

# **Blackstar**

**Ethan Drake**  
**Infernal Justice, prequel**

**by N. P. Martin, ...**

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## Chapter 1

The demon's claws came down in a vicious arc toward my face—claws already dripping with the blood of my fellow Blackstar operatives. Though that didn't mean this demon bastard would be adding *my* blood under its claws. Enough of its kind had done that over the past three days. My face already looked like I'd been wrestling with fucking Freddy Kruger, and though I'm not the prettiest son of a bitch you'll ever meet, I wasn't about to let some fucking demon disfigure me, even if the Company had the means to heal me back at the facility.

If I ever made it back there, that is. Given the madness and bloody violence surrounding me, it was touch and go if I would or not.

After three days of non-stop fighting, I was sick to the back teeth of these demon fucks and the slum that constituted the battleground. If I had my way, I'd've had the whole fucking area carpet-bombed. Wipe all the demons out, along with the rat-infested slum they had made their home.

But Wendell Knightsbridge—known by the higher-ups as The Magician, the Boss by the rest of us—in his wisdom, had made this a capture mission, not a destroy mission. He wanted the demon in charge caught and brought back to the Company facility. As soon as we could subdue the hordes of demons coming at us like... well, like fucking demons; demons in human bodies, others in their own monstrous form—there was a squad of Spreaks—Spell Freaks, magic workers—waiting in the wings to come in and trap the demon in charge of the attacking hordes. The demon currently holed up in the one remaining apartment building in this wasteland of rubble and decay; this rotten tooth in the city's mouth.

The demon attacking me had possessed the body of a woman, whose eyes were now sunken so much they might as well have been black holes, and who was so covered in blood, she barely even looked human anymore. She wasn't human to me, I'll tell you that much. This was just another enemy, another bag of blood to burst—another meat-puppet to put down.

Which is what I did, after I'd leaned back enough to avoid those bloodstained claws—claws which raked down my body armor instead.

I shoved my pistol under the bitch's chin and squeezed twice on the trigger until she fell dead. Her demon Visage continued to hover behind her for a moment—dark, smokey, hellish—before dissipating.

Sometimes, the demon spirit escapes the human host before the moment of death, but more often than not, they don't get out in time, and the demon dies along with the body they stole or manipulated into their possession, which is what happened here.

But that was just one demon out of the hundreds that still ran around this slum attacking the Blackstar combat teams sent here to deal with them.

I say combat teams, but most of them were cannon fodder. Half the guys running around here had never even faced a *single* demon before, never mind a *horde* of the fuckers. The Boss had done a big recruitment drive recently, knowing this battle would soon happen. He knew we needed bodies to throw at the demons to allow the more experienced teams—such as mine—to advance upon the apartment building and infiltrate it. Of course, the new recruits didn't know this. They thought they had signed up so they could help protect the world from the scourge of supernatural entities they had just been made aware of. Ex-military most of them, some of them hunters with a little experience.

But in the end, not enough.

As I shot another demon in the face with the Company-made assault rifle I carried, the world around me was in black and white thanks to my inbuilt thermal imaging, the Blackstar operatives, and screaming demons showing up as ghostly white figures in the darkness. The stench of blood and gunpowder permeated the air, clogging up my nostrils as I continued to fire at whatever demon was closest, doing my best not to shoot any Blackstar operatives, many of whose screams were assaulting my ears on top of the screams and screeches of the raging demons.

I don't know how many men we had left, but it didn't seem like enough. The boss had planned this assault, banking on a couple hundred demons at most coming at us, but it seemed like a lot more of the Hell-fucks were attacking us. I don't know where they were all coming from, but their numbers seemed never-ending as if they were spilling out directly from Hell itself. If the waves of demons didn't ease up soon, there would be no one left to infiltrate the building.

This whole clusterfuck was taking place inside a bubble of sorts too. Even though it was like World War Three in here, no one outside of the slum area could see or hear it. The Company had the whole area sealed off so no one could get within a mile of it, with an inner perimeter set up to prevent any demons from escaping. They were also using state-of-the-art noise-canceling technology to block out all the sounds, so no one could hear the constant shooting or the screams. And in case any prying eyes tried to see from above via a drone or a satellite, or even with the naked eye from a nearby building, they would see nothing but blackness thanks to the Invisibility Matrix cast over the entire area via laser technology. Oh yes, the Company had everything covered, with access to technology no one else had.

When it came to covering shit up, Blackstar was nothing if not thorough.

So in this hellhole, literally no one could hear you scream, except for the others screaming beside you.

“Drake, come in. You there?”

The voice of Eric Pike, my second in command, came through on the radio attached to my body armor as I was just gutting a demon in a man's body, the demon spirit making its escape a second before the human vessel gave up the ghost. Crouched behind a pile of bricks, I answered the radio. “Go ahead, Pike.”

“How you doing?” he asked.

“How the fuck do you think I'm doing?” I replied. “I'm up to my neck in fucking demons.”

Pike laughed like he was enjoying himself. “Yeah, aren't we all?”

“You heard from the rest of the team? No one's checked in.”

“I tried them a few minutes ago. Nada.”

“Fuck’s sake.”

“I think the boss underestimated the numbers here.”

“You think?”

“Relax, bruh. You and me, we got this like always. I’m close to the tenement building, should get there soon. Where are you?”

I looked over the pile of bricks and saw the building looming in the distance, maybe a thousand yards away. “I’m not too far, but there are still hordes of these demon fucks in my way.”

“So cut ’em down.”

“Yeah, just like that.”

Pike laughed. “It’s a lovely fucking war. See you soon. Out.”

No sooner had Pike signed off when another voice came through over the radio, a female voice. “Alpha Team One leader, please check in. Over.”

“This is Alpha—“

Before I could even respond, a monstrous demon with red, pustulated skin and a face like a shark came leaping over the pile of bricks at me, its massive mouth fully open as it launched itself at my head. Scrambling back, I tripped, and the demon landed on me, immediately sinking its claws into both my arms, its teeth bared as it prepared to bite my face off. The fucker even seemed to smile as it knew it had me pinned, my rifle trapped beside me on the ground.

*Where’s the fucking Hellbastards when you need them? Little shits...*

“Fuck you!” I snarled at the demon as I struggled to reach my knife, which was sheathed across the front of my body armour. But the demon had my arms pinned so tight that I could hardly move, and all I could do was stare at that ugly-ass face as it got nearer mine. At least until the demon’s head exploded in a shower of blood and the rest of its body collapsed on top of me, dark fluid gushing from its neck hole. “Jesus fuck,” I spluttered as I pushed the body off of me.

“You all right?” a voice asked.

After wiping the blood from my eyes, I saw a young Blackstar operative standing on top of the pile of bricks with a shotgun in his hands. “Yeah, thanks,” I said as I got up and grabbed my rifle. “What’s your name, son?”

“John—“

That’s about as far as he got before a demon decapitated him with a length of metal that could’ve been a flattened pipe. I stood in shock for a moment as the young guy’s head landed with a thump at my feet.

“You fuck!” I screamed, before raising my assault rifle and emptying what was left in the magazine into the demon who staggered back and then ran away.

I crouched down behind the pile of bricks again and wiped the blood from my face, still seeing the young operative’s expression just before the demon decapitated him. “Fuck this,” I breathed. “I can’t fucking do this shit no more...”

*Stop it! Fucking get a grip, soldier! Right fucking now!*

I took deep breaths as I changed the magazine in my rifle, dismayed by how little ammo I had left. Then I spoke into the radio. “Sanctum, this is Alpha Team One leader. Come in. Over.”

A second later, the same female voice from earlier came over the radio. "Alpha Team One leader, go ahead. Over."

"I'm nearing the target building. I'll radio again when I get there. Over."

"Drake?" A different voice this time. The boss's.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you need more men in there?"

I thought about the new recruits on standby like lambs waiting to be slaughtered, and then about the kid I'd just seen get decapitated. I wouldn't wish this hell on anyone, and I wasn't about to be responsible for the deaths of more good men. "No, sir. It's under control."

There was a pause. "Don't fail me, Ethan."

I shook my head at the radio before answering. "No, sir. Out."

As the madness continued to rage around me, I stayed crouched behind the pile of bricks for another moment, and inevitably, wondered how I ever came to be in a hellhole like this in the first place...

## Chapter 2

The night my mother was killed, it was 1984, and I was a few weeks shy of my sixth birthday.

Like most nights, my mother was out working, and I was inside the comic store a few blocks from where I lived. Christmas Eve was a day away, and outside there was a thick carpeting of snow on the ground. I didn't mind the cold, for it was warm inside the store, unlike in the small apartment my mother rented, which was freezing all the time thanks to the dodgy heating and the plethora of drafts that blew through the place. The cold apartment didn't seem to bother my mother much, but that's probably because she spent hardly any time in it, and when she did, she was usually tucked under a blanket sleeping. She would always tell me not to leave the apartment before she left for work. It's dangerous out there, she would say. Stay in and be safe.

Sure. Who tells a five-year-old to stay in on their own and be safe before walking out on them for a good six hours? A prostitute, that's who. Of course, I had little concept at the time of what a prostitute even was. I'd never even heard the word. But I still knew something was off when my mother would get dressed up in clothes that didn't really suit her and showed too much of her bare skin. And she would paint her face up too, looking to me like a clown. I think I may have told her that once. "You look like a clown, Mom," I said to her, and she just smiled and caressed my cheek. I can't remember what her reply was. Not that it matters now.

"Stay in and be safe, honey, alright?" she said the last time I ever saw her alive. "There are bad people out there who'd just eat a little boy like you right up without a second thought, you hear me? Mommy'll be back soon. You read your comic books until I get back, okay?"

As always, I nodded dutifully, and for a while after she left, I did as she said and stayed in the apartment. I watched TV before I got bored, going to the kitchen for snacks and discovering my mother had forgotten to get groceries again.

It was then that I thought about Karl the comic store guy. He had let me into the shop a few times before after closing so I could sit and read comics while he and his buddies played some acting game called *Dungeons and Dragons*. On game nights, Karl always had snacks, and he would always tell me to help myself. Karl was a good guy, like a really cool uncle. I didn't think I had any uncles, so I pretended Karl was my uncle. I didn't tell him that, but I thought it. He treated me like a nephew anyway, always glad to see me. He knew how into comics I was, so maybe he saw me as being like him. A nerd as he jokingly referred to himself one time, though I didn't really know what a nerd was, any more than I knew what a hooker or a streetwalker or a whore was.

Luckily for me, when I reached the comic store that night after trudging through the snow in busted sneakers and a coat that did nothing to keep the cold out, it was game night, and Karl let me in.

"Not the best night for you to be out, little man," Karl said, grinning as always as he stared down at me. I smiled at his Captain America T-shirt as he got me a soda and some chocolate bars. "You can stay for a while. Your mother out working again?"

I nodded.

"Well," he said. "You know the drill. You can read the comics, but just be careful with 'em, okay? And stay away from the grown-up stuff. Can't have you going home and having nightmares, now can we?"

I shook my head.

"Me and my buddies will be in the back room over there. If you need anything, just holler, okay?"

I nodded again.

Karl ruffled my hair a little. "You don't say much, little man, do you? That's okay. I hate people who talk all the time, anyway. People like me." He laughed as I stared at him. "Alright, have at it, buddy."

Karl went into the back room to play with his friends, all of whom would give me weird looks as they occasionally glanced at me through the doorway. I ignored the looks as I started searching through all the thousands of comics, taking great pleasure in spending ages checking certain ones out, captivated by the cover art, a feeling of warmth and excitement in my belly as I contemplated what adventures lay between the covers.

When I was done browsing, I selected a *Batman* comic and sat on the floor with it just outside the room Karl and his buddies were in. Even though I was sitting alone, I didn't feel alone. I felt less alone in that comic store than I did in the apartment with my mother.

As I sat reading the comic and eating the snacks Karl had given me, I was so wrapped up in the dark world of Gotham that I rarely paid any attention to what Karl and his friends were saying, but sometimes their voices would break my attention and I would listen for a bit just to see if I could work out what they were doing. From what I could make out, someone called a Paladin was trying to get a Hellhound to surrender because he didn't like the idea of killing a dog, especially since he owned two Corgis.

“Who’s a good doggie?” this Paladin person said, presumably to the Hellhound, though I couldn’t figure out why one of Karl’s buddies was talking to a Hellhound, nor why Karl was pretending to *be* a Hellhound.

“GRRRR,” Karl said like an angry dog.

“Who wants a horse hoof? Doggie want a horse hoof?”

“GRRRR.”

“A good dog who sits gets a horse hoof.”

“I’ll sit for a horse hoof!” someone else said. “Please!”

“Don’t sit,” another of Karl’s buddies said. “We’re still in combat here!”

“All good doggies deserve a horse hoof,” the Paladin guy said. “And guess who’s a good doggie?”

“GRRrrrRRRRrrrrRRRR,” Karl growled.

“You want me to translate that?” another guy asked. “I’m a Druid, after all.”

“What he say?” Paladin guy asked.

“You know that thing I always call you?”

“He called me that?”

“Worse than that.”

“Bad dog!”

“Can’t we just kill him?” Druid guy asked.

“He’s a dog,” Paladin guy said. “It’s not right.”

“It’s a goddamn demon hound of Yeenoghu!”

“Well, I’m sure we can find a rescue organization that specializes in that.”

“GRRRR...”

Confused by the whole conversation and game they were playing, I shook my head and went back to reading my *Batman* comic. An almost bad guy beating up *really* bad guys. *That* I could understand.

Much later, Karl gave me a lift back to the apartment in his funny little car as he played music that he called “heavy metal.” It was my first time hearing such music, but I liked it because it was much faster and more aggressive than the music my mother would play on the radio while she was home. I vowed to get me some heavy metal the first chance I got.

“Alright, little man,” Karl said with a smile. “You need me to walk you up to your apartment?”

When I shook my head, he smiled and wished me goodnight, telling me to come back to the store anytime, an invitation I appreciated more than he would ever know. I stayed friends with Karl for years until one day, some junkie tried to rob the comic store and ended up blasting Karl with a sawn-off shotgun. Karl didn’t survive the blast. I was a year into being a cop, and when the investigating detectives failed to turn up the junkie, I went searching myself. Eventually, I found the guy in a crack house in Brockton, but I didn’t arrest him. I dragged him out of the crack house and shoved him into the trunk of my car before driving him to the river. At the riverside, I put a bullet in the junkie fuck’s head before tossing his body into the dark, turbid water for the monsters to eat. It was good enough for the cunt.

After saying goodbye to Karl, I headed toward the apartment with a smile on my face, pleased that I was able to read quite a few new comics. Karl had even given me some to take home with me, saying, "Happy Christmas, little man."

The smile on my face didn't last long when I saw the door to the apartment was open. My first thought was that my mother had come home early, and now she would be pissed at me for going out so late. As I neared the open door, I wondered why she was back so early. Maybe something had happened, or perhaps she had come home to spend time with me, though I doubted it.

Still clutching the comics Karl had given me, I somewhat trepidly walked into the apartment, expecting my mother to be in the living room waiting on me, a stern look on her face. My mother rarely got angry, but she was good at conveying her disappointment when I did something wrong in her eyes. Like when I wet the bed a few weeks ago, and she scowled at me and said I was too old to be wetting the bed. I didn't tell her about the nightmare involving my murdered father that prompted the bed-wetting.

"Hello? Mom?"

There was no answer to my call. Maybe she was sleeping and had forgotten to close the door?

Or maybe there was someone else in the apartment? A burglar, perhaps?

My heart beat faster at the thought, and I clutched the comics in my hand tighter like they were a weapon.

"Mom? It's me. Are you home?"

I paused in the living room and waited on a response from the bedroom or the bathroom, the only two places she would be where I couldn't see her.

Still no reply.

An odd feeling arose in my belly. Fear maybe.

*What would Batman do in this situation?*

He would investigate, that's what.

So I did, walking to my mother's bedroom door, pausing with my hand on the knob as I became aware of a strange sucking sound coming from inside. "Mom?"

The door was shut. I turned the knob and pushed the door open gently, afraid of what I might find at this point. I knew in my gut that something wasn't right, but I didn't know what.

Not until I opened the door all the way, allowing light to spill in from the living room. That's when I made out the figures on the bed. Two people, one on top of the other.

"Mom? Is that you?"

As I looked harder, I soon made out my mother's face as she lay underneath the person on top of her. She appeared naked, and her eyes seemed strangely glazed over. I gasped when I saw the blood running down her neck.

And then gasped again when the person on top of my mother suddenly lifted their head and turned their gaze to stare at me.

To stare at me with two blazing red eyes.

For a moment, I just stared back, unsure of what I was seeing as I tried to work out why the person's eyes were glowing.



And why the person had long teeth—fangs—with blood all over them, and blood running down over his mouth.

My mother's blood.

"Mommy?"

My mother blinked once and then whispered, "Run...Ethan."

Confused and terrified by this point, I shifted my gaze to the person on top of my mother, who was now sitting up slightly, their whole face turned toward me now. Looking into those fierce red eyes, I knew the person was different.

I knew I was looking at a monster.

And as if to prove it, the man bared his bloody fangs and made a hissing sound, his eyes full of hunger as they glared at me.

Somehow, I knew it was too late for my mother. I wanted to help her, but I was too terrified of the monster on top of her to do anything. Instinct kicked in then—some form of self-preservation—and I turned heel and ran, dropping the comics on the floor as I raced through the living room and out the door into the hallway, banging on the neighbors' doors' hoping one of them would answer.

The first person to do so was the lady two doors down. She was obviously concerned when she saw the state I was in.

"Monster!" I kept saying to her as tears streamed down my face. "There's a monster in my Mommy's room! Please help her!"

As freaked out as the lady was, she took me inside her apartment and tried to get me to explain myself, but I couldn't. I got so frustrated, I ran crying from her apartment and straight into a man who lived down the hall. He went to check inside the apartment to see what all the fuss was about, emerging a moment later looking like he'd seen a ghost, the blood drained from his face. "Call 911," he told the lady from two doors down.

As the man stood there to stare at me with a look of pity and sheer horror on his face, I knew right then that I would never see my poor mother again. Not alive anyway.

Sadness and despair overwhelmed me as I ran past the neighbor and back into the apartment, despite the man trying to stop me. I was half expecting to see the monster still on top of my mother as I entered the bedroom, but he was gone. The window was open, and the cold air was spilling in from outside.

My mother lay on the bed, one arm flopped down the side, her neck and chest covered in blood. Her eyes were still open, but there was no life in them.

I hugged my mother until the paramedics came and took me away from her, handing me over to the cops outside in the hallway.

Despite the overwhelming sadness and grief I felt, another emotion burned deep inside of me.

Rage.

## Chapter 3

After gathering myself and getting my head back in the fight where it needed to be, I moved from my position behind the pile of bricks and started to

make way once again toward the tenement building in the distance. But still, in the back of my mind, a voice said:

*This is it. If I make it through this alive, I'm done. No more. The boss can go fuck himself.*

It wasn't the first time I'd thought about ditching Blackstar and starting another life, but this time I meant it. The constant violence and bloodshed, the ever-present darkness associated with fighting a "dirty war"—it was all taking a huge toll on me.

On my soul.

I barely felt a part of regular society anymore. Shit, I barely felt a part of the *human race* anymore. Too frequent use of the Spock Chip had made my sociopathic tendencies less than tendencies and more like traits these days. If I didn't stop now, I would surely become as bad—or worse—than the monsters I went out every day to fight. Yeah, I hunted monsters before Blackstar, but back then—so long ago, it seemed like now—I was compelled to do what I did out of a greater sense of purpose. I wanted to prevent what happened to my mother from ever happening to any other innocent souls. I saw it as my duty to help protect society against the monsters that lurk in the shadows and prey on the weak and innocent. The MURKs as I named them all years ago—Monsters, Unnaturals, Reapers, and Killers. I thought by joining an organization like Blackstar, I would better be able to protect the innocent. In the beginning, it felt like I was making a difference, but it didn't feel that way now.

Now I felt like a soulless killing machine, which is just how Blackstar likes its combat operatives.

But not me. Not anymore. I have a soul, and I don't want to lose it by handing it to Wendell Knightsbridge on a plate, which is what I'd been doing all these years.

You know how it is, though. You get drawn in, and then you get stuck in a rut. You feel like you can't leave, that there's nothing else out there for you. Before you know it, nearly ten fucking years have gone by, and you're in a worse place than ever.

Well, no more. I was getting out. No matter what it took.

"Ethan, you copy?" Pike's voice sounded over the radio as I scurried across piles of debris and dead bodies, wondering where the hell my Hellbastards had gotten too. Fucking little demons were like unruly children. You take 'em out and the next thing, they're off gallivanting like it's fucking Christmas or something.

"Copy," I said just before raising my rifle and shooting an oncoming demon in the head and chest, glad to see it fall and its Visage dissipate. "Where are you?"

"Where the fuck are *you*? I'm nearing the building. I'm twenty yards out."

"I'm right behind you," I said, even though I wasn't. There were still a good five hundred yards between me and the building, with dozens of demons in between.

"Get your ass in gear, will ya?"

"Remind me who's in charge again."

Pike laughed. "You are buddy."

"That's right. Wait for me. Over an out."

I forged on over the piles of rubble, shooting demons as I went until I finally ran out of ammo for the assault rifle, at which point I switched to using my pistol,

which didn't have the same effect on the demons, and did little to stop them. When they got too close, I fought them with my knife to the point of exhaustion.

"Drake?" The boss's voice came over the radio as I lay behind a mound of bricks catching my breath after dispatching three demons in a row, now drenched in their blood.

"Copy," I gasped.

"We're sending in a team with flamethrowers to finish the demons that are left. Our surveillance shows us there aren't many."

"Doesn't fucking seem like it from here."

"I'm sure it doesn't. Stand by."

As I looked back toward the outer edges of the slum area, I soon saw huge jets of flame cut through the darkness as maybe a dozen men with flamethrowers began to target the remaining demons, who screamed as their host bodies were set alight. I was glad to see some backup at last. I just hoped none of the greener operatives got caught in the fire.

Seeing the damage the flamethrowers were doing, many of the remaining demons scampered back to the relative safety of the tenement building from which they'd come, which I wasn't happy about. They would've been easier to kill out in the open than inside that building where they could hide and pounce. But still, a part of me was glad to see the bastards run for cover because it meant I wouldn't have to fight any more of them out here. When it came time to breach the tenement building, I would have the Hellbastards take point, who would bear the brunt of the assault.

Speaking of whom...

*Scroteface. Report. Where the hell are you?*

*We're here, boss.*

*Where's here, for Christ's sake? I can't see you anywhere.*

*Near the building. We have never had so much fun...*

*Oh, well, I'm glad for you, Scroteface. This must really remind you of home.*

*Better than home, boss.*

*Find Pike and wait for me outside the building. I'll be there shortly.*

*Yes, boss.*

When I joined Blackstar, the last thing I expected was to end up having a bunch of vertically challenged demons on my team. Though I had to admit, the little bastards had come in handy over the years and had even saved my ass on a few occasions. Despite their unruliness and lack of discipline, they were a good asset to have around, and as weapons went, they were formidable when they wanted to be.

Before long, I was less than a hundred yards out from the tenement building, and through the thick smoke, I could just make out Pike crouched down by the front of the building, alone it seemed, the rest of the team MIA for now.

My empty rifle hung from my body armor, and in my hand, I held my pistol, the magazine of which was half full. Around me, the sound of screaming demons pierced the air, and the smell of burning flesh cloyed at my nostrils, almost making me gag it was so bad.

At fifty yards out, I started to think I would make it to the building with no further incident. But then out of the black smoke, a flaming demon came

screeching toward me, its human vessel like charred steak at this point, though that didn't stop the demon from attacking me.

Despite emptying the rest of the magazine into the charging demon, it kept coming, so I kicked the wretched creature away from me, causing sparks to shower between us, giving me just enough time to pull out my knife, though not enough time to use the thing. The demon was fast, and before I could get a chance to stab it, it had grabbed me with its flaming hands, burning the skin on my arms and face as it tried to unbalance me, screeching like a maniac as it did so.

The demon probably would've got me down had something not jumped on its back. As it released me, I saw tiny hands tear at the demon's face, ripping off chunks of charred flesh as the demon screamed in frustration. It didn't take me long to realize that one of my Hellbastards was on the demon attacking me—Cracka, the smallest of the bunch. The diminutive demon continued to claw and tear at the burning demon's face until there were no discernible human features left, nor even a mouth to scream with.

Then the other five Hellbastards showed up and attacked the still standing demon en masse. Within seconds, they had taken the demon down and were ripping the creature apart, tearing off limbs and eventually ripping off its head.

"Thanks, boys," I said as the six Hellbastards stood looking pleased with themselves, their small bodies covered in the blood of their fellow demons. "Although I thought I told you to meet me outside the building."

"We were just on our way, boss," Scroteface said, his rows of pointed teeth showing as he grinned at me.

"We saw you in trouble," Cracka said. "We come help."

"Like the fucking *A-Team*, boss," Reggie, a dreadlocked, red-skinned demon who had somehow managed to keep a lit cigar in his mouth, said. "Hannibal ain't got shit on us."

"Or Mr. T," Cracka all but squeaked, flexing his tiny muscles. "I kick that motherfucker's ass!"

"No one kicks Mr. T's ass," Toast—his body permanently blackened by fire—said. "Specially not you, pipsqueak."

"Fuck you!" Cracka said, squaring up to Toast, who was twice his size. "I kick your motherfucking ass right now!"

"I'd like to see you try," Toast said, suddenly spitting a small fireball from his mouth that hit Cracka in the chest, knocking him on his ass and causing the others to laugh.

"That's it!" Cracka screeched as he jumped back to his feet. "You dead, Toasty!"

Before Cracka could run at Toast, I shouted, "Enough! This isn't the fucking time or the place."

Cracka growled at Toast, but stopped his assault before it started. "Sorry, boss."

"You crazier than Murdock is, Cracka," Snotskull, the biggest of the bunch, quipped.

"Snotskull!" I said. "What the fuck did I just say? Stop winding Cracka up! Shut the fuck up all of you and follow me so we can get what we came for and get the fuck outta this hellhole."

"Feels like home to us, boss," Khullu said, tentacles writhing around his face. The others laughed.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Then maybe you’d all like to go back home right now then. You know I can do it. It only takes a few words...”

“No, boss!” Cracka said. “There no TV in Hell!”

“Shut it then and let’s get going,” I said, turning away from them as I started to head toward the tenement building once more. As I did, Knightsbridge’s voice came over the radio again.

“Drake? Do you copy?”

“Copy, boss,” I said as I kept moving, the Hellbastards following behind me now.

“The ground is clear. Move on the building now.”

“Almost there, boss. Should we wait on the Spreaks?”

“I thought I told you to stop calling them that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry. Should we wait on the PSYOP Team?”

“No. Clear the building first. Solomon and the rest of his team will enter once it’s clear.”

*Yeah, wouldn’t want the Spreaks to get hurt or anything, would we?*

“Copy that.”

On the way to the tenement building, I came across a fallen Blackstar operative, her face so mangled I could hardly make out her features. “Sorry,” I said as I claimed whatever ammo she had on her, which turned out to be two full rifle magazines and one pistol magazine. After reloading my rifle and sidearm, I carried on toward the building up ahead. Pike was standing by the front entrance, smoking a cigarette as I approached, leaning against the wall like he was just hanging out.

“What kept you?” he asked in his Southern drawl, his smile as wide as ever, despite his face being covered in blood and dirt.

“I think a better question is, what’s keeping me here?” I said, snatching the cigarette from his hand so I could take a few drags.

“You aren’t losing heart on me now, are you, Ethan? You love this shit as much as I do.”

“Do I?” I stared at him, knowing he had the Spock Chip in, knowing he wouldn’t—couldn’t—be feeling what I was feeling right now.

“You’re just battle fatigued. Here.” He dug something out of his pocket and handed it to me. A small blue capsule. “That should keep you going until we secure the target.”

I stared at the pill in my hand, knowing full well what it was. The Berserker Pill. Five minutes after swallowing it, I’d be running around like the Hulk, hyped to high heaven and ready to kill anything that crossed my path. I’d taken the pills before, though I wasn’t a fan. Useful if you’re in the thick of a huge battle and surrounded by enemies, but you tended to lose control once you took it. You became nothing more than a mindless killing machine, which I wasn’t far off already. “No thanks,” I said, handing the pill back to him. “I’m good.”

“You sure?” Pike asked. “You don’t look like you’re good.”

“I’ll be fine. Let’s just get in there and get this over with. You hear from the rest of the team? I can’t get them on the radio.”

Pike shook his head. “Not in a while. We took a lot of damage out there. They’re probably dead by now.”

His tone implied that he felt nothing over the deaths of his team members, though I knew that was just the Spock Chip. Later, when he removed the chip, he would feel the loss like I was feeling it now. "It's just us then."

"And your pet demons."

"We ain't no pets," Scroteface said. None of the Hellbastards much liked Pike because he was always dissing them. He saw no need for them most of the time and made no secret of the fact that he considered them the enemy, no better than the demons they were helping us fight against.

"Shut up, you little fuckwit," Pike said, pointing his rifle at Scroteface. "If I had my way, I'd blow you all back to Hell where you belong."

"We like to see you try, Big Teeth," Cracka said, pushing his chest out as he glared at Pike with large, yellow eyes.

"Insolent little fucker," Pike said, about to step toward Cracka. "I oughta—"

"Enough!" I barked at Pike, putting a hand on his chest to stop him. "It's like arguing with kids for fuck's sake. Just leave it and let's get inside and finish this so we can all go home."

Pike glared at the Hellbastards for another second before smiling again. "You're the boss."

"That's right. You forget that sometimes. Now move."

"Sure thing... *boss*."

*Asshole.*

I tell you, it was easier when it was just me and I didn't have to worry about any goddamn team...

## Chapter 4

My first ever kill was made at the age of thirteen. After my mother was murdered by the vampire, my young eyes were opened forevermore to the Darkness and all of its monstrous permutations. Soon enough, I could sense—if not always see—the Shadow World; the world behind the world that most people were blind to. Just through careful observation, I developed a sense of the darkness and evil that permeated society. What most people took to be mere shadows on the wall, for instance, I saw for what they were—monsters lurking, creeping... preying.

For years, that's all I did was watch from afar and pretend not to notice the evil nearby. If I spotted a vampire feeding off of a person in an alley, I walked on by without a second glance. If I sensed darkness in someone—even if I didn't know what form that darkness took—I didn't let on that I noticed.

Until one day, I had no choice but to not only notice the darkness in someone but to do something about it.

After being moved into a boys' home when another set of foster parents decided they didn't want me anymore (too quiet, too intense, too... *off*), I soon discovered that the man who ran the home was preying on the boys who came under his care. Boys would go missing, and when the authorities came to investigate, the man in charge of the home—a man named Bryan Bentley—would simply say the

boys must have run away. This happened. I'd done it myself a few times. But not at the rate of one boy a week, and sometimes two.

In the three months I spent at the home, eighteen boys went missing from the place. Crazy right? Even crazier that the cops and social services didn't appear to be doing anything about it. To this day, I don't know why that was. Some of them could've been hellots—ordinary people enthralled to demons, given power for their faith and devotion... and their soul. It could also have been the case that the authorities didn't care about a bunch of missing boys and were content enough to let them slip through the cracks rather than launch an expensive investigation into their disappearance.

A likelier explanation was that there was a conspiracy afoot, a conspiracy involving a ring of powerful people with the wealth and resources to ensure that no one ever investigated the disappearances. I was too young at the time to realize this, but years later, I decided this was the case. The boys were being handed over to a ring of pedophile occultists—some or all of them being hellots or even demons—to be used in various magic rituals. Years later, as a cop, I tried to open an investigation as boys were still going missing from various homes, but my request was quickly blocked, and I was warned to drop it if I valued my job. Reluctantly, I dropped the investigation, but not before I uncovered signs of a vast conspiracy involving many powerful players in society, including the mayor of Fairview and a number of senators and corporate players in the greater Washington County area. I still have the files stashed away, and I intend to open up the investigation again just as soon as I have the means to do so.

But anyway. Bryan Bentley. What a despicable fuck of a man he was. Back then, he was the size that I am now—six-four, built like the side of a house, with dark, beady eyes and a stare as dead as his blackened heart. All the boys in the home were afraid of Bentley, including me. He cast a blanket of terror over the whole place, to where silence pervaded the old house because most of the boys were afraid to speak too loudly in case they annoyed Bentley. He didn't tolerate any shit from any of us, and if you fucked him about or pissed him off, he would drag you down to the basement, tie you to a torture rack that he kept down there, and then lashed you with one of his many whips or beat you with a paddle. And if you screamed or complained about any of it, you got more, so you learned to grit your teeth and take it, else the torture would never end.

When he was done punishing you, Bentley would toss you back into the room that you shared with half a dozen other boys, and you'd lie on the floor whimpering and bleeding as he stood glaring at all the others as if daring them to say something out of turn so he could punish them as well. When he left, the other boys would help you get cleaned up, and you would spend the next week in pain, weeping silently into your pillow every night.

Just for that, Bentley deserved to die. I spent many a night thinking of ways to kill the bastard, as I'm sure every other boy did. But the other boys didn't take that next step of killing Bentley.

Only I did that.

It was after another boy went missing. A boy I had become good friends with. His name was Charlie, and we were both planning on running away from the home so we could make our way to New York. When we got to New York, we were

going to walk into Marvel Comics and show them the comics we had made. I wrote the stories, and Charlie did all the art. I tell you that boy was a real talent. His drawings were amazing, and between my stories and his art, we felt sure Marvel would give us both jobs, and we would spend the rest of our lives creating comics, and our characters and stories would be known and read by everyone around the world, and we would be millionaires by the time we were even adults. Every day, we would talk about what we'd do when we had all that money, the houses we would buy, the cool sports cars we would drive...the girls who would fall at our feet because we'd be famous comic creators. It was a dream that got us through the dark nights and helped us block out the screams of the boys suffering at Bentley's hands.

It was a dream we believed in completely, and we felt we couldn't fail. We just needed the money to get to New York first, which we were both working on getting, by doing burglaries mostly. Charlie was good at getting into places, the best I've ever seen. The stuff we stole, we fenced at a local pawnshop for a fraction of what the stuff was worth, but we didn't care because we were getting at least *some* money. Eventually, we had enough for the bus tickets.

But the day before we could buy them, Charlie went missing in the middle of the night and turned up three days later in a roadside ditch, his body broken and beaten, showing signs of sexual abuse according to the brief newspaper article written about him.

I was devastated by Charlie's death and went into a deep depression that lasted a week. The only thing that pulled me out of my dark hole was the thought of killing Bentley because I knew he took Charlie out of the home and handed him over to some evil gang or cult. Hell, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Bentley himself had killed Charlie. Bentley was a sadist, so he could've tortured and killed Charlie in the basement before dumping his body, knowing there would be no investigation afterward, which there wasn't.

So one night, I decided to kill this monster called Bryan Bentley. I knew I had to do it, for Charlie, and for all the other missing boys. And for myself, because I realized that I might be next, especially if Bentley suspected I knew what he was up to, which I often thought he did.

The night before I killed Bentley, another boy disappeared, and I knew I couldn't wait any longer. That day, I went to the pawnshop and bought a hunting knife with a serrated edge. I hid the knife under my pillow and lay on my bed until darkness fell, and everyone was asleep. Then I waited further until the small hours when I knew Bentley would be asleep. Or at least I hoped he would be.

My breathing was shallow, and my hands shook as I took the knife from under my pillow and crept out of the bedroom, wearing only socks to minimize any noise. In the darkness, I crept through the house, avoiding every creaking floorboard as I went until I reached Bentley's room. His door was locked, but that was okay. Charlie had taught me how to pick a lock, having learned from his father before his father was killed in a burglary gone wrong. I picked the lock just as Charlie had shown me, and then opened the door as slowly as I could, my heart jumping at every creak. I felt sure Bentley would hear me as I entered the room, but he never did. The room stank of whiskey, so I guessed he'd drunk himself to sleep.



Bentley's massive form lay sprawled on the bed as he snored loudly. As I stood staring down at the man, my previously hammering heart began to slow, as did my breathing. An unexpected calm came over me. For days, I had wrestled with the moral implications of killing a man, but now my mind was clear, and I felt no such moral quandary. This man had killed or helped to kill my best friend—along with many others—and therefore deserved to die.

And it was me who had to kill him.

No one else.

Me.

His eyes opened suddenly as I raised the knife over his chest, but it was too late by then. His hard stare didn't frighten me this time. In fact, my stare seemed to frighten him as his eyes widened in fear, and he realized what was coming.

I stabbed him as hard as my young arms could stab him, plunging the blade deep into his chest, pausing for a second before ripping it out again, shocked at my own strength. Spurred on by Bentley's screams of pain and fear, knowing I was doing this for Charlie and all the other boys, I kept stabbing.

And stabbing.

And screaming.

And stabbing.

I've no idea how many times I plunged that knife into him. I only stopped when the blood-slicked knife slipped from my hand, which I had slit open in the process of stabbing him repeatedly, but I didn't care.

Below me, Bentley lay covered in blood as he took his last breath and the life went out of his eyes.

Tears ran down my face as I thought of Charlie and the fact that this monster had taken him away from me forever.

At some point, I turned and thought there was someone else in the room with me, but it was just my reflection in the full-length mirror. In the silvery moonlight streaming through the window, I stood to stare at myself, a young boy covered from head to toe in blood.

And I knew...

This was who I was now.

A killer.

An avenging angel.

And I liked it.

I still have the scar on the palm of my right hand, where the knife had sliced me deep. I look at it now, and I see it for what it is:

The Mark of Darkness.

The Brand of a Killer.

I still went to New York, partly because I was now on the run, and partly because I still wanted to fulfill the dream Charlie and I had. With the money we had collected, I bought a bus ticket and rode to Gotham, heading straight for Marvel headquarters when I got there, homemade comics in hand. The doorman never let me enter. In fact, he laughed and told me to fuck off. I still had the hunting knife on me, the one I'd used to kill Bentley. I should've thrown it away,

but I felt like I needed protection for when I got to New York. My blood boiled as I stared at the doorman. Who did this asshole think he was, stamping on my dream like that? Stamping on my dead friend's dream? My hand went inside my jacket and gripped the knife, but then a voice in my head told me not to do it, so I released my grip on the knife, and the doorman never knew how close he came to being stabbed that day. I handed him the comics and asked if he'd give them to Stan Lee for me, and he laughed and said, sure kid, you got it. Knowing Stan Lee would never lay eyes on those comics, I walked away, my dream of being a comic writer now as dead as my best friend was.

I ended up remaining in New York for some time. Two years, I think, though it felt much longer. I fell in with a bad crowd, as they say. The worst, in fact. But that's a story for another time...

## Chapter 5

When Pike and I entered the tenement building, we found it to be strangely silent, at least compared to the hellish cacophony still blaring outside. Inside, it seemed like the building had been a victim of a sustained mortar bomb campaign, with chunks blown out of the walls everywhere, and jagged pieces of glass sticking out of the window frames. The floors and stairs seemed layered with decades of grime and dust, with detritus strewn everywhere. There were bodies as well. Previously possessed human vessels and smaller demons in their monstrous forms, dead from numerous bullet wounds or irreparable damage by explosions sustained during the battle.

"Nice fucking place," Pike said as he stood next to me at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the first floor. "I might move in after all this is over."

I shook my head at him as I directed the Hellbastards to take point, which they did, scurrying up the stairs as they muttered to each other in Hellion.

"What kind of security do you think this fucker has up there?" I asked Pike.

Pike shrugged like he couldn't care less. "Fuck knows. A few high-level demons, maybe? Does it matter? I'm sure we can handle them."

"A few more men would help."

"Come on, Ethan," Pike said, checking his rifle. "Don't get the heebie-jeebies on me now, buddy. We've handled worse than this by ourselves before, haven't we? Besides, I got a secret weapon up my sleeve."

"What fucking weapon?"

Pike flashed his large, whiter-than-white teeth at me as he took a small cylindrical metal object that he had stashed behind his body armor. "This baby right here, a little something my tech girl recently designed."

"What is it?" I asked, having never seen it before. "And how'd you get a hold of it?"

"Well, you know I'm fucking Janine the tech girl, right? She designed this thing and gave it to me to test out."

"You know there's protocol—"

“Fuck protocol. I knew this battle was happening, so I needed something now, not when the boss signed off on it.”

“It’s your funeral when Knightsbridge finds out you broke protocol, taking untested tech out into the field. You know how he is about following protocol.”

“Yeah, I know. But I trust Janine. The girl’s a fucking genius. Remember that device she made that paralyzes werewolves by emitting a sound frequency only they can hear? Remember how the mutts couldn’t stand that fucking thing? Well, this little device here is like that, only for demons. My girl Janine made it so the sound this thing emits totally fucks with them. She says it should mess with the demons’ celestial frequency or some shit.”

“And does it?”

“I don’t know yet. It hasn’t been properly tested in the field. That’s why Janine gave me the thing—to test out.”

“So it might do fuck all to disrupt the demons then?”

“Have a little faith, Ethan. Janine doesn’t make bad tech, just like she doesn’t do bad sex. Besides, she’d never risk not having my cock in her again.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious, bruh. She loves my fucking dick so much she made a mold of it so she could make a dildo for herself to use when I’m not around to please her. I fucking kid you not.”

“Jesus Christ. You’re too fucking much sometimes, Pike. Come on, let’s head up and get this shit over with. I need a fucking shower so I can get this demon filth off me. And don’t say I love the filth, because I fucking don’t. I hate it.”

“That’s your problem. You need to love the filth a little more. You know what I’m saying?”

“Are you talking about monster filth or sex? I can never tell with you.”

“I thought they were both the same.”

“You would. Come on.”

“Lead the way,” he said, putting the sound device underneath his body armor again. “I’m right behind ya.”

Struggling to see in the gloom, I was reluctant to use my thermal imaging just yet, for I often found it disorientating. So I stuck with my normal sight as I purposely headed up the stairs with my rifle pointing out in front of me, ready to fire should any demons come pouncing out of nowhere, as they were wont to do.

About halfway up, I was startled by something flying across the landing and slamming off the wall with a loud grunt before rolling down the stairs and coming to a stop at my feet. Looking down, I saw it was one of the Hellbastards. Snotskull, his blunt, slimy face scrunched up in pain. “Hey, boss,” he groaned.

“Snotskull, what the fuck is—” My question was cut short by an earsplitting screech from the hallway above.

“Looks like we have contact,” Pike said before looking down at Snotskull. “What’s up there, you little bastard?”

Snotskull groaned again before getting to his feet. “Big demon,” he said.

“A big one, huh?” Pike said. “Well, let’s go see how big this motherfucker is then.”

Without further hesitation, Pike marched up the rest of the stairs ahead of me, his rifle shouldered and ready to fire. But before I could even tell him to wait,

something hit him when he reached the landing, and he was slammed against the wall before crash-landing on the stairs.

“Pike!” I said. “Are you alright?”

“What the fuck was that?” he groaned.

Looking up to the landing from the stairs, I soon saw a huge black tentacle writhing there, which must have been what hit Pike, and also Snotskull. Noises from the hallway indicated the other Hellbastards were going hell for leather as they fought against whatever monster the tentacle belonged to. “Something nasty by the looks of that tentacle.”

Pike got to his feet, shrugging off his fall as he shouldered his rifle again. “Whatever it is, let’s go kill it.”

The tentacle had retracted back into the hallway, but the noise continued, a cacophony of screeches and screams, punctuated by the occasional roar as the monster up there no doubt took hits from the Hellbastards. And speaking of which, Snotskull was already up the stairs and disappearing around the corner into the hallway to rejoin the fight.

When Pike and I made it up the stairs and onto the rubbish-strewn landing, we both stood to gawk in horror at the abomination in the center of the hallway, which was a black mass of barbed tentacles, squelching mouths filled with glistening white teeth, and eyes all over it, the whole gelatinous mass held up by multiple legs that resembled crab legs. The Hellbastards were all over the thing, hanging off it in various places, ripping and tearing at it, Toast blasting it with fireballs from his mouth, Khullu trying to choke it with his tentacles, and Cracka shouting, “Die you squidgy fuck!”

“The little one’s vocabulary is really improving,” Pike said, seemingly unaffected by the giant monster we were about to face.

“It’s the TV,” I said, gawping in horror at the monster. “It really brings them along, especially their sarcasm.”

Pike laughed. “What do you suppose that thing is?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say a higher demon,” I said. “Maybe even a Demon Lord. Those fucks are always the uglier ones, and this guy is ugly as fuck.”

“You got that right. How you wanna handle this? Leave it to the Hellbastards?”

I watched as Snotskull vomited pure acid over one of the demon’s legs, the limb soon melting off and dissolving in a puddle of goo. But as the demon’s detached leg dissolved on the floor, it used another of its legs to stab Snotskull through the shoulder, pinning the little guy to the floor. On seeing this, Scroteface jumped down to help, using his brute strength to snap off the leg holding Snotskull and ripping it out of Snotskull’s body, who screamed in pain but immediately rejoined the fight.

“Tough little bastards,” Pike said. “You think they got this?”

“No,” I said. “That thing is too big and powerful. It’ll kill them eventually.”

“What then?”

“Maybe now’s the time to try out your girlfriend’s new tech.”

“Janine ain’t my girlfriend. We’re just fuck buddies.”

“Whatever. Whip that thing out and use it.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.” Pike grinned as he took out the sound device, pressing a few buttons on it before throwing it onto the floor near the monstrous demon. We both waited, but nothing happened. “What the fuck?”

“Your junk seems to be impotent, Pike.”

“I don’t get it—”

“Let me guess. This has never happened before, right?”

“Just give it a minute. It just needs a little time to—”

He was interrupted by a sudden loud roar from the demon that was unmistakably pain. The eldritch abomination stopped fighting the Hellbastards as it fell over onto the floor and convulsed like it was being electrocuted and fucked up the ass by a giant barbed dildo at the same time.

“Holy shit,” I said.

“What I tell you?” Pike said with an infectious grin. “It just needed a little time to get going is all.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Fuck you. Let’s kill this thing.”

“Scroteface!” I shouted. “Stand clear!”

The Hellbastards, not knowing what was happening, leaped away from the downed demon just before Pike and I opened fire, each of us emptying a full magazine into the demon, causing it to howl and screech even more as jets of black fluid erupted from its body. But despite the number of bullets we put into the thing, it still picked itself up and scarpered down the hallway, leaving a trail of slime and black ooze as it went.

“Well, that taught it not to fuck with us,” Pike said as he walked over and retrieved the sound device. “Janine is getting double the pleasure from me when I get back, I tell you that.”

I shook my head and smiled. “I can’t say she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Drake, do you copy?” The boss’s voice came over the radio.

“Copy,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“What’s the situation?”

“Pike and I are inside the building, sir. We’re heading to the top floor to clear it for the Sprea—the PSYOP Team.”

“I’m sending backup. Hold your position.”

I looked at Pike once Knightsbridge had signed off. “He’s sending backup.”

“Backup? Since when did we need backup? We got this, bruh.”

“Fuck it,” I said after a moment. “Let’s go. I’m not waiting around here for more of those things to come. The sooner we clear the top floor, the sooner we can get the fuck outta here.”

“Fucking A. Let’s do this shit.”

## Chapter 6

I landed back in Fairview when I was fifteen years old, having left New York in a hurry, feeling like the city had swallowed me whole before spitting me back out again with my life barely intact. My experience there had changed me,

hardened me. I was no longer the scared little boy I was when I arrived there, which made living on the streets of Fairview easier. My eyes had also been fully opened to the walking nightmares—the MURKs—that stalked the city streets and beyond. This knowledge, along with my hardened mentality and shutdown emotional state, made me feel apart from the rest of society like I existed in a separate world to everyone else. Couple that with the usual teenageisms of raging hormones and sullen temperament and you had a kid who dressed in black all the time, listened to metal, and glared at everyone who dared even glance at him.

Inevitably, with no home, no school, and no parents, I fell in with various gangs, most of them criminal in nature, dealing in drugs, guns, and stolen gear. Violence was a constant. I carried weapons all of the time, knives and eventually guns. Caught up in the lifestyle of being a street thug, I often tried to forget about the monsters that existed out there, filling myself full of drugs and alcohol, living the street life to the full, knowing everyone, but friends with no one.

And then one night, at age seventeen, I came across a familiar face in an alley that made me freeze like I'd just seen a ghost.

The face of the vampire who had killed my mother.

A face that looked the same in every detail, for it hadn't aged a single day in all those years. He was feeding off of some poor teenage girl, sucking her dry when I stumbled around the corner and almost walked into him. Full of drugs at the time, my adrenaline spiked as the memories of seeing him on top of my mother that night, draining her dry, came flooding back in an instant. In a panic, I took out the .38 Special from inside my jacket and pointed it at the vampire. "You..." I said, my hand shaking, my voice quavering.

The vampire stopped feeding to stare at me, and then the recognition came into his blazing red eyes. "You..."

I shot him twice before he stood up, a smile on his face as he stared at me. Even when I shot him four more times, he remained standing and then bared his fangs at me as if he was going to make me his next victim. Dropping the gun, I ran at that point, not stopping until I had run out of breath, and I couldn't go on any farther. I had expected the vampire to follow me, but he didn't for some reason. He could've killed me easily, and to this day, I don't know why he didn't.

He fucking should have, I tell you that.

I left the gang I was in at the time and holed up in the squat I was staying in, remaining there for days as I decided to hunt down the vampire. The only problem was, I didn't know how I would find him. Nor did I know how I would kill him once I found him. Bullets clearly had no effect on vampires, so I stole a few books from an occult bookshop and holed up in the squat again while I came up with a plan.

Much of what I read turned out to be contradictory and as fictional as the comics I used to read as a kid, but most of the writers seemed to agree that vampires sustained serious damage through fire. The books also suggested the usual method of using a wooden stake to the heart, and also beheading, or causing so much damage that the vampire couldn't recover from it. Leaving them in sunlight also burned them up, apparently.

So I made myself a nice big wooden stake from the leg of a chair, and also obtained a machete, both of which I carried with me—along with a can of lighter fluid—while I went out every night on the hunt for the vampire. After weeks of

searching, it became clear that finding the fanged fuck would not be easy. The city was vast and labyrinthine and finding anyone in it was difficult enough without them having the ability to move in the shadows and stay constantly hidden from view.

Then one night, I heard a scream that came from inside an abandoned hotel as I was passing by. Deciding to check it out, I went inside to find a female vampire feeding off of a young street kid. The vampire was small and wiry, only a kid herself it seemed like, but with a fierce, aggressive demeanor. "More food," she hissed as she stared at me standing there with the wooden stake in my hand.

I said nothing as I tried to contain my fear. The vampire tossed the kid she had been feeding off to the floor and turned to face me.

"What are you gonna do with that stake, boy?" she asked as blood ran down her chin. "Do you think you can kill me with it?"

Staying silent, I continued to glare at the vampire, my adrenaline raging inside me as I contained my fear and focused on how I would kill the bitch. She wasn't the vampire I was after, but at least I could practice on her. Something told me she hadn't been a vampire for very long, and was therefore inexperienced, though not as much as I was.

Not knowing what else to do, I ran at her, holding the stake out in front of me, intending to stab her in the chest with it. But I should've known she'd be too fast for me. Within seconds it seemed, she had gripped my arm, crushing it so hard I squealed and dropped the stake as she laughed at my pain. Then she grabbed me by the throat with her other hand and squeezed, her eyes full of psychopathic glee as the boy's blood dripped from her mouth.

"What a silly little boy you are," she said. "Does Mummy and Daddy know where you are? Or maybe you have no mummy and daddy. Would you like to have a mummy again? Would you like me to be your mummy, hmm? We could spend eternity together, how does that sound?" Her face leaned in closer to mine as she bared her fangs and prepared to bite me with them. "We would never have to be lonely again, you and I. We could—"

Shock registered on her deathly white face, and her eyes widened as she looked down to see the wooden stake sticking out of her chest. As she released her grip on me, she staggered back and then fell to the floor, where she lay unmoving as if paralyzed. Behind her stood the boy she had been feeding on, barely able to stand up he had lost so much blood. "Fuck you, bitch," he said before collapsing to the floor.

Forgetting about the vampire for a moment, I rushed to the boy to see if he was all right. He was unconscious but still breathing, and I realized he had collapsed from the blood loss. If I got him to a hospital, he should pull through. But first, I had to take care of the vampire who still lay on the floor as if frozen.

"You aren't dead," I said as I stood over her, curiosity in my voice. "Only paralyzed. Interesting."

The vampire's mouth was frozen half-open, and no words came out. Her eyes, however, were filled with pain and fear. She was at my mercy now, and she knew it.

"Let's try something else," I said as I took out the can of lighter fluid and poured it over her. "Maybe you'll burn to death."

I dragged the boy back first before lighting a match and tossing it onto the vampire's body. The lighter fluid ignited immediately, and within seconds, the vampire became engulfed in flames, the smell of her undead flesh filling the room.

For a good few minutes, I watched as the fire ate at her, and then was surprised when she started moving, and I realized it was probably because the wooden stake had been burned away. A blackened husk now, a scream of pain and rage issued from her mouth as she sat up. Reaching inside my coat, I took out the machete I had sheathed under there.

As the vampire was on her hands and knees, I stood to the side of her and brought the machete down on the back of her neck as hard as I could. The blade, probably not as sharp as it should've been, didn't go all the way through her neck and her head dangled on the flesh that was left. Taking another swing, I brought the machete down again, and this time lopped her head off, which hit the floor and rolled away.

Seconds later, the vampire's whole body, including her head, seemed to collapse in on itself, turning to a pile of smoking dust.

It took another three months of going out every night and searching before I finally located the vampire I was after. Or rather, he found me.

He must've known I was hunting him, for he appeared from behind a tree as I was traipsing through the park one night, despondent because I hadn't spotted a single vampire since the one I killed in the abandoned hotel. Either there were fewer vampires around than I thought, or they were just incredibly good at staying out of sight. The truth, I later discovered, was somewhere in the middle.

"Hello, Ethan," the vampire said as he leaned casually against the tree several feet in front of me. It was winter, and there was snow on the ground, the air surrounding us freezing, the lake in the park covered with a thick sheet of ice. "I know you've been searching for me, so I thought I would save you the trouble of finding me. In fact, I thought we might have a little chat, you and I."

The machete was already in my hand as I glared at him, noticing for the first time how handsome he was in a rockstar sort of way, with longish dark hair and tight black clothes. "Fuck you," I said, still afraid, though not as afraid as the last time we met. The difference being, I knew I could kill his kind now. I knew I could kill *him* if I given the chance. "I have fuck all to say to you."

"Really?" he said, moving toward me now as if he really did just want to talk. There was no aggression in his eyes, but that didn't mean he wouldn't kill me if I gave him a chance. "You don't want to ask about your mother? She came to me, you know. Working the streets, your mother's eyes were wide open to everything in this city, including my kind. She sought me out."

"Bullshit!" I spat, my hand tightening around the grip of the machete as I itched to bring the blade down on his neck. "My mother would never seek out the likes of you. Why would she?"

The vampire smiled. "Isn't it obvious? She wanted to die, but she couldn't do it herself. So she came to me and asked me to do it for her. And I was happy to oblige."

As tears stung at my eyes, rage built up in me. Why would he spout such obvious lies? Was he trying to mess with my head? There was no way my mother



would willingly go to a vampire to be killed. “You think you can get into my head that easily? You can’t.”

“Ethan, Ethan...” The vampire sauntered toward me. “I already am. I speak the truth. Your mother was a wretched woman, filled with self-loathing, wracked by depression. Not to mention the burden of having a needy son to look after—”

“Shut your filthy fucking mouth!” I screamed and ran at him with the machete, taking a swing at his neck, missing by a long way and unbalancing myself. The vampire did not try to counter-attack, but merely stood there as I came at him again, and then again as he easily avoided my desperate swings.

“The truth hurts, Ethan, doesn’t it?” he said as I went at him again, and this time he pushed me into the tree after avoiding my attack, my face smashing against the rough bark. “Your mother never wanted you. You were a mistake she was too weak to abort before you could grow in her belly like a parasite. She hated herself so much she was incapable of loving anything, never mind you, Ethan. Why else would a woman become a two-bit whore for men to use and abuse as they saw fit? Because that’s all she thought she was worth, that’s why.”

Tears mingled with the blood running from my nose as I stood glaring at the vampire. “Lies!” I screamed. “Fucking lies! My mother loved me! She didn’t kill herself. You murdered her!”

I ran at him again with the machete, swinging it so many times to no avail that I ended up stopping out of sheer exhaustion, falling to my knees in floods of tears as despair and hopelessness overwhelmed me.

The vampire walked toward me, a slight smile on his face as he looked down. The bastard was enjoying this. “What a pitiful creature you turned out to be, Ethan. You are physically strong, yes, but inside you are weak, full of as much self-loathing as your mother was. I can almost taste the poisonous drugs in your system, just like I tasted them in your mother’s blood. Like all humans, you are pathetic, at the mercy of your weak will and pitiful emotions.” He crouched down in front of me. “What is there for you, Ethan? What kind of life can you really have? You have no one. You are all alone. The only thing you have is your pain. That’s all that drives you. I can see that. But what if I told you that you would never have to feel that pain again? What if I told you I could make you more powerful than you ever imagined? You could become a true predator, leaving your pathetic humanity behind forever. Would you like that, Ethan? I could give you that. All you’d have to do is—”

He didn’t notice me take the can of lighter fluid from out of my back pocket, so engrossed was he in giving his little speech. “Fuck you!” I screamed and squirted the lighter fluid over him, his clothes soaked before he could snatch the can from my hands and throw it away. As I went for the matches in my pocket, he launched himself at me and pinned me to the ground, his fangs bared in anger now, his eyes blazing red.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he growled. “I was going to make you immortal, give you a great gift that most of your pathetic kind would kill for. But now, I’m just going to make you a ghou. You know what that is, Ethan? It means you’ll be my bitch and have to do whatever I tell you to do.” He released one hand from me as he bit into his wrist, his fangs drawing blood. He then held his bleeding wrist

over me, his cold blood dripping into my mouth. “Drink. Become my fucking bitch, Ethan.”

As I spluttered and gagged at the taste of his foul blood, my free hand searched for something that I had put in my pocket earlier before going out. A small silver dagger that I had recently stolen from a pawnshop, thinking it might come in handy since it was made of silver and vampires didn't like silver. When he pushed his bleeding wrist against my mouth, my fingers found the dagger, and I pulled it out and quickly swung the blade toward him, feeling it puncture the flesh of his thigh as he screamed in pain.

“You fuck!” he shouted as he backed off me a little so he could take the knife from out of his leg. In doing so, however, he unwittingly gave me the opportunity to locate the matches in my pocket. Finding a loose one, I took it out and held it in my hand, striking the head with my thumb, something I'd practiced often over the years, usually just out of boredom. Now I was glad I did.

Before the vampire could reposition himself on me again, the match ignited on the second strike of my thumbnail, and I tossed it toward him. At that moment, time seemed to slow down as the lit match went sailing through the air, and the vampire's eyes widened, showing fear for the first time, knowing he wouldn't be quick enough to stop or avoid what was coming.

When the match landed against him, the flame ignited the lighter fluid soaked into his clothes, and within seconds, his shirt and jacket were in flames, along with the top half of his dark jeans. A squeal left him as he staggered back, patting at himself in a desperate attempt to douse the flames licking at his face, burning his hair. But the more he tried to put out the fire, the worse it seemed to get, spreading over his entire body as quickly as if he was made of tinder. “Ethan!” he roared in a rage.

Transfixed by what was happening the whole time, I shook myself out of my trance and scrambled to my feet so I could locate the machete which lay on the snow-covered grass nearby. In a panic, I ran over and grabbed the machete before turning to face the vampire again. He was on his feet now, completely engulfed in flames, the smell of his burning flesh filling the night air. But even as he burned, I could still see the murderous rage in his blazing eyes.

Burning or not, he intended to kill me.

But I had my own rage within me. I kept thinking about what he had said about my mother, and his hateful words ignited fires of wrath in me that burned just as intensely as the fire still consuming him.

The vampire stood for a second before roaring and coming at me, a ball of flame in the night set against the backdrop of the snow. And just like the night I killed Bentley, a calm came over me, and I knew right then that I would kill the vampire before he killed me. Unlike him, I was born for this. I realized that now.

All of that self-loathing and pain he talked about earlier, I channeled it all into a scream of rage as we ran toward each other.

Thanks to my ineffable calm and a new sense of destiny flowing through me, my timing was perfect when I swung the machete, and this time I didn't miss. The sharpened blade sliced right through his neck and decapitated him in seconds. The vampire's headless, burning body pitched onto the snowy ground, and his head landed a few feet away, melting the snow beneath it.

“For my mother,” I said to the severed head, just before it and the body it used to be attached to turned to dust. “Fuck you, you stinking bloodsucker.”

## Chapter 7

“So tell me,” Pike said after we were done clearing the second floor of the few demons that were there, for the most part allowing the Hellbastards to take care of them. “Did you mean what you said earlier?”

“About what?” I said, unhappy at the fact that the magazine in my rifle was barely half full. *Maybe we should’ve waited on backup after all*, I thought.

“About having had enough.” Pike had a lit cigarette in his mouth as we edged down the dark hallway, on guard in case any demons burst out of the empty apartments. “You really thinking of leaving?”

“Maybe. It’s been nearly a decade, though it feels like a fucking lifetime.”

“What would you do instead?”

“Dunno. Be a cop, maybe.”

Pike guffawed. “A cop? I fucking hate cops, man. Those bastards put me away. I told you about that, right?”

“Yeah, you beat the shit out of some guy.”

“Not just some guy. The motherfucker was boning my woman behind my back. He was supposed to be my friend, man.”

“You put him in a coma.”

“Yeah, well, I may have gone a bit far. Fuck it, he deserved it. You don’t mow another man’s lawn, you know what I’m saying?”

“I find it hard to believe you’ve never done it.”

Pike smiled. “You know me too well, Ethan.”

Up ahead, the Hellbastards were all over two demons in human vessels which had burst from one of the apartments. Neither Pike nor I even raised our guns, knowing the Hellbastards would take care of it. We just hung back as the demons did their job, which was to rip the enemy demons asunder. “Don’t you ever get sick of this?” I asked Pike.

“Sure,” Pike said, passing me his cigarette, which I took as the screams from the demon’s echoed down the hallway. “But what else am I gonna do? I certainly ain’t gonna be no cop. At least with Blackstar, I can do what I fucking want. Mostly anyway.”

“Knightsbridge owns you. He owns all of us.”

“Yeah, I know, and that’s precisely why you won’t leave. You know as well as I do what happens to guys who say they wanna leave. They end up on the Scrap Heap, dead in a fucking alley somewhere, or they’re given the Cocktail and have their brains so fried, they spend the rest of their miserable lives drooling in a fucking nursing home. Fuck that, man. Knightsbridge will never let you leave. You’re his top operator. He needs you.”

“There are plenty guys out there to replace me. He’ll still have you.”

“Yeah, and who am I gonna have, huh? You’re really gonna leave me to fend for myself?”

“You’re a big boy. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m hurt, man. Our friendship means that little to you?”

“Course not,” I said as I took a drag of the cigarette before passing it back to him. “But sometimes you gotta think of yourself. I can feel my soul slipping away from me the longer I’m here.”

“Fuck off, Ethan,” Pike said, shaking his head at me. “What the fuck does a guy like you need a soul for? We’re soldiers for Christ’s sake. We kill things. That’s it. You don’t need a soul for that.”

“That’s just the Spock Chip talking. Maybe I don’t wanna kill things anymore. Maybe I’ve had enough of killing.”

Pike stopped walking to stare at me. “Jesus, you really are fucked up, aren’t you? You used to be so clear about all of this. Hell, you helped whip me into shape when I first joined up. Now look at you. You’re crumbling.”

“Can’t a guy move on?” I asked, just as a demon came running down the hallway toward us, chased by Cracka and Khullu.

“Motherfucker,” Pike growled, pulling out a huge Bowie knife and then charging at the demon, roaring as he went. When the two clashed, Pike plunged his knife into the top of the demon’s skull, continuing to roar at it as he pulled the knife out and stabbed the demon multiple times all over its body before kicking it away from him for the Hellbastards to finish. When he came walking back, his face was covered in blood, which he didn’t seem to care about as he stood to light a fresh cigarette. “How many cops would get to do what I just did?”

“None, I’m guessing.”

“Precisely,” he said, taking a deep breath like he was breathing in victory. “Fucking none. God, I love this shit.”

I wish I shared his enthusiasm. It would be a lot easier if I did, but I didn’t anymore, and there was no getting away from it.

*I should’ve listened to Cal when he tried to tell me...*

## Chapter 8

I first met Cal Grimes when I woke up in his underground bunker in a world of pain.

The last thing I remembered before blacking out was stumbling upon a guy doing some kind of magic ritual in the same abandoned hotel where I killed my first vampire. I was there hunting a cat creature that had been preying on the street kids downtown. After speaking with a few of the kids, they told me they had only glimpsed the creature and weren’t even sure if what they saw was real and not some drug-induced hallucination. What they knew was that three of their fellow gang members had gone missing, with only their blood left behind.

With three missing kids, I knew something had to have taken them, so I started searching the area over a few nights, finally entering the old hotel when I happened across bloody footprints—paw prints actually—in the alley behind the hotel. I went inside equipped with my machete and a loaded sawn-off shotgun, expecting to come across the creature that had left the bloody prints. But instead,

I found a naked guy sitting inside a magic circle with strange symbols carved into the flesh of his chest and stomach. I had no idea what the guy was doing exactly, but the energy in the room was dark enough to make my blood run cold, and I also sensed an ominous presence in there with him, though I couldn't see anyone or anything else. Next thing I knew, something hit me from behind and then started beating the shit out of me. That's when I blacked out.

Upon awakening, I saw some older guy standing over me that I didn't recognize. A guy with long graying hair and hard gray eyes; a guy who looked like he'd been around the block more than a few times. "Who the fuck are you?" I said as I tried to move but nearly screamed when a sharp pain jabbed at my side.

"I'd advise you not to do that," the stranger said in a low, gravely voice. "Your ribs are broken. You've also got a concussion and a ton of bruising."

I stared at the stranger as he mixed some kind of paste inside a porcelain bowl. "What is that?"

"For your bruising. It'll help you heal quicker."

"What is this place? Where am I?"

"You're in my bunker," the stranger said as he began to rub the warm paste over the massive dark bruises on my naked torso. "I saved your ass tonight. You're welcome, by the way."

"Saved me? From what?"

"The demon that hellot was summoning when you walked in on him."

"Hellot?"

"The guy doing the ritual was enthralled to a demon. Hellots do the demon's bidding in return for power."

I nodded. "I found out about those people while I was in New York as a kid. The hunters there called them meat puppets."

"Assholes would be a more apt description." Cal paused to stare at me for a second. "You've been around, haven't you?"

"I guess. Did you kill that guy?"

"The only good hellot is a dead one," he said as he continued to apply the paste on my bruises.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because clearly someone has to before you end up dead," he said. "Judging by the weapons you had on you, I'm guessing you fancy yourself as some kind of hunter."

I tried to shrug and grunted in pain instead. "It's just what I do, that's all."

"Well, you mustn't be very good at it. Otherwise, you would have known to get the fuck out of that place as soon as you saw that hellot sitting inside the magic circle. You shoulda knew what he was up to. You ever come across a demon before?"

"One or two."

He grunted. "You gotta be careful with those things. They're powerful, and they take no prisoners."

"What about the demon that attacked me? Did you kill it?"

"Eventually. Not before it did this, though." He stopped applying the paste to lift up his T-shirt to reveal a long gash across his stomach that he'd obviously stitched up himself.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

When he'd finished applying the paste, he sat me up and taped up my ribs after much moaning and groaning from me. After that, he walked away and came back a moment later with two bottles of beer, one of which he handed to me. “Thanks,” I said, grateful for the drink to parch my dry throat. “So, what were you doing at that old hotel tonight?”

“Last night, you mean? It's morning now. You've been out of it since I found you.”

“I guess I owe you one for saving me.”

The stranger stared at me before saying, “My name's Cal. What did your mother call you?”

“Ethan.”

“Ethan,” he said. “Sounds soft.”

“You think she should've called me Frank or Jack or something?”

“It would've been better than Ethan.”

“Fuck you,” I said, a slight smile on my face as he smiled back. “So what were you doing there last night?”

“I was hunting the hellot you stumbled across. What were you doing there?”

“I was hunting a creature that killed three kids.”

“Three kids, huh? What kind of creature?”

“I don't know. Something that looks like a big cat according to the kids I spoke to.”

“Could be a werecat... or something else entirely.” He stared at me for a moment. “Maybe I'll help you hunt it when you heal up.”

I stared back at him as I felt some connection pass between us, a real human connection that I hadn't felt in a long time. Not since Charlie anyway. This man was a stranger to me, but yet here he was helping me. More than that, it felt like I had met a brother-in-arms, someone who finally understood me, who got what I was doing. “Is that what you are?” I asked him. “Are you a hunter?”

Cal sat down in a wooden chair next to the bed I was sitting on, lighting up a cigarette before offering me the pack which I refused because I didn't smoke at the time. “I don't class myself as a hunter. The real hunters out there do nothing else *but* hunt. They live for it, and most of 'em are crazy from it. I got other shit going on, but if I hear of something, I'll check it out and do what I can. Hellots I go out of my way to take down. I hate those fuckers. Demons, vampires, werewolves, and every other creature in this city, they don't get a choice in what they are. But hellots? Those fuckers chose the darkness for their own gain. You see this?” He ran his index finger along a thin scar that went right around his neck. “A hellot did this. Cut my damn throat with a knife. Admittedly, I was high as fuck at the time, but the asshole who did it was supposed to be my friend. He made a deal with a demon, and the demon told him to kill me. I'm lucky to be alive. Only reason I am is that the stupid asshole didn't cut deep enough and because I know some shit about healing wounds. I was an Army medic, but I also know stuff they don't teach in you in the Army or anywhere else. Shit that's saved me from dying countless times.”

Despite the pain I was in, I hung on his every word. Here was the man I had been searching for all this time without even knowing it. The man who would teach me things, the man who would be my friend so I wouldn't have to be alone anymore. The man who would have my back. And it seemed like he too had been searching for someone without knowing it. Someone he could teach and pass on his extensive knowledge to. Someone who could be his friend, so he didn't have to be alone anymore either.

"So tell me, kid," he said after getting me another beer. "You know what an apprenticeship is?"

I was nineteen when I met Cal, and I served as his apprentice for the next three years, living in a trailer at the scrap yard he owned. When I wasn't helping out the guys at the yard—which was often because Cal insisted I had to pay my way—Cal was teaching me about hunting, and about how to stay alive while going up against the Darkness. He taught me how to shoot correctly, how to use all sorts of weapons, and how to use the most important weapon of all, which was my mind according to him.

I'm not going to lie, half the time I hated Cal for what he put me through. He used his Army experience to design a training regime that involved getting up at dawn and training right into the night. Every day was taken up with all kinds of shooting drills, unarmed drills, and learning how to use a whole assortment of weapons. For the unarmed exercises, he would bring in other guys, big fuckers who seemed to take great pleasure in beating the shit out of me, often leaving me broken and beaten in the dirt.

Afterward, Cal insisted I treat my own injuries. I would go down to the apothecary in the bunker to make my own ointments and such from the myriad of ingredients Cal kept there. If I got the formulas wrong, that was my tough luck, and it would just take me longer to heal. Cal said I would learn everything quicker if my health was at stake, and that by learning it all by myself, it would sink in better. This meant studying tons of books and Cal's own notes so I could memorize dozens of formulas and methods of healing. When it came time to heal myself, I wasn't allowed to refer to any of the books or notes. If I didn't know how to treat a particular injury, then it was tough shit, and as far as Cal was concerned, it would give me the motivation to make sure I learned it for next time.

And there was *always* a next time. Cal would even ask the guys he brought in to give me specific injuries, just so I was forced to learn how to heal those injuries. This was especially true if I had failed to do so the previous times. It was a brutal, often sadistic regime, but it worked. It forced me to learn quickly. Admittedly, he took it too far sometimes. He had one guy stab me in the belly once just so I could practice stitching myself up and healing the internal damage with one of his many healing formulas. Another time while I was out in the yard doing shooting drills, he picked up a .38 and shot me in the shoulder without warning. "Now you know what it feels like to be shot," he said without emotion. "I hope you know what to do next."

As I said. Brutal.

It wasn't all training all the time, though. Right from the beginning of my "apprenticeship," Cal would take me out to the "field" to garner some much-

needed experience. Often, he would hunt things he wouldn't usually hunt, including werewolves, vampires, wendigos, various demons, malevolent witches and spirits, and things there wasn't even a name for—spawn of the Darkness, whose only goal was to hunt human prey. More often than not, he would let me take the lead on these hunts, insisting it was the best way to learn. Cal was all about the sink or swim philosophy, and never stepped in unless he really had to, like when I was about to get killed.

After these hunts, we would sit outside his trailer drinking beer and discussing everything I did wrong and could've done better, which according to Cal more often than not, was everything. "Your shooting stance sucked when you were firing at that werewolf," he would say. "Double up on your drills tomorrow."

"Sure, Cal," I would say, often deflated by his lack of praise.

"What the fuck way were you swinging that machete? You looked like you were trying to swat a fly. Work on it."

"Yeah, okay."

"Next time a hellot tries to strangle you, use the fucking move I showed you. Don't try to break their grip. I keep telling you these fuckers have enhanced strength."

"He'd already hit me half a dozen times before that. I was dazed—"

"Better footwork you need. I'll get some extra guys in to help you work on it."

"To beat the shit outta me, you mean?"

"Don't be a pussy."

"Sure, Cal. I'll try not to be when they're coming at me from all angles."

"Just drink your fucking beer."

I realize I'm probably making it sound like the years spent with Cal were pure hell, and they were, but there was no other place I wanted to be or anyone else I wanted to be with. For despite the hell Cal put me through, he not only made me a topnotch hunter and one tough son of a bitch, but he also played the vital role of a father figure to me. Perhaps inevitably, given my own father was murdered in front of me when I was four, I quickly considered him to be the father I never had, and my best friend into the bargain. In between the bouts of hell he gave me, we would always find something to laugh and joke about, ribbing each other mercilessly but good-naturedly. We would have deep conversations about the world and the meaning of life and philosophy and every other subject under the sun. For Cal wasn't just the toughest motherfucker I knew, he was also the smartest, and as well-read as it was possible to be thanks to the thousands of books in his library, many of which he insisted I read as well.

Before meeting Cal, all I'd really read was comic books. After meeting Cal, I was introduced to the works of many authors, some who wrote about the darkness in all of its many forms, and others who dealt in light. The latter he insisted I read especially, for according to him, it was important that I knew there was light in the world as well as dark. When you spend most of your time focusing on the darkness, it's easy to forget there's an opposite force out there more concerned with nurturing life instead of taking it away, of spreading hope rather than despair, love rather than fear.

Believing in the light is all well and good, but when you're in the shit and in the crushing grip of the Darkness, it's hard to think of much else *but* darkness. For



me, real light comes from the people you know and care about, although such people have been few for me over the years. All it takes is one, though. One person you love and who loves you back. There's real power in that. Power that can move mountains, according to the poets. Power that can make you not give up, according to me.

Those three years I spent with Cal at the scrap yard were the most intense, but also the happiest of my young life. Cal took me and molded me into a man.

Then Blackstar came calling, and everything changed.

## Chapter 9

“Just when I thought I'd seen everything...”

Pike stared slack-jawed down the hallway on the third floor of the tenement building, as did I. Before us was something we hadn't expected to see. Shit, neither of us—or anyone else I'd wager—would've expected such a thing to even *be*, least not outside the imagination of Lovecraft or in some damn horror movie.

Coming down the hall toward us like a giant grub was a mass of pink flesh that had multiple limbs and faces protruding out of it everywhere. It was like a dozen or more people had been rolled up into a giant ball of pink dough and squeezed into the confines of the hallway. It appeared that multiple demons in human bodies had combined into some fleshy mass and was now squirming its way down the hallway toward us. In the center of the flesh-ball was an enormous mouth with an array of pointed teeth all the way around its jagged lips, a mouth big enough to swallow one of us whole, after it had mangled us with those teeth first.

“What the fucking hell are we supposed to do with this monstrosity?” Pike asked, genuinely confounded by the shapeless mass before us. Even the Hellbastards weren't making much of an impact on the thing. Toast kept hitting the monster with fireballs, but it was like the blob's skin was fire retardant, and apart from a few black marks, it sustained no damage from the fireballs. Snotskull spat some acid vomit at the thing, which burned a few holes in it, but did nothing to slow it down. That sack of gelatinous flesh just kept on coming like a slow-moving train, meaning there was no way we could get past it to reach the next floor.

“I'm not even gonna try shooting that fucking thing,” I said as it slithered closer. “Try the device on it.”

“Good thinking, Batman.” Pike pulled out the sound device from beneath his body armor, turned it on and tossed it onto the floor. After the last time, we gave it a moment to warm up. But after several moments—during which the monstrosity gained further ground—nothing happened.

“Is it working?” I asked.

“How the fuck should I know?” Pike said. “It's only meant for demons.”

“Well, isn't this blobby fuck just a load of demons rolled up into one?”

“You ask like I'm a fucking expert or something. I'm like you, I just kill the fucking monsters, not study them.”

“Well, aren’t we fucking useless then.”

“I told you we shoulda waited for backup.”

I threw him a look. “You said no such fucking thing.”

“I know. Still, where the fuck are they? Backup should’ve arrived by now.”

“Fuck it. What are they gonna do anyway? By the time they get over their shock, that thing will have belly-flopped them.”

Pike laughed. “God, I’d love to see that squishy bitch land in a swimming pool full of people. Can you imagine the faces?”

“No, you sick fuck. And squishy bitch? It isn’t one of your BBW fuck buddy’s.”

“Damn it. You shouldn’t said that. Now I can’t help wondering what it would be like to fuck something like that.”

“What?” I said aghast.

“Look at it, all those mouths, that soft, squishy flesh. Do you think it has multiple pussies and assholes?”

“Wait, let me go check—”

Pike laughed, and so did I. It seemed the only sane reaction to the thing still coming toward us.

“Alright,” he said. “Enough bullshit. How we gonna kill this big momma?”

“You got any grenades?”

“No, I used them all outside. You?”

“I wouldn’t be asking you if I did. I’d’ve thrown one by now.”

A scream drew our attention back to the monster, and I looked to see that Cracka had been gripped by one of the monster’s many arms. The other Hellbastards were struggling to get him free while trying to contend with all the other hands trying to grab them, not to mention that huge fucking mouth, and the fact that the thing was still forging ahead like a damn steam roller, almost pulling one of the Hellbastards under it. “Let me go!” Cracka screamed as the arm that held him tried to maneuver him toward that pulsing mouth, which was like a giant anus with teeth.

“Hold on, Cracka!” Snotskull shouted as he jumped up and gripped the fleshy monster with his claws, holding on as he vomited acid over the arm holding Cracka until the limb dropped off and Cracka was released. In response, the faces embedded into the fleshy mass of the monster screamed their anger and rage, with one shouting, “You’re all gonna die! We will eat you and shit out your bones!”

“Nice,” Pike said. “So it does have an ass behind there. I’m not sure I wanna see it, though.”

“You’d probably try to fuck it,” I said.

“You got any lube?”

“Fuck you. I say we retreat to the second floor. I’ll radio and find out where that backup is.”

“Yeah, and tell them to bring a fucking rocket launcher.”

I could only imagine the satisfaction of firing a rocket at that thing and seeing it explode like the fucking Marshmallow Man. “Let’s go.”

I called the Hellbastards to me, all of whom came apart from Cracka. The tiny demon remained standing in front of the monster as it inched ever closer to him.

“Cracka!” I shouted. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Cracka turned and grinned at me. “Don’t worry, boss. I got this.”

“He’s got this?” Pike said. “How the fuck does he got this?”

“Cracka!” Scroteface shouted. “What the fuck?”

“Cracka got this,” he said, bouncing up and down on his tiny feet now like he was preparing for a race.

“Just how the fuck do you got this, little guy?” Pike asked.

Cracka never answered. Instead, he shocked us all by sprinting toward the monster at full speed while shouting, “Wakka Wakka motherfuckerrrrrrr!”

And then, unbelievably, he jumped right into the monster’s mouth and disappeared into that dark maw.

Everyone stood in shocked silence for a moment, including, it seemed, the monster, which had stopped moving. “Well,” Pike said. “That was unexpected.”

“What the fuck?” I said.

“Jesus fuck,” Reggie said. “He had to go and do it, didn’t he?”

“Yep,” Toast said.

“Now what?” asked Snotskull as the remaining five Hellbastards all looked at each other, seeming to reach an unspoken agreement after a second.

“I’m gonna tear that little bastard a new asshole after this,” Scroteface said as Snotskull, Khullu, Toast and Reggie all lined up behind him.

“Guys,” I said. “You can’t be serious.”

“We gotta go after him, boss,” Scroteface said.

“Jesus god,” Pike said, grinning from ear to ear. “This is just fucking awesome.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I said. “They’re all about to follow Cracka to their deaths.”

“I don’t know,” Pike said. “Just... let it play out.”

“What? I can’t—”

“Oh, too late.”

I turned to see he was right, for Scroteface was now sprinting at full speed toward the monster’s mouth, and to my amazement, jumped right inside and disappeared down its throat. The monster didn’t even try to stop him. In fact, it didn’t stop any of them, probably thinking it was getting an easy meal as the other four dived in behind Scroteface, also disappearing down that stinking gullet.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I said. “Did I just watch my Hellbastards commit fucking suicide?”

“Just wait a minute,” Pike said as if he knew something. “You don’t give the little guys enough credit.”

“I don’t? You’re the one who fucking hates them—”

“Oh, wait, look.”

“What?”

I turned to look at the monster again, which appeared to be moving in an odd way now as if it had a bad case of indigestion.

Then an awful howling noise left its mouth as if it was in great pain. The faces embedded in its flesh twisted up in agony also, as if something bad was happening underneath all that gelatinous flesh.

And something bad *was* happening.

The Hellbastards were happening.

First, a tiny green-skinned hand burst out of the monster near its center where you’d imagine its belly to be. After the hand, a shape pressed out, distending the

monster's pink skin, and then a face burst out in a spray of blood. Cracka's face. And he shook his tiny fist and shouted, "Wakka Wakka!"

"Fuck me," Pike said with glee all over his face. "That little guy is fucking insane. He's my new hero, seriously."

Once Cracka burst free from his fleshy prison, the monster howled continuously and squirmed like a giant slug that had just been doused with salt. Soon, holes began to open up all over the monster's lower half and fluid spilled out, steaming rising from it, which I guessed was Snotskull's acid vomit. Then smoke billowed from the holes, along with licks of fire, which had to be Toast doing his thing somehow.

Things got crazy after that. All the Hellbastards went to town on the monster, tearing it apart from the inside, the monster's guts sloshing out onto the hallway floor in a river of red, spilling the Hellbastards out with it. The monster lost so much of its innards that it eventually deflated like a giant balloon. Soon, all that was left was a great mass of skin and a pile of heads and limbs. The Hellbastards made short work of the heads by stamping them into mush before collapsing onto the floor in exhaustion.

"Fuck yeah!" Pike stood clapping and whistling like he'd just watched the greatest show on Earth. I could only shake my head in astonishment as he then turned to me and said, "And you want to leave all *this*?"

## Chapter 10

A Blackstar recruiter approached me initially. A guy about Cal's age dressed in a dark suit, looking like some government type, which is what I thought he was until he explained he represented a private company who was interested in recruiting "capable guys" like me. When I asked him how he could possibly know what I was capable of, he replied that he knew all about me, which immediately made me uncomfortable, not to mention suspicious as hell. Cal had already warned me that the government didn't take kindly to guys like us running around killing people, even if those "people" weren't really people half the time. Plus, the hellots had infiltrated the government to the highest levels and used their power and influence to try to stamp out hunters and people like Cal and me as much as they could.

So naturally, I was immediately wary of a man in a suit approaching me and saying he knew everything about me, which as it turned out, he damn near did. He had a folder full of information on me dating back to when I was still a kid living with my mother. It scared me at the time how much this guy had on me, and despite what he said, I was convinced he was a Fed, and that I would soon end up imprisoned at some black site or locked up in an asylum for the rest of my life. I ended up telling the guy to fuck off and leave me alone. He didn't seem offended by my response, and he even gave me a business card before he left, saying to call him when I was ready to "change my life and do some good in the world."

When I showed Cal the business card, and he saw the name Blackstar, he sighed and shook his head. “I was worried this might happen,” he said. “Those fuckers approached me in the past too. I hope you’re not thinking of joining them.”

When I asked about the Company, Cal explained that Blackstar was a private corporation that officially (but secretly) did what Cal and I did, which is hunt monsters, but that wasn’t their *raison d’être*. The main purpose of the Company was to profit off of the MURKs they hunted in every way that they could, experimenting on the MURKs themselves to develop new technology of all kinds and to track down and steal the many powerful artifacts that existed within the Shadow World. Like every corporation, Cal said, Blackstar existed to make a profit, not to make the world a better place as they claimed.

Despite hearing all of this, I was still intrigued. Truth be told, I was looking to do something more with my life at the time. As much as I appreciated everything Cal had done for me, the idea of spending the rest of my life with him at the scrap yard, putting my life on the line for little to no gain or even recognition, wasn’t very appealing and was less so as time went on. Unlike Cal, I was young, and I wanted something more. I wanted to prove myself in a bigger arena, and Blackstar seemed to offer that exact opportunity.

I thought on it for days, and then finally told Cal that I was going to take Blackstar up on their offer. It felt like I was betraying him somehow, but Cal being Cal, he said it was my life, and I could do what I wanted with it. “You know where to find me,” he added, walking away.

The Blackstar training facility was located outside the city on an ex-military base. The Company had a corporate building in the city, but that was mostly for management and the higher-ups. They had real estate everywhere, in fact, but all recruits, including myself, were processed at the facility just outside Fairview.

On my first day at the facility, I was herded into a large auditorium with everyone else, where we were given the Welcome Speech by a grizzled Commander in combat fatigues.

“Okay,” the Commander barked like he’d given the speech countless times before, his tone already making it clear that he didn’t give a shit about us. “You’re here because for whatever reason, your eyes have been opened to the true reality of this world, and the darkness that lies behind it. There are fucking monsters out there, and you damn well know it.

“You’re also good. That’s a given. You’re good at a lot of things, or you wouldn’t be here. You’re killers and healers, hunters and hiders, builders and destroyers. You are good because there is no alternative. From now on, you will live in a place where there is nothing and no one who is not, at the very least, good.

“You’re good, or you would have been dead a long time ago. You’re good, or you would right now be fish food in the bottom of the Great Lake with a bullet in the back of your head, put there by my operatives, on my orders, because I wanted it to happen. Lots of others who would have liked to be here aren’t because they weren’t good enough. And they’re dead now.

“So let’s just get past that. Let’s forget that you’re good, because it doesn’t matter. You might as well just say you’re breathing, because it has the same amount of importance. Being good only gets you here. You are going to have to get

much better than good. It doesn't matter how "good" a firefighter you are, once you've been sent to hell.

"I see some of you out there. Cocky. Rolling your eyes like you've heard it all before. You're all such badasses, aren't you? There's nothing you can't handle. Well, cherish that confidence, troops. Hold on to it like the gunwale of the ferryman's boat. You will need it. Starting tomorrow, everything you've learned will be wrong.

"I'm not going to sugar-coat it. There's no way to pretty it up. This is hell. You're going to be taught and trained, humiliated and beaten to a broken, bloody mess. You will feast and you will starve. We will test the limits of your body, exceed your endurance, teach you the purest pleasures and the severest pain. We will put an unbearable strain on your mind and force you to question your motives, your faith and your own will to live. You will face death, and some of you will die.

"And if you survive, you will wake up late on certain nights, sweating and cold, wondering whether it was worth it.

"But it is.

"When you leave here, you will be among the most competent, all-around bad motherfuckers on the planet. You will be better than seven billion other people, the whole remainder of humanity. No one you meet, for the rest of your life, will be able to outdo you in anything, unless it's another one of your own. You will kick ass and take names. In effect, you will have complete freedom and unlimited resources to do whatever it takes to get your job done. You will be gods among men.

"Which isn't to say we won't own you. We will. Forever. But with that ownership comes a great boon. You will exist outside of society. You'll walk between the raindrops. Nothing will touch you except for us. And even that won't matter to you. By then, you will have been incorporated. *You will be us.*

"So you live in hell for three years; you do your time, and when you get out, you'll be handed a life that's richer and more exciting than anything you can imagine. You will do things that everyone knows are impossible. You'll experience things that live only in the minds of lunatics and visionaries, things you thought were made up to scare children. Trust me; it's a whole 'nother level. It's the bargain of a lifetime.

"And if you don't like the bargain, you can have what's behind Door No. 2. A bullet.

"Dismissed."

The Commander was right. The training was hell. But luckily for me, I'd already been to hell and back with Cal. Although I have to say, the Blackstar training was a special kind of hell, and even I wasn't prepared for some of the stuff they threw at us.

It was truly an excruciating time, both mentally and physically. It sits like a black stain on the wall in the dungeon of my memory, something I wish I could block out, but I never will.

On the other hand, not a single Blackstar operative isn't proud of having graduated from that special hell. We knew that the time in hell was necessary. We would've been dead meat out there in the field if we hadn't been put through

Blackstar's brutality. The fact that I can come upon a demon gnawing the limbs off a little girl and not throw up, wet myself or break down crying is testimony to the success of my training (and Cal's, of course). When we saw the little glimpses of hell that punctuated our missions, we could always say, "This isn't so bad. I've been through worse."

Only the elite made it into the Blackstar training facility, and those who made it out...we were something else, something beyond that, something almost godlike. More importantly for Blackstar, we were Company men.

Inside and out, we belonged to Blackstar.

The training I and the other recruits went through lasted three super intense years. Of the two hundred recruits that started training, only eighty of us finished. The rest were "placed out" and were never seen again.

For me, the training resembled the training I received from Cal in some ways, but times ten in terms of intensity, brutality and creativity. Our bodies were pushed to their absolute limits and beyond, to the point where we ended up doing things we never thought fucking anyone could do, never mind little old us. Completing triathlons and marathons in record time, free-climbing to ridiculous heights on dangerous mountain ranges, fighting multiple opponents constantly for hours on end, surviving extreme temperatures during exposure drills, having to do logic puzzles on a computer while strapped to a chair as a hypodermic needle moved ever closer to your neck if you got a wrong answer, and you had no idea what was in the syringe (turned out to be a sedative). And all of this was in the first year. It was tough beyond words and designed to weed out the quitters and weaker recruits.

After that, the remaining years were spent teaching us skills and then refining those skills, everything from shooting skills, to "book-learning" (we were required to master a diverse array of subjects), to espionage and social manipulation. Throughout all of this, recruits were "ranked" though no one knew what for. We just knew we were all in competition against one another, which only spurred us on more to push ourselves. It was only after training had finished were we informed that the rankings were to help the Commanders divide us up into different departments.

It came as no great surprise to me or anyone else that I got selected for the Combat Department. I had excelled in my combat training—in no small part thanks to Cal's "pre-training"—and so that's where I was placed. The other departments were Intelligence (later incorporating PSYOP), Science, Security and Technology.

Although it is spoken of as a centralized entity, in actuality, Blackstar is a collection of disparate departments, with their own facilities and headquarters. They work together to fight a common enemy, but they also pursue and promote their own secret agendas. To belong to a department is to swear allegiance to a certain way of thinking and, more importantly, a specific method of achieving the Company's goals.

The power struggle among the department heads is what keeps each department sharp. The leaders want to prove that their operatives are the best-trained and most competent. The department with the best operatives is likely to

be present in more missions and thus have more influence on the direction of the campaigns. More influence means more support from Blackstar. While it may seem petty and political, the struggles actually serve Blackstars' purpose by keeping operatives as competent and efficient as possible. The machine doesn't run unless the gears press against each other.

The Combat Department had the prestige of being the first department formed by Blackstar, along with Intelligence. Wendell Knightsbridge knew if he was to fight a secret war, he would need troops on the ground, and also minds and muscle to get behind his more hidden agendas. Not that we grunts knew much about those. We just went where we were told to go, which as it turned out was all over the damn world. Wherever we were needed basically.

The department was run initially by a man named Dalton McKenna. Dalton was the perfect leader for the department: physically intimidating, tactically brilliant and as wild as a New Orleans brothel. He was a walking contradiction. He was sweet yet fierce; he loved to kill, but he revered life; he was earnestly compassionate, as strict as a nun and as kind as a grandfather. He was an intense, gracious man, and I was always awed in his presence. Dalton was old, though, and died at the age of eighty-six, even though he looked twenty years younger than that. When he died, I got the shock of my life when it was decided I should take over as the department head. Apparently, Dalton had a liking for me, and before he died, he insisted that I take over from him. I'd already proved myself on numerous missions by this point, and I got on well with most of the men, though that didn't mean I wanted the job. I preferred to follow orders, not give them, but Knightsbridge didn't give me much choice in the matter. It meant I had to cut back on missions as I attended inter-departmental meetings and all that boring shit, but I delegated as much as I could and stayed out of the politics side of things, which meant I was still able to head up most of the missions and do what I did best.

The Combat Department has only one facility, based in the Warehouse District in nearby Sherwood. The building is a four-story structure that looks like any other warehouse on the docks, painted with a huge fish emblem and the words STEELHEAD DISTRIBUTION. The front company (which actually does most of its business from other locations) is generally ignored by the industry and the community.

Inside the building, beneath an unremarkable warehouse facade, is a combat op's mecca—fighting arenas, shooting ranges, gun courses and even a huge, underground explosives-testing lab. The place has twelve stories beneath the surface, and includes a submarine-docking station for the Company's pair of stolen Soviet nuclear subs.

As well as hard tech, all combat operatives were bestowed with tribal tattoos that covered their right arm, shoulder and part of their back, though these tattoos, although badass, were not for show. The ink used was magically endowed, and the tattoo served as an early warning system of sorts. Whenever a MURK was in an operative's nearby vicinity, the tattoo would alert the operative of the MURK's presence by moving underneath the operative's skin and creating a burning sensation on the back of the neck. So even if a MURK was hiding beneath human form—or hiding anywhere nearby—an operative would know. As well as this early



warning system, the tattoo ink could also be used to scramble the brain of anyone the operative chose to. All an operative had to do was raise their right palm after the ink had moved by itself down the arm to show a person the swirling pattern there, which would immediately make the person susceptible to brainwashing. Handy when you don't want to leave any witnesses behind at a scene. Blackstar was all about secrecy, so they saw the tattoos as essential for every operative. A handy side-effect of the tattoos was that they made you immune to most low-level magic attacks, which was useful when hunting witches, warlocks and other Spreaks.

Genetic enhancements were also available to operatives if they wanted them. Some enhancements were mandatory, like the Combat Offense Booster, which gave use faster reaction times. I also had steel caps fitted over my knuckles, and I had bone material from a werewolf grafted onto my radius and ulna, making both my forearms as hard as steel and great for blocking incoming attacks or for smashing bones. I also had the tendons in my legs enhanced with genetic material taken from the tendons of an undisclosed monster, allowing me to run as fast as any hellhound and kick as hard as a mule. There were many other enhancements available, but I chose not to go down that road too much. Some operatives ended up resembling fucking cyborgs they were augmented so much. Genetic engineering was another option, but I trusted that even less. I'd seen it go wrong too many times to let the Science guys anywhere near me.

The final weapon—or weapons—we had at our disposal was the Hellbastards. Every squad had their own Hellbastards, and as a squad leader, it was up to me to control and direct my own team of delinquent demons. According to Blackstar, when it came to fighting monsters, sometimes you had to use unconventional weaponry, which the Hellbastards definitely were. They also made good cannon fodder as they could be summoned in their dozens if need be.

I was made a team leader right from the off because of how well I'd ranked in training, so it wasn't long before I had to form my own squad of Hellbastards. At the time, I was ushered into a large room in the facility, accompanied by a Spreak who was there to conduct a summoning ritual. I wasn't happy at the time about having to work with demons of all things, but Command insisted they were essential so I had to go along with it, as I had to go along with everything Blackstar demanded of me.

The Spreak summoned six small demons into a magic circle before leaving me alone with them in the room, explaining before he left that it was up to me get the demons' allegiance, however long that took. When I asked the Spreak how I would know when I had the demons' allegiance, he just smiled and walked away.

Hellbastards were summoned straight from Hell. They were, as the name suggests, the bastard spawn of other demons. Unwanted, they were left to fend for themselves in the lower reaches of Hell in something that apparently resembled a giant creche for bastard and aborted demons. Their growth was often stunted through lack of sustenance, and if they learned to survive at all, they remained diminutive in stature, eking out an existence in the bowels of Hell well away from the bigger demons, who would kill and often eat the Hellbastards if they were near. So the Hellbastards formed their own community of sorts, claiming a little part of Hell as their own, scavenging to survive, eating each other if they had to.

At some point, someone at Blackstar had gotten the idea of using these wild little demons as weapons. The sheer hell of the Hellbastards' existence was bad enough that they were only too happy to serve us humans here on Earth. But as they were mere children, they still had to be forced into obedience first. This was helped along by the Spreak casting a spell over the Hellbastards that would endow them with rudimentary language skills, allowing them to speak and understand English, to an extent anyway.

According to the Spreak, I had to name all the Hellbastards, as well as appoint one of them team leader. Once I was sure of their loyalty, I could break the magic circle and allow the demons out. When I had their obedience, the Hellbastards would then be allowed to leave the room to go to their own special quarters.

The six Hellbastards stood eying me warily as I stared at them, unable to believe I had to work with these fucking cretins. I hated demons—they were the enemy after all—and no matter how small in stature they were, or how borderline cutesy some of them were, I resented the little bastards right off the bat.

"Alright," I barked, staring at them. "You were summoned here to do a job and to do whatever I tell you to do. If you have a problem with that, then it's a simple matter to send you right back to Hell again, and from what I hear, it really is fucking hell there, for you cretins especially. Here, no one's gonna try to eat you or fuck you or whatever it is the other bigger demons do to you. Here, you'll work as part of a team to fight other monsters and to protect the people here. Compared to Hell, you'll live like fucking kings. So what do you say? Do I have your loyalty?"

The Hellbastards stared at me for a long moment, their large, bulging eyes full of suspicion, before the littlest one said, "Fuck you, asshole!" and then they all burst out laughing, rolling around the floor in fits of hilarity.

I nodded, unamused. "Good to see you getting creative with your new English skills."

"Cuntface!" one of them shouted.

"Bunghole!"

"Wank fucking dick slut fuck!"

"DICKSUCKINGCUMGUZZLINTHUNDERHO!"

They went on like this for I don't know how long until they finally ran out of insults. "Are you quite finished?" I asked them, refusing to get mad at their antics, which I half-expected anyway.

"We trying to think of more," the biggest one said.

"Well, while you're thinking of creative ways to insult me, know this." I took a step closer to them. "I can send you right back to Hell anytime I want. All it takes is a few words and you're all gone again. So it's in your best inter—"

"Fuck off," the one with dreadlocks said. "You don't own us."

"Yeah, bitch," the little one squeaked. "Fuck off!"

I started to say the words the Spreak had given me, and the floor beneath the Hellbastards began to open up into a Hell Hole, causing them all to scream in fear. "Stop!" the biggest said.

"Why should I?" I said. "You insolent little shits obviously want to go back to where you came from, otherwise you wouldn't be giving me shit like you are."

"Wait!" the one with blackened skin said. "We do as you say!"

"We be your bitch, bossman!" the ugliest one screamed. "Don't send us back!"

“I’m sorry. What was that?” I said, cocking my head like I didn’t hear them.

“We do as you say!”

“Who’s the boss?” I asked them.

“You are!” they all replied.

“Who?” I asked again.

“You the boss... boss!”

“That’s right,” I said. “And don’t fucking forget it. Now...” I stood staring at their ugly mugs. “Let’s give you little bastards names...”

As for the missions, there’s not really much to say about them. Most missions fell into six basic categories: capture, clean-up, containment, cover-up, discovery and reconnaissance. Many missions were joint ops with other departments. Nearly all missions required the presence of at least a few grunts because you never knew when force would be required. In the beginning, I reveled in these missions, thinking I was playing no small part in keeping the world safe from all the MURKs out there with evil agendas. But after a while, it became apparent that things weren’t quite so cut and dried. Often, instead of killing these MURKs, deals were done instead. So if a demon or a vampire had killed a load of innocent people or committed some other heinous crime, if they had intelligence to trade for their life, then they would get a pass. I wouldn’t have minded so much if the intelligence they gave helped save lives, but often said intelligence only helped the Company expand its power and increase its profit margin from the many clandestine enterprises it had going, most of which were highly illegal.

I’m not naïve. I know these situations are often murky and that everything is a shade of gray, but when the needs of the Company are put above the lives of people, that’s when I draw the line.

And now I find myself in a position where I want to leave, but I know the boss won’t let me, not unless I can think of a way to leverage my way out without getting the Cocktail for my troubles. I’m a Company asset, you see, and the Company doesn’t like to lose its assets for any reason.

Which is why I gotta be smart about this, and just maybe, I’ll get to walk away with my mind and body still intact, unlike every other employee who tried to leave before me.

## Chapter 11

We made it to the top floor, but something wasn’t right. It was too quiet for a start, and we weren’t meeting any resistance.

“I thought we’d have our hands full up here,” Pike said.

“So did I,” I said as the Hellbastards walked either side of me. “I don’t like it.”

“Maybe we killed all those fuckers already. The target’s probably hiding up here somewhere.”

The “target” was a high-level demon who had been branded as a “terrorist” by the Company, which made me laugh because I considered all demons to be terrorists. It’s what they do after all—terrorize people. But this particular demon,

which Intelligence called Molloch, had been going all out for months, attacking mostly Blackstar facilities, but also soft targets in major cities like churches and even a school, killing dozens of innocents. Blackstar covered up all these attacks as they always do, and the government were happy to go along with the Middle Eastern terrorist narrative that the Company fed them, which in turn fed into the government's own pack of lies that they told the people.

Intelligence was vague about the reason for all these attacks, claiming that Molloch was "waging war against mankind," which was fueled by his hatred of humanity, who he wanted to terrorize into submission so he could enslave everyone on Earth. I burst out laughing at the briefing when Intelligence had said this, earning myself some stern looks from the others in the room, including Knightsbridge. When he asked if I had a problem, I just shook my head and said no. The meeting then continued, and the mission we're currently on was planned out.

Molloch was, of course, running around in a human vessel. That of a man named Jack Taylor, ironically an ex-priest and former Irish Republican terrorist into the bargain. Molloch was, therefore, a man in his fifties who we had been shown a picture of so we knew who to go after. Half his face was covered in scar tissue from a bombing gone wrong years ago, so he shouldn't be hard to recognize.

I turned to Pike to suggest we search each of the apartments along the hallway, but when I turned around, Pike was nowhere to be seen, and neither were the Hellbastards. "What the fuck?" I said, looking up and down the hallway. "Pike? Where are you?"

There was no answer from Pike, and only an eerie silence existed in the gloomy hallway.

*Scroteface. Report. Where are you?*

Despite my telepathic attempt to get through, I got no reply from the Hellbastard.

By the time I had tried the radio and got only static from it, I knew something was up.

Then I heard a voice coming from up the hallway, and when I turned and looked, I saw a figure standing in the semi-darkness, small in stature, only a boy I realized when he spoke.

"Hello, Ethan," the boy said, and my jaw dropped because I recognized the voice immediately.

"It can't be," I whispered. "You're dead..."

"Thanks to you, Ethan." It was Charlie, my best friend from the boys' home, whom Bentley had killed. "Why did you let him kill me, Ethan? Why?"

I knew this wasn't real. I knew it all had to be in my head, or that the demon Molloch was using his power to play some psychological trick on me. Whatever the case, it still felt real, and all the guilt I felt over Charlie's death came flooding back at that moment. Despite myself, I answered as if it were really him standing there. "I'm sorry, Charlie," I said, walking toward him a little. "I didn't know you'd be next. It could just as easily have been me—"

"But it wasn't, was it, Ethan?" Charlie said, walking toward me now. As he got closer, I saw he resembled a walking corpse, his skin a grayish color, his

emaciated body covered in gashes and bruises, one arm grotesquely dangling like his shoulder had been pulled out. “Do you know what they did to me, Ethan?”

I shook my head as I wondered how I was going to escape from this mental prison that I was in. “If I could’ve saved you, Charlie—”

“But you didn’t!”

“I killed Bentley. I avenged your death, made it so he couldn’t hurt anyone else ever again.”

“Good for you, Ethan,” Charlie said with a vehemence I had never heard in his voice until now. “Not much good if I’m already fucking dead.”

“I’m not talking to you anymore,” I said. “You’re not real.”

“But I *am* real, Ethan,” Charlie said, getting uncomfortably close to me now. “Do you want me to show you how real I am?”

“I know what you’re doing, Molloch!” I shouted. “This bullshit won’t stop me from coming for you. It’s over. Give it up and save us all the trouble.”

“It’s only over for you, Ethan!” Charlie suddenly screamed before launching himself at me, clinging onto me like a demonic monkey and sinking his sharp teeth into my neck as I staggered back trying to keep my balance. Grabbing Charlie’s hair, I forced his head back until he stopped biting me, and then he spat my blood in my face, blinding me for a second before I felt his thumbs press into my eye sockets, his sharp nails lacerating my eyelids, causing me to cry out as I staggered back again, this time failing to keep my balance as I tripped on something and toppled back onto the floor.

Despite his small size, Charlie—or whoever the fuck it was on top of me—was freakishly strong, and I couldn’t push the little bastard off me. Still blinded, I groped for his head and then his chin, pulling his head in toward me so I could get enough leverage to twist sharply, hearing his neck break as I did. When his body went limp, I pushed him off me, sitting for a moment as I blinked rapidly and rubbed at my stinging eyes. When my vision finally came back, it was blurred but seemed to be clearing slowly.

Getting quickly back to my feet, I stared down at the lifeless form on the floor, sickened that I should have to look upon this twisted representation of someone who was once so dear to me. “I’m sorry, Charlie,” I said, swallowing back my sadness as I addressed Molloch, wherever he was. “Is that the best you got, Molloch? You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Ethan?”

I turned to see Pike coming up the hallway toward me, along with the Hellbastards. “Pike. You okay?”

“Fine,” he said. “Although I had something of a tangle with an old foe. What the fuck’s going on?”

“We were back in Hell, boss,” Scroteface said.

“It sucked,” Cracka said.

“I’m sure it did,” I said. “This is Molloch fucking with us.”

“I figured as much,” Pike said. “He must be hiding around here somewhere. We’re coming for you, fucker!”

“No need for name-calling,” a voice said, and then a figure emerged from one of the apartments at the end of the hallway. “I’m here.”

Pike and I both pointed our rifles at the guy. “Don’t fucking move!” I said.

Molloch shook his head as he half-heartedly raised his hands. “Your guns won’t hurt me, you know. Besides, I only want to talk. I thought you should know what’s really going on here.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked, edging closer to him, my rifle still pointed at him despite what he said.

“Don’t listen to him, Ethan,” Pike said. “He’s trying to play us.”

“I think you’ll find *you* are the ones being played,” Molloch said.

“What?” I said frowning.

“Come inside,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

“Don’t listen to him, Ethan,” Pike said. “He’s a fucking demon. You can’t trust him. Let’s just wait for PSYOP to come and bound him. He isn’t going anywhere anyway. I’m calling for the Spreaks right now.”

Pike had a point. Molloch was a demon and couldn’t be trusted, but there was something in his voice that rang true. He said we were being played, and given what I knew about the company we worked for, I couldn’t help but want to hear what he had to say. “Call it in,” I told Pike, just before I walked down the hallway toward Molloch.

“Ethan!” Pike shouted when he noticed me walk away. “What the fuck?”

“It’s fine,” I said before addressing the Hellbastards. “Come on, boys. If this asshole tries anything, rip him apart.”

“You got it, boss,” Scroteface said as he and the others came down the hallway after me.

When I reached Molloch, I pointed my rifle at his head. “What’s going on?” I asked him. “After everything you’ve done—the bombings, the constant battling us—you expect me to believe you’re just going to stand down and come quietly?”

Molloch stared at me for a moment with eyes that started out blue before turning an amber color. “I can assure you that I never wanted any of this violence to happen.”

“Yeah? A trail of dead bodies says otherwise.”

“You’ve been misled, Commander Drake, by those above you. If you put aside your hostility for a moment, I’ll be happy to explain how.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” His scarred face was serious as he stared at me. “I can see in your eyes that you’re inclined to believe me. Deep down, you know the truth about your organization. Perhaps you’ve always known.”

“And what truth is that?”

“That they are liars and thieves, profiting off of things they shouldn’t.”

“Like you demons, you mean? Profiting off of human misery?”

“I am not a demon,” he said. “I am a divine creation of God. More than that, I am a servant of God. That’s why I’m here, to serve, not to cause mayhem.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

“Ethan,” Pike called from down the hallway. “Spreaks are on their way in.”

“We should hurry before your magicians arrive,” Molloch said. “I don’t have much time to show you.”

“Show me what?”

Molloch smiled and then walked inside the apartment. I followed him in to find that all the internal walls had been taken down to make one large space, which

was taken up by some sort of massive machine, in the center of which was something like a glass ball containing glowing blue energy. One look at the machine told me that no human had built it. Its structure seemed incredibly complex, with wires and pipes of various thicknesses running over each other everywhere to form a complicated tapestry of alien engineering.

“What the hell is that thing?” I asked, in awe despite myself. Even the Hellbastards were captivated by the massive machine as they stood staring at it.

“That is the God Machine,” Molloch said. “It is designed to hold God Energy, the stuff that each of you humans carries within you. The very substance that God Himself used to create the universe.”

“You’ve been siphoning this energy from people?”

“Yes,” he said. “For the greater good, I might add. My goal on arriving here in this world has always been to restore it to what it once was and to make it glorious again. It is my way of redeeming myself. My way of making up for rebelling against my creator. I thought if I could restore His greatest creation, then perhaps I would earn His forgiveness.”

I stared at him for a moment before looking back at the machine, which was humming softly. “Is this thing dangerous?”

“Anything is dangerous in the wrong hands. That is why I’m going to destroy it before your organization gets a hold of it.”

“I can’t let you do that,” I said.

“Oh, really? Why not?”

I stared at him, unable to give him an answer. The Company man in me wanted to tell him that the machine belonged to Blackstar now, and that’s all there was to it, but I wasn’t thinking like a Company man anymore. I was thinking for myself for a change, and my conscience was telling me that such a powerful machine shouldn’t end up in the hands of a company like Blackstar.

“Why didn’t you destroy it before now if you knew we were coming?” I asked him.

“I thought I could prevail against you,” he said. “Clearly, I underestimated your resolve and your seemingly bottomless resources.” He walked to the machine and ran his hand over the glass ball filled with God Energy. “There is almost enough energy in here to reshape this world. I thought I could finish gathering it before you caught up with me. Such a shame that it will all be for nothing.”

“You don’t have time to destroy anything,” I told him. “The magicians are coming to contain you.”

“I have already started the process. No one can stop it now.”

“Is that thing gonna blow up or something?” I asked, worried now.

Molloch merely smiled just as the sound of many footsteps echoed from down the hallway. The Spreaks had arrived. “You should know,” Molloch said. “I had nothing to do with the bombing of that school or any of the other civilian targets. Your boss orchestrated those attacks to make me look like a terrorist. I, in turn, orchestrated the attacks against the Blackstar facilities to fight back in some way, for all the good it did me. Knightsbridge knows about the machine. This is why he painted me as a terrorist in the first place and sent you after me. He doesn’t want me; he wants the God Machine.”

“You’re saying Knightsbridge killed all those innocent people? *Children?*”

“Yes. Your boss is a bad man, Commander. You should stop being his puppet.”

The Spreaks were almost at the apartment now, their footsteps getting closer. Still standing by the machine, Molloch hovered his hand over some kind of control panel and uttered a few words in a language I didn't understand. The machine then responded by increasing the intensity of its humming and throwing out a muted red light from its innards.

“What did you just do?” I asked Molloch.

“I saved the world from Wendell Knightsbridge, that's what. Goodbye, Commander Drake.”

Before I could stop him, Molloch pulled a dagger from out of his coat and stabbed himself under the chin with it, falling dead a second later. And while I was trying to work out how he had killed himself so effectively, the PSYOP team stormed into the room and surrounded the God Machine as if they knew it had been there the whole time. Not one of the six Spreaks even glanced at Molloch lying dead on the floor. Their full attention was on the machine.

“Time to leave, Drake,” their leader, Richard Solomon, said. Solomon was a tall, thin man dressed in a black suit like the rest of his team. He used to work in Intelligence before he took over PSYOP. The man gave me the creeps like every other Spreak I knew.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I asked him.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” he said. “Your job is done. You can go now.”

As he spoke, the other Spreaks held their hands in front of the machine and closed their eyes as they began to mumble in what sounded like the same language Molloch had used, and it soon became clear that they were trying to save the machine before it destroyed itself.

“Molloch was right,” I said almost to myself.

“About what?” Solomon asked.

I shook my head at him. “Nothing.”

“Leave,” he said. “I won't ask again.”

Turning, I left the room, the Hellbastards following after me. The hallway was empty as I walked down it, but I could hear the sound of multiple footsteps heading up the stairs. Soon, the place would be swarming with Blackstar techs, here to cart away the God Machine no doubt, the whole point of this stinking war in the first place it now seemed like.

“Where we going, boss?” Scroteface asked as we headed toward the stairs. “Back to base?”

“No, Scroteface,” I said. “I don't think we'll be going back there.”

“Then where, boss?” said Cracka. “Movies? I really wanna go movies. You say you always take us but don't.”

“I'm not sure we'll be going there either,” I said, suddenly realizing something. “I'm not sure you guys will be going anywhere, come to think of it.”

“What you mean, boss?” Scroteface asked.

Stopping, I sighed as I looked down at the six of them. Despite their antics, I had grown fond of the little bastards and hated having to break the bad news to them. “I'm sorry, boys, but we're gonna have to part company. For the time being at least.”



They all stared up at me with frowns on their faces, wondering what I was talking about. “What you mean, boss?” Cracka asked. “Where you going?”

“Away, Cracka,” I said. “Which means you guys...” I trailed off, hoping they wouldn’t make me say it.

“Oh,” Reggie said, seeming to understand.

“Shit,” Snotskull said.

“It’ll probably just be temporary,” I said, knowing that it wouldn’t be. Once I left the Company, I would have no further use for the Hellbastards. And if I got a bullet or the Cocktail instead, well then...

“You can’t do this, boss,” Scroteface said. “You can’t send us back there. We... we need you.”

*Goddammit. Why’d they have to make it so hard?*

“What he talking about?” Cracka asked Khullu. “Where we going?”

No one answered.

“Look,” I said. “Let’s go back to base for one last drink, eh?”

They all looked at me despondently and nodded, apart from Cracka, who still seemed confused, as he didn’t understand yet where he would soon be going to. Or rather, going back to.

But he would.

They all would.

## Chapter 12

Two days later, I was sitting in the waiting room outside the office of the boss, Wendell Knightsbridge. For the first time in what seemed like months, I wasn’t wearing military fatigues. Sitting in these clinical surroundings, with the secretary eyeing me occasionally from her desk, I felt tense, and like I’d forgotten how to fit into normal society, the blonde secretary not helping matters by staring at me like I was some other species other than human. I’d’ve probably felt more at ease if a raging werewolf had burst in and proceeded to rip the secretary apart. At least then I’d know where I stand, which right now I didn’t. I was about to walk into the boss’s office to tell him I was leaving the Company for good, which was almost akin to a prisoner walking into the warden’s office and telling the warden he’d be leaving now and won’t be coming back. It just wasn’t something that was done, but here I was, about to do it.

The secretary’s phone rang, and she picked it up straight away before putting it down again just as quickly. “Mr. Knightsbridge will see you now,” she said, her face unreadable, probably because she was an operative underneath that expensive suit she wore. Under her desk, she kept a loaded automatic pistol. She was part of the boss’s personal security team and would fill me full of holes without a second thought if she considered me a threat. Luckily for me, I wasn’t.

I gave the secretary a half-smile as I walked by, but she’d already turned back to her computer screen by then like I didn’t warrant any further attention from her, which only made me feel more anxious as I approached the double doors of the boss’s office. The oak doors were inscribed with warding glyphs, a protective

measure to ensure no demons could enter his private office uninvited. Luckily for me, I wasn't a demon, and after pausing for a second to compose myself, I opened the door and walked inside.

It had been some years since I was last in the boss's private office since we usually met in boardrooms during inter-departmental meetings. The office, however, hadn't changed any since I was last in it. It was still a huge space, and like the last time I was in it, I was struck by how clinical it felt inside. Every surface was spotless and gleaming, the white walls and ceiling free from even a single mark as if they had just been painted. Massive plate-glass windows at the back and left side of the office allowed a copious amount of light to spill in, while also affording an unmatched view of the sprawling city below. Every time I'd come here, I always ended up picturing Knightsbridge standing by one of the huge windows, his hands behind his back as he looked out over the city like a man who owned every square inch of it. That's how Knightsbridge always came across to me, like the man who owned the world, which in a way, he did. It was just most people didn't know it, and I always got the impression that that's how Knightsbridge liked it. He was an intensely private man, and very little was known about him, which was ironic because he knew everything there was to know about everyone else, or at least, the people he dealt with. Including me.

On the right wall of the office was a massive black and white portrait of Harry Houdini. Knightsbridge made no secret of the fact that the fabled magician and escapologist was his all-time hero. In fact, the dead magician was the only person I ever heard Knightsbridge speak highly of. Floor-standing glass display cases were lined up underneath the portrait, containing artifacts that once belonged to Houdini. Knightsbridge showed me once, explaining what they all were as I tried to look interested. The biggest case held a straitjacket used by Houdini in one of his most famous tricks, the Chinese Water Torture Cell a.k.a. the "Houdini Upside Down" trick. Knightsbridge had reportedly paid a small fortune for the item at Christies when it went up for auction. Other display cases held a pair of old handcuffs used by Houdini many times, and a Kingbreaker key and lock. Knightsbridge had previously explained the significance of these items to me before, but I barely remembered any of what he said. To me, they were old junk and meant nothing. To Knightsbridge, they were everything, which said it all about the man, that he held a dead man and his possessions in higher esteem than he did anyone living as if no one around him was worthy of his adoration.

On the opposite side of the room stands Houdini's personal desk, which again, Knightsbridge told me about once. The front of the desk is decorated with full carved figures of gods guarding the desk corners, ornate phoenix birds on the plaques, and huge lion feet. The back of the desk features carved doors that swing open to reveal sets of drawers with carved bats as drawer pulls. There are also secret drawers, spaces, nooks and crannies that apparently came in handy when the desk was used during Houdini's séance demonstrations held at his home. Not only were the floors wired for sound, but furniture like the desk was "tricked out" to help Houdini produce the "spirit phenomena" for his gatherings. Although Knightsbridge did mention once that Houdini held other séances for a select few, during which he contacted real spirits. It was during one of these séances that a

spirit told Houdini the exact date and time that he would die, according to Knightsbridge.

It says a lot I know more about Houdini—the dead magician—than I do about Knightsbridge, the very much alive magician. For someone who worships a man like Houdini—a man who courted fame—Knightsbridge sure kept himself to himself.

He was sitting behind a designer desk when I walked into the office. The top of the desk was some sort of redwood, polished to perfection with probably not a single scrape on it. The redwood sat atop a much darker wood that was cut into something like a squashed C shape, which again was polished to perfection. The desk was rumored to have cost upwards of a quarter-million dollars. On top of the desk was a small lamp, some precisely stacked folders, a laptop and, off to the side, a deck of ordinary playing cards.

Knightsbridge paid me no attention as I stood stiffly in front of his desk, my hands clasped behind my back, unwilling to sit until he invited me to do so. As he stared at the laptop like I wasn't there, I stared at him, somewhat fascinated by the man as ever. He was, to use Churchill's words, a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. A man who came from nowhere to start a global corporation that now holds more power than most governments around the world thanks to the nature of its previously untapped business.

Physically, Knightsbridge was far from imposing. In his fifties with dyed brown hair swept back from his still smooth forehead, he stood at 5'6 in height and maintained a medium build that wasn't exactly toned muscle. A man like myself could easily make short work of him.

But what he lacked in physical stature, he made up for in presence, and was, without a doubt, one of the most imposing people I have ever met. When his piercing blue eyes looked at you from behind his round, black horn-rimmed glasses, you felt the weight of his brilliant intellect and vast knowledge bear down on you. He knew how to intimidate, and he didn't need brawn to do it. He did it all with his mind, and his unmatched grasp of human psychology. I've seen my fellow grunts—some of the toughest guys in the world—walk away from Knightsbridge with tears in their eyes like they'd just been mentally raped after one of his dressing downs. I've felt the same way myself on more than one occasion. Knightsbridge was a man that you did not want to fuck with, and everyone knew it. Yet here I was, about to do exactly that.

When he finally closed his laptop and looked up at me, he stared at me for a moment as if he didn't know what I was doing here, though I knew he was just making sure I knew where I was before he spoke, and that I knew exactly who I was standing before. If he was going to speak to me, it would be when he wanted to and not before. He was in control here, his eyes said; he was the boss, and I better not forget it.

"Sit down, Ethan," he said in that slightly creepy way of his. Creepy was a word that many Blackstar employees attached to the boss, though few dared say it out loud. "I'm on a tight schedule today. I hope you're not here to waste my time. You know how I feel about time-wasters."

I said nothing as I sat down in the leather chair opposite him, almost afraid to put my hands anywhere near his desk in case I marked it. As I sat outside, I

rehearsed in my head what I would say to him, giving him a whole speech about what a pleasure it's been to serve the Company for all these years and blah blah. But as Knightsbridge sat back in his brown leather chair and steepled his fingers in front of him, giving me that neutral smile that never failed to unnerve me, I knew there was no point in trying to bullshit him or beat around the bush. He clearly wanted direct, so that's what I'd give him, even though I knew he only demanded directness in order to give people no room for bullshit. Not only would he not have to suffer it, the other person would have no room for maneuver. Your words either held up, or they didn't.

"I'm waiting, Ethan," he said, his eyes narrowing slightly, making me realize I was dragging my feet, so I just came right out with it.

"I want to leave the Company, sir," I said, doing my best to hold his gaze, and for whatever reason, also noticing how impeccable his dark hair was combed, and how expensive his suit looked.

Knightsbridge didn't react as he sat in silence, my words hanging in the air between us like a bad smell. He merely stared at me like I'd spoken a language he didn't understand. In response, I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as I decided whether to say something else or wait for him to respond. In the end, I waited on him to speak, deciding my words would have more weight if I didn't weaken them with unnecessary qualifications. Knightsbridge's chest rose and fell slightly before he finally spoke. "Do you remember the Welcome Speech you were given when you first joined us, Ethan?"

I nodded, seeing where he was going. "Yes, sir."

"I wrote that speech myself, you know. Do you remember the part about being incorporated?"

"I do, sir."

"And do you remember what's behind Door Number Two?"

I tried not to sigh. "I do."

"What is it?"

"A bullet. Sir."

"And knowing this, you still come in here to tell me you want to leave the Company?"

This time I did sigh. "Look," I said, finding my nerve. "I'm going to save us both some time here and come right out with it. I'm leaving this Company. I've done my time, and I've served you better than most."

"That you have," he said. "Tell me, why do you want to leave, Ethan? Are you not happy here? Do we not provide you with everything you could possibly need? Is there something we aren't giving you that you need? Tell me what it is, Ethan, and I'll be happy to provide it for you."

I was expecting this. He was trying to buy me off, keep me sweet. Fuck him, if he thought I'd be that easy. "What I need, sir, is something that doesn't exist in this Company, I'm sorry to say."

Knightsbridge cocked his head to one side. "Please, Ethan," he said. "Why don't you enlighten me as to what is missing from *my* company?"

"Integrity. Sir."

A smile creased his face, and then he chuckled to himself. "Integrity. That's funny, coming from a grunt like you, Ethan."

No doubt that barbed comment was designed to undermine me, to undermine what I was saying, but I wouldn't let it. My position was cemented, and nothing he could say could change that. By the end of this conversation, I was either leaving this Company in a bodybag or on my own two feet, but either way, I was leaving. "I used to think this Company stood for something," I said. "I thought I was making a difference, but over time things have come to light, and now I see that the only difference I'm making is to the Company's bottom line, and in helping you advance whatever agenda you're working to, which isn't for the good of all, as your mission statement made out."

"Okay, interesting," he said, smiling again. "So what is it you think we're doing here, Ethan, if not defending the world against the dark forces out there? And while we're at it, just what agenda do you think I'm working to?"

"Well, I know it involves that God Machine you started a war to get your hands on."

"I started a war, did I?"

"You know you did. Molloch didn't bomb that school or hit the other civilian targets. You did."

Knightsbridge sat stony-faced, but I could still sense the anger boiling beneath the surface. I could tell he was close to having his secretary come in here so he could tell her to put a bullet in my head, which she would unhesitatingly do. Before that happened, I had to make my play.

"Look," I said. "I didn't come here today to cause trouble. I just want to move on, that's all. What you do with this company is up to you, I just don't want to be a part of it any longer. As a show of good faith, I'd like to give you something."

He smiled coldly. "And what is that?"

I reached into my pocket and took out a ring made from obsidian and placed it on the desk between us. Knightsbridge's eyes flicked down for a second before going back to me. "What is that?"

"I think you know what is," I said, sitting back and crossing my legs. "You spent years trying to find it."

"Are you trying to buy your way out, Ethan, is that it?" He smirked and shook his head. "Please."

"Don't pretend you don't want it."

"I have since found other ways to enhance my psychic abilities. I no longer need it."

"If you say so. I'll leave it there, anyway."

"If you must. Though it changes nothing."

"I didn't think it would, which is why I took other measures."

"What measures are you talking about?" he asked, his stare hardening, a clear sign to me that his patience was wearing thin. If I didn't convince him this time, I was dead.

"We both know what would happen if the rank and file found out you orchestrated those bombings," I said, finally getting down to the crunch. "Nearly a hundred innocent people were killed in total. Children were blown to pieces. And all because you wanted to add yet another item to your list of possessions. There'd be dissent in the ranks. The Company can't manage without the rank and file; we both know that. Not only that, but what do you think the Feds and the media

would make of all the shit this Company has pulled over the years? You rely on their cooperation. You couldn't operate without it, and the government and the media moguls only cooperate because you lie to them about what you do, and what this Company gets up to. If they knew the truth, they'd never let you or this Company exist. You know that."

Knightsbridge stared at me for a moment before nodding and pressing a button on the phone on his desk. The secretary answered straight away. "Clarissa, could you come in here, please?"

*Shit.*

The secretary walked into the office a few seconds later and came to stand by the side of me. "Yes, sir?" she said, looking at her boss.

"Clarissa," Knightsbridge said. "Please shoot Commander Drake in the head."

"Yes, sir." The secretary reached inside her suit jacket and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol, which she pointed at my head.

"Wait!" I said, looking at Knightsbridge. "You don't want to do this."

"You're wrong, Ethan," he said. "I do want to do this. And to think I was going to offer you the position of head of my personal security team. Oh well."

"If you shoot me you'll be killing the Company as well," I blurted, still expecting to be shot any second. "Everything I know has been loaded onto a flash drive and given to someone. If that someone doesn't hear from me soon, they have instructions to upload everything online for all the world to see, including reports, video footage and a full testimony from me, detailing every mission I've ever done for this Company."

Knightsbridge stared at me. If he was rattled, he didn't show it. "You're bluffing," he said. "You're not that smart, Ethan. Nor that stupid, I hope."

"Yeah? You trained me to be this smart," I said. "As for being stupid, I don't think so."

A tense silence fell in the room as Knightsbridge stared hard at me and the secretary continued to point the gun at my head. I sat there preparing myself to die until Knightsbridge turned to the secretary and said, "Leave us, Clarissa."

The secretary glared at me before putting the gun away and walking out of the room. As the door closed, a small sigh of relief escaped me. When she'd gone, Knightsbridge got up and walked to the windows, standing with his hands behind his back as he stared out. It was a tense few moments for me as I waited in silence, wondering what he was thinking, and hoping my somewhat flimsy plan had worked.

"Tell me, Ethan," Knightsbridge said without turning around. "What will you do if I let you leave?"

Unsure if he was still fucking with me, I said, "I was thinking of joining the police force. I figure with my skills, I could do some good there."

"That's very noble of you."

"As I said, I just want a different life. You've trusted me for all these years, and I never let you down even once. I'm asking you to trust me now when I say I'll keep my mouth shut... as long as you leave me alone."

Knightsbridge lapsed into silence again as he remained standing by the window. A moment later, he said, "Okay, Ethan. You win. You can have your freedom."

My jaw dropped in shock. I couldn't help it. "Are you... serious?"

“Well, you have me over a barrel, don’t you, Ethan?” He didn’t sound all that annoyed or angry about it anymore. He didn’t sound bothered at all, in fact. His tone was such that I half-expected him to shake my hand and wish me all the best, which of course, he never did. Instead, he looked over his shoulder and said, “Goodbye, Ethan.”

I sat for another moment, waiting on him to say something else or to change his mind, but he said nothing more as he continued to stare out the window.

At least not until I had gotten up and walked to the door. As my hand clutched the door handle, I heard Knightsbridge’s voice behind me, causing me to freeze as a wave of anxiety went through me. “Just remember, Ethan,” he said. “Long runs the fox.”

I frowned at the door in front of me for a second, wondering if he meant that as a threat. The way he said it, it didn’t sound like a threat. More of a warning, perhaps? Either way, I didn’t respond, and walked out of the room.

My anxiety was still present as I passed the secretary who glared at me as I walked by. Standing by the elevator with my back to her, I kept waiting for the bullet. But it never came.

The elevator ride was the longest of my life, going all the way down from the top floor. I was dreading the doors opening, for I fully expected someone to be in the lobby waiting for me so they could either shoot me on the spot or administer the Cocktail. But when the doors opened, and I walked into the lobby, no one was waiting for me.

Outside as I hurried down the street away from the Blackstar building, it was the same story. No one appeared to be waiting for me, at least not that I could see. By the time I rounded the corner, I knew I was in the clear. The fact was, if Knightsbridge wanted me dead, I would never have made it out of his office. If the secretary didn’t put a bullet in my head, Knightsbridge himself would’ve used his psychic powers to make my head explode. And as OCD as he was about cleanliness, having my blood and brains all over his office wouldn’t have bothered him.

A smile crossed my face as I realized my plan had worked.

I was finally free of the Company’s grip.

But little did I know that having left one corrupt organization, I was about to jump straight into the bowels of another...

