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Opening extract from

Firefight

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Warning: most things you think you know about the world are a lie.

Previously in my life . . .

Three months ago I was just another gypsy boy – moving from place to place, earning a crust of bread here and there, and maybe getting into a few scrapes. The next thing I know I've got an undercover police operation called Phoenix on my tail. It turns out they're the ones who deal with other-world crime – rumours of monsters in the sewers, laboratories letting mutants loose, secret troops of genetically modified soldiers ... if it's weird, they investigate.

You have to be crazy or a freak to work for Phoenix. That's why they wanted me – I've got the craziness. I spend my free time running across roofs, or finding ways to get into tunnels below the city streets. And any bit of trouble that's around usually sticks to me.

But mostly they came after me because I'm a freak. I have something called the Hercules gene. My great-great-great-granddaddy, the champion bare-knuckle fighter Hercules Smith, had a rogue gene that gave him phenomenal strength, and I've inherited it. That's why Wren, Phoenix's mission controller, contacted me three months ago. They wanted me

to close down an underground fight club where kids are born and bred to fight all their lives.

And that's how I came to meet a rich girl called Java Sparrow and rescue her brother Johnny from the fight. After that, I thought I'd done my share of saving millionaires' kids from a fate worse than death, and Phoenix would leave me in peace to get on with my ducking and diving.

But this is my life we're talking about. Instead I got recruited full-time into the organization by Wren, so that I could risk my life on even more missions. Which wouldn't have been too bad, but I swear to God, no one – especially not Wren – mentioned anything about demons.



Part One
England

Chapter One

If anyone caught me I was in big trouble.

In the light from the monitor I tapped out the instructions I'd memorized. An email flashed on to the screen. It said:

Hey, mates, watch this video clip closely. It's a scream!

I clicked on the attachment. A picture filled the screen. It was a figure in a black robe, the sort monks or martial arts fighters wear. He'd got his head bowed, as if he was praying.

So this was what all the fuss was about? A guy with his head down. *This* was the email I wasn't supposed to look at, or even breathe near. Jeez, what sort of baby did they take me for?

Skritch!

I froze. A faint scratching to my left, coming from the corridor. I waited to hear it again. Nothing. A mouse, maybe. This place was ancient, and probably full of rats, mice, deathwatch beetles and ghosts ready to rattle their chains.

Thing is, what I was doing was against the rules. I knew it.

But I was doing it anyway. So maybe it was my guilty conscience making me hear things.

Skritch!

No, that was definitely not my imagination. I crept to the door and peered out.

The corridor was pitch black, except for strips of bright light coming through gaps in the curtains, like laser beams. There was just enough light to show up the nightmare statues lining the walls. A two-metre-tall winged horse on my left, next to a marble lion and a unicorn.

I listened for a second or two. Nothing. So I went back to the monitor.

The man in the robe still had his head down. *Big deal*, I thought. But maybe I was missing something, so I leaned forward to get a better look. Which meant my nose was right near the screen when suddenly – *the hood lifted up.*

Wham! There was a flash view of a nightmare demon face. Glittering insect eyes. A thin slit of a mouth. A long forked tongue flickering out between needle-thin fangs. Then it screamed in my face.

I swear to God my heart nearly stopped. *Danger!* said my brain and I went into a crouching, heart-pounding stance, ready to fight, ready to run, ready to defend myself. And then, just when I'd managed to convince myself that this demon was on a computer screen and not breathing fire in my face, a hand thumped down on my shoulder.

'Don't move a muscle, boy.'

I could've whirled round in a fraction of a second and power-kicked whoever had got hold of me. But I didn't,



because it was Wren. And he was worse than the demon. He was a giant of a man, but he'd appeared out of the shadows as if he'd got a cloak of invisibility or something. He was also my boss, this was his office in Phoenix Headquarters, and it was on his orders that the Screamer email was off limits to me.

'Want to know why I told you not to touch it, Freedom?' he growled in my ear.

I didn't answer, just stood staring out into the darkness with Wren's hand still gripping my shoulder. He told me anyway.

'Because kids who watch it disappear without trace within twenty-four hours.'

So that was me in trouble again.

Chapter Two

'Cut it out, Wren,' I said. 'It's just a joke. It can't hurt anyone. Put "screamer" or "prank flash" into Google and there's loads of 'em to download.'

Wren pushed me down into the office chair. It was like being shoved by a bulldozer. He loomed over me. The Screamer demon had been bad, but this was worse. He punched one of his big mitts at a control panel on the wall. The blind behind him slid up, letting the midday sun flood into the room.

'Some joke,' he said grimly. 'Except that eight other kids haven't found it funny.' He gave me his cop's stare. 'They've disappeared off the face of the earth. Who knows if they're even still alive?'

I blinked in the bright light. I wished he'd left the blinds down. It's easier to tell lies when your face can't give you away. And anyway, Phoenix HQ looked better in the dark.

It was an old haunted mansion squatting way out on the

moors. It was just the right place for a freaky organization such as Phoenix, because it'd been built by a mad earl. His hobby had been collecting statues of Greek gods and mythical creatures. He was allergic to sunlight, so the place was short on windows and big on tunnels and dark corridors. Turn a corner in Phoenix HQ and you were more likely to come face to face with a one-eyed giant or a mermaid than another human being.

There were dungeons and cellars, as well. Last week something had started howling down there, all night long. It sounded like they'd locked up the king of the wolves.

Wren began pacing up and down. He was wearing his usual cowboy hat, with an empty shoulder holster showing under his jacket. Usually it held a Magnum. He gave me a hard look.

'Tell me what you know about Screamers, Freedom.'

I pinned the innocent look back on my face.

'They're the sort of thing you email to your mates as a prank,' I said.

Java, the girl I'd met on my first Phoenix mission, had taught me about them. She was a marvel when it came to computers.

'It's a short movie, of something funny or puzzling, and when you lean forward for a better look it suddenly screams and makes you jump out of your skin.' I began to sweat. 'You've got it all wrong, Wren. They're harmless.'

Wren narrowed his eyes. 'Not this one.'

'An email can't make a kid disappear,' I said, sweating some more.

'We think there's a message hidden in the scream.'

'What? Like "run away"?'

'Exactly. And then the night before the kids disappear, they have a visit. They wake from a deep sleep to find they can't move a muscle. Imagine how terrifying that must be.' He paused. 'And then the Screamer appears in their rooms. We don't know what happens after that. But the kids go missing.'

I laughed. I swear I thought he was joking.

'The Screamer?' I said. 'The demon on the video, with the pointy teeth and the black eyes?'

'Yep.'

'The Screamer's not real, he's computer-generated!'

'That's not what we've heard.'

My heart began to beat a tattoo. I swear to God, I hadn't known it was dangerous. I couldn't meet Wren's eyes. But he bent down until we were eye to eye.

'So who did you forward it to?'

'I wanted to frighten my little nieces with it,' I said, after we'd stared at each other for a while across the desk. 'I was just messing around. I sent it to my laptop.'

Which was half true, but half a lie as well. Sometimes you have to lie to protect someone you're crazy about.

I'm talking here about Java Sparrow. She's nothing but trouble, but I'm mad about her. And I think she feels the same way about me. Unfortunately her rich and powerful daddy hates me, even though I saved his son's life. So me and Java aren't supposed to see, speak or even exist anywhere near each other. Me being on the same planet is enough to make her father see red.



'That's all? To no one else?' said Wren.

I looked away. Two days ago me and Java had talked on MSN. She showed me some Screamers she'd downloaded off YouTube. But I had to go one better, and say, 'That's nothing. Phoenix've got a Screamer that Wren's forbidden me to watch, it's that bad.' Which I shouldn't have done, because Phoenix stuff is secret. I was trying to impress her, I suppose.

Worse luck for me, she went, 'Oh my God, I have just got to see it!' and nagged and nagged me until I agreed to sneak into Wren's office and forward a copy to her laptop.

For a rich girl, Java was pretty good at breaking the law. But I couldn't tell Wren I'd disobeyed him.

So I said, 'Honest. Just my laptop.'

It was a small lie, compared to some of the whoppers I've told in the past, but it sealed my fate.

'Anyway, it's no big deal. I'll delete it straight away. Honest.'

I pushed my chair back. Wren must have thought I was going to make a dash for the door. His hand thumped down on the desk.

'Don't even think about leaving,' he said. 'Snow wants a word. You're on your last chance to start behaving like a member of a team, and not like a spoilt brat.'

In answer I swung my chair back on to its two back legs and stared out of the window.

When Phoenix had moved in they'd left the inside of the mansion much as they'd found it, but now the gardens were full of rifle ranges and physical training courses, with fun little items like a flooded tunnel, six-metre-drop jumps over

spikes, and climbing walls with hardly any footholds.

I began flexing my muscles. Something told me I'd be needing to run very soon. I'd had enough of being indoors, and being told what I could and couldn't do.

'So do I get fired?' I said eventually. 'Can I go home?'

Two little lines appeared at the side of Wren's mouth, which I'd learned meant he was smiling. 'No. You don't get to just run away from your mistakes. Life doesn't work like that here.'

I could've pushed past him and been out of that room in seconds. But I didn't. A silence stretched between us. Then his mobile rang.

'Wren here. Yeh, I'm dealing with the Screamer email.' He shot me a look that warned me not to make any sort of move. 'You've got the footage? Is the quality good enough? Right, patch it through to me.'

Wren grabbed a remote and pressed a few buttons. The blinds slid back down.

He turned to me. 'You think the Screamer's not real?'

There was a click as a digital projector came to life. A beam of light shone on a screen on the far wall.

'Well, we've caught him live on camera kidnapping a teenager.'