

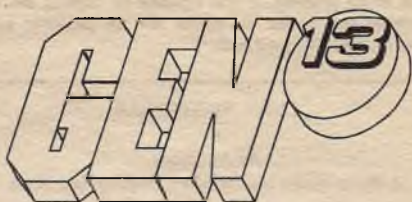
AMERICA'S HOTTEST SUPERGROUP IN THEIR FIRST NOVEL!

GEN¹³



NETHERWAR

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN and JEFF MARIOTTE



NETHERWAR

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN

and

JEFF MARIOTTE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN CASSADAY



WILDSTORM PRODUCTIONS



BYRON PREISS MULTIMEDIA COMPANY, INC.
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PROLOGUE



The world itself had a premonition—it shivered with a pre-scient foreboding of impending evil. Only one man shared the world's terrible, despairing foreknowledge, and that man was Cardinal Francesco DeMedici. He had felt it before, so long ago that none of the children of the children of the people who wrote the history of that age still lived. But DeMedici lived on. Lived on for one purpose only.

To feel the evil approaching, and to combat it by whatever means necessary.

The Pope who had entrusted him with that sacred obligation was dust now. But DeMedici kept his sacred trust. No matter that the years and the solitary nature of that trust had turned him hard and bitter, that he might have done things in the pursuit of his obligation that the Pope had never intended. If he was never going to die, he would not have to concern himself with the righteous judgment of the Lord.

It would not be accurate to say that Cardinal DeMedici had grown lax in the pursuit of his sacred trust. Rather, it had made him arrogant. He had seen and done things that would have driven others mad—had, in fact, saved the entire human race from eternal damnation, and an agony unimagined.

But that had been a long time ago, and waiting to do it again had become a bit . . . well, boring.

So it was with a mixture of dread and delicious anticipation that Francesco first sensed the approach of evil, sizzling electrically in the air like the crackle of an oncoming storm.

He had known it even before the current Pope had called

for him. He had left his villa with the soft, brown leather case within an hour, and had whistled jauntily as he strolled down to his limousine. The trip to Rome had been uneventful, but that would change. His reemergence, particularly with the artifact in his care, would eventually draw the interest of all manner of human agencies.

But it was the inhuman that was his concern. His revulsion toward the darkness was matched only by his determination to keep it from encroaching upon the world. The time was approaching when Francesco DeMedici would be called upon to save humanity once more. And he would do it, or die trying.

That was his sacred trust. It was also the only thing that defined him. It was who he was.

Il Mediatore. The human being who was whispered about among the tribes of the night.

As the Cardinal's aide, Lorenzo, steered the sedan along the winding back roads that separated Rome from Florence, an odd expression bloomed on DeMedici's face. Somewhere between a snarl and a smile, it was the face of the warrior within him.

After a time, the streetlights flashing by in the dark above and the gentle rocking of the road below took its toll. He was, after all, the oldest human being on Earth. Francesco began to drift off to sleep with evil hanging heavily in the air like the moisture of thunderclouds.

He could practically smell it.

DeMedici was jostled awake when the sedan bounced in several ruts on the soft shoulder of the road. When his eyes flickered open, he glanced over at the driver's side to see that Lorenzo was already getting out of the car.

"What is it?" DeMedici asked in Italian, a small spark of fear in his heart despite his arrogance. "What's wrong, Lorenzo?"

"Nothing, Your Eminence," Lorenzo replied in that same language. "The car is making strange noises."

Another night, this might have eased DeMedici's mind. But not with the malevolence which seemed to flit ghostlike through his consciousness in every waking moment.

"Be careful," the Cardinal said.

Something slammed against the passenger's side window,

and DeMedici leapt in his seat, sliding away from the glass as he turned to stare at the madness in the face that leered in at him.

Lorenzo's face.

"You might have thought to mention that to him before," were the words that came out of that face.

But they were not said in Lorenzo's voice. Nor did the burning red eyes that glowed in the darkness beyond the car window belong to the Cardinal's chauffeur.

"Back, demon!" DeMedici shouted.

His warning didn't stop Lorenzo from tearing the passenger door from its moorings with a deafening screech of metal.

The Cardinal scrambled back in the seat, but he could not escape the inhumanly powerful hands that reached in to grasp at his clothing and haul him out into the night.

A little piece of Hell had escaped into the world.

And that was only the beginning.

CHAPTER 1



Bobby Lane looked down on his friends.

Not from very high up—they'd been warned to keep a low profile, and a goateed blond guy dressed in red and gold spandex hovering just above the tree line would be sure to attract some attention, even if he weren't seemingly enveloped in flames. Which Bobby was.

But it wasn't easy to stay inconspicuous while trying desperately to stay alive. Not to mention that an aerial view was good strategy in the middle of a pitched battle. So he stayed level with the treetops, hoping his glow wouldn't be too brilliant in the afternoon sunshine, and marveled at how quickly a day could go from totally normal to completely insane.

They had left the house that afternoon for a simple tour of the Supercomputer Center at the University of California, San Diego, arranged for the group by their mentor and guardian, Mr. Lynch. Jack Lynch. Who also happened to be Bobby's father, much to Bobby's frequent dismay. His father had set them all up in a sweet sprawl in La Jolla—Bobby, Grunge, Roxy, Sarah, and Caitlin—and the kids would all be enrolled at UCSD come September. But on this sunny summer Saturday, Caitlin Fairchild had really, really wanted to check out the supercomputers, and the others had basically come along for the ride.

Good thing they had, Bobby figured.

Someone else had wanted access to the hardware today—someone whose interest was less academic than Caitlin's. They'd never encountered him before, but they knew the

type—power hungry, greedy, probably certifiably insane, yet possessed of a certain criminal intelligence. And he had friends—half-a-dozen goons wrapped in Kevlar body suits with straps and belts which presumably performed some function other than high-tech “supervillain” fashion.

Bobby and his friends were on the other side of that fence. Superhumans. Heroes. Just like in the comics. Sometimes it was a blast. Other times . . . not so much.

Like now. The goons were well armed, so maybe the belts and straps carried ammunition or power supplies for their weapons. They called their boss Doc, but that didn't reveal much information. There were plenty of “Docs” in the underworld community. This one wasn't familiar, but he fit into the category Grunge labeled “big-heads.” His cranium was enlarged far beyond normal size. On the vegetable scale, Bobby figured Doc was long past watermelon and closing in on Great Pumpkin.

From where he hung, burning, high in the air, Bobby watched Doc scurry across the campus lawn, and tried not to laugh. He made a pretty comical figure, running with his big, pale head, white lab coat flapping around a skinny frame, stick-like arms and legs pumping as he ran. It was even funnier when Roxy used her powers to levitate Doc whatever into the air. The big-headed guy looked pretty frustrated, flailing about and running in place three feet off the ground.

His goons posed more of a problem. They weren't afraid to use their weapons—it had been the sound of a gunshot that had alerted the team to trouble in the Supercomputer Center—and now that the gunmen were effectively cornered, they held their weapons trained on Bobby's friends. They weren't all armed with standard projectile-launching weapons, either. Three of them had what looked like automatic weapons, but three carried fancier armament—laser rifles or plasma blasters or electron-pulse weapons, maybe. Bobby had zoned out during some of Mr. Lynch's weaponry lectures. Now he regretted it, but, he reflected, he wasn't called Burnout for nothing. It was his code name now, but he'd had that nickname in high school, way before he got his powers.

The goons were backed up against the outside wall of the Supercomputer Center. They'd been on their way in, blasting

past a couple of guards, when the sound of their weapons had interrupted the tour the five teens were getting. Bobby and Grunge, at least, were thankful for the interruption.

Probably Roxy, too. Sarah was hard to read—she could have been bored to death, but her impassive face didn't show it. Caitlin, though, had been fascinated, asking hundreds of questions of Dr. Garner, their somewhat geeky guide. Garner seemed interested in her questions, as well, but he could have been masking interest in her body. Hard to tell, usually. But it was just a fact of life: nobody ever failed to notice Caitlin's body.

So the lay of the land was this: Caitlin, Grunge, and Sarah advancing on the six goons, who held their weapons at the ready and looked primed to use them. The goons, backs against the wall, but standing at the corner of the building. Roxy, busy fifteen yards away holding Doc whoever aloft. If the goons were going to try to cut and run, they'd go around the corner and gain a second or two. If they were going to stay and fight, they'd start now because otherwise they'd be pinned to the wall.

They fought. Six weapons started blasting at once. The conventional arms made the most noise—the high-speed burst of automatic weapons fire, the *clink* of shells hitting the ground. Bobby soared into position directly over his friends and loosed a blast of searing heat, creating a barrier between the goons and his teammates, melting most of the bullets before they could travel five feet. He figured Grunge could take care of the gunmen after that.

But he'd been too late to stop the first barrage from the assault rifles. Thankfully, Bobby Lane's friends were more than capable of taking care of themselves. Most of the time.

The bullets bounced off Caitlin's tough hide.

That's gotta hurt, Bobby thought, but he knew she'd end up with nothing worse than a few bruises. Even before the goons had fired, Grunge had reached down and touched the sidewalk, and absorbed the properties of the cement. His body turned concrete-hard, and the slugs flattened against him and dropped to the ground. Sarah Rainmaker wasn't bulletproof, but she used her control of the elements to whip up a wind that blew the bullets harmlessly past her.

The assault rifles were out of commission, but the other, more dangerous weapons, were still around. More dangerous, but obviously, from the time it was taking the goons to use them, more complicated. Two of them were indeed electron-pulse weapons. They crackled like high-voltage power lines and sparks issued from their noses as they built up juice. Even as Bobby tried to figure out how to deal with them, Sarah called lightning down from a clear blue sky. With a deafening boom of thunder and a blinding flash, the bolts struck the two weapons and shorted them out. The goons who had carried them dropped the now-melted twists of metal and fell back against the building, clothes smoldering and hair standing on end from the lightning's static electricity.

One gun left, but one gun was still a threat. That last weapon had to be a plasma blaster, Bobby realized. He could tell by the way its barrel glowed bright orange. The goon wielding it looked around for an escape, didn't find one, and turned to fire at Grunge and the others. The blaster made a weird liquid-sucking noise as glowing tubes of pure plasma erupted from its snout. If Bobby remembered Mr. Lynch's lectures correctly, those glowing tubes would explode on impact. Which meant someone had to make sure there was no impact.

Bobby turned on the steam. Flaring brightly, he flew down between the goons and his pals, and then swooped back up into the air. The plasma blasts were caught in his mini jet-stream and followed him airborne, away from the others. Now he only had to shake them before they caught up to him. He turned on the speed, then ventured a glance back and saw that the blasts were gaining on him—twelve or fifteen of them, he figured.

It occurred to him that he may have made a terrible mistake.

As Bobby rocketed into the sky, Caitlin Fairchild made her move. Her long legs were the subject of much comment from strangers she passed on the street—and from Grunge, come to think of it—but there were times when it was useful to be able to cover the yardage in a hurry. Three strides took her to where she needed to be. As she closed on the plasma-gunner, he aimed his weapon directly at her. But he misjudged her speed

and her intent. Instead of grabbing him or the gun, her last step turned into a kick, and three feet of Fairchild-leg, shod in a green and purple Vibram-soled boot, swung up into the thug's hands from below. Caitlin could kick a two-story building over—she'd done so, last week—so there was nothing the guy could do to hold onto the gun. It went spinning into the air, and the thug dropped to his knees, clutching his hands to his chest.

“Righteous! The Chargers could use a kicker like you, Kat!” Grunge shouted.

His voice sounded odd coming from a cement-man—gravelly, and deeper than usual. He came forward now, and reached out with both muscular arms. He grabbed two of the assault rifles, one in each hand, and squeezed. The gun barrels collapsed in his rocky grip. Then he yanked the guns forward, and their owners stumbled toward him. Grunge let go of the guns and plowed concrete fists into two Kevlar vests. The goons grunted and doubled over.

“Good work, Grunge,” Caitlin called. Like everyone else, she called him by his code name most of the time. He was short and squat, with a barrel chest and immensely powerful arms. But his long brown hair, stubbled chin, and casual (to the point of slovenly) attitude made Grunge a far more appropriate name for him than the one he'd been given at birth: Percival Edmund Chang.

The third gunman made a break for it. Instead of rounding the corner, though, he dashed between Fairchild and Grunge, past Sarah, and headed right for Roxy. The three of them all called out warnings, and Roxy turned her attention away from the floating and cursing Doc, just in time to be bowled over by the running goon.

They both crashed to the lawn in a flurry of arms and legs. By the time they'd recovered their equilibrium, the thug had a wicked double-edged knife blade held against Roxy's throat, right below the black leather choker she wore.

“Stay back, everyone, or the babe bites it,” the goon drawled.

Roxy nodded her head, the magenta stripe at the front of her jet-black hair bobbing as she did. Roxanne Spaulding was a rebel, and it showed at a glance—in the dyed hair, the leather

jacket and half-gloves, the everpresent cigarette, the hard, cocky stance. Right now, though, she looked more vulnerable than tough.

“What he said,” Roxy chirped. “This dude is either totally klutzy or, like, fiendishly clever. But either way, his knife is way sharp.”

As she spoke, she and the knife-wielder were rising off the ground. A foot, two, ten. Finally, he looked away from her toward the others, checking to be sure they'd kept their distance.

“Hey, what do you think—” he blurted, but then Roxy restored the gravity under his feet. Not hers. He dropped like a stone. His legs buckled beneath him as he hit the ground, and Grunge was on him in a second. A single punch from his cement fist laid the thug out flat.

“That’s why you don’t mess with a girl called Freefall,” Roxy said as she drifted back to earth. “But, whoa . . . where’s the Doc? And where’s Bobby?”

Keeping a low profile was no longer an option. There weren’t many students on campus today anyway—some using the library or labs, some who lived in the dorms enjoying the campus’s green areas, a few just chilling in the shade.

Bobby poured it on, flying high over the trees and then banking west, diving in a straight line toward the cliffs on the other side of North Torrey Pines Road. He left the campus behind, sailed over the hang-gliding port, and then he was over Black’s Beach (clothing optional, but this was no time to scope the scenery).

He couldn’t remember having ever flown this fast. He was cooking the atmosphere as he flew through it, could hear the oxygen ignite and flash as he passed, could smell the crisp, ozone-burning odor. And behind him, ever gaining, he could still sense the plasma bursts.

Once past the beach, he started to cut down toward the surf, hoping to lead the plasma missiles into the water. But below him, there were a couple of surfers paddling out toward the breaking waves. Beyond that, seals swam toward a rocky outcrop. Bobby kept going, painfully aware that even one of the plasma blasts would tear him to pieces, and fifteen of them

would obliterate any sign that he'd ever existed.

Finally, clear water. Bobby dove, tucking his arms to his sides, curling his head down to take the force of the water on the back of his head and neck, pointing his toes. Olympic quality, he hoped. He wanted to break the water clean. He'd never score perfect tens, though, because as he hit its surface, the water boiled and bubbled and erupted into clouds of steam around him. Still Bobby dove, deeper and deeper, until the ocean's floor was rushing at him. He braked, then, coming to a stop against the rocky bottom.

The plasma missiles struck the surface. Each one ignited as it hit. Underwater, the boom was thunderous. It seemed to come from all around, and Bobby clapped his hands over his ears to keep it out. The force of the blasts pushed through the water, sending Bobby tumbling and turning, crashing into submerged rocks, and finally thrusting him into a thick kelp jungle. Tangled in the seaweed, Bobby lost consciousness.

The door to the Supercomputer Center stood open. Caitlin, Sarah, and Grunge had all been rapt, watching Roxy deal with the knife-toting goon, and no one had seen where Doc what's-his-name had gone. There were only a couple of possibilities, though—around the corner to the parking lot beyond, or into the building. Sarah Rainmaker dropped to one knee, then lowered herself to hands and knees, sighting along the grass. It was like watching something from a hundred years ago, Caitlin thought—the Native American scout looking for tracks on the open plain. Rainmaker was one hell of a tracker.

Sarah's long, black hair grazed the grass as she held her position, back ramrod straight as always—that girl had perfect posture. Like Caitlin herself, her code name was also her last name. Caitlin went by Fairchild, and Sarah by Rainmaker. Sometimes, Caitlin despised the name—Rainmaker, at least, reflected Sarah's abilities, while Fairchild seemed only to apply to Caitlin's looks. And looks were of almost zero importance to her. But hey—at least she wasn't called Grunge. Some comfort there.

"He's inside," Sarah announced.

No one questioned her.

"Then we go in after him," Caitlin said. "Whatever it was

he came for, it's in the Center. We can't let him get it just because he slipped past us while we were distracted."

"The cops'll be here any minute, Kat," Grunge said, flesh again, instead of cement-boy. "Shouldn't we audi and let them finish up?"

"He's right—much as it pains me to admit it," Roxy said. "Mr. Lynch will have our hides if the police find us here."

Caitlin shook her head. "No," she said. "We don't know why he's here, or what he's looking for. But you can bet that it's something that'll make him more dangerous than he already is."

Roxy choked back a laugh. "Dangerous? If there was ever anybody more totally not dangerous . . ."

"We don't know what he's capable of, Roxanne."

Caitlin was acknowledged as the unofficial leader of the team, had been since the beginning, when Gen¹³ was nothing more than a rogue government official's secret pipe-dream. Since then, they'd taken pride in the name that had been given to them by their worst enemy on Earth. They'd actually become a team, worked together toward common goals, and through it all, Caitlin—tall, brainy, with a centerfold's body, the strongest of them by far—had found herself forced into the position of the team's captain, calling the shots, naming the plays. When she used someone's given name—like a mom scolding her children—the others knew she was serious.

They went in.

Bobby felt a nudge at his shoulder, like someone shaking him awake for school. He closed his eyes all the tighter, willing that someone to go away. Then he felt it again. He opened his eyes and mouth at the same time, ready to tell whoever it was off. But his mouth and lungs filled with water, and his vision was blurred by water and seaweed in nearly equal quantities. He was hopelessly entangled in the thick stuff, the explosions having turned him over again and again so that it was coiled around him like so many ropes.

He felt panic coming on—underwater, unable to see or breathe or escape, fear tightening like steel bands around his chest. Then he was nudged again, and he turned his head enough to see a sea lion, bowling ball-like head split by what

looked like a friendly smile, staring at him. The sea lion backed away, moving without effort through the kelp. Bobby realized then that it could be done. Watching the sea lion, he saw that he had only to move with the thick strands of seaweed instead of struggling against it. He wriggled and writhed, trying to approximate the sea lion's fluid motions, and he felt the strands loosen and separate.

The sea lion turned in one smooth sweep and swam away, and Bobby, freed finally from the most confining lengths of seaweed, followed in its trail, trying desperately to hold his breath. The great mammal, more than twice Bobby's circumference, swam through the kelp jungle without hesitation. After nearly a minute, Bobby's lungs aching and head feeling ready to burst, they both broke free into open water. Bobby swam for the surface then, strong arms clawing at the water.

Within seconds, he erupted into the air, spitting and choking. He caught his breath, dog-paddling at the surface for a moment, and then ignited and took to the skies. His friends were back on campus, and they could still be in trouble.

The Supercomputer Center had been nearly empty on this Saturday afternoon. Since the action had started, those few who had been working inside had run for help, or cover. Now, four members of Gen¹³ walked its wide corridors, terribly conscious of the echo of their footfalls on the tiled floors. The inside chambers, the clean rooms where the bulk of the equipment was stored, were always filled with the steady electronic hum of the powerful machines. But out here, all was quiet, and there was no background noise to mask their approach.

"What would this dude want in here anyway, Kat?" Grunge whispered. "Nothing but a bunch'a overgrown PCs. You think maybe he's putting together a jammin' Playstation for himself?" Grunge smiled at his own idea.

"Shh," Caitlin responded. "Let's at least pretend we're trying to take him by surprise."

Sarah looked at both of them with disapproval. She was the only one who could walk noiselessly. "Let me," she said quietly. Caitlin held up her arms, blocking Grunge and Roxy, and let Sarah take point.

"Go for it," she said.

Sarah moved down the hall, twice as fast and twice as quiet as they all had been together. As she approached each door she paused, crouched a bit in case there were someone on the other side pointing a weapon at the doorway, and eased around so that she could see into the room with one eye. The coast was clear. She stepped into the room, looked around, came back out, and motioned for the others to advance.

It took six rooms to find him. When she spotted the Doc, Sarah raised a hand to alert the others. She stayed absolutely still, peering into the room with one eye. Caitlin led her friends cautiously down the hallway. When they reached Sarah, she turned to them.

"He's here," she said. She wasn't whispering. "I don't think he's noticed us."

Caitlin looked inside the room. Sarah was right. The Doc was inside, sitting on a swiveling vinyl desk chair. Before him, a huge bank of Crays and other computer equipment soared to the twenty-foot ceiling. He looked intently at a monitor in front of him. Cables led from the computer to electrodes, attached to the Doc's oversized head. Blood trickled from each spot on his head where the electrodes were attached; apparently, he'd driven them deep into his scalp. Or directly into the brain.

Caitlin entered. "Whatever you're up to, Doc, it's over," she said. "Time to shut down."

He swiveled in the chair. His eyes danced madly behind thick-lensed, black-framed glasses. His lower lip quivered a few times before he spoke.

"I don't think so, my dear," he said at length. "I don't think so at all."

"You may not be thinking, period, if you don't get away from that machine, dude," Grunge said. "Kat tells you to do something, it's usually a good idea to do it."

"You fail to understand," Doc said. "Information is power. Knowledge is power. I may look like a weak old man to you, but I'm currently downloading all the information this supercomputer has to offer. Most brains couldn't accommodate it, but mine can. Mine was made for it."

"When I have downloaded this information, I will be unstoppable. A human brain at peak performance is a miraculous

device." Doc was grinning now, bits of saliva flecking his lips as he spoke.

"You'll be a drooling freak, you mean," Roxy said.

"The brain, in case you weren't aware, young lady, is the organ that controls the rest of the body's functions," Doc went on. "Strength is not in the arms and legs. Strength is in the brain. Wisdom is in the brain. Courage is in the brain. When I'm finished here, I will be stronger than all of you, faster than rockets, more courageous than armies. The world will tremble at my feet, and I shall not be a kindly master. I owe too much pain to too many people."

"Shazam, dude," Grunge muttered.

"I've heard enough nonsense," Caitlin said. Her long legs took her across the room before he could rise from the chair.

"No!" he screamed, but she gripped the cables in one fist and yanked. Electrodes popped out of his huge head, gouts of blood splashing the equipment from the holes they left.

"No! You can't!"

He grabbed the chair and lifted it easily over his head—something Caitlin would have assumed was beyond his capabilities. He hurled it at her, and she batted it away. It crashed to a landing across the room. Doc backed up, but the equipment bank was behind him.

"Okay, you're stronger than you look," Grunge said. "But smell isn't everything."

"That one was old when your grandfather learned it, Grunge," Roxy said, disgusted.

"Sometimes the old jokes are the best jokes, Rox."

"Yeah, and sometimes they just suck." Roxy turned to the Doc. "Come on, mister. I'm sure there's a bed waiting for you at Shady Acres."

"You meddling fools, you don't know what you're getting into," Doc said. With both fists, he pulled on the computer bank. For a moment it looked like he would have a heart attack—veins bulging, face turning purple—but then the heavy equipment started to move away from the wall. The bank of equipment, all joined together, must have weighed tons, but the scrawny Doc was actually budging it.

"Maybe there's something to this theory of yours," Caitlin

said. "But can't you use your intelligence to help the world instead of trying to rule it?"

"Shyeah," Grunge said. "And monkeys might fly—"

"Never mind, Grunge," Sarah said. "Just brace yourself."

Doc had pulled the equipment free of all the cabling and conduit joining it to the wall. Unable to lift it over his head, he was settling for rocking it back and forth. In a second, it would tumble over, on top of himself and the four teens. One rock, two . . . it started to fall.

"Roxy!" Caitlin called.

"I'm on it," Roxy replied. She gritted her teeth with the effort, and created a powerful anti-gravity field underneath the heavy equipment. Doc was pulling at it, trying to force it over, and Roxy pushed, trying to work it back. Both strained with the effort.

"Let me help," Grunge said. He approached Doc, pushing his way through Roxy's anti-grav field. When it threatened to lift him off the floor, he held out an arm and pushed off the computer bank to maintain his footing. When he reached Doc, he balled his fist. Doc saw what was coming, and shook his head back and forth, redoubling his efforts to pull over the computers. His eyes were wide now, the reality of his situation finally settling in.

Grunge clobbered him. Doc's head bounced off his fist, smacked into the computer equipment, and his pupils slid up inside his head as he sank to the floor. Caitlin rushed forward then, helping to settle the equipment bank gently onto the floor.

"This is going to be a nightmare to reconnect," she said. "But at least he didn't totally trash it."

Grunge shook his fist. "I think I trashed this hand, though. Guy's head is harder than it looks. Like punching a medicine ball."

"We should be going," Sarah pointed out. "The police can wrap things up here."

They headed toward the door, Caitlin carrying Doc in her arms.

"What about Bobby?" Roxy asked. "Where's he been?"

When they emerged into the bright sunshine, Bobby was

leaning against the building, arms folded, casually passing the time of day.

“Sheesh,” Grunge said. “Here we are killing ourselves to save the world, and this guy is just chillin’.”

“That’s right, Grunge-man,” Bobby said. “I’m the king of the chill.”

To look at Anna, blonde and slender, with a beautiful Nordic face and perfect poise, you’d never know she was a robot. She served the kids lemonade on the back porch of Mr. Lynch’s La Jolla mansion, and her sympathetic comments and perfectly timed touches made her seem like the ideal mom-figure. But robot she was, manufactured and programmed for just that purpose. She helped John Lynch keep an eye on the kids when he couldn’t be around.

It sounded like they could have used her this afternoon, he thought. They downplayed the significance of what had happened, as they always did. But their lives had been in danger, and he was responsible for them. He had to protect them until they learned the full range of their powers, until they were able to be in absolute control of their special gifts at all times. And, he knew, until they stopped being hot-headed, emotional teens and became stable, mature adults.

He was their caretaker while they grew up—a foster father, perhaps, though Bobby was his biological son.

He figured the job would probably kill him.

“Check it out, Mr. L.,” Grunge said, as he crunched ice from the lemonade between his teeth. “The guy has this blade at Roxy’s whaddyacallit, jugular, and she just hoists him up and drops him before he even knows he’s off the ground.”

“I’m glad it worked, Roxanne,” Lynch said. “But it might have paid to try a more conservative tactic. Even a nick at that spot could have disastrous consequences.”

“I knew what I was doing, Mr. Lynch.”

“I’ve known several dead people who might have made the same claim, Roxanne.”

“Do we know who the ringleader was yet, Mr. Lynch?” Caitlin asked.

“What’s the diff?” Grunge said. “Big-heads are a dime a dozen.”

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“Not yet, Caitlin,” Lynch said. “And I have to agree with Eddie on this one. He’ll spend the next thirty years or so in prison—Purgatory Max, probably.”

The prison Lynch named was the U.S. intelligence community’s prime holding spot for super-powered criminals, and Doc whatever seemed to fall squarely into that category.

“Where he belongs,” Grunge said. “I’m just glad we didn’t have to work up too much of a sweat to put him away.”

“Why’s that?” Bobby asked.

“I’m saving my strength, Bob-a-loo!” Grunge said. “Tonight, I’m plannin’ to party!”

CHAPTER 2



Ivana Baiul was ice.

She was flawlessly beautiful, which was rare in itself. She knew she was beautiful, which was rarer still. And she was aware that she knew it, using her awareness as a weapon. That was almost unheard of. But to Ivana, it was just the way things were.

Her beauty—and her knowledge of it—was only one weapon in Ivana's arsenal, though. There was also ruthlessness, greed, lust for power, absolute command of every situation. Those weapons were less immediately apparent, but they were there at her disposal. And Ivana was never shy about employing her weapons. Getting her way was as important to her as breathing itself, and she used whatever it took. Ink-black hair with the silky sheen shampoo commercials promise; perfect face, features at once chilling and absolutely right; body to die for—so what if much of it had been rebuilt by I.O.'s Sci-tech geniuses?

It was the effect that counted, and the effect Ivana's physical form had on people was potent indeed.

She stood by the window, staring out at the lights of Manhattan. By refocusing her gaze, she was able to see her own reflection, and the room behind her—Carver and Clark settling into their chairs, all black leather and polished chrome; her own desk with its array of sophisticated communications equipment on top; the huge, illuminated world map that filled one wall. She spoke without turning. From here, she could watch the expressions on the faces of the others, but they

would never know if she was looking at them or at Central Park West.

"I will run I.O. again, and sooner than you think," she said.

Gene Carver's dark face remained impassive, but Carolyn Clark raised a fist, too late, to cover a sudden smirk.

"Not much on the social graces, eh, Ivana?" Carver asked.

"What do you mean?" Now she did turn to face them.

"Most people would have said hello, spent a few minutes on casual conversation. Maybe even offered us a drink, a cup of coffee. Something."

"Most people are idiots," Ivana said. "I don't waste my time on them. I'm not wasting my time on you, am I?"

"I like to think not."

"And you, Ms. Clark? What do you think?"

"I think you're very ambitious, Ms. Baiul."

Ivana nodded. "You're right about that. Not necessarily perceptive. Ambition is one of my primary traits, and I'm sure it's all over my I.O. file. You've read the file, no?"

"I have," Clark said. "Several times."

"What else does it say about me?"

"Verbatim?"

"In your own words."

"You're right, of course. The word ambitious comes up a number of times. So do the phrases 'misguided patriot' and 'criminal mastermind.' They hate you at International Operations, but they admire you nonetheless."

"And you? What do you think?"

"I've only met you a couple of times, Ivana. I haven't formed an opinion yet."

"Nice dodge, Carolyn. I don't buy it, though."

"Maybe this is enough small talk, ladies," Carver interrupted. "How about we get down to brass tacks?"

"This isn't small talk, Gene," Ivana said. "This is business."

She stepped away from the window, crossed to her desk, and sat down. Open on the desk's surface were I.O. files on these two—personnel files, as they were both operatives of America's most secret, and powerful, intelligence organization.

She glanced over Carver's, looked squarely at him: a black man, about forty, well-built. His European suit was tailored to fit nicely over his physique, revealing his strength without advertising it. There was a dusting of gray in his close-cropped black hair, and his mustache was salt and pepper. His posture in the chair was confident, almost casual. Carver looked like a man who had seen a lot, and was rarely surprised by anything. The file bore out this impression.

"Eugene F. Carver. Field agent, stationed in Berlin, Istanbul, Kabul, D.C., Beijing. Promoted to command position, Special Section, Asia. Promoted again to a position reporting directly to Miles Craven. I understand why you want to work for me—the Craven loyalists are being forced out in droves under the new power structure."

She moved the other folder to the top, flipped through a couple of pages.

"But I'm not so sure about you, Carolyn no-middle-initial Clark. You've served in Washington, New York, Florida, Colombia, Peru. You've got no black marks on your record, but very few commendations. You've been with I.O. for several years, but haven't climbed the ladder very far. Is it a glass ceiling? I don't think so—I had no trouble moving up through the ranks. Is it a lack of ambition? Or are you not kissing the right behinds?"

Clark squirmed under Ivana's direct gaze, crossing and re-crossing her legs. They were fine legs, Ivana noted dispassionately. Clark was not a bad looking woman. Caucasian, as was Ivana. Shoulder-length blonde hair framed a pleasant face, with green eyes and a smallish nose and lips that could have been a little fuller. Her outfit was Armani, not inexpensive, and it flattered her petite figure. She was nervous, no question about that. Ivana figured anyone who was nervous in her presence had a right to be.

"I'll get there," Clark said. "I've been patient so far."

"And how will throwing in with me advance you at I.O.?"

"We've already established that you're ambitious, Ivana. I believe you when you say you'll be running the place. I want to be part of the team that helps get you there."

"But if I fail, your position will be compromised."

"Then we've got to see to it that you don't fail."

“Exactly. You understand what I need from you both?”

“In general terms,” Carver said. “You need eyes and ears at I.O.”

“I have eyes and ears there already. I need watchdogs to make sure my eyes and ears are seeing and hearing everything they should be—and reporting to me without exercising editorial judgment.”

“I’m sure Gene and I can accomplish that,” Clark said. “When do you tell us what your plan is?”

“Maybe never. You operate on a need-to-know basis. I’m the only one who knows all the pieces. You’ll have bits of it, but not the whole thing.”

She closed the folders and sat looking at the pair of them. Both turncoats, ready to sell out the organization they’d devoted their lives to for the possibility of a quick buck or a boost toward the top. Putting their own futures ahead of their agency’s.

These were the kind of people she needed more of.

Before she could say anything else, a light flashed on her desktop intercom.

She pushed a button. “Yes, Marcus?”

“Misters Reisner and Manning are here to see you, Ms. Baiul. You said to let you know the minute they came in.”

“So I did. Send them on in,” she said, and looked up at Carver and Clark again. “Your lucky day. This is one of the pieces of the puzzle I’m going to let you see.”

Reisner and Manning pushed through the big doorway a moment later. They were two of a kind: hustlers, anything-for-a-buck guys; all cheap suits, hard liquor, and nasty business. Ivana had dozens just like them.

“You have something for me?” she asked.

Manning stood before the desk: designated spokesman. His reddish hair was cut short, ruddy face lined with lack of sleep and hard effort. He spoke with a slight stammer—making him give the report was Reisner’s idea of a joke.

“Y-yes, M-ma-ms. Baiul,” he began. The stammer faded as he warmed up. “Th-the Horn is d-definitely on the move. De-deMedici left Vatican City at 0400 hours, Rome time. Totally alone, and carrying a satchel. Drove to Florence. We picked him up again at the airport there. He bought a ticket

to Ireland, Shannon International. He wasn't on that flight, though. It l-looks like our agent l-lost him at airport."

"'Looks like?' " Ivana repeated. Her words were clipped, her expression somewhere between furious and enraged. "We knew he'd make a move! We knew he'd have the Horn of Jericho with him! We know what the Horn means to me—to my plans! And yet . . ."

She stopped, smiled. The kind of smile an alligator might show a fuzzy little bunny rabbit that it was about to swallow whole. She reined in her anger, though, didn't let it get the best of her. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. "And yet we let an old priest give two of our agents, supposedly professional people, the slip. One of the busiest airports in Europe, and our people couldn't even maintain a tail there."

"I'm s-sorry, Ms. Baiul," Manning said. "We'll p-pick him up again. I've already got people on it."

"I'm sure you do, Mr. Manning."

She walked around from behind the desk, approached Manning. She let a slender hand trail across his shoulders, down his arm. He swallowed, nervous, but didn't speak. Then she turned to Reisner.

"And you, Mr. Reisner?" she asked. He had the tanned, thick features of a football coach. Short, dark hair, small eyes, heavy jowls. He stood at attention, or close to it, as she sidled up next to him. She rested her hand on his shoulder, then drew her long fingernails up his neck, across the line of his jaw. His cologne almost masked the scent of fear on him.

"Did you hire those agents in Rome, Mr. Reisner?" she asked.

"You know I did, Ivana," he said. "You approved the hires. They're good men, both of them. They're on top of this."

"Sounds to me like they're underneath it. And so are you."

She held his chin, looking directly into his eyes as she spoke. "I don't like failure, Mr. Reisner," she said. "I can't afford failure. Certainly not on something like this, something so important to my plans."

"I know that," he said. "This is only a temporary set-back."

“Not for you.”

She lowered her hand, suddenly, and with a practiced motion drove her fingers straight into his throat, fingernails piercing the flesh. But it wasn't just fingernails—her own flesh peeled back, at her mental command, and steel alloy shredder cords shot out. Her command of these was as exact as if they had been her own fingers, but they were molecularized razor wire, and far sharper—another gift from the guys in the I.O. labs, back in the day. She yanked, ripping skin and severing veins. Blood spurted, and she let it splash on her for a moment before she let go and backed away. The room was suddenly full of the metallic scent of blood and the musky aroma of death. Reisner dropped to the floor, twitching and gurgling.

She went back to Manning. “You understand now, don't you, Mr. Manning, just how serious I am about this operation?”

“Y-y-yes, ma'am.”

“Find Cardinal DeMedici. Let me know where he is, what he does, who he talks to. Get on it.”

“Y-yes ma'am,” he said again. He swiveled on his heel and headed out the door.

Ivana turned back to Carver and Clark, who had remained in their chairs the whole time. Clark looked dismayed, but Carver maintained his almost-bored composure.

“So, now you know,” Ivana said. “I will kill to get what I want. No question about that.” As she spoke, the flesh of her hand—which was really a latex-based artificial skin—reformed into slender fingers, hiding the killing weapon within.

“We knew that before we came in here, Ivana,” Carver said.

“I'm sure you did.” She went to her desk, opened a drawer, and removed a Sig Sauer semi-automatic handgun. “You both left your sidearms with Marcus before you came in here. Now there's something I need to know about you.”

“You can count on me,” Carver said.

“I wasn't talking about you,” Ivana said. “I know all I need to about you. No, I'm interested in Ms. Clark here.”

She approached the woman, the weapon held loosely in her hand.

“I'm intrigued by you, my dear. You think I'm full of it.

You think I'm pompous, overbearing, probably in over my head. You don't think I have a chance at taking back the reins of I.O. And yet, here you are. You haven't left, you haven't tried to back out. You're still trying to impress me. You want to be part of this operation."

"That's right, I do," Clark said. Her voice was smaller than it had been.

"Then show me that you can," Ivana said.

She handed the gun to Carolyn Clark. The younger woman took it with fingers that trembled only a little.

"Kill him."

Clark raised the gun, pointed it at Carver.

"Now just a minute, Ivana!" Carver said. He rose from the chair, knocking it over as he did. "This has gone far—"

There was a short sharp burst from the gun. It echoed in the cavernous office. By the time it faded, there were two corpses on the floor.

Ivana returned to her desk. "Congratulations, Ms. Clark," she said. "You've passed this interview." She punched the button on the intercom, leaned toward it. "Marcus," she said. "Send someone in here to clean up this mess."

The club rocked.

Shelter was an all-ages dance club that had taken over a warehouse in San Diego's Market Street area—an area overcome decades ago with urban blight. In the last few years, though, galleries had started to flower here, and coffee shops and funky boutiques sprang up. Then Shelter opened, giving people under twenty-one someplace they could go at night, and the whole neighborhood was on the verge of, if not respectability, then at least something like trendiness. At night, music spilled out the doors and windows onto the streets. Someone standing a block away could see the flashing strobes and clouds of smoke from upper windows and know that there was a party inside.

Outside, you could hear the music. Inside, it filled you, shook you, made you move. Even Caitlin, who had never considered herself a party animal, felt its call. Her body swayed to the driving techno beat, and more than once she caught her foot tapping to its rhythmic pulse.

But Caitlin was here because her friends wanted to be. This was not the kind of place she'd spend time by her own choosing. Her friends had accompanied her to the UCSD Supercomputer Center this afternoon, though, so she felt obligated to go where they wanted that night. And her friends wanted to party.

Or they said they did. Once there, the lights and smoke and music seemed to have a stunning effect on most of them. Grunge and Bobby leaned against a bar. Sarah stood right behind them, sipping a Pepsi. Only Roxy was out on the dance floor. Every now and then she passed before Caitlin's field of vision—and at 6'2", Caitlin was taller than most of the kids in the room, so her field of vision encompassed a lot of territory—always with a different guy, always smiling or laughing, always moving. Roxy was a girl who knew how to have a good time. Sometimes Caitlin envied her that.

Well, more than sometimes.

Suddenly, Roxy reached out of the swirling mass of bodies and grabbed her arm.

"C'mon, Kat!" she shouted. "You gotta let loose! There are, like, so many happenin' men here!"

Caitlin tried to draw her arm back, but Roxy's grip was strong. "I really don't think—"

"You don't have to think!" Roxy interrupted. "Just let go!"

With that, she pulled Caitlin onto the dance floor. There were guys all around, but Caitlin couldn't tell that she was dancing with anyone in particular. Everywhere she looked, she saw their gazes on her, saw smiling faces looking her way. She wasn't impressed by the guys she saw—whatever Roxy liked about these teenaged hedonists, she didn't. Their eyes looked glazed over from the smoke and loud music, their jaws were slack, their bodies gyrated like electric shock victims. She did a quick mental calculation. If there are 400 people in the room, she thought, and 68 percent of them are male, that's 272 boys here. If the average I.Q. of the boys was fifty—and as an average, that meant that a lot of them were well under—then the total I.Q. of the males in the room was 13,600. Combined, they made up fewer than seventy intelligent men. If only she was strong enough to ram three or four of them together, combine their brain cells somehow . . .

After a few minutes, though, she stopped looking at the faces, stopped thinking so much, and let the music take her. As her self-consciousness faded, she became less awkward, and she started moving in perfect time with the music.

“Look at Kat,” Grunge said. “She was born to gyrate!”

“What?” Bobby shouted. It was almost impossible to hear normal conversation in there.

“I said, look at Kat!”

“I would, but I’m too busy looking at Roxy!” The small brunette had gone all out this evening—black leather mini-skirt, fishnets, a tight, form-fitting black top. Her leather jacket was slung over the back of Bobby’s bar stool, and he touched it unconsciously as he watched her dance.

“She’s hot, but Kat is . . .”

“I know how you feel about her, Grunge,” Bobby said. “Too bad you’re too dense to know how Roxy feels about you!”

Grunge shook his head, looking at Bobby. “She’s okay, Bobby. But not really my type, you know?” He looked back at Caitlin, moving to the music, eyes closed and a half-smile on her face. “Besides, Caitlin’s the one for me.”

“Never happen,” Bobby said, too quietly for his friend to hear.

“What?”

Bobby looked up. Walking across the dance floor, weaving in and out between the dancers, he saw a woman coming their way. She was tall and slender, with a halo of blonde hair catching the strobes and sparkling in the dark room. She seemed to have her gaze locked on Grunge, and she was making a beeline for him, never letting the flailing arms and legs deflect her from her course.

“I think there may be a way to make you forget Kat,” Bobby said. “Incoming, Grunge!”

Grunge scanned the crowd, saw her. She smiled in his direction, a radiant, electric smile. His face lit up, and he smiled too.

“Yes!” he said. “This is it, Robert my man! She wants me bad.”

Watching her move across the floor, single-minded, never

averting her gaze or losing her smile, Bobby thought that Grunge was probably right. Grunge rose from the stool, stretching to his full height—which was still not very impressive, Bobby thought—and tugged on his vest, straightening it. Maybe he should've worn a shirt, Bobby thought. But then, Grunge wasn't big on shirts. He, like Caitlin, had a tendency to tear them. Plus, a shirt would hide the tattoo—a disembodied skull, flying on eagle wings—that graced his muscular chest.

Grunge put a hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Listen, man. If I don't come home tonight, cover for me with Mr. L., okay?"

"You got it," Bobby said.

Grunge took his hand away, then, and moved forward a step, then another. He was going to meet her halfway, Bobby thought. He watched her as she emerged from the crowd. She was a goddess. Her white dress flowed when she walked, her lush body moving inside it, and now she and Grunge were on a collision course. Bobby could see Grunge pause, his body language change; he was about to make an opening statement of some kind. Bobby just hoped it wasn't so lame that she turned around and walked away.

But instead of stopping, she kept moving, taking a half-step to dodge around Grunge as if she hadn't really noticed him there. Grunge spun as she passed, the smile on his face quickly fading to a look of confusion, then dismay, as he saw where she was really headed.

"Hi, my name's Kelly," the blonde goddess said.

Rainmaker let her hair fall across her face in a flirty way Bobby had never seen her act before.

"I'm Sarah."

"Like a drink?"

"Love one."

Sarah Rainmaker and Kelly the blonde goddess retreated to the bar, and their heads bent together in animated conversation as Grunge returned to the stool beside Bobby.

"Sorry, dude," Bobby said.

"I just don't get it," Grunge said. "How can they tell? Across a crowded dance floor, in a dark room . . . what kind of signals are there?"

"I know what you mean, man."

"And how do you make the signals work for you?"

"It's the eternal mystery," Bobby lamented.

"I thought the eternal mystery was the meaning of life or something," Grunge said.

"Naw, man. It's chicks."

"Yeah, I guess it is. Chicks." Grunge shook his head sadly.

They pulled into the driveway in La Jolla a little after three. Fairchild was at the wheel of the van. Roxy sat beside her, with Grunge and Bobby sprawled on the bench seat in back. Sarah was not with them.

"Okay, let's be really quiet going in," Fairchild said. "Mr. Lynch asked us to be home by one, and he's not going to be happy if he finds out what time we really got here."

"Especially if he finds out some of us aren't even home yet," Grunge said.

"Sarah could have been home in bed hours ago, for all you know," Roxy said.

"Right. I don't know about the 'home' part," Bobby grumbled.

"Quiet, both of you!" Caitlin snapped. "Sarah's a big girl. She can take care of herself."

"Doesn't look like she needs to," Grunge said. Bobby slugged him on the arm.

"Knock it off, man," he said. "You're just bitter."

"Of course, I'm bitter." Grunge rubbed his bicep. "I have every right to be bitter."

"Listen, both of you," Caitlin said. "That's enough. Now grow up, and sneak in there like you've been home all night!"

The house was big, which was normal for La Jolla, and beautiful. Ditto. La Jolla was one of the wealthiest communities in the country, a unique mixture of old money and new, and the people who settled there—especially the ones with beachfront property, like Mr. Lynch's—didn't build shacks. This one was not quite a palace, but it was modern and richly appointed, and unlike most of the houses around, it came with a few extras.

The security system, for instance, knew the second the van approached the driveway. It identified the van by a microwave signal, measured the weight of the van, determined how many

occupants were inside it. By the time the van doors opened, cameras were trained on the occupants. Super-enhanced digital images of the four of them were sent to a computer that matched retinas to the database, and by the time they reached the front door, the house knew they belonged there.

The door opened for them. Lights were on inside.

Fairchild went in first. She looked around the entryway. "Anna?" she said softly.

No answer. The others came in behind her, and Grunge silently closed the door. Maybe they had gotten in safely, Caitlin thought. She knew Mr. Lynch's security system would record when they came in, but if he didn't have a reason to check it in the morning . . .

"Anna's gone to bed. Hours ago."

It was just like Mr. Lynch to keep up the pretense that Anna was a flesh-and-blood woman instead of a clever combination of microcircuitry and latex, Caitlin thought.

"Mr. Lynch!" she said. "What are you doing up?"

He stepped into the entryway from his den. Lynch was tall and lean, with long, brown hair, graying slightly, and a hard face that only infrequently broke into a smile. When it did, the grin was infectious, diminishing the predominant feature of his visage—a long, double-scar that ran from his forehead, across his unseeing left eye, and down his cheek. When he scowled, that scar stood out and made him look fearsome. He wasn't smiling now.

"We have a guest," he said. "I told him he could meet the five of you tonight. He wanted to wait up for you, but I didn't realize he'd be waiting up this late. I also didn't realize there would only be four."

"Sarah's coming along in a little while," Caitlin said. "She's getting a ride from a friend."

"No kidding," Grunge said.

Bobby flared his fingertip and touched it to the small of Grunge's back, under his vest.

"Hey!"

"Cool it," Bobby said.

"Okay, jeez."

"I hope she's here shortly," Lynch said. "The Cardinal really did want to meet all of you. And he's come a long way to do it."

CHAPTER 3



“Cardinal?” Grunge said. “Did you go and get religion or something, Mr. L.?”

Mr. Lynch shot Grunge a tired look, then turned to Caitlin. Bobby might be his biological son, but like everyone else, their mentor recognized Caitlin as the natural leader amongst the kids. She was the most mature, the most responsible, the most intelligent.

She was the most everything, Grunge thought. That was what being gen-active had done for her. Not that any of them minded. Except Roxy, maybe, in a jealous kind of way.

“Whatever’s going on here, I doubt religion has anything to do with it,” Roxy said cynically. “As if you’d know anything about it, Grunge.”

“Hey,” Grunge said with a shrug. “God’s cool.”

“Actually, Roxanne,” Lynch replied, ignoring Grunge completely, “religion has a great deal to do with the Cardinal’s visit. Which you’ll all find out just as soon as Sarah bothers to return home. Let’s hope it’s before dawn, shall we? Why don’t you all wash up . . . or whatever it is you do . . . and then meet me in the study. Perhaps by then, Rainmaker will have . . .”

“She’s here,” Bobby said.

Grunge turned to see him standing at a window.

“You’re, like, the worried Dad, huh, Bobby?” Grunge said. “Like reruns of *Cosby*.”

Bobby sniffed, glared at Grunge. “Yeah? Does that make you that annoying little chick?”

“Do *not* diss Raven Symone, man. Not even my best bud can get away with that,” Grunge said angrily.

“Well, at least now we’ll find out what’s going on here,” Caitlin said. “I have to confess, Mr. Lynch, the curiosity is killing me.”

“Whatever, Kat,” Roxy said. “What’s killing me is sleep deprivation.”

There was silence after that, a rare commodity in the La Jolla mansion. But exhaustion and strange visitors in the night will do that to even the most excitable teenagers. Well, most of them, at least.

“Hey!” Grunge cried suddenly. “Do we still get that dirty movie channel on cable?”

“You are a major pig,” Roxy sighed.

“Bobby, would you please see what is taking Sarah so long?” Mr. Lynch asked.

Bobby didn’t respond. Grunge walked over to stand next to him at the window. He looked out, saw what was happening on the front step of the mansion, and froze. His eyes glazed over, and he was transfixed. Entranced. Totally blown away.

“Bobby!” Mr. Lynch snapped.

With a huff, their mentor strode across the room and reached for the doorknob.

“Ah, Mr. L., I think maybe that’s not such a good . . .” Grunge began.

Mr. Lynch opened the door. On the front steps, Sarah and Kelly, the blonde goddess from the club, stepped nervously away from one another. Kelly blushed, fiddled with her car keys. Sarah ran a hand through her hair, shot an angry glance at Bobby and Grunge. They looked back with matching “who, me?” expressions, and shrugged.

“Oh,” was all Mr. Lynch had to say.

“Okay, so you’ll call me?” Kelly said sheepishly.

“Definitely,” Sarah replied.

The two girls looked at each other a moment longer, as if they had something else to say, then Kelly turned and jogged back down the walk toward her Forerunner.

“What a babe,” Bobby said.

“What a shame,” Grunge added.

The two guys grunted.

Sarah strode through the door without looking at any of them. Grunge was surprised that she didn't even ask what they were all doing still up, and hanging out waiting for her like, well, Cosby.

"I'm glad you all had a nice evening," Mr. Lynch said. "But before you can begin your hibernation until sometime after lunch tomorrow, we must meet with our visitor. If you'd like to wash up, or change or what have you, do it now. We'll convene in the study in ten minutes."

Mr. Lynch turned and walked down the hall toward the study. Grunge saw a small smile start to play at the edges of Sarah's mouth. She walked over to Bobby and kissed him on the cheek.

"That was from Kelly. But she really wasn't your type," Sarah whispered, then turned and marched up the stairs.

"Totally harsh," Grunge said.

All four of them stared after her. After a moment, Caitlin spoke up.

"Guys, is it me, or was Sarah wearing something else at the club. Where in the world did she find time to change her clothes?"

Grunge looked at Bobby, then they both turned back to Caitlin. The genuine confusion on her face was almost enough to send Grunge over the edge, but he did his best not to totally lose it.

Then he looked at Roxy.

"God, Kat," she sighed. "Buy a vowel."

They were laughing all the way up the stairs, with Caitlin angrily sulking, demanding they tell her what was so funny. Which only made them laugh all the harder.

After Caitlin had washed her face and changed into sweats, she came out of her room to find the others all waiting in the hallway for her. They all tried to look nonchalant, but she knew they were probably all just as creeped out by this late night mystery as she was. Mr. Lynch made a career out of not telling them stuff they probably should have been aware of . . . his idea of protecting them, she guessed. But this was even weirder than usual.

On the other hand, if they stood around in the hallway,

they'd never find out why a Cardinal was in their house.

"You guys ready, or what?" Caitlin asked.

"Just waitin' for you, o beauteous Kat," Grunge replied, and executed a deep bow to indicate that she should lead the way.

Reluctantly, she did.

Mr. Lynch's study was usually off limits to them. It was kind of his room to chill, and they all figured he needed it to escape their, well, teen-ness, once in a while. Caitlin had only been inside once or twice, and then just to bring Mr. Lynch a bunch of stuff she'd downloaded off the 'net for him.

The lights had been on then.

Tonight, though dawn was still several hours away, and though it was at least sixty degrees outside, Mr. Lynch had a blaze going in the fireplace. That flickering orange light was the only illumination in the room.

"Okay, I'm officially wiggled," Roxy said quietly.

"Did somebody fast forward the rest of summer and fall, or did I sleep through it?" Grunge asked.

Bobby and Sarah said nothing.

Caitlin glanced around at the rows upon rows of books and wondered where Mr. L. had found time to read them all. She pictured him all business, just thinking about war and espionage and government conspiracies and stuff. Then she caught sight of a title on a nearby shelf, lit up by the firelight. *Every Spy a Prince*, it was called. A book about the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, she remembered.

Okay, so maybe he does find time to read, she thought.

"Didn't I say ten minutes?" Mr. Lynch demanded.

They all looked up to see him in a shadowy corner of the room, standing next to a high-backed leather chair which faced the fireplace.

"Grunge had to make himself pretty," Bobby said lightly.

Mr. Lynch frowned. "Belay that foolishness, Bobby," he said sternly. "We have work to do now."

Caitlin felt uncomfortable, felt bad for Bobby. She knew they all did. Mr. Lynch was his father, which somehow made it worse when Bobby got chewed out by him. Caitlin wondered if it was her imagination, or if Mr. L. actually corrected Bobby a lot more than he did the rest of them.

"Sorry we're late, Mr. Lynch," she said. "I think it's my fault, though."

Lynch frowned a moment longer, then relaxed.

"Well, you're here now," he said. "Come in and meet our guest."

Caitlin led the others deeper into the study. She walked toward the fireplace and around in front of the twin leather chairs, the others gathering in behind her. The warmth from the fire was almost uncomfortable, but Caitlin had stopped paying attention to such things.

She was staring at the man in the opposite chair. He looked impossibly old, at first glance. Wrinkled, almost decayed, his leathery skin drawn taut over his cheekbones to accent the skull beneath. Then the light from the fire seemed to shift, and the old man's face changed. He was still old, but not nearly so ancient. In his sixties, perhaps. Thin and bony, with wispy white hair and long fingers. His eyes blazed with more than firelight, with a vigor that Caitlin found startling.

Particularly in a man whose clothing was stained with blood, and whose arms and neck were swathed in bandages. He'd been badly hurt, obviously. How recently was difficult to establish. But despite the vitality in his eyes, the old man was in pain.

Caitlin recalled, just for a moment, her first glance of the man, the Cardinal, according to Mr. L. She wondered, now, if that withered, ancient face was just her imagination. She hoped it was, but one way or another, she sensed that something very freaky was going on here. Something unlike anything they'd been through before.

And they'd been through some seriously wacky stuff.

"Cardinal Francesco DeMedici," Mr. Lynch began, "it is my pleasure to introduce my charges to you."

Mr. Lynch ran through the intros pretty quickly, and the old Cardinal examined them all closely. Caitlin felt majorly uncomfortable under his gaze, and found herself unwilling to meet the injured man's eyes while he scrutinized her.

"Do you take me for a fool, Jack?" DeMedici asked, when the introductions were concluded. "You want me to put my life in the hands of these . . . these children?"

Caitlin frowned, and looked at Mr. Lynch, waiting for him to come to their defense.

"What choice do you have?" was all Mr. L. said.

The Cardinal smiled bitterly. "Indeed," he said.

"Francesco, why don't you tell the kids what you're doing here. Then they can decide if they want to help you or not," Mr. Lynch suggested.

"*They can decide . . . ?*" the Cardinal repeated, as if the idea that they could refuse him was absurd.

Mr. Lynch only smiled. And not kindly.

"Very well, Jack," the Cardinal agreed. "Make yourselves comfortable, children, it's time for a bedtime story."

All five members of Gen¹³ had remained silent during the Cardinal's insults, which had amazed Caitlin. But it was not to last.

"The Three Little Pigs, I hope," Grunge muttered angrily.

A darkness flared on the Cardinal's face, and he no longer seemed frail.

"Still your tongue, son, and you might learn how to survive the next few days," the Cardinal sneered.

Miraculously, Grunge didn't say another word.

The blaze in the fireplace seemed to roar up a moment, casting longer shadows across the old man's hawk nose; then it died down again, as if growing quiet to allow him to speak.

"My office is in Rome," he began. "It has been in the same place, in the same small building in Vatican City, for more than one hundred years."

Caitlin glanced up at Mr. Lynch, astounded by the Cardinal's words. Mr. L. paid no attention to the kids' reactions, only watched the old man with narrowed eyes, as if judging his words.

"Happily, I am rarely forced to suffer the boredom of visiting Rome, or of spending any time in that musty office. Rather, I spend most of my time in a small chateau in the south of France, drinking wine older than your grandparents and watching the sun crawl across the sky. I daresay it would bore the lot of you to tears. It is blissful for me.

"Several days ago, I received a communique from Vatican City. From the Pope himself. I was to bring a certain . . . artifact, in my possession, to Rome in order that this current

Pope might view it in person for the first time. The first and only time, since even the Papacy only grants a man certain privileges.

“I knew that I would be followed. Representatives from certain occult agencies and espionage groups—”

At that, DeMedici glanced slightly to his left with a withering look. He did not turn all the way around, but it was clear to Caitlin that the look was meant for Mr. Lynch.

“Many people are interested in my movements, and the location . . . even the existence . . . of this artifact of which I speak. I left for Rome with several of my closest aides, believing them to be all that was necessary for my safety. I had the artifact with me, removed from its traditional resting place for the first time in more than fifteen years.

“After visiting with the Pope, I began my return trip. However, I knew that any attempt to return home immediately would be subject to some kind of attack. They knew where I was going, after all. Instead, I followed a prescribed plan to throw off any followers—several plane reservations, decoy cases, even a disguise.

“I managed to lose the incompetents from I.O. who were among those on my trail,” DeMedici said proudly. “I left Rome by car, and followed an escape route I had worked out twenty years earlier. I was to fly out of Florence on a private plane.”

Caitlin glanced at Mr. Lynch again, and thought she sensed a bit of amusement in his features. Then they turned hard and cold again.

“So, who actually caught up to you?” Sarah asked. “MI5? CIA? Mossad?”

The Cardinal smiled benevolently.

“I only wish it had been something so mundane,” he said.

“So?” Grunge urged, caught up in the story as they all were.

“Lorenzo, my closest advisor, was the driver of the car. It was just the two of us. On the road to Florence, he pulled the car over and got out on the pretense that something was amiss with the vehicle. When he came around to my side of the car, he ripped the door off the frame and attacked me, attempting to force the case carrying the artifact from my grasp.”

"He ripped the door off the . . . ?" Roxy began.

"Lorenzo had been possessed by a demon," the Cardinal explained, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"No way," Bobby whispered.

"Way, I'm afraid," DeMedici replied, eyes dancing in the firelight.

When the kids glanced at him, surprised at his use of the slang, the old man smiled. "I suppose I watch a little television in my chateau, as well. I have a satellite dish that gets all the American programs."

"When you say 'demon' . . ." Caitlin began, but the Cardinal cut her off.

"I mean exactly that. I was forced to kill Lorenzo, and he was not the last. Some of my other aides, lieutenants who had been with me for years, were set up along my escape route to assist me. Several of those were also possessed, and had murdered the others. I was forced to abandon my route and improvise. Obviously, I did not escape unscathed. In truth, my arrival here is nothing short of a miracle. But I knew that if anyone could help me, Jack Lynch would be the man.

"I only wish that he had more firepower at his disposal than a house filled with children."

Caitlin bit back a sharp retort, but Bobby didn't even try.

"You want firepower," he said angrily, and lifted a hand which blazed into fiery life. "You got it!"

Fairchild expected DeMedici to reel back in shock, maybe even horror. Instead, the old Cardinal merely raised his eyebrows appreciatively.

"Hmmm," he said. "Perhaps you can be of use to me after all."

"If they choose to be," Mr. Lynch corrected from the shadows behind the Cardinal's chair.

"Oh, of course," DeMedici muttered, waving Mr. L.'s comment away.

"Just one question," Sarah interjected suddenly.

"Just one?" Roxy said. "'Cause, y'know, I've got like fifty thousand."

"What is it, ah, Sarah, is it?" the Cardinal replied.

"That's right," Rainmaker agreed. "I just want to know a little bit more about how you managed to get away from these

guys. I mean, you aren't exactly the picture of health, and you're talking about men and women responsible for your security being possessed by demons. And you killed them? How, exactly, did you manage that?"

"Ah," the Cardinal nodded. "Of course, how foolish of me. Well, it's quite simple really."

"Really?" Caitlin asked, wondering how any answer to Sarah's question could be simple.

DeMedici raised his right hand and cold blue light arced up from his long fingers, sparking and dancing on the air.

"I know a little magic," the old man said.

They were all quiet for a few seconds. But Grunge never could stay quiet for long.

"You've gotta be freakin' kiddin' me!" he said.

"No," Caitlin said quietly. "I don't think he is."

After that, there was no sound but the crackling of the fire. Caitlin began to shift nervously, waiting for the Cardinal to continue. Finally, he scanned their faces, and cleared his throat.

"That is all I will tell you tonight," he said. "Your . . . commander? Hmm. Jack has been adamant that you all decide for yourselves if you will help me. If you decide to do so, I will explain the crisis further. Suffice to say that if you do not help me, the possession of my friends and associates will be only the first in a flood of supernatural horror that will soon envelop this world."

With that, the old man rose painfully to his feet and left the study. They could hear him moving down the hall to the guest quarters. Nobody spoke until the sound of a door closing deep inside the mansion reached their ears.

"Okay, so I feel like we've got a whole lotta choice in this, don't you guys?" Roxy asked angrily.

"Demons," Bobby said grimly. "No way."

"Didn't you hear the old guy?" Grunge asked. "Way."

"That's enough," Mr. Lynch said. "There's nothing more any of us can do tonight. We all need rest, and the Cardinal is as safe here as he would be anywhere. Let's all get some sleep, and in the morning, you can decide what your next move will be."

Mr. L. turned to leave.

“Mr. Lynch?” Caitlin asked. The older man turned his scarred face toward her.

“Why are you letting us decide on this one? I mean, usually you just tell us what needs to be done,” she said.

“Why?” he asked, and his face turned cruel. “Because I don’t like the old bastard, Caitlin. Nor do I trust him. Part of me wants to throw him out on his ass.

“But if he’s telling the truth, well, whether or not I like him isn’t really an issue,” Mr. Lynch said.

“Good night,” he added. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah,” Caitlin replied.

“As if,” Roxy muttered.

“Demons, man, what’s up with that?” Grunge said to Bobby when they were back in their room. “Kind of cool, actually, right? We could kick some demon butt, Mr. Lane. Grunge the Exorcist!”

“Are you even listening to yourself, Grunge-man? We’re talking about demons, here. Old Testament stuff, y’know? Hell. Lucifer. Pea-soup puking, head-spinning, Latin speakers.”

“Latin,” Grunge said. “Who the hell speaks Latin besides the Three Stooges?”

“That’s *pig*-Latin, you moron,” Bobby sighed. “And I never thought I’d say this, but you watch way too much cable.”

“Ssshyeah, right, Burnout.”

Bobby threw a pillow at him.

“I guess you’re right, though,” Grunge said. “I mean, trashing on some cyborg or big-head or techno terrorist is getting kind of old, but at least it’s, I don’t know, safe.”

Bobby stared at him. “Safe.”

“Y’know, in comparison.”

“Right.”

“Demons are majorly unpredictable,” Grunge explained.

“Says the expert.”

They fell silent again. Grunge was thinking. Bobby just wanted to go to sleep.

“Your dad really hates that Cardinal dude, though, huh?” Grunge said.

Bobby rolled over to glare at him.

"Don't call him that," Bobby snapped. "He may be my father, but Lynch has never been my 'dad.'"

"Foot in mouth, dude. Sorry."

"Just go to sleep, Grunge," Bobby replied angrily. "If we're lucky, we'll all wake up and find out this whole night has been a bad dream."

"Yeah," Grunge agreed. "Especially that whole thing with Sarah and that Kelly chick."

Bobby chuckled, even as his eyes fluttered closed.

"Especially that," he agreed.

Neither of them slept well. As much as they hoped to dream about Sarah and Caitlin and Roxy, they dreamed about demons instead. In Grunge's dreams, the demons spoke pig-Latin.

"It's weird," Caitlin said.

"You can totally say that again," Roxy agreed.

"Other than the obvious, Caitlin, weird how?" Sarah asked.

She sat on the edge of Caitlin's bed. Roxy lay in her own bed, far under the covers like a frightened child. Caitlin was exhausted, but her mind was racing.

"I believe in God," she said. "I was raised Catholic, and all."

"We all were," Sarah agreed. "Though my heritage has a pretty mixed bag where religion is concerned. Still, I think I know what you mean."

"I don't," Roxy said. "I mean, demons, right. Nasty buggers, fight angels, tempt people, all that stuff."

"That's the point, Roxanne," Caitlin said. "I've always believed in God, and usually in the other stuff the Church teaches. But when I was a kid, they always kind of glossed over all the demon and angel stuff. Heaven they talked about a lot, but Hell was kind of blown off. That's where you go if you're evil. Beyond that really vague concept, nothing. I guess I just never thought of them as anything, well, real."

Sarah was about to reply, but she expected some kind of sarcastic comment from Roxy. She waited for it, but it never came. After a moment, she turned to look at Freefall, expecting to find the other girl asleep. Instead, Roxy was huddled

under the sheets, her magenta streak spread across her pillow, eyes open and staring at them.

“Roxy?” Caitlin asked, obviously as concerned about her as Sarah was.

“You possessed or something?” Sarah said, only half-kidding.

“No,” Roxy replied. “Just a little scared.”

Mark Bradach’s heart beat much too fast as he stood in front of the door to Ivana Baiul’s penthouse apartment. One of many residences, he figured. Ivana wouldn’t leave herself open by having only one address.

In fear of his life, as he had been since the moment he first agreed to work for Ivana, to be her inside man within the hierarchy of I.O., Bradach knocked on the door.

It clicked open before he could knock again.

“You’re late,” she said sternly.

“I’m sorry,” Mark quickly replied, though he’d thought he was at least ten minutes early. It wouldn’t do to argue with Ivana.

He could only see her from the neck up, around the edge of the door. Eyes as cold as her soul, wide and blue inside a crushingly beautiful face.

Bradach smiled. Ivana had been running this little op on her own, but had brought him in to ride herd on the lower level I.O. operatives who were on her payroll. He was absurdly pleased to be her highest placed spy, and the only one who knew the real purpose of her quest for the missing Cardinal. But there were a lot of others who worked for her as well. She had her own little agency within the agency. And if Bradach played his cards right, he’d run it for her when Ivana finally took over I.O. completely. He didn’t doubt that day was coming.

“What news of DeMedici?” she asked.

“Manning and the others have picked up his trail,” Mark said with relief. “He killed a whole bunch of his own men, it seems. Maybe they were on someone else’s payroll. But one way or another, it looks like he flew out of Florence for New York.”

“Excellent,” Ivana said, and let her head drop slightly, her hair hanging just so, lips pursed as if to kiss.

Bradach knew she did it on purpose. Knew she had complete control over the power that came with heartbreaking beauty. Knowing didn't save him from being a foolish man.

“Keep it up, and I may not have to kill you after all,” she said, as if it were a joke.

Bradach knew better.

“Did you bring what I asked for?” Ivana asked.

Mark produced the bottle of champagne which had cost him just under one thousand dollars.

Finally, Ivana smiled. She let the door swing wide, and stood back so that Mark could see all of her. And he could see all of her.

“Well done,” Ivana said. “Now come in and give me what I want.”

“Yes, mistress,” Mark Bradach replied.

He did whatever Ivana told him to do.

CHAPTER 4



After the kids had gone upstairs to bed, Lynch remained in his study. He stood by the window, listening to the dull roar of the ocean outside. Several moments later, Cardinal DeMedici silently returned to the room, walking uncomfortably to the high-backed leather chair he'd abandoned just a few minutes earlier. There was silence for a while.

"John," DeMedici said at length. "Thank you for welcoming me into your home."

"We go way back, Francesco," Lynch said.

"We have known each other for many years, but we have not always been friends."

"That's true." Lynch stretched, his stringy musculature showing in his arms as he extended them. He was much stronger than he looked—and had hidden powers that went well beyond physical strength. He hated to use them, though, and hoped that, whatever the Cardinal's real problem was, it wouldn't come to a fight. "What's it been, twenty years? Twenty-five?"

"You were part of a team then."

"Team 7. Cray, Slayton, Chang, Callahan, Cash. Dane. I'm surprised you didn't go to Dane with this, actually. It's more his bag, now," Lynch said.

"I never liked Dane," the Cardinal said grimly.

"You never liked me," Lynch reminded him. "But business is business, right?"

The Cardinal didn't respond.

"Remember Alex Fairchild?" Lynch asked. "Caitlin is his

daughter. Grunge, the one with the tattoo, is Chang's son. Bobby, of course, is mine."

"The more things change . . ."

"That's right. Team 7 has long since disbanded. Now I have another team to worry about."

"A much younger team, at that," the Cardinal observed.

Lynch nodded. "Younger, for sure. But potentially even more powerful. These kids have barely begun to test their real limits. I walk a fine line with them—I want them to explore their powers and abilities, but I don't want them killed in the process. And I want them to learn responsibility at the same time."

The Cardinal steeped his long fingers, touched them to his lips. "I see your dilemma, John. Difficult to truly test them except in combat situations. But in combat, the wrong choice can be a fatal one, no?"

"That's right. We do drills, exercises. I train them and work them as best I can. But none of that is the same as real world experience. The kids have done great, so far, in the battles they've had to fight. But I know there are challenges greater than the ones they've met so far, enemies far more dangerous than the ones they've taken down. How do I gauge their readiness for the big leagues?"

"Sometimes one has to be thrown into the water to see if one is ready to swim," DeMedici said archly.

"There's usually a lifeguard at the pool, though. These are kids. Powerful kids, and bright, but kids just the same. I trust them. But they're still teenagers. You know how confused teenagers can be. Raging hormones, identity crises, peer pressure . . . teens have it rough to begin with. Add in abilities beyond the comprehension of most humans, and you've got a bunch of kids whose problems are far beyond those of your average mallrat."

"Mallrat?" the Cardinal asked.

"Sorry. An Americanism. I've been in California too long. Teens who spend all their free time hanging out at shopping centers."

"Ah. Sounds frightfully dull."

"Agreed," Lynch nodded. "But it's a fairly common phenomenon, I'm afraid."

"I'm sure."

"At least they're not home watching MTV. You do know—"

DeMedici raised one hand. "Yes, John. My villa is remote, but even there, we know what MTV is. We get CNN, as well."

"Right," Lynch said. "We've exported ourselves everywhere."

The Cardinal rose to his feet, a little shakily. "Again, John, you have my deepest gratitude for welcoming me like this. You owe me nothing, and yet you've taken me in. Now, it's very late, and I've been traveling for quite a while, so if you'll excuse me, I must retire before I fall asleep here in my seat."

Lynch walked the older man to the foot of the stairs. "You know where your room is, Cardinal," he said. "We'll talk more in the morning."

Sleep didn't come easily to Caitlin that night. Too much to think about, what with Mr. Lynch's strange friend, Cardinal DeMedici, and his tale of supernatural weirdness. She had come upstairs, brushed her teeth, changed, and slipped between the sheets, but her eyes wouldn't stay closed and her mind wouldn't quiet down. What did the Cardinal really want? Their protection from . . . from demons? That was insane. But what, she thought, if it was true?

They had faced plenty of bad guys (and gals) before, and had always come out on top. But demons? Still, when it came to heroics, she and her friends, she had to admit, weren't half bad. There had been a time when she'd never have believed it possible, though . . .

Princeton was awful. Not the school—most of her instructors were great, and Caitlin loved learning. She expected to graduate with a degree in computer science, maybe get into programming. She wanted to be the female Bill Gates.

So it wasn't learning that bothered her, but the overall college experience. She hated her roommate, man-crazy Alexandra, who kicked her out of the room on an almost nightly basis so she could play with her boy-toys.

And if time spent on campus wasn't bad enough, she had

to spend her summers back in Oregon with her aunt and uncle. She'd been living with them since her parents went missing—she'd tried to stop herself from believing they were actually dead. (It had only been recently that she'd found out, to her delight, that her dad was still alive.)

In those days, she was lonely and far from home, with only her schoolbooks to keep her company. So when the opportunity to become part of a government youth service program called The Genesis Project presented itself, she wasn't hard to convince. It was either that, take a summer job in New Jersey, or head back to Oregon again. And the recruiters for Genesis were very persuasive. The program, they told her, was open only to the most highly qualified students. It paid well, so she wouldn't have to work a part-time job while finishing her degree. She'd get real world work experience, specialized training, and a comprehensive academic program.

The recruiters didn't give Caitlin much time to think it over. But in light of her other choices, it wasn't really much of a decision at all. She agreed to go.

Remembering it now, safely ensconced in Gen¹³'s safe house in La Jolla, it gave her chills to remember how naive she'd been back then. She'd grown up an awful lot in the months since that day. There were so many clues that ought to have made her suspicious. Instead, she was just excited.

The recruiters had given her only a few minutes to pack her belongings before they drove her to a government airfield outside of Princeton. The flight was direct, a few hours in the air, and then they touched down at a small airstrip inside California's Death Valley, at the base of a vast complex built into a rocky mesa.

She was amazed at the level of technology that surrounded her here—things she'd never seen, or dreamed of, that seemed commonplace. The whole first day was a bizarre experience. Helga Kleinman, the heavysset German woman who ran the orientation session, sped her through the complex so fast she couldn't make heads or tails of things. There seemed to be a strong military presence—well-armed soldiers in futuristic-looking armor that Helga called "Keepers" were everywhere—and there were numerous doors with "Authorized

Personnel Only” and “Hazard” signs posted on them that made her a little nervous.

But, still, she wasn't really suspicious. Intrigued, yes, but not suspicious. She just hadn't been raised that way.

At the end of that first day, she was sent to her private room, a smallish chamber where she had a bed, a locker, and a small shelf to hold the books she'd need. Despite her anxiety over her new surroundings, she slept like a rock, exhausted from the day's frenetic pace.

But that day was nothing compared to the next. It started as soon as she dressed and left her room to track down the cafeteria for breakfast. A strange-looking young man came barreling down the hallway, straight at her, with Helga and a couple of Keepers in hot pursuit. He was looking over his shoulder at them, and didn't notice Caitlin stepping into the corridor.

Caitlin had pulled her door closed, and had no room to retreat. It was a classic case of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object, and it ended up with the force, in this case one P. Edmund Chang, sprawled on top of the object, Caitlin Fairchild. He was in no hurry to get off, she noticed. He did apologize, once they were both on their feet. She wondered if his politeness then had anything to do with the fact that the Keepers had lifted him off her, and that Helga was holding his arm while a medic injected him with the hypodermic that he'd been running from in the first place. Still, he'd been kind of cute, in an unpolished way.

There were two other kids on the scene, one with a magenta streak in her black hair and an unauthorized cigarette between her lips, and the other an unsmiling boy with reddish-blond hair. Caitlin, it turned out, was in the same “study pod” as Grunge, Roxanne Spaulding, and Bobby Lane. They worked together, studied together, drilled together—there was far more emphasis on physical fitness than Caitlin had been led to expect—ate together. After classes, they socialized together, playing cards, watching TV, or just talking. After a while, they were joined by Sarah Rainmaker, a tall, beautiful Native American girl from Arizona. These five excelled while other kids in the program flunked out and were shipped home.

If only they'd known then what was really going on at the

Genesis Compound. Maybe they would have been able to get out before their lives were changed forever.

The whole thing was secretly an I.O. experiment run by a madwoman named Ivana Baiul, with the knowledge and complicity of I.O.'s head, Miles Craven, but against the wishes of John Lynch, another I.O. executive. Helping Ivana run the place were Matt and Nicole Callahan, codenamed Threshold and Bliss—brother and sister, and two of the most twisted people Caitlin hoped ever to meet.

The truth started to come together the night Caitlin became violently ill. She left her room after lights out, which was strictly against the rules, to look for the infirmary. Instead, she happened upon a computer room where a glowing monitor displayed a very familiar name—that of Alex Fairchild, her father. While looking at the screen, trying to figure out what it might mean, she was startled by Grunge and Roxy. They said they often came here because it was one of the few areas where there were no security cameras. Grunge came to eat, Roxy to smoke.

But Caitlin must have set off some kind of alarm, because suddenly an armored Keeper was pointing a gun at them. When Grunge tried to get the guy to back off, the Keeper took a swing at him and nearly knocked him out of his bear-foot slippers. Angry, Caitlin rushed the Keeper, but he knocked her down as well.

Rage coursed through her body, burning inside her like she'd swallowed living fire. She pushed to her feet, came at the Keeper again, and punched him with all her might. All her might being, at that moment, far more than she had ever had before. The Keeper's head snapped back in his armor, and he crumpled to the floor like a discarded candy wrapper. She was afraid that she'd killed him.

But that fear didn't last long, because she was suddenly far more distressed by what was happening to her body. The pain that wracked her was incredible. She felt as if her muscles were tearing, her bones breaking. And that wasn't far from the truth.

While Grunge and Roxy looked on in amazement, Caitlin's body—there was no other way to say it—grew. Years of development taking place in seconds. Her legs stretched, gaining

her several inches of height. Her figure became rounded, even voluptuous—hips and breasts filling out and ripping through her nightgown. Grunge's eyes widened, and it wasn't just surprise at her transformation. Even her vision improved—the glasses she'd always needed fell to the ground, broken, but she could see perfectly.

Caitlin had become some kind of super-woman. A nearly naked one, at that. Roxy persuaded Grunge to give Caitlin his shirt. It took some convincing, but he finally went along with it. She pulled it around her suddenly buxom form and began to button it when klaxons sounded. Somehow, an alarm had been raised. Caitlin and the others could hear the sound of a dozen armored Keepers running toward them.

They ran.

When they spotted the Keepers, Nicole Callahan was at the head of the pack, screaming for blood. They ran harder. Finally, they turned into a dead-end corridor. It looked like all was lost for Caitlin, Bobby, and Roxy. But Caitlin grabbed the steel wall with her bare hands, and shredded it like so much tissue paper. This gave them access to a service tunnel, and they dodged in there. Breathing space, at last . . .

Then they came to the end of the road. Or tunnel, in this case. The end of this particular tunnel opened onto the side of a cliff, several hundred feet above the hard-packed desert floor. A killing drop in front, Keepers gaining behind. Nowhere to go.

Until . . .

The steel-clad ceiling of the service tunnel began to melt, taking out a few Keepers as it did. When the opening widened sufficiently, Bobby flew in, flames dancing around his body. Suspended in the air with him were Sarah Rainmaker and a guy they didn't know very well, Tom Hallinan. Bobby constructed a wall of flame between the Keepers and the kids, and then lifted them all on a thermal updraft and flew them out over the desert. By the time they landed, they'd crossed into Nevada. Tom had been carrying a uniform in his backpack, which Caitlin put on. They were free.

Or so they thought. Of course, the Keepers didn't just let them leave. They dispatched ships to chase the kids down. At Tom's urging, the kids stopped running and started fighting.

First, he used some kind of mental power to make one of the ships crash. Then, Bobby lit himself up and flew to meet the next one, cooking its weapons and finally toasting its occupants. Caitlin herself took down the next one, lifting a boulder as if it were a pebble and hurling it into the ship's engine.

While those three were occupied, though—as much with trying to understand their newfound powers, as with using them—the occupants of a fourth ship cornered the other three, Roxy, Grunge, and Sarah. They used a weapon called a Tangler on Roxy, entwining her in stinging cords. Grunge tried to free her, but the Keepers were closing in. Suddenly, Sarah whipped up a sandstorm that buried the Keepers. She had known of her powers even before coming to the Genesis Compound, but had kept them secret, in her own inscrutable way, from everybody. When an unseen Keeper leveled a gun at Sarah's head, Roxy, whose powers had just manifested, floated the Keeper into the air and dropped her against a rock wall.

The team's first battle was won. Only Grunge was still without some special powers. As they talked about their strange situation, Tom told them what he had learned about them. He had been a Keeper, not a student, so he had access to information the others didn't. They were all Gen¹³, he told them. Progeny of Gen¹², experimental subjects—and only the latest batch, going back decades—of a top-secret I.O. project that tried to use advanced drugs to give people superhuman powers. At some point, it had been decided that the children of the Gen¹² subjects would be more inclined than the general population to manifest those powers, given the right stimuli.

They had taken another Keeper hostage, and he confirmed Tom's story—or at least part of it. Specifically, the part about how the people behind the Genesis Project would never let the six kids live long enough to tell the authorities about it. Tom responded by letting his mental powers loose on the unarmed, bound soldier, causing his head to explode all over the walls of the small cave in which they'd taken refuge.

That was it for Caitlin. She'd had enough of Tom's way of doing things. No way was she going along with any plan he wanted to promote—he was too bloodthirsty. But the others had fallen under his sway. They left Caitlin alone, in the mid-

dle of the Nevada desert, while they headed back to the Compound to kick some tail.

She was lonely, but determined to find her way to civilization, to reveal the true nature of Project Genesis. That night, she slept fitfully. In the morning, as she tried to formulate a plan of some kind, she had a sudden, clear mental image of Roxy in incredible pain, and Tom Hallinan—but not Tom. It wasn't Tom at all, never had been. He was really Matt Callahan, or Threshold. Ivana's lapdog. He had tricked them all; led them into combat, where their powers would manifest, and then taken the others back to the Compound where they could be imprisoned and forced to serve as super-soldiers in a secret I.O. army.

Caitlin knew what she had to do. She went back to the scene of the previous evening's battle, and found an operating gun that had belonged to one of the slain Keepers. Then, she struck a course for the Genesis Compound. Her friends needed her.

Back at the Compound, Sarah, Roxy, and Bobby were confined, with Neuro-bands dampening their powers so they couldn't break free. Grunge was hung upside down by his ankles and wrists. Threshold was doing everything he could think of to try to force Grunge to manifest his gen-active powers. "Everything" included torture and verbal abuse. Finally, Threshold threatened Roxy, and that did it.

Grunge changed. As his powers manifested, he absorbed the properties of the steel alloy cables that were holding him. His escape was dramatic, to say the least.

He broke free, and slugged Threshold with a metallic fist. By the time Caitlin found her friends, there was a battle royale underway. Grunge was learning his new powers quickly—as a side benefit, he could absorb the properties of bullets as they were fired into his body, making them relatively harmless. As good as the Gen¹³ team was, though, they were young and inexperienced, and Ivana had a nearly endless supply of Keepers to chase them down. The kids were becoming exhausted, and it was starting to look like they were down for the count.

Which was when John Lynch came in with a squad of Black Hammers. The Hammers made Ivana's Keepers look like cub scouts. While they mopped up, Lynch explained to

the kids what they really were. He told them about Team 7, a military unit made up of the finest soldiers from the various services. As good as they were, though, Miles Craven wanted them better. He exposed them to the Gen-Factor. They developed supernormal powers—but were nearly killed in the process. Some went mad, some killed themselves, some survived. But none were unchanged. Lynch's scars were self-inflicted, on that first day, as he clawed insanely at his own face.

But with time, the survivors settled down into nearly normal lives. Normal, that was, until I.O. decided it wanted to experiment with their children. Then they went into hiding. Some were separated from their kids, like Alex Fairchild and his daughter Caitlin.

Now, Lynch was determined that the fate that had befallen him and his Team 7 comrades would not be the future of these young people. He meant to shut the Genesis Project down once and for all. If that meant shutting down his old nemesis Ivana Baiul, so much the better.

In the end, however, Ivana escaped with other experimental subjects—teens in stasis tubes whose powers had not yet materialized. Mr. Lynch asked the five friends to join him, to work with him to realize their true potential, to use their special powers to make the world a better place. They all agreed to throw in their lot with him, knowing that Ivana and her Keepers would be looking for them, would not rest, in fact, until they were all dead or on her side. So, Gen¹³ was formed—five young comrades who had been through trial by fire, and come out of it unscathed, undaunted, and ready for more.

Now they lived in a safe house that Lynch had prepared for just such an eventuality, in the relative paradise that was La Jolla. No one here knew their real names, or where they'd come from. No one, as far as Caitlin knew, even asked why that scarred man with the blonde housekeeper shared his beachfront house with five teenagers. People around here respected one another's privacy, which was, she figured, one of the reasons he had chosen this place to begin with.

It was comfortable here, she realized. She liked her companions, liked Mr. Lynch, and Anna. The beach was lovely. UCSD looked like a great place to continue her education.

The house was perfect. In a way, though she'd never be able to have a "normal" life again, Caitlin realized that she didn't want to go back to her old life. And with this thought, she snuggled deeper under her covers and began, at long last, to drift off to sleep.

Cardinal DeMedici had no problem falling asleep. He'd had long days before. You didn't achieve his position in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church without hard work and a few sleepless nights. But most of his previous long days didn't involved killing anyone, or running for his life. Most. And those which had had been a long time ago. He was exhausted, mentally and physically. As soon as his grayed head touched the soft pillow, he was adrift.

But the cares of the day stayed with him. Dreams filled his head, disturbing his sleep. He tossed, pulling the pillow around his head.

It became a cloud, and he was on a plane, flying through a thick blanket of white fluff. He didn't know what was on the other side of the cloud layer, knew only that behind him, on the ground, a terrible menace snapped its jaws and snarled at him.

He rose from his seat and walked to the other side of the airplane, hoping to get a glimpse from the windows there at his destination. When he got there, the row of seats was empty. He slid in, and over to the window. Nothing. More clouds, as far as the eye could see. The plane kept rising, tearing through the clouds like a sword through cotton candy. But he couldn't see a top to the cloud layer.

Turning to exit the row, he saw that there was indeed an occupant in the aisle seat. Funny he hadn't noticed it before. The occupant turned to him as he tried to excuse himself, and smiled. The smile was exceptionally toothy—the seat's occupant was a grinning, moldy skeleton wearing a business suit.

But the suit was threadbare, decomposing, as if the skeleton had been buried in it months or years before. As DeMedici pushed past, the skeleton's lower jaw snapped off and dropped to its lap. Insects fell onto the jaw with wet, plopping sounds, as if the skull was full of them and the jaw had been the only thing holding them in.

With skeletal hands grabbing at his robes, DeMedici forced his way into the aisle and ran back toward his seat. But the airplane was suddenly full, and everybody was standing in the aisles—had they landed? Were they disembarking? DeMedici pushed against the current. The other travelers were all ashen-faced, listless, so many zombies blocking his way. Finally, he shoved past them, into a clear spot.

There was a flight attendant coming at him now, pushing a cart before her. Maybe this was why the aisles were clogged, he thought, as the airplane was still clearly in flight. Passengers trying to get out of the way of the cart. He could use a drink, though. He held out a hand, and the smiling, vacant-eyed attendant pushed a glass into it. Tomato juice, he thought, tilting his head back and swallowing.

He spat it all over the seat. She'd filled the plastic cup with blood! He spat again, looking for the flight attendant. He'd get her name and report it to the airline when he reached his destination. Wherever that was. She had moved several rows ahead, and now, all the other passengers were settled in their seats, taking cups of blood from her and drinking silently. He tapped her on the shoulder. She turned.

And glared at him with fiery eyes. Long strands of saliva dripped from gleaming fangs. Her face was covered in scales. He backed away, didn't say anything to her. Probably, he thought absurdly, a trainee.

He sat down again. Leaning over the center seat, which seethed with a writhing mass of snakes, he looked out the small window. There was a break in the clouds now, and something on the other side. Something solid and green. He was looking, he realized, at the earth. He had thought they were climbing through the clouds, when all along they'd been dropping. Now the ground was immediately below them, only seconds away from a horrible impact. He screamed. Around him, all the other passengers turned and glared at him. They weren't concerned—but why would they be? They were already dead, all of them. Their skin was gray and rotting. Eyeballs fell out, fingers dropped off, teeth were spat at him. They were dead, and he was alive, and they resented him that difference. They were closing on him as the plane's engines

screached, revving up for that final dive into the hard, hard ground. . . .

Caitlin heard the Cardinal's cry of terror. She had been drifting off, finally. But the old man sounded genuinely scared. She slipped from her bed and ran down the hall. His door was unlocked, and she pushed it open, flipping on the light as she did so.

"Are you okay, Cardinal DeMedici?" she asked. "It's me, Caitlin."

The Cardinal was sitting up in his bed, but she couldn't tell if he was awake yet. His hands were up in front of him, as if warding off some horrible evil. His eyes were open, buggy with fear. His mouth worked, but only a small croaking sound came from it.

"Cardinal?" She went to his side, unsure of what to do next. She touched one of his hands. He jerked it away, cranked his head to face her. But he seemed to wake up then, focused on her.

"Oh," he said. "Please forgive me, child." He smiled ashamedly. "Old men have nightmares, you see. I hope I haven't distressed you."

"I was a little worried about you for a minute," she said. "You looked pretty freaked out."

"It wasn't . . . pleasant. But just a dream, no? Nothing to worry about."

"Sounds like you have plenty to worry about anyway, without dreams adding to it."

"Truer words were never spoken, Miss Fairchild. But I'm fine. Really."

"Okay," she said. "I'll go back to bed, then. If there's anything you need, though, I'm in the room right next door."

"I'm sure I will be fine now. If you could do me a favor, though . . . ?"

"Whatever."

"Please don't mention this to John, if I might ask that. I don't want him to worry about me."

"Cardinal DeMedici," Caitlin said with a smile, "worrying about people is what Mr. Lynch does best."

She left his light on, at his request, and closed his door behind her.

What a strange guy, she thought, walking back to her room. She couldn't remember ever having had a dream as horrible as the one he seemed to have had. She would have expected a Cardinal to be at peace with himself and the world, and his dreams to be full of grace and light.

Maybe bad dreams were the price you paid for entry into Heaven, though. Might not be such a bad tradeoff, she reflected. She thought about that as she shut her eyes. A few bad dreams, eternal salvation. There were worse bargains out there.

CHAPTER 5



There were things, Lew Manning had heard, that money couldn't buy. But he knew from experience that information wasn't one of them. Neither was loyalty—although you could put a good-sized down payment on that, a truth he'd learned through fear over the past twenty-four hours.

Fourteen hours after he'd left Ivana's office, dying for a cigarette—a habit he no longer pursued—he stood inside JFK International Airport with the two agents who'd lost the Cardinal in the first place. Bozzi was Italian, and Lew held him more to blame than the American, Bell. Hell, Rome was Bozzi's home territory. They never should have lost the Cardinal.

It would be the last screw-up any of them would be allowed.

At least they'd picked up the Cardinal's trail, and traced him here to JFK. The trail hadn't been difficult to pick up. Airport police had reported finding a body in a men's room. The body had been unidentified until fingerprints were broadcast over the Interpol's computer network—a sort of law enforcement Internet—and Vatican police had matched the prints with their own records. The dead man was Guiseppe Cotrupe, an aide to the recently vanished Cardinal DeMedici. He'd been killed the hard way—barehanded—his head bashed again and again on the hard tile walls of the men's room.

Weird thing was, according to the coroner's report, there'd been no signs of force on the corpse. No bruise or contusion to show that Cotrupe had been attacked. It almost looked like

he'd done the damage to himself. Which was, of course, patently impossible.

Manning's search web had already been cast by the time the body was identified, so he got a call in the middle of the night. Bozzi and Bell were already airborne, flying into JFK because that was where DeMedici's escape plans called for him to fly to. They knew he'd eventually flown out of Florence, but it looked like he had indeed landed at his original destination—the dead aide was proof of that, to Manning. The question was, why had DeMedici killed his aide, and where had he gone?

The three had split up to more efficiently cover the airlines, rental car companies, and cabs. Manning took airlines because he was in charge, and it meant he could stay inside. He didn't like New York at all, didn't want to breathe its air if he didn't have to.

"I'm sorry, sir," the counter clerk at United said to him. She flashed him a smile, but it was forced—she didn't like having to waste her time on this kind of wild goose chase. The people in line behind him didn't care for it either. Too bad for them, he thought. He didn't care about them. As for her, she'd already pocketed the fifty he'd slipped her. "I don't find any tickets in the system sold to anyone with the name DeMedici."

"Look up C-cardinal," he said.

"Like the baseball team?"

"Yes."

"One moment." She punched some keys, waited. She looked at him again, caught him looking at her, gave him the smile.

"No matches on Cardinal, either."

"Thank you very much." He moved on to the next airline.

Bell hated this duty. He was a Keeper. He had been trained by I.O. as a soldier. He'd been with I.O. for a couple of years, brought in by Dick Reisner and Ivana Baiul herself. When the Genesis Compound had opened, he'd been posted there, escaping with Ivana when it all went sour at the end. He was a guy who wore armor, carried a powerful weapon, kicked tail.

Shadowing some priest wasn't the kind of thing he had signed on for.

Bell had never been any good at subtlety. He liked the direct approach. Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out. If he had his way, he wouldn't be wandering around the airport looking for people who remembered the old man. He'd be on the counter, waving his weapon at the herd, threatening to shoot a sheep a minute until someone came through with the info.

He'd finished asking questions of all the car rental agencies in the airport. No one remembered anyone who looked like the priest. He'd shown a picture. Didn't jog any memories. The name DeMedici didn't show up on any rental receipts. Neither did the name Pope. He didn't know if the old priest had a sense of humor or not, but figured better safe than sorry.

Now he was looking for the janitor who found the body. This was charming. The only way to find a janitor, he figured, is to look for the cleanest bathroom you can find. Janitors kept away from the really messy ones, because then they might have to work. He found a relatively clean one, and waited outside for a few minutes.

It wasn't long before a guy showed up dressed in a gray jumpsuit, pushing a cart with a huge gray trash barrel on it, a couple of brooms and mops sticking out from different holes, a big wad of plastic trash bags, and a few squirt bottles of cleaning solutions. Everything about the guy was gray. He was a white guy, but his hair and mustache were gray. Bell was pretty sure if he got close enough, he'd see that the janitor's teeth were gray.

He walked into the men's room behind Mr. Gray. Sure enough, he was inside wiping down a counter that was clean to begin with.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Yup," the janitor said.

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

"You a cop?"

Bell flashed a badge. He had a collection of them.

"Ask away."

"I'm looking for the guy found a body in here the other day."

“We find bodies all the time, boss. You’d be surprised what we find.”

“I’m talking about yesterday. A man. In one of the men’s rooms.”

“I found a woman in one of the men’s rooms one day. ‘Course, she wasn’t dead. ‘Bout died of embarrassment, I walked in on her, though.”

“Never mind. I guess it wasn’t you.”

“Sure, it was. Yesterday. Just down from the Northwest ticket counter. Cat in a nice suit, tie. Bloodied up something fierce.”

“You found him?”

“I just said, didn’t I?”

“Buddy, I’ve already lost track of whatever you’ve said. Tell me about it, and make sense.”

“You can’t just take the report from the airport police?”

“I could, I’d be wasting my time here with you?”

The janitor smiled at that. “Guess maybe not.”

“Then tell me.”

“I just did, boss. Over by the Northwest counter. Men’s room. I walk in. Blood everywhere, walls, floor. Had to scrub for an hour to get that out. My elbow still hurts.”

“Was there anyone else around?”

“Not at first. I walk in. Place is empty. Except for the dead guy, of course. He’s going nowhere. I call it in. Cops come, take a bunch of pictures, measurements, like that. Then they take the body away, tell me get the place cleaned up.”

“So you didn’t see anyone leave the room before you went in?”

“Sure, I did. Tall, skinny guy. Older. Wearing a hat and a long coat. Looked foreign, you know? Get a lot of foreigners here, of course.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that at first?”

“Why didn’t you ask me that, that was what you wanted to know?”

Bell pushed past him, out of the men’s room. He dialed Manning’s number on a cell phone. Manning picked up on the second ring. “Y-y-yeah.”

“He’s the guy. Janitor saw him coming out of the men’s room right before he found the body.”

“G-good. At least we can definitely p-place him here. I haven’t found out where he went next, though.”

“How’s Bozzi doing?”

“Haven’t heard. Meet me at the D-delta counter.”

Bozzi was nowhere. Talk to cab drivers, shuttle drivers, limos, Manning had said. Of course, it took him longer to say it. So Bozzi went outside, found a long line of cab drivers, started approaching them. Each time, he first had to convince the guy he didn’t need a ride, was just after information. Then he had to slip each one some bills to even talk to him. Turns out, even though Bozzi’s English wasn’t so good, it was better than that of ninety percent of the cabbies here. He managed intelligible conversations with twelve of them in English, and there were a couple of paisans who spoke Italian.

The fourth cab driver had put it best. “I don’t know nothing,” the guy had said. Maybe that was all the English he had memorized, or maybe it was a simple statement of fact. But it could have been the response of everyone Bozzi talked to. No one seemed to recognize the picture. No one seemed to remember the old Cardinal. Eventually, an airport cop started getting curious about what Bozzi was doing, and Bozzi decided giving up and going back inside was the better part of valor.

Two hours of failed attempts at conversation hadn’t done much for Bozzi’s mood. And Bozzi wasn’t exactly Mr. Cheerful at the best of times. He didn’t mind admitting it, either. He knew he hadn’t been hired for his personality, and they didn’t keep him around for his charm.

Bozzi had been recruited in Rome by a guy named Reisner. Manning said Reisner wasn’t with the company anymore. He always called it that—the company. Bozzi had worked for a company once. They sold medical supplies.

This was no company. The only medical supplies these guys were involved with were the ones that were used to treat their accident cases—the ones who accidentally didn’t die.

Not that Bozzi had a problem with that. He’d been born in Palermo. As a boy, his family had moved from there to the Bronx. He had moved back to Rome when he was twenty. He had known people who died. And he’d known people who

killed them. Didn't matter much to him, one way or the other, as long as he wasn't on the dying side. Bozzi loved life . . . his own life. Others, he wasn't so concerned about.

So he knew basically what kind of operation this was from day one. He could tell by looking at Ivana, who had been around when Reisner brought him on board, that she wasn't one to flinch from doing what needed to be done. Sometimes that would mean whacking somebody. Sometimes not. Today, it looked like a "not" day.

But some of those cabbies were just asking for it. And the way that airport cop looked at him, like he was trying to pull something . . . it took all his self-restraint not to take the guy out then and there.

JFK was a big airport. There was no way he was going to find Manning and Bell in here. Maybe if he listened for the sound of Manning trying to get a sentence out . . . Bozzi hated anything that he considered a weakness in a person. Any kind of defect or deficiency was probably a sign that a person shouldn't be allowed to live. He didn't hate his job, except sometimes when he had to do stupid things and put up with stupid people. But he hated having to take orders from a guy like Manning.

His cell phone rang. He snatched it out of his pocket. He despised the thing, but Manning insisted he carry it.

"Bozzi."

"B-bozzi, it's M-m-manning." Bozzi made Manning nervous. He loved knowing that—it made dealing with the guy that much more bearable.

"Who?" he asked.

"L-listen, Bozzi. I'm running out of airlines, and B-bell found a guy who saw DeM-medici here in the airport. How you doing?"

"Big zero. Nobody knows nothing."

"O-okay. Meet us at the Delta counter, then. We're almost done here, I guess."

"On my way." Bozzi pushed the "end" button and closed the phone. He wanted to shoot it.

June was the counter attendant at Delta. At least, that was what her little name tag said, and Manning didn't figure she had a

reason to lie about it. Had he been running the place, he might have had all the employees switch name tags once in a while, just in case some annoying customer complained about one of them. He'd bring the correct June out from behind the wall, and the customer would be forced to admit that this wasn't the person he thought was June. Then he could laugh at her (in Manning's world, all annoying customers were women) and send her away.

June smiled at him when he approached the counter. "Yes sir?" she said. She was perky—red hair cut in a kind of page-boy, bright blue eyes that actually twinkled. Manning hated perky. "Ticket please?"

"I d-don't have a ticket," he said. "I'm not flying."

She thought a moment, chewing her lower lip. This was clearly outside her range of expertise. "Then . . . how can I help you?"

"I'm trying to locate a man. My f-father, actually. He may have flown on Delta yesterday. He has a bit of a m-mental condition, and he neglected to tell us where he was going."

"Oh, dear," June said. Her expression changed: concern. It was like they trained them in facial expressions at Delta school.

"Yes," Manning said. "He may have flown under the name DeMedici. Can you check that?"

"Certainly, sir," June said. Solicitous now. A lost father, and all. "Just a moment."

People in line started to mumble and shift around. Manning shot them a dirty look. So did Bozzi. They stopped.

"Sorry, sir. No DeMedici."

"Try Cardinal," Manning suggested.

June bent her head, tapped some keys. "No . . ."

Bell joined Manning at the counter. "Look under Pope," he said.

June tapped some more. "Sorry."

This was where they all lost patience. Manning dropped a fifty dollar bill on her work surface, below the counter. She looked at it.

"Sir," she said.

"This is r-really important," Manning said. "My father, you know. Maybe you could look at a p-picture of him."

She scooped up the bill, tucked it into a pocket in her uniform. "Sure," she said.

Manning fished the picture out, showed it to her. She let her gaze rest on it for a full minute before looking away. Then she rubbed her temples.

"He does look kind of familiar," she said. "Let me look at something." She turned back to her computer monitor, punched some more keys. The perky smile came back.

"Mm-hmm," she said. "Thought so."

"What is it?" Manning asked.

"Yesterday," she said. "We red flag the files when there's something out of the ordinary. I saw this one this morning, when I came on, but didn't really think anything of it."

"What?" Manning said.

"We bumped a passenger, bound for Lindbergh Field." She looked up at Manning, solicitous again. "San Diego, that is. The flight was full, but this passenger had a seat. Still, we bumped him. But the flight log showed a full flight. Someone flew for free, without a ticket. I'm not sure how. He would have landed in San Diego at 4:57 P.M."

"You're p-positive of this?"

"It's all here in the system. It's red flagged. The thing is," June said, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "I was working yesterday. I kind of remember seeing someone who looked like your father. But right after that, I got this headache. Just awful, blinding. A migraine, I guess. I don't really remember much from the next few hours. I suppose I could have somehow given your father a boarding pass without selling him a ticket. I don't see how, but anything's possible, right?"

"Right."

"I'm sooo sorry," June said. "I suppose you'll want to tell my supervisor?"

"We'll k-keep it between us, June," Manning said. "I won't tell if y-you don't."

Delta had a flight to San Diego in three hours. It went through Atlanta. It would land at 10:20 that night. Manning got on his cell phone, called a number he'd memorized but had used only twice before.

"Travel," the voice on the other end of the line said.

“Manning, Lew. 104957,” Manning said. There was a moment of silence.

“This isn’t a land line.”

“That’s r-right. No time.”

A sigh. “What do you need, Manning?”

Manning loved this. He wasn’t working for International Operations, he was working for Ivana Baiul. At least, she gave him orders, and she paid him. But I.O. paid him, too. And when he needed to fly somewhere in a hurry, I.O. would fly him there. And somehow, Ivana kept all this shielded from the people at I.O. who would care.

This guy at the travel desk, he didn’t care. His job was making travel arrangements for I.O. personnel. Probably had never been outside the Beltway in his life. One operative was the same as another to him. A name and a number. He didn’t realize that he was about to schedule a military jet to transport three people who were working with Ivana to bring down the power structure of the whole agency and replace it with their own. If he had, he probably wouldn’t have cared. Long as he got to run the travel desk.

“Three passengers, New York City to San Diego. We’re at Kennedy now.”

“We can accommodate you there,” the voice said. “But in San Diego, you’ll have to land at Miramar Naval Air Station. The Top Gun base. It’s a little ways outside of town. We’ll shuttle you to Lindbergh Field.”

“Y-you do that,” Manning said. Things were starting to come together.

DeMedici had known I.O. was on to him in Rome, dodged them somehow and flown out of Florence instead. But I.O. already knew that JFK was his destination, and still they’d missed him here. Manning had been sure not to mention that part of it to Ivana. But now they were getting warmer.

There was more to it, though. Manning couldn’t figure out why the Cardinal had flown alone, or why he’d gone on to San Diego. The aide figured into that somehow. How, Manning didn’t know. But DeMedici had killed him because of it. Then, Cardinal DeMedici, who Manning had been told was some kind of magician or sorcerer had cast some kind of spell over June at Delta—if you believed that sort of thing. Still,

somehow he had persuaded her to get him on a plane to San Diego without keeping any kind of record that he had flown. What he didn't realize was that by not making some kind of record, he had created a record anyway.

If he'd just used some phony name he'd have been better off.

But was San Diego his real destination, or was it just where the next convenient flight was going? What had tipped him off that he was in trouble? These were things Manning couldn't know until he found the old man. But he'd do that, even if he and Bozzi and Bell had to repeat the same process at San Diego that they'd just gone through. Manning rubbed his neck gingerly. It didn't do a person any good at all to let Ivana Baiul down, he thought. If anybody did that, it wasn't going to be him. He was thinking about growing a beard, just because he was no longer comfortable even shaving his neck.

CHAPTER 6



CHAPTER 8

For, like, the entirety of his existence before becoming gen-active, Percival Edmund Chang had hated waking up. Sleeping in was an art form practiced by many, but mastered by few. Grunge had been the Master. If he was up before one in the afternoon on any day that didn't start with school bells, it would definitely have signified the imminent arrival of the Apocalypse.

But Mr. Lynch only had so much patience for the Master. Sleeping in did not go over very well with the Big Kahuna. Grunge figured Mr. L. had, like, every scout medal there was, and a few they had invented just for him. Well, okay, maybe he didn't have the one they gave for helping old ladies across the street . . . or the one for personality, come to think of it.

All the others, though, definitely.

Which meant he expected them all to get up bright and early, or at least by, like, ten at the latest, and do something with their lives. Study. Work out. Hone their control of their gen-active abilities. Which would have been easier if they had some kind of massive high-tech room built just for that, like in the comics.

Grunge had actually spent a lot of time being disappointed that having the equivalent of superpowers wasn't more like the comics. But then, not everything was a disappointment. And there were some really, really good reasons to get up early, even on a Saturday morning. For instance, Caitlin was built like a teenage Wonder Woman. Better, actually. And it never sucked getting up early when it meant you could have

breakfast with Sarah, Kat and Roxy sitting at the table in their nightgowns. Grunge wasn't even sure you could call what Sarah had on a nightgown.

He didn't know what to call it. But he knew what he liked.

"Gru-unge!" Roxy whined, staring daggers at him for the way he was totally not looking at their faces.

"Pass the sugar, Rox," he replied.

"You know," Sarah said, "it completely escapes me how you can put six pounds of sugar on a bowl of Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch, and not just keel over and die after eating it."

They all laughed.

"Grunge, I think you should use your powers on the Crunch, man," Bobby said. "Then you wouldn't get soggy in milk."

"I'd be a tasty treat," Grunge agreed.

They sat on the deck eating breakfast. Caitlin and Sarah had split the paper between them, and made comments about it now and again. Roxy chuckled a little as she read the comics. Grunge and Bobby didn't even bother with those.

Grunge wolfed another huge bite of PB Cap'n Crunch. He was getting near the end of the bowl, and the dregs of his cereal put the lie to the whole not getting soggy thing. But it still tasted like the necktie of the gods, or whatever.

"Can I get you guys anything else?" a sweet voice asked.

They all looked up. Anna stood inside the screened part of the slider. There was a small smile at the corners of her mouth that just killed Grunge every time he saw her. She was incredibly cool. Cleaned the house, watched out for them all, made the meals, looked better than a supermodel . . . and she'd covered their asses in more than a few firefights.

If only she were real.

"I think we're all set, Anna," Caitlin answered. "Thanks for asking."

"My pleasure," Anna replied, then turned and retreated further into the house.

"Y'know, there are times I wish she wasn't a robot," Bobby said with a mischievous grin, echoing Grunge's own thoughts.

"Yeah," Sarah replied. "You and me both."

Grunge laughed, then shot a glance at Caitlin, who was

oblivious as usual. He wondered if she just acted that way because she was embarrassed by their banter, or if she really was clueless about such things. It wasn't like Sarah tried to hide her preferences.

Ah, well . . . the mysteries of women.

The wind shifted, the salty air of the nearby ocean suddenly replaced by the acrid odor of cigarette smoke. Grunge was about to complain, but Sarah beat him to it.

"Rox, do you have to do that here?" she asked.

"Hey, we're outside," Roxy replied. "It's still a free country, y'know! Besides, I'm just getting a little antsy. I want to know more about this whole demon thing. I mean, if we're expected to go running off to fight the army of Satan, or something, I think we should know more."

"Aren't they a band?" Bobby asked. "Army of Satan?"

Roxy and Sarah glared at him.

"I'm not kidding," he pleaded.

"So when do you think we go demon hunting?" Grunge asked.

"Today, if you're willing."

They all knew the voice. It was the little voice of their conscience in the back of each of their heads. It was also the voice of John Lynch. He slid the screen to one side and stepped out on the deck with Cardinal DeMedici, who held a leather briefcase in his hand. The old guy looked worse than ever, Grunge thought. Like he'd spent the night in somebody's torture chamber or something. The black bags under his eyes were nasty looking, and the wispy white hair on his head looked like somebody'd played alien crop circle on his scalp, tufts of white shooting every which way.

Mr. L. looked tired, too, but then, he never looked his best, whatever his best would have been. Sure, when he actually laughed or smiled, he seemed like a totally different guy. But as grim-faced as he was this morning, with that nasty scar and creepy white eye, he looked more like the meaner brother of spooky Frank Black from *Millennium*.

"Good morning to you all," the Cardinal said. "I trust that each of you slept better than I did."

They all said good morning to him as well, but nobody responded to the second half of his greeting. What were they

gonna say? "Good morning, Cardinal, you look like hell." That would be appropriate.

"I think I can speak for everyone, Cardinal, when I say we're intrigued by what you've said so far," Caitlin said. "But before we're willing to help you, to risk our lives for you, if that's what it takes, we'll need to know a lot more about the situation we'll be running into."

"Perfectly understandable, young lady," DeMedici said. "And to begin, I'd like you all to take a close look at this."

At that, he slid the leather case onto the table, rotated the lock sequence on the front of the case, and popped it open. When he lifted the top of the case, Grunge couldn't get much more than a glimpse of what was inside. He leaned way over, getting too close to Sarah, who pushed him away. But he'd already gotten a good look.

The Cardinal was showing them a Horn. Not like a trumpet, though. More like something used to start a fox hunt in some old movie. It was obviously ancient, made of bone or something, with gold bands around it.

"It's beautiful," Caitlin said.

"Cool," Bobby agreed.

"What is it?" Sarah asked, fascinated.

"This, my young friends, is the Horn of Jericho," DeMedici said, his tone a combination of fear and pride.

Grunge didn't get it, but from the look on their mentor's face, he figured Mr. Lynch knew what the Great Kazoo was for.

"Wait . . ." Sarah began.

"You mean like in the *Bible*?" Caitlin asked, obviously pretty doubtful.

"Exactly," the Cardinal replied. "This is the Horn blessed by God with such power that by sounding it, the walls of ancient Jericho were brought down. In legends, it is also known as Roland's Horn. But it has a vastly more important history, and more important function, than either of those pieces of trivia even begin to imply."

They were all silent, waiting for him to continue. Grunge figured the old guy liked the attention, because he seemed to be milking it. With a glance around to make sure nobody was looking at him, Grunge reached for his toast and took another

bite. Then reached for his glass of Anna's fresh-squeezed OJ.

"By blowing this Horn," DeMedici finally continued, "whoever has it in his or her possession could open the gates of Hell."

Grunge swallowed wrong, started choking on his juice. Everyone glared at him but Caitlin, who was too enthralled with the Cardinal's fairy tales.

"You've got to be kidding me," Fairchild said. "I mean, you expect us to believe there are some kind of massive gates separating Earth from Hell, like the pearly gates in Heaven, only nasty?"

DeMedici frowned. "Not at all, Caitlin. I expect you to believe whatever you like. However, the gate I refer to is less of a physical one than a . . . let's say a dimensional one. A passageway, if you like."

"I have a question," Bobby said.

Grunge looked over at his bud and was surprised to see Bobby looking pretty grim. This whole thing was really getting under his skin. On the other hand, Grunge wasn't really bothered by it. He'd seen enough horror movies to sort of half-believe in demons, anyway. But he'd also seen enough horror movies that even with what the Cardinal was telling them, he still only half-believed. It just didn't seem real.

"If this Horn can open the gates, how do you close them?" Bobby asked.

Grunge stared at him.

"Bob-a-licious—listen, bud, if you keep, y'know, thinking, we're not gonna be able to call you Burnout anymore," Grunge said with disdain.

Bobby didn't laugh. Grunge didn't laugh either. The subject of demons and Hell was a major buzzkill.

"The Horn may also be used to seal the gates. In fact, that was precisely its purpose the last time it was used," DeMedici explained.

"Wait," Roxy said, and they all looked at her.

Grunge wasn't really taking any of this stuff very seriously, and he figured the same was true for Rox. Sarah and Caitlin were the uptight brainiacs, so it was only natural for them to get all caught up in this thing. But Bobby? And now, Roxy?

"I don't buy it," she said grumpily.

Go, Rox, Grunge thought.

“I mean, I’m not exactly an expert on world history, but I kind of have to think that if the gates of Hell had been opened up on Earth, that kind of thing might have made been a little hard to forget about,” she said.

“It *was* opened,” the Cardinal insisted. “But not for long. And, after all, these are the kinds of things that those with the power in the world are determined to keep from the herd.”

“The herd,” Sarah repeated. “I think I’ll take that as an insult.”

“All right,” Mr. Lynch said sternly. “That’s enough of that.”

They all looked up at him. Grunge was surprised by how upset Mr. Lynch seemed by the things the Cardinal had said. He did not look like a happy camper. In fact, he looked a little spooked. That was what did it for Grunge. If Mr. L. was spooked, he knew he ought to be as well, because nothing scared John Lynch. Nada.

“Get to the point, Francesco,” Mr. Lynch told the Cardinal.

“There are great powers at work, forces which want to have the Horn for themselves. I suspect that they wish to bring the Horn into Hell, and blow it, thereby opening the gates. You see, if the Horn is blown on Earth, it closes them, but blown in Hell, it will open the gates wide. So, yes, I am a little concerned for my safety, and the security of the Horn.

“If I should fall, and the Horn be captured, the gates of Hell will fall and its residents, legion upon legion of demons, will swarm out and over our entire planet. No power on Earth could stop them if they were truly released from Hell. At least, no single power.”

Grunge was going to ask what the Cardinal meant by that, but Caitlin spoke up first.

“So, what do you want from us, sir?” she asked. “I mean, what can we do to protect you? It sounds like as long as you’re guarding this Horn, you’ll be a target. I, for one, would like to help you, but not for the rest of my life.”

“No kidding, dude,” Grunge said. “We’re, like, young and wild and free. No offense, but bodyguarding a holy man would be kind of detrimental to our lifestyle.”

“Grunge!” Sarah whispered.

“What?” Grunge asked. “Oh, I’m *sure* this is how you want to spend the next thirty years, Sarah. Guess you won’t be calling Kelly back after all.”

Sarah looked angry, as if she were about to scream at Grunge. Then she turned her attention back to the Cardinal.

“I hate to say this,” Roxy said suddenly, “but this thing is too important to just let it go. I mean, what would happen if the Horn *did* fall into the wrong hands? Can we even risk that, like, at all?”

“No,” Bobby replied.

“No,” Caitlin and Sarah agreed.

Grunge was not happy. He knew they were right, which made him even unhappier.

“Wait, dudes, I have an idea,” Grunge said, then smiled at his own cleverness and looked up at the Cardinal and Mr. Lynch. “Why doesn’t the holy man move in here? I mean, the Horn would be totally safe here with us, right? Then we wouldn’t have to completely give up our lives, right?”

Mr. Lynch shook his head and looked at the deck. The Cardinal actually smiled.

“Thank you for the suggestion, young man,” DeMedici said. “However, you’re all moving too far ahead of me. It won’t be necessary for you to give up your lives. I have guarded the Horn by myself for a very long time. I will be able to do so for many years yet.

“The problem is more immediate. You see, there has been a small breach in the gate. It isn’t open, but there is a sort of hole through which demons have been able to escape ethereally.”

“And do things like possess your aides,” Rainmaker said.

“Precisely,” the Cardinal agreed. “Eventually, the breach will grow and widen and the gates will collapse. The demon invasion will happen more slowly, but if the breach is not sealed, it will still happen. I must take the Horn to the breach in order to make certain that it is closed forever.”

“That’s it?” Grunge said. “We can do that.”

“I’m for it,” Bobby agreed.

“Mr. Lynch?” Sarah asked.

“It’s up to you kids,” Mr. L replied. “I’ll be coming along,

of course, but I can't make that decision for you."

"Kat?" Roxy asked.

Caitlin looked around sheepishly. Grunge didn't think she wanted to be the one to decide, but it was up to her in the end. She looked at the Cardinal.

"We'll help you, sir," she said. "We have to."

Mira Pravia had worked in the hotel for six months. She'd promised herself over and over again that she wouldn't ever get involved with another employee. Business and pleasure, her mother had always told her, did not mix. Office romances never worked, she'd read in just about every issue of every women's magazine that came into her mailbox.

Then she met Brian Daley. He wasn't a slick, greedy-eyed snake like most of the other guys who worked and played at the hotel. Brian was from Philadelphia, from a good, middle-class family who gave him enough love to teach him to respect women and to be confident in himself. He was cocky, in a way, but not really arrogant. He was charming and funny and that was what did it for Mira. Brian always made her laugh.

So she broke her rule.

They'd been dating for three weeks, and it had gone from fun and mysterious to madly passionate. They couldn't get enough of each other, now that they'd become intimate. On shifts they were both working, they would manage to take breaks at the same time, and they'd come down to the sub-basement where the laundry room was. The room was huge, the machines running constantly. Though housekeepers were in and out of the room all day and night, it was managed by an ancient, white-haired man named Pedro, who was more than happy to keep a lookout for them for twenty minutes or so.

For ten dollars.

It was a crazy thing to do. The kind of thing that would have disgusted Mira's parents. But she didn't care. She was in love with Brian. More importantly, she couldn't keep her hands off him.

They lay down together on a blanket Brian had pulled from the laundry, behind a bank of huge machines whose thrumming thunder ran through them both with a thrilling vibration.

Mira threw her head back while Brian kissed her neck. His hands roamed over and under her clothes as he started to undress her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of his hands and his kisses.

When she opened them, Pedro was standing over them, looking down with a lascivious grin on his face. Mira screamed.

Brian started to scream obscenities at the old man, and stood quickly. He raised his fist, but Pedro didn't give him time to land a single punch. Pedro lifted Brian by the throat and began to squeeze, his too-long nails digging into Brian's flesh and drawing blood. Her lover's throat made gagging sounds and his eyes began to bulge. She stood, screaming, trying to cover herself even as she pounded on Pedro to let Brian go.

The electricity failed; lights went out, laundry clanked to a halt.

It was only then, in the sudden dark, that she noticed the red glow of Pedro's eyes. She screamed again, and in the silence that followed, she heard a slithering movement all around her in the dark.

She couldn't tell where Pedro was anymore. His red eyes still glowed, she assumed, but now they weren't alone. Dozens of pairs of red eyes stared at her from all over the room. She thought she heard one of them chuckle, a deep, rumbling sound that she didn't like at all.

Then Mira was screaming again.

But not for long.

"I'm gettin' freakin' tired of sitting out here askin' cabbies the same question over and over again, and gettin' the same stupid answers, if I get any answers at all!" Bozzi said angrily. "Not to mention that, let's face it, San Diego ain't New York City."

Bell laughed. "I know New York's your home away from Rome, Bozzi. But come on. I want to wrap this thing up out here if we can, so I can stick around for a while and enjoy paradise. Have you ever seen the beaches in San Diego? The scenery is incredible."

"K-k-keep your m-mind on the job, Bell," Lew Manning said.

He was still stewing about Bozzi's tirade. How *dare* the little Mafia-wannabe? Manning knew the job was tedious. Hell, he didn't want to be standing out here, either. But they'd been through all the airline counters and it really didn't seem like DeMedici had boarded another flight out of San Diego. So maybe this was the old guy's last stop.

And the car rental companies hadn't turned up anything interesting or out of the ordinary.

So this was it. Talking to cab drivers and bus drivers and hotel shuttle drivers. Most of whom had schedules to keep, or just didn't want to talk and had to plied with medium-sized bills. Not that Lew cared. It was I.O.'s money. And, after all, he would do whatever it took to fulfill his orders from Ivana.

The alternative was unthinkable.

"I'm tellin' ya," Bozzi went on, "I think this whole thing is stupid. Like a wild goose chase or something. We oughtta just forget about it. Pack up and go home."

Manning grew even angrier then.

"Y-y-know what, B-Bozzi?" he stammered. "Y-y-you just do that, o-okay? Go home and r-relax."

Bell and Bozzi both looked at Manning like he was completely out of his mind.

"What?" Bozzi asked, as if he hadn't understood Manning's words.

"No, r-really," Manning insisted. "G-go on. Bell and I will k-keep s-searching. It's all r-right."

Bozzi started to smile.

"And when Ms. B-B-Baiul asks where you w-w-went," Manning went on, "I'll just t-tell her you thought it was stupid, so I s-sent you home."

Bozzi's face drained of color. He looked like he was going to throw up on his shoes. Manning fought off a smile. He didn't really feel triumphant. After all, he knew just how Bozzi felt—made him want to puke, too. If they didn't find the Cardinal, he didn't know what Ivana would do to all three of them. He only knew that it would be painful, and it would more than likely result in having to notify his next of kin.

"We have to f-find him," Manning said simply.

Bozzi nodded. Bell stared off at the line of cabs waiting to pick up passengers.

"Yeah, okay," Bozzi answered.

That was it. They went back to interviewing cab drivers. It took forever, but eventually, they talked to one cabbie who became really confused, even disoriented, answering their questions. Manning couldn't help but remember the airline ticket saleswoman who had her brains scrambled by DeMedici's magic.

"I don't think I remember anybody like that," the driver, a man in his forties who looked like he'd spent the past quarter century on a surfboard, told them.

"What do you mean, you don't think?" Bell asked.

He had been the one to call Manning and Bozzi over, so Lew let Bell continue to ask the questions. Plus, it was easier for him.

"Well, the guy looks a little familiar, but I see a lot of fares, y'know?" the cabbie replied.

"That's it? That's all you got for us?" Bozzi snarled.

Lew held up a twenty. He knew there was more than met the eye here, but Bozzi and Bell hadn't put it together yet. They weren't asking the right questions.

"L-l-let me ask you something," he said to the man. "Anything w-weird happen to you in the p-past couple of d-days?"

The driver frowned at the question, and seemed about to reply with some snide comment. Then, his eyebrows raised in surprise and his eyes widened at some memory. Or lack of memory.

"Y'know," he said, "I *did* have a really odd thing happen yesterday."

He was silent a moment. Maybe hoping for even more money. But it wasn't forthcoming, so the man went on.

"I had this . . . look, don't mention this to my boss, okay?" he said, and looked worried.

"It'll be our little secret," Bell sneered with contempt.

"Well, I kind of blacked out," the driver admitted in a whisper.

"Blacked out?"

"It was like I zoned out a whole part of the day, like half

an hour, or even an hour. When I came out of it, I was driving my cab. I was scared, y'know, like I should have gotten in an accident, but I didn't."

"Where was this?" Bell asked.

"I was driving back from La Jolla. Or at least, that's what it seemed like, the roads made sense. And in the time I was out of it, I couldn't have driven out much further than that. Not enough time had gone by. Somebody left a twenty-spot on the passenger seat of the cab."

They stared at him.

"Hey, I'm just telling you what happened," the driver said angrily. "The thing that really pissed me off was the money. If I'd had the meter running on a fare out to La Jolla, it would have been at least thirty dollars with tip."

Bell and Bozzi both turned to stare at Manning, waiting for instructions.

"Thank you," Manning told the cabbie as they walked away. "You've b-been helpful."

"So, now what?" Bell asked quietly when they were by themselves.

"N-now?" Manning answered. "Now we call B-bradach at I.O., g-get him to send some K-keepers for b-backup.

"L-let's go g-get this guy."

CHAPTER 7



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Mr. Lynch stood with his back to them, his hands clasped behind him, looking out at the sea. His posture was still military, even though he'd been a civilian for many years. And his voice, when he wanted it to, boomed with a military commander's strength.

"There is nothing," he said, "more important than protecting Francesco and the Horn of Jericho."

He turned then, as if to emphasize his point. Caitlin, Bobby, Roxy, Sarah, and Grunge were all seated on comfortable deck furniture, and DeMedici stood nearby, listening in silence. Lynch raised a hand, indicated the ocean beyond their deck, the slice of shore visible across the water.

"You kids have faced some serious threats," he went on. "As have I. I've only been in close proximity to an actual demon once, a long time ago in the Yucatan. But none of us has ever—*ever*—faced anything like this. None of us."

"You can tell he's serious when he starts repeating himself," Roxy whispered. Caitlin shoved her.

"Everything you see—the ocean, the beach . . . the very fabric of reality as we know it, could be threatened, if what the Cardinal tells us is true. As of now, we have no reason to doubt that it is true. In fact, we have every reason to believe him. And if he doesn't use the Horn in the proper way, and soon, everything you see, everything you know and love, could be gone. The world will be changed, horribly, beyond description."

“Mr. Lynch,” Caitlin interrupted. “I think we all understand the gravity of the situation.”

“I’m sure you do, Caitlin,” Lynch replied. “But I wanted to reiterate my own concerns. You’ll be asked to do things you’ve never had to even consider before. You’ll see things that are utterly terrifying. I know you kids are strong, but the challenges you’re—we’re—about to face are so far beyond anything you’ve encountered . . .

“I worry, Caitlin.” Lynch dropped his arms to his sides, took a step closer to them. He walked slowly in front of them as he spoke, looking at each one in turn. “I worry about all of you. I worry about Francesco. I worry about me. And I worry about the Earth I’ve grown to love. I don’t want to lose it.”

“Dude, take a breath,” Grunge said. “We kick some demonic butt today, and tomorrow we’re surfin’.”

“That attitude only illustrates my point, Eddie,” Lynch said. “If we go into this overconfident and unprepared, we don’t have a chance against these odds. The armies of Hell, Grunge, that’s what we’re talking about here. This is very serious business, and if you’re not prepared to treat it that way, perhaps you’d better say so now.”

“Sorry, Mr. L.,” Grunge said. “I’m down.”

“Anyone else?”

Sarah rose from her seat, went to the edge of the deck. She leaned her hands on the balustrade and watched the waves break for a moment. “Count me in,” she said. “I think we all owe the planet a little something.”

“How utterly Greenpeace,” Roxy said.

“You don’t have to come along,” Sarah snapped.

“Whoa, Sarah,” Roxy muttered. “Touchy, touchy.”

“I just get a little tired of you always questioning my commitment to things,” Sarah said. “Just because I care about certain issues, and I think about some of the problems facing the planet, and you’d rather just party and ignore them all—”

“Hey, *I’m* not the one who made a new friend last night and abandoned my old ones,” Roxy said with a snicker.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Sarah asked, a

pained expression on her face. "If that's what this is really about—"

"Sarah, Roxanne," Lynch said. "There's a time for this kind of conversation, but now is *not* that time."

The girls glared at each other.

"We're leaving this morning for a little trip," Lynch said. "We'll take the van—public transportation is too dangerous, although it would be a little faster."

"Where are we headed?" Bobby asked.

"I thought that was obvious," Lynch said, maybe a little too sharply. "The gates of Hell."

"That can't be more than a couple of hours away, right?" Grunge said.

"What do you mean?" Lynch asked.

"Dude. Los Angeles is Hell, right? The gate's gotta be there somewhere. Maybe Burbank?"

Lynch shook his head, sparing one of his rare smiles for Grunge. "A reasonable guess, but no cigar. The gates of Hell are located, according to Cardinal DeMedici, in Las Vegas."

"D'oh!" Grunge smacked his forehead, Homer Simpson-style. "My bad."

"I always thought of Vegas as a little bit of Hell on Earth," Sarah said. "I guess I was more right than I thought."

"We'll need to be on the road in fifteen minutes," Lynch said. "Everybody suit up and grab whatever you'll need for a few days away."

"That means deodorant, Grunge," Bobby said.

"No, dude, I'll be all right. I hear Hell's a dry heat."

"Children!" Lynch barked. That was his cue to quit sparring and do whatever it was he'd told you to do. The meeting on the deck broke up as everybody moved to get ready. Bobby was the last one inside, but he caught up to Sarah before she reached the stairs.

"Sarah," he said. "I just gotta tell you you're even more babe-alicious when you're royally pissed off."

She stopped, turned to look at him. "Is that meant to be a compliment, Bobby?" she asked icily.

His eyes widened. "Well, yeah. I thought so."

"Thanks, I guess," she said, her anger draining out of her. "Listen, Bobby, we're friends, okay? But that'll have to do."

“Great. Never heard that one before.”

“I don’t know what you want from me, Bobby.” She sighed deeply. “Okay, maybe I do. But I don’t know that you’re ever going to get that. You’re just not my type.”

“Not your gender, you mean?” he said bitterly.

“Maybe that’s part of it. But not all of it. I don’t think, anyway.”

Bobby pushed past her and started up the stairs. “You ever figure out what it is you want out of life, be sure to send me an e-mail.”

Sarah stood at the base of the stairs and watched him go up, shoulders hunched, head lowered. Great, she thought. How many more of her teammates would be angry with her before they even got in the van? This would be a fun little jaunt to Vegas.

Upstairs, she decided to try to repair some of the damage, and knocked on Roxy’s door.

“Yo!” Roxy called.

Sarah pushed the door open, stuck her head in. Roxy was gathering toiletries into a little black bag. “Listen, Rox. Can we talk?”

“What are you, Joan Rivers?” Roxy asked.

Sarah came into the room, closed the door behind her. “I just wanted to apologize for flying off the handle down there,” she said.

“No prob.”

“It’s just . . . sometimes I still feel like I’m not quite part of the team. You know, you and Caitlin and the guys all knew each other at the institute before I came along. And then there’s the little matter of my sexual preference, or lack of one. I just feel like an outsider sometimes, and it gets to me.”

Roxanne looked at her, the cynical twist to her mouth softening slightly.

“We all like you, Sarah,” she said finally. “But you project this holier-than-thou attitude, and it gets old. It’s like you’re trying so hard to be politically correct, and the rest of us just don’t live up to your standards.”

“It’s not an attitude or an affectation, Roxy. It’s just the way I’m wired, I guess.”

Roxy shoved a couple of changes of clothes into a small

knapsack. "Maybe it's just me, Sarah. I get tired of judging myself by your standards and coming up short."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Roxanne. If you don't count always smelling like cigarettes."

"That's what I mean!" Roxy snapped, and dropped the knapsack on the bed. "You can always find the weakness in anybody!"

"Like you can't," Sarah said. "The way you put down Grunge, for instance."

"I put down Grunge? When do I ever talk about Grunge? I barely notice him," Roxanne protested.

"Right," Sarah snorted.

"He's so busy fawning over Kat, he hardly knows I exist," Roxy said. "Why should I pay him any more attention than he pays me?"

"Are you sure it doesn't bother you that he thinks she's more attractive than you are?"

Roxy snorted a laugh. "That'll be the day. I wouldn't want to look like that overstuffed, redheaded Amazon, anyway."

"Like she's not beautiful," Sarah said, raising her eyebrows.

"Sure she's beautiful," Roxy said, and sighed. She looked into a mirror at her own face. Nothing wrong there. And her figure was fine—petite, compared to Caitlin's, but then, you had to be Anna Nicole Smith or something not to be. "I just prefer a more subtle approach to beauty. Anyway, you're next on the Grunge hit parade, you know."

"What do you mean?" Sarah asked, frowning.

"He's fascinated with your love life, Sarah. You should have heard him last night, coming home from the club. He was giving us the blow-by-blow description of what you were up to, even though he wasn't there."

Sarah's nose wrinkled as if she smelled something putrid. "God," she said, "what a pig! I wish people would just let me be me. It's bad enough that Bobby is constantly coming on to me."

"What's wrong with Bobby?" Roxy asked. "He wouldn't be half bad if he wasn't always so gloomy. If you'd just give him a little of what he wants, he'd probably be in a much

better mood, you know? He might even turn out to be a fun guy. I mean, he's no Grunge, but who is?"

"He's okay, I guess. Not my—"

"I know," Roxy threw up her hands. "Not your type."

"Right."

"Listen to us," Roxy said. "We're as disgusting as the guys are." She dug in her dresser drawers for something that was, apparently, not there. Giving up, she looked on the floor of her closet. "Maybe Mr. Lynch's friend has the right idea. The celibate life. Forget about all this sex stuff and focus on higher matters."

Both girls looked at each other. After a moment, they smiled.

"Naaah!" they said together.

"I guess we are pretty bad," Sarah said.

"Hey, you going to pack, or what?"

"I'm always packed and ready to go," Sarah said. "I just keep a backpack with enough supplies for a three day trip in my closet, just in case."

"See what I mean?" Roxy said. She came out of the closet with a pair of fishnet stockings triumphantly raised before her. "How can anyone measure up to that?"

"Sor-ry," Sarah said. "Tell you what. In my next life, I'll be a slob and a loser, okay?"

"That'd be a relief," Roxy said, shoving the fishnets into the knapsack. "Be sure you find me so I can watch."

Within the allotted fifteen minutes, they were all at the van with their stuff. Lynch supervised the packing of the van's cargo area, then climbed into the driver's seat, next to Cardinal DeMedici. The Cardinal held the leather case with the Horn inside it on his lap. They could all feel its presence, as if they were transporting some kind of unstable explosive.

"Everybody in," Lynch said. "We've got at least five hours to Las Vegas. We need to be on the road."

Grunge held the van door for Caitlin. "After you, ma'am," he said. "I'll sit next to you so I can hold your hand if you get scared."

"Other way around, more likely," Roxy said.

“Knock it off, Rox,” Grunge said. “Caitlin and I share a deep and profound understanding.”

“The only thing you’ve ever had a deep and profound understanding of is your own intestinal processes,” Roxy said.

“I think there’s an insult in there somewhere,” Grunge said. “Sometime when I’m not so busy, I’ll figure it out.”

“You can count on it, Grunge-man,” Roxy said. “Why don’t you sit with me and I’ll explain it to you in detail?”

“You guys,” Caitlin said. “Does it really matter who sits next to whom? It’s not that big a van, you know.”

“Caitlin’s right,” Sarah said. “Let’s get going.”

“I’ll second that,” Lynch said. He turned the key and gunned the motor. “We’re wasting time.”

By the time everyone was buckled into their seats, Grunge and Bobby were in the back row, with Caitlin, Sarah, and Roxy in the middle.

“Okay, Mr. L,” Grunge said. “It’s demon-trashing time!”

Lynch backed the van out of the driveway onto the road. “I’m glad you’re enthusiastic,” Lynch said. “Just remember, this is no game.”

“Demons,” Roxy said with a shiver. “Where’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer when you need her?”

“Where is she any time?” Grunge asked. “She is *so* hot.”

“Have you seen the new Buffy?” Bobby asked.

“New Buffy? Get out of town!” Grunge said. “What do you mean?”

“There’s gonna be a TV show. If you got a haircut once in a while, you’d know they got all these great magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* at the Supercuts. They had a picture of her in one.”

“Dude! Rule 14 in the Commandments According to Chang is that there shall be no Buffy above Kristy.”

“I’m tellin’ ya, man. This Buffy is the babest of babes. Her name’s Sarah something, which is why I even noticed her in the first place. Well, one of the reasons, anyway.”

Caitlin had been looking out the window during this exchange, but now she shifted in her seat. “Excuse me, you guys. Do you mind if I interrupt the hormonally challenged among us long enough to point out that there’s a car that’s

been following us, and it's getting closer—and the guys in it have big guns?"

"Heh heh," Grunge snickered. "She said 'big guns.'"

"And I was serious! Take a look!"

"Already spotted them, Caitlin," Lynch said. "But I'm glad at least one of you is paying attention. Prepare for evasive maneuvers."

Lynch flipped up the head of the gearshift knob and pressed a button hidden within. The van had a few aftermarket modifications, one of which was a few hundred extra horsepower that could be added to the standard engine when necessary. They'd burn through gas quicker, but with any luck, they wouldn't need the extra speed for very long.

"Go, Speed Racer," Roxy said drily.

The van accelerated like it had a jet engine mounted on top—which wasn't far from the truth. Lynch's International Operations contacts included people with excellent mechanical skills, and one of the best had transformed this van. With a squeal of rubber, it shot forward, away from the trailing car.

"Who do you think they are?" Caitlin asked.

"Yet another party interested in my death, and in the acquisition of Roland's Horn," DeMedici said.

"He's probably right," Lynch said. "I don't recognize them, anyway."

The car, swiftly dropping away behind them, looked like a standard mid-sized sedan, in a nondescript dark blue color. There had been six men in the car, and Caitlin had spotted at least five weapons before Mr. Lynch turned on the juice. It would have been a fight, but they could have taken the men on, she was sure. Probably Mr. Lynch just didn't want to take a chance on Cardinal DeMedici being hurt in the crossfire. Well, it wouldn't be a problem now. They'd be halfway to Vegas before the sedan got off this residential street.

"Uh-oh," Lynch said. "Battle stations, people."

"What?" Caitlin looked back, and the nondescript sedan was tearing up the pavement, going just as fast as the van. No. Faster. These streets were winding, and the van was too high-centered to corner well at its top speed. But the sedan didn't have that problem. On a straightaway, the van might have had the advantage. But the car closed in fast.

“Where’s Racer X when you need him?” Roxy mumbled.

“Who are those guys?” Grunge asked.

“Not sure yet,” Lynch said. “But that car isn’t factory equipped, I can tell you that.”

“What are we going to do?” Roxy asked.

“We can’t run,” Lynch said, “so it looks like we’re going to fight. Everyone hold on.”

He stepped on the brakes and twisted the wheel. The van went into a skid, brakes grabbing, tires melting into the pavement with a horrible odor. Lynch controlled the skid, and the van came to a shuddering stop with the driver’s side facing the oncoming sedan. Protecting the Cardinal, Caitlin thought—good move.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s take them!”

Lynch drew a gun from a holster tucked into his armpit, but stayed in the driver’s seat, window down, to provide cover and block any moves made against DeMedici. The kids dove from the van. Bobby ignited and took to the air. Grunge touched the side of the van and metamorphosed into sheet metal.

“Let me start it, Kat!” Roxy called. “I’ll put the brakes on that thing!”

“Go!” Caitlin said.

Roxy planted her feet and held her arms out toward the onrushing car. The arm thing wasn’t strictly necessary, she knew, but it helped her focus her powers. She hurled an anti-gravity wave onto the roadway ahead, and when the car hit it, its nose started to rise. Brakes screeched and smoke rose from the back tires, but the front wheels were already airborne. The rest of the sedan followed suit. Between the rear brakes locking and the front of the car raising off the ground, the whole thing began to turn over on its side.

Then Roxy pulled back, and the restored gravity dropped the vehicle with a crunch of metal. Glass from the shattered windshield sprayed the road’s surface.

“That’s why they call me Freefall, morons!” she shouted.

“You rock, Rox!” Bobby called.

“They’re not beaten yet,” Caitlin warned.

“Maybe not, but they’re all shook up,” Grunge said. “We can move in and mop up.”

The car came to a rest on its side. Doors popped open, and hands appeared as the occupants began to climb out. Hands with guns in them . . . big, mean guns. Ion blasters and scatters. And there was something not quite right about the hands. What was wrong became clear as the men made their way out and dropped onto the street. They were all clad in a familiar red-and-silver armor, with helmets that covered their faces.

They were I.O. Keepers.

"Guys," Caitlin said warily, "I think this may be a little more trouble than we thought."

"We can take six Keepers," Grunge sneered.

There was a quiet moment, as the five friends looked upon their oldest enemies, mentally preparing themselves for battle. Then, the quiet was broken by a distant, shuddering noise that rapidly grew louder and closer, transforming into the recognizable sound of helicopter blades.

"We can take six Keepers," Caitlin agreed. "But I think I hear reinforcements on the way."

"Then we'd better finish this," Sarah said. "Before they finish us."

CHAPTER 8



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The Keepers dealt the first play: they opened fire without even waiting for the chopper to touch down. Each of them had a target in mind. Caitlin dodged an ion blast, which hit the street behind her and tore a yard-long gash in the black asphalt.

Bobby performed an aerial maneuver, and scattertaser needles sailed harmlessly past him. Sarah called down a powerful wind which blew the electrified needles fired at her back toward the Keepers. One of them fell, a victim of his own weapon. Roxy threw a gravity field in front of the ion blasts coming toward her and Grunge. They wafted into the air and exploded.

“Counterattack!” Caitlin called. She ran toward the nearest Keeper. The I.O. soldier raised his weapon, trying to get a bead on the attacking girl. When she was at point-blank range, he squeezed the trigger. The blast never reached her. A wave of unbearable heat sliced down from the air and flash-fried the Keeper’s weapon, melting the barrel and causing it to explode in his armored hands.

Kat waved a thank you at Burnout high above, but he had already moved on to his next target. He might not be the brightest guy in the world, but Bobby Lane was getting awfully good at throwing down with the bad men.

The Keeper screamed, staring at the melted gloves of his armor. He dropped to his knees, and Caitlin finished him with a single punch that knocked his helmet off and sent it rolling over newly cut grass on a yard half a block down the street. He sank to the pavement, unconscious.

Grunge, still hardened steel, bore down on another Keeper. Scattertaser needles bounced off Grunge's Detroit-hard skin. Reaching the Keeper, he snatched the gun away.

"That won't help you, bud," he said. "I'd surrender if I was you. I hear there's a shortage of hospital beds."

The Keeper drew a wicked looking electro-knife from a sheath at his hip. Its blade crackled with a high-voltage charge.

"Stupid kid," he said. "You think that's the only weapon I've got?"

He lunged at Grunge, knife forward. Grunge sidestepped the blade. He chopped at the Keeper's forearm.

"Hai yah!" he shouted.

The Keeper grunted with pain, but kept his grip on the knife. He slashed back, and the blade caught Grunge a glancing blow. Sparks flew when the charged blade hit steel, and Grunge grunted. He'd felt that blow. Might be a good idea to make sure the Keeper didn't connect again.

He dropped, spun, kicked. His foot connected, tore through the Keeper's armor. The man dropped the knife, screaming. Grunge continued the spin, came around with fists locked together. They slammed into the Keeper's helmet and he collapsed.

Bobby fought from a distance, using heat blasts against two of the Keepers. Their armor fused, they were immobilized and out of the fight in no time. Before Sarah and Roxy could help finish off the Keepers on the ground, though, the helicopter was closing in behind them—coming down on the far side of the van.

The side DeMedici was on.

"The Cardinal!" Sarah screamed. "Come on!"

Bobby flew over the van, and Roxy levitated over it, as Sarah ran. Caitlin and Grunge stayed where they were—there were still two armed Keepers on this side.

Inside the van, Lynch pushed DeMedici's head down, leaned over him and stuck his Heckler & Koch nine-millimeter automatic out the window. He squeezed the trigger lightly, peppering the chopper with shots. As if no one aboard the helicopter had noticed, the doors opened and ten more Keepers dropped to the ground. They spread out, hit the dirt, rolling

off the shoulders of the road. From their vantage points, they opened up on the van.

The sound was chaotic—different types of weapons fire, bullets and blasts and rays of different pitches. Caitlin clapped her hands to her ears as she charged another Keeper. He fired at her, but she dove under the ion blast, hit the ground, rolled and came up, too close for him to get in another shot.

Thank God and Mr. Lynch, she thought, for all those tumbling drills.

The Keeper hauled back and swung the heavy gun at her, holding it by the barrel. She came to a stop, waited for it, and caught the stock in one hand. Squeezing it, she crushed the metal of the stock. The Keeper's face was covered by his helmet, but she could tell by his body language that he was amazed by her strength. Body language, and the fact that he started trying to back away from her. She took a long step forward, got a grip on his shoulder.

“Not so brave without your gun?” she asked. “How about without your armor?”

Digging her fingers into his chest plate, she broke through, and pulled down. It was like tearing aluminum foil. The armor peeled away. The Keeper inside began to sob with tears.

Caitlin turned away, disgusted. Who was hiring these Keepers? she wondered. They sure didn't make them like they used to.

Grunge, meanwhile, had tried a new trick with the last Keeper from the car. He allowed the Keeper to fire a scatter-taser at him, and then took on the molecular structure of the needles as they hit his steel-hard skin. Then he flung himself at the Keeper. Keeper armor can withstand a few taser needles, but not a five-foot-six, 170-pound one. The Keeper writhed in pain, rolling over and over on the street.

But the real trouble was still on the other side of the van. Lynch was holding the Keepers away from DeMedici's window, but he kept having to duck his head down to keep from being shot himself. The van's superstrong alloy construction repelled the bullets and blasts, but Lynch needed a window open to shoot out of. He saw the kids come around, and over, the van.

“They’re everywhere!” he shouted. “Choose your targets!”

“Got it, Mr. L!” Roxy yelled. She picked a Keeper who was ducked behind a brick mailbox stand. “Nice hiding place,” she said. Instead of using her power on him, she lifted the brick base off the ground, levitated it over the Keeper, and dropped it on him. Bricks went everywhere, and the Keeper went down. Hard.

Sarah called down lightning on a couple of Keepers. Their armor couldn’t protect them from the bolts, and they cried out in pain as the electricity coursed through them. She found herself smiling at their pain.

“Looks like the weather’s changing,” Bobby said. “And here I thought it was going to be hot!”

As he said it, he gathered a ball of flame and bowled with it, knocking over two Keepers who were scrambling for safety.

Inside the chopper, Lew Manning clutched the pilot’s arm. “It’s all going h-haywire!” he shouted. “G-get us out of h-here!”

“Take it easy, sport,” the pilot said.

He looked relaxed, but Manning was far from calm. He was up in the helicopter, at least. That was relatively safe . . . at least in comparison to Bell and Bozzi, who’d suited up in Keeper armor to go after DeMedici themselves. Nobody had any idea they were going to end up head to head with those Gen¹³ kids again. Too late now, though.

Too late, especially, for Bell, who had wanted nothing but to find these kids and destroy them. Now they’d found Lynch’s pack without even looking for them, and Bell had been melted to human slag by the one they called Burnout. Bozzi, at least, was still alive. The Italian, who had never worn a Keeper’s armor before, was crawling toward the copter, his gun abandoned. Four others were down, not counting those who had been following the van in the car. And Lynch’s brats were still unhurt.

“I’m p-paying the b-bill here, b-b-buddy! Get a-airborne!”

“Ms. Baiul pays the bills, but okay,” the pilot said.

He smiled at Manning and flipped a couple of switches. The pitch of the blades changed, and Manning could see their

shadow speeding up. Not fast enough for him, though. Even now, with the blades starting to pick up speed, most of the Keepers on the ground were trying to do the jobs they'd been hired for. "Trying" being the operative word. Jack Lynch and the kids were making short work of them.

Grunge and Fairchild had come around the van, and now all five of them were pounding on various Keepers, with Lynch still firing through the open window of the van.

The copter lifted off the ground, tilted a bit. Manning was glad. This had gone bad, and he just wanted out. There would be other opportunities to get the Horn. Then he saw why it tilted—Bozzi had wrapped his arms around one of the struts and was holding on for dear life. He was screaming something, but Manning couldn't hear him over the chopper's noise. Probably "let me in," or something equally mundane. Manning didn't care. If Bozzi was still there when they landed, they'd keep him. The rest of them were history.

One thing Manning knew: the next time they went up against Gen¹³, they were going to have to do it with a lot more firepower.

The helicopter took off, one of the Keepers still clutching the landing gear. Caitlin saw it go, but her attention was diverted by a Keeper firing at the open window of the van. She was too far away to reach him, so she drove her fist down into the asphalt of the street and pulled out a huge chunk, almost as long as she was tall. She hurled it at the Keeper and he went down beneath it.

The others were finishing up with the last of the Keepers. As the copter flew away, Caitlin surveyed the scene. The street was torn up in a number of places. Unconscious Keepers littered the landscape, and a handful of others had taken off their helmets, dropped their guns, and sat quietly with their arms behind their backs.

There was a pile of bricks that used to be a mailbox stand. A streetlight pole was bent where a Keeper had been slammed into it by a hurricane-force wind that Sarah had brewed up. A patch of someone's yard smoldered from a lightning strike.

So much for a quiet La Jolla neighborhood.

A couple of the locals had looked out through windows

during the fight, and one even stepped outside before diving quickly back in and slamming the door. But they'd been seen, Caitlin knew—you didn't have this kind of pitched battle without attracting some attention. More than likely, at least half the neighbors had been peeking out their windows, despite the danger. And even now she could hear distant sirens.

"Let's get back to the van, guys," she instructed.

"No argument from me," Roxy said.

"There's a first," Bobby added.

"Bite me," Roxy replied, too tired from the fight to come up with something clever.

"You wish."

"Not even."

Climbing inside, Caitlin looked at Lynch, who was holstering his H&K.

"Sorry about the mess," she said. "It'll be hard to maintain our anonymity after this."

"Couldn't be helped, Caitlin," he said.

"You're concerned about anonymity?" DeMedici asked. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"We've tried to stay in the background, Francesco," Lynch explained. "Largely to remain hidden from the Keepers—the very people we just had this run-in with. Doesn't seem possible now."

"I wonder how they found us," Bobby said.

"I'm sure that I'm to blame for that, Robert," DeMedici said. "I did everything I could think of to cover my trail, but these people are very persistent."

"Not much we can do about it now, Francesco," Lynch observed.

"I can at least help with your problem," the Cardinal declared. "Excuse me for a moment."

He didn't leave the van, but the Cardinal did seem to go somewhere else, at least mentally. He closed his eyes. His wrinkled skin seemed paper-thin, and muscles jumped and twitched in his face. His lips were clamped tightly together, almost disappearing. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, trickled unimpeded down his face.

Everyone was quiet, watching him.

And watching him, they almost missed the real show.

The neighborhood began to heal itself. Bit by bit, things were made right again. Bricks reassembled, stacked themselves the way they had been. Broken windows grew together. Gouges in the street healed like wounded skin. Grass that had burned turned green again. A streetlamp straightened by itself. The Keepers' car righted itself, and the damage disappeared. It parked itself carefully beside the road.

By the time the police cars appeared down the road, the van was in motion. There was no indication that there had ever been a struggle here, except for the Keepers who were sitting around. Their weapons had vanished, though, and the fight was gone from them.

DeMedici opened his eyes. "Well?"

"Much better, Francesco," Lynch said, staring, obviously disconcerted about something. "Now we just have to worry about the neighbors, and how much they remember."

"They remember nothing," DeMedici said. His voice was hoarse. "Neither do the Keepers. They'll surrender themselves to your police, but they won't even know what they were here for."

"There's no evidence against them," Grunge said. "They'll get sprung in no time."

"I'll make a discreet phone call," Lynch said. "I still have some connections, you know."

"Y'know, it's not like I'm not grateful, okay," Roxy said, staring at the Cardinal, "but if you're that powerful, how come you didn't help us against the Keepers before? We could really have used the help then."

Silence in the van. They were all looking from Lynch to DeMedici, waiting for an answer. Roxy's question was one that had occurred to all of them, but she was the only one with the guts, or at least the lack of decorum, to mention it.

The Cardinal stared at Roxanne. For a moment, they could all see the dark side of the man's nature, a cruelty in him that was impossible to miss.

"I'm trying to reserve my strength for the battle to come, Miss Spaulding," Cardinal DeMedici said. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you. I merely felt that it would be worth expending some of that strength to make certain you could all

continue your lives here in La Jolla when you return from Las Vegas.”

“If we return,” Grunge mumbled.

The others still looked at DeMedici doubtfully, but no one else spoke up.

“Thanks for your help, Cardinal DeMedici,” Caitlin said at length.

“The least I could do, Miss Fairchild,” he said. “Also, I’m afraid, the most I could do. That takes more out of me than it used to. I hope there are no more interruptions for a few hours . . . I’m afraid I am going to need a short nap.”

“That’s cool,” Grunge said. “I always get sleepy in the car, too.”

By the time the car was on Interstate 15, headed out of San Diego, they were both snoring.

Martin Brody had gambled in Las Vegas before. He’d even walked away a winner before. But he’d never left the tables with as much money as today. He’d have to count it again, when he got up to his room, but it seemed like he had somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand bucks in the inside pockets of his jacket.

He also had an unfortunate suspicion that someone had followed him from the cashier’s cage. There was a long-haired, bearded guy in a denim jacket and sunglasses who Martin was sure had been watching the blackjack table when he had his amazing run of luck. Then he thought he’d seen the same guy lingering near the cage where he cashed in his chips. Now, he was headed for the elevators, and the same guy was strolling along behind him very casually, not looking at him. But Mr. I-Wear-My-Sunglasses-At-Night had one hand in the pocket of his jacket, and Martin was pretty sure that if they got on an elevator together, only one of them would get off.

And it wouldn’t be Martin.

He was not exactly a physical fitness freak. In fact, the only thing he’d done even resembling exercise in the last ten years was walking to his car to drive to the grocery store for more chips and beer. Any shopping more complicated than that, his wife did . . . and she carried in the bags. Martin was the sedentary type, and he liked that lifestyle just fine. He liked TV,

he liked snacks, he liked a good book now and again. When he did get out of the house, twice a year, it was to head for Vegas and sit on a stool playing cards or feeding money into slots.

So the young guy with the shades and the beard and the hand in his pocket could take him easily. And Martin had already started calculating how many cases of beer fifteen grand could buy. He wasn't going to give that up easily.

When he reached the big bank of elevators, he kept going. Backtracking into the casino would take him too close to the guy, but there was a door just beyond the elevators. "Authorized Personnel Only" was stenciled on the door, in the dripping-blood kind of lettering favored by the casino. He pushed through the doors. Surely he'd find an employee back here, and that employee could find him a security escort to his room.

Martin found himself in a wide, well-lit corridor—maybe the only one in the building. While he'd gambled at casinos resembling giant sphinxes, and medieval castles, and Western towns, had stayed and played at places with pirates and erupting volcanoes and ancient Romans, he'd never been to this casino before. It was a new one, he'd heard—Screamland: For A Monstrous Good Time. It was a kick—the cocktail waitresses dressed like sexy devils, the front desk staff wrapped in mummy garb. Right now, though, he'd settle for a security guard dressed in a guard's uniform, as long as he was carrying a gun.

Problem was, there didn't seem to be anyone back here. Anyone at all. Just this big, empty hallway that seemed scarier in its sterility than the corridors upstairs, illuminated by flickering candle-like electric lamps.

Martin sped up. His footsteps echoed on the tile floors. There had to be someone working back here. Where were the authorized personnel? He turned a corner and was met, yet again, with an abandoned hallway. This was getting ridiculous.

There were a couple of doors along this hall, with windows set into them at head height. He looked in the windows. Kitchens, all stainless steel counters and walk-in freezers, but no people. Behind him, he heard the door he'd come through open and close. At last! He started to speak, to turn back, but

stopped himself. It might be the denim guy, following him in here.

He had to keep going, find some casino employees somewhere. Maybe they had a private game of cards going, or were getting a special performance from one of the showgirls. He didn't care . . . he just wanted to find a human somewhere.

He was out of luck.

Martin turned another corner, and this hallway was narrower than the last. Some of the overhead fluorescents were burned out, making it seem less like a hospital corridor. He could still hear footsteps behind him, so he picked up the pace. There were a few doors ahead of him, solid, windowless wooden doors. He tried the knob of one. Locked. He went to the next, and the knob turned. He pushed the door open, and walked in, closing the door quickly behind him. He listened for the latch to click, and then looked at the room. Some kind of office.

Not a living soul in the place.

Dead guys, on the other hand, were in large supply. Martin's stomach retched as he scanned the room. Garishly clad in horror costumes, it was at first hard to tell the real blood and gore splashed across the casino employees from the fake stuff. But only at first.

At first, Martin's mind tried to make sense out of the masses of tissue, buckets of blood, torn uniforms and dismembered parts littering the desk and chairs and what looked to be a really nice leather couch. But then he sensed movement in a shadowy corner of the room, and he forgot all about the corpses.

The movement was a gathering of something. Several winged somethings, actually. They were hunched over some of the corpses making slavering sounds accompanied by crunching and gnawing that reminded Martin of Christmas day, when he always gave his dog, Chester, a new bone.

He sucked in a breath. Only one. But the noise was enough to attract the attention of one of the creatures. Blood dripping from its jaws and running down its chin, it turned to him: a creature with green skin and wings like a bat's and a long tail sticking out behind it, pink and fleshy as a rat's tail, and weirdly segmented. (Martin could feel his mind taking in the

details, cataloguing them because it was easier than accepting what he was seeing, which was this creature.) The creature smiled at Martin with huge, bloody teeth. It spoke with a voice that didn't work quite right, voicing its concerns with two words:

“Still hungry.”

Martin was dessert.

I.O. had some of the fastest jets around, but right now, nothing was good enough for Ivana except teleportation. Of course, I.O. had teleportation, too. But that was one area of the agency over which even she couldn't pull strings. Yet. That would change, and soon.

So she had to be content with a jet screaming across the continent at several hundred miles per hour. Or was it knots? She didn't know how pilots measured speed, she only knew how she measured it, and by her measurement, this just wasn't fast enough. Everything was going on out West. Manning, that loser, had let DeMedici and the Horn slip through his fingers again.

She'd personally make him pay for disappointing her a second time. And those damn Gen¹³ kids were with DeMedici, headed for Las Vegas. She needed to be there before they arrived. Bradach was in Vegas now, and he was good. He was her most highly-placed agent in I.O., and, she was willing to admit, the one who'd done the most to make Operation: Hellgate a reality. But Bradach, for all his good points, had never been up against those kids. She had. And she'd gotten away clean. That was saying something.

“Ivana?” It was Clark, sitting across from her in the plush lounge seats.

“Yes?”

“You look agitated. I was just wondering if you wanted to talk.”

“I am agitated. And no, I don't.”

“Fine,” Clark said, crossing her legs. “Whatever.” She reached for a magazine.

“Wait,” Ivana said. “Tell me something.”

Clark looked at her over the top of *Foreign Affairs Quarterly* and waited.

Ivana hated it when someone knew how to play power games as well as she did.

“What does I.O. brass think Screamland is?”

Clark thought for a moment. Or seemed to. Ivana was fully aware that she might just be drawing out the game. “Most don’t know it exists. Those who do think it’s just another gimmicky Las Vegas Casino. Marshall spent three days there, last month, and was totally unaware that it was an I.O. operation.”

“But you knew he was there. I’m impressed.”

Clark smiled. “I’ll show you the tapes sometime. Quite entertaining. He was there with someone—not his wife.”

“I knew you had some good qualities when I hired you,” Ivana said.

“Thank you.” She put the magazine down. “The ones who do know about it, because they pay the bills or authorized it in the first place, believe that it’s a cash laundering facility, which it is, and/or a front for weapons research, which it also is. It’s a natural for that because it’s out there in the desert. Not far from Las Vegas, there are thousands of square miles of nothing, where many weapons systems are tested. Since I.O. is too secretive to share weapons information with the military, we need our own headquarters out there. Most people who think about Screamland at all think that the casino and hotel are it.”

“How many would you say know what it really is?” Ivana asked.

“Bradach. Me. A few of the people on Bradach’s staff, but by no means all of them. The tracks are pretty well covered, Ivana.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I know,” Carolyn replied. “If there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that you value your secrets.”

“A few days ago, you wouldn’t even talk about me.”

“I’ve learned a lot in those few days. It’s truly liberating to spy against the spies, to betray the people you work for.”

“Do you know why I decided to keep you and not Carver, Ms. Clark?” Ivan asked archly.

“Because I remind you of yourself?” Clark answered.

“Precisely. Just like me, but not as good-looking.”

“Meow.”

“I’ve been called worse things than catty, Carolyn.”

“I can only imagine,” Clark replied.

Ivana turned away from Clark. A picture had begun to form in her mind of the last man who’d spoken badly of her. He had called her a manipulating shrew. He had died upside-down, suspended by his feet, with his throat cut centimeter by centimeter. He had been alive to watch the blood begin to spill onto the floor, some of it splashing the four inches back to his face.

The thing was, they were right, the people who called her names like that. She knew it, and accepted it. But that didn’t mean she could allow other people to express such opinions. Allowing it would only encourage insubordination in others, and Ivana needed to be in control.

It was, ultimately, for their own good.

Ivana hadn’t been born in the United States. She had been born, and brought up, in the Soviet Union. By the time she was in her teens, she had escaped it, at the price of her family and friends. She hated communism. When the chance to help bring about its fall by working with International Operations came about, she joined it willingly and gave it her all. Then she was betrayed, like nearly everyone else at the agency, by the late and very unlamented Miles Craven. Her dream, Project Genesis, turned into a fiasco, and she was stripped of power.

But she needed power, needed it as much as she needed oxygen or water or food or sex. Not just for its own sake, but for what she could do with it. Communism was down but not out. There was still China, and Cuba, and North Korea. There were still penny-ante dictators scattered around the globe, and some of them were perilously close to having nuclear or biological or chemical weapons. The United States needed to consolidate its position as the world’s only superpower. And Ivana didn’t trust anyone but herself to watch out for the needs of the U.S. like she could. Others were weak. She was strong. She could take care of things.

Ivana Baiul considered herself an American patriot.

So, Operation Hellgate was born. Working with Mark Bradach, they had tried to determine which American locations would be appropriate for their needs—where in America

might the barrier between the Earth plane and the netherworld already have been worn thin? There had been several possibilities, but Las Vegas seemed the best choice.

There, they had begun to build Screamland. And beneath Screamland, they had begun trying to chip away even further at the barrier, to open a new gate to Hell from which they could access power undreamed of by the enemies of America . . . and the enemies of Ivana Baiul. In the end, they realized that they needed the Horn of Jericho in order to control the forces of Hell. She wanted to control Hell. And if that would make her the devil . . .

Well, Ivana didn't have any problem with that at all.

Interstate 15 ran north from San Diego up through Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, across the Eastern Mojave Desert, and into Nevada. From there it angled up, through Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Montana, and to the Canadian border.

They wouldn't need to stay on it that long. But after miles of boring desert, Caitlin felt like they'd already been on that same highway long enough to have reached Canada. Even the arctic, if it weren't for the heat, and the sand and the barren wasteland, of course.

Caitlin didn't really hate the desert, but there was a sameness to it that was getting to her. How could people live out here? she wondered. But she was distracting herself with these kinds of thoughts, and she knew it. She hadn't wanted to let her mind be free to wander, because it kept coming back to the same thing. Caitlin was not into confrontation. She liked to live and let live, and she was a peacemaker, which set her apart from her often argumentative teammates. But she had swallowed down her questions on this issue for long enough. If no one else was going to raise it, she would.

"Mr. Lynch?" she said. He looked up into the rearview mirror, made eye contact.

"Yes, Caitlin?"

"I hate to bring it up but I still feel like . . . like we're going into this thing blind. I don't think you've told us everything we need to know. You and Cardinal DeMedici, I mean. We're going into Las Vegas, into who knows what kind of trouble . . . I really think we need the whole story. The back-

ground. I'd like to have a better idea of what our purpose here is, before I walk into what may very well be a massacre."

"She's right," Bobby said. "You guys are holding back on us. There's got to be more to this story."

"There is, Bobby," Lynch said. "I was hoping we wouldn't have to go into all the details. You kids may not like hearing about the history of this conflict."

"Y'know, Mr. L.," Roxy said angrily, "you're always calling us kids, and maybe that's okay. Maybe we are kids. But the way you say it, it's like you think we're all your children or something. Well for the record, you're not *my* father."

"You're Bobby's dad. Maybe *he* has to stick with you, but the rest of us don't. We choose to stay. And one reason we have, so far, is that we've always felt you treated us straight. You start hiding junk from us now, we might just have to walk."

"No need for that, Roxanne," Lynch said. "I think we can tell them the rest of the story, don't you, Francesco? The kids are right—if they're putting their lives on the line for this, they deserve to know what it's all about."

DeMedici straightened up in his seat and craned his head to look in the back. It pained him to do so, and he rubbed his neck with his left hand.

"Yes, John. I agree. They do deserve to hear the truth. And hear it they shall. . . ."

CHAPTER 9



CHAPTER 9

“I’ve purposely withheld any more profound explanation of my own history, with the Vatican and with the Horn, because I knew that you would all be skeptical at best,” Cardinal DeMedici explained. “At worst, I thought you might try to convince John to have me committed.”

Lynch smiled at that. They all did. But the smiles disappeared rather quickly as the Cardinal went on. And while he spoke, there were no interruptions. Not even the usual sarcasm from Grunge, or cynicism from Roxy. Not even a gasp of astonishment from Caitlin, who was so impressionable despite her vast power.

“I suppose it’s best to just forge ahead, so we’ll start at the beginning. Or as near to the beginning as I can recall. My memory is not what it once was, you see.

“I am slightly more than five hundred years old.

“I can see the doubt, even amusement in your eyes at such a claim, but it is true, I assure you. You notice that John does not balk at my words. He has some small idea of my age, and I must admit that my own knowledge of it is only slightly better. You see, when one has lived as long as I, the past begins to fray around the edges, to lose its focus. I can no longer remember the date of my birth, nor the year. I can tell you events I remember, but the days of my actual childhood, and therefore the precise time of my birth, are a mystery to me.

“Most of my earliest memories are of the Church. I became a priest, I believe, in Florence, while Julius II was Pope. It

was an age of enlightenment, an age of vast change throughout the civilized world. The Middle Ages were a memory, the Renaissance in full swing, and the Reformation of the Catholic Church was just about to begin. Lutherans and Huguenots and other challengers to the faith were growing ever more popular.

“I moved to Rome and became embroiled within the politics of the Vatican. Before long, I was an advisor to Pope Paul III. That was in the late thirties . . . of the sixteenth century, of course. When the Council of Trent was first summoned, I had already been made a Cardinal. I worked with Ignatius Loyola to found the Jesuit order, and within the order, to found the new Inquisition in 1542.

“You have heard, I am certain, of the horrible things perpetrated on accused witches during the original Inquisition. Have not a single doubt that most of them are true. However, the second—and much less notorious—Inquisition was begun for a single purpose, and it fulfilled that purpose: we killed demons. Demons and vampires and werewolves and sea monsters and all other members of those races we collectively refer to as ‘the Night Tribes.’

“And that is where this story takes us, my young friends. To the new Inquisition, and to the Night Tribes, and to the demons.

“Why am I still alive? Why, of all the members of the Inquisition, do I still live? The answer to that question is the answer to all questions. In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, after I had silently led the Inquisition in a quest around the world to scour the earth of the Night Tribes, an extraordinary thing occurred.

“I was in my quarters in the Vatican when a young priest in service to my Inquisition, a Father Macchio, as I recall, knocked on the door with a desperate and horrified look on his face. It had happened in Paris, that first time. In the tunnels below the city, a breach had somehow been opened between Hell and Earth. Already, a search was on within the depths of the Church’s archives, not only in Rome but around the world, for the Horn of Jericho. It had not yet been found.

“Without the Horn, we didn’t have a chance. Not a chance. At least, not without help. An idea had begun to form in my mind. An idea so horrible, so absolutely reprehensible that at

first I sought the counsel of the Lord Himself, silently praying for hours on end, hoping that I had not been tainted by my decades battling the monsters of this world.

“But the more time passed, the more I realized that without the Horn, my plan was the only way to save the Earth from the demons, to prevent Hell from completely overtaking the Earth.

“I conferred with the Pope, of course, but I had much more experience in such things than he did. He deferred to that experience quite gladly. He did not want to have the burden of such a decision.

“That is how I came to contact, at the cost of some three hundred and twenty seven lives, the leaders of the Night Tribes. The lords of the vampire and werewolf nations, and all their terrible brothers and sisters. It is how I came to organize the Peace of Vienna in 1578. You will never read about the Peace of Vienna in a history book, my friends.

“Ambassadors from each of the Night Tribes arrived in Vienna in March of that year. They fully expected to be executed, despite all my assurances, and so their lords had sent expendable representatives. It wasn't until the final day of the negotiations, when nothing else had occurred, that individuals at the top of the monstrous hierarchy of the shadows began to appear.

“The Peace of Vienna was signed on March 21, 1578, and from that day forth, I became known as *Il Mediatore*, because I was the man who had brokered that peace. The Pope knew that nobody else could have accomplished what I had, and therefore, he wanted to make sure that I would always be there to pacify the Night Tribes, to negotiate with them. For the first time in nearly one thousand years, the arcane secrets of the Vatican were delved into, spells were woven. Now, for as long as the tribes of the night roam the Earth, I will never die.

“I know what you are thinking, of course. First, that this is all some kind of insane joke or ridiculous fantasy story. But you know, don't you? I can see it in your faces that you know this is not just a story. And then, beneath that skepticism is your real question.

“Why? That's what you want to know, isn't it? Why would the Tribes do such a thing? Why choose peace?

“I’d like to think it was my talent for persuasion, I truly would. But I’m afraid it is only my ability to present the facts clearly, and to draw conclusions from them. You see, the Night Tribes, even as diminished as they were after I had spent nearly fifty years killing them off, were the things that humanity feared were lurking in the darkness. They still believed that, one day, the Earth would belong to them, to split up amongst them and war over like cave dwellers. Like humans in general.

“Each of them wanted to rule and so they had spent milenia at each other’s throats. But they needed humans to stay alive, needed humans as slaves and as meat. And if the demons did overrun the Earth, it would accomplish two things: there would be no more humans to feed off, and no single Night Tribe would have triumphed. They wouldn’t be ruling the world, they would be searching for a place to hide.

“Simply put, it was in their best interests to band together, for the first time since the world was young, and drive the demons back. All I did was point out the facts; the decision was theirs. However, once the facts were known, the decision was also swift.

“There were questions, of course, about the wisdom of bringing them together. Once they had destroyed the demons, it was argued, what was to stop them from turning around and working together to take control of the world. I knew better. With the whole Earth threatened, the Night Tribes could hold back their natural hatred and disgust for one another. But once the threat of Hell’s rule was ended, nothing less dangerous would hold them together. They would begin bickering immediately.

“I knew that. I counted on it. And, thank the good Lord, I was right.

“But for now, suffice to say that the peace between the Night Tribes enabled us to hold the demons, for the most part, under the streets of Paris. That was only the beginning, however. The Night Tribes turned the tide, yes indeed. But it was the discovery of the Horn of Jericho inside the remains of a church in Budapest that finally won the day. I blew the Horn myself, and it was an exhilarating experience.

“The screams of pain and anger from those demons will stay with me forever, which, for me, is not an idle boast. Those screams are like a symphony of angels to me, the sweet sound of evil being turned away from the precious morsel that is humanity.

“After the breach had been sealed, the bickering began. I spent more than a century continuing to be *Il Mediatore*, doing whatever it took to made deals, to broker compromises between the Tribes. Only one other time did I need their assistance against a pack of demons, but even though that had its own disturbing facets, it was nothing compared with that first time.

“Other than that, the hordes of Hell have been kept reasonably contained. This led, comparatively quickly, to more bickering amongst the Tribes. I was unable to help. Or, perhaps, I was unwilling. I don't really remember much about my state of mind that night, except a kind of helplessness I hadn't felt in a long, long time. But it all fell apart. Many of the priests and sisters in my Inquisition were slaughtered.

“The Peace had come to an ugly, violent end. Since then, the wars among the Night Tribes have had their lulls, but none of them ever stop for long. And it has been too long, now. They have forgotten the reason for the truce, forgotten that they were even capable of it.

“There will be no Peace this time, no joining of forces to combat the demons. Someone has found a way to breach the seal, or maybe it was never completely locked up. Demons are passing through now. It began with possessions, such as my aides and lieutenants. I suspect there are several authority figures near the breach who have already been taken over.

“But as the breach widens, the smaller demons will begin to step across physically. Then the carnage will begin, if it hasn't already. No matter what happens, I have spent my many centuries of life battling demons and monsters, and I will die doing exactly that.

“But not yet. Not until that breach is sealed.

“You are brave young people, and I would not desire to see you in danger if it could be avoided. But I will not lie to you. It would be worth all of your lives to me, and a thousand

others besides, a million others, if it meant saving the rest of the world and closing the breach.

“I tell you this so that there will be no misunderstanding regarding what you are getting yourselves into here. So that you will know exactly how high the stakes are in this contest.

“The most difficult part of it all is perhaps this: if we win, our only reward is that nothing changes. If we lose, all of humanity will slide into eternal damnation without the benefit of Judgment Day.

“Now you know. Now, it is up to you.”

Francesco DeMedici watched their faces as he spoke, knowing full well that his life was in their hands. They were only teenagers, and immature at that. But there was a courage and dignity in their hearts and minds that he believed would see them all through.

He had faith.

And it had been a very, very long time since he'd been able to recall what that felt like.

CHAPTER 10



The city took them by surprise.

Approaching Las Vegas after dark, the glow could be seen for miles as one drove toward the city, millions of lights brightening the night sky. That was what they'd been expecting.

But this wasn't night. In fact, as they arrived in late afternoon, the sun was headed toward the horizon behind them. Instead of beauty, they found barren emptiness. There was nothing around but desert until they crested a hill and started down into a valley, and there, in the distance, was the towering Stratosphere. Other landmarks came into view soon—the pyramid shape of the Luxor; the oversized, upraised guitar outside the Hard Rock; the New York City skyline, slightly reduced, of New York, New York.

"This is so cool," Grunge said.

"What, Las Vegas?" Caitlin asked.

"Yeah," Grunge replied. "It's the entertainment capital of the world. Gambling, mobsters, shows—I heard there are more topless dancers in this one city than in the rest of the country put together."

"We're not here to look at topless dancers, Mr. Chang." Lynch's tone was deadly serious. "You keep your mind on the business at hand, or you may end up headless."

"Hey," Roxy said, "was that, like, a joke, Mr. Lynch?"

Grunge rubbed his neck. "I'm not laughing."

"And you're too young to gamble in the casinos," Caitlin added.

“You don’t think I can pass for twenty-one?”

“You’re lucky you can pass for human,” Caitlin said. “Anyway, gambling is dangerously addictive, I hear. With your personality, you’re better off not starting.”

“Yeah,” Roxy put in. “They don’t call the place Lost Wages for nothing.”

“Actually,” Lynch said, “Las Vegas means ‘the meadows.’ That was the name given this area by the first Spanish explorers who came through here.”

“Why would they build a town in the middle of nowhere like this?” Bobby asked. “I mean, this may sound odd, coming from me, but doesn’t it get really hot here?”

“The Spanish didn’t settle here,” Lynch explained. “Mormons did.”

“Whoa,” Grunge said. “Bet they’re bummin’ now.”

“I’m sure.” Lynch turned to DeMedici. “Do you have any idea where in town we’re going?”

The Cardinal smiled. “Not at all. But the Horn seems to.”

“Dude,” Grunge said, “it talks to you?”

“Not exactly. But it communicates, nonetheless. In fact, John, if you would be so kind as to take the next exit . . .”

DeMedici opened the leather case and took out the Horn. He held it tightly in his hands, but it moved of its own accord, squirming, seemingly trying to jump free of his grip. “We seem to be getting close.”

“The Horn can really tell?” Caitlin asked.

“Yes, Miss Fairchild. It really can.”

Lynch exited at the airport and turned right, toward the Strip. Hotels and casinos reared up on their left. As they neared a cross street, Lynch asked, “Which way here?”

“Left,” DeMedici answered.

“So, if it can tell us where to go,” Sarah asked, “can it also tell us how to differentiate possessed people from your average gambling zombies?”

“That, Miss Rainmaker, may be even beyond the Horn’s abilities.”

They hung a left at the cross street, onto Las Vegas Boulevard. To Grunge and Roxy, who had both been here before, the Strip was a wonderland of light and color and sound. To Sarah, it was an example of all the worst things about Amer-

ican culture thrown together in one spot—greed, conspicuous consumption, gaudiness and all things excessive. To Bobby, it was a place that gave off vibrations of desperation and hopelessness. Caitlin looked at it as a giant petri dish, an experiment in abnormal sociology on a grand scale.

Cardinal DeMedici, struggling to hold the Horn, just thought of the city as one more challenge in a long life of them—and maybe the hardest one he would ever face.

Screamland rose twenty stories high, two blocks off the Strip. “A Tower of Terror Guaranteed to Raise Your Spirits!” the billboard back on the freeway had announced. And the place looked like it would do the job, for monster fans, anyway. The architecture was pure gothic horror. The walls were faux stone, with a crumbling “haunted medieval castle” look to them. Gargoyles guarded the ramparts, from which cobwebs were carefully strung to look perfectly natural—except that they could be seen from the street. Huge wooden doors opened onto a vast parking lot—automatically, of course, but with a squeal that could be heard a football field away.

The penthouse floor held the office and residence of Mark Bradach. Guests never knew that—the sign on the elevator simply read “King Suite,” but, when anyone asked, the King Suite was always booked. Insistent guests, or high rollers, were offered comparable suites one floor down: the Rice, Straub, Koontz, and Barker suites had four rooms each, lavishly appointed in ghoulish splendor, but maybe a little too big. Guests who knew better, who had been around, knew to request one of the rooms on the lower floors.

Mark Bradach never ventured onto those floors. He was, frankly, a little disturbed whenever he encountered a hotel maid dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein in one of those dingy, fake torch-lit halls. Monsters had never been his thing. But he’d given the design of the casino over to the previously successful team of Octavian & Bunkowski, and they’d come up with a destination resort unlike any Las Vegas had ever seen. And it worked. Flipping through the financials for the last month, Bradach knew that the casino could be self-supporting even if it weren’t an I.O. front operation.

But I.O. it was, from the ground up. Below the ground,

actually. The building had sub-basements and sub-sub-basements, going seven stories into the earth as well as twenty above. Bradach had been part of the organization for some twenty years, since back in the old Team 7 days. He'd served Craven well, and built himself a little fiefdom to call his own. He was secure enough in the company to risk an operation like this—completely off the books. He'd raised his own money for it, mostly by shuffling bank accounts around and skimming a little off each one. I.O.'s books were so complicated—and so secret—that it wasn't hard to turn up money that no one really knew existed.

What was money, anyway, in the Nineties? Information. Numbers on a computer. Nobody used actual cash anymore, not in big quantities. The casino was a cash machine, though, and Bradach was well on his way to replacing what he'd skimmed from I.O.'s accounts, and becoming a wealthy man besides.

He had security, he had wealth, he had power. And he had Ivana.

Or, more accurately, she had him.

Bradach was a handsome man, and he'd never been lacking in confidence. He'd had women, dozens of them, including some of the world's great beauties. He was attracted to women, and attractive to them. But there had never been anyone like Ivana—cold, calculating, breathtakingly beautiful Ivana. Sure, she used and manipulated him, but he let it happen just to be near her. She was the one wild card in his life, the one thing he knew he could never control. But she had him wrapped around her little finger like a piece of string, and he knew she could discard him as easily once she had what she wanted from him.

So, he had to make sure that what she wanted, he would be able to keep. She wanted power. Fine. So did he. And he was here on the scene, where the power would come from. The power that came from Operation: Hellgate would be shared power. There was certainly enough here for both of them.

Ivana wanted to run I.O., and Bradach would see that she did. Then he would make sure that he helped her run it. The man behind the woman. That would be good enough for him.

Besides, with Ivana, the view from behind wasn't half bad.

He closed the files, pressed a button on his phone. His secretary answered.

"Yes, Mr. Bradach," she said. There was always an edge in her voice when she called him that. She wasn't used to formalities, and Bradach knew she despised him. He liked that. It meant she wouldn't try to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"What's going on downstairs, Lolly?" he asked. "Any news?"

"Last report was, like, an hour ago," she said. "Seems we've lost most of the kitchen staff. Not that that's any great loss, right? Have you tried the eggs downstairs? The Overlook Café, on four, is the only restaurant still open. Some of the guests are complaining. And, of course, some of the staff. But guests always complain, and the staff would have to be dead to stop complaining—it's what they do. In fact, some of them are dead and *still* complaining."

"Booze still flowing?"

"So far, thank God," she replied.

"But things are confined to the behind the scenes areas?" he asked. "No mass panic?"

"There have been a couple of what you'd call 'minor incidents'," Lolly said. "Some guests have been possessed. A few have been eaten. How you could eat someone who's been sitting in that smoky casino for a few hours I'll never know, but then, I don't like bacon, either." Bradach could hear the shrug in her voice. People died every day, and you got to see a lot of them, even if you were just a secretary in I.O.'s employ. Lolly had ordered her share of bodies carted out of Mark's office.

"Nothing major yet," she finished.

"Thanks." Bradach punched the speaker button, shutting the intercom off.

Hurry up, Ivana, he thought. You wanted to be here when things started to happen. Well, they're happening.

Lynch parked the van in the big lot. They all climbed out, stretching after the long ride. DeMedici stuffed the Horn back into its case. The towering hotel seemed like it was a mile

away, and heat waves shimmered off the rows and rows of parked cars. They started walking.

“Francesco,” Lynch asked, “you’re sure this is the right place?”

“There is no doubt,” the Cardinal said.

“There had better not be. A mistake now could be embarrassing.”

“Not to mention fatal,” Sarah added.

“Definitely that,” Lynch said.

Outside the front doors stood two sepulchral doormen dressed in black undertaker’s outfits. Their name tags identified them as “Mr. Cooger” and “Mr. Dark.” Caitlin shuddered involuntarily. Then the door swung open with a deafening screech, sounding like all the doors in all the haunted houses in the world rolled into one.

“Welcome.” Mr. Cooger waved them inside.

“Enjoy your stay.” Mr. Dark repeated the gesture.

“Spooky,” Grunge said.

“Thank you,” Cooger and Dark replied, in unison.

The lobby was four stories tall. From the center of the high ceiling, a body hung, arms and legs bound. More cobwebs filled the higher reaches. Bats fluttered above. The eyes of painted portraits hanging on the walls didn’t just seem to move, they really did. The reception desk was a forty foot long sarcophagus. Beyond the lobby, the casino area clanked and clattered and jangled and buzzed.

“Awesome,” Grunge whispered.

A cocktail waitress scurried past them, her forked tail bobbing behind her.

“Check out the help,” Bobby said.

“I am,” Sarah replied.

“Jeez,” Roxy said, “do we have to go there again?”

Lynch stood still, eyes moving, taking everything in. “Where do we go, Francesco? Any ideas?”

“It should be obvious from here, John. We go down.”

How was not as immediately evident. Escalators led upstairs to restaurants—the Overlook Café, Hill House, Bethany’s Inn—and the conference rooms—the Poe Room, the Matheson Room and the Lovecraft Room. But nothing led down, at least from here.

DeMedici led the way, into the casino. "There must be some access through here," he said.

Caitlin's first thought was that Sarah had been right. The people sitting at the slot machines and blackjack tables *could* be zombies. Everyone seemed to have a glazed-over stare. Their motions were mechanical. There were no smiles, even on people sitting in front of machines that vomited coins like nauseous robots. A thick haze of cigarette smoke hung over everything. In the casino, the monster theme nearly disappeared. Except for a few small touches, this could be any casino.

They passed through the casino quickly. DeMedici was more alert than Caitlin had ever seen him, walking tall, eyes wide, gaze constantly moving, as if attack could come from any direction. And, Caitlin knew, it could.

"Excuse me." A man in a sheriff's outfit blocked their way. Caitlin looked at his tin star, on which "Desperation, NV" was stamped.

"Yes?" Lynch asked.

"These kids can't be in the casino," he said. "They're underage."

"How do you know?" Roxy asked.

"Okay, let's see some ID."

Lynch put a hand on the sheriff's arm. "We're just passing through," he said. "Really. We have no intention of gambling. We're on our way out the other side."

"See that you make it quick," the sheriff said. "You and the old guy can stay, but those kids gotta get out. We could lose our gaming license."

"Understood," Lynch said. "Thank you." They continued on their way. "If you're right about this, Francesco," he snarled after they were out of earshot, "a gaming license is going to be the least of that guy's worries."

"I assure you, I am right," DeMedici said. "Can't you feel the evil in the air?"

"I thought that was just Vegas," Grunge said.

"Worse than that," DeMedici replied. "We truly have arrived at Hell."

CHAPTER 11



CHAPTER 11

"This is kind'a creepy, isn't it?" Roxy asked no one in particular.

"No joke," Grunge answered.

They were making their way toward the back of the casino. The mood here was different . . . grimmer, somehow. While the people in the first section were intent on their gambling, the people here seemed to take it that much more seriously. They didn't look up as the gang passed by, or if they did it was with an angry, red-eyed glare. They seemed glued to the machines, feeding nickels and quarters as if the slots were ravenous beasts that would attack if their hunger wasn't quelled by coins.

Caitlin felt a chill rush down her spine as she looked at a heavy-set gambler in a pink muumuu turn as she walked past and glare at her with eyes that almost seemed to glow with an inner fire. The woman shoved a nickel into the machine's hungry maw and punched a button, already fishing out another nickel as the wheels spun. As Caitlin passed, she swiveled on her stool, watching. Caitlin looked back twice, and each time the woman's gaze was still locked redly on her.

"Through here," DeMedici said. He indicated a double doorway just past a bank of elevators that led to the guest rooms upstairs. "There should be access to the lower floors here."

"What about the sign?" Grunge asked. He pointed to where "Authorized Personnel Only" was stenciled on one door.

"They don't mean us," Bobby said. "We're sneaking in, anyway."

"Oh, yeah. Right." Grunge was a little nervous, though, especially when he took a closer look at the sign. On top of the red letters was a red handprint. It looked like blood, but he figured it was probably painted on, to complete the effect created by the blood-dripping style of the lettering. Real blood would have dried to a dull brown, anyway.

Unless it was fresh.

The corridor was a dramatic change from the casino outside. As soon as they were in with the doors shut, the noise of the machines was muffled. The corridor was brightly lit, and seemed clean enough. No goofy monster movie decor here.

They were almost to the first turn when the door behind them opened. Pink muumuu came into the hall. Behind her, the door swung shut, but it opened again almost immediately. Two other gamblers they'd seen outside joined the first woman. In the harsh light of the hallway, Caitlin could see that their eyes really were glowing red . . . it wasn't just an illusion caused by the casino lights.

This was it, then. It began.

The door swung open again, and a few more gamblers, if that's what they were, crowded in.

"Easy, people." Lynch's voice was quiet but commanding. "We don't want to start anything this close to the casino if we can help it."

"Looks like they're starting it," Bobby said.

"They haven't done anything yet."

"They're looking at us like they haven't eaten in weeks and we're the \$2.99 prime rib buffet," Roxy said.

"Keep your cool. Back down the hall. Maybe they won't follow." Lynch took a step backwards, then another. The others followed.

And with every step they took, the gamblers took a step forward.

"What are we seeing here, Cardinal?" Fairchild asked.

"Demonic possession," DeMedici replied, matter-of-factly. "These people look much like my aide did, before I killed him."

“All right,” Roxy said. “I’ve gone along with this so far, but I can’t say that I’ve really believed any of it.”

“And now?” DeMedici asked.

“Do I have a choice?”

They continued backing down the hall, turning once in a while to be sure they weren’t backing into more of the possessed gamblers. But the way before them was clear.

“Remember,” Lynch said. “They’re possessed by demons, but they’re not demons themselves. They’re innocents. If they should attack us, defend yourselves, but try not to use excessive force.”

“Try?” Bobby repeated.

“Try. If they don’t back down, though—”

“Then what?” Bobby interrupted.

“Kill them.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Caitlin asked. “Kill innocent people?”

“Caitlin, this is a war,” Lynch said. “Those are soldiers of the devil. If killing a few civilians is the only way to contain them, then it’s a price that has to be paid.”

“If my father was here—”

“He’d say the same thing!” Lynch snapped. “Alex Fairchild is a soldier, a good one. He knows that, in a war, the rules change.”

“Yeah,” Caitlin muttered. “I guess he does.”

They had retreated almost as far as they could go, past several closed doors. The hallway dead-ended at a service elevator. Sarah pushed the down button. It lit beneath her finger.

Before the elevator arrived, though, the possessed gamblers rounded the corner. There were more of them now—fifteen, maybe twenty. They shuffled forward, without expression, eyes fixed on Gen¹³. DeMedici pushed to the back of the group, so when the elevator came he could be first on.

It was a slow elevator.

This is just like Night of the Living Dead, Grunge thought. The zombies would shamle forward, unstoppable, until they’d overrun the heroes, and then they’d eat them. But, he knew, this was no movie. And they’d called the elevator—it was just a matter of holding these out of shape possessed weirdoes off long enough to get on and go down a few floors.

Of course, he thought, if this was a movie, the elevator would come—and it wouldn't be empty.

They kept coming. The elevator didn't. Finally, when the gamblers were less than twenty feet away, Lynch cupped a hand on Bobby's shoulder.

"You're up, Bobby. Let them have some heat. Try not to burn them too badly, but hold them off long enough for this elevator to get here."

"You got it, boss." Bobby flared a fist, released a moderately hot plasma blast that rolled along the corridor. It hit the possessed gamblers. The stench of smoldering hair and flesh and clothes instantly filled the hallway. But they didn't stop coming, as normal people would have done.

"John," DeMedici said. "They are from Hell, after all. A little heat . . ."

"Hadn't occurred to me. You're right. Looks like it'll be the hard way."

They were closer now, and they reeked, and their skin was blistered and burned. And still they came on.

Grunge touched the tile floor, took on its properties. Caitlin braced herself to start swinging. Sarah stood back with DeMedici—in these close quarters, there wasn't much she could do that wouldn't also risk hurting her friends. Lynch drew his H&K.

Grunge was the first to make contact. Tile hard, he swung at a guy in a loud Hawaiian shirt. His fist connected with enough force to tear the man's scorched head half off. Blood sprayed Grunge. The man staggered, then righted himself, and kept coming. Grunge slammed him with a body blow, knocking him back into the crowd. Four of them fell over.

"You go, Grunge!" Roxy yelled.

Fairchild was next. She punched the woman in the pink muumuu. She rocked back on her feet, swayed forward. Caitlin followed up with another tap to the chin, and the woman fell back into the group.

"They're so close together they're taking each other out," Bobby said.

"Yeah, but they're closing in on us, too," Roxy pointed out. "They move in much more, they'll crush us against the walls!"

“Can’t you push them back, Rox?” Bobby asked.

“I can try!” She created a gravity bubble between the possessed mob and her friends, and mentally shoved it back down the hall with all her might. It worked—the crowd was pushed back as if before some invisible shield. They tumbled and slid down the hall to the corner, buying Gen¹³ some breathing space.

And then the elevator came. It was empty, after all, Grunge noted with some relief. It was a wide elevator, made for freight, not luxury. They crowded on. Sarah jammed the “door close” button, and the big door did so with a *bang*.

“Floor?” Grunge asked.

“Please, no ladies’ lingerie jokes,” Sarah said.

“As far down as it will go, if you please, Master Chang,” DeMedici replied.

“SB 7 it is,” Grunge said. “What’s that mean?”

“Sub-basement,” Lynch answered.

“Going down.”

The elevator started with a shimmy, then descended steadily. Lights on an indicator panel flashed as they passed each floor. B, SB 1, SB 2 . . .

That was as far as they went. The elevator stalled with a jerk and a thump, halfway to SB 3.

“Oh, no,” Roxy said.

“No doubt,” Grunge added. “I just hope everybody used deodorant this morning.”

“Shut up, dear heart,” Roxy said. “Kat, give me a boost.”

Caitlin made a nest of her hands, and Roxy stood inside it and let Kat boost her up. She could have drifted up by herself, but it was awkward to use leverage when you were free of gravity’s hold, and she needed leverage to shove the hatchway in the elevator ceiling open. Besides, there was something unsettling about playing with gravity in a malfunctioning elevator.

She got the hatch free, and peeked out through the top. Then she replaced the hatch and dropped down out of Caitlin’s hands. The others looked at her expectantly.

“Okay,” she said. “We are well and truly screwed.”

The helicopter flight in from Nellis Air Force Base, just outside the city, was short and pleasant. The pilot was a fine-looking hunk of a man, an Air Force chopper jockey who had no idea who Ivana was or why he was flying her to the top of a casino, but hey, orders were orders, right? Ivana appreciated a submissive man in uniform—there was something deliciously ironic about it.

Carolyn Clark looked less thrilled. Downright green, in fact.

“Airsick, dear?” Ivana asked.

“A little,” Clark admitted. “I don’t do well in small planes or—urk—helicopters.”

“Well, hold it in, sweetie,” Ivana said. “We’re there.”

There was a helipad marked by a big blue H on top of the Screamland tower. The pilot put the big machine right down on top of it, gently, and cut the power. The blades slowed to a gentle whir.

“Here you go, ma’am,” he said. “You sure this is the right place?”

“Absolutely.” Ivana pushed her door open. “Nice control of that stick,” she said. “We’ll have to get together again sometime.”

Clark followed Ivana out, ducking under the blades even though they were considerably above her head. As the chopper lifted off, she turned to Ivana.

“I know who they’ll be talking about in the Officers’ Club tonight,” she said.

“Better to be talked about than not.”

“I suppose,” Clark said. “Someone meeting us here, or what?”

“They may be a little busy inside,” Ivana said. “Let’s go see.”

They crossed the roof to a doorway that opened onto a metal staircase. The door was unlocked—Ivana was expected, after all. She pulled it open, and started down the stairs. Clark, behind her, closed the door firmly. At the bottom was another door. This one was locked. Ivana touched some buttons on a keypad next to it, and opened her eye for a retina scan. The door slid open with a rush of air.

"Nice security," Clark noted. "What would have happened if I'd tried that?"

"I'd be wading in through what was left of you," Ivana said. "My Ferragamos would be ruined, and I'd be pissed."

"Hate to see that."

"You have no idea."

Lolly met them at the door to the King Suite. She was short, with dark coppery hair and a round face. "You Baiul?" she asked.

"You must be Lolly," Ivana said graciously. "I've heard so much about you. Looks like it's all true."

"Yeah, right." Lolly blew a pink bubble. "Bradach probably talks about me as much as I, like, think about him. Which I'm still waiting for the first time that happens."

"Au contraire, my dear," Ivana said. "You're all he thinks about."

"Pathetic, ain't it?" Lolly pointed to an interior door. "Poor lovestruck sap is in there."

He was sitting in front of a bank of television monitors when they went in. He pushed himself away from the spectacle and rose to greet Ivana with a hug. She tolerated it.

"Ivana," he said. "I'm so glad you're here. Things are proceeding nicely."

"Glad to hear it, Mark." She nodded toward Clark. "This is Carolyn Clark."

"We've met," Bradach said. "I didn't know she was one of yours, though."

"Of course not. So tell me, what's happening?"

He led them both to the TV monitors. "These show every level of the building," he said. "Two-minute rotation. That means that each monitor shows one floor, and every two minutes it skips to a different camera on each floor. Every floor is totally scanned every ten minutes."

"A lot can happen in ten minutes," Clark said.

"There are other cameras, particularly in the gaming area, with more frequent coverage," Bradach pointed out. "Those are piped into the security office. This is sufficient for my needs. If I want to see any specific camera in the building, I can call it up on my desktop." He indicated a screen in the

second row. "Sub-basement six," he said. "Look at those guys. Do you know what they are?"

The figures on screen were tall and powerfully muscled. If these monitors could be trusted, their skin was a particularly unlovely shade of decaying gray. Their basic shape was humanlike, but they looked broader than most humans, with thick necks and high foreheads from which jutted stubby horns. Their wings were folded behind them as they stalked down a corridor.

"Tell us," Ivana demanded.

"Those are demons," Bradach said. "Not the minor ones—those have been slipping out for a week now. These are the real thing, Ivana . . . major league. These guys might be named in the Bible. Certainly in some of the Grimoires."

Ivana smiled. "Nice work, Mark," she said.

That was the closest to a compliment he'd ever heard from her. He beamed.

Ivana studied the screen. Fascinating. Actual demons from Hell, walking on Earth. What would they be able to teach? How powerful were they? She turned to Bradach, still glowing from her praise.

"Mark," she said. "I want one."

"Excuse me?"

"A demon. One of those. Have someone go get me one."

"Ivana . . ."

"You wouldn't refuse a direct order, would you? You must have somebody here who's not worthless. Is Manning here?"

"Lew Manning? Yes, he's downstairs in a guest room. He and his men came in earlier today."

"Call him."

Bradach punched the intercom button on his phone.

"Yes, Mr. Bradach." That edge again.

"Lolly, get me Manning."

"Yes, Mr. Bradach." Click.

A moment later, the phone buzzed. Bradach picked up the receiver.

"Yeah."

He listened for a moment, then said, "Get a couple of guys and get up here ASAP. Good men, no slackers. The best you've got." He hung up. "On his way, Ivana."

“Are you keeping track of my demons?” she asked.

“I know where they are.”

Ivana watched them on the screen for a few minutes, until the door opened. Manning came in with that Italian, what was his name? Bozzi. He looked a little windblown. With them was a third man Ivana had never seen before.

“Hello, Lew,” she said.

“I-i-ivana.”

“I understand you had Gen¹³ in your clutches today, and you let them go.”

“Th-that’s right, b-basically,” he said.

“Why?”

“They k-k-kicked our b-butts, that’s a-all. I had no idea h-how powerful they w-were.”

“They’re good,” Ivana said. “Probably better now than they were last time we met, back at the Genesis Compound. But they’re not invincible, are they?”

“N-nobody’s invincible,” Manning replied.

“Glad to hear you say that. So, next time, you’ll beat them?”

“N-next time I’ll be r-r-ready for them.”

“You’ll have an opportunity soon,” she said. “They’re here.”

“Th—Here?”

“Just saw them on TV. But they have problems of their own right now. They’re right where we want them.”

“Wh-what is, then?”

Ivana rubbed his upper arm lightly. “I have a little job I want you to do for me.”

“W-what is it?”

She pulled him over to the monitors, pointed at the demons on screen. “Get me a demon.”

“You want a d-d-demon?” he repeated.

“A demon.”

Bozzi rolled his eyes. This was just determined to be one of those days.

“So, what’s up there?” Grunge asked.

“What has big, pointy teeth, glowing eyes, horns, and flies?” Roxy said.

“A possessed garbage truck?” Grunge ventured.

“Not flies, buzz buzz. Flies. You know, flapping wings, all that?”

“This is not a very good time for riddles,” Caitlin said.

“What riddle?” Roxy asked. “I just don’t know what to call it. A devil? A demon? It doesn’t look like the ones we saw upstairs.”

“Those were lesser demons, Miss Spaulding,” DeMedici said. “They can’t function on this plane of existence without inhabiting a human host body. What you’re describing sounds like one of the greater demons.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said. “Anyway, it stopped the elevator by grabbing the cables.”

“So we make it let go,” Bobby offered.

“Not so fast, brainiac,” she said. “It’s chewing on them.”

The elevator lurched, as if to emphasize her point.

“I think we better get out of here,” Grunge said. “While the getting’s good.”

“Not by going up,” Roxy said. “Not this girl.”

“Caitlin, get the door,” Lynch suggested.

“Right.” She shoved her fingertips between the doors, breaking through the heavy rubber seals. For a second, she thought she’d just rip the steel, but then the mechanism gave way, and the doors began to part. When she was finished, there was a two-foot gap. They were between floors, but the surface of SB 3 was visible five feet below.

The elevator dropped again. Four feet now.

“Let’s go!” Grunge said.

Lynch dropped down first, hitting the floor and whirling around, H&K ready to fire. “Clear. Francesco, you’re next.”

Caitlin helped the Cardinal down, and Lynch supported him from below. Roxy followed him out, then Bobby and Grunge. “Let’s go, Sarah,” Caitlin said.

“You go, Kat. I have one thing to do first.”

Caitlin stepped down from the elevator. “Hurry up, Sarah,” she said. “You don’t know—”

“I’m fine.” Sarah peered up through the doorway, looking between the elevator and the shaft wall. She could barely make out the cables, high above. But that was enough.

She sent a lightning bolt flying at the steel cable. There was

a bright flash, a whooshing sound, and a high-pitched scream. Sarah leapt clear of the elevator as it dropped past them, plummeting to the bottom of the shaft. It hit with a loud crash, and dust drifted up from three levels down.

“Got him,” Sarah said. She smiled. “There stairs around here?”

“Right over here,” Lynch said. They started down.

“This is just great, Boss,” Bozzi said. They were descending yet another flight of stairs. Down eight stairs, landing, turn, down eight more, landing, repeat. The sub-basements were high-ceilinged, with serviceways between.

“Hey, it’s not my f-fault.”

“I’m not blamin’ you, you know? It’s just that with the service elevator out, what are we gonna do, we do get one’a those demons for Miss Baiul? Take him up the guest elevator? Carry him up twenty-seven flights of stairs?”

“Let’s w-worry about that after we c-catch him.”

Harris, the third man, checked his blaster for what must have been the fortieth time. “You sure these should be set on ‘stun’?”

“A dead demon don’t do Miss Baiul no good,” Bozzi said.

“Yeah, but we don’t know how tough they are. Could be a kill setting will stun one, and a stun setting will only tickle.”

“C-could be,” Manning said. “On the other h-hand, you s-sure you want to accidentally k-kill one, and then tell Ivana what you d-did?”

“I just don’t want to go up against a demon without adequate firepower,” Harris said.

“Me, I don’t want to go up against a demon at all,” Bozzi agreed. “Why we doing this again?”

“I-Ivana said to.”

“You sleeping with her, Boss? You don’t mind my asking, I mean.”

“No, I don’t m-mind. No. I mean, I h-have. S-slept with her. But not now, I don’t th-think.”

“Long as you’re sure.”

“Ivana’s a c-complicated woman.”

“Never would’a guessed that.”

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“I mean, you n-never know where you stand with her. She likes it that way.”

“I bet she likes it every way,” Harris said.

“You’ll never find out, Harris.”

“Like you will, Bozzi.”

“Hey!” Manning interrupted. “We’re h-h-here.” He pointed to the heavy black “SB 6” painted on a white metal door. “Let’s go get us a d-demon.”

CHAPTER 12



“What was that?” Grunge asked.

“Sounded like someone going through a door,” Roxy replied.

“I know that,” Grunge said. “I meant, who—or what—was it? Demons? People?”

“No way to find out till we get down there.” The sound had come from below, the sixth sub-basement. Caitlin thought she’d heard someone—multiple someones, to be exact—running down the stairs right before they’d reached the staircase door. Whoever it was had, presumably, exited the staircase at a lower level.

“Where are we going now?” Bobby asked.

“C’mon, dude, pay attention,” Grunge said. “We keep going down ’til we get to the whaddayacallit—the breach? Into Hell? The Cardinal blows the Horn, we go back upstairs and check out some showgirls.”

The clatter of them all running down the concrete steps echoed up through the stairway. Caitlin had to shout to be heard. “It might not be that easy. We know there are demons around—it’s only logical to assume there’ll be more as we get closer.”

“Good thinking, Caitlin,” Lynch said. “We’ve got to be ready for anything. Whatever or whoever you might think you see could be one of them. Trust no one and nothing except each other.”

“But if the demons are escaping,” Sarah pointed out, drawing to a stop on the landing outside the door to SB 5,

“shouldn’t we try to make sure they’re confined? There are lots of innocent people in Las Vegas.”

“Show me one,” Roxy said.

“You know what I mean, Roxy. Can we just let the demons get past us into the city?”

DeMedici was breathing heavily from the exertion. “Miss Rainmaker,” he said, “closing the gate will keep the bulk of the demons in. Every moment we waste trying to stop an individual demon, we risk releasing a horrible plague on all humankind.”

“I suppose,” Sarah agreed. “I’ve been told that if you want to help a species, you can’t always stop to set the broken wing on an individual bird. But I’ve never been able to pass up that single hurt bird, either.”

“What are you saying, Sarah?” Lynch demanded. “Are you talking about disobeying a direct order?”

Sarah whirled on him, eyes flashing, cheeks suddenly flushed. Caitlin knew one of Sarah’s holier-than-thou lectures was coming, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. “We stay with you by choice, Mr. Lynch. You’ve helped us a lot, all of us, and we owe you for it. I admit that. But you don’t own us. This is not the military, or I.O., or any of your other macho he-man organizations where what you say goes. If I want to open that door and go hunt demons by myself, that’s what I’ll do!”

“You don’t have to go alone,” Bobby said. “I’m with you all the way.”

Lynch raised his hands in exasperation. “Sarah, Bobby. We have a very important matter to take care of. The issue here is not me giving orders or you taking them. It’s about all of us saving that which we hold most dear.”

“I agree with Mr. Lynch,” Caitlin said. “The whole world is at stake here, not just the few gamblers and tourists upstairs.”

“John,” DeMedici said. “There really isn’t time to argue. I must get to the opening, and I must do it now, before it’s too late for any of us. If the children would rather go off and pout, let them. I only need enough of them to help protect the Horn for a short while longer.”

Sarah crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at Lynch and

the Cardinal. Bobby put a hand gently on her shoulder, but she shook it off.

“Jeez,” he said.

“Not now, Bobby, okay?” He stepped away and she continued. “Fine. I think we’re making a mistake, but I’ll go along with the Cardinal’s plan on one condition.”

“You’re in no position to make demands,” Lynch said.

“I’m making one, anyway. When this is over, and the Horn is blown and the gate is closed, then we go back up, level by level, and we take care of any demons who are still outside Hell.”

“I take it you don’t mean medical care?” Roxy asked.

“Obviously not. Kill them, exorcise them . . . whatever you do with demons.”

“I think we can agree to that, right?” Bobby asked.

“Fine,” Lynch said. “Let’s just go.”

A floor below them, the stairway door crashed open. Grunge bent over the railing. “Guys,” he said. “We may be a little late.”

Below them, the staircase was filling with demons: red ones, gray ones, tiny, fluttering brown ones. And they were all headed upstairs.

Manning, Bozzi, and Harris pushed through the SB 6 doorway, weapons charged and ready, only to find it empty. The demons that they’d seen on the observation screen upstairs were gone, though there was a faint sulfuric scent in the air.

Bozzi heaved a sigh of relief. “Guess we go back upstairs now?”

“Y-you’re afraid of a few d-d-demons?” Manning asked him. “You’ve obviously never s-seen Ivana when she’s mad.”

“It’s been a long day already, Boss,” Bozzi said. “A long week. I’m ready for a break.”

“After we get Ivana’s demon. Not b-before.”

“Got it, Boss,” Bozzi said, resigned.

“How do we find them?” Harris asked. “Here, demon demon.” He let out a low whistle.

“Maybe we use a bonehead for bait,” Bozzi suggested.

“Hey,” Harris said.

“C-cool it, b-both of you.” Manning looked around. This

sub-basement was primarily a storage level. There were vast caged rooms stocked with food, beverages, supplies, and weapons enough to outfit a small army.

The army was bivouacked on the second and third levels. Three hundred Keepers, the largest force assembled anywhere in the world, and all of them off the books, officially. A small handful of people at I.O. knew they were here, but no one else did. Not Congress, not the President, certainly not the Pentagon. Fighting demons had even been part of their training, even though it was all simulated, and very few of them, if any, took it literally.

The three men worked their way down the hallway, checking the locks on the cages to be sure they hadn't been tampered with. Beyond the row of cages, though, there was a set of solid double doors. The locking mechanism hung loose, and the doors were slightly parted.

"Through there," Bozzi said.

"L-looks like it," Manning agreed. "Get ready."

They took combat positions. Harris stood on the left, aiming high. Bozzi took the right, and aimed low. Manning covered the middle ground. He reared back and kicked the doors so they flew open.

Nothing moved on the other side but the slowly dripping blood that fell from the ceiling.

Blood covered the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Bits and pieces of the Keepers who had been posted on this level were everywhere, along with their weapons, their helmets, assorted gear. The hall looked like the slaughterhouse of an especially sloppy butcher.

"I don't like the looks of this, Boss," Bozzi said.

"No kidding," Harris added. "These guys were just as well armed as we are. And there were a lot more of them."

"Y-you're r-r-right," Manning said. "M-maybe this time Ivana d-doesn't g-get what she wants. L-let's go."

They let the doors swing closed on the gruesome scene. They were only six steps away when the ceiling over their heads exploded in a cloud of plaster, and the demons swarmed out.

Manning reacted first. He spun, raising his blaster as he did. He squeezed the trigger and ion charges shot out, each

one finding a target, but the weapon was set on stun, and stun didn't phase these creatures at all. There were dozens of them, every size, color, and configuration imaginable. There didn't seem to be any reason to how demons looked—maybe their appearance in the afterlife was dictated by how they'd passed their time on earth, Manning supposed. They came in every color of the rainbow, although he saw very few blue ones, for some reason, and pastel colors didn't seem to exist. Mostly, they were reds and grays and greens and browns. He noticed lots of claws and slavering jaws with big teeth and scaly skin. There were demons that looked like humans, and there were others more monstrous by far. Manning blasted at a huge, pear-like being with eyes scattered randomly about its body. Some of the eyes exploded as the charges hit, but the loss didn't seem to bother it.

At the same time, an eight-foot-tall demon with a huge, many-toothed mouth set into its chest dropped down on Harris, teeth chomping. Harris fired at it, but its mouth closed over his arm and bit. The gun and the arm both disappeared inside. Harris screamed, but his scream was cut short by the big gnashing mouth coming at him again. It caught his head and its jaws snapped down.

Bozzi turned to the nearest of the caged rooms and smashed the padlock with the butt of his blaster. The lock broke off, and he dove into the room. He knew the cage wouldn't hold the demons off, especially with the door hanging open. But anyplace was better than staying in that enclosed hallway, he thought. Maybe Manning and Harris would be good enough for them, and they'd leave him alone.

As he scrambled across the floor, looking for someplace to hide, Bozzi switched his weapon to its kill setting. No point playing around with these things—Ivana wasn't going to get her demon specimen this way. And the creatures didn't seem to realize that they were supposed to be on the same side.

The cage was full of palettes on which rested big wooden crates, wrapped in plastic. There was no light in here except that which spilled in from the hallway, so he couldn't make out the stenciled words on the sides of the crates. Great, he thought. Could be weapons just made for killing demons, and he'd never know it. On the other hand, it could be crates of

potato chips. He ducked behind one of the stacks and shut his eyes tight. What a day.

Back in the hall, Manning was up against the cage. Demons surrounded him, closing in, breath hot and fetid. They were as ugly as anything he'd ever seen, with their open, running sores and eyeless sockets and snapping teeth and flapping wings. The stench of them made him gag. He could feel the wire mesh of the cage biting into his back, the blood from a dozen cuts and scratches running down his arms, his cheeks, his forehead. One of them had grazed his left eye, and it was swollen shut. His weapon was empty, its charge wasted on creatures unaffected by it.

This was all Ivana's fault! If she hadn't been so demanding, so greedy, so unreasonable . . . letting loose the demons of Hell! The ego it took to imagine that she could even control them . . .

She was the very definition of hubris. He was going to die here, and it was all because of Ivana. He swore that if he somehow survived this—even if he was possessed by one of these demons—he would kill her himself.

Suddenly, in unison, the demons simply stopped. They all backed away from him. Some of them chattered to themselves—he hadn't been able to understand a single word they'd said, although it had certainly seemed like they'd been communicating with each other.

One of them pointed down the hall, toward the door to the stairway. Finally, one spoke so that he could understand, although the words didn't sound quite natural in its mouth.

"There," it said. "The Horn we seek . . ."

They all ran for the stairs, then—ran and flew and skittered. Manning didn't dare breathe until they were at the door, and then he blew out the air he'd been holding and sucked in a great lungful.

"Boss."

The voice behind him made Manning shriek. His heart felt like it would leap out of his skin. He turned, shaking.

"Bozzi," he said, with no stutter at all. "Why aren't you dead?"

"Looks like my lucky day," Bozzi said. "Guess I just live right."

“It’s the Horn,” DeMedici shouted. “They’re after the Horn!”

“What would they want with it?” Lynch asked.

“How do they even know it’s here?” Caitlin demanded.

“They have a spiritual bond with it,” the Cardinal explained. “They know its power!”

“Don’t look very spiritual from here,” Grunge said.

“Are those all demons?” Roxy asked. “They look so different from each other.”

“Demons of various degrees of importance and lost souls of the damned,” DeMedici replied.

“Come on, people,” Lynch said. He backed through the doorway onto SB 5. “Let’s not try to fight them on the stairs. We need room to maneuver.”

“I’ll take, like, a football field,” Roxy said. “Maybe one in Florida. Anywhere but here.”

They all followed Lynch out of the stairwell. DeMedici held the Horn close to his breast, as if drawing strength from it. Sarah and Roxy went out next, with Bobby, Grunge, and Caitlin bringing up the rear. By the time Caitlin was out, the first demons—tiny, flying ones with papery wings and dozens of legs—were fluttering around the landing.

SB 5 was a research floor. Libraries and laboratories shared equal space down here, as every method for opening the doorway to Hell had been attempted. Every field of study that might have any bearing was investigated—religion, geology, spiritualism, quantum physics. In the end, the room that had proved most useful was not a lab or a library but a vast, darkly shadowed chamber with an upside down cross nailed to one wall and a pentagram painted on the floor. Candles provided most of the illumination, normally, but they weren’t lit now. A couple of bare electric bulbs burned in ceiling sockets far overhead.

Lynch kicked open every door until he found this chamber.

The libraries and labs and computer research stations were too small, their spaces too confined. He was beginning to think the fight would take place in the hallway, until he found this room. It was perfect. Space enough for Gen¹³ to really use their powers. Nothing of importance to be damaged in the fray.

“In here!” he called.

They all followed him in. The Cardinal stopped just inside the door, glanced back down the hall to where the landing was filling with demons, crossed himself, muttered a quick prayer. But he entered the room.

“Anyone know black magic?” Bobby asked. “Maybe we can call them off.”

“Too late for that,” Sarah replied.

“Are they following?” Caitlin asked.

Grunge looked out the door. “They’re on the way.”

“Brace yourselves, kids,” Lynch said. “And remember—we’ve got to get the Cardinal and the Horn down two more flights, no matter what the cost.”

“Always ready with a cheerful word, aren’t you?” Roxy asked.

If Lynch answered, it was lost in the roar as the demons burst into the chamber.

Bobby didn’t hesitate. He flared up and was airborne, loosing a powerful plasma blast right at the doorway. There was no way to miss, they were packed in like commuters on a New York subway at rush hour. The air crackled with the heat.

When the demons howled, the noise was deafening. Some of them dropped back. The rest kept coming.

“Gimme a light, Bobby!” Roxy called. Bobby looked at her blankly for a moment, then realized what she meant. She had taken refuge in a virtual forest of candles, some of them up to eight feet tall. Bobby shot a blast of flame at them, and when it died out, the candles were ablaze. Roxy used her control of gravity to lift them off the ground and hurl them at the oncoming demons.

They hit hard. Demons backed away from them. Candles sputtered and went out, but the sheer weight of them, combined with the fire, caused some of the demons to drop back.

Grunge ran to an antique-looking cabinet standing against one of the far walls. He yanked its doors open. Inside there was a variety of magical accessories: goblets and chalices, knives and swords, staffs of different lengths. He touched the tempered steel blade of one of the swords. The familiar brief wave of nausea rushed over him as he changed, his molecules rearranging themselves to mimic some other substance. Then

there was a flash of euphoria, and he was tempered steel from head to toe, clanging as he walked across the stone floor.

“Yo, Kat,” he said, rushing towards her, “let’s do some slicin’ and dicin’!”

She understood. When he reached her, she put out a hand. He took it, and she swung him off the ground, turned twice, three times, whirling him around her. When she’d worked up enough speed, she let go.

“Yeeehah!” Grunge shouted as he flew across the room, whipping through the air like the world’s largest throwing knife. He tumbled and turned into the demons, barely feeling their weirdly supernatural flesh split before him. He dropped on the other side of the mob with a crash like a dropped cymbal. “Gonna need a shower for sure after this,” he said.

“You needed one before,” Caitlin pointed out. “But good work.”

Where there had been almost two dozen demons, there were now half that—and various demon parts cluttering the doorway and the hall beyond. But the ones that remained were among the most fearsome of all: the tallest, the strongest, the most powerfully built. The tiny, fluttering ones were discounted—they hadn’t shown any interest in getting involved in the battle, but seemed to be mere pests, or maybe watchers of some kind.

Before the fight could be joined again, one of the demons split off from his fellows. He was nine feet tall and brick red, ripped like Schwarzenegger’s bigger brother, handsome in his own demonic way, with horns that curled twice jutting from his forehead and thick, curly hair covering his goat-like legs. For a moment, Caitlin wondered if this was the Big Guy. Then she decided if it was, she wouldn’t still be here to wonder about it. She’d tested the limits of her strength, over the past months, in many different ways. But she found herself curious to take on this enemy, to truly see what she could do.

Before she got a chance to move, the demon spoke. “All we want,” he said in a deep voice that made Roxy think of Barry White, “is the Horn.”

Lynch and DeMedici stood together in the center of the room—in, Lynch had noticed, the center of the pentagram, in fact. Lynch had guns in both fists, but the Cardinal had done

nothing but pray since the demons had appeared in the doorway, leather case clutched to his breast like an old woman afraid of purse snatchers.

"You going to do anything this time?" Lynch asked. "Or are you planning to let the kids fight all your battles?"

"There is nothing I can do," DeMedici answered. "Here in the pentagram, I cannot call the power of the Lord down to smite the demons. But if I were to step outside it, they would destroy me instantly and take the Horn."

"Nothing's for sure," Lynch said, "except that if you don't do something soon, I'm gonna feed you to them myself."

"We have nothing to gain from arguing like this," DeMedici said. "Let the children fight them. If it looks like they can't win, I will take the necessary steps."

Lynch shot the Cardinal a withering glance.

"The Horn," the demon said again.

"Go to Hell," Lynch said

"It's not that far away," Grunge added.

The demon opened his mouth, wide, wider than looked possible or reasonable, and spat a jet of flame at Lynch and DeMedici. The Cardinal raised one hand as if to block the flame, but it stopped at the edge of the pentagram as surely as if there had been an invisible wall there. The demon kept it up for a full two minutes, until the heat was nearly unbearable for everyone but Bobby. Still, Lynch and the Cardinal were untouched.

When the demon stopped, Sarah brewed up a storm and unleashed it on him. Rain and hail pelted him, turning, after a few moments, to a freezing slushy snow. The demon drew back, shivering.

"Guess you're not used to real weather here in Vegas," Sarah said.

Caitlin approached the demon then. The moment had passed. He was weakened, and it wouldn't be the test of her powers she'd wanted it to be. But the demon still stood, and still constituted a threat. When she came close, it swung a huge paw at her, fingernails like horny claws aiming to rip her throat. She caught the hand in both of hers, stopped it mid-swing.

"It's just not happening for you, big guy," she said. She

wrenched his arm, twisting it. Pain contorted the demon's features. He opened his mouth, but the fire had gone out of him, blown out, Caitlin guessed, by Sarah's storm. She pulled him off balance, toward her, and let go with her right hand. She balled that hand into a fist and slammed it into his gut. He expelled a blast of putrid breath. The blow made him double over, and Caitlin followed it with a right uppercut to his chin.

The demon toppled over like a big tree falling. With their leader down, the other demons seemed disoriented, confused. They looked at one another, as if hoping for someone to take charge. Tiny ones wafted overhead on thin wisps of wings. But no one came forward, and, after another moment, the remaining demons slipped from the room, headed back toward the stairs, back to safety and known territory.

"We did it!" Roxy said, her smile broad. "We whipped them!"

"That was awesome," Grunge agreed. "Demonbusting is a kick!"

"I hate to rain on anyone's parade," Caitlin said. "No pun intended, Sarah. But we beat a dozen or so demons. Maybe they were the strongest there are. But maybe not. And they have, how many more, Cardinal DeMedici?"

"Millions, I would guess, Miss Fairchild. Maybe tens or hundreds of millions, if you include all the lesser demons and the lost souls. Who can say?"

"Right. So we beat a handful, but if we don't get down there with the Horn, and pronto, we'll never be able to stand against what will come out of there."

"Point taken, Caitlin," Lynch said. "Let's move." Turning to DeMedici, he lowered his voice so only the Cardinal could hear it. "You know as well as I do, Francesco, that the pentagram is only lines on the floor unless it's been properly prepared and blessed. You didn't have time to do it, and I sure don't know how. Which leaves just one possibility—you used your magic to save your own skin."

"The Horn—" DeMedici said.

"The Horn, my ass. You wouldn't use your power to help the kids, but when you're threatened, you don't hesitate. You're losing points with me fast, Padre."

Ivana turned away from the monitor.

"I don't know whether to be glad, or furious," she said.

"At what?" Bradach had been sitting at his desk, watching his computer screen.

"Those Gen¹³ brats just survived an attack by some of the demons," she explained. "If the demons had gotten the Horn, they would have blown it, and the floodgates would have opened up."

"Which is what you want, right?" Clark asked.

"Yes, but I want to control the Horn," Ivana said. "She who controls the Horn ultimately controls the hordes of Hell."

"Even after they've all escaped?" Bradach asked.

"They can always be returned," Ivana replied.

"I hope you're sure about that," Bradach said. "So far, I haven't seen any indication that that's true."

"They were confined there in the first place, weren't they?"

"I don't think it worked quite like that, Ivana."

"Well, if you have any better ideas, I'd certainly like to hear them, Mark."

"Not me, Ivana," Bradach said. "This is your show."

"So what now, Ivana?" Clark asked. "Now that the demons lost the fight?"

"It was a skirmish, nothing more," Ivana said. "A tiny group of demons. Most of them retreated rather than fight."

"Still, it means Gen¹³ is pretty powerful, right?"

"I've always known that," Ivana answered. "I've underestimated them before. And I've sworn not to let that happen again."

"I guess the demons won't be underestimating those kids anymore, either," Lolly said from the doorway.

"Do you always let your secretary listen in on private conversations, Mark?" Ivana asked.

"No," Mark replied. "Lolly . . ."

"Only ever since I found out what his weaknesses are," Lolly said.

"Interesting." Ivana graced Lolly with a beaming smile. "And what, pray tell, are those?"

"The usual vanilla stuff," Poppy said. "Wine, women, fast cars, gambling. Mr. Bradach is just about as boring a sinner

as you could hope for, especially in Las Vegas. Some of your Vegas perverts get extremely creative, but not our Mark."

"Don't you have some work to do, Lolly?" Bradach asked her. His smile was very forced.

"No, Mark, let her finish," Ivana said. "I'm curious."

"Mark is very whitebread, Ms. Baiul," Lolly said. "I think about the things that rev his engines when I can't, you know, fall asleep at night. It's better than counting sheep, and I don't wake up with any sleeping pill headache. The only one that should maybe concern you at all is the gambling thing, seeing as how he skims money from the casino to feed his habit. But then, I guess the casino isn't really the reason we're all here anyway, right? So maybe you don't care about that."

"Is that a fact?" Ivana asked. "I am surprised at you, Mark."

"Listen, Ivana, she's just talking—"

"Not at all, Mark," Ivana said. "She sounds very well informed to me. Secretaries often are, you know. Overlooked, underpaid, but privy to all sorts of delicious information. Your Lolly seems to be no exception."

"But Ivana—"

"Let me finish. As I was saying, I am surprised you'd skim from our little operation, Mark. I didn't think you had the guts. Maybe you're not as worthless as I was beginning to fear. What do you think, Carolyn?"

"Oh, I agree," Clark said. "I don't think he's worthless at all."

"Very well, then," Ivana said. "We'll keep him around." She turned to Bradach. "Show us those vaunted guts, Mark," she said. "Let's go get that Horn."

CHAPTER 13



Bozzi had his hand on the door and was beginning to push it open when he heard a commotion on the stairs above. He gingerly let the door shut, holding it all the while to keep it from making noise.

"Hey, Boss," he whispered. "Those really were demons, weren't they?"

"What else could they be?" Still no stammer. Manning was beginning to like this near-death thing.

"Well, I think they're back."

Manning's face went white. Bozzi figured his own looked the same. There was nowhere to hide, so they waited by the doors, listening and hoping.

The demons went past, continuing down to a lower floor.

"What'd I say, Boss?" Bozzi said. "My lucky day."

"Let's hope your luck holds."

Once they'd heard the demons exit the staircase, they opened the door cautiously and peered out. Looked clear. Manning went first, Bozzi close behind. The stairs were empty, though there was a trace odor of something disgusting . . . demon sweat, Bozzi figured.

They crept upstairs, as quietly as they could manage. Bypassed SB 4, going straight to SB 3, and the relative comfort of knowing there were hundreds of Keepers there.

Relative, because Keepers hadn't seemed to be able to stop the demons down below. But maybe there were only a few of them—hard to tell when none of the parts were connected.

The staircase door opened here into a large, barracks-like

room with bunk beds lined up along one wall, two lockers standing between each one. Keepers lounged on some of the bunks, others played cards or chatted around folding tables. They were all in uniform, but not armor, and their weapons weren't close at hand. A couple of them looked up when Manning and Bozzi walked in.

"Help you?" one asked.

"Don't you people know there's a war on?" Manning said.

"Always one someplace," a Keeper said.

"No, I mean here. In the building."

General laughter followed that remark. "Think maybe we would've heard about that," someone said.

"Try calling upstairs," Manning insisted. "Mark Bradach's office. Ask him."

"Never talk to him," another Keeper said. "Got a question or two I could ask that secretary of his."

"Look, Boss," Bozzi said, "this ain't worth it. These guys wanna sit on their butts and get eaten alive, that's their problem. Let's just get outta here."

"No, Bozzi." Manning faced the Keepers again. "Who's in charge here?"

"That'd be Captain Shelley," someone answered. "Command offices are up one flight."

"There a connecting stairway in here?" Bozzi asked. "'Cause I'm really tired of those stairs out there."

"Through the barracks, out the door, on your right," a Keeper answered. "Just don't go through the next door on your right, 'cause that's the women's barracks, and they appreciate it if you knock first."

Manning and Bozzi followed the directions they'd been given, and in five minutes were sitting in Captain Shelley's office. She was a very short woman, with a compact strength and an air of authority that made it easy to see how she'd achieved her rank. Her neat brown hair was tucked under a cap.

"Of course, we've been monitoring the situation," she said. "The building's security cameras show every level, and there are three places from which they can be accessed—Bradach's office, casino security, and through that door." She pointed to a door at the back of her office, opposite the one

they'd entered. The office looked like any military commander's anywhere—two flags, U.S. and Nevada, crisscrossed behind her dark brown wooden desk, portraits and certificates on the walls, a bookcase with models of fighter planes on top. "The cameras on the lower floors have stopped working, just in the last twenty minutes or so," she said. "But we've been watching everything up to that point."

"Why don't any of your soldiers seem aware of it?" Manning asked.

"They're on alert," Shelley explained. "All personnel have been recalled from leave. Everyone is in the building. They're not armored up and waiting to strike, but they can be that way in a matter of minutes, when the word comes."

"Seems like the word is a little late in coming."

"You don't make that call, Mr. Manning, and neither do I. Only Mr. Bradach or Ms. Baiul is authorized to do that."

"They're not downstairs looking at the remains of dead Keepers. Including one of my men."

"They'll be down in a moment, though," Shelley said. "They're on the way."

"Coming here?" Manning asked.

"That's right. I spoke to Mr. Bradach's secretary not two minutes before you came in. They'll be joining us momentarily. Would you like some coffee while we wait?"

Manning shook his head. The last person he had hoped ever to see again—his personal vow notwithstanding—was Ivana Baiul. But he couldn't exactly leave now. And where would he go? He and Bozzi were trapped down here, and leaving in the company of a few hundred soldiers seemed like the best hope of getting out alive.

And even then, what was next? Demons overrunning the planet? Was that what he'd signed on to help accomplish? How did that forward his goals, or anyone else's? Ivana was a nutcase, superpatriotism pushed beyond any logical extreme.

He looked at Bozzi. The guy had been beat up, had to hold onto the strut of an airborne helicopter for twenty minutes, chased by monsters. And he wasn't even a citizen. He was doing this for cash, no other reason. No wonder he was fed up. At least Manning had been able to persuade himself, for a time, that he was doing what was best for the country. A

strong hand at the helm of I.O.—Ivana's strong hand—was what the nation needed to get it back on track.

Or so he'd believed once. Now he was fresh out of beliefs. Now there was only terror and the desperate urge to live.

The door opened. He didn't look up at first, not until he heard her familiar voice.

"Well, hello, Lew," she said.

"I-I-Ivana." The stammer was back, in a big way. Great.

"Where's my demon?"

"D-didn't g-get one. Sorry."

"Hmm . . ." she said. "I wonder if I should let you live. I don't normally, when someone has failed me as many times as you have."

"Ivana," Bradach said. "Please."

"What, Mark? Want me to spare him? Why? He's worse than useless. I count on him, and he lets me down. I trust him with yet another task, and he lets me down again."

"I-Ivana," Manning said. "You wanted the H-Horn. It's h-here in the building. You wanted a d-demon. They're all around us. T-take your pick."

"True," she replied. "In a way. But not good enough. Or am I being too harsh, Carolyn?"

Clark shrugged.

"Don't we have better things to do, Ivana?" Bradach asked. "Isn't there some pressing business that we came down here for?"

"I believe you're right, Mark," she said. "We came down here to acquire that Horn, once and for all. We'll need your people, I think, Captain Shelley."

"They're ready to go, Ma'am."

"D-don't look it," Manning said.

"I'll thank you to keep your uninformed comments to yourself, Mr. Manning."

"W-who outranks who here, Mr. Bradach?" Manning asked. "B-Bozzi and me, we report to y-you. Do we t-take orders from these people?"

"You're lucky to be alive, Manning," Ivana replied. "You'll take orders from the janitorial staff and like it."

"Ivana," Bradach pointed out. "The janitors have all been possessed."

"I know," she said.

Captain Shelley didn't exaggerate. Within fifteen minutes, the Keepers who had looked like they were on summer vacation were formed up in orderly rows, fully armored, weapons clean and charged. Ivana, Bradach, and Shelley walked among the ranks while Manning and Bozzi stood off to the side, watching. Each Keeper wore protective battle armor that covered him or her from head to toe, yet was flexible enough to allow ease of movement and complete visibility.

The helmets had large visors, Shelley explained, that not only let the Keepers see in front and to the sides, but there was a tiny camera mounted on the back, and by glancing at the upper right quadrant of the visor, the soldiers could see a display of what was behind them. They wore light packs that contained water, one meal's rations, and extra ammo for the conventional sidearms each carried as well as charge packs for their Stunburst electrical weapons or plasma loads for their blasters. Each soldier also had a vibro-blade belted to his or her ankle, and an assortment of grenades hanging from belts that crisscrossed the chest.

"The army of the future," Captain Shelley said with pride, and Manning had to agree.

When the inspection was complete, Ivana, Bradach, and Shelley stood before the troops.

"They've been filled in as to where we stand vis à vis the demons, Ms. Baiul," Shelley said. "Would you care to clarify the objective?"

"Certainly. Thank you, Captain Shelley." Ivana faced the ranks of Keepers. "There are, as you've been told, demons escaping from a fissure in Hell. Some of you may find this hard to believe, but I assure you, it's true." The Keepers listened, stone-faced and silent.

"Our goal is twofold," Ivana went on. "There are five teenagers down there somewhere, accompanied by two older men. The teens are super-powered brats. The older men are enemies of the United States of America. One of them, the oldest, carries a leather valise, and in that valise, a Horn. This Horn is not like anything you've ever seen. It's a biblical artifact, priceless and powerful. Your primary goal is the retrieval of that Horn, before the old man can use it in a manner

contrary to the best interests of our nation. Kill him, but save that Horn.

“Your secondary goal is to keep the demons somewhat contained until the Horn is recovered. Right now, the demons are simply running amok. They’ve been confined in Hell for a long time, and they’re like death row prisoners suddenly released into a big playground. Ultimately, they’re on our side, or will be. The Horn is what gives us control over the demons. Until we have it, they don’t understand that they’re our allies. They’re killing anyone and everyone they meet.

“So, two objectives. Get the Horn and bring it to me here. And keep the demons from killing our people until we can bring them in line with the Horn. Clear?”

“Yes, Ma’am!” the troops answered as one.

“Any questions?” Shelley demanded. There were none. “That’s it, then! Move out!”

The Keepers marched in orderly rows to the staircase and headed down, as dedicated as soldiers in any other service.

On the stairs, out of sight of their commanding officers, some of them started to talk.

“You believe any of this?” a Keeper named Atkins asked. He and Etchison were in the very front, with a couple of female Keepers, Curry and Navarro, behind them. Hundreds of booted feet pounded down the stairs above them. If there was action, they’d get it first.

“Demons?” Curry said. “Right.”

“That’s what I think,” Etchison offered. “I don’t know what is down here, but I don’t buy that witch’s story for a minute.”

“Why not?” Navarro asked. “Makes as much sense as anything else around here. When you were in Basic, did you ever think you’d be stationed at a casino complex in Las Vegas?”

“I never thought I’d be assigned to I.O.,” Atkins said. He was twenty-three. His mother was English, and he had just a trace of an accent, from living in Liverpool as a kid. “I never heard of I.O., for that matter. Until the transfer came in, I mean. But nothing surprises me about I.O. anymore. Still, demons? I don’t know.”

“We’re going down,” Navarro pointed out. “You think

maybe there are communists living under Las Vegas?"

"How about trolls?" Curry asked with a laugh.

"Fifty bucks says this is a drill," Etchison said.

"I reckon we're about to find out," Atkins said. "We're here."

"Here" was SB 6. The man carrying the Horn had last been sighted one level up, on SB 5. Half the troops were stopping there, half continuing down to 6. They would simultaneously sweep both floors, clearing out any demons and hunting the Horn.

"What are you waiting for, Atkins?" Etchison said. "Lock and load."

"I did that upstairs," Atkins said. "Whatever we find in here, I think it'll have teeth." He held off, looking at his watch. At the prearranged moment, he went through the door, knowing that upstairs the same process was underway.

Demons had congregated on this level, waiting for something to happen. None of them knew exactly what. They could all sense the presence of the Horn, though, and the one carrying it. The one who meant to seal them back in Hell forever. The desires of demons, the needs of the lost, were few. But one thing they all wanted was to be free of the boundaries of Hell.

So when Atkins went through the door, he didn't even have time to fire his Stunburst. His head was torn off and tossed into the air by a creature shaped like a big gelatinous blob, colorless, with hundreds of whip-like protrusions dangling off it. Whip-like and sharp.

Etchison opened fire. He'd grown to like Atkins, to enjoy the man's twisted sense of humor. Seeing his friend's head flung down the hallway by this Jello mold gone haywire ticked him off. He blasted at the thing, and his charges had some affect, blowing bits of goo all over the hallway. Curry crowded in behind him, then Navarro. They all opened up into the mob of demons there, advancing as they fired. When a weapon's charge was gone, that Keeper dropped back to reload and two others took his or her place. Within five minutes, they'd moved thirty yards down the hallway, and the demons were still retreating. Etchison was dead, but Curry and Navarro fought on.

But then the demons countered. They'd massed behind the double doors halfway down the hall, and taken refuge in the dark, caged rooms to the sides. Once they'd drawn the Keepers down the hall, the demons attacked from three sides. It was a slaughter—flame and claw and tooth and tentacle against weapons made by humans and armor that, while strong enough to stop a conventional bullet, was nowhere near capable of arresting the full supernatural force of demonic attack. Soldiers fell by the dozens, and the hall ran red with human blood.

In the seconds before she died, Navarro found herself wishing she'd taken Etchison's bet.

Another feature of the high-tech helmets was that battleground commands could be displayed to soldiers in combat. After a few minutes, Captain Shelley's orders were changed, and Keepers charged the caged rooms along the right side of the hallway. A few plasma bursts cleared out the few demons still in the way, and then soldiers were tearing apart crates to reveal artillery pieces. Phase disruptor cannons, or PDCs. Often called "phasers" by the troops, after the weapons in *Star Trek*. Like lasers, the manuals said, but instead of amplified, directed light, PDCs shot a stream of charged atomic particles at a target, disrupting its molecular structure. Building, person, aircraft—the PDC could take out any of them.

They'd seen phasers in battle sims, but had never trained with the real things. They were about the size of antitank weapons, mounted on tripods. But instead of barrels, they had thick metallic coils that twined around a clear center rod. The Keepers knew from the sims how they operated. Power switches were clearly labeled, and were punched in seconds. As soon as the power came on, a low hum started to build, and within a minute, the center rod glowed from within. Gunners dropped into seats mounted behind the weapons and aimed at demons, then pulled the triggers.

The squeal was ear-piercing as the first PDC was activated. A ray of light beamed from the tube, but it wasn't steady light—tiny particles seemed to dance around within the light, giving it a wavering effect. The gunner swung the weapon around so that it was trained on a specific demon, a tall, gray-green beast with four arms and a suppurating wound for a face, and waited.

At first, nothing happened. Then the demon clutched its chest where the ray was hitting it. It let out a scream nearly equal to the screech coming from the PDC. Finally, it imploded as its molecular structure was disturbed, losing the cohesiveness that held it together. One second, there was a demon. The next, there was the stuff that had been shaped like a demon, but was, in fact, air and water and compounds that didn't exist on the earthly plane and therefore had no names.

In short, a greasy spot on the floor.

A cheer went up from the troops. More of the weapons were activated, and demons disappeared right and left.

"Let me take a shot," Curry shouted, squeezing in behind one of the PDCs. The gunner using it scooted over, and Curry sighted down on a demon with nine mouths and no limbs, rolling and biting everything in range like the whirling blades of a push mower gone berserk. She squeezed the trigger. The thing burst into near-nothingness.

"This is cool," she said.

With the surveillance cameras out of commission, the people upstairs had to watch the battle's progress via images beamed up from helmet-mounted cameras. The tide on SB 6 seemed to be turning, thanks to the well-placed phasers. But there was no good news on SB 5—Gen¹³, and DeMedici, seemed to have vanished from there. Keepers were checking every room, engaging the occasional demon. But no sign of the meddling kids or the old man with the Horn.

Ivana was furious.

"This is your fault," she raged at Manning. "If you had just been able to find one ancient man, and take his toy away from him, I'd have this entire situation under control by now."

"Ivana," Bradach said, "you've made your displeasure with Lew known by now. It's not helping us move forward."

"You want to move forward?" she said. "I thought you were fine where you were, Mark. Sharing my bed, stealing money from our casino—that's not enough for you?"

"You know what I mean, Ivana. We need to address the situation as it stands, not point fingers and assign blame."

Ivana turned to Captain Shelley. "Are there sensitivity sessions held here these days, Captain Shelley? It must be a new

thing since I've been persona non grata at I.O. And it sounds as if Mark has been doing very well at it, because that sounds like happy psychobabble crap to me!"

"Persona non grata, Ms. Baiul?" Shelley asked.

"That's right. Didn't Mark tell you? I have no official standing at I.O., currently. I will after Operation: Hellgate, I assure you. But for the time being, no. Think of Mark as my figurehead there. I'm the power behind the scenes."

"Then you can't really give orders."

"I can," Ivana said with a smile. "And I do."

"I don't have to obey them, though."

"Th-that's right, Captain," Manning said. "Y-you don't h-have to listen to a th-thing she says!"

"Lew." Ivana's voice was icy. "Did you think I'd forgotten how angry I was with you?"

"S-stop her, Captain," Manning went on. "It's your d-duty to arrest h-her!"

Ivana rose from her chair and walked casually across the room to where Manning sat on a hard couch. "I think you've overstayed your welcome, Lew," she said. "Just a teensy bit."

She flicked a hand at him. The fingertips drew back and shredder wires shot out, wrapping themselves around Manning's throat. He tried to speak, to shout, but couldn't. The wires pulled tighter. He could feel them cutting the flesh. He grabbed at them with his hands, but that only resulted in him cutting off his own fingers. They dropped to his lap like spilled Vienna sausages, he thought, the image almost comical in his mind before the wires at his throat cut his jugular and the life poured out of him pint by bloody pint.

"What about you?" she said to Bozzi. The wires retracted into her fingertips as she watched him.

"I'm on your side, lady," Bozzi said. "I just do what I'm told."

"Very well." She went back to her seat.

"Nice, Ivana," Bradach said. "The guy's worked for you for how long?"

"The guy was a waste. I put up with him for far too long. No sense allowing it to go on."

"You're out of control, Ivana. I thought once that you had

some good ideas. I believed you when you said you had the good of the country at heart. I listened to your grandiose schemes for taking back control of I.O. I helped you do it.

“But this . . . this is turning into a mess. You don’t have any power over those demons. It’s not like you made a deal with the head guy or anything. You’re just going to let them out and try to build something out of the ashes.”

“Do you have a better idea, Mark?” she shot back. “It’s our country that’s out of control. Crime in the streets, madness in Washington, filth on the airwaves. The U.S. is lost, Mark. There’s no restoring sense to a nation gone insane. The only way is to start over. Rebuild from the ground up, with a firm hand at the controls. We went soft, we let things get away from us. We fought the communists, but once they were defeated we forgot who to fight next. We lost our way.”

“No, Ivana. *You* lost your way. The country is hurting, sure. But it’s a great nation. It can be righted again. It needs leadership, direction, but it doesn’t need to be burned down to be built back up.”

“That’s where we differ then, Mark.”

“We differ in more ways than that, I pray.”

“Tell me, Mark.” Ivana got up from her chair again. Bradach was standing near the doorway to the surveillance room. Shelley sat at her desk, with Clark seated in a visitor chair next to Ivana’s. Bozzi was on the couch, uncomfortably close to the dead Lew Manning. “Did you enjoy your time with me?”

“What kind of question is that, Ivana?” he asked.

She addressed Clark. “He was my lover, you know. Everything Lolly told us about him is true. His tastes are very mundane. He’s an experienced lover, but not especially skilled.”

“Ivana . . .”

“But in deference to the fact that you were my lover, and my partner,” she went on, “I’m not going to use the shredder wire on you.”

Bradach pulled a gun from a shoulder holster. “Don’t even think about trying anything with me, Ivana. You won’t survive it.”

“Now, Mark,” she said. She smiled, still drawing closer

to him. "I'm surprised at you. Do you really think you can shoot me?"

"Take another step and find out."

Instead of a step, Ivana dropped to the floor, caught herself on her hands, and catapulted herself at him. Her right foot hit his gun-hand and the pistol flew from his grip, discharging once as it went. The bullet thudded harmlessly into the ceiling.

Ivana's left foot followed, catching Bradach in the neck. He grabbed at his throat and fell to his knees. By then, Ivana was on her feet again. She grabbed his collar in both fists and pulled him, shaking, to his feet.

"Never underestimate me," she hissed in his face. "I didn't ask if you were capable of shooting me, moron. I asked if you could do it." With that, she head-butted him, driving her forehead into his nose. He fell like he'd been shot, and lay still, bleeding onto Captain Shelley's carpeting.

"Oldest one in the book," Ivana said. "I don't know my anatomy that well, but I know what kills."

"Very impressive," Clark said. "As usual."

"Glad you liked it, Carolyn. Since it makes you my second in command at the new, improved International Operations." She walked back to her chair, slowing by Clark's and drawing her fingertips languidly across the other woman's shoulders and neck. "And yes, that makes you eligible for fringe benefits as well."

"I'll look forward to working with you closely," Clark said.

Ivana laughed. "Very closely, my friend. Very closely indeed."

CHAPTER 14



There had already been too much killing, Caitlin thought. They were making their way down inside the walls—experience back at the Genesis Compound had taught them that the accepted routes of passage, stairs and hallways and elevators, were dangerous when you were surrounded by your enemies and vastly outnumbered. So Caitlin had carefully removed a section of wall, and after they had gone inside the wall, she put it back so that only someone actually inspecting it would notice that it had been disturbed. These sub-basements were huge, and required extensive ventilation systems, and those systems required maintenance access. So inside the walls, if you knew where to look, there were hatches and ladders and ducts plenty big enough for the seven of them. DeMedici had some difficulty negotiating the ladders, but Roxy made it easier for him by gently levitating him down.

But from inside the walls, Caitlin could hear the sounds of battle. Gunshots, explosive charges, screams of the injured, sobs of the dying. There were people being killed, people who, she suspected, probably didn't even know for what cause they were fighting. And demons—could they die? It seemed like it. Upstairs, she and the other kids had certainly taken some demons out of the fray in gory fashion. The creatures the Cardinal called the Lost Souls of the Damned, she guessed, were already dead, but even so, it looked like there was a way to kill them again.

She didn't know if they went back to Hell and were reborn again—if so, then this was a never-ending war.

But it was, anyway. It was a microcosm of the ultimate struggle of good against evil, wasn't it? She and her friends battling on the side of good . . . she was almost embarrassed at how prideful that sounded. Still, that was what they were doing here. All the petty criminals, the costumed crooks, the deranged scientists and megalomaniacs they usually fought paled in significance compared to what they were up against here.

This truly could be the end of the world. And even knowing that, she would prefer to put an end to the killing. Death in the cause of the greater good was still unacceptable to Caitlin. She had already lost enough—all the children of Team 7 had lost enough, and even though she'd recently learned that her father had, in fact, survived his Team 7 days, she'd spent most of her life believing in his death. She was an orphan who happened to have a father. That was something she didn't wish for the children of the people whose dying she could hear muffled on the other side of the walls.

The maintenance access passage was a narrow space, running alongside the enormous ductwork it took to heat and cool the sub-basements. Galvanized sheet metal stretched in every direction, and the gridwork floor and welded ladders looked like spillover from it, excess metal that happened to flow into these useful shapes. Moving single file, the team made it past the floor where the worst of the fighting seemed to be, and down to where there was no further down to go.

"End of the line," Mr. Lynch said, looking from right to left. "Anybody see an exit?"

"There's gotta be a hatchway somewhere," Roxy replied.

"If not, I'll make us one," Caitlin said.

Bobby scouted down the passage a few feet, illuminating the way with a flame that danced in his palm. "Here's one," he called back. When the others had gathered around, he turned the handle to open it.

"Easy, Bobby," Lynch warned. "This is the lowest level. The closest to the rift. Who knows what could be on the other side of that door?"

Bobby swallowed hard. "Guess we'll find out," he said, and pushed it open.

There was nothing on the other side. A narrow hallway,

unlike the ones upstairs. It was unfinished, the walls blasted out of the bedrock. Several doors were set into it at intervals, all closed. Bare electric light bulbs strung along the ceiling provided minimal illumination. No humans, no demons. Quiet. Down here, they could barely hear the thumping and blasting of the battle raging above.

"Maybe there are lower levels than this," Sarah suggested.

"No," DeMedici said quickly. "We are very near. The Horn tells me this."

"That Horn sure is a motormouth," Roxy said. "To listen to you tell it, anyway. I haven't heard it say a word yet."

"You are young and naive," DeMedici answered. "You think you know the way the world works, but what do you know of faith? What do you know of the power of the Lord, of Satan's dark ways?"

"I got a hunch I'm gonna find out."

DeMedici chuckled, an activity that was as rare for him as for Lynch. "That you will, my child."

"Does the Horn tell us which way to go?" Caitlin asked.

The Cardinal pointed down the hall to the right. There was a single door blocking the hallway, a submarine-style hatch with a big wheel that operated it. "Through there," he said.

"That's it, then," Lynch said. "Let's finish this."

They went straight to the hatchway, ignoring the doors lining both sides of the hall. Lynch gripped the wheel, spun it, and the hatch swung open.

Onto a nightmare.

Demons rushed at them, in greater numbers and more horrifying variety than they had yet seen. Many were still vaguely humanoid. But there were others of shapes that defied description, forms that made no sense to the human eye, combinations of things that couldn't reasonably be combined. A spinning cloud of dust belched at the hatchway and a thick gray column flew toward them. Roxy responded by throwing up a gravity shield that deflected the column, and it dispersed into a million tiny gray moths. Another demon rolled flame into an ever-growing ball and hurled it at the hatchway. Bobby countered it with a blast of his own and knocked it harmlessly to the side.

Lynch slammed the hatchway shut and spun the wheel again, locking it.

“You sure you want to go through there, Padre?”

“There must be another route, though less direct,” De-Medici agreed. “Through the side chambers, perhaps.”

“Let’s check,” Lynch said. He hurried back to the nearest door off the hallway, opened it. The room looked like a lecture hall, rows of chairs facing a lectern, but it was empty. There were no other doors.

“If there’s another room like this on the other side of the wall,” Lynch suggested, “we could bypass the chamber with all the demons in it. Possibly.”

“Possibly is a better chance than attempting to battle our way through them,” the Cardinal said. “But there is no door to the next room.”

“That’s what I’m for,” Caitlin said.

There was a rattling at the hatchway, and smoke drifted through the seal.

“You guys go for it,” Bobby said. “I’ll stay here and keep the demons occupied so you can get around them.”

“Bobby—” Lynch started to say. Sarah interrupted him.

“He’s right, Mr. Lynch,” she said. “It’s the only way. I’ll stay with Bobby. The rest of you go ahead.”

Bobby and Sarah ran back to the hatchway. Bobby put his hands on it, charging himself up. Sarah had to stand a couple of feet back; the heat was too intense. After a minute, he let go, and the hatch glowed with the heat he had instilled in it. Drops of molten steel splattered on the ground below it.

“That ought to keep them off it for a minute,” he said.

Sarah readied a barrage of lightning in case it didn’t hold. It didn’t. In less than a minute, the hatchway rattled again, and the heavy steel door bulged toward them.

“Watch it, Bobby!” she called.

He leapt back just as the hatch blew out, the metal door hitting the stone floor and kicking up a shower of sparks as it skidded. Sarah hurled the lightning into the opening, and was gratified at the howls of pain that came back. Bobby followed with plasma blasts of his own. Burnout and Rainmaker stood shoulder to shoulder, throwing everything they could muster through the hatchway, sweat running down their cheeks.

They glanced at each other, their eyes met, and they held the contact for a moment. Bobby knew he could fall into those rich brown eyes and never come out, and it looked like she felt the same. After a minute, almost as if prearranged, they both stopped the assault. Beyond the hatchway, nothing moved. Sarah took Bobby's hand, drew him into a hug. He responded, putting his hands on her back, pulling her into him, feeling her strong body press against his.

"Nice going, pal," she said into his ear. Then, with a last powerful squeeze, she broke the clinch.

"I guess we did it," Bobby said. "The demons, I mean."

"I know what you mean. I guess we did."

Bobby took a couple of steps forward, peering through the smoke into the chamber beyond. He was leaning in, off balance, when the huge clawed fist smashed into him. He fell backwards, stumbled, crashed to the floor where he lay sprawled and unconscious.

Caitlin made a door. It wasn't hard. The side rooms were built out, painted wallboard over steel struts and cross-braced with two-by-fours. She punched a fist through the wallboard, snapped the two-bys with a kick, bent the steel. It wasn't quiet, but it worked. They passed through into another room, much like the first, but this one had a projection unit and a large screen. Caitlin guessed that the I.O. operation running the place held classes down here. Strange place for a school, though.

They passed through quickly and she made another door. There was, on the other side, a room much like the last two, except that this room held armored soldiers. The armor looked very familiar.

"Keepers!" Lynch called.

The Keepers had been huddled near the real doorway, weapons trained on it. Caitlin guessed they were on patrol, had fled into here from the demons outside, and were hiding, hoping the demons would move on. Fat chance of that, she thought. If anything, they were going to spread out.

Suddenly, though, the Keepers turned their guns on Caitlin and the others. Lynch had a gun in each hand, pointed at the Keepers, but there were fifteen of them and only one of him.

“Ms. Baiul will be happy to see what we’ve got here,” one of the Keepers said.

“Ivana?” Lynch nearly exploded. “I knew I smelled something rotten.”

“Only thing rotten here is you, Lynch,” another Keeper said. “You were one of us, and you turned against us.”

“I turned against an agency that had lost its way,” Lynch replied. “And if I remember correctly, an agency of which Ivana is no longer a part.”

“She’s coming back, Lynch. And in a big way.”

“What you got in that bag, old man?” asked another one.

“Keep away from me,” DeMedici said, his voice quavering with fear.

Grunge sidled up next to Caitlin, spoke softly toward her ear. She bent her head, almost imperceptibly, to make it easier for him.

“You guys keep going,” he said. “Me and Roxy’ll stay here and keep these dudes busy.”

Caitlin nodded. Only half of her mind was paying attention. The other half was still reeling from the news of Ivana’s involvement with this. It was just like her. But it also strengthened Caitlin’s resolve—not only were they pitted against the hosts of Hell, but they were up against their oldest and most hated enemy. This was one fight that she was going to enjoy winning.

“Rox,” Grunge said, “lift ’em!”

She reacted instantly, wiping out the gravity beneath the Keepers’ feet. They floated towards the ceiling, confused for a moment. In that second, Grunge reached down and touched the stone floor. He took on the properties of the heavy bedrock.

“Run!” he shouted.

Caitlin, Lynch, and DeMedici did. At the far wall, Caitlin punched another hole. As they started to go through it, some of the Keepers got their bearings well enough to open fire. Grunge threw himself in front of the blasts, though, and they ricocheted off his stone exterior. When the other three were safely through the wall, Roxy restored the gravity and the Keepers came down in a pile.

Grunge moved in to mop up. Keepers fired at him from

closer range, but his stone surface repelled the shots. His stone feet and fists, however, crushed Keeper armor, and in a couple of minutes they were all out cold. Grunge let his natural molecular form return.

When he did, Roxy saw that the shots had had some impact after all. Where the stone had been chipped away by close range blasts, Grunge was cut and bleeding.

“Grunge, you’re hurt!” she cried.

“No way,” he said. “I’m the Grunge-man. I can’t be hurt.” He tried to take a step toward her, and wobbled dangerously. “Well, maybe a little.”

She caught his arm, held him on his feet.

“You were great, Grunge,” Roxy said. “The way you plowed through those guys.”

“Kinda like Jet Li, huh?” Grunge asked.

“Jet who?”

“Never mind, Rox,” he said.

She took his cheeks in her hands. “Whoever, dude. You rocked.” She pulled his head toward hers, kissed him on the mouth. Long and hard.

When she let go, he was blushing. “Rox,” he said. “You’re a stone babe, and all, but . . .”

“You didn’t like it?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t say that. No way. I mean, I liked it. A lot. But . . .”

“But what?”

“But I just don’t think this is the best time, you know? I mean, shouldn’t we go after Kat and Lynch and the Cardinal? They might need us or something.”

Roxy shrugged. “I guess so,” she said. “But let me tell you, this is a fine time for you to start thinking with your brain.”

Sarah rushed to Bobby’s side. She ignored, for the moment, the possibility that another attack could come from the chamber at any moment.

“Bobby!” she cried. “Are you all right?”

He moaned, twitched. Not dead, then. That was something. She inspected him, saw his face already beginning to swell, to discolor. He’d been hit hard. She rolled him, gently. The

other side of his face was rubbed raw where he'd skidded along the stone floor. She wiped blood away from his eyes. He opened one of them.

He smiled. "You are so hot," he said. Then he shut his eyes again. Looking at the smile that remained on his lips, she couldn't even find it in herself to be mad at him for being so shallow. She traced his lips with her finger.

A shadow fell across them both.

She looked up at six demons. No, eight. They were stepping through the hatchway. The one in front was humanoid, with goatish legs, like the demon she and Caitlin had taken down upstairs. If only Kat was here now, she thought. The others were less familiar looking. A couple of them were smaller, gray, with bat-like wings folded behind their backs and long fangs that couldn't be contained behind rubbery lips. One of them looked like a gambler from upstairs. He wore a Hard Rock T-shirt that didn't quite stretch over his gut and a baseball cap with a Nike swoosh on it. But his eyes glowed red, and his mouth had a malevolent grin. One looked like a cat that had swallowed a Vegas showgirl and taken on her shape, while retaining its own fur and features. In other circumstances, Sarah might have found this one oddly appealing, but right now she was just another enemy.

"You hurt Bobby," she said, rising to her feet as she spoke. "He's probably a sweeter guy than any of you ever were, or deserved to know, and he's just doing what needs to be done and you hurt him." She knew she was working herself into a rage, but that was okay. She let it build.

"We have our place, you know, and our place is the earth. And you have your place. Maybe it's not so great, I don't know. Maybe you don't have canyons and rivers and tall, snowy mountains and hot reaches of desert. Maybe that's what you're missing. If so, I feel for you, I really do. Maybe you don't wake up in the morning to crashing surf and calling birds and the sounds of a neighborhood pulling itself together to face another day.

"But you hurt Bobby, and no matter what else, that's unforgivable. He's just trying to keep things the way they're supposed to be, to make sure you stay on your side and we stay on ours." As she spoke she felt the storm brewing around

here, tasted the ozone on her tongue, felt the static electricity lift her hair. "You hurt Bobby," she said again. "But that's where it ends, you understand? Damn you to Hell!"

And the storm broke. Thunder shook the narrow hall and stinging icy rain and lightning flew at the demons. Hailstones the size of golf balls pelted them. Two demons fell, struck by lightning, but the others held their positions. Sarah let the storm die.

"Cute," the demon in front said. Then he opened his mouth and spat a sheet of flame that enveloped Sarah.

The path that Caitlin had made for Lynch and Cardinal DeMedici was an easy one to follow. Through the hole in the wall, across the next room, and through another hole.

"How many rooms do they need to go through to circle around those demons?" Grunge asked.

"No telling," Roxy said. "Anyway, wherever the rift in Hell is, there'll be demons there, so I don't know why they didn't just take the shortcut."

"I guess the Cardinal knows what he's doing."

"I hope so. If not, we're all royally hosed."

Then they came to a room that was different than the rest. It seemed to be an equipment storage facility instead of a classroom. There were rows of shelves on which rested things Grunge could recognize, like video tapes and carousels of transparencies, and things he couldn't, like a coil of rubber tubing with a small black box attached to one end and a flange on the other with four set screws attached. Several of the shelves held books, reinforcing the idea that some kind of classes were held here. The names on the books were unfamiliar to Grunge, though, and many of them looked very old, huge thick ancient texts with titles written in what looked like Latin, Greek, German. He read some as he passed. *Malleus Maleficarum. Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer. De Vermis Mysteriis. Lemegeton. De Occulta Philosophia. Daemonolatrias*. He couldn't suppress a shiver.

"What's wrong, Grunge?" Roxy asked.

"These books," he began. "I mean, I know we've seen demons. They're as real as we are, I guess. But somehow I've been thinking of them as just more bad guys. Tougher ones,

maybe, but not something completely, I dunno, other."

"Yeah? And what do these coffee table books have to do with that?"

"These are old, Rox. Real old. People have been searching for ways to contact these demons for centuries. Thousands of years, maybe. And somehow, Ivana has done it. That's what scares me, Rox. The walls of Hell have been solid for so long, but Ivana has really done it. She's tearing down the walls.

"It just didn't seem real to me until I saw the books," he went on. "But it is. It's real. They're real."

Roxy took his hand. "So are we, Grunge. You and me. We're as real as the demons are. Don't forget that."

He favored her with a smile. "Just don't start kissin' me again. I'm tryin' to keep my mind on business."

"Then maybe you've noticed that we have a small problem," Roxy said.

"What's that?"

"There's no hole out of this room," she replied. "There are doors. Three of them, to be exact. Which one did Caitlin and Mr. Lynch take, and where do the other two lead? And do we really want to find out?"

Bobby opened his eyes just in time to see the flame heading toward Sarah. He was weak, but he'd rested for a moment, there on the hard floor, and he'd been enjoying Sarah's gentle ministrations. The storm had given him a few more seconds of respite. So when he saw the flame, he was able to react. He threw up a corresponding wall of heat around her, far away enough from her skin so as not to burn her, but superheated enough to hold off the demon's fiery attack. He felt the demon redouble his efforts, trying to break through.

After a minute, though, the demon stopped, took a deep breath. Bobby pressed the advantage.

He bolted to his feet and blasted the superheated air at the demon. The thing had just thrown off the cold and wet of Sarah's storm, and upstairs they'd already learned that these demons were weakened by cold, or by water. He was surprised that this one was even capable of spitting flame after Sarah's assault.

But his own blast was having an impact on it. The demon

faltered, fell back. His fellows had already escaped through the hatchway, back into their chamber, dodging Sarah's storm. Now this one allowed himself to be driven back. Bobby pressed on.

The demon stopped just this side of the hatchway. The fury and pain showed on his face in equal measures. He held up to Bobby's advance, took a swing at Bobby. Bobby remembered the impact of that great clawed hand and ducked away from it. In doing so, he let the heat die just a little.

But enough for the demon. The creature lunged, slamming into Bobby with the force of a freight train. They both went down. Bobby was underneath, crushed by the incredible weight of the demon. He felt the beast's hot breath in his face. He tried to hold off its claws, but the demon was strong. He got Bobby's neck in his scaly hands. The claws pierced Bobby's flesh. He tried to pull the claws back, a finger at a time, but couldn't get a grip. He was weakening. He remembered the time he'd blacked out in the seaweed—was that just a day ago? It felt like months. He was close to that again, the demon's shape was blurred, indistinct, and it looked like the electric bulbs had all faded away.

Only one hope left. Bobby put all the strength he had remaining into heating himself as fast and white-hot as he could. The cold stone beneath him sizzled. The demon, taken by surprise, reared back slightly.

And when it did, Sarah drove a lightning bolt straight into its face.

The demon screamed, clawing at its face. Bobby was spattered with some kind of gore—demon blood, he guessed. It burned like acid where it fell, but when it touched Bobby's still superheated form it just evaporated with a loud hiss. The demon fell backwards, scrambling for a footing on the steaming floor. Its screams were deafening, and when it slammed into the hatchway, the hall shook. Two of the light bulbs were jarred loose from the ceiling and smashed on the floor, still attached to their cord. Rocks tumbled from the walls.

Sarah kept blasting the demon with lightning bolts, one after another, as he escaped through the hatchway. Regaining some of his strength, Bobby added plasma bursts to the barrage. The demon rose up to his full height, once he'd passed

through the low hatch, stretched his arms over his head, and then fell face-first onto the floor. He was a charred and smoldering mess when Sarah and Bobby dared to look, and the reek of his cooked skin and fur assailed their nostrils.

The chamber beyond him was empty. Whether the sight of this demon being so utterly defeated had scared the rest off, or whether some more important prey had shown itself elsewhere, they couldn't know. But for now, the room was clear of demons. Bobby and Sarah passed through the hatchway, into the great, empty chamber. At the far end, still along the same walkway, was another hatchway. The hatch there was ajar. No question, then. That was where they had to go. Sarah put an arm around Bobby, offering support. He threw his arm over her shoulders, and together, they headed for the hatch.

It appeared that Cardinal DeMedici was right. The Horn seemed to know where it wanted to go. Or, Caitlin amended her thinking, the Cardinal knew where he wanted to go. Like Roxy, she had not heard the Horn say anything. But she was willing to believe that it did, and that only the Cardinal could hear it.

Either way, it led them through one classroom after another, and finally to a supply room of some kind. There were three doors leading out of this room, all of them closed. Caitlin started to cross to the opposite wall, ready to pound out another doorway. On the way, she blew on her knuckles and shook her fingers. They were beginning to get sore.

"No, Miss Fairchild," the Cardinal said. "That won't be necessary this time."

"Why not?" she asked.

He pointed to the farthest door. It, unlike the others, was a wooden door. The wood looked incredibly ancient. She was surprised that it was still standing; it looked like the worms and termites would have eaten it years ago. It looked like some kind of artifact from—and now she could have kicked herself for not realizing it sooner—biblical days.

And mounted in the center of the door was a cross. A simple cross, made of two pieces of wood lashed together with something that looked as old as the door. Catgut, maybe, or

some kind of reeds she'd never seen. But a cross, just the same.

"This time," DeMedici said, "we go through there."

"What's on the other side, Francesco?" Lynch asked.

The Cardinal didn't answer. Instead, he crossed himself, and then started speaking. Not to Lynch, not to her. Not, Caitlin knew, to anyone in this room, and yet, she hoped that he was being heard.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven," Cardinal DeMedici murmured. He spoke in Latin, but Caitlin recognized the tempo, and found herself soundlessly mouthing the familiar English phrases along with him. "Hallowed be Thy name." He walked toward the door, ignoring Caitlin and Lynch. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." He stopped with his hand on the wooden handle of the door. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

"Amen," Caitlin and Lynch said in unison.

DeMedici pulled open the door.

CHAPTER 15



“Let me go first,” Caitlin said, and physically moved the Cardinal out of her way. “We don’t know what’s on the other side.”

She stepped through, tensed to defend herself against the attack she was expecting. An attack which didn’t come.

Caitlin’s jaw dropped as she surveyed the scene before her. She had entered an enormous, oval chamber at least two hundred feet across. Its curved walls were ridged with columns that did not look like anything humans had made. The floor was pitted with long trenches from which fire flickered and danced. Fairchild had a weird flash of insight: it looked, to her mind, like some kind of church turned inside-out. The trenches were pews and the bony columns rafters. It looked like a church made from the internal organs of some enormous creature.

Or demon.

“The belly of the beast,” Cardinal DeMedici whispered as he came through behind her.

“What in the name of God . . .” Lynch began in halting tones.

“This has nothing to do with God,” Caitlin said, suddenly sure of herself.

“Oh, but it does, Miss Fairchild,” the Cardinal said grimly. “This is the Devil’s parlor, Caitlin. Hell’s foyer, if you’ll allow me the analogy. And anything to do with Hell is intrinsically tied to the Lord.”

“Then it’s where he throws his garbage,” Caitlin whispered.

There was another entrance on the far side. The hatchway they’d come to earlier, where they had left Sarah and Bobby. The hatch was slightly open now, but no sign of the others.

And then, of course, there was the rift.

It was the third point of a triangle formed by its placement from the other two entrances onto this chamber. Caitlin didn’t know what she had expected of it: some kind of shimmering wall of fire, or a hazy whirlpool of energy, perhaps.

What she hadn’t expected was a door. No traditional door, to be certain, but it was an actual, physical passageway, looking more like the mouth of a cave than the mouth of Hell. And yet, looking at it more closely, she shivered—despite the intense heat that permeated the chamber. The passageway had been melted through. Its walls looked like recently cooled lava. But the way it had cooled, the walls had formed ridges that looked like nothing so much as a huge esophagus.

In the flickering light coming from the belly at the end of that esophagus, in the illumination cast by the fires of Hell, Caitlin Fairchild saw things moving. Awful, terrible things, worse than any they had encountered thus far. They were silhouetted in the passageway, but even that tiny glimpse made her close her eyes to shut out the sight.

To shut out the fear.

Caitlin Fairchild had known fear in her life. But this was her first taste of true terror.

“Caitlin?”

Lynch stared at her. Fairchild had frozen. She just stood there, jaw agape, staring at the flickering orange light at the mouth of the cave across the chamber.

Then he saw what she had seen. For several seconds, he could only stare as well. But in his years with Team 7, and with International Operations, John Lynch had seen a great many horrible things. Terrifying things from this world, and from others as well. What he saw cost him a few more gray hairs, but he shook himself free of his fear the moment he heard footsteps behind him.

They’d left the ancient wooden door open, and Lynch spun

to see that Grunge and Freefall had entered the chamber.

“Whoa,” Grunge whispered.

“Mr. Lynch, what’s going on?” Roxanne asked. “What’s wrong with Caitlin?”

Lynch glanced over at the Cardinal, but DeMedici was also fixated on the rift itself, on the figures that moved within. The clergyman’s face was contorted with hate, and a malicious little smile that bordered on sadism. Francesco DeMedici, John Lynch knew, was not his friend. But at least he now knew, from watching the Cardinal’s face, that they truly did share an enemy.

“Mr. L.,” Grunge said, glancing around at the cathedral-like chamber. “Not that I miss them or anything, but, like, where are all the demons?”

“Kat?” Roxy asked, and reached out to touch Fairchild on the bicep.

“We should never have come here,” Caitlin whispered to herself. “We can’t stop this. Nobody can. This is what it’s all about, isn’t it? The Apocalypse?”

That did it for Lynch. He’d had enough. He strode two steps forward, spun Caitlin to face him and stared into her eyes. She was lost, at first, unfocused. He snapped his fingers in front of her face to make sure she saw him, that she knew who was talking to her.

“Mr. Lynch?” she asked.

“Caitlin Fairchild, you listen good,” he snapped. “I’ll tell you what this is. This is an I.O. operation run by Ivana Baiul. Whatever else it is, you can worry about that on Sunday morning. If any of you feel like dragging your asses out of bed to go to church, be my guest. As long as you don’t wake me up, I don’t care.

“But I’ll tell you this much. We’ve killed some of these things already. We know we can do that. Now all we have to do is close that rift and we’ll be gone. But I need you, Caitlin. You’ve always been the coolest under pressure, even more so than Sarah. Don’t start flaking on us now!”

“So, where next?” Roxy asked. “I mean, do we go down into that gross cave? Is the gate down there?”

DeMedici laughed. “Silly girl,” he said. “That is the gate.”

Lynch stopped short in his upbraiding of Fairchild. He turned on DeMedici, blinking in disbelief.

"What?" he snapped. "That's the gate?"

The Cardinal nodded, staring at the demons that were moving up toward the mouth of the cave.

"Then why don't you blow the goddamn Horn?" Lynch roared.

Then he knew. He knew and it made him want to throw up that DeMedici was risking the lives of Gen¹³ for such petty foolishness. Cardinal DeMedici hadn't blown the Horn yet because he was taunting the demons. Teasing them with his presence, and the presence of the Horn. They were at a stalemate, at least for the moment.

"Mr. L.," Grunge said again. "Not like I'm looking for trouble or anything, but, shouldn't there be more demons? Where did they all go?"

But Lynch wasn't listening. He was staring at DeMedici.

"For God's sake!" he snapped. "Give me that!"

He reached for the Horn, and DeMedici pulled the leather case away. In his peripheral vision, Lynch saw Roxy stumble back several steps and fall onto her butt on the stone floor of the chamber. She sat at the edge of the huge grate, away from where fire belched from trenches dug in the floor.

And she pointed into the air.

"Up there," she said, her tone revealing utter despair.

DeMedici was reaching into the leather case for the Horn. Lynch looked up.

The shadowy reaches of the ceiling, hundreds of feet above them, was undulating with masses of red and black and brown and putrescent purple. Leathery wings flapped.

There were hundreds of them, and they swarmed down from the ceiling toward their ancient enemy, the man who held their imprisonment in his hands, Cardinal Francesco DeMedici.

For once, Grunge was speechless.

Instantly, he reached down and touched his hand to the stone floor, letting his body change once more. His muscles rippled, flexible as always, but with the consistency of ancient granite.

How many times had he sat in a darkened theater and chanted to himself, "it's only a movie, it's only a movie?" Well this was no movie. This was the real deal. No question about it, the Grunge-man was scared. But Kat looked totally freaked, and Roxy and Mr. L. were counting on him, too.

He thought about Roxy's kiss earlier, and clenched his fists as the claws and fangs of demons swept down over him. Then he lashed out, pounding and scraping and kickin' it old-school Hong Kong action style. He was still hurting from earlier, but he didn't even have time to think about pain.

Mr. L. was firing point blank and splattering demon guts all over the place. Roxy was using her gravity control powers to slam the ugly mothers into the walls and each other, to toss them off her and Caitlin. And, yeah, Kat was trashing them something fierce now, too. Which was a huge relief.

If only Bobby and Sarah were here, Grunge thought.

Then, a second thought: Where *are* Bobby and Sarah?

And though he was the eternal optimist, Grunge suddenly thought the worst. Bobby and Sarah weren't there because the demons had already gotten to them. It was possible, even probable, that Bobby and Sarah were dead.

Which was when Edmund Percival Chang stopped being Grunge, just for a little while. No smile. No fun. No love or laughter.

With a cry of anguish and rage, Eddie Chang started mopping the floor with the demon hordes, pulping them to gory bits and using their own limbs to bash them down and crush them. Fairchild wasn't doing half as much damage to the monstrous creatures.

And, as the greatest threat to the hordes, Grunge also became their Number One target. They focused on him, overran him, covered him with so many demon bodies that he couldn't even move anymore. And then they started dragging him toward the cave entrance, toward the gate to Hell itself.

For a second, he thought maybe the Cardinal would blow the Horn in time to save him. But then he saw that the Cardinal was being carried right next to him, barely conscious and bleeding from a head wound. But he clutched the Horn tightly to his chest, and Grunge said a rare, silent prayer that the old man would have the strength to hold on.

“Grunge!” he heard Roxy scream. “Kat!”

Which is how Grunge knew that Caitlin had been taken as well.

This was not going well.

That’s what he was thinking as the demons pulled him through the mouth of the cave, and he felt the old world slip away. It was as though there were some slimy film that separated Hell from the real world, and as he passed through, Grunge cringed at the heat and the stench and the feeling that no matter how many times he took a shower, he’d never be able to wash off the filth that settled on his flesh the second they entered.

After all the inane images that came to mind, all the defense mechanisms dropped and Grunge fought savagely against the demons who held him, needing desperately to get out of there, to escape having to deal with exactly where he was.

But he fought to no avail. They had him.

And they had the Horn. On the inside. And if it was blown while inside Hell, the doorway to the netherworld would be blown open completely, and all the armies of Hell would walk the Earth.

“Oh, man,” Grunge said in despair. “This completely sucks.”

Bobby and Sarah stepped through the hatch into the huge chamber just in time to see the demons descend from the upper reaches of the distant ceiling. Grunge started kicking butt almost immediately, and Fairchild trashed some demons as well—Bobby saw her rip the wings off one of them—but it wasn’t good enough.

In fact, the only thing that saved Roxy and Mr. Lynch—Bobby still had a hard time thinking of the old man as his dad—from getting dragged into Hell along with them was that, the second the demons got DeMedici, most of them headed back toward the rift.

“They’re leaving?” Bobby asked incredulously.

“Don’t you get it?” Sarah snapped, her face frantic. “They’re dragging the Cardinal to the other side. If they blow the Horn over there, the barrier between Hell and Earth drops, and . . .”

"We're all toast," Bobby finished. "I get it."

"We've got to go after them!" Sarah said.

Even as she spoke, Bobby saw that Roxy and Mr. L. were doing just that. Crazy as it was, they were fighting their way past demons to get into Hell. Sarah started across the chamber after them—weaving in between the flaming trenches in the granite floor—and Bobby followed her. A huge, winged demon swooped down to land on the stone floor in front of them. It opened its mouth and began to bellow with laughter.

"High and low!" Sarah shouted.

She slammed him in the face with an electric crackle of lightning, and Bobby torched the big ugly mother's midsection—not to mention his jewels. They went up in smoke.

"I wonder if they make Tylenol the size of a football," Bobby muttered, clutching at the side of his head.

Which was when somebody started shooting at them from behind. Side by side, Bobby and Sarah spun to see Keepers piling through both the hatchway and another door, which must have been where Caitlin and the others had come in.

Much to Bobby's dismay, the demons seemed to ignore the Keepers. Several of them exploded in a shower of black gore from Keeper weapons fire, but the Keepers were really after Gen¹³, and after the Horn. The demons were trying to stop Bobby and Sarah and Mr. L. and Roxy from going through and helping the others, and they didn't much care if they got shot while doing it.

Which gave Bobby an idea.

"Go!" he shouted at Sarah, and shoved her hard toward where Mr. L. and Roxy had finally pushed through to the cave mouth that led down into Hell.

Bobby ignored his headache, concentrated on generating a righteous blaze, and used his mind to give it shape. Fire curled around his face and head, looking a little like horns. It swirled behind him and he prayed it looked enough like wings.

"Stop, my brothers!" he screamed.

And a number of the demons actually turned to listen to him.

Bobby pointed at the Keepers, drawing the demons' attention to them. The I.O. soldiers were heavily armored, and heavily armed. They looked pretty impressive, from Bobby's

perspective. Of course, he figured the demons just saw some more prey.

“We shouldn’t waste our time chasing children!” he shouted. “They can do us no real harm! But these humans have come to slaughter us and to bring the Horn back to Earth. They must be stopped!”

One by one, the demon horde began to turn, and to move in on the Keepers.

“Yes!” Bobby whispered to himself.

Lynch was surprised to see Burnout and Rainmaker. While he’d been trying not to think about it, in his heart he had already written the pair off as dead, lost to the demons or to Keepers.

He swept the barrel of his assault rifle across the cave mouth, splashing demon gore across the floor of the chamber. They’d successfully navigated past the blazing ruts in the ground, managed to survive assault by the demons that remained in the chamber, and now they had to take the ultimate step.

“I can’t believe we’re gonna do this,” Roxy said at his side, even as she used her gravity powers to slam a demon into the chamber’s far wall.

“Me either,” John Lynch admitted, surprising himself almost as much as he knew he had Roxanne.

“Mr. L.!” Sarah shouted as she came up to join them. “We’re going after them, right?”

“Right!” Lynch replied.

“What the hell is Bobby doing?” Roxy asked, staring at Burnout, who had enveloped himself in flame and was now shouting at the demons.

“I can guess,” Sarah answered, “but you’d think I was as crazy as I think he is.”

Then they were moving through the mouth of the cave. There was a little resistance at first, as though a strong wind were blowing from the tunnel, though there was none. Then they seemed to almost slide through a barrier, like walking underwater. And they were through.

The heat was incredible.

“God, I’m sweating like a pig!” Roxy complained.

"It's Hell," Rainmaker replied.

They ran down the tunnel, the throat-like cavern that twisted around and down. It grew wider and the ceiling higher as they went, and after half a minute, they rounded a corner to find themselves right on the tail of the demonic hordes who had abducted the Cardinal and their friends.

"Why haven't they blown the Horn?" Sarah asked.

"It's possible Francesco has to give it up voluntarily," Lynch suggested.

"Yeah, well, either that or this is just the hallway, y'know? Maybe just the passage, and not actually Hell yet. They need to be right in Hell for it to work, right?" Roxy asked.

"Right," Lynch said.

"Let's do it," Sarah barked.

Roxy bulled through the demons, throwing them aside, and as they passed, Sarah zapped them with lightning on one side and Lynch shot them into pieces on the other. He had three more clips for the assault rifle. After that, he was done.

"Roxy!"

"It's Grunge!" Freefall shouted.

"Fight them, Grunge!" Lynch called to him, though he couldn't really see him, or Caitlin, or even DeMedici.

Then he did see them, or at least, the knot of demons that surrounded them. And he heard the voice of Francesco DeMedici as the Cardinal prayed loudly to his God to keep the Horn safe in his hands. For the moment, the prayers seemed to be working, and Lynch wondered if Roxanne had been right, if this was just the passageway and not Hell itself.

"Sarah, I have an idea," Lynch shouted.

And he did. A perfectly crazy idea for a completely insane battle. Demons weren't the same things as vampires. That was for certain. Stakes and garlic and silver and all that wouldn't do a thing to a demon. But prayers kept them away from the Horn because those same prayers made the artifact sanctified. So maybe . . .

"Make it rain!" Lynch barked. "A downpour, drench those demons!"

Sarah Rainmaker lifted her arms, not even raising an eyebrow to question Lynch's instructions. As the rain began to fall heavily, as if from nowhere, Lynch silently thanked the

girl. She had seemed to question everything just a short time ago. But when it got down to the real thing, life and death, she was a soldier, no matter how much she'd hate to admit it.

"Francesco!" Lynch shouted, loud enough for the Cardinal to hear him over the shrieks and chittering of the demons and the shouts of Grunge and Fairchild.

Then he saw the Cardinal's face, saw the blood where claws had dug furrows in his skin. But DeMedici was looking right at Lynch. He'd heard.

"Bless the rain!" Lynch screamed.

DeMedici's eyes lit up, and his prayer changed. Immediately, the rain began to hiss as it hit demon flesh. Smoke rose and demons screamed. They didn't shrivel up and die. They didn't die at all. But it hurt the bastards, and that was the entire point.

Lynch and Roxy plowed through the demons that still separated them from DeMedici, Grunge, and Fairchild. The demons hissed and slashed out, but Grunge and Caitlin were free now, and started whupping some serious demon tail. Lynch pulled the trigger and cut down half a dozen demons off to his left. The rain hissed. Demons screamed.

Then he was standing over Cardinal DeMedici, staring at the face behind him, the face of a huge demon with a face that was almost human. But this was not some man possessed. It was a true demon with the intelligence so obviously lacking in most of the others.

"You are hurting ussss!" it snarled at Lynch.

"Yeah," Lynch replied. "Sucks, huh?"

He shot it thirty-seven times, replaced the empty clip, and put a few more bullets in it.

"Way to go, Mr. L.!" Grunge shouted, ignoring the bloody wounds that he'd received in the battle.

"Let's get out of here!" Lynch replied.

He reached down and pulled DeMedici to his feet. The Cardinal had wounds all over his body, scratches and bites, but nothing too serious. The demons had been afraid to touch him, at least a little. DeMedici clutched the Horn in his hands, a green glow surrounding it that Lynch didn't think had anything to do with the old man's prayers.

"Your magic protected you?" he asked.

DeMedici looked at him. "My magic, and His," the Cardinal said, and pointed up, to where he imagined Heaven might be.

And, standing in the gullet of Hell, Lynch was willing to allow for the first time in decades that the old man might be right.

"Mr. Lynch!"

Lynch spun to see Freefall using her powers to keep back several demons. Rainmaker lay on the ground, apparently unconscious. The rain had stopped, he noticed for the first time.

"Pick her up, Roxanne!" Lynch called. "It's time to go!"

Roxy levitated Rainmaker off the ground and the group started back up the tunnel toward the cave mouth. Several demons blocked their path, but Lynch mowed them down. DeMedici took another one out with a bolt of green fire.

Caitlin and Grunge still guarded their backs. Fairchild was covered with blood and demon gore, and Lynch wondered how much of that blood was hers. She fought hard, and seemed to have shaken off whatever shock she had experienced earlier. Now she was just pure warrior, through and through.

"Go, go, go!" Caitlin screamed, trying to hurry Lynch and the others along as best they could.

But with Lynch helping the Cardinal, and Roxy levitating Sarah, it wasn't a speedy withdrawal. The demons began to multiply, now that the rain had stopped and they no longer feared its acid sting.

Then Lynch saw the mouth of the cave.

"Almost there!" he shouted. "Just another few seconds!"

Caitlin and Grunge were working together better than Lynch had ever seen them. He felt awkward thinking about team dynamics now, but seeing them in action was amazing.

Then he felt the resistance at the mouth of the cave, the walking-through-water feeling of the barrier as they pushed through. He stumbled through with DeMedici at his side and let the Cardinal slump down to the hard stone floor.

Roxy came next, and Lynch grabbed Sarah out of the air and set her gently on the floor. Freefall sighed with relief as her burden was taken from her.

Lynch scanned the huge chamber and saw that the Keepers

and demons were locked in a bloody battle, and that his son, Bobby, was egging both sides on while trying not to get killed.

He looked back down into the cave, saw Caitlin and Grunge struggling to move up the narrow passage with demons slashing at them from all sides.

“Let’s go, you two!” he shouted to them. “Once you’re through, the Cardinal can—”

Lynch cringed and covered his ears, as the deep bass mournful call of the Horn of Jericho, Roland’s Horn, echoed in the massive chamber. He blinked, then turned to stare in horror at DeMedici as he realized what the Cardinal had done.

“You evil son of a . . .” he began, but couldn’t find the words to express his fury and disgust.

Lynch turned to look at Caitlin and Grunge. They’d heard, and Caitlin was looking at him now, her eyes pleading, not understanding.

“Get out of there, now!” he screamed.

But the demons were slowing them down. Holding them back.

And the passageway began to shrink.

Lynch rounded on DeMedici, who had struggled to his feet. He stared at the Cardinal, nostrils flaring.

“I couldn’t take the risk that they’d get another chance to grab the Horn,” DeMedici explained, as if it were that simple.

There was a small smile at the edges of the Cardinal’s mouth. Lynch saw that smile and forgot DeMedici’s age, forgot that he was a clergyman, forgot everything but what he’d just done. If he hadn’t had the Horn in his possession, Lynch would have thrown him into the tunnel.

Instead, he decked the old man.

DeMedici stared up at Lynch from the ground, eyes blazing with anger, but he said nothing.

“Use your magic!” Lynch demanded. “Save them, or so help me God, I’ll . . .”

“There’s nothing I can do,” DeMedici said. “Nothing any of us can do.”

Lynch spun away in disgust, saw the shock and horror on Roxy and Sarah’s faces, and then looked back down the tunnel. Caitlin and Grunge had moved closer to the opening. But not close enough.

And the passageway continued to shrink.

CHAPTER 16



Roxanne Spaulding didn't even think before she started to move.

She knew the others saw her as a "bad girl," a party animal who was only out for a good time and didn't take anything overly seriously. She saw herself that way, too, most of the time.

But she was also Freefall, and Freefall was part of a team. If it bordered on, like, multiple personality syndrome, so be it, but when she was Roxy she was one thing and when she was Freefall she was something else altogether.

Right now, she was Freefall, and she saw two of her teammates in megatrouble. It didn't hurt that one of them was Grunge, and she could still remember the feeling of his lips on hers, still taste him even over the reek of sulfur and flame that belched from the rift. She moved so fast it was like everyone around her was operating in slo-mo.

"Roxanne!" Lynch called behind her, but she had already shoved past his reaching hands, headed for the opening to Hell at top speed.

"Let her go," she heard DeMedici say. "It's too late for her to interfere. We have done what we came here to do."

It looked like he was right. The tunnel was narrowing fast. Grunge and Caitlin were nearly out of sight, submerged in a sea of demons as they tried to fight their way out.

But Roxy had learned to hate Cardinal DeMedici in the past few hours, and the last thing she wanted was for him to be proved right. She put on an extra burst of speed and

launched herself at the opening. She hit it in mid-flight, and the thick miasma of hellish air slowed her down noticeably. But she smiled, because that meant she had made it. She was through the rift.

And she knew what she needed to do now. Roxy had the ability to control gravity, and she used it, creating a gravitational bubble surrounding herself, filling in the space at the mouth of the tunnel. The force of the rift's closing threatened to break the bubble, but Roxy pushed against it with all her might, even expanding the dimensions of the gravity field slightly. As long as she could hold this, the rift couldn't close, and as long as it was open, Caitlin and Grunge had a shot.

How long that would be, she had no idea.

Back in the neck of the tunnel, or what Caitlin had, somewhat uncomfortably, come to think of as the gullet, she and Grunge were nearly overwhelmed by demons. Sarah's holy rain had long since dried up, and the demons left behind were furious at the rift's imminent closure. They recognized the hopelessness of their situation, and wanted revenge on the humans who had put them here. The only humans in range now were Grunge and Caitlin.

Her arms were so tired she could barely lift them anymore, and there didn't look to be an end in sight. She slugged and punched and ducked and dodged and punched again, occasionally drawing her arms in close to her body to rest them while she kicked out at demons with her booted feet. She and Grunge moved together, fighting their way always in the same direction, trying to clear a path toward the opening.

He was slightly more effective than her at this point. Sometime during the battle, he had touched one of the steaming rock fissures, and had taken on the physical properties of the Hellstone. His body was black, volcanic-looking rock, split with fissures that glowed and smoked. She hoped there would be no long-term ill effects from allying himself, however briefly, with such an unholy substance. But it made his fists hard, and he was seemingly tireless. There was a ragged smile on his face as he cocked a fist back and drove it into the toothy face of a reddish-brown, bat-winged demon. The face pulped

under his onslaught and the demon dropped away—only to be replaced by two more.

Both of which he quickly dispatched. Caitlin wondered briefly if he had in fact heard the Horn blow, if he knew the rift was closing and they were trapped in here forever, or if he was fighting so valiantly because he was still laboring under the illusion that they had a chance.

The proverbial snowball's chance. That's what they had.

Before she had a chance to wonder about it much, Fairchild was hit hard from two different sides by stocky gray demons. They slammed into her with rock-hard skulls, and their claws tore at her arms and ribs. She slammed an elbow into one skull and felt it cave. The other drove a fist into her solar plexus, though, knocking the wind out of her. He came at her again, claws headed for her throat. She was able to catch one of his scaly hands and she bent it backwards, forcing the creature to his knees. Before he could react, she kicked out, catching him in the chin with her heel. He rocked back, fell against three more demons who were rushing at her.

They carried him along in their rush, and his unconscious body plowed into her along with the other three. The last thing she saw as she headed for the ground was Freefall diving into the mouth of the tunnel. But that couldn't be, she thought—Roxy's not that incredibly feeble-minded, is she? She thought it must be a hallucination, and then she was too busy to think anymore.

Lynch knew he should do something to help Freefall save Caitlin and Grunge, but he was at a loss to think of what it might be. He couldn't get past Roxanne to get back into Hell even if he'd wanted to, and at the moment his most passionate wish was never to go there again.

Anyway, he had other problems to deal with here.

There were still demons about, and someone had to keep them from interfering with Roxy on this side. His gun was empty. Rainmaker might still be of some use, but he could see that she was near exhaustion. And Burnout was off somewhere leading a force of demons against a bunch of Keepers. Lynch could hear the rapid bursts of automatic weapons fire elsewhere in the big chamber. There would come a point when

the demons would realize he wasn't one of them, though, and then he'd be in big trouble. Unless, of course, the Keepers won, in which case the trouble would be just as bad.

"Francesco," he snarled. "Your precious Horn isn't safe until we're out of this building and you're on your way back to Rome. You'd better come up with something to help. And you'd better do it quick."

"The Horn won't be safe until it is returned to its resting place inside the Vatican," DeMedici said. "You agreed to protect the Horn, and me. I suggest you keep your part of the bargain."

"Like you did?"

"I did nothing beyond what I promised to do. I sealed the rift."

"You did that, all right. With two of my people inside."

"We are all dispensable, John. Don't you remember?"

"Except you, right?"

The Cardinal nodded. "Except me."

"Well, you're officially on your own, DeMedici. I quit! We all quit."

"You—you can't!" DeMedici sputtered.

"Too late." Lynch shot him a grin that wouldn't have looked out of place on a tiger about to swallow its prey. "So you'd better come up with a plan, and fast."

He saw the realization settle in the Cardinal's eyes. The man was on his own, mere feet from the gateway to Hell, holding in his hands the artifact that all the bad guys wanted. His thin lips began to move in what Lynch supposed was soundless prayer. As he prayed, a greenish glow began to surround him, spreading like a leaking aura. Lynch didn't trust DeMedici's magic. It didn't look like something that would come from the God he claimed to serve. But it had to, or how would he be allowed to use it against the forces of Darkness? The whole thing was troubling. Lynch would be glad when it was over.

Not far away, Sarah Rainmaker hurled a bolt of lightning into the heart of a demon. The eggplant-colored beast exploded when it hit, bits of gore flying in every direction. She wasn't sure how long she could keep this up, but there seemed to be

fewer and fewer of the demons to contend with, since the Cardinal had blown the Horn.

Speaking of the Cardinal, she had seen him arguing with Mr. Lynch, but she couldn't hear what it was all about. Now she hazarded a glance his way. He was enveloped in a green fog, and whenever demons tried to grab him through it, they screamed and drew away their hands. Or, in some cases, their bloody stumps. That green stuff was nasty.

Lynch was doing some demon-pounding of his own, she noticed. He wasn't shooting anymore, but he swung his gun like a club, spattering demon brains against the stone floor of the cavern. The old guy was good, she had to admit. He was older than the rest of them by decades—if you didn't count DeMedici, who was older than dirt—but he kept up his end of things. You'd expect a guy his age to sit back when the fighting got heavy and toss out orders, like those old creeps in the Pentagon who sent kids off to war at every opportunity. But here Lynch was, in the trenches. For all the disagreements she had with him, all the superior tones he used, all the pulling rank, he wasn't afraid to get in there and get demon blood under his fingernails.

She blasted another demon. There really were fewer of them now, she realized. They were going to win this one. Her heart soared at the thought. They had gone up against the forces of Hell, and they were going to pull it off!

But then she remembered Caitlin, Grunge, and Roxy, still in Hell, and her spirits dropped again. Victory wouldn't be so sweet after all, without them to share it.

Grunge saw Caitlin go down, like a lifeguard watching a swimmer submerge for the third time. He knew if she didn't get up soon, she wouldn't be getting up at all. There were at least four of the bad boys on her, and more on the way. Time to get motivated, he figured.

He chopped the nearest demon in the throat and leapt over the creature's collapsing form. "Kat!" he called in mid-air. "Cavalry's on the way, babe!"

Grunge landed in the midst of the pile. He punched and kicked and even bit one demon whose outflung arm came too close to his mouth. Grabbing one of the demons pressing

Caitlin to the floor, he twisted the thing's head until he heard a satisfying crack. Another demon broke his claws on Grunge's leg, and got a kick to the chin for his trouble. Finally, he could see Caitlin's face. She was locked in a struggle with a demon, his gnarled claws at her throat and her fingers at his. Grunge doubled his fists and brought them down on the back of the demon's head. The creature slumped forward, and Caitlin threw him to the side.

"Thanks, Grunge," she panted. He put out a rocky hand and helped her to her feet. Her chest rose and fell as she sucked in breaths of precious air, but Grunge knew he'd better not let that distract him now. He spun around, ready to fight the next demon, and the next—but they weren't there. Before them was the tunnel's mouth, and the only thing between them and their own world was Freefall.

"What is she doing there?" he asked.

"Holding open the rift!" Caitlin said. She had just now realized it herself. The Horn had sounded minutes ago, and the opening to Hell should have been long since closed. Roxy had thrust herself into the opening, and was holding it until they could get out. But she could see from here that Rox couldn't hold out much longer. "Move, Grunge!"

They both ran the last few feet to the opening. More demons came at them, but they batted the creatures away, intent on their goal. Closer, she saw now that Roxy wasn't just fighting a losing battle against the rift—she was actually wedged in tight, her gravitational field collapsing around her. If she released the field long enough to get out, she'd be crushed. The opening was barely two feet across now. And as long as Roxy was in the way, with her gravity bubble filling all the available space, there was no way for Grunge and Caitlin to get out.

Behind them, the demons massed for a final assault. It was clear these humans were going nowhere. Caitlin had never heard teeth gnashing on such a large scale before.

There was only one chance, she knew. There were times that called for finesse, and times that called for brute force. This was one of the latter. Brute force, Caitlin could do.

"Grunge!" she called. "Get human!"

For once, he obeyed without asking questions. He dropped

the rocky exterior and allowed his human—and considerably more flexible—self to come back. He glanced at her once, as if wondering what was next, but she didn't give him time to ask.

“Get on Roxy!”

Grunge tried, bending over her, but the gravitational field wouldn't let him near her. Still, it was good enough for Caitlin's needs. She put the palms of her hands against his butt and pushed with everything she had. “Hey!” Grunge shouted.

But even as he did, he knew what she was doing. Caitlin was forcing him against Freefall's gravity bubble, and he was shoving her through the narrow rift and into the outside world. The real world, he thought. Hoping he wouldn't cut one, he clenched his cheeks and let Fairchild work.

For her part, Caitlin decided she'd had more pleasant tasks in her life, but this was pretty much one of those do-or-die things. And it seemed to be working, maybe. She managed to move Grunge, and thereby Roxy, a foot, two feet. She figured she'd be able to get them out, at least, and then the rift would close and she'd be stuck here. The demons wouldn't leave her alive for long, though, so her suffering would be brief.

When Roxy passed through the thickness of the barrier into normal Earth-air, the lack of resistance sped her progress and she popped out of the tunnel's mouth like a champagne cork on New Year's Eve. Grunge tumbled through behind her, rolling on the stone floor of the great cavern. Without Freefall's gravitational field, the rift tried to slam shut, but Caitlin was able to dive into it and slip through just in time. Stone met stone, tearing off the sole of her shoe and scraping the bottom of her foot. But she was out. She felt the cool stone of the cavern, tasted the air. She had done it.

They were all around her then, Grunge and Roxy and Sarah, even Mr. Lynch. “Are you okay, Caitlin?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“That was awesome, Kat,” Sarah said. “Truly wonderful.”

“You rule,” Grunge agreed. Everybody touched her, almost as if they needed to reassure themselves that she was really back with them. She was glad for the human contact, herself. Then she realized who was missing.

"Where's Bobby?" she asked.

"Umm . . . guys?" The voice was definitely Bobby's. The team looked around the cavern, and finally saw him. He'd been playing off demons against Keepers, but when the rift had closed, the demons had lost their flow of reinforcements.

The Keepers hadn't. Now their armored forms filled one side of the cavern. Their weapons were pointed at Gen¹³. Except for the dozen or two pointed right at Bobby's head.

"I think we have another problem," Bobby said.

"No problem at all," another voice said. It was female, and very familiar.

"Any time you're involved, Ivana, there's a problem," Lynch said.

"Nonsense, John," Ivana replied. As she spoke, she pushed between her soldiers and stepped into the forefront. Her concession to the battle had been to put on a helmet, but the faceplate was raised, and she was wearing a dress that would have looked more appropriate on a Victoria's Secret model than in a war for the fate of the world. "All you have to do is hand over the Horn, and you can all go free," she said. "It's very simple."

"We didn't fight the battle of our lives just to give the Horn to you," Lynch said.

"Have it your way. If you won't give it to me, I'll just have all of you killed, and then I'll take it, anyway."

"You and what army?" Grunge asked.

"This one," Ivana replied, spreading her arms to indicate the hundreds of Keepers crowding into the chamber. "Or had you forgotten them? You never were a very bright boy."

"Give it up, Ivana," Caitlin said. "You've never been able to beat us before. What makes you think you can take us now?"

"I've never tried immediately after you had fought thousands of demons from Hell, and were practically dead on your feet," Ivana answered. "I've never thrown hundreds of armed troops against you, with orders to kill, at a time when you'd be incapable of raising your hands to wave away a cloud of gnats, much less defend yourselves against our weapons. Look at you. None of you has the strength left to even come

up with a clever retort, much less actually fight off my Keepers.”

“I hate to say it,” Caitlin said. “But I think, this time, Ivana might be right.”

CHAPTER 17



Bozzi and Clark pushed their way through row after row of Armored Keepers. Bozzi was sick of feeling their steel-jacketed elbows and gun stocks jabbing his ribs and hips. But Ivana had said "Keep up with me," just before she'd slithered through the troops to make her grand entrance. The troops parted for Ivana, all right, but closed up as soon as she was past. And if there was one thing Bozzi had learned in the past twenty-four hours, it was that Ivana expected to be obeyed.

"You think she's noticed that we're not with her yet?" he asked.

"If not, she will soon," Clark replied. "She's not a woman who misses much."

"You got that right, lady." Bozzi remembered Lew Manning and Mark Bradach, dead upstairs in Captain Shelley's office. Ivana Baiul was a woman who got her way. It looked like these teenagers she'd been harping about were finding this out, too.

Finally, he pushed his way to Ivana's side.

"Of course I'm right, Miss Fairchild," Ivana was saying. She threw up her hands in mock exasperation. "And I'm tired of talking about it. Just kill them."

The Keepers reacted to the command instantly. Hundreds of weapons sounded in the cavern—conventional automatics, blasters of various sorts, electronic rifles. The cacophony was deafening. In the midst of it, Ivana stood smiling, Clark and Bozzi flanking her.

"I've been waiting a long time for this," Ivana said.

"What?" Bozzi shouted. The sudden noise had drowned out Ivana's words.

"I said . . . never mind!" She snarled at Bozzi, who turned to Clark. Clark shrugged. Big help.

The firing seemed to go on for a long time, but Gen¹³ was not without some defenses. Burnout, surrounded, threw up a superheated plasma wall around himself that blocked every projectile and ray directed at him. Across the room, Freefall played havoc with gravity, which threw off the trajectories of the flying ammo. Rainmaker's lightning short-circuited electronic charges before they could be a problem. Even DeMedici projected blasts of his eerie green glow at the Keepers. Their shrieks of pain sounded above the din of the firefight.

Lynch, Fairchild, and Grunge were at the back of the group. They weren't the ones with useful defensive powers. Lynch drew Caitlin close to him.

"I just want you to know, Caitlin, that I'm proud of you—of all of you. You're a good team, as solid and effective as Team 7 ever was."

"Thanks, Mr. Lynch," she said. It was a little unnerving—it was almost like he was admitting that they were finished. But she was glad to hear it, anyway. She knew that his days with Team 7 were important ones to Mr. Lynch, that unit integrity and pride meant a lot to him.

"You've all done well. If it wasn't for DeMedici . . ."

"If it wasn't for him we wouldn't be here in the first place," she said. "Ivana would already have won."

"I know," Lynch replied. "But he's done everything he can to get us all killed, anyway. I'd just turn him over to Ivana if I didn't know that she'd never keep her promise to let you kids go. And I'd hate to give her the satisfaction of winning."

"Turning him over would just mean that she'd blow the Horn and we'd be right back where we started," Caitlin said.

"That, too."

Still, the Cardinal had put them in an impossible predicament, Lynch knew. The kids were beat. They couldn't keep up their defenses forever against what seemed to be a virtually unlimited supply of Keepers. If they slipped, and Ivana got her hands on the Horn, then the demons would be released

again, and there was no way they'd survive that.

Lynch was angry—mad at DeMedici, mad at Ivana, mad at himself for getting the kids into this jam. As the Keepers rained fire down upon the brave teens, Lynch felt his anger snowballing, and didn't make any attempt to check it. He could use this anger.

John Lynch had a power, going all the way back to the early Team 7 days, in the 1970s. I.O. had experimented on the team, exposing them to unknown substances without warning them. The experiment had proved fatal to some, less destructive to others. It had driven Lynch mad for a while, and resulted in his trying to claw his own eyeball out of his head—hence the ragged scars on his face, and his useless left eye. Ultimately, it had changed him, like it had the other Team 7 members. He was left with a power he called “the mojo”—a horrible, destructive power that he didn't like to unleash. It was like looking at himself in a circus mirror—using the mojo showed him an image that didn't fit with the way he saw himself. It was terrifying to behold.

But this was one of those rare moments when the mojo might come in handy. He had reined it in so well, buried it so deeply within himself, that he couldn't release it anymore under normal circumstances. When he was desperate, and the rage built in him like it was now, though, then the mojo floated close to his surface.

He let it come.

It welled up inside him like a thing alive, a thing fighting to get out. It filled Lynch like a fire. He felt his skin growing warm to the touch. He saw the world—Keepers blasting away, Roxanne and Bobby and Sarah and DeMedici doing what they could to block the Keepers' fire, the cavern walls flickering in the intermittent light of muzzle flashes from the weapons—as if through a thick curtain of red. Caitlin and Grunge turned to him, but it looked like they were moving in slow motion, and though their mouths moved, he couldn't hear their words. He was beyond hoping they were safely out of the way.

The mojo had taken over. It burst from Lynch, a bright white light that flared from his eyes. At the last second, he raised his head, directing the beams away from Gen¹³, away, even, from the Keepers and Ivana, and toward the cavern's

rib-shaped walls. He screamed as the power passed through him.

The first indication of the mojo's power was a falling rock from the darkest part of the ceiling. It dropped to the ground between Gen¹³ and the Keepers, hitting the stone floor with a crash and splintering. The gunfire stopped for a second, then resumed.

Hardly anyone felt the first shudder. Most of them were too busy shooting or avoiding being shot. Bozzi was not included in that group. He grabbed Clark's arm.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Feels like a quake," she said.

Bozzi touched Ivana's shoulder. "Ms. Baiul," he said. "Is this place earthquake safe?"

She shot him a withering glance. "Mr. Bozzi, I assure you that this building more than conforms to every standard of structural integrity known to man. You'd be safe from a nuclear explosion in this sub-basement."

"It's not nukes I'm worried about," he said.

"If you're so concerned, then go," Ivana snapped. "I won't hold you here. I'd rather have you out of my sight if you're so cowardly. Go, before I change my mind and snap your neck myself."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Bozzi said. He raised two fingers to his forehead in a quick salute to Carolyn Clark, and ran for the stairs. The Keepers he'd already pushed through were in his way again, but at least this time they could see him coming.

"Dude," Grunge said, his voice hushed. "What is that?"

"He calls it his mojo," Caitlin told him. "He's talked about it, but I've never seen it. It's his remnant Team 7 power."

"I'm glad he doesn't bring it out very often."

They didn't have to talk loudly, because the firing had stopped again and a preternatural silence had come over the great chamber. A few more chunks of stone slipped from the darkness overhead, but otherwise all was still.

Everybody could tell the stillness wouldn't last, though. A

second, two, and then there was another shudder, and this time everyone felt it. The room moved. Then the lights went out.

Twenty-seven stories up, Lolly was sitting behind her desk, feet on its polished surface, telephone cradled between her shoulder and head.

“So what I said was, ‘Johnny, just because you haven’t had a date in, like, six months doesn’t constitute an emergency on my part,’ you know what I mean? I mean, I’m getting regular attention, you know, like a well-maintained car. Lube and an oil change every three thousand miles. And he goes, ‘But, Lolly—’ ”

The building shook and the lights flickered.

“Hold on a sec. No, it’s not Bradach, when did I ever let him interfere with my personal calls? Just hold on, Nance.”

The lights flickered again, and the overhead fixture swung on its chains, sparked, and died.

“Listen, Nancita. I’ll call you later. This place is going *Titanic* around me, if you know what I mean. I didn’t sign on for this.” She dropped the headset into its cradle, scooped her purse out of the desk drawer, dropped some pens and a stapler into it, and headed for the door. The stairs were closer than the elevator, and she trusted them more, anyway. It was only twenty flights to street level. She could make that in a minute tops, even with heels on.

With Lynch’s mojo disrupting the bedrock that Screamland rested on, the building started to implode from the top down. Seconds after Lolly hit the stairs, the twentieth floor swayed to the east, then back. Pictures and plaques flew from the walls. Computers and telephones slid off desktops and exploded on the floors. An air conditioning fixture on the roof snapped its mountings and fell over, punching through the roof and crushing Mark Bradach’s desk. Both of them collapsed the floor beneath the desk, and they dropped through to the next floor, and the next. With each shudder of the building, other heavy equipment slid from the rooftop toward the hole created by the air conditioning unit or made new holes. The chain reaction had begun.

From there, offices fell into offices and into hotel rooms.

Beds and bathtubs from one floor took out TVs and couches on the next. Pipes burst. Water and steam spat everywhere, but not enough to quench the flames that sprang up from electrical line breaks.

On the ground floor, gamblers finally realized something was wrong when the slot machines stopped spinning and the lights died. The casino was suddenly quiet, the ringing and clanging and bonging silenced forever. But those noises were quickly replaced by a more sinister one from above, a sound like distant thunder coming closer with freight train speed. People made for the doors just as the roof collapsed and the weight of the building above came down on their heads.

The slot machines, banks of video poker, roulette wheels, blackjack and poker and craps tables, and somewhere around a ton of rolled and loose coin just added to the damage as the ground floor crashed through.

Bozzi made his way up the service stairway in the dark after SB 4, just before the lights went off for good. He heard shouting below him, and figured things weren't getting any better down there. On the stairs, all he had to do was keep a hand on the rail. Up eight stairs, hang a left, up eight, left. Not much to remember.

He figured he was at SB 2 when the stairs flattened beneath his feet. There was a wrenching as the whole structure seemed to twist sideways, then he heard a thunderous crash as the inner wall fell in, away from him, and the stairs followed. He took a step into nothingness.

But his hand on the railing saved him. He kept his grip, and when he felt himself falling, he yanked himself back to the relative safety of the banister. It hadn't gone, anyway, and there were vestigial remains of the stairs next to it. They were no longer the six-foot wide stairways he'd been used to, but at this point, six inches was better than nothing. He continued up a little slower, but still headed in the right direction.

In the great cavern, the "belly of the beast," as DeMedici had referred to it, panic had set in. The Keepers had all stopped firing when the lights went out, and most of them had started to scream. The building seemed to be caving in around them,

and they were as low as they could get, which meant the weight of the whole thing would be down around their heads in a minute or two.

In the faint light emitted by Bobby and Cardinal DeMedici, Caitlin could see Keepers trampling one another in their rush for the exits. But she could tell by the piles of humanity at the exits that there was no help there—falling rubble had probably already filled in the staircase and blocked off the corridor she and the rest of Gen¹³ had come through. The only other way out of the cavern was back into Hell, and only then if DeMedici blew the Horn again.

She could see by the set of his jaw and the steel in his eyes that he had no intention of doing that. She agreed. What would be the point? Save a hundred or so lives for a few minutes, until the demons killed them, anyway? She wished she and her friends could live through this. Putting their lives on the line to rescue the human race, win the main fight, and then die because of Mr. Lynch's enormous power. Where was the justice in that? But she didn't see much hope. There were limits even to Roxy's anti-gravity power. She might be able to protect them for a few minutes, but with the tons and tons of material coming down on top of them, she couldn't hold it off for long.

Ivana Baiul and Carolyn Clark made their way toward the staircase. Both carried automatic weapons, and neither hesitated to open up with those weapons on any Keeper who didn't move out of the way quickly enough. Ivana recognized that as she got closer to the doorway, she was farther and farther off the ground, walking on an uneven floor of Keeper corpses. She didn't care. Keepers were expendable—that was their mission in life. She, however, was not. She had a destiny to fulfill, a nation to resurrect.

"Clark!" she shouted. "Get me out of this mess!"

"I'm trying, Ivana," Clark replied through gritted teeth. She pumped a couple of rounds into a Keeper who was blocking her way, shoved his lifeless body aside.

"There's a promotion in it for you," Ivana told her. "When we get back to Washington—"

"Ivana," Clark said. "This was your big idea to get back

into power at I.O. It didn't work. When we get back to Washington, I'll be lucky to still have a job. You'll be lucky if you're not in jail. So don't make me any empty promises, okay?"

Another one, Ivana thought. Another useless traitor, sucking up to me when I could do her some good and turning against me as soon as the chips are down. She planted her feet as firmly as she could against the squirming mass of dead and dying Keepers, raised her weapon in both hands, pointed it at Clark's back, and squeezed the trigger.

The sound of the automatic weapon fire, and Clark's dying scream, were drowned out by the collapse of the ceiling. Ivana could see the rock split and give way in the muzzle flashes of her own shots, and then she couldn't see anything at all.

Light!

Bozzi kicked open the ground floor doorway which led out to the vast Screamland parking lot. The lights had stayed on out here, and there was enough ambient glow from the city to make the lot almost as bright as day. Before him, casino visitors were running away, shrieking, from the collapsing resort. Behind him, the building roared. A billow of smoke or dust belched up from somewhere downstairs. But Bozzi didn't care. That was all in the past now. He was through with I.O., through with Ivana. He would never see any of those people again, and the idea didn't bother him in the least.

"So, are you planning to just hang around in the parking lot all night, or did you have some kind of a plan or something?"

He turned around. It was the secretary from upstairs. Her short coppery hair was a little mussed, and the purse slung over her shoulder had some odd bulges to it, but otherwise she looked just like she had when he was up in Bradach's office. Which was bright and curvy in all the right places, and better than anything else Bozzi had seen that day.

"No plan," he said.

"I know a place where we could get a drink," she said. "Your name was Bozzi, right?"

"Still is."

"I'm Lolly." She put out a hand. Shaking it, he was sur-

prised at how small her fingers were. Good grip, though. Bozzi hated a weak handshake.

“So, this place you know,” he said as they hiked across the ocean of parked cars, away from Screamlan. “There any monsters there?”

“Honey, this is Las Vegas.” Lolly’s laugh was as pure and clear as a ringing bell. “There are always monsters.”

Freefall strained under the effort. As the chamber had fallen in toward them, she had thrown up a gravitational field around herself, Grunge, Caitlin, Sarah, Bobby, Mr. L., and DeMedici. But the pressure of tons of rock and steel and concrete and God knew what else was getting to her. Bad enough she’d had to hold open the gate of Hell earlier. If she survived this, she was going to park her shapely behind in a hammock for about six weeks and make people wait on her, all the while maintaining a personal space of about six feet. She was tired of feeling squeezed.

Of course, the living through it part was looking pretty unlikely.

“Francesco, isn’t there something you can do?” Lynch snarled.

“I’m sorry, John, truly,” DeMedici said. “Even my powers of survival can’t help us now, I’m afraid.”

“And if the Horn is buried under all this stuff, at least we won’t have to worry about it falling into the wrong hands for a century or so, right?” Caitlin asked.

“I am sorry that you have grown to mistrust me, Miss Fairchild.”

“Only because you’ve continually proven yourself unworthy of trust,” she shot back.

“My duty was clear. I have only performed my duty as effectively as I could.”

“So, this is it?” Bobby asked. “After all we’ve gone through, we’re just gonna die here?”

“It’s certainly looking that way, son,” Lynch said. “Unless you think you can burn your way through twenty-seven stories of accumulated debris, plus the solid rock ceiling of this cavern.”

“Maybe given enough time,” Bobby said. “But as soon

as Rox let the field down so I could even try, we'd all be crushed."

"I think you're right," Lynch agreed.

"There must be some other way out," Sarah said. "Something we haven't thought of. Can't you blow a different tune on that Horn of yours, Cardinal?"

"No, child. The Horn only has two functions. Building up and tearing down the wall."

"Let me see it," Grunge said. He reached for the Horn.

DeMedici yanked it away from Grunge's hands. "No!"

"What's the big deal?" Grunge asked. "It's not like I'm goin' anywhere with it. I don't even want to blow it. I just want to see this artifact that's so important."

"It is a sacred object," DeMedici said. "Not a curiosity."

"Oh, let him take a look," Sarah said. She jerked it out of the Cardinal's hands, tossed it to Grunge. "He won't hurt it. Will you, Grunge?"

But Grunge didn't answer. He was holding the Horn in his hands, turning it this way and that. The real Horn of Jericho, he thought. Just like in the Bible. This really was a sacred object. He could feel the power humming through his palms.

"Grunge?" Caitlin said. "Are you . . . ?"

I wonder . . . Grunge thought.

Normally, he didn't even have to think to use his power. Touch a substance, take on its properties. Now, however, he felt some unexpected resistance from the Horn . . . which suddenly became a warming sensation that seemed to flow through him. He wasn't, he knew, just mimicking its physical substance—he was actually taking on its spiritual property in some way.

Caitlin watched the bone color of the Horn spread across Grunge's body. He began to glow, a deep, warm, golden glow, like candlelight. An expression of serenity, of peace, illuminated his face. The glow spread, so that it was now filling the space that Roxy had created. Outside the space, Caitlin could see the tons of debris pressing down. Suddenly, though, she wasn't afraid of it anymore.

"It's okay, Rox," Grunge said. His voice was deeper, more assured, than usual. But she seemed to know what he meant. She relaxed, let the gravitational field recede. It didn't matter.

The golden glow created its own field. As Caitlin watched, rubbing her arms to restore sensation where she'd had every muscle tensed before, the rubble above seemed to shift.

"We're going up!" Bobby said.

And they were. The golden bubble was lifting, floating up through the layers of rock and concrete and steel. The stuff was pushed out of the way as they moved through it, and cascaded down the sides of their rising orb of enclosed space as they passed. Caitlin saw pipes and girders, walls and furniture, indescribable rubble of every variety. The noise of their passing should have been overwhelming, but the golden bubble seemed to muffle it, though they could hear each other perfectly.

She felt terrible for the Keepers below, for the casino patrons who had been possessed and used by demons, even for Ivana, lost somewhere underneath what used to be Screamland. There was nothing that could be done for them now. Ivana had built this place, or caused it to be built, and now it would be her grave.

Still the glowing sphere rose, up and up, passing as it did level upon level of the casino complex that continued to collapse in on itself. Finally, it broke through into the artificial light of the Vegas night.

Screamland was gone. In its place, a few girders twisted toward the stars. Every wall had fallen in, every level dropped down on the ones below it. The sub-basements were thick with debris, and a column of smoke rose high into the Vegas sky. A crowd had gathered to watch the destruction—firefighters and police held the curious back with yellow tape and saw horses.

When they were safe, Grunge handed the Horn to Cardinal DeMedici. The bone-colored cast left his skin, the glowing, protective orb dissipated. Grunge smiled.

"That so rocked," he said.

Grunge was back.

EPILOGUE



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The van was parked far enough back that none of the falling debris had hit it. For the first thirty or so rows of cars, shattered windshields and dented hoods were commonplace. But nothing had flown as far as the group had been forced to park.

"I thought sure those cops would stop us when they saw us coming out of the building," Bobby said.

"They would have had to have seen us," Cardinal De-Medici said.

"You mean you—"

"I still know some parlor tricks," the old man said with a smile. "Perhaps not as impressive as young master Chang's, but useful nonetheless."

"That was no parlor trick," Roxy said. "You were so awesome, Grunge." She hadn't let go of his hand since he'd reverted to normal. He didn't seem to mind.

"We all do what we can, babe," he said.

"She's right, Grunge," Caitlin said. "You were great. If you hadn't figured that out, we'd be flattened underneath that mess."

"I couldn't let that happen, could I?" Grunge said. "I mean, you honeys flattened? What a waste."

Sarah punched him lightly in the arm. "You loser," she said. "Thanks for saving our butts. And don't even touch that line."

"My lips are sealed," Grunge said.

They all climbed into the van. Grunge and Roxy sat in the

middle seat, Caitlin and Sarah behind. Mr. Lynch sat behind the wheel, and DeMedici rode shotgun.

“Where to, Padre?” Lynch said.

“The airport will be fine, John,” DeMedici said. “I’m sure I can get a flight to New York from there, and then to Rome.”

“Taking that trinket back to the Vatican?”

“Back to its proper resting spot, yes. With the sincerest hope that it will never be needed again.”

“You going to be sticking close to it, just in case?”

“If that continues to be His will.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I say that I never want to see you again.”

“I understand perfectly, John. In spite of everything that happened today, I want you to know that I bear you no ill will. I admire all of you.”

“I bear you plenty, pal,” Lynch said. “And I’m not good at letting go of grudges.”

“Point taken. I, on the other hand, practice forgiveness. I appreciate all you’ve done for me. You children are truly an amazing team. The Church could use warriors like you.”

“The Church can have our help when necessary,” Caitlin said. “But we’re not planning to ally ourselves with one Church, or anything else. We’re Gen¹³. We go where we’re needed and we do what has to be done.”

“Noble enough, Miss Fairchild. I can find no fault with that.”

“That’s good,” Bobby said. “’Cause if you did, well, the airport’s not so far that you couldn’t hitch a ride.”

“We’ll drive the Cardinal to the airport, son,” Lynch said. “Then we’ll kick his butt out of the van and head for home. You want to ride up here with me?”

“Sure, Dad,” Bobby replied. The word felt strange in his mouth. He’d have to try it out a few more times, see if it took.

After they dropped Cardinal DeMedici outside the Departing Flights doors, Lynch headed the van toward the freeway. Roxy had slipped an arm around Grunge and laid her head down against his shoulder.

“Thanks, Grunge,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t have held

that much longer. We really would have been toast if it wasn't for you."

"I just did what I had to," he said. "Like you did. You were the one who bought me enough time to figure it out."

"I know. But you're the one who, like, saved the day, you know? You're the hero."

"That's cool," he said. "I can live with that." He was quiet for a moment, basking in the glow of this new-found respect. "What time is it, anyway?" he asked.

"Just after two in the morning," Lynch answered from the front. "Why?"

"I was just thinking," Grunge said. "Aren't the strip clubs in Vegas open all night long?"

Caitlin and Sarah took turns swatting the back of his head, and Roxy slugged his bicep.

"Ow!" he complained. "I thought the hero was supposed to get some respect!"

"You may be a hero, Grunge," Caitlin said, "but you'll never change!"

In the front seat, John Lynch chuckled softly as he steered the van onto the freeway onramp. 15 West headed toward San Diego and familiar beds. 15 East took them back into Las Vegas, where the neon and glitter still lit the sky. Lynch took the East ramp.

Three girls, three guys. But Sarah broke the tie. The vote was four to two. And after all, when you had just saved the world, what harm could a little playtime do?