

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

THE
JAG CHRONICLES
VOLUME I



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Midnight's Children: The Jag Chronicles - Volume 1
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Part I

Midnight's Children

The Devil is real.

I found that out the hard way, when that bus hit me and started all this. God is real too, but neither side wants us to know for sure. While most people believe in Heaven and Hell, I have seen Peter's Gates and screamed into the Devil's den. God and Satan play games, if you ask me. Games that ultimately end in a soul making difficult choices. I don't know why God allowed that angel to trick me, or what Hell wants me to do in this world, but I intend to find out. That's what I do best—I learn things others want to keep hidden.

My name is Curtis. Curtis Jag.

“You okay, mister?”

“What?”

“You okay?” the heavily bundled man asks, sipping at a cup of coffee. A round pink face presses up into the cold. “Looks like you've had a rough night. Anything I can do?”

My reflection casts from the car window, and it's all I remember before that bus hit me—if not completely different. Rage carries through the green in my eyes, and it scoffs at the stubble that once made me look hard and in my thirties. Pridefully forgetful, Hell called me—just like everyone else. Suppose that's why it's so damn busy down there. People have been forgetting lots of things these days. Their God included.

Fog horns rise above the sound of jiggling keys.

“Oh, sorry,” I say, pushing from the car door. The man in blue smiles.

“No problem, friend. We've all had nights like that.”

Not yet, you haven't. The wind picks up, and the man fumbles with his coffee. The scene draws laughter, but not my own.

No guts. I'd be bored. Let's move along.

It's all I can do to keep the Disease at bay as hands shake through morning's cold. I can feel Him in there still, hungry and wanting. Like He's waiting for me to fall so His demons can pick me up. Laugh in God's face.

“It's not mine,” I comment.

A fat head pokes up from a heavy woolen scarf. Beady eyes linger on my suit before the oddity of what I said sets in. “What?”

“I just found it on me.”

The man shakes his head. Though his eyes say he's frightened, his grin attempts the opposite, and nervousness forces him into an awkward dance. He looks like he has to pee or something. He must think I'm drunk.

“Forget it.”

I step aside and the man gets into his car, door locks clicking before the engine even turns over. I move off into the grass and watch him pull away. There's an odd sadness to his departure.

Way to go, Curtis. Scare off the first person you've seen in ages.

It's for the best, my tormentor whispers. There'll be others.

Leave me alone.

Certainly.

Beyond, morning casts light across the frigid bay. To a man delivered from Hell, it's the best sight ever. Still, I don't feel like rejoicing. Nobody would after what I went through. A few women pass by, pointing and chatting. Japanese girls, I suspect, by their pink hair and oversized sunglasses. School girl uniforms hide beneath thick winter jackets, all tightly cinched to expose their womanhood. They barely pay me any mind, but for a moment their conversation sparks memory. I recognize some words but don't care to translate them.

The penetrating breeze reminds me this is not Japan.

And I am no longer the man I knew before that bus hit me. His sword on Earth, the Devil called me. The idea sickens the heart, but I fear I'll prove it true. Somehow I'm going to end up helping that bastard destroy God's kingdom.

And San Francisco is just the place to do it.

Fifty-seven days I spent in Hell's caverns—if the newspaper curled at my feet reads right. Fifty-seven days since Fate sent me spiraling into darkness. And here I am again, a man reborn from Hell's abuses, barely a mark or scratch to the body (beyond the turmoil that brews inside). Fifty-seven days in the ministry of whips and forked-tongued sermons. Bathed in the blood of serpents.

Fifty-seven days.

An eternity, by my count. And fifty-six more days than the demons needed.

Obedience. Blasphemy. Allegiance. These are merely at the surface of what the soul wills over to Satan when put to the test. Mere trivialities. I gave everything I could think, and more, just to make the laughter stop.

And did it do me any good? Just ask those still within. Those laughing as we speak. God might have saved me, pulled me from the ice, but I sense the bonds still hold, those I swore to Hell. Nothing will change that. Not God. Not the Bargain. Nothing. A man swears many things when pressed beyond mortal bounds.

Now I have to find a way to rescind those promises. Earn Heaven's reprieve. The Devil might own me, but I'm in the world again, and free to walk as I might. I have no intention of going back. Or helping Hell's minions complete the Reckoning, as the world beneath us calls it. Maybe if I can stop this war then God will see the good in me, and forget the sins I've committed in another's name.

Maybe.

Bazarut laughs. *Good luck, Curtis.*

Go to Hell.

Where do you think I am?

Laughter echoes as I push the demon from my thoughts. Block his taunts. The world is full of people with prejudice. And Hate. Frustration. Hopefully, I can find a few with the same beneficiary as mine. And we'll give it all back to Him. Interest accrued.

I take my place beside the homeless and wasted, pretending to suffer from the cold like they. Huddled along Forte Point's lonely arches, the vaulted brick framework provides good shielding as I search through pockets. Not much remains from my former life. My wallet, keys, phone... they are all gone. Whoever dressed me in this curious nightclub getup left an ID and ATM card, but they're obviously not mine. Bank of Manhattan. The name Joseph Cain stamped across the bottom. Same name on the New York Driver's License. A blood-stained note wraps the two plastic cards:

"Use them when you're ready," it says.

I shrug off the implication, and stuff the paper back into my coat pocket. It's strange to be in the city again.

Time to get to work, Curtis. Let's figure this thing out.

Careful not to wander too far from the beach, I traverse Crissy Field, the wide open park rippling my less-than-protective overcoat. The walk allows me to collect my thoughts. I have a feeling all that time in Heaven and Hell caused me to miss a few things down here. Wonder what's changed? Who I can still trust?

Eventually, I find a bus stop, not the Muni, but it gets me where I am going, a quick transfer to the 10 seeing me all the way to the BART station. ATMs beckon, but I'm not ready to start this Joseph Cain's life yet, so I swipe a ticket from an old man not paying his surroundings any attention, hop on the train, and head south.

In my old life petty thievery would have bothered me, but in retrospect I've already paid this toll. The train rumbles quietly down its track, the repetitive click-and-clack of rails a soothing distraction. It keeps my mind from thinking. Remembering. And more than anything, it reminds me that to move forward I'm going to have to bend the rules. Just a little.

Okay, a lot.

One stop short of the final BART station, San Francisco International bustles, and I blend with barely any effort, deciding the best place to gather myself is an environment where everybody is a stranger. With no boarding pass, and no way to explain the death certificate I just found in my coat's inner pocket, I wander over to the airport's T.G.I. Friday's, watch a few minutes of the Niners game, and figure out what to do next. Curtis Jag officially died in a Japanese hospital on July 27th. Complications from internal bleeding.

Complications is right.

A business woman passes—attractive if not a little bit on the young

side, black travel luggage chugging behind her. She glances my way and smiles, but I decide not to pursue. Women tend to do that a lot, and these designer threads don't make it any easier on a man of unraveling morals, but I see no point in engagement. Truth is, I don't really feel like talking to anyone today.

Imagine that, a man from my profession, and I don't feel like asking a beautiful woman for a ride home. Satan really did a number on me.

And he'll do much more before it's over. Bazarut promises.

I take off my coat to watch the rest of the football game. The nice hostess doesn't bother me. She thinks I am waiting for someone. In many ways I am. Have been for quite some time.

Who? Bazarut taunts. *Who will come for you now? You are broken.*

That's irrelevant. I reply.

Then why hope?

That's easy. I push the demon from my thoughts. His laughter echoes. Life had other plans for me once. Long before that bus. And I abandoned them. Made poor decisions. I realize that now. But things can still change. Evolve. Hell taught me that lesson, if nothing else. Whip by stinging whip.

"We are the victims of our choices," Bazarut once told me, "and the pawns of opportunity. Ask for turmoil, and Satan will gladly deliver. Life is never stagnant. What fun would that be? Man chooses this fate because he has not the patience for Faith. We love you for that, mankind."

It wasn't always this way you know. Once things were different. Faith had its place in my heart. Until death and temptation ripped it away. I once loved what I did. Who I had married. The life I had fostered. The world threw its challenges, and I gladly accepted. In a previous life, I thrived on adversity. Denying temptation. It shaped my world.

And my passions. It made me successful.

And vulnerable.

The game drones on in the background. I sip at my beer, allowing the mind to drift. The past invades my thoughts. It haunts with the promises of a life once on the right path. Free of guilt.

And then *she* found me.

The rain was the first sign. And it should have warned of the storm to follow, but I was young, and cocky, and too proud to accept defeat. The woman had been chasing me for miles, three-hundred to be exact, and her moped whined alongside the bus, a beast whose war cry pierced the conversations near my window.

“Flores, twenty minutes,” the speaker crackled. Tourists bristled at the announcement. Cameras clicked, and those once sleeping stirred awake.

Our imminent arrival in Flores, a small island town near Guatemala’s famed Mayan ruins, on a crowded caravan eight hours in its exodus from Guatemala City, signaled the end of our chase. Soon, I’d have to return the papers in my possession. Hand over the film. And submit to interrogation. Though I’d memorized what I could (my Japanese was still incredibly shaky), it didn’t really matter. Without proof, nobody would believe me. And without proof, I wouldn’t get my bonus. Not that it mattered. Proof or not, I had succeeded in my mission (despite every attempt to sabotage my infiltration), and inevitably I’d forced the Sato Corporation’s hand. My employer wasn’t about to let me board a plane and just return home.

Not after the secrets I’d uncovered.

“Be careful,” my boss had told me. “Trust only your instincts. If you find what you came for, get out quick. Before news travels back to Japan.”

Apparently, I wasn’t fast enough. The informants Sato Corporation put in my path were obvious decoys. The information they planted meaningless. But there were others in wait, others I did not count on. After I planted the virus, the Central American offices went offline. By

all accounts, I'd shutdown operations for at least a week. That's when the agents, mostly Guatemalan police, knocked down my hotel door. I'd barely escaped with my shoes and briefcase.

For two full days, I'd been on the run. And for days, I'd dodged bullets and bruisers looking for a payday. I guess my success wasn't part of the Sato Corporation's plan. The sheer effort behind my capture boggled the mind. It seemed asinine to blame me for the virus' effectiveness. After all, the Sato Corporation paid handsomely for the attempt. I was only doing what they'd hired me for. I'd heard the Corporation even planned a press conference to announce the results.

Results assured favor by those high in the Corporation's ranks.

Now management was scrambling to contain the damage. It was an important lesson to learn: keep accountability to the V.P.s and senior executives. Avoid the chiefs at all costs. People like Kenta Sato hated looking foolish. And even worse, guilty. The virus was only the beginning. After the firewalls and safeguards went offline, I gained access to the internal data centers. And the documents I'd recovered exposed a much deeper threat than anything I'd found to that point. Corruption at the highest levels. Documents best left alone. And buried.

But like I said, I was cocky. Ambitious. My first foreign infiltration was meant to prove my worth to bigger more renowned Corporate Security firms. Failure and mediocrity were not options. The 'Wake up', as those in the business called it, promised future promotions. It's what people like me dreamt about. If the Sato Corporation wanted to find the flaws in its security, I was the best to discover them. And there was no rule book on how I accomplished such a feat. But I'd gone too far. Dug too deep.

Kenta Sato's name was on every document I recovered, including a contract to hire local mercenaries for a "voluntary relocation" of several villages near Sato's newest silver mine. His accountability was undeni-

able. Professional ethics prevented me from revealing this information to anyone but the Corporation, but that didn't dissuade a man in Kenta's position. He couldn't risk an outsider knowing what he was up to. And taking that information to the competition.

Or worse, the governments in control of his contracts.

At least I understood why I was being followed. Why this information could never reach the outside world. Too bad fax machines in Central America ran on such old modems. In more modern cities, I might still have time to send a victory flare. And divert attention. It seemed the only way to avoid my demise. But regardless who reached the hotel first, Kenta Sato's agent would put a stop to the transmission. My pursuer made no effort to slow the bus. Showed no hurry to race ahead. Instead, the moped simply followed behind, content to blend in with the traffic. Fewer witnesses meant more options. When I had nowhere left to run, the Corporation would make its move. And I would be dealt with, as quietly, and efficiently, as possible.

Like the suitcases wedged in the bus' upper holds, I felt my career suddenly shrink into the dark stank confines of anonymity. I doubted Kenta would kill me—my firm knew exactly where I was—but for a family man, one with a newborn son and debt to his eyeballs, far more discouraging options remained. I didn't mind ending up in the hospital—that part was a given, a consequence of my expertise, I suppose—and I really didn't care that much about the money (Linda could wait to buy her purses and fancy scarfs), but I wasn't about to let the Sato Corporation threaten my son. If I didn't send that fax they would hold leverage over the one thing in my life I loved more than my job. And he would never be free from their vigilance. Linda would be next on the list. And then my mother. And so on, until the Corporation could assure my silence. If I didn't send that fax, get these documents out of my hands and into my

management's (whose lawyers and legal expertise could deflect the heat) then the Corporation could demand anything it wanted.

Disappointed, I sank back into the bus' weathered cushions. Springs impinged against the small of my back. "Ambition blinds you to the obvious," my mentor once proclaimed. "Don't walk out a door if the enemy is holding it open for you. Hold it open for them instead, and wait to receive your thanks." I should have been more careful in my relationships. More thorough with my research.

I'd let the wrong people hold that door open. And now they came for their reward.

Dressed all in black, with only a pony-tail to betray her origins, the woman revved her single-cylinder conveyance and passed us. She shot off down the road, cutting through the muddy ruts carved by carts and villagers on their bicycles. Auto-rickshaws darted for the shoulder. Few, save those around me, even noticed the woman pass. She'd kept her distance most the ride, but I'd been on to her since that proverbial door clicked shut. I glanced often out the window, my trepidation evident. There could be no doubt who followed, not after I caught wind of the rumors. Even in American circles, the "Asian Shadow" had few equals. The stories were many. The variations innumerable. Some said the Shadow could suck the soul from a man. Others claimed her responsible for a hundred assassinations.

Whatever the truth, Asa Sato—daughter and heiress to the Sato family fortunes—pursued with a vigilance only a child protecting her father could embrace. What the hell was she doing here, in Guatemala, of all places? Why would Kenta put his best hound on my trail? It hardly seemed fair to the mission. But then again, my failure was scripted from the beginning.

The bus arrived at the Fuente del Norte bus station in Santa Elena,

and passengers scrambled for the exit, each more anxious than the next to retrieve their luggage. Auto-rickshaws lined the avenues, ready to ferry tourists into Flores proper, the island town a short distance across the causeway. Naturally, I joined the crowds, careful to remain in the public eye. Many of us, especially those with little to no luggage, walked the causeway. I had no idea where Asa waited, or when she would strike, but I knew I couldn't wait around to find out. The island seemed a fool's choice long term, but foolish or not, it would buy me time.

Time to think. To assess my options.

Unfortunately, once rooted on the small island, the mass of tightly-packed colonial red-roofed buildings and narrow cobblestone streets forced the tourists to separate. Restaurants promptly swallowed my cover, the herds thinning as stomachs growled and throats looked for refreshment. Charming in its simplicity, Flores quickly became my tomb, a burial ground better suited for burying a body than hiding it. There simply was nowhere to run. With documents and film tucked safely in my briefcase, I headed for the harbor, where conversation held that several boats were available to cross the lake into San José or San Andrés.

But again, I only sought to buy time. For what, I didn't know yet. I couldn't risk random searches for fax machines. And while a post office might do, I'd have to buy stamps, envelopes, talk to customs. Surely, the Asian Shadow would watch those routes. And even if she didn't, I pitied the postal man who tried to make it off the island. She could dispose of me, get a good night sleep, and then take her time hunting down the package. There just wasn't time to...

"Going somewhere?" a Japanese accent queried as the glove on my shoulder turned me into the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. My breath caught as long flowing black hair spit in the breeze. The woman glanced down at my briefcase. Wide oval eyes glistened green in the late

afternoon sun.

“I was wondering when you’d find me,” I replied. Despite my attempt at cool, sweat dripped from my nose, and it splattered on my loafers, the echo almost loud enough to match my heartbeat. Arms trembled in the woman’s grasp. She worked her hand down my shoulder to the wrist. Fingers played across the briefcase’s leather handle.

“I’ll take that,” she said.

“You know your father paid me to do this.”

The woman frowned. “No, he paid men to make sure you failed.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

Asa Sato set the briefcase on the ground and kicked it away. Gravel skidded across the cobblestone. With her eyes fastened on my throat, she stroked my wrist. Shortly, she stepped back under the awning of the small cafe. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Maybe we can work something out.”

“You have nothing I want.”

“I have a family.” It was the first thing that came to my mind. By the woman’s reaction, I knew it wrong choice of words. I could see her chewing on the statement. Working the threat.

“Yes, I know.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“We all have families, Mr. Jag. You should have thought about yours before stealing those papers.”

In an all black jumper, with red stripes down the arms, the woman flexed against her tight leather riding suit, her small frame more bone than muscle behind the curtain. A frail woman, hardly a physical threat, I wondered on the rumors. Could she really be capable of killing a man? She looked more a model than a murderer. A true contradiction of profession and reality.

“Might I make a suggestion?”

The woman’s brows pinched. “If you wish.”

Oddly, it was the woman’s beauty that showed me the way out—a solution to both our problems, though at the time I wasn’t aware of what her’s might be.

“Let’s sleep on it for a night. And then you can make your mind.” I ran a hand through my hair, smoothing the curls from a full day’s travel. Black waves bristled in the breeze.

The woman studied my smile, like she found it humorous. Obvious. “You presume too much, Mr. Jag.”

“Do I?”

Truly an image of her father’s wealth and power, Asa Sato made it hard to focus, but I knew the effect I had on women like her, and I trusted those powers, even in this most desperate of situations.

Besides, what other option did I have?

The tall Asian heiress approached, eyes heavy with suggestion, but her gait suggested a cat on the prowl, and her hands remained hidden, tucked behind her back. A gun maybe? A knife? I worked quickly to reassess my tactics. Women like Asa Sato had plenty of men like me in her harem. And western charms would only motivate her so far. What could I offer that they didn’t? I could see her assessing. Calculating. Like the suggestion still lingered.

She walked almost like she wanted me to recognize what was coming. To suffer in its inevitability. Slow and agonizing, her footsteps echoed across the stone.

Finally, I understood. And it was in that instant that my world changed. Our eyes met, and had I not acted it would have been the end of me. Under her gaze’s allure, courage leaked from the veins and pores, a pheromone to my desires. Before she could object, I reached out and

pulled the woman into my body. Leather pressed against my sweat-soaked linen shirt. Our breathing quickened. Asa made an attempt to push away, but it was weak and ineffective. I unzipped her top. Wickedness lurched into my fingertips, and I found hands creeping up her shirt, towards her breasts.

Asa gasped. “No....”

“It’s what you came for, yes?”

This was not a tactic women of beauty, and power, were accustomed to. Yet, it was the very tactic she desired. We kissed long and hard. Our bodies melted against each other.

In that moment, the woman who had pursued me across a country, sought my head and the restoration of her family name, released to carnal hunger, helpless to resist. It was one thing men never gave her—not the Asian Shadow—and I knew I had to be complete in my domination. She wanted to give over. Desired it more than anything. Blood seized my groin, stretching pants tight. In that embrace I gave over too, forsaking all I had sworn under the eye of the church. Linda faded. My son forgotten. It was just the woman before me. Beautiful. Dangerous.

Wanting.

The next morning, Asa had her documents, and I was on a bus, on my way back to Guatemala City. Our encounter lingered like a fine cigar, filling the senses, so fragrant in my mind I could think of nothing else that day. I barely remember arriving in the states. How I got home. What I did thereafter.

The woman’s body had become my temple. Her laughter a secret treasure I alone possessed. Our night in Flores would be the first of many such encounters over the years. Asa Sato was a deep and mysterious woman. Her darkness drew me in, like the moon and the tides. Kenta would have been better suited sending a man that mission, or at least an

ugly woman, to do his dirty work. In the end, I survived because I did what I must. And it felt good. And inspiring. Cosmic.

I think often on those days, even now, like this, in this body. I see Asa for the purpose she served: not as a gift of God, but a temptation from Hell. Perhaps that's why I'm here. Why I've been punished. In Asa Sato, I turned my back on all that was once decent and pure. I became that man so many hate. And it didn't matter. We were in love. And Love makes a man blind to many things.

Like buses? Bazarut says.

Shut up.

Cheers wake me from my daydream.

Unceremoniously, the past fades, almost like it never existed. Reality crashes down, reminding me where I am. I wake to a bar full of business men, San Francisco International a buzz. TV monitors indicate Overtime. Niners on the drive. The wall clock reads 4:30, but I'm not sure why that matters. I've got nowhere to go. Nobody waiting for me.

The world thinks I'm dead. In many ways I am. That part of me that mattered, at least. With the Curtis Jag of old behind, and my world travels an expired memory, I breathe deep, and try to focus on my next steps.

Again, I look at the paper in my pocket. Laughter rings in my head, slow to depart. The blood-stained note bears the numbers 666444 along the outer edges. Even before my groan draws strange looks from the next table the irony makes my stomach churn.

Cute.

Okay, let's play the game. See where this is leading. Hell might own the body, but Curtis Jag still has a say in which way it's pointed. There's got to be a way out of this. Somebody with answers.

I walk over to an ATM. The Bank of Manhattan card slides into the

machine. It feels like my soul does too, my destiny attached to whatever happens in the next few seconds. I punch in the numbers—666...444. Admittedly, a dozen emotions swirl. Emotions long dead within. Funny, you'd think it would be nice to feel something different than pain for once. But I've grown weary of anything else. I'm suspicious of these emotions. My new feelings. Hope — it's not an emotion easily fostered after an eternity down below.

As the menu appears, I crumple up the note and throw it aside. Somehow I doubt I'll forget *this* PIN. The Withdraw button pulses invitingly, its promise a heated ride home, but I pause mid-selection, curious now about this Joseph Cain. Whoever went through the trouble to put this card in my hand probably went through as much trouble to see I could take advantage of it. I select the Balance menu. The ATM lights up, white numbers filling the screen.

My breath catches.

All right then. This changes things. Maybe Luck is on my side after all. Or if nothing else, somebody's twisted sense of humor. I'll take either. Could be fun to live in the moment for once.

I take out some money (a small fortune by my old standards, and way more than an ATM should allow), buy a paper, and check the classifieds. No reason to take a cab when a motorcycle will do.

How about a Ducati?
