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Printing history: 1991, Ace Books, New York.

1995 Armada Press, Moscow

2002 Wildside Press, New Jersey

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DEDICATION

With fond memories and warmest regards to the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, and the Sunday afternoon gang of crazies at Chestnut Hall: Oz Fontecchio, Barbara Higgins, Luke Thalmeyer, Frank Richards, JoAnne Lawler, Larry Gelfand, Joyce Carrol, John Prentis, T-Burn, John and Laura Symms, and especially to the vivacious Debbie Malamut.

Okay, who brought the pizza?

INITIATION

PROLOGUE

The scream came from out of nowhere.

Steadily, the howl of pain grew in volume until it split the forest night like an endless explosion. Rapidly increasing, the raw-throated cry of anguish wavered and wassailed until it abruptly ended in a meaty thump. In perfect harmony, the mountain cabin shook; pictures and diplomas went lopsided, mugs danced off bookshelves and the glass door of a surgical instrument cabinet cracked.

Quickly rising from her easy chair by the fireplace, Dr. Joanne Abernathy threw aside the medical journal and hobbled over to a window. Dear God, what was that horrible noise? Had somebody fallen off Deadman's Cliff?

As she drew back the lace curtains, the panels of thermal tempered glass segmented her view of the Canadian forest into tiny squares. Pressing her nose flat against the glass, the veterinarian frantically glanced about. Illuminated by the full moon overhead, the trees were frosted by the silver light, making green seem black and black turn invisible. Completely filling the northern horizon was the ragged gray expanse of the MacKenzie Palisades, an irregular series of sheer angular foothills that bisected this isolated area of the Yukon wilderness like an insane granite wall.

Then the howl sounded again, closer this time, and faintly overhead could be heard a jetliner streaked off into the distance. An odd thought came to Abernathy. The old woman promptly dismissed it as nonsense. Anybody falling out of a plane would be dead before they hit the ground from cranial blood loss. And afterwards? Well, you'd simply fill in the impact crater with a bulldozer and put a tombstone any ol' damn place that seemed proper.

However, if the noise of the passenger jet had frightened some poor bastard into tumbling off the cliff...

Hurriedly, the retired vet retrieved her teeth from a glass of water set on the stone hearth, pulled on her walking shoes and grabbed a flashlight. After forty years of birthing calves, inoculating sheep and fixing broken bones for both man and beast, there was little she couldn't patch. If the luckless son-of-a-bitch was still alive when she got there, he had a good chance of staying that way. As the closest thing to a doctor in these parts, Abernathy was duty bound to heal even incompetent hunters who tumbled off mountains. Darn fool was probably drunk. Frightened by a plane, indeed. Hummph!

Pulling on a light cloth coat, she paused for a moment at the gun rack. This wasn't downtown

Whitehead. There were pumas and grizzly in this area, neither of which gave a hoot about her Hellenic oath, but only how tasty old folk were. Bypassing the big bore 30.06 Winchester as too cumbersome to use with her arthritis, she started to take the Browning .22 carbine, but then decided no. It was only a varmint rifle and so incredibly lightweight that it floated if dropped in water. Obviously, a compromise was the answer.

Yanking open the hall closet, she retrieved a bulky leather belt from a peg on the wall. Dutifully, the vet strapped it about her waist and checked the load in the shiny clean Webley .44 revolver. She had never fired the weapon except in practice sessions and once, only once, to put a rabid opossum out of its misery. Afterwards she had burned the corpse and gotten royally drunk. As with all the women in her family, Joanne hated to kill anything. Being a pacifist just seemed to run in her blood.

Unbolting the front door, she clicked on the porch lights and stepped outside. The forest was strangely quiet. Weird. Testing the wind with a damp finger, she guesstimated that the noise had come from the direction of the old salt lick and started east. After a few dozen meters the trail angled off in another direction, so Abernathy took advantage of a fresh bear tunnel to continue towards the cliff. She moved fast and silent along the collapsed line of bushes that marked the regular passage of a large bear. A griz, perhaps. Thankfully, the droppings smelled old.

Minutes later, she found the moaning creature buried under a pile of leaves by a copse of tall evergreen trees. The white beam of her flashlight displayed little of the animal besides its hind legs, but those were enough. Joanne knew a wolf when she saw one, and this was the biggest ever. The paws were large as a grown man's foot. Enormous!

Laying her flashlight on the rocky ground to shine on the wolf, the ranger gently brushed aside the leaves and uncovered the wounded animal. The beast whimpered at the intrusion, but offered no resistance. Black blood was matted heavily on the chest, and there was reddish foam about its snout. Joanne frowned. Damn. Possible internal bleeding. There wasn't much she could do for that here. Glancing upwards, she was not surprised to see a leafy hole through the tree branches overhead. The ground here was a flat outcropping of stone, torn branches and smashed bushes forming a natural cushion under the dying wolf. Hmm, the angle was wrong, but the creature must have fallen off the cliff. What else made sense?

Keeping well clear of the dagger-sharp teeth, Abernathy examined the beast more closely. The wolf was shivering and panting, but its nose was bone dry. Trained fingers checked its ears and eased back an eyelid. Damnation, the pulse rate was down, while the temperature was up. The wolf seemed to be suffering from more than mere impact damage. Suspicious, the vet turned her flashlight directly on the bloody chest and got an answer. Yep, it was also gunshot. But the wound in chest was only superficial, made by a .22, or .32 at the most. Ye god, were the frigging poachers using poisoned bullets again? Anything to save the pelt from additional damage. Damn them. There was a difference between hunting for food and killing for fashion. Morally, ethically and legally.

Furious, Abernathy hoped that the slug hadn't hit any bones so the ballistics lab of the Royal Mounties could get a good reading off the round. With any luck they would be able to track the poacher's by the identifying marking from his or her rifle and slam the stupid sonofabitch into jail! Wolves were an endangered species, protected by international law!

On the other hand, if there were massive internal injuries compounded by poisoning, there might be nothing she could do to help. Tentatively, Dr. Abernathy drew the Webley .44. Unexpectedly, the beast extended a shaking paw to gently touch the gun barrel and push it away in an amazingly human gesture.

In ragged stages, Abernathy holstered the handgun and knelt alongside the wolf to tenderly stroke its head. A hot tongue licked at her wrist.

“Okay, *lupin*,” she softly crooned. “No mercy killing. I’d rather not anyway. Somehow, I’ll get you back to the cabin and fix you proper. *Qui, mon ami?*”

There was no response. The wolf had fallen unconscious.

Realizing that time was now against her, the elderly vet moved fast. Placing her pocket handkerchief on the oozing wound, she cinched her belt tight about the chest. The wolf stirred and mewed in pain, but did not lash out with its deadly paws, and the bleeding slowed.

Using her belt knife, the woman split some of the fallen tree limbs and crisscrossed the branches through the sleeves of her coat to jury-rig a drag. Gently, she rolled the huge animal onto the makeshift litter, and the limp wolf actually seemed to assist in the task. She smiled at that. Either this was a hell of an intelligent animal, or else somebody’s escaped pet.

Buttoning the coat closed to keep the wolf in place, Abernathy grabbed the pockets of the garment and began the arduous task of dragging the wounded beast through the woods. An hour of backbreaking labor later, the panting vet and patient reached the cabin. Gasping, the elderly woman thanked God for the new bear tunnel or else she never would have made it here. The colossal animal must weigh a hundred kilos! Almost as much as a full-grown man. Maybe more.

The shed at the rear of the cabin was on ground level, easy to get into, but unheated. So she nearly busted a gut hauling the hairy giant up the inclined wooden ramp used for conveying fireplace logs into the house.

As she closed the front door, Dr. Abernathy took a moment to catch her breath. Getting the poor thing onto the dining table was out of the question. The surgery would have to be done here in the living room. It would be messy, but the battered rug had seen worse. Her monthly poker game with the local Eskimo tribe always added a few more beer and bloody-nose stains to the overlapping montage on the old Sears two-ply. Someday, she really would have to give the rug a serious cleaning. Or maybe just burn it and buy a new one.

Retrieving her medical bag from the hall closet, Abernathy loaded a glass hypodermic needle with a clear liquid, tapped out the air bubble and injected the moaning animal with 10cc of morphine. Audibly, the beast sighed in relief as the pain diminished. She followed with a wide spectrum antibiotic. The bacteriological compound was an inexpensive sulfur mixture; trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole. The only type she could afford. It wasn’t as powerful as the new crystal silver formulas, but it didn’t require refrigeration after mixing and would do the job. Wisely, she decided that the distemper and rabies vaccine could wait till later. Step one: get that bullet out.

Going into the kitchen, Dr. Abernathy threw an assortment of instruments into a sterilization steamer and washed her hands. Returning to the living room, she switched on every light in the place. Grabbing a jack-and-shackle arrangement from the top of a bookcase, Abernathy knelt to tie the animal’s fore legs to a plastic support. Carefully, she extended the framework to separate the legs and expose the chest for ease of accessibility. Gently, Joanne removed the belt and handkerchief and washed the chest wound clean with an astringent solution and white cotton cloth. The animal moaned weakly and she touched the big vein in a stiff ear. Pulse rate was low, but steady. She had bought some time. Hopefully it would be enough.

Rummaging in her medical bag, the elderly vet found what she wanted and used electric clippers to tenderly shave the area around the entry wound bare. Next, she packed the opening with #4 surgical sponges, finishing just in time for the sterilizer to ding.

Racing over, she used potholders to handle the hot instruments and, returning to the living room, she laid them down on a pristine rectangle of white cloth. Then, taking a slim steel rod in hand, Abernathy softly spoke to the delirious animal as she began to judiciously probe for the bullet. Abernathy knew that wild animals responded to words and could feel your true intentions better than most people. Many a fur trapper faking friendship found that out the hard way. Wolves were smart.

Surprisingly, the elderly vet located the slug immediately, lodged just under the outer layer of fatty tissue, directly between the main lateral pectoral muscle and the fourth rib. A glancing entry. Thank God.

Extracting the probe, Dr. Abernathy used long-finger forceps to carefully remove the silvery blob of metal. There came the expected well of blood with its removal, but that soon stopped. Wary of the poisonous coating, she placed the slug on a cotton gauze pad and then into a plastic specimen bottle, which she dropped into a pocket. There, the Mounties would want to see that. Odd, though. The bullet didn't appear to be coated with anything, and the metal was surprisingly soft. The forceps had disfigured the material. Definitely not steel, or cold iron. It resembled silver. That gave her pause. Somebody had shot a wolf with a silver bullet? The breathing of the wolf increased and it moaned softly.

Shaking the wild thoughts from her mind, Abernathy pivoted to gather needle and thread from her medical bag. But as she turned to suture the wound, the hole was already closed. Eh? Dr. Abernathy blinked to clear her eyes of the illusion. Yet the impossible scene stayed the same. The wound had shut by itself. Incredible!

Then as the dumbfounded vet watched, the bullet hole healed completely, without even the slightest puckering or discoloration of the skin to mark its presence. The hair began to grow with fantastic speed, filling the shaved patch in mere moments.

Horried, the vet backed away from the undamaged thing lying sprawled on her rug and retreated to the bedroom. She slammed and locked the door in an automatic response. With shaky knees, she dropped into a chair.

Dr. Abernathy tried opening her mouth to speak, but no words would come. Frantically, the veterinarian searched for a scientific explanation to the phenomenon, but none presented itself. Facing the mirror above her dresser, she examined the conjunctiva/rectus under her eyes, extended a tongue, then checked pulse and temperature. Mentally, she juggled a few algebraic equations, then nodded.

Okay, not ill or blatantly senile. Well then, what had she just witnessed? Magic? Preposterous!

Yet the folk who lived in the deep woods swapped stories about magical creatures they encountered. Beings who talked, or changed shape, or couldn't be killed; human ghosts, *angedkok*, Indian spirits, the *wendigo* and countless *sasquatch*. But to actually encounter a ... a ... werewolf?

Without conscious thought, Joanne Abernathy reached into the night table alongside her bed and withdrew a half-full bottle of Alaskan Gold whiskey. She pulled the cork with her teeth, almost losing her dentures in the act, and proceeded to liberally administer a heroic dose of liquid courage to herself.

Just then, something crashed against the locked door and began clawing at the oak planks in a wild frenzy of frustration.

Choking on the blended 90 proof, Abernathy dropped the bottle and took refuge behind her chair. *Mon dieu!* The beast was moving already? How fast did this thing heal? Carefully, she listened to the noises coming from the living room. It didn't sound as if the wolf was smashing furniture randomly. The animal's efforts seemed to be directed against that door. But why? It must smell her and desperately want in. To kill her?

Steadfastly denying that notion, the old woman grew adamant. No. The wolf was only disoriented from the morphine and the operation. The animal could have no wish to actually hurt her. She had saved its life!

Forcing herself to stay calm, Dr. Abernathy moved swiftly across the room and stood flat against the wall alongside the trembling door. She had to try reasoning with the creature. Werewolves were half human, so they must be able to think. A pause. Or could they? Which was the dominant half, man or beast? The vet didn't know.

"Hush, it's okay," Abernathy said in soothing tones. "There's only me in here. You're in no danger. I'm the person who saved your life. I took out the bullet. Remember? The old lady with the white hair? I found you in the forest and fixed your wound."

Silence.

"Remember? Please, remember!" she implored. "I'm your friend! Friend!"

A strident growl was the only response, and the door violently vibrated in the framework as a hundred-plus kilos of muscle slammed against the stout portal. Again and again.

As Dr. Abernathy listened, the growls turned to slavering, a noise the vet had heard before in her work. The beast wanted what every patient needed after some serious blood loss and an operation. Nourishment.

She relaxed with the thought. Yes, of course. That was it. Hunger could make even the most mild of animals crazy. Well, born and raised French Canadian, Dr. Joanne Abernathy had the solution to that minor problem! However, getting to the kitchen was another matter.

The pounding on the door increased and the hinges started to rattle as Abernathy slid the bed in front of the portal, then tipped over her dresser as an additional barricade. Screws popped from the jamb and the door began to sag. Trying to control her panic with Lamaze breathing, Dr. Abernathy stood with one hand on the light switch and the other on the latch to the hallway door. Any second now.

In an explosion of splinters, the first door collapsed. Abernathy cut the lights, threw open the kitchen door, dashed through and locked it behind her. A moment later that door violently shuddered.

Moving fast, she raced to the freezer and unearthed a fifty pound slab of sugar-cured moose rump that the vet had won with a royal straight flush. Thank God for wild cards. It was a tight fit into the microwave, but she forced the roast in and turned the dial to maximum and high. Precious seconds ticked away as the tremendous haunch of meat was electronically thawed and the werewolf clawed a hole in the kitchen door.

With a musical ding, the microwave won the race. Yanking out the bloody roast, Dr. Abernathy slammed it onto the kitchen table and scooted into the living room, closing the flimsy louvered doors and

slid the bolt. Designed more for decoration than protection, these wouldn't stop an angry human for very long. But at least the panels hid her from sight.

"There," she whispered breathlessly, as she pushed the sofa in front of the doorway. "That moose ought to slack the appetite of anything this side of a lumberjack."

Hopefully, the woman added privately. If not, she had a whole hickory smoked hog in the shed that was almost as big as the wolf itself! Odd noises came from the kitchen and she peeked in through a crack of the slats to see.

Standing in the middle of the floor, her patient dominated the appliance filled room. Towering some seven feet tall, the beast was much more human in its manner and stance than before. Must have disguised itself as a common wolf as a purely defensive measure, she deduced. A monster? Me? Sorry, mate. I'm just a timber wolf. Nudge-nudge, wink-wink.

Padding to the table, the beast picked up the warm red slab of moose and sniffed at it appreciatively. Hesitantly, it gave the morsel an inquisitive lick. An expression of disgust crossed its bestial features and with a snarl he threw the massive roast away. A meaty cannonball, the haunch plowed aside pots and pans to careen off the spice rack and smash through the curtained window. In a shower of glass, the moose returned to its natural habitat and disappeared into the night.

Empty hands clutching at air, Dr. Abernathy backed from the door, cold terror chilling her bones. No. The wolf didn't want just any food. An old kill held no interest. It wanted fresh meat. Human meat! It wanted her. Alive.

A massive shadow darkened the louvered doors.

"Bon appetite, lupin!" Dr. Abernathy screamed, drawing the Webley .44 and emptying the handgun at the dimly seen figure. In spite of her fear, the veterinarian aimed high, trying to frighten the creature. Chunks of wood the size of saucers were blasted out of the slats, and the animal on the other side howled in fury.

But as the hopeful woman holstered the revolver, a huge paw rammed into one of the holes, sharp talons clawing at the aged hardwood as if it was cardboard. When the cavity was large enough, the beast looked directly at the old woman, and it grinned.

Self-preservation overwhelming her natural reticence, Abernathy moved fast to grab the Remington twin-barrel shotgun off the wall rack and, without bothering to see if it was loaded, rammed both of the barrels into the wolf's face and pulled the two triggers.

The double explosion hurtled the man-beast from the ruined door. Blindly, the animal staggered about screaming and clawing at its face. But as the smoke of the discharge cleared, Abernathy saw the werewolf shake its head and the lead pellets scattered outward as if the beast was merely shucking water off fur.

Merde! Desperate, the oldster lowered the shotgun and glanced about the room. Damn few weapons here. Never needed them before. Pistol empty, shotgun same, no time to load the 30.06 rifle. Used the dynamite for fishing. Having little choice, the elderly woman ran out the front door. It latched shut behind her.

In the nighttime cold, without a coat, her choices were even less clear. Escape on foot? Fat chance. Her

horse, Tramp, was in the corral. No good. She had never learned to ride without a saddle. Yes, the jeep! But no, the keys were on the hearth inside. Damn! Damn! Damn!

The full moon clearly illuminated the yard around her cabin with a silvery-blue light, and she cursed the orb in acidic French using a few choice phrases learned from a U.S. Marine who had accidentally cut off his hand with a chainsaw.

The woodshed!

Frosty ground crunching beneath her shoes, Dr. Abernathy hurried across the few meters separating the cabin and the shed. Once inside, she swung the single thick door shut and dropped the big locking bar into place. A cord of split wood was neatly stacked along a wall while a few dozen smoked meats hung from the ceiling like so many condemned prisoners. The shed was a hundred years old, built to serve as an ice house in summer and to be a last refuge for settlers to hide in from attacking Indians, British troops and American Old West desperadoes. The walls were solid stone a good meter thick and the door was a seamless expanse of solid oak with four iron hinges. Although werewolves had not been in the original design specifications, it would serve. Then again, maybe they had been. How long had these things been around? Since prehistoric times? Which came first, the were or the wolf?

A bellowing roar of rage thundered in the night, closely followed by the sound of screeching metal, and the woman knew the beast was loose.

Praying silently, the vet backed into a corner, pushing her way through the dangling assortment of salt haunches, homemade sausage and dried birds. She took a position by Big Boy, her prize dead hog. Wolves had great vision, but they tracked by scent. With any luck, lost amidst the dozens of smoked meats, her bodily odors would be masked. However, it was a feeble hope.

Even through the thick stonewalls, Abernathy could faintly discern the destruction of her jeep and the screaming death of Tramp. A tear welled in her eye, and she used a sleeve to wipe it away. Unable to find her, the wolf was going on a rampage of destruction. Oh God, what had she unleashed upon herself? This was a nightmare! It seemed obvious now that the werewolf must have fallen from that passing jetliner, and only the granite ledge had stopped it from forming an impact crater in the soil. If not, then the people who shot the beast would still be in pursuit. They had silver bullets! She only had the useless slug. Oh Lord, oh God, what could an old woman with arthritis do against a creature that took a 20,000 foot drop onto solid rock and was merely stunned?

Until tonight, Joanne Abernathy had never believed any of the wild stories told around the campfires. Monsters? Creatures of the night? Ridiculous! But now she desperately racked her memory for any detail that would help her in this fight for life.

Ghostly images of movie monsters filled her mind and Abernathy fought to rid herself of the nonsense and concentrate on what she had heard. Werewolves were ... what? People cursed by gypsies, or victims bitten by a werewolf? They only appeared during a full moon. Well, the moon was definitely full. Wolfbane! They couldn't stand wolfbane! Yes, but what was it? An herb? A root? A long drawn howl sounded from outside. Unfortunately, the encyclopedia was in the kitchen and that was no longer a proper environment for scholarly pursuits into toxic botany.

Resting her cheek against the cold stone, Dr. Abernathy let the rich flavored scent of wood and meat fill her lungs like a healing potion. Scenes of her youth flowed into her mind, but Abernathy forced herself to concentrate on the present. She wasn't dead yet. Think, Joanne, think. Wait a minute, silver killed werewolves! Or was it only silver bullets? The vet shook her head. That didn't matter. She certainly had

no silver bullets, and the slug in her pocket was too distorted to be used without being melted and reformed. Okay, any silver in the house? Silver knives? Goblets? Hell and damnation, this was a Yukon cabin, not the Montreal Hilton!

Wait! Digging into her pants pockets the vet found a fistful of change. Most of it dime and quarters! Those were made of silver ... no! Furious, she dashed change to the ground and tromped on the coins. Darn money was only a copper disk with a thin electroplating of silver! Utterly useless.

Suddenly a throaty laugh came from the door of the shed, and Dr. Abernathy knew the beast had found her.

The entire cabin shuddered from the impact of something on the other side of the barred portal, the cord of wood toppled over and the hanging meat danced a ghastly jig. In heart-pounding fear, Abernathy glanced about the enclosed structure, but there was no place to run or hide. She was trapped. This was it. Tonight was her final day. Here was where she'd die. That foul beast would be the last thing she saw before death.

A great calm came upon the elderly woman, similar to the emotionless elation she experienced when performing a delicate operation. So what would be the final act of Dr. Joanne Gertrude Abernathy upon this Earth? Cowering submission? Hysterics? Suicide?

Several minutes later, the oak beam barring the door finally cracked and the wolf stooped over to enter the shed. Appended on a length of chain, the hundred kilos of hickory smoke, sugar cured, Big Boy hog slammed the beast in the face. Roaring in annoyance, the werewolf ripped the giant hog off the steel support hook and tossed the carcass into the litter filled yard. Behind the werewolf, the cabin was on fire.

The dancing flames cast eerie shadows inside the darkened shed, but the wolf could still clearly see the old woman standing brazen. She held a machine thing in her hands.

“Okay, *lupin*, you want me?” Dr. Abernathy snarled. “Then come and get me!” With a snarl, she tore a piece off the machine.

The bold defiance puzzled the man-beast for a second, but as the elderly female did not hold the booming-device-which-killed, the wolf steadily advanced.

Yanking on the starter cord again, Abernathy got the chainsaw to come to deadly life. In a stuttering roar, the linked array of carbide-steel teeth moved in a thundering blur of speed, great billowing clouds of exhaust spewing from the rusty side-mounted muffler.

Brushing aside the brandished log-cutter, the wolf raked a paw at the woman's throat, but Dr. Abernathy raised an arm to block. The claws shredded cloth and flesh. Blood sprayed everywhere. Writhing in agony, Abernathy went sprawling upon the floor, trembling fingers trying to staunch the flow of blood from her slashed forearm.

The drooling beast came closer. Then from underneath, the old vet swung the small hand axe used to split kindling. The attack was so pitiful, the werewolf paused in astonishment. It was only for a single moment that he saw the tiny silver slug neatly impaled on the edge of the axe blade.

This was an impossible gambit and Dr. Abernathy's very last chance for life. A wild gamble on a possible flaw in the gypsy legend. A werewolf could only be killed by a silver bullet, that was stated plain and simple. No if, ands, or buts. Yet nowhere did it say the monster had to get *shot*.

Guided by the expert knowledge of a trained veterinarian, the axe blade sank into the chest of the beast, directly between the fifth and sixth rib, missing the sternum entirely and driving the misshapen silver slug deep into the animal's heart.

Galvanized into immobility, the wolf screamed in an amazingly human voice, and its eyes rolled into its head until only the white showed. Dropping to its knees, black blood gushing in horrid amounts, the entire body began to shake.

In reverse motion, the full coat of hair withdrew into bare pink skin. The snout retracted and teeth blunted. The ears moved down the side of the changing skull, talons became fingernails. The Z-style joint of the lower canine legs twisted around to become a single knee. The body shortened, a face formed. And in mere seconds there lay on the floor of the shed a naked dead man with an axe in his chest.

Finished wrapping her plaid shirt around the gash in her arm, Dr. Abernathy climbed shakily to her feet and glared down at the would-be killer. *Sacre bleu*, it had actually worked. Momentarily, she wondered who he was and what his story had been. But Joanne Abernathy realized she would never know. He was dead and that meant she was safe. Safe!

Then the elderly woman frowned. Of course, she had the minor problem of a nude corpse on her hands and a home that resembled Quebec after the riots. But those were minor matters compared to the singular implications of her wound.

Deep as the slash was, the blood was slowing in an unnatural manner, which highly raised her suspicions. If the legends held true, and they had so far, then a bite from a werewolf made you one as well. But did getting clawed also result in the cursed transformation? Even if you killed the first werewolf? Was it an event chain that could be broken, or a series of isolated events each alone and independent? Dr. Abernathy didn't know, and wouldn't. Not until the next full moon.

Exiting the bloody shed, the exhausted woman stumbled into the yard and sat on Big Boy. The possibilities were endless and frightening. Every month to lose her humanity and become a non-sentient animal. To roam the woods and back alleys of towns searching for helpless people to slaughter. Then to eat.

Calmly watching her home burn to the ground, Abernathy came to a decision. No. It would never happen. She would not let it happen. She would wrap herself in chains every month. Get drunk. Use illegal narcotics to stupefy herself. Anything! But she would not kill again. Ever.

Facing the starry sky, Joanne Abernathy made a solemn vow. Doomed as an immortal slayer, a cannibal beast, the retired veterinarian would not rest until she found a cure for this artificial disease of lycanthropy. She *would* find it. Even if she had to move Heaven and Earth to do so!

Or even Hell.

INFORMATION

CLICK "Good evening and here now the news. Today, the president announced that..."

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SECURITY LEVEL TEN

ULTRA-RED ALERT

EMERGENCY SITUATION

PRIORITY ONE

ATTENTION ALL BUREAU 13 PERSONNEL:

Yesterday, at 14:43 Eastern Standard Time, there occurred somewhere in the continental United States an unprecedented disturbance in our plane of existence. Momentarily, a rift formed between the ethereal dimension and our own universe, a vibrating portal which released a wild energy burst of staggering proportions. In ordinary language: 12 hours ago somebody set off the magical equivalent of a nuclear bomb.

Instantly, every telepath in North American was rendered unconscious and/or dead from the secondary psionic shock waves produced from the tremendous pulse of raw power. Plus, there's not a single functioning crystal ball remaining from the Panama Canal to the Arctic Circle. Temporarily, the Bureau has been made blind and deaf; sans such crude electromagnetic communications as this printed message overriding your local television broadcast. A totally unacceptable situation. Who knows what the hostile supernaturals of our country may be doing in this brief interim of unrestricted freedom? The mind boggles. While our physicians and mages try to resuscitate the comatose telepaths, replacement crystal balls are being flown in from around the world.

However, TechServ theorizes that the ethereal radiation has already dropped beneath detectable levels, and since there should be no physical destruction from the blast, it will be extremely difficult for us to find the epicenter of the disturbance. Yet pinpoint it we must. And fast. Before it occurs again with more permanent results.

ORDERS:As of this moment, all vacations and sick leaves are hereby canceled. Students have graduated early from our Bangor, Maine training academy. Retired and/or dead agents have been recalled to active duty. Every field team and solo agent is directed to fully investigate any unusual occurrence, no matter how minor or seemingly inconsequential, even if it does not blatantly involve the supernatural. Especially any bloody crimes of violent murder involving cannibalism. Occult power such as this usually requires a human sacrifice. Maybe several.

Okay, people. We're dealing with the totally unknown here, even more so than usual, so get moving, stay hard, be alert.

And pray.

Horace Gordon

Division Chief, Bureau 13

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ETTOPSECRETTOPSECRETTOPSECRET ETTOP ...*Slam!*

“Lucy! I'm home!*Ai carumba!* What have you done to your hair?”

"*Waa ...!*"

ACTIVATION

CHAPTER ONE

We headed for death at sixty miles per hour. Had to. That was the speed limit.

As I checked the loads in both of my .357 Magnums, the world moved silently past the bulletproof windows. Swiftly, our RV maneuvered through the thinning traffic of the West Virginia Highway, its sixteen-cylinder engine oblivious to the mountainous terrain we had to overcome. Although deemed a major transportation route by the locals, I considered I-65 little more than a roller coaster ride cast in stone. Just over the edge of the berm was an astonishingly deep ravine filled with white-water rapids, jagged boulders and somber metallic signs saying ‘please do not feed the grizzly bears your hand’.

It sounded like a joke. But in truth, the doctors of West Virginia were the best trained physicians in the world on the tedious microsurgery involved in re-attaching severed limbs.

Trying to appear casual, I surreptitiously raised the Armorlite window. Just in case we encountered any hairy hitchhikers with bad attitudes and no respect for the law.

“Everybody ready?” I asked, angling the 38-foot van off the main road onto a paved secondary route. Traffic disappeared. As we bumped over potholes and dead raccoons, a ragged chorus from the aft passenger section of the huge RV answered my question.

“Of course we're prepared, dear.” Jessica Alvarez smiled.

“*Bonsai*, Ed,” Mindy Jennings added.

“Rock-n-roll, chief,” George Renault grunted positively.

“*Anti-no, kemo sabe*,” Raul Horta intoned, arms crossed mysteriously.

“*Da*, comrade Alvarez,” Katrina Sommers said in her deep sultry Russian voice.

“Hssss....”

Taking a fast peek in the rear view mirror, I could see that my team was relaxed, alert and heavily armed. That last response had been from Amigo, the Gila lizard who traveled with us as a pet and bodyguard. Currently, he was lying on the carpeted floor, sunning his belly and digesting a truly impressive meal of crickets. Only two feet long, with a pebbled hide the color of a rainbow, the softly burping desert reptile didn't appear very impressive. Yet Amigo was more loyal than a dog, faster than a fish, smarter than an elected official and deadlier than a grenade in your shorts. If the tiny lizard ever had to battle a pack of lions, it should be even money on the outcome. Should be. But wasn't. Amigo didn't fight fair.

Satisfied with our status, I returned my attention to the road. Hadleyville, here we come.

* * * *

Despite the ominous warning received on our television from the big boss, Horace Gordon himself, my team was still in good spirits. This morning we had neatly neutralized a haunted prison in Pittsburgh by reenacting the execution of The Evil Doctor Salvatore, ending his irate spirit's ten-year-long rampage of death and destruction. But this time, just as my team was about to hang me disguised as the deceased physician, there was a last minute stay from the governor. The ghost was so overcome with elation that he lost his tenuous hold on this plane of reality and faded away forever. Ha! Child's play. Leaving the execution cell, we blessed the prison, dynamited the building and went for lunch.

It was a pleasant success after our failure in the Yukon last month. A werewolf had escaped from us by the unprecedented ploy of jumping out of a jet plane at 40,000 feet. By the time we got the pilot to turn around, decrease altitude and slow enough for us to parachute after the monster, the beast was already dead and a local vet had disappeared. Almost certainly bitten and now an unwilling enemy of humanity. Poor soul. As one of our very few outright failures, the memory of the incident badly rankled us.

On the rear couch of the RV, a redheaded giant finished his prayers with a rumbling, "Amen." Removing the purple sash from around his collar, Father Michael Xavier Donaher folded the cloth into a neat bundle and placed it inside a small suitcase with the rest of his priestly paraphernalia: rosary, Bible, scapula and shotgun. As always, the good Father was dressed in a black cassock, black pants and track shoes.

"Faith, and what do we know about the history of Hadleyville?" Father Donaher rumbled in his phony Irish brogue. "Any known ghosts? Local monster legends? Devil cults? Young Republicans Club?"

Placing her 35mm Nikon camera back into the bag between us on the front seat, Jessica pressed a few buttons on the dashboard and cycled up a small computer keyboard and monitor. Booting the on-board system, my Oriental wife keyed in the security codes and accessed the West Virginia data file. This state had always been a hot bed of paranormal activity, so while in Wheeling for gas, we used a cell modem at a payphone to download the appropriate ASCII file into the van's gigabyte zip drive memory bank from our big InfoNet Cray SVG Mark IV mainframe located in Chicago.

Suddenly, I went cold. Ye god, I had actually understood that hacker babble! Gotta get out more.

Her slim fingers dancing on the keyboard, words began to scroll onto the screen. "Established as a municipality in 1774," Jess started. "Was a coal mining town until the vein was exhausted in 1905. Population dropped from 20,000 to 400. Wow. Big bootlegging operation in the '30s. Town converted to tourism in the 1950s. Built a luxury hotel specifically designed for conventions. They hold about one a month there: plumbers union, Shriners, Elks, WesCon, which is some kind of a science fiction convention, all sorts of stuff."

The screen scrolled some more. "Current mayor is a Eugene Synder, police chief is Steven Kissel. Owner-slash-manager of the hotel is a Lucia Read. Apparently the three of them pretty much run the place."

"Interesting," Donaher remarked, sliding fresh shells into his Remington shotgun. "Sounds like your typical small town. Isolated, incestuous and innocent."

"Except it ain't there no more," Jess noted.

True enough. We had already been on our way here when the telex came in from the state police and suddenly our recon mission to Hadleyville was elevated to Full Investigation. When any town stops answering every phone, CB, Ham radio, computer modem, Western Union telegraph, fax, and email, this

raises suspicions. But when the event occurs at nigh exactly the same time as a transdimensional rift, bingo! We go in, hard, fast and with guns drawn.

Sitting on the third couch, was a pale slim man softly cursing as he struggled to unfold a road map and made a botch of the job. Nice to know there was something the mage wasn't good at doing. Dressed rather conservatively this morning, Raul Horta was wearing a sleeveless black T-shirt decorated with a starry picture of the Milky Way galaxy marked with a tiny red arrow indicating that 'You Are Here'. Neon-blue jogging shorts displayed his incredibly pale legs, and his bony feet sported tan yacht-style moccasins complete with ropes, portholes, anchors and a minuscule steering wheel.

"Only a few more miles to the Hadleyville exit," announced Raul's voice from behind the map. He crossed his legs to the sound of the ocean. "Unless I'm reading this wrong and we're actually in Brazil."

"Okay, how about landmarks?" I requested, heroically trying not to tumble the RV off the inclined road. Geez, hadn't any of the builders heard of that nifty invention called a level?

"Landmarks?" Raul repeated, turning the map turned around, sideways and then went upside-down. "Ah! There we are. Make a left past the next runaway-truck crash ramp."

"A major historical landmark," George quipped from underneath a camouflage cap. Uncrossing his arms, the gunner straightened his cloth headgear and sat upright. A proper soldier, Mr. Renault had been trying to catch a nap before a possible battle. Appropriately, our plump killer was wearing mottled green U.S. Army fatigues, complete with high-top black GI boots and web-style gun belt holding a holstered Colt .45 automatic. On the seat next to him was a banjo which made an unnaturally large depression in the cushion.

"Not true," Jessica denied, loading a clip of tranquilizer darts into a spare Nikon. Her cameras could shoot in more ways than one. Say cheese or die!

"In West Virginia, a truck crash is just another way of saying that tourists are in town," she finished with a grin.

"Ha. I laugh," George replied sleepily. Lowering the brim of the hat, he started to snore. Sprawled on the floor, Amigo politely began to echo him.

Depositing the Nikon into a cushioned bag full of telephoto lenses, Jessica began loading infrared film into an underwater camera. The love of my life had good balance and fine composition. Took nice pictures too.

"Here comes the Hadleyville exit," Mindy said, continuing to sharpen her long curved katana. As always, our lady ninja was sensibly dressed in combat sneakers and a muted gray jogging suit, which gave her maximum freedom of movement, plus could hold an arsenal of edged weapons.

I squinted at the roadway. "What? Where?"

Stroke. Stroke. "Wait."

Methodically, Ms. Jennings ran a rectangular block of depleted uranium along the edge to clean the blade. Ultra-thin strips of the superdense metal curled up from the block and tumbled to the carpeted floor with tiny thumps. The Ginsu people would kill to get a hold of that sword. Which is the only way to remove it from the deadly hands of Mindy Jennings, girl ninja.

A minute later, the RV rounded a bend and we saw the exit. Someday, I would have to discover how the hell she did stuff like this. Smell the paint on the sign?

On the side of the road was a set of empty wooden poles, the pale clean wood at the top clearly announcing where a sign had formerly been located. Hmm. Was somebody trying to hide the very existence of the town? Or just sidetrack the idle curious?

Slowing alongside, it was possible to see a green-and-white metallic sign lying partially hidden in the grass. And just beyond was a double line of rubber yellow cones closing off the exit ramp. A brand new sign said that the road was closed for repairs.

“Isn't this the only route in or out of town?” Father Donaher asked, tugging on the ends of his long red moustache.

Placing an ear against the colored paper, Raul briefly consulted the map. “Yes, it is,” he confirmed.

“Oh, Kathi!” I called.

A plush recliner swivelled about to display the amazingly buxom, Katrina Sommers. Wearing only denim short-shorts, ankle strap sandals and a skimpy red halter top, the tan actress would have been considered a major traffic hazard in any civilized nation. A recent addition to her ensemble was a tiny tattoo of a butterfly decorating her right shoulder. The tattoo used to be on the opposite thigh. I was surprised to learn that butterflies migrate. At least, Kathi's did.

Waving her fingers about as if saying goodbye to a friend, the wizard formed trails of sparkling lights in the air.

“*Nyet, Edwardo,*” she said in heavily accented English. “Bridge intact is.”

The lovely Russian mage had only recently joined our covert team, and her knowledge of the English language was nowhere near as good as her command of the occult arts.

With a nod, I loosened both of the .357 Magnums in my double shoulder holster. “Okay, battle stations.”

That statement was immediately followed by a series of metallic clacks as a wide variety of weapons were prepped for instant combat. Except, of course, for the two wizards. Gunpowder-and-magic mix about as well as sex-and-glue.

But each mage held a metallic staff. The wizard wands had always been there, only now they were visible to the naked eye. A master wizard, Raul's staff was four-feet-long and made of pure silver topped with gold. Just a beginner mage, Kathi's was only made of stainless steel. But since she possessed the stolen power of three adult wizards, it was also four-feet in length. Precisely as long as Raul's. Exactly to the micron. Once in the middle of the night, I had accidentally caught them drunk, in the closet, measuring each like a couple of teenagers. Sheesh! Mages. They're the main reason why antacids were invented.

George awoke.

Wary of a trap, I carefully rotated the steering wheel and maneuvered onto the berm to bypass the safety barrier. Momentarily, a meter on the dashboard flickered, indicating that we were in the process of

running over needle-sharp railroad spikes buried in the loose gravel. There was only the faintest burbling noise as our self-repairing tires handled the inconvenience.

As we spent most of our duty time traveling, aside from the standard amenities, the massive RV was equipped with: front-launched Amsterdam Mark IV All-Purpose missiles, side mounted .50-caliber machine guns, twin aft 40mm grenade launchers and miniature Claymore mines in the door handles. Moreover, the hull could be electrified, and the razor-edged door could instantly snap closed under 8,000 pounds of hydraulic pressure. The van could also instantly change color, travel underwater, through fire, and sported a quadraphonic Bose stereo with digital CD player. Although a true technological marvel, the upholstered fort got terrible gas mileage. Ah well, nothing was perfect.

Then a thought occurred, and I turned to smile at my beautiful wife. She smiled back, and the temperature of the van rapidly increased by twenty degrees. Correction. Almost nothing was perfect.

Maintaining an even speed, the long RV rolled onto the old country bridge. The stout oak trestles rattling and clattering under our twenty-four tons of military armor.

When we reached mid-span, another meter ticked, showing that a device underneath the bridge had just bombarded the van with an EM pulse which should have fried every working circuit in the vehicle.

The wheels started humming again when we reached macadam, and I increased the speed, only to hit the brakes a second later. A tree lay across the road blocking any possible advance. Annoyed murmurs arose. It may have only been my imagination, but it was certainly starting to appear as if somebody really didn't want any visitors going to Hadleyville. Maybe tourist season was finished for the spring.

“Brace yourselves,” I calmly announced, hitting the buttons for the nitrous-oxide injector and the automatic front jacks at the same time. With a roar, the gigantic van lurched forward and over the horizontal oak. We hit the ground with a moderate jar and rolled sedately onward. I tried to hide a smile and failed. God, I love doing that.

Moving at a slow pace, the RV barely crested the next hill when the road leveled out nicely. A couple of miles later, at the bottom of a low valley, I slammed onto the brakes so hard that Amigo almost went through the windshield.

Sprawled in the middle of the road were dozens of dead bodies. Or rather, what remained of them.

CHAPTER TWO

Slow and easy, the team exited the van, watching where they stepped so as not to disturb anything of importance. But with a sick stomach I knew it would be hard to find anything significant in all this blood.

Maybe a dozen bodies dotted the concrete, sprawled in dry pools of caked brown matter. A buzzing cloud of insects darkened the sky. I had smelled worse, but not in this universe.

There was no sign of their cars.

Jessica started clicking her camera, taking shots of the crime scene. Raul and Kathi put their heads together to confer, then majestically waved their wands. Instantly, the cloud of flies went buzzing away and we got a clear view of the bodies. The corpses had no hands or heads. Yuck.

The last to leave the van, I flipped a switch activating our Dead Man box to record our conversations, and I armed the self-destruct. If anybody, or thing, tried to enter without our consent, they would suddenly be flying towards Mars in several large chunks.

“Raul, George, do a perimeter sweep,” I ordered, Magnum in my left hand. “Mindy, you're on guard. Jess, photo everything. Kathi and Donaher, stay with me.”

The team separated to their assigned tasks. George paused only a moment to grab a spare belt of linked .30 ammunition for his banjo.

Pulling a fountain pen from inside his cassock, Donaher removed the cap and telescoped out a long surgical probe. Removing another pen from my own shirt pocket, I twisted the middle twice and gave it to him. Gazing through my pen, he prodded the ends of an arm, and neck stump. He tried very hard not to step in the blood and almost succeeded. Steeling myself, I went through the pants, shirts and dresses. Every pocket was clean. Not even lint remained. A very professional job.

“Well?” Kathi asked after a moment.

“Removed by amateurs,” the big priest stated coldly.

Eh? “Explain,” I demanded, rocking back on my heels.

“They cut off the hands at the wrist, here, where the joint bones are their thickest,” Father Donaher demonstrated. “A classic beginner's mistake. Plus, while the wrists were done in one shot, the neck took two. I postulate the implement as a wedge of smooth steel, very sharp and thin. A butcher's cleaver would be perfect. Maybe a machete, but it would have to be new.”

“How do you know that?” Kathi asked, puzzled.

“Machetes are manufactured from cheap steel,” Mindy answered, stooping over to inspect something on the ground. “They dull fast and resharpening always leaves irregularities in the blade length.” Dead bodies didn't bother our martial artist in the least. Lord knows she'd made enough of them in her time.

Camera clicking steadily, Jessica gave a shiver. “But why remove the heads and hands? Symbolism? Demonic ceremony?”

“Lunch?” Raul added somberly.

Zounds. What a mind the man had.

“To hinder identification,” George said around the beef stick in his mouth. Hefting his heavy banjo to a more comfortable position, George suddenly seemed to realize the food was there, made a face, and threw the snack into the weeds.

“Sure be hard as hell to tell who is who, if the fools had also taken the feet along with the wallets and rings,” he said scrubbing his mouth with a handkerchief.

True enough. Footprints were like fingerprints, totally unique, and they never change. Both the FBI and Bureau 13 had identified many a weird corpse by processing prints off feet to compare with hospital records taken of babies at birth. It was a long and tedious process, despite the recent augmentation of government computers. But it did work. Eventually.

“Besides, they may be ... wearing the heads as a disguise,” I finished. It was a very strange business we were in.

“Appears as if the victims were physically pulled out the windows of their cars,” Donaher said, brushing a tattered coat sleeve. “Note the tiny glass particles on their clothes? And here, and over there, on the road.”

Yanked out of the closed window of a moving vehicle? Wow. Our mysterious perps were seriously tough hombres. Even worse than South Philly cops.

Curiously, I glanced about for any splotches of green or yellow or black fluids. “Any blood that isn't human?”

The priest frowned. “None that I can see.”

“Damn.” I frowned.

Standing in the middle of the roadway, I tried to reconstruct the sequence of events in my mind. “Okay. Cars are driving along this road. Something, or things, jump onto the vehicles and pull the drivers out through the windows.” I glanced around at the trees and safety barrier. “So how come there are no automobile wrecks? What'd they do? Eat the cars?”

Putting two fingers in his mouth, George gave a sharp whistle. “Over here!” he cried and motioned us closer. “Skid marks!”

Long irregular streaks on the road surface told the story of brakes applied hard. Many of the tracks overlapped each other.

“How many vehicles?” Raul asked, pulling off the shoes of a corpse to take toe prints.

“Ten, twelve cars,” I estimated.

Holding her wand out of the pools of blood, Kathi distorted her face into an expression of disgust. “Which implies many killers.”

“Ominous,” Raul agreed, applying a sheet of shiny white paper to the soles of the headless man. The acid in the skin began to form recognizable patterns of the specially treated paper. It wasn't an invention of the Bureau's, just standard FBI issue field equipment.

Kneeling on the berm, Mindy prodded the laurel bushes which edged this section of the road with the tip of her sword. “They came through here,” she announced. “And hid behind this clump of evergreen trees.”

“Any details?” Donaher growled, grimly jacking the pump-action on his Remington 12-gauge shotgun. Father Mike considered killing monsters a holy chore. One he performed with pleasure and relish.

She squinted at the leaves. “Fifty ... maybe sixty. Humans.”

Everybody stopped.

“Humans?” George queried with a frown. “You sure?”

“Dress shoes, high heels, slippers, bare feet, boots, and a lot of sneakers,” she replied in answer. “This soil is nicely moist and holds the tracks well.”

“Sneakers?” Donaher asked, rubbing a hand across his wild crop of red hair. “You sure?”

Mindy gestured. “Take a look.”

Careful not to disturb the tracks, Mike and I ambled closer and stared at the dirt. It appeared to be perfectly smooth and unmarred. But that's one of the reasons we had Ms. Jennings along. She could follow a drop of rain in a typhoon. I, on the other hand, often experienced trouble locating my car keys.

“See,” Mindy said, fingering the blank ground. “Definitely not human norm. Vaguely similar to the stride pattern of hoofed demons, but different. Smoother, lighter.”

“Little demons?” Kathi asked scowling.

The stars on his T-shirt twinkling brightly, Raul leaned in close. “They're called imps,” he whispered.

The Russian mage nodded. “*Da*. Thanks.”

“Imps wearing boots?” Jessica asked in disbelief. “There is no sign of tail drag. Nor is any of the grass wilted from any brimstone contamination.”

“Hey, Ed,” Raul said, looking my way, “do you think it might be some more of the Augmented Men?”

Vehemently, I shook my head. “We killed the last of those schizo mechazoids in Idaho. This is something new and nasty.”

“Strange and serious.”

“Deadly and dangerous,” George said, finishing the slogan.

“And hairy as a hound,” Father Donaher added.

Eh? That wasn't part of the litany.

Using tweezers, the priest lifted a minuscule item from a crimson splattered shoulder. “Ed, this was done by werewolves!”

The whole team hurried closer, and the long coarse hair was passed around.

“What?”

“Can it ...?”

“Nyah.”

Damnation, this mad no sense. Each clue contradicted the others. The marks on the victims appeared to have been made by amateurs, yet identification was expertly removed. The tracks were human, tool-using humans, but werewolf hair was on the bodies. Okay, so it was humans, or humanoids, with

supernatural strength, speed, agility. But certainly not dumb ol' werewolves. Those idiots driving cars? Using machetes?

"Impossible," Jessica snorted, holding the follicle to the sun. But the stern expression on her face softened into puzzlement. "Ed, werewolves are not sentient. Wolfmen even less so!"

Standing, Kathi appeared puzzled. "Explain, please. Werewolf, wolfman is not same?"

"Faith, lass, a werewolf is a person who assumes the partial form and abilities of a wolf," Donaher said lugubriously. "A wolfman is an animal which achieves the partial structure of a human."

"Both are not smart?"

"Dumber than a politician," I stated firmly. "It's only in the movies and bad horror novels that were-creatures chat on the phone or use a coffee machine. The best we've ever encountered was a wolfman who figured out how to trigger a rifle. Unfortunately for him, the muzzle was pointing in the wrong direction."

Raul agreed. "Most werewolves are stymied by revolving doors and light switches. It's the lone saving grace in fighting the bastards. Weres are the meanest, toughest, most stubborn, amoral, devious sons-of-bitches in this whole dimension."

"Even worse than corporate lawyers?" she asked, amazed.

A nod. "Yep."

With her butterfly flapping nervously, Kathi muttered something appropriate in Russian. "So were-creatures stealing wallets is impossible?"

"Absolutely," I stated.

"Then how came this to be?"

There she had us stumped. Lifting my left hand, I activated my wristwatch, established a relay link with our van, and turned on the scrambler circuit.

"Calling Merlin's Tower," I said loud and clear. Hopefully the transmission could be heard. The Rocky Mountains were dense enough to foul anybody's communications system.

"This is Merlin's Tower," the Bureau answered. "Identify, please."

"This is Team Tunafish. Report number 3 for 7/26."

"Stardate 4132.96," Raul joked.

Mindy shushed him.

I shot the mage a dirty look and continued. "We have a multiple slaying on a country road outside Hadleyville, West Virginia. Indications are that the killing was possibly done by intelligent werewolves."

"By what?" crackled my watch.

Bemused expressions came from the team. It was the first time HQ had ever interrupted anybody during a field report.

“Intelligent werewolves,” I repeated. “There may be a link between the deaths and the ethereal explosion of yesterday. We will investigate and report every 30 minutes from this mark.” I gave ‘em a beep. D-flat, I believe. “If we miss two reports consider this area a Class Alpha Three hot zone and send in General MacAdams and the Phoenix Squad.”

A short whistle of astonishment sounded, but was cut short. Must be a new guy at Communications.

“Ah, acknowledged, Tunafish.”

“Roger, base. Over and out.”

“Over and out,” the tiny speaker crackled.

Shaking my watch to terminate the transmission, I grimly reached into a pocket and started screwing a silencer onto the barrel of my Model #42 ultra-lightweight Magnum. The muzzle blast of the heavy-duty Model #66 gave silencers an annoying tendency to explode, which simply ruined my aim. However, I made good-and-goddamn sure both pistols were loaded with blessed silver bullets.

“Okay,” I announced, easing the cylinder closed. “The stolen cars will take hours to trace. So let's follow the forest trail. Maybe we can find the transdimensional hole, the flying saucer these things landed in, or whatever caused these freaks.”

Steadfast, my team murmured assent.

I clicked back the hammers. “On foot. Standard formation. Single file, one meter spread. Mindy on point. George take the rear.”

“Check.”

“No problem, Ed.”

As we entered the thick array of bushes, I noted a faded sign on the road which boasted: ‘Welcome to Hadleyville. Population 2,572.’ Somehow, I doubted the first and wondered about the validity of the second.

The team lost sight of the carnage as we proceeded deeper into the morass of bushes, trees, and shrubbery that composed the dense West Virginia forest. In ragged stages, the cool, lush greenery swallowed us whole.

Then the plants attacked.

CHAPTER THREE

In a wild explosion of green and brown, the bushes raked at our faces, weeds whipped our legs, and trees slammed their limbs towards our heads. Even the very grass under our feet moved, trying to trip us. Cursing, my team stumbled into a defensive circle, firing every weapon we owned.

“Alex Haley!” I cried aiming my Magnums for the roots. A thorny vine ripped away the front of my shirt, exposing the molded body armor underneath. As my bullets blasted the vine apart, sticky sap spraying into the air, I made a mental note that I must get tougher shirts.

“Huey, Dewey, and Louie!” George shouted, and we all ducked. In a stuttering roar, his banjo began spitting flame. For a single moment, the protective illusion faded to reveal the huge ungainly M-60 machine rifle in his trained grip. The shiny belt of linked ammunition dangling from the breech mechanism of the huge weapon shrank with alarming speed, as the heavy duty .30 combat rounds chewed a path of destruction through the attacking foliage.

A prismatic blur, Mindy's sword flashed with rainbow eagerness. A tree branch thrust close to her and withdrew as kindling. Jessica's camera sprayed pneumatic death at the Spanish moss. Father Donaher's shotgun boomed a hellstorm of hot lead, blowing away bushes, destroying daisies, and pulverizing pansies.

“...!” Raul shouted in the secret language of mages, and a blizzard of ice and snow began howling from the business end of his wizard's staff.

“...!” Katrina added, as volcanic flames poured from her own wand.

In deadly harmony, the two mages went back-to-back, and turning around each other, overlapped the area-effect zone of their spells. Soon, the nearby greenery was reduced to charred ice statues and dirty snow, with only a muddy band of steaming bare ground encircling us.

As the rest of the forest rustled its leaves in unbridled anger, we caught our breath. Whew. I'd heard about planting a trap, but ... trapping the plants?

“Thank you, Lawn Doctors Mengele,” I said saluting.

Flushed with excitement, Raul smiled. “No prob, chief-a-roo.”

“My pleasure, comrade,” Kathi said, firing a miniature Lightning Bolt at a suspicious hunk of honeysuckle. The plant fried and dropped the rusty nail it had been hiding behind its stalk.

While reloading my Magnums, I noted that my Bureau-issue sunglasses gave no Kirlian aura reading off these ambulatory plants. There was no white for good, black for evil, green for magic. Nothing! Maybe botanical life was too primitive to register.

“This was a trap,” Father Donaher stated, ramming fresh shells into his shotgun. “If the plants had been simply trying to get food, they would have attacked the instant Mindy was among them.”

“Instead, they waited for the lot of us,” I said with a shiver. Swell.

After cleaning sap off my sunglasses, I adjusted the focus and gave the combat zone a fast once-over. While the brunt of the dense forest separated us from the van, there was only scattered bushes between here and Hadleyville. No details of the place were clearly visible at this range. Just buildings and houses. Interestingly, not a person was running this way to find out what the firefight had been about. Not very surprising. We had already surmised that nobody was alive, or at least conscious, in the village. Could the plants have attacked the cars on the highway?

“Should we go back for the RV?” Jessica asked, screwing a long telephoto lens onto her camera.

In scorn, Mindy curled her lip. “Retreat? Never!”

A tiny meteor shooting across his starry chest, Raul proffered his wristwatch. “I can call Amigo and have him bring the van to us.”

“The way that lizard drives?” George scoffed. “No thanks. We're safer with the plants.”

“Priority one is getting to Hadleyville,” I reminded them, stomping on a dandelion trying to get up my pants leg. “If there are any survivors trapped, they may need immediate evac and medical help.”

“Hey babe, can you conjure some military defoliant?” George asked, removing the tape from the handle of a thermite grenade clipped to his belt. I approved. The time for subtly was over.

Lovingly, Kathi caressed the short soldier's grim face, making his expression noticeable soften. Ah, young lust. Messy, but romantic.

“Da, babushka,” she purred. “But maybe can do better than that. How far is to town?”

“Hadleyville? About half a mile.”

Kathi and Raul started mumbling to themselves in that secret wizard way.

“You've never done it before,” Raul warned.

“Da. But you good teacher.”

The mage gave a cocky smile. “Yes, I am. Okay, go for it.”

“Mindy!” Kathi called, her staff starting to visibly pulse with power.

Sword in hand, the slim woman turned from slicing apart a particularly determined bit of ragweed. “Yeah?”

“I will be point.”

“Be my guest,” Mindy said, waving her forward.

After consulting her pocket spell book, Katrina started chanting and spinning her staff in the manner of a drum major's baton. Steadily, the speed increased until the wand was only a blur. Then the Russian mage removed her hand, and the steel length continued to twirl in place, going faster and faster, until into the rod hummed from the sheer raw velocity of its violent rotations.

“Forward!” Kathi boomed in a Voice of Command, and the staff levitated towards the town.

As the smear advanced, everything in front of us—plants, trees and even rocks—was instantly reduced to flying splinters and dust. Some of the greenery tried to make a run for safety, but all were annihilated. The saps. Single file, we followed the wizard and her wand, staying in the trail of bare dead earth behind her.

Occasionally, some fanatic bush would try to run close anyway, and we shot it to pieces. Brought a whole new meaning to the term 'crabgrass'.

As the team progressed, I caught an occasional glimpse of the street beyond the row of houses. There did not appear to be any wrecked vehicles or bodies. But I wasn't sure. Definitely a lot of damage to the buildings. Maybe this whole incident was only a horticultural experiment gotten entirely out of control, or a lunatic killer wearing a bad toupee. Intelligent werewolves?

Exiting the forest, Kathi reclaimed her staff and allowed Mindy to take point again. Only dried mud, gravel, and a flimsy wire fence stood between us and Hadleyville. We moved closer. It was a hurricane wire fence, topped with an array of thin wire resting on insulated posts.

"Electrified?" Mindy asked, furrowing her brow.

"Detection wire," I answered. "Works on proximity, same principle as the warhead on a missile. However, with two mages nearby, it should be dead."

Boldly, I touched the wire and nothing happened. The same as with radios, TVs, and computers. Mages were just a wet blanket on the fire of technology. Whenever we had to use a commercial airline, getting Raul and Kathi past the security scanner was always a royal pain in the butt. Banned under official edict, we weren't ever allowed to visit Dulles Airport anymore. Plus, I don't even want to think about the problems we experienced getting cable TV installed!

Set in a sturdy iron-pipe framework, a simple hinged door with a commercially purchased lock barred our use of the fence. A key lock? Trying not to laugh, I reached for a lock pick in my shirt, but Mindy cut off the restraining bar with a swipe of her sword. The metal pieces tumbled to the ground, the cut ends mirror-bright. Raul scanned for magical runes, while George checked for booby traps before we swung the gate ajar. It was clean. Beyond the fence was a wide expanse of plush lawn, deep green and smooth as a billiard court. Or was that a pool table? Golf course? Sports were not my forte.

Sword in hand, Mindy started through the fence.

"Freeze," George growled, his eyes mere slits.

Everybody went motionless.

Silently chewing the inside of his cheek, George stared at the manicured lawn. "Ed, got an EMS with you?"

I patted my hip. "Natch."

"Do a full spectrum scan, will ya?"

What an incredible paranoid the man was. But then, that's how you survive in the Bureau. I once got bit 'where the sun don't shine' because I thought a banister was safe to sit on. I had been very wrong.

"Of course," I said.

Reaching into the jacket of my sports coat, I removed a portable electromagnetic scanner and started a general sweep of the lawn. The readings went off the scale.

“Land mines,” I said, returning the device to my coat.

My team gave assorted noises of displeasure, but we kept it relatively clean, since Donaher was present.

“What kind of mines?” Kathi asked, a touch of fear marring her lovely face.

Aghast, the big priest stared at her. “Saints above, lass! What kind? The kind that go boom. Are there any others?”

“Who cares?” Raul stated cavalierly, the tiny bells on his yacht moccasins chiming a merry two o'clock. “We're mages. The mines won't go off when we walk on them. Kathi and I will blaze a path for the rest. Okay?”

As the only ex-soldiers in the group, George gave me a weary glance, and I returned the look with proper embellishments. Civilians!

“Wrong, Mr. Wizard,” George explained. “Some mines explode when you step on them. Others when you get near. More detonate when you step on some other mine yards away. Plus, a few wait after being stepped on and then explode later.”

Raul turned paler than usual. “Good gods, why?”

“A delayed blast gets more of the invading group by exploding in the middle of them.”

There was a long pause. “Oh,” he said softly.

“And some first ignite a small charge to shoot the huge secondary charge into the air so it explodes in your face,” I added succinctly.

“Or your groin,” George snarled. “I know a couple of soprano Marines who can testify to that. They're called Bouncin' Bettys. The land mines, not the Marines,” he quickly corrected.

Morally outraged at the very concept, Father Donaher hawked to spit at the minefield, then paused in reflection and swallowed instead. Wise move.

“So how do we get past them? Circle round to the main road?” Jessica asked, turning along the fence. Suddenly, the bushes and trees in that direction went very still. “No. Never mind. That's probably even better protected than this side exit.”

“We could crawl along on our hands and knees probing the soil with a knife like they do in the old war movies,” Mindy suggested eagerly, drawing a foot-long butterfly knife from inside her shirt.

“Knifing may work, may not,” George growled, pulling the big bolt on his M-60 machine rifle. “But this definitely will.”

In a thunderous roar, the weapon began spraying a stream of armor-piercing rounds into the ground, the big .30 bullets chewing a path through the manicured grass. A few meters away the soil exploded in a geyser of flame. Then a bit further out a dark metallic oval boomed into the air and then exploded at chest level. There was another of those, two more geysers, and the bullets began impinging on the wooden fence. In a spray of splinters, the clapboard collapsed, offering us a path through to the town.

Releasing the trigger, a ringing silence engulfed us and for a moment everybody worked their jaws to try and stop the echoes in our ears. Wow. Dolby Surround Sound, eat your heart out. Even the animated forest seemed temporarily stunned. However, during the bombardment, I had been watching the town. Not a window curtain stirred, nor a light blinked on. Hadleyville appeared totally deserted. Yet, somehow, I had the feeling that we were not alone. Maybe it was ghosts.

On the other hand, what the hell was this place? Augmented humanoids, animated trees, high tech proximity sensor wires, and a Whitman's Sampler of land mines. What had we stumbled upon here? A lost Bureau 13 base?

Mindy made the same observation aloud, Kathi asked for an explanation, and Jessica obliged. In the summer of 1987, an unknown foe had decimated the Bureau, killing 90% of our operatives in less than four hours. We still had no idea who, or why, it was done.

Only slightly less important than the identity of the mysterious foe was the fact that a lot of files were lost in the aftermath, including the locations of hundreds of our secret hideouts. Mostly small boltholes—some only hidden rooms in hotels—the covert locations had been used as emergency hideouts or surveillance blinds. Occasionally, a Bureau team relocated a lost base. The sites were usually deserted, sometimes with the bones of the original Bureau agents trapped behind magical doors that would no longer function. But once we discovered a bolthole turned into a foul nest for Cherubs of Hate, and another occupied by Tibetan Imperial Bloodslugs, demonic escargot using Bureau 13 equipment and weapons to seek revenge on the staff of a local French restaurant. I shuddered at the memory of their illustrated menus. Feh. It was enough to make a grown man become a vegetarian.

We had reclaimed each base, but it hadn't been fun.

Pensively, I ran a hand through my hair and scratched the outside of my brain. Could this be one of those scenarios? Was Hadleyville a lost Bureau location? Battling hellspawn armed with our own weapons was every agent's worst nightmare. Every sane agent, that is. However, it was our job.

Summoning some pluck, I eased back the hammers on both Magnums. "Come on, gang, let's go visit beautiful downtown Hadleyville."

In battle formation, we crept across the backyard and angled around the side of the house. That was when we realized why the perspective had been wrong on the building.

There was no front. Or more correctly, the entire front of the home had been squeezed into the rear. Smashed? The building was only about a foot thick. Similar to a Hollywood false front used in a movie. Yet the whole structure was there. Just compressed.

Before moving past the house, Mindy eased her sword out into the front yard and wiggled it about. When nothing happened, she proceeded onward. One by one the entire team boldly tagged along. In passing, I noticed that the windows weren't even broken. And from somewhere inside, a light was still shining. *Ai carumba.*

Looking uptown and down, we could see that every house on this outer block was mashed the same way. The street was bare of cars, and the homes on the other side seemed okay, just odd somehow. As if it was difficult to focus my vision on them.

"Oh, Raul?" Kathi sang out, just as I was about to too.

Thoughtfully, the mage scratched his head with his wand. That made me nervous, but then I relaxed when I realized that he was only doing it to aid the thinking process. Raul often went into itching fits when in the immediate presence of evil magic. This odd tendency of his had saved our butts more than once.

“Possible,” the pale wizard conceded at last. “If Hadleyville is indeed the source of that ethereal explosion, a reaction like this one is theoretically possible.”

Stepping over a pile of smashed plaster ducks, Donaher held his pocket microscope pen to an accorded window.

“Could there be survivors?” Kathi asked hopefully, squinting to see more clearly.

“No way,” the Catholic priest stated flatly. In perfect harmony, the inside light flickered and the faded away. Bummer.

Ahead of us stretched a flat green lawn and a smooth black driveway made of macadam. Dividing the two was a path of irregularly spaced blue Virginia flagstone. We took the path.

Reaching the sidewalk, I observed that the street was completely empty of cars and incredibly clean. The black asphalt seemed brand new, just like the driveway, without a Popsicle stick, leaf, or newspaper in evidence. Nor any potholes. That was suspicious. Potholes were the official state animal of West Virginia.

With George and Kathi flanking her, Mindy stepped off the curb and onto the street, her eyes constantly moving in search of danger. But as her sneaker touched the hard macadam, the material parted in a watery manner and, with a blub, she sank out of sight.

CHAPTER FOUR

I moved as never before. Dropping my guns on the crumpled lawn, I insanely reached out, grabbed ahold of the rapidly sinking blade of Mindy's sword, braced myself with both legs, and yanked backwards with every ounce of strength I possessed! Searing pain filled the universe beyond imagination, and I fainted.

* * * *

Trembling and sweaty, I came awake sitting on the grass with an oily black form lying nearby. It was roughly human-shaped, with the bloody end of a sword sticking out of one end. Chanting wildly, Raul lowered the end of his staff. A steamy discharge bathed the deady quiet form of our friend. For a moment, the body was completely masked; then, as the billowing fumes dispersed, Mindy groaned and struggled to sit upright.

“Blah,” she said and spat black onto the sidewalk.

Like a living snake, the ebony fluid undulated along the concrete and into River Street.

As the team gathered close, I glanced at my hands. There was a pink line across each palm, and on every finger in a staggered pattern. When I closed my hands, the pattern joined to form a straight line. Warily, I flexed my hands expecting agony, but everything felt fine. There was no pain.

“You have the good Father to thank,” Jess said, offering a hip flask.

Unscrewing the cap, I took a healthy swallow. Ah, ten-year-old blended Kentucky whiskey. Now that was a healing spell.

“Thank Donaher for what?” I asked, returning the flask.

She stuffed the container into her camera bag. “Kathi magically healed your wounds, but when one of your thumbs was rolling away, Mike made a catch just before it reached the street and sank.”

Wow. Talk about giving a fellow a hand.

As I struggled to my feet, an amazingly clean Mindy came over and, grabbing my coat lapels, proceeded to administer a kiss that could only be measured in amperes of high voltage. Something around the gigawatt range.

“Thank you,” she said afterwards.

Embarrassed, I retrieved my Magnums from their resting spots on the ground and wiped some blood spots off the handles. Egads, I guess my brain had temporarily gone on hold. On the other hand, my ploy had worked and saved Mindy.

Balancing his humongous rifle expertly on his right hip, George pushed back the cap on his head. “Well, this explains why a group of somethings went out to steal cars on the highway. I bet there isn't a working vehicle left in this whole town.”

I agreed with that assessment.

“So how do we get across the street of death?” Father Donaher asked, brushing out his moustache. “Build a raft?”

Jessica chuckled. “Thank you, Huck Finn.”

“We can fly,” Raul offered, raising his staff.

Mages! They would use magic to open soda cans, and then be actually surprised when they ran out of power in the middle of a battle. Sheesh!

“No, we need a bridge,” I said, scanning the surrounding area.

Father Donaher tapped the barrel of his shotgun against a nearby telephone pole. “How ‘bout this?”

“Perfect,” I acknowledged, drawing my ultra-light-weight Magnum. Removing the silencer, I assumed a regulation firing stance and snapped off six shots, neatly cutting the wires free from the crossbars of the pole. We Wyoming boys were born with a pistol in one hand and a beer in the other. Which explained why my penmanship was so bad.

Most of the wires slumped to the ground, but one line fell to dangle into the street. There ensued a brutal tug-o-war which ended with the cable snapping off from the pole across the road and whipping into the macadam like a strand of spaghetti.

Having seen worse, we were unimpressed. Once my team spent an entire summer stationed in Detroit.

“Ms. Jennings?” I requested, stepping aside.

Shifting her hips, Mindy swung her sword and the blade went through the telephone pole to no apparent result. Then the thick pole slid apart on a sharp angle and toppled over to loudly crash onto the far sidewalk with pinpoint precision.

The street bubbled with anger. Hmm.

“Raul, Kathi, maybe you'd better fly over as escort,” I instructed the mages. “Just in case.”

Gripping her staff, Kathi gave a nod and levitated into the air, while Raul snapped off a salute and started running towards the sky as if ascending an invisible staircase. The big show-off.

One at a time, we each crossed over. Mindy skipped across as if she was on the balancing beam in the gym. Father Donaher slowly shuffled along, refusing to lift a foot from the surface of the pole. Holding his big M-60 machine rifle in both arms to aid his balance, George reached the far side with no problem. Jessica simply strolled along, while I scooted on hands and knees. It was undignified, but efficient. Especially since I can't swim.

Upon reaching the other side, I heard a sharp wooden crack. I stood to see the telephone pole break into several pieces and sink into the street. That was when I noted the pair of fins moving along the macadam surface. Snorting my contempt, I rejoined the group. It was only a transdimensional shark. You could kill 'em with a standard Army bazooka. Big deal.

The houses on this block were made of semi-transparent glass. There were some loose stones lying on the ground, but as nobody seemed to be home, we decided against testing the old adage.

Skirting the houses, we scrambled over a backyard pine-board fence and found ourselves on the outer rim of a blast crater. I couldn't think of anything else to call the pit.

Concentric rings of devastation marked where downtown Hadleyville had once stood. At our feet lay a band of jumbled wilderness, with machines and plants haphazardly piled together in pure chaos. Next came a circle of bubbled glass. But inside that sat an island of normalcy: orderly streets, undamaged homes, and a shopping mall with a mirrored building in the far distance. However, I was starting to believe that in this goofy place, the more normal something appeared, the greater the danger was. The first fluffy teddy bear I encountered was getting a grenade smack in the kisser.

Checking my sports coat, I found my long-range folding binoculars and trained them on the Hadleyville Hotel. The obvious question was, had the center of town magically exploded outward, or had the whole place gone boom, with only the center of town shielded from the blast?

A modest ten-story building with a nice neon sign announced a heated swimming pool, color TV in every room, and happy hour at the Kon Tiki Lounge every Friday at six. The Pou-Pou Platter was extra, but then, isn't it always?

But my sunglasses revealed a steady ethereal wind whirling around the upper structure of the building. Purple lightning crackled against bloated crimson clouds that moved under their own volition. A thick primordial ooze dripped down the sides of the eerily twisting building, while dark muted shapes moved with inhuman purpose behind warped windows.

The parking lot was a smooth expanse of empty black macadam. I could guess what happened to the cars. I'm surprised the lot wasn't burping, with a giant toothpick sticking out of its entrance ramp.

"Hey, there's an electronic crawl sign over by the Kon Tiki Lounge," Jessica announced, fine focusing her pocket binoculars. "Welcome ... to the..." She dropped the binoculars. "Oh no."

"The what?" I demanded, trying to find what she had seen.

"Welcome to the First International Occult Convention of Hadleyville," she read in a tiny voice.

Hoo boy.

"What now, comrades?" Kathi asked in concern. "Should we attack? Call for assistance? Run away?"

Chewing a lip, I seriously debated that. "Not yet. We haven't encountered anything really dangerous. Let's go further. Our answers should be in that hotel."

"Agreed," Donaher muttered. He held his oversized gold crucifix in both hands before him in a defensive position. "I sense great evil there. Yet everything inside is not evil."

"Fabulous," Mindy groaned. "Some innocent bystander hiding in a broom closet, I suppose."

Touching her forehead out of habit, Jessica began to probe the building. Suddenly lowered her hand and flashed red in embarrassment.

"Could it be a trapped desk clerk?" she asked, helpless as a normal human.

Taking a firing stance, George snapped the bolt on his M-60. "A hostage? Sacrifice?"

"I cannot say for certain," the priest said slowly. "But I strongly suggest we proceed with extreme caution."

"All is not as it seems," Donaher added softly.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, George tilted his head to gaze up at the moaning structure. "Anybody got a clever idea how we can find out what happened inside the hotel?" he asked bluntly.

Ghostly figures moved in and out of the pulsating walls, while blood started to run out of one window to be licked up by another. The front door was full of sharp teeth, and a fleshy tongue-like carpet lay panting on the concrete sidewalk.

Drawing the Model #66, I checked the scenario load: armor-piercing shell, silver bullet, blessed wooden bullet, mercury-tip explosive round, phosphorus incendiary slug, and a hollow-point dum-dum. Good enough. I was loaded for were.

"Sure," I said, easing back the hammers until they clicked into firing position. "We go inside."

"I was afraid you'd say that," George mumbled, hitching up his belt. "Want me to stay here and guard our escape route?"

"Nope."

"I'll help," Kathi offered kindly, beaming.

"Sorry. Need you both to administer smelling salts in case I faint."

Smiling, Mindy playfully punched the plump gunner on the arm. "Come on, guys. How often do we get to march into the jaws of death incarnate?"

"Total so far, or this year alone?" Raul asked rudely.

"Sissy merlin," she sneered in contempt.

He stood erect. "And proud of it."

Without warning, Raul jerked backwards and fell sprawling to the ground. A heartbeat later an echoing *cra-ack!* of a large caliber rifle rolled over us.

"Jules Verne!" I bellowed as the rest of my team headed for the center of the earth.

"Pink Floyd!" Father Donaher then loudly added, ramming shells into his shotgun.

Arching an eyebrow, Kathi stared at the priest. "Pink Floyd?" she repeated puzzled, as hot bullets zinged by overhead. "Dark Side of the Moon? Wish You Were Here?"

"The Wall!" Raul shouted, and gesturing from his prone position, a chest-high barrier of shimmering ethereal energy formed. Four more rifle rounds nosily ricocheted off the magical shield.

"Are you okay?" Jessica asked urgently. Edging closer, she yanked apart the top of her camera bag and pulled out a medical kit and plastic bottle of Healing Potion #4. It was the good stuff, strictly reserved for emergencies only.

Tugging at the ragged hole in his starry black T-shirt, Raul frowned as the molded body armor underneath came into view. There was a gray metallic smear directly above his heart. "Hey, they completely obliterated the Orion Nebula!"

"You're fine," Jess announced, closing the bag.

"Return fire, on my mark!" I growled, rising to a crouching position. "One, two, three ... go!"

In unison, my team stood, and we emptied our weapons at the distant foes. Since we were armed with pistols and such, they were eminently safe from our retaliation. It was mostly for morale, but what the hell, there was always blind luck.

Only Father Donaher didn't join the volley discharge. As a Catholic priest he was forbidden, under any circumstance, to take a human life. Technicalities, technicalities.

"Are you people nuts?" Mindy admonished haughtily. "Firing short-barreled pistols at an unseen target over two hundred meters away?"

In a shatter of glass, a screaming figure crashed out of the upper windows of the hotel and tumbled to the hard pavement ten stories below. From the results, it appeared that the concrete was very hard and

unfriendly at this time of year.

“Of course, there's always blind luck,” she relented.

“Divine providence,” Donaher corrected.

Working the bolt on the M60 to clear a jam, George grunted. “Thought that was in Rhode Island.”

“Heathen.”

“Democrat,” George corrected.

The priest snorted. “Same thing.”

Just then, a thin finger of flame stretched out from the hotel and impacted on the barrier with pyrotechnic results.

“What in the ... that was a LAW rocket!” George stormed, as the mountain breeze blew the blast cloud away. “A SETA military weapon! Who are these guys?”

I retrieved my sunglasses from the dirt. “You tell me, Sundance.”

Adjusting the focus with my Donaher thumb, I found the hotel and trailed upward until I located our attackers on the top floor. Long rifle barrels protruded from open windows; I got a fine clear view of them—two men and a woman.

Then the world went very still. Because through the Kirlian sensitive lenses, I could also see the aura of the normally invisible tattoo on their foreheads. A very famous tattoo. The design of a dagger through the moon.

“It's the Scion,” I announced as calmly as possible.

At the base of the hotel, the smashed body stood—now clearly a large hairy form—and dashed inside the hotel. “And they're the werewolves.”

More bullets came our way, as another LAW rocket streaked by and missed hitting the invisible shield by scant inches.

“The Scion?” Kathi asked, rubbing her wand.

Briefly, I explained. The Scion of the Silver Dagger was a lunatic organization dedicated to destroying the world for no particular reason that we have ever been able to discover. Sort of a dark version of the Bureau, they practiced voodoo, witchcraft, black magic, ate human flesh, and were generally considered on the level of something to scrape off your shoe before entering a house.

“Saints preserve us!” Father Donaher cried, smacking his forehead. “Ed, this isn't a lost Bureau base, its one of theirs!”

Yeow! What a notion.

“It certainly would explain the weird offensive devices we encountered,” George commented dryly, as

he fingered the U. S. Army Colt .45 on his belt. "Who else but the Scion would have killer crabgrass and military weapons?"

Who indeed?

"A militant arm of Green Peace?" Mindy joked, her hands twisting on the pommel of her sword.

"But what is the Scion of the Silver Dagger doing with an occult convention?" Jessica asked petulantly, her camera clicking steadily. "Holding a recruiting drive?"

On my command, the team stood, fired, and crouched again.

"A possibility," I acknowledged, reloading. "They certainly have suffered a lot of personnel losses recently. Especially after their massive failure with the Forever Castle."

"True enough."

Another LAW rocket hit the shimmering barrier in strident fury. Loud, too. I yawned to pop my ears back into working order.

"An occult convention where something went horribly wrong. Or, worse, something went horribly right." Mindy blinked, and shook her head. "Causing Hadleyville to be destroyed, and all surviving members of the Scion to be transformed into werewolves."

"Sentient werewolves?"

Donaher frowned. "Feh."

I agreed. Feh on toast. With ketchup.

"Raul, how long can you hold this barrier?" George asked, laying an assortment of grenades on the ground. Father Donaher was doing the same, and Mindy was hastily assembling a compound bow from her pocket arsenal of secret ninja death-dealers. Patent pending.

Spreading powders on the dirt in a rune pattern, the mage loftily sniffed his disdain. "Against purely physical weapons? No problem. Domes take a lot of power. Globes even more so. But this? Piffle."

Father Donaher blinked, and shook his head. "Piffle? Now where did he learn language like that?"

Raul jerked a thumb. "From Ed, of course."

I was shocked. "Now just a dog-gone minute there, buckaroo—"

Shouting something incomprehensible, Kathi stood and from her cupped hands there lanced a swirling cone of lightning and boiling flame. But the lambent outpouring of concentrated death-spells thinned into nothingness before it reached the hotel. The distance was just too great, and neither wizard could stand long enough to draw the size of pentagram necessary to cast a long-distance conjure.

Cra-ack! Zing!

George blinked, and shook his head. "Up yours," he growled.

Jessica stared at him intently.

Activating my wristwatch, I got only a carrier-wave buzz. Interference from the hotel must be blocking the radio signals. And every telepath was off-line. Damn. So much for summoning air support. A renovation via saturation bombing was just what this place needed.

Mindy blinked, and shook her head.

More incoming rounds. *Cra-rack! Zing! Whoosh! Boom!*

Wisely, I decided it was time to get tough. "Kathi, take Donaher and Jessica and teleport back to the RV for our combat armor and heavy-weapons trunk."

Kathi blinked. "Da, Edwardo."

I blinked and shook my head. What had I been about to say? Oh, yes. "Donaher, assist her with the big—"

Diving forward, Jessica grabbed at George and jerked backwards. As she came clear, I could see my darling wife held the pull-rings from a brace of grenades. Frantically, George clawed at his chest. There was a smoky explosion and everything went black.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rocking gently, I came awake with both of my .357 Magnums out and searching for danger. Who? What? Where? Ah.

"Hello, dear," Jess said from behind the wheel of the van. Through the windows I could see that we were speeding along a highway somewhere. Sprawled on the rear couches was the rest of the team. Nobody seemed hurt, and our weapons were readily evident.

"Hi, hon," I mouthed around a flannel tongue. Then as my head cleared, memories flooded in and I coldly aimed a Smith & Wesson at the love of my life. If the human sitting near me was Jessica. Her aura read human norm. But that wasn't good enough.

"Holmes," I demanded. If she gave the wrong answer, I would have to move fast after blowing her head off to grab the wheel and keep us from crashing. Luckily, the road was fairly even and straight. I didn't think we were in West Virginia anymore. Ohio, maybe. Oz?

Jessica gave me a rueful smile. "Watson. My, my, aren't you a Mr. Paranoid."

Ain't that the truth. But that was only because I had so many enemies and they were everywhere. I sneaked a quick peek under my car seat. Okay, safe for the moment. Maybe.

"Mother's maiden name?" I asked grimly.

"Yang-Wu," she sighed. "And I was born in Evanston."

"What happened in Honolulu?"

“We ran out of massage oil.” Jess cocked an eyebrow. “Satisfied?”

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, holstering my weapons and feeling slightly foolish. How was I supposed to know the stuff was flammable?

She shrugged. “That's okay, Ed. Business is business.”

True enough. While it was not an everyday occurrence for my wife to kidnap the team in the middle of a mission, clones and doppelgangers were a common danger in our line of work, and someday, it wouldn't be my wife I would wake up alongside. Which would put me in big trouble on two counts.

Just then, a sign flashed by my window stating the miles to the Indiana border. Wow. Had long had we been asleep?

“So what happened?” I asked reclining in the front seat.

“I set off some gas grenades,” she explained.

“That explains the lovely cat-litter flavor in my mouth.”

“Hey, I don't make ‘em. I just use ‘em.”

Abruptly, Mindy sat up. “Oh, it was a gas grenade,” she said, chewing her tongue. “Ick. What a taste. I'll start some tea.” The martial artist moved towards the tiny kitchenette in the rear of the van.

Sounding like a foghorn on steroids, Father Donaher gave a yawn that threatened to implode the windows and blinked consciousness into his face. “What the ... ah, of course. Anesthesia gas.”

“Tea?” Mindy offered, busy with the kettle.

“Please, lass. Thank you.”

Stretching his arms to the ceiling, George really put the stress test on his Army shirt, and for a moment you could see the hard muscle underneath his fat. His jacket was laying on the floor, and our pet lizard Amigo was half inside one of the pockets munching loudly on what sounded like cookies or bones.

“Geez, Jess,” George said, rubbing his temples. “You could have asked me for the K47L cans. No need to steal ‘em.”

“Sorry,” my wife sang out from behind the wheel. “There was no time.”

Damnation! Had everybody figured this out but me?

Groaning softly, Kathi wobbled erect and ran fingers through her long hair in a crude abolition. “Sleep gas,” she rumbled. “Bleh.”

On cue, Raul groaned into life. “Oh god, I hate knockout gas,” he moaned. “What's the chance of getting a beer?”

“Ed?” Mindy asked, glancing my way.

Hesitantly, I nodded yes. Mages had a tendency to drink heavily, and we had to monitor them. On the other hand, absolutely nothing cleared the biochemical crud from your mouth like a frothy cold brew. Except, perhaps, another cold frothy beer.

All by itself, the door to our small refrigerator opened and a six pack of Bud started to float out.

“One each,” I clarified.

Two beers broke free from the levitating pack and wafted over to Raul and Kathi. Now that's what I call a light beer. The wizards formally clinked containers and drank from the closed cans. I was unimpressed, having seen the Invisible Straw trick before.

After serving George and Donaher, Mindy passed a couple of steaming ceramic mugs to us, and I held the wheel for a moment while Jess added mint and lemon. I took mine straight.

“Okay,” I said after a preliminary sip. “Report. How did we get into the van?”

Jessica lifted a plain copper bracelet into view. “I used this magic bracelet taken from Raul to teleport us here, and I drove away as fast as possible.”

Wiping the moisture off his hand, Raul accepted the bracelet, and slid it back on his wrist. The copper band was drained at present, but the Recharge spell was a minor matter. Raul could do such things in his sleep ... and often did. Which explained why nobody ever bothered the wizard during nap time.

“Why the improvisational retreat?” Father Donaher asked, placing aside his empty mug.

Neatly, my wife maneuvered around an 18-wheeler full of livestock. Thank God for air conditioning.

“Had to,” she explained, as we accelerated past the portable barn. “We were being systematically hit with a mind-probe by an enemy psychic. God knows what information they got already.”

“Was it a pro, an expert telepath?” George asked, frowning. None of us trusted mentalists, after seeing what Jess used to be able to do with the bad guys. Chilling stuff.

Jess gave a grim nod. “Somebody so good, you guys didn't even know that it was happening.”

“Then how did you?” Mindy asked bluntly.

Here Jessica faltered. “I ... used to do it often enough that I can recognize the signs.”

There was a respectful moment of silence from the team. Until only a few months ago, my lovely bride had been the top telepath in the Bureau, i.e., the world. But after battling a fledgling god, she had been blasted into a normal human. She still possessed an eidetic memory, but her vaunted telepathic powers were gone forever, and nothing in Heaven or Hell could make them return. This I knew for a fact. I had asked the management of both places. Personally.

Would it be the same as one of us going blind or deaf? I didn't know. Nobody but another telepath could know. I could only ponder on the fact that all of her fellow mentalists were now dead, and it was only her debilitating handicap that allowed her to survive. What did my lady feel deep down inside? Maybe remorse, shame? Or was it envy?

Impulsively, I reached out to touch her, but Jess shied away, her features an iron mask of neutrality. It was at that precise instant that I finally realized exactly how much my wife missed her telepathic abilities.

“Well, if the situation ever occurs again, let's code name your tactic quote, Friendly Fire, end quote,” I suggested, returning my hand to my own lap. “That way, if you're a bit slower and one of us is a bit faster, we can avoid those expensive dry-cleaning bills.” Brains were a really difficult stain to get out of a white line shirt, plus a tad disgusting.

Frowning, George turned from looking out the window. “Jessica, exactly where are we going?”

“Nowhere in particular,” she replied.

“Faith, lass, and why are we going nowhere so fast?” Donaher asked puzzled, glancing about outside through the windows.

My wife jerked a thumb backwards. “Them,” she said.

Reaching down, I jerked the lever underneath my seat and swivelled about. Amid the rest of the meager traffic, there were a number of perfectly normal 18-wheel Mack trucks behind us.

In a standard #2 surveillance formation. Oh, fudge.

Grabbing his rosary, Father Donaher started reciting a prayer of protection.

Turning around, Kathi splayed a golden light from her wand about the van, checking our defensive seals, and George activated the HumBug unit, a nifty little techno-device we got from the CIA. It made our car windows vibrate in an irregular ultra-sonic pattern so that anybody using a maser beam couldn't hear our voices through the glass. Also, did a damn fine personal massage.

“They've been following us since we departed West Virginia,” Jess announced, confirming my suspicions. “I decided not to tell you about them until everybody got a chance to recover from the sleep gas. Let you acclimatize.”

I growled in annoyance, even though it was good sense. I had almost shot my wife upon awakening. If she had been frantically yelling that we were being trailed by enemy forces...

“Any hostile moves?” Mindy asked, her rainbow sword out and ready.

Jess shook her head. “Nope. But where I go, they go.”

Sliding back a panel in the ceiling, Mindy liberated a pair of binoculars from the overhead weapons rack.

“The five trucks appear to be perfectly ordinary tractor-trailer assemblies,” she announced, staring out the window. “A high riding 6-wheel cab, with 12-wheel trailers being pulled along behind. Different colors and different ages. Sides made of unpainted corrugated steel. No perceptible openings, presumably a double-door in the back. One has a compressed gas cylinder on the bottom. Must be refrigerated. There are a variety of company names on the trucks, and ICC numbers. Looks like a simple buddy convoy. Possibly a couple of independent truckers out on a TSD, or piecemeal run.”

“Faith, lass, I agree,” Father Donaher said. “Now could you try that again, in English, please?”

“They look clean,” the former resident of New Jersey explained for everyone's benefit. “No obvious armaments.”

“Doesn't mean a damn thing,” I noted, clicking back the hammers on both of my handguns.

“Any CB activity?” Raul asked, polishing his wand with a vengeance. Sparks flew from the tip and arced down into the bottom as the staff charged itself for action.

“Go ahead and try,” Jess offered, with a gesture.

Rising from the middle couch, George stepped past the wizards and took the swivel chair at the Communications Panel. He flipped some switches and a strident howl whined from the floorboard speakers. Scrunching his face in concentration, George twisted the dial to different positions and pressed some pre-set buttons to the same result.

“Full spectrum jamming,” he cursed, savagely twisting the Off dial. “That's the Scion. Subtle as a brick through a window.”

“And just as smart,” Raul added.

“Did not know our radios could be jammed,” Kathi said suspiciously.

I answered, “Anybody's radio can be jammed with enough raw power.”

“And if they're knocking us off the air,” George said. “There must not be a working TV or radio station in this whole section of the state!”

“Which means help is on its way,” Kathi said optimistically. “Bureau will detect and send recon unit.” Then her face clouded. “No, *nyet*. We are the recon unit.”

Rotating around, George held out a hand. Donaher tossed him the banjo-from-Hell. Catching the 30 pounds in one hand, our plump soldier worked the bolt on his huge M-60, starting a new belt of ammunition.

“Gas situation?” he asked, already starting to talk in short battlefield sentences.

Keeping one hand on the wheel, Jess pointed at the dashboard. “Already on emergency tanks.”

Oh swell. Damn this Detroit monster and its low mileage! Didn't Toyota make any armored luxury cars?

Crouched over the weapon locker, Father Donaher's black cloth-clad bottom wiggled about as he rummaged in an ammunition drawer. “Hey George! Aren't there any Deer Slugs for my shotgun?”

“Sure. Over by the Armbrust stealth missile.”

“Ah, there they are. Thanks.”

Double-ought buckshot cartridges from the good father's Remington could cut most monsters in half. However, the effectiveness of a shotgun is decreased geometrically with distance. That was why he wanted the Deer Slugs. Simply put, they were bullets for a shotgun. Only the mighty Donaher could

handle the mind-numbing recoil of the projectiles, but they changed his shotgun from a short-range to a long-range weapon and increased its destructive power astronomically.

As this was plainly no time for trick cameras, I passed Jess an Uzi machine pistol from the small arsenal in the glove compartment. Maintaining speed, she accepted the weapon, along with four additional clips of mixed ammo. I put the open carton of grenades on the couch for easy access by both of us.

“Mindy, what does radar say?” Kathi asked, sliding tiers of copper bracelets from her wizard's kit onto her slim tan arms.

Glancing over my shoulder at the dashboard, the short woman consulted the beeping screen. “That there are two of them,” Mindy announced.

Ah, modern technology. Ain't it grand?

That was when I noticed that both mages were now dressed for warfare in combat sneakers, denim pants, T-shirts and short vests with zillion tiny pockets bulging with magical items. Of course, Raul's T-shirt was adorned with a giant bull's-eye target surrounded by the international ‘NO’ symbol, and Kathi's had a picture of her wearing a T-shirt with a picture of her wearing a T-shirt with a picture of her wearing a T-shirt, ad infinitum, but that was only to be expected.

In grim satisfaction, Father Donaher stroked his Remington shotgun into readiness. “And what's the magical report,” the big priest asked.

“Magical probes show clear,” the mage reported, fondling the empty air. “No cargo, one driver per truck.”

That caught everybody's attention. The Scion sent empty trucks after us when we escaped from their secret headquarters? Bullshit.

With renewed interest, Mindy located her binoculars on the wheels. “Riding too damn low for empties,” she observed. “Could be bad suspension on one or two, but all five?”

Adjusting my sunglasses, I dialed for computer enhancement. The view fragmented, the middle section magnifying the lead white cab. Everything seemed normal. They appeared to be just a bunch of tired looking asphalt jockeys. Typical long-distance truckers. Following Bureau procedure, I switched to ultraviolet on my sunglasses. Nothing of interest showed. However, on infrared there were strong indications of heat sources in the trucks. Including the refrigeration rig.

“They're phonies,” I calmly announced.

That was precisely when the trucks behind us exploded.

CHAPTER SIX

Even as the blast ripped along the highway, the five big Mack trucks detonated again. The tiny metal squares that had formed the trucks' sides fluttered to the ground, exposing an inner framework of metal struts. Fluted ramps extended from the sides of flatbeds, hovering inches above the rushing concrete, and giants on motorcycles poured onto the turnpike, skillfully scattering to give their brethren room to descend.

The hairy riders had leather bandoleers of ammunition crisscrossing their Herculean chests, full-body military flak jackets, and oversized crash helmets. Each monster biker was armed with a MAC-10 spray-and-pray and a LAW rocket launcher. Those were big trouble. Enough of the anti-tank weapons just might prove effective against the armor of our Bureau 13 issue van. What was even worse, the lunatics weren't riding standard motorcycles, but ultrafast Harley Davidson racing bikes with V-nosed prows, stabilizer fins and studded tires. On or off the road, they could easily outrun our lumbering RV. But what really caught our attention were the innocent-appearing saddlebags draped over the rear fenders of each bike. Bags protected by a defensive rune that visibly glowed with power. Made my eyes water just to stare at the things. My Kirlian sunglasses gave an aura reading so black with evil it was as if the riders drove in a coal-dust cloud.

On my request, Raul and Kathi concentrated their magical probes on those lumpy leather pouches. Each was jammed full of C3, the unstable and temperamental grandfather of modern day C4, high explosive military plastique. Uh-oh. Fast, I hit the controls for external microphones and video cameras. The back window frosted over to a magnified view of our surprise guests.

Yep. It was the Scion.

“Yee-haw!” I saw and heard a grinning slab of muscles scream, his long body hair flying in the wind. “About time we attacked!”

A heavily scarred werewolf brushed his whiskers with a clawed paw. “Our sorcerer had to finish these bikes first, fool.”

Magical motorcycles? I didn't like the sound of that.

“Freaking, deacon,” a crewcut werewolf laughed, revving her supercharged Twin V88 engine to near overload. “On these, those Bureau bastards will never escape us again!”

“What if they teleport?”

“Deudonic shields are up to stop them,” another smirked confidently.

“SOBs deserve to die!” a werewolf shouted, an ear dripping with feathers. “Everybody deserves to die!”

The crewcut agreed. “And if we're successful, soon the whole world will be dead!”

“Yowsa!” the muscle-boy howled, flipping back and balancing the Harley motorcycle on its rear wheel. “I'm gonna eat me some Pentagon porkchops! Washington white meat! Federal—”

“Nothing fancy,” a big werewolf barked, his fur having a slight touch of mange. “Let's hit-n-git!”

The slab wildly shook his head, lashing himself with his own mane. “No! I wanna eat some of them first!”

“Alive?”

“Of course!”

Another laughed. “You wanna eat everything!”

“Not if it looks like you, fuzball!”

“Enough!” the front werewolf ordered, extending the launch tube on a LAW as a prelude to firing. “Time to get nasty!”

I glanced at Raul, and he nodded glumly. We were trapped. Damn! The trucks dropped back and the motorcycle pack grouped into an attack formation. A shiny metal tidal wave, they surged forward.

“Trouble. We are in trouble,” Jessica muttered, holding the Uzi firmly between her thighs and yanking on the spring bolt to chamber the first automatic round.

“Battle stations,” I announced, and the Armorlite glass of the rear window became illuminated in a vector graphic of holographic squares as an aid to targeting.

As Jessica urged the huge RV on to even greater speeds, Father Donaher passed out flak jackets, George began activating the scientific defenses of the vehicle, and Mindy laid out medical supplies and started sharpening her sword. Meanwhile, Raul and Kathi were throwing colored powders about the van and chanting as if our very lives depended on their spells.

Finished loading and priming my twin .357 Magnums, I worked the radar trying to get a more detailed reading of our unusual adversaries. They were proof to magic. Had the Scion considered shielding themselves against technology? Nope!

“We have eighty-five bogeys confirmed,” I announced in a crisp voice. “Range: three quarters of a klick and closing fast.”

Shocked murmurs rose from the team. That many?

“Jess, any chance of outrunning those bikes off the highway?” Raul asked, mixing vials of bubbling chemicals.

“Zero,” my wife brusquely answered, concentrating on her driving.

“What about on the highway?”

“Almost zero.”

“So stay on the highway.”

“Thank you, Captain Tactics,” she said between clenched teeth, as we zigzagged through traffic.

The digital speedometer blinked 145-146-147 mph. Cars flashed past us at an increasing pace. Only then did it occur to me that we were butt deep in civilians. Crap!

“Saints above, we need some combat room,” Father Donaher said, obviously thinking along the same lines. “Ed, should I release the oil slick, or the nail-clusters?”

I vetoed that. “Too great a chance of the cars going out of control and crashing into each other. Where's the EMP pistol?”

“We left it in the station wagon,” Mindy reminded me.

“Damn!”

Leveling her wand in a grip similar to playing billiards, Kathi pointed the steel staff out the window and jerked it forward a nudge. Instantly, the car alongside us faltered and began to slow as its engine conked out. Then the vehicle behind it started to swing around and Kathi got that one also.

“Good shooting, Tex,” Raul complimented, picking off a Subaru, Volvo, and Pinto in a neat three-banked shot.

Closing an eye in concentration, she only grunted in acknowledgment. Another nudge and a station wagon full of nuns stalled. Father Donaher doffed an imaginary hat as the puzzled sisters fell behind us.

Together, the mages neutralized engines until there was a solid wall of dead cars, vans and trucks coasting to a stop behind our RV. Suddenly, some smartass from New Jersey tried to get by on the berm, and another attempted the same on the grassy median. They also got the Big Stall. Sputter, shudder, wheeze, *clunk!*

Then the barrier of cars shook, windshields cracking, as a wave of motorcycles with their heavy passengers bounded over them in tight formation. The bikes hit the pavement hard, but stayed upright and now revved their massive engines to full throttle. The distance between us began to shorten with alarming speed.

Kathi and Raul tried the same trick with these guys, but nothing happened. I would have been very surprised to learn that the Scion hadn't magically protected their bikes from such an obvious ploy. The members of the Scion of the Silver Dagger were insane, but not stupid. Which was unfortunate, as that sure would have made our job easier.

Barely perceptible, the 16-cylinder motor under our hood lowered its screaming output.

“Jess, why the hell are you slowing?” I demanded.

Both hands tight on the wheel, she pointed with her chin. “The cars ahead of us are too damn close! We have got to get more room!”

Great. Swell. Wonderful.

“George!” I barked.

His chair turned around. “Yeah, Ed?”

“Slow the Scion. Buy us some time.”

He grinned. “Yes sir!” Swiveling to the Fire Control Board, he threw a few switches and shoved a gangbar to its furthest setting.

“On my mark, Jess,” he said, face tight against a hooded viewer.

“Ready ... set ... go!”

Tortured tires squealing and smoking, Jessica swerved the van to a strategic position midway on the road and enticingly slowed, bringing the oncoming motorcycle pack within optimum range of its weapons. Then the heavy RV began fishtailing and the aft .50 caliber machine guns hidden in our bumper cut loose, the big copper-jacketed bullets sweeping through the motorcycle pack. On and on, George poured hundreds, thousands, of rounds at our hairy enemies in a seemingly endless fusillade. Windshields shattered and several riders doubled over, clutching their stomachs. But as we had no silver bullets in the hopper, not a werewolf fell, not a bike slowed.

Finally, our reserves of ammo became exhausted and the guns fell silent. Although seriously rattled, the Scion bikers maintained formation and kept coming. But now, both the cars in front and behind us had enough of a lead to be relatively safe.

“It’s showtime,” Mindy announced at a control board, and flipping the top of a joystick, she pressed the red button inside.

The phony pile of luggage atop the van dropped its rear flap and out whooshed a pair of Amsterdam heat-seeking missiles. Caught by surprise, the werewolves were too stunned to react. Zeroing in on the red-hot engines, the Amsterdams dipped and leveled smooth. Frantically, the motorcycles tried to scatter, but seconds later, a series of resounding explosions annihilated a goodly portion of the dogs of war. Pieces of hairy corpses flew everywhere. Our aft machine guns may not have had silver bullets in their load, but our missiles sure did!

Struggling to regroup, the remaining bikers retaliated with their machine pistols, clumsily hosing the rear of the RV.

Mindy sent three more rustling firebirds from the nest to add their destructive bid to the flaming ruin on the road.

A score of badly aimed LAW rockets streaked past us to violently impact on the highway, flame-formed geysers throwing tons of concrete skyward.

Far ahead, the disappearing traffic was apparently trying to perform a mass audition for the Indy 500. Good for them.

A few more shots were exchanged with little additional damage done, when a lucky shot from the Scion landed inside the missile pod on our roof. Instantly, the volatile cargo of spare missiles detonated in a blinding thunderclap. The baggage rack blew into a million pieces, denting the ceiling and cracking windows, and the flame spread downward from tiny cracks in the ceiling armor to fill the inside of the RV. Automatic extinguishers in the walls and seats spewed fire retardant foam everywhere, and the blaze was quickly smothered.

Coughing from the acrid fumes, I somehow managed to eject the missile launcher. It hit the road in a crash. With hot shrapnel zinging everywhere, the bikers expertly wheeled around the raging inferno on the highway.

Accepting a wiggling something from George, Father Donaher tossed it out the window. “Sick ‘em, me boyyo!” he cried.

Amigo?

Tumbling through the air, our pet lizard hit the pavement and bounced directly into the exploding missile

pod. Half of the Scion had passed, when from out of the roaring flames there appeared a huge reptilian figure. Now metamorphosed into his true form, the baby dragon spread wide his iridescent wings and shrugged off the mass of burning metal. Cawing a war cry, the *enfant terrible* lumbered straight into the motorcycle pack and extended his splayed claws. Moving fast, Amigo managed to snatch six of the werewolves off their bikes and stuff them into his gaping maw.

Horrified, the rest of the Scion veered well past the dragon, careful to stay far outside his deadly reach, and continued on, leaving the frustrated juggernaut behind. Filling his lungs, Amigo blasted them with a lance of brimstone flame, then started after us in his infant's waddle. It had been a good try.

As the vents heroically struggled to cleanse the air, the Scion regrouped and fired a volley of rockets past us. The rockets exploded in front of the RV, issuing volumes of brackish smoke that clung to the hull as we sailed through.

“Nerve gas!” George shouted in warning, watching a meter on the environmental board hit the red-line.

Wow. It hadn't done that since our last visit to the Buffalo NY Chili Cook-Off. I glanced at the cracked ceiling. Only our velocity was keeping the lethal war gas from entering.

Slowly, Mindy removed her hand from the window handle. “Then we can't open any of the windows or gunports to fight!”

“You got it, toots,” George said, frowning deeply.

From the look on her face, George would pay for that ‘toots’ line later. If we lived. But that was becoming a doubtful proposition. The Scion of the Silver Dagger wanted us seriously dead. Or more correctly, they wanted us dead and to get their claws on all the information we carried on the Bureau and its operations. Our organization was the only real deterrent they had ever faced.

“Ed, what do we do?” Raul asked, biting a lip. Hindered by the sheet of unbreakable glass between us and the Scion, even magic was under severe limitations.

“Anything we can,” Father Donaher said, releasing a flood of oil from the bottom of the van, followed by a rain of nail-clusters. There was no appreciable effect on the Scion.

“First, we're doing a Clean Sweep,” I announced. Removing the cigarette lighter, I shoved a finger into the hole where no sane person would shove a finger. As my prints were identified, a small panel swung out from the dashboard and I hastily typed in a Go code. The tiny computer screen repeated a request for authorization, asked several secret questions and, when finally satisfied, gave a good long beep.

With a sigh, I reclined in my seat. There! Every computer file in the RV was deleted and in the process of being overwritten with the collected works of Oscar Wilde, my favorite author. Afterwards, the disks would be deleted again, melted, and then diced to pieces. Go ahead and try to reconstruct those records, ya bozos.

Brutally, our vehicle was pounded under a hail of armor-piercing bullets. Which didn't. Score another win for TechServ.

In less than a minute, the rest of the team had performed similar procedures to their own private records, and Jessica had armed the self-destruct on the RV. With six hundred pounds of thermite packed into the hull, the werewolves might capture our dead bodies, but not in large enough pieces to even make a

zombiehors d'oeuvre. The Scion was getting nothing from us. Period. End of discussion.

A rocket streaked by taking the side view mirror. Uh-oh, they were in trouble now. That's seven years bad luck.

“What next?” Father Donaher asked, crumbling a sheet of ash into an unrecognizable mess.

More bullets ricocheted off our vehicle.

“We'll use the lasers,” I declared, holstering my Magnums.

Smiling, George fumbled at the vault in our arsenal and withdrew four sleek pistols. Top-secret weapons built for the Pentagon, the futuristic power pistols delivered the punch of an angry lightning bolt, but occasionally exploded on users, removing their hands. They also took a week to recharge. We saved them for dire emergencies only.

Dutifully, we switched the pistols' setting from Flash, a disabling light burst that would temporarily blind anyone not wearing polarized goggles, to Beam, a polycyclic ray that cut steel. We didn't want the werewolves wounded, we wanted fried corpses. When we play, we play for keeps.

Crowding to the extreme right side of the van, Donaher, George, Mindy, and I braced our pistols in our hands while, on the other side, Raul and Kathi copied our positions with their wands. They had a Deadly Light spell very similar to what our pistols could produce. And with the same limitations. Technology and magic, the only real difference was who held the patent: GE or God.

The motorcycles came closer. A LAW struck the highway just aft of us, clouding our view with flame and hunks of concrete. A chance chunk of shrapnel impacted off the rear Armorlite window and a small crack appeared. Horrified, I held my breath, but the crack did not penetrate all the way through.

“On my mark,” I commanded, with a dry mouth. “Ready ... aim ... fire!”

Straight through the clear glass rear windows of the Bureau RV there lanced out half a dozen scintillating energy beams. Only a fleeting touch of each beam was necessary for the werewolf rider to fall, minus a head or arm. Systematically, we cleared the road. But, as the charred remains dropped to the highway surface and bounced away, the motorcycles leaped forward with renewed speed.

“Tricked!” Donaher roared, slamming a fist onto his knee. “The motorcycles are the attackers, not the drivers!”

Sweat running off her face, Mindy brushed away a strand of damp hair. The temperature of the RV must have risen twenty degrees from the secondary effect of the lasers. “Got to be demonically possessed,” she guessed.

“Ah, not necessarily,” Raul said with a pained expression.

Oh, what now? “Report,” I ordered, annoyed. The power level on my laser read 50% charged.

Trying to radiate innocence, Kathi started studying the ceiling and Raul cleared his throat. Twice. “Well, there is this theory. Only a theory, mind you—”

“Talk!” George yelled impatiently.

Raul sighed. "It is believed by some wizards that if werewolves could ever become sentient, they would have the ability to decide what the curse would change them into."

Silence filled the van for a small eternity.

"Anything?" Mindy gulped, swallowing a small internal organ.

The mage gave a solemn nod.

"So those might not be *from* the Scion," she started.

"But Scion members themselves," Raul finished. "Correct."

Intelligent, hostile, paranormal were-motorcycles. Should we lodge a complaint with Consumer Reports or the ASPCA?

"Here they come!" Jess shouted, veering the vehicle from side to side.

With a whining roar, the motorcycles surged ahead, and we fired again. But this time, the nimble bikes wheeled crazily about in a Gideon knot of confusion, making it impossible for us to get a clear sustained shot. Switching tactics, I ordered the highway destroyed in an effort to make the cycles crash. The lasers brutalized the highway before they winked out. But the sleek two-wheelers merely bounced over the buckled ridges of asphalt. Some of them wobbled badly and almost toppled, but then miraculously righted themselves.

Shocked expressions filled the van. The damn things must have gyroscope stabilizers. They couldn't fall over!

As the rest of the team heaped verbal abuse on the Scion, a dozen plans went through my mind, each critically flawed by the fact that we couldn't open the windows. Vestiges of the nerve gas still adhered to the outside of the RV.

I gnashed my teeth in frustration. Missiles gone. Out of bullets. Lasers drained. Low on magic. No help was coming. Yet, if we didn't do something fast, those kamikaze kooks would soon reduce us into covert Federal hamburger. Desperately, I tried to think of something clever, and succeeded.

"Kathi prepare to cast a Hook," I commanded, drawing my Magnum. "Raul, get ready to do a mass Meld. Mindy, get me a stick from Storage. George grab a map, and everybody get ready to go EVA!"

Nobody bothered to reply. They just did it.

Handing the stick to Jess, she shoved it in between the gas pedal and the dashboard, holding the pedal to the floor. Using rope, she tied the steering wheel into position.

"Kathi? Raul?" I asked, filling my pockets with ammunition and grenades just in case this didn't work.

The wizards nodded.

"Hook!" I ordered.

Kathi gestured and from the side of the RV there shot a glowing green chain appended with a giant anchor. It hit the highway and embedded. On screeching tires, the van brutally arced about on the ethereal tether.

This had to be done perfectly. Timing was everything. "Ready and ... release!"

Poof. The chain was gone. Now facing in the wrong direction, the huge RV hurtled itself towards the enemy bikes.

"Meld!" I shouted.

Suddenly, we became insubstantial and moved with ghostly rapidity through the physical mass of the Bureau vehicle. We found ourselves standing on the highway watching our twenty-four tons of armored Recreational Vehicle race straight at the oncoming array of motorcycles: a solid wall of Detroit metal moving at a relative velocity of 300-plus miles per hour. Without a doubt, ramming speed.

"Duck!" I cried, and the whole world seemed to shatter into pieces and then reform, so powerful was the mass detonation of the motorcycles' explosive cargo of plastique, aided and abetted by the six hundred kilos of thermite in our RV. Shrapnel and bits of concrete pounded all around us, while a brutal shock wave rattled the bones in our bodies, a single heart beat before a boiling thunderhead of flame extended hungrily for us.

"Berlin!" Kathi called, and we crouched low behind her magical Wall.

A wave of fire engulfed our position, but the licking flames spread out harmlessly as they rebounded from the resilient spell. However, killing heat seeped around the edges and our roasting seemed to last forever.

Eventually, the wall flickered into nothingness as Kathi ran dry of magic, and we lay panting in the middle of the disfigured Ohio highway. Battered, broiled and bone-weary, the team grimly prepared what weapons we had and crossed fingers in a primitive luck ceremony. Failure? Success?

Then from the rumbling firestorm down the road, there appeared a smoking motorcycle tire that rolled aimlessly along for a few meters then wandered off the road to collapse in the weeds.

We cheered until our throats got as sore as the rest of our bodies. When everybody else is dead, you win: Bureau 13 axiom 7, I do believe.

Romping in from the fiery horizon, came Amigo. As he reached our group, the collar around his neck rippled with light and he was a tiny Gila lizard again. Picking up our pet, Raul scratched him under the neck and Amigo came as close to a purr as he could.

"Map," I wheezed, loosening my smoking necktie.

Bleeding from both ears, George offered the charred piece of paper to me with a bow. I thanked him and managed to focus my vision long enough to see a milemarker and locate our position. Painfully, my team hobbled off the road and headed for the someplace named Zanesville, the nearest town with an airport. We had a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in. This made twice the Scion had forced us into a retreat.

There would be no third time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As we stumbled into downtown Zanesville, our appearance frightened a small child. So the team stopped at the local mall and got shaved, showered, shampooed, haircuts, bought new clothes, and wrapped ourselves around a reasonably priced meal at a nice restaurant.

While the team was devouring desert, I ambled over to a payphone and placed a discreet call to the Bureau. With the relay in our RV gone, our wristwatches probably couldn't reach wherever the heck it was our HQ was. So the public phone was my sole option.

After being endlessly relayed through exchanges in Alamogordo, New Mexico to Trevoise, Pennsylvania, I finally reached somebody in authority I could formally report to. The exchange of information was short and succinct.

Returning to the table, I gleefully informed the group that since we had been in direct telepathic communication with the Scion, no other Bureau team was going to interfere and chance exposure. We alone had been given the honor of stopping the Scion. Somehow, my friends were able to restrain themselves from doing the dance of joy at this news.

Appropriating a chair, I called for a group discussion. Kathi cast a small Dome of Silence over the table as and everybody gathered in close.

"Okay, obviously we can't go to Hadleyville without some sort of psionic protection," George noted, mopping the last vestiges of gravy from his plate with a buttermilk biscuit. "Raul? Kathi? How about some big ju-ju magic?"

Conferring for a moment, the two wizards were glum.

"*Nyet*," Kathi sighed so deeply, she almost burst out of her new blouse. "Spells for minds must be cast on each person and only last few minutes. Drain Raul and me in quick time."

"Raul and I," Jessica corrected primly.

She nodded. "*Da*, both of us."

"Horta, old pal?" I asked hopefully.

Almost knocking over the condiment tray, Raul was madly flipping through his big book of spells, currently disguised as a menu. "Sadly, that seems to be the case," he announced. "There are some alchemical potions which might work, but the side effects are rather unpleasant."

"Such as?" I asked curiously. Headaches? Stomach cramps? We could take those if it got the job done.

Scowling, Raul ran a finger down a page in his book. "Let's see, there is Lungfire, Demonic Cancer, Brain Spiders...."

"Enough!" Mindy called, holding up a palm. "We get the general idea."

"And we're eating," George munched, his mouth stuffed full. There were priorities.

Her steel wand pulsating with flashes of hot power, Kathi barked a long phrase in Russian. It didn't sound very cheery.

"This is intolerable!" Father Donaher raged, snapping a bread stick in half easy as a baseball bat. "Just because the Bureau has no operating telepaths, we're supposed to sit on our butts while the Scion of the Silver Dagger does..." He gestured vaguely. "Who knows what! How many civilians have perished already? And how many more will die?"

A good point. Where the Scion went, death followed, and lots of it.

Mindy struck the table a resounding blow with her fist, rattling the silver. "God damn it! We discover a coven of sentient werewolves, the biggest threat to the world in recent memory, and we can't even *investigate* because the bad guys can read our minds? I say we go back to Hadleyville anyway and kick some butt!"

"Yeah!" Raul agreed. "If we move fast enough, or independently, even if they know what we're doing, they may not be able to stop us."

Kathi brandished her invisible wand. "We shall bury them!"

"Thank you, Mr. Khrushchev," George chuckled.

The Russian glared in return, then smiled.

"No," I stated in a tone that brooked no further discussion. "The danger is too great. Lord knows what important secrets those Swiftian yahoos have already learned about the Bureau! Jessica saved our hides before, and we're not going to muck up the mission now by charging in unprepared. We'll find a way to stop the Scion. A trick, a trap!"

Everybody looked at me expectantly.

"Something," I mumbled lamely.

"We always do," Jess added, trying to be helpful.

Reclining contentedly in his swivel chair, Raul crossed his arms. "Okay, then shoot us the straight poop, boss man."

Furrowing my brow, I revved my brain to overload and thought like a sonovabitch. No ... no ... nyah, that wouldn't work either ... ah ... er ... um....

Silent during the rhetoric, Father Donaher sat hunched over, doing his rosary at record speed and starting to break into a sweat. Then he stopped, crossed himself, and wet his lip.

"Yes," Mike said in a strained voice, as he stared at the spinning ceiling fan overhead. "If only we knew of something that could help us. But say, if some priest had heard of such a ... thing in, oh, the confessional, for example, then he couldn't tell anybody about it ... even if he really, really wanted to," finished the big priest with a pained expression.

Smiles abounded. We have a bingo.

“Hey, Mike,” I grinned. “How about we go stretch our legs in the parking lot outside and maybe have a friendly game of darts?”

Tongue between teeth, Raul was already digging about in his spell book and extricated a giant map of North America. We had done this before. Many times.

Pulling a brass-trimmed, red leather box from a voluminous pocket of his cassock, Donaher eased open the top. Nestled inside on a cushion of gleaming white satin lay three darts. The needle tips were engraved with Donaher's full name, the shafts were of African ironwood edged with mahogany, and the fletching was of the neatly trimmed feathers of an American bald eagle.

Daintily lifting a dart into view, Donaher flipped it into the air and on the way down caught the point between thumb and forefinger. Mike flipped it again and caught the dart underhand with a snapping wrist motion. Mindy couldn't have done better.

“Gosh, Ed,” the big Catholic priest said. “I'll be glad to play a game, but I'm really not as good at darts as I would like to be.”

Ooh, watching a professional like him skirt around the Ninth Commandant was always a thrill.

* * * *

The two of us played darts across four states, before we ‘needed’ a fresh map to replace the old one. Pretty soon, Mike and I were working on a street map of Kansas City, Missouri. With amazing accuracy, he laid a feathered pattern in the suburbs around a small estate owned by an old friend of ours. That is, if you use some new and twisted meaning of the word ‘friend’. Try arch-enemy instead.

Gathering the crew, we paid for dinner and took a cab from Zanesville to Columbus, sleeping the whole way. In Columbus, we purchased a brand new limousine using my disposal ID and fake American Express card listed under the name of Hank Mathers. The credit card was good for any amount, but only for one purchase. Afterwards, the account would be paid in full by the Bureau and permanently closed.

Driving to Kansas City, sleeping the whole way, we traded the limo in on a used school bus, which was the closet thing to an armored assault vehicle it was possible to obtain on such short notice. It also helped to muddy our trail in case the Scion was still after us. Not an unreasonable assumption. Those guys could give bloodhounds a bad name.

Hitting a local theatrical supply company, a hangout for devious criminal types, we purchased the few additional supplies needed to do this assignment, and then took off to find a secluded place where we could work in peace.

Pulling into the lot of the Lazy Eight Motel, Jessica got us four adjoining rooms, and we trundled our new equipment inside. Most of it was weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, silver ingots, and a special purchase by me for me. I was the only member of the team trained to handle the stuff. I might have no idea what Donaher was sending us after, but I had a pretty good hunch what I would have to do to get it.

As this mission was incredibly dangerous, and slightly illegal, I was going alone. The more people involved, the bigger a chance of failure. It was not a unanimous choice, and in fact I had to pull executive privilege. Something I had not done since that nasty incident in Columbia with the New Gods. But we knew whom that suburban mansion belonged too: Dr. Mathias Bolt.

Bolt was a medical doctor, licensed psychotherapist, millionaire, philanthropist, wizard, necromancer, murderer, litterbug and leader of the Brotherhood of Darkness, a lunatic cult dedicated to conquering the world. Probably so those losers could get dates for Saturday night and avoid paying taxes. Who knew? They were as nuts as the Scion, only less efficient.

The Brotherhood of Darkness had never been a serious threat to the Bureau, or to the world in general, even though Dr. Mathias Bolt was the best ... er, make that *themost powerful* necromancer in the world. On the other hand, some members of the Brotherhood were smart. Too smart. So the only way to handle them was to give the loonies all the information they could handle, but make them positive it was totally false. Reverse psychology was what the gang in Strategy & Tactical called it. Field agents called the process 'polishing the mirror.' With the help of my friends, I began the process.

Stripping naked, I hit the shower and scrubbed myself painfully clean. Then I carefully dyed my black hair the color black. Next, I smoothed a clear tanning lotion on my normally dusky hands and face. I slid on a padded corset, and slipped on shoes with hollow heels twice the thickness of regular shoe heels. I dressed in brand new clothes, put clear non-magnifying contact lenses into both eyes, and removed my wedding ring. I used a darker tanning cream to color the pale band on my finger. Then placed the ring back on.

Carefully, the gang scrutinized me from head to toe. Perfect!

To a casual observer, I appeared as always. But, to a trained observer, I was obviously in disguise. My hair color had none of the minor color differences of natural hair. Obviously it was dyed. The same with skin tone. I was wearing contacts, so black was not my natural eye color, and I had an old scratched wedding ring with no pale skin band underneath. Plainly false. Shoe lifts meant I was short. And the padded corset indicated I was fatter than appeared, and was trying to hide the weight.

Plus, I had a bulky Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum revolver in a shoulder holster build for a slim automatic pistol. Nobody would switch holsters, so a Magnum was obviously not my standard gun.

I had just successfully polished the mirror. I looked exactly like myself, only nobody would believe it. That is, nobody smart, which is what I was counting on.

Padding to the main bedroom, I found the gang waiting for me. Raul was chanting over a coffee pot filled with a foul smelling brew, and Jessica was loading a hypodermic syringe.

Tossing my necktie over a shoulder, I unbuttoned my shirt and lifted my body armor. Soft as silk, the stuff would stop anything this side of an elephant gun.

"This may hurt," Jess said, wiping my amazingly muscular torso with an alcohol swap.

"Do I get a lollipop afterwards?" I asked.

Gently as possible, Jessica impaled me. Ouch!

"Sure. But only if you don't cry."

Tried my best. Whew. Who makes those things? Nazi war criminals? Then my skin went numb as the novocaine took effect. Ah, much better.

As Jess stepped aside, Kathi moved in to sketch a diagram on my chest. Kinda tickled. Then Raul took

her place and used a brush to paint over the outline. Even through the novocaine, I could feel the occult brew sizzling into my tender skin. Goodbye, summer tan.

“Is this going to leave a scar?” I demanded when he finally allowed me to lower my body armor.

“Gosh, I hope so,” Raul said, pouring the rest of the concoction into the sink. The enamel began to peel off.

I stopped my buttoning. “What! Why?”

“That will make it last longer,” Raul said honestly, tossing the brush into a waste can. A piece of old newspaper flared into ash.

“Swell. Thank you, Mr. Wizard.”

Doffing an imaginary plumed hat, Raul did a sweeping bow. “At your service, sahib.”

After checking the load on my Magnum, I bowed my head. Father Donaher did a little prayer over me. I lifted a pant leg as George strapped on an ankle holster, and I accepted a fistful of pens from Mindy. She had personally filled and primed each, thereby greatly reducing the chance of a malfunction. Kathi poured some powders into my shoes, a potion in my mouth, and a lotion down my back. My chest burned, my head ached, and I was starting to feel a bit slimy. Yuck. The things I do for America. Then Jess gave me a glass of water and some extra-strength aspirin. God, I love that woman.

After issuing some detailed instructions to the gang and receiving a priority kiss from Jess, I went outside, hailed a cab, went downtown, bought another car, and drove boldly to the known headquarters of our hated enemies.

Briefly, I wondered again what Donaher thought was so damn important.

* * * *

Strategically, I parked my car a good block away from the mansion, stopping directly under an old oak tree whose spreading branches offered a pool of shadows from the overhead street lamps. Every little bit helps.

Dominating the street was a brilliantly illuminated billboard announcing that this was the headquarters of The Brotherhood, a non-profit, charitable organization, and an equal opportunity employer.

Openly, the Brotherhood was a publicly chartered organization dedicated to the study of magic, parapsychology and the occult science. Their agent provocateurs never went anywhere without a lawyer, which made for interesting firefights. They actively sought the company of news reporters and protected themselves with the continued association of innocent civilians. A dirty trick that worked much too well.

Their Kansas City base shared land with a unique orphanage for the blind and a training center for the physically handicapped. Both of these noteworthy institutions were supported by the blood money of the Brotherhood. Totally unconcerned with the welfare of these trusting people, the Brotherhood looked upon them merely as protective coverage. This way, the Bureau couldn't simply drop a plane full of napalm upon the mansion as these sister organizations would also be destroyed. The matter had been discussed. In detail.

The Brotherhood of Darkness was sneaky, tricky, and damn annoying. They used our own laws against

us. If I tried to strongarm my way in, a horde of lawyers wearing pinstriped polyester would descend, each loudly demanding to see my search warrant, holding order, writ of habeas corpus, FBI badge, driver's license, fishing license, birth certificate, and anything else they could think of. If trouble occurred, a TV news team would be there within minutes.

I couldn't bluff my way in or use force. With all of their magical and technological defenses, I couldn't sneak inside. That left only one remaining option. The most dangerous and difficult of all. Knocking on the front door and asking for admittance.

* * * *

Strolling across the street, I noted that the fence was made of brick and about six feet tall. Which was exactly as high as the law allowed. But topping the brick was an additional two feet of iron picket fence, crested with shiny swirls of concertina wire. Hardly more than an endless razor blade, concertina wire would slice through leather gloves, and the hands inside, with frightening ease.

Halogen light clusters, which are very difficult to shoot out, dotted the double fence every eight meters. There was only one gate, big, heavy and made of stainless steel painted a non-descript black. There were no hinges. The massive two-ton slab of metal was lowered and raised from the concrete apron of the driveway by a set of hydraulic motors big enough to lift the fence, much less merely the gate. Of course, there were armed guards.

Standing brazenly in a cute little brick gatehouse whose inner walls were plated with Soviet Army reactive armor were a man and a woman in baggy uniforms designed to hide the body armor underneath. Openly, the pair carried Ruger .38 service revolvers. Legal, if kind of wimpy. But the arm locker of the gatehouse also held a nasty assortment of military deathdealers, and a large cache of thermite bombs each of which was powerful enough to fry God. Pitbulls watched from stout steel chains, but those were no danger. As long as their leashes held.

As I came close, the woman started talking into a hand radio, video cameras swung my way, and the man rested his thumbs in his belt so that his hands were closer to his pistol.

"Good evening," I said politely, offering my hand.

Hesitantly, he took it and we shook. The goof.

"Sir," he replied stiffly.

Radiating innocence, I beamed a smile. "I would like to see Dr. Bolt, please. Is he in tonight?"

"Do you have an appointment?" the man asked, reclaiming his hand. Too late!

"No," I said honestly.

"Then I am sorry, sir, but Dr. Bolt is a very busy man," apologized the guard. "Perhaps if you called his secretary in the morning for an appointment?"

Hell would freeze first, bucko. "I'm afraid the matter cannot wait," I said amiably.

The woman was on the radio again.

"And you are, sir?" asked the man asked, a hand resting on the wide leather belt, only inches away from

his gun.

Casually, I reached inside my sports jacket and withdrew an amazingly clean FBI commission booklet. The badge was real and the card showed my picture. But there the identity process ended.

“Special agent Emmanuel Rodriguez,” I stated. “Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

The guards grew more attentive. The Brotherhood could not know for certain, but I was sure they harbored notions who the Bureau was a subdivision of.

“And exactly what is your business with Dr. Bolt?” the woman asked, speaking for the first time. She had a stern voice, used to be instantly obeyed.

“Private,” I said, letting the cold ring of authority enter my voice.

Huddling together, they held a private conversation, so I gazed at the stars overhead. Such a beautiful night. What was the chance of a meteor hitting this place? Sadly, next to none.

“If you would just wait a moment, Officer?” the man said, as the woman stepped into the gatehouse and started dialing the phone.

“Agent,” I corrected, sliding the commission booklet into my breast pocket so that the shiny badge was always visible. “Of course.”

Privately, I sure hoped somebody got rude real soon. This artificial smiling was starting to make my jaw hurt.

In less than a minute, four more guards appeared on the other side of the fence, and I was informed that Dr. Bolt would be delighted to see me. Anything to assist the police.

The gates opened with the sound of a bank vault, and if the new guards didn't quite frog-march me across the lawn, they sure came close. Naturally, I didn't get much chance to view the external grounds, but that was not important. I had already seen the aerial photos in the Bureau file room. Mostly it was plush lawns, manicured hedges, and splashing fountains. But lining the broad front walk was a double row of bronze statues depicting the signs of the zodiac: Aries, the ram; Taurus, the bull; the Gemini twins; Cancer, the crab; Leo, the lion; a nude woman for Virgo; another dressed woman holding a pair of scales for Libra; a scorpion for Scorpio; a nude man with a quiver and bow for Sagittarius; Capricorn, the goat; a scantily dressed woman pouring water from a jug for Aquarius; and this really big fish for Pisces.

I'm not much of an art buff, but they were beautiful sculptures. Although it didn't take much surmise on my part to guess that in case of trouble the whole damn zodiac would come to life and the horoscope of any invader would read, ‘Time to die, bozo.’ ‘Nuff said.

The front doors were made of aged seasoned oak, thick enough to stop a medieval battering ram. And while I wasn't wearing my sunglasses, somehow I could still tell that the butler was a zombie. Or else, truly British. Sometimes the distinction is difficult to make. I offered my hand, and he gave it the most perfunctory of clasps. Ha! Got you!

The foyer was Italian marble, a French crystal chandelier filled the ceiling overhead, and suits of Olde German armor stood at rigid attention in recessed niches in the wall. I was starting to get the idea that

Bolt was more paranoid than the Bureau. Did we actually rag his case this much, a pleasant notion, or did he have more enemies than just the Bureau, an even more pleasing idea. Hmm.

The guards stayed at attention in the foyer, and I shook their hands goodbye, then tagged along after the icy butler. At the top of the stairs, more guards were waiting, and we shook hello. I am such a friendly guy. Then we formed a procession down a hallway full of locked doors and portraits whose beady eyes followed every move I made. Faintly, I heard the telltale noise of a machine gun bolt being pulled. Maybe this hadn't been such a great idea. Below, on the ground floor, the great front door boomed shut with the noise of a coffin lid closing.

Eek! I hate symbolism.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As we strolled merrily along the corridor, the guards managed to accidentally-on-purpose bump into me several times as they attempted to take an inventory of what I carried. A partial inventory, anyway. I had more weapons and equipment than these yutzes could ever imagine. I only hoped it was enough.

Turning a corner, we passed through a cleverly disguised X-ray machine and ankled past a hidden machine gun nest and several infrared scanners. This might be more difficult than previously imagined, and I still didn't know what I was here for!

At the end of the corridor was a simple wooden door marked 'office.' The four guards took positions outside the room, while the butler opened the door, and followed me in. Ah, at last.

Foolishly, I had half expected the private office of Mathias Bolt to somehow resemble a mad scientist's laboratory with bubbling experiments, a dissection table overflowing with blood-stained retorts, shelves made of human bones bowing under the weight of forbidden volumes of alchemy and black magic. Actually, the place was rather nice. A bit conservative for my taste, but not bad.

The walls were lined with bookcases filled with leather-bound volumes in a hundred colors and a dozen languages. The floor was a plush velour carpet which hid my ankles, and so soft it made you want to lay down with your best girl. Almost felt alive. Centered on the left wall was a fireplace you could cook a car in, and the right wall was dominated by a Belgian tapestry large enough to hide almost anything.

Over by the far wall, bracketed by a pair of balcony windows, sat a massive slab of mahogany pretending to be a desk. The flawless surface was polished mirror bright; the only items displayed were a gilt-edged leather blotter with green paper and a gold pen-and-pencil set in a rectangle of white marble. I was sure that all of them were deadly weapons.

Behind the desk, Mathias Bolt was waiting for me. His eyes were the very first thing anybody noticed. They were overly large, set deep into his skull, and never blinked. Creepy.

A slim dapper man, Bolt was wearing a velvet smoking jacket and silk lounging pajamas. Geez, who still made those things? If his mouth was too broad for smiling, he did it anyway. Mathias had hair coal black, with streaks of pure silver at each temple. Dr. Bolt was smoking what smelled like an herbal Egyptian cigarette in an ebony Chinese holder almost a foot long. Although wearing no rings or watch, Necro-Man had a plain band of copper adorning each wrist. Ah, magic bracelets. Same as mine. This could get interesting. Depending upon your definition of the word. Was a nuclear war interesting? In the movies, sure. Live? No way.

Puffing on his cigarette, Bolt reminded me of a big snake preparing to eat a small bird. And I was the guy wearing feathers. Briefly, I wondered if he had forged the bands himself, or had he stolen them from the cooling bodies of dead Bureau agents? Either way made him a man to be reckoned with. And disposed of as soon as possible.

As I walked towards the brooding, sophisticated killer, I toyed with the concept of gunning him down on the spot, but dismissed the notion. Not only was it illegal, and bad manners, but also he had yet to tell me what I was here for.

That was when I noticed the *Playboy* calendar on the wall. Wow. August was a good month. Maybe the old necromancer was sub-human at that.

Grandly, the leader of the Brotherhood of Darkness gestured towards a plush chair that was so softly cushioned it would be impossible to get out of in a hurry. Our battle had begun. *En garde!*

I parried by accepting the seat and snuggling in deep. That should put Mathias at ease, and put him off guard. Ha! Bureau 13 agents were deadly even if stark naked, upside-down, and chained to the wall, and that's the way we liked it! No, wait a minute, I hadn't put that quite correctly. Oh hell.

"Good evening, Agent Smythe," Mathias Bolt said in a tone so soothing that I instinctively braced against Mind Control.

Then I came fully alert. Smythe? Yikes! A straight lunge to the heart! I hadn't used that name since my old Chicago days as a PI. Did this carrion magician actually know me? No, wait, I had used that name during a few Bureau missions. He only knew of me. Whew.

"Who?" I asked with a puzzled expression, dancing aside and keeping my guard raised. "I'm sorry. Your butler got the name wrong. Its Emmanulle Rodriguez, Special Agent, FBI."

"Of course," he purred, oozing charm. "My mistake. I will fire the incompetent bungler immediately."

Slash, and miss. I covered a yawn as my riposte. Nice try, bozo. But if he was attempting to incur my sympathy and thus weaken my resolve, he had the wrong man. We Symthes are a fighting people.

"So why is the Bureau," he stressed the word, "giving me a visit at 10:30 at night?" Thrust.

"Official business," I said gruffly, placing my shoes on his desktop and deliberately marring the perfect finish. Parry and lunge.

Dr. Bolt turned red in the face, and then puffed himself to quiet complacency. "Indeed? And what is the nature of this business, pray tell?" Maintain guard, backstep.

Going for the kill, I gave him a death's head grin, honed from a thousand poker games and specifically designed to freeze the very blood in your veins. Had actually worked once on a naive vampire.

"Ever hear of a Bureau 13?" I countered bluntly.

Astonished, Dr. Bolt dropped his cigarette holder, and then yelped as he burned his foot. First blood!

"Why, ah, yes," he responded, opening a drawer in the desk, and extracting a slim manila folder. "I have

even been made privy to a file amassed on a quote Bureau Thirteen end quote."

Nice grammar, but whatever information was in that folder bode ill for me. There were a dozen defenses in my repartee, so I choose the classical best. Offense.

From the hum in the bracelet on my left wrist, I could tell that Bolt was protected by a magical forcefield a bazooka shell couldn't get through. The desk was ancient wood, hard as nautical nails. But the file was tagged with a red edge, denoting a non-duplicable original.

With the flick of a wrist, I activated the second function of my cigarette lighter and aimed a stream of liquid fire directly towards Dr. Bolt. A burning lance of chemical flame washed over the man, his prismatic shell deflecting the fiery onslaught, but the report flared into ash.

His eyes round as saucers, Bolt lowered his hand and stared at the charred stub of paper.

"Sorry," I said, pocketing the lighter. "These darn things malfunction occasional."

"Who are you?" he demanded in a very quiet voice.

No more niceties. The game was over. I had openly displayed advanced technology and a knowledge of magic, and his shield spoke volumes about him. We each knew who the other was. This was it. Fast, I shook my watch activating the self-destruct mechanism. A lot depended on what Mathias attacked with next. If he used psionics, I was dead meat. But I would take this dirt bag with me, along with a good part of the mansion. Hope he had lots of insurance.

"Ask me in Hell," I snarled, placing my feet on the floor and sliding to the edge of the chair. As I started to reach for my gun, he smiled, as pleasant a sight as a child's grave.

"Accepted," Bolt whispered.

There was no other warning. Exploding across the desk came a boiling wave of intangible force, a hellish tsunami of primordial black magic that blew aside the blotter, exploded the pen and pencils, and engulfed me like a blast of live steam.

Frantically, I raised both hands, the copper bracelets tingling as they expended every erg of stored white magic in a desperate try to counter the lethal conjure. The very air seemed to seethe as the magiks met and battled it out in silent ethereal combat. Inside my aching skull, my beleaguered brain vibrated under the pounding command to *TELL HIM EVERYTHING I DON'T WANT HIM TO KNOW!*

It was an old spell, but a goody.

Then my chest burned as the mystic rune painted there flared in response, absorbing the ethereal onslaught, containing it, controlling it, and violently throwing it right back in the face of its caster.

"It's in the desk!" he screamed, his eyes wide with panic.

Grateful, I spat in his face. Outraged beyond words, Mathias started to rise and then slowly ground to halt like an old machine rusting solid. He froze, motionless, hands raised, trapped in the very act of casting some deadly spell. Aw, too bad, so sad. I win.

With a finger, I toppled him over into his chair and pushed it away from the desk. By necessity, the

lotion on my hand must act slowly. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been allowed in here. Contradictorily, the swallowed potion reacted nigh instantly, but only for about ten minutes, so I had to move fast. I had made him angry enough to try and magically force the truth out of me. In return, it had forced the truth out of him. Black magic was something I could not use and retain my soul, but I could outwit its caster. Bolt was out of commission for nine more minutes, and the item was in the desk. What else did I need? How tough could a desk be?

I soon found out.

Underneath the hutch was a full control panel of hidden buttons, knee switch, and foot pedals. Most were labeled, in cryptic symbols of some arcane language that resembled chicken droppings. However, off to one side, behind a sliding panel was a very modern computer lock keypad. Bingo!

From the burglar's kit in my coat pocket, I dusted the push buttons and found prints on only four of the numbers. Ha! That lowered the math quite a bit. Plus, two of the integers were more worn than the rest. Those had a high probability of the first and last numbers. Start sure and end with a flourish. For all his faults, Mathias Bolt was still a human being. Well, probably.

Unfortunately, there was still a small problem. There was a Stuart Industries box around the keypad.

Originally, electronic boxes would be indelibly stamped with the name of the manufacturer to help promote sales of the product. But it was soon apparent that this advertising ploy worked against the client. A smart crook would have a library of plans stolen/purchased/copied from each manufacturer, and after reviewing the schematics of a particular keypad, would simply drill holes in the box at the precise critical points to cut crucial circuits and tremendously ease entry into the home or business. That is, until Stuart Industries Limited.

Stuart Industries didn't make alarms, security systems, or even locks. What they made was boxes. Undecorated, steel re-enforced, dully identical boxes that could hold the works of a hundred other companies. With no brand name to work with, it became a crapshoot for the crooks. Thus, for only a paltry few bucks, a hundred thousand dollar security system could be massively augmented. State prisons were full of master thieves who could attest to the efficiency of the Stuart Box.

Careful not to bump into any of the controls around me, I tapped here and there on the burnished metal cube. Listened, smelled, and glanced at my watch. Five minutes till he broke loose. Think, Alvarez, think! Millionaire bad boy Bolt should have purchased the very best for his private safe. A Gotterstein Deluxe? No, must be a Vische. Okay, go for it.

Holding my breath, I filed a tiny slit in the top of the box exactly seven millimeters from left side. Uncorking a tiny vial from my kit, I poured in a couple drops of smelly sulfuric acid, waited ten seconds, eased off the Stuart, and tapped in the most likely combination on the keypad.

I allowed myself to inhale again, when a section of the desk slid into the floor exposing a squat armored cube masquerading as a safe. Turning to smile victoriously at Dr. Bolt, my grin wilted when I saw a barrier of laser beams encircling the desk. Extending from ceiling to floor, the beams were barely separated. It would have been difficult to pass a sheet of paper between them. Hoo boy.

Hatefully, Bolt was watching my every move.

Returning to work, I ignored him and the lasers. I still had to breach the safe. Afterwards I'd worry about departing, surviving, and secondary stuff like that.

Four dials fronted the safe in a diamond pattern. Here, I was on home turf. It was an Anderson. Two were real, two were armed with explosives, but all joined together in the middle where the master support bar of ultra-rigid titanium-steel pivoted the semi-flexible sidereal arms of nickel-cobalt to activate the easily melted copper drop pins that retained the eighteen independent dead bolts which held the six thick alloy door closed. She was a bitch to blow, burn, or pick your way into. But I had an answer to that.

Four minutes.

From my kit, I withdrew a fat tube and removed the crinkly plastic wrapper. A DeTalion Turbo-Drill. This tool was so new it was not even on the market yet. But I had read about it in Popular Science and used my FBI clearance to get one immediately. I was sure they would soon be all the rage among crooks and brain surgeons.

With a tiny click, the miniature battery started revving the small electric motor. Then the tube jerked as the motor finally obtained operational speed and activated the main flywheel assembly. The soft vibration in the tool increased as the flywheel reached the necessary RPMs to activate the main air turbine. A warm breeze blew on my hand as the turbine whined into ultra-sonic range.

Now rotating at half-a-million RPMs, the carbide-steel drill bit was moving so fast it appeared to be smooth metal. Touching the tip to the safe, a fine spray of metal filings sprayed out. I started to carve a path around the dial. Offensive technology had finally caught-up with defensive, and the centuries old technique of a 'punch job' had returned to safe cracking. Made me proud to be an American.

At the three-minute mark, I finished cutting the desired pattern, the dials spun themselves like crazy, and the bolts disengaged. Killing the DeTalion, I placed the warm vibrating tube tenderly in my kit and eased open the door, being wary of any additional magical or demonic defenses. But there were none.

Inside, the safe was stacked with mounds of cash, a clear plastic box filed with vials of colored liquids, and a flat jeweler's box. Sliding on my kid leather beauties, I eased open the case so that it was facing away from me. There was a puff of greenish smoke and a dart thumped into the carpet. Satisfied the boobytraps were all deboobied, I rotated the case and looked inside.

I think my eyes left my head. Silently, I sent heartfelt thanks to who ever watched over fools and private dicks. If I hadn't been wearing gloves when I picked up this case, my hat size would now be zero. Because no catalog of legendary occult amulets was necessary for me to recognize the infamous Necklace of Me.

A millennium or so ago, a mad master magician who had been born mute forged a unique amulet out of metals stolen from the center of the Earth, smelted in a furnace fed by trees he had personally grown, and quenched in a bucket of his own blood. To say that this guy needed a hobby was putting it mildly.

As the mage had never been given a name by his parents, whom he killed by the way, he refused to christen the necklace. Instead, whenever the mage thought of a person he disliked, the poor slob would be bodily torn to pieces by the thundering clarion telepath call of 'IT'S ME!' Hence, the name.

Although weakened by the passage of thousands of years, it was still a lethal psionic booster. Now without a master, ME wildly amplified the telepathic ability inherent in any person, so that with a single touch your head would explode. Nobody could touch the amulet and live. Nobody with even the faintest smidgen of telepathic powers. Except, perhaps, for my telepathically dead wife.

Wrapping the case in a Bureau handkerchief, I slide it into an inside pocket of my jacket and buttoned the flap down. After what I went through to get ME, I was taking no chances on losing the necklace.

Job done. Two minutes remaining. In smirking satisfaction, the impulse came upon me to take the money. Or burn it. Depriving the Brotherhood of a few million in cash would seriously hinder their operations. The rub was, I was a cop.

This necklace was stolen property. Not provable in court, but the truth nonetheless. A grateful President had given the Bureau great legal leeway in these delicate matters. I felt little remorse reclaiming the dangerous artifact from homicidal lunatics.

However, the vials of chemicals and the cash were the undeniably legitimate property of the Brotherhood. And there I had to draw the line. I know that George would have no such reticence. Or Mindy, for that matter. Which was why neither would ever lead their own field team. But I did. Ah well, sometimes it was tough being the good guy.

Duck-walking out from under the desk, I stood with a creak. Standing inches away from the wall of lasers beams, I could truly appreciate their searing gigawatt majesty. With a flick of my right wrist, I activated my next to last magic bracelet and turned Invisible. Unharmd, I stepped through the deadly curtain of lasing photons. With no colors to react to, a laser was just so much indirect lighting. Ain't science grand?

But at the exact moment the jewelry case passed the brink of the lasers, I heard glass shatter. Eh? Pivoting, I saw the broken vials in the safe, their bubbling liquid contents combining into a translucent greenish ooze, which broke apart into small spheres and bounced to the floor. Pulsating, they commenced to grow: ping-pong balls, baseballs, basketballs...

Utilizing extreme wisdom, I ran for my frigging life.

In the hallway, I nearly tripped over the sleeping guards whom had given the ol' Morpheus happy handshake. I made it past the infrared sensors no problem and passed through the X-rays as easily as they did me. But I paused at the top of the main staircase. The winding expanse of carpeted marble steps appeared totally innocent, open, and safe. In this place? Yeah, right. Hey, Bolt! Sell me some swampland only driven by a little old lady minister on Sundays.

Removing a special Bureau device from my side pocket, I placed it at the top of the stairs and, with a finger push, started the Slinky down the steps.

Ka-ching, ka-ching. Arrows flew, bullets zinged, flame whooshed, poison gas hissed, spears jabbed, swinging blades did, crashing weights also. But at knee and chest level. Casually, I strolled along in the calm wake behind my diminutive six-inch-tall assistant. Ka-ching, ka-ching.

At the bottom landing I reclaimed the coiled spring and was forced to nudge the snoring butler out of the way of the front door. The empty suits of armor stirred at the action, but did not attack.

Stepping outside, I closed the door as quietly as possible. Safe! The Brotherhood mansion was tightly sealed against teleporting and gating. But once off the front veranda, I was home free! Then a bronze arrow the size of a javelin slammed into the doorframe. Turning, I saw the whole zodiac advancing towards me. Oops.

Nimble, I ducked between the shapely legs of Virgo, and outmaneuvered the Gemini twins, the hollow metal giants clanging like church bell when they collided, but Aquarius drowned me in water and Leo pinned me to the ground under paws the size of sofas. Shaking the fluid from my ears, I could hear sirens starting to wail. Yawning guards were stumbling onto the grounds. Options came and went in my mind like the fluttering pages of a book. I was only a yard from freedom. But my Magnums, grenades, acid squirting pen, pocketknife, dazzling personality, nothing I had could even dent those bronze Titans. No, wait a second, that was wrong.

Taking the jewelry case from my coat, I tore off the handkerchief and tossed it at the lion. Leo made the catch in his mouth and his head exploded like a bronze balloon. Moving fast, Virgo snatched the case before it hit the ground, and her skull blew apart. Pisces made a successful snap and went to pieces.

Animating an inanimate object was always a tricky job. Being born dead, they were incredibly stupid and your instructions had to be most explicit. Bolt had probably ordered them to get the necklace. Telepathically.

Well, they got it. Each and every one.

Bullets were starting to fly my way when I used gloves and handkerchief to recover the jewelry case from amid the jumble of headless bronze junk. Contemptuously, I thumbed my nose at the onrushing guards in the official Bureau 13 salute to bad guys, took two giant steps, and used my last bracelet to teleport away.

* * * *

As per regulations, I appeared in the parking lot of the motel instead of in our rooms. That was just in case anything could follow a teleport. Ha. What a laugh.

Then a swarm of large black balls appeared.

Yikes! God bless regulations.

Cursing Mathias Bolt, I emptied my pistols at the bouncing spheres. I raced across the parking lot and hit the door to our rooms in a baseball tackle worth of any center. The cheap wood bent alarmingly under my strike, and didn't crack, but the lock popped and I lunged into what I sincerely hoped was the correct room.

"Orson Wells!" I cried, announcing the invasion, and I dove over the bed towards my suitcase.

My team turned, and the balls were upon us. Closest to the door, George dropped his sandwich and kicked the television on top the first globe. In an explosion of electrical sparks, the black thing was gone.

Spinning around from the sink, Jessica quick-drew her Uzi and started pumping 9mm rounds into the demonic ... whatever these things were. Satan's beach balls?

Larger than the rest, King Beachball hissed a billowing cloud which set fire to a cushioned chair, while another spewed a stream of brackish liquid at me. Fast as possible, I ducked out of the way, and the vicious liquid hit the wall, dissolving the wood panels, glass mirror, and lamp. Wow. Talk about morning breath.

Slamming a clip into an Uzi machine pistol, I gave the devil rounders a taste of 9mm Parabellums Ala Alvarez.

Charging in from the parking lot came two more beachballs. Frantically, Raul gestured and a loud grinding noise suddenly came from the doorway, although nothing was visible. Unstoppable, the balls leapt into the air to sail through the doorway at us.

Bad move. As the globes crossed the doorjamb, they were converted into fine mist which sprayed across the hotel room, dampening the carpet and wetting the bed. The Barrier of Wering had worked again.

However, bullets were not doing so well. Lead slugs simply bounced off their adamantine hides, phosphorus rounds flattened as glowing dots of yellow fire, the steel rounds musically ricocheted away, and blessed wood splintered. Ah, but then I noticed that silver bullets hit the beachballs with sledgehammer force. I tried to keep them busy while Jess got more silver ammunition.

Going for her sword, Mindy flipped over backwards in her chair as a ball jumped to get her. As it passed overhead, a slim hand holding a silver knife shot up and gutted the thing in mid-flight. Deflated, it collapsed and vanished.

Just then the bathroom door was shoved aside and out came Katrina, stark naked, dripping wet, hair matted with shampoo and the four-foot length of her stainless-steel wizard's wand held in both hands. As lovely as the lady is, I was more pleased to see the staff than her ample feminine charms.

“...!” Katrina shouted, her staff pointed at one of the monsters. It went motionless and turned gray as stone.

Bouncing off a wall, a particularly nimble beachball went careening towards Father Donaher. Swinging an arm, he slapped the thing with his steel-reinforced Bible. There was an audible crunch above the tumultuous combat, and the black globe dropped to the carpeted floor, incredibly dead.

“Get thee back, hellspawn!” the priest bellowed, the golden cross in his hand ablaze with holy power. The snarls of rage from the globes changed into whimpers of fear, and the demonic balls retreated.

Snapping the bolt and clicking off the safety, George added the firepower of the big M-60 to the battle, spraying a glittering stream of silver rounds into the remaining demons trapped between the intoning priest and the doorway jammed full of an invisible lawnmower. Steadily blown to pieces, the scraps started to roll into tiny spheres which began pulsating and growing again.

Then inspiration hit! Maintaining fire with the Uzi, I dug inside my pocket and tossed the jewelry case towards my wife. My shirt had ridden up in the battle and the box nudged my bare waist. Fleeting as the touch was, my entire left arm went limp and I was blinded by the mother of headaches.

Through tears of pain, I saw Jess make the catch one handed, but then stagger violently backwards against the wall, her small body rigid in pain.

CHAPTER NINE

Instantly, my wife recovered, her eyes narrowing in concentration. Standing straight, totally confident, Jessica turned towards the bouncing demons. Yowza! I hadn't seen her like this in years.

"Die!" she throat, clutching the necklace in her bare hands.

Both of the remaining creatures went stock-still, and tiny wisps of steam rose from the bits scattered about on the floor. Equally exhausted, I slumped to floor, hoping to land on something soft. I missed.

Dumbfounded, my team stared with slack jaws.

“How the hell did that happen?” Mindy crogged, lowering her weapon.

“Impossible!” Father Donaher gasped.

"Mon dieu!" George added.

Raul spun about. “And when the bloody heck did you get your telepathic powers back?”

Just now, she sent softly, fingering the glowing necklace in her hands.

“Happy birthday,” I groaned from behind the ruin of the bed.

The team rushed forward and helped me to my feet.

No pain, sent Jess.

Instantly, my throbbing head pieced itself together. *Gracias, hon .*

You're welcome, pumpkin.

Sssh!

Sheathing her sword, Mindy helped me into a chair while Raul gave me a bottle of healing potion and George offered a beer. As I thanked each of them, I gazed hard into the faces of my teammates. Okay, apparently nobody had received the dreaded ‘P’ word. My pride was yet intact.

“Report,” Father Donaher ordered, in a good impression of me.

I took a healthy swig from the healing potion and my aches went away. Then I took a swallow from the beer and my thirst went away. Alternating sips from the two bottles, I gave the pertinent details: Mathias, rune, safe, statues, balls.

Sitting boneless in a chair, his feet dangling, Raul massaged his chin. “So the Brotherhood can track a ‘port. I’ll have to do some work on that.”

“Definitely,” I agreed.

Just then, Kathi jerked her head. “Raul!” she screamed, pointing.

Weapons at the ready, we turned to see the angry manager of the motel stepping through the doorway. Raul gestured so hard and fast to cancel the earlier spell he fell out of his chair, but the man stayed in one piece as he walked into the room. Whew, that was close.

“What the hell is going on here!” the manager stormed. His nametag said ‘Fred’, and the bulge over his belt said ‘diet’.

Moving fast, Jessica took his head in her hands and he went motionless. “We’re a famous rock band,” she said aloud to reinforce the hypnotic illusion. “We’re here in disguise to escape our fans. We have given you a deposit of five—”

Generously, Father Donaher lifted a pack of cash from our emergency stash.

“—*tenthousand* dollars for any damages we might incur to your property. You interrupted us in the middle of an orgy. You joined in for awhile, and now, totally sated, you’re going back to the office for a nap.” She released his head.

“Take care, gang,” he said with a wave and ambled away whistling a Madonna tune.

Chuckling, I locked the door, Raul closed the window curtains, and George offered Kathi a robe.

She looked puzzled, then laughed. “*Da!* Nudity taboo. Forget. I go finish shower.” Unconcerned, the natural blonde strolled into the bathroom with the grace of a panther, and soon we heard the sound of running water again.

“Conference,” I announced, pulling up a chair.

“Wait,” Jessica commanded and slowly revolved once, twice.

“There,” she sighed with a smile. “I’ve put everybody in the motel asleep again and sent the police off to the nearest donut shop.”

Will that accursed stereotype never die?

Meanwhile, the rest of the team had gathered cushions and chairs around me to form a rough circle. That way we could talk face-to-face and watch each others’ backs.

“Okay. We have protection again,” I started, resting my arms on my knees. “What’s the fastest way to get a replacement Bureau vehicle, so that we can go and crack this Hadleyville nut?”

“The longer the Scion is left unsupervised, the harder it will be to stop them,” George stated.

“Closest supply dump is our own in Chicago,” Mindy said, sitting cross-legged on the rumpled bed. “With Raul and Kathi to drained for a mass teleport or Gate, it’ll take us five, six hours to drive there.”

“Only two, if we put Flash Renault behind the wheel,” Father Donaher gibed.

Sucking on a fresh lollipop, George was not insulted. Our daredevil soldier firmly believed that highway speed limits were merely social guidelines to be used by the weak and confused.

“We could ask for an air drop,” Raul suggested.

Jess gave a snort. “Air drop an RV?”

“Okay,” the wizard said. “Or how about a nice tank?”

“A Bradley Fighting Machine would be better.”

Reloading his M-60, George frowned. "Might as well announce ourselves to the media with a bullhorn."

"Hrmpf," Raul grumped.

"Then again, maybe we don't need an armored assault vehicle," I said thinking aloud. That caught their attention.

"What'cha mean, Ed?" Raul asked, leaning on his staff.

"The Scion might think that we died on the Ohio highway," I explained. "If so, we can sneak back, find out what they're doing, and stop it before they even knew we're alive."

From the expressions shown, my idea was met with general approval.

"Jess, can you do a soft recon of that town and give us more information without endangering yourself?" I asked.

My wife chewed a lip for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, I can do that. But it would help tremendously if I could see the place."

"Any maps of West Virginia?" I asked the group.

"In the RV," Mindy answered, getting comfortable on the floor. "Burned to ashes."

Floating in closer, Raul smiled as he tucked both feet underneath his butt. "There I can help. Mike? The hair, please."

Smiling in understanding, Donaher reached inside his cassock and withdrew a white evidence envelope. Using tweezers, he pulled into view the werewolf hairs he had found on the corpses on the highway. How long ago was that, a million years?

"Standard ritual?" Father Donaher asked, loosening his rosary.

His fingers already crackling with power, Raul nodded and we prepare for the long-distance call. This was not going to be an easy task for mage or telepath. There was a good thousand miles to cover, with nobody on the other end that either was familiar with, plus it was hostile country patrolled by an enemy telepath as strong as Jess. Maybe better. Just your average day on the job.

Clearing a spot in the wreckage, we laid a soft blanket on the floor and dimmed the lights. Placing the hairs in the middle of our circle, Raul gestured at them and a white spotlight illuminated the follicles. Then he began speaking under his breath, raising his voice in timber and volume until he shouted the last unintelligible word and lightning crackled from his staff to the hairs! Whew, what a stink.

In ragged stages, a blob of light formed on the blanket, a splotch that moved and changed, flowed and reformed until it suddenly clarified into an aerial view of Hadleyville and the surrounding country. It was primarily the same as we last saw it, with but one notable exception.

The hotel was gone. Only a flat-bottomed hole remained to show where the ten-story structure had once stood.

“Confirmation,” I barked, staring at the translucent three-dimensional image. “Is this the past, present, or future?”

“Present,” Raul said, scrunching his face into a scowl.

Mindy poked at the vacant spot with the tip of her sword.

“Blown up?” she asked. “Teleported away? Eaten? What did they do with it, Ra?”

He gave a palms up shrug. “There's no way of telling.”

“Wait,” Jessica said in a soft whispery voice. “There's a feeling ... a message...”

Eyebrows rose.

“A message from the Scion?” Mindy scoffed in amusement.

“Or fan mail from some flounder?” George added softly.

Speaking quietly, so as not to disturb my wife's concentration, I explained. “Telepathic residue. Hadleyville is so twisted in the different dimensions, it would have been unusual to discover there wasn't any ghostly thoughts from the former residents.”

“Its very fuzzy,” Jessica spoke, her eyes closed in concentration. “Jumbled ... chaotic....”

“That sounds like the Scion,” agreed Raul.

Using his armored Bible, Father Donaher rapped the mage on the head and Raul got the hint. No jokes. This situation was too unclear. We needed information badly. Lots of it, and now. What was their master plan? Where was the Hadleyville Hotel? And what happened at the occult convention which started these events? Was it an isolated incident, or an event chain that we could somehow break?

“Mostly there's hate,” Jess whispered hoarsely, her mental vision turned to infinity. “And disgust at the decadence of the world.”

We exchanged glances. Could that be the big reason? The Scion were ethical purists and wanted to destroy the world because civilization was so decadent?

“But also a purpose,” she muttered. “And much happiness. The Day is coming soon, very soon.”

That sounded bad. We could hear the capital letter.

“Which Day?” George demanded, taking notes.

“Soon,” my wife breathed and with a body jerk, Jessica returned to the real world.

“Good work, kid,” I complemented, patting a knee.

She smiled, then went pale and clutched my arm. “Oh Edwardo, they know who we are!”

“That we're Bureau 13?” Mindy asked shocked.

“Say, that is bad news,” Raul agreed somberly.

My wife shook her head. “No! The Scion knows who each of us is, individually.”

“We, as in us?” Father Donaher asked, with no trace of his phony Irish accent.

“Our names?” Raul squeaked.

Jess gave a frightened nod.

Mike and I both made the sign of the cross. Sitting side-by-side, Mindy and George bumped hands and I could have sworn they maintained the contact for a bit longer than decorum allowed.

“How?” Raul asked, his fingers white on the staff lying across his lap.

“The license,” Jess explained wearily, looking as if she had not slept for a week.

What license? Oh, the license plates on our ex-van were Illinois state and we had a Chicago city sticker in the window. With that much info, tracking us was easy. I smacked a fist into my palm. Damnation! The team had been fighting non-sentient monsters for so long, we made a serious mistake. In this business, one was all you got. On the other hand, what was the worse they could do with that information?

“Jessica, check our apartment!” Mindy cried, rising from the floor.

Grabbing a hold of the glowing necklace, my wife closed her eyes and frowned in concentration. “Somebody is there!”

“What?” we bellowed in loose harmony.

“There are dead werewolves littering the floor,” she spoke in a monotone. “They must have died by the dozens to gain entrance, but they did get inside.”

At least our defenses had held that much.

“Donaher!” I snapped. “Call both of our downstairs tenants and inform them the building is on fire. Order them out now! Save nothing! Just get out!”

“Done!” he cried sprinting for the desk phone.

A towel wrapped around her head, and thankfully wearing a bathrobe, Kathi had exited the bathroom during the shouting match. “What about deaf family on floor first,” asked Kathi in concern. The deudonic pulses of her steel wand ebbed and sparked in mimic of her emotional discord.

I waved the trifle aside. “They have a computer monitor hooked to the phone that allows them to see and read any incoming message. A flashing red light tells them the phone is ringing.”

Cassock twirling, Father Donaher spun around. “George!”

“Yeah?”

"Ready the SDC!"

He gulped and got busy with equipment bag. Soon, he handed me a miniature radio transmitter with a built in keypad.

"Jess?" I asked, typing a long coded phrase into the mini-computer.

She released the gem. "Yes, the tenants are safe outside and the fire department is on the way. The monsters are rummaging through our computer files."

I hit the switch.

In a way, I was glad we couldn't see the results of that simple action. Our apartment building was designed by the Technical Service geniuses of the Bureau to be as fireproof as possible on the outside. Meanwhile, the inside was packed with enough thermite and napalm to put that theory to the ultimate test.

Tossing the SDC aside, I slumped in my chair. Jessica touched my arm and gave a squeeze. Mindy tightened her fists until her knuckles cracked. A solemn Donaher began saying his rosary. George closed his eyes. Raul was livid. Kathi was pale.

Everything we owned was gone. Our wedding album, family photos, Mindy's antique weapon collection, Raul's library on magic, our trophy room filled with irreplaceable mementos from our combined ten years of service. Gone. What a day this had been! But at least it was over.

No, it isn't, Jessica sent.

Good lord, what now? An IRS audit?

We should be so lucky.

Uh-oh.

"We didn't get them all," Jessica announced aloud.

Heartfelt groans greeted the statement.

"How many escaped?" George asked wearily, picking at some lint on his new slacks.

"No, we killed the werewolves in our apartment," my wife amended. "But Hadleyville boasted a population of 2,000 and we have only eliminated about a hundred."

"So its not over yet," Mindy growled, partially drawing her sword and then slamming the blade back into the scabbard.

"Not by a long shot," Jess stated firmly, stroking her necklace. The jewel pulsed with inner lights, and sparks crackled along the chain.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There's to be an attack on Bureau headquarters." Jess said the words hesitantly, as if not sure she had

that correct. "I was trying to scan their minds when the roof caved in, but I definitely got that much."

"Faith, lass, and how could they possibility find it?" Father Donaher countered. "We don't even know where HQ is!"

A reasonable question. Since the Slaughter of '77, when an unknown enemy destroyed most of the Bureau, not even its own agents knew where headquarters is located. I thought we had found it once in Manhattan, but by the next business day, it was gone.

"That doesn't matter," Jessica said, in that sad voice.

"What?"

"Eh?"

"Nonsense!"

"Why?" I demanded, getting to heart of the matter.

"The exact location of the Bureau isn't pertinent to the attack," she wearily explained in a monotone. "Now that the Scion knows we come from Chicago, they plan to totally destroy the city. All of it. Every building, person, rock and tree. That way they're sure of getting our hidden main base."

Dead silence filled the motel room, only the dripping of the shower could be faintly heard in the background.

"But HQ may not even be in Chi!" George suddenly stormed. "It moves around, so this sort of thing can't happen!"

Running a palm along his face, Raul scowled. "Try telling them that."

"When is the attack?" I asked breathlessly.

"Midnight."

"Tomorrow? Next week?" Mindy prompted hopefully.

"Tonight," sighed Jess, gazing at the clock on the motel wall. "In less than four hours."

Tick-tick.

CHAPTER TEN

After placing a telephone call to the local FBI office, within minutes a commandeered Bell Air Ambulance helicopter retrieved us from the Lazy Eight Motel. Violating federal and civilian air traffic laws, the chopper ferried my team to the Lake City National Guard Arsenal where a sleek USAF supersonic transport flew us back to Chicago. Traveling at Mach Two, we arrived almost as fast as Mr. George could drive.

En route we telephoned a travel agency and made reservations in our own names for a railroad to New

York and chartered a plane to London, England. That was to throw the Scion off the trail. Underestimating these people was fast becoming a sure way to die.

Also, I sent a coded, scrambled, radio message to our hidden headquarters detailing our discovery and the possible threat to Chicago. A special meeting was arranged at the downtown Sears Tower at 9 o'clock; which would give us twenty minutes to examine the ruins of our apartment building for any clues or Scion survivors. Telepathic impressions were good, but if we could secure a prisoner and make the bum talk, we might bust this plan before fruition.

That is, if winged hordes of flying Mack trucks didn't try to ram the plane in flight. Luckily, there were no attacks and we arrived on schedule. It made me nervous.

There was a big crowd of reporters at the main terminal, so we chatted with the O'Hare security and took a side route through the hangars and called a cab from there.

* * * *

We saw the crowds from a block away. Police cars with flashing lights, fire truck spewing streams of water, the crackling ruin of our decimated home. Parking at the corner, we paid off the cabby and proceed on foot. Nobody said a word.

The marble outside of the building was black with soot. Every window was gone, the roof was missing, and it was painfully obvious that the structure was now hollow.

Strong shoulders and grim determination got us through the bustling crowd of curious onlookers. A TV station was here filming the destruction and maybe a dozen people in the crowd had cameras. Raul gestured with an 'empty' hand and the TV camera shot out a geyser of sparks. Kathi sub-vocalized an unintelligible word and every chemical camera in the crowd popped open, spilling rolls of film onto the ground. The digital cameras simply fell apart. A city ambulance was nearby, and I saw our tenants getting treatment for smoke inhalation. But otherwise everybody seemed fine. Our Bureau-issued insurance would cover medical expenses, replace of their stuff and pay ample punitive damages for relocating. Even if we survived this night and rebuilt the place, I made a solemn vow never to have tenants again. It was too damn dangerous.

FBI badges allowed us passage past the police cordon, and a telepathic suggestion from Jessica convinced the Fire Captain to let us by the sweaty, tired firemen.

Picking our way through the jumble of fire hoses, safety barriers, and pools of water and foam, we stepped into the thermal ruins. Destruction was rampart. Great slabs of concrete were piled atop each other, and bits of furniture smoldered with flame. Glancing up, I could faintly see the stars through the thick smoke rising from a thousand small blazes still crackling. The heat was intense, the cloying smoke thick enough to chew. Raul regulated the temperature and Kathi cleaned the air. Father Donaher did a blessing and George kept guard with his banjo. I cursed. The building was gutted to the walls.

"Our home," Kathi sniffed.

As a crumbling wall collapsed, a smoking timber fell from the sky directly toward us.

"Yeck. What a mess," Mindy said, irritably batting the hundred pounds of charcoal away with her sword. The neatly twained pieces hit a pile of wet foam to expose the red embers underneath.

Ed, Jess sent.

“Yes?” I asked aloud, using my shoe to push about an unbroken dinner plate on the soiled terrazzo. Wow. Must be that Corel style.

Pirate Pete is gone.

“Really can't blame him,” George commented, nudging a charred section of flooring with the muzzle of his M-60. “What self-respecting ghost would want to stay in a dump like this?”

“No,” Father Donaher said, his body stiff with rage. “There has been an exorcism.”

I started to ask why, but the reason was obvious. We wanted prisoners to talk and they wanted the same. But I would bet good money that the old buccaneer who lived in our cellar had probably put up a magnificent fight before the Scion finally drove him into the Great Abyss from which nobody ever returns.

Obviously, the Scion telepath had gotten more from us in Hadleyville than we had ever imagined. Okay, that agent would be the first to die.

“Another score to settle with these brigands,” Mindy growled.

Her long hair fanning in the smoky breeze, bolts of lightning playing about her partially recharged staff, Kathi agreed. I gave her a nudge and made her stop that. Too many witnesses.

With a gasp of delight, Raul pulled an undamaged volume from a pile of embers. Promptly, the book disintegrated into ash.

“Enough searching for physical clues,” I commanded, dusting off my hand. “Let's do a full globular sweep. Psionics, ethereal, mystic and EM scan.”

Devices were activated, spells unleashed, and wands waved to the grand sum total result of nothing. The Scion covered their tracks well.

Pocketing my scanner, I sighed in resignation. “Let's go.”

As we departed the burnt shell of a building, George retrieved a broken closet door from a pile of bed frames and jimmed it into a sagging doorway. Without looking back, Team Tunafish left home for the very last time.

Weary and angry, we moved resolutely through the crowd of puzzled people trying to shove uncooperative film back into cameras. Heading uptown, we hung a right. No sense getting a cab for seven when the Sears Tower was only a few blocks away.

Once past the hubbub, the streets of Chi were almost entirely deserted at this hour. Elsewhere in the country, the joints may be jumping, but we midwesterners like to get our sleep. In the far distance, a lonely Pace bus was rumbling along its night owl route. Wisps of steam rose from the manhole covers dotting the street, and you could hear the streetlights click as they went from red to green.

“Holy jamoke!” a voice cried out in the night. “Look! It's them!”

We spun about. Across the street was a delivery truck with its rear flap rolled up and a score of men and women lifting boxes into the vehicle. The crowd turned away. Their auras were human so I relaxed.

Oh, hell. What now? A news team?

“Jamoke?” Mindy asked with a quizzical smile.

Rising to his full height, Father Donaher scowled. “Faith, that's a mining term!”

“I can't sense them,” Jess said with a touch of urgency.

Then the group across the street pivoted towards us with machine guns blazing. Tracer rounds filled the air with burning specks. Donaher was slammed against the wall, blood sprayed from Kathi's left arm and something punched me in the stomach. Reaching upward, Mindy grabbed my belt and yanked me to the pavement behind a parked car. The sidewalk felt rough and cool against my cheek.

Windows exploded. Ricochets blew stone chips off the brick wall behind us. Parked cars bucked from the multiple impacts of heavy caliber bullets. Rolling onto my knees, I drew both Magnums and paused as I smelled gasoline.

“Hut! Hut! Hut!” I cried, in a battle phrase inspired by some old foes. Dead and buried thankfully.

Rolling to new positions, we waited the standard six seconds, then popped up and returned the gunplay in an orchestrated attack pattern. Six of the people shooting at us hit the ground in a manner to highly suggest that they were going to definitely stay there. But the rest stood brazen and uncaring of the lead-and-silver fusillade slamming into them.

Then they started to grow in size. Seams split as limbs expanded. Coats of hair sprouted, and toothy snouts extended. Ears went pointed. Hands became paws.

In seconds, the remnants of their shirts and dresses went fluttering to the ground. But instead of being naked, each creature was wearing a SWAT-style full-body flak jacket.

Aiming with extreme care, I pumped six rounds into the chest of one of the werewolves. The manbeast didn't even stagger from the triphammer blows of the .357 slugs. Our rounds can't penetrate their body armor. Hoo boy. Not SWAT body armor, but NATO Red Class military bodyarmor. Bad, this was very bad.

With a bow twang, Mindy put an arrow into the left eye of a werewolf. Startled, the man paused and yanked the shaft free, snapping the hard wood between hoary talons. Raul sent a Lighting Bolt their way, and a werewolf crackled into ash. But another took her place. George added a concentrated burst from his M-60, making their delivery van detonate.

Dripping flame, they continued towards us. What the hell?

They're coated with Cosmoline, sent Jess. A thermal resistant chemical compound that stage magicians use so they can hold burning coals in the palms of their hands.

“Limitations?” Father Donaher asked, ramming fresh shells into his shotgun. The rosary wrapped around his hand clinked with every round. Bureau body armor showed through the hole in his cassock.

It'll wear off in about an hour, and there's a good chance of cancer within five years.

“We're in trouble!” I announced to the rest of the team in case they had not been paying close attention.

I swallowed and commanded myself not to barf. Geez, my stomach hurt!

Store windows were gone. Alarms were clanging. Lights were coming on in a hundred windows. A crowd was starting to gather. The police would be here in about thirty seconds.

“If we had some explosives, we could blow the flak jackets off and then shoot ‘em,” George stated loudly, peppering a werewolf with .30 silver bullets. The soft metal rounds simply flattened against the military flak jackets and stayed there. The linked belt of ammo dangling from his machine rifle was shrinking fast.

Livid, Jessica was staring at the monsters. Whether she was trying to brain blast them, steal information, redirect the police, or shoo away civilians, I didn't know. Hopefully, all four. And maybe a fifth.

“Any grenades?” Kathi asked, casting a death spell. The chosen target went stiff and keeled over with a lily in its paws. Nice touch.

Everybody patted his or her pockets.

“No,” Raul said, casting a death spell.

“Used mine already,” Father Donaher said through clenched teeth.

“Yes!” Mindy cried. Ripping at her wrist, she removed her watch and buckled the strap tight around the shaft of an arrow. Setting the self-destruct, she stood, released the shaft, and ducked again.

With a meaty smack, the arrow went deep into the exposed armpit of a charging werewolf. Terrified, the man-beast stopped and was trying to pull the shaft free when it exploded. When the smoke cleared, I saw his chest was bare fur. Yowza! I gave him three silver hollow-points smack in the aorta. Coughing blood, he stumbled backwards, turned into a human, and died.

Six more watches were thrust at Mindy, and the rest of the werewolves started running.

“Your momma was a Pekinese!” George shouted as a taunt.

My twin Magnums at the ready, I stood. Wild shadows danced everywhere from the burning vehicles, making it hard to see. But Mindy got two additional werewolves before they disappeared down a dark alleyway.

“George, on cover!” I snapped, reloading my weapon. “Donaher, bandage Kathi. Raul, teleport them out of here! Jess and Mindy, with me!”

The team split. Dashing across the littered street, I jumped over a smoking tire and dodged round a naked corpse. We were going to get one of these bastards alive. Or die trying.

“On point,” I called, as we reached the other sidewalk. Mindy and Jess separated, each going to a side of the alley. I stood in the middle of the entrance, and then slowly walked in. Jess and Mindy slipped round the corners and hugged the walls.

As befitting a center city alley, it was wide, filled with garbage, and should have been well lit. Had the Scion removed the bulbs to establish a retreat? They were good. But were they that good?

With each passing minute, the werewolves could be getting further and further away. I would have loved to simply chase right after them like the idiots in the movies. But that was how cops got their name in granite.

“Fresh blood,” whispered a shadow the size and shape of Mindy.

As she gave no additional information, that meant we were headed in the correct direction.

Jessica? I asked in my head.

They're psi-shielded, she responded. *I can't even detect their physical presence. But I'm trying to probe around and locate a dead spot where I can't sense anything.*

I understood that. A mental shield is 100% effective or it's not there at all.

We passed a favorite Chinese restaurant, the rich smells completely masking the pungent aromas of the alley. Not a single beam of light reached the dark alleyway from the boisterous establishment.

Hey, since when do restaurants paint their rear windows over?

“Alert,” I said.

Danger, Jess sent.

“Incoming,” Mindy warned.

In an oft-practiced move, we took refuge behind garbage cans and dumpsters. A tiny pinprick of light appeared in the distant blackness, which rapidly swelled in size until a glaring ring of exhaust painfully washed over us as a HAFLA missile streaked close by overhead.

Bracing for the blast, I counted to three. A strident explosion illuminated the alley behind us, and burning garbage spewed into the sky like trashy fireworks! However, the brief flash showed a dozen more werewolves ahead of us entrenched atop a law office.

Okay, so it was a trap.

My gun swung on the memory of the brief vision, and I pumped a few rounds that way, with Jessica's Uzi also saying hello. A chattering barrage of machinegun bullets answered our question.

Suddenly, the door to the Chinese restaurant opened a crack, bathing us in brilliant light. Jessica barked something in Mandarin. The door slammed shut, was bolted, and I heard scraping noises as if a piece of furniture was being shoved against the portal.

“What the hell did you say?” I asked, reloading again.

Tong war.

Ah. Good choice. That would scare the crap out of anybody.

There sounded a twang alongside me, and something on the dark roof ahead exploded into flame and fur. I emptied both pistols at that locale and got a death howl as a reward.

Another rocket came streaking in to impact slightly in front of us. The blast knocked me off my feet and I couldn't feel my left arm. That meant a bad wound.

Ed, I don't think taking them as prisoners is an option anymore.

“Why?” I demanded, struggling to my knees and holding a Magnum in my armpit so I could slip in the last speedloader of silver bullets. “Not that I disagree, but why do you say so?”

There is a helicopter parked on the roof. I have already killed the pilot, but the co-pilot is one of them. There was a short pause as she slammed a fresh clip into the Uzi and pulled the bolt. *Plus it has a 40mm Vulcan mini-cannon.*

Oh, fudge.

There was a scattering of reddish light from the missile hits ahead and behind our dumpster. Darkness had lured us to this location and we were bracketed with deadly illumination. Already it was possible to faintly discern us. The next rocket would be the last.

“Saigon bug-out!” I ordered, getting ready to make a run for safety. What the heck, we can't win ‘em all.

“No frigging way,” Mindy announced loud and clear.

As she stepped into the middle of the alleyway, the distant fires bathed her in flickering illumination. Bullets starting to chew the alley apart, filling the air with flying lead, but Mindy just stood there, bow in hand. With a revving whine, I heard the helicopter gunship start to spin its rotor blades, preparing for takeoff and a strafing run. Oh hell. Then my Bureau sunglasses came alive, the whole edge of the roof of the law office plainly highlighted in the infrared spectrum by the massive thermal outpouring from the big helicopter engines.

Indomitable, Mindy notched an arrow in her bow and waited. The black outlines of two werewolves started angling their machine guns in an overlapping figure-eight pattern, while another outline blatantly stood with a squat tube in its paws. He flipped the sights, zeroed the port, and aimed the gaping end of the tube in our direction.

Calmly, Mindy released her shaft. There was a double explosion as the wristwatch on the arrow detonated the LAW still in its launching tube. The results of the combination were spectacular. A thundering fireball engulfed the howling werewolves, blowing body pieces off the building in a grisly rain. As the chopper tried for a lift-off, it also blew apart, adding the destructive power of its fuel and ammunition to the brewing hellstorm on the roof. Yeah, who wanted prisoners? Too much paperwork anyway.

Watching the mushroom cloud of smoke rise into the starry sky, I felt the normally high level of my confidence slip a notch. Werewolves with flak jackets and military weapons. This was beyond serious. Perhaps these bozos actually were going to try and destroy Chicago, and maybe they might succeed.

“Ed, we need help,” Mindy said, hobbling close.

Accepting a wristwatch, I heartily agreed.

“An who ya gonna call?” Jess asked, with a weak grin.

Sheathing her sword, Mindy started to speak, then stopped. Nyah. Besides, they only worked the East Coast.

Activating my watch, I began the procedure to relay a priority one call to Bureau HQ. Who was I going to summon for assistance?

Everybody.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Who the hell are you?” the grizzled police captain demanded, as I entered the conference room of City Hall.

“In charge,” I retorted, settling the matter at once.

Resolute, I strode up the center aisle between a sea of folding chairs filled with law enforcement personnel from a dozen federal, state and city organizations. Tucked in my shirt pocket was written permission from the President to tell these people anything necessary. Including the awful truth.

When we arrived at the Sears Tower, Horace Gordon himself was waiting for us. Doc Robertson and his field forensic team analyzed the remains of the people who attacked us on State Street, and the results were most interesting. The humans who died so easily from our bullets were local gangsters who dealt in stolen munitions and military weapons. No shit. The pilot in the illegally armed helicopter was Jim ‘Mad Dog’ Kerigan, a professional mercenary. News that cheered nobody. The Scion was hitting us with everything they had. I debated on requesting the Chicago PD to keep an extra special watch on the import or sales of any kitchen sinks.

The most disturbing news was that the alarms on the synchronized digital wristwatches of everybody, human and in-, had been set for exactly five minutes till midnight. Giving them just enough time to do what, leave town? Ominous.

Most of my team stayed to brief the other Bureau 13 teams called in on this emergency, and I was given the honor of lying to six thousand trained observers. Whee, what fun.

Taking the podium on the raised speaker's platform, I opened my attaché case and glanced at the wall clock: 9:10. Two hours and fifty minutes to doomsday.

Before me was a resolute battalion of grim faces. There was a neatly pressed platoon of suits with flesh-colored wires snaking out of their ears and down into the stiff shirt collars: US Secret Service. Smart and tough, although slightly fanatical about America, they were the best pistol marksmen in the world.

Nearby was a gang of FBI agents wearing our official blue suit and matching tie. I even had the regulation sidearm in a regulation holster. We nodded at each other. I had dealt with Stan and his people before. Their only knowledge of me was as the-guy-who-shows-up-when-the-shit-hits-the-fan. How true.

Filling the front of each quarter area of chairs were the representatives of the military: the stiffly formal

operatives in full dress uniforms; Army Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and Naval Intelligence.

Sitting alone were the field commanders of the Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Delta Force, and Air Force Rangers. The three men and woman seemed entirely at ease, but that was normal. These folk were trained never to get nervous or frightened. Nothing could rattle them. In a crashing plane full of dynamite, they would finish their card game and then jump naked into enemy territory. Ice. They were made of solid ice.

By the window stood a lone woman in a plain dress and wearing a governmental pass identifying her as CIA. Legally the Company was not allowed to operate within the continental boundaries of the United States, but that had never stopped them before.

A half dozen NSA field agents sat nearby and stared at me as if trying to crack a suspect. Nice try.

The rest of the attendees were mostly composed of the top echelon from the state police, Chicago city police, Sheriff's office, and Federal Sky Marshals ... although I do believe there was a smattering of National Guard officers.

Lounging in a corner was as disreputable a collection of scum and assorted miscreants as it has ever been my misfortune to encounter. Bums, bag ladies, whores, and pimps, they even had a small runny-nose child with them to complete that nice Amish family ensemble. I could almost smell the filth on their bodies and started to scratch at imaginary fleas.

Of course, the impression was totally wrong. Half of them were undercover DEA agents and the rest were volunteer members of the CTA's elite transit police: code-named: CATs for Criminal Attack Teams. These folk loitered about in sewers and alleyways, and the instant they saw a crime starting to be committed, they jumped the perp. And the child was actually a midget who held black belts in enough different styles of the martial arts to give Mindy a good fight.

That's when I noticed ...*him*.

Standing alone by the door was a solitary figure in a rumpled blue outfit. He was unshaven, smoking a cigar, and radiating power and authority. This guy probably was carrying enough weapons to level a small town, but I was damned if I could identify what branch of the Justice Department he came from. TLF? Treasury Department? Another covert agency like our own? I went for the gold.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

The big man removed the cigar from his mouth and gazed at the glowing tip before answering, obviously marshalling his collection of responses for the correct reply.

"Janitor," he said at last. "Youse giot nuff cha'rs?"

I nodded yes and shooed him away. Mentally, I made a personal note to burn my private investigator's license when I got home. Oops, too late.

Finished shuffling my papers into the correct order, I turned around. On the wall behind me was a huge pull-down map of Chicago and its suburbs. Yanking on the bottom bar, I eased the map upwards to expose the words 'four million' which Mindy carved into the cinderblocks with her amazing sword. Involuntarily, I glanced at my hands. Boy was that thing sharp.

“Four million,” I boomed over the loudspeaker system, “That number is precisely why we are here. The four million residents of greater Chicagoland.” Which is what we locals called the whole damn shebang of our mighty metropolis. Had to let the gang know I was not some 30-day-wonder from DC here to steal the glory. I was a Looper, with family and friends only blocks away.

A small hand was raised for a question. I hate such formality, but in this situation it seemed the only way to control the possible pandemonium. I gestured at the child.

“How come you're in disguise,” the CAT officer asked, squinting suspiciously at me.

Whew. These cops were good. Time for evasive maneuvers.

“Now that's a damn fool question, don't you think?” I growled at him in my best impersonation of Horace Gordon.

Chuckles sounded from everybody but the military.

“Yeah, I guess,” he relented.

Whew. Buying time, I cleared my throat. “Firstly, as of twenty-one hundred this day, the President of the United States, in conjunction with Congress and the governor of Illinois, has placed the city of Chicago under martial law.”

Shocked murmurs even came from the military with that announcement. Except for the Special Forces gang. Ice.

“However,” I recanted, “this ploy is only a political move to legally save our butts if we screw-up big time. Should this deal come off as planned, nobody is the wiser and the media never finds out.”

Pensive faces. Hushed conversations. Grudging acceptance.

From the attaché case, I slid a piece of paper into a slot on the podium. “The enemy calls itself the SSD,” I began. The Scion of the Silver Dagger, I thought was a bit too far out for even this veteran group to handle in a single dose.

“Okay, we call ‘em Sid,” a DEA agent stated.

I nodded. Give the enemy a silly name and you remove half of their power to frighten. God, I love professionals. “Sid has sworn to destroy Chicago at midnight tonight.”

A state police captain raised her hand.

“Yes, they're serious,” I cut her off. “And competent enough to do it. They have already annihilated a small town in West Virginia just to test their equipment!” What's a lie among friends?

“Any survivors?” a Secret Service agent asked.

I gave them a full eight-second dramatic pause. “No.”

The room filled with furrowed brows and grimly set jaws. I could see the thought process in their faces. First blood went to the enemy. The Scion was just elevated to a real threat. But that wasn't enough. Time

to drive the stake home.

“In point of fact,” I continued. “Sid is so competent that the military has already invaded Chi with hundreds of plainclothes soldiers, plus, the President of the United States has ordered the Pentagon to activate the North America defense grid, placing NORAD and SAC on DefCon Three.” That sobered the lot of them.

A beefy US Marshal whistled. “One step from war.”

“Now you're starting to get the picture,” I informed them. “Sid is as dangerous as terrorists come. Smart, ruthless and very well trained. With more equipment than we like to think about.”

“Where did they get it?” a Coast Guard commander asked.

“Handled already,” I snapped. Didn't want them trying to ferret out the Scion by backtracking their equipment. They might discover the Bureau!

“How do they plan to destroy Chicago?” an Air Force Intelligence operative asked. “A nuclear device?”

Device. Didn't anybody say bomb anymore?

“Unknown,” I replied honestly. “But if they've got one, they will use it. Even if a hundred of their own people are within the main fireball.”

“Ah, loonies,” a Chicago street cop noted clinically.

“Fanatics,” I corrected. “Doped on combat drugs which gives them twice normal human strength for this one night, then they die.” How else was I to explain paranormal strength? Say they visited the health spa regularly? Watched Arnold Swartzenegger movies?

The military was remarkably complacent during this, but I did notice a few generals dictating notes into pocket recorders. Futile. Any recording leaving this room would be instantly erased. Even if they had some secret lab invent the drug, we'd only steal it again like we did the last four times.

“Plus, Sid has special body armor that regulation police rounds will not penetrate,” I went on.

A few rueful smiles appeared.

“Nor will those illegal dum-dum rounds, or those 10mm Teflon-coated European bullets do shit to these guys.”

The smiles abruptly melted.

I jerked a thumb towards the boxes of ammunition stacked along the wall. “However, over there are a few thousand rounds of Top Secret plasma bullets. They're steel-jacketed, hollow points with a liquid silver metal core. The rounds will easily go through the flak jackets and then explode.”

“No shit?” a CIA agent asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No shit,” I informed her, steadfast.

The DEA wino chuckled. "Cops with silver bullets. Hi-ho, Tonto! Away..."

Whew. At least they were thinking Lone Ranger and not werewolves.

"How very amusing," I said, in a voice guaranteed to tell them it was anything but funny.

"What's the timetable?" an FBI agent demanded, making notes in a pocket computer. "How long do we have to prepare before they attack?"

Although wearing a watch, I purposely glanced at the clock on the wall. "Roughly two hours, twenty minutes. They strike at midnight."

Eyes went wide, but only silence greeted my outrageous statement. My respect grew. In their faces, I could see the crowd weigh options and discard useless procedures. Evacuating the city was a laugh. The Bureau had tried that once when New York was in serious danger and more people died in the exodus than from the enemy.

"And this is the earliest you could inform us?" a National Guard colonel admonished furiously.

This time, I gave them a four-second pause. "Yes."

"This midnight deadline," one of the CATs asked, "is it a lock?"

"Dead certain."

The US Army Intelligence operative smiled knowingly. "Sir, why don't we let them know that we know and maybe that'll scare 'em off, or at least slow the bastards down a bit."

"Nice try," I acknowledged. "But Sid does know that we know and doesn't give a good goddamn."

"They really think they can pull it off," the Naval Intelligence operative said slowly. Her uniform proclaimed she was in the submarine corp. "Destroy all of Chicago?"

"To the ground," I reiterated as firmly as possible.

A Green Beret colonel scratched his dimpled chin. "Or from the ground up," he murmured thoughtfully.

That was an interesting idea.

"Two hours doesn't give us much time," the CAT midget cop observed, lighting a pipe. "It's going to be a bitch following standard police procedure."

Knowing how cops think, I was prepared for this. "Fuck procedure," I said bluntly. "Blow your covers, strong-arm suspects, enter houses without warrants, do whatever you have to. The city is under martial law."

The clock on the wall loudly clicked forward another minute.

"Because we're rapidly running out of time. And there are four million innocent people who have placed their trust and their lives in our hands."

“And when we find Sid?” the bag lady asked, checking the clip in her Glock 10mm automatic pistol. A callused thumb started ejecting rounds as a prelude to reloading.

This was no time to mince words. Not only might it get in the way, but being diplomatic could very seriously lower the high intensity of feeling I desperately needed to instill into this group. Especially that particular team of police officers. When the CATs prowled the city, street crime dropped like a rock.

“If you find them,” I said coldly, “blow their frigging brains out. We neither want, nor need prisoners.” Besides, I wasn't sure we could handle any.

A major in the Air Force Rangers stood up. “I am not thrilled by the concept of armed personnel running amuck in a major city with a government license to kill randomly.”

You and me both, brother, so I spoke from the heart. “If you blow away some poor slob by accident, it will be a terrible shame. But accidents happen. However, if anybody, repeat, anybody uses this emergency as an opportunity to take a little personal vengeance, they will answer to me and my people, who do not legally exist and have no board of inquiry to explain their actions to.”

Bodies relaxed. They now understood that this was not to be a free-for-all, but a deadly serious gambit to save a city from extinction. Step One: save Chicago. Step Two would be to justify our actions to a population still sucking in air.

“Alert,” a Secret Service agent said, touching his ear. “There has just been an attempt to seize control of the *U.S.S. Idaho* while on a training cruise in Lake Michigan.”

“The *Idaho* ?” an NSA field agent snapped. “That's an antique!”

The CIA operative frowned. “But secretly armed with Tomahawk nuclear missiles.”

Shocked murmurs engulfed the room.

“You know about that, huh?” the Navy admiral asked.

The master spy gave a grim nod.

“As of five minutes ago, a squadron of Apache helicopters in a joint operation with Air Force Blackbird stealth bombers has sunk the *Idaho* with concentrated missile fire,” the Secret Service agent continued. “Rescue operations by the Coast Guard are proceeding for the crew.”

The Navy SEAL touched his ear. “The warheads are safe. My people have them.”

A SWAT captain crossed himself. The CIA took the bottle of whiskey from the DEA wino and downed a healthy shot. I agreed with the sentiment. Dear God, oh dear loving God, the fight for Chicago had already begun.

Hours ahead of schedule.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Two seconds later, the meeting was over, with everybody politely and nicely filing out of the room so that

they could start unleashing their hordes of destruction. When I was alone, I touched the shiny new bracelet on my wrist and teleported to the top floor of the Sears Tower.

I appeared inside a pentagram made of yellow electrician's tape on the carpeted floor. On every side I was banked by sandbag walls bristling with machine guns, arbalists, microwave beamers, and other assorted deathdealers.

A medieval knight in full armor holding a Glock .45 ceramic pistol lowered her weapon. "Hey, its Ed!" she said in relief.

A wizard with an acid-filled waterpistol clicked off a safety. "It only looks like Ed," he growled. "Password or die!"

"Horatio," I said fast.

He scowled. "Cerberus."

"Balder."

"Right," I said finishing the litany of famous guards.

A section of the sandbags moved backwards on hidden rollers and I scooted free. I shook hands with some folk I knew and was given a Kirlian security badge. It visibly glowed with my normally hidden aura. Also had my name and thumbprint.

Following the markers on the floor, I moved through the bustling crowd of humans and supernaturals, nearly getting trampled by Clarmont the gorgon and his lovely wife, Boom.

Passing another checkpoint, I was scanned by a team of folk holding a machine that resembled a leaf blower and was finally admitted into the main conference hall of the Tower which was now temporarily converted into our war room.

Going through the double sets of sliding doors, I stepped into Madhouse Central. Dimly illuminated, the four walls of the big room displayed vector graphics of the different sections of Chicago. Moving colored dots, triangles, and other assorted geometric figures indicated police, possible monster attacks, and Bureau teams.

Clustered on the floor were banks of control boards filled with radar screens, thermographs from orbital Keyhole satellites, rainbow swirls of chemical readouts, and the dancing light show of Kirlian television. A very recent invention, it had already stopped two transdimensional invasions and gotten four talk show hosts fired and/or jailed.

Far against the back wall, an assortment of staggeringly beautiful women were busy stripping off their street clothes. Two redheads were yanking off full evening gowns, a buxom Latina was removing a cop uniform, and an Oriental goddess was peeling off a lacy nurse outfit. As each item came away, a hidden arsenal of miniature weapons was exposed taped to the satiny acres of skin.

Quickly, the buck-naked bevy of babes squeezed into patent-leather commando jumpsuits which couldn't possible show more anatomical details if they had been made of thin air. Now dressed for combat, the female warriors yanked open a trunk and pulled out even more tiny weapons, along with clip-feed bazookas, spiked magic wands, chainsaw-garrotes, exploding bolos, and vampire boomerangs.

These ladies did have a taste for the strange and unusual. They were the ThunderBunnies, the sole Bureau 13 team for the entire state of Texas.

The whole staff of a Houston brothel had been violently introduced to the world of the supernatural when a client had turned out to be an incubus, a sex vampire, and these ladies of the evening had to become the impromptu defenders of a sleeping town and save the population from being ... ah,*enjoyed* to death by him and his female counterpart, a lesbian succubus. The battle of the sexes raged until dawn, and by sunrise the Bureau had a new team, battered and bruised, but victorious. Now that was a story worth telling and re-telling around the fireplace at two o'clock in the morning. Just send the kids to bed first.

Near them was a somber crowd of men and women in neat black suits and black hats, the combat rabbis of Team Macabee. Some of the older men had beards and long sideburns with the fringe at the belt. A lot of the women wore yarmulkes, those brimless skullcaps. But tonight each was armed with an Uzi machine pistol and draped with bandoleers of ammunition clips, including the cabalistic mage. Unable to use the weapon because of his magic, the mage carried the Uzi merely to fool the opposition and as a spare for the fighters. Good thinking, actually. The Bureau jokingly referred to them as the American Mossad. Their information gathering system on the supernatural was so efficient that sometimes they informed HQ about a coming problem, instead of vice-versa. Also, although they didn't like it, Macabees would work on the Sabbath. What could be more holy than saving lives?

The sad expressions on the team tonight was directly attributable to their missing telepathic leader, who died with the rest of the mentalists when the Hadleyville Hotel detonated.

Off by themselves as always, bandaging wounds and drinking healing potions, was our infamous gang of bad boys, Roger's Rangers. The Boston team broke rules that hadn't even been written yet, but they always got their monsters. However, civilians had this nasty habit of getting dead by standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing the Ranger's did had any effect on this constantly happening. Some agents believed them to be cursed.

"Hey, Rangers!" I called out in passing.

The group pivoted with weapons at the ready, then relaxed when they saw it was only me.

"The *Idaho*?" I asked.

Wet and bloody, they nodded.

"Good job."

The eight Rangers shrugged.

Next came the Los Angeles based Team Angel. Their leader was a wild haired man named Damon who posed as a science fiction author. His lieutenant was a dashing handsome computer journalist only known as Aki. Finnish, I think. I waved hi to a beautiful woman in a low cut gypsy gown of a thousand colors. Pat smiled in return and touched her nose. We both grinned at the private joke.

However, levity faded when I noticed somebody standing over in a corner all by himself. A slender pale man dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and a white tie. He was smoking a pungent cigarette and had his hat pulled so low over his face that only a pair of eerie transparent blue eyes were visible beneath the snap brim.

It was the legendary J. P. Withers himself. The very first Bureau 13 agent recruited back in 1850. It was rumored that he was immortal and slightly insane. Plus, he had this very bad habit of using explosives when diplomacy would have done the job. Or using ten sticks of dynamite when one would have sufficed. Overkill wasn't his modus operandi, it was his philosophy of life. Rare indeed was the situation which warranted the summoning of J.P., and I was of the personal opinion that Horace Gordon was secretly terrified of the man. If man he was. However, Withers was on our side. Well, mostly.

In the center of the room, talking on two phones at the same time, was the chief. Horace Gordon was a giant of a man, large and muscular, with gray crewcut hair and a barely healed scar across his throat. That was new. He was dressed in black military boots and a tan NASA jumpsuit. A double holster about his waist supported a Bedlow laser pistol on the left and a short golden wizard wand in the right. How he could safely mix magic and technology was beyond my understanding. Around his neck was an amulet on a silver chain that pulsed with a protective aura of blue anti-magic.

Then I found my own team, gleefully in the process of looting the collection of folding tables bowed under the weight of the massive assortment of weapons and magical supplies piled on top.

“Hey,” I offered as greeting.

With cries of delight, they scampered close and hugs were received. Nothing like a good hug to help lower the tension.

Freshly scrubbed and looking like spring, Jessica was in denim pants, white shirt and denim short jacket. She had a double-barrel taser stun gun at her belt, an Uzi slung over her shoulder and was arranging medical supplies inside a field surgery kit. The necklace of Me was where it should be, dangling between her breasts and glowing contentedly. I would too.

Now stop that! she sent privately.

Sorry.

Mindy was in her ninja outfit of loose black pajamas with no belt, a double quiver of arrows on her back and a compound bow. With sword in hand, Ms. Jennings was stuffing knives into a sleeve.

Adjusting the rosary dangling from his belt, Father Mike was also in military fatigues. His combat Bible rode in a special holster at his hip, and over his back was a set of pressurized tanks whose complex pipes fed into a short, insulated sprayer which had discolored from heat. The M1A flamethrower was the big priest's favorite weapon when battling hellspawn or thawing frozen Thanksgiving turkeys. These tanks were an odd color though.

“What's this?” I asked, thumbing the pressure rig with a fist.

“Amen,” Father Donaher mumbled kissing the rosary. “Hey, Ed. Normally, I use jellied gasoline. But for this wee scenario, the tanks are filled with Napalm #4.”

Patently, I waited for enlightenment.

“Napalm #1 was jellied gasoline,” he explained. “Number two could burn under water. Number three stuck to the target like epoxy glue.”

“Number four does everything, I suppose.”

“Aye, lad. And it's poisoned.”

I made a face. “Very nasty, Michael.”

He shrugged, making the tanks slosh. “If this helps to send more Scion members to meet their Maker, then praise the Lord.”

When a Catholic priest starts talking like a Southern Baptist minister, I know we're in for trouble. Or a picnic.

“Hallelujah!” Mindy shouted.

Dapper as ever, Raul chuckled appreciatively. For some bizarre reason, Mr. Horta was in white, from deck shoes to nautical cap. Staff in hand, with lumpy pouches hanging over each shoulder, his arms were full of copper bracelets. His right pants pocket bulged with a hip flask and his linen shirt was embroidered with the words ‘shiver me timbers!what does that mean anyway?’ When had this sailing craze overcome him?

You gave him the Old Spice for his birthday, dear.

True enough. My fault then.

Her long blonde hair tied in a ponytail, Kathi was in a tight leotard that showed off her every ample curve and changed color to match anything she stood near. A belt of small pouches went around her trim waist and a bandoleer of foot long magical wands was draped across her chest. A few I could identify as Lightning, or Stone-to-Flesh, the rest were unknowns. Even the butterfly on her cheek was wearing an Army helmet for protection.

Whistling contentedly, George was in standard Army fatigues and expertly adjusting the straps of his huge plastic backpack. The square container had a cushioned hip-rest and padded shoulder hooks to help distribute the tremendous weight of the 18,000 rounds of ammo in the pack. From the top of the container snaked an enclosed belt which fed directly into the breech mechanism of a stocky rifle with a worn, pitted maw.

The Masterson Assault Cannon fired 20mm caseless, armor-piercing, high-explosive rounds. I have seen just one of these weapons destroy a whole company of giant robot spiders. Thankfully in another dimension. If news of this terrible gun was ever made public, Geneva would hold another convention just to outlaw the thing. Bureau regulations strictly forbid its use outside of a war.

Amigo was lying belly-up on the table, softly sawing toothpicks.

“Where's mine?” I asked eagerly. “Did it arrive?”

George took me by the elbow. “Over here. When the Ranger's saw the rifle, they tried to confiscate it. But Raul and I persuade them that was not a great idea.”

“That's right, pilgrim,” Raul drawled. “Wa-ha.”

“That was the absolutely the worst Harrison Ford I have ever heard,” I said with a straight face.

Visibly disappointed, Raul scowled, "But I wasn't doing Ford!"

"Rex Harrison?"

"Get stuffed."

Aside from my twin Magnums and a sampling of high explosives, in unrestricted combat I also carry a combo pack: three LAW rocket launchers and two HAFLA incendiary rockets in a cushioned haversack. But downtown Chicago was no place for a bazooka battle, as I knew from hard experience, so I had requisitioned the next best thing. A Barret M-1 sniper rifle.

Longer than the M-60 and heavier than cardinal sin, the tremendous rifle was made exclusively of space-age alloys to cut the weight as much as possible. Chambered for .50 Long SuperMagnums, the rifle had a muzzle blast of 5,487 fps and an effective range of two incredible miles. Perfect for home defense.

Cresting the main barrel was a Starlite sniper scope that could see your tonsils in pitch darkness at nine hundred yards. The cigarbox-sized ammo clip held eleven gigantic bullets. Twelve, if you were foolish, or desperate enough to carry this portable howitzer with a live round in the chamber.

I slid in the twelfth round.

"Tunafish!" Gordon called out, and we hurried over.

"How'd the briefing go?" the chief asked as a greeting. Signing a spell book, he handed it to thin air, where the volume vanished.

Hmm, spacial delivery? Quickly, I slid on my sunglasses, then yanked them off as tears rolled down my cheeks. Zounds! Maximum overload. Too much magic around here. Alvarez, never do that again.

"Well?" Horace repeated.

"Everybody is ready as they can be on such short notice," I reported, wiping my eyes. "They each were handed a copy of the written notice, and know they should report on radio channel such-n-such, and that you'll issue orders that damn well better be obeyed on channel such-n-such."

"Such-n-such?" Kathi asked curiously.

Shifting his weapon, George rested an arm around her dulcet curves. "It's a technical term, sweetheart. Sort of like blah-blah, or thingy."

Lord, give me strength. "How about us, sir?" I asked. "What's the status on our wave division? And the cyber-cops?"

"The mermaids have already been briefed and are taking position out in Lake Michigan," Gordon said. "Our robots and sentient machines are in position at Hadleyville, still searching for clues to where that Hotel went."

"Then we agree it is the key to this whole matter?" Raul asked, leaning on his wand.

The chief gave him a stare to wilt flowers on wallpaper. "Was there ever any doubt?"

"Sir! Anti-yes. Sir!"

Having dealt with mages before, Gordon was unruffled. "Anyway, General MacAdams and the Phoenix team have been split in half. One section positioned near Cheyenne Mountain, in case the Scion try to infiltrate the base and start a nuclear war."

"And the other half?" I asked.

"Is currently at Camp David with the President. In case the Scion has any ideas of taking the boss hostage and offering his life in exchange for the Army destroying Chicago."

My temples started to throb. Ye God, what a devious mind the chief had. But then, that's why he was in charge.

"Who does that leave to guard headquarters?" Mindy asked bluntly, tucking throwing stars up her sleeve.

Gordon looked at her without an expression. "Us," he replied.

That took a minute to sink in.

"It's here?" I gasped, glancing around. "You moved Bureau HQ from wherever it had been to here?" I had trouble getting the words out of my mouth.

"Saints preserve us man, are you mad?" Donaher demanded in a booming voice.

All conversations stopped in the room and J. P. Withers started our way like an express train from Hell.

"The purpose of the Bureau is to guard American citizens," Horace Gordon stated coldly. "Our HQ has many devices and weapons which cannot safely or quickly be removed from the ... place that we used to occupy."

"So you moved the whole base to exactly where the enemy thinks it is, so that we can better guard Chicago?"

He seemed surprised at our reactions. "Of course. Contingency plans have been prepared in case we all die. But the best hope we have of not dying is to hit the Scion with everything we have."

"And that includes me," Withers whispered, a cold breeze moving silently around the man. He stood near, but not close to us, both of his hands tucked in pockets and the same cigarette smoldering away at the same length.

Waving at the smoky air, Jessica gave a delicate cough. "Do you mind extinguishing that, please?" she asked politely.

J.P. Withers stared at my wife and, for a second, I thought he was going to kill her. I started to swing the barrel of the Barret.

"If it accommodates you, madam," he relented. Drawing the smoldering butt into his mouth, he chewed

for a moment and swallowed, wisps of smoke coming out his ears.

Hoo boy.

Carrying an Uzi, a centaur in a flak jacket galloped by and tossed a folder towards the chief. "Sir, report on the *Idaho*!" he said, then galloped away.

Horace made the catch and flipped to page one. "Hmm, G2 reports the attackers as large muscular men with weird faces. They seemed to be almost bulletproof until the sailors and SEALs used our new plasma rounds. Henderson!"

A young man appeared from nowhere. "Sir!"

"Have somebody go check on any unusually large purchases of Nair, or other hair-removing solutions within the past week. Apparently, the werewolves are depilating themselves to hinder identification and confuse the issue. However, if they used a credit card, we might be able to trace the owner in time."

"Aye, and don't bother," Donaher said, dismissing the matter with a wave.

Both Gordon and Withers stared at him.

"Five will get you ten, that the stuff was bought on cards taken from the corpses outside Hadleyville."

"You could be correct, Father," the chief admitted. "But it never hurts to check."

"On it, chief," the lad said, and he was gone. Poof.

Running a hand over his crewcut, Gordon turned to stare at the ready boards on the four walls. Red lights pinpoint the city in a dozen locations showing the presence of a fire or mysterious explosion. Normally, didn't have too many of those here. This wasn't New York.

"Damn, but the Scion is good. Too good," Horace acknowledged, then added softly. "By God, we just have to be better."

Amen to that.

"Alert," a woman calmly announced while gesturing over her crystal ball. The medium was in a white turban and flowing burnoose in a Niagara pattern. And I do mean flowing. I could hear the water splash. "Somebody is beginning a spell of summoning in East Cicero."

It was amazing that she was getting anything on the ball. Took a medium a long time to establish the proper rapport with the mystical crystal. These folks had just been teleported in from our sister organizations around the world: The Farm in England, Sunshine in Israel, The Sons of Van Helsing in United Germany, Department 9 in Russia, Fantasmique in France, and Wally's Spook Club in Australia.

Gordon raised his wrist and spoke into his watch. It was larger than ours, more complex than ours, with a teenie-weenie TV screen and a printer. But then, he was the boss. "Roger's Rangers, there's a code three in East Cicero. Get the coordinates from Henderson."

"Anytime, anywhere, *mon Capitaine*," the watch said in stereo.

In a puff of smoke, the group in the corner disappeared.

“Alert,” an android called out from a satellite communications console. “FBI and the State Police are currently in hot pursuit of a tanker truck that has smashed through the barrier around the water purification plant in Joliet. Army has sent a flight of Apache helicopters to assist. Air Force Foxbats and Navy Tomcats are on route.”

“Peirpont!” Gordon snapped.

An artificial man glanced from a radar console. “Sir?”

“Watch that tanker. If it gets to within a hundred meters of the purification plant, have Finkelstein use some of our reserve magic and gate it to the Moon.”

“Say what?” chorused the whole room.

Suddenly, Horace was very embarrassed. Damn well should be. Gate the werewolves to the Moon?

“I meant that figuratively,” corrected our commander-and-chief gruffly, turning beet-red in the face. “Cast it into the corona of the sun. Any sun. Try for Betelgeuse, or Rigel.”

“Acknowledged!”

“There's been an incident at the Grand Avenue ASPCA,” an elf technician reported, holding a receiver to his pointed ear. “Every dog and cat is gone.”

The screen on his board showed a detailed vector graphic of the downtown street corner. Interesting. The Bureau hadn't used combined technology and magic since the Atlantis incident, but I guess this was the time to pull out all the stops.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Gordon growled impatiently. He sat and a chair appeared underneath him. “It's just the Fringeworthy doing a pre-emptive strike.”

I couldn't stop myself from asking. “Who are they, sir?”

He glared at me. “Beyond your security clearance, Ed.”

Did such a thing exist? Bummer.

Tugging on the brim of his fedora, J.P. Withers lowered his hat until it completely covered his body, then touched the floor and was gone.

“Alert!” another crystal ball gazer calmly announced. “SAC HQ has just ID'd a UFO high above I-80. Washington DC has NG'd a TNT ICBM, but OK'd a BZ-loaded SAM in an effort to KO the UFO.”

“Acknowledged,” Gordon snapped, loosening his collar.

“What the hell was that?” Mindy asked confused.

George got a sly expression. “Oh, just an initial report.”

I reached for my gun, but Jessica restrained me.

“Later,” I promised.

George blew a kiss.

The centaur trotted close and stopped this time. “Sir, the King of the Sewers announces that all is normal in his domain.”

“Thank His Majesty for me,” Gordon said. “And ask him to please continue surveillance of the underworld.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Shaddup!” I barked at everybody.

Although my brain was revving furiously, in some distant section of my mind I could vaguely discern that although Gordon was shocked at the behavior, he accepted it.

“Sir?” I started hesitantly.

“Okay, what is it, Alvarez?” There was the unspoken promise that is better be good, or I’d be guarding the Haunted House at Disneyland for the rest of my life.

“When we fought the Scion years ago in New York, and just recently in Ohio, they used Mack trucks, or tractor-trailer assemblies to haul weapons around.”

“If you got a point make it,” he said, crumpling a sheet of paper and tossing it into a wastebasket, where it flared into ash.

“The Chicago underground,” I said succinctly.

Faces cleared in comprehension. When the City Council of 1871 was rebuilding Chicago after the great fire, they had a brilliant idea. The underground. Not to be confused with the underworld of which we had more than enough, thank you. Summarily, it was decreed that trucks would not be allowed in downtown Chicago anymore. But in order that business could get their shipments, a subterranean copy of the main streets was built, so the trucks could deliver their goods directly to the basement of a building or store.

However, since the trucking level was poorly illuminated at night and very isolated with few easy exits, the underworld was tailor-made for the Scion. Simply drive in a few hundred truckloads of explosives and blow up the city.

Horace Gordon rubbed his chin. “Damnation, you could be right, Edwardo. Hey, ThunderBunnies!”

“Sir!” a busty blonde vision of loveliness responded, loading an ammo clip into a portable M-35 mini-rocket launcher. The damn thing resembled a honeycomb with a trigger, or an old-fashioned pepperbox packed with high-tech firepower. Nasty thing. I owned two of them, myself.

“Go check the undercity,” Gordon said, jerking a thumb at the wall map. “I’ll send along a dozen or so black-and-whites and a squad of Green Berets to assist. The ID code is: Krakatoa. Response: Vesuvius.”

The blonde jacked her weapon into ready status and gave a dimpled smile. "Gotcha, sugar," she purred and turned for the exit.

Close behind followed the rest of the Thunderbunnies, similarly armed with Atchinson automatic shotguns, Heckler Koch G-11 caseless machine guns, O'Neil gauss rifles, and their exotic goody bag of lethal ironmongery.

"Sir," I objected. "Team Tunafish is perfectly ready to go."

"Have a rest," interrupted the chief. "The Bunnies are gone already. You've been on this from the start. Take the next hot spot."

"Alert," called out a voice. "There has been a perimeter breach at the Commonwealth Edison nuclear power station."

"A China Syndrome," growled George, slamming a fresh clip into his Colt .45 automatic.

The dreaded China Syndrome scenario. A terrorist attempt to force a meltdown at the local nuclear reactor and smother Chicago in a deadly cloud of radioactive steam. A super Chernobyl! Yeah, sounded like something the Scion would go nuts over. Almost as good as nuking us, or poisoning the water supply. Thank God this wasn't Denver with a hundred billion gallons of Hoover Dam looming overhead.

"Henderson!" Gordon bellowed. "Who do we have on ready status?"

"Nobody, sir," the young man answered from behind a humming array of laser printers hard-wired to a crystal ball. Hey, maybe that was how Wall Street stockbrokers controlled the market. "Macabees are out handling a disturbance at the City Armory, Angels are investigating a massive influx of burglar alarms at the Museum of Science and Industry."

Horace grunted. "Accepted. Tunafish, get!"

That ended our break. Hastily, we gathered supplies and I felt the first cold rush of adrenaline with the prospect of battle. Yet as I shouldered the massive Barret, I got a gut instinct felling that the attack on the museum was actually a greater threat to Chicago than the possible nuclear meltdown.

How is that possible? Jessica asked.

Neither my mind nor gut knew. Could another piece to the puzzle of the Scion have just dropped in our laps, only we were too busy to see it? What could the Scion of the Silver Dagger possibly want in the Museum? On the other hand, what *couldn't* you do with a warehouse full of technology and information?

Hmm.

Hmm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An express elevator reserved for Bureau teams took us down twelve hundred feet to the parking garage in the sub-basement. Moving fast, we chose an El Dorado stretch limousine; eight tons of armor plate,

and bulletproof windows. Painted a non-reflective dead black with all of the chrome removed, while not quite as impressive as our old RV, the luxury car would blend into the surroundings better. Stay low and keep moving, that was my motto for the month.

A huge pentagram had been spray painted on the corrugated steel of the garage door. As we approached, the design shimmered into a picture of the Eisenhower turnpike. With me at the wheel, we raced into the magical gateway and neatly merged with west-bound traffic. I don't think anybody even noticed us.

At ninety miles per hour, we crashed through the flimsy toll barrier and rocketed along a secondary street, wildly zigzagging through traffic. Of course, we had wanted to teleport directly to the nuclear power station, but apparently defensive wards had been cast around the place, sealing it off from intrusion. Our mages were trying to batter down the mystical jamming, but in the meantime we readied our weapons and put the pedal to the metal.

Taking another side road, we hurtled into the country. Farms and crops gave way to weeds and forest. A few miles later, the limo moved past the minor obstruction of some yellow rubber cones and we found ourselves facing a more formidable barrier: a roaring assortment of dump trucks, steamrollers, graders, mixers, generators, and the supremely important coffee wagon.

I slowed at the approach of a large burly woman in faded denims, a sweaty work shirt, and an unbreakable plastic yellow hardhat. However, there was a suspicious bulge by her right ankle, almost exactly the correct shape and position for a .22 automatic pistol. The preferred weapon for undercover police officers.

"Road's closed, mack," she yelled. "You got to circle round and take Hinkle Road."

Bringing the limo to a halt, Jessica and I exchanged smiles. It was a good lie. There was no such street as Hinkle and you couldn't circle round. Just trying would get anybody hopelessly lost. Which should deter any sane person, maybe even news reporters. But then I noticed the nervous look on many of the operators' faces, and that two had fresh bandages on their throats and legs.

The Scion had been here.

As the annoyed foreperson stopped outside my door, I gave the woman a fast once-over with my sunglasses. Through the Kirlian-sensitive lenses I could see that her aura was human. The matter had never really been in doubt, but when on assignment, it's better to take nothing for granted. The ancient Scottish saying of, 'Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.' only earned you a coffin in the Bureau.

With fingertip pressure, I hit the button to lower the slab of Armorlite which served us as a window.

She frowned. "Hey, jerk. I told you to scram."

"Cerberus," I said.

She paused. "Horatio."

"Balder."

Nodding, the foreman placed two fingers into her mouth and gave a sharp whistle. In ragged harmony,

the motors of the trucks and graders started with a roar, and the construction equipment dutifully parted to form a slim passageway between their massed tonnage. Taking it slow, I eased the limo through the leviathan gauntlet and moved on down the road.

A few miles later was a squad of state police cars in a standard broken H pattern blocking the road. Maybe fifty cops were present, a good dozen of them in full SWAT uniforms of flak jackets, combat helmets, and holding M-16 rifles. Even the K9 Corp was present, hard-muscled German shepherds walking in tight formation at the heels of their human partners. There was even a bomb disposal truck and a waiting ambulance. Wooden sawhorses adorned with flashing red lights completed the ensemble of authority.

On the berm were four smashed police cars that resembled the losers in a demolition derby. One had windows coated with something red. I decided not to look too closely.

Stepping in the middle of the roadway, a ton of muscle in a state trooper's uniform held out a palm to stop our approach. The other hand rested ominously on the scarred butt of his HK 9mm. Lowering the window, I extended an arm through the opening to display my commission booklet.

He was properly unimpressed. "Thanks for coming, but we already captured the escaped prisoners."

"Cerberus," I stated impatiently.

His eyes narrowed. "Horitio."

"Balder."

There was a pause and he moved towards the HK.

"Right," I hastily added, and he relaxed. Whew. Different checkpoints, different codes.

Removing his hand from the proximity of his gun, the officer took the mike from his shoulder rest and chatted for a few seconds. Three of the four cars in the H moved out of our way. In passing, it was plain that forth would never go anywhere again except the junkyard.

"What hit these guys?" George asked frowning.

Jessica was vague. "Somewhere between forty and fifty enemy troops in bulletproof fur coats."

"Bulletproof?" Father Donaher cried, touching his cross. "You mean the new plasma bullets didn't stop the werewolves?"

Holding the amulet of her necklace, Jessica listened to secret thoughts. "The rounds haven't arrived yet. Too many delivery points and only so many people who can be spared to do the task."

"Swell," I muttered, stomping on the gas. "Just swell."

The road went serpentine for a mile, probably a landscaping ruse to help hide the evil power plant from rabid environmentalists, and then straightened. Now facing us were four mammoth Abrams tanks, their gigantic 120mm cannon lowered to exactly car height. The colossal military machines were backed by mobile artillery, TOW missile launchers, howitzers with crates of linked 40mm shells standing open and ready for immediate use, .50 machine guns, bazooka teams, Bradley Assault vehicles, and dozens of

Hummers with stanchion mounted 10mm electric mini-guns.

I hit the brakes.

Wounded troops were everywhere. Stumbling towards the waiting medical choppers with the help of a friend, or lying on stretchers and moaning in pain. Spent shell casing covered the ground like brass snow, and the charred wreckage of two Apache helicopters lay partially hidden in the weeds.

Bright light bobbed in the sky as fully mobile sister gunships traveled low and steady along the outer perimeters of the barricade. Whew. On both sides of the roadway, the trees and weedy bushes were filled with the glittering strings of concertina wire. Miles of it. Nearby was a flatbed trailer truck half-filled with the plastic boxes the deadly stuff came packed in and drums of the chemical compound used to dissolve the wire. Not ecologically sound, but neat and fast.

George gave a whistle. "They've got enough concertina to encircle the whole damn plant."

"Twice," Kathi added, her face pressed against the Armorlite glass.

"It didn't help," Jessica said in a small voice.

Just then a squirrel scampered out of the bushes and entered the clear band of burned-off grass. A guard shouted, others turned, and the arboreal rodent was hit with machine guns and grenades, and then the deafening roar of an Atchinson rapid-fire machine shotgun vomited a storm of lead and steel. As the smoke cleared, a team of soldiers in silvery, full-body, Chemical Warfare suits moved in to cleanse the area with flamethrowers.

I heartily approved. The official orders were that nothing goes in, or out, without proper authorization. I was pleased to see that the troops were being so literal in their compliance.

At our approach, a heavy middle-aged man turned from the group of bedraggled soldiers examining a M-16 with a barrel bent like a pretzel. The general was a big man, completely filling the green-black combat uniform of the 157th Illinois Regulars. The brim of his web-covered helmet was mathematically straight, shoes mirror-polished, and pants sharply creased, but at his belt holster instead of the standard Colt .45 automatic was a mammoth blue-steel .50 Desert Eagle. A nasty weapon suitable for killing rogue Buicks and assorted small buildings.

The two-star general glowered at us. I glowered back, and he started limping over.

I glanced at Jess.

Broken leg, she sent. He tackled a werewolf barehanded to hold it in place so one of the Abrams could shoot the beast.

Much as ex-PFC George Renault disliked brass, he positively shone at the officer in admiration. No wonder he was in charge. Briefly, I wondered if the general believed in magic. The Bureau could use a man like that.

"Did it work?" Raul asked curiously, leaning forward in his plush contoured seat. The motion made his shoes list starboard, and the tiny crew started bailing to stay afloat.

"No."

Oh crap. "FBI," I stated doffing my commission booklet and flashing badge. Dutifully, the rest of my team tried their very best to appear tough, alert, and wary. The quintessential description of every federal operative in existence.

I let him have a good look at the badge and photo ID card. A bit dusty, it was my real badge. Edwardo Alvarez, FBI, Justice Department, sub-division Bureau 13. It wasn't often we got to announce the fact in public.

My badge glowed brightly as he held it, informing him that I was the real article and informing me that he was ditto.

In the distance, I could see the Commonwealth Edison power plant and faintly heard the crackle of small arms fire. It was infuriating to just sit here, but without proper ID, these troops would do their best to blow us into atoms. The perimeter guards were going nowhere.

After a moment, the general snorted his disdain and pushed away the proffered booklet. "Trust me, with that suit, you don't need a badge."

What? Oh yeah. I was still wearing my FBI-clone clothes. A real plainclothes federal agent was as close to invisible as science alone could make them.

"What happened here?" I asked, sliding my commission booklet into a breast pocket so that the badge was on open display.

"Don't waste time dicking around with us!" he roared. "Get in there and frag those geeks!"

Startled, I stomped on the gas pedal and the limo lurched ahead. This time nobody moved an inch to accommodate us and I had to skillfully maneuver around the military obstructions until we reached clear road.

I almost pressed the supercharge button, but stayed my hand. The road beyond was blown to pieces. Blast craters made the pavement resemble a flat colander. I was impressed. Unable to move beyond their appointed position, the Army had blasted the Scion every inch of the way as they fled.

How nice to deal with professionals.

The stout limo jounced through endless craters until we reached an eight-foot-tall triple-wire fence surrounding the place. Actually, it was three fences laid atop each other. The outer two were plastic-coated, while the middle carried enough voltage to achieve the Tesla effect, if necessary. And yet punched through that formidable barrier, the resilient gate, and concrete guardhouse, was a hole big enough to herd elephants through.

Rolling into the breach, we skirted around a flatbed truck loaded with concrete pylons. A crude but effective battering ram. Damn their efficiency!

Beyond was a chained dog run. Scattered inside were the remains of what might have once been German shepherds. As there was no time, or place, to go around, I accelerated the limo and tried to ignore the meaty bumps we rolled over. Mike said a brief prayer as we passed. Jessica looked as if she was going to be ill.

There still remained one defense for the nuclear reactor. I hope it worked.

Straight ahead was a three-story brick building. Offices. To the north was the two-hundred-foot-tall fluted ceramic structure of the cooling tower. It was what people saw wafting into the sky as they hastily drove past a nuke powerplant. Geez, it was only warm water vapors, about as harmful as a daydream. To the south was an encased area filled with power transformers directly connected to an array of metal skeleton towers, the high-voltage transmission lines which feed electricity into town.

In the midst of this stone and steel grandeur, dominating the landscape, sat a huge smooth concrete dome. The emergency containment vessel. Resembling an inverted granite soup bowl, it completely covered the main reactor building so that in case of a core meltdown, a cloud of radioactive steam couldn't escape.

What about Chernobyl?

The communist government had tried to save money on the plant and didn't bother to erect a containment vessel.

Bad move.

Yowsa.

Cars from the parking lot had been parked in a circle around the plant. The limo smashed the little things aside as easily as the Scion werewolves had climbed over them. Beyond lay a collection of broken sawhorses that had once offered a meager defiance against the adamantine beasts. But no human corpses, as there wasn't a living soul in the whole complex. Had the Scion noticed?

The front doors had been locked, and the handles linked together with plastic shipping straps, tough as leather. The plastic had been snapped like taffy and the doors completely ripped free from the thick alloy casing frames. Could even a werewolf do that?

So far our watches had remained silent. I pressed the test switch and was satisfied that the Geiger function was working. But if these babies start clicking, well, even magic can only heal so much. What the hey, I had a lot of friends waiting for me in Heaven, and most of my enemies were in Hell.

Gingerly, we stepped through the shattered windows, wary of the jagged glass daggers ringing them. Inside, the whole lobby was blackened by fire, and charred lumps of meat marked where a few of the Scion had died from land mines hidden under the plush carpet. Turnabout was fair play.

Three hallways branched out from the lobby, but one was blocked with office furniture stacked in a crude barricade. There was a map on the wall behind the receptionist's desk, but I knew from experience that it would be subtly wrong. The security in these places was tight as our own. Even so, it had been beaten.

"Diversion?" Raul asked, jerking a thumb.

Moving silent as a dream, Mindy was already at the hallway, prodding the furniture scraps with her sword. "Yep, the reactor is this way."

A lumpy shape blotted the floor in shadow.

“Twelve o'clock high!” I cried, firing a Magnum at the overhead lights.

In a spray of broken tiles, a huge creature dropped from the ceiling to bounce off the receptionist's desk and land on a decorative glass table. The top instantly shattered beneath the impact of the heavy being, slashing its scaled legs to ribbons. Ha! I always knew those things were dangerous.

Wait a minute, a scaled werewolf? It was a gargoyle!

As the snarling beast struggled to free itself from the ruin of the table, the seven of us formed a firing line with our backs to the wall, not the open mouth of the tunnel. Jessica's machine pistol sprayed a deadly combo of lead, steel, and the new plasma rounds at the animated stone monster. Annoyed, the beast hissed its defiance and vomited a stream of acid-based enzymes. A golden ray from Raul's wand diverted the stream in midair. The poison hit a computer terminal, which began dissolving. An arrow from Mindy bounced off the gargoyle's eye. Donaher hosed the beast with liquid fire. Kathi gestured, and shackles covered its mouth.

With a fiendish grin, George snicked off the safety of his Masterson Assault Cannon and started pounding the gargoyle with armor-piercing HE rounds. Slammed into the plastic mock-up of the nuclear furnace, the gargoyle was held motionless under the furious onslaught of caseless HE. A perfect target.

Holstering my .357 Magnum, I leveled the Barret, took aim and squeezed the trigger.

At first, I thought the rifle had jammed and exploded on me. Mentally, I braced myself for the pain of the searing shrapnel tearing me to bloody gobbets. Then I realized the gargoyle had no head.

“Nice shot,” George complemented.

“Thanks,” I said loudly to hear my own words. My hair hurt from the concussion of the rifle, and my ears were numb. Did this thing actually fire a bullet, or did the noise level simply smack things to death?

“Now that,” Raul panted breathlessly, pointing to the motionless statue on the floor, “is no werewolf!”

“Faith, lad, we called in friends,” Father Donaher said, adjusting the sizzling pre-burner on his weapon. “Apparently, so did they.”

“But why?”

Sourly, George tapped his rifle. “What kind of ammo we carrying?”

“Silver,” I answered, and the light bulb clicked on. “Which will do nothing special to a vampire, ogre, or medusa!” Our other ammo was miles away at the Sears Tower. Bloody marvelous.

Levering in a fresh round, I then shouldered the massive Barret. “That was just a guard. Come on, I'm on point. Raul on rear. One meter spread. Let's go!”

Hurriedly, we started down the central hallway, Then a siren outside began to wail loud enough to rattle the broken window. We did not need Jessica, our universal translator, to decode its dire message.

“Meltdown,” Mindy breathed.

And we smiled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Yes!” I cried, raising a clenched fist in victory.

Jessica and Mike shook hands. George and Raul did a high five. Mindy hugged Kathi to the evident surprise of the big Russian actress. Even her butterfly did a little jig.

“Let's go get ‘em!” George shouted brandishing his M-60/banjo.

Scrambling more than running, we hurried along the central hallway. This was our big chance. Destroying the nuclear powerplant was such an obvious ploy that precautions had been taken. Every city which possessed a nuke also had a full-scale working model of the plant in which to train new personnel. It was an exact duplicate, with the proper pipes hot or cold, live steam in the turbines, and a floor that vibrated. Completely draining the magic from a fully charged mage, the Bureau had switched the two buildings. The real powerplant had been rendered invisible and was a hundred feet to the west. This was the model. Perfect bait to finally capture a werewolf.

But if the Scion deduced the truth and managed to find the operating plant, Chicago could very quickly get blowtorched off the face of the Earth. A sobering thought. The fake alarms never stopped or slowed.

Turning a corner, we faced a set of double-doors with a gaping hole in their middle, closing off the hallway. The team paused when Mindy spotted a tripwire, and George deactivated the Claymore mine attached. Just a gift from the Scion.

Beyond those doors lay another set, and then more. Finally, we reached a more formidable portal. The door was a seamless slab of highly polished alloy. There was no lock, handle, window, keypad, keyhole, card slot, sensor pad, or dial. And lying on the floor was a very dead human technician. Jessica faced a corner and vomited.

In the wrong place at the wrong time, the poor man had been brutally killed. I took off my FBI jacket and draped it over as much of him as possible.

“Damn beasties must be on the other side of this wee door,” Father Donaher reasoned, radiating Irish anger hotter than his flamethrower.

“Okay, how do we get past this?” George demanded, panting slightly from our brisk run.

“Nobody does,” I said, shifting the cushioned strap of the Barret rifle. “Obviously, the whole plant has undergone primary lock-down!”

“Which means?” Mindy demanded, poised on her toes with her sword in both hands, ready for action.

I thumped the armored portal. “Meaning that nobody gets in until the President personally commands the Atomic Energy Commission to send the step-down code.”

“But this is only the model.”

“Which functions exactly as the original!”

Donaher whipped out his pocket cellular phone.

Reaching out a pale hand, Jessica closed the phone. "We'd never reach the White House quickly enough."

Separated from capturing our enemies by only a meter of reactive metal alloy. It was infuriating!

In an unprecedented move, George spat the gum out of his mouth. "Okay, the front door is locked. How about a side window? Or we could do the old Santa Claus bit with a chimney flue."

"*Nyet*," Kathi said in a ghostly voice, her eyes glazed. A wizard's inner sight is often a wonderful thing at times. This was one of them. "Scion did not pass door."

"Eh?"

"What?"

Impulsively, I glanced around. "Then where are they?"

"Ohmigod," Jessica breathed, staring at the floor.

Although most of the dead man was covered with my darkening suit jacket, the mangled remains of his arms and legs were horribly apparent. I did a double-take when I saw what my wife had noticed. Wholly intact, his undamaged left arm was fully outstretched, with a single finger pointing to the west. Towards the real plant. Yikes! Not murdered, but tortured!

George took Raul by the shoulder, "Horta, get us out of here!"

With a furious expression, the mage stomped his staff upon the floor. Nothing happened, except that the body was gone and the meltdown alarm was strangely quiet.

"This is the real power plant!" Father Donaher gasped in understanding.

Proudly, Raul kissed his wand. "Wizard's got to see where they teleport and what could be better than a full scale model?"

"How nice," I acknowledged hastily. "Mindy, carve that door to pieces!"

"No need," she said pointing upward. "Look."

We craned our necks. There was a gaping hole in the ceiling above us, continuing for several levels. Beyond that, even with maximum augmentation from my sunglasses I saw nothing.

"They did a bypass," Katrina breathed in admiration.

Brushing back his wild crop of red-hair, Father Mike raised an eyebrow. "The defenses of the main control center were too great?"

Pulling the bolt on her Uzi machine pistol, Jessica scoffed. "No way. But if anybody tries to force entry, the whole plant shuts off with overrides. Then the Scion could never get the meltdown they want."

“But out here?” Kathi asked confused. “What can werewolves do outside reactor?”

Yeah, what could the Scion do out here? Any computer commands from the office building had to be routed through the main control booth and would be easily deleted by the technicians. No important equipment was external of the containment shell. And without computer guidance, the only place a meltdown could be forced was the main reactor. No, *in* the main reactor.

“Merciful heaven, they're headed straight for the core!” Father Donaher cried, almost dropping his shotgun. “Going in from above!”

“Brilliant!” I reluctantly agreed.

Craning his neck, George was crogged. “Through the containment shell? It's ten meters thick!”

But the ploy made sense. They would encounter no real security devices or defenses on the outside of the building. There was only thirty meters plus of ferro-concrete to pierce, and they were home free.

Faintly, in the distance, I heard another explosion from the perimeter. Just another rabbit, or the Scion trying to escape after finishing the sabotage? Suddenly, a soft horn began bleating. The actual meltdown alert? Hoo boy.

Crouching low, Mindy jumped and pulled herself onto the next level. “Come on!” her voice cried. “It's an easy climb!”

Yeah, right.

Gesturing and chanting, Katrina tapped our miscellaneous footwear with her wand and we each raised a leg and carefully placed a shoe on the wall. With a lurch, the team lifted the other foot and now stood on the curving dome, our bodies perpendicular to the ground. In standard attack formation we raced the three stories to the roof. Flying would have been faster, but this was a magic minimum mission. How many additional battles would we have to fight tonight?

Stretching endlessly above us was the containment vessel. A quarter million tons of formed, pre-stressed concrete reinforced with every artifice available to modern science. Spiraling around the dome was a series of dots, bare bolts indicating where the access ramp leading to the top had originally been, but removed for this emergency.

But high off to the side was a dark unidentifiable splotch. Sky to my left, rooftop to my right, we scampered forward. If the military was watching us through binoculars, somebody was asking for aspirins right about now.

The splotch was a hole. Keeping well clear of the opening, we gathered around the breach in the concrete. The passage was roughly six feet in diameter, neat and round as if done by a giant shoemaker's awl. It was a disquieting, if picturesque, visual.

Keeping close to the concrete, I turned my head slowly so as not to experience vertigo. “Raul, stay here on rear guard.”

Raul nodded. “Natch.”

“And if the worst happens, can you do a prismatic shield over the whole plant?”

“To hold in an atomic steam cloud?” The wizard made a face as if digesting a brick. “Ah ... yeah. Maybe. If I paint runes.”

Always ready, Jessica handed him a crayon. “Then start drawing. If we fail, you erect a shield.”

“With you guys trapped inside?” he blinked, pocketing the marker.

Snapping the huge clip loose, I checked the load on the Barret. “Please do as requested, Marnix.”

The use of his real name shocked the Belgium mage. After a moment, he glumly nodded. Real aristocracy always knew when to shut up.

As we started inside, I saw Raul using the crayon to hastily write mystic symbols on the smooth concrete, take a sidestep, do another, and step again. Smoke poured from his shoes and the crew was rowing frantically. However, if the wizard had a whole plant to surround with those runes, he'd better hurry. But then, we had better, too.

The inside of the tubular hole was silky smooth and dotted with the ends of flexible black iron bars, gray lead plates, and bright white cadmium sheeting. Our watches were still silent. Or maybe the thumping of my heart covered their telltale warnings.

Stepping forward, we found ourselves a meter above a metal lattice catwalk that encircled the dome at several levels. Probably for inspections. There was a low humming noise that permeated the air and vibrated softly in the walls and floor.

Below lay an impossible maze of pipes, conduits, ducts, T-joints, condensers, and just assorted stuff. Occasionally a hiss sounded, or the dull cluck of an automatic valve closing. The place resembled a car engine from an ant's perspective.

Marring the angular perfection of the technological jungle gym was a pattern of pipes bent or crushed aside to accommodate something much larger than human. Yep, our boys had been here. If it ain't ours, break it, that was their philosophy.

“Kathi, stay here and try to repair the hole in the concrete,” I ordered brusquely.

She nodded and went to work. Good woman.

Sword in hand, Mindy took the point and dropped silent to the catwalk. The rest of the team followed as best we could. Our first indication that we were getting close was another dead technician, this one impaled on a manual release wheel. Not the shaft, but the wheel itself. Mindy scrutinized the disgusting corpse for a whole second.

“Ogre,” she declared, and we moved on.

Soon, a grinding sound started to make itself heard above the balanced hum of the reactor and turbines. In the distance, partially obscured by pipes and mist, was a bullet-shaped metal construct with thick conduits connected to every side. The pressure chamber of the nuclear reactor. The grinding noise was coming from a shuddering machine held in the hairy paws of a gang of creatures. Supported by a sling, a roaring diesel engine was pouring out black smoke as it powered a whirling cone covered with concentric teeth.

The ancient DeTalion drill bucked and shuddered as the monsters forcibly held the reluctant tool against the heat-slick covering of the core. Already, the outer wall of the chamber had been segmented and pried out of the way. Chunks of thermal insulation and interlocking slabs of graphite lay discarded on the lattice flooring. And like a chainsaw doing wood, this mining machine was chewing a path into the final wall. Beyond which was only superheated steam, hard radiation, and certain death.

“Can't risk using the flamethrower in here,” Donaher said, tucking the steaming hot barrel into his insulated belt and stroking the pump action on a Remington shotgun. “Might finish the job for the Scion.”

“And no time for finesse,” George said grimly, checking the feeder mechanism of the Masterson. “Let's just kill them.”

Sheathing her sword, Mindy pulled out her bow and notched an arrow. “At last, a battle plan I like.”

“Routine one,” I agreed, leveling the mighty Barret on a frosty horizontal pipe. “On my mark.”

In the Starlite scope, I got a clear view of a werewolf directing the drill; then I relocated the crosshairs onto the drill itself and squeezed the trigger. *Ba-doom!*

Torn from its grip, the ruptured diesel spun away, spewing oil as it clanged off the reactor and plummeted downward.

With slack jaws, the Scion turned, and then we cut loose. The deer slugs from Father Donaher's shotgun punched a hole in one monster big enough for Mindy to feather the ogre behind him with a silver-tipped arrow. Both monsters seemed incredibly surprised. Jessica hosed them with a stream of 9mm Parabellums from her Uzi, and I blew a fourth to pieces. Body armor didn't mean crap to the Barret and our new plasma rounds. Why hadn't I gotten one of these sooner? Would have made a splendid birthday gift.

To difficult to wrap. Shaddup.

Although rattled by our appearance, the remaining fur-faces rallied to the fight. Two flank wolves trained their MAC-10 machine pistols at us, sending a hail of .22 bullets zipping our way. Meanwhile, the rest of the beasts insanely started stuffing blocks of a sticky clay-like material into the nearly finished breach. It was C3, I realized, a high explosive plastique.

I held my breath to facilitate aiming. Thunder sounded. A headless werewolf jerked backwards, the fistful of detonators in her paw falling among the complex piping.

“Here!” Jessica ordered, handing a copper bracelet to Mindy.

Fast, the martial artist tied the metallic band to an arrow with a strip of cloth, pulled, aimed, released.

Streaking fifty feet past me, the pipes, and the Scion, the arrow jammed itself into the thin strip of exposed insulation edging the puncture in the reactor casing. Grabbing her necklace, Jess stared. With a flash, the gash was gone. The outer shell had become as smooth and perfect as the day it had been forged.

Gleefully bracing for the recoil, George triggered the Masterson. In short controlled bursts, he sprayed the support legs of the platform the Scion agents stood on. And with a screech of stretching metal, the

flooring tore free from its mounting. The werewolves tumbled downward, bouncing and slamming off the maze of pipes like hairy pinballs.

“After them,” I commanded, shouldering the Barret. “We want a captive!”

Angling to the side, the team headed for the walkway and stairs. There was a convenient airshaft close by, but we ignored that. I'd fought my share of monsters in airvents and didn't care to repeat the experience. They had the advantage that I was trapped, but I had the advantage that they couldn't dodge my bullets. So it equaled out. I hated that. Nothing worse than a fair fight with monsters. Because neither of us really fights fair.

“Didn't know you could trigger a spell from a distance.”

If nobody is wearing the bracelet, of course.

Interesting.

An explosion sounded from below, and a siren began howling.

Incensed, I smacked my forehead with a palm. Idiot! The Scion, detonators, and the C3 had each dropped to the ground floor. Re-united, the werewolves were back in business. Chicago wasn't safe yet.

Options came and went like cars on the freeway. Then a beauty screeched to a halt. Frantically, I looked around. Where the hell was it? Ah-ha!

Behind an incredibly thick window of bulletproof plastic was the reactor control room. Terrified technicians stared at us. Every inch of every wall was jammed with meters, dials, knobs, and switches. A circular bank of control consoles fronted the status board, which monitored conditions inside the core. How could anybody learn to operate this thing? It made my VCR seem simple.

“Jess, tell them to do a shutdown!” I ordered.

They can't. The main computer is crashed, and the auxiliary doesn't respond, and they aren't leaving the control room to operate the manual overrides with those monsters running amuck.

“Then tell them to get clear!”

That she relayed, and the men and women dropped out of sight.

Leveling the Barret, I aimed at the distant cluster of control panels and fired. *Ba-doom!* The muzzle blast was deafening when reflected by the metal pipes, and my eyes stung from the glare of the yard-long lance of flame stabbing from the barrel. But in response, the shatterproof window shattered into a zillion pieces.

Riding the recoil, I worked the bolt and fired once more. *Ba-doom!* Pieces of electrical console sprayed into the air like technological trash, throwing off showers of sparks. Crackling short-circuits crawled everywhere. After a third round from the Barrett, the muted rumble in the floor died away.

Satisfied, we moved on. It was an obscure piece of information I had once read in a scientific journal that if the control room of a nuclear reactor receives significant damage, an independent sub-system seizes control of the core and does a priority shut-down. I.E., shoot it and it breaks. Advanced technology is so primitive.

Scampering down the stairs, I kicked open a locked wire-mesh door and ducked as a ricochet went past my head. Shotgun in one hand, flamethrower in the other, Father Donaher gave suppressing cover as the team regrouped on the ground floor. We took cover behind a stack of steel drums used for who-knows-what in this place. Maybe clam dip for the boss.

Ten meters across what resembled a loading bay, the werewolves had established a workable redoubt by ramming a forklift into a pile of pallets. Having found their MAC-10 machine pistols along with the plastique, two wolves were wildly spraying us with small caliber bullets, firing non-stop, without any consideration for ammo reserves. A good tactic that just might work. We were at a serious disadvantage since we still didn't want to hurt the reactor behind them. Melt-down had been made impossible, but if breached, the boiling radioactive water inside the core would kill everybody here. Then again, maybe that was their new plan, to take us with them. Okay, time to get clever.

Getting her attention, I displayed three fingers to Kathi and waved them around. She nodded and relayed the message to the team.

Clutching his throat, Donaher gurgled in pain and dropped behind the barrels.

"Damn!" I cried real loud. "My gun is jammed!"

"I am out of bullets!" Mindy added, tucking away the bow and drawing her sword.

"My leg!" Jessica gasped, kneeling expectantly.

Grinning like fiends, the werewolves charged. What shmucks. Still somewhere in the rafters above, George cut loose with the Masterson Assault Cannon, angling his shots to make damn sure he did not hit the reactor shell.

Their bodies jerking wildly, the Scion agents did a little dance of death as the caseless, armor piercing, high explosive, and now silver-tipped mini-shells blew them to hell in nine pieces. Jessica did mop-up with the Uzi, Donaher set them on fire, Mindy cut off everybody's head with her sword, and my Magnums blasted anything that seemed healthy or hairy. No sense wasting the Barret on dead fish in a barrel.

"Die!" Jessica throatied, holding her glowing necklace, and empty air filled with a dead werewolf turning visible.

Amazing. How had she found him?

Bad breath.

I laughed. *Lack of flossing saves America. Film at eleven.*

Black blood dripping off a flaming paw, the largest werewolf pulled a small velvet bag from his tattered flak jacket and tossed it at us. We braced for an explosion, but nothing happened. The team pointed an arsenal his way.

"Alive for questioning!" I cried.

Reluctantly, the weapons drooped.

“Sic ... ‘em....” he commanded and then died.

Sic ‘em? Expanding, the velvet bag tore apart as out stepped one mother-ugly monster: fifteen feet tall, with four skinny legs, six muscular arms, and a bulbous head made entirely of tentacles lined with suckers filled with teeth, and tipped with long claws. A weresquid? Would silver kill a weresquid?

Shoot it and see.

I placed my last four shots from the Barret into the pulsating chest of this thing, and I'm not sure it noticed. Okay, silver meant doo-doo to the Wiggling Wonder.

Stepping in close, Father Mike butt-stroked the beast in the face with the wooden stock of his shotgun. Wood affected a lot of supernaturals. A whipping tentacle slammed the big priest aside. Donaher crashed into a tool locker and went limp on the floor, blood flowing from his face. A no go on the wood, then.

Her wrist jerked, and Mindy buried a knife into its body. Then she added a couple of throwing stars. *Nada*. Jessica peppered it with assorted 9mm rounds, but lead, steel, wood, silver, and phosphorus had no noticeable effect. Except maybe slow it down a bit with all that weighty metal tucked inside.

“Cadillac Seville!” George announced, flipping the Masterson to full auto. But the fiery stream shells merely vanished into the body of the weird aquatic beast.

Scrambling to the moaning priest, I pulled open his cassock. Strapped around his chest was a bulky vest made completely of pockets, each numbered and containing a shotgun shell. Since we were fighting were-creatures, Donaher had requisitioned a full bane collection. Good move.

These shells did not contain lead pellets or steel shot, but every known type of natural substance which had a negative effect on evil supernaturals: wolfbane leaves, dragonbane bark, salt, silver filings, garlic powder, thorns from a wild white rose, sawdust, mandrake root, minced bat wing, dried dodo droppings, essence of newt, powdered thulium, shredded income tax forms, and instant coffee. The real stuff. No decaf. That didn't do anything to anybody.

Mindy cut off a tentacle. The bodiless limb wrapped itself around her torso and started to squeeze.

In a flat pocket was a tiny booklet, and I fast read the enclosed bane chart: shrew, skunk, Shriner, oh hell, octopus was the closet we had to a squid. Was an octopus a relative of a squid? What was a squid anyway? A mollusk? Isn't that in the clam family? Only one way to find out.

Flamboyantly pulling the pin with his teeth in total disregard for good oral hygiene, George threw a thermite grenade at the wiggling monstrosity. But it caught the sphere in a tentacle and threw the grenade back. Surprisingly fast for a man of his bulk, George dove out the way, and a time clock was engulfed in searing flames. No loss.

Then the water sprinklers came on, a fire bell started clanging, and a calm voice began telling us to walk, not run, to the nearest exit.

Dripping wet, I frantically rummaged through the mess of shells until I found the huckleberry-bush ashes picked by a left-handed virgin and burned on an even day of the week.

Avoiding a whipping tentacle, Jessica dropped her Uzi and tasered the thing in a leg. Nothing.

I thumbed in the only anti-wereclam shell we had, turned, and triggered the weapon. As the gun exploded, the beast screamed in pain and began clawing at the bloody ruin of its mighty chest. Yes! The solo tentacle dropped off a gasping Mindy, and in ragged stages the beast collapsed to the ground. Slowly, its form softened, blurred and reformed into a ... little ... tiny ... goldfish?

I dropped the gun. What the hell was this? Some kind of demented joke? Taking inventory of the enemy, I could only gasp when I saw they were dogs and cats. None of them were human. Then the answer came to me like fist in the dark. We had been tricked!

The clock on the wall loudly went *tick* .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Quickly, I recovered my aplomb. “Jess, call in Raul and Kathi! George, check Donaher. Mindy on guard.” They moved.

Grabbing a hold of the amulet around her neck, Jess scrunched in concentration, and with a flash the mages appeared. Wands sparking with power, they searched for danger.

“Hey, it's over. We won,” Mindy said, with a lopsided grin. “Praise Buddha!”

Buddha? “Like hell we won,” I snapped fingers for attention. “Horta, I need HQ now. Full contact.”

“Why-o-mino, pal-o-mino?” Raul asked, tilting his head. “The danger is over, isn't it?”

“Do it!”

“Okay, okay. Don't get you panties in a bunch,” the mage said with a grunt. Marking a spot in the air with the glowing tip of his wand, Raul drew a floating square. Chanting under her breath, Kathi reached out to twist a bit of nothingness, and with a loud click the phosphorescent square cleared into a view of the War Room with Horace Gordon shouting orders to people. Neat! I wondered if we could get free HBO this way?

“Hello, Mountain Top,” I reported. “This is Manhattan. We've been tricked! These aren't the genuine articles, but cheap copies!”

“Code isn't necessary,” Henderson said. “This is a secure, scrambled, magic television.”

“Copies? You sure, Alvarez?” Gordon demanded. One second later, his image mouthed the same words. Little time lag here.

Tugging on a sleeve, Henderson gestured, and Horace turned to face us directly. In the background, some bedraggled Thunder-Bunnies were donning fresh clothing, and the wall maps were blinking with warning lights.

“These perps were not humans,” I reported furiously, “but animals bitten and turned into intelligent were-creatures!”

“Then why was the goldfish in a bag?” George asked, pouring a healing potion over Father Donaher.

The wounds and bruises washed away like dirt stains.

Bracing a thumb on her scabbard, Mindy sheathed her katana. "Heck, magic can only up your IQ so far. Dogs and cats are naturally smart. Any angler knows that fish are only animated vegetables."

"Too true."

Horace Gordon rubbed a hoary hand across a grizzled chin. "Animal agents, eh? The crafty bastards."

I heartily agreed. "These attacks have only been a diversion to keep us from..." And there my line of reasoning ran out of steam. To keep us from doing what? Where? There had to be a method to this madness. So where were the real Scion members, the mage, and that blasted telepath!

10:45pm. *Tick-tick.*

"Sir," Kathi asked, giving a curtsy. "What was at museum?"

"Um? Oh, yes, that caught my attention also. The robbers were more were-animals—and some hired guns from Wisconsin."

Ah ha! The best mercenaries were always farmers. Strong, diligent, and incredibly patient.

"What were they after?" Raul asked pensively.

"The geological exhibit," a petite blonde said, strapping on a fresh bandoleer of ammo clips. "Weird, eh?"

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"The moonrock!" George and Henderson cried together.

Understanding brightened everybody's face. Yes, it all made sense now. In a never-ending quest to stir interest in space exploration, NASA would happily place one of their precious moon rocks on display at any public event.

Desperate for new personnel, the Scion had held an occult convention to try to recruit people. As an exhibit, they had gotten a moonrock. It was from another planet; high mystical energy there. But during the con, some poor werewolf had walked into a room to find itself in the direct physical presence of the Lunar Master. An event unprecedented in world history.

Which resulted in the ethereal explosion!

Damn straight. Surviving the blast, Scion members were transformed into intelligent werewolves and, justly so, saw this as their big chance to destroy the world.

"Henderson!" Gordon barked in a roar.

The young man saluted. "Sir?"

"Get that frigging rock out of the Museum pronto! Take Team Angel, a company of soldiers, some police, and the Air Force Rangers."

“Done!” the man cried and went off-screen.

“So what we have to do is find the person holding the moonrock?” Mindy asked, chewing on a callused thumb. “If we break contact between this person and the moonrock, the Scion will become human again?”

Her long hair flying, Kathi shook her head. “*Nyet!* Change permanent is.”

George helped Donaher to stand. The molehill and the mountain.

“Doesn't every moonrock exhibit have a radio transponder hidden in the base of its display stand, so if somebody steals the rock, NASA can find the thieves and get the moon junior back?” asked the big Irishman.

That's my priest. Always thinking.

Hands clasped behind his back, Gordon turned expectantly.

“Accessing NASA files,” a technician calmly announced as he typed madly at a control console. “Transmission codes ... Frequencies ... triangulating with New York and St.Louis ... Got them! We've detected a radar anomaly 60,000 feet over Peoria.” Hand touched the earphone. “Our NORAD liaison reports that the anomaly vaguely resembles ... a building?”

A flying building?

“It's the Hadleyville hotel!” Gordon declared, throwing his hands at the ceiling.

Wow. Talk about a mobile headquarters. It probably held every big weapon they owned *and* the two thousand members. This was bad. If necessary, they could always just drop in on downtown. Take out a couple of city block at least.

“This was a short war,” the chief smiled. I don't remember him every doing that before. “It doesn't matter how heavily that building may be fortified, it can't be very nimble. Plus, we now know where their mage is. Inside, keeping it aloft.”

Gordon turned. “Schwartz! Manchilde! Have our Naval shore batteries launch everything they have and blow that thing out of the sky. I want Tomahawks flying in five seconds.”

“Aye, sir!”

A dozen mages screamed for them to stop at the same time.

“Why?” Gordon demanded angrily.

“Because of the death factor!” Raul stated, as if that clarified everything.

“Lord almighty,” a pale ThunderBunny whispered. “The death trauma factor!”

“What's that?” Mindy asked before I could.

With a tense expression, Kathi haltingly explained. If the person holding the moonrock was violently killed, the trauma of their own death would rekindle the initial reaction.

As understanding flared, I took over. "Converting everybody in the Chicago area into werewolves?"

"If the hotel was close enough. Yes."

Instantly creating four million more werewolves. Eek.

"Four million angry, intelligent downtown werewolves," George corrected, smacking himself in the head. "Lord Almighty, Ed, there aren't that many silver bullets in existence to stop that big an army!"

"Welcome to the end of the world," Jessica breathed.

"At least the end of humanity as the top link on the food chain," Mindy corrected bitterly.

Raul gave her an eloquent elbow in the ribs.

This must have been their plan from the start. The Scion would be delighted if the Bureau shot down that hotel, it only served their purpose. And if we don't, they would drop it on Chicago with the exact same end result. Once again, we lose.

"Damned if we do and damned if we don't," somebody muttered.

A power plant engineer peeked his head around a corner of the nuclear reactor. Goggle-eyed he stared at the magic window. With a glance, Jessica sent him scurrying off away.

"If the hotel is flying, why don't we add a few more fly spells and hurtle it into space?" suggested a passing centaur as he bounced along. Geez, buy some underwear, fellow.

Horace gave the matter due consideration. "Wouldn't work," he declared. "The moment we started to augment their spell, the Scion would cancel it completely, and the hotel would crash immediately."

"And I bet they're not traveling in a straight line to Chicago," George postulated, tightening his grip on the Masterson. "But, in fact, zigzagging across the country, going from one population center to another."

"Safeguarding their approach."

"Exactly."

It was good military strategy. Once more we were forcibly reminded that ruthless and amoral did not equate with stupid. And even if we shot them down over Rockville, or Sheyboygan, we'd still get a hundred thousand werewolves. Although, it was an option.

Horace started pacing. "What we need is an infiltration team to get inside the hotel and extract the werewolf with the rock." He said it calmly, as though ordering a cheese sandwich. "But as this may also be a diversion, I'm sending only one team. Any volunteers?"

Hands, wings, mandibles, filled the room.

Thoughtfully, Horace gazed over this cornucopia of suicides.

“Alvarez, your team is the furthest west, thus the closest, and minutes count. Go stop that hotel.”

Whee! Fun time. “Mission limitations?” I asked aloud.

“You have until O'Hare. The population density there is relatively thin. When the hotel reaches that point, we destroy it, even if you're still inside.”

That was only to be expected.

“Plus, I will have NORAD prepare for a nuclear accident to occur at the airport to handle any residual werewolves created.”

Fluttering into view, a fairy seemed perturbed. “Sir, won't the radioactive fallout from even a low yield atomic blast pollute Lake Michigan, contaminating half the water table of the nation?” she objected strongly.

“We'll have to chance it,” the chief replied gruffly. “I'd love to use a gas vapor bomb, but the prevailing winds are too strong.”

George nodded in comprehension.

“What's a gas vapor bomb?” Donaher asked.

“Know how a leaking stove can blow up a house?” I asked. “This is the same thing, only on a military scale. Removes entire cities.”

He whistled.

“Alert,” an old woman announced from a crystal ball. “A group of werewolves is attempting to open the gates of lower Hell.”

“Send JP!” Gordon snapped. “He has diplomatic immunity down there. Tunafish, you have your orders! Get going!” The window went blank.

With a pass of her hand, Kathi dissolved the empty square.

“Conference!” I called and they gathered close. “Okay, how do we get there?”

“Teleport?”

“Never seen the inside.”

“Gate?”

“Can't get a psionic lock.”

“Grow wings and fly?”

“For this many people? It would drain us of magic.”

“Use helicopter gunships?”

“From the Army outside? Now that's a good idea!”

“Gotta stop off at the limo first,” declared George. “To—”

And we were standing on the main access road, next to the limo, surrounded by military personnel.

“—get more ammunition,” George finished lamely. Hostily, he scowled at Raul. “Enjoy doing that, don't you?”

“Who me?” the mage said innocently.

“The choppers are on the way,” Jess said, looking at the dark sky with a hand on the glowing necklace.

Unlocking the trunk, I grabbed a satchel charge and slammed a fresh clip into the Barret.

We had a reservation at the Hadleyville Hotel.

* * * *

Five minutes later we were airborne, and airsick.

Resembling a hatchet blade with short wings, Apache helicopters were amazingly quiet. Sleek and fast, the trim military gunships could do a ground speed of 300mph, had more surveillance equipment than our old RV, were radar-resistant, had a low infrared signature, were armored proof to a 40mm shell, and had a 20mm electric machine gun in the nose. The stubby wings, unnecessary for flying, were only there to carry more weapons: three Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, three Maverick air-to-ground missiles, and two Blockbuster go-to-hell bombs, plus there was a 35mm rapid-fire mini-rocket-cannons on each side.

Unfortunately, the Apaches could only carry one passenger, two if we squeezed tight and sat on each other's lap, so the team had to split into four groups. A Bell & Howell Huey transport could have held us and the limo, but none were available. The perimeter guard originally had one, but it was still burning in the weeds.

Big on bottom, little on top, I got Jessica, thankfully. Kathi got George, Raul got Mindy, and Donaher was the cheese.

What?

He rides alone.

Ah.

Stuffed into the front gunner's seat, Jess and I had three windows to look out, rectangular in front and trapezoidal on the sides. I could only assume there was some intelligent reason for the design. The military was not big on aesthetics. A triptych of video monitors topped the complex control panel spanning the cockpit. The middle showed a perfectly illuminated view of the ground below, the left behind us, and the right above.

Cold and clear, the dark sky was full of twinkling stars. Flying in close battle formation, we could see the other three squat choppers moving swiftly and silently. Maybe not properly invisible, but damn close.

Rapidly, we hurtled past the sparkling lights of O'Hare Airport and into the flat Illinois farmland.

The point of no return.

"How we doing?" I said to the microphone built into the control panel. The switches and dials were marked with abbreviated phrases such as: SygNob, RetVap and TacZer, so we weren't touching anything!

The pilot was aft, in a raised secondary cabin, completely sealed off from us. Both pilot and gunner could fly and shoot the craft. If one got wounded, the other took over. Plus, in an emergency situation, they could place the ship on autopilot and both cut loose with the weapon systems. It was an effective combination. Just ask Iraq.

"Doing fine," the speaker said in smooth, undistorted tones. "Fuel good, all systems green, and according to the navigational coordinates I'm receiving from ChiTacOp, we'll be within strike range in ten minutes. Very close. How are you two sardines surviving?"

"It's hard," Jessica said with a wiggle. "But we'll manage."

I pinched her. *Stop that! This is business.*

Tee-hee. Oh Mr. Alvarez, what a big gun you have! How many times can it shoot?

Sexual tension often ran high prior to a battle. It was one of the nicer perks of this job.

"We have contact," the speaker announced. "I'm putting it on the doppler radar."

Removing Jessica's shoulder from my nose, I brushed aside her long hair and saw that the middle monitor was showing a vector graphic of the landscape moving below us. The luminescent green radar arm swept steadily about on a perfectly clear screen.

"See it? Sector four, mark 10 degrees."

"I'll have to take your word on it," I admitted. Guess it takes a trained eye to operate this high-tech gunship.

And a lot of quarters.

"Sheridan, this is Patton," crackled the speaker. "We have a confirm with Craig and Schwartzkoff on our boogey."

It's the other helicopters.

"Thank you dear," I sneered. "Now, who's Craig?"

She gave a mental shrug. *Some general guy.*

"Roger the confirm, Patton," the pilot spoke into his throat mike. "We are approaching go zone. Interlock guide beacons, assume formation Q, and begin primary countdown."

Not understanding half of what he was talking about, we still got the gist. Jessica and I scrambled to

finish lashing weapons to our body harnesses. Geez, things sure move fast in the Air Cavalry.

“Ready,” the pilot said in calm tones. “Set ... and go-go-go!”

Hitting the ejector button, the door slammed aside, there was a bang under our seat, and we were thrown clear of the deadly flashing rotors.

Without parachutes, my team fell through the black sky.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The wind whistled past our ears, but before we even had a chance to activate our fly bracelets, the team hit velvet steel with stunning force. *Urmph!*

Dizzily, I shook my head to reboot my brain. Above in the starry sky, the black outlines of the Apache choppers were dwindling into the distance. Below was the landscape moving at a steady progression and around me was the moaning team lying on air.

Okay, we knew the hotel was invisible. But even after we landed on it? Good spell.

We haven't hit it yet, Jessica sent.

“We're not on the roof?” Father Donaher asked, arms and legs splayed as if in freefall.

Sitting upright, Raul stared at him agog. “Does it frigging *feel* like we're on the roof? This is a prismatic sphere! A kind of force shield, a magical bubble around the hotel.”

“So how do we get through?” Mindy asked. The daredevil martial artist was standing on the empty sky.

Why did I arrest her, your honor? No visible means of support.

Shaddup.

“Depends. Better ask Kathi,” Raul said. “This is more her specialty.”

I stared at our Russian mage. Ms. Sommers was waving fingers, weaving trails of light, and studying the results.

“Runes of defense!” she barked at last.

We waited for explanations. Tick, tick.

“Runes of defense, or defensive runes?” Raul demanded.

“What's the difference?” I asked.

“One cancels the effect of offensive weapons, but the other only repels the very physical presence of enemies to the caster.”

“So one rune keeps out the weapon,” Mindy rationalized, “but the other holds off the people?”

“Yep.”

“Defensive runes!” Kathi cried in triumphant.

“Cool,” George said popping a stick of gum into his mouth. “So which one is it?”

“Weapons!”

“Then people can get in?”

“Long as we don't have any weapons,” she declared. “And don't try to hurt the building!”

Good enough. “Dump ‘em!” I shouted, tossing my Magnums away. Hell, we didn't even have a coded battle phrase for this contingency to cushion the emotional shock. When had it ever been necessary for us to get rid of weapons?

Reluctantly, the team slowly began to disarm.

The Barret slid over an invisible hump and tumbled into the night. C4 satchel charge, HE grenades, signet ring, cigarette lighter, trick pens. I still wasn't going through. Ah, in my ankle holster was a Bureau derringer, and my pocketknife. Plus the Swiss Army knife.

Shrugging out of the harness and straps, Father Donaher dropped the flamethrower and it vanished like a lead safe. Followed by his shotgun, bane vest, wristwatch, pocketknife, pens, rosary garrote and Holy Water pistol. Smoothly, the priest sank out of sight. But then, priests travel light.

Biting a lip in concentration, Jess dumped her taser, Uzi, ammo clips, grenades, pocket camera, watch, a couple of loaded hypodermic needles from her medical kit, two earrings, an inflatable pentagram, some pens, Swiss Army knife, and two bracelets.

Bracelets! That's why I hadn't gone through yet.

Stoically, George slapped and twisted the release buckle on his chest harness. Straps whipping wildly, the Masterson flew off.

Now that was going to cause damage when it hit ground. Boy, I sure hope we weren't over a playground or anything.

After a moment, George added the ammo belt, the Colt .45, a derringer, two knives, a switchblade, his wristwatch, some pens, brass knuckles and his hat.

His hat?

“Ed, I can't do it,” Mindy cried, tears running down her cheeks. She was hugging the scabbard of her sword with both arms.

Oh crap! This was an unforeseen development. Mindy would never release that sword. She had spent ten years of her life on a physical and spiritual quest to obtain the blade. I once saw her dive into a lake of boiling water just to retrieve the scabbard. Whatever the bond was between the sword and woman, it went beyond the boundaries of such mundane considerations as sanity, or common sense.

In a consolatory manner, I waved at her. "It's okay, Min. Everybody has limitations. Fly off and rendezvous with the choppers. Act as a relay and direct their actions if necessary."

Wordless, she nodded and drifted away on the winds.

Great, here we were stripped naked and we just lost our best bare-knuckled fighter. Some invasion force.

"Hey, how about you guys?" I shouted over the wind.

Raul snapped, "We're discussing it!"

Discussing what?

Who stays and who guards the other person's staff.

Oh no, a mage also?

Tick, tick. With a stone face, Katrina Sommers gave her staff to Raul. She tossed off her vest, a Swiss Army knife, some vials of potions, a bundle of envelopes containing powders, the bandoleer of wands, a pair of velvet gloves, and more bracelets than I could easily count. Kathi still wasn't passing, until she pulled down her jacket exposing a shoulder and her butterfly took to the winds.

The tattoo? Well, I guess it was offensive to purists.

Okay. Better strip ship myself. I threw behind my wristwatch, another speedloader for the Magnums, the lightning blast bracelet, the disintegrate and the flame lance. This left me with fly, jump start and teleport. Still here. I added my burglary kit and suddenly began to descend into an inky abyss which blotted my vision.... Until bright lights erupted as I dropped six feet to the roof of the hotel. Ouch. Standing painfully, I saw a silvery egg surrounding the building, the inside of the defensive field. Nearby, the rest of the gang was gathered around Kathi, who was using a pen to scratch the tar rooftop in front of a stout metal door. Hey! A weapon got through?

It's just a ballpoint pen.

Close enough for government work.

Actually, she's making a pentagram.

Natch. Oddly, there didn't seem to be anything blocking the door, but I had a sick feeling in my bowels, and the back of my teeth ached. That could only mean a single thing.

"A death barrier?" I guessed, kneeling beside my friends.

Busy sketching, Kathi grunted yes. "Bad one. I can get cancel, but will take while." Without further preamble she began mumbling and gesturing at the doorway.

As we waited, I gave a shiver remembering what a Death Barrier could do. Several years ago, while in Haiti dealing with some voodoo spies, a witch doctor had imprisoned us inside the foul thing. While our old mage Richard Anderson and Raul frantically composed a counterspell, I had witnessed a squirrel run

by. The moment the animal crossed the barrier it had ceased to live, but the momentum of its dash kept the body moving. First the fur vanished, then skin, muscle, internal organs, bones, and finally a tiny squirrel ghost screamed in unnamable agony as it faded away.

When the wizards finally broke the magical trap, none dared question why I shot the witch doctor using 57 bullets, set fire to the corpse, dynamited his juju hut, and relieved myself upon his car. Why 57 bullets? That was all the ammo I had.

Stopping the protective litany, the Russian gripped the empty blackness and pulled her hands apart, straining with the effort. At first, nothing seemed to happen, then the air miraculously cleared and the wizard started crawling forward.

“Move quickly,” she ordered. “This last only a few seconds.”

In close order, the team scurried across that all-destroying boundary. Safe on the other side, I turned to spit at the foul barrier. The globule of saliva vanished in a crackling display of sparks.

Past the death barrier, I could see that this was not a regulation hotel door securing the roof. Composed of a hundred different pieces of metal, interlocking like a jigsaw puzzle, the bits were held together with steel bands, closed by a ceramic disk bearing the impression of the moon with silver daggers stabbed through it. The mark of the Scion. Just looking at the disk made my eyes hurt.

“Can't get in this way,” Katrina stated flatly. “Soul seal. It would take more magic than a dozen mages to nullify.”

“Damnation,” Father Donaher snarled in frustration, and he slammed his fist against the seal. Under the Herculean blow, the disk crumbled into dust and sprinkled to the floor. The steel bands disengaged and swung away with a creak.

We shared a grin. Can't argue with success.

Borrowing a hairpin from one of the ladies, I picked the lock on the real door, and we entered. What we should have seen was a dingy stairwell leading to a service elevator.

What we did see was a small swatch of floor that ended in ragged tiles over an endless vista of swirling clouds that stretched into forever. Dotting the mist were a million pieces of aerial debris and huge floating chunks of masonry. The individual floors of the hotel. Some were dripping with jungle growth. Others were trapped in a swirling hurricane. Some danced with fire, two were upside down, another was cocooned, and one was inverted—but it was hard to tell with hotel rooms.

Gulp. Well, now we know why the Scion had brought along the whole hotel. It wasn't an armored attack fortress. They most likely just couldn't find the person with the rock! This was going to be much more difficult than originally expected.

Worse, Jess sent.

“Incoming!” George cried, and we crouched low.

Scuttling forward came a werewolf astride a winged tarantula. He held a red wizard's staff in one hand, but the other was extended toward us.

"Die!" he screamed as a greeting and sent a lightning bolt at us.

Whew. Even Dale Carnegie would have shot this guy.

Palms outward, Kathi deflected the bolt with a mystical shield. Then she raced off the ledge mouthing words of power. Trapped on the ledge with no distance weapons, we were unable to do anything but watch.

Plowing straight in, Kathi made a fast series of finger movements, and a dazzling beam lanced out at the enemy mage. But at the last moment, a swirling pattern of energy appeared about the man to deflect the ray. It struck a floating marble pillar, vaporizing a chunk of stone.

“Goodbye, child,” the fellow sneered, and the fight began in earnest.

Fireballs and laser beams were tried at first, but such simple tricks were soon discarded. Transformations were stopped by reality checks. A shrinking spell was countered by a growth incantation. A death barrier hummed into existence and was nullified by a jump start. The air itself about the gesturing mages crackled with the discharge of mystical energy.

It was a battle royale between the mages. Supremely confident, the werewolf was in his home, with friends on the way. Sans her staff and spell book, Kathi was at a serious disadvantage. Only her massive reserves of magic gave her any hope.

Above the mages, translucent figures of their astral forms wrestled for supremacy. Scintillating daggers of light constantly thrust and jabbed, searching for any opening large enough to reach the all-too-mortal bodies of the antagonists. Fire and water elementals danced about the wizards, roaring into gouts of steam when they touched. Flesh eating plants erupted through the stonework of the ledge. We backed up. Spectral lawn mowers cut them down in a spray of green. We advanced again. The clouds rained thousands of scorpions, which instantly curled up and died as poisonous yellow gas fogged the sky.

Wearing NASA jetpacks, a squad of armed werewolves rose into view, went stiff, and dropped dead. So much for hecklers.

Getting tough, Kathi switched tactics. Maintaining a shimmering shield with her left hand, the Russian leveled her right arm, and a massive power beam erupted from her fingers. Hungrily, the disintegrate conjure tried to consume the red staff of the enemy mage; to burn, boil, or bore its way in. But her foe grabbed the Seal of the Scion about his neck, and the staff resisted stiffly. A stream of vitriolic gold splashed against the immaterial barrier of shimmering blue. The sky was awash in lethal vibrations of the silent battle.

The entire hotel shuddered under the iridescent by-products of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object in a dazzling pyrotechnic display. I glanced at my bare wrist.

Staring at the opponent mage, Jessica made a fist about her amulet, but nothing happened. The psi shield was stronger than ever inside their headquarters. Then I did a double-take—the pendant! Somehow she had made it through the death barrier with it. Maybe it didn't register as a weapon. Our good fortune.

“We have to leave before more defenders arrive,” I ordered. “If Kathi wins, she'll rejoin us. If not, then we don't want to be anywhere near Bug Boy unprotected. And we still have a rescue to accomplish.”

The team made grumpy faces. Sure, it made tactical sense, but was damn unsettling. Desert a comrade

in a fight, was the world worth this? Well, maybe Chicago, at least. Defeat would mean the end of decent pizza.

Reaching for my Bureau sunglasses, I cursed, remembering they were gone. Nearby, Father Donaher was using a pair of folding binoculars to scan the different hovering floors. With only naked vision, I couldn't see any numbers, or anything which resembled a convention hall.

“Well?” I asked.

He shrugged.

Explosions, sword clangs, and blinding coronas of energy came from the mages. The tarantula was dead, but Kathi was dripping in sweat, and the haughty werewolf mage seemed amused.

Touching her forehead as she used to, Jessica hesitated and then pointed towards the floor covered with jungle. It would be.

“Routine four,” I declared. Separate and converge was our only hope. Maybe a few of us would get through to reach the floor and find the moonrock. I only hoped it was the correct one.

Father Donaher said a quick prayer before we activated our fly bracelets and took off, leaving our pal to fight alone.

Tick, tick.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Human missiles, we streaked through the sky.

As the battling wizards disappeared behind us, we separated and took diverging routes towards Jungleland. From this new perspective, it was easy to discern that the other hotel sections were orbiting the tropical rainforest.

Several machine guns chattered at me from a chunk of building covered with ice and snow. Already at max speed, I did a few Immelmans and banked away to befuddle their aim. Then a rocket whooshed by me. Yipes! Whether it was a LAW, Armburst, or HAFLA, I had no idea. Trouble comes in many shapes. But it was definitely not a Rapier or Amsterdam, because I lived to tell the tale.

Another rocket flashed by, then an arbalest arrow, followed by more machine gun fire, this time with tracer bullets. Fast, I did a Hammerstall to build speed and barreled straight in towards my goal. Speed was my best defense now.

The target floor loomed before me, rapidly increasing in size. A full tropical jungle overflowed the hotel piece, vines and creepers hanging over the edge. Just floating in the air like that, it resembled an Amazonian plateau, without the plat.

Swelling in dimensions, the greenery became individual trees, the growth cleared into bushes with leaves, and I crashed in going head over heels. Roll, Alvarez, roll! It'll help cushion the impact. Didn't help when you hit a tree, though. Ow!

Extricating myself from the brambles, I found my bottle of healing potion and took a swig. The pain diminished. Ah. Now, where was the gang?

Over here! Ten meters towards the volcano.

The what? Oh, there it is. Wow.

Hurrying, I found them in a small clearing of bare ground, with a matching set of chairs and sofa surrounded by lush vegetation.

Already hard at work, George had a long stick that he was frantically trying to sharpen a point on with a jagged rock. Nimble fingers busy, Father Donaher was tying his ceremonial purple sash around three stones to fashion a crude bola. Jessica was plucking leaves off a vine already knotted into a garrote. Way to go, Tunafish! We were down, but not out.

Removing my shoes, I knelt and filled a sock with dirt. Called a tap, cosh, persuader, blackjack, sap, whatever, it was one of the oldest weapons created by humans, but it was still here because it worked so well. Totally silent and reusable, a sap hit like a sledgehammer and could kill in trained hands. Mine.

Testing a swing on a palm, my flesh stung from the mild impact. Cracking open a skull and pulverizing the brain should slow down even the strongest werewolf. Hopefully.

“Okay, standard search pattern,” I said. “But this time we stay together. Double coverage. Me and Jess, George and Mike.”

“Hold,” Jessica whispered urgently. “There's something out there.”

We moved into a defensive posture. Straining vision, I could dimly perceive a misshapen thing moving through the jungle, circling our position. We could clearly hear the steady tap of multiple feet.

“What is it?” George asked, peering against the darkness of the trees.

“Another tarantula?” Father Donaher guessed, starting to swing his bola. The stones clicked once and soft as the noise was, the creature instantly scuttled forward in our direction.

“Manticore!” Jessica shouted as the monster burst from the foliage.

The silver-blue illumination from the magical sky highlighted its bloated hairy body. Ugly bugger. Part-spider, part-scorpion and part-cockroach, the very name of the demonic insect meant death in several dimensions.

As it came near, George heaved his makeshift spear and missed. Mike threw the bola and hit, but with no effect. Before the rest of us could move, a stream of brackish liquid squirted from the mouth of the monster and hit George in the face. With a hideous gargle, the man fell, clawing at his smoking flesh.

The manticore vomited a second stream of death at me. I ducked as Donaher leapt upon the back of the beast and buried his cross into its mottled hump like a dagger! Poison blood squirted across the glowing crucifix and ignited as Mike dove for the bushes. In a juicy crackle, the mutant bug burst into flames. Bleeding fire, it charged into the bushes. A moment later we heard its death scream fading into the distance. Downward.

But congratulations for the victory were put on hold as we sprinted to our wounded friend. Biting his tongue not to scream, George clawed feebly for his canteen. Pushing the hands aside, I poured a full bottle of healing potion on his face. There was a violent hiss and he relaxed. As the fumes dispersed and his countenance became visible, we tried not to gasp in horror.

Looking worse than a week-old corpse, George's face was a ghastly greenish yellow, the flesh puckered into ravines of gnarled skin. But even worse, his eyes were featureless orbs of solid white.

"Will I live?" he croaked.

I gave it to him straight. "Yes. But you're blind."

He took the bitter news stolidly. "Healing potion?"

"Tried already."

Gingerly, the man fingered his face. "How bad is it?" George asked in a small voice.

"Oh, I've seen worse," I lied. "Makes you look sort of like Broderick Crawford."

He flinched. "Never play poker with me, Ed. That terrible, eh?"

Trapped, I told him yes.

Gamely, the soldier stood. "Come on, we still got a world to save."

Stout fellow. With Donaher on guard, Jessica was already busy. Holding a forked branch by the ends, she walked around in circles searching for a secret door, hidden entrance. Maybe even the elevator. That would be nice.

Fat chance, bucko. She stopped. "We dig here."

Using our hands, we scooped aside the loose soil until we reached concrete. Guided into place, George slammed the steel-reinforced heel of his Army boots onto the material. After a few tries, it started to crack. Pieces came loose and, bending low, we pried them aside. Below was a hotel corridor.

"I'm staying here," George said, crawling to the nearby bushes and pulling branches loose. "I'll cover the hole and try to sidetrack any werewolves."

Blind and armed with a stick. I would add the name George Renault to the heroes roll call of Horatio, Audie Murphy, and Ken Saunders. George and I shook his hand, Jess gave him a hug, and we dropped down inside.

We found ourselves near a curtained window at the end of a hallway lined with doors. The carpet was decorated with party favors, and every door had a dining tray loaded with plates and liquor bottles, plus women's underwear hung from the doorknobs. These occult conventions must be pretty wild.

There were no numbers; each door had a brass plate and was named after a President. Yep, this was the convention floor. I tried a knob and found it unlocked. Peeking inside I saw the ocean. Donaher cracked a door and confronted a desert plain. Jess peered at the Alps. A goat wandered by.

We closed the doors. How many dimensions and places was this poor befuddled building occupying at the same instant? *Tick, tick.*

As the doors would lead us nowhere, we advanced down the corridor in a triangle formation, ready for attack. This deep in the enemy citadel, anything could happen.

Turning a corner, we encountered an elderly woman with white hair and a cane.

“You!” the gnarled oldster and Jess gasped in unison.

My wife grabbed the amulet around her neck as the elderly woman extended a fist adorned with a huge signet ring. Motionless, they stood there locked in silent battle. It was only specks at first, then glowing sparks started swirling about the two telepaths, and soon they were encased in a vortex of static discharges from the awful load of mental energies unleashed.

Father Donaher started to reach for them, but I stopped him.

“Don't,” I warned. “It'd kill you in a microsecond.”

Frowning, Mike touched the empty shotgun holster on his belt. A single 12 gauge round would have ended the matter, and I would have given anything for the big priest to have a load for his weapon.

“Come on,” I said and forced myself to take that first step away from my wife.

Two floors away we ran straight into a pair of werewolves. They were in flak jackets and carrying M-16 machine guns.

Moving fast, we stepped close to the monsters. Now standing behind the muzzle, the guns could no longer harm us. It was apparently a trick the Scion agents had never heard of, as their jaws unhinged. In grim satisfaction, I swung my cosh and Mike smacked the other in the face with his armored Bible. Bones crunched in stereo.

Reeling backwards, the wolves stumbled to the floor. We pounded them again for a while until they stopped moving. Quickly, we stripped them of flak jackets, pistols and ammo clips. They even had one grenade apiece. How nice! Old WWII-style pineapples loaded with blasting powder and gelinite, but serviceable nonetheless.

Sprawled on the carpet, the werewolves were already starting to moan back into life. It takes more than a simple beating to kill a were. But hey, no problem, Bureau 13 agents are most obliging.

Dragging the bodies around a corner, we jammed them into a closet. Then Donaher and I each stuffed our grenades into their mouths, pulled the pins, slammed the door and ran. Thunder and flame filled the hallway in our wake, but we kept going. Let's see how quickly they heal with no heads.

As we raced along the corridors, I checked the load on a clip. U.S. Army-issue regulation 5.56mm perfectly imbalanced tumblers. Nasty bullets that enter a shoulder and ricochet around, chewing the major organs to mincemeat, and then exit from the opposite hip. I had been hoping for phosphorus tracer rounds, or mercury-tipped explosive bullets. Might as well wish for the blessed silver. Still they were something.

At the elevator bank, a sign on an easel announced the times and locations of numerous convention

functions. There was no listing for the moon rock.

With a musical ding, the central elevator doors parted to display a score of werewolves with fire axes and pistols.

“Pinocchio!” I screamed, aiming the M-16 at the wall above the cage. Donaher added the firepower of his M-16 and we spent an entire clip chewing a hole in the wall. *Crack!*

After the initial shock of seeing us, and the gunfight with nobody, the grinning and drooling werewolves started towards us. Then with a sharp crack, the weakened elevator cable snapped and down they plummeted.

“Blast, this only bought us a minute at best. The safety brakes will stop them from crashing in only a few stories,” Donaher grumped, peering into the dark shaft.

“Only there aren't any more stories,” I reminded him.

Suddenly, light bathed his face as the cage left the shaft and dropped through empty air, building speed on its way to a rude visit to Mother Earth. Distant screams reached us.

As the doors automatically closed, we returned to business.

“Okay, now where?” I asked, glancing around.

“NASA doesn't allow you to charge admission to see the rock,” the priest said thoughtfully, flexing his big hands, “so it must be in a main public area.”

“But immediately near your ticket booth to entice folks to see more marvels inside,” I added.

“Main conference room?”

Shouldering my assault rifle, I nodded agreement. There was a map of the floor on the wall. We smashed the glass and peeled it off the frame. Hmm, big hotel.

His finger stabbed at the map. “There it is. Down this corridor, make a left, three doors, right.”

I rolled up the floor plan and tucked it into my belt. “Groovy. Let's go.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We had only taken a step when Mike gasped in pain. I turned about and saw the priest taking a hand away from his right hip. The palm was covered with red.

“They must have shot me,” Donaher said, sounding amazed.

The priest started wobbling a bit, so I slid a chair underneath to stop him from falling over. Gently raising the cassock, I found his pants and shirt were dripping with blood. Tenderly, I probed for a wound.

He inhaled sharply. “It's in my hip.”

“Can't get a tourniquet there,” I stated. Feeling in my pockets I found the bottle of healing potion. Empty.

“Mine's also gone,” Father Donaher groaned. He was a bit pale by now and starting to sweat.

That was the way most small-caliber bullet wounds worked. At first your body rejected the pain, but with blood loss it was soon undeniable. I touched his throat searching for the carotid artery. His pulse was up, yet his temperature was down. Sweaty and clammy. There was major internal hemorrhaging. He was dying.

“Wanna do a George?” I asked, feeling a lump in my throat.

He exhaled mightily and nodded yes.

I ripped off my white shirt and folded it into a pressure compress, using my tie to hold it in place. The belt would have worked better but I needed that to keep up my pants.

With Donaher's weakening assistance, I moved the chair to the wall and dragged a sofa in front. His back was protected and the furniture gave him some cover to hide behind. Good enough. Dripping sweat, Mike gave me a shaky thumbs-up, and I hurriedly departed. It was my job now. Alone.

Rounding a corner, I bumped into somebody holding a Wichita Thunderbolt .475 pistol. Adrenaline flooded my body and with blinding speed I aimed and fired the M-16 in the same motion.

Scowling in annoyance, J.P. Withers looked down at the line of puckered bullet holes in his chest, the gaping wounds exposing a wealth of odd-looking internal organs.

“Well, if you didn't want my damn help,” he growled, “you only had to say so. No need to be rude.” In a flash, Withers vanished.

“No wait!” I cried to the empty corridor. Blast the man! Then I paused. Wait a minute, if he gated in, then were the runes down? Was help on the way? There was no way to know. I hurried onward.

At a pair of double doors with tiny decorative widows set in them, I stayed low and peeked through. Exhibit Hall A.

Surrounding a ticket booth, sparkling layers of non-reality swirled and spun in a multicolored light show of dimensional instability. Countless phantasms strolled along, crossing from one world to the next: transparent fish swam by, ghostly flocks of birds, spectral racing cars, an ethereal cavalry charge, a spirited elephant stampede. The floor bucked and writhed like a living thing. The walls pulsed and the ceiling constantly broke apart, the acoustic tiles sliding over each other to endlessly rearrange themselves.

On the ground lay the charred bones of the Marine honor guard that accompanied the moon rock wherever it went. Behind the velvet ropes was a little old lady poised in the act of lifting the unearthly object from the Lucite base. Bingo!

Something hit me from behind. Burning pain filled my skull, and I felt my heart slow ... down ... and ... start again! Completely healed, I sat upright and blew smoke out of my mouth. The copper bracelet on my wrist gave one last tingle and went still. Whew. That was the third and last jump start I had ever experienced. My quota was filled. I could never again use the death-or-life emergency healing spell. Who ever had killed me had left too soon. They would pay for that mistake.

Once more, I peeked into the main exhibit hall. Stalking around on patrol was a werewolf holding a crimson-splattered fire axe. That was my blood and brains on the blade! Boy, was I pissed off now! In a curse that was more snarl than words, I kicked open the doors and cut loose with the M-16.

“Eat silver, bozo!” I screamed.

The stuttering stream of Army tumblers stitched the monster's torso, shoving him backwards until it hit the marble wall and collapsed to the floor, twisted and bleeding.

“...should have known ... silver bullets,” the monster coughed weakly.

Trying my best to radiate confidence, I moved towards the lady and rock. I was almost there, when the werewolf clawed at his chest, pulling one of the slugs free with a faint sucking sound. Intently, he stared at the grayish lump.

“Just a darn minute,” the beast growled, the flow of blood from its wounds noticeably slowing. “This isn't silver!”

“Hey, so I lied. Sue me, creep,” I sneered, hosing another clip into the monster.

As the air cleared, I could see that the nightmare creature had literally been cut in half by the fusillade. Howling in agony, the werewolf was writhing about on the floor, his claws digging sharp furrows into the crimson-splattered stone. Ha!

Then I watched in horror as the Scion werewolf pulled on its legs as a man would don a pair of pants. Whole once more, the beast stood and hobbled forward in a weak charge.

There was no time for this! Glancing at a huge clock placed prominently on the wall, I saw that one hand was spinning backwards, while the other hung limp. Swell.

“Gonna eat, then kill you,” the manbeast snarled insanely.

Slamming in the last clip, I didn't bother to reply. The heavy combat rounds made the creature jerk with every impact, but nothing more. Out of bullets, I hurled the rifle and hopped over the velvet ropes. There was still a chance to rescue the lady. I had a teleport bracelet. If I used it on her instead of me....

Something got my collar and I was yanked backwards to hit the floor. As claws reached for my face, I delivered a killing karate chop to the kidney. Now, I was no Mindy Jennings, but I had been trained by some of the best.

As the werewolf howled in pain from the dirty blow, I rolled to my feet and, spinning about, kicked the monster's knee, feeling the bone crunch under the edge of my shoe. The beast staggered and almost fell. Then he stood, whole and undamaged, rising to his full eight feet in height, and roared like the primordial beast it was!

“Aw shaddup,” I growled and kicked him in the groin.

Gasping in pain, the werewolf raked its claws at me. Gracefully, I bowed beneath the blow, stepped in and rammed both of my fists into the jaw of the creature with triphammer force.

Bruised, the werewolf shook off the tap and butted me hard. I saw the ceiling go by as I went flying to smack into a wall with a sickening crack. Disorientated, I staggered to my feet. Bemused, the unshaven Scion agent laughed, a mistake that nearly cost him a jaw. Shouting a martial arts battle cry, I leapt and hit the man-beast in a flying kick, powered by my full hundred and fifty pounds of Wyoming ranch muscle. Kill me will you?

Spitting teeth, the stunned werewolf staggered about, so I pressed the attack home. Had to get this yutz off me so I could 'port the old lady out of here. How close were we to O'Hare? How soon till the missiles blew us all to hell? My sunfist broke the nose of the monster, cupped hands slapped against its pointed ears rupturing eardrums. A finger jab nearly removed an eye. As I had been trained to do, I was concentrating on the werewolf's head, probably the only vulnerable spot the creature had. If any.

No longer bemused by this game, the enraged werewolf thrust his paws downward to rend me apart. I barely managed to duck out of the way, but even so, the front of my bodyarmor ripped and I saw three shallow red lines on my stomach beginning to ooze blood. Oh crap! This close to the epicenter of the ethereal vortex, the protective spell on my T-shirt had been nullified!

Again, I ducked under a fist the size of an express train. Diving past the hairy titan, I tripped on the ropes. Frantically rolling aside, a hairy foot slammed on the floor, cracking the marble and just missing my head. Since it was so close, I did the only logical act and buried my teeth into the shin of the monster. Hey, any damage done to an opponent, no matter how minor, was a point in your favor. Crunching hard, my mouth filled with the coppery taste of warm blood. Bleh. How do vampires live on this stuff?

Strangely, the werewolf screamed from the tiny wound as if he had lost a limb and violently shook me off. Taking advantage of the situation, I scrambled to my feet, grabbed a hairy arm and tossed the giant creature over my shoulder in a classic judo throw. The monster hit the marble wall like a sack of wet newspapers advertising cement and slid to the floor, leaving a grisly trail on blood to mark its passage.

Forcing itself to stand, the groggy creature turned to face me eye-to-eye. Eh? When had the beast shrunk in size?

Then, shrieking in pain, the werewolf seemed to blur as ripples of change spread outwards from the trivial wound in its leg. Hair follicles withdrew into the skin, its jaw shortened, fangs shrank, and ears became round and pink.

Catching my breath, I had a flash of understanding. According to the legends, if a werewolf bit a person, they became a werewolf. So maybe to cure a werewolf, what you had to do was bite him? Well, waddayano.

In stark terror, the transforming monster tried to escape, but I tripped him. Scrunching his face, the Scion agent tried to countermand the transformation. But it proved unstoppable, and soon I was towering over a naked man with the most amazingly innocent expression on his face.

"Why, I am cured!" he cried joyously. "It is like I have awakened from a bad dream."

Oh brother, now tell me the one about the magic bunny. I guess my expression revealed my feelings, because he went pale.

"Don't you believe me, officer?" the runt asked, with a sickly sweet grin.

Now how would he know I was a cop unless he remembered his actions as a werewolf?

“Should have copped the Fifth, pal,” I said, slamming the cowardly killer smack in the bazoo with every ounce of strength I possessed.

The blow nearly succeeded in melding nose to ear. Spinning like a drugged top, the scrawny bastard spewed blood and teeth as he toppled to floor, nowhere near as dead as he deserved.

Turning, I kicked over the ropes and advanced for the rock lady. But then from the midst of the raging dimensional storm came a dark flash, followed by a sucking retort. Everything went calm. And with a sick feeling in my stomach, I knew the fly spell had just been cancelled.

The hotel was starting to fall.

Retreating a meter, I charged at the old woman. Instantly, I was bombarded by delusions of madness: scenes from my personal past, movies clips, TV commercials and vignettes from the legitimate theatre. Struggling to retain my sanity, I fought my way through the phantasmal hordes of historical figures and cartoon caricatures. Step by step, I advanced. Grimly determined to reach her or die. My heart began to pound wildly. It was difficult breathing. My skin tightened painfully, my bones shifted positions, my hair began to grow ...*Jumping Jesus, I was becoming a werewolf!*

As ghostly bicycles raced through the room, I threw myself forward against the hurricane force of the space-twisting rift. Stretching until I thought my joints would pop, I just barely managed to slip the bracelet on her skinny wrist.

Home! I mentally screamed.***HOME-HOME-HOME!***

Instantly, she vanished. Taking the transdimensional vortex along with her. Whew!

Still braced counter to the ethereal winds, I was caught off balance and hit the floor. Success! Chicago was safe! Ouch, landed on my car keys.

My joy dimmed as giant cracks appeared in the floor, and the ticket booth collapsed. The whole damn hotel was shuddering from the raw velocity of its unchecked plummet. I always knew this job would kill me someday. Well, at least it would be quick.

No. Wait a minute, I'm in a hotel for an occult convention!

Adrenaline rushing in my veins, I glanced about. With the departure of the moonrock, I could not see clear to the other side of the exhibit hall ... and a line of dealers' booths. Struggling to keep my balance on the disco-dancing building, I hurried over and did a fast inventory of the magical paraphernalia: crystal balls, books, pyramids, Tarot cards, Quija boards, cassette tapes, knives, rugs. Rugs! Yes! But my sunglasses were long gone. How was I supposed to know which was real and which was sham?

Gathering air into my lungs, I shouted a Word of Power above the deafening noise of cracking concrete. A rug at the bottom of the pile seemed to tremble. Maybe it was just my imagination. I yanked it free, sending the rest of the carpets tumbling to the floor. Then again, maybe not.

The doorway collapsed and the windows exploded. Icy winds howled throughout the hotel tearing the fixtures off the walls.

Rummaging in the debris, I found an assortment of ornamental daggers. Hoped they were clean.

Snatching a serpentine kris, I sliced my palm and squeezed a fist letting the drops fall onto the carpet.

“One is for thy weaver.” Drip. “One is for thy master.” Drip. Oh hell, what was next? Ah, yes. “One is for thee.” Drip, drip, drip. “And three is for me.”

Nothing happened.

As the building started to break apart around me, I angrily dropkicked the carpet. “Fly, damn you!”

Instantly, the woven cloth went rigid, hovering at knee level. Banzai! Grabbing another carpet, I hopped onto the Egyptian Express, wrapping the second rug tight around me. God, I hoped this worked.

The curtains and carpet burst into flames, and a steel I-beam pierced a wall, coming dangerously close.

“Get me out of here!” I commanded.

Wafting casually, it headed for the stairs.

“Straight through the window!” I screamed. “And don't spare the horsehairs!”

In a shower of glass I was suddenly outside the hotel and flying through the starry sky. Yowsa! When this thing cut loose, even George would be impressed with the speed. I decided to name it Runner.

Shucking my protective wrap, I craned my neck to watch the building fall. Sadly, I observed that the individual pieces had joined together and it was a completely whole ten-story building hurtling down towards ... hey, that wasn't O'Hare! Or Chicago!

No, it isn't.

Jess!

Who else, pumpkin?

No coherent thoughts came to mind.

How sweet. I love you too. And to bring you up to date on current events, using his and Kathi's wands, Raul gated the whole damn building away from any populated area.

Brilliant! Where?

She told me, and with a contented smile, I settled in to watch the show. From this high upward, I should have a splendid view of the crash.

A trail of flame stretched out behind the rocketing hotel like a comet's tail. Knifing through the cloud layer, the hotel reached and went past Mach One. With a sonic boom, the building broke apart again, the chunks continuing like a shotgun blast.

What remained of the hotel crashed precisely in the middle of Hadleyville, West Virginia, instantly converting into 700 million ergs of pure radiant heat.

In a blinding flash, the stores and homes disappeared, everything pulverized by the sheer force of the

concussion. Jagged cracks spread out from the impact point like earthy lightning bolts. Motionless for a million geological years, the nearby Appalachian Mountains danced from the shock waves, but maintained enough integrity to contain the brunt of the nuclear-grade explosion.

For a split second, the twisted skeleton of a subterranean base was silhouetted in the hellish fury. Brought into view and annihilated. Feebly, the volatile chemicals in its armory added their pittance of destruction to the violent display. Fusing into fission, the structures vanished in a strobe sequence, the lambent vapor converting metal and stone into radiant flame. Layers of bedrock dissolved. Then the sheer mass of the planet pushed back against the ravaging onslaught, and the plasma blast rebounded. Superheated gasses belched forth from the bottom of the incandescent crater in a deafening roar, coruscating flares leapt for the sky and boiling smoke formed a clean mushroom cloud overhead.

Clutching the fringe of Runner, I held on for dear life and rode the volcanic storming as best I could.

After what seemed an eternity, the rumbling vibrations ceased, and an eerie stillness enshrouded the decimated headquarters of the Scion with a graveyard peace.

EPILOGUE

We never heard from the Scion of the Silver Dagger again.

After Kathi beat her mage, and Jess killed her evil counterpart, they rushed to join the fight, rescuing George and saving the good Father's life. Mike had been one heartbeat away from death. He walks with a wooden cane these days. But a cane from Remington Industries that fires 12 gauge shotgun shells, of course.

Our jetsam equipment crashed in farmland and the only victims were an assortment of young corn and squash. How appropriate.

A short phone call from Horace Gordon to the President, and NASA started replacing their moonrocks on display with precise duplicates tooled out of rocks from Ganymede, a moon of Jupiter. Who's going to know the difference? It cost them a pretty penny, but after that 'special favor' we did for them, it was considered only fair payment.

Our cyber-cops had wisely fled the vicinity of Hadleyville when the sky began falling and we didn't lose a single robot.

In less than a month, Mathias Bolt and most of the top echelon of the Brotherhood of Darkness were arrested for committing a wide variety of crimes directly traceable to them by the money I had marked inside that safe. Snicker.

The crew of the U.S.S. *Idaho* was rescued, and with the assistance of the Bureau mermaids, we even managed to save the mighty battleship herself. The mass marriage is next month. Oh, those crazy sailors.

It took micro surgeons from West Virginia to remove the moonrock from the fist of Dr. Joanne Abernathy, but she has a nice robotic replacement and doesn't really mind. After a pep talk from Horace Gordon, it appears that Dr. Abernathy will be joining our august organization. Lord knows, we can always use trained medical personnel.

Our running battle on the Ohio Turnpike was declared a shoot-out between rival drug gangs. The

firefights in Chicago attributed to mob warfare. The *Idaho* officially never sank.

Surreptitiously, exposed to the truth about the supernatural threats to America, the Bureau received over a thousand recruits from every branch of the Justice Department and Department of Defense. For the first time since the Slaughter of '87 we have a full compliment of agents.

Enough agents for me to propose a very special mission that was flatly refused by the Bureau as too damn dangerous. However, I did have some vacation time coming my way...

Runner and Amigo have become the best of friends. If only we could stop them from taking joy rides and strafing the Chicago Zoo. The dry cleaning bills are killing us!

Damaged from her deadly psionic battle, Jessica found that her telepathic powers had been reduced to her natural level and ME! is visiting a psychologist and getting some treatment for its maniac depression.

We got a new RV.

After rebuilding the downtown Chicago apartment building, an old dead friend of ours, Abduhl Benny Hassan, moved into the basement of the new building. This pleased everybody, especially Mindy. Without a ghost in the basement, it just wasn't home. Besides, who else could get a pizza from Carmen's on Sheridan Avenue and get back in under a minute flat? Now that was a useful talent. Cold pizza? Phooey.

Meanwhile, George is in the Geneva Medical Institute recovering from the latest rounds of plastic surgery. He'll be fine, and resembling a short, Sean Connery if the lovely Ms. Katrina has anything to say about his facial reconstruction.

Bureau 13 headquarters is no longer located in the Sears Tower.

The 'Lazy Eight' Motel was renamed the 'Vogue' Motel.

I started growing hair every full moon, but with my monthly anti-lycanthropy shots and a fresh razor, I'm doing fine.

The fight between the buxom ThunderBunnies and the demonic Colombian mercenaries at the Museum of Science and Industry will be released next summer by TriStar pictures. Rated: H. No heart attack patients or heretics allowed.

To this day, J.P. Withers will not talk to me.

Once again doing the impossible, the Army Corp of Engineers diverted a West Virginia river and managed to flood the impact crater from the hotel, then a private investment company started construction on Meteor Lake Amusement Park. We even got to help design the Haunted House. Now that was the best part-time job I ever had. See you there sometime!

Boo.

THE END

BONUS SHORT STORY

A MATTER OF TASTE

“One-two-three!” screamed the furious crowd of Scottish villagers, and the crude battering ram surged forward once more. With the sound of splintering wood, the huge doors blocking the entrance to the abandoned coal mine crashed apart, splinters exploding into the night air toward the moon.

“For God and King!” bellowed a red-faced dollymop, brandishing an executioner's axe.

Shouting in victory, the mob of highlanders dropped the old weathered caber and started to charge in through the ruined barrier, the local constable and grimy navies waving their wooden staves and blunderbusses.

In the lead of the angry throng was a lean whippet of man sporting a soft-brim hat, swallow-tailed coat, tight breeches and fine Chase & Adams boots: dapper gentleman's clothes from across the Atlantic. The big Yank looked a toff, but tucked firmly into his black leather belt was a shiny silver badge bearing the Great Seal of the President of the United States, and grasped in his big calloused hands was a brace of ornate Collier pistols, the long tapering .72 barrels of the new style breechloaders gleaming like polished justice in the rosy dimness of predawn.

The name he gave the locals was J.P. Withers, and he was the very first Federal Agent of the brand new organization of American police designed to deal with supernatural criminals. Hopefully. Cocking both of the curved hammers, Withers double-checked to make sure the copper percussion caps were firmly in place. Now was no time for a deadly misfire. As a duly empowered agent of Bureau 13, it was his task to see that the inhuman beast who had plagued Manhattan, and now this peaceful Scottish valley, must never be allowed to kill man, woman, child, or even somebody from France! Hopefully, the silver-and-wood balls in his primed guns would send the beast to hell, or maybe somewhere even worse.

Although lead by resolute Withers, the brave British posse stopped dead in their tracks as the flickering light of the torches clearly illuminated the interior of the mining tunnel. The ceiling was completely covered with fat chattering bats, thousands of the noisy beasts flapping their leathery wings, and foam dripping from their cruel mouths. And the hard stone ground was solid with a living carpet of snarling rats. Millions of beady eyes stared at the humans, who could feel an almost tangible cloud of hate and hunger. Even the one barrister in the crowd felt faint.

Suddenly a cold wind blew from deep within the old coal shaft, carrying with it a smell of newly turned earth, death, and mint leaves. Withers frowned. As always before, that was when the torches sputtered out. But now, bits of hot oakum were used to ignite dozens of whale-oil bullseye lanterns, the glass flumes protecting the delicate flames within, and brilliant white cones of light illuminated the rocky passage.

The beams bobbed about in frantic search and soon converged on the source of the wind. At the rear of the mine, a dimly seen figure smirked at them and stuck out its long forked tongue. Standing brazenly at the rear of the mine entrance, protected by the slavering army of night hunters, was a humanoid creature dressed in a double-breasted Duke Street coat, ruffled shirt, Beau Brummel breeches, roll top boots, and a long flowing Spitfields silk cape. Very nice, indeed. However, his skin was deathly pale, his eyes glowing red, and his teeth were a dentist's nightmare.

“So the colonial thief-catcher and you silly kilt-wearing fools actually did manage to find me,” hissed the vampire, exposing every inch of his long white fangs. “Amazing. Bloody incredible.”

Incensed, the tartan-clad Scots cursed in anger and started forward, but when the bats and rats hissed in unison, the dire threat stopped the invasion faster than it had begun. With the entire population of the remote village outnumbered thousands to one, even the alcoholic mayor and the junkyard dog wondered if it was time to try diplomacy. Immediately, the secret band of Freemasons in the group started writing a petition.

“Its a rum deal, my culleys,” sneered the inhuman beast in a really bad Rookery accent. “Enter, and my servants will tear you to shreds! Oh, some may live to combat me, but will there be enough?” A truly devilish eyebrow rose in contempt and, self-consciously, he tucked the medical marvel of the recently invented Pierre Fuachard toothbrush deeper into a vest pocket. His personal hygiene was none of their damn business.

“I'm ready for battle!” it panted breathlessly. “Are you?”

Not exactly sure what a lot of that meant, Withers felt sure it was mostly insulting. In reply, the Bureau 13 agent fired both of his Colliers, the silver ball smacking the vampire directly in the chest to no effect, but the wooden ball exploded into splinters from an overload of gunpowder. Damn!

However, his blazing weapons triggered a barrage of blunderbusses, four-barreled ‘duck foot’ fowlers, horse pistols, and muzzle-loading rifles from the attending crowd, and the strident discharges filled the mine with thunder and flame and boiling clouds of acrid black-powder smoke. Wasting no time in a reload, J.P. Withers dropped his spent Colliers and pulled two squat .66 Newarks from the voluminous pockets of his greatcoat and fired again. This time cold-iron balls. Then he dropped those and drew from his boots a matched pair of double-barreled Manton conversions. Deadly little barkers, indeed. Withers fired simple lead this time, but only used one pistol to hold the other for reserve. Even he could only carry so many weapons and still be able to walk.

The Scottish mob gave another volley from their blunderbusses and muskets. The assorted fusillade of rounds wildly ricocheted off the back wall and blasted the expensive clothing of the vampire to pieces.

Contemptuously, the man-beast brushed some imaginary lint off a riddled lapel, took a bit of snuff from his gold Nathaniel Mills box, sneezed, and smiled toothily at them.

“Ouch,” he chuckled.

The angry crowd made more angry crowd noises, but much less sure of themselves this time. His flowing white beard bristling in fury, a determined piper doffed his tam o'shanter and started playing the bagpipes at full volume, but even that vicious attack seemed to have no dilatory effect on the man-demon. Deciding this was the appropriate moment to act, the barrister promptly took a huge swig of pure quill laudanum and fainted dead away. The priest began a lengthy exorcism.

Unexpectedly a flurry of wooden arrows twanged across the mine entrance. The shafts impacted everywhere except into the half-naked body of the muscular monster. At the rear of the mob, a doddering old groundskeeper glared hostilely at his impressed gang of apprentice archers. Britons who couldn't fire a long bow? What was the empire coming to! In return, the clerks, cooks and coopers looked incredibly embarrassed. Well, at least they hadn't shot themselves in the foot again.

Inside the mineshaft, the laughing vampire twirled the remains of a bedraggled Spitfield cape about himself and was gone from sight.

“Goodbye, Yank!” cackled the darkness, the words echoing strangely. “Within minutes I will be safely

hidden within the endless natural catacombs beneath this mudhole of a city. A thousand men in a thousand years could never find me again!"

An elderly dairy farmer gave a juicy raspberry, and the village tout shouted out a virulent oath that even made the blustering navies blanch at its raw vulgarity. Hot haggis, that was a good 'un!

"And I will return to tap the claret of these fools," continued a whispery voice fading at every moment, the dire words invoking ghastly images of rivers of human blood. "Next year, on this very day, I shall come back to reap my revenge, for I will use the secret second sleep of a vampire. During the coming seasons I will rest, arising for but a single day one year from now. Three hundred and sixty five times stronger than I am now!"

Fading rapidly, the words repeated in snarling fury. "Three hundred and sixty five times stronger! How will you stop me then Yankee, and save these dirt-eating peasants? Seal the mine with iron plate, and I shall break free through the granite with my bare hands. Run, and I shall track you each down across the whole world!"

The bats and rats screamed in victory and the pale highlanders began retreating into the forest. Across the whole world? Even as unimaginably far away as Edinburgh? Bloody hell! Maybe this hunt hadn't been such a swell idea after all.

Tucking away his last charged pistol, J.P. started reloading his dropped weapons as quickly as possible. There was no manual for Bureau 13 agents yet, and the man was unsure of his next move. Read the beast the Riot Act? Call in the U.S. Marines, or the Royal North Umberland Dragoons? Offer a stash of blunt as a bribe? Get royally pissed on a dog nose's at a dollyshop? Suddenly, the silver badge on his belt seemed to weigh a thousand tons and hindered his every step. What could he do against such an indomitable adversary?

"I win," whispered the cold wind in the rustling trees.

Sullenly and frightened, the villagers and the grim Bureau 13 agent shuffled along the king's road winding through the heather carpeted forest. Just then, the sun crested the western mountains, the golden glorious dawn only horribly counterpointed the humans listless retreat to their lonely, vulnerable homes.

"See you real soon.... Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha...." evilly murmured the disappearing shadows.

But with those words, the Washington DC lawman slowed and ever so slightly gave a sly smile like a 10-ball shooter facing an ironclad leave on a billiard table.

The vampire was wrong, he would not see them soon. The West End fop had truly missed the mark with that remark. Ever so thoughtfully, the young American fingered the loudly ticking Breguer watch in the pocket of his waistcoat. Time was on their side, and he had a full solar year in which to act. A fact which gave the new Bureau 13 agent a very dangerous idea that immensely appealed to his personal sense of justice.

Only ... would the chancy scheme work?

* * * *

Three hundred sixty four days later, the people of the isolated Scottish town were busy erecting colorful booths, gay banners and great canvas circus tents. Fresh, fragrant flowers adorned every house, every barn, and every inn, while great iron cooking vats bubbled merrily away in the campsites, filling the air

with the rich, pungent fumes of meaty stews and fancy French soufflés and zesty sauces.

Lean and grim, J.P. Withers ignored the mountains of food and roamed the festivities like a panther, fresh pistols tucked into every pocket and boot, wooden knives hidden in his sleeves, a silver crucifix about his neck. There would be no mistakes this time. He hoped.

Everywhere around the Yank, squealing mudlarks happily dug in the ground seeking dropped coins, while rouged whores lifted their skirts for patrons behind every bush, and scarred pugilists pounded each other in a glorious drunken stupor.

Lounging about in false casualness, all six of the infamous Bow Street Runners of London, including the right honorable Sir Fielding himself, did nothing to stop any of it, even though prize fighting had been illegal since 1750. The imperial lawmen merely sipped their blackjacks of hot gin and nutmeg, kept a close eye on their gold watches, and ready hands on their loaded Collier and Manton pistols. But the leather-wrapped handles of sharp wooden daggers rose from their Hoby boots. Soon now, very soon.

During the daylight hours dozens, hundreds, then literally thousands of people from London, Paris, Italy, Germany, and even distant Russia had responded to the invitation and swarmed into the tiny highland village, adding to and augmenting the tantalizing cloud of cooking aromas with their own culinary contributions.

By twilight, a boisterous party was in full swing with four different bands playing, scores of dancers twirling, and a hundred whole oxen roasting in huge pits full of crackling logs, the juicy meat spewing endless volumes of tangy smoke towards the distant twinkling stars. The staggering array of beef had been personally donated to the endeavor by good Queen Caroline and President James Monroe of America. An extremely old King George had temporarily gone potty again, and currently believed himself to be an Etruscan vase full of live mice.

The feasting and festivities went on far into the night. The only disruption to the happy revelry occurring at exactly midnight, when the dance music was momentarily interrupted by a small explosion from the direction of an old abandoned coal mine in the foothills, closely followed by a loud squeak of inhuman horror.

Seconds later, a barely noticed handful of dry ash blew across the joyous Scottish folk and the lone Bureau 13 agent celebrating the first combined North American & British International Garlic Festival.

THE END

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