The Crusader Chronicles:
Redemption

By Patrick R. Aquilone

Chapter One:

The room was almost completely dark. Security lights barely illuminated the room. It was just the way Mark Robbetson liked it as he gazed into the room from a air vent in the wall. He worked well in the dark, behind the scenes and out of sight. In the center of the well decorated room behind countless number of infrared, laser, pressure, and motion alarms stood the Heart of God diamond. It was the largest and rarest diamond in the world, and soon would be Mark's or so he thought.

Carefully, he removed the cover to the vent making sure not to make even the slightest sound. He was a skilled master in this type of work and today was no different. He worked with the kind of precision that only comes from years of refining your trade. He twisted the cover around and placed in on top of a large burrough just to the left of the vent opening. He looked down and smile. He knew the floor was lined with pressure plates that would have sent off an alarm signal if he had been so clumpsy, but he was not. For a moment, he thought back to the first time he became aware of pressure plates. It was during his combat training in the Navy and he paid dearly for missing them, but that was another time, another place. Today. He would not make such a mistake.

Still smiling, he pulled up a small black duffle bag from somewhere further down the air shaft. Opening the bag, he removed a small light-weight crossbow, an arrow, some rope and an electronic suction plate. He placed the suction plate on the wall of the shaft next to him, and tied one end of the rope to it. Next, he took the arrow tying the other end of the rope to it and loaded it in the crossbow. He quickly took aim and pulled the trigger. There was no audible sound as the arrow was sent flying across the room. There was a small thud as the arrow hit the far wall. Wasting no time, he tightened the rope until there was no slack as all. He looked at his watch and then sat back. He looked up and let out a sigh. In fifteen seconds, the video cameras in the room would no longer be viewing what he was doing anymore. Prior to coming into the building, he had hacked into the security network and recorded about an hour of video that the security guards would be shortly seeing and presuming all is well. He looked back down at his watch and slowly counted off the last five seconds. That would give him about an hour of time to work. Of course, he knew he didn't really have an hour because the guards would be making their rounds long before that, but he only needed about ten minutes. He just always played it safe.

Grabbing his duffle bag, Mark moved out across the room on the rope with the agility of a cat. Almost as soon as he started he was in the center of the room and was ready to get to work. Below him was the diamond. He reached into his duffle bag and grabbed a fairly large round plate. Attached to the plate at several very precise points there were arms equipped with mirros that unfolded and extended to be about three feet in length. Leaning directly over the diamond, Mark fastened this plate to the ceiling and unfolded the arms. He played with the alignment and when satisfied pushed a small button. The arms dropped another two inches. Now in place, all the laser alarms that surround the diamond are being reflected back onto one another and seeming as if there is no break in the light.

Mark moved quickly knowing he did not have much time left. All that remained was the removal of the cover without tripping the alarm. He took a small electronic device out of his bag. He then let himself hang fully down inside the cage he had created with the plate and mirrors only leaving his knees bend over the wire to hold him up. Reaching down just below the cover, he placed the electronic device on the pedestal. The device went to work burning a small whole in the case. Lowing an eye piece over his left eye, he could now see inside the case. He touched a few buttons on the device until he could see a small metal arm coming out across the two of the three wires present. It was obvious that he was fully aware of the exact alarm system used. A final push of a button and the two wires were severed and became one maintaining the circuit connection. He smiled again, and removed the cover off of the pedestal. Quickly he grabbed the diamond, secured it in his bag and replaced the cover. Grabbing the device and removing the plate and mirrors, he began to make his way back to the vent.

Suddenly the lights went out.

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Theo Bracket was enjoying Monday night football when the power went out, and in typical dramatic fashion the power went out when his team was driving for a score in double overtime. He now had no idea whether or not his team scored the winning touchdown in the final seconds or if it ended in a tie. He hated it. He was hopping mad. He was still ranting and raving at the dead television when Thomas Harden his partner arrived at the main security station.

"Theo, get me a flashlight."

"Did you see that," Theo remarked pointing at the television. "The Panthers were driving for a score in the final seconds of double OT and the stupid power goes out." Theo violently waved his arms as he rants. "I can't believe it."

By this time, Thomas had reached the booth. "Theo, the flashlight?"

"Huh, oh yeah." Theo began rummaging through the toolbox. "I almost forgot that I had a job to do." Finding the flashlight, Theo handed it over to Thomas.

"Thanks, I'll let you know if I find something." Thomas remarked as he headed down the main hallway.

"Yeah, let me know." Replied Theo almost sarcastic. He had worked at this job for almost ten years, and never saw anything truly unusual happen. Sure there were the occasional things that didn't work right, but nothing had gone wrong, and as far as he was concerned nothing was going to go wrong.

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Mark looked around and then out the window. He could see that the power outage was not limited to the building, which was a good and bad thing. First, it meant that he was safe to travel across the room and get out without worrying about any alarms; however, it also meant that when the power came on and rebooted the security network his video loop would not be active and the room would be televised live. He knew had to move it out of the room. He dropped to the floor and began to run for the vent. Mark knew that standard procedure would have the security guards visible check all high security items. That meant he didn't have much time before a guard would discover his handy work and alert the police.

Arriving back at the vent, He pulled out a small pulley device. He placed it over the rope and with the touch of a button it clamped down. Suddenly, Mark had an overwhelming urge to write a letter of thanks to Energizer. He pressed another button. The rope was severed and recoiled at a high speed preventing the arrow from hitting the floor not that it was necessary with the power out. But it was efficient. As he placed the cover back on the vent the diamond somehow fell more like was pushed out of his bag by some force. It landed on the floor and rolled around under a large antique burrough with a small thud. This was the kind that had an opening in the back and a wooden skirt all around. The diamond had rolled underneath from back and all the way to the front judging by where the sound came from. Mark was just about to jump down and get it, when a security guard entered the room and flashed a light around. Mark held the cover up and waited.

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Theo pulled out an old radio he had found while he was rummaging and looked it over. It still had batteries and light up when he switched the power. That was a good sign. He tried to raise the volume, but the knob was broke. The radio was barely loud enough to hear. Theo tuned in the local sports radio station. They had been commenting on the game, but had not gotten to the end yet. There was still hope. As the announcer was near the ending of the game, his walkie-talkie squawked.

Thomas' voice came across the radio. "Theo…" He was obviously scared and shaken, but Theo was too wrapped up in the game to notice.

Theo broke him off. "Can't you wait one minute. I am about to get the score of the game." As Theo spoke the announcers continued, "And in a stunning effort by…"

The walkie-talkie broke in again. "Theo, it's missing."

“And that wraps up our coverage of the game.” The announcer finished as signed off. Theo was hopping mad again. Now he would have to wait until tomorrow to find the score. In anger he picked up his walkie-talkie. “That’s twice, Thomas. Twice that you interrupted the game before I could find out the score. What is the matter with you?” Theo’s question wasn’t the kind that needed an answer.

“Theo, it’s missing.”

“What’s missing?” Theo questioned and continued without waiting for an answer. “What could possibly be missing that is important enough to interrupt me. No, wait, I got it. The bathroom is missing toilet paper and you expect me to find you another roll again.” Theo was dancing around the booth in rage. “Well, I am not doing it this time, pal. You can crawl out and get your own toilet paper.”

There was a silence.

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Mark couldn’t help but snicker and what he heard coming over the radio. More importantly, he was not used to messing up and now he did it twice. He caught himself and stopped. Looking out in the room he could see that the guard heard him as well. This was going from bad to worse. Mark decided that it was in his best interest to make a quick escape. The diamond was in a good and safe place and if he was just a little lucky they would presume he made off with it and not find the diamond. Then he could return at his leisure and retrieve the diamond later. In either case, his best course of action was to become absent. Without even looking back or fastening the air vent, he grabbed his bag and made his way backwards down the air shaft and soon out of sight.

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Thomas moved his flashlight slowly over to where he heard the noise. He was literately shaking in his boots. He not only was on duty when the rarest diamond in the world was stolen, but he was still in the presence of the criminal. Somewhere in this room near the far corner something made a sound. The flashlight finally reached the area where the sound was. No one was there. Thomas let himself key the walkie-talkie. “Theo, call the police. The Heart of God is missing and I just heard someone make a sound.” There wasn’t a reply and Thomas presumed it was because Theo was calling the police. Actually, he would have hit the panic button and then called, Thomas remembered. But that wasn’t important. He needed to find out who made that sound.

Thomas began to make his way over to the far corner. He did not see anyone, but he did notice the air vent. Taking particular note of the size, Thomas determine that it was most likely where the criminal was. The question in this mind was is the criminal still there waiting for him. With everything that Thomas was, he was hoping that the criminal had left. After all of his two hours of training, he did not feel ready or adequate to handle and face to face confrontation. As a matter of fact, his body was telling him to get out, but his mind and his honor was telling him different.

Just as Thomas reached the vent his walkie-talkie squawked and Thomas just about meet the ceiling. Allowing himself a second to take a breath, he stood still and listened.

“Thomas, the police will be here within the moment.” Theo’s voice piped through was a much more serious tone. “They said to lock up the room and don’t touch anything.”

Thomas really wanted to do just as he was told, but he had to know if the criminal was still there. Slowly he grabbed the vent and gave it a tug. To his surprise, it came right off. There was no doubt now, this is where the criminal was. Thomas dropped the vent and gave a quick look down the shaft as he was readying himself to have to dodge. But there was nothing there. No one had been laying in wait for Thomas to remove the cover. Thomas brought the walkie-talkie up to his mouth. "Theo, someone was here and he used the air vent to get into the room, but he is gone now.”

“Thomas, don’t touch anything else and get out of the room.” Theo sounded concerned for the first time since Thomas started on the job. He was just about to leave the room when

something caught his eye in the vent. Shining his flashlight on it, Thomas could see the suction plate still attached to the wall. Thomas had not seen one of those before, and his fear got the better of him. He began to run out of the room yelling on the walkie-talkie. “Bomb! Theo, there is a bomb in the vent!” He was still screaming as he passed the security booth headed right out the front door and into the arriving police.

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Mark made his way down the endless shaft to the basement. From here he had to make his way down the sewer to a manhole in an ally nearby. Once on the street, he could jump in his car that is waiting for him and be long gone into the night. Presuming that all went well of course. Well, this was not to be Mark’s night.

Without trouble, he made his was down the sewer to the manhole. However, he could hear the police above the cover. He didn’t know how close they were or even if they were in a position to see the manhole, but he could hear them. He had no choice but to wait. He could hear them talking about the fact that one of them had just become a father and that the other was becoming a grandfather next month. It was all very touching, but Mark had to find another way out. The problem was that this was the only manhole within miles of building that didn’t open up in the middle of a busy street. One that he would be sure to be caught at. No his only chance was this manhole.

Mark decided he had to take a peek and see where the police were. It was risky, but he didn’t have a choice. Raising the cover slightly and looking he could see where the police were and of all places they were parked directly over the manhole. Mark fully removed the manhole and looked around. Just off to the side of the street was his car ready and waiting. Along the street there was another car and a little way down was several dumpsters. Taking another second to survey the area completely, Mark decided on his best course of action.

He reached into his bag and grabbed the crossbow and an arrow. He slowly and quietly loaded the crossbow and laid it under the car. He then lifted his bag out and placed it on the street. Finally, he lifted himself out. Now laying under the police car, he picked up the crossbow and took aim down the street at the dumpsters. A quick press of the trigger and the arrow was flying off to it’s destination. Mark didn’t miss. It hit the dumpster and made a loud clang. Loud enough to the police officers to take note of it and exit there car. They called down the street, but there was no response. After they called in the incident over the radio they headed down the ally.

Mark wasted no time. He quickly and quietly got out from under the car and into his car. All that remained was to turn on the car and get out of dodge, but it was not that simple. He looked in his rear-view mirror to watch the police. He had to be sure there was enough distance for him to have a chance at a get-away.

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Harry Benin and his partner John Girard made there way slowly down the ally. They knew they heard a noise, but what they didn’t know is why. Was the noise intentional to lure them in, or was it a mistake on the part of the criminal or maybe it was just a car. Harry knew better then to not think of all the possibilities. He had seen too many cops retired early due to lack of foresight. That was not to say that Harry was the best either, but he did try his best and the one thing he did not want to happen was to get caught with his pants down. He looked over at John and motioned for him to stop. It was best if one of them covered the others back.

John had become so accustom to Harry’s signals that he didn’t even question. Instead he stopped and looked around. He knew his job and it was his job to be sure that his partners back was covered. As John looked around he noticed someone sitting in a car near the patrol car. He took a second to be sure, and that was all he needed. As he watched the car started and peeled out of the ally. John began to run for the car. He was going to tell Harry, but Harry was already running the same direction.

As they both hopped into the car, John took the wheel and Harry rode shotgun. The car was still running and John dropped it into reverse and floored the gas. Rocketing out into the street, John pulled the emergency brake, turn the wheel, dropped the emergency brake and hit

the gas. The manuever spun the car part way around and had them moving in the forward direction. They were now in pursuit of the perps car which could be seen just up the road.

As John drove, Harry grabbed the radio microphone and called in the event. He was quick to call for road blocks and extra units to assist in the pursuit.

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Mark floored the gas. He was going just about as fast as he could. His car was not really made for high speed chases and he didn't expect to have to be in this perdicament. But things happened as they did, Mark was trying to make the best of it. He knew his best course of action was to head out of town for the mountians. Once successfully there, he could lose the police in an off-road area, and he knew a lot of off-road areas.

Mark dodged cars and quickly made his way out of town. The police were still behind him now three patrol cars were on the chase. The road they were on, he knew all too well. When he was young, he used to race cars on the road. Up about a mile ahead was a hairpin turn with at least a hundred foot straight drop. He had taken that turn a hundred times before and at great speeds. He knew if he could get there before they reached him, he was home free. After the mountain he would go off-road. All he had to do was make it there.

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Harry looked over at John. He was driving like a professional. He was precise and efficient and they were gaining on the criminal. Harry also knew that dead-mans curve was coming up and that there was a two car accident on the curve. Their job had become two-fold. First, catch the criminal and second prevent him from causing a worse accident on the curve. Harry watched carefully. "Will he beat us to Dead-Mans curve?"

"I'm not sure." John spoke truthfully. They were gaining, but it was a close call as to who would get there first. "He won't if I can help it."

Harry nodded. They had closed to about fifty feet from the criminal, but they were already passing signs for Dead-Mans curve. It was just ahead, and the criminal was not showing signs of slowing down. Harry knew very few people who could successfully navigate the curve at the current rate of speed and to the best of his knowledge the perp was not one of them. Harry watched carefully, as the curve approached.

John took his foot off the gas. He had to slow down. The perp had continued to maintain his speed. John knew that just around the bend out of sight was the accident and he shuttered to think what the perps car would do to the scene. John only hoped that somehow everyone involved with the accident had cleared away. Although that hope was not practical. The emergency vehicles had not yet arrived and most likely everyone is around the cars waiting.

The perps car took the curve and never decelerated. He went out of sight for a moment. As John and Harry rounded the curve, they could see the mangulled guard rail. The perp must have gone over the cliff. John was the first out of the car when it stopped, and ran over to the edge. Below him he could see the remains of a crashed car in flames. A second later there was an explosion and it was all over.

Harry walked slowly back to the patrol car and reported the incident.

Chapter Two:

Mark awoke to find himself in a large circular room. He was groggy and felt as if he had been hit by a truck. He shook his head, but it had no affect. Taking a look around, he could see that there was a ledge that went around the entire room to far above to reach. He also reasoned that it is probably a half wall to a second story, but a second story where? Something was strange about the room. There was no way to get where he was. There was no door, ladder, elevator, seems in the wall, or anything that he could distinguish as an exit or an entrance. He took another look around, but it turned up empty. They only way he could see in or out was the ledge above him that was obviously too far for him to get to.

Attempting to stand proved a bad idea. His body still ached. Now he really felt like a truck had hit him. But the pain didn't stop him, he stood up and wobbled. He almost went back to the floor, but he was determined not to let the pain keep him down. He knew he had to figure out where he was and how he could get out. He had already ruled out the police. They didn't operate this way, but who did. Maybe some kind of crime family or someone from one of the many government he ran missions against or who knew. Mark had made some pretty big enemies. Granted he was only doing his part of king and country, but that didn't mean some people didn't blame him. That was one of those things that they don't put on the recruitment posters.

Mark let a smile come across his face until he began thinking back. He remembered the Heart of God diamond and that he didn't make it out quite so easily. He remembered that the power had picked a really bad time to go out. He questioned why the museum didn't have a backup generator or something. He also remembered being chased by the police and that he went over a cliff. Wait a cliff. He remembered clearly driving off a cliff and about half way down blacking out. There was nothing until he awoke here.

"Am I dead?" Mark yelled out in vain. He knew that there was no one that he could see, but he did hope someone somewhere was listening and would answer him. No one came or acknowledged that they heard him. He looked around at the walls again hoping to see something he missed. They were a very plain light brown with light brown solid wood floor. Above him, he could see the ledge and the lights lining the edge, but he could see no way to get to the ledge. Looking up, he saw the ceiling and a few more lights. Although, there was plenty of fixtures, the light in the room was dull. He could see, but not extremely well.

"Hey?" Mark yelled out again, but there still was no answer. Mark decided to begin to feel his way around the wall. There had to be some way in and out and Mark was determined to find it. Besides the light was dull and maybe somehow that was why he couldn't see anything. He knew that to be false thinking because he has had to trust and rely on his senses before, but he didn't have anything else to do and anything was possible. So, Mark began looking.

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In another room several men have gathered in silence. They are all seated around a large round table. There were nine men in all and they were all dressed the same in white hooded robes with a white belt around the waist and a large black cross in a black circle on the left breast. The men had all retracted their hands within the robe and wore their hoods up. It would be hard looking at them to see any since of a person underneath, but they were there. The men were seated motionless waiting.

A bright light flashed as three men seem to appear from nowhere at one end of the room. These men wore similar robes with hood however, these men had red and gold trim around the hood, cuffs, belt and black cross. It was obvious from the increase in decorative trim that these men were leaders of some kind. The seated men all stood in respect and all faced the three leaders. One of the leaders reached up and threw his hood back displaying his face. He was an elderly man somewhere between sixty-five and the grace. His face shown of a lifetime of service and love. He was gentle and yet he stood over six feet and was in good shape. He appeared to be the leader of the men in the room.

"Brothers, it appears that we have had an unexpected delivery into our hands." The elderly man allowed a smile to cross his face. "I believe he is perfect for the crusader project."

Many in the room let out a sigh and small mumbling began to be heard. The elderly man raised his right hand and all sounds stopped. "I understand you concern and brother Theo and I discussed this at great length. However, Mr. Robbetson is almost everything we need in a brother for the crusader project."

One of the original nine men in the room spoke out. "Brother Addis, you say almost. What is he lacking?"

"Redemption." Brother Addis slowly looked over to Brother Theo who was to his left and then back towards the center of the room. "And that we are about to take care of."

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Mark had had no success in trying to find anything that could even be considered a seem in the wall let alone something that could be a door or window or something. He was beginning to realize that whoever had him here was serious about keeping him here. He didn't like that feeling. In the past he was always able to get out of anything anywhere. There wasn't a jail or cell or prision or anything that could hold him, but here there was simply no way to get to the upper level and no way he could find out from where he was. It had seemed hopeless.

Mark had begun to get tired of searching along with the fact that his stomach was telling him that he hadn't eaten in quite some time. He thought of yelling in the hope someone would bring him food, but he figured if they didn't respond yet they weren't going to respond to him yelling again. Besides his training in the military had taught him how to handle prolonged periods of starvation. This was always the just in case method, but you never know when you might need it and you wouldn't want to sell out your country. He sat down along one side of the wall.

Although his stomach continued to remind him, Mark was more concerned with who brought him here and why he was here. He ran down a list of possible assailants, but the list was quickly getting too long. He decided to narrow the list down to people who would have the kind of resources to build such a layout, but that left just about everyone of his targets when he was in the military. That left him at another dead end. A thought passed his mind that somehow it could be our own military bringing him back in for something, but he quickly passed on that due to the nature of his discharge. Finally, Mark settled on the fact that he was going to have to wait and see who exactly was holding him.

The lights momentarily got brighter and then returned to there previous state. Mark looked up and he could see that now there was twelve men standing equally spaced around the balcony. He quickly scanned them for anything that would help him or give him a clue as to who they were. He saw the white robes with the black crosses and quickly picked out the three leaders, but he could not make out any of there faces. Not to mention to the best of his knowledge, he never did anything against any kind of religious organizations. He was still no closer to the truth.

"Mark Robbetson?" Questioned one of the elders.

Mark thought about not answering it, but then decided that his name was not a piece of vital information. "Yeah, that's me." Mark replied. "Who are you?"

The elder who began the questioning removed his hood. Brother Addis continued his questioning. "Mark Robbetson, who we are right now is not important." Brother Addis waved his hand off as if that information was irrelevant. "What is important is the condition of your soul."

Mark interrupted before Brother Addis could continue. "My soul is just fine. So, if you don't mind I would like to leave now." Mark stood up.

"Don't you remember Mr. Robbetson," Brother Addis rebutted. "You went flying off a cliff in your car. You should be dead right now."

Mark looked Brother Addis directly in the eye. His stare softened as he tried desparately to remember the events that lead up to his arrival in this room. He could remember going after the Heart of God diamond and being unsuccessful. He could also remember a car chase down some road, but that was where everything got hazy. "Dead? I can't be dead."

"Allow me to refresh your memory." Brother Addis pointed to a small area to Mark's left. As he looked over at the wall, a large holographic viewscreen appeared. Mark began to wonder where that came from, but the imagery caught his attention. He could see himself racing down the road with the police behind him. The viewscreen showed the events almost as if a movie

crew had taped them. He saw his car race up the mountain, around the bend and over the cliff. Mark didn't really need to see it. He had already begun to remember it all, but somehow he didn't want to believe it. The viewscreen displayed the car crashing and the police men calling it in. After the car crashed, a spark ignited the fuel tank and the car was quickly nothing more then cinders.

Mark gasped at the last scene as the viewscreen vanished. He could remember everything up to driving off the cliff, but not a crash and certainly not going up in flames. He began to stagger a bit. After a moment of silence from the men above, Mark regained his composure. "If I died, where am I?"

"