

Hell Cop



David C. Burton

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To Penpointers, with thanks, and of course to Dee, with
thanks and love.

FORWARD

When people die, their souls go to Purgatory where it's decided whether they go to Heaven or Hell. The process is not perfect; an occasional clerical error is made and an innocent is sent to eternal torment.

When a soul is sent to the wrong place, the person who cared most about the deceased when alive (not always the obvious choice) begins to have disturbing dreams, sometimes visions, and a distinct feeling of unease, as if the universe is out of balance somehow. Through a priest, or perhaps a counselor or therapist, the loved one is put in touch with certain specialists. Armed with information and pictures, and a large check, the specialist goes into Hell, finds the misplaced soul, and returns him or her to Purgatory by way of Heaven Gate for proper processing.

There is risk. If the specialist dies in Hell proper, his or her soul is trapped there for all eternity.

Soul Retrieval is a secret to all but a few, though it has been going on for centuries. Retrieval helps restore the balance between Heaven and Hell, policing the bookkeeping of Purgatory, keeping the demons of Hell honest. These specialists who risk damnation are known, among those who know of them, as Hell Cops.

Chapter One

The way to Hell is not straight. It twists and turns, goes up and down, is infinite in length, but finite in time. Sometimes you step through a shimmer that blocks the tunnel and know you've taken a giant step toward the eternally expanding and contracting Netherworld.

I stepped through one of those shimmers and, seeing what lay ahead, crouched down right there and took a big breath. In front of me stretched a long straight section of tunnel with a bulge about two thirds of the way to the next turn. This section occurred at a different location each time I went to Hell, and I knew what it was. I pulled the hood of my fireproof jumpsuit over my head, made sure I sealed the suit tight, and walked carefully on.

The bulge glistened with continuously moving facets—Jump Bugs, thousands of them. They covered the wall and ceiling, forming a gauntlet ten feet long and barely two feet wide. Jump Bugs, each about an inch long, scoured sections of the tunnel, cleaning it of the constantly oozing slime so that the walls were pristine black rock.

They also ate anything that lived. So long as they weren't touched, they left you alone. Touch even one, it jumped on you, followed in seconds by the rest of the colony. Their tiny mandibles can strip a man to the bone in minutes. I saw it happen.

A couple years ago somebody managed to follow me into the tunnel. I had turned the far corner when I heard the

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scream. I ran back within ten seconds, but it was already too late. All I saw was a whirring, churning mass of black on the floor. A bug covered arm pushed out, but was immediately sucked back into the frenzy. Not a single Jump Bug remained on the wall. I got as close as I dared, aimed my gun where I thought the head should be, and fired. Maybe I spared the man, or woman, a few seconds of pain and horror. I hope so.

Just around the corner from the Jump Bugs are the Tongue Vines. If you're lucky enough, and fast enough, and aren't brought down by the sheer weight of the Bugs like an antelope by a lion, you might make it to the Vines. The Tongue Vines are whip fast vines with rough, flat pink leaves like cats' tongues. They love Jump Bugs. If Bugs are on you, you must stand still and let the Vines scour them off. But don't stand too long. The Vines will not stop when the Bugs are gone.

A few feet from the Bugs, I stopped and removed my small backpack. I breathed in slow and deep to get my chi flowing. Heart racing, I held the pack and my walking staff in front of me, turned my shoulders to make myself as thin as possible, and walked quickly through the gauntlet.

Ten feet on the other side I stopped and breathed again. One obstacle down, an infinite number to go. I continued on. A half mouth, spiky tooth, cat-sized creature darted crookedly at me. I call it Wylie E Coyote because it always returns no matter what I do to it. It has seven unevenly distributed legs, so it has a hard time moving in a straight line. I flicked it away with my staff, but Wylie was a tenacious little beast and kept nipping at my boots. No ten year old girl, my daughter

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or not, should spend any more time in Hell than necessary. I was in a hurry. I finally had to shoot Wylie and hope the concussion wouldn't alert any demon guards.

Ten minutes later, my time, the rosy glow of Hell proper appeared in the distance. Eager to be out of the tunnel, I nevertheless forced myself to slow down. A Sling Spider always lurked ahead, somewhere.

The cool damp of the tunnel turned warm. The slime dried into razor sharp flakes that rippled with a blood-red glow over the uneven surface. This moving pattern hid a deep indentation ahead where a Sling Spider waited. The way looked clear. The unwary might stride confidently forward, glad to be out of the stifling corridor. They would never make it to Hell by doing that. Not the way they intended, anyway.

The spider waits in a deep fissure in the rock wall, camouflaged by a fine web that resembles the dried slime. A thicker, elastic web is hidden behind the fine one. The spider stretches the center of the web and attaches it to the back of its lair. Then it waits in the center.

The body of the spider is about one foot wide by two feet long. It has thirteen legs, ten facing out, two to hold on to the web and one that, when the beast detects motion, cuts the anchoring strand, launching the spider at its prey. Its three foot long legs wrap around the unfortunate, the single red claws at the end piercing the victim's flesh. Six inch pincers administer a paralyzing poison. Then the spider can store the meal and suck it dry at its leisure.

I stepped cautiously down the center of the six foot wide passage. It could be on either side. I took a step, scanned

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ahead, took another step. There, ahead on the right, the pattern seemed different. I moved slowly to the left, gun ready in case I had a chance to shoot. I kept my eyes to the right. The spider does not attack slow movement.

I took another step, close to the left side. A hot breeze blew into the tunnel. It rippled the razor scales on the right side. The pattern moved, shifted. I looked for the dull yellow eyes of the spider behind the scales. I saw only solid rock. I stood near the entrance. There was only one other place it could be. I froze. The skin on my back crawled as I felt eyes on the back of my neck. I wanted to bolt. In my imagination I felt the thick, furry legs wrap around me. Felt the pincers close on my head. Saw my body hung in a corner, the spider slinking forward to suck me dry. I didn't panic, but I damn sure wanted to.

I held still for two minutes. I visualized Tai Chi movements. Calm. Calm.

Slowly I turned my head to look behind me. Through the thin web I saw the spider, a big one, not five feet away, yellow eyes waiting with arachnid patience for me to move.

My mind blanked. Instinct took over. Calm. Calm. You've done this umpteen times before. Slow. Steady. Smooth. Pick up a foot. Easy! Move it forward. Set it down. Control the movement. Now the other. Again. Again.

A Blood Bee buzzed past my head. Startled, I jerked my head around. That was enough. I heard the snap as the spider cut the restraining strand. It came through the camouflage webbing like an emerging nightmare. Ten

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reaching legs first, then the heavy body. It came too quickly for me to use my gun. I shifted weight and swung my staff.

The spider's impact twisted me around and knocked the gun from my hand. The staff screwed up the spider's trajectory, and it flew past me, leaving four small rips in my jumpsuit. It landed upside down. Ten thick, shaggy legs curled into a tight ball. The thing looked dead; then the two web holding legs snapped it upright. The spider crouched three feet away and was pissed off. My gun was five feet away. Logic said—go for the gun, instinct said—RUN, Hell Cop survival instinct said—attack don't react.

The Sling Spider didn't care about that. It jumped. At the same time I plunged my walking stick through its main body. In a frenzy, thirteen legs scrabbled at the stick. I let go, then went for my gun.

With the thing dead, I made myself walk, not run, to the end of the tunnel. I slumped against the wall, burned clean of slime by the dry heat of Hell, and let my body shake. Cool water from my pack unwound the knot in my stomach. There was another tale to tell my father.

It hadn't been a very auspicious start. As I stared out at the barren boundary area spread out below me I hoped that Christine was wrong and that I was prepared.

* * * *

"Please don't go to Hell now. You just got back, you're not ready," Christine had said, not bothering to plead. She knew it wouldn't make any difference.

"You know I have to," I said.

"Well, you don't. But you will. Because of the girl."

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"Yeah," was all I replied, not quite able to meet her gaze. What else was there to say? She knew that if my wife, her sister, hadn't died in childbirth ten years ago, our daughter would be the same age as the girl's soul I'd been hired to retrieve.

"Be careful. You haven't had time to prepare properly."

"I'll be fine. It's not my first trip, you know."

"It wasn't Dimitri's first trip either."

Despite my preoccupation I didn't miss the catch in her voice. I held her broad shoulders and looked into her deep blue eyes, bright with impending tears.

"Christine, I miss your brother as much as you do, and I don't believe he's dead, either. I'll find him, you'll see."

"I know you will," she said, coming into my arms. "I told him not to go. After he destroyed the demon that killed Dad, the others were after him, but he went anyway, damn it. The damsel in distress and Mr. Macho."

I held her and breathed in her sweet scent, her fine blonde hair soft against my cheek. It would be awhile before I smelled anything half that agreeable. After a minute she took my face in her strong hands and gave me a tender kiss and a matching smile.

Hands on my chest, she sighed and said, "The sooner you go, the sooner you get back. Let's get you ready."

Christine knew the procedure. She'd been a Hell Cop until she fell for some jerk who only understood that when she was gone she wasn't there to be abused by him. A mundane job as an accountant followed after she got rid of the guy. Then her brother Dimitri disappeared. Dimitri was his Hell Cop

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name. Retrieving souls is an intense business. We take the job seriously and tend to use our Hell Cop name amongst ourselves, even when in the land of the Living. Christine made two trips to Hell with me to look for him, but she'd lost her edge and knew it. She moved into my house right after that.

A month later we both succumbed to desire and curiosity and spent an inflammatory night in bed. The sex was terrific, though most of the time I was feeling, tasting, or seeing Julie, my late wife. We never discussed it, but I think Christine was more interested in a familial connection. During that night, often at what most people might consider inappropriate times, she mentioned Dimitri, Julie, or her father rather than me. Christine always had a very strong sense of family. She stayed on, in her own bedroom.

She made sure the flameproof closures on my coveralls worked properly. She fussed with the neck seals. "You need a haircut," she said, letting her fingers linger an affectionate second. While she filled the water bottles, replaced the flashlight batteries, and packed some food, for that trip as well as some to cache for future trips, I checked my gear.

The terrain in Hell is so varied and unpredictable that it's impossible to carry equipment for every circumstance. If things go well you don't need any of it anyway. I carry the basics and trust to field expedients, as they say in the military, for the rest—A Buck survival knife with an eight inch blade, a big Swiss Army knife, two Space Blankets, binoculars, gloves, two changes of underwear and two pairs of socks. Besides the underwear, I carry two other important

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items, a staff and a gun. The two piece, six-foot walking stick/bo-staff is rosewood with a gold connector in the middle. I can break it down to carry in a three-foot sheath attached to the backpack. The gun is a specialty revolver that shoots six 20-gauge shotgun shells loaded with shot mined in Hell. Most trips I've never had to use it, but when I need it, I need it.

I also carry one gold and one silver crucifix; sometimes they work. Hell is non-denominational. No matter what kind of Hell people believe in, there's a place for them. If they don't believe in Hell, there's plenty of dark, empty space to wander around in forever. If a person deserves it, according to the Purgatory Assessors, they go to Hell forever; it's that simple.

My heartbeat was rising fast, and my hands shook. Hell is a scary place. Without fear, survival is unlikely. Fear needs to be controlled, doled out in small amounts to keep your guard up. I hadn't even left the house yet, and the fear already controlled me. It was the girl, I knew. She could have been my daughter. For her to be in Hell one minute longer than necessary was unacceptable.

For five years after my wife died I wouldn't retrieve kids. I'd convinced myself I didn't want anything to do with them. Finally I did one for a family whose concern for their eight year old son's soul was matched only by their bank account. It went okay, so I kept my feelings in my back pocket and did a professional job when the work was offered.

While Christine finished inspecting and stowing my gear, I ran through a Tai Chi long form. The slow, controlled

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movements calmed me, helped me concentrate, focus. When my gear was ready, I was ready.

I needed to go. The longer it takes to get there the colder the trail can become, so to speak. The girl was ten. She'd been harassing her younger brother in the back seat. The mother turned to yell at her. Her eyes were off the road just long enough for the car to drift left into a dump truck riding the center line. The two kids died. I suppose, technically, the girl was at fault—no harassing, no accident. But come on, send her to Hell for that?

The girl's mother had the vision, told her priest, Father Henry, and he recommended me. The local Catholics are big on Hell, and I've had some good referrals from Father Henry.

Before I backed out of the garage Christine said, "If you're not back in four days I'm coming after you."

"Christine, no," I said, taken by surprise.

She placed a finger on my lips, stifling my protest.

"Don't bother arguing," she said, with finality.

I had to try anyway. "Christine, you've never been down alone. Your dad didn't let me go solo till after ten trips with him and ten with Dimitri. There are too many hidden dangers. It can get rough without a partner. You know that."

Her eyes told me the same thing her voice had.

"I will assume you are in a hurry and didn't really mean to say that you don't think I can handle the rough stuff. I can if I have to." She gripped my arm with both hands and shook it. "Listen to me. You're all the family I've got left. There's nothing where you're going that's any rougher than waiting here, alone, for you to return. It was a bitch when Dimitri

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didn't come back. I won't go through that again with you. Six days, and I'm coming after you."

I headed east, toward the hills. I passed the fancy developments, my good-old Ford pick-up conspicuous among the luxury cars. A lot of my clients come from the area. There seems to be more ambiguity about where the rich should go when they kick. Soul Retrieval isn't cheap, so I let the rich clients subsidize the regular folks. It's only fair.

I left the final golf course behind and began climbing into the hills. I kept an eye on the rearview mirror. There are some people who'd like to get to Hell for their own reasons, as long as they know how to get out again.

The pick-up's tank was full so I didn't stop in Nobell. Nobell has about twenty buildings, half of them unoccupied. The first time I stopped at the gas station an old boy about fifty, going on seventy, wearing greasy mechanic's coveralls and a John Deere hat, sauntered out to pump the gas. He asked me where I was going.

At the time, I was pretty new to the business and full of myself, so I said, "I'm going to Hell."

He looked over my flame-proof suit, long hair, and diamond stud earring and said, "Yep. You're dressed for it. Check yer oil?"

I said sure and then asked, "How about you? Where you going, Heaven?" I thought I was real cool back then.

He popped the hood. "I'm already there," he said.

"You've been to Heaven?"

"Am there. Look around you, son."

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I walked out by the road and did a slow three-sixty. The town straddled the road as it came out of the hills into a high valley. Trees—evergreen and aspen, cottonwoods along the river at the base of the hill, surrounded it. On the other side of the valley, higher hills rose up to snow-capped mountains. The sun hung low, suffusing the valley with a golden glow. Even then, as a cocky young man, I could see why it might be considered Heaven by some.

I ambled back to the truck. “Yeah, Heaven. I can dig it,” I said. “Hell doesn't look like this.”

The man held out a knobby hand for the gas money.

“Look again,” he said, ambling back to the office.

I looked around again. This time I saw a dying town out in the middle of nowhere. I saw the plywood covered windows of abandoned stores. Cars showed their rust. A woman in a faded dress too big for her scrawny frame called to a couple unsmiling kids with dirty faces.

I learned something that day about taking the time to look at both sides of a situation, about testing first assumptions. I've met many people since then who could benefit from a good long look from that gas station.

The station was still open as I passed by, but I noticed fresh plywood over the windows on a couple buildings. I left the town behind and raced across the valley. After the first rise I turned onto a dirt road that wound up through aspens over the next ridge. Nobody followed me.

I pulled off the road into a small clearing. Two deer stared at me with big doe eyes, then bolted into the trees. I

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activated my Find, a small, half electronic, half magic device that allows one to navigate through the netherworld.

The road to Hell lay ahead, somewhere. The good intentions it was paved with changed constantly so the location kept moving. It's hard to keep track. One year your intentions might admit you straight to Heaven, the next year they get you a pitchfork up the ass. The entrance shimmered into view a hundred yards ahead. Then the fear hit me like it always does. A rush of pure terror. I sat on the running board with my head between my knees and vomited up Christine's roast chicken and mashed potato dinner, the last good meal I figured to have for awhile. That ritual over with, I rinsed out my mouth, got in the truck, and drove through the entrance onto a road that's not on any map.

My shoulders tensed as the land rose up around me. Instead of gold, the aspens were blood red. The pine needles rippled, searching for prey to skewer on their barbed tips. The light darkened to a sinister gloom almost palpable in its promise of Evil. I concentrated on the black rock above me. It doesn't happen often, but things do escape occasionally. A warm, live body is a real treat for them.

The road ended abruptly in a dim, high rock cul-de-sac barely big enough to turn around in. I parked heading out. After checking that I was alone, I donned my pack, locked the truck, and, Find firmly in hand, walked through a blank stone wall into the back way to Hell.

I'm not sure even The Big D knows about the tunnel. The walls are rough hewn, as if chewed out of the rock by some monster with a mouthful of blunt teeth. The sides quickly fade

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from a clean gray to a damp, slimy moss covered black. The tunnel has a putrid air about it, like rotting flesh combined with sulfur. This is the pervasive aroma of Hell. It quickly disappears with familiarity; there are many more specific odors to take its place.

I made my way carefully. Small alcoves or cracks can hide any sort of creature. I carried my gun at the ready. You don't always have time to draw and aim when something quick and hungry comes after you.

* * * *

In Hell, Hell Cops rarely use their real names. You never know what might be listening and have a connection to the Lifer world. My name in Hell is Getter, and I'm proud of it. I've gotten every soul I went after, except one. And everyone acknowledges that that one wasn't my fault.

After fifteen minutes rest I was pumped and ready. I donned my gear, flipped my middle finger at the dead spider, and stepped out into the boundless variety of Hell itself.

Chapter Two

Hell's a hell of a big place, to use an earthly phrase. I could spend eternity searching for the girl and come away with nothing but hot feet. So, as usual, I went to see Rack the Hack.

The millennia-old trail descended easily from the tunnel exit to the sizzling flat below. I wondered what the pioneer Hell Cop thought as he descended into Hell for the first time.

Legends are based on facts it's said. Hell Cop legend is based on a few more facts than are generally available in ancient history or mythology texts. The first known Hell Cop was Ninshubur, the vizier of the Sumerian Inanna. The stories say he petitioned the gods to rescue Inanna when she went to the underworld to visit her sister, Ereshkigal. He didn't petition; he just went and got her. Odysseus really did go deep into Hell, not take a quick look and then split. The Roman poet Virgil used his own adventures as a model for Aeneas, the hero of his *Aeneid*. It was an easy leap from seeking advice from the souls of the dead to rescuing misplaced souls and guiding them to Heaven. Dante's description of Hell may have been accurate when he wrote it, but the ever shifting geography has rendered his maps obsolete. Some day a Hell Cop scholar will write our history. Though it's fact, it would probably be shelved next to books on UFOs and alien abduction.

As the Lifer population increases, so do deaths. Purgatorial bookkeeping mistakes also increase (rumors of demon

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manipulation abound) and so does the need for Hell Cops. There are about a hundred of us alive and scattered throughout the Lifer world. Recruitment is an oft discussed topic when two or three gather together.

The Spire Grove begins somewhere on the baking flat ground below the tunnel exit. I've never seen where it begins. Suddenly they're all around. The Find is essential; without it a person is lost, and lost in the Spire Grove means, whether by critter or by thirst, an unpleasant death.

The Spires, like crooked stacks of red donuts, can reach hundreds of feet above the hard packed orange dirt. They feel like solid rock, but they're hollow. They have to be to contain the millions of Spire Mites that live inside. The Mites build the structures with material they gather from the miles of tunnels dug underneath the spires. The tunnels sometimes come close to the surface. Fall through the crust into one when Mites are present, and the chances of surviving are none to none.

I used the Find to guide me through the Spires, some of them twenty feet in diameter, and toward the Info River where Rack the Hack lived, so to speak. I tapped the ground ahead with the staff. I had no desire to fall into a tunnel filled with hungry Mites. Their jagged rock crushing jaws would make quick work of my bones. But they weren't what I was the most worried about. Marauding Sticky Lips were the real danger.

I didn't see any till I began to notice the babble coming from the Info River. The ground sounded hollow under the staff, so I rounded a small spire with my eyes on the ground

instead of above me where they should have been. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a dark shape.

A young and thirsty Sticky Lips crouched above me. These flat, hairy, cartoon creatures have huge lips they can shoot out like a frog's tongue. They scratch holes in the thinner upper reaches of the spires and use their lips to sweep up the mites. The lips stick to anything. They can rip the skin right off the ass end of a Rockarino. This one was young and aggressive; all three eye stalks were trained on me. It wasn't so much interested in me as much as the liquid I represented. If it got a hold on me it'd suck me dry in fifteen painful minutes.

My face was well within its lip range. I took a step back, and it took a step forward. My staff saved me. I swung it between us just as the Sticky Lips attacked. The lips hit the stick, instead of my face, giving me a chance to jump back. We tug-of-warred with the stick. They're strong little sons-of-bitches; this one dug in its claws and dragged me around the spire—where two more were waiting. I was about to let go of the stick and grab my gun when the other two attacked the first one.

The original little demon let go, and I stumbled backwards. The ground gave way, and my heart leaped into my throat when my legs fell into a Spire Mite tunnel. The staff spanned the hole as I went through. A fetid odor engulfed me. My eyes teared and my stomach convulsed even as I recognized the chattering click-clack sound of the Mites' jaws over the screech of the fighting Sticky Lips.

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I clutched the staff, sucked in a deep breath through my mouth, and heaved myself up and rolled to the right, hoping for solid ground. The dirt gave way under the staff, but momentum carried me to safety. Mites covered my legs. I brushed them off, suffering only a few pinches. I regained my feet just in time, because the Sticky Lips had settled their differences and joined forces. They must have decided I contained enough moisture for all of them.

They rarely leave the spires, but liquid is where you find it. Their broad flat bodies flowed off the spire, thick claws ticking on the hard dirt. I had my gun ready, but I didn't need it. The hole in the ground distracted them long enough for me to haul my ass out of there.

In sight of the bridge over the Info River, I stopped in the shelter of some rocks and regrouped my mind which hadn't really been on the job at hand. For a few minutes I engaged in a common Hell Cop pastime, wondering how the hell I came to be in Hell.

I'd met the Thanos family twelve years ago. I was a rookie policeman, twenty-four years old, scared and unsure, and too cocky to admit it. I hung out with other young cops. Our youthful machismo far outstripped our experience. Me and another rookie were off duty when we ran smack into a robbery in progress. Our belief in our own immortality and a few beers got us in way too deep. He died. I spent a week in the hospital. The last thing he said to me was, "I didn't really think I'd die. Did you?"

No, I didn't. The incident messed my head up pretty good. Julie Thanos was the night nurse. We talked, a lot, and when

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I got out I met her family. Six months later we got married. A year later I was a Hell Cop, going down to Hell with her dad and brother, Dimitri. We wanted kids from the beginning. It didn't happen. Our daughter would have been ten in a month and three days.

That idea of the impending imaginary birthday was getting to me, though, and if I didn't get a professional, impartial attitude real quick I was going to end up dead for real.

While I thought, I scanned the air for Skyhooks, gray and brown birds with fifteen foot wingspans and bony hooks hanging down they used to snag their prey. They have long necks and sharp beaks so they can feed on the souls they impale while flying. They are ubiquitous throughout Hell.

On a bluff across the river I could see Rack the Hack's house and the thick wires running into the river that supplied him with the information he craved.

What passed for sky in that boundary sector, number 281, looked clear. I jogged over and crouched by the foot of the stone bridge. Skyhooks aren't the only danger going over the bridge. Squidlings live on the underside, and they don't like to be disturbed by beings clumping over their bridge. I didn't see any, but that meant nothing.

Bones of the ancient damned imbedded in the rock provided a grip for my boots. I walked steadily across, treading lightly on the skull faces staring eternally toward Heaven, my staff and gun ready. Three trips before I had had to shoot one of the Squidlings. They were intelligent creatures and would remember my smell, although how they could pick it out of the pervasive stench I had no idea.

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Two thirds of the way across I heard a Skyhook cry. I stopped and scanned the haze. Nothing. Then, gently, almost like a caress, I felt something slip around my ankle. From behind me a two inch thick, smooth, mottled gray tentacle with an oval tip covered by teeth rimmed suckers wrapped around my leg. Resistance was useless. The tentacle urged me toward a single softball-sized eye peering from the edge. I placed the gun barrel on the gray flesh where it flared into the tip. The urging stopped. It knew what a gun can do.

"The other one attacked me," I told the eye. "I tried not to disturb him. I just wanted to get across."

Nothing happened. I put a little pressure on the gun. The tentacle unwrapped from my leg and slithered out of sight. The eye stared for a few seconds, then disappeared also. I made myself scarce as quickly as possible. A trip to Hell is a constant cycle of trying to stay out of trouble, getting into trouble, and then, assuming you're still alive, running like crazy away from trouble.

Rack's house was one story, built of stone (What else?) and would have been worth a million plus in a better location. Beyond, the terrain turned to pine covered hills that rose to snow-capped peaks. That's where those chanceless snowballs came from. The sunrises and sunsets would be spectacular if there were any. I once asked Rack why he rated a fancy house full of computer equipment. He said he knew demons in low places.

Rack didn't care about mountains and sunsets. The only views that interested him were on the monitor screens in his computer room. I walked in the front door and made my way

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through the house. Rack glided across the floor in his wheelchair and began a furious tapping on an oversize keyboard. He squinted through thick glasses at the screen and attacked the keys again.

"Hey, Getter. That Squidling almost got you, didn't it? You must not stink bad enough."

"He didn't want to get his tip blown off."

"Who does? Oh, shit. Look at this will you. Some Senator just opened a bank account in the Cayman Islands. What do you think that's for?"

"Which Senator?"

"Getter, don't start. I'm in Hell here, you know. Why bother to tell when you won't remember? Son of a bitch, all this input and no fucking output. Man, I could rule the damn world with just one phone line back to Life."

Rack had been regarded by the hacker community as the best ever. The government certainly thought so. To feed his habit Rack worked his way through the banking system to the IRS, the military, the FBI and CIA. He even cracked MIT's unbreakable Omega system. The government was hot on his trail, albeit far behind, when he sold some information that got some agents killed. The spies were caught and gave him up. Rack was shot, trying to escape. In Hell he can get into any system, but he can never tell anyone what he knows. Rack ran his long fingers through his Dagwood hair and said, "Well, whatever. Who you looking for this time?"

"An ten year old girl, Brittany Highwater."

"Brittany? They ought to reserve an extra hot room for parents who name their kids Brittany or Tiffany. How long?"

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"My time, five days."

He wheeled over to another screen and entered the name.

"Hey, Getter," he said as he worked. "The next time you talk with God ask Him if He wants me to help shape up His network. Those guys are screwing up up there."

"I'll mention it to his secretary. Anything?"

"They've added some more security levels to their system here. It might take awhile. This'll be fun."

"Rack," I said, wanting to get his attention before he zoned out in underground cyberspace. "You know Dimitri, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure, Greek guy. You guys used to come down together. Haven't seen him in awhile. Those Greeks, wait till the Olympics. That'll be a surprise. Man, one phone line ..."

"He's missing."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

"How long?"

"My time, three months."

"Damn. That long down here?" He shook his head as if watching a casket sink into the ground. "Not good, man. He's gone."

"He said he was going to see you that trip."

"Yeah? Could have. Three months—three years, don't mean shit down here. Who was he looking for?"

"A woman named Grace Goody."

Rack laughed—Huh Huh Huh, like a repressed cough.

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"With a name like that I'm surprised they let her in, mistake or not. Those guys upstairs are really fucking up. What'd she do?"

"Hooker. Supposedly killed one of her customers when he tried to strangle her. She got caught in a ménage a trois in prison, somebody slit her throat. Conviction was reversed a week later."

"Tough luck. She a looker?"

"Yeah, but I know what you're thinking. She wasn't that special. Anyway, Dimitri wouldn't give it up for any woman. He's too experienced."

Rack gave me a pitying look over his shoulder.

"Yeah, right. Those broads ain't the same once they get here. You know that. Now get out of here. I'll call you."

I knew he was right. Old Satan and his boys loved to recruit the innocents. Dimitri was a fool for women. Someone like Grace Goody, with the powers and temptations available to her, could make it hard on a man, in more ways than one.

Just before I left the room Rack looked at the constantly scrolling screen next to him. He leaned over and tapped some keys. "Son of a bitch," he said triumphantly. "I knew that cop was on the take."

I took a shower, ate some rice and beans from a stock purposely left from other trips, and slept till Rack woke me. That part of Hell had perpetual light, but by my body clock it was midnight.

From Rack's place Hell proper began. The terrain became closer, gloomier, and the dangers more subtle, or blatant. I needed to be sharp and not think of the girl as the daughter I

might have had. Despite what I said to Christine I did think Dimitri was dead. It had been too long. When a Lifer is killed in Hell his soul is stuck. He can never leave. My priority had to be the girl.

"I found her, Getter," Rack said when I reentered his computer room. "She's at 101, the Schoolyard. But, somebody has really fucked up or somebody knows something about that girl I don't."

"What do you mean?" I asked around a yawn. Many kids went to the Schoolyard.

"She's with Mrs. Scritch."

That woke me up. "Ah shit. She gets the worst ones. This Brittany doesn't even come close to qualifying."

"You sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is a rush job, right?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"So all you know about this girl is what the doting parents told you, right?"

I thought back to my meeting with the parents. They had seemed sincere, the tears real. And Father Henry had vouched for them. I tried to remember what they said about the girl besides the usual platitudes. Something about another child who died. It was a girl one year old who accidentally suffocated in a plastic bag. Brittany had felt responsible, they said, and hadn't been the bright, sunny sweetheart she had been before.

"We did everything for her but she just never was as ... loving as before," the mother told me.

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I asked how Brittany got along with her little sister.

"Oh, she just adored her. Isn't that right, dear?" the mother said.

"Yes, absolutely," the father said. I wasn't convinced, and I don't think they were either.

Something to keep in mind when I found her.

To Rack I said, "You're right. I don't know as much about the kid as I'd like. It's too late to worry about it now, though."

Rack shrugged his shoulders and gave me an it's-your-funeral look.

I thought for a few seconds, then said, "Oh, man. Is Bujo still the Principal demon of the Schoolyard?"

"Yes, he is. And he gets nastier with age, so I hear. He's tight with Mephisto, too."

"Great. An innocent like this girl will draw him like blood draws a Gutlick. I got to hit the road."

"Don't you want to know about Dimitri and Grace?"

"Did you find him?"

"Well, no, but I know where he was."

He swiveled around to the bank of computers he uses for "Domestic operations" and brought up a file.

"See here." He pointed at a line highlighted in red. "Grace Goody was sent to the Fires."

"What? That's way too severe, even if she was guilty. What the hell's going on here? And Dimitri?"

"The last position I have for him is arriving at Nexus 666B."

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"666B? Isn't that the dungeons under the Golden Palace? What the fuck is he going through there for? That's like stepping on the Devil's tail. Was he alone?"

Rack paged down. "A Cop called Cappy and miscellaneous demons."

"Cappy is from LA. He's damn good. I can't believe they were both caught. Nothing for either one of them after that?"

"Nothing on the usual records," Rack said, giving me a blank expectant smile.

"Meaning there are other records that could only be accessed by a genius such as yourself."

"Flattery will get you anywhere, Getter, but it will take some time. Something I have plenty of and you don't."

"Is there anyway I can contact you away from here?"

"Use the Nexus phones."

"I can't use those."

"If I give you the Hell Security codes, you can."

He gave me some numbers, and we plotted my route into the Find. My nerves were tuned up and my body quivering with eagerness when I stepped out of Rack's house into the perpetual heat and headed for my first destination—the Dead Forest and Nexus 405.

Chapter Three

The trail led over a low rise to the edge of the Dead Forest. It split into three paths—doors one, two, and three. I expect to see Monty Hall here someday frozen with indecision.

I activated the Find. It pointed dead ahead.

The Dead Forest isn't called that because it itself is dead. Hundreds of creatures prowl within its caliginous interior. They skulk about and prey on each other and any of Hell's uncountable damned souls that are left to wander its trails that lead nowhere. Sometimes I hear their screams in the distance. The occasional, actually living interloper is a rare treat for the Dead Forest demons, so cautious, yet speedy, progress is called for.

I pushed for an hour with barely a glimpse of danger. I felt eyes follow me and heard odd scufflings in the darker shadows. Once, two fist-sized yellow eyes glared at me, but they didn't follow. The path led along the edge of a mist filled clearing. Anything could slither out of that pea green soup, so I concentrated on it and didn't see the man in the path till I was only ten feet away. So much for being alert to my surroundings.

The shotgun pistol leaped into my hand. It does that sometimes when I'm paying attention to the wrong danger—a survival instinct all Hell Cops acquire.

"Ho, friend," the man said in a thick Scottish brogue. "I be lookin' for the way home. Do ye know it? No need for that strange gun there. I not be lookin' to harm ye."

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"Who be ... Who are you?" I asked, all senses alert. The man appeared too substantial to be a soul and the only real "live" people, Lifers, in Hell were Hell Cops. The man didn't fit either way. Whenever I meet the unusual I remind myself to remember that sometimes a cigar is not a cigar.

"Me name is Gregory Alexander MacConnechy Farquharson," he said, taking a step forward and putting out his hand. "And ye might be?"

"They call me Getter. What home?"

"My farm, man. They wanted me to leave my farm. Fourth generation I was, and I told 'em I wasn't leavin' easy, and by ... by the devil I didn't."

That slip of the tongue was my clue, as well as the stench that came out of his mouth like a poison gas cloud. I knew that distinctive smell, like fish gone bad in a sewer. A Morph Ape, no doubt about it. Before I could shoot, it began the fascinating flow into its true shape. In seconds the human form melted and grew into an ape-like creature with shark teeth in a round mouth that opened wide enough to swallow my head and cut it off cleanly at the neck. Elongated arms with retractable scimitar claws stretched out for me. I felt their sting on my shoulder at the same time I fired.

The demon let out a deafening screech as it launched itself at me. I shot again, hitting it in the chest. Momentum carried the ape forward. It crashed into me, knocked me to the ground, squeezing the breath out of me with its massive bulk. I gagged on his powerful halitosis. Morph Apes are solid creatures, and it took me a minute to squirm out from underneath and get my breath back.

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The first thing I did was reload; scavengers from miles around would be on the way. Quickly, I picked up my walking stick and ran along the path away from the body. At the first turn I looked back to see the dead Morph Ape dragged into the mist by something covered with purple blotches. My scratches were minor, though my jumpsuit had three clean cuts in it. I'd only worn the thing twice, too. Most trips I came back sweaty and dirty, but intact. I hoped this wasn't an indicator of things to come.

A half hour later I spied a figure ahead. I drew my gun and kept walking as I scanned the forest on either side for creepy-crawleys or accomplices. Closer, the being looked familiar. My heart leaped. I'd been thinking of Dimitri, and in the gloom I thought it was Dimitri coming toward me! Then I saw it wasn't. It was Gregory, again.

"Ho, friend," the man said in a thick Scottish brogue. "I be lookin' for the way home. Do ye know it? No need for that strange gun there. I not be lookin' to harm you."

"I've heard that before," I muttered. "Who be ... Who are you?" I asked. As if I didn't know.

"I be Gregory Alexander MacConnechy Farquharson. And you might be?"

"They call me Getter. What home?"

"My farm, man. They wanted me to leave my farm. Fourth generation I was, and I told 'em I wasn't leavin' easy, and by God I didn't."

I relaxed a bit. The native inhabitants of the netherworld can't say things like God or Jesus; it's been bred out of them. The earthly damned souls can say anything they want,

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though. Satan's got them forever, so he doesn't give a damn what they say.

I activated the Find just to make sure of his status. He was a soul all right.

"Well, Gregory," I said. "I don't know where your farm is, but I doubt if it's back the way I've come. You're welcome to walk along with me. Maybe you'll find the way on the other side of the Nexus."

He peered down the path behind me. It looked just as dim and grim as the way he had come from. He said, "I'd be glad of the company, Getter. The natives hereabouts are not so friendly as they might be."

"Ain't that the truth," I said, and we walked together down the middle of the path. "So what's your story?"

Once he got warmed up, Gregory went on at length about a greedy 1850s landowner who wanted his family's land. He performed some financial shenanigans that put Gregory in his debt, then foreclosed. When the landowner came to gleefully serve the notice, Greg shot the man and the bought-and-paid-for Sheriff, too. He was supposed to hang but escaped. A week later he was shot while he rolled in a haystack with another man's wife.

"Most inconsiderate of him, I must say," Gregory said. "I was only passing through to Edinburgh."

"Well, at least the landowner didn't get your farm."

"Aye, that he didn't. And I know he's here some place, too. I be lookin' for him. If I find him, by God I'll send him to a real hell."

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We walked in silence for awhile, then he asked me, "Tell me, Getter, you are going through this Nexus?"

"You haven't been through one?"

"I woke up by a big stone and have been trapped in this stygian wood since that pipsqueak husband shot me for satisfying his wife. You can bet your bagpipes he never contented her like I did." A self-satisfied smile played across his thin, whiskered face, then turned into a tight lipped frown. "Ahh, what I'd give for some open land, with rich black soil and a view of green grass down to the sea. That's Heaven, Getter, that's Heaven."

He hadn't really answered my question. I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, though. After all, he had been alone for a hundred and fifty years or so. But, once suspicion has been aroused it doesn't go away easily.

Gregory sighed heavily. He peered into the shadowy wall of vegetation, then picked up a stone and threw it into a purple limbed bush with orange leaves like webbed claws. The leaves darted out and grasped at the air while something snorted deeply and retreated into the undergrowth.

"Something always watching you here and rarely do you get to see what. Unless it attacks you. Though there was the one sorcerer in the road. I dina' sense the evil in him as the others."

"A sorcerer? What do you mean?"

"Like in the books. Tall and stick thin, wearing a cloak with a peaked hood. I couldn'a see his face. He vanished when I come close."

"Sounds like a Wizard," I said. "But there are no Wizards."

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"Aye, maybe not. I don't trust what I see here." He shook his own walking stick at the forest in general. "Ye are the first friendly face I have spied since that wench smiled at me from the hay as I passed by purely mindin' me own business. You are a friend are you not, Getter, not a demon in disguise waiting to trick me into a deeper hell?"

"I'm no demon, Gregory. If you want to come through the Nexus with me, I'll take you. I can't promise it won't be worse than this."

"Worse or better, I care not. If it be a different Hell we go to I will gladly follow ye, Getter, through the Nexus."

We reached Nexus 405 a few hours later without major incident. Gregory turned out to be an affable, if voluble, companion. By the time we arrived his thick brogue sounded completely natural.

The Nexus occupied the center of a pentagonal shaped clearing where nothing grew. It appeared like a fifteen foot splinter of rough, black rock stuck crookedly in the ground by some ancient giant, which it may well have been. On the opposite side from us was a smooth face—the Nexus entrance.

"Gregory," I said before we entered the clearing. "Before we enter the Nexus take hold of my arm. You can't get in on your own."

"Do not worry. I will stay as close as three in a bed."

I assumed that meant he'd stay near.

"Keep an eye out, Greg. These Nexus clearings are popular spots for an ambush."

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We entered the clearing, keeping to the right side. As we came around the stone I saw a flash and heard a low whoosh, and two demons appeared. We were too far from the trees to run there, so I pulled Gregory against the rock and held a finger to his lips for silence.

One of the demons had the squat hind legs of a gorilla. Its front legs were almost human about four feet long. It had a monkey's muzzle poking out of a misshapen head covered with mottled brown fishhook fur. Sergeant Grizzle. The other was bipedal with red leather-like skin and a classic devil's tail with pincers at the end. On his long head he had two short black horns, large protruding ears, and two suppurating slashes on his cheek. He'd had a promotion since the last time I saw him. The extra slash made him a Captain in Helland Security. Captain Boam, just who I didn't want to see, or rather see me.

They turned in our direction, and Gregory and I backed around the Nexus as the two left the clearing by the same path we arrived on.

I heard the Captain say, "Come on, Sergeant, let's get this disturbance checked out. I have new souls to torment later."

Curious, I stared after them. What disturbance? The Morph Ape incident was minor; it wouldn't warrant a flick of a secondary demon's tail. Yet, major happenings make themselves felt over a wide area. Sort of a twitchy feeling, like animals get before an earthquake, that makes you keep glancing over your shoulder, expecting something to be there. I hadn't felt anything. And that gave me an uncomfortable feeling.

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Captain Boam, despite his desire to torment new souls, was alert. He stopped, tilted his head as if listening to me think, then spun around. Yellow eyes flaring, he pointed at me with the stub of an index finger.

"Getter!" he roared.

I barely heard Gregory over the nervous rustling of the surrounding forest, not to mention my own heartbeat. "That demon is not pleased to see you, friend Getter."

"He probably wants his finger back. Come on!"

"What-?"

I grabbed Gregory by the lapel of his coarse wool coat and dragged him through the smooth rock face. And ran smack into the pockmarked haunch of the biggest demon I'd ever seen inside the Nexus.

Chapter Four

Like Hell itself, the Nexus expands as needed, but it must have been busting at the seams to accommodate that Dinocat. He had a dinosaur tail with a ball o' spikes at the end. Its thick lizard rear body sat back, propped up by cat legs as big as tree trunks. Its huge paws were covered with blue fur. A flat feline head on a long neck bent down to inspect us. Beside the Dinocat a KKC (King Kong Coyote) about ten feet tall, its gorilla hand resting on a thin curved sword, scowled down at us, too.

"What are you souls doing here?" the Dinocat said, its spittle hissing as it hit the Nexus boundary.

Its rancid breath hit me like a solid wave. My stomach spasmed and I tasted bile, but I managed to keep it back of my teeth. Gregory groaned. Of all the times to have company during transit. I stepped back and tried to sound like I belonged there and wasn't in danger of puking on its big cat feet. My gun wouldn't be any use against something that big; besides KKC's are way quicker than their chunky gorilla bodies look.

"I am taking this soul to Nexus, ah, 29, for Captain Boam."

The big demon put its truck tire sized face a few inches from mine and said, "He don't look like a demon, does he, Zoat?"

The KKC sniffed at me with the end of its thin snout and said, "He don't smell like one either."

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"You are souls trying to escape!" the Dinocat said, jerking his head back to avoid soul cooties or some damn thing.

Christ, an alarm. That's all I needed. I'd be dead and stuck in Hell for eternity, but worse, Brittany would be, too. I had to get on with the job at hand.

"How did you get in the Nexus?" the KKC asked, looking like Brer Fox finally cornering Brer Rabbit.

"I have a Find," I said, holding it up. "Captain Boam gave it to me."

The two demons stared at the Find, working it through.

In what I thought was reasonable tone, I asked, "Would Captain Boam give a soul a Find so he could take another soul through the Nexus?"

"Captain Boam is an idiot," Zoat said. "Ain't he, Flunk?"

"Yeah," Flunk replied with authority. The Dinocat flicked its tail, the spiked tip vague in the Nexus fog, in increasingly wider arcs—a bad sign.

The Nexus seemed to be taking an awfully long time getting to our next stop. Gregory's fingers dug into my arm; he wasn't used to such huge creatures. The pain kept me alert.

Both demons inspected the Find I held up. "That is an old one," the cat face rumbled.

"Helland Security does not use them anymore," Zoat said. "Let me see it." The gorilla hand flicked out to snatch it. I yanked it back.

"You know I can't give it up," I said. "We won't be able to get off the Nexus without it. Captain Boam would not be pleased."

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Boam was an idiot, and I suspected Zoat and Flunk were, too. That didn't make them any less dangerous, though. While I thought about that, Flunk raised a fat cat paw and impressed me as six inch claws emerged inches from my face.

"And neither would Mephisto," I added.

They drew back at that. Mephisto was the Hannibal Lecter of demons, not to mention head of Helland Security.

"Mephisto?"

"It's on his orders I'm taking this soul to 29."

The two locked eyes a few seconds, then turned to me.

"Is that so?" said Zoat.

"Yeah, that's so," I said as if it were true.

I rested my hand on the gun butt. The two demons were up to something, and demons can be so unpredictable. Zoat knew what the gun was. It wouldn't stop his big friend, but it would tear him up. I concentrated on Zoat and disregarded Gregory's hiss of warning.

Next thing I knew an elephant-sized cat paw pressed me to the firm, but nebulous, floor of the Nexus. Two claws pinned my ears back. My heart pounded against the pressure. It needed oxygen. The weight on my chest kept me from breathing. I couldn't even gasp.

"Can you breathe, Getter?" Gregory whispered as he knelt beside me.

I could only shake my head. My lungs screamed and vision blurred.

Gregory stepped over my head and confronted the Dinocat's face.

"Let him go," he said into the demon's grinning snaggletooth mouth. "He has orders to take me to Nexus 29."

Zoat loomed over him from behind.

"That's just where we are going, soul. We will take you. Mephisto will be pleased that we finished what this strange demon started."

With that, he picked Gregory up and threw him against the big cat's side. Gregory screamed as the fish hook hairs snagged him and he hung like a burr on a blue wool sweater.

The pressure on my chest lifted long enough to gulp air.

"Gregory, I'll get you," I wheezed. I liked the little Scottish soul. Actually, I'd stopped thinking of him as a soul, and I felt I couldn't let him suffer whatever fate the two scoundrel demons might inflict on him.

Zoat leaned over me and snatched the Find from my hand. He must have noticed my panic at losing the Find. Without it I was trapped in the Nexus.

The corners of his coyote mouth turned up as he looked down at me. "Do not worry, strange little demon, we will deliver this soul for you."

"And take the credit," the other said. They laughed cartoon villain laughs. I could barely move, or breathe.

Suddenly they lifted their heads. We had arrived at Nexus 29, out of a thousand and one Nexuses, I had to pick 29 to lie about. They slid away from me. Zoat vanished first through the normally impenetrable Nexus wall. Flunk's head followed.

Gregory's face reflected his pain and fear. His eyes pleaded for help.

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I welcomed air into my lungs, fetid as it was. I'd miss Gregory, but my first duty had to be to the girl. Didn't it? However, I needed the Find to save her. And if I happened to rescue Gregory at the same time, so much the better.

Decision made, I lunged for the disappearing tail. And missed! With no grace at all I scrabbled after the tail, and just as it faded from view I clutched one of the foot long spikes at the end.

As the tail dragged me through the exit I felt the line of demarcation between the benign climate of the Nexus and the area I was entering. My hands grew hot. I'd never been to 29. I held my breath and envisioned a glass of Christine's home-brewed iced tea.

I let go of the Dinocat's tail as I cleared the stone face of the exit. The oppressive heat and humidity stunned my lungs. I ran across the Nexus clearing and crouched at the beginning of the trail to check out the new section of Hell.

Noise assaulted my ears. It took a few seconds to sort out what the terrible sound was. Cries of pain, shrieks of anguish, long screams cut short—souls in torment. I closed my eyes to steel my emotions against what I was sure lay ahead. You don't ever get used to it.

The demons waddled off down a trail to the left. Gregory hung limply on the big one's right side, arm flopping lifelessly with the slow rolling gait.

I looked around.

Jungle. Dense rain forest. Vegetation that writhed within itself creating shadows within shadows. Trees that reached hundreds of feet high yet appeared to lean over, peering at

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me. A beautiful white and red orchid snapped at me. A spiked vine tried to wrap around my ankle. And overlaying it all were the howls, wails, and screeches of the damned.

I cut the vine from my leg and started cautiously up the trail. Souls became visible, pale bodies, naked or dressed in tatters, moving against the blue green backdrop of jungle. To my right I heard the ripping sound of something running through thick vegetation.

A male soul burst onto the trail, his body streaked with blood and sweat. A few feet behind a huge bright-striped serpent followed. It had spikes on top of its head and its three foot wide jaws stretched open. On the far side of the trail the serpent caught the man by the leg. It raised its head ten feet off the ground and shook the soul like a puppy worries an old sock. Bones popped and crackled like a dry brush fire. With a deft flip the demon snake positioned the man's head towards its throat and let the still struggling body slide down. When the soul was a only a slight bulge in the two foot thick body the snake turned pitiless slitted eyes on me, then slid its blood speckled form back into the jungle.

I continued on. It got worse. Souls swarmed the trees, trying to climb to safety. They were attacked by mobs of monkey-like creatures that threw them screaming off the trees into giant spider webs attended by foot long spiders with thick, hairy legs. The spiders bound the souls with silk and hung them out till their time came to be sucked dry and dropped into boiling pools of puke green mud. Some made it to the tree tops, only to be picked off by Skyhooks and carried away to some other terror. Huge serpents coiled

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around trees. Occasionally they shit a soul who fell screaming into the thick underbrush.

A few souls recognized me as different. They pleaded for help. In all my trips to Hell I'd steeled myself to the suffering I witnessed. It was hard sometimes not to interfere. Did all these souls deserve such torment? I had to remind myself that during the thousands of years of Hell's existence mankind had performed millions of monstrous acts whose victims might think these souls were getting off easy. I couldn't help them.

Gregory, an exception to noninterference I will not try to justify, and the two demons were ahead. The trail forked often and I fell behind. I couldn't stop to help the souls. I just couldn't.

I hurried on, constantly watching for Noose Vines dropping from above, attacks from the side and back and even the trail itself with its own particular dangers, Snap Dragons and Barbecue Pits, among others. Two snakes fighting over one soul held me up. Finally I had to leap over one of them. I was too late. The trail branched into four. My quarry had disappeared.

I stalked from one trail to another searching for a sign. Nothing. I had to get the Find back. A Lifer could never survive here. And I couldn't do that to Christine. She'd lost her father and brother to Hell. If I disappeared, she'd come after me, and Hell would claim us all.

Why did I go, then? That's a question I ask myself on occasion, though I prefer not to think about it. It's what I do. Hooked on the adrenaline rush of fear, to help those who

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need it, being part of an almost unknown group of adventurers, stories for my father, money. Those were the easy answers, all true, yet not the whole truth. I'm not much for introspection, let the hundred-dollar-an-hour shrinks worry about that, but I suspect the real reason I go to Hell has something to do with curiosity and redemption.

Man, talk about adventure. Though the fear is always with me (after all the price for screwing up and really dying is spending eternity in Hell) there are some strange and spectacular things in Hell and I wanted to see them all. I saw the first Indiana Jones movie fifteen times.

Neal Tannenbaum was the cop killed in that robbery when we were rookies. He went in first, took my bullet. I know in my head that it was pure chance, he happened to get there first. He could run faster than me. My gut, however, is not totally satisfied that I didn't slow down ever so slightly so that Neal had to go first. That is totally not true, but every time I put myself in danger I think maybe I'm trying to prove to myself, to my gut, that it isn't true. Well, let the shrinks figure it out. I had a soul, who could have been my daughter, to retrieve.

Disgusted with myself for losing the demons, I looked back and wondered if I could find my way back to the Nexus.

That's when I saw the naked woman in the bushes.

Chapter Five

Despite the dirt and blood and ratty dark hair, it was easy to see the woman was beautiful. She crouched behind the large claw shaped leaves of a low bush and stared at me. Every few seconds she glanced nervously behind her. Her skin had a luminescent whiteness to it, and I had no trouble seeing that whatever time she had spent in Hell had not ruined her figure. If she was acting as a diversion for some hungry demon, it worked.

The woman stood up, took a step toward me, then froze. Her huge dark eyes grew big with alarm. She darted a glance behind her and ran.

A huge Saber Bunny leaped out of the bushes in pursuit. Two leaps and its protruding jaws with backward curving teeth would have a mouthful of muscular, finely sculpted thigh. Instinctively, at the sight of a damsel in distress, the male chauvinist in me emerged. I raised my gun to blow the hungry demon away. I didn't have chance to fire. A thick Noose Vine dropped out of the branches and plucked the woman off the ground. The Saber Bunny's jaws clacked shut on hot, humid air. Momentum carried it into the jungle.

The Vine began to raise the struggling woman into the dense canopy. I raced to her, leaped, and caught her ankle. The Vine stretched with the added weight. My feet touched the ground, but the woman still hung by the neck, choking and gagging. I pulled her down until I could reach up and cut

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the Vine, all the while intensely aware of the naked leg, thigh, and hips I held. So much for non-interference.

If yielding to temptation is what leads a person to Hell in the first place, resisting it when you're there is doubly hard. Since I first went to Hell with my late wife's father, I resolved to emulate him and the other Hell Cops I met. I kept my trips on a professional level and did not yield to the many temptations available. Like the one naked and splendid in front of me. I could do what I wanted with the soul gasping on the dirt in front of me. I could beat, rape, torture her unmercifully, all with impunity. There were few rules in Hell and none of them to the Damned Souls benefit.

To take advantage or abuse a soul was as abhorrent to the men of honor and integrity, of which I count myself as one, who came on missions of mercy to Hell as to like men from the real world. The more so because of the total freedom Hell offered. Occasionally, a Hell Cop overstepped the boundaries and indulged his perversions. These people are dealt with harshly by other Hell Cops.

I cut the Vine from the soul's neck and helped her stand. She eyed me suspiciously, yet showed no fear. Actually the jut of her chin and upward tilt of her head suggested a certain haughtiness that I suspected didn't come from being an old hand in Hell.

"Thank you," she said, her voice hoarse from the strangling she'd just suffered. "You are not a demon, are you?"

I resisted taking advantage of that straight line and said, "No, I'm not."

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Her eyes narrowed. "You are a Lifer. I've heard of them. What is your name, Lifer?"

"Getter."

"Prince Getter, my hero."

Her eyes opened up like jewel boxes, offering two perfect emeralds for my inspection.

I was wasting time, but somehow it didn't seem as important as it had a minute before. Still, I did manage to ask, "Did you see two demons go that way a little while ago?"

Her right eyebrow arched just a fraction.

"Yes," she said, drawing it out as if uncertain.

"Did you see which path they took?"

I tried not to let my returning desperation show.

Her left eyebrow rose to join the right, and she moved closer. She was three inches shorter than me, yet she didn't raise her head to look at me, just her eyes. This gave her a poor-little-old-me look that carried a message of little-girl vulnerability that I had no doubt worked like a charm back in her life. Fortunately, with my increasing anxiousness to recover the Find, and Gregory, came some clarity to my thoughts.

I needed her help. We both knew it. The question of price remained. She stood inches away. I swear I could smell the sweetest of perfumes over the stench of rotting vegetation. I steeled myself to play the game.

"Yes, I saw which way they went," she said.

"Which path?"

"If I help you will you help me?"

"What do you want?"

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"I want to go to the Lifer world."

"I can't do that."

She didn't seem surprised. "I thought not. Take me out of this jungle."

"It may be worse some place else."

"Possibly, but different."

"If you help me find the demons and retrieve a soul they have with them, I will take you through the Nexus to our next stop."

She took my hand and laid it on her proud, firm breast.

"And is that all you will do to me?"

I wanted to fall into her shiny eyes and join with the mesmerizing forms swimming deep inside them. With great effort I forced my way back from the brink.

"Yes," I said with a catch in my throat.

A bloody neon sign flashed, Trouble Trouble Trouble, in my brain.

"This way," she said with a toss of her head and took off with a bouncing jog.

Having myself witnessed women's newly expressed appreciation of men's butts I felt little guilt for the appreciation I felt for the sight of the smooth rippling muscles of the woman's rear that led me deeper into 29.

I asked her name.

"Helen," she said.

She offered little explanation as to why she was in Hell except that she was a princess and many men died because of her.

"I did not ask them to die," she said. "Should I be punished for that?"

I had no answer for her.

In ten minutes we caught up to the demons at a place where the jungle dropped off sharply to the right. Helen didn't even break a sweat. She did breathe heavily, though mostly for my benefit, I think. I was soggy with sweat. The special fabric of my fire-proof coveralls was supposed to breathe, but the heavy humidity of the jungle was too much for it. We followed at a distance while I caught my breath and figured out what to do.

The demons lumbered on undistracted by their surroundings. I could see my Find on Zoat's belt beside his own, so I thought a quick dash and grab would be as good a strategy as any.

I drank from my canteen and checked my equipment. For a second I thought of leaving it with Helen, but that neon Trouble light persuaded me otherwise.

"Okay, Helen," I told her. "I'm going to do a quick snatch and then we run like Hell back to the Nexus. Remember, I can't take you through if I'm dead."

She gave me a look that all those men probably died for and said rather melodramatically, "Good luck, my hero," then kissed me, hard and hot. It felt like her tongue tickled the back of my throat. It was probably my brains melting. She released me and pushed me toward the demons. My head had a bad case of the whirly's.

I quickly fought through the effects of the kiss and gathered my wits. Gregory still hung from the Dinocat's side,

his moans squeezed my chest, but the Find had to come first. I kept to the side of the trail and simply approached Zoa from behind and lifted my Find off his belt. An ex-pickpocket, who taught me a few of the basics when I was a regular cop, would have been proud.

I gave Helen a thumbs up. She waved back, a puzzled expression on her striking face. The next move was the tricky part. I yanked on leather gloves, breathed deep, then leaped on Flunk at the base of his undulating tail. I scrambled up his back till I was above Gregory. The little Scottish soul looked up at me with hope and pain in his eyes. A finger to my lips for quiet, a handful of barbed fur, a quick jerk on his collar, and he was free.

No time for a reunion. Gregory followed me down the broad back. As we got to the leathery rear of the beast that neon light proved to be correct.

"Zoa!" Helen yelled.

Zoa may have been an easy pickpocket mark, but he moved fast when he needed to. Suddenly he was there, flameword, or flammer, standard issue for Hell's military and security forces, pointed steadily at my stomach. The Dinocat stopped. Its big feline head swung around and stared at us with unemotional yellow eyes. The vertical black pupils narrowed as they focused on us.

I felt Gregory's fingers dig into my shoulder.

"What now, Friend Getter?" he said under his breath. "You should have left me."

"Good company is too hard to find down here not to make a little effort," I told him.

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I kept my eyes on Zoot. I thought I might be able to anticipate it if he decided to burn me sooner rather than later. But then Helen, all smug and superior, sauntered up to him and took his hairy arm with the familiarity of a long time lover. I had to look. It was definitely possible that a ball of fire from Zoot's flamewgun was going to burn a hole in my gut and painfully consign me to Hell for all eternity. Yet, I couldn't help but note that Helen was still exquisitely naked.

"Very good, Getter," Helen said with smug sarcasm. "You almost got away."

"No thanks to you."

"I gave you a chance." She shrugged as if that were true.

"Come down, Lifer," Zoot called to us, a grin on his thin coyote lips. "I'm sure Captain Boam, idiot that he is, will reward us for capturing a live Lifer."

"Hey, Zoot," said Flunk. "Maybe Boam will let us watch him torment the Lifer. What da ya think?" Flunk laughed at the thought, and the movement almost shook us off his back.

Helen moved in front of Zoot, her pale white skin stark against his massive dark body. He slid a thick, gnarly hand over her, cradling her breast with two fingers.

"Come down, Getter," Helen purred seductively. "Maybe your torment will not be so unpleasant."

"I would, but Zoot looks like the jealous type."

She patted the hand that held her and smiled slyly.

"Zoot can be very friendly."

"Come down now or I'll burn you where you stand," Zoot said, flamewgun held out like he meant it.

"Hey," said Flunk. "Careful with that thing."

Flunk shook his reptile rear end and stretched his flat cat head close to us.

"Get off me, Lifer. You too, soul."

We got to our feet and started down Flunk's body. His tail swept side to side like a lazy lizard in warm water.

"What now?" Gregory said low. "If they get you, you will die for real."

"I know. I think I have an idea."

"A good one I hope, because if you die, no hell will be hot enough to burn away my guilt."

"Don't go scorching your lips on Satan's ass yet, Greg. When I yell 'Go' haul your own ass to the end of Flunk's tail and hold on. It'll take perfect timing, but if it works, we're going for a ride."

"Shut up!" Zoat yelled.

Flunk's tail was almost at the end of its arc.

"Fuck you. And that demon right behind you," I yelled.

So easy. Zoat looked.

"Go!"

Gregory and I leaped off the base of the tail and ran to the spiky end. I hoped something I'd heard Christine's dad say years ago was true. We grabbed hold and I plunged my knife blade into the tail right in front of the first spike.

"Hang on, Greg!"

Nothing happened. Oh shit.

"Zoat, you fool," Helen cried.

"Lifer!" the coyote head growled as he swung the flamewgun around.

I yanked the blade out and brought it down again.

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Something happened. Flunk screeched and his tail lashed out, launching me and Gregory high into the air. I lost one glove to a hooked spike.

A fireball blazed past us and burned a hole through the giant spider web we tumbled toward. Luckily it took out a dull sticky section, not the shiny non-stick area I wanted to land on. Gregory tumbled out of control. At the last instant I grabbed his foot and yanked him away from a sticky part to a tangled landing.

Unluckily the fireball ignited the web. The flames crackled along each strand like a fireworks display.

"Down, Greg, down!"

We scrambled down the web, racing fire. I slipped, reached out, and grabbed a sticky strand with my bare hand. I pulled my knife to cut myself loose. The web convulsed as a major strand parted. I dropped the knife and it fell into the underbrush at the edge of the steaming mud pool below.

Gregory heard my curse. He climbed to me, tried to pull my hand away. The web quivered as the fire crept toward us. Sparkling ash floated past.

"I can't break the web," Gregory said.

"In my pack, left side pocket a Swiss army knife," I told him as calmly as the circumstances allowed. Heights are not my favorite places.

He got the knife and reached up to cut me loose.
Over by the trail Zoat took aim.

"Hurry up, Gregory," I urged, a little less calm.

"It won't cut!"

"It won't matter in a few seconds."

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Flame sizzled on the strand that held me. My right hand would be useless if it burned through.

"It's cutting now."

"It's about time."

I grasped a non-stick strand. The knife cut through and I swung down, trailing a three foot piece of web with flames eating the end.

"Down, Greg!"

One of Zoat's fireballs whooshed through the space where I'd just been. I heard the static crackle of hair singeing. We'd only gone down a few feet when the flames finished burning through the web. Our side collapsed, and we plunged toward the putrid, yellow mud pool.

Chapter Six

I hate falling. I didn't have time to think about it on Flunk's back. Hanging fifty feet above the ground with the flames closing in, I did have time. Though I gagged on the brimstone fumes from the pool, my scream as I fell was every bit the equal of any tormented soul in Hell.

One side of the web was still anchored to a thick tree. The strands we clung to changed our trajectory, swung us away from the center of the pool. I thought I was going to smash into the tree when leaves from a razor palm cut the web and I landed heavily at the edge of the mud. Gregory ended up in a heap next to a clump of needle moss.

I lay still, catching my breath, and suddenly realized the web strand stuck to me still burned. I sat up and stuck my hand into the mud, and yanked it out again. That mud was hot. I lay against the tree, feet at the edge of the pool. I closed my eyes for a few seconds. That was all it took for something to take hold of my ankle and start drawing me into the mud. I kicked at whatever it was. No good.

"Gregory," I called.

No answer.

I looked for something solid to hold on to. A flash caught my eye. My knife. My fingers barely reached it before I was dragged out of reach.

"Gregory?"

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Immersed up to the knee, I ignored the pain and stabbed into the mud. The mud demon didn't like that and let go. I scrabbled away from the edge. Where was Gregory?

I heard thrashing in the bushes. The spiders apparently blamed us for the destruction of their web. Gregory fought four of them as they spit web stuff at him and tried to jump on his back. He was a scrapper and held his own with the little Swiss army knife. I'd had it, I was pissed and wanted to get back on track. I split two of those spiders open with my big knife and kicked the others into the pool, then grabbed Gregory and hauled him up the slope.

I found a secluded place away from the trail. We rested for five minutes and for some reason nothing bothered us. Gregory finally roused himself and asked, "What about them?" He waved a slender hand in the general direction of Zoat and Flunk. "Will they forget us?"

I changed my socks and scraped at the mud on my boots.

"They might, but I don't think Helen will."

"Ah, Helen is it? A fair lass that one. Certainly I have seen nothing to match her beauty in my time here, or before, if the truth be told."

"She's a double crossing, cold demon bitch."

"Aye, the evidence would prove you right, but must ye talk of the fair sex in such crude terms?"

I pulled on my boots and stood up.

"This is a crude place, Gregory, with crude inhabitants. And I'm getting tired of it. Let's get the fuck out of here."

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I kept my gun in my hand. No more Mr. Nice Guy and so much for trying to keep a low profile. Something got in front of me I was going to blow it away and keep walking.

I led the way around the far side of the mud pool and cautiously took us back to the trail. Neither Helen, Zoat, nor Flunk were in sight. I retrieved my staff, and we stood by the side of the trail. Into the Find I entered the Nexus entrance as our destination.

Gregory handed me the Swiss Army knife. I took it, then handed it back.

"You keep it, Greg," I said. "It might come in handy during your travels."

He took it, turned it over in his hand, rubbed its smoothness with his thumb. He offered it back.

"Friend Getter, I appreciate the offer, however, I think you may have a better use of it than I."

"Greg, I think we've been through enough together that you don't have to be so formal anymore. Just Getter will work."

I didn't take the knife.

Emotions played over his thin weather-worn face. He caressed the white cross on the handle with his thumb.

"Getter," he said sincerely, thinking over each word before he said it. "I am dead. No matter what painful events befall me I will survive to be tormented again. You, my friend, are alive. And, although your choice of profession may make one wonder, I think you want to stay alive. This unique instrument may one day save your life and allow you to return to the family you briefly mentioned." He held out the

knife again. A sly smile crept over his face. "Besides, you have already given me a greater gift."

"Oh? What?"

"Hope."

"Hope?" I was only half kidding when I said, "Jeez, Greg, be careful nothing hears you. Hope is a real dirty word down here."

"Yes, I understand Hope is not encouraged here. Yet, you are alive, not a lost soul like the rest. And you intend to go back to your life in the upper world, is that not so?"

I looked into the little soul's eyes and did see something that hadn't been there before.

"Yeah, I do intend to go back. But I can't take you. It wouldn't work."

Greg smiled kindly.

"Do not worry, my friend, I will not ask that of you. Just knowing that an exit must exist, somehow lifts the despair and makes all this a little more bearable. That gift is worth much more than a fancy knife, precious possession as it may be here in the Underworld."

"Right. Okay. Why don't you hold it for me, though? Give it back when we split. This pack is getting heavier by the minute and the humidity is killing me."

We walked fast down the middle of the trail, constantly scanning for predators. I almost learned to block out the unceasing outcries. Most sections of Hell are filled with anguished cries of torment. Misery, after all, is what Hell is all about. The cries in 29 bothered me more than most. Perhaps because of its newness, though many sections are similar, or

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perhaps because I had a personal connection in Gregory which offset my necessary professional detachment.

In any case, I had to keep my eyes straight ahead and every muscle in control when I heard one of the long piercing screams of a falling soul and then the ripping sound as it fell through the trees and the thud as it hit the ground. If it was close enough, I could hear the rustle of the scavengers after a new victim.

I almost lost it when a shrill cry sounded overhead. A fat soul, black with dried blood, slammed onto the trail ten feet in front us, fat rippling with the impact, bald head turned toward me. Despair filled eyes implored an end to the constant terror. His feet were in a Quickbug hole. Quickly they sucked him in. His scream turned to a choking cough as the bugs flowed into his mouth. Then he was gone.

Gregory rested his hand on my shoulder and squeezed with reassurance and sympathy. We gave the Quickbug hole a wide berth and moved on. I hate falling. Hell is falling, seeing the ground approach, yanking at a ripcord that never works. Helpless. Watching death come. Helpless.

I wanted to make time. Despite the oppressive heat, I ran. Sweat poured off me. I didn't care. I'd been in 29 too long. Serpents, saber bunnies, and spiders left us alone. I began to hope we'd make it to the Nexus without any more trouble. But, as Hell has a way of doing, that hope vanished as we rounded a sharp bend in the trail.

Chapter Seven

Helen, Zoaat, and Flunk straddled the trail. Helen, I couldn't help but notice, still naked. Zoaat aimed his flamewgun at my chest. No smile on his coyote lips. Flunk stood behind them, flat eyes glaring with feline dislike.

"Get out of the way," I said. "I have no quarrel with you."

"Why, Getter, aren't you glad to see me?" Helen asked, batting eyelashes that were probably poison spikes.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Helen, but I'll be glad to see the back of you, as the saying goes."

"Oh, you silver-tongued devil you," she gushed. Then she turned around and bent over to give me a full view of her smooth, round backside. "Are you happy now?"

"Ecstatic," I assured her. "Let us pass."

"Can't do it, Lifer," Zoaat said. "You lied. Captain Boam didn't order you to take that soul anywhere. But he did order me to hold you till he gets here."

No time to lose then. I checked the surrounding area. The open ground fell away on both sides. No cover, nowhere to run. On the right, a huge serpent lounged at the edge of a mud pool. It looked hungry. On the left, the ground looked like it was flexing its muscles. Something squirmed underneath.

Well, okay.

I flexed my grip on the gun. It pointed right down the big bore of Zoaat's flamewgun.

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"You're an idiot, Zoa. You couldn't hold me if I was handcuffed to a tangle tree. The only reason you almost caught me before was because of her. You're incompetent, inept, and incapable. You're stupid. You can't think for yourself."

Anger flared in his black eyes. He controlled it.

"Without her, you're nothing. I'll just shoot her and you'll be incapacitated."

I turned the gun on Helen, kept an eye on Zoa. He broke.

"No, Lifer!" he roared. I meant to drop under his fire ball and fire back in self-defense, keeping my conscience clear. He fired too fast. Instinctively, I shot back. The shot from my gun and his fireball collided. The collision sent out a concussion of sparks that knocked us all to the ground. I sprawled, my gun a few inches from my hand.

Zoa recovered first. He sprang to his feet. Aimed at me. I hoped it wouldn't hurt too much for too long.

"Don't hurt, Helen," he said.

Gregory snatched up a flat rock from the side of the trail. "Ahhhh," yelled Gregory as he charged the hairy demon.

Zoa swiveled and fired.

I grabbed my gun and fired.

The fireball knocked Gregory off his feet, but the flat rock he held up deflected the ball toward me. The flame plucked my gun away as if a hand reached out and grabbed it.

All eyes turned to Zoa. He held his black gorilla hands over his stomach that wasn't there. His mouth opened to scream. Nothing came out. Slowly he crumpled to the ground.

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Flunk did scream. An anguished sound that drilled through to the very core of compassion. For about three seconds I was sorry about Zoot. Then Flunk charged.

The front part of him was cat fast. Fortunately for me the lizard rear-end couldn't keep up. He stretched to the limit as he took a swipe at me. I felt the wind of his six inch claws on my cheek. I dropped and rolled. The other paw whiffed over me. I was down, vulnerable. His rear-end caught up with the front. One more swipe and I'd be the pepperoni on a Netherworld pizza.

Motion to the right. With one eye I saw a flash. With the other I saw Flunk's three foot wide mouth open over me. I struggled to bring my gun around and give his head a major cavity. It caught on a loose pack strap. I gagged. Flunk's halitosis hadn't improved. God, I didn't want to die with that putrid odor in my nose. I brought an image of Julie into my mind; took a mental whiff of her sweet, clean fragrance; heard that faint rasp in her voice when she told me she loved me. A man could die with worse thoughts. I'd be stuck in Hell forever. How I'd miss her.

The gun came loose from the strap. Why wasn't I dead yet? Still a chance! I rolled. Finger on the trigger. Flunk's head rose away from me. His mouth stretched open and emitted a screech that pierced my ears. Flunk reared back, whirled, struck out at Gregory as the nimble little Scot retreated, bloody Swiss Army knife in hand.

Gregory disappeared over the edge of the trail. The Dinocat pounced after him. His lashing tail sent me tumbling down the trail and my gun over the left edge. The slope was

steep and slippery, and the big demon tumbled down to land with his tail in the mud pool and his head three feet from the waiting serpent.

"Greg," I yelled, struggling to my feet.

Motion to the left. Helen! Zoot's body already steamed in decomposition. She knelt by it and drew out his sword. It had a four foot blade, thin, slightly curved, and razor sharp I had no doubt. She needed two hands to hold the massive handle. She stood up and faced me, handling the weapon like she knew how to use it.

The surrounding forest grew silent, the heat, if possible, became more oppressive. I felt the stare of unfriendly eyes caress the back of my neck. I drew out my eight inch Buck survival knife. Helen smiled.

"They're waiting for you, Getter," she said indicating the forest demons with a smooth motion of the sword. "Waiting for your soul. But they won't get it. Your soul will be mine. Your torment may even be pleasurable."

"What about Captain Boam?"

"Ha. Captain Boam is a fool. I don't worry about him. He worries about me." She came forward. "Come to me, Getter. Don't make it hard." She grinned. "Until later."

The invitation was obvious, but I figured the afterglow would probably come from being lowered head first into a lava pool.

Helen advanced, I backed away. My eight inch blade against her four foot sword. Not good odds. Some politeness was called for.

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"You're the fool if you think that scaggy body of yours is worth dying for."

"Getter, what happened to that charming hero I knew?"

"He took a leap into a mud pool when you betrayed him."

She fainted with the sword, toying with me. I parried with my knife. The clang of the blades disturbed the forest's expectant silence. I lunged as she left an opening. A desperation move. It might have worked if she hadn't left herself open on purpose. She whacked my head with the flat of her blade. With the sword tip, she lifted the Find off my belt and flipped it off the left side of the trail onto the undulating ground. Still toying with me. I didn't like it, but I worked to control my anger. Waited for a real opening.

She began to press her attack. At will she touched me, leaving small cuts on my body or slapping with the flat just to show I had no chance. I glanced to where my gun rested in the open. The ground rose and fell underneath it. My chances looked better there. The next time around I'd break for it.

Helen had other ideas. At the point where Gregory vanished she stopped, reached down, and raised him up by the scruff. The sword's edge creased his neck.

"Submit," she commanded, voice lowering to a deep demon authority. "Submit or I will cut this soul in two and bury the pieces at the opposite ends of Hell."

I saw the hope fade from Gregory's eyes.

"Don't do it," he said firmly. "Save yourself. Live!"

I stumbled backward. How could I live with that?

The answer was that I couldn't. I had to try. Hadn't I sworn not to inflict more suffering on the souls, even if I

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couldn't lessen the pain already assigned to them? If I didn't try to help Gregory I'd carry Hell in my heart to the day I died, whether a natural death or not. Julie would understand, I knew she would. I had to believe that.

"Ahhhhhh," I cried. And ran toward the murderous demon.

At the first step I flipped the knife over and caught it by the blade. At the next step I drew back and flung it with all my strength. The blade buried its full length just under her right breast.

"Huuuuh," she uttered, then I slammed into her. The three of us tumbled over the edge and down the slope. Helen and I struggled for possession of the sword. She was stronger than me, but the knife had weakened her. At the bottom I kned her hard in the ribs and tore the weapon from her hands. I lurched backwards onto my feet.

Helen rolled to her knees. Her right hand flashed out and grabbed Gregory by the neck. Sword raised, I tensed for the final blow.

"Dimitri," she said in a deep voice tinged with glee.

I froze. Dimitri! "What about Dimitri?"

"Do you want to know where he is?"

As she spoke the slender feminine hand that held Gregory began to morph into something hideous. Fingers grew long and thick with five bulbous knuckles. The pale white skin crinkled like burnt flesh shot with bright red veins. The thumb pressed into Gregory's neck. An orange claw slowly emerged from the tip, ripping open my friend's windpipe.

"No!"

Taunting. "Dimitri."

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Blood sputtered as Gregory tried to draw breath.

"NO!"

"Dimit—"

I swung the sword.

Chapter Eight

The long sword tugged at my grip as it sliced through Helen's unblemished neck. Her head shot up on a jet of glowing blue blood. As it arced through the air it transmogrified into a grotesque demon head, with skin the color and texture of red clay. Medusa hair writhed and a black foot-long tongue trailed from the corner of thick, pink lips open wide in a silent scream.

My throat clenched shut at the memory of her kiss and what I had thought was my imagination fulfilling the old adage about having a girl put her tongue down your throat.

The head landed with a flat splat in the mud pool. It floated a few seconds, then a tentacle reached up and pulled it under. Time slowed. The deathly quiet of the waiting forest lasted ten seconds, or ten minutes, then broke.

Flunk and the snake stopped fighting. The Dinocat and the Serpent added their feline screech and reptilian hiss of agony and loss to the sudden raging cacophony of howls, screeches, squawks, caws, and grunts. I dropped the sword and covered my ears. The clamor bored into my brain and tickled all the panic buttons. I wanted to run, but the underlying anger and pain of the creatures drove me to my knees. Weariness washed over me. I wanted so much to sleep.

A wind exploded out of the clearing's center and whipped the trees into a fury. A whirlwind formed over the headless carcass. The real demon had emerged, cracking the once flawless pale skin like an eggshell. The whirly picked up the

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body, leaving the broken shell, and bore it away followed by a "V" of Skyhooks, some with souls squirming underneath.

I felt a tug on my arm. I opened my eyes.

"Getter," Gregory rasped. "Better run. Your friend Christine will be angry."

I had to lean close to hear him over the numbing din that surrounded us. The sight of the little soul with a big heart snapped me awake. He held his throat with blood covered hands, while he struggled for breath.

"She'd be angrier if I left you," I yelled back at him.

While I wrapped a bandage around the hole in Gregory's neck, Flunk regained his feet.

"Can you move?" I asked Gregory, one eye on Flunk.

"Yes. Death does not last long when you are already dead."

"Well, like you said, we'd better run. Flunk doesn't look very happy, and you know how a cranky cat can be."

We scrambled up to the trail. Gregory used the sword as a crutch.

"Oh shit. The Find."

It still lay in the clearing on the other side of the trail. Whatever lay under it convulsed the ground like a shark feeding frenzy convulses water. No time for stealth or trickery. I grabbed the sword and ran to the Find.

It was like walking on a narrow half sunk dock. I staggered, fell, got up, and fell again. A translucent, milky white worm a foot in diameter burst from the ground beside me. Its mouth, ringed with brown stained teeth, gaped wide and darted at me. Knocked onto my back, I struck with the

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sword, cutting half way through its slime filled body. Another worm rose up. I rolled to my feet and this time severed the ugly hole.

Two more attacked before I got to the Find. As I reached for it a worm erupted from the ground, my Find in the center of its mouth. The dark shape descended erratically through the worm's gullet. If the Find sank below ground?

I lost my footing as I slashed at the worm. The Find drifted down its gullet. I swung again, cutting clean through just above it. The worm gulped again. The Find floated inches above the ground. I cut another section, and before my Find could be sucked underground, rammed my arm into the worm's gut and snatched it out.

I turned to retreat and found myself surrounded by worms. The Hell with it. I'd blast my way out. I reached for my gun. It wasn't there. It was on the trail. Gregory watched me nervously, unable to help. He kept looking behind him. He waved for me to come on. The worms grew taller, five, six, seven feet high. More all the time. No way I could cut my way through. Though the worms made no noise, Gregory couldn't hear me yell above the continued clamor from the forest. I made an exaggerated grab for the gun. Held up an empty hand. Slashed at a worm. Made shooting gestures, thumb up, index finger extended. Turned, swung again. Turned back. The worms were too high. They blocked Gregory from my sight. Something touched my shoulder. Teeth, inches away. Slash. Dodge. Cut. Jump. Slash. I was going down fighting, but going down just the same. To my ears the forest cries changed to cheers. The demon-murderer would die!

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The worms crowded in. I lay on my back, swinging the long blade in a circle. The ground rumbled under me. I jabbed the sword into the dirt. The ground shuddered and rose up, offering me as a sacrifice to the surrounding mouths. I cut off two more.

The worms froze at the sound of my gun firing. I risked a glance toward the trail. BOOM. The upraised mouths of distant worms fell from view. BOOM. The rest of the worms weaved about uncertainly. Gregory!

With new energy born of hope, I rolled to my feet and began to cut my way to him.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

"Getter!"

"Gregory! Don't shoot me."

The worms were disoriented. They undulated as if to some discordant music. I ran toward Gregory.

"Time to go, Greg," I said.

"I have never seen a weapon such as this, Friend Getter. Its power is truly amazing," he said standing in a ten foot circle of ruined worms.

"Yeah, but it's out of shells now so it isn't worth shit at the moment. Let's go before these squigglys figure that out."

Back on the trail Gregory's breathing was almost normal despite the blood and puckered gash in his neck, so we didn't waste time analyzing the last fifteen minutes' events. We switched weapons and headed for the Nexus. While I reloaded, I glanced at Flunk. The serpent had his left rear leg in its mouth. Flunk bopped him with his tail. Free, the Dinocat shook himself and took an unsteady step in our direction.

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The forest's lament for the dead demon died down, replaced by the renewed screams of the suffering souls. The rustle of the vegetation, from small bushes to the top of the tallest trees, seemed to follow us, as if to pinpoint the location of the dreaded demon killer.

The jungle inhabitants began to attack us. Snakes and Saber Bunnies came from the side. A large porcupine-type thing with long legs that I hadn't seen before ran at us from behind, then curled into a spiny ball and tried to make a spare out of us. Giant toads shot ten foot forked tongues at our feet. Noose vines constantly dropped on our heads. We avoided the attacks we could and cut or shot at the ones we couldn't. Gregory became quite proficient with Zoot's sword.

The Nexus was close when a small, fast serpent with bulging purple eyes got a grip on Gregory. I was concentrating on the Find and almost didn't hear his cry. Before it could flip him up to swallow him down I shot the serpent's head off. I had to put one foot on the lower jaw and heave on the upper to get Gregory loose.

Distracted, I didn't see the big Dragon Moth swoop down behind me. Gregory did. He pushed me aside and rammed the sword into a fist-sized, blue-faceted eye. The bug fluttered its five-foot wings once, then dropped on the spot, knocking me over.

I sat on my heels to catch my breath, and heard the high cat screech and felt the vibrations of what could only be a Dinocat at full gallop.

"Flunk!" we said together. "Run!"

I sprang to my feet, and we ran on.

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The Nexus came into sight. We'd made it.

"Stay close," I reminded the stoic little Scot.

"As close as a barnacle on me grandfather's boat," he assured me.

Flunk's shrieks suddenly got louder. I looked back. He saw us!

"Faster!" we yelled simultaneously.

I looked forward. Oh no. Two demons exited the Nexus. Captain Boam and Sergeant Grizzle. The big red Demon advanced a couple steps and stopped, his leathery face incredulous. He had no time to react except to say, "Getter?"

Gregory went right and I went left around the surprised demons. As my left fist, grasping the Find, vanished through the entrance, Gregory gripped my right arm, and we plunged into the Nexus, out of 29.

Chapter Nine

Relief washed over me as the womb-like Nexus bore us toward 73, our original destination. I sank down against the insubstantial yet supporting gray mist that comprised the interior of the Nexus. I rested my forehead against the staff and willed myself to breathe deep and slow. Gregory sat beside me, hand resting on my shoulder.

"Getter," he said. "Are you all right? You are shaking."

"I'm fine. Fine."

"You have much blood on you."

"Scratches."

"How long until we reach the next place?" Gregory asked.

"I don't know. A few minutes I hope."

I squeezed my eyes closed to shut out the horror of 29. That didn't help. Staring at the swirling mist of the Nexus was better.

"Christ, that place got to me," I muttered, as much to myself as to Gregory.

"That is the worst place you have been?"

"I've been in worse. There's always some place worse." I shook all over like a wet dog to shake off section 29. "Man, those fucking worms."

"The worms scared you."

"You don't survive here without being a little scared all the time. They just got to me. They were so damn quiet. If only they'd growled or something."

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"Ye are a very brave man to have fought them so hard when you were so frightened."

"Panic gets you dead."

"As good a definition of bravery as I have heard."

I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to talk about it. Worms. Yuck. I closed my eyes, looking for a minute or two of quiet time. Instead I thought of how I was tired of living with fear and horror, tired of tortured souls, tired of being pulled by guilt like a puppet on strings. I wanted to be in my own bed with Julie in my arms and peace in my heart. That neither of those was possible while still alive was a constant sadness to me. I had accepted Julie and our daughter's death. There had been other women, none serious or long term. So when I got depressed or freaked out, I thought of Julie and the comfort she offered. The worms would have fascinated her. Worms. Yuck.

I shook all over again, came back from my mental hell to the physical one. I sucked in a long slow breath. Focused.

"When we get to 73 we'll go right," I said. "Stay against the exit stone and look up. Skyhooks love the place."

"Skyhooks are the large birds with the hook beneath them?" I nodded. "I saw them fly over occasionally. The woods were too thick for them to hunt me."

"How long were you in the Dead Forest?"

"I don't know. An eternity, it seems. I wandered, never seeing so much as a field or meadow, always the trees, never an exit. Sometimes, I would be sure open land was near, yet I never reached it. Always the dense wood and thick underbrush were there to restrict my movements. Aye, even

flat barrens would be a welcome sight, never mind the Highlands blessed with heather or a valley green after a spring rain."

"There's plenty of open space where we're going," I assured him.

"That is good to hear," Gregory said.

"Just remember, eternal upward vigilance—when you're not looking over your shoulder."

"Will we get there soon?"

"Hard to say, but probably."

"May I ask you a question, about 29?"

I really didn't want to think about it. I was sure that what happened to the lovely Demon Helen, would come back to haunt me soon enough. She was no ordinary demon. Reluctantly, I nodded yes.

"Why did you risk your life to rescue me? You had to retrieve the Find, but not me. I would not have thought ill of you if I had not seen you again. Why did you not leave me, just another soul damned to Hell, behind?"

Oh, man. That was an area I was not prepared to get into, assuming I knew the answer. Well, that was bullshit, I did know the answer if I was willing to talk about it. I'd never told anybody, not even Julie. Why should I tell Greg? Just because he saved my life two or three times? Of course a Skyhook might have snagged me five minutes later so why not tell someone? Guilt has a way doing that sort of thing.

I relaxed a little, sat back, absently bounced the staff on the invisible floor and said, "My best friend as a kid was Macy

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Lunt. One day we were down by the river. The river had steep—.”

The Nexus pushed us gently into 73.

Chapter Ten

The dry heat hit me like a Dinocat's paw. I shook my head and scrambled to a crouch against the black rock of the Nexus exit. A good move on my part. A Skyhook's hook passed through the space I'd just vacated. Gregory dropped face first into the dust.

"Eternal upward vigilance, Greg," I reminded him.

He spat out dust and crawled to me. He sat against the rock, looked out, and his jaw fell open.

73 was flat. In any direction, as far as he could see, the land was perfectly flat. Not a hummock or a hill or even a mountain in the distance marred its immaculate flatness. And not a tree in sight, either. The plain was, however, uniformly covered with tall grass about five feet high. The grass was golden like a ripe wheat field in a TV commercial with a random sprinkling of what looked like ears of corn. To be sure, a benign vista, that, nevertheless, hid its own unique dangers.

"What do you think, Greg? Open enough for you?"

A smile graced his lips for the first time. He was a handsome little bugger when he smiled, and I could see why that housewife invited him into her haystack.

He breathed deeply and said, "I can breathe again, Getter. You have given me hope and open land."

His smile faded to a grim frown, and for a long moment his eyes scanned the flat plain with the hard gaze of a hunter

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searching his prey, instead of the glassy stare of a hunted soul, searching for safety.

I'm not sure he was speaking to me when he said, "If there be any justice in this universe, McFetter is here. I feel him."

"McFetter is the landlord you shot?" I asked.

"What? Oh, aye, indeed. He was a Highlander. He hated flat land such as this. He is here." Gregory drew a deep breath and turned to me. "I can never repay you, Getter."

"See if you feel like that in fifty years. This one dimensional flatland could get a bit monotonous. Except for the demons."

"The Skyhooks?"

"There're others. The hooks are the most obvious."

Once you started looking for them, they filled the air. Hundreds of them, hunting souls in the grass. In the distance they could be seen flapping their huge wings as they lifted a wriggling soul into the air to feed.

"I see. Where from here?"

I held up the Find.

"To the right."

Four narrow roads led in four directions away from the Nexus. I'd taken them all on previous trips. They all ended at the same place. I cleaned my scratches with water from the hidden faucet all Nexus stones have. More tears in my almost new coverall. I was going to look like a scarecrow when I got back.

Amid the screams and cries of the souls being hooked, stung, and eaten, I told Gregory of the particular dangers of 73.

"We'll travel down the middle of the road, away from the grass, so the Skyhooks will be our biggest danger. If you see them coming, they're fairly easy to avoid. Jump to the side, drop to the ground. Sometimes several will come from different directions at the same time. Be aware of that."

He scanned to the left side while I kept watch to the right. We both looked backward more than forward. The birds made no noise as they dove for their prey. You had to look.

"If you have to jump into the grass, don't disturb one of those ear-of-corn looking things. They contain Corn Wasps. Their stingers are a half inch long and make regular wasp stings feel like a love nip. You'll feel the pain as it paralyzes you, souls are not immune. Then they tear strips of flesh from you and fly off to start new nests. There's plenty of them now so—Jump!"

I pushed Gregory and dropped and rolled as a blood stained hook whistled between us. We continued on. I told my companion about the shredder mice that hunted in packs, the patches of grass that formed moving nets, the pit bugs, and the hip-high centipedes. Occasionally a soul ran across the road, usually pursued by something. We passed a soul caught in a grass net. The bottom half had already been stripped to the bone. Fortunately it was facing away from us. If I had seen it blink, I would have freaked.

"Still like the open spaces?" I asked Gregory.

"Is there no safe place, Getter? No Sanctuary?"

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"This is Hell, Greg. No place is truly safe. Though I have heard stories of a Sanctuary."

"What is the next place?"

"Not a place anyone, or anything, would want to stay. It makes the Dead Forest seem like Disneyland."

"Like what?"

"I'll explain some other time."

"When will we get there?"

"I don't know for sure. As I'm sure you know, time means nothing here. Judging by previous visits, my time, a few hours."

"This 73 has two of these Nexuses?"

"Yes. A few sectors do. Hell is chaos, a randomly fluctuating space. Different time, same destination, a different route through the Nexus. My theory is that 73 and other numbers like it are bridges between regions. Like between Northeast and Northwest. The trouble is that what's Northwest this trip may be in Southeast next time."

"That's why the Find?"

"Exactly. It seems to make sense of the fluctuations and be able to plot a course to where you need to go."

"Can you go from one section to another without the Nexus?"

"Yes, but you need a Find. Otherwise you'll wander forever, like you did in the Dead Forest. That's 323, by the way."

We fell into a routine, walking fast, checking for Skyhooks every fifteen seconds. Gregory appeared deep in thought. He scanned up automatically. Jumped or ducked when

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necessary, but was obviously distracted. I couldn't blame him. The open space he'd dreamed of for so long wasn't any Eden. Our agreement was to take him to the next number. 73 was it. Would I take him farther? Yes. He was a capable companion and I enjoyed his company. I did have questions, though. Not serious ones, but questions that at some point needed answering.

Then he reminded me about Macy Lunt.

* * * *

The river had steep sandy banks. Macy and I decided to dig a cave and attack the pirates, or whoever our imaginations conjured up, that passed by on the river. It was easy digging, and we soon had a hole big enough for the two of us. Macy crawled in first. He pushed out more sand but stayed at the outer edge. I called him a wimp and crawled past him.

The sand at the back was harder. I clawed at it with adolescent energy. This was going to be a big cave. Four feet in part of the roof fell on my legs with a dull thump.

"Hey, Macy, what're you doing?" I accused.

I twisted around to push the sand off. I didn't see Macy; then he looked in from the side of the hole.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, dope," I said, not yet scared. "Jeez, give me a hand will ya?"

He slowly moved out of sight, and then the whole front of the cave fell in. Darkness and sand enclosed me. I panicked. There was space behind me, but I began gasping for air anyway. I scabbled at the sand. Pleaded and cursed at Macy

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to help. Sand got in my mouth, nose, and eyes. I choked on it. It stuck to my tears. I knew I was going die, buried alive, alone except for monsters who would drag me down and into the dark to feed me to other monsters. They grabbed at my legs, I felt them. Then I broke through. Light and air flooded in, driving the monsters away.

* * * *

"Was yer friend there?" Gregory asked when I fell silent.

"No. I was alone."

"Did he go for help?"

"That's what he said."

"You dinn'a believe him?"

"I guess I did, but he abandoned me. I could never forgive him for that."

"And never have it seems. Ye were but wee children, Getter. He made a childish mistake. It was not as if a grown-up you trusted left you."

"He abandoned me, Gregory. He should have stayed."

We were quiet as we walked quickly on. Ahead I heard the loud whining buzz of angry Corn Wasps. A soul burst out of the field and ran away from us on the road. He swatted at the dark cloud of wasps that surrounded him. Remembering past experience, my muscles tensed each time he screamed at the searing pain of a sting. An alert Skyhook glided over us and lined up on him. The hook took the soul dead center and yanked him off the ground just as the paralysis took him. Gregory and I waited as the bewildered wasps swarmed in a tight ball, then flew off.

We continued on.

Gregory asked me, "Did ye remain friends, you and Macy?"

"Yeah, but it was never the same. About a year later his family moved away. I was glad."

"You never forgave him for his mistake?"

"Not while he was alive."

"So you saw him again?"

"Fifteen years later," I said reluctantly.

Gregory stopped and held his head cocked to one side like a bird listening for worms. He turned and looked behind and to the right of us.

"There," he said.

I saw the ripple of something moving fast through the grass. A tall thin soul emerged onto the road only ten feet from us. He glanced at us, kept running, then suddenly stopped and stared with wide, haunted eyes.

"Gregory?" the soul asked with a Scottish brogue even deeper than my companion's.

Gregory stiffened, sucked in a quick strangled breath.

"McFetter!" he said as if spitting out sour milk. "I felt your evil in this place." He drew Zoat's sword. "Bastard. You have not known Hell till now. Now justice will be done."

"Gregory, please," McFetter pleaded.

My little soul friend, the fire of vengeance in his eyes, ran after McFetter, and they disappeared into the grass. I started after them, but a knee high centipede, after the same prey as Gregory, blocked my way. When it saw me, it raised up its first few segments and snapped ice-tong-sized mandibles at me. I stuck the end of my walking stick under one row of legs. The insect tripped about fifty times, veering toward me,

but away from the feuding Scots. I poked the big bug several times, and it glided back into the grass.

Stunned, I watched the two souls' path through the field. The raised sword served as a marker to their progress. I wasn't the only one watching. A Skyhook had noticed, also. It lined up behind them.

"Gregory! Behind you!" I yelled.

The big bird came in low enough for the grass to tickle its belly, the hook hidden from view. When it passed over Gregory's position, it looked like it stopped for just an instant, as if the hook had snagged on prey caught in a net. The bird let out a squawk like a bass Crow and flapped its fifteen foot wingspan to gain height.

My jaw dropped at what I saw then. Gregory wasn't impaled by the hook and carried away for a lunch on the fly. He hung on with his hands. The hooks, though about a foot and a half long, only have a sharp edge for half that length. The back half is rounded so that the souls won't split in two and fall off.

From my pack I quickly dug out a small pair of binoculars. I got them focused in time to see Gregory scamper up the long leg of the hook and emerge on top of the bird, riding it like a mouse on an elephant. The bird put on an incredible display of acrobatics to dislodge its surprise passenger. Flips, rolls, dives with last second pullouts, nothing shook the tenacious Scot. Mesmerized by the spectacle I forgot to watch out for myself. The unending plains were still for once, acquiring a benign feeling as all its denizens waited for the outcome of the unusual aerial display.

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Finally, the big Skyhook had had enough. It flew slow and level until it turned and glided lower in wide easy circles. It floated past me at about fifty feet. Gregory's smile filled the sky. He held the sword up in salute.

"Thank you, Getter," he yelled. "We will meet again."

Astounded and suddenly alone, I watched Gregory and his tame Skyhook rise, then circle the area where they had come together. Suddenly, they dove straight down. At the last second the Skyhook leveled out. Its hook ripped through the grass. The bird hesitated, then rose up, with McFetter neatly and securely skewered on the hook.

They flew off into the distance.

I reshouldered my pack and continued on down the road. Occasionally I glanced in the direction he had gone, thinking maybe he would come back. I already missed the little Scot and had more questions than ever to ask when I saw him again.

An itch in the center of my back reminded me to look around. "Shit!" I hit the dust. A hook whistled as it flew past my ear.

Two hours later, neck sore from looking over my shoulder, I sighted the Nexus in the distance. I also came upon a phenomenon I'd never seen before in 73. It surprised and concerned me. And I really began to feel that something was not quite right in Hell.

Chapter Eleven

A wide area around the Nexus, perhaps a mile or more, had no standing grass. It had been trampled flat, ground into the dust. I crouched at the edge of the area for a long time trying to figure out what happened. When I examined the dust, I found it covered with hoof prints. My first thought was horses, but that made no sense. There are few horses in Hell and those are reserved for the souls who are terrified of them. I thought of pigs, then I thought of cloven hoofs, and then a chill ran up my spine.

I'd heard some of the stories passed down by the old hands: of Satan's cloven-hooved minions marching through Hell, of wars for power and control of souls, of palace infighting and assassination. What had Rack the Hack said? Security had been increased. Security meant Mephisto, and anything that involved Mephisto meant trouble for Hell Cops. Once he acquired a soul, mistake or not, he hated to lose it. And why was Captain Boam checking out minor disturbances? Something was happening, and whatever it was, it wasn't good.

I couldn't wait any longer. The quicker I got the girl and got out the better. After a quick, exposed jog across the cleared area, I filled my canteen and entered the Nexus. In two minutes the Nexus walls contracted and slid me through the rock into the classic Hell of 15.

Rough, black rock formed a straight up wall with no obvious exits around the Nexus. I darted to a small recess

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while I checked the Find. I followed its lead and an opening appeared. Inside, stone steps led upward. At the top I cautiously poked my head out. Since I had seen the trampled area in 73, caution seemed in order.

15 is ragged black rock mountains and perpetual night. I scanned around. Guards! There were never guards here. I saw their spindly winged forms as silhouettes against the glow of the fires. Fortunately they weren't guarding hard. They smoked crooked cigars and laughed at the piteous cries of the souls.

I slipped onto the Nexus wall and crawled around to another set of steps that descended into one of many narrow canyons radiating away from the Nexus. The canyon stretched into the far distance. The floor was a hundred yards wide and the walls curved in. A rift, ten to twenty feet wide, ran down the middle of the canyon floor. Yellow mists floated from the rift carrying the smell of brimstone and eternity. A fall into it was to fall forever through the Abyss. Stone bridges spanned the rift intermittently. There were, of course, legends of lost cities and great wealth guarded by majestic monsters in the Abyss. They were just stories. No body or soul or demon had ever gone in and returned to tell.

Visible just below the rift rim was a second level. There the Devil's minions tended huge fires that heated the canyon floor to an orange glow. Bandy legged minions scampered about the flames, their shadows cast large on the glistening canyon walls.

Souls filled the space between the rift and the walls. Hundreds, thousands, millions of them as far as I could see, a

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churning sea of pale, luminescent souls scrambling over each other to avoid the searing heat of the rock under their feet. The press of souls pushed up a mound of bodies against the wall. The overhang toppled the pile over onto the flat. The souls' skins hissed and turned black as the hot rock scorched it. Then they ran back to the pile to gain a few minutes respite from their eternity of suffering. Sometimes the souls on top of the heap would throw a climbing soul far enough that it would tumble over the edge of the Rift.

Octoguards, octopus-like demons that scuttled along the edge on hundreds of tiny legs, snagged the falling souls with their long tentacles and dragged them back into the crush. The Octoguards, relatives of the Squidlings, operated on instinct more than intelligence. They were ever vigilant for the accidental as well as the on-purpose leapers. Many souls would rather chance the Abyss than an eternity of hot feet.

I had to get almost ten miles down the canyon then over the mountains and into the Schoolyard. Even in the easiest of times, entering the Schoolyard by the Nexus was sheer folly. Like a spinster headmistress at an all girls boarding school, Mrs. Scritch guarded her charges closely. Inappropriate visitors were dealt with most harshly, starting with death and getting worse. Sneaking in the back way was always the safest. The longest, but most secure route, was the trail between the ridges that formed the canyons.

I crept cautiously through the rocks to the left, keeping to the flickering shadows formed by the fires' glow. I hadn't gone far when I heard the dry, crackley voices of minion

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guards. Going around them didn't seem to be a problem until I heard the deep bass gnarl of a Hound.

I froze. Hell Hounds were not to be taken lightly. I didn't have to see it to know what it looked like: massive square-jawed head high as my chest, a blood red tongue surrounded by backward curving snake's teeth, yellow eyes filled with savage intelligence that glowed like red searchlights when on the hunt. Black as the Abyss, even in full light, Hounds were indistinct, as if they were their own shadow. Maybe that's why, even using the Hellmetal load in the shotgun shells, they were unaffected by the guns Hell Cops carried.

I backed away. A little distance back I climbed over a huge boulder where I could get a look at the guards. There were three of them playing cards around a fire, all oblivious to any disturbance. The Hound was invisible in the dark except for yellow eyes scanning for me like laser beams. It growled, but a guard told it to shut up. The eyes swung to the guard and flared red with disapproval. All the guards froze in place, realizing how close they were to being dog meat. There was no way past the Hound. I'd have to take another route.

The Find guided me through hidden doors down to the fire level. The Fires were stoked with coal mined from under the mountains by souls supervised, according to legend, by blind miner demons who had worked the mines since Hell began. Ore carts on golden rails rumbled out of caves miles deep. The carts dumped the coal in a circle around gigantic caldrons. Souls, whipped on by scampering, bony minions with flat monkey faces, climbed rickety ladders to toss the black chunks into the flames.

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The hundred feet from the mine entrance to the coal mounds were usually deserted, and with a little caution, easy to traverse. I made good progress for the first few miles. I only had to duck into a cave once to avoid a four-armed demon Supervisor as he kicked some lazy minions back to work.

My mind wandered as I got into the rhythm of stopping at each set of tracks, checking if anything was watching, moving on. Was Brittany Hightower really as innocent as her parents made her out to be? Now that I had a chance to think about it, I didn't like the veiled reference to the death of another daughter. Were the changes in Brittany they mentioned because of guilt, or sorrow? The mother had the vision that brought them to me. Yet, a previous sin unentered in the Book is not unknown.

The parents obviously loved the child. If my daughter had survived wouldn't I love her unconditionally, want the best, no matter any vague suspicions? Would I love her enough to erase any unfavorable entries?

The question that came back to me more and more was would I have the chance to find out if I could love that much. I was 36, in a dangerous, little known profession. A permanent relationship was hard when you might have to leave on a moment's notice for an undetermined amount of time, and if you didn't return, the other person might never know what happened.

If I had kids, I'd have to give up being a Hell Cop. Did I have that much love in me? I didn't know. I doubted it. It would take a special woman. I did know one woman special

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enough. She was a Hell Cop, too, but the thought of her with kids just didn't compute. Though her thoughts on the matter might be different.

Voices ahead. I ducked into a cave mouth and waited. An iguana-headed Supervisor with prehensile whiptails for arms drove four souls into the next cave. A loaded cart from below caught me by surprise. I pressed flat to the ground as it rumbled past, and I lay still as the souls working the fire began to unload it. Except for the roar of the fire the second level was quiet. My body insisted on rest. I promised it five minutes.

The faint howl of a Hell Hound jolted me awake after three minutes. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. My heart shrank in my chest, and for a moment I closed my eyes and wished it would be all over. But, I thought, jumping to my feet, what would happen to Brittany Hightower if I surrendered to an instant of weakness? Of all my retrievals, this one was the one I didn't want to fail.

The howl rose from a bass growl to a high wail that penetrated right to the brain's panic center. I peered out of the cave in the direction I'd come from. I heard the frightened voices of souls, minions, and Supervisors alike. A hunting Hound was not particularly discriminating about its victims.

A dark shape ran erratically toward me, hugging the wall. The Hound's howl grew louder, and in seconds the red glow of its eyes became visible in the distance. The limping figure drew closer. It had to be a Hell Cop. In between the Hound's wails I heard the Cop's grunts of frustration and fear. I knew those grunts!

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The Hound closed in, sure of its prey. The limping figure came even with the cave mouth. I grabbed an arm and swung the body in.

"What the fuck?" the Cop grunted, eyes big with astonishment, hands up in self-defense.

"Hello, Sneaker," I said. "Out walking the dog?"

"Getter? Where the Hell'd you come from? Jesus, the Hound."

I took her fine thin face in my hands and kissed her. Quickly.

"Sneaker, you'll make a damn good mother someday."

"What? Getter?"

The Hound was close. I bolted out of the cave, yelled, "Hey, fuck you, bitch!" at the beast, and followed the golden tracks around the caldron. The Hound followed me.

Souls and minions scattered. A Supervisor tried to grab me with a tentacle. An angry snarl from behind me changed his mind.

I slid to a stop at the edge of the Abyss. A stone bridge spanned the twenty foot gap a few feet away. I tensed, concentrating on the beast in front of me and not on the emptiness of the Abyss behind. The Hound silently approached.

The way it was supposed to go was that the thing would leap at me, I'd duck, and it would fly over the edge into the Abyss. Another brilliant save.

The Hound stopped ten feet away. What it thought about my idea rumbled deep in its throat. Smoldering eyes tried to hypnotize me. Then it took a slow, confident step forward.

Chapter Twelve

The Abyss wanted me. I felt it between my shoulder blades—Come to me. Come to me. Blissful nothingness awaits within me.

It was either the Abyss or death in the fangs of the Hound. Unless ...

I had my gun out. I'd never actually shot at a Hound. Maybe the stories were false. I raised the gun, and Sneaker came into view directly behind that slobbering black shadow. If the beast didn't stop the shot, Sneaker would.

Sneaker wore her show-no-mercy face, eyes narrowed to slits, nostrils flared, thin lips tight and slightly turned up on the left side. I hoped she wasn't mad at me for scaring her. A few of the minions appeared now that the Hound had cornered its prey. One minion, showing a snaggletooth grin and chuckling at the prospect of blood, stood a few feet from her. Sneaker lunged at it, caught the four foot high minor demon by the scruff of its leathery neck and, raising it over her head, threw the nasty little creature directly at the Hound.

The minion screamed. Sneaker yelled. I jumped for the bridge. The Hound leaped. At the same time the unlucky minion fell on top of it. And went right through, as if the Hound was only a phantom. Then, the Hound lashed out with a claw filled paw and gutted the little beast in the air. The body dropped into the Abyss without a sound.

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I took my chance. I shot point blank at the Hound. The blast ripped through it. The damned thing got to its feet. I stepped backward onto the bridge.

A thought occurred to me. If the Hound was so insubstantial that the gun didn't affect it, how could it be substantial enough to hurt me? On the other hand, the claws were certainly substantial to the minion. I suspected it could go either way at will.

While I was asking myself questions, the Hound stalked toward me.

Sneaker had the same questions. She came forward and raised her gun. She stepped on an old bone, and the dry snap drew the Hound's attention. It swung its massive square head and snapped at her. She fired. The shot went through the black demon as if through a shadow and blasted a divot out of the rock an inch from my foot. Not used to being attacked, the Hound was in trouble. Its hindquarters slipped over the edge. Concentrating hard, I thought I saw a slight shimmer as it became solid again. Thinking I knew what to look for, I held my breath and fired.

The Hound's howl of pain and surprise echoed in my head. In a second, I remembered a dog hit by a car when I was kid. Its pitiful cries clutched at my adolescent heart. I wanted to stop its agony, but I wanted the dog to get better, not die. This time I had been the one who inflicted the pain. Though the beast would have eagerly ripped my heart out, I wanted its misery to end. I couldn't help or heal it, so, with conflicting emotions, I watched the poor Hound scabble and snap and,

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once again, I began to doubt if I had the toughness it took to be a Hell Cop.

Sneaker didn't have any doubts, or at least she had the courage to do what had to be done. She went up to the Hound and shot it in the head. The shot did no physical damage that I could see. The beast lay still and I thought, is that it? Is that how a savage Hound from Hell dies? Not even a whimper? Then the Hound raised its head and answered my question.

The enormous jaws opened and emitted a eerie, almost tangible, cry. It seemed to wrap around us like a soft, yet constricting blanket. I couldn't move, nor did I want to. The farewell song touched me with a deep sadness. The Hound was, after all, a being with at least enough intelligence to know of its death and want to bid farewell to others of its kind. The cry continued, and out of its mouth a vapor issued. It swirled about the body like a living thing. Tendrils of mist explored me like cold fingers. The vapor held Sneaker, too. I wondered if I should tell her I loved her, just in case. Though, surprisingly, I felt no malice in the Hound's spirit.

I watched her through the swirling vapor. Sneaker had inherited her Oriental eyes, thin lips, and dusky skin from her Chinese father. Her mother gave her a thin nose, high cheekbones, and a strong chin that she held up to show her defiance. She wore her black hair short like most Hell Cops. Short hair is harder for something to grab, and a leisurely shower and shampoo is out of the question. It stood up in haphazard spikes. She was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

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The mist flowed from around us, rose in a whirlwind, and dissipated, leaving us surprised to be alive. The Hound's cry faded up and down the canyon. Its body vanished.

Free to move, I joined Sneaker.

"We killed a Hound, Getter. It's never been done that I know of. Son of a bitch."

"Another good story for your memoirs," I said.

She flashed me a tired smile. "And you'll be in all the good parts," she assured me.

I gave her a grin back. "I've already been in all your good parts."

"Oh, was that you?"

15 returned to normal. The fires roared, the souls screamed. The Supervisor and his minions drifted toward us. Faraway, another Hound let the canyon know it was on the hunt.

"I think it's time to move along," I said. "How's the ankle?"

"I can stand it."

Guns drawn to discourage any brave minions who wanted to move up in the ranks, we hurried around the cauldron and faded into the back area. Five minutes later, limping badly, Sneaker led me into one of the caves. A hundred feet in we flattened against the rough cave wall as an empty cart rolled past into the dark. I turned to ask Sneaker where we were going. She was gone.

"Sneak, damn it. I hope this is a joke and not for real. Where are you?"

"Right behind you."

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I about faced and stared at the rock. I played my flashlight over the wall. Nothing.

"Sneaker, don't do this to me now."

"I'm here, dummy." Her hand came out of the wall and grabbed my arm.

"What the hell?"

She pulled me into a camouflaged crack in the rock. I had to take off my pack and suck in to squeeze through.

"Christ, Sneak, what is this?"

"Come on," she said.

We side-stepped about ten feet, then single-filed another twenty to a tiny open area. I felt the weight of the mountain on my shoulders. I'm not particularly claustrophobic, but I felt the space we were in shrink around me. I focused on the flashlight's circle and breathed deep and slow.

Sneaker reached into the darkness above, pushed up, then pulled down a crude wooden ladder.

"Next stop, the Penthouse," she said.

She turned off her flashlight and started climbing. I kept mine on. The ladder topped out on a narrow ledge twenty feet up. She showed me how to lift the ladder and set its legs into holes chiselled in the rock. From the ledge we crawled upward through a short tunnel. At the other end we stood.

"Turn out your light," Sneaker said.

"What?" I didn't like that idea.

She took my arm and pressed close. "Turn out your light."

I turned out the light. "Holy shit!"

"Like I said, welcome to the Penthouse."

Chapter Thirteen

A narrow cavern extended miles through the mountain. A river of molten lava flowed several hundred feet below us. My eye followed its course up the cavern to a lavafall so spectacular I forgot to breathe. The falls must have been a thousand feet high. Blue and orange flame flared as the lava poured over the edge. At the bottom the lava disappeared into a mist of sparks. The distant roar of the falls surrounded us. It came from everywhere. The reflected glow of the lava lit the cavern with soft, rosy light.

Huge columns formed by converging stalactites and stalagmites held up the roof. Some columns were tens of feet thick and some only inches. The roof rose high above us. It was polished black, and the reflection of the lava wove across it like aurora. Despite the lava, the cavern was relatively cool. A huge funnel-shaped hole penetrated the ceiling, sucking out the hot air and creating a breeze throughout the cavern. Over the dull roar of the lavafall I heard water trickling.

I stood dumbfounded for several minutes before I found my voice. When I spoke, my voice couldn't help but come out in a whisper of awe.

"This is fantastic. I had no idea this was here. How did you find it? That lavafall is incredible."

"It's called Fairy Falls," Sneaker said softly. "See how the sparks swirl out like wings?"

"It has a name? Jeez, Sneak, who else knows about this place?"

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"Just one Hell Cop that I know of."

She sucked a quick breath through her teeth as she let go of my arm and put weight on her bum ankle. I asked if she needed help. She testily told me no but didn't protest too much when I scooped her up in my arms. Maybe my kiss distracted her. I held my breath, averted my gaze from the emptiness in front of me, and inched along a narrow ledge to a wide spot that had obviously been in use for a long time.

"You okay?" she asked when I set her down by a crude wooden table.

"Oh, yeah, that's my favorite thing, walking along narrow ledges with thousand foot drop-offs."

With a gentle sweep of her fingers, she wiped the sweat from my brow. "It's not like falling into the Abyss."

"That's a great comfort. What is this place? You come here for summer camp?"

The table and two cobbled together chairs were set against the far side of a roughly square indentation. A fire blackened ring of stones with a small wire grill was closer to the edge than I liked, though I felt relatively safe in the little hideaway. Two blankets and foam pads were rolled up in the back. In one corner a miniature waterfall fell ten feet to a small pool, then flowed through a groove in the rock to the edge of the cliff. A metal bucket with holes in the bottom hung on a iron spike beside the falling water. Cans of food were stacked on natural rock shelves.

Still in awe, I looked out into the huge cavern.

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"Sneaker," I said, holding my arms out to indicate the magnificent scene. "This place is incredible. Who's the other Cop who knows about it?"

"Destiny."

I turned to face her.

"Destiny? I forgot you trained with him.."

Destiny was a legend among Hell Cops. For forty years he'd retrieved souls from Hell. He was a short stocky man with a round bald head, round eyes, and big ears. Not exactly a heroic image, but he was fearless, intelligent, and dedicated. It was said that he once retrieved a soul from Satan's bedroom.

"He taught me everything I know."

"Then you must know a lot. Is he as good as the stories say he is?"

Sneaker moved the chair so she could let the water run over her feet.

"Yes, he was that good."

"Was?"

"He retired about six months ago."

"Retired? Man, a Hell Cop for forty years. Hard to imagine surviving down here that long. He must have some tales to tell. Is he going to write his memoirs?"

"Nah, I don't think so. The stories about him are much more interesting than the reality. At least he thinks so."

I sat down by the fire ring and gazed out at the cavern. I couldn't get enough of it. The reflection of the lava river on the polished ceiling was like an orange snake winding its way among the columns that supported the roof. As I stared, it

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was as if the serpent breathed, expanding then contracting while it slithered across the underground sky.

I rested my hand on a fire ring rock. I was so dazed at the unexpected sights, it took a minute before I realized the rock was hotter than the surrounding stone. I waved my hand low over the ashes. It had been twelve hours at the most since they'd been formed.

My eyes on the lavafall, I said, "So you and Destiny are the only ones who know about this place?"

"As far as I know. And you."

I heard splashing and turned to look. Sneaker, naked to the waist, leaned forward from the chair with her head under the waterfall. The water left glistening trails on her dusky skin. She sat back and shook her head like a sleek proud animal. Not at all embarrassed at my scrutiny she stretched and slowly rolled her head. Her smile was like a flashbulb in the dark, blinding me to everything else.

"Getter, come wash my back," she said and smiled again.

* * * *

After making love and eating a meal we lay together on the blankets. The water kept the air cool, and the occasional spray was sensuous on my skin. Sneaker's head rested on my chest. She smelled of shampoo and sex. The thought of leaving the refuge of the Penthouse sent a shiver through me. As if she read my mind and knew what I needed, Sneaker snuggled closer.

A few minutes or a few hours later, Sneaker said, "How'd you become a Hell Cop? You never told me."

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I told her how my late wife's father introduced me to soul retrieval. I was young and thought my balls were made of stainless steel back then, eleven years ago, so I tried it. I told her how my own father was instrumental in my staying with it.

He had had the wanderlust. His curiosity and affinity for remote, indigenous people carried him around the earth, either on his own, as part of some expedition, or on a rescue mission. I loved his stories of unknown lands and strange peoples. As a kid I yearned to have stories of great adventures to tell him in turn.

At sixty, he lost a leg during a rescue mission in the high country of Peru. They found the cancer at the same time. There would be no new adventures for my father, but he eagerly listened to mine. I hope I repaid him for all the pleasurable hours he kept me enthralled with his detailed yarns of faraway places. He impressed upon me his desire to help people in need. If we meet again in Heaven, I intend to have a lot more tales to tell him. Though it's souls, not people, I'm saving, I think he'll be proud. Assuming I make it to Heaven.

"He will be proud of you," Sneaker said. "You're a good man, and if I ever need rescuing, I'd feel a lot better knowing you're the one coming after me."

"I hope you're saving your money. My rates are high."

Her hand roamed my body and, her tongue in my ear, she whispered, "I'll keep that in mind."

Later she asked, "Getter, do you think you'll be a Hell Cop for forty years?"

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"I doubt it," I said, watching the lava river's undulating reflection on the cavern roof. "I think Destiny used up an awful lot of luck by lasting that long."

"Do you think you'll die here?"

"If anybody thought that, who'd be foolish enough to come here? The money's good, but still ..."

"Destiny thought he would die in Hell," she said.

"Are you kidding? Man, why'd he keep coming back then?"

Sneaker shifted onto her side and propped her head up on her elbow. Her fingers absently traced circles on my stomach.

"He didn't want his tombstone to read—Here lies Destiny. Dead of boredom. Finally released from ordinariness." She nodded as if agreeing with the sentiment.

I reached out and caressed her silky hair.

"What do you want on your stone?" I asked.

She thought for a minute, then glanced at me as if checking to see if I was really paying attention.

"Here lies Sneaker. She did some good. Earned the respect of her peers. Did it her way."

"Why mention the respect part? You have that."

"Yeah, sure. How many women Hell Cops are there?"

"I don't know. Two others that I know of."

"And how many men?" she asked.

"Don't know for sure. A hundred around the world probably," I guessed.

"Right. Soul retrieval is a man's game, and most men want to keep it that way." A hint of bitterness rode on her words.

"I don't think—."

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"Don't defend them, Getter. I can do the job as well as any man. I just want to be accepted for what I can do, not shut out."

"What do you mean, 'Shut out?'"

"This is the first job I've had in three months. The woman who hired me is a heavy duty feminist, and I still almost didn't get the job. Only one man will send me referrals. One priest told me it wasn't a woman's job. He actually said I should stay home and have babies. The asshole."

"Well you damn sure have my respect," I said. "We killed a Hound, Sneak. Some Hell Cops may be chauvinists, but none of them has ever done that. They'll come around."

"They'll think I'm trying to take some of your glory."

"Give yourself some credit will you?"

She pouted for a few seconds, then flashed a smile.

"We did kill the fucking thing, didn't we?"

"Yeah, we did. It'll make a Hell of a story, won't it?"

She placed her hand on my chest to assure me of the sincerity of her concern. "Jesus, Getter, it had you over the Abyss."

"I know." I didn't want to talk about that.

I held Sneaker in my arms and eventually slipped into an uneasy sleep. In Hell, even in sleep, a Lifer's guard is always up. There is always danger. But in the Penthouse, my unconscious must have felt safe and so let down its guard. My dreams were haunted by visions of Hounds, and the emptiness of the Abyss, and serpents and flying demon heads. I woke, aware of what was happening to me, unable to control it. My heart pounded. I began to hyperventilate. My

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lungs screamed for oxygen. Fear slammed through me. Fear of Hell. I couldn't leave the security of the cavern, ever. I was doomed to die in the safety of the cavern, but better that than to go out into danger again. In my dread-filled mind I saw myself falling through the Abyss. Falling, falling forever chased by Hounds and serpents and demons' heads.

My thrashing woke Sneaker.

Immediately alert, gun in hand, she crouched next to me.

"Getter, what's the matter?"

"Scared," I gasped.

"Oh, shit." Quickly, she looked around. "No bags, damn it." She laid down the gun and straddled me. "It's a good thing I like you, Getter."

She took a deep breath, pinched my nose, and covered my mouth with hers. The extra carbon dioxide she breathed into me began to ease the hyperventilation. In a few minutes I could breathe on my own; the self-perpetuating terror of the anxiety attack began to fade.

Sneaker laid a cool rag on my forehead. "Damn, Getter, you scared the shit out of me, man."

Once I began breathing normally I said, "I should never have come in here."

"What are you talking about?"

I wanted to sit up, but my whole body was limp as if all my bones were missing.

"As long as I'm out there, in Hell proper, where I have to be alert all the time I can control the fear. I don't have time to think about being scared, and it doesn't bother me. Even

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standing over the Abyss, facing the Hound, I was tense, yes, but not particularly scared. You know what I mean?"

Sneaker wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and sat next to me.

"Yeah, I know. No time to be terrified, only time to think about surviving."

"Exactly. Only in here, in the Penthouse, where it's safe, you have that time. When you mentioned the Abyss and the Hound I started thinking about it and couldn't stop. Jesus, I've never had an attack down here before."

"You've had anxiety attacks before?"

"Just about every time I come down. Right after I activate the Find and the road to the tunnel appears, I usually spend a few minutes throwing up. After that I'm fine. What about you?"

Her fingers intertwined nervously. In the gloom of the cavern they looked like a ball of hornworms copulating. She kept her head down. I squeezed her knee, lightly.

"I showed you mine. Now you show me yours. I won't think less of you."

She shot me a glance, wrinkled her lips, and shrugged.

"I'm okay going in. Nervous, but excited, you know. While I'm in it's like you said, no time to be scared. Once I'm out, that's when I lose it. When I get to my car I'm like a zombie on the outside, yet inside I'm boiling. I want to explode, but I know, I know, that if I freak out right there something will come through the gate and get me. So I get in the car and drive very carefully to a cheap motel that's close by. I mean

the pressure inside me is so great I feel like my eyeballs are going to pop out."

Her tears glistened in the lava glow. I knew exactly how she felt and wanted to comfort her, but had the sense to let her finish.

"Once inside I fall apart. Sometimes I don't make it to the bed. I'm curled up in a ball and shaking and crying with terror and laughing with relief at the same time. I mean I just freak for hours." She hugged herself and shivered. "It takes a couple days till I can sleep regular."

I put my arm around her and drew her close.

"Sounds pretty normal to me," I said.

She laid her head on my shoulder, and who's to say who got the most comfort out it?

Suddenly, our companionable silence was interrupted by a long, high scream cut short at the height of its crescendo. The scream echoed around the cavern, impossible to tell what direction it came from. A little slow on the uptake we scrambled for our guns. We waited. Nothing happened.

"I guess we're not alone anymore, are we?" Sneaker said.

"I guess not," I said, relaxing. "Now I have something to be scared of."

Then I started to laugh, and she started to laugh, and pretty soon we were on a laughing jag that left us helpless. Tears streaming, gasping for breath, one of us would get under control, then a glance would set us off again.

My stomach hurt when I crawled back to my sleeping pad, totally wasted. Sneaker joined me. At some point we made love again and then slept. When we woke, we washed and

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ate, then packed and climbed down the ladder. Sneaker's ankle, while sore, had improved considerably. Pain is something a Hell Cop quickly learns to ignore.

At the mine tunnel entrance we surveyed the fire area. All seemed quiet and normal. We slipped out of the tunnel to the left and began an easy jog that would quickly cover the three miles to the trail that led over the mountains to 101—The Schoolyard.

The first mile went easy. At each set of tracks we stopped and checked for Supervisors and minions. Twice we had to hide, but that's normal. I began to worry that things were going too smoothly when we came up on a group by an overturned ore cart. The Supervisor, a ten foot tall by five foot wide demon with four arms and a scrunched up werewolf face, cursed imaginatively and flogged his minions and souls. As fast as they gathered up the ore, he'd kick it out of their hands and curse even louder.

I leaned over and nibbled on her ear and said, "A sweet innocent young thing like you shouldn't be listening to crude fucking shit like that."

She turned and gently sucked on my ear lobe and said, "Are you going to be my hero and go tell him to stop?"

"You have to learn sometime."

She gave me a dig in the ribs. "It hasn't said anything I haven't already said, better."

"I'm sure. It looks like they're going to be there for awhile. We'll have to go upstairs through the Hot Zone."

She dug around in her pack. "I hate going through up there. Even with nose filters, it stinks."

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We were hiding in a small indentation in the rock wall which contained steps that led to the upper level. You get used to the general odor of Hell, but there are places where the stench is particularly intense. The reek of charred flesh, the ever present brimstone, and the suffering sweat of the eternally damned combine in the Hot Zone to form an exceptionally potent stench. With nose filters installed, asbestos booties fitted, and guns at hand we mounted the stairs. At the top I took a big breath, activated the Find, and once again stepped out into one of the most Hellish of Hells.

Chapter Fourteen

In all the miles in all the directions the canyons of 15 stretch there is no break in the crush of souls clamoring to escape the burning rock. Sneaker and I didn't have the luxury of sending minions through the door first to clear the way for us like the demon Supervisors. We emerged at the bottom of the heap. The stench hit me like a breaking wave, the impact stronger than the press of souls. Sneaker's eyes crossed for a few seconds; then she shook herself and nodded she was ready.

Souls are strange things. Though they were piled three or four high on top of us and ten or more in front of us they offered little resistance as we pushed forward. It's as if they have mass but no mass. You can touch them, hit, cut, and fuck them, and your senses tell you they are real; however in the reality of Hell, they are quite unsubstantial. Moving through them was like walking through heavy water.

The anguished cries of those wretched souls are almost as bad as the smell. It's an emotional battering you take, though. From a distance, even from the fire level, the cries merge into one and with practice can be ignored. But, as we followed the cliff at the bottom of the stack, each scream had an individual face.

A woman soul clutched at me, tried to climb over me to get her feet off the hot stone. One side of her face was a pretty young woman and the other side was charred black, the eyeball a dangling black lump. Don't interfere. "Help me,"

she pleaded. Don't interfere. She had her arms around my neck, half-face inches from mine. "Please." I grasped her arms to push her away. A man-soul with a blood spattered gray face and milky pig eyes grabbed her hair and threw her down. It had to have been my imagination that I heard the sizzle of her skin. The man-soul stepped on her and grabbed my shoulder to pull himself up. Don't interfere. Then, as if watching myself from the outside, I smashed his head against the rock, threw him down, and kicked him. I drew my gun. Sneaker put a warning hand on mine and, reluctantly, I let the gun drop back into its holster. Stepping on the pushy soul's face, I picked up the woman. Before I boosted her up to the top of the pile I said, "There is escape. That way, a trail into the mountains."

Her eye searched mine. I thought I saw a glimmer of hope similar to what I saw in Gregory's eyes. Sneaker pressed past me, and our eyes met. Oblivious to the misery around us, she stared at me. Accusing or supportive, I couldn't tell. Then the souls pressed in and pushed us on our way like a rising tide.

Once you learn to ignore the individual souls, and see them solely as obstacles to get through, progress is quick. Pushing through souls is hard work; we switched the lead often. We hadn't spoken since I helped the woman.

Sneaker was leading. About five feet ahead, she unexpectedly broke through to an area clear of souls. She cried out in surprise, otherwise I would have walked into the clearing right behind her. I froze, listened, and heard a familiar deep voice.

"Grab her, bless you, or you'll freeze in Heaven!"

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Captain Boam and his monkey boy, Grizzle. Shit.

I dropped to a crouch and retreated from the clearing. I checked my Find. Still two miles to the trail.

"Come out, Getter," Captain Boam yelled. "If you don't, I'll drop your beautiful friend Sneaker into the Abyss."

That was a lie. Captain Boam wouldn't throw away the chance to torture a Lifer. Nevertheless, Sneaker was in for a tough time if I didn't do something. I grabbed a soul and held it up as cover while I snuck a peek.

A platoon of minions ranged along the open rock. The big red demon stood ten feet from the edge of the Abyss in the middle of a glowing orange spot. Steam came from his feet as he paced. He held a flamewgun, and his tail twitched as if he had a snake up his ass. Sergeant Grizzle stood to his right, closer to the edge, with one of the hands he used as feet splayed across Sneaker's chest. Holding her hostage was one thing, but copping a feel, too, was a bit much. Besides there was no place else to go. I flicked off my gun's safety and stepped out of the soul pile.

"Grizzle, you scamp," I said. "Don't you be trying to feel up my girlfriend. I don't want to have to cut off one of your fingers."

The black tunnels of Captain Boam's eyes flared red, then settled into a steady orange glow like coals waiting for the barest breath of encouragement to burst into flame. His grip on his gun was a little awkward because of the missing finger, but the muzzle never wavered as it tracked my approach. The minions all had their small caliber flamewguns pointed at me. Octoguards hovered in the background. Grizzle sat back on

his squat hind legs. He kept one protruding eye on me while he nuzzled Sneaker's neck.

"Hey, Griz, lay off her. She's already been nuzzled today."

"It stinks," the Sergeant said as his upper lip turned up to cover his nose. His voice was too high-pitched for his size, and he slurred his words, as if he'd had too much to drink for too long. "Maybe the troops like it. Make it smell better for me."

"It always stinks like that," I said. "Why don't you give it to me and I'll take it away."

"I'll take her," Captain Boam said.

Fitting action to word he grabbed Sneaker by the scruff of her neck. Grizzle reluctantly let her go. Captain Boam held her a foot off the ground and inspected her as if she were a stray kitten. And like a kitten, Sneaker lashed out at him. To no effect, as his arms were twice as long as hers.

With mock admonishment the big demon said, "Sergeant Grizzle, she is quite beautiful." He brought her close and sniffed her. "And her smell is not offensive." To me he said, "What do you think, Getter? Maybe I'll keep her. Mephisto will be impressed if I have a Lifer wife."

I had a quick vision what life as his wife might be like. From the look on Sneaker's face, she did too. Her eyes caught mine. She slid her eyes to the left, indicating the Abyss, then nodded. She'd rather chance the Abyss than a nasty, and probably short, life as the lesser Mrs. Captain Boam. "Or," he continued, "I could throw her into the Abyss."

The edge in that particular area was ragged rock. When I'd looked out from among the souls I noticed that right behind

the two demons a thin point of rock overhung the edge. From my angle I saw a crack run almost through it. This is where Captain Boam stood and, with no visible effort, held Sneaker out over the long fall.

The idea of Sneaker drifting forever, alone, in the Abyss, frightened me. I'd just begun to entertain thoughts of a more serious relationship than professional friends. She looked so helpless, dangling from the end of Captain Boam's musclebound, red leather arm. On a purely selfish level I wanted to rescue her so she would be impressed with me. After my little anxiety attack in the cavern, I needed to show her I could handle a situation. She was getting under my skin, and though she was as independent as a Hell Cop needs to be, I wanted her to need me. And need me she did at that point.

My first thought was to blast him over the rim and deal with the surrounding minions and their flamerguns after—except he'd take Sneaker with him. I kept my gun aimed at his chest. It was the only insurance I had.

"So it's Captain Boam now is it?" I said, taking a step closer.

"No thanks to you, Getter," he said, turning his right hand to show me the missing finger. The grit in his voice made me wince.

"Well you shouldn't have tried to cut my head off when I had a knife in my hand."

"That soul was mine."

"He didn't belong here, Captain. If it'll make you feel any better I had the Purgatory People check him out. He may

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have been a religious fanatic with a young wife and nine kids, but, despite what most people think, that doesn't automatically qualify him for eternal damnation."

I stood only twenty feet away and a little to the right of him. Unconsciously he had stepped back as far as he could on the jut of rock. He still held Sneaker by the neck, her feet dangling over the Abyss. She gripped his arm to take some of the weight off her neck. She wouldn't last much longer. Her eyes bulged and her mouth formed an O as she struggled to breathe. Octoguards crept closer from both sides. Their baseball eyes steady on the closest beings to the edge, Captain Boam and Sneaker.

I stepped forward and to the right. The nearness of the Abyss and its Forever Fall raised my breathing rate. Why couldn't it be water or snakes? Those I could handle. I tried to ignore the gaping emptiness.

"What's going on, Captain? It looked like an army marched through 73. Is there trouble in Hell?"

"Trouble for you, Getter, when Mephisto gets hold of you. That was his daughter you killed in 29."

"Oh." Oh shit.

"After he takes over Hell from that wimp, Satan, he will have forever to make you pay."

Captain Boam grinned at the thought of Mephisto tormenting me. His lips rolled back, revealing double rows of red stained, black tipped teeth. A thick, black, forked tongue slithered out of his mouth and wiggled in my direction. "I'll be a Major, at least, when I deliver you to him," he said, his eyes taking on an unfocused, orange glow.

That was it. I couldn't wait. I hoped those Octoguards were alert.

Sneaker's eyes caught mine. She knew it was time and accepted what I had to do.

I rushed toward the edge. Sneaker pulled her feet up. I leveled my gun and fired at the spit of rock Boam stood on. Sparks and dust exploded. I fired again, expecting to burst into flame from the minions' combined fire power. Captain Boam roared with surprise and pain. He fired at me. I dropped to the ground. The fireball passed over me and sent two minions sprawling. I curled on the ground, shot behind me twice, taking out three more of his soldiers. Other minions ran.

I rolled to my feet. My right foot slipped over the edge. My heart stopped for an instant as I teetered over the Long Fall. Sneaker's choking cry cut through my fear. I shot the rock again. A scuffling noise came from behind me. A Sergeant minion looking to be a hero came at me fast. I twisted and struck out with my staff. His hooves went out from under him. I smacked his hairy head with my gun, and he went limp. I dropped to a crouch, expecting an attack by Captain Boam.

He wasn't there. And neither was Sneaker. Grizzle ignored me and stared slackjawed at where the rock outcropping used to be.

As I approached the edge, the bulbous rear ends of the Octoguards inched up over the edge. The closest one to me had Sneaker securely wrapped in two long tentacles. The other one struggled.

Once Sneaker was safe, I quickly went to the second Octoguard and, not without some guilt, cut the one tentacle that stretched taut. It parted with a dull snap. I hardened my mind against Captain Boam's faint cry.

"I'm sorry," I said to the whimpering Guard as it nursed its wounded tentacle. I included Boam in that apology, too.

Sneaker knelt with her head down and sucked in deep breaths. Her rescuer sidled away as I came near, its tentacles doing a nervous dance. It apprehensively watched me reload the gun.

"I'm sorry," I said again. It hesitated, then backed away to join its partner, and they disappeared over the edge.

"Are you all right?" I asked Sneaker.

She looked at me and forced a grin. "It's a good thing I have an extra set of underwear." She blew out a big breath. "Yeah, I'm fine. Let's get out of here before Grizzle figures out what happened."

The Sergeant held a gun in his gorilla hand. He didn't seem to know what to do with it. He was used to following orders, not giving them. The immediate area of the canyon came back to life: Supervisors yelled, minions chattered, souls screamed. A Hound howled far off in the distance. Flames from newly stoked fires peeked over the edge.

I helped Sneaker to her feet and turned my gun on Grizzle. He stood between us and the direction we needed to go. He held his flameweb on us, and his eyes narrowed as if calculating odds. We went toward him.

"Free at last, Griz," I said. "Don't blow it by thinking of being a hero."

"You sent Captain Boam into the Abyss?" he said, still not comprehending.

"Hey, I'm sorry, man, but it was either him or Sneaker and though you don't think so, she's better looking and a lot more fun in bed."

Sneak poked me in the ribs. "How do you know I'm better?"

"My secret. You need your gun back."

Grizzle had her gun stuck in his bandolier. She circled behind him and carefully retrieved it. Grizzle let it happen. I felt a little sorry for the creature. He knew what his duty was, yet couldn't seem to act on it without orders. The confusion, frustration, and uncertainty were all plain on his simian face.

"It wasn't your fault, Griz," I told him.

Then Sneaker and I took off up the canyon.

We kept our own thoughts as we ran along the open area of the upper level. I ignored the screams of the Damned Souls as well as Captain Boam's cry that kept echoing in my head. I hated the idea of anybody plunging into the Abyss.

Sneaker ran easily next to me, barely limping, intent on running, expression unreadable. I had a sudden sickening, tight feeling in my chest that I would willingly take the Long Fall for her. With that realization, and despite my attraction and growing affection, I think I hated her a little for making me feel that way. I suppose, deep down, all love has a small component of hate, or at least resentment, at the control a person gives up when they love somebody. No matter how willingly it's given. They were strange feelings, the love and the hate; I'd felt so little for so long.

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The confusion in my thoughts made the time fly.

We ran hard for the first mile, then slowed to an easy jog when Sneaker's ankle acted up. At a mile and a half I took out my Find, and we followed its directions to an exit that led to the fire level. We continued like before, stopping, checking for Supervisors or grunt minions and running quietly past cave openings. Nothing bothered us. We saw nothing unusual. The going was easy, the trail over the mountains to the Schoolyard was only a quarter mile farther on. Piece of cake.

As we crossed the fifth set of tracks, I looked toward the fires. Two Supervisors stood with their backs to us. They weren't cursing or kicking or whipping at anything. I thought they were working very hard not to look over their shoulders.

We kept on. As we approached the next mine tunnel entrance Sneaker had the same thought I did.

"Getter," she whispered as she stopped and pressed against the black dust coated wall.

"Yeah, I know," I said.

We crouched inside the tunnel mouth and scanned the area.

"What do you think?" Sneaker asked me.

"I don't know. Too easy. It could be luck."

"Sure it could. No sign of pursuit."

"Short attention spans."

"There was a Hound. Where is it?"

"Lost us when we came down here," I said, not believing it either.

"You've got an answer for everything."

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"Yeah, but is it the right answer? You ever been back in one of these mine tunnels?" I asked.

"No. Just as far as the Penthouse entrance."

"Me neither. Is there another entrance into the cavern?"

"Not that I know of."

We watched and listened. Heard nothing alarming.

"It's only a quarter mile to the trail," Sneaker said.

Our eyes met, and there was nothing more to say. We had to go on. I reached out and touched her cheek, so soft and so beautiful despite the smudge marks and the growing bruise on her neck. She pressed her cheek against my fingers and smiled. Yeah, missing her would hurt.

All senses on red alert, we hugged the wall as we made our way down the passage. At the next cave we saw nobody. Then, suddenly, at least twenty security troops appeared in front of us. I drew my gun and spun around to run. There were twenty more behind.

These weren't the scrawny, bandy-legged grunts that did the menial labor, either. They were in shape and disciplined. Their twisted mouths formed grim frowns and the only sign of nerves were the tails that twitched around leathery legs.

We stood back to back, out gunned twenty to one.

"The mine," I said over my shoulder.

We turned, took a step, and stopped. Five minions filled the tunnel. No way out there. I looked into Sneaker's big, dark eyes and saw that she felt the same as I did. Simultaneously we mouthed the same words—The Abyss. Though I'd die of thirst before I ever hit anything, if there was something to hit, and I'd be with Sneaker, my gut clenched

into a tight ball at the thought of taking the Long Fall. I was fairly sure, however, it would be better than an eternity of torment at the hands of Mephisto.

Our eyes still locked, I tensed, ready to make the dash to the Rift edge. She placed a hand on my chest, and I wasn't afraid. At least we'd be falling together. As I filled my lungs for the dash I wondered if I'd see anything interesting in the Abyss before I died. That thought took some of the terror out of it.

I nodded as I counted, "One, two—."

"Getter!" a voice boomed.

I spun around at the unexpected voice. Captain Boam! No, the voice carried more authority than his ever would. A demon came toward us through the short rock passage from the fires. He had to lean forward to keep his head from scraping the roof. At the passage entrance he rose to his full ten foot plus height. He had a stubby crocodile head with three glistening slashes on the cheeks, a Major. As he looked down on us, the two-inch claws at the end of his double-elbowed arms slid in and out of their sheaths.

"Getter," he said as if we were old acquaintances, his voice deep and scratchy as if gravel rubbed together in his throat. "You have been a nuisance during your visit this time. Usually, you are so inconspicuous. Now Mephisto is angry with you."

My surprise that he knew of my previous trips to Hell overcame my surprise at his sudden appearance.

"What do you mean 'visit this time?'"

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"We are not fools, Getter. We know about you so-called Hell Cops. You sneak in here and take a few souls. It is nothing. But now, if you and Sneaker were going back where you came from, I would tell you to warn the others. Soon it will not be so easy to come to Hell and return."

"Mephisto is raising an army to challenge Satan, isn't he?" I asked.

"Mephisto is ambitious," the demon said.

"War, then."

"I do not think it will be much of a war. Satan is old and tired."

"And which side are you on, Major...?"

"I am Major Molas," he said with a slight bow. It was hard to tell in the dim torchlight, but I'd swear his thick lips curved up at the corners in a small, wily smile. "I will be on the winning side."

"How do you know me?" Sneaker asked.

"Ah, the beautiful Sneaker. You made many visits here with Destiny, I believe."

"You know Destiny?"

"I know many things."

Nobody spoke after that. I could hear the creaks of armor as the troops became restless and shifted positions. Molas seemed to have lost interest. He looked right through us. I had a creepy feeling that something else was going on underneath the obvious.

My heart pounded. Major Molas was no Captain Boam. I would not be able to trick or manipulate him like Boam. Plus he had experienced troops with him, instead of the dim-

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witted Grizzle. I didn't dare think what Mephisto had in mind for me, but I was determined to take it like a man. At least while Sneaker was around. She took my hand and gently squeezed. I squared my shoulders and waited.

Molas came back from wherever he'd been.

"We will go now," he ordered, turning away.

"Wait," I said. "Leave her. She's done nothing wrong."

Molas looked hard at me. He was good at it. His eyes were like hard-boiled eggs sliced lengthwise. The hard yellow irises shot with green roiled around the large black pupil.

"Just being here is something wrong," he said. I swear he shrugged, less annoyed than amused. His claws tapped absently against the passage wall, as if waiting for something. "Not to mention the matter of the Hound." He glanced toward the cave next to us. He saw something, pushed off the wall. "She comes with us."

"No! She comes with me!" somebody shouted.

Every being froze. Molas did, too, though slowly, not at all surprised. Where had the voice come from? I looked at Sneaker; her mouth and eyes were wide open, staring into the depths of the cave.

"It couldn't be," she whispered.

Sounds of a struggle came from the tunnel; minion grunts and human curses. Shots echoed simultaneously with the flash of flammers.

"This way, Sneaker," the new voice called out from the tunnel.

"Get them!" Molas bellowed to his men.

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Sneaker and I jumped. Both groups of minions fired, their flame balls passing through the space our heads had just left. They weren't dumb enough to shoot their own comrades, though. Dying flames inside the cave lit the way as we leaped over several bodies and followed a shadowy figure into the dark. A ball of fire hissed over my shoulder, its sparks singeing my hair. I fired back at the figures silhouetted in the entrance, then lost sight of them as the tunnel curved down.

We ran in near total darkness, following the stranger's dim flashlight. The tunnel curved several times, always descending. The heat increased. The walls were slimy and stank of sulfur and age. Our pursuers gained on us.

Suddenly the light disappeared. I continued a short way, thinking our rescuer had rounded a corner. I trailed one hand along the wall to keep oriented.

"Sneaker," I whispered loudly, the darkness and the minions closing in on me. "Sneaker!"

"Here, Getter."

"Where the Hell's here?"

The lights of the advancing troops reflected off the slime covered rock.

"A few more steps. Come on!"

"Christ, Sneak, they're almost here. Where the—?"

A dim light turned on and off. In the quick flash I saw a hand about two feet off the floor reach up and grab my walking stick. Before I could react, the hand yanked me down and through the tunnel wall.

Chapter Fifteen

I felt like I'd been pulled through an old-time clothes wringer, with some sand thrown in to keep me alert. As I struggled to my feet a light blinded me.

"So this is Getter?" the mystery voice said.

"That's him," Sneaker's voice confirmed.

"We have met, once or twice. I knew his Father-in-law, Jack Thanos, a good man, one of the old school. He'd never wear an earring."

"All right, so you think I'm a punk kid, get the damn light out of my eyes, will ya?"

"Touchy, isn't he?" the stranger said, but he lowered the flashlight.

While yellow spots danced in my eyes I looked around.

"Where are we? Molas's minions were right behind me."

"Just a little rabbit hole I found," said the voice. "Molas is too big, so he'll have to send some of his troops in after us. It'll take them awhile to find it, so we should be on our way."

He turned and started up a narrow fissure that led upward, leaving us in the dark.

"Wait," I said, shining my light after him. "You're Destiny. Aren't you?"

He stopped and faced me. Like somebody's grandfather ready to do yard work, he wore khaki pants, a long-sleeved burgundy shirt that hung loose, and a limp tennis hat of indeterminate color. His pale egg-shaped face hadn't been shaved for a week, and large, dark, deep-set eyes inspected

me with uncomfortable intensity. He carried a small day pack that was as worn as the rest of his clothes. There was something about him my instincts didn't trust.

"Yes, I am," he said.

"Then what are you doing here? I thought you retired."

"That's what I want to know," Sneaker added.

"No time for that. If you don't want to be minion stew I suggest we move."

"Molas let you rescue us, didn't he?" I said.

Destiny stepped up and inspected my face. He spoke to Sneaker. "You did say he was clever." Without waiting for an answer he turned and set off through the fractured rock.

Destiny was a stocky man with a barrel chest and short powerful legs that didn't quit. He had a bullet head with a fringe of grizzled hair about an inch long that stuck out from under his hat in random spikes. He was sixty-five with the stamina of an ironman champion. Damned if I was going to let him show me up.

We made good time at first. Though narrow, the fracture had few obstructions and gradually widened. Destiny knew the way. He didn't hesitate at the many forks we came to. After a half hour of fast walking he stopped and turned off his light.

I'd been dragging a little, and as I came up to Sneaker and Destiny, standing at the cave mouth, I was going to say something smartalecky and offensive, but when I saw what they saw I just caught my breath and stared.

The lava river that looked so beautiful and benign from the Penthouse, raged ten feet below, down a steep, polished

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slope. The intense heat pushed against me like a strong current. While the heat pushed, the fantastic scene drew me as an open door draws an agoraphobe. Fear and fascination tugged at me, but I held my ground.

The lava expanded and contracted as it slithered past, like a living entity. Molten rock spat into the air then dropped back with a flat plop. A crust of cooler, black lava rode the surface, swirling, breaking up and reforming in a mesmerizing display of nature at its fiercest. Slabs of crust broke with deafening cracks. An occasional piece broke off, upended, and crashed against the river bank with a grating roar before the lava sucked it back in. Underneath the other sounds was a continuous hissing, as if the river rolled on gravel.

Fairy Falls couldn't be seen from our position. The cavern narrowed to almost the width of the river itself, its walls, continually swirling with hues of ocher from the lava light, rose sheer to fade into the semi-gloom of the ceiling.

I glanced at Destiny. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and inspected his fingernails like a bored tour guide, letting the tourists have five minutes to gawk before moving on to the next sight. What must he have seen in his life that such a scene was of no interest?

Destiny pushed off the wall and said, "Time to go. They've probably broken through by now."

"Destiny," Sneaker said, awe heavy in her voice. "This is incredible. How did you find this place?"

"Just poking around," he said noncommittally. "Come on. Sneaker, take my hand, face the wall. There's a narrow ledge

just around this corner. Getter, you're last. You'll find some hand holds up high. Don't slip."

It was obvious by his expression that he meant don't slip and endanger Sneaker.

I broke down my staff, secured it in its sheath, and followed them. He was right about the ledge. It was a narrow six inches at its widest with a slight downward slant. The handholds were barely worthy of the name. I don't know how Destiny managed it with his big chest and short arms. I was too busy kissing hot rock to notice.

The ledge widened into a path that rose up the ragged rock face as if the top half of the cavern had slipped over two feet. As we climbed the steep trail I concentrated on Sneaker's rear to keep my mind off the hundred foot, and rising, fall to the cavern floor. Destiny surged ahead of us, ignoring the small stones that rolled underfoot, providing heart-stopping moments along the way. Did the man have a death wish, or was he truly fearless?

The path wound along the convoluted cavern wall. At a point about two hundred feet above the floor the path split into three. One branch continued up, one switched back and up, one went down.

The old man let us rest for a minute. A shrill scream echoed through the cavern.

"Minion," I said.

"Hit the lava," Destiny said, spreading his stubby fingers. "Poof."

I'd been keeping my eyes straight ahead or up or to the side or closed, anywhere but down.

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Sneaker laid a hand on my shoulder.

"You okay? This probably isn't the route you would have chosen."

"Yeah, I'm great. Your ass is a terrific diversion."

Her smile said she took that mostly as a compliment.

"Are you afraid of heights, Getter?" Destiny asked, too casually to be considered innocent.

What did he have against me? Of course I didn't know him, so I assumed for the moment that was his way.

"Not heights. Falling. If you had a nice solid rail on this ledge, it'd be no problem. I don't suppose we're going down now, are we?"

"It's your lucky day," he said, standing up. "Let's go."

From the time we'd started up the trail, I thought I saw something above us in the ceiling shadows. Tiny specks that glided through the dark, like hunting birds or bats. They could have been an illusion so I said nothing. As we descended, I looked up and clearly saw three pairs of wings circling toward us.

"Destiny," I called ahead. "There are three birds of some sort looking us over. Friend or foe?"

He stopped and looked up. He took binoculars from a pocket and followed their progress.

"Cavern Flyers," he said, putting the glasses away. "Some are friendly, most aren't. We should get to the floor quickly. Your gun's loaded?"

In the dim light I had no way of telling how big the flying demons were. As soon as we started down, they dove on us. They got big fast.

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Sneaker must have been watching the Flyers, too, not where she was stepping. She slipped. She landed on her butt, one leg over the edge. Off balance, with nothing to grab, downward momentum began to pull her over. I jumped and grabbed her pack. We both held still and took a couple quick breaths before she scrambled back onto the trail. Destiny helped her to her feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. There was no mistaking the affection and concern in his tone. Like a father to daughter. Could that be? I couldn't think more about that because right then the Flyers attacked.

The Flyers had an eight-foot-plus wingspan. The wings were hairy leather, like a bat's, with double talons at the apexes. Their bodies were long and slim and tapered to a lizard's tail. The eyes with huge black irises like a bull's eye, protruded over a hooked beak. Long boney legs dangled from mid-body, ending with two opposed claws.

The first Flyer dove below us, spread its wings and swooped up the cliff face until it stopped, eyes level with mine, two feet in front of me. I looked at it with surprise. Then I felt its claws close around my ankle and pull. Instinctively, I dropped to my stomach and grabbed at the rock. I kicked out, but the Flyer's leg bones just bent and absorbed the shock.

I hung half over the edge, fingers scraping the rock for a handhold when I heard the deep boom of a Hell Cop gun. I barely caught sight of the Flyer's head disintegrating before the pressure stopped and the headless body fell away to the cavern floor.

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I hung by my elbows and turned in time to see a Flyer swoop behind Destiny and hook its claws into his pack. Ignoring the two hundred foot drop beneath me, I held on with one arm and drew my gun. I rested it on my shoulder and, hoping I didn't blow the old man's head off, fired.

Destiny didn't even blink as the shot put a hole in the Flyer's scrawny chest. The old Hell Cop shrugged away the dangling body and knelt beside Sneaker. They ignored me.

I struggled back onto the trail and rolled onto my back to catch my breath. Then another group of Flyers attacked.

Sneaker got the first one. Then they were all over us, screeching like pissed off dolphins with loudspeakers. I could barely hear my gun firing.

Destiny yelled, "Down. We must get to the floor."

That sounded like a good idea as long it wasn't the Flyer's way—straight down. We slipped and slid down the path, fighting all the way. With no time to reload, my staff proved almost as good a weapon as the gun.

When the trail descended to within ten feet of the cavern floor, Destiny jumped down, followed by Sneaker. That ten-foot might as well have been a hundred as far as I was concerned, but I had no choice. I took a breath, swatted a Flyer out of the way, and jumped.

The landing restarted my heart. I rolled to my feet and followed the others into a maze of blue-streaked, cube shaped boulders twenty feet high where the Flyers couldn't get us. We rested, shielded from above by an overhang.

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"I hope those weren't the friendly Flyers you mentioned," I said to Destiny, who looked like he had just come back from a stroll about the garden.

"No, there are only a few of them. They can't help when the others are around."

"Do you mean they will actually help you?" Sneaker asked. "You never mentioned them before. How long have you been in this cavern, Destiny? And why are you here at all?"

"And speaking of friendly demons," I added. "What's with you and Major Molas?"

Destiny looked at me, then nodded as if a suspicion had been confirmed. He stood up.

"Come on," he said. "I have a safe place to rest. Besides, I'm hungry."

A few minutes later, under two boulders that touched at the top, we entered a cave. The ground rose slightly for two hundred feet, then turned into chiseled steps that curved to the left. The steps got steeper then dead-ended. I shined my light around but saw no hidden ladders or other ways out. My Find showed no exits. Sneaker couldn't find an exit, either.

Destiny watched us with a serious frown and amused eyes.

When we gave up and looked at him, he said, "This is for you only. You will tell no one, and no thing. Sneaker, I know you. Getter, how is your word?"

"My word is damn good," I said.

Destiny glanced at Sneaker for confirmation that I could be trusted. Sneaker opened her mouth, but I spoke first.

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"I don't need her to backup what I say. My word is good, whether in Hell or otherwise. If that's not acceptable to you, I'll find my own way out."

"Getter," Sneaker said, taking my arm.

I shrugged it off.

"Sneak," I said, "I know you two have a history. That's fine. But I have a history, too, and no Hell Cop, soul, demon, or civilian Lifer has ever had cause to doubt my word. If he didn't trust me, why bring me here in the first place?"

"Getter, please. I know he doesn't know you. He knows your reputation. Just—."

"Oh, I do know him, Sneaker," Destiny said. "He's me."

The older Hell Cop cocked his head, as if listening to voices nobody else could hear. Then he said, "We will discuss this over some hellfire pudding. Now, pay attention."

He faced the blank rock, activated his Find, and pressed it into a natural looking depression near the right edge.

"Rookbaku fetmac," he said. Without a sound, a five foot section of rock six inches thick swung outward. Destiny showed us the setting on his Find and made us repeat the words several times.

Behind the door was a smooth face similar to a Nexus entrance. He changed his Find setting, showed it to us, then held it to the blank stone.

"After you," he said.

Sneaker looked at me, shrugged, and stepped through.

I shrugged, too, and followed close behind.

Chapter Sixteen

I don't know what I thought would be on the other side of the ersatz Nexus entrance, but more steps wasn't it.

"Sneak," I said, low and quick before Destiny came through. "Is this guy for real? Do you trust him?"

She stared past me up the stairs.

"I trust him," she said. "I owe him everything. But he shouldn't be here. Why isn't he with his wife. He's retired, for Christ's sake."

I had a pretty good idea why he was bopping around Hell instead of improving his shuffleboard game. Sneaker wouldn't understand yet, she'd only been a Hell Cop for a few years, but if I was right, it could be a sad thing for her.

Destiny led us up the steps. We rounded a corner and came out in a high ceilinged chamber about fifty-feet long by thirty wide. On either side arched doorways led to other rooms. Except for a low stone wall, the end of the room opened into the main cavern. The lava river hissed a hundred feet below. Fairy Falls was visible in the far distance to the right.

The room showed signs of long use. Parts of the floor around a stone table and raised fireplace chiseled out of the stone, were worn smooth. A lantern hung over the table and clothes hung from steel spikes. Long horizontal grooves cut into the wall held cans and bags of food. A yellowed picture of a mountain pond hung by the table. Water trickled into a

stone catch basin then flowed through a channel in the floor into the first room on the right.

Destiny stopped in the middle of the main room and turned to us. He pointed to our left.

"That's your room. That's my room," he said, pointing to the other side. "The next one's the bathroom. There's a shower rigged up, help yourself. Don't forget to flush."

He went to the rough archway into his room.

"Destiny," Sneaker said. "What is this place? Who made it? How'd you find it?"

He said, "We'll eat in a little while," and went into his room, drawing a black curtain across the entrance.

Carefully, we inspected our room. About ten by fifteen and rough-hewn out of solid rock like the rest, it had an irregular window that looked out on the main cavern. A large straw-stuffed pallet took up one corner. In the opposite corner were a crude wood table and two stools.

Sneaker sprawled on the mattress, I dropped onto a stool. We were quiet for awhile, then I said what I'd been thinking.

"I thought I knew Hell pretty well, but now I don't know. I've never even heard rumors of this place. And what's with Major Molas? He helped us back there. Did you know about him?"

"No," Sneaker said, staring at the ceiling.

"What about the friendly Flyers he mentioned?"

"No."

"Well, what'd he teach you, then?"

After a long silence, she said, "How to survive."

"He left out a few lessons on safe places."

She threw her arm over her eyes.

"He didn't want to retire," she said. "His wife made him stop. He has a bad heart."

"He must've got a new heart, then. Christ, he didn't even break a sweat."

"He can go for days and not stop."

"Maybe he's gone around the bend," I said carefully. "Hell is not exactly a retirement haven. Do you really trust him?"

"You asked me before."

"I'm asking again."

"Do you trust him?" she asked back.

"No. Yes. I don't know. He obviously knows how to survive down here. I guess, on your say so, and his reputation, I'll go along. But I'm keeping my skepticism dusted off."

She nodded under her arm, and we were quiet again.

I got antsy after a few minutes.

"I'm going to take a shower," I said.

Sneaker lifted a finger in acknowledgment. I picked up my pack and left the room.

The bathroom was about ten feet square with a rough circular window that looked out along the cavern wall. A five gallon bucket rigged with a string-actuated shower head hung under a crack in the roof. A thin stream of water kept the bucket overflowing. I squatted over the drain hole in the corner for a few minutes then, still in my tattered jumpsuit, stood under the bucket and pulled the string.

Sneaker came in after a few minutes. She washed her suit while it was still on, then stripped and came into my arms. She felt so good, a piece of softness in a world of rock.

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Without speaking, we washed each other. Still wet, and without exchanging a word, we had intense, serious sex against the wall with the window. Though we both came, there was little joy in the act. It was as if we did it because we thought we should. There's little enough softness in Hell. If something touched you, it was usually trying to kill you. You had to take your tenderness when you had the chance.

In our room we dressed in clean jumpsuits. I was gazing out the window at the passing lava when Sneaker asked me what I was thinking about.

"Brittany Hightower," I said.

"The soul you came to get?"

"Yeah. All this sightseeing is great, but the reason I'm here is to retrieve her. I figure I'll eat, sleep a little, and then go find her and take her to the Gate."

Sneaker hugged my arm and rested her head on my shoulder.

"Me too," she said. "Little Bobby Johnston needs to go to Heaven. He died rescuing his brother. I don't know how they could screw up on a kid hero like that. Come to think of it, three of my last four retrievals were kids."

"Three out of five for me."

"That's unusual."

"Very," I agreed.

"Think it means something?"

"Yeah, I do, but I have to focus on my kid first. If Destiny will leave, I hope he'll lead us out of here."

"What do you mean, 'if he'll leave?'"

I shrugged and said, "I'm wondering if maybe he's Hell Crazy."

"Hell Crazy? I've heard the term, but I don't really know what it means."

"I've only heard of a couple of cases myself and they were a long time ago. Some Cops spend a lot of time in Hell, interacting with demons and all. Well, sometimes they begin to think they are demons. They forget they're Lifers and don't go back."

"And you think Destiny is Hell Crazy? You're crazy."

"Come on, look at him. He's supposed to be retired, but he's practically moved in here. He has something going on with Molas. He talks about friendly Fliers. That's nuts in my book."

"He must have a reason," Sneaker defended. "I know him. He's not Hell Crazy."

"She's right," Destiny said from the doorway. "I'm not Hell Crazy." He cocked his head and shrugged. "At least not completely. Dinner's about ready." He turned and left.

Sneaker shot me a look then punched my shoulder. I followed her out at a discreet distance.

* * * *

"This stew is terrific," I told Destiny after the first two bites. "It's got blackweed in it. What else?"

"Spit Lizard and blackweed," he said as he set down a bowl for himself. He went back to the rock oven and took out a square steel pan. "And one of Sneaker's favorites, Blind Fish eggs in Lavaflower sauce."

"Oh, Destiny, it smells wonderful," Sneaker gushed.

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"Man, I haven't had Blind Fish eggs in years," I said, hungrily eyeing the pan. "Did you collect them yourself?"

"Yes, I did," he said and held up his hands so I could see that he still had all his fingers.

Blindfish live in scummy, black water pools all over Hell. They build their nests in shallow water. They're found by looking for a steady stream of bubbles from the methane they give off as the eggs suck in and break down the scum. The adult fish have wide mouths with piranah-like teeth. They are blind, yet have no problem identifying a hand reaching down to pluck the eggs from their woven nests.

The eggs are a disgusting doughy, gray when fresh, but cooked in Lavaflower sauce they turn a bright sky blue. I carefully lifted one out with my spoon. I didn't want to puncture it and lose any of the sweet yolk inside. The barely sour sauce flowed over my tongue. Some of the eggs inevitably break during cooking, adding a subtle tang to the sauce that anticipates the exquisite flavor to come.

I couldn't wait. I crushed the egg with my front teeth. My body jerked as the flavor burst onto my tongue like a hit of high-grade crack. My eyes closed so as not to be distracted. The taste filled my mouth, then slowly seeped into my head, filling it like smoke fills a bottle. When I opened my eyes, Sneaker, sitting across from me, had her eyes shut also, as she savored the near addictive taste of Blind Fish eggs in Lavaflower sauce.

We ate in silence for awhile, all of us experiencing the delicacies in our private way. The chunks of Spit Lizard meat were large and tender and did not taste like chicken. I wiped

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up the last of the stew with Destiny's Hellbaked bread, made with flour imported from the real world. For dessert we had coffee and hellfire pudding with berries from 257 that tasted like chocolate.

Destiny refilled my cup with Beelzebub decafe. He sipped from his own crystal mug, stared into its depths. "So Sneaker, how are you?"

Sneaker also tried to see something in the bottom of her cup as she rotated it with her fingertips. But when she spoke she looked right at Destiny like a daughter about to reprimand her father.

"I'm fine, Destiny," she said, biting off each word. "But that's not the question, is it? The question is, What the fuck are you doing," she swept her arm out to indicate the chambers, "setting up housekeeping in Hell, in the cavern, in these rooms? You are retired. That means you stay home with Barbara and do things with her, for once. Not gallivant around the secret cavern playing Boy Scout. You have a bad heart, Destiny. 911 does not come into this neighborhood."

I had to look away to get rid of the lump in my throat. I could take the cocked-head, chin forward, doe-eyed look she gave him, but that one tear glistening on her cheek got me. She loved the guy and was really worried about him. She was already too independent and too hardened by the suffering she'd witnessed to ever say so.

"Are you finished?" he asked gently.

"No. Yes. Just tell me what's going on."

She brushed the tear away, then gave me a tight lipped, squinty look as if I'd done something.

Destiny reached out his stubby fingers for her slender ones. She pulled away, with little conviction. He gathered her hands in his.

"Sneaker, what are you really angry about?"

Her mouth worked, and she bit her lip to stop it.

"Destiny," she finally said. "You know what the other Hell Cops say when they see me? 'Oh, it must have been great to work with him.' 'Man, he was the best.' 'Jeez, forty years and now he gets to retire. I envy him.' The other Cops admire you. You're a hero to them. Even to Getter here, though he'd never admit it."

I kept a neutral expression as they searched for an admission. Sneaker was right for the most part. I did admire the guy. I mean, you had to. But as far as being a hero, I wasn't ready to admit that, although some of the stories about him certainly painted him as a heroic figure.

She sort of humphed at me, then said, "The point is, you're their role model. You had your adventures and then you retired. It's what they want, what they look forward to. Now you're back in Hell. If you die here, instead of being a legendary hero you'll be a legendary fool." She took his hand in both of hers and the lump returned to my throat. "I don't want that to happen. You don't deserve that, and I couldn't stand it if it did. Do you know what I mean?" She pulled back and brushed another tear. "Oh, Hell."

Sneaker stared into her coffee, Destiny stared at the cavern, and I just stared, sneaking an occasional glance at them.

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"Getter was partly right," Destiny said, breaking a silence that had lasted a little too long. "I guess I am a bit Hell Crazy, though I don't think I'm a demon. During the forty-two years I was a Cop I spent twenty-eight and a half in Hell. I kept track, and so did Barbara. I made a good living, and she never wanted for anything, except a husband. It was inevitable that we'd drift apart and she'd have her own life."

"But you always seemed so close," Sneaker said.

Destiny wore a tender smile, whether for Sneaker or Barbara, I couldn't tell.

"Oh, we didn't fall out of love. We still enjoy each other's company, just not on a full time basis."

"So you decided to retire in Hell for, what, six, seven months a year?" I asked.

"Something like that. Besides, life in the real world is so boring. You can't tell me you haven't noticed."

I shrugged agreement.

"Also, it's not like I bask in the lava glow all day. Hell has some interesting stuff if you look for it."

Somebody had to ask. "Like what?" I said.

His eyes lit up as he stood.

"Come, I'll show you."

Sneaker and I looked at each other and stood to follow. As we walked toward his chamber, Destiny put his arm around her shoulder, though he was several inches shorter.

"Sneaker," he said. "I know you like Barbara, as well you should. She's a wonderful woman, and she likes you, too. I said I made a good living as a Hell Cop, but not good enough to buy the house on the beach, and the house in the

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mountains and the condo by the university. And what about the cars and her private research observatory?"

"I guess I thought she made good money at the University and you made some good investments. I did wonder though."

"As well you should have."

He brushed aside the heavy curtain that closed off his bedroom. Though the light was dim the fabric sparkled as if reflecting light from a huge chandelier. His room was slightly bigger than ours with the same front window. The side window, though, was a good six foot square with a rock platform jutting out three or four feet. Hanging tapestries covered much of the wall space. At first, the patterns looked vaguely Oriental or Indian, but as I looked closer the patterns became more alien and resolved into scenes from Hell. Devils and demons tormented souls that were not quite human, as if woven by Bosch or Signorelli on LSD. The tapestries were old, faded and frighteningly different from the Hell I was used to.

Behind me, I heard Sneaker say, "Destiny, is that what I think it is?"

"Yesss," he said, drawing out the word in a whisper as if experiencing an intense pleasure.

I turned and stared. He had lifted the covering from his bed, revealing an orderly, two foot high by six foot long stack of metal ingots, glowing with the unmistakable sheen of gold. The old man gently slid an ingot off the top. I could see the heft of it as his arms dipped with the weight. He held it to his chest, then offered it to Sneaker.

"Gold? Where'd it come from? Why is it here? There must be millions of dollars worth here." She handed the twelve-inch long brick to me. "Getter, look at this, it's all gold."

Without thinking, I began calculating—about ten pounds, a hundred and sixty ounces. The price of gold was about two hundred and eighty dollars an ounce—the metal that lay hot in my hands was worth about forty-five thousand dollars. Imprinted into the ingot was a design. A circle with a curved line ending in a triangle inside, like a devil's tail. There was a lightning bolt opposite the tail with five squiggles in between. Destiny gently caressed the pile. I turned the design to him.

"The Lost Devil Mine?" I asked.

Destiny nodded, his face wearing a self-satisfied smile.

"It's here, in the cavern?"

He nodded again.

I handed the gold bar to Sneaker and inspected the room. Once I knew to look, it was obvious. I went to the back of the room and drew a tapestry aside. A faint smell came from the black cave entrance, brimstone mixed with electricity, ozone, as well as other unfamiliar scents.

"Ozone?" I said.

"The Lost Devil's Mine?" Sneaker asked. "That's just a legend, isn't it?"

"All legends have a basis in fact. You know that," Destiny said, sitting on his pile of gold. "Actually, 'Mine' is a bit of a misnomer. Factory is more correct."

"Factory? Destiny, what are you talking about?"

Destiny looked at me with a quizzical smile that made me feel dumb. All novice Hell Cops had heard of the Lost Devil's

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Mine. Satan's private mine where he got the gold to build the Central Palace when he first arrived in Hell. It was an ancient joke that when a Hell Cop retired he'd found the Lost Devil's mine. Apparently, Destiny really had.

My head whirled when he mentioned factory. That and the lingering odor of ozone.

"Are you saying," I said, "that Satan makes gold down there?"

"Made gold. The place has been abandoned for a thousand years, probably."

Sneaker sat beside her mentor.

"I don't understand," she said. "Satan can make gold?"

"Where do you think gold came from?" he said. "Satan invented gold."

"What? Des, you're weirding me out here."

"Think about it. More sin has been committed, more misery suffered, over gold than anything in human history, except maybe love and religion. It's one of Satan's best strategies. It was brilliant."

"You've been down there," I said. "Do you know how to make it?"

He laughed.

"The old alchemist's trick, turning lead or mercury into gold? No, I don't know how. I don't need to, there's tons for the taking. If you can get out."

Sneaker looked like she wanted to say something so I kept quiet, though there were plenty of questions I wanted to ask.

"Destiny, did you know about the mine when you were training me?"

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"Yes, I did," he said.

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Because you had much more serious things to think about then. Like learning to survive. There's a lot more to becoming a Hell Cop than learning a few rules and how to work a Find. Hell Cops are unique in that they have a very high survival instinct. That instinct needs to be trained and focused for the singular dangers in Hell. You have it, though it needs to be more focused. Getter has it, perhaps stronger and deeper than any I've seen."

I barely heard what he said because that instinct he was talking about was telling me something was coming. I stepped to the door and checked out the main chamber—empty. Then I heard a soft rustle behind me. I had my gun out before I completed my turn. The sights rested on two Fliers folding their wings on the ledge outside the window. Their big eyes kept watch of the gun. Otherwise they seemed calm.

The smallest one, about six feet from beak to tail, waddled forward. Though the only Fliers I'd seen before were trying to kill me and I hadn't had the time to scrutinize them closely, I could tell this one was old, even ancient. The nicks and scars on his wings took a long lifetime to acquire. A ragged scar ran diagonally across his ten-inch beak, and his long tail had a crook in it near the end. He even waddled old, slowly, rocking from one foot to the other.

Yet, there was great dignity and power about him. His eyes held an intelligence born of long experience. They studied each of us in turn, and when he finished with me, I

felt that he knew everything about me worth knowing. He radiated no particular menace, but still ...

Destiny went to meet the old Flier.

"Put that gun away, Getter," he said.

I did, though I kept my hand on it.

The Flier greeted Destiny with a nod and then spoke with a lot of acks and caws and gnashing of beak. Destiny surprised me by replying in kind. In a couple of minutes he turned to us.

"Reech says other Fliers told Molas's demons where we are. But Reech told them the first group was lying and then sent them up the trail. We've got five or six hours before they make it here."

He spoke to them again, then pointed to Sneaker and said her name. Then he pointed at me and said my name. Reech waddled to the inside edge of the opening. Destiny motioned me forward.

"Getter," the Flier said in a high pitched, guttural voice that nevertheless was easily understandable. "We know of you. You killed Mephisto's relative. You and Sneaker killed a Hound. Mephisto is angry. Do not let him catch you. You may hide here if you must."

"Thank you," I said hesitantly, not quite trusting kind words from a demon. "Mephisto doesn't know of this cavern?"

"He knows but does not believe."

"How have you heard of me?"

"We hear of many things here."

"Have you heard of war?"

Reech's stare penetrated my brain. I felt as if I'd said, "Fuck you," to my mother. But his words carried no special admonishment.

"Yes, there is talk of war. Another reason for you to avoid Mephisto. He would make an example and an excuse of you. That is to be avoided at all costs."

"Well, I certainly intend to avoid him. I only want to find the soul I came for and go home."

"That is what you want, Getter, but it will be a longer flight than you think before you truly return to your home." Slowly he unfurled his wings and laid them on my shoulders. His gaze held me as if I was encased in concrete. "Strange," he said, "how Fate offers greatness to the one who wants it least."

"I don't understand," I said, or thought. I wasn't sure which. "Greatness? Me?"

"Be yourself, Getter. Greatness is in you. The future of Hell is in your hands." With a final blast of his eyes he removed his wings. He turned to Destiny. "I must go."

They spoke formally in the Flier language, and then Reech turned and waddled slowly on bent legs to the edge of the rock. His age showed in every laborious step. The other, younger Flier stepped back, his respect for the elder obvious in his stiff, watchful stance. Reech spread his wrinkled wings and fell out of sight.

The younger Flier stepped forward. "I am Orbuck," he said. He raked us with his glare. Our eyes met and held. My survival instincts tried to read him. His expression was unfathomable. I got a sense of danger and respect from him,

without a clue as to how they pertained to me. He raised his wings, gave a powerful downward thrust, did a fancy spin in the air, and was gone.

I turned to Destiny.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?" I said.

"Don't take Reech's words lightly, Getter," he admonished.

"I don't," I assured him. I didn't know what in Hell the old Flier was talking about.

"There seems to be an awful lot you didn't tell me about," Sneaker said to her mentor.

He rested an affectionate hand on her shoulder.

"I taught you what you needed to know," he said.

"Besides, you can't expect to learn forty years worth of stuff in three years, can you?" He took our arms and guided us into the main chamber. "I need a drink, and then we should rest for four hours."

"Are you going to tell us about Reech?" I asked, sitting down.

"He's ancient," Sneaker said. "I've never seen anybody radiate such age, and wisdom."

Destiny poured sparingly from two bottles into three cut diamond cups. One bottle contained a rich, dark, almost black liquid, the other a pure sky blue fluid. The solution had a smokey look to it as the two liquids mingled and fought together. Black and Blue Wine; Destiny was definitely living large in Hell. The wine was extremely rare. The Dandelion like weeds only grew in one place, the black and blue flowers intermingled in vast fields. Each color liquid was poison by itself; mixed in proper proportion they were pure ambrosia.

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When the Wine reached its proper blood color, Sneaker and I clinked crystal and sipped. My stomach was beginning to glow when Destiny spoke.

"Reech came here with Satan."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in.

"That would make him three thousand years old," I said.

"Depending on who you talk to," Sneaker added.

"You're much too low in your estimate," Destiny informed us. "Suffice it to say he's ageless, timeless. The Fliers were the original demons. There's few of the original bloodline left, but they seem to know everything that happens in Hell." He raised his eyes to me and smiled seriously. "When I first met Reech, he looked at me the way he looked at you."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"Not for me to say," he said with an inscrutable smile that had my instincts singing, DANGER, DANGER.

He turned to Sneaker but pointed at me.

"Take care of this man, Sneaker. He is bound to do great things, if he survives."

"Now what does that mean?" I said, getting a little testy at all the enigmatic "looked at you" and "great things" stuff. The only great things I wanted to do were get Brittany Hightower out and survive the process. "Is that what Reech said?"

Destiny stood up. He drained his glass of Black and Blue Wine and took thirty seconds to savor the ecstasy of it.

"All in good time, Getter," he said. "We should rest. There's some climbing to do. Four hours."

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Sneaker looked positively angelic as she sat with eyes closed and gave herself up to the wine. When she came back, she hugged Destiny and asked if I was coming to bed.

"In a minute," I said, staring into the priceless diamond glass with its priceless blood red wine.

Alone, I went to the open end of the chamber and looked out on the lava river. In the distance Fairy Falls raged on. Its subdued roar filled the great cavern, its effect as good as silence.

I didn't care for mystic foretellings like Reech gave me. Some Hell Cops believed in that stuff, consulting fortune tellers of various types before accepting a retrieval commission. I didn't listen to that sort of thing. In Hell, dire prognostications were too easily turned into self-fulfilling prophecies, and trust in predictions of success could too easily lead to inattention and failure.

But, I couldn't help thinking that already I'd had more trouble in a shorter time than on any other trip. I wanted to get the girl, who could have been my daughter—man, I had to stop thinking like that—and get out. Not only to avoid Reech's pronouncement, but because souls, especially young ones, have been corrupted and missed their chance at Heaven, to their everlasting regret.

Fed and rested, I was getting antsy. Destiny, with his luxury hideaway, gold, and ancient friends, was interesting, but time consuming. I wanted to get back to the familiar unfamiliarity of Hell proper and do my job. I considered leaving right then; Destiny and Sneaker could take care of themselves. Common sense prevailed, though; I had no idea

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how to get out of the cavern. And, as I took in the debris littered floor below me, the soaring walls, the shifting shadows of the roof, and the fuzzy glimpses of watchful Fliers, I realized there was much in Hell that I didn't know anything about. Though the loss of independence rankled a bit, I decided to wait for the others.

My thoughts wandered as I contemplated the splendors of the place and sipped the wine. After awhile I lay beside Sneaker, already asleep. The questions and doubts continued to present themselves like a bill collector who loves his work. I slept badly.

Chapter Seventeen

It figured that the trail couldn't stay on the floor of the cavern. At first Destiny led us along a path that meandered around and through the debris of millennia. After about a mile at a quick-march pace we encountered wide, unfathomably deep fissures, and the trail took to the walls. Progress toward Fairy Falls, where Destiny assured us we had to go to get out, was slow. Not because the trail was steep, but because the trail sometimes took a hundred yards to advance fifty feet. The rock walls undulated like heavy drapes.

The openings to some of the deep folds were only a few feet wide and could be jumped. I dreaded those jumps. My heart hammered in my chest, and I knew I was going to fall. My feet stuck to the ground, my fingers dug into the rock, and I didn't give a damn what Sneaker or Destiny thought.

Sneaker talked me through the jumps. I'm sure future clients would have a lot of confidence if they saw me fighting panic a few feet off the ground. The jumps didn't get any easier with practice, whether the drop was fifty or five hundred feet.

We'd made it halfway to the Falls when we spotted six of Major Molas's demons. They emerged from the floor debris and mounted the wall trail at a run. Their cries carried clearly as they saw us, too.

"Getter," Destiny said. "We must move quickly now. We do not want to fight them on the trail."

What he meant was that I'd better jump quick when I had to and enough with that fear of falling a thousand feet to my death crap.

We ran when we could, walked fast when we had to, and jumped without hesitation. I just closed my eyes, accepted death, and leaped, hoping my heart would start again when I landed safely.

Coming out of a fold with, thankfully, an opening too wide to jump, I had a sudden feeling that a bull's eye had appeared on my back and something had taken aim at it. I glanced over my shoulder. The demons were out of sight. I jogged on and caught up with Sneaker. The feeling intensified. I looked back again. Movement high up caught my attention.

A Flier swooped down at speed, hugging the wall, outstretched wing tips brushing the rock face.

"Duck," I yelled and dropped to my knees.

The others had no time to react. The Flier missed me, but one claw hooked Sneaker and yanked her off balance toward the void.

Destiny was quick for an old guy. Before Sneaker went over the edge, he had his gun out and had fired. The force of the blast blew the Flier into two pieces and stopped it dead in midair. That saved Sneaker's life. It gave me that fraction of a second I needed to reach out and snatch Sneaker's wrist as she began the long drop. Her falling weight slammed my face to the rock and began to drag me over the edge.

Her scream mingled with mine. As my left shoulder and leg slid into nothingness, my right-hand fingers snagged a tiny

ridge. I squeezed my eyes shut so I didn't have to look down. Still, the image of Sneaker dangling beneath me with half a Flier hanging from her pack was perfectly clear in my mind's eye.

Sweat trickled down my face and I tasted blood. My fingers began to cramp.

"Getter," Sneaker said, her voice small and far away.
"Don't drop me, okay?"

"I won't, Sneak," I managed to say, afraid to move. Her face below me was filled with trust. I would fall with her before I let her go.

She swung as she tried to unhook the dead Flier from her pack.

"Easy, Sneak!" I croaked. "Can you climb up my arm?"

She slipped a half inch through my sweaty grip.

"Hang in there, Getter," Destiny said, over the sound of his pack opening. I swear he chuckled after he said it. Using my Tai Chi training I concentrated all my chi to my hands. Getting rid of the Flier body helped.

Then Destiny said something that broke my concentration.

"Oh, shit."

Then I heard the Flier cries, and Destiny started shooting. Warm liquid sprayed my face. Something brushed my leg. I snuck a peek. Ten or more Fliers wheeled around us. Destiny kept them at bay with an economy of shots. But it was only a matter of time till one knocked him off the ledge or Molas's demons reached us.

Sneaker grasped my wrist with her free hand.

"Let go," she said. "I can climb up."

Looking her in the eye, I relaxed my grip. My heart skipped as she took all the weight. Quickly, uttering a loud grunt of effort, she lunged and grabbed me just below my elbow. I bent my arm to give her a better grip. She rested a few seconds with her eyes closed.

When they opened, they opened wide, and she let go with one hand. She reached for her gun, swung it up till it was by my head, and fired. The compression felt like a spike in my ear. The Flier she shot crashed into Destiny, knocked him over. He tumbled on top of me. I lost my grip on the rock. His weight pressed my body against the gritty ledge. I didn't feel any pain. I did feel Sneaker's hands slide off my arm. For an instant she seemed to float, her hands reaching out, inches from my bent arm.

NO! I screamed in my head. I lunged after her, disregarding my tenuous attachment to the rock. Our fingertips caressed. Then she fell. Her receding eyes told me she didn't blame me. The sudden emptiness in my chest told me that I always would. I barely felt Destiny pull me back to the relative safety of the wall trail. My eyes never left her.

"Look!" Destiny cried out, pointing down to the left.

"What?" I said, desperate not to lose sight of Sneaker.

Destiny forced me to look. Two Fliers dove at top speed toward Sneaker.

"Those bastards," I said between clenched teeth, ready to declare war on all Fliers.

"No," Destiny said. His fingers dug into my arm. "It's Orbuck!"

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My heart gave one great beat, filling my emptiness, then along with my breathing, stopped, waiting. Destiny produced a small pair of binoculars. I'd lost sight of Sneaker in the gloom of the cavern. The Fliers were bigger, but they too disappeared from sight. Dying a little with every passing second, I stared at the cavern floor thousands of feet below—and waited.

The attacking Fliers had vanished into the upper dimness. Within seconds the cavern had taken on an air of expectancy as if the cavern's fate was linked to Sneaker's. As the long seconds ticked past, I knew that my fate had become inextricably bonded with hers. A frightening, yet somehow comforting, thought.

We were within five hundred feet of Fairy Falls. The sheer immensity of it was stunning. Pure lava two hundred feet wide and twenty-feet thick flowed with a deafening roar over the edge of a flat stone plain. At our height, a hundred and fifty feet vertically from the top, the lava glowed orange, the intensity made fuzzy by waves of heat that rose like ocean waves, bringing swirls of sparks and ash with it. Where the trail met the Fall's face it zig-zagged up to the top, at one point disappearing behind the lava. I assumed that was where we were going.

"He's got her," Destiny said with a relieved sigh. "I think she's too heavy for one, though."

"Let me see." I grabbed the binoculars.

I located them as the second Flier glided over Orbuck and grasped him where the wings joined his body. They quickly synchronized their wing motions and began to rise. I worried

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at first because they headed straight for the Falls. Then they rose rapidly in a tight spiral and I realized they were riding the rising heat like a sailplane.

"Can you walk?" Destiny asked.

I struggled to my feet.

"If it will get me off this ledge, I can walk, run, hop, skip, or jump," I assured him.

We had two folds to negotiate. Neither one had an opening close enough to jump. At the entrance to the first fold I noticed there was a long, deep crack in the rock ledge. I pointed it out to Destiny.

"If you look, that crack is way deep. Do you think if I fired my gun in there it would do something?"

He looked it over and said, "Both guns."

We stuck the muzzles in as far as we could.

"If this works," I said, "it's going to screw up your trail."

"Don't worry about it. It can be fixed. After you shoot, jump back. This rock can be unpredictable."

I averted my face and said, "Okay. On three. One. Two. Three!"

The gun kicked back from a muffled blast. I turned to look at what happened just in time to see the whole corner shear away from under one of my feet. Destiny pulled me back. "I told you, unpredictable."

We raced around the fold. The demons arrived. They cursed and shot at us with flamerguns, but we were gone. The break in the path wouldn't stop them, though it would slow them down some.

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The next fold was the biggest yet. As Destiny and I made our way around it, I looked through the opening and came to a halt.

"Son of a bitch. Destiny look at that will you? Those sneaky bastards."

Framed in the opening space two Fliers, double-decked, flew leisurely past with a demon hanging underneath them. Then another trio went by, then two more.

The old Hell Cop turned to me and shrugged his thick shoulders. "Well, I never said some of them weren't clever." What could I say to that? We jogged on, carefully rounding the last sharp corner.

"There's Sneaker." Destiny pointed to the corner where the zig-zag trail and ours met. She sat far back in the corner, hidden from above, gun cradled in her lap. Above her, at the top of the zig-zag trail, the four demons started down.

I hugged Sneaker.

"I thought you were gone," I said, shouting over the din of the cascading lava. "I missed you after the first second."

"Me too," she yelled back.

"I'm sorry I let you go. It won't happen again."

"It better not," she said, smiling as if she hadn't just fallen almost a thousand feet to her eternal death. But I felt the quiver in her fingers when she stroked my cheek.

"Let's go you two," Destiny interrupted. "This isn't Lovers Lane."

"More like Lover's Leap," Sneaker said, with a roll of her big dark eyes that I wanted to leap into.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "We're trapped."

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"Follow me. Quickly." The old man strode up the first zig.

Up close, the cliff face was convex; from one switchback the next one wasn't visible. The first turn was actually behind the falling lava. I saw that at the first turn the trail also went straight, under the falls. We went along this trail, unseen by the descending demons. A scorching wind blasted us, carrying the usual smell of brimstone, but something else, too. Something rank and fetid like a rotting body left too long in a hot closed room. A moist odor, out of place on the searing wind.

Destiny stopped, and we crouched together. He had to shout to be heard over the wind's wail and the rush of lava.

"There are holes in the rock along this passage," he yelled. "You must stay well below them. Something lives in there. If you show even an inch, it will get you. You must stay low. There is no rescue. Understand?"

Leaning into the wind, barely able to breathe, we entered a groove cut into the rock. Twenty feet in, Destiny pointed and dropped to his knees. The hole was four feet up, oval shaped, two by three feet. I felt eyes on me. The holes continued at irregular intervals. One was at foot level. I think the two men in the group were a bit more leery than Sneaker as we stepped over that hole. A burning ash found its way to my neck. I jerked my head as I slapped at it. Then fell to the ground as I remembered I wasn't supposed to do that. We all sensed something massive move behind the rock and lost no time getting to the end of the groove.

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We paused for a few seconds to suck in some relatively cool air when we heard the demon screams—three distinct ones and some miscellaneous.

Destiny said it was only a couple of miles to an exit that led to the Schoolyard. That was good news. I came to Hell to retrieve Brittany Hightower's soul. That's what I needed to be doing instead of meeting the Cavern natives with a Hell Crazy Hell Cop who slept on a bed of gold.

As we negotiated the flat trail on the upper level, heading toward the back of the cavern, guilt rode on my shoulder. In real time my arrival at the Schoolyard would only be five or six hours later than the normal uneventful trip. Nevertheless, I grew more anxious the closer we got to the exit. Sneaker picked up the pace, too, dogging Destiny's heels. So we were bunched up perfectly when the demons attacked.

Chapter Eighteen

They wanted us alive, otherwise we'd have been dead before we knew what happened. These demons, like demons in general, especially the minion demons in Helland Security, while well trained, were not very bright. I figured their commander, Major Molas, to be an exception to that rule. Before I parted company with Destiny, I wanted to discuss Major Molas.

The three demons who had survived the Beast Under the Falls stepped out from behind a huge square boulder and blocked the path, flammers leveled and cocked.

"Major Molas said to bring you to him," said the Sergeant with three raw slashes on his arm and a short dog muzzle sticking out from his feathered head.

Destiny is short but broad. Using him as cover, Sneaker and I drew our weapons. I could tell by the way Destiny stiffened that he knew what we were planning.

"Tell the Major thank you for the invitation, but I have some place else to go now," Destiny told the Sergeant.

"You will come with us," said the Sergeant. "He said to bring you to him."

"I don't think so," Destiny said.

I dropped to my knee and took out the one on the left at the same time Sneaker took the right one. Like an old time gunslinger, Destiny drew his weapon. The Sergeant, reacting quickly for a minion, maybe that was why he was a Sergeant, fired first. The flame ball caught Destiny just above his left

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knee. It was a solid hit, and he went down with a scream that hurt my ears. The Sergeant, surprising me again with his quick thinking, darted behind the boulder.

"I'll get him," I said.

Sneaker ignored me as she tore at her pack for a first-aid kit.

I ran in a crouch to the boulder. The Sergeant ducked around the other end. I followed. Too late, I realized I probably screwed up. Sneaker's admonishing yell confirmed it. The Sergeant stood behind Sneaker as she worked on Destiny, his flamethrower a foot from her back. At that range, if he pulled the crooked trigger, even if I shot him, Sneaker and Destiny were toast.

"You will come with me to Major Molas," he said. An imaginative conversationalist, was the Sergeant.

I put my gun in its holster and knelt to help Destiny.

The old Hell Cop's burn was bad, six inches in diameter and half an inch deep. With efficiency born of experience (burns are a common occurrence in Hell) we treated the wound. There wasn't much we could do, really. Burns don't heal any faster or slower in Hell. The usual treatment was stop the pain, keep it clean and dry, and go about your business until a real world doctor could look at it. Destiny was going to need some serious looking at. We ignored the Sergeant.

"Looks like we're going to see Major Molas," I said.

"Destiny," Sneaker said, keeping a tight rein on her emotions. She had a lot of feelings for the old guy. "You seem to know Molas. Will he help you?"

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Destiny, spacey from the drugs, grasped her arm and pulled her close. I leaned over to listen in.

"War is coming," he whispered insistently. "There are some intelligent demons in Hell. Help Molas. He will help you, but nobody, no demon, must know." He took ten seconds to blink. "Get your souls to safety. Getter, I think you have other important work to do."

"Is that what Reech meant?"

He nodded once and closed his eyes. The drugs had taken the edge off though the tenseness of his body and the careful way he moved told me he still endured a lot of pain.

I leaned back to think about that and touched the Sergeant who, by his grim expression, obviously had heard every word. Did he understand what we said? What would he do? Kill us? Report Molas to further his own career? Was he a Mephisto spy?

His flammer hung at his side. He seemed intent on Destiny's wound. I drew my hand toward my gun. If the Major was a friend, I couldn't let the Sergeant tell anybody what he'd heard. He turned his head to look down at me. In a curiously human gesture he held his gnarly hand out, palm down, indicating that I needn't shoot him.

Our eyes met. His eyes were small, slanted up. They had no white to them, red instead, with black pupils, and some intelligence. Also, they had a quizzical quality to them as if he had a decision to make and wasn't sure exactly what the question was.

Sneaker began wrapping the burn. The Sergeant decided something.

"Wait," he said. He reached into a pouch on his right side. He brought out a purple rag and handed it to Sneaker. "Put on the wound. It will help."

Sneaker looked from the rag to me to the rag to the demon's eyes. She took the rag and carefully unfolded it, revealing a yellow glob, like thick mashed potatoes. She wrinkled her nose at the smell, like old beer farts.

The Sergeant made a swirling motion.

"Use little. Cover all. Will fix."

She looked at me. I shrugged, it was a new one on me. She poked the mass with a tentative finger. When it didn't jump and bite her she scooped some up with her fingertips and gingerly spread it over Destiny's wound. He stiffened at her touch, but she kept on. The Sergeant held out his hand for what was left.

"Now what?" Sneaker asked, not sure if she'd done the right thing.

"Wait."

In less than a minute Destiny's face, bunched up with pain, began to relax. Another minute and his eyes fluttered open. His head rolled to the side, and he looked at our demon captor.

"Fire Moss Balm?" he asked.

The Sergeant nodded.

"Haven't seen any of that in years," Destiny said faintly. "Thought it was extinct. Molas supplies you well."

The Sergeant took a step backward and just stared.

"Speaking of Molas," I said. "Do we still have to go see him?"

"Yes," the Sergeant said.

I turned away so he wouldn't see my smile. Behind him, swooping down from the shadows a Flier lined up on the Sergeant's back. I had no doubt it was our rescue party, not reinforcements. Sneaker made to stand up.

I touched her leg and said, "Wait."

"But ..."

Suddenly the Flier loomed large. Its long stick legs stretched out, claws closed, and amid a cloud of dust, the Flier yanked the Sergeant off the ground. More Fliers arrived. One of them was Orbuck.

"Destiny is hurt," the young flier stated and asked.

"The Sergeant gave us some Fire Moss Balm," Sneaker told him.

"Yes, will heal," Orbuck said. "You are unhurt?"

"I'm fine. Thank you again," Sneaker said.

"And thank you for me, too," I said.

Orbuck came to attention and nodded to me in acknowledgment.

I looked up at the Sergeant dangling from the big Flier circling overhead.

"Orbuck," I said. "Can you take him to Molas?"

Again the slight nod. Orbuck spoke to one of five Fliers gathered behind him.

To me he said, "Destiny cannot walk."

"We can't leave him here," Sneaker said.

Destiny took her hand. The tenseness had gone from his body though his weakness was evident as he struggled to sit up.

"Sneaker," he said, his voice strong but rough. "You and Getter go and find your souls. It's your duty. I'll be all right. The Fliers will take care of me."

"But we have a duty to you—."

"No buts, Sneaker. Follow this trail. It comes out in 333. Use the Find to locate the door to the Schoolyard. Go on. Your young souls are waiting."

He spoke to Orbuck in his own guttural caw and cackle language. The Fliers moved to him, crowding us out of the way.

"Go now," Orbuck insisted. "It is not safe here."

"No shit," I mumbled.

We gathered up our equipment while they laid Destiny in a rough woven sling.

"Getter." Destiny motioned me to him. "You think you are just another Hell Cop. You are more. Don't fight it when the time comes to be great. Hell and the real world may be in your hands. Be yourself."

The Fliers took him then. Sneaker and I watched them spiral upward till they vanished into the high shadows. I worked hard at not thinking about what Destiny said. Then, as we came to a small rise in sight of the cavern end where the roof sloped into the floor, Sneaker asked over her shoulder, "What did he mean, 'The fate of Hell and the real world may be in your hands?'"

"He didn't say fate."

"That's what he meant."

"He didn't know what he meant. He was delirious."

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She stopped and turned to me so fast I walked into her. She poked a slim finger at my chest.

"He was not delirious. He believed what he said. And I agree. When that Hound was after me and you suddenly appeared and then drew it away from me, I felt forces at work. I felt that a chain of events was working on you, that our meeting was not random. I forgot about it until we met Reech. And now this." She came closer and concentrated on wiping the dust off my chest. "You're special, Getter, whether you know it or not, or like it or not. You're special to me, too."

I think it got a degree hotter in Hell every time she touched me. I wiped the dust from her arms with trembling hands. It took a couple tries to free up my vocal chords.

"I bet you say that to all the Hell Cops who're destined to save the world."

"That's right. One so far." She put her hands on my face and kissed me. "You're going to be important, Getter, especially to me."

"Everybody has their fifteen minutes. I wonder if Andy is down here somewhere?"

"You'll have an hour, at least."

We stood for some minutes, holding each other, totally alone among ten billion souls. During that time I didn't give a damn about Hell or the real world. Just being important to Sneaker was all that mattered.

Eventually we came to the door. Using the Find we stepped cautiously through to section 333.

Chapter Nineteen

The first thing I noticed when I stepped through was the smell. Not the usual putrid stench or acrid reek of many other sections, but the heady aroma of cooking food. My mouth watered and my stomach growled. Unmindful of danger we stopped and closed our eyes and inhaled the nidor of sizzling steaks and roasting chicken, barbecuing ribs and baking salmon. Among the million scents that assaulted my nose were candied yams, fried onion rings, beans heavy with molasses, and, for an instant, sweet peas in butter like my mother made for Sunday dinner. Spices, too, garlic, dill, basil, and saffron, subtle to overwhelming, wove among the vapors. Cakes and pastries and fresh bread and pumpkin pie I could feel melt in my mouth and chocolate, rich, warm, sinfully seductive milk chocolate filled my nose and fogged my brain. An anguished cry of frustration broke me out of my olfactory reverie. I took several deep breaths through my mouth to clear the crumbs from my thoughts. The cry brought Sneaker around, too, and we inspected our location.

I had been in 333 before, but not in that area. We seemed to be in a back corridor that ran along the edge of 333 where it bordered on other sections. The wall opposite the door was blank stone for fifty feet in either direction, then began an endless series of openings that I knew were the halls where the damned suffered their eternal torment. Following my Find, we proceeded cautiously to the left.

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The first soul I saw was an incredibly obese man straining against a leg iron attached to the rock wall worn smooth by millennia of sweating, frustrated souls. Great folds of fat quivered on the floor as the soul reached for the unattainable. I knew what he reached for; my nose told me.

The stout wood tables of the Hall of Gluttons were overloaded with every type of food humans had ever eaten, as long as it smelled and looked good. I didn't recognize some of it, but the huge roast turkey caught my eye.

No demons were in sight.

"I'm hungry," Sneaker whispered in my ear.

"Dinner time," I whispered back.

The souls, men and women, were secured to the wall every few feet. White, black, yellow, and gray blobs stretching into the distance. Gluttons trapped in their fat though they may not have eaten for a thousand years.

They ignored us at first as we picked at the table's offerings: a piece of steaming French bread, a perfect peach, an enormous lobster tail, a barbecued rib that literally melted in my mouth. I ripped the drumstick off the turkey and plunged it into a bowl of cranberry sauce. I worried a mouthful of dark, succulent meat off the leg. I'm sure my eyes rolled up in ecstasy.

That's when the souls began a sorrowful keening. To see actual humans actually eating must have been unbearable torture to them. I looked to Sneaker. She held a slab of steak in her hand that would choke a Dinocat. Juices dripped from her chin. But she understood the keening, and that it would attract demon waiters.

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The fat souls were disgusting to look at, but their cries, which grew as more souls became aware of us, could not be denied. I saw by the mischievous glint in Sneaker's eyes that she had the same idea I had.

"I can't stand it," she said. "We have to do it."

"Right on," I agreed. "Wait a second."

I jammed the drumstick into a tub of mashed potatoes and slid it through a bowl of sweet peas. Holding the feast in my teeth, we grabbed the edge of the table and tipped it over. The table crashed, and the mountain of food landed, literally, in the astonished souls' laps.

"One more!" Sneaker said, with glee.

"One more!" I said after that.

Five tables went over before cries from the approaching demons brought us to our senses.

"Dinner's over," I said.

The scene as we ran from the hall was a grotesque parody of a college cafeteria food fight. The souls scooped the food off the floor, or themselves, with their pudgy fingers so fast they sometimes missed their mouths and splattered the food on another soul who might do the same thing. The noise they made could have been a feeding frenzy involving Stickylips and Bonebreaker Crabs. Nevertheless, we ran down the corridor giggling like kids who had just pulled a prank on the town grouch.

We slowed down and finished our stolen meals at a leisurely pace. I had swiped two exquisite chocolate eclairs for dessert.

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The nature of the halls changed. One contained souls who were forced to eat. Another had cigarettes, pipes, and Cuban cigars available, if the souls could only reach them. The same with booze and drugs. We went through a long section with no halls. I felt different stirrings as we approached the next section.

The atmosphere changed. The air turned sultry and close. The odors were not of gourmet cooking, tempting to the gastronomic appetite, but appealed to a baser, more primal need. The sins were more serious there. Sins of the Flesh.

Sneaker, in front of me, sucked in a quick breath as she peeked into the hall. I pressed close to look over her shoulder. I held my breath, too. A naked woman danced to inaudible music. She was impossibly beautiful, with long blonde hair, a narrow waist, and long, lean legs. The way she touched herself left no doubt as to what she wanted. Next to her swayed another woman, darker, smaller, but just as beautiful and enticing. A couple was next, the man handsome, muscled and hugely erect, the woman, oriental, delicate, and sensuous. They stroked and rubbed each other until she took him and guided him into her. The couple's moans and grunts of pleasure were soon overshadowed by wails of desire from the watching souls.

The souls, men and women, were chained to the rock in such a way that they could not touch themselves. For some sin in life they were doomed to an eternity of arousal with no chance of release.

My own arousal grew. The pheromones in the air intoxicated me. I slipped my arm around Sneaker. She moved

my hand to her breast and pressed against me. Mesmerized, we watched the couple reach their fevered climax.

They separated, then smiled with satisfaction. The anguished cries from the souls reached a fever pitch as they strained against their chains, trying for a release that would never come.

Sneaker turned to me, and our lips crushed together in a kiss that had nothing to do with love, affection, or even simple lust. We were driven by a deeper imperative. A sexual need carried within us for a million generations that had been triggered by what we saw, what we heard, what we smelled. Have sex or die. The rutting instinct was firmly implanted in us, and there was no denying it. Satan himself walking down the corridor would not have stopped us.

The long blank space between halls had a five foot deep niche carved in it. We ran to it. Inside we dropped our gear and stripped off our clothes in a panic of compulsion. I picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my hips. I slammed her against the hot rock wall and buried myself in her. In a frenzy, oblivious to anything but the need to orgasm, we thrust at each other like two machines out of control.

My orgasm came like punch in the stomach. I gasped for breath, and my legs went soft. My body quivered. Sneaker's fingernails gouged my back, and her teeth drew blood on my shoulder. I sank to my knees, Sneaker still wrapped around me. When we caught our breath, we had sex again, though in a slightly more sedate manner.

For a few minutes we sat together. I don't know what she thought, but I was glad it was her I was with. Dressed, we

exchanged a kiss and a hug and proceeded down the corridor. We hadn't uttered a word.

As I passed the first hall, the dancing women and men were still beautiful and the souls still pathetic. The edge was off, though the pheromone thick air had things stirring in me again. Then I looked back.

I stopped. Sneaker bumped into me. Jesus, I should have known. The spectacular blonde I'd seen from the front was neither blonde nor beautiful from the back. Black leathery skin hung in folds, three rows of curved barbs ran down the middle, ending in a stubby tail. A single hooked claw stuck out from the heels. The next woman had a scaly backside. The couple had matted fur and tails wound in tight piggy curlicues.

I whispered in Sneaker's ear. "At least you're beautiful on both sides."

She patted my ass and said, "You too. Let's get out of here before I lose my virginity."

"Again?"

That got me a pinch on the rear.

The next halls were similar to the first. Soon, though, the atmosphere turned darker, meaner. A sense of depravity and degradation filled the place. The smell of blood, excrement, and decay assaulted my nose and stomach. Screams echoed down the corridor. The false beautiful people did more than entice in those halls. They interacted with the souls, but the roles were reversed. Now the souls suffered the beatings and rapes and tortures they had perpetrated in life. The cries were of pain and hopelessness. The masquerading demons became

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men, old women, homely women, children. The damned souls suffered for their sins. Their blood ran and pain racked their bodies as they spent eternity begging for forgiveness that would never come.

Sneaker and I didn't speak about what we saw. We hurried on. Quickly we passed halls where tobacco, liquor, drugs, even chocolate were not withheld, but forced. Souls were perpetually hungover, lying in their own vomit, continuously ODing or going cold turkey, forever breathing cigarette and cheap cigar smoke. Souls were boiled in vats of chocolate.

The smoothing of the edges from the food and the sex wore off. My body twitched with nervous energy, as if I had to go to the bathroom real bad and there was no toilet paper.

We were running when we found the door to 101, the Schoolyard.

Chapter Twenty

Mrs. Scritch's School for Wayward Young Souls spread out in a clearing in the middle of a two-mile diameter bowl surrounded by steep cliffs. Two small, swift rivers fed a small lake, and in the middle of the otherwise calm water a whirlpool spun patiently. Above the cliffs, black clouds roiled lit by internal lightning that periodically escaped to blast the rock. Gray cells of intense rain roamed around the rim. Thick forest enclosed the central clearing. From inside the circle, the trees looked green and inviting with soft grass in their cool shadows. But behind those trees were scraggly dead trees with dark Shapes flowing among their shattered trunks. Four roads led away from the rambling building in the center of it all.

Sneaker and I found a good vantage point on top of an outcropping of scorched rock. With field glasses we scanned the black, four story fortress for our individual souls. I took my boots and socks off, to great relief. Sneaker wasn't so incautious, though she did loosen them up a bit.

"Do you think Destiny's okay?" she asked after a while.

"He's fine," I said. "He's flying the friendly skies."

Sneaker sighed and stared into the distance.

"There's so much I don't know about this place."

"There's a lot we all don't know. You just have to be prepared and learn as you go."

We watched in silence for a few minutes. The "kids" were still in class.

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"Destiny is no threat to you, you know."

I kept my gaze on the ragged, rambling building. "I know."

"My father was killed when I was young. When he was home, Destiny took his place. He was nice to me."

"Uh huh."

"He never touched me."

I stared at the rock by my feet and said, "I'm glad he was there for you. But he's Hell Crazy and—."

"He's not Hell Crazy."

"Okay," I admitted. "He doesn't think he's a demon, but he likes Hell way too much. That's trouble waiting to happen. I'll be civil if he is. Look, it's recess time."

Kid souls streamed out of the main building. We watched intently for our client souls.

Bullies in life were now the victims, set upon by scrawny kids with glasses. Some of the new victims ran away into the trees, where the Shapes waited. Huge butterflies appeared. They selected several kids and yanked their arms and legs off. A prowling band of cats with matches set some souls on fire or tied firecrackers to their asses.

"There's mine," Sneaker said low.

"Which one?"

"The chubby red haired one getting his ass kicked by that group of demon girls. You see yours?"

"No."

Young souls continued to pour out of the great black stone building. Most were surrounded by demon children, there to learn how to torture and torment. Some, though were isolated. They wandered around alone. The demons shunned

them, and the pitiful souls went from group to group searching for contact even if it meant suffering abuse or pain.

Brittany Hightower was not there, which gave me a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"Oh, shit," Sneaker said after a few minutes.

"What?"

"The kid's heading for the woods."

I found him with my glasses. Tears streamed from his freckled cheeks as he puffed toward the trees to our left. The demons made a show of chasing him, then stopped. They knew better than to go there.

"Come on," Sneaker said, gathering her gear. "We've got to get him before the Shapes do."

We ran through the dead trees, leaping downed trunks and brushing aside reaching branches. The kid sat against a splintered stump, knees drawn up to his chest, sobbing. When he heard us he started, his eyes bugging out, expecting some new horror. Shapes lurked around us.

"Are you Bobby Johnston?" Sneaker asked him from twenty feet away.

Too terrified to speak he nodded quick little nervous nods.

Sneaker approached him. I watched out for Shapes.

"My name is Sneaker. I've come to take you out of here."

"You ... you have?" he sniffled. "Are you going to take me home?"

"Sorry, Bobby, I can't do that, but I can take you where you belong."

The kid stared at her, fascinated, wanting to believe, yet not quite trusting her. Hell will do that to a soul, live or dead.

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Yet again, he might have been attracted by her wild, oriental beauty. He was a male, after all. He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Where's that?" he asked, then hiccupped.

"Heaven, Bobby. Your parents hired me to take you to Heaven."

"They did?"

"They sure did."

His face scrunched up in thought. "Is this Hell?"

"It certainly is."

His eyes squeezed shut, and his voice became a piteous whine in its search for understanding.

"Why am I here? I didn't do anything."

"I know you didn't, Bobby. It was a mistake."

"I didn't do anything wrong," he insisted. "I was always good. My dad said I was the best son he could ever have."

"I know, Bobby. He told me the same thing."

The Shapes still lurked, drawn by Bobby's fear. One in particular came close, a shadow cloud flowing hesitantly toward us. I had my gun out. Though it wouldn't do anything against the Shape, it made me feel better.

"Sneak," I said, pointing to the bold piece of fog.

"I know."

She turned to Bobby who still sat with his knees drawn up and his eyes wide with fear as he stared at the Shape.

"What's that?" he said, voice breaking.

Sneaker knelt beside him.

"That's a Shape. It's attracted to your fear. It can't hurt you if you're not afraid of it. Look, Bobby, we have to get out

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of here, okay? Just do what I say and you'll be in Heaven before you know it."

"I'm scared."

"I know you are. Now, we have to go. Unless you want to go back to the school?"

On his feet he stared uncertainly at me.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"That's Getter. He came to get another soul out of the school."

I took a picture out of a pocket.

"Have you seen her, Bobby? Her name is Brittany Hightower."

He nodded, then looked at the ground.

"Is she in the school?"

Nod.

"Where did you see her?"

His lips scrunched tight.

"Bobby, where? She was sent here by mistake, too."

"In the office," he said low.

"Mrs. Scritch's office?"

A shiver and a nod.

"Why was she there?"

"The Superintendent wanted to see her."

"Shit," Sneaker and I said together.

"Bujo?" I asked, already knowing.

Big nod.

"Lovely," I said, not meaning a word of it.

Sneaker laid a hand on my arm. "You think he'll try and turn her?"

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"Hell yeah. He won't be able to resist. When did you see her, Bobby?"

"Yesterday?"

They did have night in the Schoolyard. The kiddies needed their rest, and the night monsters that came from under the bed or out of the closet needed their chance at them. Brittany would still be there, in the staff wing. I'd have to go in and get her.

"Getter, let's go," Sneaker said. "I can't leave the kid, and I won't take him back in there, but we'll wait on the Nexus road. I'll cover you if you have to run for it."

We made our way through the dead woods as fast as Bobby's little legs would take him. Being a slightly insubstantial soul, it was easy for us to each take a hand and lift him over obstacles. The Shape followed at a discreet distance.

The Nexus was at the end of the road on the other side of the schoolhouse. We planned to circle through the forest, they'd hide by the road, and I'd go in and find Brittany. Then we'd jump in the Nexus, go directly to Hell Gate, deliver the kids to the Purgatory Guardians, and go home. It was a good plan and might even have worked, if the Wolfpack hadn't gotten our scent.

Chapter Twenty-one

The baying of the Wolfpack spurred us on. The river came into view through the tangle of trees. If we could get across, we'd be safe from them. They didn't like water.

The Shape homed in on our spike of new fear. I let go of Bobby's hand and ran toward it.

"We're not afraid of you," I yelled.

The thing reared up as if startled. If it had had a mouth, it would have dropped open with surprise. I spun around and ran after Sneaker and Bobby.

The river had several broad shallow crossings. The others were halfway across when I reached the bank. A loud rumbling like thunder caught my attention, and I stopped to listen. I saw what caused the noise. That's when the point demon for the Wolfpack attacked.

Its paws slammed into my chest, and I tumbled backwards. The beast stuck its lizard head in my face. I gagged at breath rotten as death. As I went down, I drew my knees up and planted them under its belly. I kicked up. The thing went flying. I drew my gun and blew a hole in its gut in midair.

I rolled to my feet and jumped off the four foot bank. Sneaker's yell stopped me. I looked upstream and scrambled back up to high ground. A two foot high wave rolled past. Another wave swung around the bend. Four feet high, it pushed a breaking crest of steaming white froth ahead of it.

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Even at the normal six inch depth I couldn't have made it across before the flash flood got me.

Sneaker called out. The roar of the water and the baying of the Wolfpack drowned out her words. But, after all, what was there to say? Once a soul was retrieved, getting it to Heaven Gate had to be a Hell Cop's first priority. No Hell Cop would expect another Hell Cop to jeopardize a retrieved soul to effect a rescue. I indicated she should go to the Nexus, that I would be okay, that I would head up to the cliff rim. I almost indicated that I loved her. But did I? Then I thought that if she loved me, too, I was putting a heavy burden on her—help me or jeopardize Bobby Johnston's soul. I had no doubt which she would choose, and no reason to make it any harder on her. Anyway, that was my excuse.

Our eyes held for a few seconds before she turned and ran. I wasted a few more seconds staring after her, then headed upstream, fast, as the flash flood wave roared past.

To my right the steaming river swirled right up to the top of the bank. The heat coming off it was like a barrier that I had to punch through. To my left I heard the Wolfpack's howls as they raced through the dead wood. Sure of themselves, they made no effort at stealth. I caught an occasional glimpse of them through the thick brush and trees that lined the river bank.

The Wolfpack was made up of two different, though similar, creatures. The beast I shot had the shaggy body and legs of a wolf with a long, flat lizard head featuring four canines and swept back eyes. Its tail was a whip it could crack over a successful kill. The other beasts had flat scaly

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bodies with six long reptile legs, a bushy tail, and a misshapen wolf's head with backward slanting teeth—cousins to the Hell Hounds. Unlike their Lifer counterparts this Wolfpack had no problem hunting humans, live or dead.

On the other side of the surging river I caught a glimpse of Sneaker dodging around burnt tree trunks. I didn't have time for the sudden wave of loneliness to slow me down; a wolf's head member of the Pack leaped out of the brush, plunging both of us into the water.

The heat of the water took my breath away. I barely had time to suck in a steam-filled breath before the beast, its talons gripping my arm, pulled me under. It attempted to gut me with its hind claws. The current rolled and twisted us about like dead leaves. Completely disoriented, I couldn't tell up from down. My lungs cried out for air, my eyes burned. A wave of nausea swept through my body as the river suddenly lifted me up, then slammed me down against the rocky bottom. I had only seconds before I breathed in the first lungful of scorching water.

In the murky dimness, a dark shape loomed ahead. With the last bit of strength and will left to me, I pushed off the bottom, twisted about, and smashed the wolfhead beast against the boulder. It released me and vanished in the gloom.

Used air burst from me. I clawed for the surface. Where was it? My limbs were heavy, my mouth open, eager to suck water, when I broke through. Air! Hot, acrid, brimstone tainted, sweet air. I sucked it in with groaning gulps while the flood swept me, unprotesting, toward the lake.

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My whole body ached as I crawled onto the far bank and allowed myself a minute to catch my breath. Feeling exposed, I hid behind a boulder where the water had washed away the dirt. The river receded quickly, and the Schoolyard became eerily quiet. I planned to rest for five minutes then move on.

When I woke up, it was dark.

Loneliness filled me. Worry pressed down on me. Did Sneaker make it okay? Was she a prisoner waiting for me to rescue her? Did she miss me as much as I missed her at that moment? Of course not. She was busy getting Bobby Johnston safely across the River Styx then to Heaven Gate. I sat alone in the dark for a few minutes, feeling sorry for myself, then forced myself to stand up. Brittany's soul needed retrieval, and I'd wasted too much time already.

I crept up to the rear door of the massive school building. A light shone high up in the tower annex. I knew that's where Bujo would be, and most likely Brittany, too. There were no guards on the outside. Who would want to get in? And there were plenty of things inside to keep souls from getting out. And where would they go if they got out? In my mind, one of the worst concepts of Hell was that no matter what you did, where you went, you were always in Hell. Something was always after you or tormenting you. For the souls who were supposed to be there, there was no escape. I'd heard rumors of sanctuaries, but I didn't know anybody who'd ever been to one.

Inside, the odor of decay predominated, underlain by the sour smell of fear, sweat, and cooking sauerkraut. Kitchen noises came from down the hall ahead of me. A torch-lit,

stone stairwell spiraled up to the left. I doubted there was anything in the kitchen I wanted, so, every nerve and sense alert, I started up.

The stairwell let onto each floor through an open archway. The stairs were covered with dust despite many foot prints; the halls were dust free. On the third floor I found out why.

At first I thought the opening had been filled with stone, then the blockage seemed to shrink and slide away, and then expand again. I came up to it cautiously. Again it shrunk, slid, and expanded. I reached out to touch it. Then snatched my hand back when I realized that the stones were actually scales on a huge serpent that patrolled the halls. I hoped I didn't have to retrieve anything from the third floor that night.

The fourth floor was clear. On the fifth, a lighted doorway begged me to look in. I crept up to it and heard voices. So I listened.

"There you are now," a smarmy, ingratiating tenor said. "A nice cool glass of lemonade."

"Thank you," a trembling little girl's voice said.

"Now Brittany, relax." Bujo cajoled easily. "You're not frightened of me, are you?" After a short pause he said, "Oh please, don't be. I'm not going to hurt you, actually I want to help you. Go ahead, drink. I guarantee it's very good. Everything I have here is good, the best. You like nice things, don't you?"

"Yeah," the girl said with a bit of enthusiasm.

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"I thought you did. There aren't any nice things in the dormitory or in the classrooms, are there? No, there aren't. And Mrs. Scritch is mean, too. Is she mean to you?"

"Yes, she is. She's terrible. I don't even do anything and she picks on me."

"You like attention, though, don't you?"

"Yeah, but not like that."

Bujo's voice sounded as if it were turned away so I chanced a peek into the room.

Bujo faced a double opening stained glass window that might have come from a major cathedral except the glass depicted a dragon disemboweling a naked man while extremely female demons looked on. The room was classic old European: dark wood paneling, bookcases filled with old leather bound books, heavy furniture, lots of brass and leather. But several things reminded me of where I was, a large bust of a pointy eared devil, a hooked beak, raven-like bird in a cage made from a child size skeleton, a display of edged weapons with the blood still on them.

Bujo's fur had dark stripes like a tiger tabby. His sleek furred tail twitched like a caught snake. He wore tight, high-waisted leather shorts, and a heavy gold chain with a circle made of bone hung from his thick neck. He had cat legs with an extra knee to allow him to stand upright on thick paws.

A huge wingbacked chair engulfed Brittany. She wore an ugly brown and red plaid skirt and a white blouse spattered with blood. Her small white hands rested open-fingered on the chair arms. I could just see her profile, a white blotch

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against cracked leather. She stared at Bujo's back, eyes wide and wary, sharp nose flaring slowly.

Bujo turned away from the window. I ducked back, but I recognized the cunning in his deep-set, feline eyes.

"Did your parents give you a lot of attention? Give you things?"

"Yeah. My father gave me stuff all the time. So I wouldn't tell Mom things that would upset her."

"You like that? Getting stuff you want all the time?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"What about before, when your little sister was born? Did they pay attention to you then?"

There was a long eloquent silence before she said, "Yes. No. My Mom was busy."

"You didn't like that did you?"

"No."

"So you did something to her to get the attention back."

"I didn't do anything to her."

"What happened to little sister, Brittany?"

"She ... she died."

"How?" Bujo asked, beginning to push.

"I don't know."

"How, Brittany? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. A plastic thing got over her face. She couldn't breathe."

"You put it there."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't mean to. I mean I didn't."

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"I know you did. She took away your parents. You hated little sister. You were angry and wanted her dead."

"I wanted her to go away. Then he wouldn't do anything anymore."

My pulse pounded in my ears. I had to strain to hear. Had Mrs. Hightower's visions been wrong? Was I about to make a big mistake? Did that little girl belong in Hell?

"So you killed her."

"No! It was an accident."

Bujo's voice turned calm, disinterested.

"Would you like more lemonade? Try those chocolates. They're wonderful, and you can eat as many as you want, while you're with me. Do you like it with the other students?"

I dared another look. Brittany still sat in the chair, her head bowed, tendrils of blond hair stuck to glistening tear trails on her cheeks.

"No. They're all mean to me. I want to go home."

"Can't do that. The only place you can go is back to the dormitory with the other students. Mrs. Scritch will be happy to see you."

"I don't want to go," Brittany sobbed.

"You have to," Bujo said, "unless ..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you admit that you killed little sister and then ask to join us here, become one of us."

"One of you? Like you?"

Bujo launched into his big sales pitch. I could imagine his eyes glowing with the excitement.

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"Yes, if you wish. You can be anything you want, Brittany, a beautiful woman, a powerful demon, a cat like me. You'll be the center of attention, have anything you want. Just admit it. Tell me you killed her. Join us forever."

"I didn't kill her," the girl whined.

"Then it's back to the dormitory for you."

"Please, no."

"Admit it then!"

"It was an accident," she insisted between sobs.

"But you knew what might happen. You knew little sister might suffocate under the plastic. Your parents had told you that, hadn't they?"

"Yes."

"Then it's your fault, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you did."

"I killed her. I killed her."

Oh man. I pressed my back against the corridor wall. You don't go to Hell for accidents, unless you've been drinking, even if you are a spoiled brat. If Bujo got her to sign the Paper there'd be nothing I could do. She'd be stuck for all eternity with his lying promises.

"Do you want to join us, Brittany? Be a demon instead of a tortured soul?"

"Yes," she said, beaten. What choice did she have?

"Yesssss!" Bujo purred in triumph.

I took several deep breaths. Time to go to work.

"All you have to do my pretty demon is sign your name and then it will be done," Bujo said with unconcealed glee.

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"You will go see Mephisto, he will be so glad to meet you. Where are those papers?"

I heard a file drawer slam. I took a look. Bujo had his back turned to me as he looked through a file cabinet. Brittany quietly sobbed. It looked like a quick smash and grab without the smash for once.

In a crouch, I ran up to Brittany, clapped a hand over her mouth, scooped her up, turned, and took three steps to the door. Oh shit. A large demon filled the doorway. Mephisto. I glanced over my shoulder at Bujo. He still concentrated on his search for those papers. Mephisto smiled down at me.

"Well," the Helland Security chief said, amused at the surprise on my face. "You must be Getter."

I only had two seconds to take in his black armor, red leathery face, black hair, and turquoise horns. But it wasn't his look that convinced me he was Mephisto. It was his Presence. His aura of authority immediately reached out and tweaked your nose and slapped you twice. No one could ever doubt that he was Chief of Helland Security. I didn't have time to chat.

I pointed to my right. "No, that's Getter."

He fell for it and looked right. Some security chief.

I slammed the door in his face and jumped left. Then I ran in full stealth mode ten feet to the only other door from the room. Simultaneously, Bujo, papers in paw, turned the opposite way to check out the bang of the slamming door.

I froze with my hand on the door handle in case the motion attracted him. No need to bother. The front door flying off its hinges and crashing to the floor in front of him

was distraction enough. I slipped through the door, though I'd have liked to witness the meeting between the two demons.

A squeaky, "Sir?" from Bujo.

A loud, "Where is he?" from Mephisto.

A pause and a, "Where's Brittany?" from Bujo, gave me good preview of a future conversation between the two.

Light from the hall pinpointed another door. Halfway there, a sleepy voice of indeterminate gender came from the bed. I stopped.

"That you, Buji?"

A quick survey of the room revealed lacy curtains over the windows, a four-poster bed with a frilly skirt, and roses in a vase on a vanity table. The room smelled flowery.

"Buji, come to bed and snuggle with me."

While the sexy voice oozed seductive invitation, the size of the shape on the bed was a bit intimidating.

"Start without me, Sweetie. I'll be right there," I said.

The stomp of Mephisto's hooves in the other room signaled my departure. Once in the hall I ran toward the stairs. Even if she/he was a demon, I hoped Sweetie wasn't too disappointed.

We'd only reached the top of the stairs when Bujo's official demon voice, "Brittany!" was drowned out by Mephisto's wall shaking, "GETTER!" Where was a five story tall fireman's pole when you needed one?

The little girl soul didn't weigh much, but it was awkward running down steps with her in my arms.

"Brittany," I said in a loud whisper. "Your parents sent me to take you to Heaven. Can you run?"

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The sudden turn of events dumbfounded her. She managed a nod. The same look of hope that I'd seen on Gregory's face began to spread over hers. It felt good to see that. I set her down, grabbed her hand, and dragged her down the stairs. The serpent sentinel was gone from the door to the third floor. The second floor looked clear, also. A loud hiss filled the stairwell. I thought the snake was behind us. I chanced a look. Nothing.

Bujo roared for Security.

When I turned to look where I was going, a thick, bright green forked tongue blocked our way. Doors slammed open. Voices questioned loudly. We had no time to stop, and they already knew I was there. I drew my gun and fired at the tongue. It withdrew with an ugly sucking sound, leaving a splotch of yellow blood. The boom of the gun in a small space deafened me. I think Brittany screamed. A huge triangular serpent's head darted through the door as we raced past. Too late, the now one-forked, green tongue flicked after us.

On the first floor I grasped the ring to open the backdoor. A shrill scream cut through my temporary deafness like fingernails on a blackboard. I looked over my shoulder and saw Mrs. Scritch inching down the hall.

"Young man, what are you doing with that little girl?" The rear of Mrs. Scritch's translucent inchworm body caught up with the front. The black rear feet gripped the stone floor and lifted her wrinkled, old lady head with the frizzy gray mane ten feet in the air.

"Leave her alone, you scoundrel, or you'll get a good whipping," she warned.

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A mostly human arm holding a slender switch emerged from the second segment down. She swung the switch at me. I ducked and twisted the door ring. The door creaked open.

"The party's over, Mrs. Scritch," I shouted. "I'm taking Brittany home now."

As I pulled the door shut behind us, I heard the old maid screech indignantly, "Mr. Bujo, will you please come here?"

Above all the commotion Mephisto's deep demon voice called to me. "Getter, why run? Your destiny will bring you to me eventually."

"Not today," I yelled back. What happened to quietly slipping in and out? If I continued to be a Hell Cop, I'd have to start wearing a disguise.

While Mephisto organized his chaos of minions, Brittany and I raced up the road toward the Nexus. I confess to being a bit disappointed Sneaker wasn't waiting for us in the forest. On the other hand, I'd have been disappointed in her if she had not put her retrieved soul first.

Bandy legged minions poured from a wide door at the other end of the building. Mephisto trotted along the road, urging them on. Brittany could run. Tears streaming, driven by fear, she kept up. She slowed when we entered the forest, tried to look everywhere at once. "I don't want to go in there," she said. "I want to go home. I'm scared."

"It's either Heaven or stay in Hell with them," I told her, hooking a thumb over my shoulder.

She glanced back at the twenty screaming minions behind us and didn't say another word. Those minions could scoot if goosed hard enough, and Mephisto could goose with the best.

They would know I had a gun. On the other hand, they weren't smart enough to worry about it.

We ran. The Nexus glowed with St. Elmo's Fire about a quarter mile from the building. We could go into the Nexus or go through the forest, at night, and then climb five hundred foot cliffs while getting rained on and struck by lightning. Good survival instincts or not, there was no choice.

We made it within twenty feet of the Nexus when it shimmered and two Elite Guards of Helland Security appeared. Great. Well, we couldn't go back, and with their stubby third legs cum tails I wasn't going to bowl them over and run past them. I couldn't go up and I couldn't go down so left or right were my choices. I grabbed Brittany's hand, faked right and jumped left.

The Elite Guards are the best of the best in Hell. Still, they're not too swift on the uptake. We ran half way around the Nexus rock before they yelled and followed. That meant they were on the other side when we returned to the entrance. I activated the Find and, with a tight grip on Brittany, leaped into the Nexus.

We landed in a jumble, me on my face and Brittany on top, legs in the air. I'd set the Find and punched the button for section 1 before I hit the supporting, yet giving, floor. I felt the motion that's not motion and breathed deep with relief.

Then I realized we weren't alone.

"I am impressed, Getter. Though this hasn't been your usual quiet, subtle retrieval, you still got the soul. You are as good as everyone says you are."

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"Who's everyone?" I asked, struggling to stand and catch my breath. I tried to keep Brittany behind me. The run must have used up her fear because now she was curious. She looked out and up from behind me.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"That is Major Molas," I told her. "Not someone I expected to see at this point in your retrieval." I looked into his big orange eyes and added, "But I think he may possibly be a friend."

He allowed that little crocodile smile to show and said, "'Friend' may be a bit too strong a word, Getter. Ally might be more accurate."

He touched the Find clipped to his wide belt. I felt a faint sensation of stopping.

"Getter, there is little time. They will override my Nexus block quickly. Mephisto is tracking you. Guards wait at Nexus 1. I can help you if you will help me. Besides, you have been chosen."

Chosen? I didn't like the sound of that. It sounded too much like prognostications and superstitions. I didn't want any part of being "Chosen." I was just a Hell Cop, struggling to do his job and not even sure he was suitable for it. "Who 'Chose' me?"

"Reech."

"Reech? Oh, man. How'd you find me?"

"Reech. Your help is needed, Getter. There will be war. Satan is tired and out of touch. Mephisto will win easily. There are many who feel this would not be good. He hates Hell

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Cops. If he wins, you will not survive. And many more innocent souls, such as that one, will suffer."

Brittany didn't like the sound of that any more than I did. She hugged my waist tighter.

"I'm not agreeing to anything, but what are you asking me to do?"

"Get the other Hell Cops to help Satan win the war."

"What? That's crazy. Help Satan? Father Joe would love that. What makes you think they'd listen to me? What about Destiny? He's a damned legend for Christ's sake. If you'll excuse the expression."

"And you are not?"

"Whoa, wait a minute."

We all froze for a second. We were moving again.

"You must not let Mephisto catch you," Major Molas insisted.

"No shit."

"You must get off now."

He pushed a button on his Find.

"Wait!"

Too late. The Nexus pushed Brittany and me gently out.

"Oh, man." My legs went soft and I dropped to a crouch, leaning against the blank Nexus face. When I found my voice I said, "Well, Brittany, I hope you know how to climb a tree."

Chapter Twenty-two

Even as a kid I didn't like climbing trees. It must have been that survival instinct Destiny talked about; trees are high and you can fall from them. So I was less than pleased to be pushed out onto 155, The Tree. The Tree was said to have been growing since Satan started Hell. I'd never seen the top or been to the end of the branches. Supposedly, The Tree grew out of the Abyss, turning a missed step into a long fall. It had its own particular wildlife as well as the usual serpents and insects and sharp-toothed mammals.

I had absolutely no desire to venture out onto the twenty foot diameter branches. I couldn't trust the Nexus. Mephisto hunted me. Oh man, the knot of frustration in my stomach threatened to upset my usual method of operation; don't sit there, do something.

Well, Brittany clung to my hand, waiting. I had to do something.

Besides having water at each Nexus gate there was a phone, too. I knew records were automatically kept on Nexus use. I had to take a chance they weren't monitoring the phone. I assured Brittany that the Noose vines with struggling souls hanging from them in the gloomy mist that enveloped the Tree, would not get her. I drank, splashed water in my face, and picked up the phone.

When Rack answered, I said, "Can they trace this call?"

After a few seconds, during which I heard the rapid tap of a computer keyboard, he said, "Hang up. I'll call you."

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The five minutes I waited was the longest two hours of my life. Screams came to us out of the dim, some fading in the distance, some cut short. Shapes moved in the shadows; souls pursued by their fears and guilt. A naked young woman soul with blood on her hands ran toward us, screaming. A girl about the same size as Brittany chased her. The side of the girl's head was smashed in, and she held a gin bottle as a club over her head. "Mommy, Mommy," she cried.

Fascinated, Brittany watched them disappear along another branch. She made sure to always be in contact with me.

"I don't like it here," she said.

"Nobody who's sent here does."

"This is Hell, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Did my father pay you to come here and get me?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

I'm always surprised how quickly children grasp, and accept, a situation. In some ways they are easier to work with than adult souls.

"You won't ... You can't take me home, can you?" she asked. "Even if my father paid you more money."

"Sorry, I can't do that. Heaven is a nice place though."

"Have you been there?"

"No, but I've talked with, ah, people who have."

She was quiet for a few seconds; then she sat down and leaned against the tree, her legs straight out, hands in her lap.

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"I don't deserve to go to Heaven," she said matter-of-factly.

That was a first. Usually souls couldn't wait to get out of Hell, whether they thought they deserved to or not. I sat next to her and asked why not.

"Mr. Bujo was right. I did hurt my little sister."

"By putting the plastic in her crib?"

"Uh-huh."

"But you didn't ... Did you mean for her to die?"

"No," she said, fighting tears.

"Her death was an accident then?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You knew the danger to your little sister. Why did you put the plastic there?"

"I don't know. I just wanted her to go away."

"So you could have all the attention?"

"Yes. No. I didn't want him to ..."

She curled into herself and sobbed quietly. I caressed her hair, hoping to bring some comfort, but she flinched when I touched her. I longed to hold her and wipe away her tears. I wanted to make it all right. Instead I sat helpless and frustrated. Then I remembered what she almost said before, "You won't..." It was almost as if she was making sure I wouldn't take her home.

I rested my hand on her shoulder. She flinched slightly but let it stay.

"Brittany," I said. "If I could take you back home to your parents, would you want to go?" She shrugged noncommittally. "Yes or no," I insisted.

Slowly at first, then with increasing vigor, she shook her head. "No, no," she repeated in a whisper that grew into a shout. "NO, NO, I won't go back!"

I gathered her in my arms and held her till she calmed down. I was pretty sure I knew what had gone on. While I held her, my anger grew. To be denied a daughter and then have someone so misuse theirs was almost too cruel a circumstance to stand. I thought some crazy thoughts in the next minute, though in the end it really wasn't my business, was it? Still, I needed to know.

"Don't worry," I said, brushing the hair from her face. "I won't take you back home. I'll take you to Heaven where you'll be safe. But, Brittany, I need to know what happened, with your father."

It was simple really, the same old story. Her father had been sexually abusing her for years. When he started on the little sister she became frightened for her, didn't want her to go through what she had. So, one day, scared and confused, eight-year old Brittany took the plastic off her mother's dry cleaning and went into the sister's room. She had in mind just to get the sister out of the house to a hospital. Her mother called her, and she left the plastic in the crib.

It wasn't up to me to judge, either Brittany or her father, but I definitely planned to have a private talk with Mr. Hightower when I got back to Life.

The phone buzzed, yanking me back to the immediate predicament.

"Getter, what the hell are you doing in 155? It's a long fall from there, Bud."

"It's a long story."

"I have time."

"I don't. I was told I was being tracked, any way to avoid that?"

"Man, I don't know. The wires have been hotter than a lava pool at high noon. Mephisto wants your ass bad. Let me try something."

While I waited, I punched buttons on my Find. I expected Helland Security guards to come tumbling out of the Nexus any second. I told Brittany to get ready to run. Unfortunately, I didn't know where to tell her to run to.

"Rack," I said, when the Find told me what I wanted to know. "Can you get me through the Nexus to 83? It's the next closest to the Gate."

"Yeah, man, I could block the sensor data and set up a feedback loop so you'd be invisible, but it won't do any good. I just detected a platoon of troops arriving at 83. They got you covered."

"Can you get us anyplace? I don't know how to get out of this damn tree."

"Shit! Wait one."

Standing up, I waited, tense as a hangman's rope. "Getter, you have about thirty seconds before troops start popping out. Get out of there."

"Where?"

"Go up, I think. Just go. I'll keep on it."

I grabbed Brittany's hand and ran out along the branch the woman and the demon baby came from. I wanted to put distance between us and the troops. It finally dawned on me

that Rack said troops. Troops meant Army, which meant Mephisto was beginning to show his hand.

I'd been on the lower level of the Tree before, down where the huge trunk split and spanned the Abyss. I'd been a half mile out to the sides, also. But I'd never been up. As we ran, Noose Vines dropped with uncanny accuracy from the upper branches. The first one lifted me five feet off the bark before I got loose. My heart stopped dead as I hung over the Abyss. Those few seconds gave me plenty of time to decide to move to Nebraska. After that, I widened my focus and brushed them away.

Souls ran on other branches. Those that avoided the Vines might step into pools of blood red sap that held them till something like the Tiger Toothed Tree Toads got them. Or they might run onto a camouflaged Tree Serpent. Mutant Monkeys paralleled us a couple of times, making great leaps of up to fifty feet between branches. One of them leaped at us from a higher branch. I flipped him over the edge with my staff. Small flocks of Needlebills flitted through the branches.

I took us up whenever I could. The cries of the troops spurred me on when I had to jump over the emptiness below. I felt a bit uncomfortable going up. It reminded me of all the movies and TV shows where the bad guy, being hotly pursued, climbs a building or a tower where there is no hope of escape. I hoped Rack knew what he was talking about.

Visibility was never more than a hundred feet into the mist. I became disoriented. The only direction I knew was up. Brittany proved herself a real trooper, but then souls never tire. What sport would it be for the demons if the souls had to

stop and rest? She got caught up in some Strangler Moss. I cut her loose before the attendant Stripper Ants got to her.

I had just boosted Brittany up a steep branch when I heard a yell behind me and then a loud whoosh. I barely had time to grab a thick piece of bark and swing out before a fireball smacked into the Tree where my hands had been. Sparks burned my face. Brittany screamed. Troops converged on us along the lower branches. I scrambled up and ran, fireballs close behind.

A darkness loomed in the mist. With no time for caution we ran toward it. Twenty feet away I knew what it was, the main trunk rising straight up, ringed by a stairway of branches. I looked up and saw light. Not bright light, a clean glow free of interference from branches or moss or dead leaves. The top of the Tree.

More troops arrived from all directions. Fireballs flamed all around adding their own flickering radiance to the scene.

Crouched low by the main trunk, Brittany tugged at my arm and said over the whooshing and yelling. "Mr. Getter, save yourself, if you can. I'll be okay in the school. Thank you for helping me." She wiped away her tears and wouldn't look at me.

A lump formed in my throat and my eyes watered, not from the smoke that surrounded us. This kid was going to Heaven if I had to die and fly her there myself on my own demon wings. As she spoke, a fireball flew over our heads. In its orange light I saw something above us.

I touched her cheek and said, "Don't give up on Heaven, or me, yet."

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I pushed her ahead of me, and we clambered up the branches that spiraled around the last twenty feet of the main trunk. The very top was cut off flat, leaving a level platform about six inches in diameter. And about seven feet above that was a thin strand of rock a foot wide. The bridge faded in the distance, and I didn't know where it led. If we could get on it, we could gain some time, which was quickly running out.

"I'm going to boost you up there," I told Brittany. "If I don't make it, pick a direction and run. There may be help on the way."

That last was a lie, but it sounded good.

"I'm not leaving you," she said.

I was too busy trying to balance on the top to reply. Brittany stood on the next to last branch. Using Tai Chi balance and concentration techniques, I placed one foot onto the top of the Tree. Slowly, smoothly, as if my Sifu, or teacher, was watching, I brought my other foot up. From a crouch, back straight, I stood up.

"They're coming," Brittany warned.

"I know," I said. "Climb up so I can lift you."

Brittany scrambled on to the stone bridge, and then it was my turn. The stone was only a few inches thick. It was smooth, and the bottom was level with my fingertips. I looked down. The troops approached fast. Some were on the last big branch already. There was no time to think about what I had to do. I jumped.

My arms wrapped around the bridge. It took all my fear-driven concentration to keep hold. I swung my legs up and hugged the rock, then began to inch around to the top side,

expecting a fireball to burst against my back at any second. Brittany tugged at my leg, giving me the help I needed.

I lay still to give my heart a chance to settle back into my chest. That's when I noticed the silence. I chanced a look down at the Tree. The troops were there, Mephisto's own stubby horned, spiky-tailed demons, Lizardheads, KKC's, all with their flammers raised up to us. They made no move to fire, just stared. This was curious.

As we were in a vulnerable position and had no time for mysteries, I rose slowly to my feet, testing my balance, concentrating my chi, my reservoir of energy. Movement beneath me drew my attention. The troops on the big branch below me moved aside, obviously expecting something. I peered into the mist. Maybe it was Major Molas come to escort us to Heaven Gate?

No such luck.

A figure strode out of the fog. I had a few more seconds to check him out this time. His armor had an organic quality to it. Black, with a dull sheen, it had no visible joints, it seemed to flow with his movements. The clawed left hand rested on the bejeweled hilt of a two handed sword. His black hair trailed from his head as if blown by its own personal breeze. Thick horns swept back in a shallow curve, tapering to sharp points. They were red now. I assumed that meant he was not happy. He stopped and raised his long, wrinkled face and blazing eyes.

"Getter," his voice rumbled. "We meet again, with no door between us. You murdered Heret, one of my daughters."

"It was self-defense," I told him.

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A gnarly, clawed hand waved my excuse away as irrelevant.

"She was a disappointment to me," he admitted. "Hanging about with the lesser demons. But I had great plans for her. Queen of the Scum she would have been." He sighed a universal, paternal sigh. "I would prefer to take you alive and torture you at my leisure before taking your life force, but more important matters press for my time."

"Like war against Satan," I said.

His laugh was so deep the rock under my feet vibrated.

"It will be no war against that old demon. He can do nothing to stop me. He grows senile, cowering in that golden palace for centuries at a time. Once he was a great demon. True. Now, his greatest challenge is what side of the bed to get out of, if he gets out at all."

"And what will you do if you take over?"

"Bah! Hell has grown too lenient," he said, as if giving a campaign speech. "The souls are tormented with boredom, not pain. The demons have become sloppy. Look at you Hell Cops. You come down here and steal souls with impunity."

"The ones we take do not belong here."

"Doesn't matter. That practice, I promise you, will cease. For some, it already has."

"For who? Who have you taken?"

"You tell me, Getter. Are you missing someone?"

I couldn't help but blurt it out. "Dimitri."

"Yes, Dimitri. Come with me, Getter. I will take you to him." His eyes blazed and his mouth bunched into a

malevolent grimace. "And I'll take that young soul with you for myself. Get him!" he ordered his troops.

With a yell they rushed to the branch stairway and began to climb. Mephisto's cry was our signal to start running. Before I did, I drew my gun and fired. The blast shattered the top two feet of the Tree and sent two soldiers falling into the depths. Then we ran.

Fireballs flew all around us. One grazed my arm, knocking me to my knees. I jumped up and kept running. No time to be scared. The Tree spread out under us like a dark green canopy that had been firebombed. At irregular intervals the leaves were burned away, exposing areas of charred, scraggly branches that showed against the gray mist like a fine pen and ink drawing. Occasionally movement could be seen, sometimes a flash of pale soul flesh, sometimes a darker form.

I had no idea how far the stone bridge stretched or where we would be when it ended. It widened gradually which was a good sign. I had the Find out, simultaneously trying to figure where we were and not run over the edge, when I heard my name called, twice.

It was no mystery who called the first time. Mephisto's bass voice cut through the fog like a laser. It almost knocked me over with its power. "GETTER. I'M COMING FOR YOU." I knew then he was on the bridge. There was no way to outrun him. The other voice was faint with distance, yet somehow familiar. I couldn't place it in direction or identity. It didn't matter. Mephisto was gaining on us, and there was nowhere to run, except down.

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Brittany ran in front of me. "Brittany," I said. "Mephisto is coming. I'll try and slow him somehow. Maybe you can get some place. If you see another Hell Cop, ask him for help. Otherwise, I'm sorry. I tried."

"Don't leave me alone, Mr. Getter, please. I want to go to Heaven."

"Me too, kiddo, but not this trip, I'm afraid."

I chanced a look behind me. Mephisto's form emerged from the mist like a true Specter from Hell should, eyes burning, hair a nimbus around his horned head, sword held high. I stopped and faced him. Running twenty more feet would not make any difference.

"Run, Brittany, run."

"No, Mr. Getter, I want to stay with you."

"Do as I say. You might have a chance."

Suddenly, I heard a whistling sigh. A hard blast of wind buffeted me. I had to step toward the approaching Mephisto to keep from falling.

"Ahheeee," Brittany screamed.

I spun around. She was gone.

"Brittany!"

Forgetting my fear, I looked down, expecting to see her pale face and hands tumbling into the dark Tree. Nothing.

"Brittany!"

"She be all right, Getter, my friend," a familiar voice called from over my head.

Shapes swooped in the mist. One of them resolved itself and became clear. A Skyhook glided in a lazy circle, with Gregory sitting astride it, beaming a welcome grin at me.

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His expression went from happy to alarm. Mephisto! I twisted into a crouch. He loomed fifteen feet away, closing fast. I drew my gun. He raised his sword.

"You're mine, Getter."

I fired. The shot hit him just below the knee, throwing him off balance. The sword swung down. I blocked it with the gun. The shock of the impact almost knocked it out of my hand. I scrambled away from him, surged to my feet, determined to finish it. I kicked him when he was half way to his feet. He blocked the kick. One foot slipped over the edge. He grabbed for me. The gun came up on its own, pointed at his ugly, vulnerable head.

"You can't kill me, Getter," he said with a confident, toothy grin. "I'm already dead."

"I can try," I said back. The distraction was enough.

On his knees, he lunged forward with the sword. I jumped back. He lunged again. I jumped back again. He reversed the blade, and I had to jump before I had my balance. I stumbled backwards, tripped, and landed on my pack which forced my back into a painful arch. In an instant he stood over me. He pressed the sword's point into my arm till I dropped the gun. It skittered over the edge and vanished.

"You are mine, Getter," he assured me.

At that moment I had to agree with him.

A Skyhook appeared behind Mephisto. It glided silently toward him, hook down, ready to skewer the, officially, second most powerful demon in Hell. The security chief was having none of it. With perfect timing, with a smooth circuitous sweep of his sword, he severed the Skyhook's head

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and then its hook. The point of the sword pressed into my chest before I could even think of moving. Spraying black blood, the headless bird slowly fell into a steep dive.

"I must take your life force now, Getter. You have distracted me long enough."

He raised the sword with both claws.

"You have forever," I said. "What's the hurry?"

"My destiny awaits."

Gregory on his Skyhook came into sight behind Mephisto. Gregory looked hard at me. When he caught my eye, he raised his right hand with index finger extended, pointing at me. As the bird banked and slipped below the bridge level, he lowered his arm and pointedly pointed down.

His meaning was clear, and I had one second to decide—fall or die. I took the full second, raised my middle finger to the looming giant, and rolled over the edge.

Time stopped. Mephisto grew smaller in instant leaps of eternal time. His cry of anger and frustration filled 155, maybe all of Hell heard it. I floated in the sound; thought I heard rocks shaken loose from distant cliffs; thought I heard all the demons in the Tree cry out in alarm; thought I felt a collective shudder from every soul in Hell. I experienced my worst fear—falling, falling, falling. Yet, my heart was calm, my thoughts serene. It was almost soothing, the rush of the wind, the weightlessness. Death was inevitable; don't worry. Be happy. Some sweet sadness intruded: Would Brittany make it to Heaven? Poor Christine, losing another loved one to Hell. Never to see Sneaker again in the light of real life. Ah well, as my mother used to say, everything will work out in

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the end—so, fall, fall, fall forever.

Chapter Twenty-three

A voice interrupted my floating thoughts. "Getter," it said, a sweet singing sound. Was it an angel come to rescue me?

"GETTER!"

My mind jerked back to reality. I fell! A flash of movement on the right, another on the left. Gregory's face coming fast. Bang, I hit something. Then I fell again. A dark shape intercepted me, and I landed on the hard feathery back of a Skyhook. Little hands grabbed me. Clutching at the surprisingly soft feathers, I felt the power under me as the huge bird fought the extra weight. I breathed in the sharp, gamy, not unpleasant smell of the beast.

"Are you all right, my friend?" Gregory yelled from his own mount, flying next to me.

"Am I alive?" I called back.

"Aye, you are, and a right miracle 'tis."

"Then I'm okay."

"You won't be if he gets ahold of you again."

"We're safe now, aren't we, Mr. Getter?" Brittany asked. Her partially substantial hands gripped my arm.

"Safer, anyway."

I looked back. The gray stone of the bridge blended into the mist. Mephisto stood huge, arms akimbo, seemingly suspended in midair. I was sure I could see his eyes glowing like dull, never forgetting embers. Minions, dark silhouettes against the gray, ran to him. His voice boomed and fireballs rained down on us.

"Hang on," I shouted.

My Skyhook twisted and dove to avoid fire balls. There were too many. One hit him on the shoulder. The wounded bird screamed and lurched, almost threw us off his back. I reached across and swatted at the burning ball till it fell away. The feathers burned around the wound, and I beat them out. The bird squealed with each flap of its wings so it held them still and went into a shallow glide that took us closer and closer to the Tree.

Gregory descended to fly at my right.

"It's hurt bad, Greg. Is there anything I can do for it?"

Gregory took a small brown pouch from a leather bag attached to a harness. He tied it to my gun and then flew above and a little ahead and threw it to me.

"Rub that on the wound. It will stop the pain. His name is Ixsess."

I unwrapped the Fire Moss Balm and spread it over the wound. I swear I felt the bird's sigh of relief.

"We will follow you," Gregory called. "Ixsess will have to land soon." I waved my understanding. Gregory said, "Getter, do you know somebody named Dimitri?"

I was so surprised by the question I had to think before answering. "Yes. How do you know of him?"

"The one who told us about you said to tell you he is where the three rivers come together. Look out!"

A huge branch appeared out of the thickening fog. Ixsess dove under it. Smaller branches tugged at me as we passed under. I looked for Gregory. He flew higher, occasionally obscured by cloud.

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Another branch loomed, and another and another. Ixsess made a valiant effort to gain height, but the wound had done damage to the muscles. We continued to lose altitude, dodging branches with only a few seconds of warning. I had to clear my ears twice. Brittany and I talked to the bird, urging him on, complimenting him after each miss, telling him we could land soon. I thought of the Abyss somewhere below and wondered if we might drop into it and glide forever.

I held on with one hand and with the other worked my Find to figure out where in Hell I was. I didn't have much luck. The Find is necessary for plotting routes through the Nexus. Once through the entrance it taps into the network and tells it where you want to go. However, it's not much good when flying blind. We were changing location both horizontally and vertically so the Find was having a hard time getting a fix. It told me the Nexus was directly behind me and that I was in 155. It couldn't tell me where we were headed.

The branches stopped appearing. Brittany and I lay flat on Ixsess's back, my arm over her. I lost track of time. I might even have dozed. I could barely see Ixsess's wing tips slice through the fog. One second I envisioned us flying smack into a cliff—the next second the fog vanished and we flew into light.

A long forested valley stretched out under us. The valley walls were steep cliffs of gray rock shot with glistening black and deep purple. Mist shrouded the end of the valley. A river ran out of the mist and meandered through twisted trees.

I didn't know where we were until the valiant Ixsess banked over the river. No water flowed between the rocky

banks. I'd seen it before—The River of Bones, one of the three rivers—Flesh, Bones, and Blood—that flowed together to form the River of Souls. If Gregory had his information right, I'd find Dimitri at the confluence of the three rivers.

Ixsess was fading fast. His head drooped, and I could hear his labored breathing. He circled toward a spot, close to the mist, where the cliff jutted out, forming a tiny natural landing place about halfway down. With a last mighty flap of his great wings, Ixsess touched down.

We immediately slipped off the Skyhook's back and hugged the cliff face to give Ixsess room to lay down. Instead, he staggered and tumbled off the rock.

Brittany screamed. I forgot how high we were and rushed to the edge. Ixsess fell a couple hundred feet before he spread his wings. He screamed, too, at the pain he must have felt. He settled into a long glide that carried him into the mist, out of sight. A jumble of thoughts, which weren't mine, rushed through my head. Then there was silence.

Stunned, at a loss for the moment, I sat against the cliff face. Brittany scrunched next to me, gripping my arm.

"Will the big bird come back?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He's hurt. I don't think he can fly anymore."

I punched buttons on the Find.

"Where are we?" Brittany asked.

"It appears that we're nowhere. This section has no number. There are no souls or demons here. Probably because the source of the River of Bones is here." I punched more buttons. "There is no Nexus here. The next section has

one somewhere. I guess that's where we're going. Hope you packed your hiking boots."

I crawled around the perimeter of the outcropping, resolutely focusing on the first twenty feet of rock and not the four hundred feet to the valley floor. I found a spot with natural looking steps leading down. I almost convinced myself that after the cavern, climbing down into the valley would be a piece of cake. It wasn't, but I made it anyway.

Once on the valley floor, we went to the river. There were no souls in the valley, only their bones. When a soul was dismembered, buried, eaten, or otherwise destroyed his soul body emerged in three places: The River of Bones, The River of Flesh, and The River of Blood. The souls were made whole again in the River of Souls.

I'd never seen the convergence or the headwaters, if that's the correct term, of any of the rivers. My curiosity got the better of me, so, accompanied by the crunching and grating of bones, we turned right and followed the low bank into the mist.

The fog was fine and wet with the strong smell of an open sewer that got stronger as I carefully, on full alert, made my way over the rocks. The clack and rattle of the bones grew louder. The way steepened quickly, and I had to help Brittany scramble over and around rough, slimy boulders. I stopped to catch my breath and that's when I heard the voices.

I couldn't distinguish the words, but bitching and moaning are universally recognizable. Already sweating in the ninety-nine degree temperature and humidity, I didn't need something else to sweat about, though my curiosity didn't

seem to understand that. The dry rattle of bones falling covered our too noisy approach.

The mist parted, and I looked down on a scene that took me back to a Halloween when I was seven. Usually, the kids walked on the opposite side of the street from the old cemetery. That was where the houses and the candy were. Macy Lunt dared me to walk inside the block long, high, sharp tipped cemetery fence from gate to gate. I said I would if he walked with me on the outside of the fence. Reluctantly, he agreed.

It was one of those classic Halloween nights: a full moon witnessed all, a chill wind blew, dry leaves skittered down the dark street, occasionally a scream stabbed the night. I stepped over the thick chain that hung between tall stone gateposts. We walked slowly, no chickens here, whistling and giggling with false bravado. Halfway to the next gate some joker in a very good skeleton costume jumped up with a shriek and danced around the gravestones.

I froze to the spot, as if invisible hands from underground held my feet. The skeleton looked at me with empty eyes and in a voice very like the ones coming from the mist, called out, "Hey, little boy, I want your BONES! HA, Ha, haaa. Don't be scared. Let me take them now. I'll get them eventually, I always do. I always do."

The skeleton leaped around the stones while I stared mesmerized with horror and fascination. The skeleton turned back toward me; its unchanging facial expression somehow changed from one of gaiety to one of meanness and greed.

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"Give me your bones NOW, little boy." He reached out with a bony hand and took a giant step toward me. "Or I'll yank them out of you before you're dead. Give them to me!" And that's when Macy leaned through the fence and punched me in the back. "Run! Run!"

I ran, my feet hardly touching the ground, Dracula cape trailing straight out behind.

The voice followed me, "Come back. I'll get them in the end," it cried out. "I always do."

I leapt the chain at the gate and didn't stop running till I rounded a corner a block away. Little chests heaving, Macy and I finally peeked back around the corner. The cemetery was quiet, no dancing skeletons in sight. It wasn't till later that I wondered how I saw the streetlights right through its body.

The twins to that graveyard skeleton worked below us. Their familiar gravelly voices grumbled a chant.

Bones, bones. Dry old bones.
The souls want'em
But we got'em.
Bones, bones, we got the bones.

Two skeletons stood in a pocket empty of mist. In their bony hands they held pitchforks. Bones—*toe bones, hip bones, arm bones, skulls*—flowed out of a rock face as from a Nexus, down a stone ramp and into the very beginning of the River of Bones. The skeletons used the pitchforks to pick up

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stray bones that slid off the ramp. They were perpetually busy.

Bones, bones, cracked and broke,
If the souls don't get'em
They'll be stiff as smoke.
Bones, bones, we got the bones.

I'd wondered about the sources of the three rivers. I suddenly had no desire at all to see the headwaters of the Rivers of Flesh or Blood.

Brittany was suitably horrified and fascinated. She made to speak. I put a finger to her lips. Pitchfork wielding skeletons might not like being spied on.

We backed off and made our way out of the mist and followed the river the length of the valley to a steep narrows. We passed through on a foot wide path cut into the rock and came out into a wide forested valley. Nothing but a few minor nuisances inhabited the upper valley. The lower valley was more dangerous.

From the creature roars I heard I knew the valley held a number of the feline equivalents to Hell Hounds. Chameleon Cats weren't much different from Lifer cats except they stood five feet tall at the shoulder, could change color, and had long, sinuous bodies. They could be wounded, but I'd never heard of one being killed. They were usually easy to avoid, their purring could be heard a quarter mile away.

My Find confirmed what I already knew. I was in 306. There wasn't anything special about 306. A heavily treed

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valley about a mile wide, vacationing Demons went there to hunt souls. They used flammers mostly. Specialized ones that shot tiny concentrated flameballs that burnt through a soul like a laser. Some demons used a bow and arrow and some preferred to use only a knife to get that up close and personal feel of slitting skin and spurting blood. The vegetation was mostly benign, though there were deep muskeg pits, Jaw Flowers, and of course the ubiquitous Noose vines.

We kept to the river bank when we could. Though more exposed, we made much better time than forcing our way through the brambles and brush just inside the tree line. I thought about Dimitri.

He hated his real name, Zale Thanos, especially when he found out it meant "power of the sea." Dimitri had no use for the sea. Women, he definitely had use for, so when he became a Hell Cop, he picked Dimitri which meant "belonging to the Greek fertility goddess, Demeter." It was an appropriate name. With his tousled black hair, blue eyes radiating charm from his round face, and an enthusiastic grin, he had little problem in his attempts to fertilize every woman he met.

This attraction to women carried over into his work as a Hell Cop. He had an uncanny ability to find female souls. He barely had to use the Find. He just knew. Hell Cops, as with regular cops, out of necessity, were supposed to remain dispassionate about the souls they worked with. Dimitri had a problem with that. The soul he was after when he disappeared was a beautiful young woman. Just the kind he

could get muddle-headed about. I hoped he hadn't done something silly.

We walked/jogged for awhile without any serious incidents. I told Brittany about Dimitri and that we were headed toward where he was supposed to be. Without any prompting by me she said, "Well, if he's your friend you have to rescue him. Maybe I can help." Something I'd hope my own daughter would say.

I have to admit my guard slipped a bit because the traveling was so easy. After an hour or so I stopped and went on full alert, and not because I'd stepped into a Jaw Flower and barely snatched my foot out before it snapped shut. I'd only been in 306 twice before, briefly each time. Yet, I knew it well enough to know that I should have been hearing the sizzle of flammers, the painful screams of souls, and the triumphant yells of demons bagging their prey. There didn't seem to be any demons in 306, or souls for that matter. That's what put me on alert.

I sat by a boulder and listened. I'd become used to the continuous low scrape of the bones. I listened beyond that. Almost imperceptible in the distance ahead, I heard a branch snap. I thought maybe voices. Brittany heard them, too. Wary, I proceeded. I stopped every hundred yards or so to listen. I concentrated so hard on listening, I didn't notice the Chameleon Cat till it was a hundred feet away.

Ordinarily, that would be a bad thing.

Chapter Twenty-four

The Cat regarded us from behind several trees, its sleek, sweptback head looking like a supersonic jet with teeth. Its serpentine body, twice as long as a regular big cat, flickered against the woody background. Chameleon Cats had three-sided fur they rotated to blend in with their surroundings. Usually their color changes were subtle, but this one was nervous. It looked like the side of the Goodyear blimp with a short in its wiring.

With no substantial cover anywhere close, the cat would get us in two and half leaps. I looked to the river. I looked at the Cat. Its right front paw came out from behind a tree and tested its footing before setting down. I looked at the river again. What would happen if I grabbed Brittany and jumped in? Would the bones support me, suck me under and strip the flesh from my own bones? I had a feeling I was about to find out.

I looked back to the Cat. It flowed like a snake into the open, its enigmatic cat eyes locked on us. We weren't running, and I think that confused it, giving us a few extra seconds to take the slow steps we needed to get to the edge of the bones.

We all leaped at the same time.

I landed on the bones, having no idea what to expect. My feet sank in a few inches, and I fell to my knees. I didn't even try to stand. I used the staff across the surface for support

and scrambled for the other side a hundred feet away. Brittany, a soul with little weight, followed easily.

The Chameleon Cat stopped at the bones' edge. It took a tentative step. The bones cracked and snapped under its weight, yet the huge paw sank only a foot. The next step, though, it sank up to its belly. The River of Bones flowed slowly, but relentlessly. The bleached white bones immediately began to pile up against the Cat's body. Even a beast as powerful as the Cat wasn't going to go against the bones' inexorable flow. It let out a high sorrowful screech of frustration and backed out.

As I scrambled across, pushing against skulls and thigh bones and trying not to stab myself on rib bones, I kept glancing back. The Cat balanced shakily on all four paws, his long body bent like a U-shaped spring. I knew it was considering jumping on me, but unlike most demons in Hell it wasn't that dumb. But then, judging by the way it picked each paw up and put it down, searching for the perfect footing, maybe it was.

I never found out.

Suddenly, downstream, on the side I'd just left, fifty, maybe sixty, soldiers appeared. Dressed in brown uniforms and armed with everything from flamethrowers to sticks, they came toward us in a random fashion. In small groups or ones and twos, they were alert and obviously looking for something, but weren't having much luck being stealthy.

Astonished, I dropped down and with Brittany in my arms squirmed and wriggled into the bones until they covered us. The Chameleon Cat roared once and bounded away, its extra

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long body working like a speedy inch worm. Shouts and a few low power flameballs followed it. Brittany clung to my neck, her cheek pressed to mine. We peeked out from behind a skull, and that's when I realized that instead of the bandy-legged minions I expected, most of the troops were souls.

Souls? Souls with weapons? Strange things were definitely happening in Hell. Several KKC Sergeants attempted to get them to spread out and be quiet. It looked like a training exercise. The souls wore new uniforms. Otherwise they were a ragtag bunch of Zombies of all ages, sizes, and sexes with pale bloodless skin. Their bodies weren't quite right though, with one arm longer than the other, a head too big or small for the body, little things. Despite that, they had a more substantial look than regular souls. Almost as if they were alive again. They had to be part of Mephisto's new army. The river had carried us about even with them when shouts and fireballs came from the opposite shore. Twenty souls, like the first ones, materialized from the trees. Yelling and firing, they came right up to the bones. This activity drew the first soldiers' attention. We were carried along at a walking pace right between them. I willed myself to become one with the bones.

The Sergeant Demon of the first group looked at the new soldiers, then, too late, realized it wasn't right. A larger group came out of hiding and attacked them from behind. Some of the first group tried to escape across the river. Several scrambled all the way across, one came within a few feet of us.

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Most times when danger presents itself I know I'm going to prevail. Hope springs eternal, is a given with Hell Cops, otherwise they have no business being in Hell. When Hope, the absolute positive knowledge that you will survive, dies, then a Cop is no better than a miserable damned soul.

Lying among the bones of the dead, Mephisto's strange troops only a few feet away, I was gripped by a bout of hopelessness more intense than I had ever felt before. A deep weariness washed over me like a slow breaking wave. Powerful forces were at work. Who was I to go against them, let alone prevail? Evil was abroad in Hell, and, after all, I was only a lone Hell Cop. It was absurd to think I might survive against Mephisto's power. It was absurd to even be a Hell Cop. I was helpless. What made me believe that I could ever survive, let alone return a soul to Heaven? Reech had picked the wrong guy to prophesize about.

I considered letting my body sink to the bottom of the River of Bones. Eventually my body would merge with all the other souls and Getter, the Hell Cop, would cease to exist. Perhaps in a millennium, or two, he might be reconstituted long enough to be tormented until torn apart so that his bones, flesh, and blood would once again flow in the three rivers.

The conflict in my head numbed me. I lay among the bones and stared uncaring at the soldiers and the trees and let the river sweep me away. Unconsciously, I wrapped protective arms around my little girl soul.

Eventually, I slept.

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"Getter, wake up. Wake up." A small hand pushed at me. I held still while I concentrated on remembering where I was. I had sunk deeper into the river and could see nothing but bones. My eyes didn't want to open, and my body wanted to keep drifting, but the hopeless lassitude that had overcome me earlier had faded, though the questions lingered, and I slowly roused myself to climb to the surface. Really having to piss might have had something to do with it, too.

Brittany floated on the surface while she watched the new landscape flow by. "Where are we?" she asked.

I stuck my head out and looked around. To the left, the valley had widened out into a broad, flat plain as dry and bare as the bones I rode on. On the right, steep cliffs of rough, crumbly, tan rock rose hundreds of feet, capped by sharp spires of ugly purple stone. The whole valley curved to the left. The cliffs sloped down in the far heat-shimmery distance to meet the plain. I couldn't make it out at the time, but there was an indistinct something ahead at that joining. My instincts told me I'd find Dimitri there—at the confluence of the Three Rivers.

The plain was as desolate a place as I'd ever seen in Hell, no demons, no souls, no vegetation of any kind, only dust and rock and heat. The bones flowed at a fast walking pace. The friction along the outside of the curve, against the cliffs, put tension on the bones. Their scrape and pop was constant and loud. Occasionally a bone popped up and fell back with a dry clack. Broken bones littered the steep bank. I saw no reason to walk when I could ride, so I lay back and let the

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river carry us toward the dark mass ahead that rose from the lonesome plain.

I drank and ate and allowed my mind to wander out loud. I told Brittany about my late wife, Julie. After ten years I still missed her. Sometimes, at home, away from the danger, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, crying, sure my heart was going to break with my need for her. She had grounded me to reality whenever I was in the unreality of Hell. Her beauty softened the ugliness, her need for me took the edge off my cockiness.

After she died, I didn't go to Hell for six months. When I returned, I didn't give a damn. I was reckless, endangering myself and others. Dimitri finally set me straight.

We had gone in together. He was after a woman, of course, and I was after a young man. We went to 42, The City. The city is clean and brilliant, populated by beautiful people driving expensive cars to gourmet restaurants or gala occasions. The neighborhoods were made up of gracious mansions, sprawling estates, or gleaming highrises with obsequious, uniformed doormen.

The only ugliness was the beggars, those souls whose greed, jealousy, or ambition had driven them too far in their quest for the life The City represented. They were doomed to wander the streets, ignored, or worse, laughed at, by the rich and powerful, their envy never to be satisfied.

I found my soul and, disregarding all good advice and good sense, snatched him up right in front of a group of demons masquerading as hip young people on the way up. The City may have been beautiful, but it still had security. There was a

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commotion, and Dimitri almost got killed. I managed to extricate us and the souls. In the Nexus, Dimitri smacked me hard with his fist, dropping me to my knees like a sack of beans with a hole in it.

"Wake up!" he yelled at me. "You may be pissed off at the universe for what happened to Julie, I'm angry, too, but don't let it affect me."

"I didn't—."

"Yeah, you did. You got to follow the rules down here, man. You know that. You can't just take a soul like that in front of a bunch of demons. I damn near got killed, and it was your fault. Julie wouldn't have been real happy about that."

"I'm—."

"Shut up! Fuck, man, you may not care what happens to you, but other people do. I do. If you get yourself killed here you'll never see Julie again. Ever. They don't grant visitation rights, you know. Either way. So wake up. Get that chip off your shoulder and stop acting like an asshole and start acting like a Hell Cop, or get out of the business. You got that?"

Along with a cracked tooth, I got it. I cleaned up my act and tried to conduct myself in a manner that will make Julie proud of me when we meet again.

The hurt faded, but Julie's presence was always with me. I don't think she minded, too much, when her sister Christine moved in after Dimitri disappeared. We needed each other at the time and Christine reminded me so much of Julie, with her wide eyes and smile and fine blonde hair that felt so good on my chest in the lonely middle of the night.

Brittany said little. She shared tears with me when I told her about Julie and our daughter's death. I did not tell her that she was the same age as my daughter would have been. I think she knew, anyway.

I dozed again. When I woke, I thought I spied a lone Skyhook gliding high up in the pale sky. This led me to thinking about Ixsess and then Gregory and finally to Sneaker. Did she make it to the Gate with her young soul? How was she? Where was she? What would Julie think of her? They were so different.

They had their strength in common, though even that was different. Julie got her strength from the security of family and friends and a house she had made into a home. Sneaker's strength came from her competence which gave her the confidence to be able to rely on herself among the dangers of Hell. She lived in a mess of an apartment. She had few acquaintances and her few friends were Hell Cops. One was light, safe, family oriented, the other, dark, dangerous, a loner.

Plenty of what-ifs went through my mind, yet I was sure of one fact—Sneaker was alive and able to touch and be touched. Whether our relationship would ever go beyond sex and demons, I didn't know. I did know one thing, though. Christine reminded me so much of Julie that I'd never know where Sneaker and I were going until she was out of my everyday life. We had been brought together by Dimitri's disappearance. Knowing Christine's strong family ties, I suspected that whether Dimitri was dead or I returned him to her, the issue was going to be settled soon.

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I stirred myself and looked ahead. The dark spot on the horizon had resolved itself into a huge fortress roughly carved out of the purple rock. This was Mephisto's Fort Blood. From half a mile away I felt the malevolence of the place. Out on the plain I saw a moving dust cloud, though I couldn't tell what caused it.

I dug out my binoculars and studied the structure.

Rough hewn, it loomed over the river. A hundred feet high, five hundred long, it had narrow crenulations along its top and squat towers at the corners all decorated with gargoyles. I thought I glimpsed movement by large shapes, though I couldn't be sure. The side I could see was seamless with no openings, not a window, not a crack, nothing.

"Getter?" Brittany tugged at my arm.

"Just a minute," I said.

The fortress seemed to grow out of the end of the cliffs. I studied the crumbly rock cliffs, thinking I might find a way up and enter from there. A well equipped team of climbers could do it easily. Not me.

"Getter, do we want to go in there?"

"In where?" I dropped the glasses and looked around. "Oh, shit!"

We were going into the Fort whether we wanted to or not.

Chapter Twenty-five

The river had picked up speed while I looked for a way into the Fort. Now it was going to gather us in and all we had to do was survive the ride. A stone abutment stuck a quarter of the way into the river. It acted like a funnel, channeling the bones into a ragged oval opening. My heart went into overdrive.

“Crawl to the middle,” I yelled.

I followed Brittany as we scrambled on top of the bones away from the diversion. The current picked up too quickly, though, and drew us into the funnel.

I grabbed a small ledge with one hand and Brittany with the other. The air moaned as it was sucked in with the bones. The bones beat at me. A large femur smacked my fingers. I let go. Surrounded by a mist of bones, followed by Brittany, screaming in unison, we flew feet first through the opening.

What a ride—an adrenaline rush spiked with terror. I fell upward, somehow that made it a bit easier. I kept my feet together, hands crossed on my chest, and chin tucked in while I bumped and ground through total darkness on an E ticket ride to oblivion, screaming all the way. The pipe narrowed to a three-foot diameter; the sides were scraped smooth by flying bones. The rush of noise made it hard to think, which was good because my imagination was hyperventilating. I hoped I wouldn't be falling down at the end of the ride.

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My worst fears were groundless. I was sucked straight up, then the pipe made a sudden right angle bend. A dim light appeared ahead. The pipe widened, and the bones and I were deposited on a gentle slope. Being heavier than the bones, I didn't stop as fast. I pushed up a good sized pile before I tumbled to a stop. Brittany, sprawled on her tummy, spun to a stop against my feet.

We were in a rock chamber about forty by forty with a flat polished floor. My body tingled as if receiving a mild electric shock. The bones spread out on the floor in a single layer and when I wasn't looking directly at them seemed to flow independently of the slope of the floor.

I rolled to my knees and oriented myself. The wall I'd stopped against angled back, directing the bones through a rectangular opening into a narrow stone trough. We slid toward it, too. I pulled Brittany onto a small ledge.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Do you mean did I die?" She shrugged and showed me a strained smile. She didn't know where the sarcasm came from either. "Where are we?"

From the higher vantage point, I saw that the bones were reassembling themselves, not necessarily properly. By the time they went through the opening they were full skeletons.

"Well, we're in Fort Blood, section 333. I've never been in here before. This is a skeleton assembly room."

"I can see that."

I gave her a hard, questioning stare.

"Sorry," she said. Her shoulders squirmed as she hunted for words. "While we were in the bones I thought a lot about

what's happened to me. I'm dead, but I still feel alive, sort of. But I'm in Hell, and you say you're taking me to Heaven. But my little sister died because of me, so maybe I'm supposed to be here. That Bujo said I am. You say I'm not. I hope you're right. But what if you're not? If I'm supposed to be here, shouldn't I be bad? Mommy didn't like it when I talked smart-alecky." She hugged her knees and rested her head on them. "Daddy didn't either." She ran out of steam. "I don't know what to believe or where I belong."

My chest tightened and my eyes burned. Doubts were not uncommon in the innocents. Usually the more innocent, the greater the doubts. I put my arm around her quivering shoulders. She flinched but let it stay.

"Brittany," I said, "You've been through more than most souls, in Life and Death. It's common to have doubts. I can't tell you where you deserve to be. You know. Just ask your heart where you should be. It will tell you."

She sniffed and said, "But my sister and Bujo....?"

"Your heart, Brittany. Ask your heart."

She turned her head. Her bunched up face regarded me with confusion, then the tears came. She came into my arms, and we shared tears for awhile.

"Are we going to rescue Dimitri?" she asked when composure returned.

"Getting you to Heaven Gate is my top priority," I said.

"But if he's here, you can't just leave him, can you?" She tapped my chest. "Look in your own heart."

I had reservations. We did have to get out of the fort, though, and if we ran into Dimitri on the way?

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Through the skeleton exit the trough bent left. Faint music of undeterminable genre as well as the odor of formaldehyde and ozone floated into the chamber.

A small hole high on the other side of the chamber was the only other exit. I high-stepped over the realigning skeletons and climbed up to the hole. I listened and heard voices right on the other side. Startled, I almost lost my footing. I motioned to Brittany, and we flattened against the wall.

"You see anything in there that ain't supposed to be?" a whiny voice asked.

"Nah. Just bones."

"What the Heaven's Lol talkin' about, somethin' crawling up the bone tube?"

"Ahh, he don't know nothing. Just making up shit for us to do. Fucking Supervisors."

"Yeah. Let's get a drink before we go back."

"Yeah, let's."

The voices faded. I worked my way back to the hole. From my side the hole looked into a narrow passage that went right or left. I boosted Brittany through and, head first, squeezed through myself. Once in the passage, my first thought was, now what?

I had no idea of the lay of the place, but if Dimitri was held prisoner here, he was probably in the dungeon. I assumed that all forts had dungeons. The floor sloped left. Left it was.

The upper reaches were, for the most part, deserted. We saw or heard two pairs of guards, both as conscientious as the first pair. The ozone smell of electricity permeated the

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place. A single, deep, uninterpretable voice periodically joined the strange music that echoed through the halls.

Two floors worth of musty stairwell brought us to a heavy wood door. The voice and music came from the other side. The stairs kept on going down. I had to look anyway. I lifted the heavy latch and carefully nudged the door open a crack. Put my eye to it.

A wide balcony overlooked a huge chamber that Dr. Frankenstein would have been proud of. I had to see more. The door's hinges creaked as it opened wide enough to slip through.

The balcony ran around the chamber, carved, as was the whole building, out of solid rock. At intervals, thick stone columns rose to a high domed ceiling. Peeking from behind a column we stared into the chamber at a fantastic scene.

Wires and pipes cluttered the chamber. To the right two obsidian columns topped with pentagonal spheres rose from rough pits. Periodically, lightning arced between the spheres then ran down a thick wire that split into five strands.

Three stone troughs emerged at equal intervals from high on the wall. Each trough split into five smaller ones that crisscrossed the chamber till they ended at one of five shallow stone tanks set at the points of a raised pentagram. One of the five big wires ended above each tank, its end splayed out in a circle. Smaller wires ran from directly underneath us into each tank. Torches and golden braziers lit the chamber with flickering gloom.

Music battered my ears. I leaned against a column as I surveyed the strange scene and felt the rock vibrate to the

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heavy bass line. Tucked under the balcony to my left a bizarre orchestra played. A tall, thin bat with human hands played violin. A serpent with triple forked tail played drums while a miniature Dinocat played tuba and a grizzled Lizardhead wailed on trumpet. A non-human skeleton played electric guitar and all I could see were two shaggy arms on piano. The other players were out of sight.

The music was at once discordant and harmonious, a mix of Mozart and Hendrix. The screech of sax or trumpet or violin jumbled my thoughts. I couldn't concentrate, yet at the end of each crescendo the instruments came together in a melody so sweet it caught at my throat and threatened to bring tears to my eyes. Combined with the bass that permeated everything, and the smoke and smells and flashes of electricity, it was a wrenching, fascinating experience. Brittany thought so, too. She pressed against me, hands over ears, as she tried to take in the fantastical scene.

The whole chaos of sight and sound focused on, and was conducted by, a single exotic demon. All the other distractions faded as I realized what I was seeing. I forced my mind to remember all the stories I'd heard. It had to be. In the center of it all, on a small raised pentagram, stood an actual Wizard.

Even in Hell, Wizards were mythical demons. They commanded awesome powers and were not influenced by either Satan or God. Some said they were the creators of the universe. One of their powers was the ability to create life.

As I sorted through the muddle of my thoughts—oh man, a real Wizard, nobody will believe me—I realized what he was doing—Creating life.

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The Wizard stood ten feet tall. His (or her or its) shadowy hooded robe hung as if on a framework of sticks. His arms extended at least five feet to wide, gray hands with slender, many-jointed fingers. The arms flowed with exquisite grace as he conducted the music in time with what happened around him. Into each tank a complete skeleton slid from its trough. From another trough, blood flowed, half covering the bones. Then an empty sac of skin from the River of Flesh, its dead eyes still reflecting the horror of its "death," covered the bones.

With a smooth, strong voice that easily cut through the music, the Wizard intoned a chant:

Grack tol sim be roctelus gracie
Betoth jal fetmac hell tolkinati
Yodeth, roctelus, stpix be YODETH.

When the strange symphony reached a peak he pointed dramatically to one of the tanks. Lightning arced between the raised pentagonal spheres, raced down the wire, leaving a trail of smoke, and showered the bones, blood, and flesh with energy. At the same time the small wire glowed a dull green. A cry split the close atmosphere. The contents of the tank fused together, forming a living, if imperfect, soul.

The soul sat up and screamed. Excess blood sloshed onto the floor. Bat-like minions with vestigial wings scampered to the new soul and licked it clean of blood with long stained tongues, then led it away. This was where the troops I almost ran into came from. Mephisto had them made to order. With

an unlimited supply of materials from the Three Rivers the upstart couldn't lose.

The Wizard finished with a flourish, both fluid arms high in the air, and that's when I saw it—a chain on the Wizard's leg. A chain? On a Wizard? Was that possible? The Wizard could create life, I'd just seen it. How could a chain hold him? What power did Mephisto have that could do such a thing? Or were Wizards just rare, not as powerful as the myths said?

I looked at him as he brought another soul to life. For a moment as he turned to another tank, he bowed his hooded head. Certainly giving life took some energy from the giver, but the minute shake of his head was all I needed to know that the Wizard was indeed a prisoner.

The Wizard froze, arms upraised, one long finger extended in a wait-a-minute-gesture. The music stopped, the sudden silence like a slap in the face. He turned and stared directly at me. I froze. The hood shadowed his face, yet his eyes, dark spots in dark, held mine like the chain held him.

We didn't speak. Nothing moved. Someone moaned. Something happened in my head. I thought, I'll try, not sure what I was agreeing to. The Wizard turned away, and the music began again with a crash.

I turned away, too, and leaned against the slightly slimy column, wondering what had just happened. Had I agreed to rescue a Wizard? I was learning an awful lot about Hell that I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Hell had been simpler before: you knew the rules, knew the dangers. You came in, retrieved the souls, and left. Now there were prophesying Fliers, telepathic Skyhooks, and captive Wizards who communicated

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on an even deeper level, not to mention talk of war. Change can be good. None of those changes worked for me. I would accept them, and deal with them, but at that moment, I realized that the "Good old days" were gone forever. In ten years the young turks coming up would think of this time as the "Good old days." A sad thought.

Somebody was coming. I knew it, and it wasn't my instincts that told me. I took a last look at the, if not mythical, certainly mysterious, Wizard. Then I took Brittany's hand, and we slipped back through the door and down the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-six

The humidity went up as the stairs went down. A general aroma of filth overcame the perfume of ozone. Not an odor of rot or decay but of open sewers and long unwashed bodies. I put in nose filters and continued down.

"Ewww. This place stinks," Brittany whispered.

I stopped on the first landing and dug out filters for her.

"What were they doing in that place?" she asked.

I looked her over. Dirty, cut by the sharp bones, clothes ragged, hair scraggly, yet looking up at me wide-eyed with curiosity, not fear. Her short time in Hell had matured her well past her ten years of Life. I didn't need to shield her from any of Hell's realities no matter how bizarre.

"I think, making an army of soul cannon-fodder."

We continued down the worn stone steps.

"Who was that tall man?"

"That was a Wizard," I said. Before she asked the next question, we came to another door. I held my hand up for quiet. Unlocked, the door opened without a sound. I peeked through. I'd found the dungeon.

The dank corridor stretched in both directions. Heavy metal doors with small barred windows were spaced every ten feet. To the right the corridor came to a blank wall. I couldn't tell if it dead-ended or intersected another corridor. To the left, about twenty feet down, a smokey torch lit a chair and part of an ancient desk.

I looked in the cell directly across from me. Except for some scattered straw and a skeleton huddled in the corner, it was empty. Brittany went to another one and jumped up, trying to see in.

Voices came from the direction of the desk. I grabbed Brittany and snuck back through the door from the stairs and hid behind it. Heavy footsteps approached and the latch went up. I flattened myself against the wall behind the door and hoped that whoever came through possessed the alertness of all the other guards I'd seen so far.

The door swung open, and two Lizardhead Guards came through.

"Do you believe how many of those troops they're making? Seems like forever that Wizard's been conducting that caterwauling."

"Mephisto must have a strong army to assure victory," the other said like a fully indoctrinated party faithful.

"Sure, sure, but against Satan? He hasn't been out of that palace in two hundred years. Where's his army? Nowhere, that's where."

"Mephisto says we need a big army."

"Yeah, Mephisto says. But what for?"

"To restore Hell to its former glory, of course."

"You mean to restore Mephisto to the glory he never had."

"Gitch, do not speak like that. That is treason."

"Okay, sorry. Come on, lets get that Lifer before he croaks for real."

Lifer? Did they have Dimitri some place else? I started to follow, then heard more footsteps rising from below. I didn't

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want to chance getting caught between them so we slipped back into the dungeon. In the third cell I saw a familiar form hunched in a corner, legs drawn up, head resting on knees. Even without the flat English driving cap, I'd know that bald head anywhere.

"Cappy," I whispered. He didn't move. "Cappy, wake up." He stirred slightly. The lock was big, ancient, and rusty. It looked like it would fall apart if I touched it. It didn't. I quickly checked the other cells. One held a Lizardhead who looked like he was sleeping off a drunk. The others were empty though one had the air, if the stultifying humidity and stench could be called that, of recent occupancy. Dimitri's cell. The guards were going to get a Lifer, it had to be Dimitri.

I called to Cappy again. This time he woke. When he raised his head I wasn't sure it was him. He'd lost fifty pounds and had the haggard look and dull eyes of a man who had almost given up. He had burn marks on his wrists and across his chest. He still had his smile, though somewhat dimmed.

"Getter? Jesus Christ in a hat, what are you doing here?" he said in a rough tenor voice that could bring tears when he sang "Danny Boy" or some such sentimental favorite.

"Room service. You look like Hell, Cappy."

Cappy stood up to his full six-and-a-half feet. The top of his tattered Hell Cop coverall was tied around his waist. Renewed hope lit up his thin brown face. He limped to the door.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said. His hands wrapped around the small window bars and shook them. "Son of a

bitch, Getter, can you get me out of here?" Then he noticed Brittany. "Damn, Getter, you bring a little girl soul in here?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you later." I gripped his hands in mine and said, "We won't leave you, Cappy. I promise. Is Dimitri here?"

"Yeah. His cell is two down. He won't be there. He's up in the Resurrection Chamber. Getting the life sucked out of him."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Never mind. I think I know." The moan, the scream, the small wire, Cappy's burn marks. Dimitri had been right under me in the Chamber.

"Look, Cappy, I just heard two Lizardheads say they were going to get a "Lifer." Does that mean Dimitri?"

The smile vanished. He pushed his face right up against the bars. Desperation drove his voice.

"Getter, you got to get me out of here. They'll come for me next. I can't take it again, man." He held up his wrists. "I can't do it. I'll die for real first. Promise me, if you can't get me out you'll shoot me. Please, Getter. Promise?"

Hatred for Mephisto swelled in my chest. I knew Cappy fairly well. Always hearty and positive, with a ready smile, he was a joy to be around. He loved life and accepted the rough spots with cheerful abandon. He stood on the other side of the door a wasted wreck. I could barely stand to hear him pleading to die.

"I'll get you out, Cappy. Who has the keys?"

"I think they're down there," he said, pointing to the desk.

"How much time do I have?"

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“Not much. They'll just unstrap him, drag him down here, and drag me up.”

I ran to the desk, Brittany behind me. No keys. The passage turned right for about fifty feet then stairs curved up to the left. A lantern lit a small room. It had a wooden table, three chairs, and a rough bed. Half eaten rodents and half empty goblets littered a greasy wood table. No keys. Three cloaks hung from steel pegs close to the door. Brittany checked behind the door. I searched the cloaks.

A guard walked into the room.

One puckered gash on his arm marked him as a Corporal. A heavy key hung at his side. He was three steps into the room when he stopped and raised his broad snout to sniff in the fetid air. I had no time to waste and was in no mood to waste it if I had it.

Plan A was to knock him out with my gun and take the keys. Alerted by my smell, he saw me with my arm raised at the last instant. He whirled and knocked me off balance with his stubby tail. He swung a balled up claw at my head. Would have connected but for a minor distraction.

“Leave him alone, you dirty demon!” Brittany jumped on the guard's back, arms around his throat.

I shifted my weight, wound up, and smacked him hard in his heavy jaw. He groaned and crumpled neatly onto the floor. I hissed at the pain in my knuckles.

Voices. The guards returning with Dimitri.

Brittany rolled the Corporal over and grabbed the key. She jumped up in triumph. “I got it!”

Then the guard had her. He rolled up and backfisted me in the ribs. I dropped to my knees. As I gasped for breath he hit me again. Choking in the dust, I saw the guard raise Brittany upside down by her leg and inspect her like a new lizard treat, leaving himself wide open. On my back, I planted a solid kick square into his groin. That had the same effect as on human men. He and Brittany went down with an ommph. I stood up and hit him twice to make sure he stayed down.

"Thanks," I said to Brittany. "But you're supposed to keep yourself safe out of harm's way."

"No, you're supposed to do that." At least she smiled when she said it.

I stuck the key in Cappy's cell door.

"It won't turn," I told him.

The voices grew louder.

"You have to say the words," he said, frantic now that he could hear the voices, too.

"What words?"

"Shit, man, the words. The magic words. It won't open without them."

"What are they?"

"Oh man, oh man." He shook with his desperation and squeezed his head for the words. "Rookbalu fek ... No, no. Rookbalu fetmac ... Oh, man."

"Come on, Cappy," I urged, watching the stairway door and him at the same time. I was completely exposed.

"Okay. Okay. Rookbalu fetmac christnot. You say them."

On the second try the key turned. At the same time the stairway door burst open. The guards came through

backward, laughing and dragging a body. Instantly I recognized the dark curly hair glistening with sweat. Dimitri.

"They sure sucked the life out of him this time," one of the Lizardhead guards said with a chuckle. "Don't look like he'll be a Lifer much longer."

"Then Mephisto might reward him for his service to the Hell Liberation Army."

"Yeah, sure he will. Take him to his cell. I'll get the key from Ticmuc, the lazy slothzerd."

"Gitch, that kind of talk about your superiors will get you in trouble."

"Ticmuc? My superior? I don't think so, Jimig."

"He is a Corporal."

"He's a Corporal kiss ass. Just take this Lifer will you? Bog my dog, you'd think you were bucking for General."

I was so caught up in the guards I forgot I was in the open. Cappy didn't. He grabbed Brittany's arm and she grabbed mine as he dragged us into his cell. I crouched out of sight along the front wall.

"Shit!" I whispered. "He'll find the third guard."

"The third guard?" Comprehension clouded Cappy's wasted dark face. "We have to get them. I'm not going through that again, Getter."

I jumped up.

"Can you take care of Dimitri's guard?"

"Oh, yeah."

The guard carrying Dimitri had already gone past us. Cappy went after him. Gun ready, I ran back toward the guard's desk. I rounded the corner and ran right into Gitch's

fist. My head stopped, my feet kept going, and I landed hard on my ass with a jolt that stunned me into immobility. Everything went black, then came back through a blur as Gitch threw me over his shoulder.

"Stop!" he yelled at Cappy.

"Fuck you!" Cappy yelled back.

I heard the sizzle of a flamewgun and Cappy cry out. Gitch threw me into the open cell. My head swam and I thought I'd pass out. I threw up instead. Cappy landed next to me. Smoke rose from the flamewgun wound on his side. Gitch stood in the door, shaking his head.

"Where'd you come from, Lifer?" he asked me.

"Uhh." I was coming around fast, but no sense letting him know that.

"Doesn't matter. You can take this one's place on the rack upstairs." To Cappy he said, "You killed Jimig. He wasn't the brightest demon, he took all this Hell Liberation crap way too seriously. He was all right, though."

Gitch raised his flamewgun to Cappy. Cappy stared defiantly at him. His desire to die instead of take any chance of having to go back to the Resurrection chamber was obvious. Gitch noticed.

"You wish to die, Lifer, rather than go on the rack again? Then you will die. On the rack." He put up his gun and backed through the door. He grinned a little reptilian grin and pointed a claw at me. "You are next for the Wizard."

"Wait," I said. "Let me go and I'll give you gold. I know where Satan's Mine is."

That stopped him. "Satan's Mine is a story for babies."

"Don't you think I've been to places in Hell you haven't? Gold won't do me any good if I'm dead."

He was interested. He came one step into the chamber. "What about your friends?"

"What friends?"

That appealed to the demon's sensibilities. "Ha. You are a Lifer, aren't you? Tell me where it is."

I reached out to him. "Help me up. You hurt my leg."

The demon stepped farther into the room. That's when Brittany, hiding behind the door, tripped him with my staff, just as Dimitri rushed him from behind. They tumbled to the floor. Cappy and I pounced. A few seconds later Gitch was out of it for good.

I barely recognized Dimitri. Barely more than skin on bone, with the same burn marks as Cappy, the attack on Gitch had cost him. Hope—that old reviver—worked on him, though.

His emaciated face lit up when he saw me.

"Getter. Christos, man, where'd you come from?" he asked, voice a dry croak.

"It's a long story." I had a catch in my throat as I looked him. "God damn, man, I thought you were dead. We looked for you. You just disappeared."

"We?"

"Christine came down, twice."

"She shouldn't have come. She can't handle it." He noticed Brittany. "Who's that?"

Brittany stood beside me. She regarded Dimitri with more horror than poor Gitch at our feet. "This is my new temporary partner, Brittany." She liked that. "Part of the long story."

We've got to get out of here, now. She's got a date with an angel." She liked that, too.

"How?" Dimitri and Cappy said together.

"Damned if I know. There's another passage at the end of the corridor? Where's it go?"

"It leads out to the Rivers. There're guards there."

Dimitri grasped my arm so lightly I hardly felt it. He'd been so strong the last time I saw him.

"Getter, I can't go without Grace."

"Grace? What are you talking about? Cappy, give me a hand with him."

Cappy gritted his teeth against his pain, and we pulled Dimitri to his feet. He took a couple deep breaths and said, "I can't leave without her. I promised."

"Who the hell's Grace?"

"His girlfriend," Cappy informed me with a roll of his sunken, bloodshot eyes.

"What?"

"The soul he came to retrieve."

"What? That's crazy," I whispered loudly. "We have to get out of here."

"No, wait, you don't understand," Dimitri insisted.

"Damn right."

"I love her. I'll die before I leave her."

"You might."

Cappy dragged Jimig into the cell. He took their small caliber flamepistols and handed one to me. Inside Gitch's vest he found a big old wicked looking knife with a forked point, a wavy edge on one side and coarse sawtooth edge on the

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other. He also found a pack of cigarettes with Satan's picture on it. He searched frantically through both the guards' clothes, all the while mumbling about being in Hell and not being able to find a match.

Determined to get Grace, Dimitri stood shakily at the door.

"This way, Getter. She's in the Resurrection room. They put her where she had to watch me. I had to watch them torment her and was helpless to stop it."

The teeth-clenching grimness of his expression made it obvious that the physical pain was nothing next to the emotional pain he felt. Grace must be one Hell of a soul, I figured, to have such a powerful hold on Dimitri. I hoped she was what he thought she was.

Driven by determination, I wasn't ready to say driven by love yet, Dimitri took off with a shambling run. Cappy, Brittany, and I had no choice but to follow.

Dimitri led us past the guard room, empty now, and up the stairs. I had to help him up the last few steps. Cappy was running on fear and hate, I had a headache the size of Ticmuc's fist, and my mouth tasted like the dungeon smelled. Brittany was game, but she was still only a ten-year old soul. We were a Hell of a rescue party.

Raised voices echoed through the halls. Dimitri pressed on to a thick wooden door.

"Is this the Resurrection Chamber?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Where is she inside? Are there guards? If we sneak in, is there cover?"

Dimitri wasn't listening. He reached for the latch. I gripped his bony arm, made him look at me. "I love you like a brother-in-law, man," I said. "And I'll help you on this fool's errand. Nevertheless, know, if it comes down to it, Brittany is my first priority. And all that that implies. Get it?"

"I know the Code," he said. "Grace is my soul."

He raised the latch and swung open the door.

The cacophonous music blasted my ears, doubling the size of my headache to the size of a Dinocat's ass. Dimitri went left and again, we had no choice but to follow.

A narrow cage made of thick, rusty bars hung six feet off the floor. Inside, Grace sat with her knees drawn up, the cage not tall enough for her to stand. Rags barely covered her, blonde hair stuck to her sweat glistening face. Burn marks tattooed her body

Nobody had noticed us yet: the Wizard conducted, the orchestra played, the scurrying bats licked and hustled the new soul-soldiers away. A few Lizardhead guards looked bored.

I located the Rack, a stained stone slab with heavy leather restraints. Next to the slab, easy to identify in their white lab coats, three scientists conferred. Two were older human men, vaguely familiar. I only had a couple seconds, but I promised myself I would check the history books from World War II when I got back to life. The other had a thick body, with an insect head, a wasp of some kind, maybe.

Dimitri had eyes only for Grace.

"Grace," he said, as if they were totally alone.

She lifted her head from her knees and stared vacantly down at Dimitri.

"Grace, I've come to get you. Like I said I would."

"Dimitri?" she said, barely audible over the music.

"Yes," he assured her, his face lighting up like a lovesick boy's at a chance smile from his beloved. "I'm taking you with me. We'll be together, forever."

"Oh, Dimitri, no. You're still alive. Escape while you can. Knowing you're safe, I can easily take whatever they do to me."

While the two lovebirds decided who was nobler, I followed the chain that held the cage to a hand winch against the wall and lowered the cage. Dimitri grabbed the lock and yanked it. Nothing happened. Gaining energy from his growing frustration, he shook it, rattled it, cursed it, to no avail.

I pulled him away and told him to be quiet. He shook with fury.

"I can't get it open," he said. "Getter, open it. Please."

"Shut up, will you," I hissed in his ear. "There's still a chance we can get out of here without a fight."

Grace reached a filthy hand through the bars and took his hand. Beneath the dirt and sweat and tangle of hair she was pretty, not that I had time to notice. From the way she calmed Dimitri, I thought the name Grace probably suited her. Beyond the cage, two bat attendants noticed us then decided not to notice us. But they told others, and I quickly began to feel their attention on us.

Cappy came up to us and said, "Try this."

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I took the key. At the same time one of the bored guards looked over. I couldn't remember the damned words to go with it. Then it didn't matter. The guard yelled. Another guard answered and started toward us. So much, once again, for stealth. The shit was going to hit the fan big time.

Cappy took out the closest guard with a flameball to the chest. I got the second one.

"To borrow an appropriate phrase, Let's rock and roll," I said.

"I'm with you, Getter," Cappy said.

"But Grace?" Dimitri pleaded.

"Okay, okay," I said. "It doesn't matter now."

I drew my real gun and fired point blank at the lock. The door swung open, and Dimitri scrambled to get Grace out. The music stopped. In the sudden dead silence I said way too loud to Dimitri, "Can we get out of here now?"

"Yes," he said.

But it wasn't going to be that easy.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The whole chamber took a deep breath. Time froze. The scientists stared curiously at us. The musicians gawked. The bat minions peered at us from behind the tanks, the twitching of their ears the only movement. The Wizard faced me, his long arms outstretched, whether presenting or pleading I didn't know. I felt him inside my head and began to think about how to break his chain.

Time started up as guards burst through the door behind us. "Stay down, Brit," I said, unnecessarily. Cappy and I fired together. The guards dove for cover, and I took the opportunity to grab up the flammers the first two guards wouldn't need anymore. I thrust one at Dimitri and one at Grace.

"Don't let him die," I said to her.

The guards fired back and within a minute the chamber filled with smoke and balls-of-fire and screams. More guards arrived. We retreated along the wall, toward the Rack.

Grace fought with no fear. After all, what did she have to lose? Hair flying, grunting with each shot, she shielded Dimitri and took out her share of guards while taking several hits which she ignored. Dimitri tried to hold his own, but love and hate can only carry a man so far when he's had the lifeforce sucked out of him. Brittany grabbed up a stray flamegun and added to our side's firepower.

The scientists, bat attendants, and the orchestra fled to safety. Only the Wizard remained, following the action with a

rapt calm. A new soul, abandoned by the bats, wandered into the crossfire and went up, screaming, in flames.

We came up against the Rack. Over the smell of smoke and burning lizard flesh it had the distinctive reek of sweat and fear. I thought we might be able to escape through the door behind it.

"Cappy, through that door. Help me with Dimitri."

He helped drag a stumbling Dimitri away from the Rack. Grace and Brittany covered our backs. Halfway to the door Cappy stopped.

"Got something to do first," he said.

He took a few steps toward the Rack and shot it with flameballs till it roared with flame and the straps and wires crinkled and writhed into uselessness.

"Now we can go," he informed me.

"Okay, come on—No, wait." I sensed the Wizard's wordless warning in my head. "Get back!"

The door to the stairway slammed open. Guards poured through. I emptied my flammer at them. Cappy was out of charge and searching for another gun while doing some close in damage with Gitch's knife. Grace and Brit fought a losing battle behind us. I threw the useless flamgun at the guards still piling through the door. I used some of my own precious ammunition to take them out. Grace screamed as her left arm went up in flames. Dimitri staggered to help.

Soldiers appeared, thick Pan-like legs supporting solid naturally armored bodies. Their slick demon faces were not amused. Whether two-, three- or four-limbed, they were all heavily armed. Five of them backed Cappy up against the still

burning Rack. A small flameball from a soldier on the balcony smacked my shoulder, spinning me to my knees on the other side of the Rack.

They were Mephisto's personal troops. They didn't kill us outright, just waited silently, so he had to be in the Fort. We were done then, at Mephisto's questionable mercy—Unless?

The soldiers knew what my gun could do, so they kept their distance. I had four shells left. One for each of us Lifers, and one for Mephisto just to make a point. Or?

I looked up at the Wizard, fifteen feet away. The light from the flames beside me didn't penetrate the depths of the hood, yet I felt the Wizard's concentration on me.

Yes, I agreed, to an unspoken thought.

I checked the gun. Four rounds, more than enough.

"Getter," Cappy called through the fire. "Thanks for the try, man. You gave me hope, and down here you can't ask for more than that. I'll say good things about you wherever I end up."

A lieutenant demon with one slash on each cheek and an intelligent look to him that I didn't trust, stepped out of the crowd. He leveled his tiny black bean eyes at me.

Dimitri spoke then, nearly inaudible even in the silence. His head lay on Grace's lap. She stroked it tenderly with her one good hand.

"Getter, my brother" he said. "Tell Christine to get a life and stop clinging to you. Thank's for giving me what I wanted. I'll be with Grace, forever. Thank you."

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I had my doubts that Mephisto would just let them walk off into the sunset. Once they were souls he really had control over them. Besides—.

“Don't count your eternities before their time, Dimitri,” I said, keeping my eyes on the too smart Lieutenant. I rose up, gun hanging from my right hand. The officer stepped toward me, one spare, clawed hand held out.

“The gun,” he said, with a proper British accent. “You may be spared your life. You need not die uselessly.”

He said the right words and even said them with the right note of sympathy, but I'd been in Hell enough to recognize in his eyes the superior glint of a liar and a cheat, and a demon that enjoys it.

That would make it easier to do what I was going to do. I tensed, ready. A commotion on the other side of the chamber drew every being's attention.

A voice called out, “Step aside!”

A deeper, angrier, more familiar voice cut through the excited chatter.

“Where is he?” the voice demanded.

The soldiers stepped aside and let Mephisto through. The head demon towered over all in the chamber except the Wizard.

“Getter, you have caused me a lot of trouble, and worse yet,” he swept a long muscled arm around the chamber, “you have delayed the creation of my Hell Liberation Army.”

“Well, my job here is done then,” I said. “If you had a sunset, I'd ride into it.” Nothing like flippancy to mask high anxiety.

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"Ah, Getter, you are worthy. I will make my best soldiers from your lifeforce. Be pleased. You beheaded my daughter. I had more imaginative arrangements in store for you." His mouth flowed into an illusion of a self-satisfied grin.

"Lieutenant, prepare him. I am sure the Wizard is eager to get back to his work. Is that not so, Regulus Zar?"

"He's not speaking to you, Mephisto," I said.

"Oh, he isn't? He speaks to you, I suppose?"

"Yes, he does."

"And what does he say to you, Hell Cop Getter?"

"He says, 'Dimitri, Cappy, trust the Wizard!'"

I swiveled a half turn, shot the Lieutenant in the chest, swiveled back and shot Mephisto. He landed on his ass. At least I could take that to eternity with me. Before any of the soldiers or guards could recover, I raced up to the Wizard, held the muzzle of the gun to the lock on the chain around his leg, and fired. The lock disintegrated. The Wizard was free.

My head filled with joy, relief, then anger. In an instant the chamber filled with the anticipation and dread that proceeds a storm. A stinking wind blew past me as the Wizard, Regulus Zar, drew breath. Suddenly a shriek sliced into my brain like a scalpel. I clapped hands over my ears and rolled to the ground. The soldiers did the same, faces contorted with silent screams.

Through watery eyes, I watched Regulus Zar step off the pedestal. With his spindly fingers circling, but not touching, he lifted the top off the pedestal. An eerie green glow came from inside. He stepped back, arms warding off the light. I

felt his surge of fear in my chest, then disgust, then anger again.

Mephisto lay on the floor. He wasn't dead, permanently, and I didn't know how long till he became active again. Some of the soldiers struggled to their feet. Another scream from the Wizard sent them to their knees. Regulus Zar raised his arms, gathered his strength, and intoned a chant. From inside the pedestal a pentagonal sphere rose up, its glare too bright to look at directly. The sphere rose twenty, thirty feet in the air, then, with a flick of the Wizard's hands, flew across the chamber and crashed with a shower of sparks into the right side polished column.

"NO!" yelled Mephisto, as the sphere dropped into the pit surrounding the column.

Regulus Zar ignored him. Lightning cracked between the fixed spheres, thick powerful bolts, out of control. With each movement of his hands the energy raced along the wires, arcing, spitting. The tanks exploded in a burst of white light, as Regulus Zar pointed at them. The troughs carrying bones exploded, spraying the demons with shattered bones like a hail of darts. The empty sacs of flesh shriveled and burst into flame. The blood troughs broke, spilled boiling blood.

Mephisto, in a rage, charged the destroying Wizard. With a contemptuous glance Regulus Zar pointed at his captor. A lightning bolt arced from both spheres and struck Mephisto to the ground.

The idea of NOW came into my head. GO NOW. Sounded like a damn good idea to me. I rounded up Brittany, Cappy, Dimitri, Grace, and a couple flameguns and got them out the

door. Before I slammed it shut, I saw Regulus Zar float ten feet in the air then disappear in a brilliant flash that left spots dancing in my eyes.

"Up," I told the group. "Maybe we can hide in the mountains."

"No," Cappy said. "Pragons roost up there."

"Well, shit. Down it is then."

Pragons of Dern were the black dragons of the Skyhook family. Solid, ugly, with inadequate hooks, they were fierce and unsubtle creatures that would just as soon eat their riders as rip a soul to pieces. Walking through the Pragon's nest was to be avoided.

We made it back to the dungeon and to the descending tunnel. We caught our breath while deciding what to do.

"You know where the tunnel goes?" I asked Cappy.

"The beach, between Bones and Blood."

"Any traps?"

"Not that I know of. But I was pretty out of it. There're guards at the end."

"Great."

"And caves, I think."

Yells and footsteps rushed down the corridor toward us. We rushed down the tunnel.

Occasional guttering torches lit the way. Through several broad curves the rough-hewn tunnel narrowed to four feet or less as the floor turned sandy. The depth of the black sand increased, and so did my apprehension. I kept a flamewagon handy and carefully scanned the tunnel for clues to what made me so nervous.

I rounded a tight corner and the sand rose to a mound, as if something was buried there. I skidded to a stop. The others piled up behind me.

"Cappy," I whispered. "Do you remember this?"

He studied the mound and shook his head. Dimitri leaned against the wall and breathed deeply, his forehead wrinkled with thought.

"I don't know, man. Like I said, I was out of it," Cappy said. "Something though." He put his palms to the side of his head, as if to squeeze the memories out.

"Did they stop? Say anything? Do anything?"

"Oh, man. We stopped. One of them threw something. They were nervous. They dragged me across, fast."

"Did they throw some meat, and then slip by while whatever's under there ate it?"

"Yeah, like that," Cappy confirmed, more sure than less sure, I hoped. Dimitri nodded absently.

I didn't have any spare meat, but there were some rocks that might fool whatever had buried itself in the sand long enough for me to get a shot at it. I was thinking maybe a Coffin Spider with its long rectangular mouth shaped like an open casket.

The rock landed with a thump in the middle of the mound. I waited, ready to put a fireball down the nasty critter's gullet. Nothing happened. Another rock, same result. Something might have moved on the far side of the mound. I advanced a couple steps, now well up on the mound, and threw another rock. Nothing. After another cautious step, I was about to

throw another rock when, Cappy and Dimitri yelled, "Up, Getter! Up!"

Up?

I looked up—into a neat three foot wide hole filled with teeth. Medusa Worm! A hundred, two inch snaky necks tipped with razor teeth filled mouths, slid out of the hole right over me. I fell to my knees, back against the wall, and fired. I shot with my right and threw sand or rocks with my left. The individual necks sizzled and popped as the balls of fire hit and stuck. The affected mouths emitted a grating screech as they writhed with pain. They weren't fast, but there were so many. I attempted to crawl away. The heads blocked me. My left arm stung with tiny razor cuts. Blood ran into my eyes, and I gagged on the stench of charred worm. Smoke filled the tunnel. I heard the sizzle and scream as Cappy attacked the worm from his side. This gave me a second to draw my knife. It slipped from my bloody hand. I grabbed it in time to slice off a mouth, inches from my throat.

My flamewgun went dead. Cappy's gun had less charge than mine. Trapped by the mouths, I had one option, and two seconds to take it. I threw the flamewgun into the mass of deadly mouths, drew my gun with its one remaining shell filled with Hellshot, and fired into the smoke obscured center of the worm.

All the mouths screamed at once. I fell to the sand, hands over my ears. The whole worm shuddered, then, one by one, the mouths closed and the necks drooped.

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Relief washed over me, until the main body of the worm began to ooze from its hole. I rolled out from under it. The others would be trapped behind the thick body.

"Cappy, get through before it all comes out," I called. No answer. I struggled to my feet. The slimy worm body pressed against both walls of the tunnel. Had the guards caught up to my four companions?

"Dimitri!"

No response. Shouts came from my side of the tunnel. I endured a brief bout of hopelessness. That was a bad habit to get into. My knife against several armed guards? I didn't care much for knife fighting. Whether against demons or self-styled tough guys at a roadhouse bar, knife fighting was too up close and personal for me. Were the others dead or captured? Beyond my help? What would I say to Christine? Would I see her, or Sneaker, again? I didn't see how. The odds were continually being stacked against me. And I was tired, so tired. Fatigue settled over me like a shroud. I sank to the floor against the wall, rested blood-covered hands on my knees.

To rest was all I wanted. To sleep for awhile and wake up in my truck and drive leisurely home and see Christine and tell her that Dimitri was alive and happy with Grace and contact Sneaker and tell her I was retiring as a Hell Cop and getting a safe, dull, tedious job in a small town away from backdoors and demons and danger and fear and would she come stay with me. She wouldn't, of course, but that would be all right, because I would be safe and unafraid and not so tired.

"Getter, help."

My head jerked up.

"Getter, up here, man."

A glistening black arm stuck out between the tunnel wall and the gray flesh of the dead worm. They were alive!

I jumped up and grabbed his hand. Slowly the rest of his body emerged, with Brittany in tow. Foul slime coated them.

"Dimitri?"

"Behind us."

Hand in hand, Dimitri and Grace slipped through. The slime dripped off them into pools at their feet. Dimitri fell to his knees. Dry heaves produced nothing. Brittany's eye pleaded for me to do something. All I could do was pour a little water from my bottle on their faces. Then we all took a quick drink, leaving the bottle half full.

"Guards coming," I said. "No shells left in my gun."

"I got two balls left in this flammer," Cappy said.

"That's all you need, isn't it?" Dimitri deadpanned.

Grace was the first to laugh, then we all had a good thirty-second laugh that dissolved hopelessness. Where there's laughter, there's hope.

Grace, with Brittany right behind, led us down the tunnel at a slow jog. Dimitri protested. She told him she was already dead and the guards couldn't hurt her anymore than she'd already been hurt. Brittany had the same answer for me. Cappy followed next with the flamegun. Last, I supported Dimitri with my left hand and kept the knife ready in my right. He wanted to talk; save your energy, I told him.

Three guards appeared around a sharp corner.

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"Halt!" the lead one said.

Grace ran right past him, smacking him on his reptilian forehead as she passed. The second guard grabbed at and missed her. The third caught her and got a fireball in his gut for his trouble. The second fired a ball that streaked between me and Dimitri. Cappy shot number two, and I ran into number one, knife first.

With no time to be fussy, we stripped the bodies. The other three took their vests and belts. Grace was ready for the cover of *Flamegun Digest*, with vest, bandolier, and latest model flammer. Maybe the centerfold; she still had no pants.

We marched to the end of the tunnel, carefully inspected the guard house cut into the rock, and looked out onto the open expanse of beach at the confluence of the Three Rivers.

"So what's your plan now?" Dimitri asked. As if I had one.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The beach contained little real sand. To the left where the River of Bones curved toward the River of Blood, the beach consisted of mostly pulverized bone. The sand shaded into the rusty red of dried blood as it came closer to the point where the two rivers came together about a hundred yards in front and to the right of us. Individual bones littered the otherwise flat beach.

The rough cliff slabs rose straight up fifty feet before they blended into the blocky fort walls. Half-oval shaped caves dotted the base of the cliffs, which stretched back several hundred yards in a shallow curve to the River of Blood. They were symmetrical, nine to ten feet wide, four to five high. Tracks in the sand came from each cave.

We found a small cistern of water in the guard room. I filled my bottle and washed the blood from my hands and left the rest for the others to wash off the worm slime. Grace came and stood beside me. This was the first chance I'd had to see what she really looked like. Her hair was wet and swept back from a round face with high cheekbones and a wide, strong chin. Her eyes had probably been green when she was alive. They were large and wide set and had a clear don't-give-me-any-shit glint to them, except when she talked about Dimitri.

"Getter," she said, squinting at the brightness of the beach. "Do you have anything to eat? Dimitri needs something. He was on the Rack for a long time."

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"Sure," I said, shrugging off my pack and handing it to her. "There's some energy bar things in there."

"Thanks." She rummaged through the pack and said, "Do you think you guys will be able to escape?"

"I think we all will escape and live, so to speak, happily ever after."

"Dimitri always said you were a positive type of guy."

"Lately, that's a debatable description. Hope is a job requirement. Without it, what do you have?"

"Hell," she said.

I raised my binoculars, and she went to feed Dimitri and Cappy. I thought I knew what made the caves and a few minutes later saw I was right. From one of the farthest caves a shell the exact shape of the opening emerged. The front and back were identically sloped. Two sharp ridges ran its full twenty-foot length, and with the binoculars I saw that the caves had matching grooves. The shell did not flex and had no apparent eyes or appendages. It glided over the sand, leaving a small dust cloud behind. I'd never seen a Tank before, but I'd heard of them. They moved by rippling rows of razor sharp flippers. Anything it ran over came out the end as a bloody spot on the sand. Tanks floated on the River of Souls, formed by the junction of the Three Rivers, and fed on the empty sacs of flesh before they combined with blood and bone into a complete soul. In the far distance several Tanks fed. In the near distance I saw something else interesting.

"Got any ideas, Getter?" Cappy asked. "I don't like being out in the open."

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Still looking through the glasses, I said, "I thought about hiding in the bones, but they join the blood too soon. What do you know about the Tanks?"

"Don't get run over."

"Are they lightweight or heavyweight? They float."

"Light, I think. Seems like Cyclops told me he flipped one over once."

"Cyclops can flip over a real tank, but, yeah, light sounds right." Deslimed, Brittany, Grace, and Dimitri joined us. "I have an idea," I told them. "Can you swim, Brittany? With a strong stomach and some luck, it might work."

"Grace brings me luck," Dimitri said.

I laid a hand on his emaciated shoulder and said, "After what you've been through I don't know if I agree with your definition of luck."

"I'd be dead already without her. Not that it would matter."

"Dimitri, don't say that," Grace scolded him. "You must fight to live."

"I want to be with you forever, Grace."

"And I with you. But in Heaven, Dimitri, not Hell."

"I don't care."

"I do. Hell is not the same when you're dead as it is when you're alive. There's no guarantee we would be together."

"I'd make sure of it," Dimitri insisted with more hope than confidence.

"Don't talk crap."

"Look, don't talk at all," I jumped in. "We all stay alive, that's the program. Right? Right. We're leaving now. I'll explain what I have in mind on the way."

Like many womanizers, when Dimitri finally fell for a woman, he fell hard, letting emotion overcome common sense. I was liking Grace more and more. She was a good match for Dimitri, at least in his present weakened and besotted state. She had a good head on her shoulders; I hoped I could keep it there.

We hugged the cliff face, constantly scanning in all directions. At each cave we ducked inside. In one, Cappy took my flashlight and went in about fifty feet. He returned running, a Tank hot on his heels. Close-up the thing was huge. Its slick twenty-foot length came out of the close fitting cave with an obscene sucking sound.

Cappy said the cave was uniform as far as he saw.

Halfway to the River of Blood the first Pragon of Dern dive-bombed us. Grace yelled a warning, and we dropped to the dried-blood sand. The wind of its passing stirred up a copper tasting cloud. It couldn't reach us as long as we stayed against the cliff. Unfortunately, our goal rested a couple hundred feet out in the open. Flames didn't affect the Pragon's dull, black skin, though a fireball down the throat worked. We ran into the next cave. The Pragon swooped and looped at high speed, then would glide past, spitting fire, to glare at us from deep slitted eyes. Pragons were much uglier than their Skyhook cousins. They had powerful, short square jaws and stubby wings. The wings gave them maneuverability, but only at speed. Short, stout legs with

long heavy claws, a vicious personality, and the ability to spit flame when properly fed, made them perfectly suited for Mephisto's Helland Security Air Force.

"Now might be a good time to explore the caves more," Cappy said.

"And if we get trapped back there?" Dimitri asked.

"We're already trapped here."

"The Pragon can't get us as long we stay against the rock," I said. "It doesn't have much flame to it yet. We need to get to the shell. I'm curious, too. If we have time, you can go in. As I see it, the shell is our only out. Unless someone has a better idea."

No one did. A second Pragon appeared. He couldn't get any closer than the first one. We made it to the cave closest to the empty Tank shell I'd seen from the guardroom. The cloying smell of blood hung heavy there, twenty feet from the River of Blood. The shell was about two hundred feet away, a few feet from the river's edge.

Cappy didn't mention exploring the cave. The adrenaline rush he'd been riding since I arrived, had begun to fade. He slumped to the sand beside Dimitri as soon as we got to the cave and closed his eyes. He winced when he touched the burn on his side. Cappy was in better shape than Dimitri, but Dimitri was running on love. As long as Grace stayed around he'd push himself to the limit, and further. I wasn't sure what kept Cappy going: fear of returning to the Resurrection Chamber, anger at what they did to him, or just the hope he could escape alive. I wondered if whatever it was would be

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enough. I needed to find a safe place to rest, soon. I couldn't push the two men, or myself, much farther.

Grace sat next to me a few feet inside the entrance. We watched a Tank glide out of the river onto the blood sand.

"Think it will come into this cave?" she asked.

"Don't know," I said with a sigh. I felt the fatigue, too. And despair still had a fragile hold on my gut, ready to grab a handful and squeeze at the least opportunity.

"You need rest, too, Getter."

"I'll be fine," I said, Mr. Macho. "Those guys need it bad, though, and I don't see where or when it's going to happen."

"In back of one of the caves, maybe."

"It's tempting, I'll admit. I just have a bad feeling about it. And speaking of bad feelings, why aren't there guards swarming all over the beach?"

"We're lucky," Grace replied, Ms. Positive.

"Yeah, but why? Mephisto should have this whole section covered."

"Let's just accept it as luck and take advantage, okay? I'm going to check this cave out. Relax, will you. Five minutes, I'll be back."

"Be careful," I said, too tired to argue. "Dimitri will never forgive me if something happens to you."

I sat quietly for a few minutes, mind blank. Then I saw something curious that kick-started my brain. Two minutes later my thoughts went into OH SHIT mode. I roused Dimitri and Cappy.

"What's up?," Cappy asked, struggling to focus.

"I think that Tank is coming this way and it's got a passenger."

A Pragon had landed on top of the Tank which continued its course toward us. Cappy perked up when he realized what that meant.

"Where's Grace?" Dimitri said, as I helped him up.

"She's checking out the cave," I told him.

"What, alone? I have to find her."

"Stay here." I grabbed his arm and pushed him to Cappy who held him. I took a few steps in and yelled, "Grace, come back, now. Trouble coming."

The Pragons couldn't get us on the fly, but on the ground we were demon food. Its limited intelligence must have figured that when the Tank arrived at the cave we would be exposed. We'd have no choice unless Grace came back with some good news. The Tank headed straight for us.

"Grace, get out of there now! A Tank is coming."

"Grace, please," Dimitri pleaded, too weak to put up much of a struggle against Cappy.

I put my hand on his chest and pushed him toward the cave entrance. I turned him to face the oncoming demons and shoved a flammer in his hands.

"Try and get a ball down its throat, you got that?"

"But....?" he said, trying to look over his shoulder.

"But nothing," I insisted. "We go right, stay together, and blast the son of a bitch." I squeezed his shoulder and said in his ear, "She'll be okay, man. She's hauling ass out of there right now."

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Cappy came to stand beside him at the right side of the entrance. I looked into the dark of the cave. "Grace, hurry up," I yelled.

The tank loomed large.

I looked around. My heart stopped. "Where's Brittany?"

"Not up here," Cappy said.

"Brittany! Grace!"

"We're coming," Grace called from the blackness.

Relief made my knees weak. I retreated to the entrance.

"Run, Grace. Run," Dimitri yelled.

The Tank was fifty feet away. The Pragon eyed us confidently. Forty feet. "Hurry!" Thirty feet. Twenty. The Pragon squatted on its thick legs, ready to pounce. Movement in the cave darkness. Ten feet. The girl and the woman ran full speed toward the closing entrance. The Pragon leaped. It landed heavily. With square head tilted back, it let out a screech of triumph. Spittle dripped from the corner of its mouth.

We fired at it. The fireballs bounced off its tough skin. The forward end of the Tank entered the cave. Where were they? I couldn't spare her any attention because the Pragon swiped at us with a wing tip, knocking the gun from my hand, and all of us to the ground. Out of the corner of my eye I saw two shapes tumble off the side of the Tank. The Pragon saw them, too. Its head swung over to eye Grace and Brittany rolling in the sand. Brittany was closest.

The Pragon stretched its neck out snatch her up.

Grace jumped in front of it. "Eat me, you ugly bastard." The toothy jaws were close enough that she punched its lip.

Surprised, it drew back. Looked curiously at her. Then in one quick movement it snatched Grace by the arm and lifted her off the ground.

"NOOO!" Dimitri surged to his feet. The Pragon hesitated at the sound, dangling Grace a foot off the sand. Dimitri ran up to the surprised beast, stuck the muzzle of his gun between the discolored teeth, and pulled the trigger.

Grace dropped into his arms. The Pragon roared in pain, staggered back a few steps, and burst into flame.

Another Pragon landed in front of the cave and shrieked in sympathy for its burning brother.

"Dimitri, to the shell. Come on."

"Grace is hurt."

"She'll heal. Let's go!"

We took her under her arms and ran to the dead Tank shell. I had no idea if we would be able to lift it, move it, or get under it. If not, we were exposed and dead. A third, and not too bright, Pragon attacked with mouth wide open. Cappy and I each got a fireball in, and the thing exploded in the air.

Grace told Dimitri not to fuss, and we all grabbed the thick edge of the shell. To my great relief it came up easily and we slipped underneath. We gasped for breath at the trapped heat. At least we were out of sight.

The shell was built like a boat with three inch ribs every foot and several cross pieces, like thwarts in a canoe.

The shell had some small holes in it, enough to see what happened outside. Five or six Pragons swarmed up high. Sporadically, one dropped in a steep dive and skimmed the sand before climbing back to the others. Soldiers milled

around the guardhouse cave, keeping an eye on the agitated Pragens. Soldiers also peered from the parapets of the fort.

Grace allowed Dimitri to tend to her arm. She endured the pain, there was nothing to do about that. That's why souls were in Hell, for the pain. It would go away eventually, and the almost severed arm would heal.

Cappy was not cheerful.

"If we can't move this thing, we're trapped, you know."

"We can move it," I assured him.

"What makes you think it will float?"

"The thickness around the edge is hollow. It's flotation."

"How did you know that from the guardhouse?"

I shrugged and said, "It looked like it might be."

"Jesus, we're trapped out here because of a hunch?"

"Call it intuition. You know about that, don't you? None of us would have survived this long without it."

"Yeah, you got that right," Cappy replied, shooting a glance at Dimitri. "If I'd listened to mine I wouldn't be here now."

"I've heard that before," I said. "How'd they take you guys, anyway?"

"You want the long version or the short?"

I looked out a hole and saw the guards getting organized.

"Better make it the short short version."

"I came on these two in 163. They were with a couple minor KKC guards. The thought it might be a trap crossed my mind, but they were coming up on the Nexus and Dimitri's helped me out a couple times so I couldn't let him go in. I had the feeling something was watching me, too. Anyway, I

ignored that and confronted the dim-bulb guards. They had a little hogdog with them for Christ's sake. I ignored that, too, until it ran behind me and turned into a trained Morph Ape. The two guards weren't so dim either, and neither was the squad that appeared from the bushes."

"Mephisto's recruitment troops," Dimitri said. "They trapped me, too." He avoided the other man's eyes when he said, "I owe you, Cappy, for what you did and what happened after."

"You're damn right you do," Cappy said, smiling.

Cappy knew the code—you help a fellow Hell Cop and don't blame him for the consequences.

I stood up in the center of the shell.

"If we're going to do this, we'd better do it now. The natives are getting restless."

We took our places: me at the forward crossbar, Cappy and Brittany at the middle one, and Dimitri and Grace shared the last one. On the first try the shell creaked but didn't move. My stomach clenched, and I had a quick vision of being surrounded by the advancing soldiers with no hope of escape.

The next try, the shell broke free, and we easily dragged it to the river's edge.

The front of the shell dipped into the dark river.

"Ewww, gross," Brittany said.

Cappy said, "Just what I was dreaming about on the Rack, a steaming swim in the River of Blood."

"Just ignore it," I offered, willing my stomach to follow my own advice. The air inside the shell was so thick with the fetid

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stink of blood I had to breathe slowly through my mouth. At that point, I just wanted to keep my head above the surface.

The shell floated. Quietly, we hung onto our crosspieces and let the current carry us away from Fort Blood.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Heat, fatigue, and blood fumes induced a lethargy in us that was hard to fight. I helped Grace tie Dimitri to their crosspiece. Grace moved to the opposite side while I finished securing Dimitri beside a hole that let in relatively fresh air. Brittany hung with her, their heads together, murmuring girl talk.

Dimitri could barely hold his pale face out of the blood. Even so, he smiled at me.

"Thanks for rescuing us, Getter," he said. "It's my fault. Fell for Grace ... like a ton of Dinocat droppings. Not paying attention."

I wiped blood from his mouth.

"Save your strength," I told him. "I don't want you to die before I finish."

"S'okay. Be with Grace."

"Man, what happened to you?" I said, mostly to myself. "I'm going to have to have a talk with Cupid. Stop him from sneaking down here."

He smiled and shook his head. I turned to leave him. He called me back.

"Hey, found something for you. Something good ... for you." He lifted a blood drenched hand to indicate Grace. "She's got it."

Before I got over to Grace, Cappy, who'd tied himself to his support piece with the upper half of his coverall, called out.

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"Hey, Grace, what'd you find in that tunnel? I bet it was a hip little bar by a waterfall and a cool pool with some Island music in the background. Yea, Mon. There was probably a sea breeze and beautiful waitresses serving big, colorful drinks with lots of crushed ice. Yeah, I bet that's what you found. And a big buffet table with sweating silver bowls packed with ice and fruit, and fresh baked bread and chilled crab salad and cold plates to put it all on. Was that in there, too?"

We all took a few minutes to savor Cappy's fantasy. I had a good idea where my next vacation would be.

Grace said, "I didn't get that far, Cappy. It was probably around the next corner."

"Must have been. What did you find, then?"

"Basically, what you saw up front is what I saw in back. It's smooth as a baby's butt. There's no place, side to side, up or down to hide when that Tank comes in. The end is the same shape as this shell. It's squash-city if you get caught in there."

"Not much of a life, is it? Go out, eat empty bodies, and then park it."

"Existence is its own reward, I guess," I said.

"I think this one we're in got the best deal," Cappy decided.

"So, you told us the basics, what else did you find?" I asked. Blood covered her up to her lower lip and spatters freckled her face. Her skin was so translucent that up close the freckles might have floated a quarter inch above her flesh. Her pale eyes looked at me with a humorous sparkle. I

was liking Grace more and more. She'd have made a good Hell Cop.

"At the very end about five feet off the floor where the ceiling sloped down we found a small hole in the rock just big enough for Brit to crawl through. And don't give me that how-could-you-let-my-little-baby-do-that look."

"There was a space behind it," Brittany added. "I don't know if there was room for everybody."

"So we could have hid in the tunnel, instead of being chin deep in blood," Cappy complained.

"You and one or two others," Grace said back. "Somebody would have had to get squooshed."

Cappy acknowledged the truth of what she said with a curled lip.

"One other thing," Grace said. "Brit thought she saw a ledge that might have been part of a passage into the rock. That's a big maybe."

What could you say to that? We settled in to wait for the most gruesome part of the trip. Bones began to thump against the shell and float to the surface inside. Through the holes I saw the River of Flesh about two hundred yards ahead. The idea of empty bodies floating next me was not appealing. However, soon after the three rivers merged, the resulting River of Souls flowed into a narrow canyon with numerous side canyons. These branches dead ended and that's where the reconstituted souls emerged. They were confronted with three caves, one of which they had to go into to resume their torment and suffering. There was no way to

know where the caves came out. That's where we were headed.

The Pragons were gone from the part of the sky I could see, and the soldiers were busy inspecting the caves. I allowed myself to hope that we might escape without any more theatrics. Hell was getting a lot more complicated than I liked. I'd made too many new enemies, admittedly balanced by some new friends, than I felt comfortable with. Every new demon walking around with me on its shit list made it that much harder to retrieve souls without a ruckus.

A shadow passing over the shell interrupted my ideas on how to make Cappy's fantasy come true.

"What was that?" Cappy asked.

Shadows are hard to come by when the light comes from all directions at once. The sinking feeling in my gut sank deeper when something big landed on top of the shell. Pragon! The sudden weight pushed the shell a foot lower into the blood, dunking us all. The beast stomped to one end and began tearing at the shell with its claws.

"Dimitri!" Grace cried.

Tied to the crosspiece, he was submerged under the blood level. His arm waved stiffly above the surface. The three of us lunged to him. Cappy managed to hold Dimitri's face above the blood while I cut him loose.

The Pragon peered through the hole it ripped open, its low growl like ten lions purring into a megaphone. Cappy replied by firing his flamethrower. The pissed-off Pragon ducked and shrieked and tore at the shell. We retreated to the far end. The Pragon followed, shafts of light tracking us like lasers as

its claws perforated the shell. Helpless, we watched as tooth and claw ripped a new hole. Periodically, Cappy or I shot a fireball. It only annoyed the Pragon more. It was smart enough not to open its mouth too wide.

"Anybody have any ideas?" I asked as the ugly square head poked through, close enough that I felt its foul breath on my blood-coated face. "I think these things can swim."

"Oh shit, get that thing away from me," Cappy said.

A flaccid sac of flesh floated next to him, its blind eyes staring and its open mouth silently screaming.

"Damn, Getter, why'd you have to bring us here? I hate this."

Nobody else wanted to touch it, so he pushed it back under the blood with the end of the flammer.

I drew my knife.

"The flammers don't get it," I told the others. "Maybe I can blind him, and he'll forget us."

"You sure you don't have any more shells for your gun?" Cappy asked, pushing away another empty body.

"Yes."

"No."

"What?"

"Grace, show him," Dimitri croaked.

She pushed up on my pack so the top rose above the blood and reached inside.

"I was going to tell you before," Grace said. "We found it looking for food at the guardhouse. Got it."

Over my shoulder she held out an intact shell filled with Hellshot. I hung my elbows over the crossmember while I

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drew my gun from its holster. As I took the blood-slick shell from Grace, the angry Pragon jumped through the hole it had made. The Tank shell, relieved of the extra weight, jerked up. I fumbled the gunshell and dropped it. In a wild grasp Brittany caught it six inches under the surface.

I hung by one elbow. Blood splashed over me. The Pragon screeched a few feet away. The blood blinded me. By feel, I loaded the gun and snapped the cylinder closed. Something grabbed my leg. I jumped. Only an empty body rising to the surface.

The Pragon foundered in the blood. Simultaneously, I wiped blood from one eye with my shoulder and the Pragon spread its wings and used them to lunge at me—mouth open. My right arm, holding the gun, disappeared between its jaws. I jerked the trigger. The Pragon's head flew backward. Its teeth raked my flesh, leaving ragged red furrows.

Once, as a real cop, I saw what happens when a man puts a shotgun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. When the Pragon reared back, spun, and sank beneath the river's surface, the back of its head looked the same as that man's—a hollowed out bowl with a few stringy threads of flesh around the edges and chunks of gray matter stuck to the bottom.

The shell drifted on into the main cliff-walled canyon and eventually floated into one of the small dead end branches. Bodies and bones were thick around us. Cappy, the tallest, felt the bottom first. He pushed the shell forward till it grounded on a narrow blood-sand beach. He and Grace lifted it while Dimitri helped Brittany help me onto the beach.

After a few minutes of lying with my head down I felt better. Grace trickled water from my pack onto my upper arm. No new blood leaked through. Ever handy, she wrapped a torn and bloody T-shirt around the three rough gouges left by the Pragon's teeth. We moved up to a corner by the three cave mouths and collapsed on bright rust colored sand. It was a losing battle trying to get the blood off our faces. Brittany and Grace tried.

When my head stopped swimming and I could sit up without vomiting, I wiped off my Find. It told me only that I was still in 333. As far as I knew, the caves led to random sections. The Find couldn't tell where that might be in advance.

A new-made soul, a rib thin middle-aged woman, walked out of the blood and trudged up to the caves. She stood in front of them, deciding. She looked at us and started to say something, but, for whatever reason, didn't. She left a dark red pool when she walked resignedly into the center opening.

"What now?" Grace asked. She cradled Dimitri's head in her lap and gently picked dried blood flakes off his face.

"Through there," I said.

"Does that thing tell you where they go to?"

"No. Wherever we end up, we find a Nexus and go visit a friend of mine. He has a nice house overlooking a river."

"Not this river, I hope," she said.

"We should go," I told anybody who was listening.

"You need to rest," Grace insisted. "We all do."

"Not here. We can rest at Rack's place."

"But Dimitri can't—."

"He has to. We all do. Ten minutes."

"How about ten seconds?" Cappy said, pushing wearily and painfully to his feet. "Look."

We looked, and by their expressions I knew the others had the same sinking feeling I did—Why won't they leave me alone?

Six Pragons flew in formation above the canyon. They all had riders. I didn't need binoculars to know that the riders were more than just soldiers. They were part of Mephisto's Elite Guard. Raccoon faced, armor-plated, scaly-bodied, and bear-footed, they were fierce, dedicated fighters; not flakes like Gitch and Jimig.

"Into the caves," I ordered.

The Pragons screeched when they saw us, banked and dove.

"Which one?" Grace asked, running.

"You're the one with the luck. You pick."

"Yeah, sure, I'm so lucky. Door number three, then."

The Guards fired before we got to the entrance. We didn't have the energy to zig-zag, so we ran straight for the right-hand cave. Concentrated fireballs hissed against the sand all around us. One of them caught the back of Cappy's thigh. He went down with a cry, spikes of flame shooting out of his leg. I brushed the remaining ball off him and slapped the flames out.

"Go, Getter," he said through clenched teeth. "I'm done, man."

"Don't be so melodramatic," I said.

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I wrapped one of his arms around my neck and dragged him into the cave. My slashed arm screamed with pain. I ignored it. At the entrance, I looked back. The Pragons swooped down, allowing the guards to fire, and climbed up in a curve to take their turn again. High up, two dark spots circled. Twenty feet in, fireballs flying after us, Cappy found some strength and the four of us plunged into the blackness of the cave.

"Be ready for anything," I grunted as we passed through a lighter spot of shimmery darkness, like passing through a giant soap bubble.

"Be ready," I reminded, right before we passed through another shimmer into—

Chapter Thirty

—NOISE!

Instinctively I clamped hands over my ears. I staggered, every muscle cringing from noise like giant fingernails against an enormous blackboard. We were in 202. There would be no quiet until we entered the Nexus or went deaf.

In a daze, I pawed through the blood soaked contents of my pack where I found three packets of ear plugs. I kept one for myself and offered the rest to the others. Grace declined a pair, signaling, words being useless, that the two souls were in better shape to stand the decibels than any of us.

Gratefully, Cappy and Dimitri stuffed the green foam plugs in their ears. In 202 the plugs made more of a psychological difference than physical, though they did take the edge off.

I consulted the Find and waved the three others forward. "Come on," I said, though they couldn't hear the words.

No straight path led through 202. Monolithic speakers were placed randomly throughout. The fingers-on-the-blackboard gave way to jackhammers, airhammers through metal, whining two-stroke motorcycle engines, babies crying, all well above human endurance levels. Souls were chained by their hands between speakers, forced to listen to a hellish opera featuring an off-key soprano trying for all the high notes, or rock music with the worst of heavy metal and acid rock guitar solos, or squeaky saxes, or polkas or traditional Chinese music. Whatever was a soul's least favorite. A large group of souls was chained between speakers that put out the

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pounding of a bass drum so powerful the souls slid back and forth across the ground like kelp in a surging sea. Blood ran from their ears.

Together, we wove through the jungle of speakers and noise. Sometimes a loose soul would run near us, hands on ears, mouth open with a silent scream. These free running souls were pursued by Arrangers, three-foot high, shiny black beetle demons with tiny heads, huge pincers to pick up souls, and segmented, muscular arms with almost human four-fingered hands. Their job was to catch stray souls and arrange them in the proper place.

202 was one of my least favorite sections. I hated continuous loud noise. As a regular cop one of my pet peeves was kids, including adult kids, who cranked up their rock and roll to obscene volumes when they knew it disturbed others. Above a certain decibel count, my blood pressure went sky high and my brain functions had only one purpose, STOP THE NOISE. I couldn't do that in 202. As we staggered through the speakers, it became harder and harder to follow the Find's directions. The noise deteriorated my concentration so that I might stare uncomprehendingly at the Find's instructions for fifteen or thirty seconds before I figured out what they meant.

That's what I was doing when the Arranger attacked. The bugs were programmed to go after souls, and Grace was a soul. It ignored Dimitri and grabbed Grace around her rib cage with its spiked pincers. Her head fell back, mouth stretched open with a soundless scream of pain as the giant bug lifted her off the ground.

With a cry I could almost hear, Dimitri attacked the Arranger with his fists. The bug backhanded him out of the way. Dimitri sprawled on the ground, cradling a broken arm. I knew how to kill the thing if I could get at it before it took Grace away to be arranged between speakers to some unfathomable plan in its diminutive head. Arranger's heads were attached to a broad, flat carapace that protected its neck. I drew my big knife. As quick as I could, I approached from the left rear and stepped over its left arm. Letting a two-hundred decibel guitar solo numb the pain in my bandaged arm, I grabbed the back edge of the carapace and yanked it forward. The razor-sharp edge stung as it cut into my hand. The beetle scuttled and bucked when it realized it was under attack. I stabbed and stabbed into the open space until thick gray blood spurted and the head fell off. The Arranger stiffened, then settled to the ground. Grace slumped over the open pincers.

Cappy and I freed her, while Dimitri fretted. She had several broken ribs and blood trickled from her mouth with every labored breath. She would recover of course, but she was going to be in great pain for as long as it took us to either escape or be captured. Without ceremony, Cappy gave me the remaining flammer and held Grace in his arms like a new baby. Limping deeply, face tight against his pain, he set off.

Other Arrangers showed some interest in Brittany. I took a moment to marshal my last remaining chi, then had her climb up piggy-back. I joined the walking wounded.

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The Nexus came into view none too soon. Cappy's burned leg was about to give out, and Dimitri stumbled forward like a drunk who had passed out, but his feet didn't know it yet. My arm throbbed in rhythm with whatever noise blasted me and I thought that knocking myself unconscious against a speaker was preferable to any more noise.

Ten feet from the Nexus I put Brittany down. Seconds later a flameball smacked my back. I stumbled and fell on my face. Dimitri kicked the ball away as it seared through my coverall into my skin. The pain woke me up, energized me. A few feet away, the Nexus, oblivious to our pain and suffering, beckoned with its promise of quiet and a few minutes rest. My body wanted to give up. I was angry enough, though, LEAVE ME ALONE!, that I had to push on the last few feet to the Nexus. Besides, I couldn't let Brittany, Dimitri, Cappy, and Grace down. Thank you and damn you, Macy Lunt.

I staggered to my knees and looked behind me. Two Elite Guards approached. Sure of their prey, they weren't quick enough when I shot them both with the last few fireballs.

The action dulled my pain and brought a brief moment of clarity. I dropped the empty flammer and programmed the Find for 323, the Dead Forest, the closest Nexus to Rack the Hack's house. Eyes filled with pain and fatigue, and still a bit of hope, the others watched and waited. I managed a small smile and got small smiles back. I looked up, expecting to see a dark spot at the limit of my vision, but there was only misty blackness.

I clenched my teeth, made sure the others had a good hold on me, and led them into the Nexus.

Chapter Thirty-one

Nobody wanted to break the sudden silence of the Nexus. I dropped to my knees and sat back on my heels. Ahh, blissful quiet. I took the earplugs out and dropped them, the better to experience the serene hush of the Nexus. My blood pressure dropped rapidly. There was nothing we could do for our wounds except ignore and endure.

Dimitri and Grace muttered to each other. Cappy spoke.

"Getter, this guy Rack, is he cool?"

"Yeah, he's okay," I said, then remembered what Rack had said about the Nexus being monitored. What a fool I was. My stomach knotted at the possibility that I might have told Mephisto right where we were going. The Find was still on 323. Didn't Rack also say he would be monitoring the Nexus? I couldn't think about it. It was too complicated.

I wanted only to sleep and wake up at home. Maybe take some classes in accounting. All Hell Cops think that when the going gets rough, but it was different that time. I knew that when Dimitri returned, Christine would be out of my life. Though we had no romantic attachment, I'd gotten used to her being around. She'd leave a hole in my life that I wanted Sneaker to fill. Would Sneaker quit being a Hell Cop and stay home, the contented housewife? Not likely. The question was, if we went to Hell as partners, could I put aside my feelings for her and do a professional job? Just thinking about it was distracting. What would happen in a real situation?

All the introspection was uncharacteristic of me. It suggested a future beyond the next five minutes. It suggested change. I'd survived the same way for ten years. Why would I want change? I shrugged my shoulder to feel the breath-taking pain of the burn. That I could deal with.

I didn't say anything to the others about my questions, or the fact that we might be monitored. We couldn't run and we couldn't fight. Let them enjoy a quick rest.

The Nexus nudged us gently out.

Brightness blinded me. When I looked up I knew our escape was over. Fifteen Guards surrounded us, high capacity flammers aimed steadily at my head. I sighed once, disappointment heavy in me. I looked to the others. Dimitri waved his good hand in a defeated throw-away gesture that said it all—of course, what did you expect?

Dimitri's forgiveness didn't help me forgive myself. I felt as if I had failed them. I'd always thought I knew the risks I took when I went to Hell and felt I was ready to suffer the consequences should things go bad. As I looked at Dimitri, Grace, Brittany, and Cappy, standing, if not straight, proud, I suddenly realized that until that moment I really hadn't cared what happened to me.

Now that my life was essentially over, I finally understood that a large part of me had died with Julie and our daughter and for ten years I'd been trying to die, too. A deep sadness filled me for two reasons: because Cappy and Dimitri should have to die, after I gave them hope, then let them down, and because I didn't want to die.

Brittany could have been my daughter. If I disappeared I had no doubt that Gregory and his new soul friends would take care of her, but Hell was still Hell. She deserved to go to Heaven, and it was my duty to take her there. Julie, and Macy Lunt, would never forgive me if I abandoned her by giving up. Sneaker came into my thoughts, too. That was a separate sadness. It had been so long since I cared about anybody but my dead wife I had tried to shut out the concept of Sneaker and me together as something too difficult to deal with. Change.

What did it matter, anyway? Mephisto had won.

I looked around us. We were in 73, the flatland where Gregory found his Skyhook and Mephisto had marched his army. In front of me stood a Helland Security Colonel. He was one of Hell's many versions of a centaur. He had a compact, muscular body with four legs, the rear ones half the length of the front. The trunk resembled a snake; the arms, a man; and the head a stylized praying mantis with oval, multifaceted eyes. Four slashes of rank adorned his burnished green cheeks.

"You have arrived," the Colonel said, not unkindly, and not surprised.

I struggled to stand straight, determined to go with some dignity.

"It appears so," I said, fresh out of snappy comebacks.

"I am Colonel Zat. And you must be Getter. I applaud you, all of you. Your escape from Fort Blood was very impressive. Unfortunately for you, I must take you back."

He gestured to his demons to take us.

What was there to say? I laid my head back and gazed at the "sky." Would I ever see it again as a Lifer? I scanned all around to take in as much as I could. Over Zat's left shoulder I noticed a spot against the white haze. I kept my head moving so as not to alert him. Pain blurred my vision, making me see things. The spot was nothing. I shook my head to clear my eyes and looked again. The dark spot grew bigger, and not just one spot, many! Help was on the way. I knew it. I felt it. I turned away so Zat wouldn't see the new hope in my eyes.

Guard's claws gripped my arm. Wait! If we went into the Nexus we were gone forever, I knew that, too. But, damn it, the spots were so far away. Somehow, without getting killed right then, I had to stall.

"Colonel," I said over my shoulder. "What's your take on the coming War?"

Every being froze. Zat gestured and the guards picked me up and took me to him. I sucked air through my teeth as a talon pressed against my torn arm. Colonel Zat made no sign of sympathy or delight at my pain. He did, however, allow me a minute to compose myself. His insect eyes regarded me with, I thought, more intelligence than the average demon.

"Mephisto will win," he said, when my eyes focused.

"And do you think that will be good for Hell?"

"Hell is Hell. It's not supposed to have Good in it."

"That's not what I meant, but it does, doesn't it? Have Good in it?"

"What do you mean Hell has Good in it?" Zat asked, sounding interested.

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I had no idea what I meant. I was just babbling, stalling for time till the air Cavalry arrived. Of course, if the rescuers that were taking their sweet time getting to us turned out to be Pragons ... ? Dizziness made it hard to think straight, let alone stand still and look Zat in his eyes. Pain wanted me to give up. Hope wanted me to stall.

"Some demons think Mephisto doesn't care about Hell," I said. "They say he's only interested in living large in the Golden Palace."

"Grikshit. Who are these demons you talk of?"

"I don't know, maybe you?"

I never saw the fist that smacked me to the ground.

"Getter!" Dimitri cried out. He moved to help me. Grace held him back.

It was a stupid thing to say. Zat had no choice in his response. For or against Mephisto, in front of his soldiers, he had to shut me up lest they get the wrong ideas about him, or Mephisto. The head of security was probably in no mood to tolerate doubts in his staff.

Zat gripped my throat and bent down till his face was inches from mine.

"You should be careful what you say when you don't know what you are talking about," he said to me only. "You may cause yourself and others more trouble than is necessary."

I sensed a hidden meaning in his words. The left side of my face felt like a crazed Dinocat had run into it. All I could think about was breathing. Zat released the pressure on my throat.

"No more accusations," he said and let me go.

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As I lay gasping I knew that what I said didn't really matter, it had accomplished its purpose. All eyes were on me, on the ground, not up where the Cavalry circled.

Looking up from the ground I saw the first Skyhook and rider dive out of the sky. At the last second it leveled off to snatching height barely ten feet behind the half circle of soldiers. In total silence it hooked a soldier and lifted him off the ground with a rush wind. Two more Skyhooks took two more soldiers before the rest reacted.

Then fireballs rained down from the circling birds. The Skyhooks dove, both bird and rider screaming a battle cry, then banked and turned so tight the rider was parallel to the ground as he fired at the surprised demons. The soldiers screamed and fired back. They tried to take cover by the Nexus, but it provided no cover from an air attack and the Nexus wouldn't open for their escape. Zat scampered about trying to organize his fast dwindling soldiers. Flame hit a front leg. He crumpled to the ground, still yelling orders.

The rescuers took some casualties, two skyhooks were hit and one rider knocked off in a ball of flame. But the demons were outnumbered and taken by surprise. The five of us huddled in the middle of the action, flame all around us.

When Zat went down, I thought the fight would be over. Then he picked up a flammer. He had a clear shot at a Skyhook as its rider concentrated on a still defiant soldier. On my knees, movements jerky from the insidious burn on my back, I scrambled for another abandoned gun. Instead of taking advantage of a clear shot at Zat, I lurched forward and knocked the gun out of his hand.

As suddenly as it started, it was over.

In the shush of landing Skyhooks and moans of agony, Zat regarded me.

"You did not kill me when you had the chance, Getter. Why?" he asked, his inscrutable insect face somehow conveying a need to know.

I laid the gun in my lap and said, "Because there is Good in Hell, Colonel, whether you see a need for it or not."

Gregory came up to me, sword swinging at his side, gun hanging from one hand. Other souls converged on us, men and women, all armed, confident but reserved, a bit uncomfortable around a Colonel from Hell Security.

"You are safe now, Getter, me friend," Gregory said, sitting on his heels next to me. "Whew. You need a good wash. Blood is not for swimming, you know."

I had to smile. I wouldn't have believed how glad I was to see the little Scotsman again, rescuer or not.

"You know about that, do you?"

"Aye, I do. And it's fair to say I don't envy you the experience. Come, let's get you and your friends away from this place."

I tried to get up. Couldn't quite manage it. Not even if Mephisto stood behind me with a red hot poker. Gregory and a stout oriental man with a potbelly and a shaved head helped me stand.

"What about him?" Gregory asked, nodding at Zat.

"Give him something for his leg," I said. "He can take care of himself after that."

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Colonel Zat squared his shoulders and held his head a bit higher. His face was not as hard to read as I thought.

"Who are these souls?" Zat asked as a young Chinese soul smeared Fire Moss Balm on his leg.

"They are your friends or your enemies, Colonel. Depending on your take in the coming war." I still wasn't sure what I was talking about, but it sounded good in my dizzy thoughts.

We left him then, alone with five remaining soldiers. The others were already loaded on Skyhooks and in the air. I stood with Gregory by his mount. Unbidden and unannounced tears welled up and flowed down my cheeks.

"Jesus Christ, Greg," I said, resting a hand on my friend's bony shoulder. "I'm glad you didn't forget me. I couldn't have taken any more. I just ... couldn't."

Not in the least embarrassed, he squeezed my shoulder in return and said, "I will never forget you, Getter. Never. And believe me I'm learning how long never is."

Aloft, flanked by two solo riders as wingmen, I finally thought to ask where we were going.

With a cheery note in his voice, Gregory said, "Sanctuary, me friend. Sanctuary."

Chapter Thirty-two

Hell is a big place. No Hell Cop that can be believed has ever seen the edge of it. Some believe Hell is flat. Some believe it has no real space, that it only exists in the mind. They think that when we enter the door to the tunnel we enter a universal virtual reality game run by God, to scare the Hell out of, or perhaps into, the stupid humans. Most, myself included, think Hell is a slowly expanding sphere, location unknown (and what does it matter?) encompassing the Abyss. The raw material comes from what's left after the soul is extracted.

No Hell Cop has ever seen all of Hell, not Destiny or the even more legendary Albert Crisp who went to Hell in the early eighteen hundreds. There are places in Hell the Find won't guide you to, that Satan has forgotten, and Mephisto would like to know the location of. Places only souls know about because Lifers didn't need to know about them. If any Lifer did need to know about those places, Cappy, Dimitri, and I did. We, especially me, were wanted by the baddest badass in Hell.

Gregory filled me in on Sanctuary. Sazz, the Skyhook he captured, had flown him there. Apparently there is some cosmic connection between Skyhooks and dead Hell Cops. Sanctuary was one of the places Hell Cops who died in Hell eventually made their way to. It was also the home of the Skyhooks. The Skyhooks lived in caves in the mountains that surrounded a small central valley where the souls of dead Hell

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Cops dwell. The souls had taken over some abandoned lower caves and built some stone huts at the end of the valley by a small lake.

I couldn't help but be awed by the spectacular view as Sazz flew us through a narrow pass between two smoking volcanos, and descended in what seemed like freefall to the settlement below. I had been too tired and hurt too much to be scared of the height. I didn't remember the landing.

When I woke on a surprisingly comfortable pallet in one of the stone huts, I thought I was still dreaming.

"Hey, Sneak," I croaked. "When did you make angelhood?"

"It's only temporary," she said. "Except where you're concerned." She laid a cool cloth on my forehead. "You were a mess when you arrived."

"What about the others?"

"They'll be fine. Dimitri is still sleeping."

"How long have we been here?"

"About forty-eight hours."

"Why are you here? Did you get your kid...?"

"Yes, I got him to Heaven Gate and the Purgatory Acceptors took him in. Mephisto's soldiers almost got me as I came back across the Styx. Your friend Gregory and the other Hell Cop souls arrived in the proverbial nick. I owe the Master of the House big time. Who is Rack the Hack, by the way? He seems to know a lot about a lot."

"A friend. I'll explain later."

She took my hand in both of hers.

"Getter," she said softly.

I dearly wanted to hear what she said. I had things I wanted to say to her, too. However, relief that she was safe quickly turned to fatigue. I might have slept. She was still there when I woke again.

"Sneaker," I began.

She touched a finger to my lips.

"Later," she said with a soft smile. "I wouldn't want you to say anything you might regret while you're delirious."

I kissed her finger and closed my eyes, relieved I didn't have to tell my feelings, worried that I wouldn't have the courage to tell them later. Change can be so confusing.

"Thanks for rescuing Cappy," Sneaker said. "I thought he was lost for good."

"I didn't know you knew him." I actually felt a quick pang of jealousy. I'd seen too many green monsters lately to pay it any attention, though.

"We've been best buds for years," she said. "He's helped me get a few jobs. And I can't afford to lose any supporters, you know."

Gregory pushed aside the curtain over the door. He asked the usual solicitous questions, then I asked him about Mephisto.

"Oh, he hasn't forgotten ye, Getter. Though, thanks to yer brave actions, he has other problems—how to make more troops."

"Thank Cappy," I told him. "What about the Wizard?"

"You tell me. Everybody here thought Wizards were folktales."

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"They're real, all right." What was that green sphere? Kryptonite? How curious. "Mephisto's still planning war?"

"Yes." His eyes wouldn't meet mine when he said, "Ah, Getter, when you are recovered, the Council would like to talk with you."

"What about?" I asked, not too tired to feel suspicious.

"They just want information," he said. Yeah, right. I closed my eyes and enjoyed Sneaker's gentle touch.

"Gregory," I asked. "Why are you here? I vaguely remember you telling me Sanctuary is for dead Hell Cops."

"I am a Hell Cop," he answered with pride. His Scottish accent waxed heavy as he continued. "I was on only me third trip here when I was murdered."

"I see," I mused. "That explains why you didn't know much about Hell when I met you. I knew you weren't an ordinary soul. McFetter?"

"Aye, the bastard McFetter murdered me. 'Tis evil he is. He will pay for what he did. I swear that."

"The last I saw he was dangling from a Skyhook's hook."

"Aye, he was, and I looked forward to watching Sazz eat his black heart. But those bloody Pragons attacked. The bastard slipped off the hook, and one of the black beasts caught him and took him away."

"He's probably already paying," I said. "In a Pragon's gut."

"A possibility, but it's not enough," Gregory said to Hell itself. "Not enough."

The hate in Gregory's face sent a chill up my spine.

"Why'd he do it?" Sneaker asked.

"A girl. No, a woman."

"The one in the haystack?" I asked.

"Aye, Robina. A lovely and sweet lass, she was, and cursed with Andrew McFetter for a father."

"I take it he loved his daughter, but not you?"

"He offered to teach me to retrieve deserving souls. He waited till the third trip so Robina would not get suspicious. An evil man he is."

Sneaker touched his arm. "Gregory, I'm so sorry. What happened to Robina?"

"I do not know. But I mean to find out. Gone to Heaven, I suspect, where I'll never go."

"So that story about the land owner and the Sheriff was just a story?"

Gregory's frown turned to a sheepish grin. "Ah, well, not exactly. 'Tis true for the most part. I met Robina just outside of Edinburgh."

"So you deserve to be in Hell after all," I said.

"I was defending my property," he replied for form's sake. We all knew it wasn't a good enough excuse for a review.

Into the growing quiet Gregory said, "You have a visitor."

Brittany stood framed in the hut's low door. She approached the bed and stood next to Sneaker. She reached for my hand then drew back. Sneaker assured her it was okay.

"Hi, Getter, I'm glad you're okay. Thank you for rescuing me. Are you still going to take me to Heaven when you're better?"

"Yes, I certainly am."

"I don't mind staying here if you don't want to. Everybody is so nice. Though there aren't many kids here."

"It's good of you to offer, but you deserve to go to Heaven and I plan to take you there."

"Okay," she said, attempting a smile. She held my hand nervously with both of hers and kept her eyes down. Obviously she had something else on her mind.

I gently squeezed her hands. "What is it, Brittany?"

She took a deep breath and said as a statement and question at the same time, "Gregory says that it might be quite awhile before I can go to Heaven, and I was thinking ... wondering, if you would ... like ... sort of be my father while we were here."

Whoa. I wouldn't have seen that one coming in a million years. My first reaction was that it was a completely crazy idea. She had a father. Then I remembered where we were and what kind of a father he had been. I'd long ago stopped dreaming of having a daughter of my own. To have a chance now, even a temporary one, was flabbergasting to say the least. Not to mention as scary as any demon.

I took a few minutes to consider the pros and cons, the upside and downside and the ramifications for the universe. A waste of time. Caught completely by surprise, I'd made my decision about five seconds after she asked.

Brittany chanced a peek to see my reaction. She must not have seen what she hoped.

"It was a dumb idea," she said. "I'm sorry."

She tried to pull away. I held tight to her hands. I looked to Sneaker for some help. She was as stunned as I was.

"It wasn't a dumb idea," I said. "It was a surprising one, to be sure, but I think it's a good one. I'm touched that you asked me."

"Really? You'll really be my father?" she asked, not quite ready to accept it yet.

"Really. On one condition."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's that?"

I put on a serious face and looked her right in the eye.

"We try out Sneaker here as temporary mother."

Brittany's eyes grew wide as she looked up at Sneaker.

Sneaker, mouth open with astonishment, spread her arms wide, accepting the inevitable, and said, "Just call me Mom."

Brittany finally let go with a smile that would have lit up the darkest corner of Hell, and tears of joy, something as rare as Wizards. Her tears brought my tears. She buried her face in my neck and hugged me. The hug hurt, but it was worth it to be able to hug her back. Sneaker sat on the pallet and hugged us both. Zat was wrong, there was Good in Hell.

I wondered briefly if this was what Reech meant about it being a long time before I'm truly home. I doubted he meant passing the time at something so pleasant as recuperation in Sanctuary with Sneaker and Brittany.

I closed my eyes, hugged my new family, and put it out of my mind. If the ages-old Flier Reech had been waiting millennia to tell me his prophecy, I was willing to wait just as long to find out what he meant.

Unfortunately, I didn't have to wait that long.

Chapter Thirty-three

I had almost forty-eight hours of rest and blissful family life before Hell returned to business as normal. Pure scary shit.

Most of the Hell Cop souls lived in natural caves at the base of the high, steep mountains that formed an elongated bowl. The ground ran flat for a hundred feet, then a steep, rocky slope descended to cliffs that surrounded Lake Serene.

I stepped out of the cave my temporary family was living in when, literally, all Hell broke loose. Fireballs streaked from the sky. Jagged rock rained down from the cliffs above. The deep hunting scream of Pragons of Dern filled the air, overshadowing the surprised cries of the Hell Cop souls.

Fifteen or twenty or a hundred Pragons circled above Sanctuary. One by one they dove, belching fire while their riders blasted away with automatic flameguns.

One cry cut through the sizzle-bangs of fireballs. Brittany! I spotted her crouching by a boulder at the edge of the steep drop off above Lake Serene. I grabbed my backpack, staff, and Hellshot gun, I hadn't yet let down my guard enough not to be ready to run or fight at a moment's notice, and ran into the open. Then ran back as flameballs burst in front of me setting up a wall of fire. Brittany screamed again. I ran out, jumped through the fire, dodged falling rocks, fireballs, and a Pragon's flame as I weaved a course toward Brittany.

I slid to a stop under the boulder's overhang. "You okay?" I asked, drawing her to me.

"Yes," she said, voice shaky. "Are they after me?"

"They're after everybody. We need to get out of here."

SSSSSSS Bang! A fireball smacked down close enough to give me a hot foot. The thick odor of brimstone made me gag.

"Where's Sneaker?" I asked.

"She was with the Council," Brittany said, holding her ears against the explosions and the battle cries of the Pragons.

"They sent me to get you."

I slung on my pack and checked my gun. Where was Sneaker? And Dimitri and Cappy? We were the living ones. Besides Brittany, that's who I had to worry about. Though the Hell Cops could feel pain, they were dead and trapped in Hell for eternity. Nothing I could do about that. They knew the chances they took. Brittany was dead, too. But she didn't deserve to be in Hell, and it was my duty as a Hell Cop, and an almost father, to get her to Heaven.

The dead Hell Cops were getting their shit together and fighting back. They had few weapons—spears, slingshots, throwing rocks—but they were accurate with them and not afraid to die again. And the Skyhooks were dropping from their cliff lairs. They wielded their hooks with deadly accuracy, yanking demon riders from the Pragons' backs, severing wings and heads on the fly.

"Okay Brittany," I said. "We're heading for the main cave. I'm told a tunnel in the back leads through the mountain to a trail to Heaven Gate."

"What about Sneaker?"

"Sneaker can take care of herself."

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"No. You can't leave her. She's in our family. And what about Dimitri and Cappy?"

I looked into her pale face bright with a few days of safety. Scared, sure, but not for herself. Great. The big bad Hell Cop undone by a ten year old's sense of ethics.

"We'll get to the cave, then look for her. Okay?" I said. Back in charge. "Let's go."

I rose to a crouch, took her hand, blasted a low flying rider about to flame me, and took one step.

BOOM!

A huge explosion on the other side of the boulder knocked us off our feet. My staff went flying. I made an effort to stand up. My legs straightened. Nothing happened.

"Getter!"

Brittany was ten feet away, sliding down the slope followed by the boulder, me, and the remains of a Pragon that had crashed and burned. The boulder rolled over her and accelerated. Half the slope followed, a rock and dirt avalanche.

I scrambled across the moving dirt and grabbed Brittany. If we didn't stop ourselves we were headed for a long fall into a shallow lake. The lake I could handle. It would probably just kill me. But the long fall before that terrified me.

"We have to get to solid ground," I yelled. She didn't need any urging from me. We scabbled toward solid ground that I knew we weren't going to make. The avalanche picked up speed and swept us along toward the cliff edge.

"Brittany," I cried. "Dead or alive I will get you to Heaven. I promise."

She quit struggling and took my hand in both of hers. "I know you will," she said as we sped down the ever steeper slope.

While the battle continued above us, the only sound I heard was the shush of sliding dirt, solid clunk of colliding rock, and the thump of my heart. Then I heard a voice—*I'm coming, Getter. I'm coming.*

I scanned the area. Nobody close.

I'm coming.

"Who?" Then I saw. The voice was in my head. Ixsess dove toward us.

Hold the soul tight.

I gathered Brittany to me with my left arm. I didn't dare look down. Ixsess swooped. He flapped his great wings twice above us. Hovered long enough for me to grab the shaft of his hook and place one foot on the blunt section. The ground fell away from under the other foot as we passed over the cliff edge.

Ixsess fell with the extra weight. My stomach flipped. Then he leveled off and flew close to the cliff, away from the battle, and Sanctuary.

Climb up, Getter, the voice in my head told me. Dangerous there.

Anything to do with Skyhook hooks was dangerous. I boosted Brittany up and she climbed the harness to Ixsess's back. Both my hands were white-knuckle gripped around the hook shaft. My rational mind told me there was less than two hundred feet between me and the lake surface. My panicked

mind didn't care. It knew only that if I released my grip I would fall. A fall of any distance was not to be allowed.

Quick, the voice in my head told me.

I hesitated.

If young soul can climb. Getter can climb.

What else could I do but climb.

"The others?" I asked Ixsess once I opened my eyes and started breathing again. We sat astride Ixsess's back, Brittany in front of me, both holding on to the harness. I tucked my feet under the harness, too.

They are safe. We join them.

I told Brittany that Sneaker was safe.

"Then you'll take me to Heaven?"

"Of course."

"Then will you be safe, too?"

"Once we're there," I said, not mentioning that until we got there we were definitely not safe. She knew anyway.

"But you're in danger going there aren't you?"

"Hell's a dangerous place," I said with a shrug and a smile. Danger, no big thing.

"Well, you don't have to take me now," she said. "We could hide some place. I probably did something bad, anyway. So I should stay and—"

"No," I said with more force than I intended. "You did not do anything bad. You do not deserve to be here. We went over that. You're going to Heaven, the sooner the better."

"You want to get rid of me. I'm just some money to you."

"That's not true and you know it." Okay, truth time. "The truth is, as long as you're here, in Hell, I'll do anything, even

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make a deal with Mephisto to keep you safe. And that's not a good way to operate."

She twisted around to look at me. I touched a finger to her lips. There was nothing more to say on the subject.

Ixsess flew close to the cliff wall, below the edge, to escape being seen. The valley where Sanctuary was, or had been, constricted into a narrow, deep Gorge that led to Satan didn't know where. Apparently, Ixsess did. We had a quiet, almost pleasant, ride for about ten minutes.

Then I got a bulls eye feeling on my back.

Chapter Thirty-four

I glanced behind us. They were easy to spot. Two of them, closer than they should have been before being spotted.

"Ixsess, two Pragons with riders close behind."

I didn't hear any confirmation, but suddenly cruise mode turned into run mode. We entered the canyon less than a hundred feet in front of the Pragons.

The slick, black rock walls closed in on us, at times barely wider than Ixsess's wingspan. The rock oozed splochy ocher, puke green, neon purple that dripped and flowed, covering the canyon in a fascinating, ugly cacophony of color like a drunk's hallucination before passing out under the toilet bowl. Scraggly vegetation sprouted from cracks like angry bone claws. The stench of rot and decay was stifling.

The Pragons with their shorter wingspan soon closed the gap. The rider fired his flameweb. Just in the nick, Ixsess did a ninety degree roll that almost threw me off. I beat my panic down by ignoring the ground so very, very far below.

The Pragon flew fifty feet behind and twenty feet above us. The hard skin of the beast shielded the rider. The rider fired again. I fired my gun at the flame ball. It exploded like fireworks. The rider had more flame balls than I had bullets. Something had to be done.

"Swoop up," I yelled/thought at Ixsess.

Suddenly we were vertical, and I didn't have time to worry about falling off. I twisted left, swung my gun around and nailed the demon rider as he passed under us. A fancy bit of

shooting if I do say so. This pissed off the Pragon. It swooped up after us, jaws wide, spitting flame. As Ixsess looped backward, I sent a Hellshot round down the Pragon's gullet. It exploded in a ball of fire and fell away to the scavengers at the canyon bottom.

Ixsess completed the loop and sped on through the canyon. I looked for the other Pragon. Oh shit. It flew above and right of us, twenty feet away. With Captain Boam on board. That demon always showed up at the wrong time.

"Getter!" Boam yelled as always. "Mephisto wants you and the soul. He wants you alive, but I prefer dead."

Before I could make a snappy reply he fired his flameweb.
I fired, too.

The flame ball burst, singeing my hair and Ixsess's tail feathers. The surprised Pragon swerved to avoid the blast. It hit the wall, lost speed, and tumbled down before regaining control. Unfortunately with Captain Boam still attached.

"They're coming," I said. "Fast."

Ixsess put on a burst of speed.

Skyhooks with their long wings are basically built to soar and glide for hours, then dive and impale souls, not sustain high speed with a live rider. Pragons were quick and maneuverable and tough.

Ixsess slowed and put his power into gaining altitude. Just below the canyon rim he leveled out then turned into a convoluted side canyon. Boam followed.

Hold. Will try this.

I held the harness and Brittany tight. With no warning, we soared around a sharp fold. Then headed straight toward the

wall. At the last second he flared his wings and grasped the rock with his talons. We stuck, with a mile's worth of empty to the bottom.

Do not move.

No kidding.

We hung like a huge moth on the canyon wall. With any luck invisible to passing not so bright demons.

Boam zipped around the corner and continued past at full speed. As soon as he was out of sight, we pushed off, nosedived a couple hundred feet, and glided back down the canyon.

I didn't bother being scared at the short freefall. Been there, done that. Even the scariest things can become mundane when inevitable and often repeated.

We had five minutes of quiet flying time. Ixsess told us the end of the canyon was near. Once out we would rendezvous with Sneaker and the others. Then a fireball sizzled past. Brittany screamed. I cursed. Ixsess thought, *Hold tight*, and dropped into a steep dive.

Another fireball whizzed past. I thought I heard Boam yell, "Getter!" then all I heard was the rush of wind.

Ixsess folded in his wings and we fell and fell, faster and faster. I glanced back. Boam followed, close, eager, grinning. I looked forward, straight down, and the bottom, too, was close. Boiling, it seemed. All green and orange and purple. Hell's blood leaking.

"Ixsess?"

Hold, Getter. Soul, hold, too.

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Great, another “hold tight” maneuver. I expected the Skyhook to swoop up, or to the side, at least stay upright. Wrong. Instead, Ixsess, ducked his head, snapped his wings open, and rolled upside-down! Brittany screamed. I screamed. My feet shot straight out as the force of the turn tried to fling me into the unpleasantness of the gorge bottom. I had to jerk my feet up to avoid a bubbling yellow-green mass that reached out as we zipped by.

Boam's Pragon reacted fast. Caught by surprise, his short wings didn't have the aerodynamic bite to execute such a tight turn on such short notice. I saw the sploosh, heard the flying demon's cry, saw the burst of flame as they smacked into the bottom.

Captain Boam was an idiot, and I was glad to be rid of him. But still, better to face the enemy you know and all that crap. I wasn't as happy to see the last of him as I wanted to be.

Ten minutes later, the canyon bottom rose to meet the rim. With great relief on my part we broke out onto the Styx Flat, a limitless, dun colored expanse of dust, dirt, and suffering. The souls deposited there had more to suffer through than parched heat and loneliness. Quickdirt, Gotcha Flowers, and Mudslugs were a few. Always in the distance were the Tantalus Storms, great thunderstorms that promised cool wind and clear water. Both of which vanished as the thirsty souls came near. In their wake they left Quickdries, mud holes that hardened quick enough to trap a soul. At the far edge of the Flats are Charon's Dunes, impenetrable to

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souls and the last barrier to Hell Cops headed to the River Styx. On the other side, Heaven Gate and Salvation.

Once out of the canyon, Ixsess banked left and flew low along short cliffs, finally landing in front of a cave hidden from above. Gratefully, I touched solid ground. Brittany slid off into my arms. She was glad, too.

Your friends inside, Ixsess said in my head.

"Thank you," I said out loud. Then I thought to him, "That's two times you have saved me. If I can help you sometime....?"

It is a privilege to aid you in your destiny.

"Oh, come on. I don't want to hear that destiny stuff," I said, but Ixsess had flapped his broad wings and left us in a dust cloud.

Destiny. The only thing I wanted to hear about Destiny was that he was back in Life drinking beer and enjoying his retirement. The demons could spook you with their "you're important to the future" crap.

I took Brittany's hand, drew my gun, and on full alert entered the cave. Twenty feet in I saw them. They did not have happy faces.

One of them was missing.

Chapter Thirty-five

"Mephisto has her," Dimitri said.

Gregory came up and laid a hand on my shoulder. "I am sorry, friend Getter," he said. "She put up a hell of a fight. Killed two Pragons, at least ten minions, and a couple of officers, too. She's a feisty one, she is. But one of his captains finally got her."

Dimitri, pale, baggy eyed, and grim, limping, stood beside Gregory. "Cappy almost had her. He whipped some demon ass before ten of them piled on. He's got five or six knife and sword wounds as well as burns." He whispered, "A couple are bad."

Cappy lay in a corner like a heap of bloody rags. Grace knelt beside him, wrapping an arm wound. He saw me, mustered a weak wave.

"Where did they take her?" I asked.

"Oww." Brittany tried to yank her hand from mine.

"Sorry," I said. The idea that Sneaker was with Mephisto had me all tense. "Sorry. Why don't you go help Grace?"

"Where is she?" I asked again.

"The Skyhooks are looking," Gregory said, unhappy with his ignorance.

"He wants me," I said.

"Aye, and the young soul, I think."

There wasn't much more to say after that. Grace and Brittany tended Cappy. Dimitri had a jagged rip in his leg that

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oozed blood. I helped him lay down. That was all I could do for him.

Cappy waved me over. His face was gray, voice weak and cracked. "Getter, I'm sorry, man. I almost had her. Just too damn many of them. And I'm so damn weak. Sorry. Sorry."

"It's all right, Cappy," I told him. "If you couldn't get to her, nobody could."

Cappy smiled, then went away for awhile.

Grace, burned and blood-stained, slumped against the rock. She shrugged and shook her head. She didn't think he would make it.

I sat next to Gregory. He handed me a water bottle, and I took a small sip. I wanted to do something—go in guns blazing, sword slashing, fists striking—something. Sneaker had become important to my life in the past few days. We fit.

In Sanctuary, for the first time, we spent time together in a sort of neutral zone. No business, or errands, or TV. No demons, or suffering, or lost souls. R&R time for our little family of three. My eyes sometimes got misty when Brittany laughed. Not only because of what she went through in Life, but for what might have been had my little girl survived.

Sneaker once caught me wiping my eyes. She said nothing, just hugged me. She knew. She had mentioned more than once she had no desire to have kids. They didn't fit her chosen profession. Watching her with Brittany proved the maternal instinct still alive within her. And the paternal instinct in me. I wanted to take care of them, keep them happy and safe. Not a fit with my chosen profession, either.

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I was desperate to save Sneaker, but my duty as a Hell Cop was to get Brittany to Heaven. Duty or love? I spent fifteen minutes juggling consequences before I couldn't sit still any longer and went to the cave mouth to wait news.

Brittany came and sat beside me. The touch of her arm against mine a bare tickle.

"How's Cappy?" I asked.

"Grace says he might die."

"We have to get him to Heaven Gate. He can get help there. If he dies at least he'll be in Heaven. I need to get you there, too."

"But what about Sneaker?" Brittany asked, her tone all but accusing me of abandoning her.

"My duty is to you first," I said, hating it as I said it.

"But you love her, don't you?"

Well, there it was. I'd never told Sneaker that. I'd never admitted it to myself. Did I even know what love was? Since my wife died there'd been affection, fondness, even closeness, but no love. There was no room for love in Hell. Only duty to the soul and personal survival. Love could distract you, make you do something stupid. Make you risk your soul or your life. Go against the Hell Cop Code that I adhered to. Love did not fit my chosen profession.

"Yeah, I do love her," I said.

"Then you have to rescue her," Brittany said with simple, obvious, child logic.

"After I get you to Heaven Gate."

"No, Getter. I'm already dead. Sneaker isn't."

I couldn't argue with that logic. Though I tried. We finally struck a deal. Brittany, Grace, and Gregory would help Cappy and Dimitri to Heaven Gate. I would go after Sneaker. Gregory wanted to go with me, but Brittany convinced him that the rest needed him.

A dust cloud appeared on the horizon. I alerted the others. Out of sight, inside the cave, we tracked the cloud's progress. Nobody suggested it wasn't coming straight at us. Brittany lay beside me, Cappy's knife clutched in her hand. I hoped she wouldn't have to die again.

As the cloud came closer, our expressions grew grimmer.

A whoosh and a snap of wings from above made us all jump. Damn! I almost shot Ixsess as he landed right outside the cave.

Do not be frightened, I heard in my head.

"Easy for you to say," I said. "What's in the dust?"

Taurs.

As far as I knew, Taurs were a totally stupid and useless herd beast that did nothing but roam around the plain raising dust clouds and trampling souls and Hell Cops. They had a six legged, lizard-like lower body with an upright upper body, a grotesque parody of the legendary Centaurs.

"Taurs?" I said. "Why are they coming here?"

Too dangerous to fly to Heaven Gate. Taurs ignored by all.

Dimitri limped to the cave mouth and peered at the approaching dust cloud. "You want us to walk with them?"

No, Ixsess said. *Ride.*

"Ride? You can't ride a Taur. They're not rideable or trainable. They're just dumb animals."

I shared Dimitri's skepticism. The things ignored everybody and went where they wanted, fast.

The herd came to a stop a hundred feet from the cave. Hot wind cleared the dust. About fifteen Taur, their amphibian, reptilian, simian, canine, feline heads turned in our direction, returned our interest. One stepped forward, its six legged gait smooth and assured, but still creepy. It stopped beside Ixsess. They looked at each other for half a minute, then faced us.

"I am Flipsit," the Taur said with authority. Dimitri and I exchanged glances. Dumb animals? "We have come to take you to the River Styx."

I admit I was flabbergasted at this turn of events. A Taur speaking, offering help? "Ixsess, how, why?" I asked with my usual eloquence.

Demon armies not treated the Taur well. They will help you, Getter.

I didn't like the way he emphasized you. "They will help the others, too?"

They are with you.

"Why does that matter?"

They have heard the prophecy.

"Oh, that again." I didn't care for that prophecy business, but if they did, I might as well use it. "Ixsess, do you know where Sneaker is?"

Yes. Mephisto is camped by the Fire Cliffs.

"Can you or Flipsit take me there?"

After a quick discussion, Ixsess thinking and Flipsit speaking some gobbledygook, between them, while ignoring

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me, they decided I should be taken to Heaven Gate where I'd be safe.

I dissented.

They said it would be best.

I ignored them. Gregory and Dimitri, after our own discussion about coming with me, swore to take Brittany, Grace, and Cappy to Heaven Gate with the Taurs.

I sat down on a rock in front of Brittany.

"Brittany, as a Hell Cop, my first duty is to the soul I'm retrieving. That's you. My own safety and the safety of other Hell Cops is secondary. We all accept that, and I have always lived by that code. Sneaker needs my help, and I have to help her. If I didn't think you'd be safe with Gregory and Dimitri, I wouldn't leave you."

"Getter," Brittany said, voice plaintive enough to break your heart.

I went on before she could continue. "Sneaker has become important to me. I can't let Mephisto hurt her. Do you understand?"

Brittany gave me a look that only a ten year old who has it all figured out could give. "Of course you have to save Sneaker. You love her. I want to go with you."

"No."

"But I love her, too."

"I know, but you and Grace have to go to Heaven."

"I can help."

"It's too dangerous."

"But I'm already dead!" she said, exasperated with this dense adult.

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She did have a point, except I wanted to keep her well away from Mephisto. We went around and around a few times. In the end, she stomped off in a huff, murmuring things that would not help her get into Heaven.

There was more discussion. I played the prophecy card—how could I fulfill the prophecy if I hid out at the Heaven Gate? They of course said how could I fulfill the prophecy if Mephisto tortured and killed me. I won anyway.

We strapped Cappy on the back of a muscular Taur called Catsit. Cappy was in a bad way. I doubted he'd make it. We had to try.

Good-byes and good lucks all around. A hug from Grace, light as a butterdie's embrace. A harder one from still pouting Brittany. A finger wave from Dimitri. Gregory took my hand and pressed an object into it. He handed me my staff. "I found this back in Sanctuary," he said, with a wry smile. "Thought you might have use of it." A bow from Flipsit and they were off in a concealing cloud of dust.

I tied the staff to my pack and, without a word, climbed on Ixsess's back, and he took off low and fast, and with any luck unseen, toward the Fire Cliffs.

Chapter Thirty-six

Hell Cops take their oath seriously. You have to, considering where we work. The souls come first. Guilt for leaving Brittany gnawed at me as Ixsess carried me along the edge of the Styx Plain to approach the Fire Cliffs from behind. I almost told him to turn back. I managed to doze off instead. Sneaker needed me. I had to be ready, guilt or no.

The Fire Cliffs stretch about a mile long. Burnt black rock rises a thousand feet straight out of the plain, and a jumble of cracked, broken, and exploded rock tapers back a quarter mile to die into the flat plain. The sheer face is pockmarked with caves and indentations that randomly spout flame. Sometimes small flickers, sometimes great whooshing jets. Mephisto camped in front of the cliffs among boulders blasted from the cliff face by eons of fire.

There was one passage through the ragged rock behind the cliffs that came out at the base. I'd never been through it. Just heard the stories, and it was in my Find. Ixsess flew undetected around to the back and landed. We ducked under an overhang out of sight of patrolling Pragons.

Is price to pay for passage, Ixsess thought at me.

"What price?" I asked. I'd heard of that, too.

I know not. Only must be paid. Will listen for when return safe. And he was gone.

On full alert, I jogged through the stones, the way obvious, only one path possible. The stones grew larger, and I

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climbed higher while still exposed to curious Pragons. Twice I had to duck for cover from overflying patrols.

After fifteen minutes I emerged from a long, narrow passage to face two cave openings carved into the base of a hundred foot rock wall. No sign indicated which one to take. The Find told me to continue straight ahead. No help there. I took a few steps into each, flashed my light. Nothing but black, and a stomach churning stench.

I looked for a way up and over. Nothing but smooth flat rock. I looked back the way I'd come. Nothing but smooth flat rock. The passage had vanished. Trapped. Great.

"Are you losst, Liffer?"

"No."

The voice, a smarmy, lispy thing came from above me. I drew my gun and searched for the source. Nothing.

"Yesss."

I saw movement at the corner of my eye. Spun right. It moved too fast. Quick spin left. Then back right. Caught it.

"Clever, Liffer." The creature changed color to a fire orange as it scuttled across the slick vertical rock to a position above the cave entrances.

A Golem. I'd only seen one before. Four feet long from stumpy tail tip to thick lipped gash of a mouth in a blob of a head. It clung to the rock with four stubby legs with six sucker toes. A long dark something on its back. Its whole body oozed with a milky, snotty substance that dripped down then sucked back up. Thick lids squinted over dark eyes that regarded me upside down. I wondered if Tolkien took his

inspiration from this creature or the other way around. I'd have to check the history.

"You sseek way to the Fire Cliffsss," it said.

"Yes," I said. "Can you tell me which passage to take?"

"Oh, yess."

"Will you tell me?"

"You mussst pay."

"What is the price?"

"Do you agree to pay?" the Golem insisted.

"Tell me the price."

"Agree firsst."

"If I don't pay?"

"Lossst, then die."

"If I want to go back?"

"No go back. Pay or die."

I looked at the trap I was in. Scanned with the Find. The space was definitely smaller, pushing me to the caves. What choice did I have?

"I'll pay."

"Yess. Yess. Pay or die. Ffollow."

The Golem wriggled into the right hand cave.

I put in nose filters and followed. The cave was pitch black. I switched on my flashlight.

"No light! No light!" the Golem screeched.

I switched it off.

"Come. Come. No die yet."

The stench overpowered my filters. Rotten eggs, skunk, and overheated outhouse times a hundred. My eyes watered. I stopped to retch twice.

Faint, flickering light appeared ahead. The passage opened into a small, rough chamber about twenty feet in diameter. Dead things were piled on one side. A trickle of water formed a small pool on the floor. Flames guttered from holes in the walls. I wondered why the place didn't explode, as thick as the rank fumes were.

The Golem lay splayed out on a raised flat stone. Its saucer eyes, wide in the dimness, watched me. I was truly lost, and it knew it.

"I have to get to the Cliffs," I said. "What is your price?"
"Sscratch back," it said.

Scratch its back? I'd rather stick my arm up a Dinocat's ass than touch a Golem.

"Sscratch back. Now is time," the Golem said. Its voice was filled with urgency, almost pleading. Its body squirmed as if trying to scratch its back on something that wasn't there.

Clenching my teeth to keep from vomiting, I knelt beside the creature. I slipped on a glove.

"No glove. No glove," the Golem insisted.

Oh, the hell with it. I took it off and slowly reached out and pushed my fingers into the covering goo. I'd expected cold and clammy and sticky, but the ooze was warm and thick. I rubbed a few inches of the Golem's skin. It was tight, surprisingly rough. It sighed.

"All back," it said.

I drew my fingers down through the goo. When I raised my fingers at the end they were completely dry. The stuff did not stick at all.

"More. Give liffe, Liffer. Give liffe."

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I had no idea what it meant, but more curious now than disgusted, I repeated the motion. This time I touched the black spot. It felt different, smoother. And it moved. I jerked my hand back.

"No sstop. Give liffe."

I stroked again. The black shape wriggled under my fingers. Tiny legs appeared. Oh, man. With each stroke the shape swelled and became more animated. I forgot about the goop. Fascinated, I watched a miniature Golem take form. Soon, it raised its head and began to struggle with the goo. I slipped both hands under it and raised it up. The goo slid off, leaving it dry and glossy. Its color lightened to match my hands. I set it down on the rock.

The larger golem lay still for a minute; I thought it might be dead. Then it slithered to the floor. Still covered with goo, it waddled tiredly to a far corner of the room. It raised up on its stubby legs and shook from head to tail. The goo sloughed off. Within seconds tiny furry creatures appeared from tiny holes and began eating the goo. The Golem snatched one up in its mouth and dropped it in front of the "baby" Golem. The little one ate it.

I sat back and took in the last ten minutes. Damn, there was something I never thought I'd put on my resumé—Golem obstetrician. I had a hundred questions—from how do baby Golems get started to where do they go when they grow up? Mama, or Papa, or Mama/Papa Golem had no time for them and neither did I.

"You have given liffe," it said. "Have paid pricce. I sshow you to FFire Cliffss, now."

"What about the little one?" I asked.

"Iss ssaffe. Come, now."

Good luck, kid, I thought. Godfather to a Golem. There was something Destiny couldn't claim, I bet.

The Golem set a quick pace. I followed it through innumerable passageways, right, left, up, down. I began to sense a rhythm to the jets of flame that lit our way. Like something very big breathing. I didn't want to think about that. Though the cave walls seemed more forgiving than regular rock.

A five foot drop at the end of a passage and we were there. The normal stink of Hell was roses and lavender compared to the Golem's quarters. I almost swooned at the thrill of it.

"Thank you," I said.

"You pay price," the Golem said. "I sshow way."

"I may want to come back with one other. Is there another price to pay?"

"Always price to pay," it said. "You give liffe. Already pay. Call, I come."

"What is your name?"

"Desstiny call Heyjoe." Destiny. Great. "What call you?"

"Getter."

"Yess. I know Getter."

"How....?" It was gone. And coming toward me were two of Mephisto's elite guards.

Chapter Thirty-seven

The hole Heyjoe left me in was eight feet above the ground. I ducked back in. The Guards missed me, though they were alert, for Hell guards in general, and looking. These were not just some slacker privates in the regular demon army. They were Devil Demons. Sharp faced, sharp toothed, pointy eared, armored demons in the classic mode, whose favorite pastime, after torturing souls, was sharpening the point at the end of their tails.

Every section of Hell has its own weather and time. Night had fallen over the Fire Cliffs. There was no reason for the darkness that I could figure except to bring out the drama of the jetting fire. It was spectacular. And the dark gave me cover. Neither I nor the Find detected any more Guards close by. I dropped out, ran to the larger boulders, and made my way along them.

Mephisto held Sneaker, expecting me to try and rescue her. He might have told the Guards not to see me even if they had. Let me get close. Then snag me red-handed. I had to snag Sneaker out of a trap I knew waited for me. The problem was I didn't know how smart Mephisto was. Could he figure out what I would do, knowing I was thinking about what he was thinking about what I was figuring he would figure out? Too confusing for me. Go in from the side, keep my ears and eyes open, figure it out as I went along.

A quarter mile from the cliff exit I moved into the jumble of rocks and headed in full stealth mode toward Mephisto's

camp. From ten feet up, I peered between two smaller rocks at Mephisto's camp.

I saw one big tent, gaudy with red, green, yellow, and black swirly stripes, two slightly smaller ones on each side of it and about twenty-four demon tents circling an open area. In the middle of the area stood a crude stone cross blackened by smoke. Sneaker hung from it, arms bound to the crossmember, feet a foot off the ground. My heart rose as my stomach sank. I inspected her with my mini binoculars. No movement. Bloody, beaten, coveralls ripped and ragged. In the uneven light from the Fire Cliff flames, I couldn't tell if she lived.

I had to look away and calm myself. Charging down in a rage would not help anybody, except Mephisto. She had to be alive. Dead bait in a trap wasn't very effective.

I inspected her again, then the surrounding area. On the far side of the camp I spied a group of large shadows. It took a moment to recognize Demon Horses. Truly a beast to be afraid of, they made Clydesdales look like ponies. Fast and dangerous, they'd make a run across the Styx Plain a fool's rush. Most of the small tents were dark and quiet. One of the bigger tents emitted light and rough laughter and the clunk of stone cups on stone tables. A Guard staggered out, cup in hand. He stumbled over to Sneaker.

I drew my gun, with its two rounds left, and tensed.

The Guard spoke to her. No answer. He spoke again. Poked her with a claw tipped finger. Fresh blood dripped from her chest. Still no response. The Guard slapped her few times and walked away with disgust.

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Sneaker raised her head and silently spit at his back.

She was alive! That was Sneaker all over, alive and spitting. I willed her to look at me and know help was there. She struggled against her bonds while looking around, then went limp. I searched for the danger she saw. I saw nothing. Figured someone watched her from the farthest big tent.

The Guard went into the rocks close to me, probably looking for an impromptu latrine. With a plan in mind, I followed.

Seeing him up close, I let some of the rage through. Part of the Hell Cop Code is to leave as little trace as possible. Something I hadn't lived up to on that trip. I've killed demons in self-defense, never in cold-blood. I needed the anger to do what I had to do.

Devil Guards are only vulnerable to a blade at the front of the throat. Their armor is made from a composite of Spine Pine sap and Ironweed grass. My gun firing Hellshot might penetrate. Any blade I could wield, never. A hard collar protected the back of their necks.

I had to dispatch him quickly and quietly without allowing myself to think about it too much. He walked past me. I knocked his feet out from under him with my staff. He fell backward. I grabbed his sword as he fell. Spun, and caught him under the chin with the blade. He was dead as he hit the ground.

Thankfully the killing only took one blow. I don't know if I could have struck again. He was a demon who with glee would have tortured and killed me or Sneaker. I still didn't feel good about it.

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I threw down the sword and began the grim process of taking what I needed. Ten minutes later I strolled behind the larger tents as if I belonged there. The armor was light weight, but loose, having been made for a demon four inches taller and a lot broader than me. I passed behind the biggest tent, heard voices, stopped to listen.

Mephisto's voice, not happy, "Find them. I want to know what happened to them. They or you will go to the fires." A phone crashed down.

"What happened?" another voice said. Familiar?

"Two Pragons from the attack are unaccounted for."

"Do ye think it's him?"

I stopped breathing. Though muffled, I knew that accent. Scottish. Old Scottish.

"Maybe, but I think he would be more likely to sneak in than try a full assault." Mephisto had that right.

"You do think he'll come, then?" Gregory? How did he get here? Why is he here? What happened to the others?

"He'll come," Mephisto said, sure of himself. "Those Lifers think so much of life. They have no appreciation of the pleasures of death."

"Aye, having been alive and now dead, I quite agree." No, not Gregory, the voice older, colder.

"Yes, you would. The screams of the young soul I sent to you were quite satisfying. No, Getter will come, and I will catch him, and he can watch me cut off the head of the one he loves, like he did to my daughter."

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"Aye, General, I know how ya feel. I had a boy once who took advantage of my daughter. I made sure he suffers in Hell now and forever."

Not Gregory. The man who murdered him, McFetter. Now thrown in with Mephisto. Gregory will not be happy to learn that, I thought. There was a silence inside while I controlled my desire to march into the tent and shoot both of them.

A bottle clinked against glass inside.

"Thank you, General," McFetter said. "May I make a request of you? A few minutes with the woman before she dies? I owe Hell Cops something. The scream of a live one will be so much more satisfying than those from a dead soul."

"When I catch Getter, maybe I will grant your request."

"Your trap will work, do you think?"

"Yes, it will. Patience, McFetter. You must learn patience."

Another Guard, who looked like he really belonged there, came into view. I moved along.

"Hey, Private."

I thought the Guard behind me had caught up. To run was useless. I stopped, gripped the hilt of my sword.

"Right face, you idiot!"

The voice came from the rocks on my right. I peered into a narrow space about four feet off the ground. A small Guard without his armor peered out at me over a gray cloth. If he hadn't called to me I'd have walked right by him.

"Get me a mug of Brimstone beer from the mess tent. I ain't sitting here for eternity watching that Lifer without a praised beer to suck on. You get that, Private?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sir? I ain't no Sir. What kind of Guard are you can't recognize a Sergeant First from an officer?"

He leaned forward, face a foot from mine. Two seconds, he knew I was no Devil Guard. He opened his big mouth to yell. I glanced right. The Guard behind me was gone. I drew my sword and thrust it into the dark, narrow space.

The Sergeant's expression expressed his astonishment. His two clawed hands grasped the blade and yanked it out of his chest. Then, with a sigh, he settled back and died. I had no time to debate matters of self-defense with myself. I replaced the cloth and turned away.

No alarm blared, no hue and cry went up. Nobody had seen me except Sneaker. I moved to the edge of the tent and removed my helmet. Sneaker's astonishment matched the Guard's. Suddenly she dropped her head and hung limp.

Two Guards stumbled a circuitous route from the mess tent to Sneaker. One lifted her head, then let it drop when she remained unresponsive. They moved on.

Sneaker looked at me, looked around the camp, then shrugged a question as well as she could tied to a cross—
What are you waiting for?

I waited because the two Guards, drunk as they were, had avoided the same area in front of Sneaker as the first drunken Guard had. A coincidence or a trap? If one trap, the watcher, why not two?

The camp was quiet. I replaced my helmet, scanned the space with my Find, and quickly walked toward Sneaker. I avoided the same area as the Guards had and stepped right into trap number two.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Demons are alive. They have their own life force and when they die they lose that life force. Where that force, or soul, goes when they die, I don't know. Possibly they have their own Heaven and Hell with unique angels and demons of their own.

The life force of Demons is different from the life force of Lifers. It is detectable by the Finds. Many of the creatures of Hell can also tell the difference by some esoteric internal sensor. Some that rely on concealment to obtain their prey have learned to mask their life force from detection. That's why my Find did not warn me of the Cage Spider waiting for a Lifer life force to pounce on.

As I stepped on the buried beast, the thing jumped up from under ground, snagged my leg, and yanked me into its shallow pit. Then it stood over the hole, legs forming bars. Its solid, flat body pressed me down. I heard a short scream from Sneaker, a grunt from me, a deep satisfied laugh from Mephisto.

"You see," McFetter said. "I told you a raid on Sanctuary would get you the Lifers you sought."

Mephisto's horned feet appeared in my limited view. He kicked dust in my face, rather childish I thought.

"And I told you, McFetter," Mephisto said, pleased with himself. "He'd fall for my trap."

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Mephisto knelt down so he could see me, and I could see him gloat. "So, Getter, no smart remarks? No running away with little souls that belong to me?"

"The souls belong to Satan, not you," I said.

"HA! You know nothing. Satan's just an old demon sitting up in his Golden Palace reliving past triumphs over and over and over again. He doesn't care about one little soul, or two sneaky Hell Cops, or managing Hell the way it should be—hard and painful and scary. And no more letting you damn Hell Cops come here and take souls that belong to me. I run Hell now."

He had a truly evil glint in his big red eyes. He didn't run Hell yet, or he'd be lounging up in the Golden Palace barking orders and torturing Hell Cops.

"Does Satan know that?"

"He will when I take over. What's it to you? You'll be in too much pain to care. Then you'll be dead." He leaned in close to emphasize his point. "Like my daughter."

A three inch claw extended from his finger. He reached in and, grinning, drew it across my throat. Then he stroked the spider's hairy head. "Release," Mephisto said.

The spider didn't like that idea. It wanted to eat me, taking two weeks to do it. As it lowered its head, a drop of liquid dripped from its left mandible on to my cheek. It felt ice cold. If it bit me I'd be paralyzed, but still feel the pain as it randomly ripped me apart.

"Release!" Mephisto kicked the spider. It scrunched up into a ball, rolled a short distance, then sprang to its clawed feet. "Go eat a soul. Damn thing," Mephisto said.

The spider raised and lowered his heavy body several times while staring with arachnid impassivity at the group watching it. Otherwise it did not move. Even Mephisto did not have complete control over an insect, and he knew it.

"Go ahead and take your mate with you," he said, waving his arm dismissively.

Another Cage Spider emerged from the ground behind Sneaker. From the reaction of the Guards they hadn't known about it. The two spiders scuttled off into the night.

I climbed out of the pit, dusted myself off. Guards were all around us. They took my equipment. They must have thought my fists were clenched in fear of their bad selves, not because I was hiding something. In short order they erected another cross next to Sneaker and lashed me to it.

I got a good look at McFetter when he shoved his face in mine and looked me over. He had a thin body and a fat head. His face was square with craggy eyebrows over wide set hard eyes and a pushed in nose. It was the face of a man who had probably never loved anyone in his life, let alone death. "Aye, you're the one was with Gregory, the damned little bastard."

"You're the damned one," I told him. "Not Gregory."

He slapped me.

"He defiled my daughter. He tried to take my daughter away from me."

"Having you as a Father was probably no picnic. Maybe she wanted to leave?"

He slammed my head against the cross with the palm of his hand. Anger boiled in me. For a few seconds I tried to break off the arms of the cross and beat him to a bloody pulp

that would take a thousand years to flow into the River of Souls.

"Never! She was my daughter. It was her duty to stay."

Despite my vulnerability I couldn't keep quiet. "Maybe she wanted love and freedom instead of duty and abuse."

He whipped out a knife and held it to my neck. "Aye. She got her freedom, she did. From this."

He was only a soul, but the knife was real. I felt the sting of the blade slice through my skin. I curbed my tongue before he cut it out.

His Scottish accent grew thick with anger. "Nothing more to say? Damned righteous Hell Cop. I was a good one, ye know. Aye, I got my souls to the Gate. But ye noble Hell Cops were always quoting the Code and giving grief about what I did to the other poor, damned souls. They're in Hell for a reason, boy, to be tormented and to suffer. I just gave them what they deserved."

His eyes glistened with evil, and he turned them on Sneaker. He stood in front of her. He looked her over, barely able to contain his desire to make her pay for the disrespect he thought Hell Cops had shown him. His hands roamed her body, squeezing, stroking.

Hell Cop Code or no, I swore I'd cut off his hands. If the daggers from Sneaker's glare didn't do it first.

"Can I have her now?" McFetter asked Mephisto, his voice breathy with craving.

"Patience," the General said. "Let the desire build in you, and the fear in them." He took hold of McFetter's arm. "Go, have a drink. No hurry."

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As McFetter headed toward the striped tent, Sneaker said, her voice rough with dryness, "I won't scream, McFetter. You'll never make me scream."

McFetter went for her. Hate disfigured his face. Mephisto grabbed him with one hand, threw him backward where he landed in a heap.

Mephisto approached Sneaker. Her feet hung a foot off the dirt. Even so, Mephisto stood over a foot taller than her. She seemed a child next to him. He stood very close. Gentle as a kiss, he brushed the hair from her face with a claw. He stroked her cheek, tilted her head back for her to see his eyes. His hips rubbed against hers with an unmistakable slow rhythm. Their eyes locked. The back of his huge hand caressed her breast. She rose and fell against the cross in response to the press of his hips. She bit her lip. She did not flinch. She did not turn away.

Mephisto spoke, his voice soft on the outside, unmerciful on the inside. "I can make you scream."

He drew a line of blood across the top of her breast with the tip of a claw.

Sneaker did not flinch. She did not turn away. She did not scream.

Mephisto left her. He stopped in front of me. Met my glare. Made sure I knew exactly how he would make her scream.

"Forget the prophecy, Getter. You have no future."

He stalked into his tent. McFetter followed.

I wanted Sneaker to look at me. To tell me that what had just happened didn't affect her. That I was the only man who could leave her so stunned, head tilted back, mouth open,

eyes fluttering, breathing so heavy. For a few minutes I felt completely insignificant and inadequate.

Survival instincts kicked in. I got over it.

We hung on our crosses in silence while two Guards set up a crude table with water and food—bread, peanut butter and jelly, potatoes, meat, veggies. Another table held an assortment of pain infliction devices, mostly sharp objects and hot things. Two sets of two Guards stood on duty at the edge of the open area.

Sneaker's breathing had slowed. Her voice was rough. "You shouldn't have come. Now both of us will die."

Neither of us ever mentioned the incident.

"Did you think I'd just let Mephisto have you?" I said.

"Yes. Your duty is to Brittany first."

Despite her strong outburst to McFetter, Sneaker was weak. She'd been hanging for almost twenty-four hours with no food or water. Bruises, cuts, burns, sweat, and blood covered her. She was beautiful. And McFetter would never make her scream.

"Brittany wanted to come with me." I told her what had happened to me, how I got there. And while I spoke I opened the Swiss Army knife Gregory had pressed into my hand back at the cave. Hiding it from the Guards who weren't paying any attention anyway, I began to slice through the rope that bound my forearms.

"Sneaker," I said, when I'd cut as far as I dared. "If I cut you loose, can you stand, or run?" I whispered.

"Whatever I have to do," she answered. "Will it be now?"

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"A distraction would be nice, but without one now is as good or bad time as any."

"Getter."

"Yeah," I said, watching for the Guards to turn away.

"Thank you for rescuing me." Her eyes glistened behind the sweat and blood soaked hair falling over her face.

One of the unwritten Hell Cop codes was don't fall in love with another Hell Cop. Well, some codes were meant to be broken. "You're entirely welcome."

She tried a smile. Couldn't quite manage it. I got the point.

"Maybe they will be your diversion," Sneaker said.

To our right two Guards stood snout to snout, fists clenched, voices rising with each insult. The other two Guards moved slowly toward them, laughing, anticipating violence. Demon Guards were the bad ass fighters in Hell, but they weren't worth shit on guard duty.

I worked the knife. If Mephisto heard the growing commotion and came out, we were dead. The lashings on my right arm gave way. The other side parted with one slice. A sharp knife is a thing of beauty. I dropped to the ground, ran behind Sneaker and sliced the rope that held her. Three things happened: Sneaker fell to her knees, the two Guards drew swords, roared battle cries, and went at each other, and Mephisto came out of his tent.

I dragged Sneaker behind the cross. Her legs worked after a few steps. Her arms were useless. We almost made it past the tents and into the surrounding dark.

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"GETTER!" Mephisto's voice echoed off the Fire Cliffs. The Guards froze. Pragons and Demon Steeds muttered and growled. I stumbled. Sneaker fell.

"GET THEM!"

I hauled Sneaker to her feet and led her into the dark, right into the one Guard that was on the ball. He grabbed my arm. Sneaker wasn't stopping for anyone. She launched into a flying front kick that smashed his helmet and his face. I yanked out his sword and rammed it into his neck.

We ran.

Chapter Thirty-nine

The Fire Cliff flames lit our way. We angled left toward the bare safety of the rocks; then, with skill, bravery, intelligence, and an enormous amount of luck, we'd find Heyjoe's cave.

We had everything but luck. The Guards, now united and focused, streamed out of the camp, their voices one with the enthusiasm of pursuit. Mephisto led them, his huge golden sword slashing the air, eager for blood.

The rocks rose pale and inviting ahead. Sneaker stumbled. I grabbed her arm, ignored her involuntary cry of pain, dragged her after me. That was enough to erase the little advantage we had.

Mephisto snagged her other arm, ripped her from my grasp. He held her two feet off the ground.

"Watch her die, Getter. Just like you watched my daughter die."

He swung his sword out and up.

I couldn't hope to stop the big sword once it swung down to Sneaker's neck. But maybe ... ? I swung the Guard's sword over my head and sliced down, aiming for Mephisto's wrist. I hit his finger. Two inches of the tip flew off.

"Ahhh!" He didn't even drop the sword. Mephisto looked at the shortened finger. Then laughed. "You'll have to cut off more than that for her to keep her head." With a flick of his blade he sent my sword spinning. Two Guards held my arms.

Defiance, resignation, and sadness mixed on Sneaker's face. There was nothing I could do.

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McFetter pushed his way through the circle of Guards. He ripped open her coverall front, exposing her stomach and black sports bra. "One scream, Hell Cop, give me one scream." He touched her skin with a sharp ripping hook.

There was one thing I could do. I let the Guards hold my weight and reached out with a foot and kicked McFetter in the balls. Dead or not a kick in the nuts will slow a man down.

"Enough!" Mephisto ordered, kicking a doubled up McFetter out of the way. "Watch, Getter."

A great sadness filled me.

Mephisto raised his sword again.

A high pitched shriek froze everybody. "EEEEEEEEEEEE." A great rush of wind roiled up a dust cloud around us. Mephisto's sword fell to the ground, still gripped by his massive hand. Dark blood spurted from his severed wrist. His remaining hand dropped Sneaker. "AHHHHH!" he roared, more in anger than pain.

The high pitched battle cry of the Skyhooks drew all eyes upward. The Guards dropped me and drew their swords. Dust swirled as the giant birds dove, hovered long enough to raise an obscuring cloud, then climbed into the night.

Suddenly, from the dark, from the rocks, dead Hell Cops swarmed among the distracted Guards. Their swords ineffective against the body armor, they wrapped rope around the Guard's legs and yanked them off their feet. Once down, the Hell Cops could get at the vulnerable neck.

The deep howl of bloodthirsty Pragons joined the bellows of fighting Guards. I crawled to Sneaker. Together, we wove through the churning legs to clear space. A Pragon smashed

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to the ground and exploded close by. A headless Skyhook quickly followed. Mephisto's voice cut through the battle, "To me! Follow me!"

I half carried, half dragged Sneaker into the night. I still intended to circle back to the Cliffs and Heyjoe's cave. Two Guards stumbled out of the swirling dust cloud and spotted us. With a whooping battle yell, they ran an interception course toward us.

Now we had no choice but to get to the rocks and hide. Sneaker was game, but the loss of blood and water weakened her too much. We staggered on, with little hope.

Then hope dropped from above.

A Skyhook with a rider swooped out of the dark. Its hook pierced the back of the second Guard, lifting him off the dirt. With one deft move the Skyhook reached down with its long jaws and plucked the head off, then spit it out as he flew out of sight.

The other Guard kept coming. I swung Sneaker into my arms and ran. The Guard was twenty feet away, sword raised for a killing blow. Sneaker gripped my neck. She mumbled something about, "be together in Hell."

I thought that at least Brittany was safe and would get to Heaven.

A small, pale shape darted from the rocks. It thrust a knarly, three foot stick into the Guard's legs. He went down in his own little dust cloud. The sword clanged at my feet.

Brittany!

Grace!

Grace ran from the rocks, picked up the sword, and neatly severed his neck.

"Guards were not very nice to me," she said with satisfaction.

Brittany tugged at my arm. "Come on, Getter. They're waiting for you."

Grace, sword in hand, took my other arm, and they hustled us to the end of the rocks. Ixsess and a band of Taur's waited.

You alive. By the warmth in my head I assumed Ixsess was pleased.

"Thanks to you all," I said. "Can you fly us out of here? Sneaker needs help."

Dangerous to fly. Taur's take you.

"Wouldn't you be faster? Sneaker really needs ..."

Ixsess cut short my plea with a deafening cry and burst into the air. Two seconds later flames from a diving Pragon engulfed him. He came out the top of the flame. Fire dripped from his wings. His hook snagged the Pragon like a fish, jerking it backward. The Pragon wasn't done yet, though. Flaming, snapping, clawing it went after Ixsess. They tumbled upward through the air, blips of flame tracing their track.

"Come, Getter," Flipsit said. "We must go now."

The Taur's took over. They gave Sneaker some water and placed her gently on a burly Taur's back. Grace climbed up behind her. Brittany mounted a female Taur as if she'd been doing it forever.

I found my voice. "Brittany, you should be at the River. Why are you here?"

She looked at me like I was the dumbest demon in Hell. "To rescue you, of course. Come on. We have to go." A ten year old telling the stupido adult the obvious. I climbed up on Flipsit and held on.

We went.

As the camp and battle and Fire Cliffs receded, one image held my attention. The silhouette of Mephisto, sword raised in rage, watching me. I had the unpleasant feeling we would meet again and that there might be something to that damned prophecy business after all.

Skyhooks shadowed us, flying escort out of the Fire Cliff night into the perpetual Styx Plain day. I worried about Ixsess. Skyhooks seemed fragile compared to Pragons. But they were smarter.

The Taur's six legs gave them a smooth gait over the flat ground, and I think I dozed. Excited chatter among the Taurs woke me.

"What is it?" I asked Flipsit.

"The Steeds are after us," he said.

The knot in my stomach tightened. "Can you outrun them?"

"No," he said. "But know some tricks."

The group of twenty Taurs had spread out. It came together. They yelled back and forth in their own language then spread out again. They did not seem too concerned.

A Skyhook circled low over us then climbed away.

"What's happening?" I asked. I didn't like not knowing.

"Steeds are close," Flipsit said. "Time to run, now."

The Taur's stopped chattering and picked up the pace. Behind us a dust cloud quickly grew larger. I caught glimpses of black at the leading edge. The thunder of hooves roared in my head.

After a few minutes of all out running, small groups of Taur's split from the main band. The small groups joined with other groups coming from other directions forming a new band. Grace and Sneaker, Brittany, peeled off in other directions.

Trails of dust crisscrossed the Flats, confusing our pursuers. Some would follow a breakoff group, then lose it in a veil of dust kicked up by a band crossing their path. Some Taur's were caught. The riders decapitated them with their swords. Or the Steeds reached out with razor sharp teeth and seized the Taur by the neck. One quick snap and the Taur was finished.

Throughout the chaotic race across the Flats one Steed and Rider followed only Flipsit and me. Mephisto. No matter how or where we turned, or what veil of dust we ducked into, he stayed with us, closing fast. Close. Closer they came. I saw the smoke from the giant Steed's nostrils, the orange fire in its eyes.

I had no weapons except the little knife. That would be like fighting a Dinocat with a toothpick. My gun, staff, and pack were back at Mephisto's camp.

Closer, he came. A hundred feet. Fifty feet. Flipsit strained. Taur's could run all day, but not at full gallop with a rider. A shadow flew overhead. I looked up, expecting a Pragon to flame me. No Pragon. Gregory.

"You forgot something, my friend," he yelled.

His Skyhook dove over me. Gregory tossed something to me. My pack with the staff attached. Then a Pragon did attack. Gregory led it away.

Mephisto's Steed nipped at Flipsit's tail.

My gun was useless without ammo. I withdrew the staff and connected the halves, then shrugged on the pack. The next time the Steed nipped at Flipsit, I whacked it across the nose. It screamed and jerked its horned head back. It fell behind ten feet.

I chanced a glance after Gregory. I didn't see him. I saw something better. I shouted to Flipsit, "Go left. Do you see it?"

The Taur changed direction so fast I almost fell off. The Steed lost more ground during the quick change. Tenacious as ever, it kept coming.

"Can you go into it?" I asked Flipsit.

"Yes," was all he had energy to say.

I told him my plan, such as it was. Fatigued and winded as he was he swiveled his head a hundred eighty degrees and favored me with an are-you-crazy? look.

"What choice do we have?" I answered.

Small tornados inhabit the center of Tantalus Storms. They suck up dirt and mix it with water to form a special mud that forms a deep, narrow track behind the storms. If our timing was right, if Mephisto and his Steed cooperated, we had a chance to survive.

Flipsit plunged into the storm. Rain lashed us. Wind staggered the sturdy Taur.

Mephisto bore in after us.

Flipsit skirted the inside tornado. The suction tried to pluck me off his back. The Steed screamed in my ear. Its strength powered it through the ripping wind and piercing rain as if it did not exist.

Flipsit jumped right and suddenly we were out of the storm, Mephisto twenty feet behind.

"Now!" I shouted.

Flipsit stopped fast. Staff in hand, I leaped off his back and put myself in a ready stance dead in front of the Demon Steed. The Steed skidded to a stop and reared up. Voiced its surprise with a startled cry. I ran under the beast and planted one end of the staff on the muddy ground. The other end pointed at its massive chest.

At that moment, a few seconds before I might be dead, I smelled musty odor of wet horse and the thick redolence of fresh mud. I heard the brute's heartbeat. I saw the shine of its black hair and the different textures of mud and dirt. I had no desire to kill the magnificent creature. But I had more of a desire to survive. I held the staff steady as the Steed returned to earth.

The Steed screamed in pain. I hated what I'd done. Knew I had to. It reared up to get away. I held tight, yanked the staff out, rolled away. Smoke poured from the hole in its chest. It attempted to run. Mephisto struggled to hold on with his one hand. The Steed staggered, dropped to its knees. Blood poured from its mouth. I didn't want to watch, but I did. The Steed gained its feet. Shuddered. Flame vented, then flickered, from its nostrils and chest. Its rear legs gave way,

putting Mephisto off balance. I charged. Shouted to concentrate my energy. Struck his chest with the butt end of the staff. He tumbled backward into the narrow track of Quick Dry mud laid down by the Storm.

Movement activated the mud. It dried in seconds. Mephisto struggled valiantly. Was caught. The Quick Dry too much even for him.

“Damn you, Getter. I will take great pleasure in killing you and your friends. You will die.”

“Someday,” I said. “But not by your hand.”

The Great Demon Steed died. I felt no elation at my triumph. Only sadness. A horn off a Demon Steed's head was a rare artifact, and it would prove my story. Killing a Demon Steed was a rare feat. I left the beast intact, mounted Flipsit, and rode off toward the dunes.

The Nexus terminal is located two dunes away from the River. Because things in Hell tend to not be where they were the last time you looked, a Find is essential to avoid a hot thirsty death, provided a critter doesn't get you first.

There are plenty of nasty things in the dunes—sand fleas (cousins to Jumps Bugs,) sand worms, sand Spiders, sand holes, sand storms, water sand, and plain old sand and heat.

Flipsit needed no devices, markers, or maps. He took me through the high dunes without incident or injury, and we arrived at the only relatively good thing in the area—The Swizzel Styx Bar and Marina.

Chapter Forty

The Swizzel Styx Bar and Marina looked like an abandoned Seafood restaurant at the end of a long bad road along the Maine coast—clapboard, paint peeling, windows broken. The bar perched on a high, sharp cliff overlooking the River Styx. Stone steps, worn deep by millennia of souls climbing up to their eternal damnation, descended to a wooden dock that stuck out over the black water. No yachts or sailboats were tied up. Only one vessel used the dock—Charon's Ferry, bringing its cargo of damned souls. The souls in their chains trudged up the steps and passed in front of the Bar. Delicious aromas spilled into the air around them. Their first whiff of torment.

The original band of Tauris waited for us. Dimitri limped out the doorless entrance onto the Bar's open deck which hung over the cliffs.

"Damn, Getter, it's about time. Cappy is fading fast."

"Nice to see you too," I said. To Flipsit, I said, "Thank you for the Tauris' help, and for taking care of my friends. Will Mephisto cause you trouble because of me?"

All the Tauris knelt on their right front lizard knee.

Bowing, Flipsit intoned, "It is an honor to aid the Lifer of the prophecy. Mephisto's trouble will be nothing."

"Ah, okay," I said, not sure if there was a ritual something I should say. "I will not forget the assistance of the Tauris. Thank you."

"You will return and fight against Mephisto?"

Oh, man. I figured to return, but hopefully not to fight Mephisto or anybody. "I will return and do what I can to fulfill the Prophecy."

"The Taur will wait and fight with you." As one they bowed deeper, rose, and galloped off into the dunes.

Great, now I had a whole species of demon waiting for me to deliver them from evil.

Gregory's Skyhook landed. He slid off and gripped my arms in a I'm-glad-you're-okay gesture.

"Thanks for the rescue, again," I said, returning his grip.

"Tis the very least I can do for the Prophecy man."

I rolled my eyes and let it go. "Did you see McFetter?"

"Aye, I saw the bloody traitor. Lost him in the tumult."

By the hate in his eyes I figured to let that go, too.

"Where is Ixsess?" I asked.

"He'll be here," Gregory said, distracted by vengeful thoughts of McFetter.

The wood floor, tables, chairs, walls of the Swizzle Styx Bar were all shades of gray, from light, almost white, to an almost black. A single slab of a polished stone never seen in Life spanned the whole back wall. It had patterns of red, gray, and green that flowed and changed, but no matter how hard I've looked, I've never actually seen them change.

The Master of the House resided behind the bar. He looked like a pudgy, round-headed bald man. He was drying glasses at the far end when I entered. He smiled a welcome, then frowned as he took in my dirty, bloody, shabby state, as if the others weren't just as bad or worse.

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"Sit, Getter. Sit. What can I get you?" the Master of the House asked in a high, breathy voice as his unending serpent body coiled around itself behind the bar. There are no bottles behind the bar, but he always has just what you want.

Cappy lay on the right end of the bar. His usually shiny black skin was dull gray and tight against his bones. He was dying and we all knew it. Sneaker ignored her own injuries and sat on a stool beside him. She held his big hand pressed to her lips. He woke.

His voice was a bare whisper. "Sneaker." He attempted a smile. "I hoped I'd see you again, before ..."

A tear left a track on her dirty cheek. "Cappy, for all you've done for me, at least I can buy you a drink."

"Boilermakers," Cappy said. "Remember that time ..."

"I remember." She took a glass of water from the Master of the House and held it to his lips. "I'd had a bad trip and needed ..."

I moved down the bar so Sneaker and Cappy could reminisce. If he died in Hell, his soul stayed there forever. If he got through Heaven Gate he went to Heaven where he belonged. He was fading fast, and our limited first aid skills were meaningless. Charon's Ferry provided the only way across the river.

"When will Charon come?" I asked.

The Master of the House handed me a cold beer. The rustle of his massive serpent body was like the rush of wind through trees. "Soon," he said.

"Soon enough for Cappy?" That first swallow of beer was the best ever. It always is.

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He watched Cappy with concern. "Maybe not. His soul will always be welcome here. You had a bad visit this time."

"That's for sure. And it's not over yet."

Where was that damned Ferry?

Gregory, Dimitri, Grace, and Brittany sat quietly in a booth. Dimitri divided his attention between Grace and the river. Once the souls were unloaded we would have only a short time to board. And a short trip to Heaven Gate where he and Grace would separate. The Ferry couldn't come soon enough for me. Dimitri was in no hurry.

At a sign from the Master of the House a gargoyle perched over the door flew down to the bar. With a tray of drinks on its back, it leaped over to the table. Brittany stared with unabashed fascination at the creature.

The end of a job was usually a happy time. Often, other Hell Cops and their souls waited for the Ferry. They chilled out with exaggerated war stories, a few laughs, or a cold beer or two. Charon came when he came.

With Cappy near death, and Grace and Dimitri's separation imminent, nobody felt like laughing. I had to keep moving or fall asleep where I stood. I grabbed a handful of steamed zook nuts (demons love the baked ones, but they'll kill a Lifer) and wandered out onto the deck.

A wood rail runs along the front edge of the deck that overhangs the hundred and something foot drop to the water. The railing has been there for centuries, but I still don't trust it. I keep at least three feet away at all times. Twenty feet below the deck is the ledge the new souls climb from the Ferry, to the Nexus, to their assigned torment.

I scanned the mist for the Ferry. Nothing. I spent five minutes thinking miscellaneous thoughts. I sipped my beer and noticed that my hand shook. Then my insides tightened up. Sweat beaded my forehead. My head jerked around, up and down, attempting to see in all directions at once. I froze, hardened my thoughts against panic. I was close enough to the end of the trip to feel safe. The Swizzle Styx Bar, Charon's Ferry, the quarter-mile distance to Heaven's Gate were neutral territory. I was safe from attack. But that damn prophecy had got out and Mephisto believed it. That made me a threat, and Mephisto did not strike me as one to respect boundaries or traditions if they got in his way. I felt safe and vulnerable. For a few minutes my mind didn't know which to believe.

"Getter? Are you okay?"

Brittany looked up at me, concern wrinkling her pale brow. Brittany was still in Hell. She was vulnerable, therefore fear was in order. I could handle that.

"Sure. I'm fine. How's Cappy?"

"Not very good. Dimitri says we have to get him to Heaven's Gate ASAP. Will the Angels make him better?"

"Yeah, they'll fix him up," I said.

I knelt down and we hugged and I knew I'd miss her. Where was that damn Ferry?

"Ferry's coming," Grace said from the railing.

Charon's Ferry had cleared the dark mist that obscured the far shore. It steamed toward the dock, trailing black smoke. A sinner from the EPA would have a fit. The Ferry looked like a small tramp freighter only fitted with a wood mast and boom

carrying dingy sails, and it was made of wood with gaps between the planks. Arms stuck through the gaps. Frightened eyes of the souls peered out. Three decks of superstructure rose aft. Charon himself manned the helm on a platform around the upper deck. Tall, dark, and hooded he may be a disgraced relative of a Wizard, doomed to deliver souls for eternity.

"Better get Cappy ready," I told Grace. "Once the souls are off, we only have a few minutes to get on board."

Grace led Brittany back inside the bar. I hesitated a moment, watching the Ferry, willing it to hurry.

A shadow passed over. I glanced up. A rush of air staggered me. A huge Pragon settled on one end of the deck. Mephisto dismounted. Sword in his remaining hand, hard-edged face distorted with hate, he strode to me. Crumbs of dried mud fell off him.

I had no weapons. My staff was inside. I'd returned the little knife to Gregory. I stood firm. He would not have the pleasure of seeing me squirm.

"So, Getter, are you just lucky, or is the prophecy true?" He laid the sword blade on my shoulder. The damn thing weighed a ton.

"I'd prefer I was just lucky," I said. I meant it. That prophecy had caused me nothing but trouble.

"Maybe so. But if it is true, it would be better if you were dead and the parts of your body were buried at the far edges of hell."

"You should think of the consequences of your actions. Maybe that's what the prophecy is about?" I hoped not.

"No. The prophecy means that as long as you are alive you will cause trouble for me. So I will kill you and bury your parts and be done with you."

He raised the sword and stepped back. He must have thought I'd stand there and let him cut my head off.

"Getter!"

Sneaker threw my staff to me. I grabbed it and did a few fancy moves, more for my own benefit than any expectation of intimidating Mephisto. He didn't even let me finish before striking.

I deflected the blade up over my head. Then I lunged and struck his ankle with all my strength. His foot moved about an inch, and my hands tingled. His body was basically heavy armor. Hellshot bullets would barely dent it. My staff would barely scratch it. All I could do was defend myself and keep him located so if somebody bigger than me came to my rescue, Mephisto would be in the proper position.

I could not stop his sword, only deflect it. He tried to force me to the deck's edge. I tried to keep him in the middle. He was fast and determined. He scored on me several times, blood from a deep cut ran down my left leg. My strikes were ineffectual, my energy fading fast.

"This is neutral ground." I danced away from a fast jab.

"Not for me," Mephisto said, grinning.

I had the sinking feeling that he was playing with me, could slice me into pieces any second he chose. My guts, and morale, sank farther when I noticed that the Ferry had docked and the souls were disembarking. If we missed that Ferry, Cappy would die in Hell for sure, along with me. I

couldn't keep fighting much longer. My legs cramped, my arms felt like rubber, and sweat burned my eyes. The others were not safe either.

They had Cappy on a crude stretcher by the door. They'd attempted to sneak off the deck behind Mephisto's back. He forced them back inside. They had no weapons left either.

I'd expected some help by then. But neutral ground meant neutral ground and not everybody was as willing to break tradition as Mephisto, irregardless of death and dismemberment right in front of them. On the other hand, some beings were more sensitive than others.

"Where are all your Guards?" I asked, trying not to wheeze.

Contempt tinged his reply. "The cowards would not come here."

He was playing with me then, and we both knew it.

"You mean they were more scared of the Master of the House than of you."

"Ha!"

Suddenly, the flat of his blade swept my feet out from under me. I landed hard on my back. The tip of his sword pressed into my heaving chest. We were dead center on the deck.

"I am to be feared more than the Master of the House. I do what I want where I want. There is no neutral ground anymore, least of all here."

"There must be a reason why this has always been neutral."

"Silly stories. The Master of the House deserves no fear."

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"Yes he does," I said.

Chapter Forty-one

Behind Mephisto, the Master of the House shot out the door and rose up into striking position. A HISSSSS loud enough to hurt my ears issued from his mouth as it elongated and protruded, bigger and bigger into fang-filled jaws. At last, the cavalry.

Mephisto turned, stumbled back, stared up at the huge red maw, black teeth, and yellow eyes. His jaw dropped open, whether from fear or anger at being interrupted, I could not tell.

The transformed head struck. Mephisto jumped. I crawled to the rail. Another strike. The sword flashed out, bounced off coarse scales.

“HISSSSS!”

A thick, pink, forked tongue darted out. The twin tips wrapped around Mephisto's leg. Yanked. He dropped. Rolled. Sliced through the tongue. “HISSSSS!” Free, Mephisto jumped to his feet. Trailing green blood, the tongue recoiled. Then shot out, whacked the big demon on the chest, knocking him back. Sword slice. Recoil. Whack. Slice. Recoil. Whack. Each hit forced Mephisto toward the rail.

Eat him, I wanted to yell. Just eat him. The souls on the path stared with horror at the two fighting demons. Several slipped off the path and fell into the water. Something ate them. Welcome to Hell.

Sneaker led the others through the narrow gap in the door left by the Master of the House's immense body. With no time

to be gentle they dragged Cappy through. They dashed to the deck's end and waited for the last of the souls to climb the steep steps.

Chunks of tongue in splotches of green blood left a trail across the deck. As Mephisto backed to the rail, I stuck my staff between his ankles. Whack! Mephisto toppled over the rail.

His Pragon squawked and dove after him.

"Getter. Come on. We have to go," Sneaker yelled.

I struggled to my feet. The great snake head, yellow eyes ablaze, hovered in front of my face.

"Thank you, Master of the House," I said.

"Hissss," he said and withdrew his massive body back into the bar.

A small hand tugged at mine. "Come on, Getter," Brittany insisted. "The last soul has left the boat."

I glanced over the rail. The last soul was almost at the top of the steps. Two minutes until too late.

Sneaker had Cappy on a makeshift stretcher, her in front, Dimitri in back. They started down. Dimitri slipped.

"Let me take it," I said. "You go first. Take Grace and Brittany. You and Gregory make sure they get onboard. Go. Go."

Brittany went first. Dimitri leaned on Grace as he limped quickly down the worn steps.

I reached for the stretcher.

"I cannot go farther," Gregory said.

I faced him, the little Scot looked small and alone.

"Greg, come with us anyway. We can try."

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"No. I will not be permitted down the steps. I can feel the barrier. But you must go, quickly. We will meet again, of that I am sure."

I hesitated. I owed him. I had things to say.

"I know, Getter," he said.

I saw that he did know. I'd have to be satisfied with that.

The big slash on my thigh screamed pain that fuzzed my vision when I hefted the stretcher. "Stay with the Master of the House until it's safe," I called back to him.

"And when is it ever safe in Hell, Getter my friend?" he called back.

Cappy slipped on the stretcher. Sneaker stumbled, yanked me forward. I had to kick my feet out and sit down hard to keep us all from tumbling into the water and being eaten.

Silently, Sneaker picked up her end. My hands slipped when I grabbed. They were covered with blood. I wiped them on the stone, and we continued.

Brittany, Grace, and Dimitri were on the Ferry! Relief surged through me. Gave me strength. Limping, slipping, sliding, we reached the dock.

"Run!" the three of them yelled.

The Ferry moved.

Sneaker looked back at me, fear, uncertainty, despair, in her eyes.

"Can you make it?" I asked.

"I'll make it, damn it," she said, as if I'd challenged her. Which I had.

We ran. We came even with the rail. A foot of water separated us from the boat. Sneaker stepped over. Dimitri

and Grace grabbed the stretcher, dragged it over the rail. Sneaker collapsed on deck.

Brittany screamed.

Something slammed my back. I fell. Rolled over the edge of the dock. Grasped the edge. My legs hung in the water to my knees.

Above, Mephisto on his Pragon circled for another pass at me. Below, something big and solid brushed my legs. I tried to pull myself onto the dock. I couldn't. I was done. I had no strength left.

The others urged me on from the deck.

"Get Brittany to Heaven," I think I called back.

"Getter, please." Brittany. She'd be safe. That's what mattered. That was my job. What I did. And I always got my soul, except for one, and everybody agreed that wasn't my fault. Not a bad record. I could die with that.

So tired, but I could hold on a little longer. Then drop into the water and drown, or be eaten. Not give Mephisto the satisfaction of killing me. A long rest then through a lengthy limbo until reconstituted in the River of Souls. "Getter! Getter! Come on."

I looked up. Grace tugged at my arm.

"Hurry!"

Then I heard the others yelling at me, Sneaker, Brittany, Dimitri. At the top of the steps, Gregory.

Grace again, pleading, "Come on, damn it. What's the matter with you?" Her eyes begged me to do something. Suddenly, her eyes grew wide. "Pull your legs up! Pull your legs up!" She jabbed at the water with my staff.

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The water stirred around my legs. Fear tingled in my brain. Fear of the unseen malevolence in the dark water. Fear gave me energy, and hope. I raised my legs.

Seconds passed. Adrenaline pumped. Energy, hope.

"Now, Getter, step up. Push up. Now. Now."

I pushed down with my legs. Contacted something substantial, moving. Fear drove me. I pushed. Grace pulled. I rolled onto the dock.

Yeah. Driven by controlled fear. Back to normal.

The Ferry backed along the dock, the gap now three feet. I jumped up, grabbed Grace's arm. "Go!" I yelled. "Go!"

We raced down the dock, Grace slightly ahead of me. Movement on my right. Mephisto on his Pragon, diving. Talons extended. No time to warn Grace. I lunged. A game saving tackle. A claw caught at a strap of my backpack. Sliced though. Pragon and rider passed over.

"AHHHHH." Mephisto. Frustrated. A four foot gap. Growing.

We ran side by side. My backpack slid off. I heaved it over my head onto the deck.

Five feet.

"JUUUUMP!" we all screamed at once.

We jumped.

Chapter Forty-two

My knees just cleared the rail. My shins didn't. I tumbled hard onto the deck. Sneaker and Brittany knelt beside me, all smiles. Beautiful. I closed my eyes and breathed deep. Safe.

I started. Grace? I struggled to sit up. Dimitri leaned over the rail. Head bowed, unmoving. The dock fifty feet away. Empty. "Oh, Grace."

Dimitri straightened. Turned. In his arms, Grace clung to his emaciated body. They laughed and cried together. Their time of separation not quite yet.

"Are you all right?" Sneaker asked, when I slumped back onto the deck.

"I'm as all right as you are," I said. "You're a mess."

Her smile and the touch of her hand on my cheek almost made it all okay. "Maybe Charon will let me use the Ladies to freshen up?"

At the mention of Charon's name we looked to the upper deck. Charon stood huge and impassive behind the spoked wheel. The Ferry had cleared the dock. Wind came from nowhere and filled the sails. Charon turned the wheel, and the Ferry came about and glided toward the mist.

I peered deep into the dark reaches of Charon's hood. I found no clue to his identity. I felt him inspect me in turn, possibly attempting to judge whether I was worthy of being important to the future of Hell. An uncomfortable feeling.

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I welcomed a screech from above us. Mephisto and Pragon finding that Charon's Ferry was more than neutral ground—it was inviolate. Even to the head of Helland Security.

The vessel sailed into the mist where time and space was nonexistent. We were neither hot nor cold, felt no breeze, smelled no smell, heard no sound but the creak of the rigging and our own muffled mutterings. We rested and tended our wounds. Cappy remained unconscious, his breathing shallow. He seemed stable. I began to think maybe we might get him through Heaven Gate in time.

Sneaker and I sat on deck, leaning against the mast away from the others. Sneaker said, "Charon's power, whatever it is, and the mist keep us safe, now. But from the Landing to the Gate, we're vulnerable."

I didn't want to think about it. "Think Mephisto will try something? I've never seen any guards or demons there."

"Except for the Neversitstil."

"Well, yeah. That's why there's nobody there."

"Mephisto is Chief of Security, he hates you, he's scared of what you might do, and he's pissed. He'll try."

"I know he will." I attempted, with little success, to relax my body. "We have no choice. Cappy has to get to the Gate, and in any case we can't stay onboard forever. Once we make it to the Passthru we should be okay."

"There's a lot of open space before that. Plenty of room for that Pragon to maneuver. None of us are much in shape for a fight, either."

"You have a better plan than hit the beach and go?"

"No," she said with a resigned sigh.

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After a minute, I said, "We should get the others ready." I didn't move.

She held my hand in her lap. "Wait. We have time. Sit with me. Pretend we're on a romantic cruise."

"I don't have to pretend as long as I'm with you."

"Bullshitter." She kissed my hand, and we were quiet for awhile.

* * * *

All of our ragged group were pumped and ready as the Ferry glided to a stop at the dock on the Heaven side of the River Styx. The dock extended from a beach. About a hundred yards across the beach sheer cliffs rose hundreds of feet to vanish into perpetual cloud. The cliffs enclosed the beach in a two hundred yard long, unescapable, semi-circle of sand. A narrow crack split the cliffs full height, the Passthru. Through that, down a short, easy slope, was Heaven Gate and safety.

The first of a new collection of newly damned souls emerged from the five foot wide Passthru.

"Remember," I reminded Grace and Brittany for the tenth time. "Keep moving, especially in the Passthru. If the Neversitstil gets you, Sneaker and I will be too old to retrieve you when the River of Souls spits you out."

"We know, Getter," Grace said. She took Brittany's hand and bounced on the balls of her feet as she waited.

I waited at the front of Cappy's stretcher, searching the "sky." Dimitri stood beside me.

"Can you take Cappy if you have to?" I asked him. "I have a bad feeling about this."

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Dimitri watched the souls. "Like you, Cappy has saved my ass a few times."

That was all the answer I needed.

The Ferry stopped. The gate in the rail opened.

I took a quick survey of the area above. Nothing. Just in case I took something from the Ferry for protection.

"Let's go. Don't stop. Three Angels beer for everybody on the other side of the Gate." Sneaker and I picked up the stretcher. "Come on, Cappy. We'll take you home."

Dimitri led. Grace and Brittany followed. Brittany looked back at me, her thank you and love in her eyes. My vision blurred for a moment and it had nothing to do with the heat and sand. I never wanted a trip to be over more than that one.

We hit the beach at a steady walk, giving the line of pale, bewildered souls a wide berth. Some ignored us in their misery. Others implored us for help or sympathy, insisting they didn't belong there. Up ahead, a soul stopped as he emerged onto the beach. A bird like claw reached out from a hole in the rock and dragged him screaming into the stone. Lunch for the Neversitstil. The others around him hurried on.

Our group made it to within a hundred feet of the Passthru when Sneaker yelled, "Getter, three o'clock high."

Mephisto's Pragon dove out of the cloud cover.

"Dimitri, take Cappy," I said.

Dimitri circled and without stopping (the Neversitstil sometimes burrowed into the sand) took the stretcher. He put all he had left into it. His legs shook and threatened to buckle.

Grace and Brittany took one side for him, and they managed to keep moving.

I retrieved my staff and a shield I'd ripped off the Ferry from the stretcher. "Go. Go," I urged them.

The Pragon swooped in low. Flame blasted from its jaws. Souls scattered in terror. The beast's wings flared. I rushed to meet it. It hovered in front of me, flame hissing. I held up the shield. Fire engulfed me. I rushed in. The shield glowed red, burned me. I grasped the end of my staff and swung it with all my strength at its claw.

The screech of pain cut off the jet of fire. The Pragon lurched into the air. I threw down the shield. The back of my hand was bright red, what was left of my flame proof coverall arm smoldered.

"Yeah, Getter!" Brittany yelled as they entered the Passthru.

I had no time for pain. I ran toward the Passthru. Mephisto and his Pragon rose high, into the cloud. In seconds the Pragon reappeared without Mephisto. It circled fast and came for me.

I reached the entrance first. Visualizing the flying demon's movements, I went in, made a quick u-turn, and ran back to the entrance. Just as I arrived, the Pragon stuck its head in, its jaws wide to flame me for good. I rammed my staff down its throat. That blocked the flame from its usual exit.

The blast from the explosion blew me back ten feet. I rolled as I landed, snatched up the staff, and stumbled down the Passthru.

The Neversitstil cleaned up the few remaining souls still frozen in terror.

I saw the others clear the end of the Passthru. Almost there, I thought. Almost safe.

Not quite.

A dark shape descended on a rope dropped from the dark upper reaches of the Passthru. No mystery who it was. Mephisto. Damn, that son-of-a-bitch just wouldn't give up. He blocked the way. A Neversitstil claw grabbed him. He flicked his sword. The claw flew off.

I made a u-turn and ran back to the beach. Maybe Charon had room for one more.

"Don't stop, Getter." Mephisto's voice boomed through the narrow pass. "I want to kill you myself."

I glanced back. Mephisto followed me, but not fast. I wondered why not. I found out when I ran onto the beach. A hundred Guards formed a large circle around the Passthru entrance. I ran to the middle and stopped. There was nowhere to go, and I didn't have much fight left in me. At least the others were safe. I idly twirled my staff. Maybe I could scratch his armor before he cut my head off. I'd been lucky so far. I didn't think I had much luck left in me.

Mephisto strode into the circle. "I have a new prophecy for you, Getter. You die, now. I take over Hell from that tired old man and put a stop to all Hell Cops. When souls come here, they'll stay and suffer."

"Taking over Hell may not be as easy as you think," I said. Big talk. "Satan knows about your plans and has plans of his own." Wishful thinking.

"Ha. He knows nothing. I control everything he sees or hears. He's too comfortable up in that Golden Palace. He's lazy and indifferent and doesn't want to know anything."

"That's what you think," I said.

He waved away my lame comment and came toward me. "Let us finish this," he said. "I have work to do."

He came at me, and he wasn't playing around this time. His strides were twice mine. Running was useless. So I attacked.

I managed to duck under a sword thrust. I jammed my staff between his legs and used it as a lever to knock him off balance. All I got for the effort was a kick in the ass and a face full of sand. I rolled over, and just had time to block his strike with my staff. The sword cut it in two.

Mephisto raised his sword for the final blow. I crossed the two halves of the cut staff, hoping to deflect the blade. At least the others are safe, I thought. I did my job.

You will be safe, too, Getter, I heard inside my head.

"What?" I tore my gaze away from the sword in time to see a dark shape flash over us. Ixsess's hook sliced Mephisto's remaining hand clean off. Oh, man, *deja vu*. The sword, with hand still attached, fell toward me, point down. I scuttled backwards. The point drove into the sand two inches from my crotch.

Ixsess swooped up over the line of startled Guards. Twenty feet in the air, at full speed, he spun on a wing tip and raced back toward me.

Jump! he shouted in my head.

I jumped to my feet. Ran in the same direction. Held the two staff pieces over my head. The hook caught the makeshift handle. Yanked me off the ground in time to kick a Guard in the head.

"GETTER!" Mephisto, frustrated again.

"Ixsess, how....?"

No time. Sneaker will help you now.

"Sneaker? She's ..."

No, she wasn't at the Gate with others, waiting like she was supposed to be. She clung to the cliffs high up at the edge of the Passthu. She balanced on a small ledge, one hand wedged in a crack, the other holding the rope Mephisto had used to rappel down from nowhere.

I had no time to think how much I didn't like being up high with no safety rail. I slid the broken staff to one side and grabbed the back of the hook with one hand, then slid the pieces into my tattered coverall. It was my favorite staff, damn it. Then I noticed a small leather bag hanging from a claw. *Take it*, Ixsess said.

Ixsess sailed high, made a tight turn, glided to Sneaker. She reached out. I reached out. We grabbed wrists. I let go of Ixsess. Sneaker let go of the rock. We swung down on the rope.

Fly, Getter. Fly. I swear I felt Ixsess chuckle.

"AHHHHHH!" We bumped, scraped, and twisted on our descent. Too soon, not soon enough, the ground came at me, fast.

"Run, now!" Sneaker yelled.

I hit the ground running. Sneaker swung past and hit ten feet ahead.

"GETTER." Missing two hands hadn't slowed Mephisto any.

We exited the Passthru. A hundred feet of smooth slope to Heaven Gate.

"Get your Find," Sneaker said. "You're the only one who has one."

Oh, man, I hadn't thought of that. I fished it out and pressed buttons. "Good thing I didn't get killed."

Sneaker didn't think that was funny.

The others waited by the Gate. Cappy's stretcher rested on the ground. The Gate's not much really, a thick, round topped, rather plain, seven foot door set in a blank rock face like a Nexus entrance.

"Hurry up, man," Dimitri urged. "He's coming."

I pressed the Find to an indentation in the door. "Come on. Come on." Ordinarily, it might take thirty seconds or more for the door to open. We didn't have that much time.

Mephisto exited the Passthru.

"Please," I said just between me and the door.

Somebody had been watching. The Gate opened.

"Go in," I said.

Grace pushed Brittany through. She looked back. "Dimitri."

Sneaker grabbed the front of Cappy's stretcher. "Move," she ordered, pushing Grace through the door, dragging Cappy.

"What in Hell are you doing?" I called after Dimitri. He moved toward Mephisto, fists and jaws clenched with determination. No time for an answer. I grabbed his shirt,

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dragged him to the Gate, and threw him in. I stepped through, flipped my middle finger, and slammed the door in Mephisto's face.

Chapter Forty-three

Nobody paid any attention to me. They all gathered around Cappy. He lay on one of two raised platforms. The “room” was about twenty by twenty, though it was hard to tell as the walls were similar to the Nexus, there but not there. Undefined doorways opened and closed as necessary.

One of the Purgatory Attendants brought water. Sneaker held Cappy's head as he sipped. No one spoke.

Mephisto continued to beat on the door and curse me.

The attendants wore beige or tan. They were all ages, sizes, and colors. They radiated no-nonsense helpfulness and sympathy.

Cappy seemed to be conscious. Sneaker and Dimitri leaned in close.

The noise from the door grew louder. BOOM. BOOM. It glowed with intense heat.

A high-level Attendant, no special insignia, you just knew by the way he carried himself, came through one of the invisible doors. He radiated annoyance, as well as a serene toughness and confidence that he could handle any annoyance. He stepped up to the Gate door. Placed one hand on it. His hand sizzled and steamed against the heat. He made no move to withdraw. He bowed his head, raised the other hand, palm up.

Suddenly there was a Presence in the room. All went quiet. My heart raced for no reason. I saw nothing, only sensed an

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overwhelming force in the room. It did not frighten me. It awed me. The Attendant vibrated as if under great tension.

The noise from the other side stopped.

The Attendant slowly relaxed. He wore a small satisfied smile. He looked at me as if saying, "There, that's better."

A moan from Cappy broke the serene quiet. I stood by, watching the life drain from him. I looked to the man who silenced Mephisto, back to Cappy, back to the man.

His smile faded. He shook his head.

I laid a hand on the big Hell Cop's shoulder. His eyes fluttered.

"You're not in Hell anymore, Cappy," I said. "You're safe. You can let go now."

And with a gentle sigh, he did.

The Attendants gave us a few minutes, then gently drew us away. I held Sneaker for a few minutes, then let the Attendants do their job. Standard operating procedure was to "debrief" souls (where in Hell were you? what did you do? what was done to you?) and Hell Cops (how did you find the soul? how did you get them to the Gate? what else did you do? and in our case what was done to you?) It took a long time, and I skipped over some parts. They were especially interested when I told them about Mephisto's plan to take over Hell. They called the high-level Attendant back. I had skipped the prophecy business before, but in five minutes he had me telling him all about it. He didn't look any happier about it than I was.

Finally, they said I could go home.

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I had to mention one thing. "You could have saved Cappy. He was good man."

For the first time I noticed a deep sadness in his eyes. I wondered what he had experienced to prepare him to wield such power as he'd used on the door and still have such sadness in him. "It was his time, Getter. There was nothing I could do."

Sounded like a cop out. "Who says it was his time?"

He just looked at me with an expression that said the answer to that was obvious.

I couldn't let it go. "He retrieved a lot of souls. Did a lot of good things. Helped people. Now he can't do more."

"Perhaps he will do those things where he is going?"

I saw I'd have to be satisfied with that.

"But there is something I can heal," he said. "Hold up your staff."

I'd held the familiar, but broken, pieces of wood during the interview. Something for my hands to do. I stood up and held the pieces out, broken ends together. He gripped the break, closed his eyes. My hands tingled. When he let go, the staff was whole. Four dark rings circled the area. Writing of some kind. The guy nodded, turned and left, leaving me impressed, if bewildered. Had I experienced the power of God, or just a magic trick? If God was involved why had He spent some of His power on my staff and not on Cappy? I figured I'd ask Him if I ever saw Him.

The others waited in a corner. Grace and Dimitri clung to each other, their separation upon them. I knelt down and

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Brittany came into my arms. We had grown close. I felt I was losing a daughter. I didn't hold back the tears.

"You'll be happy in Heaven," I told her.

"But I'll miss you and Sneaker," she said, snuffling against my neck.

"We'll miss you, too," was all I could say without starting some serious bawling. The big, bad, impassive Hell Cop.

An Attendant approached. It was time.

While Brittany and Sneaker hugged a last time, Grace slipped her arms around me.

"Thank you," she said. "We'll save a special place for you in Heaven."

"You'll have to wait a long time for me, I hope."

"We'll wait forever." She kissed me and whispered, "Take care of Dimitri. He's not taking this well."

"I will. Watch over Brittany if they'll let you."

"I will."

The Attendant swept her arm toward an opening. Cappy's soul waited, smiling, cap set at a jaunty angle, ready for the next adventure. Grace took Brittany's hand, and they joined Cappy. A last look back, a thumbs up from him, and they were gone.

Dimitri collapsed onto a bench, head in his hands.

"I have to go, too," Sneaker said. "But without my Find, I don't know if I can."

"Oh, I forgot." I reached into a deep inside pocket and retrieved the bag from Ixsess's claw. "A present from Gregory and Ixsess."

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The relief on her face almost wiped away the fatigue and sadness of the last days. She was beautiful, no matter what.

"I'm going. I need a bath and a drink. And Cappy had some family. I'm not looking forward to that."

I caressed her dust smudged cheek. "He was a good man. Focus on the good he did. You'll be fine."

She indicated Dimitri with her eyes, "What about him? He lost his Find, too."

"I don't think he'll be needing it again."

I'd seen it before, when Hell Cops lose their edge. Not because of love, like Dimitri, but when they lose the ability to sustain an acceptance of the constant danger. Like me in the Penthouse. I recovered, some don't. Or when they lose their nerve after one too many close calls. Or when they witness a particular torment that hits close to home. The ones that can hold it together long enough to get home, never return to Hell and shouldn't.

"No, I guess not," Sneaker agreed. "He won't risk dying in Hell and never seeing Grace again. For that matter he may not care about living at all. He needs watching."

She said a few encouraging words to Dimitri, said, "Call me," to me, and she too, was gone.

I shrugged on my backpack, picked up my rejuvenated staff, and led Dimitri out of the room.

Chapter Forty-four

We walked through hazy corridors. Occasionally, we passed other Attendants. They all stared at me. I know they talked about me behind my back. That damn Prophecy thing. They probably wondered if I'd put them out of a job.

We came to a small wood door, the nearest exit from Purgatory to the cave that led home. I wanted to go out right away. Too long in safety can be debilitating.

Dimitri stopped short. "I can't," he said.

I dragged him to the door. "Don't say that. Don't think that. You can and you will. We'll make it home, I promise."

I lifted the heavy bar, pushed the door open, and pushed him out. The bar fell in place once we were through.

We walked on.

Out of a short, hidden cave we climbed up a rocky slope to a bare plateau. There were dangers there, and without my gun I had some concerns, but I wasn't stopping until I parked my truck in my driveway. We pushed on, skirting known dangers and alert for new ones. Neither of us said a word.

With the ever shifting geography of Hell, sometimes the plateau led right to the base of the mountain with my entrance/exit in it. Sometimes the Spire Forest moved in the way. I wanted my mountain. I got the Spire Forest.

I checked my Find and walked on. Jittery, Dimitri followed.

A ways into the confusing maze of red/orange mud spires we saw several Sticky Lips noisily slurping up Spire Mites

through a three foot hole in the base of a spire. We stopped to observe.

"That's not right." The first words Dimitri had uttered in an hour.

I'd never seen a hole like that. The spire bases are two or three feet thick. Much easier to climb up or even dig down to the connecting tunnels.

"I wonder what caused it?" I said.

"Getter, I know you want to check it out, but we ... I need to get out of here, man or I'm going to freak."

"Okay. We'll just go around this spire and look as we go by. It'll be fine."

It was fine, but not for us. As we rounded the spire the ground gave way and dumped us into an eight foot deep Spire Mite tunnel. That was bad enough. Then a familiar voice said, "Well, Getter, make any new enemies lately?"

Captain Boam.

I dusted myself off. Looked up at him. He aimed a flameweb at us. "Well, Captain Boam, flown on any Pragons lately?"

"Mephisto will give me my own when I deliver you to him. I've got you this time. I knew you couldn't resist that hole I blasted. You walked right into my trap."

From down the tunnel I heard the chittering of mites rushing to the new breach. And he stood right on top of the tunnel.

Dimitri stood frozen behind me. He muttered over and over, "We have to go, we have to go."

Over my shoulder I told him, "Get ready to run."

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Captain Boam dropped a rope to us. "Better hurry up. The mites are hungry." He laughed.

The mites were close enough. I jammed my staff into the dirt under the laughing demon. To my surprise it went through on the first try. Did it have a power of its own, or did my desire to get home give me extra power? I levered it up. The dirt gave way, and Captain Boam came down on his ass.

"Run," I said and pushed Dimitri through the tunnel away from the swarming mites.

Fifty feet along light showed through an opening above us. I placed my feet on either side of the tunnel and climbed up. The Sticky Lips, lapping up a few stray mites were surprised to see me. I jabbed at them with the staff. They backed off. I hauled myself through the hole. Dimitri scrambled after me.

The Sticky Lips didn't like being disturbed. They were thirsty. I had no time to mess around. I jumped at them and with three quick flicks, sent them flying into the trap with Captain Boam. A hell of a racket came from the hole as Captain Boam, the Sticky Lips, and the Mites mixed it up.

Dimitri and I ran. I had to carry him the last bit to the tunnel. As we reached the entrance I heard that old familiar cry, "GETTER, I'll get you!" Captain Boam had survived again. That pleased me. His bumbling helped me to not take Hell so seriously. I had a feeling that ability might come in handy in the future.

Epilogue

Sneaker and I lay in bed watching TV. We were in a cabin on the coast of Maine. It was a drizzly October night, and we hadn't ventured far, a short walk on the beach, the rest of the day reading and dozing.

Four weeks had passed since our return from Hell. Sneaker had decompressed in her usual way, then got stopped for drunk driving. The officer tried to cop a feel, and she put him on the ground so fast the video tape showed only a blur. Case dismissed. "I was pissed that Cappy died," she said. "I just needed to take somebody down, and that cop was it."

Cappy had a father, and a sister and brother both with three kids. They adored Uncle Cappy. Only the father had the faintest idea what Cappy did. It was a hard day for Sneaker.

Dimitri didn't talk for five days after we returned home. He lay in bed mostly, crying quietly, staring at the wall, sleeping. His sister, Christine, insisted on caring for him. At first she'd been so excited to have him back. She'd been waiting at my truck when we arrived, not able to muster up the mindset to go through. She had her own Find. I took it from her. Said I'd keep it until she needed it. We both knew she never would.

She couldn't understand why Dimitri wouldn't talk to her. I explained. By some twisted logic of her own she blamed me. We didn't talk for two days. That was all right with me.

I met with Brittany's parents. The mother had had a dream that satisfied her Brittany was indeed in Heaven where she belonged.

"Did you get to talk with her?" the mother asked. "I don't know how it works, but did she say anything?" She was clearly relieved to hear of her daughter's safety; equally clear, she carried a lot of guilt over her death.

"Yes, we were together quite awhile," I told her. "Brittany does not blame you in any way for the accident. She loves you very much. She is safe and looked after and wants you to be happy."

"Oh, thank God," she said, tears streaming. "And thank you. I was so worried. She was usually such a quiet girl, when she began to act out in the car, I didn't know why."

"Brittany told me what happened," I said, aiming my words at the father. "She told me everything."

Through her relief the mother caught the chill in my words and my look of contempt at her husband.

"What do you mean by everything?" she asked.

The father knew what I meant.

He stood up. "Thank you for your services," he said. "We'd like to be alone now."

The mother loved her daughter and wanted to know everything she could. "What do you mean by everything?" she repeated, stronger, suspicious.

"Do you want to tell her or do you want me to tell her?"

"Get out," he said.

"Stay," she said.

I stayed.

At one point he said, "You can't prove anything."

The mother raised an eyebrow. That he would make that statement was proof enough for her. He took a couple swings

at me, and never did admit what he did to Brittany, but I knew where in Hell he was going and as I escorted the mother out I assured her he would not like it.

At the cabin, watching the movie credits roll I asked Sneaker, "Maybe we could be partners next trip. Fifty-fifty. Try it out."

She thought for a minute, then said, "Then I wouldn't be able to love you. And I'd rather do that than be a partner in Hell."

My feelings were hurt for a few seconds, but she was right. "I'd rather you did that, too. But we could sign an agreement in blood, no love from midway through the entrance tunnel until—."

"Getter, shut up."

"Make me."

She did.

Later, Sneaker patted my chest and said, "Not bad for a Big Man in Hell with a Big Prophecy to live up to."

"I don't want to be a Big Man in Hell, and I don't want anything to do with prophecies."

"I doubt prophecies care what you want."

"I don't want to think about it."

She patted my cheek. "I know you don't." She kissed me, and within two minutes she slept.

I did think about it, of course. You can't not think about something without thinking about it. Reech's words haunted me. I didn't really believe in Prophecies. But Mephisto did. That meant the only way to avoid dealing with it was to not go into Hell again. Ever.

Hell Cop
by David C. Burton

But, as I gazed out the window at moonlight rippling on dark water, I realized one thing, I was, and forever would be, a Hell Cop.

About the Author

David Burton has been a mechanic, boat builder and sailor, and has traveled by thumb, motorcycle and sailboat. Upon his return from sailing in the South Pacific, he turned to writing. His first writing teacher was mystery writer, Elizabeth George. *Manmade For Murder* was published by Write Way Publishing, Worldwide Mysteries, and selected by the Detective Book Club. Now working as a custom cabinetmaker in Colorado, the water calls, and plans to return to the proximity of Big Water are in the works. There, in some paradise by the sea, he hopes to have plenty of time to write more about Hell and Getter's adventures, as well as other characters that pass through his life and brain in both novel and screenplay form.

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