

A_Scream_of_Angels

A SCREAM OF ANGELS

Book Two of the Templar Chronicles

by

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A Scream of Angels

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PROLOGUE

He stared down at the object at his feet with the dawning realization that what they had just uncovered could change the face of the world forever.

Never had he been more exhilarated. Or more frightened. He knew, too, that he was going to have to decide how to deal with the discovery in the next few minutes or the news would spread all over camp faster than a forest fire in the high Sierras. If that happened, it would be too late.

He and his team had been working along the shores of the Dead Sea for several months now and the season was just about over. In another week or two their permits would expire and, with little to show for all their work, it was doubtful that he could gain the funding for a return trip the following season. Never mind the rising violence in the Occupied Territories that threatened to close the borders permanently.

But now there was this.

He turned to the man crouched next to him. "Who else knows?"

The other shook his head. "No one. I've been working this end of the trench all day by myself. You're the first to see it, other than me."

Maybe, just maybe, they had a chance then.

After another moment of deep thought, he said, "Okay, here's what we are going to do..."

* * *

Later that night.

His team moved swiftly through the camp and assembled on the far side. The rest of the area was quiet and no one seemed to have noticed their passage. With five hours before sunrise, they should have just enough time to extract the specimen, wrap it up, and get it loaded on the truck before their companions discovered what they were up to.

There were five of them. All men he'd known for years. All men he trusted implicitly. They had sworn the same oaths as he and so he had little doubt that they would go to the grave with the secret if it became necessary.

He hoped it would not. He hated to think of what he'd have to do if they were discovered in the midst of their activities.

It was difficult work. The specimen wasn't too tall, just a hair over seven feet, but the width was twice that and he was determined to remove it in one piece if at all possible. It took them almost three hours just to free it from its ancient resting place. Getting it properly mounted and wrapped took another two. By the time the sky began to glow pink with the coming sunrise, they were working furiously to get the now-secured package loaded up into the back of one of the expedition's half-ton trucks.

While the rest of his team had worked through the night to extract the specimen, he had reached out to his network and had set other, longer range plans in motion. He'd secured a site to store the specimen until they could decide what to do with it and had arranged for

others to meet them a few hours drive north. Smuggling the specimen across the border and out of the country was going to be difficult, but thankfully he knew more than a few places where the border guards would look the other way for the right amount of money. Heâ€™d cross that particular bridge when they came to it. For now, heâ€™d done all he could.

The team said their goodbyes quietly and then he climbed up beside the driver for the long ride north. The rest of the expeditionâ€™s personnel were just beginning to stir and there was no time to waste.

As they got underway, it occurred to him that he had just organized and carried out the biggest theft in the history of the free world.

And, God help him, it actually felt good.

CHAPTER ONE

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

“You have got to be kidding me!” Sergeant Sean Duncan stared in disgusted disbelief at the hand-held cosmetic mirror that his commanding officer, Knight Commander Cade Williams, had just given to him. “What the heck am I supposed to do with this?” he asked.

His question was greeted with several raucous calls from the other men in the ranks, suggestions that he check to be sure his hair was in place or that he ask it who was the fairest of them all, which only caused the newest member of the Echo Team to scowl even deeper than usual.

Cade ignored both the question and its various replies as he finished handing out the mirrors that his executive officer, Master Sergeant Matthew Riley, had managed to procure. Heaven only knew where he’d appropriated them from, here in the midst of the Longfort Containment Facility, the Order’s most remote prison complex; Cade was just happy he had. They were desperately needed for what lay ahead.

When he was done he shot his exec a glance and the big black sergeant called the rest of the team to order.

“All right, that’s enough. Pipe down and pay attention!”

The men were all members of the Holy Order of the Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon, or the Knights Templar, as they were once more commonly known. Long thought to have been destroyed in the fourteenth century, the Templars had emerged from hiding during the desperate days of World War II and had joined with the very entity that had excommunicated them en-masse so many centuries before, the Catholic Church. Reborn as a secret military arm of the Vatican, the Templars were now charged with defending mankind from the supernatural in all its many forms.

Williams was in command of the Echo Team, the most prestigious of the elite strike units fielded by the Templars, and was as known for his ruthless efficiency as he was for his unorthodox methods. His command squad was made up of four men; himself, Master Sergeant Matthew Riley, Sergeant Sean Duncan and Sergeant Nick Olsen. Riley and Olsen had been with him a long time; they had seen and heard things that would make the average Templar soldier sick with fear, but Cade had won them over with his leadership and his dedication to the cause. They would follow him anywhere, no questions asked.

Duncan had only been with Echo for a just a few weeks, having spent several years before that on the Preceptor’s security detail, but in that time the unit’s strange and often enigmatic leader had become important to him. Cade had helped him begin to recognize

that his own unique gift was just that, a gift, rather than a temptation or a curse. And though he often had difficulty with Cade's disregard for the Rule, the code of behavior that every knight was sworn to live by, he had come to quickly understand that he could learn a lot from the other man.

Cade waited until he had their undivided attention and then turned to the smaller man standing rather uneasily off to one side of the group and said, "Warden, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Very good, Knight Commander." The warden was a short, stout balding individual who looked more like a banker from the Midwest than the man in charge of two hundred of the Order's most dangerous prisoners. "As you know, Longfort prides itself on the fact that we've never had a major riot or a successful escape. Since the facility's construction in 1957, we have done our utmost to keep the beings you bring to us safely locked away from the rest of humanity in a place where they can do no further harm. I say that simply to let you know how unusual and dangerous our current situation is."

The warden cleared his throat and then continued. "I'm afraid our illustrious history caught up with us last night. Somewhere around eleven pm there was an incident in Cell Block D. We don't know what caused it or even exactly what happened. What we do know is that while a guard was escorting another prisoner back to cell 26, the door to cell 28 came open instead and the Eretiku confined there was released into the main corridor."

The men were completely silent now, their attention fixed firmly on the warden.

"Things rapidly went downhill. We lost the guard and all of the prisoners along that section of the walk before we even knew we had a problem. When we did realize we had a breach, we responded the way we are trained to respond. We locked down the wing and sent in a squad to try and re-secure the prisoners that had escaped."

The warden looked out at them and every single soldier in the room could see the regret so plain on his face. "It was exactly the wrong thing to do. We lost the entire squad, never mind a good portion of the prisoners, before we understood just what it was we were dealing with. When we did, we pulled out, sealed off that section of the complex, and called for help."

Cade took over from there. "We've been ordered to secure the cell block and have been given authorization to put down the Eretiku and any of the other prisoners that we feel necessary in order to carry out that order. I don't need to remind any of you just how difficult this is going to be; Delta lost five men during the initial capture and they were better equipped than we are right now. But we don't dare delay any longer while waiting for the right equipment to be flown in because if that thing in there finds a way out of the complex we'll have a much bigger problem on our hands."

He picked up two stacks of photographs from the table beside him and handed one of them to Riley, who in turn made certain each member of the team received a copy.

“This is what you will be facing,” said Cade.

The photo showed an elderly woman in dark clothes and a shawl, her face turned mostly away from the camera.

Several of the men looked up at Cade, to see if he was joking. He most assuredly was not.

“And here is a picture of a guard who was unlucky enough to meet her gaze during the incident last night.”

Riley passed the second stack of photos around. This one showed a man in a hospital bed who appeared to be at the end of a long illness. His cheeks were sunken and hollow, his skin ghostly pale. Large red weeping sores could be seen across the exposed skin of his face, neck and hands and it was clear that they extended beneath his clothing as well. His hair had mostly fallen out; what was left was thin and lifeless.

“You’re looking at Private Jason Polnick, age 28. Yesterday he was perfectly healthy.” Cade paused, and then said, “They don’t expect him to live out the night.”

He looked them over, making certain that they understood the implications of what he was suggesting. “Some of you might not be familiar with the Eretiku. The name itself is Russian and it refers to a woman who has sold her soul to the Devil and returns after death from the grave to prey on the life-force of the living. Don’t let the old crone appearance fool you. She’s incredibly fast, incredibly strong, and meeting her gaze infects you with a wasting sickness that makes Ebola look like the common cold. She also has the unique ability to fool your eyes into thinking she isn’t there. Hence the mirrors. They’ll protect you from her gaze and let you see her at the same time.”

Cade moved over to a wall, where a map of the complex had been tacked up. It resembled nothing more than six pointed starfish, with each cell block arcing out like arms from the central hub. “We’ll station half of you here,” pointing to the thick set of blast doors that cut the cell block off from the central hub. “A second group will be here.” is The blast doors he pointed to this time were deeper down the block corridor and cut off the cells themselves from the guard’s section.

“Olsen and Callavecchio, you’re with me. You’re the best I’ve got, shot-wise, and we’re going to need everything we can bring to the table in that department because we’ll be shooting at a target we can only see in a three-inch mirror.”

The two men nodded, but didn’t say anything.

Cade looked over at Riley. "Once we're inside the doors, the first thing we'll do is plant some demo charges along the walls, rigged to a set of controls that we'll leave with you. If things go badly for us, and you suspect that thing will find a way out, don't hesitate to blow the place. We can always rebuild but we can't afford to let that thing loose."

"Roger that," said Riley, but it was clear that he wasn't exactly thrilled with the order.

Cade turned back to the others. "We do this by the numbers, people, by the numbers. Watch your backs, keep your eyes open, and make absolutely certain you don't look this thing in the eyes. Any questions?"

There weren't any.

"All right then, let's suit up."

CHAPTER TWO

WITCHY WOMAN

As quietly as possible, Commander Williams, Sergeant Olsen, and Private Callavecchio slipped through the blast doors and into the corridor leading to the cell block proper. All of them were dressed in jumpsuits of black flame-retardant material worn over a set of ceramic body armor that had been blessed by the Holy Father himself. They carried the standard issue HK Mark 23 .45 caliber handgun, complete with a twelve round magazine, a flash suppressor, and a laser-targeting device. Two spare magazines for the pistols were affixed with Velcro to their left wrists. A combat knife was either clipped to their belt or in a calf sheath on the outside of their boots. Their swords, recently blessed again during Mass, were slung across their backs, the hilt of the weapon extending just beyond their right shoulders for easy access. On their heads were lightweight Kevlar tactical helmets with built-in communication gear.

Both Olsen and Callavecchio had their mirrors in hand and were using them to scan the walls and ceiling in their general vicinity as carefully as possible. Cade, however, had decided to rely on his own peculiar set of talents.

Several years before, he had barely survived an encounter with a supernatural entity he had since come to call the Adversary. The battle had resulted in the death of his wife and left him scarred both physically and emotionally. Heâ€™d lost the sight in his right eye and the flesh on that side of his face had been savagely disfigured, leaving him with a wide band of scar tissue that stretched from the hairline above his eye, down across his cheekbone, and around behind his ear. The eye itself was still intact, but was nothing more than a milky white orb floating in a sea of damaged flesh. Normally he wore an eye patch over it, more for the comfort of others than for himself, but heâ€™d left the patch behind tonight, wanting nothing to obstruct his Sight.

While the damage to his eye had cost him his ability to see in any normal sense of the word, he had gained something unexpected in return. When he moved his ruined eye just so, the supernatural world was revealed to him in all its so-called glory. Nothing could hide from his Sight; he could see through the guises of demons and angels alike, as well as anything in between. Mystical power was as obvious to him as a mountain in the middle of a desert plain. For short periods of time he could even see into the Beyond itself, without setting foot outside his own plane of reality, but doing so also revealed him to the denizens of that realm and so he didnâ€™t do it all that often.

As a reanimated corpse that fed on the life-force of the living, the Eretikuâ€™s very nature would make it impossible for it to hide from him. What he didnâ€™t know was whether or not

its killing gaze would have any effect when seen through his Sight and so he intended to be as careful as possible in the confrontation ahead.

Still, he didn't hesitate to activate his Sight.

Much of the spiritual world is driven by emotion, with objects and locations taking on the predominant feelings surrounding them. In a prison, the primary emotion is despair. The corridor before him went from cold, hard steel to looking like a diseased artery that pulsed and glistened with unidentifiable growths and sores in the eyes of his Sight. The bodies of the dead were black with fear and pain and the ghosts of several of the guards stood beside them, the confusion about what had happened clear on their faces. They became aware of Cade in the same moment he became aware of them and with a quiet word he sent them on their way, hoping their next existence would end better than this one had. At the end of the corridor, the doors were inscribed with a number of mystical seals and signs, the power within them glowing with a white-hot heat.

Of the Eretiku, there was no sign.

"All right," he said to the others, "we're clear. Keep those mirrors handy and let 'em move out."

Weapons drawn, they advanced down the corridor, through the guard station, and into the main cell block.

They emerged on the second and middle tier of the block, roughly in the center of one of the short sides of the rectangle. On each level a narrow walkway extended in front of the cells, with enough room for two men to walk abreast comfortably. A waist high railing prevented anyone from slipping over the edge.

Olsen leaned against the railing and used his mirror to allow him a look at what was beneath them and then did the same with the level above. The other two tiers were arranged just like this one, as the plans had indicated, and the center space below them was simply left empty. He didn't see any sign of their quarry and he let the others know it.

For Cade, the cell block was even worse than the corridor, for it was the place that the inmates spent the majority of their time. The Mother Church had long ago decided that it was unjust to simply execute those enemies that surrendered to its mercy, but knew at the same time that it couldn't allow those same enemies any chance of escape back into the world where they could continue to wreak havoc and harm. Containment facilities like this one were the best answer the Church had come up with and it had put its most battle hardened veterans, the Templars, in charge of their operation and maintenance. Cell Block D was in the lower security area of the prison, but even here inmates were not allowed to interact with each other, lest they combine their abilities and discover a way of getting past the guards and the wards built into the building itself, and so their existence was reduced to solitary confine-

ment inside of soundproof cells. They were given an hour of exercise per day, in separate, isolated exercise rooms and only on rare occasions did they get the chance to see the sun and open sky.

Some of the creatures confined in this space had life spans that were all but indistinguishable from immortality to the humans who operated it and decades spent in confinement with only hope for centuries more of the same made for a blanket of rage and despair so thick that Cade had to take a moment to get used to looking at it all. When he was ready, they began moving along the walkway that extended the length of the cell block on the right hand side. Some of the cell were still sealed shut and secure; from within them the three knights caught glimpses of a variety of things that would have sent ordinary men away screaming in fear. They even recognized a few, captives from earlier missions Echo had carried out on the Order™s behalf. Others had been torn open, victims of the Eretiku™s search for nourishment and the corpses of more than one littered the walkway before them. The men from Echo were cautious, making certain the victims were actually dead before trying to move past them.

They had advanced almost to the end of the first walkway when it happened.

A hand snaked out from beneath the railing and clamped itself around Cade™s ankle. Before he had a chance to react, it yanked him off his feet and then dragged him with amazing strength across the walkway, beneath the railing, and out into the open air high above the floor three stories below.

But Cade would not be so easy a victim.

He released his grip on his pistol, sacrificing the weapon so as to leave both of his hands free. As his gun made the long fall to the floor below, Cade made a wild grab at the post of the railing as he was swept past.

Luck was with him. He caught a hold of it with one hand, arresting his fall, but the Eretiku still had a firm grip on his leg and was already trying to pull him loose from his makeshift anchor. Against the creature™s awesome strength, he knew he wouldn™t be able to hold out for long.

“Help!” he yelled and hoped the others would be in time.

He could feel the thing™s claws digging right through the thick leather of his boot, searching for a better hold, and he redoubled his efforts to kick himself free of its grasp.

Hands wrapped themselves around his wrists and he looked up to find Olsen holding on to him, the other man™s feet braced against the railing as he fought to keep Cade from falling any further. Beside him, Callavecchio leaned over the railing, his mirror in one hand, angled so as to give him a view of what was happening below, and his pistol in the other.

“Hold still!” he shouted, and Cade had a second to think “easier said than done” before the other man opened fire.

It was a difficult task, firing over a ledge at an angle, past the struggling body of a friend, with only a small hand-held mirror with which to aim. Cade was all but certain he was going to end up with a slug in the leg, but even that would be preferable to the thirty foot fall he was currently staring in the face, so he simply closed his eyes and hoped for the best.

Callavecchio made three quick shots, one after another without pause, and the third and final shot was followed by an angry shriek that echoed off the cold stone walls. Cade felt the grip on his leg loosen and realized with something close to shock that he was uninjured and free.

“Quick! Pull me up!” he said and Olsen did just that, while Callavecchio kept his eye on the space beneath them.

“Do you see it?” Cade asked, climbing to his feet and drawing his sword so that he wouldn’t be defenseless if it attacked again.

Callavecchio shook his head while continuing to scan the lower area with the help of his mirror. “No. It’s gone, for now.”

But they knew it was there. Somewhere. The attack had merely redoubled their determination to find it and end its miserable life.

An hour later, however, they were back where they had started, at the edge of the second tier, still empty-handed. They had searched the entire cell block and had not found any further sign of the creature. Cade knew it was here somewhere; there was nowhere else for it to go. But so far it had managed to elude their best efforts at tracking it down.

Just where the hell was it?

As he looked out over the open space at the walkway on the other side of the cell block, something swung down from the tier above, hanging upside down directly in front of his face. It was close enough that he could feel its fetid breath on his cheek, could smell the stink of its unwashed body.

With the help of his Sight, Cade could see through the creature’s human guise, could see it for what it truly was; a rotting corpse with slavering jaws and molted skin. A third eye existed in the center of its forehead and it was from this that its wasting gaze originated. With the help of his Sight he could even see a black wave of power emerging from that orifice and he didn’t stop to think, didn’t even take the time to reason out the options, knowing his companions would be dead the moment they turned to look. Instead, he simply squeezed his eyes shut and slammed his head forward as hard as he could.

His skull smashed into the Eretiku’s, dazing it, and he felt its weight fall upon him as its clawed feet lost their hold on the railing of the tier above. They tumbled to the floor, each fighting for the advantage, and ending up with Cade on his back and the Eretiku lying atop him, his hands wrapped around the other’s wrists as he fought to keep its slavering jaws

from sinking into his unprotected neck. He bucked back and forth, trying to throw it off him, but it managed to wrap its feet around the back of his legs and held him close. He could hear it shrieking its rage and hunger at him, but he wouldn't let that distract him for if it did he was dead.

As the creature shoved its face forward in another attempt, Callavecchio's hand shot out and held a mirror directly in front of its eyes.

The result was astonishing.

Cade didn't know if it was because its mystical gaze had been redirected back upon itself or if it simply couldn't bear the sight of its true nature, but the Eretiku reared up, its prey beneath it forgotten for the moment as it clamped its hands over its eyes, shrieking in agony.

Olsen was ready and waiting. His sword flashed out in a savage blow, slashing through the creature's arms just below the wrists and continuing forward, severing its head.

Its screams cut off abruptly and the body fell over backward, spewing blood as black as tar in every direction, as its head rolled off the edge and disappeared from sight.

For a moment no one moved, shocked into immobility by the suddenness of its end, and then Cade was kicking the thing's rotting corpse off him in disgust as the other two men helped him to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Olsen asked, his gaze never leaving the Eretiku's corpse, as if he wasn't quite convinced it was dead yet. It was a move learned from long experience; too many of the things they'd faced had a nasty habit of getting up again.

This time, however, the creature was good and gone.

Cade nodded in reply and fought to catch his breath. That had been closer than he liked. But the job was done and once more Echo had defied the odds, coming out on top without the loss of a single man. That made him smile, then laugh, and soon the other two men were laughing along with him in simple relief at the fact that they were alive while the enemy lay dead at their feet. They clapped each other on the back, congratulating themselves on the success of what they accomplished, and then turned toward the doors leading to the rest of the complex where their friends and squad mates were waiting.

Once again, Echo had triumphed.

But in the back of his mind Cade realized how close they had come to disaster.

Next time they might not be so lucky.

CHAPTER THREE

LOOKING FOR THE DEAD

“Come on! Pull!” Riley yelled from his seat on the flybridge of the Hatteras 50 fishing yacht they’d rented back in Islamorada. Duncan was in the aft cockpit below him, desperately trying to reel in his fifth marlin of the day, while at the same time ignoring the good-natured insults coming from his left where Nick Olsen was seated, a beer in each hand and a grin on his face.

With the defeat of the Eretiku at the Longfort Containment Facility coming so close on the heels of the confrontation with the necromantic Council of Nine and the recovery of the Spear of Longinus, the higher-ups had decided Echo was due some much needed rest and relaxation. After the debriefings were done, the team had been given two weeks of leave.

The three sergeants from Echo’s command unit wasted no time in getting out of town. They flew by commercial airline to Miami, rented a car and drove down to Islamorada where their charter boat was waiting for them. For the last six days they had done nothing but fish, drink beer, and bask in the warm Florida sunshine.

Riley was of the opinion that while danger could bring men closer, fishing can bond them for life. He had a standing deal with one of the charter boat captains on the island; he paid a handsome fee to keep a boat ready and waiting for him and the captain made certain it was available on a moment’s notice. Over the years he’d made it a habit to go out with each of the team’s newcomers, getting to know them in a non-stress environment, doing what he could in that short time to size them up and understand how well they were going to fit into the unit. Those that didn’t pass his unofficial test were quietly transferred out of the unit by Cade, no questions asked.

Riley had pretty much made up his mind about the new guy before the trip had even gotten underway; Duncan’s performance during the assault on the Necromancer’s stronghold had seen to that. He’d been pleased to see how well the young sergeant had fit in with the two of them and after six days of hard fishing followed by nights of hard drinking, the three were as close as brothers.

As he watched Duncan struggle with the fish, the satellite phone clipped to the helm console between the depth sounder and the VHF rang. Riley ignored it at first, intent on the battle in the aft cockpit below him, but by the sixth ring his dedication to duty got the better of him. He spun his deck chair around and snatched the phone from its cradle.

“This had better be good.”

“I assure you it is, Master Sergeant.”

The voice was crisp and clean, with more than a hint of arrogance. Riley recognized it immediately and came up out of his chair, surprised into standing nearly at attention. Despite the fact that the man on the other end of the line was some 2500 miles away, Riley's back was ramrod stiff and he stared out at the horizon directly in front of him, his attention completely focused on what was being said.

"Sir. My apologies, sir. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't, Master Sergeant."

Riley held his tongue, though it took some effort. "What can I do for you, Preceptor?"
"Knight Commander Williams. I haven't been able to reach him by landline or satellite phone. Nor has he returned any of my pages. In light of recent events, I'm concerned something might have happened to him."

Riley let the Preceptor's comments sink in for a moment. Cade had always treated this man's predecessor, Preceptor Michaels, with a fair degree of respect but it was equally obvious that he didn't care for Preceptor Johannson at all. And unlike all of the other combat units in the Templar hierarchy, Echo reported directly to the Seneschal at the Order's headquarters in Rosslyn, Scotland. If Cade didn't want to respond to the Preceptor's attempts at contacting him, he was perfectly within his rights not to do so.

But those recent events the Preceptor mentioned, including the attacks carried out by the Council of Nine against various Templar commanderies and the discovery of a mole deep within the Order itself, had left everyone shaken. Security was at an all-time high. At a time like this, Cade was unlikely to ignore any attempt at contacting him.

"What do you want me to do?" Riley asked.

"I understand you've been to the Knight Commander's residence?"

"Yes, sir, I have." Unlike the men in the ranks, the senior commanders were allowed to live in private residences rather than on the commandery grounds. Many did not, but Cade was certainly not a typical Templar commander, and he kept a small piece of property in rural Connecticut not far from the Ravensgate commandery.

"I'd like you to pay him a visit. Double-check that everything is alright. Once you've done so, I want you to report back to me. Understood?"

Riley didn't say anything for a moment. He noted the way the sun sparked off the deep blue waters of the Atlantic, inhaled the crisp, clean scent of the ocean air, paused to watch a seagull soar high overhead, hoping for a scrap of bait. It had been a good trip, while it lasted. He sighed and then said into the phone, "Yes, sir. I'll get right on it."

Once the decision was made, the three of them moved in earnest. As the other two were bringing in the lines and cleaning up the deck, Riley turned the boat to the west and opened up the throttle. While he wasn't yet convinced that Cade was in any real danger, he

didn't intend to waste any unnecessary time in proving it one way or the other either. He was headed straight for Miami, where he could catch a direct flight later that afternoon to New York. The other two would take the boat back down to the Keys, square things with the boat's captain, and then join Riley as soon as they were able.

Hopefully, they'd get back to headquarters and discover Riley and Cade having a good laugh about the Preceptor's unnecessary concern.

* * *

The sun had long since fled the coming of night by the time Riley pulled his rented Ford Explorer into the driveway of Cade's personal residence in the quiet town of Willow Grove later that evening. The house was set a good distance back from the street and nestled amidst a thick grove of oak trees; a quiet, reserved place that seemed to be in direct contrast with Cade's driven personality, until you considered the fact that even driven men need a sanctuary to call their own. Cade's black Jeep Wrangler was parked in front of the house and Riley pulled his own vehicle in behind it.

As he got out of the car, the first faint tendrils of unease began stirring in his gut. The house ahead of him was dark. If Cade was home, and the presence of his Jeep seemed to indicate that he was, then there should have been lights, signs of activity. Instead, the space beyond the windows was dark and lifeless. Riley unzipped his coat, giving him access to the pistol he wore strapped in a shoulder holster, and then climbed the steps and rang the bell. When there was no answer, he rang it again. Finally, he tried the knob.

The door swung open at the touch of his hand.

"Cade?" he called, into the darkened interior.

There was no answer.

Maybe Cade had simply left his door unlocked, but then again, maybe he hadn't. In this line of business, Riley had learned to be careful.

He stepped inside the house and quietly closed the door behind him. He stood there in the darkness, listening for signs of life.

The house around him was silent and the silence itself felt heavy, ominous even, as if the building was holding its breath, listening back.

That faint tendril of unease grew into a thick, ropy tentacle that wrapped itself around his heart.

Riley drew his gun, the heaviness of the weapon providing some sense of reassurance. Holding it in his right hand, he reached out with his left and flipped the light switch, illuminating the foyer and the living room beside him.

Everything looked to be in its proper place.

“Cade? You home, man?” Riley called, his concern over being accidentally shot as an intruder by his friend overcoming his worries that someone else might be present in the house.

There was no answer.

Riley moved through the lower rooms, turning on lights as he went. The living room and foyer led into a formal dining room and then a kitchen/great room combination. All were empty. The kitchen sink held a few dirty dishes, but they had been rinsed free of garbage and there was no way of knowing how long they had been there.

A staircase led upward from the great room and Riley climbed it to the second floor, calling out again as he did so. There still was no answer, but he didn’t take that as evidence that the house was empty. There was always the chance that Cade had been injured and was unable to respond. The upper floor held two guest rooms separated by a guest bath, all of which were empty, and there, at the end of the hall, a master bedroom.

Turning on the light, Riley was surprised at the Spartan nature of Cade’s personal sanctuary; a bed and a nightstand were the only furniture in the room. Equally surprising was the large photograph hanging on the wall opposite the bed. It was of a young woman, vibrant with life, caught in the act of turning toward the camera with a shy smile on her face. Her long, chestnut hair was in motion, twisting with her, and the light in her eyes made it seem as if she could come alive at any second.

Riley had no doubt that he was looking at a photo of Cade’s deceased wife, Gabrielle. No wonder Cade missed her so.

Riley flipped the light back off and was turning away when a flash outside the window caught his attention. Crossing the room, he pulled back the edge of the curtain and looked out.

An old shed stood at the rear of the property and even from here Riley could see the light spilling out of the partially opened door. The faint memory of a conversation in which Cade mentioned his “workshop” swam up from the depths of his mind and he knew that must be what he was looking at. The fact that there were lights on eased his tension somewhat; perhaps Cade was home after all.

Riley left the bedroom behind, descended the stairs and made his way to the kitchen again where he had noticed a back door during his earlier search. Opening it, he left the house behind, crossed the yard, and approached the workshop.

He called out again as he did so. “Hey Cade! You in there?”

There was no answer.

Up close, he realized the workshop was much bigger than it had first appeared from the bedroom window. It was actually more a barn than a shed, the darkened window high above

the door indicative of a second-story even. Riley inserted his hand into the opening between the double doors and pushed. The door rolled open on its well-oiled track without a sound.

Light spilled out into the darkness.

Riley cautiously stepped inside.

He could see immediately that the entire structure had been gutted and rebuilt, turning the lower floor into a well-furnished study. What had once been horse stables was now a large, open room with bookshelves lining the walls and several work tables arranged in a semi-circle facing toward the door. A wood-burning stove stood in the far corner, its thick black pipe running up through the floor of the second story high above.

He walked into the room, leaving the door open behind him, just in case he had to get out in a hurry. "Hello? Is anyone here?" he called but again was met only with silence.

He moved over to the closest table. It held several books, a pad of paper, and a mug of half-drunk coffee. A glance inside the cup showed that the cream had begun to curdle, giving Riley the sense that it had stood there untouched for several days. In fact, the whole place had that feeling of emptiness, as if events had been abruptly interrupted.

On the other side of the tables, he could see that a large mirror had been bolted to the floor in the semi-circle space between them. It seemed a strange place for it, Riley thought, for it would be easy for someone to forget it was there and step right on it.

Step right on it!

Riley moved over to the other tables, a sudden suspicion flaring. They were covered in books, many of which were propped open to certain pages. He could tell they were old by just looking at them, their pages yellowed, the script elaborate and in many cases decorated with symbols and other illustrations. One table had a stool placed before it and Riley correctly assumed this was where Cade had been working last.

Only a single volume rested atop this one. A glance at the text told him he wouldn't be able to understand a word of it; he recognized the strange script as Enochian, the language of the angels, but that was as far as he got. The pages of notes stacked beside it, on the other hand, appeared to be Cade's English translation. He leafed through several of them, noting that the subject matter dealt with the powers of fallen angels and the ways in which one might bind them to your service. It wasn't exactly the type of thing you'd expect a knight of the Order to be reading, but Riley wasn't surprised. Cade would go anywhere, do anything, to understand what had happened to him and his beloved wife on that summer night seven years ago. Reading a few forbidden texts were the least of his sins. But this one might just offer some clue as to where Cade had gone.

Riley knew that Cade was convinced that the Adversary, that supernatural entity that had murdered his wife and given Cade some unusual gifts of his own, was in fact a fallen angel.

Cade also believed that the both the spirit of his dead wife, Gabrielle, and the Adversary himself could be found in the Beyond, that mysterious purgatory-like realm that existed somewhere between this one and the next. One of the strange "powers" the Adversary had given to Cade was the ability to travel into and out of that place.

And he got there by stepping through the surface of a mirror.

A glance back down at the floor showed him something he'd missed the first time around. A long black case with silver clasps had been pushed beneath one of the tables. Retrieving it, Riley ran his fingers over the supple leather covering it and then threw open the three small clasps.

The space where Cade's blessed sword usually rested was empty.

The pieces of the puzzle were starting to click into place. Cade's inability to return phone calls or pages. His empty sword case. The books on understanding and controlling angels. The workshop with the mirror inlaid in the floor.

Cade was in the Beyond, Riley was all but certain of it.

From where he stood, Riley could see that the old hay loft above had undergone some changes. It had been walled off into its own enclosed room, with a set of simple wooden steps leading up to a door at this end.

Considering he'd looked everywhere else, he might as well check that out too, he thought, just to be on the safe side, though he was convinced he'd solved the problem.

He climbed the steps and opened the door.

Glass crunched underfoot.

At the sound, Riley went still; one foot inside the partially opened door, his hand still on the doorknob.

He stared into the darkness ahead of him, listening.

No other sound reached his ears.

Once again, he was convinced he was alone.

He pushed the door open wide and stepped inside the room, reaching out with his left hand for the light switch as he did so.

The darkness was banished by a dazzling display of light that was far brighter than he had expected. It was as if that single light bulb was multiplied a thousand times over, with all of the lights coming to life simultaneously. Riley was forced to turn away, shading his eyes as he waited for his vision to adjust, his skin crawling as he realized that he was all but helpless should something choose that moment to take advantage of him.

But nothing did.

Once his eyes adjusted to the light, he took a careful look around. What he saw raised his anxiety to new levels.

The room was drowning in mirrors.

Broken, shattered mirrors.

They were everywhere; on the floor, on the walls, on the small table by the doorway. Not a single one was intact, though a few fragile pieces remained hanging resolutely in some of the frames. Most of the glass was scattered across the floor, as if the mirrors had exploded from the inside out.

Riley's suspicions were confirmed.

Traveling to and from the Beyond required incredible amounts of physical energy. Though he'd never been there himself, Riley had observed Cade making the trip a time or two and was at least conversational with the details. Truth be told, you'd never get him to voluntarily cross that line. The tales of the strange and twisted creatures encountered by Cade on his solitary explorations were enough to quench any curiosity he might have, thank you very much. He didn't need to see them for himself.

But he'd learned enough through talking with Cade to understand that each and every trip through the barrier, or the Veil, was draining on the traveler. Time and distance were different on the other side and hours there could translate into days here. Should a visitor stay too long, he might find himself dehydrated, famished, even several days older when he returned.

Repeat trips, particularly in a short time frame, were extremely dangerous.

From the number of shattered mirrors before him, it appeared the Commander had made dozens of trips across the Veil recently, perhaps even more than that as Riley had no way of knowing how often the mirrors had been replaced.

That amount of travel was damn near suicidal.

Just what in heaven had he been thinking?

As Riley turned away to descend the stairs, a loud crash sounded from the room below.

Aiming his gun, Riley looked out the doorway.

The body of a man lay crumpled beside the now shattered mirror in the center of the room. Even from here Riley could recognize him. Cade's eyes were wide open and he didn't appear to be breathing.

Riley rushed down the stairs and over to his side. Kneeling, he placed the fingers of his left hand against Cade's throat while his eyes scanned the rest of the room, just in case something had followed Cade back from the other side. Riley was able to find a pulse, but only after checking for it twice and even then its threadbare nature was not encouraging.

There were no visible wounds on Cade's body, but he was clearly in bad shape. He'd lost an incredible amount of weight, so much so that his clothing hung off of him. His skin was a nasty shade of yellow and was stretched tight across his bones, as if his skeleton

was trying to force itself through to the other side. Riley was reminded of the mummified remains he'd once seen in the Natural History Museum.

No one alive should ever look like this.

Knowing Cade was beyond the limited medical assistance that was his to give, Riley pulled out his cell phone. He dialed a ten digit number from memory and when the phone was answered on the other end he identified himself, gave his location, and indicated the need for immediate medical extraction for a senior commander.

After hanging up, he gently gathered Cade in his arms and lifted him, dismayed at how light he was. He made his way out of the workshop, across the lawn, and back inside the house, taking up a position in the living room by the front window, listening and waiting for the helicopter he knew was on its way. He tried not to think about Cade's condition or the minutes slipping quickly past. The medical team would get here in time or it would not. It was all in the Lord's hands.

Riley bowed his head in prayer.

As the first faint sounds of the approaching chopper finally reached him, he felt Cade shift in his arms. He looked down and was surprised to find his commanding officer looking up at him through his one good eye.

"I've got to find her, Matt. I've got to find her."

The sound of his voice, so full of pain and desperate need, filled the big man's heart with sorrow. He struggled to speak past the sudden lump in his throat and finally settled for a short, "I know, boss."

Cade slipped back into unconsciousness, which was fine with Riley. He didn't need any further explanation anyway; Cade could only be speaking of one person.

His dead wife.

Gabrielle.

CHAPTER FOUR

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Riley was waiting in the corridor outside of Cade's hospital room when his teammates arrived. After returning the charter boat, the two men had taken a puddle jumper flight into Miami. There they had changed planes and flown directly to Boston, where an initiate brother had met them with a car and driven them the last fifty miles to the commandery.

"How is he?" Olsen asked.

Riley shook his head. "Not good. He's so malnourished and dehydrated that his body is basically eating itself from the inside out. The doc said it was pretty touch-and-go there for awhile. Another day and he wouldn't have made it, hospital or not. For now, it's wait and see."

The big sergeant went on to explain how he and Cade had been picked up by helicopter and flown to the nearest Connecticut commandery, only to have the medical officer there decide Cade's condition was dire enough to transfer him to the Order's primary hospital on the grounds of the Newport facility in Rhode Island.

Which was where all four of them were now.

Duncan glanced in through the open doorway to where Cade lay surrounded by a maze of life-support equipment. He was sleeping peacefully, but the sight of such a strong man laid so low was disquieting, to say the least.

"Just what in heaven's name did he think he was doing?" Olsen asked, clearly frustrated over the inability to do anything to help their friend.

"He was looking for his wife," Duncan answered absently, still staring at the Knight Commander.

Silence fell and when he turned away from the doorway to face the others he found them staring at him.

"What do you know about that?" Riley asked, and with his tone Duncan was abruptly reminded that he was still the outsider here. There was curiosity, but also more than a hint of protective anger in the big sergeant's voice.

Duncan answered without flinching. "I saw her. Or at least think I did."

"What? When?"

"That night we found Stone's body, at the safe house outside of Otter Lake."

Duncan remembered that evening with no small amount of trepidation. He and Cade had gone to see the head of the Custodes Veritatis, a secret faction within the Templar hierarchy that was responsible for defending the holy relics placed under the Order's control, while Riley and Olsen had played rear guard, hoping to spot anyone who might be following them.

Theyâ€™d found Stone dead at the scene, an obvious victim of torture, and had then been ambushed by members of the necromantic Council of Nine that were intent on wresting the Spear of Longinus from the Orderâ€™s control. Unable to call for back-up, they had escaped with their lives only by using Cadeâ€™s strange power to travel into the Beyond.

The trip had only pulled them out of the frying pan and into the fire, however, for no sooner had they regained consciousness in that eerie mirror of reality than they had been set upon by ravenous packs of spectres. With their backs to a dark and unwelcoming sea, theyâ€™d had no choice but to stand and fight, despite being outnumbered significantly.

In the end, it had been Cadeâ€™s dead wife that had saved them. Or so Cade believed.

Duncan explained what he knew to the others.

â€œWhy didnâ€™t you say something about this earlier?â€ Olsen pressed.

Duncan snorted in disbelief. â€œYeah, right. What did you want me to say? By the way guys, our illustrious commander thinks the ghost of his dead wife saved our asses while we were stuck on the other side of reality. Just thought you should know.â€

Riley and Olsen simply stared, not saying anything. Their silence made it obvious that, yes, that was exactly what they had expected him to do.

Flabbergasted, Duncan opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by the arrival of an initiate carrying a message for Riley. The Echo Team exec read the note and cursed once, softly.

â€œWhat is it?â€ Olsen asked.

â€œTheyâ€™ve recalled the unit. Echo has a new assignment. Weâ€™re to assemble in the briefing room in thirty minutes.â€

â€œThey canâ€™t do this now! What about Cade?â€ Duncan asked.

Riley looked pointedly through the doorway at Cadeâ€™s inert form. â€œAs much as I hate to say it, it looks like weâ€™re on our own for awhile.â€

The three men agreed to meet at the assigned time and went their separate ways. Riley followed the initiate back down the hallway, asking questions of the younger man in a quiet voice, trying to learn all he could about the Preceptorâ€™s mood before having to go see him. Olsen headed for the barracks, intending to bring the rest of the men up to speed on Cadeâ€™s condition and let them know about the recall.

Which left Duncan alone. As the newest member of the unit, he didnâ€™t have any pressing assignments and so had nowhere in particular to be until the briefing commenced.

He glanced up and down the hall. Seeing no one, he pulled open the door and slipped inside Cadeâ€™s room.

The silence inside was broken only by the hiss of the ventilator and the occasional beep of the equipment monitoring Cadeâ€™s vital signs. Duncan spent several long moments stand-

ing next to Cade's bed, staring down at him, his thoughts full of conflict. On more than one occasion he reached out to touch the injured man only to pull his hand back each time, remembering Cade's admonition during their previous mission not to touch him under any circumstances.

You could heal him.

The thought came unbidden, but Duncan was honest enough to admit to himself that he'd certainly considered that fact once or twice since setting foot inside the room.

Wouldn't take much at all.

And it wouldn't; that was true. All he had to do was reach out and lay his hands on Cade's body, to think about his injuries fading away as if they'd never been.

You've done it before, for people you didn't even know.

True again. He'd healed hundreds of strangers while overseas a few years back. And since that time he'd vowed never to use his "gift" again.

But you broke that vow, didn't you? You healed Sgt. Olsen when he was injured in that helicopter crash. And this man certainly isn't a stranger; he's your commanding officer.

Duncan began to pace back and forth in front of Cade's bed, his indecision practically a physical torment. The voice in the back of his head had been silent for years. In the wake of his disgrace in China, he decided that his "gift" was more a curse than a blessing and had fervently made up his mind that he would never again call on the peculiar power that lived inside of him. For months that voice had pushed and cajoled, whined and complained, but he'd held strong to his conviction and eventually it had gone silent.

Until now.

Duncan sighed, knowing there was only one action to take.

With the hiss of the ventilator and the beeping of the heart monitor for company, Duncan got down on his knees in the middle of the room and began to pray.

"Heavenly Father, I come to you now with a heavy heart"

After some time, Duncan finally came to a decision.

* * *

He dreamed.

Dreamed of a cold, grey sea that lapped at the shore of a grey beach, while a grey sun sank slowly down through a grey sky. He stood near the water's edge, looking out over that grey expanse, waiting; though he knew not for what. A sense of expectation rose in his heart, an emotion that was certainly out of place in a setting such as this, yet it was undeniable and one he couldn't ignore. He'd come here, to this time and place, wherever here might be, to meet someone? See something?

He didn't know.

But whatever it was, it was coming.

As surely as he knew his own name, he knew that.

And so he stood on that strange shoreline, stood and stared and hoped, as the sun sank below the horizon and darkness claimed the sea in its inky grasp.

Still he waited.

Still he watched.

And when a light shone out across those dark waters, a light that shone with a sense of living vitality that could not be denied, his heart leapt in recognition.

Unfortunately, his time had run out.

Behind him, a snarling cry rose up into the night air and it was quickly echoed by others. Dozens of others, so many that the night seemed filled with their cries.

He spun around, reaching for the sword strapped to his back before he fully registered doing so on a conscious level.

He knew that cry; had heard it often enough on his journeys here to recognize it as the hunting call of a pack of corpse hounds, one that had cornered their prey.

He braced himself for the fight ahead.

They came at him out of the fog, charging across the stony shoreline toward him. Now that the pack had been gathered, there was no need for their hunting cry and they swept forward in an eerie silence that had a weight all its own.

Cade met the first one without hesitation, sidestepping and slashing its body in half as it leapt for his throat. He did the same with the second, then plunged his sword through the chest of the third, holding the carcass with his foot as he dragged his weapon free once it had expired.

By then the rest of the pack was upon him.

He twisted and turned, slashing with his sword at any hound that dared to get too close, keeping them at bay only through the sheer ferocity of his attack. The bodies began to pile up at his feet and still they came on, bounding over the corpses of their brethren to try to reach him.

When the press of their numbers became too great, he had no choice but to retreat backward, out into the water. He kept his back to the ocean, his attention fixed on the ravenous horde that now covered the beach as far as he could see. He held his sword up before him like a talisman, waiting to taste the salty tang of his enemy's blood once more.

But the hounds refused to follow.

They wandered back and forth at the water's edge, howling in voices that ripped and pulled at his soul, but they would not enter the water. The edge of the surf became a barrier

that they would not or could not pass and their frustration was clearly evident.

Cade was just wondering what the dark waters might hide, what would keep the blood-thirsty pack from daring their depths when a pair of hands wrapped around his ankles and pulled him off his feet.

He went under, spluttering in surprise and swallowing a mouthful of water in the process. Before he could do anything he felt himself being pulled through the water at an incredible speed, moving deeper out to sea with every second.

He frantically began to kick his feet and twist his frame, doing what he could to fight his way free, knowing he had only seconds before his lack of oxygen would doom him.

The second he felt the hands on his feet let go he shot for the surface, sucking in great whooping lungfuls of air once his head had broken clear of the water. He glanced around frantically, noting that heâ€™d been dragged dozens of yards from shore. His sword was gone and the hounds still paced the shoreline in the distance, but he didnâ€™t have any choice; heâ€™d have to swim for it and deal with each issue one and a time. Remaining in the water was out of the question.

He took a deep breath, preparing for the swim ahead, but before he could set out the hands returned.

This time there was more than one pair of whatever they were. He felt their rock-hard grip take hold of his lower legs, cold, clammy hands that grasped his feet and ankles and calves while others tried to lock his legs together at the knees.

They yanked him downward for a second time.

This time however, as he sank beneath the waves, he could hear a voice calling him, shouting his name, but he couldnâ€™t respond, couldnâ€™t open his mouth without filling it with the brackish water that surrounded him, and he was certain that doing so would be the death of him. His mind screamed at him to breathe but he fought against it, clamping his jaws tightly shut as the hands below dragged at him, pulling him deeper, fingers wrapped tight about his ankles, his calves, his thighs.

A shadow passed overhead, obscuring what little light there was, and in his mind he screamed *â€™m here, â€™m here*, but only the greedy voices of the dead answered him as they dragged him deeper still, whispering that he would be here, with them, for eternity. His arms flailed above his head, frantic now, as he felt himself dragged down into the darker depths where hope was replaced by despair and the light never shone.

A hand grasped his wrist.

His heart pounded in his chest and his pulse throbbed in his head, starving for oxygen, but he had enough awareness left to understand that the hand came from above, rather than below.

As the darkness closed in he felt himself being drawn upwards, his ascent shocking, violent even. He was hauled from the grasp of the dead with seeming effortless ease. A moment later he was pulled from the water, but his body was telling him it was too little, too late. Heâ€™d swallowed too much of that vile liquid, had pulled too much of its poison into his system, and now he would have to pay the price.

The voice continued calling to him, shouting his name, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle and he gave in to it at last, too tired and worn out to fight any longer. A figure bent over him, a dark, hooded figure that should have scared him witless but only vaguely registered on his conscious mind as his sight tunneled down to a narrow window and the darkness came to claim him.

In that last moment, before the world fell away and he tumbled down into oblivion, there was a sudden flash of light and in its glow he caught a last, fleeting glimpse of his rescuer.

Inside the hood of the long robe she wore, his dead wife, Gabrielle, smiled her grim reaperâ€™s smile at him and mouthed his name, the white of bone gleaming through the ravaged side of her face a harsh contrast to the smooth skin on the otherâ€

Cade awoke.

A soft voice echoed in the back of his mind and a hauntingly familiar scent lingered in the air, but both were gone by the time he struggled back into awareness of his surroundings.

He was in a hospital bed.

His body ached as if heâ€™d been laid out and beaten for hours with a broom handle, but his thoughts were clear. He remembered his repeated trips across the Veil, his fruitless search for Gabbiâ€™s spirit, his growing despair as he came up empty with each and every crossing. How he got here, wherever here was, he didnâ€™t know, but he could make an educated guess or two.

The room around him was stark, austere, and he knew it wasnâ€™t a public hospital by the fact that he had the room all to himself. Which meant he was probably in the hands of the Order. Exactly where was still up for grabs, though. Maybe the view from the window on the other side of the room might tell him something.

Pulling back the covers, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He did it slowly, gingerly, not expecting to succeed, and so was surprised when he did so. Despite the soreness, his body responded without any problems.

He glanced down, remembering the sight of his wasted body as heâ€™d gazed at himself in the mirror just before his last trip, and was astounded by what he saw.

It only took him a moment or two to come up with an explanation, however.

Duncan.

His teammate had healed him.

Confident that he was now medically out of danger, he reached down and pulled several sensors off his chest, knowing as he did so that it would likely bring several nurses running, but he didn't care. He'd been in bed long enough; it was time to get moving again. Last but not least, he carefully pulled the IV out of his right wrist, knowing the small drip of blood would clot in a moment. He tossed the sensors and the IV tube onto the bed behind him.

Forgetting the window, he crossed to the small wardrobe and found a change of clothing inside.

He was in the midst of getting dressed when the first of the doctors burst in through the doorway to his room.

CHAPTER FIVE

BRIEFING TIME

Just before Vespers the three sergeants from Echo reassembled together in a secure conference room awaiting the arrival of Preceptor Willem Johannson, the man who had taken over after Michaels had perished in the commandery assaults three weeks before.

Riley and Olsen arrived first, with Duncan wandering in a few moments later. Echo's newest member was quiet, withdrawn, but no one thought anything of it, considering Cade's current condition. A moment or two after Duncan's arrival the Preceptor arrived. With him was a short, barrel-chested man in standard issue battle dress uniform, or BDU, with a Captain's insignia on the shoulders. They settled into seats opposite the members of Echo and the Preceptor didn't waste any time in getting down to business.

"We've got a dangerous situation brewing that needs to be dealt with quickly and decisively. Bravo and Delta are off cleaning up that mess in Argentina. Alpha is at half-strength and Charlie is still enroute from Moscow. That leaves you. I know your team leader is currently unavailable, but Echo is all I've got."

Johannson was tall and thin, with long arms that moved restlessly about whenever he spoke, reminding Duncan of a praying mantis. The man's regal attitude and obvious sense of self-importance reinforced the comparison, causing Duncan to take an instant dislike to him. The transfer to Echo had been difficult, there was no question of that, but in the long run he suspected that working for a man like Johannson would be a kind of slow torture all its own and he was glad that he was no longer in the charge of the Preceptor's security detail.

Riley ignored the thinly veiled distaste in the Preceptor's tone when referring to Commander Williams and simply nodded his acceptance of the situation.

The Preceptor indicated the man seated beside him, "Captain Mason here is with the unit on the ground. He will conduct the briefing and answer any questions you have. Captain Mason?"

Mason was the physical opposite of Johannson and he projected an air of experience that commanded authority. He stood, saying, "Thank you, sir." He stepped away from the table and over to the podium. Removing a small remote from his pocket, he used it to trigger the ceiling projector. A photograph of a smiling man dressed in the black clothes of a Catholic priest appeared on the screen. He was in his late forties or early fifties, with a full head of dark hair and the tanned complexion of a man who spent a lot of time outdoors.

"This is Father Juan Vargas, a Jesuit archeologist. He has spent his entire life shifting the dirt of the Holy Land through his hands, looking for physical evidence of the life of Christ.

Many considered him one of the finest expedition leaders of our time and his work has uncovered priceless artifacts supporting Biblical scholarship. From discovering the home of Pontius Pilate just outside of Jerusalem to excavating the secret tunnels discovered beneath the fortress of Masada, Vargas has been at the forefront of some of the most important archeological discoveries of the last four decades.

He also had his share of failures, however. Entire expeditions that were based on nothing more than rumors. Wild goose chases that bled the coffers of many a foundation dry, with nothing to show for it in the end but handfuls of dust. From Noah's Ark to the Ark of the Covenant, Vargas has chased them all.

A little over three years ago, Vargas abruptly disappeared after a failed dig on the shore of the Dead Sea. Some say he deliberately went into hiding, unwilling or unable to face the wrath of his creditors. Others believe that his health was failing and that the constant strain of the expeditionary life was finally too much for him. Whatever the reason, he disappeared and no one has seen nor heard from him since.

Until nine days ago, that is.

The image on the screen changed. The new photo showed a man in a hospital bed. Though his face was badly sunburned and he had several days overgrowth of beard, it was clearly Father Vargas.

Vargas was found wandering in the desert outside of Santa Limas, New Mexico last Wednesday. From his condition, it was clear he'd been exposed to the elements for several days. He was badly sunburned and dangerously dehydrated. There is no hospital in Santa Limas, so the locals brought him to the parish priest. When the priest discovered the injured man was a fellow member of the clergy, he contacted his bishop. The bishop had actually met Vargas at a seminar several years before. Recognizing him, he arranged to have him transferred to St. Margaret's, a private Catholic hospital in Albuquerque. Once he was stabilized, we

The door to the conference room opened and Mason stopped in mid-sentence, his expression of surprise clear to those seated at the table.

As one they turned to see the source of the disruption.

Knight Commander Cade Williams stood framed in the doorway.

Duncan and the others stared in disbelief.

Two hours ago Cade was lying immobile in a hospital bed, so weak he needed an intravenous line to feed him and an oxygen line to help him breathe. His physician had predicated it would be a month, maybe more, before Cade had recovered enough to move about on his own, never mind return to active duty. Yet here he stood, seemingly healed. His face showed signs of weariness and there was a dark, haunted look in his eyes, but his flesh no longer

looked stretched taut over his bones and the sickly yellow hue was gone from his skin.

He crossed the room and took a seat in the empty chair next to Riley. He nodded to Captain Mason and then addressed the Preceptor, "My apologies for being late, sir. I was briefly detained on another matter." His voice was a harsh rasp, like that of a twenty-year smoker, rather than its usual even tone, but that seemed to be the extent of his troubles.

Preceptor Johannson stared at Cade with a horrified expression on his face, as if Cade's very presence proved that all of the dark and dangerous rumors that were whispered about him were true. Several times he opened his mouth to speak, only to close it again before doing so, unable or unwilling to give voice to what he was thinking.

The silence stretched like a living thing.

Duncan stared down the length of the table at his commanding officer. Like the others, he was startled by Cade's appearance. He'd wrestled with his conscience long and hard beside the man's hospital bed, but in the end he'd done nothing more than get down on his knees and pray for the Knight Commander's recovery. While he'd been sorely tempted to lay his hands on him, he'd resisted the urge, believing that his gift should be used only in the direst of circumstances. While Cade's injuries had been bad, he'd certainly passed beyond the life-threatening stage once he'd arrived at the hospital and so Duncan had refrained from taking any action beyond simple prayer.

Yet here Cade was, seemingly healed and ready to join Echo on its forthcoming mission.

Thoughts of prayers and powers and destiny itself chased each other through Duncan's mind.

It was Captain Mason who finally stepped into the gap, breaking the silence. He coughed into his fist, said, "Good to have you with us, Knight Commander," and went on with his briefing as if nothing unusual had happened.

"The circumstances being what they were, the Order was called in to investigate. A three-man team, including myself, was sent out to speak with Father Vargas. When we arrived at St. Margaret's, we found him to be alternating between spells of manic activity and near catatonia. When he was lucid, if you could call it that, he would rant and rave, screaming and crying and mumbling, throwing himself against his restraints, until the hospital staff was forced to sedate him to keep him from hurting himself."

Olsen spoke up, "Was anything he said coherent?"

"Not much. Most of it was gibberish, odd phrases and sounds that seemed to mimic a language, but unlike anything we'd ever heard before. We've since had the tapes analyzed for linguistic continuity and similarity, thinking it might be a dialect we simply weren't familiar with, but came up dry. If it was a language, it's one we've never heard of."

“We had Vargas transferred to the custody of the Church and took him to our medical facility in New York. There we were able to monitor him twenty-four hours a day and every second of it was caught on video. Upon reviewing the tapes, we discovered this.”

Mason touched a button on his remote and a video began to run on the screen behind him. In it, Vargas was flat on his back on an adjustable bed and was secured with restraints. He was tossing his head from side to side, an endless stream of nonsense pouring from his mouth, his eyes tightly closed. This went on for a full minute or two and Duncan was about to ask why this was relevant when Vargas stopped moving. Very slowly he turned his head to face the camera and his eyes popped open wide. Then he spoke with deliberate clarity.

“He’s waiting for you. There in the Garden. Waiting to show you the truth. If you have the courage to face it.”

Mason paused the tape at that point, leaving Vargas to stare out of the screen at those assembled. “We’ve got four days of tape. That’s the only coherent moment in any of them.”

“Do you have any idea what he is talking about?”

The captain turned to face Riley. “No, not really. He was reportedly raving about the apocalypse and quoting from the Book of Revelation when he was first discovered outside of Santa Limas, so some of the doctors think this is more of the same. The ‘Garden’ possibly being a reference to the Garden of Eden and the ‘he’ Vargas is referring to being the serpent. Personally, I’m not so sure, but that’s simply a gut level reaction and I don’t have any concrete evidence one way or the other.”

“If you have Vargas in custody and he’s no real threat to anyone, what do you need Echo for?” asked Olsen.

“Captain Mason is getting to that,” replied the Preceptor, the first words he’d spoken since Cade had entered the room.

“Right,” answered Mason. “Vargas was given a thorough medical exam by our own physicians and they discovered something the doctors at St. Margaret’s had not. A series of numbers were tattooed on the inside of Vargas lower lip. The tattoo was crude, obviously homemade, and the numbers were backward, as if Vargas had done it himself with the help of a mirror.

“After further investigation, we determined that the numbers were a set of GPS coordinates. They led us here.”

Another click of the remote and Vargas’s wide-eyed grimace was replaced with an aerial shot of a compound somewhere in the desert. Several buildings were surrounded by a wide fenced perimeter, with a single dirt road leading to and from the compound.

â€œItâ€™s an old military base hidden in the canyons about thirty miles north of Santa Lomas, abandoned and mothballed since the close of the Korean War. When my people looked into it, they learned that it had been leased to a holding company based out of the Caymans three years ago, roughly six months after Vargas disappeared from view.â€

â€œHave your people been on site?â€ Cade asked.

Mason looked uncomfortable for the first time. â€œYes. We set up operations around the perimeter and then sent in an advance squad to take a look around.â€ He paused, obviously struggling with how to express exactly what he wanted to say. â€œTheyâ€™!â€ He shook his head, and then looked down at the floor. â€œNone of the team survived.â€

The room was silent for a moment.

â€œCan you be a bit more specific, sir?â€

Mason nodded. â€œWe sent in a full squad, eight men. They were tied into the Ops Net, so we could see and hear everything they did in real-time. At first, things went just fine. They searched the few remaining structures and were getting ready to come back out when one of the team discovered a hatch in the floor of the base garage. The hatch appeared to lead to another level of structure, this one underground.

â€œThe squad checked in and I gave the order for them to continue their search. They were preparing to descend into the lower levels when everything came apart.

â€œWe lost the video feed almost immediately. We still had the audio, however, and we could hear several of the men shouting and firing at something that we suspect came out of the tunnel after them. Within seconds weâ€™d lost contact with all of them.â€

Mason paused, obviously still dismayed over the loss of his men. After a moment to get himself under control, he continued. â€œAnother team was gearing up to go in after them when one man made it back out of the compound. Cpl. Jacksonâ€™s left arm was missing and he had a gaping wound in his chest. The medics got to work immediately but everyone knew it was a losing battle right from the start.

â€œJackson was nearly hysterical, raving about a gateway to hell and the demons that had come boiling up out of it but we were unable to get anything of tactical value out of him before he passed.â€ Mason looked at each of them in turn. â€œI canâ€™t tell you what he saw, but whatever it was, it scared him silly. Hell, he scared us, just by talking about it. And it took his life along with lives of seven other men. After that, the decision was made to have the second team stand down while we brought in the heavy guns.â€

Preceptor Johannson spoke up again. â€œThatâ€™s where Echo comes in. Iâ€™m ordering you to accompany Captain Mason back to the site and determine just what killed those men. When you do, you are authorized to deal with it as you see fit.â€ He turned and looked at Cade. â€œAre you up to this, Commander?â€

Cade nodded but said nothing.

Duncan wasn't surprised; he couldn't imagine Echo being sent out without its commander and he knew it would take more than a doctor or two to keep Cade from joining his unit when they were headed into danger. He was still wondering just how the Commander had pulled it off when Cade glanced surreptitiously in his direction and winked.

As the meeting broke up around him and the rest of the men headed for the door, Duncan found himself frozen in his seat, his thoughts whirling.

Good Lord, Duncan thought, he thinks I did it. He thinks I healed him!

But he knew he hadn't. And that brought him back to the issue that had been bothering him ever since Cade had stepped into the room.

If he hadn't done it, who had?

CHAPTER SIX

EYES IN THE SKY

“Two minutes out, sir.”

The pilot’s comment carried clearly over the intercom and so Cade didn’t bother repeating the information to the rest of his team in the seats behind his own. They’d landed at the airport in Albuquerque twenty minutes ago to find the three Blackhawks waiting for them. The locals were used to military types coming in and out of Kirtland Air Base and didn’t think anything of the choppers. Cade and the rest of the command squad had taken the lead bird, while Captain Mason and the men of First squad climbed into the second. Their gear was loaded into the third Blackhawk and after that it had been an uneventful flight across the desert and through a maze of canyons to their present position.

Cade was stowing away the briefing papers he had been studying when the pilot broke in again.

“What the hell is that?”

Cade looked up and for the first time in a long while was greeted with an unobstructed view. Gone were the twisting channels of the canyons they’d been following. Now a large open valley stretched out before them. An isolated group of buildings could be seen alone in the distance; obviously the old military base mentioned in their briefing. To the east of the base, closest to them, he could see several mobile command centers and other assorted vehicles assembled into a makeshift camp, Mason’s staging area for the earlier excursion into the base. But what had caught the pilot’s attention was the swirling mass of charcoal-black thunderclouds that hovered low over the facility, storm clouds that twisted and churned with the urgency of class V river rapids. Green and silver lightning danced through the darkness, with the occasional bolt slashing down from the heavens to strike the fence that surrounded the base in a dazzling display of pyrotechnics.

Even stranger was the column of darkness that rose from the midst of it all like a water spout and seemed to be the source of the turmoil above.

Cade had seen storm clouds like these before, but never in this world. The fact that they were here, now, on this side of reality, chilled him to the bone.

But strangely, despite his apprehension, Cade also felt an odd sense of excitement grow in him at the sight. The clouds were the same as those in his recurring dream about the Adversary. While he had long suspected that the setting of those dreams might just be a real place, either somewhere here in the natural world or on the other side of the Veil in the Beyond, this was the first time he’d had even the faintest glimmering of evidence to support his suspicions. And if the clouds were real, then that fated confrontation with the Adversary

might turn out to be real as wellâ€¦

â€œCan you get a reading on those things?â€ Cade wanted to know. â€œIs that spout moving or staying steady?â€

The pilotâ€™s answer surprised him. â€œGet a reading? Man, that thing doesnâ€™t even show up on radar. See for yourself.â€

It was true. Glancing over, Cade could see that the pilotâ€™s scope was perfectly clear, as if the thunderclouds didnâ€™t exist. If they had been flying by instruments only, they could have flown right into the funnel without any warning whatsoever.

â€œCan you bring us in a little closer?â€

The pilot glanced at him, the expression on his face unreadable. His tone left little to the imagination. â€œYeah, I could. If there was any valid reason for doing so. But youâ€™ve got to be!â€

Cade cut him off. â€œJust do it. Thatâ€™s an order.â€

â€œYour funeral.â€ As the pilot moved to comply, Cade got on the radio to the other two helicopters.

â€œBlackbird Lead to Blackbird Flight.â€

â€œGo Lead.â€

â€œIâ€™m going to check out those storm clouds. I want the two of you to hit the deck and start unloading the gear. Iâ€™ll join you momentarily.â€

â€œRoger that, Lead.â€

â€œI hear you, Lead. On the deck and unloading in three.â€

â€œBlackbird Lead out.â€ Cade replaced the mike. Through the intercom he let the rest of the passengers know that things were going to get a bit hairy and then buckled up tight.

The pilot took them in as close as he dared, letting Cade get a good, long look. The helicopter bounced around in the wash from the funnel cloud, but the pilot was good and kept them on station. This close Cade could see that the funnel was stationary; like a shaft of light, it emerged from the ground in an open area on the far side of the base and shot straight upward. At a height of about four hundred feet it simply spread outward in a churning mass from its center, the way smoke will when it encounters a ceiling. Ground zero was obscured from view, so he couldnâ€™t tell if the clouds were man-made, though he suspected they were not. Heâ€™d never heard of a piece of machinery that could do something like this and sorcery of this magnitude would have revealed itself in other ways.

Whatever it was, he had little doubt that it was intimately connected to whatever Vargas and his unknown colleagues had been doing at the facility and was determined to get to the bottom of it.

One last glance and then he turned away from the window. "All right. Let's get out of here. I've seen enough."

"Amen to that."

But they wouldn't get away that easily. As the pilot banked away from the funnel, a freak surge of wind swept over them, literally shoving the aircraft through the air as if brushed aside by the hand of a giant, tipping them over. Cade's right-hand window abruptly became his floor and he found himself staring down through the glass at the ground far beneath them. He could hear the pilot swearing over the intercom as he fought the controls, doing what he could to restore command of the aircraft before they ended up strewn all over the landscape.

Just as he seemed to get things under control a bolt of silver-green lightning lashed out from the cloud above them, striking the helicopter somewhere behind the crew compartment.

Cade tensed, expecting the worst, but nothing happened. The lightning apparently had no effect. The pilot got the bird leveled out and they all breathed a sigh of relief as he turned back toward the landing zone.

Their path put the storm to Cade's right and he turned to look at it again through the window. The clouds seemed to be more agitated than before, twisting and turning with greater violence. As he watched the clouds seemed to come together to form a face, a face that leered at him from out of those dark depths, a face full of anger and hatred and misery, a face to instill fear into the hearts of men.

That's when the lightning returned, this time in earnest.

A second bolt followed the first. Then a third. And a fourth. Each bolt struck with near perfect precision, smashing into the base of the tail rotor. Sparks flew from the controls and the pilot yelled out in surprise as the board in front of him crackled with electrical discharge like the ghostly sheen of St. Elmo's fire.

For a second time in less than five minutes, the pilot lost control of the aircraft.

An alarm began blaring incessantly as the tail rotor ceased to function, sending the helicopter spinning wildly on its axis. Thick black smoke filled the air around them, certain evidence that there was a fire somewhere in the aft section of the aircraft. The pilot's hands and feet were in constant motion as he sought to overcome the rotation and land without smashing the aircraft, and all its passengers, into a million pieces.

Time shrunk down into milliseconds that moved at a snail's pace and Cade felt oddly removed from the situation. He could see and hear the commotion around him; knew beyond a doubt that they were in mortal jeopardy, but his attention was drawn and held by the leering face in the clouds. It was there and gone again, so swiftly that Cade didn't have any time to point it out to anyone else, but there was no denying what he had seen.

“Blackbird Lead is going down, I say again, going down.” The radio message broadcast over the internal intercom, notifying those aboard at the same time as those in the command center on the ground.

“Hold on!” the pilot yelled to those behind him as the bird continued its wild spiral toward the ground.

Cade did as he was told.

The chopper spun several more times and then slammed into the dirt just on the other side of the fence surrounding the base.

Then darkness swept over Cade.

* * *

He came to only a few moments later, still strapped into his chair. Next to him, the pilot was being hauled out of the wreckage by several other knights. Groggy, but able to move under his own power, Cade managed to follow suit. Other knights were helping the rest of the team out of the rear section of the aircraft. As soon as he was clear, he turned his gaze skyward. The thunderclouds were still there, twisting and turning about themselves, but the face was gone.

The pilot was good; Cade had to give him that. He’d managed to get them all down on the ground in one piece. Short of a few cuts and bruises, and a broken leg for the hero of the hour, it looked like they would be all right.

The Blackhawk was a different story; its tail was broken off, its landing gear crushed, and its main rotor shattered into hundreds of pieces from the impact with the ground. As he walked away from the wreckage to the waiting HMMV that would take them to the trailer serving as a makeshift medical center, Cade had to wonder just what he had seen in the clouds overhead.

And what was waiting for them in the tunnels beneath the base.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE

After letting the medics give him a quick once over and being assured that nothing was unduly sprained or broken, Cade left the med trailer and made his way over to the forty-five foot mobile command center that Mason and his crew were using as a base of operations.

While he hadn't been inside this particular model before, he was certainly familiar with such vehicles. He'd used them often during his days on the Boston Special Tactics and Operations team and even a handful of times since joining the Order. While he personally preferred working out of the open tailgate of his team's SUV, he could understand the need for them on a prolonged op like this. This particular model was built on a Freightliner chassis and came equipped with a 450 hp diesel engine. It had workstations for eight and seating for eleven. In a pinch, the conference room could hold fifteen, though quarters would be tight. Interior electronics were powered by a 20-kilowatt generator and included satellite TV receivers, video surveillance cameras mounted externally on a 30 foot telescoping mast, UHF and VHF radios, mobile data computers, and other related communications and surveillance equipment, all of which were secured against intrusion.

The center was also equipped with a 12-foot glide room, which was currently extended. Two of Mason's men were monitoring video feeds on the workstations set up inside the room and Cade was tempted to ask them what they had seen during the helicopter incident, but the knowledge that the storm hadn't shown up on radar and therefore probably wouldn't show up on video kept him from doing so.

Cade moved to the rear of the vehicle, where the conference table had been folded up and put away, creating an open space large enough to hold Mason's senior officers and the men from Echo's two squads.

Each squad consisted of four men, every one of whom had been cross-trained in a number of different specialties. First squad, led by Sergeant Manny Ortega, included Corporal Phil Davis, Private Marco Chen and Private Joe Callavecchio. Cade's own squad, the command unit, included Master Sergeant Riley, Sergeant Olsen, and Sergeant Duncan. They were the best of the best and if anyone could handle the problem in front of them, Cade was confident they were the right team to do so.

Before leaving the commandery each of the men had received detailed briefing folders that described the mission parameters, objectives, and logistics. They were professionals and so Cade didn't intend to spend too much time going over those details unless there were specific questions. He had one goal for this briefing and one goal only - to be certain each and every one of them understood the sheer ferocity and power of what they were about to

face.

It was time to go to work.

“All right. Listen up,” said Cade, stepping up to the podium and looking out over the group. “By now you’ve all had a chance to study the mission parameters and the rules of engagement. I’ve no doubt that you will perform in your usual exemplary manner. I wanted to take a moment, however, and give you an idea of what we’re up against.”

Behind him the plasma screen came to life. “What you are about to see are the last few minutes of footage that was recovered from Corporal Jackson’s helmet cam after the failed incursion into the lower levels of the base. I think you will find it worth your time.”

The video was full of interference, both from whatever was disrupting communications inside the perimeter of the base and from the poor lighting conditions in the room itself. The camera was close to the floor, shooting upward, and it was clear from its erratic motion that Jackson had been injured by this time and was probably rolling around in agony. He couldn’t have been aware the camera was still recording, for there was no conscious effort to point the lens at the action unfolding around him and it didn’t stay in one position for more than a few seconds at a time. None of that really mattered, however, for Cade was only interested in a single segment and when he got to it he froze the screen.

The camera had caught one of Jackson’s squad members standing on the other side of the room, firing at something off-screen. The man was too far away to tell who it was, but there was no mistaking the fact that he was screaming at the top of his lungs; they could be heard on the audio feed even over the sound of all the gunfire.

“Watch closely,” said Cade, and he gave the signal for the tape to roll again.

As the men watched, something rushed onto camera from the left side of the screen, enveloped the knight in a shadowy embrace, and disappeared again almost as fast as it had appeared.

Except this time it didn’t go alone.

It took the soldier with it.

Cade let them watch it once through and then took them through it a second time on a frame by frame basis. It didn’t do much good; they didn’t get any further details at that speed than the former. It was as if the shadow was only that, a shadow, and it had no physical substance for the camera to lock on to. Yet that couldn’t be right, for it took more than a shadow to carry off a 200 pound soldier in full combat gear, particularly while being pumped full of lead from the machine pistol the soldier was carrying.

Silence had descended on the room by the time Cade stopped the footage.

“We’ve been through it backwards and forwards, three different ways from Sunday. And I have to be honest with you; we don’t have a clue what it is. We’ve got

several people doing an extensive search of the Order's physical archives, looking for clues, but the online database held nothing that could help us and I'm not holding my breath waiting for a miracle.

"We'll be going into unexplored territory and facing an unknown foe. Communications will probably be erratic and we won't be able to call for reinforcements if things go to hell." Cade held them all with his gaze, and then let a grin spread slowly across his face, putting a bit of jocularly into his voice at the same time. "But if it was going to be a cakewalk, they wouldn't need us in the first place."

That got a rousing cheer out of the men from Echo. When things got bad, the Order called in the troops. When the troops couldn't handle it, they called in the Elite Strike Teams. The best of those was Echo.

Cade turned to face Olsen. "How long will it take you to get NOMAD ready?"

The sergeant didn't even have to think about it. "Half an hour to prep the main systems, another 45 minutes to fit the weapons platforms. Call it an hour and a half to be safe, maybe less if things go smoothly."

"Good enough." Cade addressed the group once more. "We'll use NOMAD to do an initial search of the location and then, if it seems clear, we'll go in ourselves. The command squad will lead, with first squad in close support. Any questions?"

There weren't any and so the team was dismissed to begin their preparations. Duncan had heard of the Order's unmanned vehicles systems but had never worked with one personally and so he asked to tag along with Olsen during the system prep. The other sergeant was only too glad to have a second pair of hands for the tasks ahead.

The Near-autonomous Observation and Mobile Armament Delivery system, or NOMAD for short, was one of the best operational robotic systems to hit the major military markets during the last three years and the Order had managed to acquire several of them for its own purposes. Built on a rectangular base, it was small enough to maneuver through confined spaces of less than a meter in width and could make a neutral turn in just under a meter and a half. Its reinforced treads allowed it to manage trenches, curbs, or stairs with equal efficiency and its meter-high rotating turret provided the perfect platform for both two-way audio and multiple optical systems. The vehicle's top speed was just over five kilometers per hour.

Duncan and Olsen spent the better part of an hour prepping and testing the main control systems, assuring that all of the basic movement commands could be carried out without difficulty. NOMAD could be controlled through a cable, fiber optic, or radio system, with a complete range of up to 1000 meters, providing plenty of distance to assure the safety of the operator. For today's mission, they were going to be using the fiber optic system, as Mason had mentioned the interruption of the radio communications from the first team to and they did

not want a repeat of that situation. Once they had tested the motion systems, they moved on to the vehicle's sensors, cycling the optics through visual, infrared and ultraviolet spectrums. Everything checked out fine.

NOMAD sported a fully articulated arm that could be extended up to six meters in length and rotated a complete 360 degrees. The arm ended in two pincher claws for grasping and lifting objects weighing up to 150 kg. Seven weapons mounts were also available and it was to these that Olsen next turned his attention. While Duncan continued practicing with the control systems Olsen radioed Cade and then spent several moments discussing the firepower options. They would be infiltrating a closed structure and had no real idea of what to expect by way of opposition, so they finally settled on a diverse payload that would cover as many options as possible yet not cause extensive damage to the structure around it should the firepower prove to be necessary.

After seeing that video, no one doubted that it would.

The only question was whether it would have any effect at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INCURSION

Captain Mason suggested that they wait until morning to make the incursion, but Cade was adamant that they act as soon as possible. He had little doubt that some of the captain's concerns stemmed from the fact that less than ten hours ago he was lying near comatose in a hospital bed. Had he been in Mason's place, he supposed he'd be a bit concerned as well. But the truth was other than a bit of soreness, he felt fine. Better than he had in a long time, in fact. There was no reason to delay the investigation on his account and more than one reason to move ahead quickly. They had no idea what kind of enemy they were facing or what their enemies' ultimate objectives might be. For all they knew, tomorrow morning might bring a full scale attack from the depths of the base and that was a chance Cade was not willing to take, so as soon as he heard that NOMAD was operational, he ordered the team into place. It was time to do the job they had come here to do.

The plan was to approach the base within the relative safety of a pair of HWMMVs. Their armored exterior and high mobility would provide significant protection should they come under attack during the initial entry and would also provide a means of exit should that prove necessary. The command squad would be in the lead vehicle with First Squad bringing up the rear. Once inside the base, they would set up position roughly 100 feet from the entrance to the building where Mason's men had come under attack. From there they would deploy NOMAD, using the robot for the hard task of entry into the building. If things came back all clear, then and only then would Echo physically enter and investigate.

The men loaded the trucks quickly and then climbed inside. Both crews had been ordered to have a man standing half-in and half-out of the upper hatch, so that they could keep an eye on the storm overhead while watching the shadows around them in the afternoon sunlight. Cade didn't want the team to be taken by surprise, buttoned up in their trucks like a bunch of turtles, and he took the observation position in the lead vehicle himself, knowing he'd feel better being able to eyeball things himself rather than have them relayed over the radio. He gave the order and beneath him he felt the vehicle rumble into life.

It was only a short distance to the entrance of the facility and the team reached it without mishap. The wide gate had been secured in the open position by the ill-fated squad that had come before them and so Cade simply waived both vehicles through without stopping. Fast and hard, he thought, that was the way to do it. Give the enemy as little time as possible to adapt to their presence. He tried not to think about the face he'd seen in the clouds or his gut feeling that the enemy knew all he needed to know about their little escapade. There was nothing Cade could do about it anyway.

The base had very few roads to begin with and only the main one that ran through the center of the base like a dividing line hadn't been reclaimed by the shifting desert sands. Housing and recreational facilities were on the right hand side of the street, administration and support buildings on the left. The buildings they passed were in bad shape; paint peeling from tired walls, roofs slowly decaying into the interiors, empty windows staring at them as they slowly drove past. Jackson's squad had been through them all, front to back, and Cade knew there was nothing there to either interest or concern them at this point. No, their destination was the larger building about another hundred yards ahead on their left. From the audio and video footage they'd salvaged from the previous attempt, it was clear that the facility had once served as the base motor pool. Its interior was divided into several garage bays complete with power lifts, old barrels of oil, and shelves of parts on every wall, while the central, common area could have held a good dozen half-ton trucks or similar vehicles. How Jackson's team had even found the hatch that had gotten them into so much trouble was uncertain; the record of their excursion was spotty at best. From what they could see, it appeared to be in the middle of one of the aforementioned bays, but that was yet to be confirmed. They'd be relying on NOMAD to give them a better idea of what they were facing.

Cade kept a constant watch on the twisting column of darkness that rose over the buildings to the south, about four hundred yards away from them. While in the chopper he'd been close enough to see that the column was stationary, but that didn't mean it would stay that way. He half expected it to suddenly start acting like the twister that it resembled and become mobile. Oddly there was no sound accompanying it and that made him more than a bit nervous. Something that big, something displacing that much air, should have growled with a life of its own the way a big tornado will. This one was silent and if he needed any proof that it was unnatural, this did the job nicely.

Riley took them to the designated location and then swung the HWMMV around so that it was facing back in the direction they had come. The position would make it easier for them to get out of there quickly should the need arise. The driver for First Squad, Chen, did the same, though he kept his vehicle half a dozen yards behind Riley's preventing the enemy from hitting them both with the same attack.

Cade lowered himself back inside the vehicle and moved up to the front passenger seat. He pulled the microphone from the dash and contacted the command center.

“Echo to TOC. We've reached the target and are starting phase two.”

“Roger that, Echo. Good luck.”

The transmission was full of interference, as expected, and Cade knew they wouldn't have the option of using the broadband radio for much longer. Rather than wait until they'd lost touch with Mason, who was operating as tactical operations command for this

mission, he ordered his men to make the switch to the tight beam tactical communications system integrated into their helmets. This would allow them to stay in touch with each other even if they lost contact with the TOC.

Once each man had reported in, he gave the order for them to form a perimeter in front of the motor pool. Riley, Duncan and Cade set up in defensive positions around the lead vehicle, being careful not to block Wilson's line of fire from his position in the turret of the second. Once they were ready, it was time for Olsen to go to work.

After lowering a ramp from the rear compartment, he knelt in front of the command console and used the controls to power up the strange looking contraption sitting in the cargo space of the HWMMV. NOMAD's engine rumbled to life and then settled down into a barely discernable hum. Because of the interference they'd already been experiencing with the radios, he'd opted to use the fiber-optic interface and so he gave the leads one last look to be certain they weren't tangled. It wouldn't do to lose connectivity with the machine because he'd been lax in his checklist.

Once he was satisfied, he drove the robot out of the cargo area and sent it on its way.

The vehicle was controlled through three different LCD screens, representing a forward, backward, and alternating side view from the vehicle's on-board cameras, and a small joystick, much like a video game. The control box was just a bit too large to hold for any long period of time, a design flaw Olsen was still miffed about, and so he was obligated to kneel before the console to operate it comfortably. This prevented him from having a weapon in hand, but he trusted the others to watch his back and he did have NOMAD's firepower at his disposal if necessary.

The huge rolling bay door that provided access to the interior had been jammed open during the previous incursion. Olsen took advantage of that fact, rolling NOMAD up within a few feet of it and then extending the robot's telescoping arm beneath the door. When he triggered the camera mounted on the end of the arm he was able to see inside the building.

Expecting to see the bodies of Jackson's squad still lying where they had fallen several days ago, Olsen was surprised to see that the floor ahead was clear. He swiveled the camera, checking out as much of the interior as possible. Sunlight poured in from the windows high on each wall, banishing much of the darkness in the center of the room but creating deep shadows inside the various garage bays and preventing him from seeing what each might contain. Similarly, it was difficult to see what might be lying in wait on the catwalk high above, as the incoming light blinded the camera to some degree.

Olsen called Cade over and the two of them discussed the situation briefly. Neither man liked the idea of sending in the troops just yet; the fact that the bodies were missing disturbed both of them. It suggested that the shadow creatures possessed at least a rudimentary intelli-

gence level, which made them more dangerous. For all they knew the shadow creatures could be lying in wait in the various work bays, waiting for more unsuspecting prey to wander into their den.

They decided to send NOMAD inside the building, to test the reaction of anything that might be waiting inside. If there was no response, Echo would then advance.

CHAPTER NINE

NOMAD

Olsen guided NOMAD forward under the garage door and into the building proper. He advanced the robot into the center of the room and then brought it to a halt. With all of its on-board cameras active, he slowly turned it through a 360 degree arc, giving him a good look on all sides.

The facility appeared just as it had in the video footage theyâ€™d seen; a central common area surrounded by eight bays for servicing vehicles, four on the left and four on the right. It was the last bay on the left that they were most interested in, for that was where Jacksonâ€™s squad had located the mysterious hatch, but they were going to have to check all of them out to be certain the facility was secure before venturing inside themselves.

Though heaven knew just what they were looking for, he thought.

He switched NOMADâ€™s video cameras into infrared mode and did another slow 360 degree turn, checking for heat signatures that the visible light camera might have missed.

Nothing unusual showed up on any of the screens.

Olsen nudged one of the controls with his thumb and the camera tilted upward until it was pointed at the ceiling. He repeated the same sequence of action, a visible light search followed by an infrared one, but again found nothing unusual.

â€œLooks clear,â€ he said to Cade, who was watching over his shoulder.

â€œAll right, letâ€™s check the bays. Start on the right and work your way over to those on the left.â€

â€œRoger that.â€

Olsen directed NOMAD into the first bay on the right, scooting it around the vehicular hoist in the center and taking care to check behind the oil drums stacked against the rear wall. He used the manipulator arm to open the doors of the tool cabinet and to check under a discarded tarp in the corner.

Not finding anything of interest, Olsen drove NOMAD back out of that bay and into the second, repeating the search in the same manner as the first. One by one, he declared each bay empty of any noticeable threat.

Finally, he came to the last bay on the left.

Olsen brought NOMAD to a halt just outside the entrance to the bay and used the spotlight to examine the interior, just as he had with each of the others. The vehicular hoist seen elsewhere was missing here. Gone, too, were the barrels and tool cabinets. In their place was the floor-level trapdoor that Jacksonâ€™s squad had uncovered during their ill-fated sweep. The hatch itself was still open, just as the squad had left it.

Olsen took his hands off the controls for a moment and flexed his fingers, working out the tension that had built up during the last half hour of work.

“Take us in closer,” said Cade. “Let ‘em get a good look inside that hatch.”

Olsen did as he was instructed, bringing NOMAD to within a foot of the open hatch. From there he raised the telescoping arm and extended it out over the floor until it was able to look down into the open hatch. They had a quick glimpse of a vertical shaft that disappeared into the darkness below and then, without warning, NOMAD’s cameras went dark.

“What happened?”

“Not sure yet,” Olsen answered. He checked the fiber-optic leads, figuring one of them had gotten tangled and simply pulled free, but they were still securely attached to the control unit. When those checked out he moved on to the camera controls themselves, just in case he’d accidentally turned something off that he shouldn’t have, but that too turned out to be a bust. In fact, he could see that he was still receiving a signal from the camera, it just wasn’t showing anything through the viewfinder. He explained as much to Cade.

“Switch to infrared,” the commander suggested.

Olsen did so, but that, too, was inoperable. Concerned that they were going to lose the unit, he powered up the motor and backed the robot away from the hatch. The minute NOMAD left the repair bay the camera began transmitting a signal again, as if nothing had ever happened.

“You want me to run it through a complete diagnostic, see if it’s a software bug or something?” he asked Cade, but the commander shook his head.

“I think it’s time we gave it a look for ourselves.”

Cade ducked back inside the cab of the HWMMV and sent a final radio transmission to Captain Mason, just in case he was still receiving them. Then the Echo Team leader used the tactical communication system in his helmet to order his men to assemble next to his vehicle and prepare for entry into the structure.

The Command Squad would go in first, with Ortega’s First Squad watching their backs. When they reached the repair bay, First Squad would form up in a semi-circle facing outward into the common area while Cade and the others checked the hatch.

It wasn’t a perfect plan, but it would at least provide them with some measure of warning should that the enemy show itself again and they’d therefore be better prepared to deal with it than Jackson’s squad had been.

Cade looked at the men assembled around him, checking to be certain they were prepared for what lay ahead. He needn’t have worried; they were all professionals and more than ready to step off into the darkness to face the unknown. Riley must have guessed what

was going through Cade's head, for he gave him a quick smile and racked the slide on his combat shotgun, signaling his readiness to get underway.

Flicking the safety off his own weapon, Cade stepped toward the building, his men in position around him.

CHAPTER TEN

DESCENT

Compared to what Jackson's squad had faced when entering the motor pool several days ago, Echo's entrance was practically anti-climatic. They cleared the room swiftly and professionally, confirming Olsen's earlier assessment through NOMAD that the place was now deserted.

Once he was satisfied that they wouldn't be ambushed from the rear, Cade ordered First Squad into position and entered the last repair bay on the left with Duncan, Olsen, and Riley on his heels.

Using hand signals, Cade indicated that Riley and Olsen should circle around the open hatch so that they could approach it from either side. He caught Duncan's gaze and pointed upward, indicating the young sergeant should keep his eyes on the rafters above. That left him to take the most direct route, approaching the open hatch from directly ahead.

Step by step they closed the distance, each of them fully expecting something to come charging up out of the shaft at any moment.

But nothing did. They were able to reach the hatch without incident and as one they shone their lights down into the darkness below.

The shaft was roughly three feet square. A series of metal rungs bolted to one side formed a ladder that disappeared into the darkness below.

There was no sign of the shadow thing that had attacked Jackson's squad, nor was there any sign of the missing bodies.

"Give us some more light," Cade suggested and Riley withdrew a chemical stick from his belt, activated it with a quick snap of its casing, and then tossed it into the shaft. By its light they could see that the ladder extended all the way to the bottom, some thirty feet below. The opening of a tunnel was also visible on the wall opposite the ladder. Far below, the base of the ladder itself was clear.

"Seems there's more here than meets the eye," said Riley.

Cade nodded. "All right boys, time to earn our pay." He turned, pointing to the various squad members as he gave his instructions. "Riley, you take point. Duncan, you're his back-up. Ortega, I want you on rear guard. Nobody comes down this shaft after us without my knowing about it, clear?"

The other man nodded.

"Once Riley and Duncan give the all clear, the rest of us will follow them down and see where that tunnel goes. Let's get to it!"

The light stick's initial bright flare had passed, but there was still enough light in the stick to see the rungs without too much difficulty. Riley slung his weapon over his shoulder and started down the ladder, while the others covered him from above. When he had descended about fifteen feet, Duncan started down after him.

The descent passed without incident and the two men soon found themselves standing at the base of the shaft. Their weapons were fitted with both a laser targeting light and an optional side LED, standard issue equipment among the various Templar rapid-response squads, and so with the flick of a switch they used the latter to illuminate the area ahead of them.

Riley used the tactical radio to contact Cade. "We've got a tunnel ahead of us, running due south for about ten yards before opening into a wider space. We're going to check it out."

"Roger that. We're on our way down."

The big master sergeant stepped forward with Duncan close at his heels. A few moments later they emerged from the tunnel onto a wide platform like that found in a subway station. Another larger tunnel ran perpendicular to the one they had just emerged from, reinforcing the comparison. The platform itself extended only for another ten feet before ending in a wall. When Duncan shone his light into the second tunnel, he discovered a set of thick steel rails running away into the darkness. Along the ceiling, running parallel to the rails below, were a set of electrical cables.

"What the heck do they need with a monorail?" Riley asked aloud, though the answer was obvious even to him. The base above had just been a good set of camouflage. The real facility was down here, below ground and hidden from even the best spy satellites.

When Cade and the rest of Echo caught up with the point men, the decision was made to continue forward down the tunnel. Riley and Duncan would advance slightly ahead of the rest of the party. They in turn would be strung out in a line, the standard five feet between each man, with Cade in the lead and Ortega bringing up the rear. They would stick to the middle of the tunnel, giving them as much room to maneuver as possible.

Expecting the equivalent of a New York City subway tunnel, Riley was surprised at the condition of this one. It was cool but dry, the desert heat on the surface above keeping the moisture from accumulating down below, and there was very little debris anywhere along its length. Nor were there any rodents. The darkness, however, was all-encompassing and it seemed to crowd around him. The light he carried was a powerful one but it had a narrow beam and so it did little to banish the sense that he was slowly being smothered as the darkness flowed in like water to fill the space in the absence of the light when he turned to look at something new. It was unnerving. He could almost feel it crawling across his skin!

Riley shook himself. Come on, get over it. You stopped being afraid of the dark when you were two, remember? But it wasn't just the darkness; that he knew. It was what that darkness could be hiding. The video of Jackson's unit and the being that they had faced had gotten under his skin in a way that few things had during his years with the Order. He'd fought against hundreds of different supernatural creatures over the years, from witches to were-creatures, from the living dead to the ghosts of people past. None of them had bothered him like this. There was a wrongness about the creature that struck him at his core, a gut sense deep inside that cried out against it, that shuddered in revulsion at the knowledge that such things walked the face of the earth. He wondered how he was going to handle it when they finally came face to face.

It was not an encounter he was looking forward to, by any stretch of the imagination.

They found the train about half a mile down the tunnel. It loomed out of the darkness, a behemoth filling the narrow space ahead, the spotlight at the top of the car the dead eye of a Cyclops staring down at them. Riley held up his left arm, fist closed, signaling for the group to stop. The team crouched in place, waiting for him to check things out.

He took his time, giving the situation some thought and considering the alternatives. The train filled the tunnel; there wasn't half a foot on either side to allow them to get past it. They had no idea where the tunnel led, so backtracking and trying to find another way in was out of the question. Which means we're going to have to go through it, Riley thought.

He didn't like that idea. Didn't like it at all. They'd be penned up inside, their mobility and tactical options greatly reduced should they encounter something dangerous. It was the perfect set-up for a trap and he didn't want to think what it would be like encountering those shadow creatures in such a dark and confined space.

But what choice did they have? Short of calling it quits, there wasn't any other option. They'd have to go straight through it and hope for the best.

From where he stood he could see that the two wide windows that fronted the driver's compartment had been smashed. The window frames were big enough to allow Duncan and he to enter through them without too much difficulty. Once inside, they could make their way down the length of the train and hope that they could find a way out in the rear car. Then, and only then, would he call the rest of the team forward.

It wasn't a great plan, but it was good enough. He turned slightly so that he could see the others behind him and then used hand signals to indicate his decision. Cade nodded his agreement and as Riley cautiously began moving closer to the train Duncan stepped up beside him.

They crept forward and took position on either side of the sloping front of the engine car. On a signal from Riley, both of them stood and shone their lights inside the car.

It was empty.

The door at the back of the engine compartment was also closed, something Riley was pleased to see. The door would give them a few seconds of warning should something react violently to their presence.

While Duncan covered him, Riley reached up and used the butt of his weapon to clean out any lingering pieces of glass from the window frame. Then slinging his weapon over his shoulder, he boosted himself up and through the window into the train car.

The compartment was small, containing just enough room for a set of manual controls and a small bench seat for the engineer to sit on. Safety glass littered the floor. The good news was that the car was as empty as it had appeared to be from the tracks below.

Better yet, nothing came charging through the door after him.

He signaled to Duncan and covered the door while the other sergeant climbed into the car. Duncan slid up next to the door, taking care to keep his head below the level of the window so that he wouldn't be framed in it as a target, and put his hand on the handle.

Riley centered his weapon on the door and nodded to Duncan.

The other man pulled the door open and Riley shone his light down the center of the other car.

It was a standard tram car, with bench seats lining the walls and several floor to ceiling poles placed throughout the space. There was a door at the far end of the car, leading to the next one in the chain. Duncan slipped through the door, quickly cycling from left to right, assuring that no one was hiding against the wall on either side of the door.

Satisfied that the car was empty they moved to the far end and repeated the procedure, this time switching positions.

Finding that car empty, they moved through it toward the next. Halfway across the car they encountered their first problem. Riley's light faded and then winked out.

"This is no time for jokes," Duncan whispered from behind him.

Riley shook his head. "I'm not joking," he whispered back. He gently smacked the side of the light a few times with his palm, but it didn't do any good. The light stayed dark. "Looks like I've got some kind of mechanical failure. You'd best take point."

The two of them changed positions. Duncan's light was working fine and so they continued moving forward until they reached the door to the next car. Riley stepped up and placed himself to one side, his hand on the door handle, being careful to avoid crossing directly in front of the window, just as Duncan had done three times before this. Duncan stood in front of but a few feet back from the door, the muzzle of his HK MP5 pointed at the center of the door.

“Ready?”

Duncan nodded.

The other man pulled the door open.

At that same moment, the light on the end of Duncan’s weapon winked out and the two men were plunged into total darkness. “Shit!” the big sergeant swore, his uncharacteristic expression letting his partner know how unnerved he was. The tightness of the car itself, the constant tension from not knowing what was around the next corner, the unusual nature of the enemy that they were hunting, all of it combined to make both men feel off their usual game.

And the darkness did nothing to help the situation.

But the darkness didn’t hold sway for long. Before either man could do anything more to react, they were faced with a new problem.

In the car ahead of them, a thick greenish glow began to pulse from somewhere in the back, illuminating the figures that were moving toward them down the center aisle.

“Contact!” Duncan shouted into the tactical mike, alerting not only his partner but the rest of Echo still waiting outside the train. Then he and Riley opened fire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STORM FRONT

Captain Mason paced within the confines of the command center. It had been two hours since heâ€™d received that last, garbled transmission from Echo and he was growing more concerned as the silence continued. Yet despite his unease, he knew everything was going according to plan. They had expected to lose contact once Echo entered the base proper and the self-imposed deadline set by Commander Williams was still several hours away.

Still, Mason worried.

This entire operation made him uncomfortable. From Father Vargasâ€™ sudden appearance out of the desert like some kind of Old Testament prophet to the strange phantom-like creatures that had slaughtered his entire recon team, heâ€™d constantly been playing catch up, struggling for understanding in the aftermath of each event rather than proactively facing the issues head-on. He always seemed to be one step behind and that was anathema for a professional soldier of his caliber.

He had to admit that heâ€™d been surprised by Knight Commander Williams. The manâ€™s reputation preceded him and heâ€™d been expecting a maverick that played fast and loose with the rules. Williams had proved to be the exact opposite. He was careful in his planning, at least insofar as the situation allowed, and seemed genuinely concerned for the welfare of the men under his command. Heâ€™d expected a man with an axe to grind and what heâ€™d gotten instead was the consummate soldier that approached a particularly dangerous mission with skill and planning.

But Masonâ€™s confidence in Commander Williams still wasnâ€™t enough to calm his rapidly fraying nerves. Standing around not doing anything had never been one of his strong suits.

The door mid-way down the length of the command center opened and one his men stuck his head inside the door.

â€œSir? I think youâ€™d better see this!â€

Pvt. Chang quickly ducked back outside the command center and Mason had no choice but to follow.

He was just in time.

The storm over the base had been expanding ever since Echo Team had entered the grounds, pushing outward from the twister that had spawned it toward the edges of the facility. Now, as Mason watched, it reached the southern most portion of the perimeter, the side closest to the command center. It drifted across the fence line and then abruptly stopped as if it had hit a physical barrier.

â€œItâ€™s done that several times now,â€ Chang informed him, without taking his eyes off the storm itself. â€œItâ€™s as if there is something in the fence line keeping it from expanding beyond that point.â€

There was a strange feeling in the air, the kind that Mason had known as a boy in Alabama, when the twisters would come out of the darkness like avenging angels, all brute force and power, as apt to take you and yours as it was to simply pass you by, leaving you unharmed. That feeling would get you just before the twisters would come, pricking at the nerves and dancing along the spine, the bodyâ€™s way of saying ITâ€™S COMING AND ITâ€™S GONNA BE BAD.

That same green and silver lightning theyâ€™d been watching for days was still there, flashing among the black clouds like a frenzied animal looking for a way out of the cage that held it; the colors alone strange enough to send a chill down Captain Masonâ€™s back. As he watched, a particularly vicious array struck the main gate in several places, the force of the bolt blasting it from its hinges and sending it cart-wheeling across the desert floor until it disappeared in the distance into the darkness of the storm itself.

Chang was looking at his watch and counting beneath his breath, â€œShould be!â€ just aboutâ€now!â€

Thunder boomed, a rumbling cacophony that pounded the landscape like the crash of a hammer on an anvil. Mason was forced to put his hands over his ears, but he didnâ€™t take his eyes off the storm and afterwards he was glad he had not, for he never would have believed what happened unless heâ€™d witnessed it himself. The storm rapidly sucked back in on itself, the clouds rolling backward like a video of an explosion run in reverse, while the thunder continued to pound at his ears with a fury of its own.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the fury died down and silence returned. The storm was back where it had been before Echoâ€™s incursion into the base, compacted into a smaller set of storm clouds that hovered over the center of the installation around the base of that odd column of darkness. Even the lightning seemed to have taken a break, for Mason could only catch a flicker of its presence within the depths of the clouds themselves.

Mason stared, astonished.

â€œWhat now?â€ he asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

â€œIf it follows its previous pattern, it will take a few minutes for it to build up enough momentum to make another attempt,â€ Chang replied.

The captain knew instinctively that Chang was right. The storm, if thatâ€™s what it truly was, would keep trying, would keep pounding against whatever strange barrier kept it locked in place until it managed to find a way to free itself.

Then things would rapidly go from bad to worse.

“Keep your eyes on the situation, Private, and let me know the second anything changes.”

“Yes, sir!”

Turning away, Mason thought he heard the storm growl back at him in response.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A WATCHER IN THE DARKNESS

“Cease fire! Cease fire!”

Cade’s voice could be heard clearly even over the din of the gunfire and the two sergeants reacted to his command, pulling their fingers from the triggers and lowering the muzzles of their weapons. In front of them, the “enemy” was lost in the darkness, the mysterious strobe light suddenly winking out with the arrival of the rest of the team.

Cade pushed between Duncan and Riley, staring ahead at the strange tableau, lit now by only the thin beam at the end of his weapon. “Lights!” he called, “we need some light up here.”

Flashlights were handed forward. In their high powered beams, the identity of their assailants became immediately obvious.

It was D Squad, 3rd Platoon.

Jackson’s missing teammates.

Cade stepped forward, moving amongst the bodies. Closer examination showed that they had been tied upright to the posts that served as handholds throughout the train car, their arms extended and secured to the horizontal crossbar. They’d been tied so tightly that not even the onslaught of Echo’s bullets had torn them loose. With the strobe light flashing behind them, their positioning had given the illusion that the bodies were lurching forward.

It was an eerie spectacle, shocking in its blatant use of the dead. Just what had their opponent hoped to achieve with such a display? What was the value of dragging the bodies down here into the dark and arranging them like life-size puppets that no one would ever see?

Unless, of course, it had known that they were coming.

“Freakin’ weird sense of humor,” Ortega said quietly from the back of the car and the comment struck Cade between the eyes. Could that be it? Could this have all been some kind of a sick joke? An attempt to get under their skin and play with their emotions?

There were nine bodies in all, which meant that the entire platoon was now accounted for, if you included Jackson. Cade shone his light on the various corpses, searching for one in particular. When he found him, he pulled his knife and carefully cut the ropes holding him in place. By the time he had the man free, Duncan and Riley were there beside him, helping him lower the body gently to the floor of the tram car.

The nametag on the front of the man’s uniform read Stoddard. From his review of 3rd Platoon’s personnel files, Cade knew this was the lieutenant that had been in charge of the patrol. He’d been young, 28 or 29, if memory served, but you wouldn’t know it looking at him now. His face was shrunken, collapsed in on itself, the once smooth skin now

grey and wrinkled. His eyes bulged from their sockets and his mouth remained frozen in an "O" of surprise or fear, Cade wasn't sure which. Even stranger was the fact that the man's hair, once jet black, had now gone completely white.

A quick glance at the rest of the bodies showed that they, too, were in a similar condition.

"What do you think, boss?" asked Riley, while keeping watch on the shadows around them. "Could it be a wight? Or maybe a nest of Chiang Shih?"

Sitting back on his heels, Cade shook his head. "There hasn't been a wight sighting in the continental U.S. for more than fifty years. Besides, this isn't the right environment for them. I'd be inclined to think it might be the Chiang Shi," he said, referring to the vampire-like creatures of Chinese origin, "except for the fact that the eyes are intact and they're always one of the first things to go."

"Which leaves us back at square one," said Olsen.

Turning his attention back to Stoddard, Cade searched the man for injuries. There were a variety of bullet wounds, but from the lack of blood it was clear that all of them were post-mortem. Duncan and Riley's handiwork, no doubt. But aside from these, that was it. There were no other obvious injuries that could have caused the man's death aside from the strange condition of his face. It was as if the very life force had been sucked out of him.

What could do that to a man? They'd already eliminated the known candidates. Could it be a new species, something they'd never encountered before? He was tempted to take off his gloves to try and use his Sight, that psychometric power given to him during his encounter with the Adversary several years ago, but knew it would be pointless. The bodies had been down here for over forty-eight hours; anything residual information the corpse might have held was now long since out of reach.

Movement to his left caught Cade's attention. Duncan had drawn his combat knife and was moving toward the rest of the bodies, seemingly intent on cutting them down as well. Cade stood quickly and grabbed his arm, stopping him. "We don't have time," he said. "We've got to keep moving."

"But we can't just leave them here like this!" the young sergeant protested quietly.

Cade gently turned the other man around so that he was facing away from the corpses, forcing him to pay attention to what was being said. "We have to. I don't have the manpower to watch over the bodies and we can't spare the time to take them back through the tunnel to the surface." Duncan opened his mouth to protest but Cade shook his head, silencing him. "It's only temporary, Duncan. I promise you. We've got to focus on the mission, to complete what we came here to do, but we'll be back to give these guys the proper respect and care that they deserve. You have my word."

Reluctantly, Duncan nodded. He knew the commander was right; they didn't have any other choice. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

Conscious that the dead men had been fellow knights, Cade ordered Olsen to collect their signet rings. He would turn them over to Captain Mason as evidence of their fate, just in case something happened to the bodies before they could return.

Once that had been accomplished, the team continued their advance, moving through four more cars without incident before coming to the end of the train and exiting out through the service door in the rear.

The tunnel stretched on before them in the darkness and they continued on their way, this time with Olsen and Cade on point.

* * *

Behind them, in the darkness of the tram car, one of the slumped "bodies" sat up and got to its feet. It walked to the end of the train and stared out into the darkness of the tunnel in the direction Echo Team had gone moments before. As it did the flesh of its face began to twist and turn, features forming and then fading away again only to be replaced by a new incarnation seconds later, the skin melting and reforming like toffee in the hot summer sun, until at last it made up its mind and a new face emerged in place of the old. Two eyes, one steel grey, the other milky white, stared out of a face made of harsh planes and sharp angles. A wide band of angry scar tissue wrapped around the right side from the ear to the chin and was only partially covered by the long hair that covered the top of its head.

Satisfied with his new appearance, the lord of Eden stepped down off the train and began to follow the men of Echo Team back into the darkness of its temporary lair.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ENTERING EDEN

Echo emerged from the tunnel and found themselves in another underground station. The platform here was identical to the one theyâ€™d left behind at the other end, except that the shaft back up to the surface had been replaced by a steel security door. Climbing up out of the tunnel, the team advanced to take a closer look and as they did so, they could see that there was an inscription in Hebrew written above the entrance.

â€œNow the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man that he had formed,â€ Cade read, translating for some of the others. While everyone in the Order was familiar with Latin, ancient Hebrew was another story. â€œGenesis 2:8.â€ The words had been cut deep into the steel with a blowtorch and were clearly a recent addition, but whether theyâ€™d been placed there by Vargas and his team when theyâ€™d taken over the facility or after the trouble had started Cade didnâ€™t know.

He considered the inscription. He was familiar with the verse and those immediately around it, a key section of the Creation story, but he didnâ€™t understand their relevance here. Had Vargas considered this his Eden, his garden of earthly delights? Or did it have more literal connotations, maybe suggesting that he considered what he was doing here his calling from God? Had it even been Vargas who had put it there? There was no way of knowing at this point, but still, Cade was troubled by it. The verse made him uncomfortable, though he couldnâ€™t grasp why.

Putting it out of his mind for the time being, he turned to more practical matters. A numeric keypad was placed to the right of the door at chest height. A common sight at high security installations, both civilian and military, the unit was designed to provide limited access to the facility by requiring the entry of a nine digit password. The number of possible combinations was astronomical. If the person seeking entrance knew the proper code, the door would open easily for them. If not, they could grow old and die before they chanced on the right combination. Without the proper code, it was a dead end.

He experimentally tried a few buttons but the adjacent screen did not light up or acknowledge his efforts in any way. There didnâ€™t seem to be any power running to the unit. Stepping back, Cade gestured to Olsen. â€œSee if you can run a bypass.â€

The sergeant pulled a multi-purpose tool off his belt and quickly gained access to the guts of the unit through its maintenance panel. With the wiring exposed, it took only a few minutes for him to splice a handheld computer into the lines. When he flipped the switch, the computer began running through all the possible numeric combinations. The viewscreen next to the keypad glowed red as the numbers churned past, one after another, until a nine digit combin-

ation had been selected. The screen turned green and something inside the door gave a sharp click.

“That should do it,” Olsen said, as he removed the computer and stashed it away in his belt pack. “Somebody give me a hand.” Using the edge of his combat knife, he pried apart the twin doors, creating a slight opening between them. With Chen’s help he was then able to shove the doors back along their tracks.

Inside it was dark. The air that drifted out to meet them was thick and musty, like a tomb that had been sealed up for centuries rather than the few weeks that it had actually been, letting them know that the air pumps had stopped working along with the electricity.

Olsen shone his light inside, revealing a short corridor that stretched ahead of them for roughly thirty feet before it ended at an elevator. The elevator doors were partially open.

With a nod from Cade, Olsen took point and advanced down the corridor. Riley stayed close on his heels. The two of them stopped about ten feet away from the open elevator doors and, as Cade watched, lowered themselves into a crouch and examined the situation before them. When they were ready, they quickly closed the distance to the open shaft and flattened themselves against either side. As one they spun into the doorway, Riley flashing his light into the darkness above while Olsen did the same below.

After a moment or two, Cade heard Riley’s voice in his ear. “Clear,” he said, and half a second later Duncan echoed him.

At their signal Cade moved up, the rest of the team behind him. Once he got closer he could see that the elevator doors were almost completely open, only a thin lip of each door showing on either side, and there was enough room for his two men to stand in the doorway side by side. Their lights revealed the shaft beyond to be empty. The car itself was four levels below them, at what appeared to be the bottom of the shaft, and the tangle of cables that covered its top like a nest of snakes at least assured them that it wouldn’t be headed up the shaft anytime soon. At this distance, it was impossible to tell if the car was intact or not.

“What do you think?” Cade asked, looking up and down the shaft.

Olsen was the first to answer. “The power plant’s bound to be on the lower floor,” he said. “We’re going to need to get the power up and running in order to cover this place properly, so I vote we head down.”

Cade looked over at his exec.

“I agree,” said Riley. “It’d be a damn sight easier if we had some lights. We’re also gonna need to access the computer system and personnel logs, too, once we find them, and we can’t do that while the power’s out either.”

Cade thought it over for a moment and then nodded his head. It made sense and gave them a logical way to conduct the search, bottom to top. He quickly gave orders for Davis to

guard the approach while Riley and Olsen got into position by the shaft. They would serve as climbing anchors for the rest of the team. Both men removed reinforced nylon ropes from their packs, tied one end off on built-in belaying devices on their harnesses, and settled down on either side of the doorway, their feet braced against the wall. The other end of each rope was then tossed down the elevator shaft, where they came to rest on the roof of the elevator car below.

“Chen. Ortega. You’re up,” said Cade.

The two men slung their weapons over their shoulders and grabbed a hold of the rope. They swiftly moved over the edge and, feet firmly planted against the wall of the elevator shaft, and began walking down the rope. Cade stood between them, his weapon at the ready, watching over their descent. When they reached the roof of the elevator car, Chen carefully tested it to see whether the car would hold his weight. When he was confident it would, he gave two tugs on the rope, released it and stepped to the side. Beside him, Ortega did the same.

“Chen, give me a sitrep,” Cade said via the radio.

“Looks good, Commander. The elevator car is intact and there’s an access panel in the roof. We’re opening it up now.”

Cade watched from above as they pried back the access panel and quickly checked out the interior of the elevator car. Ortega disappeared inside the car while Chen covered him and then the latter followed suit. Chen’s voice came back at him across the tactical channel a moment later. “It’s clear, Commander. We’ve got the interior door open and are holding position outside the car.”

“Roger that. Second team coming down.” Cade turned and looked back. “Duncan. Callavechio. You’re next.”

The process was repeated twice more, until only Riley remained at the top of the shaft. Fashioning an anchor with a couple of slings and a locking carabiner, he secured himself to the line and threw the other end of the rope down the shaft. Turning his back to the open shaft, he grasped the line and rappelled quickly downward. When he reached the top of the elevator car, he stepped clear and then pulled sharply on one side of the rope. The loose end snaked free of the anchor and came tumbling down to where he waited below. After that it took only a moment to swiftly wrap it up and stash it back in his pack, ready for the next time he needed it.

When he was finished he joined the others in the corridor outside the elevator. To the best of their knowledge, they were on the lowest floor of the facility. Ahead of them, at the other end of the hallway, was a door, which led to the base’s physical plant.

The roar of running water hit them the moment they stepped into the room. A large generator and operating station stood on one side. On the other was a concrete platform with a waist-high railing. The platform extended out over an underground river, the source of the noise that filled the room. A large pipe ran from the base of the generator, across the room, and down the side of the platform into the water below.

Following the pipe, which he guessed was a conduit for cables, Cade stepped over to the railing and looked down to find an electric turbine suspended just above the water's surface. He had little doubt that when the turbine was lowered into the roaring water, the resulting electrical charge would be sufficient to fire the generators, which in turn would supply power to the entire base. The river itself was, for all practical purposes, inexhaustible, and therefore a brilliant solution to what might have been a difficult problem.

Cade's radio crackled. "You'd better have a look at this boss," he heard Riley say in his ear and he turned to find his exec waving him over to the control station by the master generator where Riley and Olsen awaited him.

Cade quickly joined them. "What have we got?" he asked aloud, and then quickly switched back to using the tactical radio when he realized he'd have to shout to have them hear him over the roar of the river.

In response, Olsen waved his hand at the control panel. From the look of things it had been repeatedly smashed with a heavy object, the various dials and levels either crushed or bent from the impacts. "Near as I can tell, someone simply took a sledge hammer to the thing. Bashed it up pretty good, too."

"No way to fix it then?" asked Cade.

Olsen grinned. "I didn't say that. They pounded the hell out of the main generator, so that's toast, but they didn't do that much damage to either of the emergency backup units." He pointed off behind the primary generator, to an alcove that Cade hadn't noticed. "Give me a couple of hours and I'm pretty sure I can have at least one of them up and running. These old generators are pretty tough."

"Good. Grab whoever you think can help and get to work." Cade informed the rest of the team that they would be taking a short break and settled down to wait.

It took closer to three hours thanks to the lack of proper tools, but in the end Sergeant Olsen was as good as his word. After ordering everyone to stand clear, he threw the master switch on the control panel and then stepped back to watch with the rest of them. A high pitched whine filled the room and then the turbine lowered itself into the river where it began to turn, once, twice, three times, each successive revolution spilling more and more electrical current into the generator, until the turbine was churning along so quickly that it couldn't be followed with the naked eye.

The lamps on the ceiling above flickered and then blossomed to life. Light returned to the Eden facility for the first time in three weeks. It was dim light, yes, but light nonetheless and Cade knew that every member of his team was glad to see it. The light would help push back the darkness and make searching the rest of the facility that much easier. The sight of it made him realize just how little heâ€™d been looking forward to hunting that shadow thing in the dark.

Olsen walked over to him, wiping his greasy hands on a rag heâ€™d found somewhere as he did so. â€œWithout the power of the main generator, the emergency lights are the best I can do.â€

Cade clapped him on the back and let a grin spread across his face. â€œTrust me, Iâ€™ll take it. Good work. Rileyâ€™s got some grub waiting for you. We move out in twenty.â€

As his sergeant walked away, Cade looked up at the ceiling and considered the levels carved out of the rock above. Something was waiting for them up there, something dark and dangerous. He could feel it, watching, waiting, like a spider hunkered down in the dank recesses of its web, patiently biding its time before the arrival of the fly.

But this time, the fly had come prepared to route out the spider. And it had teeth of its own.

â€œReady or not, here we come,â€ Cade said softly to the ceiling above him, felt his pulse quicken at the thought, and then turned back to prepare his men for what lay ahead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FIRST CONTACT

Behind a door on the other side of the generator room, a staircase led upward. Ortega had found it during the initial sweep of the room and it was to this that Cade led his men when it was time to resume their investigation. He was uncomfortable with the confining nature of the stairwell, but it was a damn sight better than trusting the elevators to carry them to the upper floors.

There were four sets of steps between each floor with a small platform between each opposing staircase. The dim lighting allowed them to see what was ahead of them clearly for the first time since entering the underground section of the base and for that Cade was grateful. The stairs disappeared upward as far as he could see, which suggested that they extended all the way to the top floor of the facility. That posed an interesting tactical problem for him, as he wasn't sure how he was going to keep anything from slipping down the stairs passed them while they explored each level. Posting a guard at the stairwell was the likely solution, but he was against leaving any one man on his own and that would mean the point team would be two men short. Still, it didn't look like he had much of a choice.

He sent the team upward in groups of two, with a few feet between each group. Olsen and Riley went up first, with the latter in the lead. He and Duncan followed next. Behind them came Chen and Gardner. Davis and Ortega brought up the rear.

They climbed the stairs to the second floor without incident. Cade contacted Davis and Ortega over the tactical channel. "I want the two of you to stay here and keep an eye on the stairwell. If you get any kind of movement, let us know immediately. I'll let you know when we've secured the level and have you rejoin us then."

With that issue resolved, Cade turned back to the others and gave the signal to advance.

Knowing the enemy was still out there somewhere, they came through the door leading to level two as if it were a hot entry, moving fast with guns drawn. The lights, dim though they were, made it much easier for them to rule out potential threats and it wasn't long before the calls of "clear" reached Cade over the tactical channel, letting him know that there weren't any immediate problems that had to deal with. After that, Echo began to make a slow, detailed search of the level before them.

The first six doors on either side of the corridor led to a series of storerooms, each one filled with an amazing variety of materials, twelve storerooms in all. It was as if Vargas had believed they would be down here for some time and wanted to limit contact with the surface as much as possible. Cloth, lumber, dried foods, medical equipment, potting soil, plastics; you name it and it was there, packed up and stored for later use. Most of it was in marked crates

and after verifying that the markings matched the contents on the first few in each room, Cade ordered that the crates themselves be left alone. They gave no real indication of what the facility had been designed for and they didn't help them uncover the nature of their enemy, so as far as he was concerned they were superfluous.

The corridor turned left after the storerooms and Echo found itself standing at one end of a massive kitchen area. Large preparation stations ran through the center of the room, with racks full of shiny steel pots hanging above them, and a row of ovens stretched down the left-hand wall. On the right, four refrigeration units stood next to the entrance to an industrial size walk-in freezer.

“All right, you know the drill. Top to bottom and let's be swift about it.”

The men of Echo moved into the kitchen.

* * *

As the others began hunting through the pantry and cabinets, Duncan stepped up to the freezer. Cold air wafted out when he opened the door, surprising him. The power hadn't been restored for that long; there was no way the freezer could have gotten this cold in such a short time.

The place had obviously been stocked for the long haul. Large steel shelving units stood on either side of the central aisle and many of these were covered with foodstuffs, from large bags of vegetables to frozen turkeys. To Duncan, it looked like enough food to feed a good sized group for several months.

He grabbed a carton off the nearest shelf and used it to prop open the door. Satisfied that he wouldn't be accidentally locked inside, he cautiously moved deeper into the space.

If the power had been turned off for any length of time, most of the contents here would have defrosted and begun to rot by now. Duncan could immediately see that wasn't the case. Water dripped off many of the packages, pooling on the floor beneath his feet in wide puddles, but the few items he touched were still mostly frozen.

Which meant whoever had trashed the generator had done so only a few hours before their arrival.

The thought was not a welcome one, for it was another clue that pointed to the fact that their arrival had been anticipated.

Past the shelving there was a large section of the freezer serving as a meat locker, with more than a dozen slabs of beef hanging from hooks in the ceiling. Here, too, the puddles were forming, but the beef was still coated in many places by a thick sheen of frost.

Just beyond the meat, Duncan found the first body.

The man had been in his mid-fifties, with a wide doughy face and only a thin wave of hair covering his scalp. He had pulled himself into a corner but kept his face turned toward the

door; as if afraid something would follow him inside. His eyes were open wide and staring; Duncan could see ice crystals still formed over their surfaces.

He was dressed in a blue jumpsuit and had black athletic shoes on his feet. On his right shoulder was a patch showing a green and vibrant earth over which the word EDEN was superimposed. Duncan couldn't see any wounds on the body, nor where there any bloodstains on the floor nearby. It looked as if the man had simply frozen to death.

A quick call over the radio and seconds later Cade and Riley had joined him beside the body.

"You haven't moved him at all?" Cade asked, as he moved around the body, studying it carefully.

"No, haven't touched him. That's just how I found him."

Riley pulled a digital camera out of a pouch on his belt and took a couple of shots, documenting the find and gathering evidence that they might need later to reconstruct what had happened here.

Once he was finished Cade squatted down in front of the body and stared at it for several long moments and then, after checking to be certain his gloves were firmly in place, reached forward and tried to move it from its position against the wall, without any success. "Give me a hand," he said and Sgt. Riley stepped forward. Between the two of them they were able to peel the body away from the wall to which it had become frozen and lay it gently on the floor. Cade then began going through the man's pockets, looking for identification or anything that might tell them who he was or what he was doing here, but came up empty.

"Ever seen that patch before?" Duncan asked and both of his teammates shook their heads.

"Considering the quote we found back at the entrance, I'm guessing it's the name of the project or of the facility itself," Cade replied absently, his attention still occupied with the corpse in front of him.

Riley snorted. "Yeah, a real garden of paradise. And this one apparently comes with its own serpent, too. Why am I not surprised?"

Cade stood suddenly and walked back over to the freezer entrance. Putting his foot against the carton Duncan had placed there, he kicked it free and watched the door swing shut in his face.

"Hey!" Duncan cried, rushing over. "You've locked us in!"

"No, I didn't," Cade said without turning and reached out and opened the door from the inside to illustrate his point. "See?"

"Oh," Duncan replied sheepishly and then hesitated, turning back to look at the corpse behind them with a puzzled expression on his face. "Wait a minute," he said.

“If the door isn’t locked from the inside, why didn’t he just get up and leave?”

No one had an answer and they remained lost in their individual thoughts for several long moments until Riley voiced the question that was hanging unspoken in the air between them.

“What makes a man so scared that he would rather remain in here and freeze to death than face whatever was on the other side of those doors?”

“I don’t know, but I think its time that we find out, don’t you?” Cade said. He propped the door open again and then, turning, walked back over to the body. Kneeling beside it, he pulled the flesh colored gloves he wore off both his hands.

Riley said a few words into his throat mike and while Duncan was too far away to hear what was said, he figured he knew the gist of it. Their commander was about to use his Gift and their exec was letting the other men in the unit know that they needed to be extra vigilant while they were otherwise occupied in here.

Duncan had seen Cade use his so-called Gift shortly after joining the Echo Team. As he understood it, the commander had received a few extraordinary powers in his confrontation with the supernatural entity known as the Adversary. His ability to look into and actually travel through the Beyond, that purgatory-like realm between the lands of the living and those of the dead, was one. This was another. Following that fateful encounter, Cade had lost the ability to touch anything without picking up psychic impressions left behind by whoever had last touched the object or what that person had last seen. Psychometry, it was called. Because of it, the Knight Commander was forced to wear thin gloves at all times to protect him from accidental, and unwanted, readings.

The last time Duncan had been present when Cade had used his Gift, he’d ended up with a chunk bitten out of his arm when the commander had lost control and succumbed to the psychic residue he was channeling. This time, Duncan made sure he was standing off to one side, out of reach.

He needn’t have worried however; after laying his hands on the corpse for a time, Cade sat back and shook his head. “Nothing. He’s either been dead too long or the cold is interfering somehow. I’m not picking up anything.”

Unnoticed, Duncan breathed a sigh of relief. Despite knowing that Cade used his gifts for the good of the Order and that if he could, he would be rid of them in a heartbeat, Duncan was still creeped out whenever they were used around him. There were some things in Echo that were just going to take some getting used to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WATCHER IN THE DARKNESS

The rest of the team had found nothing of further interest within the kitchen area and so it was time to move on. There was a bank of elevators on the far side of the room just past the freezer, but having already determined that they would stay away from them as a matter of course, Cade ordered the team to regroup with Davis and Callavechio at the first staircase and resume their journey upward.

Olsen had point, with Duncan as back up, and he had just turned to begin the climb upward when something caught his attention.

Above them, something moved in the dim light.

Heâ€™d only caught it out of the corner of his eye and so he waited a moment, watching, wanting to be sure.

There! High above him a human-shaped figure was leaning over the railing, watching them. It was just a darker shadow against the general blackness above, but it was clearly human.

Olsen turned to face Duncan and stepped close, as if he were intending to hand him something. Using his body to shield what he was doing, he held his right hand in front of his chest and jerked a thumb upward, indicating that there was something on the staircase above.

â€œHow far?â€™ Duncan mouthed.

â€œTwo flights, maybe three,â€™ Olsen mouthed back.

The other man nodded, knowing without needing to ask that there was only one choice in front of them.

They needed to catch whoever it was.

Duncan flashed a series of hand signals to the man behind him, spreading the word, and then turned back to face his partner.

Olsen held up one finger, then two. On three, he shouted â€œContact!â€™ into the radio and turned to charge up the stairwell, Duncan following close on his heels. Between their own footfalls Olsen could hear the slap of bare feet on concrete above them as whatever it was took flight.

â€œItâ€™s moving,â€™ he said into the radio and then redoubled his efforts, not wanting it to escape. Behind him, he could hear the rest of Echo Team following as Cade calmly sent orders across the tactical link, getting them into position to best support each other in case it came down to a firefight.

Olsen felt every step pass beneath his feet, his senses hyperaware as his adrenaline kicked in and his body went into combat mode. His heart pounded and he could hear his own breathing echoing in his ears. His hands gripped his MP5 firmly, ready to bring it to bear on the first target that presented itself if it came to that.

His boots hit the first landing and he turned the corner without slowing, heading up the opposite flight. Glancing upward, he saw with dismay that not only had they not closed any of the distance between them, but that their target had actually increased the gap and was now almost at the entrance to the level above.

There was no doubt in his mind.

Nothing human moved that fast.

“We’re losing it!” he shouted to Duncan and put everything he had into climbing those stairs, pulling away from his companion in an effort to shrink their quarry’s lead on them.

Two flights.

Three.

As he hit the final turn he could see that the landing above was blocked by another pile of debris, like the one they’d encountered in the south staircase, except this time there was an opening in the barrier. As he watched, whatever it was they were chasing slipped through that hole and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

There was no way he was going to follow without knowing more about what was on the other side of that hole.

The chase had come to an end; they’d lost.

When the rest of the team arrived, Olsen explained what had happened.

“You made the right choice,” said Cade, and although he knew that the Knight Commander was correct, it still bothered Olsen that their prey had gotten away.

“What now?” Chen asked, eyeing the barricade before them.

It was similar to what they had encountered on the south staircase, a jumbled pile of whatever furniture and equipment seemed to be at hand. Unlike the last one, however, this one appeared to have been designed to prevent access to the third level and seemed to have spilled out into the staircase itself by accident. It would have been an easy enough task to climb the outer edge and continue upward on the stairs had they wanted to do so. Their quarry had gone through the hole before them and standard operating procedure said that you never left an enemy at your back, particularly one you knew next to nothing about, if you could help it. Cade was going to order them through the barricade; Olsen just knew it.

“I don’t like the idea of that thing running around in the darkness behind us. It went through that hole for a reason and right now I’m a bit tired of constantly being in the dark

about whatâ€™s going on,â€ said Cade, confirming Olsenâ€™s hunch. â€œItâ€™s time to step things up. Weâ€™re going in after it.â€

Cade would go first, with Riley playing rear-guard. Once they were all through the barrier they would form up into their respective squads, ready for whatever might be waiting for them on the other side.

Squatting down, Cade carefully examined the opening in front of him. It looked like something had burrowed its way through the pile of debris; the opening was roughly circular and the tunnel beyond maintained its shape and size for at least several feet. He could see a faint sheen of light coming from the other side, so he knew the tunnel wasnâ€™t very long. It was easily wide enough to admit a man and Cade knew he could get through it without much difficulty, though he didnâ€™t like the idea that heâ€™d have several hundred pounds of additional debris hanging over his head while he made the trip. A thick, cloying stench hung about the entire barricade, a stench Cade recognized, and he knew it wouldnâ€™t be pleasant on the other side.

No sense in worrying about what couldnâ€™t be helped though.

â€œReady?â€ Cade asked and Riley nodded. Taking a deep breath, Cade entered the tunnel.

Five minutes later he radioed to his executive officer that he was clear and Riley nodded to Olsen, indicating it was his turn.

One by one the rest of the team slipped through the hole in the barricade and emerged into the mouth of hell.

What they saw there made them all but forget the shadowy form they had been following, which perhaps had been its very intention.

Once a cafeteria, the room beyond was now an abattoir, with blood and limbs and bodies scattered throughout like so much discarded trash. Several of the dead lay fallen against the interior side of the barricade itself, their positions making it obvious that they had died in defense of the breach. The members of Echo were forced to clamber over them to get inside the room, an experience none of them wanted to repeat in the near future.

The place stank of decomposition. The bodies were grotesquely swollen, so much so that it was often hard to tell if the victims were male or female, their facial and body features bulging and indistinguishable from corpse to corpse. All of them were dressed in the same blue jumpsuits found on the first body, complete with the Eden patch, confirming Cadeâ€™s earlier guess that it was the standard uniform for those involved in the project.

The team moved cautiously into the room, knowing in the back of their minds that theyâ€™d been led to this place intentionally. It was immediately obvious that the roomâ€™s previous inhabitants had never stood a chance against whatever it was theyâ€™d made a

stand against. Many of them had weapons in hand or lying nearby, but the vast majority of those were nothing more dangerous than sharpened kitchen knives and the occasional utility hatchet. There were only two handguns amongst them all and one of those was a snub-nosed revolver that looked like it had seen its better days thirty years before.

Clearly the weapons had done them little good, yet they had stood their ground and faced whatever it was rather than retreat to some other section of the complex. That suggested to Olsen that theyâ€™d known they hadnâ€™t had any choice; fight now or fight later, it didnâ€™t make any difference. Like the man theyâ€™d found frozen in the freezer, this group had been just as resigned to their fate apparently, though they had at least chosen to go down fighting.

Why hadnâ€™t they called for help? Olsen wondered. What hadnâ€™t they abandoned the base and made a run for it across the desert? It would have been difficult but certainly not impossible. Vargas had made it. It just didnâ€™t make any sense that they would have chosen to face off against an obviously superior foe.

His musings were interrupted by a call from Ortega, who had found something of interest on the other side of the room. Olsen walked over and as he drew close he could see that it was a manâ€™s body, spread-eagled on a table. Unlike the rest of the bodies in the room, this one had been methodically dissected rather than torn haphazardly limb from limb. The manâ€™s chest had been split down the middle and then carefully opened up. His internal organs had been removed; they were all now neatly arranged at the manâ€™s feet, as if briefly studied and then put to one side for later consideration.

â€œWhy would someone do this?â€ Ortega asked and in his voice Olsen could hear the hours of tension beginning to take their toll. Death was one thing; being dissected afterwards was entirely another.

Olsen could understand how he felt. First the odd tableau in the subway car and now this, both events seemed to be designed for maximum shock value, as if their architect was trying to keep them off balance and uneasy rather than focused on their investigation.

They gave the room a thorough search, including the bodies of the dead. Afterward all they had to show for it were a few magnetic passcards, like those used as hotel room keys. No one them were marked and there was no way of knowing what they were for, but Olsen figured it couldnâ€™t hurt to take them along in case they found a use for them later.

Riley passed through the room with his digital camera, taking pictures of the dead in case they could use recognition software later to reconstruct what they had looked like, and once he was finished Cade led the group away from the carnage in the cafeteria to the rear doors on the far side of the room.

Olsen breathed a sigh of relief as he passed into the hallway beyond, happy to be away from the dead and the atmosphere surrounding them.

The corridor was bisected by three others, each of which had a series of rooms on both sides of the hall. Echo searched them one by one, conscious that their enemy had passed this way before them and might be waiting in ambush anywhere up ahead.

The rooms were nothing more than a small living area with a desk, nightstand and a bed. A small television hung from a wall stand in the corner of each. Photos hung in a few of the rooms, but every single one of them was a landscape shot, none were of family or loved ones. More than a few of the rooms had plaques quoting Bible verses hung on the walls and one even had a prie dieu in the corner. Small closets set next to the bed seemed to be the only storage areas available and from the cut of the various blue jumpsuits that had been left behind inside them, the rooms seemed about evenly divided between male and female occupants.

Simple and plainly decorated, the rooms could have been straight out your typical college dorm just before the incoming class took up residence.

Yet there was something about them that bothered Olsen and it took him a bit before he figured out what it was.

There wasn't a single computer or telephone in sight.

He brought it to Cade's attention. "There's no way for these people to reach anyone on the outside. No computer means no email. No telephone means no personal calls, no way of staying in touch with anyone. Who lives like that?"

Cade thought about it for a minute. "It's really not that uncommon, is it? I know of plenty of high tech companies who wouldn't bat an eye at such restrictions. Keeping outside communications to a minimum greatly reduces the possibility of that someone might be tempted to walk off with a couple million dollars worth of intellectual property."

"Yeah, but have you seen anything that would give you the idea that these people were involved in cutting edge industrial research? So far all we've got is a missing preacher who took his flock into the desert and hid them away in an abandoned military base for heaven knows what."

Cade reminded him that they'd probably only seen the tip of the iceberg at this point and Olsen couldn't argue with that, but he was still unsettled. He had this mental image of a bunch of monks hiding in the wastelands while their clearly whacked-out leader tries to draw down the apocalypse. He didn't like fanatics, religious or otherwise, and everything here seemed to scream that to him, from the setting to the inhabitants' decision not to abandon the place when things clearly went to hell.

There was a lot here that wasn't making sense.

But one thing was certain, at least.

This place was starting to get to him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MIRROR PLAY

It took Echo almost three hours to properly clear and search the twenty-five rooms they found in that intersecting set of corridors and by the time they were done Cade was ready to call it quits for the day. The men were tired and tense and he knew it was at that point that mistakes began to happen. They needed some hot grub and some down time to return them to their usual focused readiness. The only problem was finding a secure place to bunk down for the night, someplace that was defensible in case their enemy chose to come at them while they rested.

The individual living quarters were too small and didn't offer a back door. Using any of them would effectively corner the unit and Cade was far too good a tactician to allow that to happen unless there was no other choice. On the other hand the cafeteria, while the right size and arrangement, wouldn't do either, as the presence of the dead would prevent any of them from getting the rest and relaxation they needed to return to top form.

Fortunately, there was another option.

On the far side of the dormitory, as his men were calling this set of interconnected corridors, they discovered another room about the size of the cafeteria. Filled with a variety of exercise equipment, including treadmills, Nautilus machines, and free weights, it obviously served as the facility's exercise facility. The rear wall was made entirely of glass and overlooked a second room that held an Olympic-size swimming pool. Doors on the right and left of the pool room led to a men's and a women's locker room respectively. Beyond the pool, the locker rooms connected to a central corridor that held the stairwell and elevator to the other levels.

It was exactly what Cade had been looking for. They could hole up in the pool room and have a clear view of the fitness center, so nothing could sneak up on them from that direction. A guard posted in either of the locker rooms could see into the central corridor and the pool room at the same time, keeping their rear secure. Either direction gave them a means of retreat. Even if the enemy came at them from both directions at once, Cade was confident that they could fight their way out.

After a complete search of the area, he let his men know that they would be bunking down for the night and arranged a watch schedule that gave them all at least six hours of rest while still allowing him to keep two men on guard duty at any given time. Chen and Duncan had first watch and he placed one of them in the corner by the glass wall looking out into the fitness room and the other was stationed by the rear door of the men's locker room looking down the central corridor toward the elevator and stairs.

Satisfied with the arrangements, Cade found a spot of his own and dug through the Meals-Ready-To-Eat, or MREs, in his pack, hoping he had something other than Beef Stroganoff.

* * *

Riley had third watch. Callavechio shook him awake as he returned to grab some additional rest and Riley then relieved Ortega from his position by the locker room door. He was sharing a watch period with Olsen and he took a moment to check in with him by radio. Both of them were experienced veterans and there was no chance that they would be so derelict as to fall asleep while on duty, but they both knew a friendly voice in the face of danger could often make even the most tedious of jobs more bearable, so they agreed to contact each other every fifteen minutes to remain focused and alert.

The emergency lights were on in the pool room and the corridor leading to the elevator, but the locker room itself was in darkness and Riley was confident that by sitting just back from the door he had propped open he couldn't be seen by anyone approaching from that direction.

The time passed slowly. Riley kept alert by constantly changing his focus of attention; first he'd watch the staircase, then the doors to the elevator, then the corridor leading back into fitness area, and so on. Staring at one thing for too long was often what caused more junior soldiers to lull themselves to sleep, Riley had learned, and he had long ago devised little tricks and methods like this to keep that from happening.

Which was why he was focused in the other direction when a sound came out of the darkness of the locker room behind him.

Riley turned, aiming the muzzle of his Mossberg in that direction as he did so, and listened.

Nothing.

Remembering the shadowy form that had escaped from them on the staircase earlier that afternoon, Riley climbed slowly to his feet, his attention locked on the thin shaft of light that shone into the locker room proper from the doorway, his ears straining as he tried to hear it again.

Only silence greeted him.

He had just about convinced himself that he had imagined it when it came again.

The gentle sound of a footfall.

That did it. "Hey Nick, you out there?" Riley whispered into his mike.

The response was immediate, "Yeah?"

"Heard something in the locker room. I'm gonna check it out."

“Roger that. Touch back in two or I’m gonna call out the troops.”

“Sounds good. Riley out.”

He flipped the switch of the light clamped to the barrel of his shotgun and moved cautiously into the locker room proper.

The first portion of the room was devoted to a changing area, U-shaped with a double row of lockers running around the outside edge. He shone the light around, confirming his first impression that the room was empty. Beyond the changing area were a set of shower stalls on both sides which led to a single row of sinks bolted to the rear wall.

Even in the dim light coming from the front entrance, Riley could see that there was someone standing in front of the sinks.

“Who’s there?” he demanded, shining his light directly onto the figure.

The man had his back to Riley, leaning with both of his hands on the sink before him, but Riley could tell it was Cade, could see his scarred face and eye patch in the mirror above the sink. In response to the challenge, Cade glanced up and raised a hand to ward off the light reflecting from the glass but didn’t say anything.

“Sorry, boss,” Riley said, aiming his light at the floor so it wouldn’t be in his commander’s eyes anymore. “Didn’t see come down the hall past me.”

Cade looked back down at the floor. “I came in the other way.”

Riley frowned and then remembered there was another entrance into the locker room from the front of the fitness center; Cade must have used that. The Knight Commander sounded tired; his voice had that same harshness to it that he’d had when he’d first come out of the hospital. “Are you all right?”

Cade didn’t reply.

Riley stood there for another moment, waiting for his answer. When it was clear he wasn’t going to give one, Riley decided he’d best get back to his post.

He turned and walked back toward the entrance to the locker room, keying his mike as he did so. “It’s clear, Olsen,” he said. “Turns out it was just Cade. Guess he couldn’t sleep.” He saw no need to mention his commander’s odd behavior, even to his teammate. Some things were just better left unsaid.

Behind him, in the darkness, Cade said something.

“Hold one,” he said into the mike and turned back to face his commanding officer. “Sorry, say that again.”

“Where did Vargas go?”

He must be more tired than I thought, Riley said to himself, but he answered the question nonetheless. “He’s with the medics at Ravensgate, where we left him.”

His commander seemed to think that one over and then asked, "Will he be returning to Eden?"

Eden? Oh, right. The inscription over the door; the patches on the uniform. "Your guess is as good as mine, boss, but I really doubt it."

Cade finally looked up, catching Riley's stare in the surface of the mirror. His good eye seemed to gleam strangely in the dim light and there seemed to be something subtly wrong with his face, but Riley couldn't quite put his finger on just what it was. Cade's next question was even stranger than his first few.

"Will you take me to him, then?" he asked.

* * *

On the other side of the fitness center, Olsen lowered the volume on his radio and turned his attention back to watching the front entrance. Riley seemed to have things under control, so Olsen felt there was no need to wake up the troops. As he had done repeatedly since he'd started his watch, he glanced behind him at the others resting peacefully in the semi-darkness, unconsciously mimicking Riley's habit, which was how he spotted Cade lying fast asleep on the floor between Davis and Chen.

If Cade's asleep, then who's

He was up and moving before the thought had fully formed, racing between the rows of fitness equipment for the entrance to the locker room that he knew was against the far wall. Even as he ran he was shouting at the others and trying to raise Riley on the radio without success.

* * *

Riley stared at his commanding officer, trying to understand the turn the conversation had just taken. Cade's questions made no sense and just hearing them set Riley's nerves on edge. Had something happened to the Knight Commander that he wasn't aware of? Had he been injured at some point? Had his earlier problems caused some damage that they weren't aware of, that was only coming to the fore now under the pressure of the mission?

He was about to ask if Cade was feeling all right when it finally dawned on him just what it was about the Knight Commander's face that was bothering him so.

The black eye patch Cade habitually wore was covering his left eye.

But the damage the Adversary had inflicted to his face had been on the right!

"I asked you a question," the imposter said.

Something in Riley's face must have given him way, for the imposter suddenly smiled at him and Riley felt his blood run cold at the sight. It was a terrible smile, a smile full of all the horrors of the world rolled up into a single expression, a smile full of families destroyed by

death and disease, of abused children and beaten wives, of war and famine and drug abuse andâ€¦the list went on.

It was a smile that never should have graced the face of a man.

That smile made everything crystal clear to Riley.

Thisâ€¦thingâ€¦was not Cade.

And he, Riley, was in a whole heap of trouble.

For just an instant, the barest flash of an instant, he thought he saw something else standing there, something with taloned feet and great looming wings of tattletale grey, something that filled him with fear and a certain sense of his own puny worthlessness, and then it was gone and only the imposter Cade remained.

The mirror behind the imposter suddenly drew his attention as it went smoke dark and frost formed at its edge. A fog began to billow from deep within its depths, filling the surface with a twisting, churning cloud of grayish white. Even as he watched something swam up out of that fog and a face formed behind the frosted glass, a long gaunt face of winter grey. The face had started out as vaguely human, it seemed, but thatâ€™s where the similarity ended. It was as if the Creator had grabbed the creatureâ€™s lower jaw with one hand and pulled outward while simultaneously hooking the finger of his other hand through the nasal cavities and wrenching upward, warping the face into a twisted parody of something that might have started out as human and was now anything but. Its oversized mouth gaped wide and he could see that it was filled with multiple rows of different sized teeth. Its nose, little more than holes that seemed to have been gouged into the top of its snout, was mated to eyes of liquid green that glowed with a light of their own in the semi-darkness of the room. Atop its head was a wriggling mass of hair that twisted and turned as if possessed of an intelligence all its own, reminding Riley of the Greek legend of the Medusa.

Those eyes pinned him to the floor.

It reached an arm forward and Riley watched as the surface of the mirror rippled and then allowed that arm to pass through it without resistance, as if the glass had become as fluid as water. Unsurprisingly, that arm was capped with a foot long sickle-shaped claw instead of a hand.

Riley could only stand and stare as it slowly dragged itself free, clambering over the sink to stand upright on the floor not ten feet from him. Below that face was an equally hideous body; a thick neck and muscular torso that ended in two sets of arms equally equipped with those long scythe-like claws. The thingâ€™s lower torso resembled that of a huge bloated spider, a fat ovoid body from which sprouted six legs covered in some kind of chitinous shell.

The master sergeant had seen many things in his thirteen years with the Order. Heâ€™d faced down demons and devils, shape-shifters and sorcerers. Heâ€™d been cursed by a

voodoo hougan and had felt the cold kiss of the grave when a barrow wight had seized him in its iron grip. Heâ€™d long ago come to grips with the fact that there were a good many things out there in the darkness that did not have humanityâ€™s best interests at heart and he had dedicated his life to keep them at bay.

This, he was sure, was one of those things. He had never personally encountered one, but the tomes of the Orderâ€™s library contained accounts of those who had. Known for their ferocity and identified by their scythe-like claws, reaper demons were one of those creatures that Riley would have been happy to have gone his entire life without running into, never mind facing in solo combat.

Behind the demon, the surface of the mirror wavered once more and then shot back into solidity with a loud snap.

The sound finally shook Riley free from his paralysis.

His Mossberg swung up, the barrel centering on the reaperâ€™s chest, and Riley pulled the trigger several times in rapid succession. The gunshots were thunderous in the small confines of the room and he had the satisfaction of seeing the demon thrown backward with the force of the impact against the very mirror it had just crawled out of. In the half-light its purple blood looked black as it splashed across the tiles. Without hesitating Riley swung the gun back to his left, intent on pouring several more shots into Cadeâ€™s doppelganger, only to have the thing vanish right in front of his eyes before he could even get off a shot.

Nor did he have time to figure out where it went, for even as he watched several of the others mirrors in the room were rapidly going dark.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REAPERS REAPING

The boom of Riley's shotgun reached Olsen's ears as he skidded to a stop outside the entrance to the locker room. Four shots, in rapid succession, and then silence.

"Riley?" Olsen shouted into the locker room, his back flat against the wall next to the door, but the only response he received was the thunder of another shot being fired somewhere inside.

A glance back at the rest of the unit showed them climbing to their feet, weapons in hand, but none of them would get there quick enough to help. Olsen had to choose; wait for back-up or go in alone and hope he could save Riley.

It really wasn't any choice at all.

Olsen spun around the corner.

The corridor ahead of him was empty.

He moved swiftly down its length, until he reached the point where the corridor turned right and entered the locker room proper. Flattening himself against the wall again, he double-checked his weapon. The sound of a struggle could be heard in the next room, raising Olsen's hopes that Riley was still alive, and so he took a deep breath and spun around the corner.

He took in the scene with a single glance.

Riley was on his back on the floor with a six legged monstrosity astride him, the creature's scythe-like forearms locked in either hand as Riley struggled to keep from getting his head cut off while simultaneously trying to dodge repeated attacks from the creature's lunging jaws. Around him were the carcasses of three other reaper demons, one of which still twitching with its death throes.

Seeing his teammate standing in the doorway, Riley shouted, "Shoot it, for God's sake! Shoot it!"

Olsen did.

The bullets tore into the demon's torso, ripping gaping holes in its flesh. It shrieked in pain and raised its upper body to turn and face him, which was just what Olsen was waiting for. He fired again, driving the creature off of Riley and up against the nearest wall, pinning it there with the sheer impact of the firepower and he didn't stop until he'd emptied his clip into it and there was little left to recognize.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I will be," Riley replied, as he climbed to his feet. His uniform was ripped in a several places, but the pads of ballistic armor sewn throughout had done their job and he had only

minor injuries. Nothing their medic couldn't patch up, given five minutes of peace and quiet.

Olsen watched his teammate snag his shotgun from the floor where he had dropped it, but rather than heading for the exit, Riley crossed to the row of mirrors over the sinks. Olsen was about to ask what he was doing when Riley made the question mute by grasping his weapon by the barrel and slamming it butt first into the surface of a mirror. A few seconds was all it took for him to shatter all four of them.

"Don't tell me," Olsen said.

"Yep. They came through the mirrors, just like Cade always warned us."

Any further discussion was cut short when the sound of gunfire coming from the main room reached them.

They took off at a run.

* * *

Riley skidded to a halt as he and Olsen emerged from the depths of the locker room, trying to process the scene before him. Reaper demons seemed to be everywhere and the rest of Echo had their hands full trying to fight them off. Cade, along with Davis and Chen, had their backs to the glass wall separating the exercise room from the pool. A stack of bodies lay at their feet already and four more demons were doing what they could to advance despite the withering hail of gunfire the three men were sending in their direction. Ortega was helping Duncan to his feet, apparently after dispatching a reaper that had gotten the best of their younger companion. Callavecchio, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

"Where in heaven did they all come from?" Olsen wondered aloud and it hit Riley like a train wreck. How could he have been so stupid?

"Follow me!" he shouted over the clamour and took off running without waiting to see if his companion was following. There were two locker rooms and that meant two sets of mirrors. He had destroyed the first, but the second!

He just hoped he was in time to prevent any more of them from coming through.

Riley's path took him diagonally through the center of the room, twisting and turning through the maze of Nautilus machines and other exercise equipment, headed for the dark maw of the entrance to the women's locker room on the far side. His course took him past the demons threatening Cade and the others. As he passed, he pumped two shots into the back of one of the beasts and was very nearly taken out by a stray shot from one of the other knight's weapons, but then he had left them behind and reached the entrance to the locker room.

He heard Olsen shouting behind him, telling him to wait, but he plunged inside the entrance without slowing.

Riley took half a dozen steps and then his foot came down on something round in the darkness and he felt himself tumbling forward, out of control. He hit the ground hands first and the shotgun he was carrying went off with a roar, nearly taking his arm off at the shoulder.

Disgusted with himself and with the fact that he'd just lost any opportunity of surprise, Riley glanced at the floor as he climbed back to his feet, curious to see what he had stepped on.

A human hand, severed about half way down the wrist, lay nearby.

Considering the Templar ring on the fourth finger, there was very little doubt as to who the hand had once belonged.

Callavecchio.

Feeling like he'd just been punched in the gut, Riley reached down and picked the hand up, just as Olsen came charging down the hall and caught up with him.

“œls that’s”

“œYeah.” Riley stuffed the hand in his pack, knowing it might be the only piece of their friend they would get the chance to bury given the nature of the things they were facing. At least the coffin won’t be empty, he thought, and then turned his attention back to the job at hand.

They came around the corner into the locker room proper, weapons at the ready. Unlike the men’s locker room, with its four sinks and accompanying mirrors, this room had one long mirror that extended the length of the wall and the two men were just in time to see a pair of reaper demons disappearing back through its surface, carrying Callavecchio’s limp body with them.

From the way the man’s head hung half off his shoulders, it was clear that their teammate was beyond assistance.

Now unhindered by concerns over Callavecchio’s fate, Riley didn’t hesitate. With a twitch of his finger he turned the mirror into a shower of shattered glass, preventing the demons from returning along the same path. Behind him he could hear more breaking glass and knew Olsen was doing the same to another mirror elsewhere in the locker room.

By the time the two men re-emerged into the main area, their teammates had dispatched the rest of their foes.

Echo had survived their first attack, but not without casualties.

It didn’t bode well for the hours ahead.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MASON'S GAMBLE

Commander Williams's self-imposed deadline had come and gone. Convinced that the men of Echo had met an untimely demise, Mason had no choice but to move on to the next phase of the plan that he and the commander had agreed upon before the other's departure.

He gave the necessary orders and fifteen minutes later all five of his squads were suited up and assembled outside the command center, ready for action. He intended to lead them into the base himself, descending into the tunnels that Echo had uncovered below, and mount a frontal assault on whatever they found there. Summaries of what they had discovered were already on their way to headquarters by high speed courier, so in the event they failed the next unit wouldn't have to start over from the beginning, but Mason was convinced that if he waited any longer whatever it was inside that base would only grow stronger and that was a chance he couldn't afford to take.

The men mounted the waiting HWMMVs, weapons at the ready, and Mason gave the order to move out. One by one, the armored vehicles turned and headed in the direction of the gates.

But it was not to be.

As Mason's men drew close to the entrance of the base, the strange storm that they had been watching for hours moved to intercept them. Mason had not other words for it; it was as if the storm had a living presence of its own, that it moved with intelligent forethought and intention. The black funnel cloud roared down the main thoroughfare toward them, kicking up waves of dust and dirt that mimicked the powerful sandstorms of the Arabian desert. In seconds, visibility was reduced to a few feet and then down to nothing. Radio communication between the vehicles died and each unit found itself on its own, unable to see and as a result, unable to move forward at any decent rate of speed without endangering those in the vehicle before them.

Mason ordered his driver to leave the road and try to go around the storm, but the howling wind and blowing sand made that next to impossible. While the HWMMVs were designed for strenuous off-road travel, the land around them was crisscrossed with steep ravines and treacherous sinkholes. If they couldn't see, they couldn't maneuver around them and driving blindly into such an obstacle would ruin their day for certain.

In the end, Mason had no choice but to give the order for his driver to turn around and do his best to get the back to base, hoping that the drivers of the other vehicles would have the initiative to do the same. They had no defense against the power of the storm and pushing for-

ward would just result in the useless deaths of more of his men. He would regroup at the command center and wait for the storm to die down again before making another attempt.

If they were still alive, Echo was on their own.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A VISIT TO THE HOLDING ROOM

Not wanting to remain in the same place directly after the attack, Cade ordered the team to make for the stairwell at the other end of the corridor, intending to take them up another level and away from the scene. Unfortunately, as the old saying went, even the best laid plans can come undone.

When they arrived at the end of the hall, they discovered that the target stairwell was completely blocked by a convoluted pile of discarded furniture. Everything from desks to bookcases to box springs seemed to have been tossed down the stairwell from above until they filled not just the first staircase and its landing but also at least the one above that as well. None of the jumbled mass was balanced very well and Cade had visions of it tumbling down on them the minute they tried to work their way over it or through it. He had no desire to see any more of his men injured in such a useless manner and he quickly made the decision to take an alternate route.

He didn't want to chance going through the exercise complex again, so he turned his attention to the elevator shaft beside the stairwell.

Prying back the doors revealed the fact that the car itself was somewhere below and that was all Cade needed to know.

They would go up the shaft.

Ropes were quickly rigged and minutes later Chen and Davis were hauling themselves hand over hand up the elevator cables to the floor above. Finding the doors on that level open and the corridor beyond clear, the former stood guard while the latter secured himself to the ledge to serve as a belayer and then sent a rope down for the next man.

Ten minutes later all seven of them were standing on the third level of the complex, the elevator door behind them now closed in an effort to give them some warning should anything attempt to follow them up the same route.

Continuing their investigation, they found that the corridor in front of them extended only a few feet before taking a sharp turn. Around the bend they discovered a massive vault door prevented them from progressing any further down the hall.

With the way ahead sealed off and the path behind under tight guard, it was as good a place as any to take that much needed, and previously interrupted, rest. Cade ordered the group to do just that.

The men knew the routine, knew the watch schedule and who was in charge of preparing meals for the others, so Cade settled down against one wall of the corridor, leaning his head back and closing his eyes as he mentally worked through what they'd encountered so far.

His thoughts were quickly interrupted however, as Riley settled down next to him with a look of concern on his face.

“How are the men?” Cade asked.

“They’re doing okay. This place has them on edge, but I’m okay with that. I’ll keep them ready for whatever it throws at us next.”

Cade nodded, agreeing with the sentiment. “Something else on your mind then?”

“I don’t want to make the other men nervous, but back in the locker room, before the reapers attacked, I saw something.”

Cade waited for him to continue.

Riley shook his head, as if trying to knock loose an unwelcome memory. “As weird as it sounds, I saw you.”

“Me?”

“Not you personally. Or rather, I know it wasn’t really you. But whatever it was, it certainly looked like you.”

Riley went on to explain how the creature had questioned him about Vargas and how it had turned violent, summoning the reapers, when he had refused to answer it.

Cade gave it some thought and then ordered Riley to keep the information to himself. The idea that their enemy could mimic them at will was not a comfortable one. If it got out, every single one of them would be wondering about the guy next to them and that would be disastrous for team morale.

Riley agreed and got up to supervise the meal preparation. As he turned to go, Cade called out to him once more.

“How’d you know?”

Riley looked puzzled. “Know what?”

“That it wasn’t me?”

The master sergeant grinned and pointed to his face. “The scars. They were on the wrong side.”

Cade nodded and, in a sense, felt some relief.

At least their enemy wasn’t infallible.

And with that he leaned his head back once more and was soon fast asleep.

* * *

A short time later Chen shook Cade awake. “You need to see this, Commander.”

He led him around the corner to where they’d found the vault door, except now the thick steel barrier was wide open, revealing another short corridor that ended in another door similar to the first. This, too, now stood open.

“How’d you do that?” Cade asked.

Chen grinned. “You’ll have to ask the Master Sergeant about that, sir. Claims it came to him in a dream.”

Considering what they’d been through so far, Cade was almost ready to believe it. Almost.

He moved through the corridor and through the second vault door to find himself in an enormous room the size of a large warehouse. It was a good three stories high, with a complex arrangement of steel catwalks extending throughout. In the center of the catwalks, suspended equidistant from the floor and ceiling, was another, smaller room. This one was fashioned of what appeared to be high density Plexiglas and its walls, ceiling, and floor were all opaque. The room itself was held in position by thick metal columns at each corner that stretched down to the floor below.

From where he stood in the doorway, Cade could see Riley and Duncan standing on the catwalk across from the glass enclosure. He radioed that he was coming up. Chen led him to a staircase he hadn’t seen in the corner of the room and then up through the maze of catwalks. As he got closer to where the men were standing, he could see his two sergeants carefully examining a set of controls built into a small pedestal at the edge of the catwalk.

“Okay, Houdini, how’d you do it?” Cade asked, as he stepped up to meet them.

Riley grinned. “Had a hunch. The combination was 7:2:8, the same as the verse on the door leading into this place.”

Genesis 2:8, with G being the seventh letter of the alphabet.

Cade had to hand it to him; he wouldn’t have thought of that. “So what’s this?” he asked, indicating the control box the other two were studying.

Riley straightened up. “Best as I can figure, it’s an extendable drawbridge. Seems to provide access to the holding cell over there,” he said, jerking his thumb toward the smaller room across the open space behind him.

This close Cade could see that access to the “cell” as Riley called it, was provided through a door set in the middle of the wall directly across from where they stood. Like the walls themselves, the door was made of the same, see-through material, though the steel locking mechanism set within it was plainly visible even from this distance. So, too, were the furnishings distributed throughout the chamber; a table and four chairs, a couch, even a king-size bed, all of which were made from the same strange material. Cade now understood why Riley had called it a holding cell. Its see-through exterior would allow its occupant to be monitored twenty-four hours a day and not even the furnishings would block the view of the prisoner. He glanced up at the ceiling high above. It took him a few minutes to find them but eventually he could make out the shapes of several close-circuit cameras hung amidst the

tangle of pipes and cooling ducts.

“Must have been one heck of a prisoner to require a set up like this,” Chen said.

“Let’s get a closer look,” Cade said, his curiosity raised.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Duncan replied. He flipped a switch on the console and the ground beneath their feet shook slightly as the drawbridge began to extend itself out from under the catwalk and across the open space before them. A few minutes later it settled into place on the far side with a loud clang.

Duncan swept his arm out with a flourish. “Ask and you shall receive.”

Cade stepped out onto the walkway, testing it. Satisfied, he headed across with Riley and Duncan close on his heels. Chen remained behind to guard the approach and to man the drawbridge controls in case of an emergency.

The three men quickly crossed the extended platform and stood on the small landing before the door. Expecting the door to be both locked and heavy, Cade was surprised when it swung open silently at the light touch of his hand.

Despite the fact that they could see the room was empty, they entered cautiously, weapons at the ready. Duncan and Riley fanned out on either side of Cade as soon as they were through the doorway, each of them alert for the unexpected and wary of a trap. After several moments, when it was clear that they were alone and unlikely to be molested, they relaxed and set about examining the strange tableau laid out around them.

To Cade, the interior of the room resembled a sparsely furnished apartment, if you ignored the fact that everything was constructed of reinforced Plexiglas. One corner had clearly been set up as an eating area, with a kitchen table and chairs, but there was no sign of any kind of appliance for preparing meals. No stove, no microwave, not even a small table-top refrigerator. The same held true in the bedroom area. There was a nightstand and what appeared to be a king-size bed, but no sheets, no pillows, and no bedside lamp. Standing next to the bed, Cade realized that the room was also missing any kind of washroom facility. No shower, no sink, and perhaps most telling, no toilet. Even the most rudimentary prison cell has a bucket to piss in, Cade thought. Just who the heck were they keeping inside this place?

His line of thought was interrupted when Duncan called out, “Over here!”

They found Duncan standing next to the far wall of the enclosure, in front of a hole that had been melted through the glass. The hole was large enough for a man to step through without bending over and from its appearance it seemed that the glass had been heated into an almost liquid state that flowed down the exterior wall before re-hardening into a jumbled mass that hung off the far side of the enclosure like an icicle.

Lost in his examination of the object before him, Cade didn’t hear what Riley said next and asked him to repeat himself.

The Master Sergeant waved at the home in front of them. "It got loose. Whatever it was," Riley said. There was an ominous tone in his voice and his choice of wording only served to emphasize it.

"What do you mean, 'it'?" Cade asked.

"Look around this place, boss. See-through walls. A floating room. Cameras all over the ceiling. Do you think they went through all this trouble for some ordinary Joe? Seems damned unlikely to me. They were holding something, not someone, captive."

"Okay, fine," said Duncan, "but where on earth did it go? In case you hadn't noticed, there's no causeway on the other side of this wall and it's at least a three-story drop straight down."

"Maybe it jumped," said Riley.

"Jumped? Down three stories? Are you out of your mind?"

Cade turned away from the other two men, tuning them out. He knew his exec was right; this was no ordinary holding cell and its occupant hadn't been any ordinary prisoner. He had a sudden vision of the shadow creature that had wreaked havoc with the first squad who dared enter the facility. Could this place have been used to hold such a thing?

He considered the layout. A room inaccessible except for a single entry point. What he assumed was round-the-clock surveillance. Walkways that could double as patrol routes for guards. While this might be sufficient to constrain an ordinary criminal, it would do very little to hold a creature of supernatural ability. He'd seen it go through a squad of heavily armed recon troops. The glass walls of this enclosure wouldn't last ten minutes.

Unless, that is, there was something unusual about the glass.

Removing the patch from in front of his right eye, Cade triggered his Sight.

Light blazed out at him from multiple directions, light so bright that he was forced to hold his hand up in front of his eye to protect it from the glare. Mystical words, glyphs, and sigils were written on the face of the glass in every direction, covering almost its entire available surface, each and every one of them ablaze with the light of their inherent power. While Cade recognized many of them from his years of research involving the Adversary, others were entirely unfamiliar. Yet their purpose was clear.

The entire room had been warded.

Designed to guard a specific location or object, wards were one of the mainstays of modern magick. They came in two types; minor and major. Minor wards were just what the name inferred; minor magicks that could be used to protect a small object such as a book or a small storage chest. These could be performed by a single individual with limited preparation, often on the fly. Major wards were another story entirely, requiring several days of preparation and a sorcerer or mystic of no little skill with several acolytes to assist him or her. They were not

undertaken lightly and the slightest mistake could have disastrous consequences. Major wards that failed outright often ended in the deaths of all involved in the casting.

Not only could wards be used to keep people away from a particular location, they could also be used to keep someone or something confined. Common folklore held that a demon summoned inside a pentagram could not cross its lines and the summoner was therefore safe to request the demon perform a certain act in exchange for releasing it. This was, in part, based on the fact that the pentagram, when inscribed in the proper sequence and with the proper materials, was actually a very ancient form of a major warding. But what had been fashioned here made a pentagram look like child's play.

Yet it still hadn't been enough.

A chill ran up Cade's spine and he turned back to face the damaged wall. Just as he'd expected, its surface was dark; the glyphs and sigils inscribed there were drained of their power, allowing whatever it was that had been imprisoned in the room to escape.

Not even major wards had been able to contain it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DECISIONS

The Lord of Eden moved through the tunnels at a brisk pace, his thoughts on the newcomers. He'd been observing them for the last several hours and it was clear by their actions and lack of familiarity with the complex that they were newcomers. Which meant that some other outside group had taken an interest in the activity here. That, in itself, was interesting. Outsiders wouldn't understand what his captors had tried to do, wouldn't know why the various wards and barriers had been erected. Without that knowledge, he reasoned, they would be more likely to help him escape the confines of the complex, might even unintentionally break the bonds that held him without knowing what they were doing.

That would be fortunate indeed.

But if he was not so lucky, there were other ways to persuade them to help. For all he knew, they might even listen to reason.

And if they chose to oppose him, he would deal with them in an appropriate manner just as he had with the others before them. He had been locked in the darkness for too long to allow anything, least of all a group of weakling humans, to prevent him from regaining his rightful heritage.

He would do what needed to be done, just as he always had.

And the Creator be damned if he didn't like it.

An odd sensation washed over him like a sudden dousing of ice-cold water, the walls around him wavering like a mirage on the hot desert plains that he had haunted so long ago, and the feeling was so unexpected that it stopped him in mid-stride.

He was intimately familiar with the sensation; it wasn't its unusual nature that brought him to sudden halt but the simple fact that someone other than he was capable of producing that particular effect.

It shouldn't have been possible.

But there was no mistaking it.

Elsewhere in the complex, someone had just opened a window into the Beyond.

The face of the battle-scarred leader he'd observed in the tram tunnel came instantly to mind and the Lord of Eden intuitively knew that he was the one. Somehow he had penetrated the Veil, had tunneled through the barriers between worlds and had peered into the other realm. What he was looking for the Lord of Eden did not know, but he instantly recognized that having that particular human at his side would be an advantage in his fight to escape this place.

Just like that his decision was made.

He would try to speak to this group of newcomers, try to convince them of the righteousness of his task and see if they would help him accomplish his aims without resorting to other, more violent, measures.

And if they chose not to help, he would eliminate them just as he had those who had returned him to the light.

He would not be denied.

It was as simple as that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SHADES OF MOREAU

Riley gathered the troops and led them through the vault, across the hall beneath the holding cell and out the other side into a short corridor. This in turn ended at another door protected by a card-lock. Rather than have Olsen try to jury-rig the lock mechanism, they attempted to use the various pass keys that had been collected from the bodies in the cafeteria and got lucky on the second try.

On the other side of the door was a small antechamber. Lockers painted a bright blue lined one wall. Opposite them were a series of stainless steel sinks, four in all. Cotton towels, a light blue in color, were stacked on a shelf nearby.

A series of cubbies stood in the center of the room between the lockers and the sinks and stacked in these were white cotton suits designed to be worn over the clothes. Each suit zipped up the front and included booties to go over the shoes and a shower cap-like hat to cover the head.

It was standard clean room gear; designed to keep contamination from external sources to a minimum, and the twin set of swinging doors on the far side of the room suggested the presence of a laboratory or assembly room just beyond.

Riley ordered Chen and Duncan to go through the lockers, but they came up empty. By the time theyâ€™d finished Cade had made up his mind to continue forward and Riley took point once more. With the rest of Echo at his back, he eased the doors before him open with one hand.

He didnâ€™t know what he had expected, but it certainly wasnâ€™t this. Emerging from the prep chamber, Riley found himself standing in some sort of containment center. The room had been divided up into what were, in essence, three long corridors. He stood in the central one, his shoulders practically touching the glass walls on either side. Beyond those, against the walls, were a series of what he could only call cells, small glass fronted enclosures with floors covered in a matt of dirty straw. The walls were concrete and on the doors were complicated electronic locks holding them shut. There was enough room between the cell doors and the wall of the corridor he stood in to allow room for the handlers to move in and out of the cells while keeping observers in the center corridor confined away from the action.

Even in the dim illumination provided by the emergency lights, Riley could see that the first cells on either side of him were empty. He began edging forward, looking into the cells on either side as he went. In several instances the doors to the cells were open, but he had no way of reaching them until he had moved half the distance down the hall. There he found a door on either side leading into the cell access area. A quick discussion led to First Squad

taking the corridor on the right while Riley and the Command Squad would search those on the left.

The minute they entered the access corridor they were smothered with a strange smell that was somehow both inviting and unpleasant at the same time, like the scent of lilacs and jasmine mixed with that of wet fur. It was apparently coming from the cells with the open doors, though neither Riley nor anyone else had any idea what kind of animal would give off a scent like that.

Having already determined that the first several cells were empty, Riley turned right. He stopped at the next cell, taking a moment to examine the lock on the door. It was of sturdy construction and he could find no evidence of a short or other mechanical problem.

He turned to Cade and indicated the doors with a wave of his hand. "Think they all failed when the power went out?"

The Knight Commander shook his head. "It's usually the other way around. The power fails and these things lock down tight. Practically impossible to get them open again without restoring the electricity." He glanced up and down the row of cells and something caught his eye. "That's strange."

Riley turned to follow his gaze. All of the cell doors were unlocked and open, except one. The last.

The two men looked at each other and then, wordlessly, made their way down the corridor toward it.

Much to their surprise, they found the cell occupied.

The man looked Indian to Riley, though he supposed he could have been Pakistani, Turkish, or any other Middle Eastern ethnicity. He was short, somewhere in the neighborhood of five and a half feet, and of small stature, with dark curly hair and an ungroomed beard. He wore a tattered blue jumpsuit with the now expected Eden patch on his right shoulder. From the accumulated grime on his exposed skin, including his bare feet, it was obvious it had been several days since he'd had the chance to shower.

The straw flooring had been pushed into a pile in the corner and the man was lying either unconscious or asleep on the exposed floor. On the other side of the room were several large jugs of water and a stack of canned goods. Obviously, he'd planned to be in there awhile.

Riley watched as Cade tried the cell door, discovered it locked, and then rapped sharply on the glass door several times with the barrel of his gun.

Inside the cell, the man shifted in his sleep, but did not awake.

Cade turned to his companions. "I want this door open and I don't care how long it takes or what we have to do to open it."

“Got it,” they answered and went to work. First Squad hadn’t found anything of note in the opposite cells so they were called back to join the others. Davis had a fair degree of experience with locking mechanisms and he was called over to assist Olsen as they worked to find a way around the electro-magnetic lock that held the door firmly shut. The rest of the men set up a perimeter and prepared to meet any unexpected visitors.

Halfway through their efforts the man inside woke up. He raised himself on one elbow and blinked weary-eyed at them. Riley watched as he first rubbed his eyes and then, apparently deciding they weren’t figments of his imagination, rifled through his pockets until he came up with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He slipped the glasses on.

“Hang on!” Riley shouted to him, hoping the man could hear him through the thick glass. “We’re going to get you out.”

The master sergeant was unprepared for what happened next. The man inside the cell jumped to his feet and rushed the door, shouting, the excitement on his face obvious. But the thick glass stole anything the man tried to say to them.

As Olsen and Davis continued to work, Riley tried to indicate with hand signals that they would have the man free shortly and to just sit back and relax. Unfortunately, that only seemed to get him more worked up.

“Think he’ll answer our questions?” Duncan asked.

“I don’t care whether he wants to or not,” Riley replied. “He’s the first living soul we’ve seen in this place and I suspect Cade isn’t going to give him a choice.” Riley couldn’t blame him, either. He wanted answers, too.

It took Olsen and Davis almost an hour but they eventually got the door open. The second they had, the prisoner pushed it open and stepped out of the cell.

“Oh thank God! Am I glad to see you!” He smiled at them all and then turned back to Riley. “You got him, right? Tell me you got him.”

Misunderstanding, Riley replied, “Yeah, we got him. Father Vargas is resting comfortably in a hospital not too far from here. We can take you to see him shortly.”

The man froze and a strange expression washed across his face. “Vargas? You got Vargas?”

“And like I said, he’s all right. As soon as you can tell us what happened here, we’ll take you to see him.” Riley was speaking softly, gently. The man was obviously emotional and he didn’t want him to get any more riled up.

“I don’t give a shit about Vargas! Tell me you killed it! That’s all I want to hear. That you blew its divine ass all the way to kingdom come, where it belonged.”

Divine ass? What the hell! “Look. Why don’t you tell us your name and we’ll go from there?”

The former prisoner stood there, staring. Riley was about to repeat his request when the man flew into action. They had never expected heâ€™d tried to barrel his way through several well-armed men and the prisoner was able to get past all three of them, rush up the hall, and reach the door to the central corridor before Riley, close on his heels, brought him down with a picture-perfect tackle.

Now the man turned violent. Kicking and thrashing, he did what he could to throw Riley off of him, shouting all the while. â€œGet off me you stupid son-of-a-bitch! You have no idea what you are doing!â€

â€œThen why donâ€™t you explain it to us,â€ Riley laconically replied, making no move to get up. His six-foot-four, 240 pound frame easily held the smaller man to the floor.

â€œAll right, Riley. Let him up.â€

Cade had come down the hall and was now standing in the doorway to the central corridor, his pistol held casually in his hand. Riley had seen him use that weapon without hesitation when he didnâ€™t get the answers he wanted and one glance at the prisonerâ€™s face made it clear that he understood the unspoken threat in Cadeâ€™s stance, too.

Riley stood, then reached down, grabbed a hold of the manâ€™s bicep, and hauled him rather reluctantly to his feet as well.

â€œWho are you?â€ Cade asked.

The man sullenly stared at the floor and didnâ€™t respond.

Cade sighed. â€œWe can do this the easy way orâ€!. Iâ€™m Commander Cade Williams and you are?â€

For a moment the man was silent and Riley expected heâ€™d have to get a little rough in order to get some answers, but then the prisoner rounded on Cade. â€œYou stupid fool,â€ he said, his face inches from Cadeâ€™s own. â€œYou have no idea what you are doing here and if you were smart youâ€™d get the hell out of here while you still could. This isnâ€™t an issue for the Army.â€

â€œWith all due respect, I believe I do know what was going on here, but it would certainly be easier if you could fill in a few details. Letâ€™s start with your name.â€

An exasperated snort. â€œBhanjee. Dr. Manoj Bhanjee. Chief Geneticist.â€

â€œThank you. That wasnâ€™t so hard, now was it?â€

But Bhanjee wasnâ€™t willing to engage in pleasantries, however. â€œLook, idiot, I donâ€™t give a flying fuck just who you are or how many men you have with you. Unless youâ€™ve got the entire U.S. Army out there, I was about 100 times better off locked in my little hidey-hole back there.â€

Something in his tone struck a chord with Riley. The man clearly felt he was safer locked up inside a cell, effectively cornered like a rat in the hole, rather than out here with them. It

wasn't the glowing endorsement Riley'd expected from someone they'd just extricated from the inside of a glass box.

Apparently the comment hit home with Cade, too. As Riley watched, he pulled the patch off his eye and turned to look at the glass walls around them.

“They're warded. All of the cells are warded!”

The prisoner glanced at him, his expression changing from anger to curiosity, but when he spoke up his scathing tone hadn't changed. “Of course the cells are warded. Do you think we'd have tried to contain them with only bullet proof glass?”

Whatever Cade was going to say in response was lost as he whipped his head around to face the entrance they'd passed through more than an hour before. As he turned Riley could see that his good eye, his left, was still closed, which meant whatever he was seeing was coming to him through the ghost-white orb that was all that remained of his right.

“Reapers!” he shouted into the radio and a moment later the double doors at the end of the hall burst open as the surviving demons from their earlier battle smashed their way through them.

The creatures came on without thought to tactics or strategy and this was just fine with the members of the Echo Team, who wanted nothing more than the chance to avenge Callavechio's death. Cade's warning had been enough for Chen and Ortega, positioned about fifteen feet back from the entrance, to prepare themselves for the assault and in seconds the central corridor had become a shooting gallery. The demons were constrained by both the bullet proofing of the glass and the warding etched all over its surface, effectively limiting their options. They had no choice but to funnel straight down the hallway toward the two men, which was just what they wanted. Their MP5s roared, the sound echoing in the confined space, and the slugs tore into the flesh of their foes with what to Riley appeared to be reckless abandon.

As the men from First Squad held off the initial assault, Riley and Cade moved into position behind them. On a radioed command from Cade the two men in front went down on one knee, allowing the newcomers, now standing behind them, to open fire also. Riley's Mossberg thundered in counterpoint to the crack of Cade's pistol, and both weapons played a syncopated rhythm to their companions.

The demons were, quite literally, cut to pieces by the withering hail of gunfire.

By the time Duncan, Olsen, and Davis had moved into position to back them up, the fire-fight was over.

In the silence that followed, a muffled cry came from the other end of the hall.

Riley spun around.

Down at the other end, he had the barest glimpse of Dr. Bhanjee being wrapped in inky black wings and they were gone.

The corridor was empty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FRANKENSTEIN'S PLAYROOM

With Dr. Bhanjee gone, their chance of learning first-hand just what had happened here disappeared with him and a sense of gloom settled about the group. That they could have been so careless as to leave him undefended was troubling to say the least. Cade knew it was simply a result of having constantly to be on alert, the pressure slowly chipping away at their awareness and control, but that didn't make things any less disappointing.

With no choice but to continue their search, Cade ordered the team to leave the cell block behind by passing through the door at its other end.

What they found there only added to their growing disquiet about the place.

The room was clearly a laboratory, and a sophisticated one at that. Olsen wasn't a scientist by any stretch of the imagination, but he considered himself an intelligent man and knew the difference between a microscope and an MRI machine. The equipment in this room, however, defied his understanding. Everywhere he looked there was some new contraption measuring heaven knows what.

But what really caught his eye were the two rows of glass tanks in the center of the room and he crossed over to them to have a look.

They were cylindrical in nature, about eight feet tall, and filled with a thick liquid that was slightly yellow in color. If anything they reminded him of giant specimen jars full of formaldehyde and the comparison was especially apt for in the last tank on the left, the only one containing anything other than the liquid, there floated the naked body of a young man.

Stepping closer, Olsen could see that he just might have to rethink that characterization.

The body was clearly humanoid; a torso from which extended two arms and two legs, with a head supported by a neck of the proper proportion. But where there should have been a face there was only a blank expanse of flesh, like a bare canvas before the painter has arrived, and Olsen couldn't help but stare. No mouth. No nose. No means of air intake. How had it grown to be this big without the ability to breathe? The blankness of the face didn't appear to be the result of an injury, so how had the thing survived for so long?

The body was slowly shifting in the fluid in the tank and Olsen attention was drawn to its upper left shoulder as it came into view. From its neckline to the middle of its back the body was covered with a fine goose-down like set of feathers. Even stranger, those feathers quickly changed to a set of iridescent scales that were interwoven with each other and covered the entire rest of the thing's left side down to a spot behind the left knee.

Just what the hell was this thing?

Riley walked up as he stood there, staring. "Now that's an ugly son of a gun."

Olsen nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He normally would have been the first to make some lighthearted wisecrack, especially in a tense situation like this, but this thing in front of him was just so inherently wrong that he couldn't find it within himself to do so.

Riley must have sensed his mood, for he turned serious suddenly. "Once, a number of years ago, I had the opportunity to enter a section of the archives I'd never been admitted to before."

Olsen didn't need to ask just which archives he was referring to. For a Templar, there was only one, the Archives, the great collection of information and artifacts that the Order had been gathering and cataloging for centuries.

"If my memory serves, it was just after I'd transferred into Echo. We were facing a rash of attacks by some unknown cryptid and managed to get some fairly decent casts made from the bite marks on the seventh victim. Cade sent me down to the vaults to see if I could match any of them with the various specimens that had been collected over the years, particularly the ones that had been catalogued at the turn of the century."

Riley turned to face him and in his eyes Olsen could see a reflection of the horror he'd seen that day. "I'll tell you something. What I saw down in that vault, what we as an Order actively collect and store for future studies, make this oddity seem tame in comparison. The world's one strange place, there's no question of that."

As if to punctuate his statement, the thing in the tank suddenly jerked as if awakening abruptly from a long sleep and its hands slapped palm down against the glass. In the center of each palm was an eye of jet black that stared out at them. After a moment, one of them winked.

The shock of realizing that the thing was not only alive but was also intelligent washed over him like a bucket of ice water and Olsen turned away, more profoundly disturbed than at any other time since entering the complex. Whatever it was that they had been doing here there was no longer any question in his mind that it had been a renegade operation, that the Church never would have condoned it had they known what was happening.

From where he stood Olsen could see eight cubicles against the right-hand wall, the first seven of which contained desktop computers and keyboards, the eighth a large network printer, and it was for these that he now headed.

Riley let him go, more than likely knowing he needed time to think.

Olsen stopped at the first workstation and nudged its mouse. The screen powered up as a result, showing the usual Windows log-in, confirming his unspoken hunch that the PCs had all powered off and then up again when the electricity went out. Now if he could only get one to

workâ€¦

On a whim, he tried the administrative password and log-in that every commercially bought PC is shipped with and was shocked when the machine booted up for him. Now weâ€™re getting somewhere, he thought. Vargas might have brought in some top-of-the-line scientists for whatever they were doing here, but they apparently knew next to nothing about computer security.

But it wasnâ€™t going to be that easy and his grin of success soon faded.

Sitting down to try and access some of the information on the computer, he discovered the various menu trees and file folders had been individually secured with passwords of their own. He could get into the computer, but not into any of the files that were stored on it. He tried various screen commands and work-arounds that he knew, but the computer stubbornly refused to give up its secrets. The desk itself was clear of any paper or notebooks as well.

He moved on to the next PC and booted it up, only to discover the same problem. One by one, he found them all inaccessible. He knew he could eventually break the security system and access the data, but he didnâ€™t have the time for such a prolonged process right now.

Giving up, he moved to rejoin his companions. As he walked by the final cubicle, the blinking red light on the network printer caught his eye. Paper jamb, he thought, stepping past.

Paper jamb.

He turned back to the printer and pulled out the paper drawer. It was empty. Which meant whatever had been printing might still be in the printerâ€™s memoryâ€¦

Olsen began hunting in the drawers around the printer, looking for some paper, and quickly refilled the receptacle beneath the printer when he did find it. With a quick prayer to St. Michael, patron saint of knights and soldiers, he pushed the reset button on the printer and waited.

Thirty seconds later he pumped his arm in the air in victory as pages of text began to pour out of the device.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WARNINGS

There were eighteen pages in all, each covered with single-spaced type. Close examination showed them to be selected passages from an individual's personal journal. A glance at the content made it obvious that the journal belonged to one of the scientists, though no names or identifying information was given about either the author or the project in question. The notes themselves chronicled certain events over the course of six weeks earlier that summer. Certain sections hinted at the larger picture, but without the complete journal they were left with more questions than answers.

Several of the entries were particularly intriguing, like the one from May 23rd.

The process seems to have taken hold, but only time will tell if it will last. Barajas and Orlander are working on a means of increasing the speed of the developmental cycle, but they've practically had to start from scratch due to the nature of the specimen and I, for one, am not confident that they can pull it off. We shall see.

Early June held another tantalizing glimpse.

June 14 - Unlike the earlier failures, this time the growth rate seems to be holding steady at plus 3.68. We've had four days without an adjustment and it looks like it has finally become stable. At this rate the specimen should be fully grown in just a matter of weeks, rather than the eight months it had taken with the first attempt. I take back what I said; Orlander is a genius!

Several of the entries were similar. All of them referred to the experiment in evasive terms, as if even the writer was afraid to name just what it was that they were doing, though Olsen suspected he might be putting his own subconscious spin on things. Page after page of growth rates and maturation cycles, or starts and stops as the various attempts petered out or took different tracks than had been expected. More than once the writer cursed their failures. Blame was tossed about with abandon, as if everyone but the writer was responsible for the latest setback or failure and in the process Olsen learned several of their names. The reconstruction team would at least have a place to start in identifying the dead.

The tenor of the journal changed with the last few entries. Apparently the subject of the experiment was not cooperating in the way they'd expected.

July 6th " Questions are now going unanswered. Subject B exhibiting the petulance of a teenager, refusing to do the simple tasks or carry out the smallest requests. His demands continue and this has some of us worried. Vargas intends to continue with the stated protocol.

July 9th " Violence for the first time today. Jackson's arm was broken when the evening meal was being delivered. Vargas has ordered Subject B to be isolated for a period

of 48 hours. It's certain it's a mistake.

And then nothing more.

The ambiguousness of the notes was further proof that they had lost a valuable resource when Dr. Bhanjee had disappeared. He could have cleared up any number of their questions, Olsen was sure of it.

He brought the notes over to Cade and let him know how he'd come to possess them. The Knight Commander ordered him to strip the hard drives out of a few of the PCs; they'd take them back with them and see what they could uncover with the right time and the proper tools.

* * *

When Olsen was finished, they left the crÃche room behind, this time with Riley on point. For the next twenty minutes they passed through several corridors filled with a series of additional labs, but nothing of interest was uncovered in any of them, and Riley began to feel like they were simply spinning their wheels on this level as room after room passed by without further clues. He was getting ready to call a short break when an odd thumping noise reached his ears from just around the next corner. Hearing it, Riley gave the signal and stopped. Behind him the others did the same.

Cade came up the line and settled against the wall next to Riley. "What have we got?"

The master sergeant inclined his head toward the bend in the corridor ahead. "Listen."

After a moment, the sound came again and this time Cade heard it, too. "Any ideas?" he asked.

"Not a one."

"Then that doesn't leave us much choice, now does it?" Cade turned and signaled to the others that they were to stay in place while he and Riley checked things out.

They advanced carefully toward the bend in the corridor ahead of them. When they reached it, Riley removed a small mirror from a pocket of his fatigues and held it out at an angle before him so that he could see around the corner without exposing himself. He took a long look and then pulled his hand back.

Passing the mirror to Cade, he said, "You'd better take a look. It's Bhanjee."

They switched positions, Cade extending the mirror around the corner, just as Riley had. With it he could see that the hallway continued for another twenty feet before ending at a reinforced pressure door. Attached to that door was the stripped body of a man. Bruises covered him from head to toe and there were more than a handful of open, bleeding wounds across

his flesh as if heâ€™d been cut by a knife. He was arrayed against the door in a classic crucifixion pose, with his arms stretched out on both sides and his feet placed atop one another. Even from this distance Cade could see the large spikes that had been driven through his limbs to hold him in place, one in each arm just above the elbow and another through his feet. The odd thumping sounds were a result of his hands flapping like trapped birds against the door as he twitched in pain.

His head hung downward, giving Cade only a partial glimpse of his face, but even in the small surface of the mirror Cade could see that it was, indeed, the missing Dr. Bhanjee.

Taking his attention away from the wounded scientist, Cade angled the mirror first in one direction and then the other. By doing so he could see that there were no other entrances into the corridor, so they couldnâ€™t be flanked if they moved forward. An attack through the ceiling seemed unlikely, as did one coming up through the floor. Which meant that there were only two directions that they had to worry about; back down the hallway behind them or through the door to which Dr. Bhanjee was nailed.

He turned to Riley. â€œFeels more like a warning than a trap.â€

â€œAgreed.â€

Cade gave it a bit more thought and then apparently made a decision. â€œAll right, letâ€™s see if we can get the poor bastard down.â€

Riley listened in as Cade called Olsen over the tactical net and gave orders for the rest of the team to move up to their present position. In a low voice, he explained that First Squad would be in charge of keeping them safe while the members of the command unit would see what they could do about getting Dr. Bhanjee free. Chen and Callavechio were ordered to guard the approach down the corridor, in case anything tried to come up behind them. Ortega and Davis were assigned the task of keeping their eye on the door ahead of them, so that they wouldnâ€™t be surprised by anything coming from that direction. Riley and Cade would remove the spikes from the doctorâ€™s arms and legs while the other two men supported his body in order to keep him from falling once he was free.

Hearing the plan, Riley felt a great deal of sympathy for the formerly obnoxious scientist. The next several moments were going to be very hard for Dr. Bhanjee.

Once everyone understood their respective roles, Cade gave the order and the team moved into action like the well-oiled mechanism that they were. Those assigned to provide cover swiftly took their positions, while he, Olsen, Cade and Duncan moved in on the good doctor.

He must have heard them coming for the flapping of his hands increased in tempo, slapping against the door like fish in a net, and he twisted his head from side to side in unconscious denial of what he thought was coming. A panicked whining came from him, increasing

in volume as their footsteps grew closer.

Riley cringed at the sound; no human being should ever be reduced to such fear and pain.

“Take it easy, we’re here to help you. We’re going to try and get you down.”

It took a few moments and more than one repetition by Cade, but finally what he was saying seemed to get through to the wounded man. The doctor visibly relaxed when he understood it was not his captor coming back to torture him further, his hands stopping their panicked fluttering and his head slumped forward on his chest in exhaustion.

Cade reached out and Riley watched as he gently lifted the man’s head.

What had been done to him was hideous.

Dr. Bhanjee’s eyes had been torn out, the sockets now raw bloody wounds in the canvas of the man’s face. His lips had been stitched together with what looked like electrical wire and a word had been scrawled across his forehead in blood.

Riley might not read Hebrew, but he knew his Biblical Greek well enough.

Paradidomi.

Betrayer.

Someone was very unhappy with this man.

His teammates stepped up and grasped the doctor’s arms and body, supporting him under the armpits, doing what they could to take the pressure off his lungs and give him a chance to breathe a bit easier. Cade looked over at him, silently asking if he was ready for what was to come.

Riley nodded.

They had no choice; it had to be done.

Riley moved forward and grasped Dr. Bhanjee’s right forearm, locking it firmly in place against the door, preventing it from moving. He nodded again to Cade that he was ready.

Using a set of pliers from Olsen’s tech kit, Cade placed one foot against the door beneath the doctor’s arm, grasped the protruding end of the spike with the teeth of the pliers, and hauled backward with all his might.

Bhanjee screamed in agony, tearing his sewn lips apart..

Riley was not surprised to see a tear on Duncan’s face before he turned away; he felt like crying himself. The spike had barely moved. The pain had to be excruciating and at this rate it was going to take awhile before the spike came free. Never mind the other two that would have to follow the first.

Cade went back to work.

It took them more than twenty minutes just to work the first spike free. Dr. Bhanjee lapsed into unconsciousness after a few minutes, unable to bear the horrible agony, and Riley found

himself offering a silent prayer of thanks that he did not have to listen to the man's agony any longer.

The second and third spikes took even longer. By the time they were able to gently lower the doctor to the floor, Riley's sympathy had turned to raging anger. Whoever had done this would pay, he vowed. No matter how long it took. He hadn't liked the man, had despised him a bit even, but no one should have to undergo such pain and suffering at the hands of another.

As they got up to give him some room, Bhanjee gave a quick little hiccup and then stopped breathing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE ENEMY, NAMED

“Damn it!” Riley knelt beside the body, yanked Dr. Bhanjee’s shirt open, and began giving him CPR, cursing their luck all the while. Fifteen compressions, one after another. Tilt the head, pinch the nose, expel air into the lungs. Sit back up. Start pumping again, one-two-three-four!

He gave up after twenty minutes, unable to get Dr. Bhanjee’s heart restarted. Rocking back on his heels, he did what he could to catch his own breath.

Cade wasn’t about to give up that easily, however. He suspected Dr. Bhanjee had known far more than he’d let on and he wasn’t about to let him take that information with him to the grave if he could help it. It was time for the gloves to come off.

Literally.

He let the others know what he intended.

Riley wasn’t happy with the idea. “You sure about this?” He glanced around them and from his face it was clear he had serious concerns about their present position. “This isn’t the most secure location, you know?”

“I’ll be quick. I don’t want to be lost in his memories for long; his last few moments weren’t all that pleasant and I don’t want to relive them unless absolutely necessary.” Cade knew he was going to get some of it, no matter what he did, but he hoped that the man’s close proximity to death would have had him mentally focused on more important matters there at the end.

Reluctantly, his exec nodded his agreement and then set about doing what he could to provide Cade as much security as possible. The rest of the men were ordered into two concentric circles, one inside the other, with the Knight Commander and Dr. Bhanjee’s body at the center. Ortega was in charge of the outer ring, with Riley taking control of the inner one. When he was satisfied with the arrangements he gave Cade the go ahead.

Cade knelt on the floor and stripped off his gloves, just as he had back in the walk-in freezer. He remembered his failure there, but quickly dismissed it as irrelevant. Lingering psychic impressions often dissipated within forty-eight hours and they’d had no idea how long that man had been dead when he’d tried to read him. But they’d just watched Bhanjee die; his final thoughts and feelings were still locked up in the shell of his body and Cade was confident he could tease them free.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Cade reached out and put his bare palms on either side of Dr. Bhanjee’s face.

As soon as he did, a kaleidoscope of images surged past, as if Bhanjee had, indeed, seen his life flash before him there at the end. Cade struggled to narrow his focus, to separate the wheat from the chaff, and get something meaningful from the montage that played on despite Bhanjee's passing.

Heat.

Sand and rock. The quiet hiss of the wind as it skittered across the ground and echoed softly in the trenches they'd dug that morning.

"Who else knows?" asked a voice.

"No one. I've been working this end of the trench all day by myself. You're the first to see it, other than me." Bhanjee answered and in his response Cade heard all the guilt and pain that the decision would eventually cause.

A flash of darkness and then he stood in a conference room, confronting a grey-haired man in white lab coat. Underneath it Cade could see that the man wore a blue jumpsuit. They were having a heated argument and Cade could feel his disdain and contempt for the man in front of him, but he couldn't make out the words or understand just what the fight was about.

The other man finally threw down his pen in disgust and left the room, leaving Bhanjee to stare smugly at the closing door.

Now the real work can begin, he found himself thinking, and his pulse surged.

Flash.

Another scene swam into view and this time Cade found himself gazing down at a deformed mass of flesh that vaguely resembled a human being lying stretched out on a steel table in a lab somewhere. Various parts of it were recognizable for what they should have been. Those short, twisted appendages had tried to be arms. That long thick trunk might have later developed into legs. And in the center of that bulging mass that served as its head, clear as day, was a human eye.

As he watched, the eye turned and looked at him.

He felt the tears running down his cheeks now and held his breath as the thing opened up a gaping maw in the center of its chest that might eventually have served as a mouth and shrieked its rage and humiliation at him.

Flash.

The scene changed a fourth and final time, the transition so sudden and so jarring that Cade was almost swept away in its unstoppable tide.

Agony.

Sheer unrelenting agony as the spike pierced his feet and sank deeply into the metal of the door behind. His throat, already raw from seemingly endless screaming, let loose with an-

other long peal of pain and misery that rang up and down the corridor.

Through the pain the questions had never stopped, questions asked in a voice that was louder than his cries of pain despite the fact that it they were never spoken in anything louder than a whisper, questions to which he had no answer.

What was his purpose?

Who were his allies?

Where were the Watchers and what had happened to the throne?

Question after question, none of which made any sense.

Through it all there was the face.

And with that face a command to commit it to memory, a command felt down in the very center of his bones, as if placed there at the long-forgotten time of his creation and only activated now when it was urgently needed. An order to be certain that every single detail, every nuance and expression, every blemish and wrinkle, be saved for what was to come thereafter.

With the aid of his Gift, Cade saw the face that Dr. Bhanjee had committed to memory, the face of the individual that had tortured him for what seemed like hours.

A face of smooth planes and unblemished skin.

A face with a mouth that seemed forever locked in a perpetual sneer.

A face with coal black eyes that bored into his own, searching, prying, hunting for the answers it so desperately needed.

And with that face, a name.

Baraquel.

It was the clue Cade had been looking for.

Cade broke contact and collapsed to the floor beside the professor's body, too weak from the ordeal to do anything but lie there and recover his breath for several long moments, but that was okay with him.

They had a Name now.

And in the circles that Cade traveled in, names meant power.

For the first time since entering the facility known as Eden, Knight Commander Cade Williams smiled a wolfish smile of his own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

REVELATIONS AT LAST

Cade needed some time to rest and regain his strength after his viewing, so Echo took a short break. As they did, Riley and Olsen went to work on the door that Dr. Bhanjee had been crucified against, eventually prying it open to find a single set of stairs just beyond.

The steps led upward another entire level. At the top they found a door secured by another key-code device, the third they'd seen since entering the complex the day before.

This time, however, the pass keys they'd acquired in the cafeteria did no good. Olsen pulled out his tools and started in on the door while the others took five. The events of the last half hour must have hit him harder than he'd thought; he noticed his hands were shaking as he attached the various leads and set his handheld to trying to find the right combination to open the door.

“You all right?”

Olsen jumped and nearly yelled aloud; he hadn't realized that Cade had climbed the last few steps to stand next to him. When he could find his voice again he gave a self-deprecating laugh and waved away his commander's concerns. “I'm good, boss,” he said, a bit gruffly to hide his embarrassment.

Cade eyed him for a minute, nodded, and then turned away without saying anything further. Olsen knew he hadn't fooled him but also knew that Cade's lack of further questioning was proof once more that he depended and trusted him. It was exactly what Olsen needed to cast off the willies he'd been experiencing and get back to work with renewed vigor.

And I bet he knew it, too, he thought to himself and grinned wryly at his commander's back.

At that moment the handheld beeped, indicating that it had found the proper sequence, and Olsen carefully made note of it before calling the rest of the men back into action. Riley and Cade set up beside him on the narrow landing. He input the correct combination, glanced at them to be certain they were ready, and then hauled open the door. They swept past him quickly, ready for whatever might be waiting for them.

Which turned out to be nothing.

At least nothing life threatening, that was.

The door opened onto a set of personal quarters, but these were far more lushly appointed than any they had discovered previously.

Where the others were simple dormitory style set-ups, with communal bathrooms and no dining facilities, this space was actually divided into four separate rooms, with its own bath-

room and even a mini-kitchen with a small dinette set and a stovetop. The furniture here was of much nicer caliber as well; the couch in the living room was genuine leather and the desk in the study was clearly polished oak. Even more surprising, the far wall of the study was made up of a huge window that looked out upon the mountainside and the base below. Outside, Olsen could see that the funnel cloud theyâ€™d tangled with earlier the day before was still there, churning up the ground and casting a dark cloud of dust and grit over the entire facility. For the first time since entering the complex, Olsen found himself glad he was inside here instead of out there amidst the storm.

The desk held a desktop computer, the first heâ€™d seen outside of the labs, and he suspected that theyâ€™d finally found the base commanderâ€™s personal quarters. The stack of hand-written journals they found in the desk drawers confirmed that fact. Inside the cover of each, written in spidery yet meticulous handwriting, it read:

Dr. Juan Vargas

Notes and Observations

The Eden Project

It was the goldmine of information they had been looking for. The only problem was that the rest of the pages were written in a strange, indecipherable language that wasnâ€™t familiar to any of them. While the others were flipping through the pages of the journals, trying to make heads or tails of the odd script, Olsen found himself wandering around the perimeter of the room, poking at this and that, his thoughts wandering. One wall held a large tapestry and he idly pushed one edge to the side.

To his surprise, he found another doorway concealed behind it.

Brushing the tapestry aside, he stepped through the entryway, only to be brought up short by what he saw just beyond.

â€œSon of aâ€¦!â€ Olsen said to himself, and then he called out loud enough so that the others in the next room could hear him. â€œHey boss, youâ€™d better get in here!â€

Responding to the urgency in his voice, both Williams and Riley rushed into the room, weapons ready, only to stop short themselves when they saw what he was looking at.

â€œMary and Joseph!â€ Riley breathed at the sight.

â€œKinda catches your attention, now doesnâ€™t it?â€ Olsen said smugly and then went back to staring at it himself.

It was astounding. Heâ€™d seen some amazing things since joining the Order, but this one had to take the prize. The stone itself was huge. It covered nearly the entire wall, a length of more than twenty feet and a good ten or so in height, near as he could estimate. It looked to be a good foot thick, too. It appeared to him to be some kind of shale or slate, though

heâ€™d be the first to admit his knowledge of geology was limited. Still, heâ€™d seen his share of fossils embedded in similar rocks and he didnâ€™t think he was too far off the mark. The stone was resting on what could only be specially designed supports, for the weight alone would cause the average wall to collapse as if it were made of toothpicks. Small spotlights had been arranged along the ceiling and floor to artistically showcase the display.

Yet it wasnâ€™t the stone that had captured his amazement or the way it had been so carefully hung, but what was embedded within it. The skeleton had to be at least several thousand years old and he would have bet good money that it was even older than that; it looked ancient. It stood almost as tall as the stone itself and was nearly perfectly preserved. The skull had a strong brow and a large cranium, indicative that it had probably been highly intelligent. Based on the thickness of the bones in the arms and legs, Olsen could only imagine the strength the creature must have possessed.

But it was the wings that truly captured his attention.

They stretched out all the way to the edge of the stone on either side of the skeleton, a wingspan of nearly twenty feet. The feathers themselves had been preserved in the fossilization process and in many cases the individual shafts and vanes were clearly visible, etched into the stone. When the creature had been alive, it must have been an awesome sight.

The thought caused him to snort at himself in derision. The creature? It wasnâ€™t a creature, except in the sense that it had been created.

Stop being such a wimp and admit the obvious.

It was much more than a creature.

It could only be one of the bne-elohim.

The sons of God.

An angel.

The idea that he was standing in front of the skeletal remains of one of the holiest creations ever devised by the Lord was amazing. Beyond amazing. While it was nothing more than a skeleton now, he could imagine that this being had once stood in the very presence of God. It had probably fought on the side of righteousness and stood as a soldier in the Lordâ€™s army. One of its brethren had swept through the city of Pharaoh and had slaughtered all of the firstborn. Another had freed Peter from his chains and helped him escape from imprisonment in Rome. Four such beings now stood at the corners of the earth, holding back the winds of heaven. They were the messengers and the arm of justice of God himself.

But as he gaped in wonder, another more ominous thought suddenly occurred to him.

He was making assumptions, and unfounded ones at that.

Not all of the angels had been on the side of righteousness.

Not all of them had fought on the side of Heaven.

There were also the nephilim, the fallen ones, those who had been cast out, those who had sided with Lucifer and had been thrown from the mount of heaven for their sin of pride.

Bne-elohim or nephilim. The odds were fifty-fifty.

His thoughts were interrupted as Riley spoke up.

“Looks like they removed a piece,” Riley said, pointing to a spot on the left foot where it was obvious one of the metatarsals had been carefully removed from the stone.

Olsen bent over to give it a closer look and that’s when it hit him.

The quote carved over the front entrance to the secret complex.

The crèche chamber and its accompanying tanks.

The notes from journal discussing the rapid growth techniques employed to bring the subject to “adulthood.”

They all added up to one inescapable conclusion and it came clear to him with the force of a runaway locomotive.

Olsen looked up from the stone to find Cade staring at him with an expression of awe-struck horror, the same expression Olsen knew was plastered across his own face.

“Good Lord! Tell me he didn’t,” the commander said quietly.

Olsen was unable to respond, for he was quite certain that Vargas had, indeed, done the unthinkable.

The stupid fool had tried to clone an angel from the fossilized remains hanging on the wall before them.

Even worse, he’d apparently succeeded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ANGELIC OFFERINGS

Shocked at the audacity and pride inherent in Vargas's™ experiment, Cade stepped out of the fossil room, his thoughts whirling and the rest of Echo followed at his heels.

The moment they emerged from the back room a blazing light filled the space around them, forcing them to cover their eyes and bend their heads to protect themselves from its searing brightness.

When the light faded, Echo was no longer alone.

“Do not be afraid,” the newcomer said and in light of what they now knew, none of them missed the Biblical importance of that particular phrase. His voice boomed, filling the room with its depth and grandeur, and it seemed to all of them that it was made up of a thousand voices speaking as one, all whispering the same words at the exact same moment, so rich in timbre and tone it was.

The angel's™ very presence was a burden to bear in and of itself, pressing against them with a physical weight all its own and Duncan finally understood why the first words spoken by an angel whenever it appeared to mortals in the Bible were always the same. He was afraid, and he knew that nothing the creature before them said was going to change that.

The only one of the Echo members who didn't™ seem particularly cowed was Cade. He stood in front of the newcomer, his back straight and his head held high, waiting.

“I am the messenger of the Lord and I bring good news.” The angel, Baraquel, spread his arms the way one would welcome a close friend or family member and smiled at them.

“You welcome us?” Cade asked drolly. “Is that what you've™ been doing?”

A smirk spread across the angel's™ face. “Surely you expected a test of your abilities when you entered this place? I've™ simply supplied a reasonable challenge to determine your worthiness, to see if you were the man I have been waiting for.”

Duncan couldn't™ hold his tongue any longer. This thing had slaughtered an entire base full of scientists, had defiled the dead, had sent hell-spawned demons to attack them, and had killed their friend. He would listen to no more of its drivel. “We will have nothing to do with an abomi-!”

“Silence!” the angel roared, his shout filling the room like a gale force wind, and with a flick of his hand Duncan was cut off in mid-word, unable to move anything but his eyes. Baraquel waved his other hand and the rest of Echo was seized in his power as well.

Everyone but Cade, who still stood in the vanguard of the unit, casually facing down Hell's™ own representative.

* * *

Cade did what he could to maintain his outward façade, but inside he trembled with the display of power he had just seen. He had to learn what this creature wanted, had to buy some time for them to figure out just how to gain the upper hand. Showing fear would get him slaughtered like a sheep in a pen and he knew his men wouldn't last ten seconds after that.

For now, he would play along.

"A test?" He did what he could to appear to be considering that possibility. "Okay, I can see that. And your presence here means we passed?"

Baraquel waved his hand disdainfully at the men of Echo arrayed in a semi-circle behind Cade. "You passed. They did not. I should slay them out of hand."

"Wait!" Cade said, and went on quickly before he could raise the angel's ire once more. "You tested me to see if I was worthy? Worthy of what?"

Baraquel grinned. "Now that's the question, isn't it?" He pointed behind Cade. "Turn around and look."

Knowing the angel was likely to strike him down where he stood if he refused, Cade did so, turning his back on his foe, an action that went against every bit of combat training he'd ever received. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise up in protest but what choice did he have?

Through the panoramic window that Vargas had installed in his office, Cade could see the visible portion of the base at the foot of the mountain below and beyond that the desert stretched out like a vast carpet.

Baraquel's breath washed over the back of his neck and Cade's skin crawled at the thought that something so dangerous could have gotten so close without a sound. That sickly sweet smell of lilacs and wet fur suddenly filled the air around him and Cade finally realized just what it was that Vargas had been keeping locked up in the cells two floors below. The angel's arm extended over Cade's shoulder and with a wave of his hand the desert was transformed into a vibrant city of soaring towers, all polished steel and shining glass. "Look! Look at that! It could all be yours."

Cade frowned. "How? What do I have to do to get it?"

Baraquel practically rubbed his hands together in anticipation as he sensed Cade's blossoming interest. "I need a human regent to enforce my decrees. One I can trust. A man of power and determination, one that can be counted on to do the right thing no matter how difficult it might appear."

"And it would all be mine?" Cade's voice practically dripped with greed and desire.

“Yes!” the angel cried. He stepped past Cade, his arms open wide as if to include the entire scene, his voice booming. “You will be the master of every inch, every gleaming spire!”

Riley stood to Cade’s left, still struggling against whatever power the angel had used to hold him frozen in place. Cade caught his gaze with his own and flashed the hand signal for Be Ready. Riley blinked twice to show he understood.

The angel was still going on, ruminating about what they could accomplish together, what changes they could bring to the world. Tuning him out, Cade reached up and yanked the patch off his face, activating his Sight as he did so. A shimmering braid of phantasmic energy extended from the angel to each of his teammates and it was this energy that was holding them in place, immobile. If he could break that connection!

Cade turned to look at Baraquel, still using his Sight, and had to force himself not to recoil at what he saw. Gone was the human countenance, the smile and the false glory. In its place was a hulking brute of a creature, with tattered black wings and sores oozing over its exposed skin, sores that leaked an inky black ichor down across its grey flesh.

Strangely, there was no aura around the creature, no evidence of the divine spark that Cade had encountered in every living thing that he had viewed through his Sight. Either the creature before him had been created without a soul or something had stolen it somewhere along the way.

Cade’s MP5 hung by its strap from his right shoulder and he casually let his right hand slide around its grip, his finger slipping through the trigger guard, as he turned his body slightly in that direction to hide his actions from view.

Baraquel spun around suddenly, his eyes narrowing as he sensed Cade’s use of his Sight. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Cade glanced down at the ground and turned off his Sight, taking a calculated gamble that the angel wouldn’t destroy him on the spot, and then looked back up with what he hoped was an appropriately fawning expression on his face. “What do I have to do to gain such riches?”

Baraquel smiled and Cade nearly grinned himself as he realized the hook had been properly baited. He struggled to keep a predatory smile off his face as the angel went on.

“I know you are different from your less-gifted companions, that you have minor powers of your own. I will teach you how to use them, how to make them grow in power and intensity.” Baraquel glanced away and Cade was struck by how human the gesture was; apparently even a fallen angel tended to look away when it lied. “In return you will remove the wards surrounding this place, so I will not have to waste my time with such trivial things. After that you will secure us a new location from which we can plan our conquest.”

The angel looked at him again and what seemed to be anticipation shone from eyes of midnight black. "Are you ready to seize your destiny?"

"Yes!" Cade said and shifted position to bring his weapon. He hauled back on the trigger and sent a wave of gunfire straight at the angel standing before him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JOURNEYS NEAR AND FAR

Cade kept his finger on the trigger of his weapon even as Baraquel reacted to the assault, swinging his wings around in front of him as a shield. The bullets from Cade's gun began to bounce off their tar black feathers, ricocheting in every direction.

But the attack had accomplished what it had been meant to accomplish; that braid of twisting and churning energy that had wrapped each of the men of Echo Team into immobility slipped away into oblivion the minute Baraquel's attention went elsewhere.

Thanks to Cade's prior warning, Riley was ready when he felt the pressure constricting him fall away. Without hesitation he vaulted forward into a roll, twisting around as he did so that when he came back up on his feet he was closer to Cade and facing in the same direction. As Cade's magazine ran dry Riley filled the room with the repeating boom of his shotgun, doing what he could to keep the angel pinned in place while the rest of Echo took what shelter they could find behind the furniture throughout the room.

Unfortunately, Cade was right. It was an angel they were facing and its power was beyond anything they had ever encountered. Baraquel withstood the withering hail of gunfire without a scratch and his laughter filled the room. "Go ahead and shoot!" he cried, his voice loud enough to be heard over the cacophony of gunfire even as the other members of Echo Team added their own shots to the mix. "Your puny weapons cannot hurt me!" Raising his arm, he sent a shaft of blue witchfire leaping across the room.

It struck Cade full on, throwing him back against the wall hard enough to smash the plaster and leave a man-sized dent. Cade slipped to the floor, unconscious.

Guns were not the only weapons Echo carried, however. Even as Baraquel was turning to target another member of the team with his arcane wizardry, Davis rose up from behind the desk where he'd hidden until now and stabbed the angel through the back with the blessed sword every Templar knight carried into battle.

Baraquel shrieked, the sound so powerful that it shook the very walls of the room. A ribbon of blue energy shot back down the blade of the sword, shocking Davis and tossing him backward as if he'd grabbed a downed power line. The sword stayed where it was, however, its tip protruding from the center of the angel's chest and black blood began to flow like water down his body.

The angel screamed again and as Riley watched it rose up on flapping wings. He knew he'd never forget the look of utter hatred on the creature's face as it stared into his eyes in that second and then it brought its hands together in a thunderclap that sent a tidal wave of energy pouring forth across the room.

Riley was thrown backward and everything around him faded into darkness.

* * *

A steady drip-drip-drip intruded on Duncan's awareness and he slowly came back to consciousness. Raising a hand to his face, he wiped off the sheen of moisture that had accumulated there and opened his eyes. The ceiling above him swam slowly into view but what he saw there was not what he expected.

Suddenly concerned, he sat up and looked around.

The room they were in was roughly the same as it had been before the fight. Riley and Olsen lay where they had fallen, near the large window that looked out over the base proper. Ortega was to Duncan's left and like him was just struggling to sit up. To Duncan's right, Chen was already awake and tending to a wounded Davis, who looked like he had a broken arm.

The angel was nowhere to be seen.

No more or less than he'd expected, given the confrontation they had just gone through. The disconcerting issue was the fact that everything around him seemed to have been leached of color, like a tablecloth left too long in the sun. Everything, including his teammates, was some subtle shade of grey. Grey floor. Grey ceiling. Grey flesh. Grey, grey, grey. If Duncan hadn't encountered the phenomenon before, he might have thought he'd suffered some kind of injury to his eyes, but he knew all too well what the change meant.

With rising horror he realized that they were no longer in the real world, but had somehow slipped through the barrier and into the Beyond.

Cade. Where was Cade?

Another glance around showed that the situation was even worse than he had feared.

The one man who could take them out of here was nowhere in sight.

Cade was missing.

Getting to his feet, Duncan moved over to where Riley and Olsen lay and did what he could to rouse them. They came to slowly, groggily, and it was several minutes before they were coherent enough to understand their predicament. By then Chen had managed to get Davis's arm into a makeshift sling and the two had wandered over to join them.

"What the hell's happened to my eyes?" Ortega wanted to know and Duncan did what he could to reassure them all that their vision was just fine, it was their current location that they had to worry about.

His revelation was by no means something they were happy to hear.

Nor was the news that Cade was missing.

"That bastard son of the devil must have him!" Chen exclaimed and Duncan was afraid he might just be right. But Riley wasn't willing to accept that without a thorough

search of the room around them and so they set out to do just that.

Much to everyone's surprise, especially Duncan's, they found Cade in the alcove behind the tapestry, lying at the foot of the wall where the stone containing Baraque's skeleton had hung in the real world. Here, the stone was simply bare rock.

How he got there was anyone's guess.

The Knight Commander was unconscious, with a raw, bloody wound on the left side of his head.

Riley and Olsen picked him up and carried him back out into the main room, where Chen could properly dress and bandage the wound. Cade remained unconscious throughout and nothing they did would revive him.

"Now what?" Duncan asked, looking to Riley. As Echo's executive officer, he took command in Cade's absence, or in this case, incapacitation.

Riley's answer was firm. "We get the heck out of this place. There is no way we can take on something like that without reinforcement. We'll come back with the right firepower and blast that thing back to Hell where it belongs." He looked around at the others, gauging their reactions.

He received five nods in reply.

He hefted Cade in his arms, uncomfortably aware that this whole mess had started with him holding his friend in the exact same manner, and ordered them back to the tram tunnel several floors below.

But things weren't that easy in the Beyond. The landscape there was constantly shifting, like a fun house mirror gone berserk, hauntingly familiar yet intimately strange. Where they expected to find corridors they found rooms, where they remembered a door there was only a stretch of blank wall. Everything was the same, yet different. And in the Beyond, the Eden facility showed its true nature. It was rotten at the core, like a fruit left too long in the sun, and the walls of the tunnels around them displayed this fact. Patches of luminescent fungus grew in more than one place, often hanging down and obscuring the path forward until the lead knight cleared them away with several sharp hacks of their sword. Pools of dank water were puddled here and there and more than once they came upon broken sections of pipe sticking out through the walls and pouring filth down into their path.

Three hours after they had started, Duncan had to admit to himself that they were hopelessly lost. Nor had they once had they seen a single rift that might carry them back into the real world. Several times "reality" shifted around them; for just a split second they found themselves back in the real world, with the dim emergency lightning over head and the flat institutional 1960s corridors beneath their feet, but this never lasted long enough for them to do anything with it.

It was during their second rest break when Cade had the first of his seizures. He twitched suddenly, raising Duncan's hopes that he might be coming out of his coma-like state, but when he began to thrash wildly without gaining consciousness it was clear he was having a fit instead.

Olsen and Riley leapt to his assistance, holding Cade's arms and legs while Duncan slid his pack beneath Cade's head to keep him from smashing his skull against the stone floor. The seizure went on for five long minutes and when it was over Cade lay still in their arms, breathing slowly but steadily.

Chen gave him a quick examination and then sat back on his heels, frowning.

"What?" Riley asked.

"I've done all I can for the wound on the outside; it's the inside that I'm worried about. That kind of seizure is usually caused by internal injuries and that's not good, not good at all."

"So what's the bottom line?"

"We need to get him to a hospital and we need to do so quickly. The sooner the better."

Riley simply nodded his understanding. There wasn't much more to say; he was doing all he could to find a way out of this place. He wanted to go home as much as everyone else did.

He called Duncan over and grilled him again for what he knew about the Beyond, but the other man had only been there once and had little to add to the meager information Olsen and Riley had provided.

After a few minutes of rest, they set out again.

But this time, in the back of Riley's mind, a clock had begun ticking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EXISTENTIAL CONVERSATIONS

Echo spent the next several hours trooping through corridor after corridor, searching fruitlessly for a way out. Several times they came upon half-congested staircases, but after clambering over the debris and descending to another level, all they found was more of the same. The team was exhausted, especially with the added burden of having to carry Cade everywhere they went, and at last Riley called a halt. They would get some food and some rest, try again with a fresh outlook in the "morning."

Sometime later Duncan was relieved of guard duty by Chen. Too awake to sleep, his thoughts churning at high speed, the newest member of Echo Team went looking for its executive officer. He found him a short distance down the hall, sitting watch beside Cade's wounded form.

Duncan walked over. "Got a minute?"

Riley nodded, indicating that Duncan should grab a seat on the stretch of floor across from him. "What's on your mind?" he said quietly.

The younger man sat down, glancing once at Cade's injured form as he did so but then turning away, uncomfortable that he couldn't bring himself to reveal his abilities to the rest of the group and heal their commander. If it gets worse, I'll see what I can do. There's time left still. We'll get out of here before I need to do anything drastic. He turned his attention back to what he'd come here to say. "I've been doing some thinking, trying to figure just what is going on. Why things keep shifting the way that they do. And I keep coming back to Vargas's arrogant belief that he could pull off a stunt like this without there being any major repercussions."

"I'm listening," said Riley.

"Well, we know that angels are multi-planar beings, right? I mean, they exist in both a physical and spiritual realm at the same time, just as we do?"

Riley nodded, waiting to see where the younger man was going.

"And we know that once the physical body dies, the spirit continues, that death is not the end but the beginning of a new kind of existence."

A piece of Scripture popped into Riley's head. "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. 1 Corinthians 15:51."

Duncan nodded. "Right. Clothe the mortal with immortality. Death transforms us into something more."

But Riley didn't see the point. "I'm certainly not going to argue with the apostle Paul, but what does that have to do with our situation? Are you intending to become immortal any time soon?" he asked, half-jokingly.

"Not me," said Duncan. "The angel. Baraqueel. We know that it died once. That fossilized skeleton hanging on the wall back there is proof of that. And it's reasonable to assume that when it died, its spiritual nature was separated from its physical one. Its body died but its soul, if that's what you want to call it, continued on in the spiritual realm."

"Okay. So what?"

"So what if by bringing its body back, Vargas and his men have upset the balance between the physical and spiritual realms? What if the angel's spiritual form is trying to reunite with its physical one?"

"What difference would that make?"

"The angel is no longer a creature created and formed by God, but one given life by human hands. That means it's missing that essential spark of divinity that identifies it as one of God's own."

"So?" Riley still wasn't getting it.

"So think about it for a minute! It knows it's been diminished; that it is less than it was before. It knows that it is separated from an essential part of its very nature and that the missing piece, that divine soul if you will, is still out there somewhere. It obviously has power, great power even, but it is still less than it was before and it knows it. It knows it. What would you do in that situation?" Duncan didn't wait for him to answer. "You'd do everything you could to make yourself whole again, wouldn't you?"

Riley couldn't argue with that. "Yeah, I guess I would."

"So it's reasonable to assume that the angel is trying to do the same thing, isn't it?"

Now the other man understood. "And by doing so, it is somehow causing these disruptions around us?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"But how?" asked Riley.

Duncan snorted. "How on earth should I know? I don't think the mechanics of it are all that important though. It's the end result that we need to be concerned with."

"Because every time it tries to bring its soul back across into this side of reality, it is weakening the Veil that much more," answered Riley "allowing the Beyond to leak into our world."

“Right now the hole isn’t all that big. But as more time passes, it will get bigger, until eventually it will be too big to contain. When that happens, the Veil will fall. The Beyond will merge with reality as we know it...”

“and that would be very, very bad,” his teammate finished for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A HEALER'S HANDS

Later that night.

Olsen jerked awake as he felt Cade moving beside him in the semi-darkness. A quick flash of his light told him all he needed to know; the Knight Commander was in the throes of another seizure, the worst one yet. His head jerked from side to side, setting his wound to bleeding again, and his feet drummed a shaky rhythm on the floor of the tunnel while his body shuddered and shook.

"Riley!" he called softly but urgently, hoping the Master Sergeant was close enough to hear his cry, and then did what he could to hold Cade steady as the tremors ran their course. It seemed like forever but in truth was only a matter of moments before he felt another presence and a second pair of hands joined his own.

"Damn! It's getting worse, isn't it?" Riley asked in a low voice and Olsen didn't need the light to recognize the concern and the fear in the big man's voice.

"Yeah. They're coming faster now. This is the third one in the last two hours."

"We've got to get out of here and get him to a doctor."

"Sure," Olsen snorted. "Let me just whistle up a trans-dimensional taxicab and we'll scoot right on over to the nearest ER."

Beneath their hands, Cade shuddered and then went still.

Olsen's breath caught in his throat, his fear making his heart pound like a drum, and he snatched his light off the floor, not caring anymore about giving their position away to whatever might be waiting out there in the dark. He flipped the switch and shone the light on Cade's face, holding it steady.

The seizure had stopped; their friend was breathing slowly but normally.

"Thank God!"

The crisis now passed, Olsen and Riley slumped against the wall on either side of Cade and tried to get their hearts back under control. The sense that time was running out was obvious to them both. They had to do something, and do it soon, if they wanted to keep Cade alive long enough to get the medical attention he needed.

"How long do you think we've got?" Olsen asked.

"I don't know. Heaven only knows how bad that head wound is on the inside and those seizures can't be helping the matter any. If their frequency keeps increasing, I'd say we've got several hours, half a day at most." Riley sighed. "Then again, I'm not a doctor. He could have ten minutes for all I know."

“Then it’s time to try something new.”

Both men started; they had been so involved in helping Cade that they hadn’t seen nor heard Duncan approach.

“I’m open to suggestions,” Riley replied.

The newest member of the Echo Team knelt on the ground at Cade’s feet. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again before saying anything. To Olsen it was clear he was struggling with something, but they simply didn’t have the time to be gentle or diplomatic about it.

“Just say it, for heaven’s sake” he told his teammate, with more than a hint of exasperation and impatience in his tone.

Apparently, for whatever reason, that did the trick. Duncan sat back and looked him in the face. “Remember the helicopter? That night at the Necromancer’s stronghold?”

How could he forget? They’d tracked the Necromancer and his infamous Council of Nine to their stronghold in the Louisiana swamps, had assaulted the place in an all-out attack to regain the Spear of Longinus that the group had stolen from the Order. Duncan had been with him in the helicopter hovering over the estate when the Necromancer had called a demon down out of the clouds. The beast had made short work of their vehicle and the pilot barely had time to warn them before they’d plummeted from the sky and smashed straight through the roof of the decaying mansion below them.

“What about it?”

“You almost died that night.”

“Yeah. So?” Olsen unconsciously rubbed his chest; he’d later learned that he’d been impaled on a two-foot piece of steel and it had only been Duncan’s swift medical attention that had saved his life.

Duncan hesitated, and then stumbled on. “When I got to you, you were all but dead. That pipe was sticking right up out of your chest. There was blood everywhere. I didn’t have any choice. I had to do it.”

“Didn’t have any choice? Had to do it? What the heck was the kid talking about? He opened his mouth to ask, but Riley beat him to it.

“What did you do, Duncan?” he asked gently.

The younger man looked over at his teammate, as if seeing him for the first time. With an anguished tone, he lifted his hands, held them up before him, and said simply, “I healed him.”

The other two men stared at him in stunned silence. At last, Riley found his voice again. “You did what?”

“Just what I said. I healed him. I knew he had only moments left to live. There was blood everywhere and that pipe had gone right through his lung. If he didn’t bleed to death he was going to drown on his own blood. I had to do something.” Duncan glanced back and forth between them, and it seemed to Olsen that he was searching for something. Absolution maybe?

Duncan focused on Olsen again. “When I pulled that pipe out of your chest, the blood started pumping like a fountain and I didn’t even think, I just put my hands over your wound, prayed that God would be with me and healed you. It’s what I do.”

Olsen could only continue to stare. It was a fantastic story, but yet something inside told him it was all completely true. Duncan had healed him; he had no doubt about it. But what did that mean?

Apparently Riley was trying to understand that, too. “You said ‘It’s what you do.’ You mean you’ve done this before?”

Duncan nodded. “Ever since I was a child. They’d come for miles, the sick and the injured, to see Pastor Duncan and his miracle boy.”

Olsen heard the bitterness in his tone and realized there was more to the story than that, but now was not the time. He steered the conversation back to the present. “Can you heal Cade?” he asked, realizing as he did so that he was almost afraid to hear the answer. Almost.

Duncan nodded. “I think so. Yes. At least, I can give it a try.”

“Then let’s do it.”

Riley grabbed Olsen’s arm, a concerned expression on his face. “I don’t know, man. What if something goes wrong? What if he causes more harm than good?”

But Olsen had heard enough. Deep in his gut, he knew it was their only chance. He shook himself free of the other’s grip. “Look around you, Matt!” he said, staring Riley down. “Does it look like we’re going anywhere anytime soon? If he can heal Cade, then maybe Cade can take us back across the Veil, get us back to our version of reality. It’s our only chance. It’s Cade’s only chance! Look at him for God’s sake; he’s not going to last another two hours at this rate!”

Riley couldn’t argue with that. Without another word he nodded his agreement. They would give it a try.

“What do you need us to do?” Olsen asked Duncan.

The younger man shook his head. “Nothing, I guess. At least I don’t think there’s anything you can do. It’s up to God, really. I’m just the conduit.”

Riley moved out of the way, allowing Duncan to get close to Cade. As they watched, their teammate crossed himself, bowed his head in prayer, and then, taking a deep breath, placed

his hands on the bandages covering Cade's head wound.

For several long moments, nothing happened. Duncan just sat there with his head bowed and his hands on Cade, a look of intent concentration on his face. Olsen felt his impatience growing thin and was about to say something when Duncan sat back and yanked his hands away from Cade.

"Fuck!"

Olsen had never heard his teammate swear before and the oath was startling in the quiet of the corridor, especially given its source. Ominous even. "What is it? What's wrong?" he asked.

"There's something wrong. In Cade's head."

"You mean with the wound?"

"No. I mean with his head. Inside his head. There's something in there that shouldn't be there."

Riley didn't like the way that sounded. "Can you get rid of it?"

Duncan shook his head. "That's just it. I don't think I should." He turned to face them both. "I've seen enough to know that Cade's encounter with that thing—what does he call it?"

"The Adversary," Riley supplied.

"Right. I know that his encounter with the Adversary left him with a few unusual traits. Like that thing he does with his hands. Or the way he crosses into the Beyond. He couldn't do that stuff before, right?"

"Not that I know of," replied Olsen. He looked to Riley for confirmation and the other man nodded his head in agreement.

"Okay. So that means that whatever else the Adversary did to him, it also somehow gave him those new abilities."

"So?"

"So we need those abilities to get out of here," Duncan continued. "I don't have any control over what I heal. I mean, it's not selective or anything. What if I heal Cade and end up healing whatever it is the Adversary did to him? What will we do then?"

The three men stared at each other, confounded by the choice before them. If they did nothing, Cade would probably die. If they healed him, they might save his life but might also maroon them all in the Beyond forever. It wasn't the best had they could have drawn.

"Wait a minute!" said Riley. "You healed him before without changing anything, right?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Olsen knew exactly what the other man meant. And suddenly several things seemed to make sense to him. "Back in the hospital. Before we jetted off on this insane assignment. Cade was so weak he could barely lift a hand, never mind walk. We left you alone in his hospital room just before our meeting with the Preceptor. Twenty minutes later the Knight Commander walks into the briefing like nothing happened. There was no way he could have done that on his own. You healed him, right? You must have!"

But Duncan shook his head. "No. I didn't heal him. I simply said a few prayers and left."

Now it was Olsen's turn to be bewildered. "But if you didn't heal him, who did?"

He never received an answer to his question however, for right at that moment the alert came back down the corridor from the rest of the team.

Something was on its way down the tunnel toward them.

CHAPTER THIRTY

FRIENDS IN UNLIKELY PLACES

“Olsen, you stay here with Cade. Duncan, you’re with me,” Riley said, turning as he did to head back up the tunnel and deal with whatever was coming their way.

Duncan shook his head and actually took a step closer to Cade’s now still form. “I’d rather stay here.”

Riley knew it was concern for their commander rather than fear that prompted Duncan’s actions, but he didn’t have time for his teammate’s independent streak right now and his answer to it came fast and sharp. “Tough. You’re the closest thing I’ve got to an expert on this place at the moment and that means I need your eyes and ears up front with me. Let’s move.”

Reluctantly Duncan joined him and the two of them moved quickly back up the tunnel to Ortega’s side. All of them were tired, worn out, confused by the situation they found themselves in, particularly with their leader injured and out of the action. Another firefight was the last thing they needed right now and yet it looked like that was exactly what they were going to get.

Riley hated days like these.

It didn’t take them long to reach the spot where Ortega was standing guard a short distance back up the tunnel. His position just this side of a sharp turn allowed him to stay under the cover of darkness while giving him an excellent vantage point from which to observe the long stretch of tunnel they’d already traversed. As Riley stepped up, he found himself unconsciously mimicking their injured leader. “What have we got?”

Ortega didn’t say anything, simply pointed down the tunnel in response. At its far end, a pale glow could be seen moving slowly in their direction. It was still faint and a less observant individual might have missed it but very little got past Ortega and Riley found himself thankful that he had men like him beside him in this place.

“Good work,” Riley said, clapping the other man on the back. As he watched whatever it was move slowly closer, he considered their options. They had yet to encounter anything in this hellish landscape that had their best interests at heart and he didn’t expect it to be any different this time around. Standing their ground probably meant ending up in another firefight. Their other option was to cut and run, try and put as much distance between them and this new enemy as they possibly could, without getting themselves lost in the process.

Not that they weren’t lost already.

Neither option was all that attractive, but in the end it was Cade's condition that tipped the balance for him. Riley knew that Cade needed time to rest, so he opted to stand and fight.

Decision made, he settled down to wait for whatever it was to get close enough for him to get a good look at it.

It didn't take long.

The glow became a shape and the shape quickly became a human figure as it continued moving toward them. As it got closer they began to see details.

The figure was dressed in a thick brown hooded robe that completely concealed its face. Its hands were also hidden from sight, tucked as they were inside the voluminous sleeves hanging off either arm. The individual was of average height, Riley would have guessed about six feet if asked, but even under the bulky robe he could tell that the newcomer was of slight build and probably didn't weigh more than a handful of pounds over a buck ten. The pale glow they had seen was still there, surrounding it, and Riley had the sudden sense that the figure before them was far less substantial than he believed.

That brought another, perhaps more disturbing, thought.

If things got ugly, would their weapons even work on this thing?

Unlike everything else they'd run into in this place, however, the newcomer did not give off waves of hateful malice and Riley took what little comfort there was in that fact, hoping they might have finally caught a break.

Then Duncan opened his mouth and everything changed in a heartbeat.

"You gotta be freakin' kidding me!" he breathed, so quiet that Riley doubted he'd actually heard it at first, until Duncan began moving forward.

"What?" Riley asked, snatching at his teammate, but Duncan was already past him and all he could do was stand and watch as he stepped out around the bend and stood in the midst of the tunnel, revealing himself to the approaching figure.

Around him Riley felt the rest of the men stir and he knew their level of intensity had just gone up a few notches. He held out his right hand, palm down, and slowly brought it down, indicating that they should remain in position and not interfere yet. He had no clue what Duncan thought he was doing out there, but he'd proven himself under fire and Riley was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Then again, really, what choice did he have?

While Riley and his men had gotten into position the figure had maintained its steady approach and was now roughly twenty feet away, only stopping when Duncan stepped around the corner into full view.

The two of them stared at each other and Riley watched them both, the muzzle of his weapon locked on a point over Duncan's right shoulder that afforded him a good shot at

the newcomer and he knew the men around were doing the same.

Time stretched and Riley felt his senses come into sharper focus just as they usually did in the seconds before an assault went bad, from the way the stranger's robes whispered against the floor as they swayed in the non-existent breeze to the whiteness of Duncan's knuckles where he gripped his MP5.

Riley's heart rate kicked into overdrive.

Here it comes, he thought.

But to his surprise, violence didn't erupt and it was the stranger who broke the silence first.

“Do you know who I am?”

The voice was at once achingly beautiful and savagely terrible, both melodic and discordant, if that was at all possible, and Riley's heart twisted in his chest to hear it.

Duncan's answer was the biggest shock so far, however.

“You're Gabrielle. Gabrielle Williams.”

Cade's dead wife? Riley couldn't believe what he was hearing, but there was no time to consider it in more detail for the conversation was going on without him and he dared not be left behind. He'd ponder it all later, once they were out of this mess. For now, he'd better follow along as well as he could.

Gabrielle cocked her head to one side as she considered Duncan's reply and in the seconds that followed Riley noted that Duncan still had not relinquished the near-stranglehold on his weapon. They weren't out of danger yet, apparently.

“Yes,” she replied at last, slowly, almost hesitantly. “Yes, that is my name.”

Duncan nodded, accepting her response, but he still did not relax. “What do you want?”

Again, she was slow to respond. Her actions puzzled Riley. Was she considering her answers, trying to find the proper response to the questions posed or was there something else going on? Was she even who she pretended to be? How could they know?

This time her response came a little quicker than before. “Take me to Cade.”

Yeah, right, Riley thought and apparently he wasn't the only one who was a bit uneasy at the idea.

“You can tell me what you came here to say and I'll pass it on,” Duncan replied. The muzzle of his weapon shifted almost imperceptibly closer to the woman standing before him.

Gabrielle, if that was truly who she was, shook her head. “He is dying. I must see him.”

Riley watched as it was Duncan's turn to hesitate. He knew Cade was too far up the tunnel to be visible, even with supernaturally enhanced vision, and so there was no chance that Gabrielle had simply seen his wounds and guessed at his condition. She had come here specifically because her former husband was in mortal danger. Somehow, someway, she had known and that alone was a very sobering thought.

But Duncan wasn't yet finished. "How do we know you are who you say you are?"

Gabrielle stared at him and unknowingly both Riley and Duncan held their breath. If things were going to go sideways, this was the point it would happen. In unconscious mimicry of each other, they both placed their fingers on the triggers of their weapons, preparing to defend their comrades and their wounded leader.

Their actions were unnecessary. Gabrielle seemed to understand the position they were in. Without a word she reached up and grasped the cowl of her hood and Riley couldn't help but flinch at the gleam of white bone that was revealed amidst the flesh of her hands as she did so. That might have been bad enough, but it was the sight of her face, now revealed to all who stood there, that shocked him into immobility.

She'd been gorgeous once, beautiful even, and the right side of her face still showed how she must have looked in life, her skin silky smooth and unmarred by even the smallest blemish, her lips rich and full. Her hair fell about that side of her face in a gentle wave and it shone in such a way that you just wanted to reach out and run your fingers through it.

But the left side of her face was a study in tragedy and horror. The skin had been stripped from the flesh, leaving the muscles, tendons, and blood vessels exposed for all to see in their scarlet glory. Her teeth gleamed brightly against the bloody texture of her face, her lips no longer there to tuck them away from view. Similarly her eye was a white marble in that sea of red and it rotated to fix Duncan in its baleful glare.

"I am Gabrielle Williams and my husband is dying. You will take me to him or I will go myself."

After a moment, Duncan nodded his agreement. After all, he was in no position to argue.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

REUNION

Duncan turned and, gesturing for Gabrielle to follow, headed back down the corridor to where the Olsen was watching over their wounded comrade. As Gabrielle passed, Riley felt a wave of cold wash over him, as if he'd just stepped barefoot into knee deep snow. He let her get a few feet ahead and then followed obediently behind. If Gabrielle was concerned about being sandwiched between two well-armed soldiers, she didn't show it.

Riley called Olsen over the radio. "We're headed your way. And we've got a visitor with us."

"Roger that. You want to let me in on who it is?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

By then their small group had gotten close enough that Gabrielle could see Cade lying motionless on the ground a short distance ahead. She pushed Duncan aside and rushed toward her injured husband.

Surprised by her sudden actions, Olsen stepped in front of the body of his friend, his weapon raised, but Riley had been expecting something like this and he waved his teammate out of the way before anything could come of it. Truth be told he had no idea what Gabrielle was capable of, but there was no sense testing her determination at this point.

Olsen moved aside as instructed.

Ignoring him, Gabrielle knelt down next to her wounded husband. She looked him over slowly and carefully, but made no move to touch him. She closed her eyes and was silent for a bit and then, "He's bleeding internally. If we can't stop it soon, he'll die."

It was all spoken in a voice devoid of any emotion, as if she were talking about a refrigerator rather than her beloved husband, so different from her actions upon first seeing him; a matter of fact recitation of events, a simple puzzle to be solved rather than a mortal threat to her beloved.

Slowly she turned her head and looked at each of them, until her gaze came to rest on Duncan. They stared at each other and Riley had the sense that something passed between them, but he wasn't sure exactly what. In the end he supposed it didn't really matter; Duncan stood up and moved to sit on the other side of Cade, opposite Gabrielle.

"What do you want me to do?"

As Gabrielle began explaining to Duncan what she intended, Riley found himself standing there, simply amazed at what had happened over the last twenty-four hours. From reaper demons to resurrected angels, from crossing the Barrier to sitting here taking medical advance from the long dead wife of his unit commander, it had been one freakin' strange

day.

He really hoped it would be over soon.

“Master Sergeant?”

How the hell did she know that? “Yes?” he replied, giving her his full attention.

“We’re ready to try now.”

“Good. What do I have to do?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Nothing.” She indicated Duncan. “We’re going to go inside Cade’s head and he is going to do what he can to heal the damage there, while I wall off other, less desirable, elements. He will either be strong enough or he will not. It’s as simple as that.”

“You ready for this?” Riley asked Duncan. The younger man looked even greyer than he had half an hour before, if that was at all possible in a place made up of a thousand shades of the same color.

“Do I have a choice?”

Riley, Olsen, and Gabrielle all answered at the same time. “No.”

“Well then, I guess I’m ready.” Taking a deep breath, he extended his hands and placed them on either side of Cade’s head.

Gabrielle waited for him to get comfortable and then placed her hands over his.

To his credit, Duncan barely flinched at her icy cold touch.

Bowing her head, Gabrielle began to say something in a low voice, over and over again, and after a moment a glimmering white glow could be seen flowing out from their clasped hands to surround Cade’s face and head.

It went on that way for some time until, with a sudden flash, the light winked out abruptly.

Duncan gasped and pulled away from Gabrielle, breaking the connection. On the ground before them, color slowly blossomed in Cade’s face, color here in this place that was one shade of grey after another.

Riley took that as a good sign.

Gabrielle looked over at him. “The danger’s past. He is resting normally now and should awaken soon.”

Out of the corner of his eye Riley could see Duncan staring at Gabrielle, an expression of near-awe on his face. The Master Sergeant couldn’t blame him; he was pretty impressed with the lady himself. He turned to more practical matters. “That still leaves us with the need to find a way out of here,” he said, “and figuring out how to get away from that twisted freak of an angel once we do.”

“Cade knows the angel’s name,” Gabrielle replied, watching him closely, and Riley knew that there was something significant to that statement, but he wasn’t sure just

what.

“So what are we going to do, make fun of it?”

Was that a smirk there on her face, just for a moment? If it was, it was gone as swiftly as it had come. “Names have power,” she told him. “With the right Name you could even assault the very gates of heaven. And you’d stand a good chance of forcing your way inside.”

“Okay. So what are we going to do with that Name?”

Now she grinned and it wasn’t a pleasant smile. “You, Master Sergeant Matthew Cornelius Riley, are going to bind that angel with your bare hands.”

Riley didn’t like the sound of that, but he sat down to hear her out just the same.

* * *

When they were finished, Gabrielle explained that she would open a rift between this world and the next, allowing them to return to the real world without Cade’s assistance. As the men gathered their supplies and prepared for the passage, she moved a short distance down the hall. Facing a clear, unbroken section of wall, she raised her arms to either side of her and brought them together again sharply, much the same way the angel had done earlier.

As Riley watched, a crack of gleaming blue power appeared on the wall in front of her, running from floor to ceiling. Gabrielle plunged her hands inside that shimmering vein of energy and with another shout wrenched it open wider. A sudden howling cry filled the corridor, as if the walls of the place objected to the abuse, but the opening was considerably wider as a result. As she stepped back, Riley could see a wall of water pressing against the other side of the rift, held in place as if by some invisible barrier. The bluish-green tint of the water was shocking amidst this landscape of grey.

Riley turned to address the men standing behind him. “All right! Listen up! When you get through the portal you’re going to be disoriented, confused. You’ll also be a fair distance underwater. Do not panic. I repeat, do not panic.” He looked at each in turn, one by one, making eye contact, letting them know without saying anything that he had complete confidence in their ability to do this. “The passage through the portal can sometimes make you forget things, slow down your thinking, but if you stay calm you’ll be all right. Watch for your air bubbles and follow them up to the surface.” He turned to Olsen, said, “Cade’s your responsibility. As soon as you and Chen are through the rift, head for the surface as fast as you can.” Olsen nodded, neither of them mentioning the danger in keeping an unconscious man underwater for too long. Some risks they just had to take.

“We’ve got no idea what will be waiting for us on the other side, so look sharp when you reach the surface.”

“What about our weapons?” Ortega asked.

“If you’ve got a dry bag with you, use that. Otherwise, wrap it up with whatever you might have and hope for the best.”

Riley looked them over one last time. Satisfied with what he saw, he nodded and turned to face the rift. “Let’s move out!” he yelled and the men of Echo were swift to obey. Olsen and Chen lifted Cade and carried him down the hall to where Gabrielle and Riley waited. Duncan helped Davis, the other man’s arm still in its sling, Ortega behind them, while Riley brought up the rear.

One by one they stepped up to the edge of the rift, took a deep breath, and plunged through the opening.

As Riley came forward to take his turn, he leaned in toward Gabrielle so that she could hear him over the howl of the passage. “He’s been searching for you, you know. He hasn’t given up on you.”

A sad smile crossed the undamaged side of her face. “I know.” She paused, considering, and then said, “If he comes looking for me again, tell him he can find me across the Sea of Lamentations, on the Isle of Sorrow, where the earth weeps beneath the tear in the sky. But tell him that’s exactly what the Adversary wants, as well.”

Riley was full of questions, but she cut him off before he could say anything further. “Go now. And remember what I told you. Your life, and Cade’s, depends upon it.”

Echo’s executive officer nodded, turned, and disappeared through the rift back into the real world.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A WATERY REBIRTH

Duncan's head broke the surface of the water and he sucked air into his lungs gratefully. A quick glance around let him know that he was in the middle of a swimming pool, more than likely the one in the exercise facility where they'd encountered the reaper demons, an event that seemed to have occurred weeks ago to his tired body and mind. Olsen was just now clambering out the side and nearby Chen was treading water, one arm locked around the still unconscious form of Knight Commander Williams.

Duncan sensed something coming up from below and a moment later Davis and Ortega both surfaced nearby. The expressions on their faces showed that they, too, had been shocked by how long the trip had seemed, from the moment they had left the Beyond to the point where they came up for air in their own reality. Moving from the sweltering hot air of the corridors in the Beyond to the chill waters of the pool had been tough enough, despite the fact that they'd known what was coming and had time to prepare for it, but the distance to the surface from the bottom of the pool had seemed five times its normal depth. He remembered something Cade had said to him the first time he'd found himself in the Beyond. Time and distance are different here; they are never what you expect. Yeah, he had that right, Duncan thought.

He struck out for the side of the pool and had just reached it when out in the middle of the water Riley finally broke the surface. All seven surviving members of the Echo Team had made it back and Duncan cast a quick prayer heavenward in thanks.

A short time later they were all doing what they could to warm up in wet clothes, huddled in towels they'd found in the locker room but unwilling to strip off their combat uniforms, no matter how miserable they were because no one wanted to do without their built-in Kevlar protection. With no idea where or when the dark angel and its allies might strike again, every single member of Echo wanted as much protection as he could get.

They'd only had two dry bags among them, so they did what they could to dry off their weapons, nervously glancing around the whole time they did so. When they were finished there was still no guarantee that the guns would fire when needed, but it was better than nothing.

Riley had called a ten minute break and as he sat a short distance away in deep conversation with Olsen, no doubt planning their next move, Duncan was thankful that he was junior in rank. It kept the big responsibilities off his back, like trying to figure out a way to escape this place without having to face that hellspawn again.

“Duncan?”

The voice was weak and tired, but also unmistakable. Duncan whirled around to see Cade trying raise himself up on one arm into a sitting position.

“Take it easy, Commander,” Duncan said, moving quickly to his side and helping him to lean back against the wall behind him. “We’re safe. For the time being at least.”

Cade looked around slowly, taking in the sight of the pool and the exercise machines in the room beyond. “The men?”

“They’re okay. Davis has a broken arm, but that’s the only major injury we’ve suffered. You took a nasty bump to your head during that confrontation with the angel; you’ve been out for hours.” How close to death Cade had actually been, their time spent lost in the Beyond, their encounter with the shade of Cade’s dead wife; Duncan purposely avoided mentioning any of that and he knew the others would as well. They had agreed that it would remain their secret until Sergeant Riley decided Cade was strong enough to hear it all.

“Riley’s in charge?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Cade leaned his head back against the wall and visibly relaxed. A moment later he was fast asleep.

Duncan wasn’t surprised; Cade’s body would need lots of rest to catch up on all the spent resources it had used up during the healing process. He leaned against the wall and sighed. Nice that at least one of them felt safe enough to rest.

A draft swept over him suddenly from out of nowhere, a touch of hot air that carried with it the scent of charcoaled flesh and burning tar. It was there and gone again in an instant, so swift that for a moment he wondered if he’d simply imagined it, but then it returned, this time much stronger and Duncan knew without a doubt that they were in trouble. A low rumbling started, like thunder heard from a distance, but even as Duncan was climbing to his feet it grew in volume, a train roaring toward them down the tracks, coming closer with every passing second, until it surrounded them like a shuddering clash of thunder.

There was a flash of light—and then the angel was among them.

He struck swiftly, his flaming sword slashing through Ortega’s body armor as if it didn’t exist, the charred halves of Ortega’s body falling to the floor in opposite directions. His wings beat against the superheated air surrounding his arrival, sending gale force winds throughout the room, throwing the rest of them off balance as it climbed back up toward the ceiling.

The angel swooped downward and struck again, though this time Chen managed to deflect the swinging sword with the barrel of his gun. The weapon became useless in his hands,

the metal melting like wax where it came in contact with the angel's blazing sword, but it was enough to save his life.

Echo had been trained to react quickly and this time was no exception. Even as the angel swept past Chen and headed for the higher reaches of the ceiling above once more, Olsen and Riley were responding, their firearms sending a stream of lead skyward after their quarry.

But the angel was prepared for that now, knew just what they would do, how they would react, and it jinked and jived in mid-air, putting on a display of aerial maneuverability that would have put a fighter jock to shame. Not a single round came close enough to even graze its body.

The angel sped toward the ceiling and disappeared from view.

* * *

"We're in serious trouble," Olsen said, even as he tossed aside his empty magazine and shoved a fresh one into his weapon, racking a round into the chamber immediately thereafter and searching the room for a trace of their enemy.

Riley didn't respond, his thoughts on those seconds before he'd passed through the portal back into the real world. Gabrielle had told him to remember something. "Your life, and Cade's, depends on it."

He had no doubt she was talking about something that would help him face the angel.

Except he'd forgotten just what that something was!

The rumbling came again, softer at first but building swiftly.

"Here it comes!" Riley yelled, glancing around frantically, wondering just where it was going to appear this time as he wracked his brains for exactly what it was he was supposed to remember.

The rumbling built into a roar, the roar built into thunder...and the angel exploded out of the surface of the swimming pool, filling the air with superheated steam as the water boiled off around it.

The spray caught Duncan by surprise; he felt his skin flare in pain as the steam swept across the exposed skin of his hands and face. He collapsed to the ground, effectively out of the fight.

Of the seven of them who had emerged from the rift, only four of them were left in combat condition.

Four ordinary men against the might and power of a fallen angel.

There was just no way.

Davis had the barrel of his weapon braced against the doorframe and was firing it now, doing what he could to keep it on target despite his broken arm. Nearby, Chen abruptly ran out of ammunition and tossed his now-useless MP5 away. He drew his sword and stepped

over to Davis, ready to defend his wounded teammate if it became necessary.

Riley practically screamed with rage and frustration. You idiot! How could you have forgotten?

As the angel turned and swooped down at them a third time, Riley's shotgun went silent. A glance told him it was still loaded, but it just wasn't firing properly. He jacked the slide, exchanging the bad shell for the next in line, but that too refused to fire.

A glance told him the angel was almost upon him. There was no time to draw his sidearm and getting his sword was going to take even longer. Hail Mary, full of grace!

A firearm went off practically next to his ear and suddenly Cade was there, standing tall in the face of danger, his shots hitting with deadly accuracy and causing the angel to divert its course at the last moment.

"Find some cover!" Cade ordered and as Riley moved to obey, just like that it came to him at last, the words and symbols bursting across the internal theater of his mind, blazing in vibrant gold script like literary fireworks. Rather than following Cade's order he charged out into the center of the room, where the angel couldn't help but see him, his hands already working in the complicated patterns that Gabrielle had planted in his mind, had insisted that he remember for without them he and his companions were as good as dead.

He was too late to save Ortega, and possibly Duncan. He just hoped and prayed that he had time to save the others.

Shouting to be heard over the savage shrieks of the angel, Riley called out the first portion of the binding.

"By my will and my might, by my heart and soul, I call you to me, Baraquel, and bind you to my control."

Crippling pain washed over him before the words were completely out of his mouth, causing him to stumble and falter. A glance down at his arms showed them bent and twisted back on themselves, the fingers curled like claws, the raw energy he was summoning from the spiritual world around him too much for a man untrained in its use. Gabrielle had warned him that it would be bad, but he had never imagined anything like this. He could see the veins in his arms bulging alarmingly, could feel the blood pressure in his head as a steady pounding, like the world's worst migraine a thousand times over, but he didn't dare stop, not matter the damage he might cause himself.

The angel had stopped, was now hanging in mid-air, its wings pounding a steady rhythm that served to keep it aloft. It turned its head to look at him, recognizing the beginning sequence of the ritual binding, and raised its flaming weapon in challenge. As Riley watched, Baraquel flung himself toward him and his passage was so swift that the air cracked as it parted around him.

Protect us, Lord, Riley had time to think and then he was shouting the second half of the binding, completely convinced that it wouldn't work and that in seconds there wouldn't be anything left of him but bloody chunks of flesh strewn across the floor in the wake of the angel's attack, but by God he was going to try anyway.

"Slave and servant, lord and master," he gasped, the surge of power forcing him to his knees, the pain all but unbearable. He could feel his flesh rippling on his frame, felt as if a thousand cockroaches were squirming there beneath his skin. His eyes bulged and he was convinced that at any moment his skull would burst from the energy flaring out of his form, but he continued the chant nonetheless, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that to stop now would be the death of him. "With these words I take your freedom and force your service, here and now and ever after."

As the energy left him, Riley crashed forward onto the floor, his whole body convulsing with the release of all that power. He kept his gaze on the angel however and so he saw what happened next.

No sooner had the final word left his mouth that the angel's dive was arrested and it crashed in a heap less than a foot from where Riley now lay.

"Holy shit!" Riley gasped, the fear striking him belatedly, making his whole body shake and shiver. He turned to one side and vomited, so acutely did he recognize how close he'd just come to dying.

But it wasn't over yet.

Gabrielle had warned him that the binding was only temporary, that without the usual level of arcane talent needed to maintain it, his control of the angel would depend on many things; his faith in his own abilities, how strong the angel actual was, the conditions when the binding was cast. All of which practically shouted to Riley that he and the rest of Echo had to get the hell out of there as fast as humanely possible. As he pushed himself painfully upright and turned to face the others, he was already mapping out the path they would take back down to the monorail tunnel and out into the desert proper.

Except the knight commander had other ideas.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

RETRIBUTION

Cade strode past Riley and walked up to Baraquel. Without breaking stride he began to kick the creature where it lay, over and over and over again, never once making a sound.

At least two, possibly three, of his men were dead, more were injured, and this thing had been the cause of it, just as the Adversary had been the cause of his wife's demise. He hated these damnable creatures with a passion born on personal sacrifice and pain. After this mission the stakes, and Cade's personal regrets, had grown even higher.

"Leave him, Cade! We've got to go!"

Cade ignored his executive officer; there was information to be had here and Cade wouldn't leave until he had it in his grasp.

Stopping his tantrum, he reached down and flipped Baraquel over on his back. The angel stayed where he was, unable to do anything, not even wiggle a feather, until Riley ordered him to do so.

Cade leaned in close, looking the so-called Lord of Eden in the eye. "You slaughtered the people here, the very ones who brought you back into existence. I want to know why."

The angel ignored him.

"Tell him what he wants to know, Baraquel," Riley ordered, figuring the sooner they got out of here they better.

But the angel ignored him, refusing to respond.

That's not good, Riley thought. Was he losing control already?

Cade drew his sword. "You will tell me what I want to know, or I will force you to do so."

Baraquel sneered. "You don't have the strength to harm me," Baraquel said mockingly, the light of challenge in his eyes.

But Cade had been studying angelic lore for years now, searching for that tiny scrap of information that might lead him to the Adversary, might bring him face to face with the abomination that had killed his lovely wife and scarred him body and soul. He had learned a few things during that process and he dragged one of them out now into the light.

The wings were the key.

"So you say. But what happens when I hack off those wings with the edge of a weapon blessed at High Mass by the Lord's representative here on Earth? What of your power then? And what's to keep me from going onward from there?"

The heart of an angel's power was in its wings and removing them would render the angel practically helpless. Cade prodded the paralyzed creature with the edge of his weapon,

poking the relevant body parts as he named them aloud. "What will you do when I hack off an arm? Or a leg? Or a hand or foot? Will you be fit for heavenly service then, Baraquel?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

In reply Cade kicked the creature over onto its stomach. He planted one foot on the center of its spine and grasped the edge of a wing in his left hand. Raising his sword up over his right, he prepared to bring it slashing down on the exposed flesh where the wing grew out of its back.

"Wait! Wait!" Baraquel shrieked, fear in its voice for the first time.

Cade ignored it. He'd had enough, he'd decided, and he no longer really cared why the creature had done what it had. Vargas' people were dead and so were his own men. It was time for retribution and righteousness.

Taking a firmer grip on the creature's wing, Cade brought his sword slashing down toward it.

"I know about your wife! I can tell you about your enemy, the one you call the Adversary."

Cade's sword point skittered across the floor an inch from the angel's neck. Dropping its wing and grabbing the creature by the hair, he hauled its head up off the ground so he could see its face. Cade said, "What?"

"I will tell you everything you want to know about your enemy. All you've got to do is let me go."

"I'll carve you into a hundred pieces if you don't tell me!" Cade growled.

But Baraquel had found his weak spot and he knew Cade was bluffing. "No, you won't. If you do, you'll never get the information you need. It could take years for you to find it on your own."

Cade slammed its head down into the floor and stepped away, his rage in full bloom but knowing he couldn't lose control.

Riley rushed over and grabbed his arm. "Cade, that binding is only temporary! I don't know how much longer it will hold. He already won't follow my commands; it can't be much longer until he is free to move again. We've got to get out of here!"

"How did you learn to do that?" Cade asked. In all the years they'd been together, he'd never known Riley to be anything but leery about the use of magick of any kind.

Riley glanced away, letting go of Cade as he did so. "It doesn't matter now. We've got to get out of here while we still can."

But Cade would have none of it. "Tell me, damn it!" he shouted, grabbing Riley and forcing him to face him once more.

The big master sergeant held up his hands, showing he wasn't a threat, and sighed. "It's complicated, boss."

"Then you'd best get started before that thing over there," he pointed at Baraquel, "gets up again."

Riley glanced at the angel, the fear plain on his face. He began talking, trying to get the story out as quickly and as coherently as possible, given the circumstance. "Earlier, after Davis stabbed that thing with his sword, it called down an incredible amount of power and sent all of us, the entire Echo Team, into the Beyond." Riley explained how Cade had been injured, how they'd gotten lost in the endless tunnels, and how they had only healed him with outside help. "Your wife, Gabrielle, appeared, ordered us to take her to you. With her help Duncan was able to heal your injury."

"Gabbi? Gabbi was there?" Cade's rage fled. Now he felt confused, hurt. She had appeared to the others, but wouldn't appear to him?

"She said you were in danger of dying, that she could come to you only when your life was in mortal danger. She also gave me a message for you."

Cade looked at him and Riley could see the hope shining in his eyes.

"She said to tell you that you could find her across the Sea of Lamentations, on the Isle of Sorrows where the earth weeps beneath the tear in the sky." And she made me promise to tell you that looking for her was exactly what the Adversary wants you to do. Now can we go now?"

"Not yet. Get everyone ready to move out."

Ignoring Riley's growing nervousness, and the stares of his surviving men, Cade stalked back over to Baraquel. "All right, you son of a bitch," he said, holding up his sword in front of him so he could swear on the cross built into the shape of the hilt. "I give you my word before God that I will personally not harm you further, provided you tell me what I want to know."

"And your men?" Baraquel asked slyly.

"My men, too. They will allow you to go free upon my orders."

"Sworn and done!" The angel laughed, its face creasing into a wide grin, and it was a horrible sight to behold.

"Tell me about the Sea of Lamentations. And the Adversary."

"The Sea lies at the heart of the place you call the Beyond. Its waters are poisonous to the living and its depths contain the souls of the dead, those who either have refused or are unable to travel onward to the other side. The angel Asherael, the one you know as the Adversary, makes his home on an island in the middle of the Sea."

Baraquel's left wing twitched and Cade knew he didn't have much time left. "What is his weakness? How can he be killed?"

"A man of God, talking of killing? How distressing!" the angel joked, but answered the questions nonetheless. "There is a city there, the City of Despair, and within its boundaries Asherael is vulnerable. To destroy him, you will have to face him on his own ground."

As Cade watched, the angel moved its head back and forth, as if stretching its muscles. "You have vowed not to harm me," it said, its grin growing wider in anticipation of the slaughter to come. "But I have not done the same. I've answered your questions, absorbed your abuse. Now it is my turn to have a little fun."

Echo's commander stepped back, out of reach, as the angel's hand snapped shut and then opened again. The binding was failing; Baraquel would be free in a matter of moments.

"Let's get out of here!" Riley shouted from the doorway.

But Cade had one more card up his sleeve to play. He had sworn that neither he nor his men would harm the renegade angel directly, but that did not mean there weren't others who might be willing to do the job for them. It was a calculated risk, and a huge one at that, but Cade was willing to take that chance.

"Go!" he shouted to his teammates and then turned away, not looking to see if they obeyed. Time was at a premium and he needed every second he had left.

An understanding of an angel's vulnerability was not the only thing he had learned in his years of research. Opening up his heart and raising his hands to heaven, Cade bowed his head and called out in a language that hadn't been spoken on earth in centuries.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A SCREAM OF ANGELS

Baraquel heard what he was saying and began to twist and squirm; doing everything he could to free himself from the last remaining traces of Riley's binding. Standing nearby, Cade repeated his call.

It started softly, slowly, a gentle hum that rose in the air around him, forcing him to listen closely to be certain he was hearing it. It grew steadily louder, the pitch rising, until it filled the room around them and made Cade want to cover his ears to escape it.

And still it grew, rising in volume, until the very sound buffeted Cade where he knelt on the floor.

"Do you remember what a group of angels is called, Baraquel?" He had to shout to be heard over the rising shriek filling the air around them, growing louder and stronger with every passing second. "A scream. A group of angels is called a scream." The sound built and built and built again, rising higher and higher, louder and more piercing until it forced Cade to his knees. Behind him, having ignored his order to leave, the men of Echo collapsed on the ground as well, their hands over their ears as they tried to block out the rising wail.

Silence fell and in the suddenness of its arrival, they were there. Seven of them, seven being the perfect number, seven bright and shining forms, so full of God's glory that they were difficult to look upon, their very presence overwhelming to the senses. The men of Echo squeezed their eyes shut, unable and unwilling to look upon the face of such glory.

All but Cade.

They had come when he'd called, had answered a man who until recently had sworn that he would no longer worship a God that let his beloved bride die in so horrible a manner. They had heard and responded to the true voice of his heart, the voice that knew that no matter what sins he had committed in the past or what might happen to him and his companions in this midst of this confrontation, this evil could not be allowed to walk amongst men, could not be allowed to work its twisted hopes and dreams on a populace that reacted as little more than sheep when faced with such danger.

They had come and he understood instinctively that it was his duty to watch and record what happened here today, to keep the record straight for any and all who might have need of it in the future.

Baraquel shrieked his rage and fury at the appearance of his former brethren and at last the binding that had held him was gone. He had time only to rise up onto his taloned feet and then the seven fell upon him en-masse.

The renegade did not last very long after that.

When it was over, the men of Echo were left alone in the room. Of the angels, and their fallen brother, there was no sign.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

STAND DOWN

The men of Echo made their way back through the complex to the train station and then retraced their steps along the tunnel to the exit beneath the motor pool. There, exhausted, beaten and torn, the survivors at last emerged into the open air.

It had been only three days since they had entered Eden.

For most of them, it felt like three weeks.

The dark funnel cloud that had covered the base was gone. The sky above was clear and cloudless, a bright vibrant blue that seemed almost artificial after all the time they had spent in the dim lighting of the base and the grey landscape of the Beyond. The two HWMMVs were still outside the building, right where the team had left them days before, but Cade couldn't be certain that Baraquel hadn't interfered with them in any way and so he ordered that they remain untouched until a technical team could be brought in to check them out.

Which meant Echo was going to have to hoof it out on foot.

They all wanted to put as much distance between them and Eden as possible and so no one hesitated when Cade gave the order to move out. Duncan and Chen had both suffered burns to their hands and faces, so Riley and Davis carried their gear. Olsen kept a sharp eye on Cade, just in case the commander's injuries got the better of him again. Their exit was far less dramatic than their entrance; when they come in, they'd done so as a well-organized military force, confident in their abilities to face whatever was before them, riding their modern chariots of steel and chrome, but as they left Eden behind, they looked more like a ragtag group of refugees than the trained military unit that they in fact were.

While the mission was a success, it had cost them dearly. Along with the ten men of 3rd Platoon, Echo had lost two of its own, Callavecchio and Ortega. Never mind the unknown number of staff members and scientists that Vargas had led to their doom by launching the Eden Project in the first place. Yet Cade was not unsatisfied. Good men had lost their lives, yes, but they had done so in the name of a worthy cause and their sacrifice had not been in vain. Cade was willing to trade ten men's lives, a hundred, maybe more, if it meant keeping one of the Fallen from walking the earth.

As they moved down the main street, past the crumbling administrative buildings and housing units, Cade was able to make radio contact with Captain Mason, who seemed overjoyed to hear from him. He gave Mason an abbreviated sit-rep, let him know that they had wounded with them, and asked that his medical personnel be ready to receive them when they arrived back at the staging area sometime in the next half hour.

Mason did them one better, sending a pair of SUVs to pick them up just outside the gates and was waiting for them on the steps of the command center when they arrived. On seeing the condition of the unit, he came down and personally lent a hand in helping Cade out of the vehicle.

“Praise God,” he said, a smile on his face. “We’d all but given you up for dead.”

Cade winced in pain, but refrained from mentioning how close they’d really come.

Mason must have read something in his expression, however, for he leaned in and asked, “Is it over?” His voice was steady but his eyes betrayed his concern.

Cade nodded. “Yes,” he said wearily. “It’s done.”

“My men?”

Cade shook his head. “I brought their rings out with me and should be able to direct you to their remains, but there was nothing we could do. They were dead long before we arrived.” He intentionally refrained from telling the captain about the way the bodies had been used by Baraque; that could wait until later at the full debriefing. There was no need to bring it up now.

Mason seemed to understand there was more to the story than what was being said but he was content to let it go until later and for that Cade was grateful. What he needed now more than anything else was a hot meal and a cup of coffee.

But as he turned to join his men, his thoughts were already drifting to the clues the fallen angel had given to him.

The Sea of Lamentations.

The Isle of Sorrows.

The City of Despair.

A grim smile crossed his face.

At last he had a destination and he would not be long in seeking it out.

EPILOGUE

One week later.

Cade was in the midst of unbolting the shattered mirror from the floor of his workshop when the radio on the table next to him sputtered and then quietly died. For a moment the sound of the birds singing in the trees outside could be heard through the open door and then that, too, was abruptly cut off.

Everything was still.

Cade felt a grim chill wash over him and he glanced across the room to where his sword case rested on its shelf.

Somehow he knew heâ€™d never make it in time.

A steady hum sprang out of nowhere, filling the air around him, and within seconds it had built to a fever pitch, the rising shriek sharper and fiercer than the savage wail of a banshee. Cade clamped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut against the agony.

As abruptly as it had begun, the scream faded.

Silence fell.

Cade opened his eyes and discovered the seven standing before him, shining in their glory and majesty.

He remained kneeling, unable to do anything but gaze in humble awe at their very presence.

The leader of the group stepped forward and extended its hand to Cade.

Held securely in its grip was a tar-black feather.

It was familiar looking and Cade had little doubt that it had been taken from the wings of the renegade, Baraquel.

â€œYou will need this, son of Adam,â€ said a voice inside his head.

Cade reached up and took the feather from the angelâ€™s outstretched hand. He glanced down at it, only for a second, but when he looked up again he found himself alone once more.

â€œThank you,â€ Cade said to the empty air around him, and from somewhere, far off, he thought he heard a whispered reply.

Be strong, for heaven is not yet finished with you.

And as he climbed to his feet in the emptiness of their departure, Cade didnâ€™t know whether to laugh or to cry at the thought.

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If you enjoyed A SCREAM OF ANGELS, here's an advance look at the next novel in the Templar Chronicles series, A TEAR IN THE SKY...

CHAPTER ONE

ANCIENT ENEMIES

The priest ran toward the altar as if hell itself followed on his heels.

He didn't have much time, minutes at best. Still, that might be enough. The others would have a warning at least. It was the best he could do, given the circumstances.

Racing up the steps, he crossed to the tabernacle and spun the dials on the lock with trembling fingers. He set the second one incorrectly and had to do it again, losing precious seconds in the process. Opening the tabernacle, he bent one knee, genuflected, and then removed the ciborium from inside the blessed chamber.

From the other end of the church he could hear them banging on the inside of the sacristy door. He'd locked it behind him, but he didn't expect it to hold them for long.

Opening the ciborium and removing one of the communion wafers, he begged for Christ's forgiveness for his sins and then placed the wafer on his tongue. From years past the voice of Father Jerome, his old seminary professor, came to him.

Viaticum, from the Latin *via tecum*, meaning provisions for the journey. The final rite in the sacrament of Extreme Unction, the giving of the Eucharist ensures that the dying do not die alone, but have Christ with them in their final moments just as He has been with them in life.

Behind him, the door to the sacristy burst from its hinges and the howls of his pursuers filled the nave.

He was out of time.

Steeling himself for what he knew was to come, he calmly closed the tabernacle and spun the dials, locking it against intrusion. It wouldn't hold out a determined thief, but he had done his part and could rest easy on that score. He got to his feet and turned to face the front of the church.

The shadows had reached the transept.

He hurried to the altar and took up the Bible resting there. It wouldn't hold them off but he felt better with it in his hands.

As they reached the foot of the altar, he calmly went down to meet them.

CHAPTER TWO

MONSTERS AND MESSAGES

Knight Commander Cade Williams stalked down the hallway of the Bennington Containment Facility, angry at himself for being there yet knowing that he really had no choice in the matter.

Just hours before a request had been relayed to him by the facility's warden. The request had originated from the prison's most high-profile prisoner, Simon Logan, the Necromancer, a man who had used the arcane power in the Spear of Longinus to try to destroy the Order itself.

He would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for Cade and the men of the Echo Team.

Logan had apparently asked to see Cade. Said it was urgent even. But it was the note that accompanied the request that had captured his attention.

Just eight simple words.

I have a message from your wife, Gabrielle.

Anything else the Necromancer might have said would have been ignored outright. After turning Logan over to those who ran the facility, Cade's interest in the former head of the Council of Nine had vanished. He had other, more pertinent things to worry about than the fate of a man who had tried to take on the Order and lost.

But if Logan had actually received a message from Cade's long dead wife, Gabrielle, then that was something Cade couldn't simply ignore. As a necromancer, Logan certainly had an affinity for the dead, which made the possibility that he'd spoken to Gabrielle a realistic one.

Cade knew his wife's spirit was not at rest. He'd encountered her shade several times over the last few months and it was Gabrielle herself who had convinced Cade not to slay Logan outright when he'd been at Cade's mercy following the assault on the Council's stronghold. Why she might have relayed a message through the Necromancer rather than simply coming to see him herself was what he didn't understand and that lack of understanding was what had driven him to agree to the visit.

He reached the guard station at the end of the hall. There he surrendered his side arm, watch, and the contents of his pockets. The black feather he wore on a piece of leather about his neck was glanced at curiously when he laid it down with the rest of his items, but no one made any comment. One of the guards requested that Cade remove his gloves, but the senior officer stepped in and informed the guard that that wouldn't be necessary.

Which was good because Cade wouldn't have agreed to the request anyway. His gloves stayed on, no matter where he went. He wouldn't have objected to giving up the eye patch that covered the ruin of his right eye, but they didn't ask.

He waited with the senior officer for the junior one to buzz them through the gate and then the two men moved down the end of the hall and through a series of three more barriers until they came to the room outside the Necromancer's cell.

Cade was a member of the Holy Order of the Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon, or the Knights Templar, as they were once more commonly known. Long thought to have been destroyed in the fourteenth century, the Templars had emerged from hiding during the desperate days of World War II and had joined with the very entity that had excommunicated them en-masse so many centuries before, the Catholic Church. Reborn as a secret military arm of the Vatican, the Templars were now charged with defending mankind from the supernatural in all its forms.

As the commander of the Echo Team, the most prestigious of the elite strike units fielded by the Templars, Cade was known for both his ruthless efficiency and his often unorthodox methods.

The two men guarding the Necromancer recognized him by sight, despite the fact that heâ€™d never been down to this part of the maximum security level before, and were already opening up the doors to the room beyond as he stepped up to the guard station.

The man whoâ€™d escorted him turned to face him. â€œRule #1: Nothing goes in that doesnâ€™t come out. Rule #2: No physical contact with the prisoner. And Rule #3: If you need help, just yell and weâ€™ll come running. Got it?â€

Cade nodded and then stepped through the door.

The room was large, about twelve feet to a side, and in its center stood a cage of iron. The cage had been home to Simon Logan, the man known as the Necromancer, ever since Cade had defeated him in battle several months ago. It was furnished with a bed, a toilet, and a small writing desk, nothing more.

Inside the cage waiting for him was the Necromancer.

Logan was a shadow of his former self. Heâ€™d lost considerable weight, his features sinking into the ruin of his face like a pumpkin past its prime, his bones poking awkwardly against the confines of his jumpsuit. He was in constant movement, shuffling back and forth across the small space of his cell, eight steps across and then eight steps back, over and over again, like a man hunted by something he couldnâ€™t see nor understand.

His first words to Cade seemed to reinforce that viewpoint.

â€œThe dead torment me.â€

His voice was a reedy whisper, so different from the bold commands heâ€™d shouted at his followers before his defeat.

Cade had no sympathy for him. â€œAs well they should,â€ he replied. Logan had thought nothing of dragging the souls of the dead back across the barrier between the land of the dead and that of the living and forcing them to reanimate their decomposed and corrupted bodies. For him to be haunted by those heâ€™d treated in such a fashion was nothing but justice itself and Cade told him so.

Logan went on as if he hadn't heard.

"They torment me. Especially her."

Cade's pulse quickened.

"Who?" he asked.

"You know who."

Cade crossed the room to stand in front of Logan. For all he knew Logan was running an elaborate con and so Cade refused to give him anything. "No, I don't," he said, "tell me."

Logan's response, when it came, surprised him.

"She said you wouldn't believe me, so she said to give you this."

As Logan reached inside the pocket of his prison uniform, Cade automatically braced for an attack, expecting him to pull out a shiv or some other makeshift weapon he'd fashioned without the guards' knowledge. But Logan's hand emerged from the interior of his clothing with only a pewter medallion that dangled from a silver chain.

Logan tossed the necklace through the bars at Cade.

Wary of arcane trickery, Cade refused to catch it, stepping back and letting it fall to the floor at his feet.

A glance downward told him it was a Saint Christopher medallion, the kind a lot of cops carried around, Christopher being the patron saint of policemen and lost causes.

This particular medal had a dent in it, right in the center where the face of the saint had once been, a dent large enough that it obliterated the saint's entire image, leaving just the caption running around the outside of the disk.

Seeing it, Cade froze.

He recognized that dent. Remembered the night that medallion had deflected a bullet that should have taken his head off like it was yesterday, how that tiny piece of medal had saved his life and consequently the life of his partner as well. They'd been pinned down in a shadowy corridor inside a Southie tenement house and had never even seen their assailant until that shot had come blazing out of the darkness. Saint Christopher had saved his life, there was no question of that, and he'd worn that medallion night and day for years afterwards in a superstitious show of faith.

Cade's heart beat wildly. A hand reached out in front of him and it took him a moment to realize it was his own. He picked the medallion up and turned it over, knowing even before he did so what he would see.

The inscription read: "Every day after this is a gift. Use them well."

He'd put it there, the day after the shooting, to remind him just how fragile and transitory life actually was. He'd never taken the medallion off, not until that horrible summer

day seven years ago.

Cade's fist clenched around the medallion.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, his voice as cold as winter snow.

But Logan didn't even flinch. He simply stared at Cade with those eyes that had seen too much and said, "She said you'd suspect that I'd taken it from her grave, so she gave me a message for you."

Cade visibly started. It was as if Logan were reading his mind. He had been thinking that Logan, or at least one of his cronies, had disturbed Gabrielle's rest and he was ready to tear the man limb from limb for doing so.

"One day at a time. She told me to tell you one day at a time."

A wave of dizziness washed over him at the implications of what Logan was saying. Seven years ago he'd put that same Saint Christopher medallion in his wife's hand just before the funeral director had closed the casket over her still and silent form. Call it superstitious, but he'd wanted her to have some extra protection in the next life, considering how horribly this one had ended for her. He vividly remembered leaning down to kiss her cold cheek and whispering to her, asking her how he was going to survive without her.

She'd apparently decided to finally answer his question.

Cade stayed lost in thought for several long moments. At last he looked up and met Logan's eager gaze. "I'm listening," he said.

Logan seemed to gain some of his old confidence back at Cade's reaction. He stepped away from the bars, went back to pacing back and forth across the space of his cell. "I have some requests," he began, but Cade cut him off.

"I don't have time to play games, Logan. Get to the point."

The Necromancer turned to face him.

"Sunlight."

"I'm sorry?" The comment was so unexpected that Cade had trouble following the other man's train of thought.

"Sunlight. I want to see sunlight again, before the end of my trial."

Cade didn't have to even think about it. He knew the prisoner was going to be transferred from Bennington to Longfort at the end of the month and doing so would require him to travel in an armored transport vehicle. The transport had windows. Provided it didn't rain on the day he made the trip, Cade knew he could persuade the warden to forget the blindfold and let the prisoner have one last look at the sunlight, though why Logan would want it was beyond Cade's ability to fathom. No matter. He'd put a window in Logan's personal cell if that was what it would take to get the information he needed out of him, orders to the contrary be damned.

“Done,” Cade replied. “Sunlight. Before the end of your trial.”

Logan grinned slyly, but Cade pretended not to see it. “Now,” he said instead, “tell me what she said.”

Logan explained that Gabrielle’s shade was visiting him every night, tormenting him, refusing to let him sleep. “She just keeps repeating the same refrain, over and over again, her voice like an ice pick in my mind.” He closed his eyes, as if he wanted to avoid any distractions and get it right.

“The Lady in the Tower sleeps beneath the banner of night on the island of lost dreams, but her sleep is not restful and she can find no peace.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I would think it would be obvious, Commander.”

“So wow me with your superior knowledge.”

“Your wife is not dead, simply a captive of the Adversary.”

Cade stood there, stunned.

It was perhaps the last thing he’d ever expected to hear. And yet, somehow, he suspected that the Necromancer was right.

Gabrielle? Alive?

That put a whole new perspective on things.

Books in the Templar Chronicles series

THE HERETIC

A SCREAM OF ANGELS

A TEAR IN THE SKY

About the Author

Joe is the author of more than a dozen novels, including the internationally bestselling Templar Chronicles trilogy, as well as the Hunt Chronicles series coming soon from Tor Books in the US and Pan Books in Germany. He has also written four installments in the internationally bestselling adventure series Rogue Angel from Harlequin/Gold Eagle.

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