

ANGELGUARD

ANGELGUARD

Not all the spirits are good

IAN ACHESON

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Copyright © 2012 Ian Acheson

This edition copyright © 2012 Lion Hudson

The right of Ian Acheson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Monarch Books
an imprint of

Lion Hudson plc

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,

Oxford OX2 8DR, England

Tel: +44 (0)1865 302750 Fax: +44 (0)1865 302757

Email: monarch@lionhudson.com www.lionhudson.com/monarch

ISBN 978 0 85721 203 0

e-ISBN 978 0 85721 264 1

First edition 2012

Acknowledgments

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicised Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, formerly International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved “NIV” is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in xxx (country only), xxx (date inc. month), xxx (manufacturer code)

For Fiona

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, God. Through this journey Your ever-watchful and inspirational hand has been plainly evident. May this story bring You glory.

To Fiona, my wife and best friend, thank you for your graciousness in allowing me to chase my dream. I couldn't have done this without your belief in this story and in me.

Dan and Jake, our boys, thank you for loving me.

To my constant writing companion, Brandy, our much-loved pooch. It amazes me how God created an animal with such selflessness and desire to make us humans happy.

Thanks to Tony Collins, Jan Greenough and the team at Lion Hudson for making this story the best it can be. You've spoiled me and taught me so much in the process.

Thank you to Paul Bootes, founder of Koorong, for taking thirty minutes of your weekend to share your wisdom and for the introduction to Tony. One of many occurrences during this story's gestation that can only be described as a "God-thing".

Thanks to the late Clare Booth Steward, my first editor, who helped me believe this story was publishable and who taught me the basics of writing and self-editing.

And finally, to those of you who will give up a few hours to read this story, thank you. I am so grateful.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HUMANS

In the UK

Thierry Le Bon
Ruth, his wife
Mikey, their son
Charlotte, Thierry's sister
Jerome, Charlotte's son (deceased)
Danny and Joanna Connolly
Jack, their son, godson of Jack Haines
Major Bill Lancaster, SAS

In Australia

Jack Haines
Sarah Haines, Jack's wife
Grace and Catherine, Jack's infant daughters
Jane, Jack's sister
Louise Haines, Jack's mother

In the USA

Loren Summers
Ray Malone, Loren's boss
Candice Malone, his wife
Tom Mayer, Loren's ex-husband and Ray's colleague
Taylor and Luke, Loren's children
Stephen Haines, Jack's younger brother

In Europe

Leopold Grosch, Belgian industrialist
Marie Verheyen, Belgian deputy prime minister and Grosch's mistress
Zhou Chau, hitman and mathematician

ANGELGUARD

Sami, Grosch's childhood friend and partner in malfeasance
Vincent and Farkad, Grosch's henchmen
Miroslav, a thug
Pienaar, Swartbooi and du Preez, South African mercenaries
Beny and Etienne, Zhou's friends in need
Colonel Charles Smithson ("Smitty")
Mr. Ballack, head of security for the G8 Summit

ANGELS

Tagan, leader of the European region
Athaniel

Guarding the Le Bons

Elijah
Hannen
Andola (later redeployed to guard Zhou Chau)
Jolane (also guarding Zhou Chau)

Guarding Loren Summers

Arlia
Emur
Landen
Grindor
Mylee

Guarding Jack Haines

Darius

DEMONS

The Fallen Angel
General Thrasos, Chief Warlord of the Fallen Angel
Lord Bacchazar, demon in chief for Europe, the Middle East and Africa
Volkrye, his advisor
Drakkin
Chonnggi
Tetak

Sergeant Slyzor
Zeldax
Agramon, demon in chief for the Americas and Asia
Grazag, Tom Mayer's keeper

CHAPTER 1

LONDON, JANUARY, THE PRESENT

"It's time!"

The voice was resonant, powerful, yet warm. Thierry, rising through the mists of unconsciousness, longed to hear it again.

Yet even as he stirred, the being was gone, the golden glow fading. He felt a pang of sadness. He wanted more time, to draw closer, to soak up the warmth and love...

"Nurse! I need a nurse in here!" A loud male voice jarred.

"Coming, doctor," a woman's voice responded. "I'm just finishing up here."

The doctor was checking Thierry's body, feeling his arms and legs and opening his shirt to examine his chest. Thierry tried to open his eyes but the light was too bright. What happened? Why was he here? His head was pounding.

He heard a curtain being drawn.

"Good. Nurse... Evans, is it? I need you to clean this head wound before I stitch it."

"That all?"

"Yes. We'll get him down for some X-rays as soon as we can. And overnight for observation, if you can find a bed on a ward."

"That won't be easy. It's a madhouse out there."

"Are they still coming in?"

"No, I think that's the last of the casualties. They're still bringing out the dead – the Whittington's acting as a temporary morgue."

"Right, I'll get on. It's going to be a long night."

Thierry heard it all, vaguely. Beyond the curtain there were

hurrying feet, the clatter of trolleys, raised voices. He grimaced from the vise-like pain in his head.

“Can you help me?” he whispered through dry lips. “My head...”

“It’s OK, luv, you’re gonna be all right. Just have a headache for a while.” She was swabbing the side of his head, her touch gentle but firm.

There was a pain in his side, every time he breathed in. Like an iron band round his ribs. Like... his mind went back... like playing football, a few years back, his team against Dartford United, the collision with their number nine, two cracked ribs...

Football! Recollection came flooding back. He’d been watching a football match! Jerome’s Christmas treat – his excited face grinning up at his uncle, yelling for his team. The Blues did well in the first half... then, right on the half-time whistle, the blast knocking him forward – a noise like the end of the world, screams – then nothing. Nothing. Waking up here, in pain.

His eyes flew open and he tried to raise himself on one elbow, only to fall back with a strangled gasp of pain.

“Jerome! Where’s Jerome?”

“It’s OK, calm down.” He squinted against the light and saw the nurse, a solidly built West Indian, bending over him.

“You’ve taken a bad knock on the head. I’ll get you something for the pain. The doc’s just coming back to stitch your head.”

Thierry closed his eyes and waited, his mind probing at the muddled memories. He remembered walking to the stadium, Jerome skipping alongside him. He remembered parts of the game. Then a noise like thunder, then nothing.

“Now then, Mr. Le Bon.” It was the doctor’s voice. Thierry looked up.

“What happened to me?”

“Hold still.” The doctor was expertly suturing the head wound, which gaped pink against Thierry’s dark-brown skin. “It was a bomb – a big one. Blew the stand apart, killed nearly everyone in it, lots of others injured. You’re one of the lucky ones. Someone must be looking out for you. Only a handful got out of the West Stand alive.”

“Jerome – my nephew...”

“I’ll ask the nurse to see if he’s on our lists anywhere. If not, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for police reports. Everyone’s pretty busy tonight. We’ll see if we can get you a bed on the ward. You’ve had a nasty knock on the head.” The doctor spoke rapidly, and pushed the curtain aside as he hurried away.

Thierry was drifting in and out of consciousness. He had no strength to call for help as he fell sideways and vomited over the side of the bed.

* * *

“How’s our patient?” The voice was concerned. A tall blond angel gazed in through the window of the hospital room, unseen by the hurrying medical staff and the victims lying on trolleys. Over eight feet tall with snow-white hair and piercing blue eyes, he wore a silver cloak, which swung back to reveal a meter-long scabbard hanging from his belt.

“Lucky to be alive, Tagan, sir,” reported a second angel, as dark as the first was fair. “His head struck a concrete ledge, and his ribs were broken when an advertising hoarding landed on him.” He clenched his fists. “Hannen did a tremendous job – he moved the hoarding to cover Thierry and protect him. He took a bad knock himself, from a demon who tried to stop him. He’s nursing his sword arm as we speak.” Both knew their comrade would heal fast. Angels did, as a rule.

“And Thierry?”

“His body will take a little longer to mend. But his spirit...”

“I know, Athaniel. Losing his nephew will cause him more pain. How that affects him remains to be seen. It could turn him further away. And he is vital to our purpose.” The angel paced up and down by the window, deep in thought. “He needs guidance as well as protection. I will order Elijah to join Hannen as his guard.”

“Yes, sir.” Athaniel hesitated. “Did you know Lord Bacchazar himself appeared at the scene?”

“His presence did not go unnoticed. I cannot recall when last the old warlord supervised an attack in person. Today’s

events must be important to him.” Tagan looked heavenward. “Gabriel and Michael have called a conference of all the leaders of the continents. I must speak to Elijah and Hannen and get their views.”

“Elijah was in the stand opposite and saw it all. There were over a thousand demons to our one hundred knights, and we had no intelligence of their plan, so we could not prevent it. But we will have our revenge!”

The dark angel drew his sword and raised it menacingly. It shone with a brilliant radiance, which did not come from the leaden January sky. It was a huge weapon, fit for an angelguard of Athaniel’s standing – right hand to one of the most senior in the angel kingdom.

“You will have your day, my friend.” Tagan smiled briefly at his subordinate’s intensity. “But for now we must be vigilant if we are to prevent another attack, and lay our plans with care. I will seek out Hannen and Elijah. Stay here till they relieve you.”

Tagan turned, took two paces and sprang silently into the air, white wings opening out of his back to carry him swiftly into the sky above.

Athaniel returned to his duty at the window with renewed diligence.

* * *

It was dark when Thierry awoke, and the silence told him that he had been moved to another room. He tried to lever himself up on his elbows. *Wow! That hurt! Must be time for more painkillers.*

In the gloom he could make out three other beds, and a light coming from a half-open door. He pressed the call button. Where was Ruthie? Did she know what had happened to him? His head felt clearer suddenly. When the nurse appeared he was ready with questions.

“What’s the time? Does my wife know where I am? Can you find out about my nephew? Jerome Sanders – he’s six.”

“Hold on a minute, one at a time,” said the nurse, switching on a dim light above his bed.

“Pain relief first.” She turned him expertly and administered

an injection.

“It’s a quarter past ten. You’ve been here for about four hours. I don’t know about the boy, but your wife’s outside. I’ll fetch her.”

Thierry’s heart leapt. Ruthie!

A woman in a black leather coat appeared in the doorway, glanced around the room and came swiftly over to the bed. In the dim light he could see that her eyes were swollen with crying, and tear tracks marked her smooth brown skin. To Thierry she had never looked more beautiful. She bent and kissed him tenderly.

“Hi, baby,” she said, touching his face gently. “How’re you feeling? Sorry it took me so long to get here. I had to get a sitter for Mikey. And then it took forever to find out which hospital you were in, and the traffic’s chaos. They said I had to wait till you woke up—” The words tumbled out and she stopped to draw breath. “Oh, thank God you’re alive!” Tears sprang to her eyes again. She clung to his hand as if she would never let it go.

“Ruthie – where’s Jerome?”

Ruth hesitated and Thierry saw the answer in her eyes.

“Oh, no... Charlotte...”

His sister. She would never forgive him. He’d promised to take care of her little boy. Thierry felt as though he was drowning in an ocean of guilt. He wanted to cry out but he didn’t have the strength. The pain in his head and his side faded away as the drug-induced mists closed over him again.

“I’m sorry, babe.” Ruth’s quiet sobbing was the last thing he heard before he lost consciousness once more.

* * *

Hours passed. He was dimly aware of Ruth leaving. Nurses came and went. He drifted in and out of sleep.

Then suddenly he was wide awake, and struggling to breathe. It was pitch black – where had the lighted doorway gone? Where were the other beds? He seemed to be caught in a nightmare, blind, deaf, unable to escape, yet writhing under a weight, which crushed the air from his lungs. His whole body was in agony. A chill ran up his spine. *Where am I? Am I dying?*

A sulfurous smell stung his nostrils, and he felt hot breath on his face. Something was looming over him, threatening him, enveloping him in darkness.

Then right on the edge of audibility he seemed to hear faintly a distant screeching sound, a crash, and the weight lifted. He drew a shuddering breath and it was clean, cool air, free of foul odors. Something touched his brow gently, and he relaxed, sighing, as peaceful, dreamless sleep received him again.

Like a lightning bolt, three white knights had crashed into the black cloud surrounding Thierry's bed. The demons screeched and hissed, furious at being taken unawares, as the bright blades slashed at them. Athaniel and Elijah forced four of them back, while Hannen darted forward and grabbed the last by the throat as he crouched over Thierry's sleeping body. The demon twisted in the air and drew his own sword, but Hannen smashed it from his grasp, leaving him defenseless. Black wings unfolded and the demons fled, disappearing through the ceiling like smoke in the wind.

Athaniel sheathed his sword. "You two arrived at the right moment. I couldn't have taken all of them."

Elijah's sword was still glowing with the heat of battle. "Let's finish them!"

"No, Elijah," said Hannen, placing a restraining hand on his arm. "Our task is to guard Thierry. Athaniel will report to Tagan."

The dark angel nodded his understanding and left. Hannen laid a gentle hand on Thierry's brow. "Sleep peacefully, my friend. You are safe."

* * *

A week later Thierry was at home, though his head still ached intermittently, his ribs were healing and the livid bruise on his left shoulder made movement painful.

Ruth was taking a phone call in the hall, though she didn't seem to be doing much talking. When she came back into the room he could see she'd been crying again.

"How are they?" he asked.

"Your mum's really struggling, but she's holding it together for Charlotte. Troy is doing it tough too." Troy was Charlotte's ex. "They know what happened to Jerome now. They found him under a pile of rubble. Darling, he would have died instantly – a huge piece of concrete struck his head. He wouldn't have known anything about it."

Ruth put her arms round Thierry, holding him gingerly because of his bruises. To Thierry the pain in his body was trivial compared to the pain in his heart. Why couldn't he have saved him? Why did Jerome have to die while he lived? Why had he even suggested the trip in the first place – a little boy's first live football match, watching his beloved team play at home? It was all his fault.

His arms tightened around Ruth, and then he pulled away to look at her.

"It was strange, Ruthie," he said. "I remember looking up, just before half time. The sky was really black – as if all the clouds had gathered over the stadium. I could see blue sky all around it – just this one big black cloud over us. It felt menacing – as if something was going to happen."

Ruth looked at him doubtfully.

"I know, it sounds crazy. But it was real. Then the ref blew the whistle and – wham! Everything just went blank. I didn't have time to grab Jerome or anything."

Tears were streaming down his face.

Ruth kissed him. "It's good to talk about it, babe. Let it all out. It'll help." She held him for a while longer, and then left him to rest. He still slept a lot during the day, and often Ruth would sit beside him, holding his hand, ready for the moment when he would wake up shouting for Jerome, reliving the explosion and his fear. Sometimes as he slept he half-heard her murmured prayers – for him, for Charlotte and his mum, and for all the other families who mourned.

He dozed and woke to the same anguished thoughts. I survived – why not Jerome? Anger welled up inside him. God! You could have stopped this pain, this heartache! Why take such a little boy away from his mum, whose life is already so tough?

He found he was beating his fist on the arm of the sofa. If I

could get hold of the person who did this, I'd kill them with my bare hands!

His fury exhausted him. If only I'd never taken him there. If only...

His clenched fist relaxed. If only...

Healing sleep claimed him again, and Hannen gently withdrew his hand from Thierry's arm.

The angelguard was watchful.

* * *

Not far away, in a disused warehouse, a meeting was taking place.

The building had been empty for years, and to human eyes it was dark and deserted now. But in a far corner a huddle of black creatures were arguing noisily. Suddenly the group scattered as one of their number was thrown bodily across the building and crashed against a wall. A second followed, landing on the first. Raucous laughter and hissing broke out among their fellows. Then a misshapen form hobbled out of the group, waving a crooked walking-stick.

"Spineless cowards!" he croaked. There was another burst of laughter, quickly hushed as another creature stepped out of the shadows. This one dwarfed the others, standing eight feet tall, and wielded a huge sword with a muscular arm. He let out an ear-splitting roar, which caused the two ejected beasts to cower against the wall.

"I don't want to see you two cowards again, until you each present me with the hide of a white knight!" snarled the demon lord. The scars that disfigured his face throbbed a deep crimson. "If another mission is interrupted by the haloed ones, do not think to return unless in victory. If you fail, then die fighting the enemy, not in fleeing. Do I make myself clear? Now go, before I feed you to the monsters of hell myself!"

The two struggled to their feet and shakily took flight through the warehouse roof.

Others flew up beside them, mocking and crowing.

"Be silent!" bellowed the huge demon. "Let this be a lesson

to you all. Failure will not be tolerated. We must not let the white knights prevail. We tasted victory at the football stadium. Let us savor it again." He sheathed his blade.

"We have noted the presence of the angelguards around one survivor – a man named Le Bon. He or his family may be of some importance to the enemy. We do not yet know why. But we should do away with them before the white knights can awaken their spirits. I want them under attack by every means – mentally, physically, and emotionally. Do you hear me?"

There was a mumble of agreement.

"We must outwit the white knights. I have battled with them often enough to know they are not easily deterred. Away with you! Drakkin has a base in a vacant shop close to Le Bon's house. Go and keep watch."

The remaining demons took flight, passing through the physical barrier of the roof as though it were mist. Only two remained: the powerful monster and the elderly one with the walking-stick.

The huge beast spoke first. "Volkyre, wise old sorcerer. Why the white knight interest in Le Bon, do you think? What role does he play in their plans?"

"Lord Bacchazar, take my counsel. Their presence around Le Bon is only small. He may just be wavering on the brink of belief, and the white knights are encouraging that. I would not concern yourself, my lord. More significantly, I hear that the plans for Los Angeles and Sydney are now in place. Both will be marvelous victories. And it is time for us to plan for the biggest strike of all. More and more will suffer, more will come to doubt, to fear, to succumb to evil."

Volkyre's voice rose to a quavering shout, flecks of black spittle flying from his curling lips. "And, Lord, what a great day that will be. You will stand alongside the Most Evil One, as commander of this earth-shattering victory!"

Bacchazar merely smiled.

CHAPTER 2

LOS ANGELES, JANUARY, A WEEK LATER

Loren Summers breezed into the cavernous arena. It was abuzz with activity in preparation for tonight's fundraiser. Dressed professionally in a black skirt-suit, she smiled; seeing it all come together gave her a strong sense of pride. She had been responsible for its creation.

Scanning the crowd of workers and not seeing a familiar face, she made her way towards the front—

Thud!

A short young man knocked her off her feet.

"Oh! Sorry, sweetheart – didn't see you there!" he said in a Texan drawl. He helped her up.

"That's all right, no harm done," Loren said, brushing her skirt down.

Loren moved on briskly towards the stage. The Texan called out to her, "Sorry again!" and mumbled something to his co-worker who stood at the opening of the front-of-house mixing pit, leering as his eyes followed her long legs.

Arlia, the white knight who accompanied Loren, paid little attention to the men. Her attention was focused on the two huge reptilian creatures that sat atop the nearby speaker boxes.

They promptly jumped off, landing directly in front of the angel, halting her progress. They stood upright, their massive torsos blocking the white knight's path.

Releasing her wings to accentuate her size, and looking intently from one demon to the other, the angelguard spoke. "I mean you no harm. Out of my way!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" The two hoodlums broke up in hissing

laughter, momentarily relaxing their stance.

"You mean us no harm, then?" one replied sarcastically, sticking his ugly head right in the angel's face so his crooked beak was inches from the angelguard's perfectly shaped nose. He blew a cloud of foul gas into the glistening turquoise eyes.

The white knight stood motionless, meeting her enemy's hate-filled stare.

The demon's veins were bulging in his oversized neck. "Of course you're not going to harm us. If anyone is going to be harmed, it's going to be *you*." The other snickered.

The white knight stood still, continuing to make eye contact with the aggressor.

"So what's your business, then?" the demon demanded angrily, holding up a clenched claw, talons bent forward, ready to inflict pain.

"On guard duty, that's all." She shoved the offending claw away. "You understand that, I presume?"

The demon rose to his full height, his face narrowed and his body taut, whilst his partner moved in closer.

Moments passed as the three stared intensely, all primed to strike on the slightest movement.

Chomp! The demon feigned a bite. The angel didn't flinch.

He slowly moved aside, allowing her to pass. As she was almost beyond them, he reached for her—

Slash! A white streak sliced the air, ending with a sword at the demon's throat, forcing him to release his grip on her arm. He gulped.

"Hold your horses!" he growled through gritted teeth. The sword lowered but the intensity on her face didn't, nor did she relax her fighting stance.

"One more thing before you go."

"Yes, and what's that?" Still she hadn't moved.

"What name do you go by, you stuck-up—?"

"Arlia is my name. Remember it... as the day will come when I will be standing over your corpse. The next time I draw my sword in your presence, your head will roll! Be warned." She re-holstered her gleaming weapon.

"Huh, I look forward to the day our swords meet," he spat

back.

Arlia ignored that final comment. She took note of the other six demons in the arena as she hustled forward. They watched her approach attentively.

Arlia was expecting this, but she knew no trouble would start.

Not yet, anyway.

The demons returned to their watchtower in the mixing pit, their long tattered black overcoats swinging past the two Texan sound engineers, who were on their hands and knees bolting on an addition to the electronic mass under the panels.

“How long is this going to take?” asked Arlia’s interrogator, exasperated, his eyes fixed on the two humans.

“It is nearly complete, Sergeant Slyzor. Before we were rudely interrupted, I heard Max say it should only be another few minutes,” hissed the other.

“Well, about time!” Slyzor said. “I can’t wait to see my blade slice that lousy angel trash in two!”

He took a deep breath, his vast shoulders rising.

“Tonight is going to be a great victory,” he announced, “Our army is a thousand strong, and they,” pointing first in the direction of Arlia, then at the stage, “don’t stand a chance.”

The two demons turned their attention to the two men below them.

“That’s it, Max. Timer set. We’re ready to rock’n’roll,” said one.

“Good, good, Rick, my good friend. Mr. King will be pleased with us,” said the second one.

A roadie from the stage came over and addressed them. “Hey, Max, have you finished rigging up all the sound cables, as we need to take them under the floor to the stage?”

Max popped his head up. “Yeah, Vince, we’re almost done. Give us a couple of minutes and we’ll start joining them to the stage.”

“Great, Max! We’re ahead of schedule. We should be able to knock off early, the way we’re going.” Vince was pleased. “Keep up the good work, guys.”

* * *

“Roger, you have my word,” Ray Malone said, gripping the handset tightly. “You will have a full report on all of these transactions by the end of next week.”

He listened to the response, loosening the button to his shirt collar, sweat beads running down his neck.

“Looking forward to seeing you tonight. Till then, Roger.”

He hung up and slumped in his chair.

He grabbed his cell phone from his desk drawer and dialed a number.

“Tom Mayer... ” answered a male voice through the speaker.

“Tom, Ray. We got a problem. I just got off the phone from Roger McDowall. He spent twenty minutes interrogating me about a series of ‘suspicious’, to use his words, transactions the audit team has discovered. And guess what? They happen to amount to a cool fifty million dollars.”

“Whoa, cool it, slow down a little,” Tom replied.

“Don’t tell me to relax, Tom. We’re talking about fraud here, and that could get me jailed!”

“Yes, yes, I know. But yelling and screaming at me isn’t going to help you.”

Malone got to his feet and went to sit on the edge of his desk. He was short and solid, with a weathered face.

“You do have all the backing documentation safely locked away, don’t you, Tom?”

“Of course I do, Ray. All safe and sound in my New York office.”

“I need to pull together a report for McDowall, so I require a detailed investment strategy from you for each of the amounts transferred. You can produce that for me, can’t you, Tom?”

“Yeah, no problems, Ray. Will get that to you ASAP next week. I’m working out of New York, so it will be fine. Don’t you worry, you’ll have everything you need to convince him of the bona fide nature of those transactions. I’d best be off. Have a great weekend. We’ll talk next week.”

The line disconnected.

No blasted audit partner is going to take Ray Malone down, no chance!

He was stomping around his large office getting angrier and angrier at each step he took.

I'm the best in the business and I am not finished with it yet. I've still got another good twenty years left. I'll be the next famous ad industry mogul, you watch me. No audit partner who's paranoid about being sued is going to stand in my way!

Two black shapes, invisible to the human eye, towered over him as he leant over his desk. They each had a claw on his shoulder, and one whispered in his ear, feeding Ray's anger.

Malone swung around and resumed his angry pacing. The two demons left a trail of sulfur as they followed him, inciting his rage:

"You should be angry, Malone."

"We'll get that audit partner."

"How dare he go direct to McDowall?"

"You're the best in this business."

Malone's face burned crimson with fury. He was aware of an unpleasant smell, and sniffed his own armpits suspiciously. The room was thick with a fog of sulfur and sweat.

A large shadow stepped out from behind the sofa, flanked by smaller dark figures. The leader was considerably larger, bare-chested, with thick black hair covering his torso. His only clothing was a pair of black trousers, stretched to cover his tree-trunk-sized thighs.

His grotesque face wore a look of complete disgust.

PHPHOOM! GASP!

His right arm shot out and grabbed one of Malone's shadows around the neck. The others froze where they stood. He dragged the cowering fiend by the neck and brought him to within an inch of his rock-hard face.

"GRRROWWWLLL." He sounded like a lion before it devours its prey.

"How dare you place this mission at risk!" he said. "If it falters because of your incompetence, I will personally send you to the abyss, never to return!"

His grip was tightening. The junior demon was gasping for

breath, shaken like a rag doll.

He opened his mouth but no sound emerged.

"You wish to speak?" the strongman asked.

The noose-like hold on the sentinel's neck eased. He spoke haltingly. "Agramon, sir... it was not my fault. One of the others—"

"No excuses!" Agramon yelled, lifting him off the ground with one mighty paw. "I want no more mistakes. Make sure Malone isn't found out yet! It's too early. Or else, you all know what the penalty will be..." he hissed.

THUMP! The sentinel fell in a heap, his legs unable to hold him up.

Agramon turned and walked through the wall, followed by his two aides. The accused's colleague helped him to his feet.

Malone, oblivious to these exchanges, had resumed his seat behind the magnificent desk. The demons returned to their stations behind him.

He felt a sudden sharp pain in his neck as it locked up.

"Ughhh..." he cried out in pain. He couldn't move.

The demon, his face burning with anger, grabbed Malone's neck in a vice-like grip.

He squeezed a little tighter. "Arghhh!" Malone winced in agony. Panic hit him, as paralysis started moving down his spine.

The second demon thumped his colleague's powerful arm, forcing it to release the pressure. Malone gasped in relief.

"Wow, what was that?" he muttered to himself.

"That's not going to solve any problems, you know," said the second demon.

"I know, but it sure made me feel better!" snarled the first. "Let's get Malone back to work!"

She was in her car listening to the radio when her car-phone rang. She didn't recognize the number on her dash.

"Loren Summers," she answered, a serious expression on her face.

“Off to make ourselves beautiful for tonight, are we?” came a voice she knew instantly. Loren smiled.

“Ray, you know we women always want to look our best... one of the problems with being a woman.”

“Hey, sorry I couldn’t meet with you this morning. Something urgent came up.”

“No problem, Ray. It gave me extra time at the arena, looking over the preparations for tonight.”

“Good.” Malone was sounding slightly smug. “I wanted to tell you that you’ve been accepted by the Board to take part in the Executive Leadership Development Program that starts next month.”

A smile spread across her face.

“Are you serious?”

“As if I’d joke about it, Loren.”

“Ray, I don’t know what to say, other than thank you.”

“Loren, you deserve it. You should have got it last year but – oh well, best not go into that.”

Hmmm, what’s that about?

Ray filled the silence. “It starts with a week at Insead in France. Will getting someone to mind the kids be a problem?”

“Oh, ah, it shouldn’t be. Most likely I’ll have Mom and Dad move in. Might even ask their father.”

“Would he do that?” He paused. “He’ll be too busy, surely?”

“Probably, but it’s about time he starting taking some responsibility for his children. He’s hardly seen them since he took that New York-based job.”

“Certainly. But some guys just aren’t cut out to be fathers, and I reckon Tom Mayer is just one of those men.”

“Ray, he’s their father, for heaven’s sake. It’s not about whether he’s good at it or not, it’s his responsibility. If he wasn’t cut out for it, he should have thought more about that before he decided to have children. And anyway,” Loren’s voice turned bitter, “I actually think he can be a good father. He’s just consumed by doing deals and bedding every pretty girl that walks by.”

“OK, OK, enough. No doubt you’re right. But he won’t be able to help you out at the end of the month.”

“Why not? How would you know?” Ray and Tom were both members of the same country club. But why would Ray know Tom’s schedule?

“Oh, he mentioned something to me at the Club the other day, about having to be in New York or somewhere at the end of the month.”

She had caught the slight hesitation. “Ray, it sounds like you know more than you’re telling me.”

“Not at all. He didn’t say anything else that I can recall. Obviously, ask him.”

“You bet I will!” Loren had little respect for her philandering ex.

A moment passed in silence.

“Listen, Loren, I need to keep going, more calls to do. Congratulations once again on the EDP. The Board is very proud of your achievements. And I’ll see you tonight, looking gorgeous, I imagine. Bye.”

Ray hung up before Loren could say goodbye.

Not like Ray to hang up like that. Hmmm.

The Saab was really purring at sixty, shooting down the Santa Monica Boulevard. Her frown soon dissolved.

Oh, wow. I got the Development Program!

“Yesss! Yesss!” She starting tapping the steering wheel, elated.

The clock on the dashboard said 3:17. Right on time for her hair appointment.

* * *

The darkness was absolute – but alive, moving, pulsating. Every few feet two red glowing eyes pierced the blackness. Hundreds of them, scanning feverishly, ever watchful.

The moving mass was scratching, hissing, shouting. Squabbles broke out, the noise intensifying, causing an eruption of barking dogs across the city that drove their owners mad, while dog-less neighbors yelled obscenities over back fences.

The noise ceased suddenly.

In an empty Hollywood studio, a herald blew a series of

sharp notes on an ancient golden horn. The dark space lit up as a thousand-strong army of writhing black ghouls scrambled and shrieked into a roughshod formation.

THUMP!

The ground shook. Hushed silence. Almost in unison the demons, of all shapes and sizes, turned their attention to the far end of the studio. Those at the front took a step back, only to be pushed forward again by those whose space they had invaded.

There at the head was their leader, extending his monstrous frame. Covered in masses of hair from head to toe. Agramon. His black, beady eyes examined his silent legions.

“The time has come, my eager, murderous army,” he bellowed, snorting sulfur. The crowd erupted in a chorus of snarls, growls and hisses.

He continued in his gravelly voice: “We have waited for this day for a long time and the planning is complete. All is in readiness. You all know what is expected of you—”

Agramon stopped and waited, a smirk revealing dagger-like front teeth.

The stillness was broken by a commotion from the side.

“Let me *go!*” screamed a deformed creature. Two bulky wolf-men were dragging it towards the leader.

“Stand to attention,” demanded one of the henchmen as they stopped in front of Agramon, with a whack to the back of the demon’s head as encouragement.

“No, no, no, Agra—” it whimpered. “No... it wasn’t me, no, I didn’t do it, please, Sir—”

With a single slash Agramon decapitated the creature. Its lifeless form crumbled to the ground in a black cloud of dust.

Cheers rose from the crowd. Demons existed only for this. Kill or be killed.

“That is what will happen to any who fail,” Agramon snorted gleefully, his black sword smoking as he held it triumphantly above his head. “I will personally ensure that any who fail never return. Arise now and wreak havoc on all you encounter this evening. Spare no one and be willing to die for the greater cause!”

“KILL! KILL! KILL!” chanted the crowd.

There was a flapping and clapping of wings as row upon

row of demons flew off, filling the sky. An enormous black stain soon blocked out the sunset, like a large oil spill consuming the blue water of the ocean.

The streetlights cast a shadowy glow over the hills of Hollywood. A frigid night wind blew in off the Pacific. People on the streets quickened their pace, seeking refuge from the storm, and looking into the murky sky with a sense of unease.

The demonic assassins did not have far to travel to their destination, the nearby arena, for what they anticipated would be a major victory.

“Here they come, over towards the hills in the north-east corner,” a tall white knight on watch duty relayed to the group of five standing in Loren Summers’ office. Promptly, they moved to the windows to see for themselves the black swarm that approached.

“There must be at least a thousand of them,” one said, exasperated.

“Far more than we have at our disposal. We don’t stand a chance!” another said.

“Yes, Landen, you’re right,” Athaniel replied. “We don’t stand a chance if we engage. But the plan is not to engage tonight,” he said, turning back to the centre of the office.

“What? We just stand by and watch this army of murderers wreak havoc on our city?!”

Athaniel put his arms on Landen’s shoulders. “Landen, I know it sounds ridiculous, almost unbelievable, but we must stick to the plan!”

Athaniel’s dark features contrasted with the fairness of the others.

“Reinforcements from Denver, Colorado are on their way as we speak,” the angelguard leader continued. “They will boost our numbers by three hundred.”

“Oh, that’s good to know. Now the odds are only three to one. That makes me feel a whole lot better! *Not!*” Landen said, stomping his foot.

“Will they engage us, Athaniel?” the watch guard asked.

“You can never tell with the enemy. They are so blood-thirsty. It doesn’t take much to get them to reach for their swords. But they are more interested in humans tonight, not our limited forces.

“The key is to keep Loren safe. Our intelligence indicates they are not yet aware of Loren’s importance to our plans, so we hope they will continue to ignore her.”

Loren entered her office in a stunning full-length cocktail dress, her long brunette hair now stylishly swept up. Arlia followed and, on seeing her comrades, joined them.

Loren dialed a number on her desk phone.

“Hello, Marcie speaking,” said the voice through the speaker.

“Hey, Marce,” Loren replied.

“Hey, babe, you all dolled up for your big night?” Marcie asked.

“Ah, yeah, I guess. You know me – always feel better in a suit rather than a cocktail dress!”

“I’m sure you’ll be the belle of the ball.”

“Oh, don’t know about that! Hey, got some sensational news today.”

“Do tell.”

“Remember how I always wanted to be accepted into that Leadership Program? Well, my boss told me today that I’d got it!”

“Yay, Loz! Congratulations, babe! That’s great news.”

“Look, I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, as I’m kinda in a rush now. How are Taylor and Luke going?”

“All good here. Well, in fact, it’s a bit of a crazy house at the moment with Bec’s three, my three and your two.”

“And you’re loving it, I bet!”

“Naturally, nothing makes me happier than seeing all our kids having a ball.”

“Marce, I better go. Give my love to Tays and Luke – oh, and Bec.”

“See ya, babe. Have a fantastic night, and we’ll talk in the morning about dropping the kids back to you.”

“Thanks, Marce. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

The group of angelic beings locked arms. Their wings were held tightly within their backs.

They began quietly humming a song of praise as Loren opened her closet and took one last look in the mirror. The white radiance of the group’s tunics reflected off the ceiling lights, creating a halo effect around Loren.

“Oh well, this is going to have to do,” she said to herself.

It was 6:31.

Across town, Marcie, having gotten off the phone from Loren, was standing in her kitchen, deep in thought, marinating the chicken for the barbecue. Rebecca walked in, a beautiful knight glorious in all-white battle-dress following her.

“Bec, whilst the kids are out of sight, I think we should pray. I’ve felt uneasy all day and I sense Loren needs our prayers.”

“Hmmm, let’s do it, Marce,” Rebecca replied. “I know to never doubt the Spirit’s nudges on your heart.”

A second white knight strode up, greeting the first with a warm embrace. They knew each other very well.

“How is she, Marce?”

“Sounded rushed and a bit flustered. This is a really big gig for her and she could do with the Lord’s protection.” Marcie grabbed her friend’s hand and led her to the lounge. They knelt at the coffee table. The two white knights stood over the two women, shielding them with outstretched wings.