplane, almost hitting the aircraft's tail by a fraction of an inch as he did so. He was whipped around severely by the wind until he reached a lower altitude, but it was still rough going until he was finally able to open his parachute. He landed safely, but was still off course.

Perhaps the reality was that he was exhausted from all the missions that they had him going on over the last several months. "Has it actually been several months? Perhaps it had been a couple of years," thought Jason to himself as he moved frantically with all his energy to the rocks. He really wasn't sure how long it had been, as he had lost track of time, what with him going nonstop on mission after mission without the proper rest.

And as anybody knows, one can only continue physically, mentally, and emotionally for so long without stopping and not have some kind of serious consequence happen. That's what had been happening with Jason.

Whatever the reason, Jason knew that something was terribly wrong. And if the situation continued the way it had up to this point, he didn't think he would be able to complete his mission as planned.

Jason had been through worse, like the one time where his parachute had malfunctioned and he had to use the reserve, which performed as needed. He had been told that he was going on a simple in-and-out mission that should have been a piece of cake, but he ended up walking into what he had been told was just a small contingency of enemy

forces when it actually turned out to be ten times that amount. Again, this was nothing that he couldn't handle as he was always able to adjust and ad lib as needed to move on to complete whatever objective he was involved in. He had always prided himself on this aspect of himself and he wasn't going to let anything stop him now especially since he was in the middle of the current situation. He did feel fortunate considering the circumstances with the weather that he had landed safely with no injuries, but now he was dealing with the lightning that appeared to be getting closer and closer to him with each strike.

"This reminded me of a time in Uganda when I –." A bolt of lightning struck just a short distance from him, almost knocking him over and he was shocked not only by the pressure, but also by its high-intensity and he could feel the electricity as it made the hair on his body stand on end.

"Damn! That was too close." as he veered away from the electrical strike. But then another one struck near his body as if trying to hit him personally, shocking him into running faster towards the rocks.

Jason tried to time and predict where the lightning would strike next, but knew that this was futile and hoped that he could make it to the rocks before he got hit. It did seem as though the lightning strikes were honing in on his position. A vision of Zeus, the mythology God with his lightning bolts was hunting him down while he laughed and would hit him at any moment.

The rain suddenly started coming down in sheets, as if someone, perhaps God himself were throwing buckets of water specifically at him. He was quickly drenched and soaked through his clothes to the core of his body, and the rain fell down hard on his head as it turned into hailstones and felt like nails were being pounded into his head.

"This is totally bazaar. I don't get what's going on," he thought as he got closer to the rocks. He was running faster than he could remember doing before. He felt as if he was running for his life, which unbeknownst to him, he actually was. The wet ground was making him slip here and there, but he pushed forward as strongly as he could.

Jason was only up about 100 feet from reaching what he hoped would be his sanctuary when he was suddenly struck by one of the lightning bolts and for a moment his body did not register the impact as it froze in place. All he saw was a blindingly white light and he swore he had been hit with a massive baseball bat over his whole body. This wasn't like where a person is electrocuted while thousands of voltage and amperage surged angrily through their body and they have time to realize what is happening to them. No, this was like an electrical bomb inside his body had detonated and erupted into white.

A flood of thoughts, visions, ideas, memories, sounds and words of everything he had ever learned in his life surged through his mind at breakneck speed that he couldn't even comprehend as he felt his body and brain explode.

Jason had heard stories of people who claimed that they saw their whole life pass before their eyes at the moment of their death and he knew that he was about to die. And for some strange reason that he couldn't quite fathom, Jason accepted it and allowed the darkness that was actually white light to flow over him and he blacked out.

The blackness that Jason was immersed in slowly evolved into a dark gray as he struggled to open his eyes, but found that they didn't work. He could barely make out foggy

shadows that moved around him, in a language that he didn't comprehend, but somehow understood it had a Middle Eastern accent that didn't make sense to him at the moment.

A male voice spoke to him quietly with what Jason sensed was concern or even empathy, and he instinctively knew that the man was trying to ask him about his situation. Jason tried to remember who he was or where he was, but he couldn't come up with a response even if his life depended on it. Which at the moment, he also didn't care what happened to him.

Trying to make any part of his sluggish mind and body function was futile, as he felt that he was drowning in a vat of tar and he could only gasp a response. The man was quiet for a few moments and then a couple of minutes later, he felt his body being moved by several hands. At that moment, he wasn't certain if he was dreaming or if he was already dead, or if he was in some other dimension, such as Purgatory, and he was being prepared to be judged by God.

Intermingled with the man's voice, Jason thought he heard a woman and children's voices as well, as they talked quietly but rapidly amongst themselves in concerned, excited tone of voices. He could make out some of the words but not exactly what they were saying and he got the sense that they were trying to decide what to do with him.

Jason continued to struggle to regain his full eyesight, and here and there, he caught glimpses of a bearded, dark skinned man and what he believed was a woman and a couple of children. When they didn't speak, the area around them was very quiet.

Jason couldn't quite understand what most of what they were saying, partly because of his delirious state of mind and also because they were talking so fast he couldn't quite comprehend the words. He ordered his voice to speak and his body to move but nothing functioned. He felt hands grabbing and moving him and again he blacked out.

Over the course of what he could only determine were days, weeks, months, years, or maybe an eternity, Jason opened his eyes as he slowly regained consciousness and here and there he saw that he was lying in some kind of a wagon loaded with supplies. When he could glance out of the wagon's cover, he saw the bright light daytime and the golden hues of the desert sands.

Jason was jostled about as they moved at a slow, steady pace along a long bumpy road, and he could hear the clop-clop-clop of a horse or mule. The steady rhythm put Jason into a relaxed state of mind, which gave him time to collect his thoughts and attempt to make sense of his situation, as he was still feeling mentally and physically drained. He still couldn't remember just exactly how or why he had gotten where he was. Ideas about being 'exhausted' or something about being in an accident floated through his mind, but he couldn't make heads-or-tails of any of them. He thought about this for a time until he faded into darkness once again.

While he floated in and out of consciousness, Jason felt hands on him, tending to what he determined were his wounds, but he couldn't feel any pain, so he wasn't sure exactly what they were doing. Here and there, his head was lifted and water was being offered for him to drink, but he wasn't certain if he drank or not, although he felt liquid being poured into his mouth, which he assumed was water. He did feel that they tried to give him food but he couldn't even move his tongue, let alone his jaw to chew or swallow, although he felt he was somehow able to swallow at least a little bit but he gagged and coughed lightly.

Jason also felt coolness applied to his head and neck, though, and that comforted him. He continually attempted to open his eyes and speak, but his body still would not respond to his mental commands. He must have been doing something right, because he got the impression that the people were spending more time on him, and they talked to him more.

Again, Jason wasn't sure about the timeframe during this period of being blacked out. When he was awake enough to think at all, he attempted to remember his name, or anything at all about his life, but all that came to him were random, blurry images in his mind that only added to his confusion. Here and there, he would get a flood of images of all kinds of topics, but again, he couldn't make sense of what the message was that he was supposed to be understanding...if he actually was supposed to. It was as if he were in some drug-induced state and not knowing if it was real, a dream, an actual memory from his life, or just random bits of information that anyone could be exposed too.

While Jason was struggling to regain his health back, he was also fighting an internal battle between good and evil with his soul. It's been said that sometimes the only thing that keeps a person alive after being seriously injured is their will to live. Jason was dealing with his. There was part of him that felt like giving in and not coming back to consciousness. But in the darkest moments that he was experiencing during his recovery, Jason kept seeing a white light in the distance, although it was very far away and very dim.

During this internal ordeal, Jason felt his life...his very soul being pulled back and forth between the dark and light side, as if demons and devils and light beings or Angels played some sort of a spiritual tug-of-war with him, where either side could be the victor. Part of him felt that his life was being judged by some unseen entity, and he swore that he was hearing voices arguing back and forth about what to do with him.

He had heard stories of people who had been critically wounded or who were pronounced clinically dead, who claim that they had gone to Heaven and saw a wonderful, bright light and had had miraculous visions, even claiming that they saw God, or members of their family who had passed on before them.

For a time, Jason wondered if he had died and was actually in Purgatory, and was waiting to be judged for his actions he had performed while alive on Earth, and now it was just a matter of time before it was decided that he was going to Heaven or Hell. Jason sensed that he hadn't lived a good life overall, but that it wasn't totally his fault, which he didn't understand.

Here and there, he got glimpses of people that he somehow recognized, but couldn't put names to the faces. He wasn't certain if they were imaginary or if they were real. Intermingled with these were also people who were seriously injured, with their faces half blown off. These faces transformed into ghoulish, hideous, demon-devil faces with deep black eyes that bored into Jason's very soul as they grabbed for him with bony fingers with sharp claws. The background in these visions turned to a hellish image that Jason could only imagine was Hell itself, and he knew that he was going to die and never wake up again. Jason's soul screamed from deep within as he prepared for his final plunge into the dark side.

Perhaps it was the natural urge for a person to want to survive, and Jason found himself struggling to fight off the evil spirits. Just when he was about to be thrown into a huge, fiery pit, a white light suddenly erupted, pushing the demons away and Jason relaxed. It was as if he was being saved by Angels, and he could feel strong love come over him. He tried to

place a face with the energy, but could only see the people he had seen earlier in his mind, who now smiled and said to him, "Jason, it's not your time yet. You still have an important journey ahead of you. Be strong."

Jason didn't understand the meaning or why he should be saved at the last moment, but felt a real sense of harmony at that moment, and he relaxed. There was a part of him that felt like he was so tired, so exhausted that if he was to die at that moment he hoped that he would be going up to Heaven as a resting place where he could rest for eternity. There was a relaxing aspect of not having to make a decision that was satisfying to him that he had never really experienced before. He reflected on the positive, white light that had enveloped him and allowed whatever was going to happen with him to transpire of its own accord.

The blackness continued for an undetermined time, but slowly and surely it evolved from gray and then more clarity of color. And the more Jason commanded his body and mind to respond to his internal orders, little by little, he began to feel them start to respond. First his fingers and toes and then his hands and feet began to tingle the way the body does when the body part has fallen asleep and its function comes back to fruition.

Once Jason felt the connection with the mind and body started working stronger, he was soon clenching his fist and lifting his legs and with a real struggle, he was able to slowly sit up. He would lie back, catching his breath, exhausted, but he took stock of this and realizing he was gaining ground with the control over his body.

Even though he didn't feel too much pain, Jason noticed that there were parts of his body that caused him serious discomfort and he wasn't able to move these areas at all which he couldn't understand, since the rest of him seemed to be steadily improving. He assumed it was just part of the healing, recovery process. When his eyes focused enough and he examined his body, he noticed that there were quite a few bandages over it.

This realization sent Jason into a momentary panic attack and he wondered if he was actually more seriously injured than he thought. However, when he was able to move his body enough without too much pain, Jason relaxed, knowing that he was still in one piece.

At one point, the people who had been taking care of him came into the wagon and saw that he was awake enough to be helped up to sit up and drink heartily from a wine flask. When he looked at them, he saw that they eyed him curiously, wondering whom this strange man was that they found in the desert. Jason's mind couldn't make sense of any of it. It was as if his mind had been erased other than understanding some basic general facts about life. He still wasn't quite certain of anything at that moment other than he was in one piece and was drinking water. For some reason the thought scared him to his very soul, but he didn't understand anything further, except to take a deep breath and fade into blackness once again.

Jason was walking on a narrow trail surrounded by rows of trees that were so close together that it was difficult to see through them. He looked up and saw that the trees were so tall that they went up to what seemed like hundreds of feet into the air, and there was sunlight above him, which lit up the trail that he walked upon.

Jason continued to follow the trail and it looked like there might be an opening up ahead. But he noticed that no matter how long he walked, he didn't seem to get any closer to exiting the forest. Jason looked at the trees on both sides of the trail and noticed how dark the forest was. The only light upon the trail came from the sunlight at the top of the tree

line. He didn't know where he had come from or what his destination was, so he continued to walk forward at a brisk pace.

"Jaaasssonnn..." A voice in the trees called to him making him turn in that direction, but there was no one there. He didn't recognize the voice, but there was an eeriness to it that sent a chill down his spine, which caused him to walk faster.

"Jaaasssonnn..." the voice was closer this time and came from the other side of the trees. Jason walked even faster, hoping to get out of the forest before whomever or whatever it was decided to jump out and attack him. Jason was at a near run at this point as he continued to head towards the light in the distance.

"Jaaasssonnn..." More voices this time, from both sides of the trees and Jason swore that they were on the trail itself, but he couldn't see anyone or anything, even though they sounded like they were right on top of him, coming in closer by the moment, ready to grab him.

"Jaaasssonnn...! Jaaasssonnn...! Jaaasssonnn...!" the voices called out and he glanced around quickly, trying to gauge just where they were coming from. The voices were haunting, being called out slowly as if they were from another dimension.

Jason started to run and swore that the trees on both side of the trail moved in closer until there was not much of a trail left. It was as if the tree's branches were reaching out across the trail to where they were starting to come together to trap him.

Jason breathed hard as his heart pumped fast and sweat ran down his back. He increased his pace and as he ran by a tree, a bony hand reached out to grab him, but was only able to tag his shirt, and cut it with a razor-sharp fingernail. This made Jason run faster, but more hands reached out for him and he began to swing his arms at them to push them away. Some of the arms broke off, but others were able to grab his clothes and cut his skin. Jason called out in pain as blood dripped down his arm and face.

"Jaaasssonnn...!" the voices were behind him and he chanced a glance over his shoulder to see the group of zombie like creatures moving down the trail behind him. There seemed to be dozens of them.

"Jaaasssonnn...! Jaaasssonnn...!" the voices were everywhere, as if the forest echoed their cry. Jason ran as hard as he could by this time and looked to see the light at the end of the trail begin to get bigger and brighter, like a ray of hope. Jason ran for all he was worth as zombies stepped out from the tree line, grabbing at him.

He evaded them as he cleared the trees into what he believed to be an open area and his freedom from the horrors of the forest behind him. But as he exited the trees, he discovered that he had entered a graveyard, and the bright sunlight had suddenly turned into a dark scene, with no sun and only dark clouds in the sky. A cold wind slapped against him as he stood in the middle of this scene trying to catch his breath.

Jason turned to see if the trail was still there, but the trail and the trees were now gone. Instead, there was only a graveyard surrounding him with an endless array of tombstones that seemed to go on forever in all directions.

"Jaaasssonnn...!" The voices were all around him and he tried to pinpoint exactly where they came from. He heard a noise and turned to see a zombie coming out of a grave. Jason tried to scream, but his voice caught in his throat. Other zombies began to crawl out of their graves as well as they called out his name.

Jason tried to run and willed his body to move, but it wouldn't. The zombies were now on top of him, their sharp, bony claws reaching out for him, with dark sockets where there should be eyes, and some of them had worms coming out of their skulls as the stench of death overpowered him. The scene was hideous and reminiscent of a low budget black and white horror movie.

Jason wanted to fight them off, but couldn't. They had him surrounded and were now grabbing him. He could only cover his body with his arms and cry out in anguish as he collapsed to his knees into what he saw was a gravesite. He looked up and saw a tombstone with his name on it. Several bony hands came out of the ground and began to pull him into the gravesite and possibly into Hell itself.

"Jaaasssonnn...!" was the last thing he heard as the zombies dug into his skin and ripped his body apart.

"NOOO!" screamed Jason as he sat up in a cold sweat, suddenly awake. He stopped and looked around to see that he was now back in the wagon, realizing that he had been dreaming. He also found that he was buried under a pile of blankets and supplies, as if he were being hidden. He sat there, sweaty, catching his breath and his bearings, but this moment was suddenly shattered when the back door of the wagon was flung open quickly and there was a rifle pointed at him.

Before he had an opportunity to react, a couple of mean looking, bearded, Middle Eastern men jumped in and pulled Jason roughly out of the wagon, and threw him to the ground, where he knelt as the men screamed in loud, angry, excited voices at him.

Even though he had been in a semi-comatose state for a while, this sudden action woke him up enough to know that he had just been dragged into a bad situation. A rifle was pointed at his head, and Jason thought that they were going to shoot him at that moment, but nothing happened.

He looked up to see a family whom he assumed had been taking care of him and there were several bearded men dressed for harsh desert conditions, with turbans and weapons. A couple of them sat on their horses, and they all had their weapons drawn. They were glaring at him and if looks could kill, he would have been a dead man.

Jason determined that these men were probably bandits who freely roamed the countryside, raiding villages and travelers at their whim and fancy with no one ever stopping them. This thought left him with a bitter taste in his mouth, and only increased his apprehension that was quickly turning into fear.

One of the men that Jason decided was the leader of this pack by the way that he carried himself and how the others in his group obeyed him, walked over to Jason, roughly grabbed his hair and stared silently into his eyes for several moments, as if trying to decide what to make of this person. He screamed something at Jason, who didn't understand his words. Jason could only shake his head in silence, and the man slapped him hard across the face before letting it go. He turned back towards his group and then confronted the man of the family as he pointed at Jason, with what he could imagine was some sort of accusations about who he was.

The family man tried in vain to argue back, but the main bandit slapped him in the face as well, knocking the man back. The man began to speak quickly, with begging and pleading in his voice, which only seemed to infuriate the gang leader even more. They all exchanged heated voices, and even though he really couldn't understand what was being

said, Jason got the sense that the family man was trying to explain that he was only a humble traveler and had picked him up because he found him on the side of the road and was going to take him to a hospital for better care, and "Look at him. He is in no condition to hurt anyone. Please, let us be on our way. Take what you want and we'll leave in peace."

The men in the group started to speak out and argue amongst themselves with the gang leader in continually growing angry and accusatory voices, and the negative energy got worse with each passing moment. Jason tried to understand what they were arguing about, and picked up a few words here and there, but they were talking so fast it was hard to do so, but even in his mentally and physically weakened state, he instinctively knew that this wasn't going to end up well.

The bandits continued to argue back and forth amongst themselves and the family man and the tension began to get very heavy to the point where Jason knew that it wouldn't take much for someone to pull the trigger on their weapon and they would all be dead.

The main bandit lifted his hand and demanded silence, and the loud voices now echoed across the desert before the area grew into an uncomfortable, yet tension-filled silence, which only created more tension. The main guy walked over to the family women and children, who stood quietly by as a couple of bandits held the man. The guy stroked the woman's face and arms as he would examine a prized jewel, and the look in his eyes showed that he was having more than a passing interest in her.

The family man attempted to release himself from the grasp of the bandits holding him and one of them punched him hard in the stomach, making the man drop to his knees as he grunted in pain. He held his mid-section as he begged them not to hurt his family.

The main guy walked over to the fallen man and kicked him in the stomach while belittling him. The guy turned to his men and barked an order, which made them smile. A couple of the bandits grabbed the woman and children and began to roughly force themselves on them. The family man attempted to get up and rush towards the bandits, but was rifle-butted in the stomach and knocked down again, but the man persisted and tried to fight back.

The main bandit pointed to Jason and he could only imagine what he was ordering them to do to him. Words such as, "Infidel!" were tossed in, and Jason got the distinct impression that they were going to torture him in hopes to get him to talk. That, or just flat out kill him.

Jason glanced around at the horrific scene that had quickly turned into a nightmare and the fear that he was experiencing before was now evolving into a quick rage. The woman and children were screaming in terror as the men started ripping their clothes off and having their way with them sexually. The family man screamed out in anguish as he watched the bandits assaulting his wife and children.

It was too much for Jason to bear to just sit there and do nothing. He looked at the two bandits who were standing next to him and saw that they were watching with evil intention in their eyes at the woman's now naked body and the men who had dropped their pants.

In a blink of an eye, Jason suddenly grabbed the wrists of the bandits standing next to him with a death grip, and sent them a burst of energy that he didn't know that he possessed, and they screamed out in agony. The sound of bone crunching was heard as he broke the men's arms and they crumpled to the ground holding their arms in agony. In the next

moment, Jason grabbed the rifle that one of the bandits had been holding and shot the bandits that were assaulting the woman and children, killing them instantly.

Rolling from the spot he was in as one of the bandits fired at him, Jason killed two more before running out of bullets. He rolled back over to one of the downed bandits that he had injured, grabbed a knife from his belt and threw it with precision at the main bandit who was reaching for the pistol in his belt and hit him in the chest. The man went to the ground, screaming in pain as he grabbed the knife to pull it out, but was unsuccessful in doing so.

Before this man touched the ground, Jason grabbed a pistol that the main bandit had been reaching for and killed the remaining bandits who had hesitated too long to take action and were now dead before they hit the ground.

All of Jason's actions had transpired in less than a minute, but to him it was as if he had moved in slow motion with calculated actions, each one perfectly timed and executed. Jason now stood there, with the pistol pointed at the main bandit leader gazing up at him, trying not to look stunned by what he had just witnessed while he struggled with his own pain and injury, as if he wouldn't have believed the story of what just transpired unless he had seen it with his own eyes.

The main bandit relaxed his actions once he realized that it would be futile. He sat, kneeling down with open hands to show that he was at Jason's mercy. Jason glared at him, his finger tightly on the trigger, with only a decision on his mind whether to kill this man or not.

To prove the point that he was serious, Jason quickly shot and killed the two men who he had injured when the action first began, as they attempted to regain their composure, before turning the pistol back to the main bandit.

The main bandit's eyes never left Jason and the pistol. By this time, the family man had struggled to his feet and ran over to his family, who were recovering from their humiliation. The wife was screaming and kicking the bandits who had tried to molest and rape them, and the family man stopped them by hugging them together in a huddle to check to see if they were ok. They nodded and said that they were. He then looked over at Jason and the bandit and moved over to the bandit to grab the knife that was still imbedded in his chest and pulled it out before kicking the man in the face.

The family man grabbed the bandit, knocked his turban off his head, and roughly grabbed his hair, yanking his head back. He screamed obscenities at the bandit, who remained silent but glared at the man. The family man then slit the bandit's throat, deeply and slowly, so that the man would die a painful and slow death. The bandit gurgled while he held his throat and fought for his last breath. The family man let the bandit go and kicked him away so that he landed on his back, instead of face forward as the bandit withered in pain until he finally succumbed to his death.

Now that the excitement of the violence was over, the family man looked over to Jason, who was still holding the pistol as if he were waiting to see if anyone was going to attack him further, but he looked as though he was either in shock or could barely stand. The family man dropped the knife and turned to Jason with open hands while saying in English with as much empathy as he could muster, "It is ok. No one is going to harm you anymore."

The family man slowly moved towards Jason while continuing to talk him down. Jason looked at the man strangely, as if he weren't standing in front of him and then glanced at the main bandit in a way that appeared as if he seemed to recognize the man before gazing at the family man. The family man's wife and children watched this with concern in their eyes, knowing that their husband and father could be killed at any moment.

The family man finally stood right in front of Jason to smile at him and slowly put his hand over Jason's, who looked down at the pistol as if it weren't real or wondering where it had come from and didn't resist as the family man took the weapon from him. Jason smiled at him slightly before suddenly collapsing as he blacked out.

Several hours later and miles from where the attack had occurred, Jason woke up in the darkened wagon, wondering if he was perhaps dead or blind, but then heard voices outside and realized that it was nighttime as he could see a light coming through a crack in the door. He got up slowly, testing his stability as he made his way out of the door. He leaned against and held the doorframe to steady himself as he watched the family sitting around a campfire eating dinner. They turned to him when they saw that he was standing there, and the family man got up to help Jason find a seat in their small circle.

The wife and children gazed at him curiously in silence, but their eyes showed concern and worry. Jason looked at each of them in turn, smiling lightly to show them that he meant them no harm, which at the moment, he really didn't think he could do much, since he still felt weak.

"Ca-can I have some water?" asked Jason hoarsely. The family man smiled, nodded and handed Jason a wine flask, who began to drink heartily from it. The family man grabbed his arm.

"You may drink all that you want, but please drink it slowly." Jason stopped, gazed at the man, nodded his understanding and took a long, slow sip from it before pouring some of it over his head. He handed the flask back to the family man, who pushed it back towards Jason.

"At the moment, I think you need that more than we do. So, please drink up."

"Thank you." replied Jason as he took another long drink from it. When he was finished, the family man offered Jason a plate of food, who looked at it strangely.

"You must eat to get your strength up."

Jason sniffed at a pot of stew that was brewing over the fireplace. "That smells really good. I definitely think I could eat that."

The wife smiled and poured some of the soup into a bowl before handing it to Jason with a spoon and some bread, who accepted it with a nod and began to wolf it down. The family man spoke up, "Please slow down, my friend. There is plenty to eat, but you must eat slowly."

Jason stopped with a mouthful of food that he was gobbling and looked at the family, who were getting a kick out of his actions. He put the bowl down as he swallowed the food in his mouth. "This soup is really delicious."

"Then you may have all that you wish." said the man with a genuine smile as he held out his hand to Jason who looked at it before reaching over to shake it cautiously, but formally. "My name is Abdul Nassar. This is my wife, Halima, my son, Ansar, and my daughter, Rashida."

Jason held Abdul's hand for a few moments as he looked at his family and smiled at them. Abdul continued to hold Jason's hand as he asked with a scrutinizing eye, "And what is your name, my strange friend?"

Jason began to answer but then stopped and gave a look of total confusion before answering, "I wish I could tell you my name, but honestly, I don't know who I am."

The people sitting before him looked at each other strangely for a moment, wondering if perhaps this person was lying to him or was he serious. Abdul held Jason's hand firmly for a few more seconds before slowly releasing it, and nodded. "Well, that is understandable after what you've been through. Or, what we believe that you've been through."

Jason looked at him curiously for a moment, before looking around their dark surroundings. "Where am I?"

"You are in Afghanistan. About a couple of days away from Kabul, to be exact."

Jason's expression turned to disbelief, hanging his head down. "Afghanistan? What am I doing here? How did I get here?"

"We were hoping that you could tell us. We've been curious about you ever since we picked you up."

"How long ago was that?"

"Well, there was a freak lightning storm about four nights ago, and we were lucky enough to find an enclave of rocks to spend the night. In the morning, as we headed towards the road, we found you lying by some rocks. It looked like you had gotten caught in the open when the storm hit and were headed to the rocks as well, but...unfortunately, you didn't make it."

Jason sat quietly as he tried to remember this situation, but nothing came to his mind. He looked at Abdul and asked, "What was my condition when you found me?"

The other man hesitated for a moment before continuing. "We actually thought that you were dead. From what we can tell, you were hit by lightning."

"Lightning? What?"

"That would help explain why you may not be able to remember your name or other information about yourself. Have you not noticed the bandages on your head and hand?" asked Abdul, pointing to Jason's head and hands.

Jason felt the bandage on his face and looked at his hands as if seeing this for the first time. "To tell you the truth, I hadn't really noticed these before."

"That's understandable, considering what you've been through. Here let me take a look at the wound." said Abdul as he moved over to Jason and slowly removed the bandages. He examined the wounds for a moment, turning Jason's head towards the campfire's light. He sat back with a look of surprise.

"The Gods must be on your side, my friend. I don't know how it's possible, but your wounds are nearly healed."

Jason looked at him strangely. "What do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is that in just a few days, your wounds are almost gone. Although I've heard of such things, I've never seen it with my own eyes. Somehow, the Gods have decided to spare your life. Many people are killed or seriously injured by being struck by lightning. Especially if they can't get professional medical help quickly. You are very strong, my friend."

Jason smiled as he rubbed his face. "Well, I don't feel so strong at the moment. I still feel like I could sleep for a year. How is it you seem to know so much about medicine?"

Abdul smiled back at him, and Jason could see that it was one of self-pride. "I am a doctor. I was trained in the United States and actually had a practice there."

Jason gave a confused look and asked, "Your English is very good. What are you doing out here then?"

"I was born and raised in this country. With the two wars going on over here, I felt obligated to see what I could do to help my people. We go village-to-village treating the people, exchanging food and supplies, etc."

"And how is that working out for you?"

"Well, my wife was against it from the start, but our tradition demands that we do what we can to help out," explained Abdul.

Jason looked at his Abdul and his family and then the wagon and horse. "Why do you use such primitive transportation?"

"The horse is a very strong animal, especially for this harsh condition. Like most things, you take care of it properly and it will return the favor. A mechanical engine requires too much maintenance and if a part breaks down, it's very difficult to get help. Plus, traveling this way, it appears that we are just travelers that don't have much to offer."

"What about bandits? Don't you get confronted by those trying to take your stuff?"

"Usually we are approached by those wanting to barter, but sometimes there are those who want more. So far, we've been lucky." Abdul let the words float on the air, as if they were a test for Jason.

Jason suddenly remembered something. "What about the bandits today? It seems that they were going to take everything from you."

Abdul smiled lightly at Jason's quick response. "I was wondering if you had any recollection of that. Yes, you are right. Today was very bad. That is the first time that happened. And I'm afraid it won't be the last." Abdul looked at Jason seriously for a few moments before continuing.

"What do you remember about what happened earlier?"

Jason glanced at him, trying to understand his change of tone. "Remember?" He thought about it for a moment, then realized what the other man's meaning. "Oh, my God! I actually killed those men today, didn't I?" he responded with genuine concern in his voice.

Abdul nodded silently, and then glanced at his wife and children. "I need to know something, my friend. I hope that you will be honest when answering."

Halima touched his arm. "Abdul..."

He turned towards her. "No, it is ok. We must know the truth." He turned back to Jason, who returned the serious gaze. "What?"

"Are you an assassin?"

Jason gave a shocked reaction, but strained to understand why Abdul was asking him this question. Jason shook his head, "I don't believe I am. I really don't know."

"Well, you obviously have had some of that type of training, or you are a soldier, by the way that you took out those men today."

Jason glanced at him, not really believing that the man before him was accusing him of being a trained killer, but he understood the man's concern. "Abdul, I can understand your

concern. Again, I don't know how to answer your questions, as I'm not totally sure of who or what I am."

He looked at the woman and children. "I promise you, I mean you no harm. If you are really concerned by me, I will leave."

Abdul glanced at his family, and then back at Jason. He put his hand on Jason's arm. "No, it is ok. My friend, you are welcome here. We actually have you to thank for saving us today." The man got quiet for a moment before speaking. "My wife has been begging me to stop traveling around like we've been doing, and I have refused her, believing that God would protect us. I guess she is right. Today was a message that I can't ignore. It never used to be this bad...and I think it will only get worse from here on."

Abdul looked at his family before fixing his eyes back on Jason. "Perhaps there is a reason why our paths crossed after all, at this time in both our lives."

Jason nodded lightly. "That is an interesting thought, Abdul. I really couldn't tell you one way or the other. I guess I always believed that we make our own fate in life."

"That is also what I have believed for so long and been taught, but I think I have been fooling myself all these years." Abdul gazed up at the clear starry night. "I used to believe many things that I no longer do."

"Such as?"

"I have been taught that mankind is basically good, but the world seems to have not been taught this. Today confirmed that."

"You can't let what happened today determine the whole world. There have always been good and bad people. It is the way of the world."

"I think you are right, my friend. Perhaps I am just shaken up by what happened today. I almost lost the thing most precious to me today." Abdul said as he reached across and touched his family with tears in his eyes and they returned the gesture. "Without having loved ones by your side, one is truly poor. The richest person in the kingdom is the one who is loved and gives love." Abdul looked at Jason and asked, "Do you have anyone?"

Jason thought for a moment but couldn't find an answer. "I don't think I do. My mind is still blank."

The other man studied Jason for several moments. "I know that they would be worried about you. I think that your memory will improve as the days go by. You must work on remembering as much as you can. You will probably have images and visions come to you, and when they do, contemplate their meaning."

"I hope so. I really don't like this situation. It makes me feel helpless."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You are at least healthy, with no real serious physical or mental damage that I can tell other than your loss of memory. Give it time. There must be some reason for why all this has happened to you. Sometimes, things happen in our lives that don't make any sense that we can't see, but happens anyway."

Jason looked at the man for a moment before gazing into the fire as he contemplated the words. "I think time is all I have right now."

"We were headed in the direction of where the Americans are located. I should be able to get you near there tomorrow. There are better facilities there, and I'm sure they will be able to assist you in getting back to your family."

Jason nodded at him. "Thank you. You have been most helpful and kind."

Abdul smiled, lighting up his whole face. "We are glad to help you as well."

"I'm curious. What happened after the situation with the bandits today?"

"Well, you passed out, so we were able to get you back in the wagon. We left the bodies and horses where they were. The scavengers now have something to feast upon. We took what supplies they had that we can use. We took their weapons and buried them away from the bodies."

"Why?"

"It was tempting to take the weapons, but if we got caught with them, we could be accused of smuggling weapons, which goes against my values. We wanted to make it look like the bandits were attacked by other bandits or the military that are hunting terrorists in this part of the world."

Jason nodded his understanding. "Right. But don't you think you should at least have some kind of weapon on hand for protection?"

Abdul smiled and presented a pistol from under a pillow sitting next to him. "Well, I did keep one souvenir."

"That was smart. Sad to say, I think you might need to use it someday if today was any indication of what you'll be up against down the road."

"I hope not, but I think you are correct." Abdul glanced at his family and sighed. "I guess it is time to go back to safer grounds. I do wish I had a faster and more mobile means of transportation so that I could travel to these villages."

"Sorry, I can't help you there, Abdul."

Abdul gazed into the fire and then at the stars. "Sometimes, I think the world will never improve. I thought so at one point in my life. But, now...it seems at times if the world is falling into a chaos that it will never recover from."

Jason thought about this for a few moments. "I think the world has always been in a state of change. But, perhaps you are right though. We can only hope that something...or someone will come along to help change things for the better."

Abdul's serious expression changed. "I would love to see that happen, especially for my children and future generations. I think we are leaving them a world that is so messed up that they won't be able to fix it."

Now it was Jason's time to put his hand on the other man's arm. "You must have hope, my friend. You are a good man and are good example of how to live. That is all anyone can ask of themselves for their family."

Abdul touched Jason's hand as reassurance for the compliment. They sat quietly for several moments, enjoying the solitude of the moment and scenery.

Jason drank more water. "I'm curious about a couple of things. When the bandits showed up, it seems that I was buried under a lot of stuff."

"We had seen the bandits coming from the distance, so we hoped to keep you hidden from them. But it seems that you made yourself known to them, which had a different result than I think they expected. Us as well. I hope you weren't in too much discomfort."

"No, it is ok under the circumstances. It did seem strange that I woke up like that. The other thing I'm wondering about is the clothes that I'm wearing. These aren't my clothes, are they?"

"No. They are an extra pair of mine. It is ok if you take them with you."

Jason thought for a moment then asked, "Do you still have my clothes and any belongings that were found with my body when you picked me up?"

Abdul thought for a moment, then ordered his son to get Jason's things from the wagon. Halima tried to stop her husband, but he assured her that it was ok. The son went to the wagon, rummaged around for a few moments, brought back a neatly folded bundle, and handed it to his father. Abdul held it for a moment and then passed it to Jason. The wife relaxed.

Jason saw that the clothes were all black, with burn marks on most of the material. He unwrapped the clothes and found several items inside: a compass, map, canteen, a large knife, binoculars, a digital camera, a flashlight, survival blanket, and an object that looked like it was either a radio or a tracking device that didn't work, among a few others. He examined each one individually as if they were curiosity items in a convenience store.

Abdul and his family watched Jason curiously as he performed his actions until he held up one of the burnt pieces of clothing. "Wow, I guess I really did get hit by lightning."

The family smiled and the man said, "Yes, but it also looks like they might have protected you as well."

"I don't feel so protected at the moment. This combination of things seems a bit strange considering my situation." Jason paused for a few moments as he studied them harder. "If you're wondering, none of this is making me remember how or why I got here. I notice that there is no form of identification for me here."

"We didn't find any on your body as well. What you see before you is what you were carrying. We searched the area around you, in case you might have dropped a backpack, but there was nothing else around."

Jason thought about that for a moment before lying the clothes down and drank more water. He didn't seem to acknowledge any further significance with his stuff, or else was avoiding any further focus on it.

"So, where will you be taking me tomorrow?"

"There is a U.S. military base camp about half a day's ride from here. They should be able to help you out, although I think they might find it strange that you are out here like this."

"Perhaps you're right. But I don't have much choice right now, so I guess I'll have to take my chances with them."

Abdul's wife spoke up, saying that she was going to put the children to bed. Abdul hugged and kissed his family and they got ready to sleep for the night. As they made their preparations, Jason and Abdul continued talking long after the family was asleep. They discussed various aspects of each other's lives, as people do when they have first met and are trying to get to know more about the other person. Their conversation was a mixture of philosophical ideas, laughter and serious discussions.

Abdul was actually very open about his life and answered Jason's questions without hesitation. Abdul would ask Jason questions about his life, but he wasn't very good company because he still couldn't remember much about his history. Jason did get the impression that the other man was asking a lot of questions in hopes that this would jog his memory, and here and there, a vision or image would come to him but it didn't help him to remember.

Abdul did bring up the U.S.'s involvement with the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how he felt that they were useless and actually defeated much of what was supposed to be accomplished.

"Sending your troops to fight in Afghanistan is actually a futile venture. Numerous countries have attempted to conquer this country over the years and have always left with their tails between their legs, with their head down in defeat. The United States will not fare any better. Logistically, it is too big a country and the people are mostly nomadic. Why this country is over here doesn't make sense. There's nothing really to win, although I have heard that there are soldiers who are protecting the poppy fields for the heroin traders. Too bad the U.S. doesn't spend its time going after the bandits like we encountered today.

"The other thing that no one seems to bring up is the fact that this part of the world has always been unstable. The history of the Middle East is that whoever has the bigger army will control things. Whether it was a stick and a stone, a sword and a spear or a nuclear bomb. There's no real government, never has been. We are also too bogged down by filtering all our realities through some sort of religious ideology, which doesn't help anyone."

Jason calmly took all this in, not judging or criticizing, just accepting what he was being told. Whether the man was trying to rile him up or just trying to get his thoughts off of chest, Jason just let it flow and didn't say anything, which the other man was glad to see.

Jason sat there, unfazed by Abdul's comments and observations other than to acknowledge the fact that from what he was saying, that it was a very stupid way to fight a way. "Perhaps there is some other reason why those in the U.S. have decided to spend so much effort to send troops over here. I wouldn't know. This is something that I will definitely be glad to find out about...if and when my memory comes back to me," said Jason

"Well, I did think that it was strange that our paths crossed at this point in time, but the more I think about it, I believe there is a reason for it, as there is a reason for why so much happens in this world."

"I would love to know what that reason is for me. I don't really care for this loss of memory thing."

"The fact that you were struck by lightning and that you didn't die is a pretty strong symbolism. I guess the Universe felt that this was something that needed to happen to you. With the way I found you and with the items that you had on you does seem out of place in this country. I have traveled a lot over here and have never met anyone like you before.

"And your actions with the bandits did make me believe you are some sort of a killer or an assassin. But somehow I don't think so...it's not who you are...it's not your way. But, if you have been living that type of life, then perhaps being struck by lightning was the Universe's way of wanting you to stop. Maybe this is supposed to be a turning point in your life or somehow the Universe is wanting you to reconsider how your life has been," observed Abdul.

Jason studied the man for several moments before gazing into the flames of the campfire. "That's an interesting way to look at it. I guess I will have to wait and see."

Abdul smiled as he got up and went to the wagon, returning with a bottle. He opened it and took a sip of it. "Ahhh, I forgot I had this. Here, please have a drink." He handed the bottle to Jason, who grimaced when he sniffed it.

"What is this?"

"Just something that will help you to regain your strength."

Jason looked at the smiling man for a moment, shrugged and drank from the bottle, but gagged harshly. "Ugh, this is nasty."

Abdul said between his laughter at Jason's reaction, "The medicine that doesn't taste the best is usually the most effective."

Jason looked at him and wondered if the man was talking about the concoction he was drinking, or he was referring to his current predicament of his life. He accepted the man's philosophy before drinking more from the bottle. Between winches, he said, "This stuff tastes like it was strained through some old man's used diaper. I'll accept your words, because you're probably right. Hell, anything is a help for me right now."

After Abdul's laughter subsided, he spoke. "This drink is a mixture of herbs and liquor. It is a bit hard to swallow, but it has helped several people recover their health when nothing else was available or worked. One of the side effects is that it can make you urinate and with some people...a need to defecate. This is part of the cleansing process."

"Nice. Not something I would recommend out here in the desert though."

"Well, I usually don't administer it unless the person can stay inside their habitat. So, don't drink too much. But I did want you to have some to help you regain your strength. Continue drinking as much water as you can as well."

The other man studied him for a few moments then continued. "I know that there is probably part of you that would like to come with us on our travels, but this is not where your path leads. I think you need to go back home and try to retrace your steps to find out how and why you ended up out here like you did."

"Take your time when you get back. I think you will have some luck reclaiming your memory. Although sometimes people who have amnesia like yours have trouble getting their memories back fully. But in your case, I think this is more of a situation to get you to rethink and review your life to restructure it."

Jason grew quiet for several moments as he contemplated these words and for some reason he thought that the man was right. "I do hope you're wrong about my amnesia, but I'll take your advice to heart. I think for some reason this has happened to me that I don't know but I sure would like to find out." Jason suddenly felt tired. "Well, I guess we'll have to wait and see. I apologize, but I'm feeling really tired right now."

"That is ok. I have been enjoying your company. I sometimes rant needlessly, which my wife scolds me for being so negative."

"No, it is fine. You are trying to make sense of this crazy world like the rest of us."

Abdul smiled. "I guess that is one way to look at it. We will talk again tomorrow. We should get some rest because we have to travel again in the morning before it gets too hot."

Abdul got up and Jason asked him if it would be okay if he slept outside under the stars, and the other man nodded his agreement.

"Sounds good. Goodnight." said Abdul as he moved to be with his family. Jason got comfortable with the blankets that were on the ground and gazed into the campfire as he tried to make sense of the twists and turns that his life had taken him on. He then turned his body to look up at the clear, starry night sky. A shooting star streaked across the sky, causing Jason to wonder why he suddenly felt something was missing...or had changed in his life. At the moment, he couldn't acknowledge what the significance of the star was.

They were up early the next morning and on the road before the sun began its daily ritual of baking the desert and anyone who was unfortunate to be on it during its daily sojourn. Abdul asked Jason to sit up front with him, so that his family could stay in the

shady, but warm confines of the wagon. There was enough cover over the wagon seats where they were, but the desert heat couldn't be escaped.

As they traveled, Jason and Abdul made small talk, some of it a continuation of the discussion from the night before, other times it was just odd and end subjects. Abdul made sure that Jason continued to drink plenty of water as the day wore on. He also had him drink his special concoction as well and got a chuckle out of watching Jason grimace every time that he tasted his concoction.

"You know, as bad as this stuff tastes, I'm actually getting to like the effect." said Jason in a manner that made Abdul wonder if the man was actually telling the truth or was being sarcastic. Jason smiled brightly. "I don't think I could ever get used to this taste, though. I would highly recommend doing something about that. Then I think you could actually sell it on the free market."

Abdul nodded in silence as they continued on their way.

Over the course of the day, they did manage to stop at a couple of villages. But Abdul had Jason hide in the back of the wagon so that he wouldn't be seen. Jason still looked through the crack in the wagon's sheet cover and watched the other man and his family going about their business of trading and helping out the villagers.

By the middle of the afternoon, Abdul stopped the wagon and got off. He turned to Jason and said, "This is where we depart, my friend."

Jason looked around at the endless desert surrounding them as far as the eye could see, except for a mountain range. "But I thought you said that you were to get me to the Americans."

"No, I only mentioned that I point you in the right direction."

"But don't you want to come with me? I'm sure that they would be of assistance to you, in terms of helping you get your practice set up, or that you could help the Americans out somehow."

Abdul studied the other man for a few moments. "No, I guess that you don't understand. This is a war zone. If I show up at the American's military base, they would probably round me up or think that I was a terrorist."

"I could put a good word in for you."

"No, my friend. This way is better. Our paths weren't meant to cross for very long."

Jason pondered this thought for a moment, nodded and moved to the back of wagon where the man climbed in and returned with a backpack, along with another, larger bundle, and he handed them to Jason.

Jason looked at the new item curiously, and then at Abdul. "What is it?"

"It is part of the items I found with your body, but didn't show it to you before. You can examine it after we're gone."

Jason wanted to open it right then and there, but took Abdul's words to heart. "Ok."

Abdul also removed a final bundle from the back of the wagon and handed it to Jason. "This is some food and water that should last you until you get with the Americans."

Jason took stock of the items and then looked at Abdul. "This is very nice of you to do this. Are you sure that you don't require them?"

Abdul nodded and smiled. "No, we will be fine. There is a village up the road where we will be staying tonight and they will take care of our needs there."

“Ok. Abdul, thank you for your help. I hope I wasn’t too much of a burden for you and your family.”

The other man studied him for a moment, smiled and replied. “It was our pleasure, my friend. I think what happened yesterday was a good message for both of us to reevaluate our lives. My wife is most grateful, because we won’t be traveling like this too much anymore.”

Abdul looked at him seriously for a moment and then said solemnly. “I would like to recommend one word of advice. If you are actually an assassin, with the people who sent you out here to do whatever it was you were up too, it might be possible that they will want to make you disappear because I don’t think you finished your objective.”

“Interesting thought. I’ll heed your advice, my friend.”

Abdul pointed to the mountains in the near distance. “Like I said earlier, your destination lies on the other side of the mountains. The military base will probably be hidden, but you’ll be able to find them if you look hard enough. Just use your binoculars.

"You should be able to find some shelter in the rocks on the mountain for tonight. If you're lucky, you might even find a cave, but beware of any animal who sought shelter from the sun. As I said, this is a war zone, so there many dangers around. You saw that with the bandits. Just remember to keep your wits about you, and I think you will be fine."

Jason looked from the mountains to Abdul. "You wouldn't happen to have an extra weapon that you can spare?"

Abdul gave him a knowing smile. "There is actually one in the bundle I just gave you."
"Ok."

The man looked from Jason to the mountains and pointed. "If you keep going in that direction you will eventually find what you're looking for." Jason pondered the thought, wondering if he meant it as an indication of an actual destination or just as a metaphor.

Abdul extended his hand in friendship and Jason took it before suddenly hugging the other man. “Please thank your family for all your help.”

“I will. Take care, my friend.” said Abdul as he called for his family to get into the front of the wagon, and then turned to get into the wagon’s driver’s seat. He took the horse’s reins, signaled to it to start moving and the wagon was soon on its way again.

“Good luck, my friend! May your path bring you to an answer.” he called out as he waved goodbye. Jason waved back at the family as they slowly disappeared into the heat vapors of the desert’s horizon.

As Jason stood there in the middle of the vastness of the dessert, a great immense emptiness washed over him like the desert’s heat and for a moment, he wasn’t certain which way to go. It was as if he was standing at the crossroads of his life, and there were different directions that he could go towards. It wasn’t just about the immediate situation that he was in at that moment, but almost a metaphor about his life in general. He got the sense that it didn’t really matter which direction he would head down. But a nagging feeling came over him that he was supposed to head in the direction that Abdul had pointed out.

The man had told them that going over the mountains would get him to a U.S. military base, so he knew that was probably the right path to take, considering his current predicament. What would happen on the way or when he got there remained to be seen and he still wasn’t sure this was the best choice. Jason felt a real sense of apprehension come over him.

Jason still couldn't make sense of his identification or how he had gotten to where he was at that moment. Part of him sensed that something was wrong and that his being in this area of the world and to end up like he had was not something he was really supposed to be doing. However, another part of him said that he was actually where he was supposed to be at that point in his life. The two thoughts played tug-of-war with him, but brought no solace of satisfaction to help answer his dilemma.

He didn't know if he had been running away from someone or something, or if he had been headed to a specific destination, for a particular reason. Perhaps he would never know. And what if he really were a soldier or an assassin as the man had accused him of? How was this possible?

"And how was I able to do what I did to the bandits? And what if I get to the military base and they think I'm a spy? And what if it's like Abdul had said, that someone might be coming for me because I screwed up? They could easily bury me out here and nobody would ever know."

The squawk of a bird flying overhead, which sounded quite loud because of the quietness of the desert, startled Jason awake and he realized that if he stayed where he was he would probably going to collapse from the heat.

He repacked the items in his backpack so that they fit together more efficiently. He found a pistol inside and it had a silencer on the end of the barrel as well. He double checked the pistol to make certain it was loaded, tucked it back into his belt and continued packing.

Jason then opened up the larger bundle that Abdul had given him and saw that it contained a dismantled rifle complete with a scope and silencer. On closer examination, Jason could tell that it was a high-powered rifle of the type that would be used for long distance shooting, such as a sniper would use. This made Jason stop and take stock of the weapon.

"What the hell? Is it possible that I actually am a soldier, or even an assassin? What would I be doing with a weapon like this, or the silenced pistol? Is this what I was doing out here? But why?" Jason pondered these thoughts as he gazed up at the warm sun and the horizon that seemed to span endlessly before him, as if hoping for an answer, but none came.

Jason finished packing his belongings before putting the backpack on and adjusting it on his body. Taking a long drink of water, he then looked in the direction of the mountains and used its' peak as a point of reference before setting off on foot.

Luckily for Jason, Abdul had dropped him off in the later part of the afternoon so that the sun was already making its way closer to the horizon, which meant that it would be a bit cooler without the scorching heat of the midday sun. He walked at a gradual, but steady pace to conserve his energy and judged that if he didn't stop, he would be at the mountains before it got dark. Despite the heat of the day, the nights in the desert can turn to freezing, so Jason wanted to make certain that he could find some type of shelter. Perhaps he would be fortunate as the man had said and he would find a cave to spend the night in.

As he moved along, Jason continued to scan the horizon around him for any sign of danger, but saw or felt nothing to be concerned about. He did have his weapons, so he knew that he had a least some sort of protection, so he relaxed. For some reason, the heat didn't bother him as much as he thought it would. He thought for certain that he would be

sweating profusely and even feeling lightheaded, but instead, he was maintaining a state of physical coolness. How this was possible, he wasn't sure, but he relaxed into the sensation. He was concerned that the heat would overtake him before he got to the mountains, and focused his mind on saving his energy as much as possible.

As he walked along, Jason would see the remains of dead animals littered across the desert sands. He would gaze at some of them and be unnerved by the empty, dark holes where the eyes should have been in the skull, as if they were looking and accusing him directly for their demise. Jason would have to shake this sensation off or else he felt like he would remain in place, as he continued to stare at the bones.

At one point, he stopped to watch a swarm of bugs that had descended upon what was left of a carcass as they went about their natural urge of survival. The scene brought up weird emotions and images to Jason that he couldn't explain at the moment, and they left him feeling strongly uneasy.

"Keep moving!" he reminded himself and forced himself to keep walking.

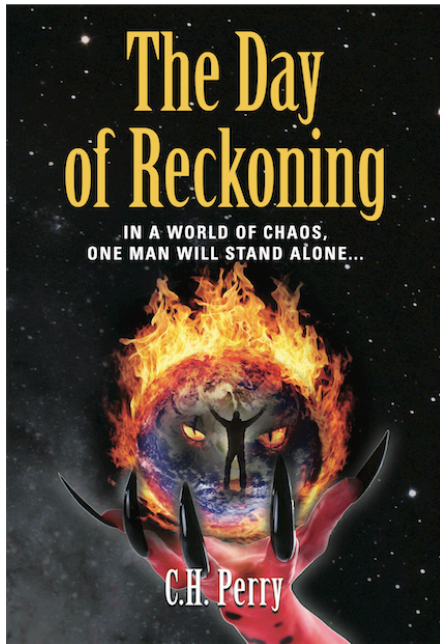
"Jaaasssonnn!" Jason stopped suddenly, gazing around frantically. He swore that he had heard a voice calling his name, but as he gazed around, there was no one there.

"Damn it, I must be getting delirious. I have to keep moving or I might end up like the animal back there." The stimulation for action made him feel better, but the effects of the dead animal still haunted him. He stopped to look and listen, but the voice didn't return.

Part of him did feel like Jesus wandering in the desert for all those years, and it wasn't difficult to imagine that he was going through the same sort of contemplation that the other man experienced, although he did remember that Jesus had done his journey as a means to purify himself. In some respects, Jason understood why people did such things, but he knew that he wouldn't be doing such a thing unless he had no choice.

"But, perhaps I am being purified for some reason. Why else would I have been struck by lightning and survived? And why have I been stricken with amnesia? Is this some sort of a new beginning for me? But, why? For what purpose?"

Jason let his endless thoughts wander as he attempted to remember who he was and what was waiting for him in the future. What he didn't know was that he was about to have another life changing experience that would set him on a new path for the rest of his life.



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