

# Earth to Hell

JOURNEY TO WUDANG  
BOOK ONE

KYLIE CHAN

HARPER

*Voyager*

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*The Serpent slides through the black icy water of the Antarctic, wreathed in permanent darkness.*

*The Turtle hides from the weak Arctic sun beneath the ice.*

*They cry, but there is no answer.*

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# CHAPTER 1

‘Now,’ I said gently, ‘concentrate. You’ve done it before. This time, bring the chi out as slowly as you can. Feel the rubber band pulling it back.’

Apple bit her lip and the glowing yellow ball of chi floated out of her outstretched palm.

*Emma, emergency, the stone in my ring said. Some third years have run into trouble. They raided a prostitution den in Mong Kok that was holding sex slaves, and instead of humans running the show they met up with demons. They need help.*

‘Let the chi go, Apple,’ I said, still very gentle.

The chi floated back down into Apple’s hand and she sagged.

‘Take a break now, and don’t try it again without supervision,’ I said. ‘I’ve been called away, so we’ll end it there. Head back to the Folly and have a rest.’

Apple nodded. ‘Yes, ma’am. Thank you.’

I patted her shoulder, then quickly rose and spoke urgently to the stone as I charged out to the stairwell. ‘Get Marcus to bring the car around the front. I’ll meet him at the ground floor. Which Masters are free?’

‘Sit, Park, Lee and Edwards are there already. The demons are holding the students hostage. It’s a standoff,’ the stone said.

I jumped over the balustrade to the empty space in the centre of the stairwell, twenty storeys to the ground. I fell at maximum speed until the floor loomed below me, then slowed my fall, levered one foot on the railing and jumped down to the landing in front of the ground floor door.

‘Demons holding third years? They must be big,’ I said.

*Do you need us? General Ma said into my head. The demons holding your students are quite large.*

‘Aren’t you dealing with a demon attack on the Horse Village?’ I asked via the stone.

*The Majia are handling it well, General Ma said. If we bring in the Princess we will be finished very quickly and be back in Hong Kong within the hour to help your students. Western Horsemen are on their way to assist us.*

‘Can the Horses and Horsemen handle it?’ I said. ‘I don’t want to take Simone out of school unless it’s absolutely necessary, you know that. She’s skipping a lot of school with these attacks as it is.’

*They can handle.*

‘Head back when you’re relieved, and we’ll see if we need your help. How long do you think it will be?’

*About an hour and a half.*

‘See you then.’

*My Lady.*

It took nearly forty-five minutes to reach the area of Mong Kok where the students were being held hostage. Marcus wound his way through the narrow, busy streets of the area and dropped me outside the brothel, then went off in search of a car

park. The brothel had a large sign outside advertising the prices: *White Russian 500; Fair Skin Thai 400; North and South Chinese 300.*

Two of the Masters, Sit and Park, stood outside the brothel with a group of five or six seniors, looking up at the second-storey windows. The brothel was a blackened concrete apartment building, 1950s era, with small barred windows on each floor. The ground floor was occupied by a microscopic mobile phone shop, all pristine white tiles and blazing lights. The brothel's single front door had a steel gate, which now hung open. Plain narrow concrete stairs led up inside.

'Where's Edwards?' I said.

'Around the back in the alley with another couple of seniors,' said Lee.

'What do we have here?'

'Six level fifty to sixty demons. A couple of them appear to be Mothers. They're holding a team of third years who came in to practise on them and were taken by surprise.'

'Mothers? Damn. Anybody hurt?'

'One of the prostitutes tried to escape and a demon smacked her down; she's probably concussed,' Sit said. 'A couple of the students sustained some severe injuries when they were taken—these demons hit them hard with some sort of energy blast.'

'The police aren't aware of what's going on? We won't see uniforms and guns roll up?'

'No,' Park said.

'What do the demons want?'

'Free passage.'

'That's all?'

'Yes. We're just waiting for you to give the go-ahead on either a raid or to let them go. We're prepared either way.'

'Recommendation?'

'Let them go.'

'Can we take them down without hurting any more girls or students?'

Park hesitated, then, 'No.'

'Let them go.'

'Ma'am.'

Park concentrated, and the teams moved into action. Sit and Lee went upstairs to deliver the deal to the demons. A bus appeared around the corner and stopped outside the brothel.

'Demons took off,' Park said. 'Lee has taken a recording.'

'Good.'

Three more of the seniors with us charged into the building and up the stairs. Two of the four third-year students who had been held hostage came limping down the stairs, obviously nursing injuries. They made for the bus.

'By your leave, ma'am,' Park said, 'we'll take the other two injured students directly to the infirmary.'

'Go,' I said.

Park and Lee went into the building.

The seniors who had run up the stairs shortly before came down escorting ten or so prostitutes. The girls were tiny and slim; some of them only looked about fourteen

or fifteen. There were no Europeans, only Thais, Indonesians and Chinese. They were obviously terrified as the seniors guided them onto the bus.

A few bystanders watched, curious. One of the seniors jumped off the bus, walked over and loudly told them in Cantonese that this was a police plainclothes operation and to move along. The bystanders grinned but continued to watch, unfazed.

‘Update on the Horse Village,’ I said to the stone.

*Under control. A squad of about fifty demons attacked the village, but the Horses held them off. Three Horses were killed and four were injured before the Generals arrived to help.*

‘Tell General Ma we have a lid on things here and he’s not needed,’ I said.

*We have been called to another attack anyway, ma’am, Ma said. A phoenix has called for help—a Mother is outside her nest and threatening her clutch.*

‘Can they make it in time?’ I said.

*If we move now we may make it, but we will be cutting it close, Ma said.*

‘Need help?’

*Simone could be there immediately to protect these chicks, Ma said. It is the phoenix’s nursery; she thought it would be safe in this remote area, but some Mothers have found it. She and her children are fighting but there is a large number of demons after her clutch. He hesitated a moment, then, This looks very bad. Please allow us to send in Princess Simone.*

*Help, General Danahuo, a woman’s voice said into my head. All of my babies are here, and a Mother and sixteen of her demon spawn are attempting to break into my nursery. Her voice became strained. Help!*

‘Can you relay, stone?’ I said. ‘Let me see.’

‘Networking...’ The stone’s voice trailed off. ‘I have a link. The phoenix has a sentient stone Shen as a jewellery item. Oh! It’s Glauconite, I know this one. Bringing up an image.’

A phoenix appeared in front of me, transparent against the buildings and people around me. She bowed, spreading her scarlet wings; royal blue and purple peacock-like feathers rippled among the flaming red pinions.

‘General Danahuo,’ she said. She gestured with her head to her left. ‘There they are. They threaten my clutch.’

She was standing on a barren, rocky hillside somewhere in southern China. About twenty metres down the slope, some red-garbed warriors fought with a band of demons. A Snake Mother stood behind the demons; the top half of her body was human, but with the skin flayed off, while the bottom half was an enormous black snake with clear gelatinous toxin oozing from between her scales. She must have been close on four metres in length; a really big one. I gasped when I saw the demons she was controlling—fake stone elementals. They appeared to be made of rough-hewn blocks of granite held together with an invisible force. They were about two metres tall, had featureless faces and moved with disturbing smoothness as they battled the phoenix’s defenders.

‘More of these things!’ Edwards said as he approached me from the back of the building and saw the projection next to me. ‘Who’s making them? They keep popping up everywhere!’

‘I’m surprised they sent stone to fight the phoenix’s guards,’ I said. ‘Wouldn’t

water be more effective against fire?’

The guards, wearing traditional all-red Chinese armour, were fighting valiantly with both swords and phoenix fire, but the demons outnumbered them about three to two. None of the guards had fallen yet, but they were obviously losing the battle—the stone demons were completely unharmed by their weapons and fire.

‘Tell Simone,’ I said to the stone. ‘Tell her where to go.’

*Thank you, ma’am,* both the phoenix and General Ma said at the same time. The image of the battle snapped off.

*On it,* Simone said into my head. *It was only PE anyway.*

‘I’ll go on the bus with the girls,’ I said to the stone. ‘Tell Marcus to take the car back. How are the injured seniors?’

*In the infirmary back at the Academy,* the stone said. *Serious injuries but not life-threatening. There’s some debate about whether to send them to hospital.*

‘What does Regina say?’ I said as I got onto the bus and sat next to Edwards. Edwards, as usual, wore a pair of plain slacks and a business shirt without a tie. His bald head, glasses, and paunch made him look like a fifty-year-old schoolteacher—and deceptively harmless.

The driver pulled away from the kerb and into the traffic.

*Regina says hospital.*

‘Damn, we can’t afford this. If they don’t go to hospital what are the consequences?’

*They will just receive better care in hospital,* the stone said. *Regina doesn’t have the facilities to deal with this type of fracture.*

I hesitated. We would be asked too many awkward questions if the students were checked into a hospital. ‘Stone, get me Bai Hu, please.’

*Ma’am,* the White Tiger said into my head.

‘Ah Bai. We have two badly injured students and Regina wants to hospitalise them. Any room in your clinic?’

*Stand by.*

His voice returned a couple of minutes later. *Either of them demons?*

*No,* the stone said. *Human.*

*Ah shit,* the Tiger said. *Well, okay, I’ll take them. A Horseman is on his way to get them.*

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Why do you always want my injured demon students?’

The Tiger didn’t reply.

‘He has a group of his children researching demon nature,’ the stone said.

‘Dear Lord, he’s not doing any genetic experimentation on them, is he?’

*Nah, just having a look inside,* the Tiger said. *They’re moving way ahead of us in breeding research, they always have. I thought it was about time that we caught up.*

‘Breeding?’ I said, horrified.

‘The Tiger is breeding demons?’ Edwards said.

*No, no, of course not,* the Tiger said. *We just collect them as we go along. Some of yours would be fun to have—a few of yours are the results of some very interesting breeding experiments. That’s why they have so much free will and have joined you in the first place.*

‘You hurt one hair on any of my demon students’ heads and your tail is in serious

trouble,' I said.

'Hear, hear,' Edwards said quietly.

'He's not breeding them, he's collecting them and doing research,' I said for Edwards' benefit. 'He wants some of ours 'cause they're the result of some "interesting breeding experiments".'

Edwards leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. 'No way is that bastard laying his paws on any of my students. My kids are not guinea pigs.'

*I promise I won't hurt them, Jim,* the Tiger said.

Edwards gave an excellent British harrumph. 'The psychological damage of undergoing that level of medical examination would undo all the good work we've done in getting these kids over what they've endured in Hell. The Tiger can piss off, he's not getting any of mine.'

*What if they volunteer?* the Tiger said.

'Oh, now that's clutching at straws,' Edwards said with amusement.

*It's like a holiday for them, Jimmy,* the Tiger said. *You know how nice it is out here. Let them come and check it out.* His voice became eager. *How many good demon students do you have anyway?*

'None of your damn business, and shut the fuck up,' Edwards said. He winced. 'Sorry, ma'am.' His tone was amused as he spoke to the Tiger again. 'Get lost. You're not getting any of my demons.'

'You're not getting any of the Academy demons,' I added. 'Get your own. And if I send any over to you for medical attention and find that you've experimented on them, your tail is mine.'

*Fine thanks I get for helping you out here,* the Tiger grumbled in my head. *Just one or two—*

'No!' Edwards and I said at the same time.

*Fine!*

'Oh, and Ah Bai?' I said.

*What!*

'Thanks for looking after these students for me, my friend. Most appreciated.'

*Stop sounding like Ah Wu,* he said, and went quiet.

'Be interesting to see what he's finding out about them,' Edwards said. 'I've always been fascinated by demons. Never knew they existed when I was back in the UK, but I must have run into a couple of them without realising.'

'You think so?' I said.

'It follows. Demons are often in on the nasty stuff that goes on.' He nodded towards the prostitutes, who cowered in their seats at the back of the bus as the students tried to explain to them that they were no longer slaves. 'We were often called in to deal with this sort of thing.'

'Ever run into any nasties that seemed more dangerous than your average felon?' I said. 'That gave even a group of trained fighters like yourselves a tough battle?'

He thought for a moment. 'Never had anybody that didn't drop when we shot them, and demons would be unaffected by guns.' He hesitated. 'But some of them did seem tougher. We were given extensive training, and it's like they were too.' He shrugged. 'Stronger, faster, smarter. A match for us. Could have been demons.'

'But if you shot them, they fell down,' I said. 'Never had any explode into demon

stuff?’

‘Never,’ he said. ‘Must go back to the UK and have a look one day.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ I said.

He harrumphed again. ‘Neither of us have the goddamn time, ma’am. We’re both flat out keeping our people here safe from the Demon King and his little kiddies.’

I sighed. ‘I know.’ I touched the stone. ‘How’s Simone doing?’

‘Let me see,’ the stone said. ‘She’s just arriving there now.’

‘Can you link me up, please?’

Simone appeared as a small image in front of us, running downhill towards the demons from where the phoenix was standing guard at the entrance to her nest. She was wearing her school PE uniform—a pair of green shorts and house T-shirt—and carrying her father’s sword, Dark Heavens. The sword was completely without adornment on either the handle or the blade. It was slightly too big for her but it was her weapon of choice.

As she closed on the demons, she lifted into the air, her tawny hair flying around her. She raised Dark Heavens horizontally above her head, and held her left hand up, her first two fingers pointing towards the demons, ready to use chi energy if necessary.

She flew lightning-fast over the Snake Mother, somersaulted directly above it and sliced diagonally through its skinless body. It fell in two pieces, the snake part writhing across the ground, the human hands scrabbling at the gravel.

Simone landed in a crouch, and I was breathless for a moment thinking she had hit the ground too hard. She spun and rose and launched shen energy at two nearby demons, blinding white blasts that destroyed them. The red warriors that had been fighting the demons stepped back in shock and raised their hands.

About six of the fake stone elementals remained. Simone ran to the centre of the battle, concentrated for a split second, then rammed Dark Heavens into the ground. Her hair flew up, the gravel lifted from the ground around her and a shockwave spread outwards from the blade of the sword, creating a visible ripple in the stony ground. When the shockwave hit the warriors, it knocked them off their feet; but when it hit the demons, it completely shattered them. They fell to the ground in shards of stone.

The shockwave stopped and the gravel that had been flying around Simone dropped to the ground. She pulled her sword free, and walked back up the slope to the phoenix. The red warriors rose and checked the area; the demons had all been destroyed.

Simone shared a few short words with the phoenix, then they touched wing to hand, the flaming feathers doing her no damage. She nodded to the warriors, who saluted her, then she shot straight up into the air and disappeared towards the north, leaving behind a trail of vapour.

*I thank you, Madam General,* the phoenix said into my head. *You and the Princess have saved my babies. I am your servant.*

‘Tell her she’s welcome,’ I said to the stone, and the image of the phoenix snapped off.

‘Never ceases to amaze me how such a sweet young lass can kick so much serious arse,’ Edwards said.

One of the seniors called to us from the back of the bus. ‘A few of these girls don’t speak anything but Indonesian and Thai, and one is Vietnamese. We need your

help, Masters.'

Sit moved to the back of the bus where he talked to the girls in Putonghua. Nevertheless, they all understood him.

'I envy the Immortals,' Edwards said.

'Then you'll never join them,' I said.

He shook with a short, silent laugh. 'I know.'

'If you want to take the time to go and cultivate the Tao, it's your choice,' I said.

He considered for a moment. 'One day maybe. They all encourage me to go and cultivate the Tao on the Mountain, living on pine nuts and spring water, but I don't think I'm ready for the Art of Navel Gazing. I'm just having too much damn fun here.'

I nodded. 'Just so you know. If you feel the time is right, then go. They will help you.'

'Thanks, Emma,' he said softly. He shifted to sit more upright. 'Nearly there now. Let's work out what to do with these poor girls.'

## CHAPTER 2

The team who'd rescued the prostitutes gathered for a debriefing in the conference room on the ninth floor.

'Four of them can't go home; their families sold them into this and they won't be wanted back,' Sit said. 'Of the seven who can go home, we found only three of their passports in the brothel, the other four passports are missing. We'll have stones tap into the relevant immigration computers to extract their details and make duplicates for them. Something very interesting, ma'am—one of the girls appears to be half-dragon and completely unaware of her nature. One of our dragons recognised her.'

'I'll talk to her,' I said. 'Arrange for her and Amy to meet me in my office after this; and to bring along the four girls that can't go home. But first let's have a look at Mr Lee's recording. I want to see this energy blast that injured the students.'

Lee folded up from human to stone form and drifted to sit in the middle of the table. We waited for him to produce the recording of the standoff with the demons, but nothing happened. He returned to human form after a couple of minutes, obviously puzzled.

'The recording's not there,' he said.

'It's not in your matrix?' I said.

He shook his head, bewildered. 'That area of my structure is clear. Like nothing was ever there.' He looked concerned. 'I've been hacked.'

'Not possible, they were just Mothers,' the stone in my ring said. 'Bring out what you have either side, let's see.'

Lee rubbed his hands over his face. 'There isn't anything there. I recall arriving at the building, going up the stairs, then going into recording mode. Then the next segment of data is me back down in the bus. I've been wiped.'

'Not possible!' the stone said.

'Has anything like this happened to you before?' I said.

Lee shook his head. 'Very disturbing.'

'Time to go back and see what's going on there,' I said. 'Lee, grab a couple of other stones, take a couple of Celestials. See if you can get a dragon if they're free, and teleport directly in. Everybody take a recording. Someone take an old-fashioned video camera from stores; ask Lok for one. We'll meet back here in a couple of hours and see what we can see.'

'Ma'am.' Lee lowered his head and disappeared.

'Has anything like this ever happened before?' I asked the stone.

'It is possible for us to experience damage to part of the matrix, but usually we can piece together the undamaged parts to give us an idea of what went wrong,' the stone said. 'Being erased like that is unheard of.'

'Are you passing it through the stone network?'

'Quite a few stones have dropped what they're doing and are going along with Lee. A few want to examine his matrix. We're looking into it.'

'Good,' I said. 'Sit, get a stone to make some duplicate passports for these girls,

and let's send them home. I'll talk to the dragon and the four that can't go home in my office. Other than that, I think we're done here.'

'Ma'am,' Sit said, and disappeared.

'I'm very concerned, Emma,' the stone said.

'You're not the only one.'

'So it's your choice,' I said to the five girls. 'Go home to your own country, or stay here. If you stay, we can give you the right of abode and you can find a job and work here. We will give you somewhere to live. It is up to you.'

One of the girls sniffled. The others sat looking down at their hands, silent and disbelieving.

'If you don't know what you want to do, take your time,' I said. 'We will look after you; we won't make you do sex work. We will train you to do office work if you like, and you can find yourselves good jobs back home.'

None of the girls moved or spoke.

'My staff will show you where you're going to live until you decide,' I said. 'The lady who brought you here is waiting for you outside the office. If you want to go, just tell her, she'll take you home. If you're not sure, then you can stay with us until you know.'

I called to Martha and she opened the door and came in. 'I'll do the rest,' she said.

She smiled at the girls and folded her hands in front of her. 'I will look after you, nobody will hurt you any more. I can take you home or you can stay here; either way you are safe.'

The girls sat without moving.

Martha put her hand out. 'Come with me.'

The girls rose like automatons, still looking at the floor, and went out with Martha. One of them sniffled again and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

Martha gently put her hand out to stop one of the girls from leaving the room. 'Not you, you stay here. Madam needs to talk to you.'

The girl stopped, still staring at the floor. The other girls went with Martha without looking back.

I checked my notes for her name. 'Hien. Please sit again, and I'll tell you a story.'

She returned to her seat and glanced up at me through her long fringe. I smiled. Actually looking at me was a promising step.

'About eleven years ago, I took a job as nanny to a little girl named Simone. Her father was a wealthy Hong Kong businessman.'

Hien didn't move.

'After a while, I discovered that he wasn't a businessman at all, but a god. He was Xuan Wu, the black Turtle Snake God of the North.'

Hien glanced at me through her fringe again.

'I don't know how much you know about the gods, but he was the North Wind, an Immortal. He married a human woman and had a child with her. It's a long story, but because of his wife he was forced to stay in human form for a long time and this made him weak. His wife was murdered by a demon before I met him; that's why he needed me to nanny. He and I fell in love and he died about three years after that,

murdered by a demon. I've been looking after his daughter, Simone, ever since. I've also been given the job of looking after his martial arts academy and some other stuff related to him being Emperor of the Northern Heavens.' I put my chin on my hand. 'Not exactly what I was intending to do with my life, but one day he'll come back and we'll get married.'

Hien clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap.

'Yep, you're probably thinking: more lies. But this is actually easy to prove because I can have any god or demon wander in here and take their True Form and scare you to death. I won't do that though.'

She studied her hands carefully, still too traumatised to talk. This would take time.

'Some of the staff and students here at the Martial Arts Academy are dragons,' I went on. 'Dragons are fierce fighters with impeccable honour and completely loyal to us. They are also incredibly fickle in love. They tend to love humans and then leave them without thought; not out of malice, just because that's the way they are. We've been working here to explain to the dragons that this sort of behaviour isn't really acceptable where humans are concerned. That if you produce a child with a human partner you're expected to hang around and help care for it. Dragon children hatch fully able to care for themselves, but half-human dragons are generally the same as human babies.'

She sighed gently. I was boring her now.

'One of your parents took off when you were a small child, Hien, leaving the other to care for you. Was it your mother or father who left you?'

She frowned slightly but didn't reply.

'Please answer me, Hien. Was it your mother or your father that left you when you were a small child?'

She tilted her head slightly, still hiding under her long fringe. 'Mother,' she whispered.

'Your mother left when you were little. Your father probably has nothing but good things to say about her, and says that she left because that's the way she was. He might even say that he still loves her.'

She glanced up at me through her hair.

'Your mother is a dragon, Hien.'

She looked down again. Lost her.

'You're a dragon too, if you can learn to transform. You can be very powerful, able to swim and fly. But you must make this hidden dragon nature emerge. If you can, you will never again have to worry about anybody harming you.'

She remained still and silent.

'I have one of the Academy dragons outside the door, Hien. She's been translating for me. I can't speak a word of Vietnamese.'

A small lie, but worthwhile in the circumstances. Amy wasn't translating for me; all languages were understood within the walls of the Academy.

'Right now she looks like an ordinary young woman. She can transform into a dragon to show you, if you like, and then you can decide whether you want to be a dragon and learn what you are capable of, or whether you would just like to go home.'

Hien sat unmoving, thinking about it.

‘Come on in, Amy,’ I said.

Amy opened the door and Hien jumped. Amy smiled reassuringly at her, and sat in the other visitor’s chair.

‘I know this is shocking for you,’ she told the girl. ‘I didn’t know I was a dragon until I was twenty-five years old; my father never told me he was a dragon too. We have a community of dragons here at the Academy and we go out and swim and fly together. It’s great fun. And we’re fierce fighters too; we never have to worry about being hurt.’

‘Amy will look after you now, Hien,’ I said, ‘and introduce you to some other dragons. All of them will be in human form. When you’re ready, you can ask her to show you her dragon form, her True Form. Take a few days, meet the other dragons, then at the end of the time decide whether you would like to learn to become a dragon yourself, or whether you’d like to go home.’

Amy held her hand out to Hien. ‘Come with me, I’ll look after you. Nobody’s going to hurt you any more.’

‘Go with her, Hien,’ I said. ‘And good luck. I hope one day I see you in dragon form. I’d like to see what colour dragon you are. Amy is the most beautiful black dragon with gold fins that I have ever seen.’

I nodded to Amy and she smiled back at me. As she gently guided Hien out, she turned back to me. ‘Don’t worry, Emma, I think we’ll bring her round.’

‘I hope so,’ I said. ‘She’s had a lot of bad stuff happen in her life. It would be nice to see something good happen.’

I was about halfway through the end-of-year leave requests when there was a knock on the door. ‘Enter.’

Lee came in, looking grim, with Silver, one of the Academy dragons. They took the visitors’ chairs and Silver placed the Academy’s video camera on the desk.

‘What did you find?’ I asked.

They both shook their heads.

‘Nothing,’ Lee said. ‘I wasn’t wiped this time. In fact, nothing at all happened. We went right through the place and didn’t find anything. You can watch the video, but it’s basically a tour of a down-market Mong Kok brothel. Four stones and Master Sit came with us, and absolutely nothing happened.’

‘Let’s see,’ I said.

Lee picked the camera up off the desk, flipped open the LCD screen and turned it on. He glanced down at the screen and his face filled with shock.

Silver leapt to his feet and changed to Celestial Form—nearly two metres tall with long, flowing, shining grey hair and scaled silver armour. He summoned a spear and held it to one side in the small office.

‘Don’t attack,’ Lee said to Silver without looking away from the screen. ‘That’s Lady Emma’s serpent form.’

‘What?’ I said.

Lee turned the LCD screen around so that it faced the same way as the lens. I could see myself in the screen; the camera was on record mode, not playback.

I stared at myself. ‘Holy shit.’

Silver changed back to human form, but his hair remained long and grey. ‘The

Dark Lady is a serpent?’

‘Nobody knows why, but I can change into a big black snake. Not many people know about it, Silver,’ I said, watching with fascination as the enormous black serpent in the tiny screen also opened its mouth to speak. ‘We’d prefer not to freak out the students.’

I took the camera from Lee and watched myself. ‘I never knew I’d look like that on video; on still cameras I appear human. Wait!’ I looked up. ‘Stone, Simone took a home video about six months ago when we went to London and I was human in that. What the hell?’

‘No idea, Emma,’ the stone said. ‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘This information isn’t to be shared,’ Lee said to Silver. ‘Many of the human students would probably take it quite badly.’

Silver nodded. ‘I understand. How long have you been able to do this, Lady Emma?’

I paused, embarrassed.

Lee glanced at Silver, obviously sharing the information by telepathy, and Silver’s face cleared. ‘Sharing mind and body with the Dark Lord. That could very well bring out an inherent serpent nature.’

I could feel my face growing red, and Silver grinned. ‘In this respect you are still very human, ma’am.’

‘And I’d like to stay that way, thank you very much,’ I said.

I changed the camera to playback and watched as Lee and Silver swept through the brothel, pausing to focus on the untidy metal beds in each room with their cheap polyester quilts. ‘You were right. Down-market.’

‘Very,’ Lee said. ‘But we didn’t find anything.’

‘I had a serious look around for anything that would give us more detailed information on the nature of these demons,’ Silver said, ‘and I too came up blank. No paperwork, no messages, nothing. I’d say it was stripped clean but they never came back to do it. Which means there was never anything there to link the demons to the operation in the first place.’

‘Credit card machine? EFTPOS?’ I said. ‘Any cables you could hook into to get information, Lee?’

‘They had an EFTPOS line to the Hong Kong Bank. I traced it back and it was listed to a company registered at the brothel’s address, but with names of nonexistent people as the directors,’ Lee said. ‘Drawing a blank, ma’am. We have nothing.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Let’s leave it for now. Warn the third years, and keep an eye on the criminal operations for these demons.’

‘They’ll probably keep a low profile for a while now,’ Lee said. ‘But I’d really like to know what they did to me.’

‘Are you okay?’ I said.

‘I’ve been checked over, I’m fine.’ His mouth tweaked in a small smile. ‘I’ve just been erased.’

‘We’ll let the others know. The stone network is on the lookout. That’s basically all we can do,’ Silver said.

‘Thanks, guys,’ I said.

They stood patiently in front of my desk.

‘Dismissed!’ I said. ‘And you know you don’t need to wait for it!’  
Silver bowed slightly, grinning knowingly. ‘Serpent Lady.’  
‘And don’t call me that!’  
They both disappeared.

## CHAPTER 3

I'd just finished the last of the end-of-year leave forms when I heard a soft sound and a red box materialised on my desk. Thank you very much, Heavenly Bureaucracy: 7 pm, a hell of a day, and this lands on my desk. I hoped it wasn't urgent.

I pressed my thumb to the elaborate gold filigree clasp on the front of the box. Inside was a single scroll, dun-coloured vellum tied with a red ribbon. I opened it and perused the black Chinese characters. Not written in red, so not an edict from the Jade Emperor, but from the complexity of the large square seal at the bottom of the document it was from someone quite high up. I couldn't read the flowing Chinese calligraphic characters but the Celestial nature of the scroll made their meaning apparent as I scanned them. My heart leapt when I saw Leo's name.

*Lady Emma Donahoe, Grand Master (Acting), New Wudang Academy of Martial Arts; Probationary Regent of the Northern Heavens*

*Madam,*

*Your application to attend to the matter of your Retainer Leo Gerald Alexander has been reviewed by the Office.*

*In light of the nature of the circumstances it has been decided that this matter will be forwarded to the Secretary for Underworld Affairs for further consultation.*

*Signed and chopped*

*Undersecretary for Review of Promotion*

Yes. Finally we were getting somewhere. The Secretary for Underworld Affairs was the head of the Department of Hell and Yanluo Wang's second in command. Yanluo Wang, Lord of the Underworld, answered only to the Jade Emperor when it came to the judgement of those found Worthy for Immortality. After eight years of tedious bureaucratic blockades I was close to being able to enter Hell and talk Leo into coming out.

I grabbed the scroll, rolled it up and shoved it into my handbag. Simone would be thrilled. I was meeting her for dinner at a Thai restaurant nearby and then we were going shopping in Pacific Place. I walked to the door, then stopped when I heard a soft sound outside. I listened. Quiet voices. Damn, in this form I couldn't use my Inner Eye to check.

I tapped the stone, then put my hand over it to signal that it should stay silent.

*I hear them, it said in my mind. It paused. Demons, Emma, big ones.*

Not again. And right when I was about to go home. This was becoming ridiculous.

Yep, the stone said. *It's only three weeks since the last bunch.*

I dropped my bag on the floor of my office, strode out the door, down the hall to the lift lobby, and switched on all the lights. There was a soft exclamation, then silence.

I stormed back into the middle of the main office cubicles, stopped in front of the demons, and crossed my arms.

They had taken the form of ordinary Chinese teenagers: two boys and a girl. I studied them carefully. The stone was right: really big ones. The girl was a shape-shifter; the two boys were humanoids.

'Looking for me?' I said.

The demons shared a look, then the girl stepped forward. 'Are you Emma?'

'Yes I am.'

She smiled and tilted her head. 'We found your wallet downstairs and wanted to return it to you. But I left it back at my apartment. Can you come with us and I'll give it back to you?'

Wow, that was lame even by their standards.

'I suggest you leave right now,' I said, 'before you find yourselves in serious trouble, kids. How did you get in past the seals anyway? I just had them reset three weeks ago.'

Her eyes glazed over. 'Seals?'

Great, a genius leading the group.

'Yes, seals. Ours are some of the best. Who helped you to get in?'

A fleeting expression of vicious cunning crossed the face of one of the boys. Ah, the real brains.

'We don't know what you're talking about, Emma,' he said. 'We just have your wallet and want to give it back to you.'

'You were told by the Demon King that if you brought me to him in one piece, he'd let you back into Hell,' I said. 'What did you do to piss him off? You're the fourth bunch of kids since November.'

The girl recovered herself. 'I'm sorry, Emma, I have no idea what you're talking about. Don't you want your wallet?'

'It's in my bag back in my office,' I said. 'And now I'm giving you fair warning. Turn, and I will take you in. Run, and you'll probably starve to death locked out of Hell. If you wish to take the third option, I will oblige but I won't be happy about it. You could attain humanity if you just gave it a try. I'm a generous master to all my demons, you can ask any of them.'

When I said the word *demons* they stiffened slightly.

'Very well,' the smart one said. 'You know what we are. Fine. Come with us and we won't hurt you. Our dad just wants to talk to you, that's all. Come along, and we promise nothing will happen to you.'

'I can take all three of you down, you know,' I said.

The girl snorted with laughter. 'Yeah, right. We're all spawn of the King himself. No chance, lady. Come quietly or you'll regret it.'

The cunning one studied me appraisingly.

'We can take her,' the girl told him. 'Dad said she's just an ordinary human. We can do it.'

I held my hand out. 'Three against one is hardly fair. May I use a weapon?'

The second boy shrugged. He hadn't spoken yet, and his presence radiated apathy. The follower. 'Whatever. We can take you, doesn't matter what you use against us.'

'Anything at all?' I said. 'How about this then?'

I called the Murasame, the Destroyer, and it appeared in my hand. I held the katana in front of me and used my thumb to slide the blade five centimetres out of its scabbard in a visible threat. 'So who's first?'

'That's the Murasame, guys,' the second boy said quietly. 'Oh my God, we are in big trouble.'

'Not possible,' the girl said.

'Why? Because the Murasame belongs to the Dark Lady, head of New Wudang?' I said. 'Check the first floor of this building with your demon vision, kids, and tell me what you see.'

Their eyes unfocused and their faces filled with horror as they saw the armoury that took up most of the floor.

The girl made a soft wailing sound of terror. 'This is New Wudang. He sent us to New Wudang.'

'Let's get out of here,' the cunning boy whispered.

'Join me and I'll treat you well, you know I will,' I said. 'If you run you'll end up dead.'

The girl and the cunning boy disappeared. Running. The follower boy didn't run; he stood and watched me.

I bowed slightly and dismissed the sword. 'Welcome. Kneel and pledge.'

He fell to his knees in front of me and his face filled with wonder. 'I pledge allegiance to you, Dark Lady. I am your servant. Protect me, I am yours.'

'Rise,' I said. 'Someone will have to complete the taming process for me because I really am an ordinary human.'

The demon rose and the expression of wonder faded into contentment. 'As you wish, my Lady.'

'Stone, can you see who is on the night shift for demon duty and ask them to come up and get him?'

'Did it a while ago,' the stone said. 'Nigel's on his way.'

'Now tell me what you did that got the King so annoyed,' I said to the demon.

He sagged, miserable. 'We were on guard duty for the black one.'

I raised my hand to stop him. 'The black one? You mean Leo Alexander?'

He shrugged. 'Yeah, that one.'

A stab of pain hit me. 'Is he okay?'

'Apart from refusing Immortality, ma'am, yes, he is.'

'So, what happened?'

'We were guarding Leo when a hawker came past with sweet bean curd. We all went to buy some, and left Leo's cell unattended.'

'Is Leo alive?'

'Uh...' The boy hesitated. 'Define "alive", ma'am, and I'll be able to answer that.'

'If I were to go down there and talk the Courts into releasing him back to the