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PRAISE FOR BUREAU 13

"Great!"

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"Very funny."

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"High adventure, highly recommended."

—Science Fiction Chronicle

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—Moscow Times

"This is the X-Files meets the Marx Brothers!"

—Raymond's Reviews

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WILDSIDE PRESS NOVELS

BY NICK POLLOTTA

ILLEGAL ALIENS(w/Phil Foglio)

BUREAU 13: JUDGMENT NIGHT

BUREAU 13: DOOMSDAY EXAM

BUREAU 13: FULL MOONSTER

THAT DARN SQUID GOD(w/James Clay)

* * * *

FORTHCOMING

BUREAU 13 RPG SOURCE BOOK

THE BROTHERS GRIMOIRE

DAMNED NATION

NICK POLLOTTA

WILDSIDE PRESS

DAMNED NATION

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SPECIAL THANKS

To the lovely and talented Judith Taylor,

proofreader extraordinary.

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To my nephew, Logan Randall,

master swordsman.

"...and a wall of troops surrounded the campfire, guarding the civilians and children through the chilly darkness until the dawn. So shall it ever be. Soldiers standing bold against the creatures of the night."

Marcus Aurellius

Roman Emperor, 140 AD

CHAPTER ONE

Standing at a window in the mansion, Joshua Witherspoon gazed in torpid horror at the deadly battle raging across the Potomac River. Somewhere over the horizon, entire divisions of Union and Confederate cannons were firing non-stop, the violent discharges of the heavy artillery filling the night sky with crimson flashes. The massive guns must have been deafening to the ground crews, but the distance softened the titanic blasts and Joshua could only hear a muffled thumping. Strong and steady.

Almost like the beating of a human heart, Joshua observed sadly. The analogy was disturbing. A civil war, there was an oxymoron if I've ever heard one .

Looking down at the sleeping city, Joshua couldn't see a soul on the cobblestone streets. Washington seemed as deserted as a warehouse on Christmas. This eagerly awaited war-between-the-states was already eight months old by now, and the initial hope for an early victory was long gone. The civilians were becoming accustomed to thundering cannons in the night, and the military was digging in for a prolonged conflict. As a prelude against possible invasion, the Union Navy had anchored a dozen warships in a defensive line across the Chesapeake Bay to protect the entrance to the Potomac River.

And hidden in the thick forest along the river, the Army had hundreds of disguised gunnery emplacements, more than enough troops, rifles and Napoleon cannons to stop any conceivable Confederate attack on the Executive Mansion. Built by the famous architect James Hoban, the great white house on the bank of the Potomac River was the official residence of the President of the United States, the headquarters of the northern War Department, and a prime target for the Confederate Army.

To take and hold the Executive Mansion would mean capturing President Lincoln alive, which would assure Jefferson Davis an almost instant victory.

However, the War Department was prepared for such a scenario. Encamped around the Executive Mansion was a thousand armed soldiers, the elite 110th 'Cassius Clay' Battalion, backed by more brass Napoleon field cannons than could ever be counted in a single day without the use of roller skates. A dozen sharpshooters walked the flat roof of the Executive Mansion, and a score of heavily armed soldiers patrolled the sprawling grounds of the estate. To the general public, the Executive Mansion was a military hardsite, a fortified redoubt. What the Confederacy thought about the matter was anybody's guess.

Shaking his head at these dark thoughts, Joshua let the curtain drop back into place and turned away from the window. The war was not his concern tonight, dinner was. With a properly neutral expression,

the head butler for the Executive Mansion lifted the silver serving tray loaded with foodstuffs and started along the dimly lighted corridor of the West Wing. The War Department was still in session, and although nobody had rung for food, it was part of his job to know when such things were needed before being asked. A good butler always anticipated the needs of his employer. Like putting a kerosene lantern into the outhouse to warm the seat just after serving a large meal. Or obtaining a wheelbarrow during a night of heavy drinking to help move the more inebriated guests to their bedrooms.

Or dump them out onto the street, Joshua noted sagely. It all depended upon how badly they had worn out their welcome during the festivities. Getting drunk and vomiting was considered manly, messy, but acceptable. But pinch the bottom of a maid and the president would personally heave the transgressor out the nearest window. Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln didn't touch alcohol. However, they didn't mind drinking, only drunks. If a guest found himself airborne, then he must have committed a serious breach of etiquette. It was always a shocking discovery. *Especially just before crashing into the rhododendron bushes .*

As Joshua walked through the huge mansion, only the creak of the floorboards disturbed the thick silence. In spite of the late hour, Joshua was neatly dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and matching bowtie, along with a gay tartan vest he had purchased at a Boston pawn shop. Orphaned at a young age, Joshua had no idea if his ancestry was Scottish, but he liked the bright mix of colors. Besides, the vest was a small rebellion against the iron rules of decorum that governed the social elite in DC like invisible chains.

Unlike the real shackles that others wore in the South, Joshua thought sourly, glancing back at the curtained window. *Wish to Heaven there was something I could do to help them, but I'm just a butler. If I was to join the Army, they would only assign me to be the aide to some fat general. If I'm going to be a servant no matter what, then I might as well stay in DC and work for the president. Besides, what possible difference could a single man make in the outcome of any war?*

Moving past the railing at the top of the stairs, Joshua saw a dark shape lunge out of the shadows.

"Halt, and be recognized!" the private ordered brusquely, then he smiled and lowered the shotgun. "Hi, Joshua."

The butler paused. "Private Augustan," Joshua replied politely, giving a little nod. Then he looked at the ceiling and started whistling.

Quickly shouldering the .69 smoothbore Remington, the private gently lifted the linen napkin covering a plate on the tray, and snaked out a sandwich from the stack of them underneath. Lowering the napkin, the soldier hid the food behind his back and delicately coughed.

"Good evening, private," Joshua said, facing forward again. Giving a wink, he continued into the West Wing. Oh, it was against orders for the staff to feed any of the soldiers around the mansion. But in Joshua's opinion, a man could not properly guard the president and his family if the poor fellow was weak from hunger. Some rules were meant to be adhered to at all costs, and some could tactfully be, well, bent every now and then. It was all a matter of moderation. *Which every man had to decide for himself .*

Turning sideways to squeeze between two large packing crates blocking the hallway, Joshua fervently hoped that the private was not caught with breadcrumbs on his uniform by Sgt. Montgomery. The wrath of the sergeant was legendary. With just a stern glare, the big Irishman had once made a mule burst into tears. *Scary stuff .*

Raising the tray high, Joshua maneuvered past a colossal packing crate with labels from France. This collection of boxes was just the most recent purchases for Mrs. Lincoln's planned renovations of the Executive Mansion. President Buchanan had been a fine man, but a total slob, and the mansion had been an absolute pigsty when the Lincolns moved in. Incredibly, the new First Lady had gotten Congress to loosen its purse strings and grant her thirty-thousand dollars to repair, rebuild, and redecorate the Presidential abode. To anybody with even the slightest dollop of political savvy, that was a miracle equal to the parting the Red Sea, and Mrs. Lincoln had wisely moved fast on the repairs before Congress had gotten sober and rescinded their outrageously generous offer.

Every day another crate arrived with more furniture, curtains, or fixtures; a chandelier from Paris, dinnerware from New York, rugs from Madrid, or crystal from Moscow. Wherever that was located. But even more importantly, an invading army of carpenters had done a splendid job repairing the creaky old mansion. The windows could now be opened without resorting to the use of a crowbar, the banister on the main stairs no longer threatened to collapse, and everybody was delighted that the furnace was working again. Sans the usual 'black fog' of escaping coal soot.

Sidestepping a sideboard from Sweden, Joshua grimly reminded himself that there was still the problem of the basement rats that needed attending to. There were several rooms below that the maids steadfastly refused to enter without pitchfork and burning torch. On his first day, Joshua had declared war on the indigenous rodent population. But the rats seemed to thrive on the arsenic-laced cheese he put in the traps. Only hot lead stopped the little monsters, and while Joshua was slowly becoming rather a good shot, the home of the President of the United States was as divided as the nation itself, with humans ruling the upper floors, but the Potomac River rats the uncontested masters of the dank basement.

Softly, the distant cannonfire continued to thump in the background, the beat quickening.

Spotting a tilted picture on the wall, Joshua scowled and placed the serving tray on top of a packing crate from Luxembourg. Whatever the box might contain, the butler was positive that it could not possibly be as useful as a bloodthirsty farm cat. Unfortunately, Mrs. Lincoln did not want any animals in the mansion out of a fear that they might scratch the new furniture. *Pennywise, pound foolish*.

"There you go, sir," Joshua said politely, leveling the frame. "All better."

In the flickering light of the ceiling lanterns, the unfinished portrait of George Washington seemed to wink in reply. The butler chuckled as he took up the tray once more. Amazing how a man could imagine such things late at night.

Traversing one last barricade of crates and barrels, Joshua slowly approached The Shop, the private office of the president. Angry voices could be heard through the closed door. *Oh dear, what was wrong now?*

"Poisoned bullets?" a deep voice growled, footsteps pounding along the floor. "What does that madman Lee think he's doing?"

A gruff voice replied, "Bah! What could we expect from rebel scum?"

"By God, that's inhuman!" President Lincoln sputtered furiously. "Are our spies sure about this?"

"Well, our soldiers certainly aren't dying just because they looked at some hairy-arsed rebel!" somebody replied with a sneer in their voice. "Sir, our troops are being found dead in the battlefields from minor

wounds that shouldn't have slowed down a Spanish dandy! Scratches, sir, mere trifles! If the Apothecary-General wants money to hire chemists to try to find an antidote for this poison, plague, whatever the Hades it is, then by thunder, I say give it to him! Give the man anything he requests! Including the mucking Liberty Bell melted down into surgical probes if he so desires!"

"And I agree," Vice President Hannibal Hamlin added in his booming oratory voice. "I say the War Department should assign the good doctor the sum of a thousand dollars for emergency medical research. All those in favor?"

The room chorused in the affirmative.

"So passed," President Lincoln stated wearily. "Now what's next on the agenda?"

"The planned attack on Leesburg, sir."

"Oh, very well. Any suggestions?"

Feeling the time was ripe for an intrusion, Joshua politely knocked.

"Come in!" Vice President Hamlin demanded.

Expertly balancing the tray in one hand, Joshua worked the latch and entered.

"Well?" President Lincoln wearily snapped in his standard greeting. Both of his hands were full of papers, and the tall man was bent over a Hoban drum table covered with maps.

Across the room, several generals were drawing diagrams on a blackboard with squeaky sticks of chalk, and a couple of yawning Union soldiers stood exhausted in the corners, their Springfield rifles more holding them up than the other way around. Bent over a desk, two of the president's secretaries, Nicolay and Hey, were busy scribbling away in journals, the scratching of their pens sounding like chicks trying to be hatched.

"I brought coffee and sandwiches, sir," Joshua said, deftly closing the door with an expert bump of a hip.

"Thank the lord," Vice President Hamlin sighed, rubbing his eyes with closed fists. "I was getting ready to eat the furniture."

Laying aside the papers, the president frowned. "Coffee is not what this nation needs," Lincoln growled dourly. "Nor I, for that matter."

"Speak for yourself, sir," General Henry Halleck snorted, rubbing his unshaved jaw to the sound of sandpaper. The military officer had been freshly shaved when he arrived at the Executive Mansion this morning, but that was so long ago it seemed like another lifetime.

"That better not be Virginia ham," Lt. General Winfield Scott muttered in accusation, placing aside a piece of chalk, and dusting off his callused hands.

"Never, sir!" Joshua brazenly lied, placing the tray on an empty table. "That would be unthinkable!" *Ah, politics, the fine art of splitting hairs with a sledgehammer.*

As the War Department descended upon the food like Alabama farm workers, there suddenly came a

ghastly noise from outside that froze the men motionless. Half gurgle, and half whimper, every manjack present instantly identified it as a deathcry. Somebody had just been violently killed in the garden.

"Lock the door!" General Scott ordered, pulling his LeMat pistol, and thumbing back the massive hammer. "And sound the alarm!"

As the guards rushed to obey, a window exploded, throwing glass into the office, and a huge mangy dog landed on the India rug near the crackling fireplace.

Dropping a pile of napkins, Joshua recoiled from the incredible sight. The beast was colossal, larger than a grown man, with fangs like daggers. But how in Hades could anything that large have jumped to the second floor?

Snarling in a manner that almost sounded like a chuckle, the slavering beast looked over the array of gaping people, and launched itself at the President. Slammed out of his chair, Lincoln went tumbling to the floor, and the monstrous animal closed its jaws on the president's throat with a loud snap.

CHAPTER TWO

Clutching his heart, Joshua gasped in fright, braced for a terrible spectacle of gushing red blood. Sputtering in disgust, the werewolf turned to expel a mouthful of bristly black hair.

Overcome with joy, Joshua felt his heart leap. The president was unharmed, saved by his bushy beard! But the butler knew that mistake would not happen again. In a surge of indignation, Joshua started forward with bare fists.

Shoving the president's head backwards to expose his throat, the werewolf opened his jaws just as a Union soldier rammed a Remington .44 revolver into an ear and fired.

Pausing in his rush, Joshua saw the head of the beast rock back from the triphammer blow of the lead miniball, and flame actually shot out of the opposite ear. *Gotcha!*

Crossing its eyes, the werewolf tumbled off the president and collapsed, sprawling onto the floorboards, his limbs twitching. Brandishing weapons, everybody rushed closer. But then the werewolf rolled over and impossibly rose again, the flow of blood stopping and the gaping wound closed as if it had never been.

"Lord protect us, it's a demon from Hell!" the frightened trooper cried, fanning the hammer and firing three more times into the hairy chest. The lead bullets erupted out the back of the werewolf, throwing blood onto the stucco ceiling.

Snarling in annoyance, the monster leapt upon the trooper, ripping the man apart with both paws, gobbets of flesh flying everywhere. A moment later the corpse of the Union soldier dropped to the floor, looking as if the poor fellow had fallen into the working gears of a McCormick reaper.

"Protect the president!" General Scott bellowed, firing his pistol into the nightmare beast. General Halleck did the same, Mr. Stanton threw a bottle of whiskey, and a Navy officer drew a saber. Coming out of their shock, the two Army guards in the corners aimed and fired their Springfield rifles, the deadly duet of .58 miniballs slamming the demonic animal against the fireplace, cracking the mantle.

As the billowing gunsmoke cleared, the men gasped as the fantastic creature slowly stood, the bullet wounds closing and smooth fur growing to cover the bald patches.

"Sweet mother of God," a major whispered, making the sign of the cross. "It's Satan himself!"

Strangely, the creature seemed to flinch at those words, and Joshua felt a surge of hope. *So this was some sort of a devil dog, eh?* he theorized wildly. *Well, my Sunday school teacher had told me how to deal with those!* Snatching a huge Holy Bible off a Hoban drum table, Joshua threw it at the beast with all of his might!

The book hit the werewolf in the haunches and harmlessly bounced off, the creature seeming more confused than annoyed.

"Oh crud," Joshua muttered, backing away quickly. *I'd best leave this to the men with guns.* The butler had a 1776 Manton horsepistol in his room, but the .75 gun was loaded with gravel and arsenic for the rats in the basement. Somehow, the butler felt that mixture would not do much against a monster from the deepest pit of the Unholy Abyss.

Slamming aside the office door, four Union soldiers burst into the room, their rifles at the ready.

"Shoot it!" Mr. Stanton shouted, yanking a sword from the ornate scabbard hanging from the belt of a paralyzed Naval officer. "Shoot the damn thing!"

Seeing the bloody corpse on the floor, the Union bodyguards needed no further prompting to aim their Sharps rifles and start rapidly firing. The new-fangled repeaters unleashed a hellstorm of hot lead at the animal until the office was foggy from the black powder discharges.

Finished with their reloading, the soldiers in the corner added the strident firepower of their big-bore Springfield rifles, and the devil dog was driven backwards against the wall again, howling and snarling like a lunatic in Bedlam.

"Summon the battalion!" President Lincoln commanded, rising to his feet, an arm pressed to his chest as if cradling a wound.

At the sound of his voice, the werewolf turned and charged through the smoky gunfire, knocking aside Stanton. Pulling out a silver-plated Colt with an ivory handle, Vice President Hamlin blew flame at the passing demon. Nicolay threw an ink bottle at the beast, and Hey added a wooden stool. Both of the impromptu missiles hit the target, but bounced off doing no more appreciable damage than the lead miniballs.

Scrambling over the map table, the monster paused in surprise as President Lincoln dropped into a boxing stance and hammered a rock-hard fist at the sensitive nose of the canine.

Blinded by the searing pain, the werewolf backed away, only now spotting the sterling silver ring on the hand of the bony politician. *Curse the luck, the prey was wearing death metal!*

Stepping between Lincoln and the devil dog, two soldiers raised their double-barrel shotguns and pulled the trigger. Caught pointblank, the werewolf literally flew off the table, blood gushing from a dozen wounds, huge chunks of flesh torn off, revealing the pulsating organs inside his body.

Sprawling on the floor, the beast landed in a pool of moonlight streaming through the broken window, and once more the impossible occurred as the monster regenerated, the ghastly wounds closing and healing even faster than before.

"Eat steel, devil dog!" General Scott cried, swinging his saber.

Then the steel blade hacked off an arm of the werewolf, and it howled in anguish. *The shiny sword was edged with silver!* But catching the limb in his other paw, the man-beast simply shoved the arm back into place, bones, tendons and torn flesh rejoining instantly.

"Lord, love a duck," the general muttered, going pale, lowering the useless saber.

With a low moan, Nicolay fainted, and a Union private dashed out of the room screaming hysterically. But the rest of the War Department moved closer. General Halleck began to empty a pistol into the devil dog, hitting it with amazing regularity, while others threw knives, bottles, and random pieces of furniture. For a moment, the beast was driven backwards into a corner by the sheer mass of assorted projectiles.

"Get the president out of here!" Joshua ordered, shoving a stunned soldier towards the panting Chief Executive. It was obvious that the president had received injuries from the first attack. Broken ribs if they were lucky, but there could be internal bleeding. *Please don't let him die. The nation would fall if Lincoln perished.*

As the guards closed around the president, a mob of soldiers knelt in formation to hammer the beast with concentrated volley fire. Snarling in rage, the werewolf ignored the lead miniballs, and started forward once more.

The air in the room was becoming thick with gunsmoke, and Joshua's ears were painfully ringing from the constant fusillade of the indoor battle. *Guns, swords, footstools, could nothing stop this thing?* Looking over the devil dog to see if it had received any lingering damage, Joshua noticed the small cut on the monster's forehead that wasn't healing like the other wounds. Less than an inch long, the tiny gash was still bleeding, and was oddly surrounded by a smear of green ink.

Joshua blanched. *The bulletproof monster had been injured by an inkbottle?* The butler felt his mind whirl in confusion. Then he saw the twinkling shards of the silver crystal laying on the filthy floor. And the president was wearing a silver ring on the hand that made the demon bleed. *Silver hurt demons?*

As the cursing Union soldiers paused to reload, the werewolf dove forward to rake a pawful of claws at Lincoln. The president escaped, but only by the thickness of a prayer.

Icy cold adrenaline flooded his body as Joshua grabbed the sterling silver tea tray on the sideboard, flipped off the food, and insanely stepped between the onrushing monster and the leader of the Republic. Joshua raised the tea tray just in time, and the metal bent from the impact of the beast. The butler was shoved backwards into Lincoln and nearly fell, but the president caught him by the arms.

"Thank you, sir," Joshua panted.

"No problem, son," Lincoln replied tersely. "But what in tarnation are you doing?"

"I'll explain later, sir." Jerking free, Joshua peeked around the tray to see the devil dog crouching on the dirty floor, cradling the busted paw. White bone showed through the matted fur, blood flowed freely, but most importantly, the wound was not healing. *Checkmate!*

"Look there!" General Halleck cried out, pointing with a shaking hand. "The beast is wounded!"

Without conscious thought, Joshua rushed closer to slam the silver tray over the head of the hairy hellhound.

The monster rocked from the blow as his skull cracked, and the werewolf turned to rush blindly through the gunsmoke, only to stumble over the body of his first victim and slammed into the fireplace. Moving fast, the Vice President snatched a brass lantern from a table. Pitching it sideways like a cricket ball, he saw the lantern hit the monster, the glass reservoir shattering to cover the beast with burning kerosene.

Howling in agony, the flaming werewolf tried to reach the window again, but volley fire from the soldiers drove it back once more. When the soldiers stopped to reload, the fiery monster charged, only to find the way blocked by that darn butler again, still holding the tea tray. As the werewolf headed for another window, Joshua swung the tray sideways and caught the beast squarely in the throat with the edge. Hacking and coughing, the smoldering beast doubled over, and Joshua raised the tea tray to bring it down upon the head of the monster with every ounce of strength he possessed!

The embossed metal bent from the staggering impact, and with a guttural moan, the monster dropped to the floor, trembled once, then went still.

Eagerly rushing forward, the soldiers and officers shouted a battlecry as they used swords and bayonets to ruthlessly hack the crackling monster into pieces.

"Keep going, lads!" General Halleck shouted, trying to get a clear shot at the beast with his Colt. "Dice the hairy bastard into mincemeat!"

But the group of men slowed in the mutilation, and started backing away. Many of the soldiers dropped their weapons and started whispering prayers, or pulling out religious icons.

"Impossible..." President Lincoln whispered, lowering the fireplace poker he had snatched up to join the fight. "That ... this can not be happening!"

His hands still vibrating from the killing blow, Joshua looked down to see that the pieces of the animal laying on the floorboards were changing shape like wax melting in the sun. The fur was retreating, the decapitated head altered, and the pulsating limbs were shrinking. Talons retreated into furry paws. Hair withdrew into pink skin. The rear legs straightened, the pointed ears dwindled and the battered face took on a startlingly human appearance.

Reloading his rifle, a soldier gasped, dropping the paper cartridge from his mouth. General Scott used a blistering oath, and a colonel tried to sheath his sword, but missed the scabbard entirely, stabbing the blade into an Ottoman instead.

Barely able to believe what they were seeing, the men stared at the incredible metamorphosis until the devil dog was gone, replaced with the vivisectioned body of a naked man laying in a spreading pool of red blood.

CHAPTER THREE

"What the Hades is going on here?" President Lincoln murmured, laying the dirty poker on the war map of Pennsylvania. A single drop of blood flowed off the tip to drop onto some little town by the name of Gettysburg, completely obliterating the place.

"Hades is properly correct. This is magic of some kind," Joshua said with a tight throat, lowering the tea tray. Then the butler hastily added. "Sir."

"Mayhap you're right," Lincoln muttered, warily looking about. "Or was the animal disguise a magician's trick, like that French fellow Houdin? Merely a clever stage illusion?"

"No sir, Mr. President," a major replied, draping his uniform jacket over the mutilated face of the dead soldier. "Private Anderson has his throat ripped out, sure enough, and not by human teeth. That's no goddamn illusion!"

"Major Connors, your language is unseemly!" Mr. Stanton cried angrily.

"Such vulgarity is quite understandable under the circumstances, Edward," President Lincoln countered, walking uneasily towards the disassembled corpse. Several soldiers moved between their Supreme Commander and the body, drawing their handguns from sheer force of habit.

"Well done, Mr. Calvert!" General Scott stated, slapping Joshua heartily on the back. "Bloody well done, indeed!"

"Witherspoon, sir," Joshua corrected, massaging his stinging palms. There was still a faint ringing in his ears from the killing blow. "My name is Witherspoon. Calvert was the butler that I replaced."

Frowning slightly at being corrected by the household staff, Scott then nodded in remembrance. *Oh yes, the fellow who stole all the dinnerware. What was it with butlers and silver?*

Gallantly, the general flipped a hand to dismiss the matter. "Call yourself anything you like, son, it was a brilliant move. How did you know the tea tray would stop him ... er, it ... I mean the assailant?"

"I had no idea," Joshua said honestly, a cold sweat breaking out over his body now that the danger was passed. "I was simply defending my president."

"Your employer," a soldier retorted gruffly to the civilian.

Turning about, Joshua arched a stern eyebrow. "No, sir," he replied firmly. "My president."

"Good man," Vice President Hamlin stated, tucking both thumbs into his belt. "By Gadfrey, I haven't seen a mess like this since Bullrun! Remember those photographs in the newspapers?"

At the memory, Mr. Hey started to gag, and lurched for the open window. Sticking his head outside, the man began to loudly lose his dinner, his legs shaking from the sheer force of the expulsion.

"Ignore him, just a touch of Soldier's Flu," General Scott said, jerking a thumb at the shuddering secretary. "A lot of men do that after their first taste of combat."

"Taste ... ow..." Mr. Hey groaned, redoubling his efforts.

Embarrassed at the slip, General Scott winced. "Sorry about that."

The reply from the window was non-verbal.

Exhaling deeply, President Lincoln sat down in a chair filled with bullet holes, tufts of wadding sticking out like cottony vitals. "By thunder, it was a good thing that Gustav or Charles weren't here. They're fine men, but my secretaries would have wet their trousers."

"Not exactly troopers, eh?" Navy Secretary Gideon Welles said as a question, mopping his damp face with a linen handkerchief.

"Neither am I," Stanton muttered honestly, brushing back his hair with stiff fingers. The man felt queasy, and debated going to join Hey, but forced himself to refrain from such a lewd public spectacle.

"Is ... *isthis* what the rebel bastards are throwing at us?" General Halleck raged, starting to reload his revolver. "Perhaps our men aren't dying of poison bullets. Just think about it! A wounded soldier, bleeding on the battlefield, alone, helpless, and then suddenly that appears...!" He gestured angrily. "Who wouldn't die of mucking fright?"

Everybody in the room frowned in consternation at the notion, and a long moment of silence passed in which the only sounds were the ticking of the wall clock, and the visceral expulsions of Mr. Hey. One of his shoes had fallen off by now, a single bare toe sticking out of a worn sock.

"Mrs. Lincoln gets a bee in her bonnet if one of the rooftop guards can't reach the privy in time, and, ahem, 'waters' her oak trees," a lieutenant muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "When she learns about this, the First Lady will want poor Mr. Hey strung up for treason."

"My family!" President Lincoln shouted unexpectedly, jerking up his head. Stifling a groan of pain, the politician rose stiffly from the tattered chair, and started shuffling for the door. "I must see to my wife and sons!"

"They're fine, sir," Sgt. Montgomery reported from the hallway, tamping down a reload into his shotgun. "When I heard the ruckus, I sent half of my men there in case this was a kidnapping attempt."

"Bless you, sergeant," the president sighed, gratefully collapsing back into the chair. "My sincerest thanks."

"Quick work there, Monty," General Scott said, finished with the reloading of his LeMat pistol. With a flip, he deftly slipped the French hogleg into a holster. "You there, Chesterson! Sergeant of the guard!"

"Sir?" a soldier replied with a crisp salute. His uniform was spattered with blood, the lid to the ammo box on his belt open, showing it almost empty of paper cartridges.

"Double the guards around the Executive Mansion until further notice," Scott ordered brusquely, then frowned. "No, triple them!"

"Yes sir!"

"Then raid the pantry," the general continued. "I want all of the silverware brought here at once."

"And coins," Joshua added, dabbing at his bloodstained coat with a handkerchief. "You might try loading a few shotguns with silver dimes."

"Deuced clever idea," Mr. Stanton complimented, twirling his waxed moustache.

Coins and silverware? The confused sergeant looked hopefully at the president.

"You heard the orders, son," Lincoln said, gingerly opening his shirt to peek at his bruised chest. The skin was already starting to turn a mottled purple, but no bones showed. Thank the lord for small miracles. Then his fingers fondled his beard to find a chunk was gone about the size of a partridge. *Just one inch lower ...* In his mind, Lincoln could still feel the hot breath of the dire beast upon his flesh. *Ghastly*. The president tried not to shudder, but did anyway. *This had almost been a successful attempt on his life*, he realized somberly.

"Move with a purpose, sergeant," Vice President Hamlin added curtly. "If there's one, there could be two of these things. If your troops spot so much as a stray dog on the grounds, shoot to kill, then set the body on fire."

Snapping his boot heels smartly, Sgt. Montgomery gave a salute. "Sir, yes sir!"

"And summon a priest," Joshua added, tucking away the dirty cloth. "We need all the help we can get."

Nodding in agreement, Sgt. Montgomery departed at a run, already shouting orders.

"Why a priest? The Holy Bible did no damage to the thing before," a general growled petulantly, nudging the disassembled body with the toe of his boot.

"That may have been more the fault of the holder, sir," Joshua commented dryly. "Rather than the author."

"That is might close to blasphemy," Stanton declared with a stern frown.

"So was this," Lincoln replied curtly, gently massaging his sore chest.

"Should I fetch a physician, sir?" Joshua said, kneeling by the politician.

"Just bruised," Lincoln said with a dry smile, brushing aside the offered assistance. "I suffered much worse learning how to split rails back in Illinois. Wood chips have the darnedest tendency to fly back at you." The politician offered a hand. "Thank you for saving my life."

Thoroughly embarrassed by the unexpected honor, Joshua struggled to find some way to escape from the socially awkward situation, but he was trapped. Placing aside the dented tray, Joshua accepted the offer and hesitantly shook hands with the leader of the nation.

"By the way, I voted for you, sir," Joshua said crazily, unsure of exactly what to say at a time like this.

His tired eyes twinkled in amusement. "So you were the one?" Lincoln said with a chuckle. "My thanks again."

"The election wasn't that close, sir."

"Nonsense. If the results had been any tighter, the numbers would have squeaked."

With a low moan, Mr. Hey pulled himself out of the open window and collapsed in a chair. His shoes crunched on the shards of glass covering the floor. A chill breeze rich with the scent of flowers was blowing in through the smashed window, and the clouds of gunsmoke were beginning to dissipate in the office.

"Feeling better?" Vice President Hamlin asked solicitously.

"No," Hey groaned weakly, slapping a hand over his mouth and rushing to the window once more.

"All right, you, you and you!" General Scott snapped, pointing at the remaining group of soldiers. "Get on the roof, and warn the guards to stay sharp! This could be a diversion! A prelude to a full invasion!"

"Do you really think that President Jefferson Davis sent a wild animal to assassinate me?" President Lincoln asked in disbelief, gingerly flexing his bandaged hand. "I mean a man disguised as a ... that is... does anybody know what the deuce this fellow was?"

"Don't know, don't care," Stanton commented rudely, using a sleeve to wipe some specks of blood off his cheek. "You there, private! Close the shutters on that window, and block it with the sideboard! Lieutenant, build up the fire in the hearth in case anything tries to come down the chimney!"

"And close the curtains," Joshua added, picking up the tray once more. "Silhouettes invite snipers."

Slinging their weapons, soldiers rushed to obey.

"How many men do we have on guard duty?" Vice President Hamlin asked, retrieving his knife from the wall. As the blade came free, the cracked plaster sprinkled over the mutilated corpse like winter snow.

"An entire battalion," General Scott answered curtly. "Plus, the house detail of a hundred."

"Hope that's enough," Hamlin muttered. "A dozen of these things could slaughter half the army before they'd be stopped."

Kneeling down, the vice president folded the soiled rug over the body, then stood again, wiping his hands clean on his vest. "Ashes to ashes," he whispered softly. "Dust to dust."

Just then, a squad of Union soldiers arrived, each of them armed with a Remington .69 shotgun, silver knives and forks jutting out of the large barrels as if they were going to attack a regimental dinner.

"No silver dimes," Sgt. Montgomery declared, panting, his pockets bulging with extra dinnerware. "But I have some on the way. Sent a runner to the Treasury."

"Most exemplary," Mr. Welles exhaled, going to a sideboard. Ignoring the pile of coffee-soaked sandwiches, the Secretary of the Navy poured himself a long drink from the liquor cabinet. His hands were shaking badly and more whiskey went on the floor than into the glass, but he finally got enough into the tumbler and quickly drained it in a gulp.

"Perhaps a round for all would be in order, sir," Stanton suggested. "Considering the circumstances."

"Not while on duty," General Halleck retorted, even while glancing at the single-malt Scotch with a longing expression.

"Unless you're Ulysses S. Grant," General Scott growled. "But then, you could hammer a tap in one of his veins and open your own pub."

"Well, that's better than the hobby of General Hooker," Vice President Hamlin added, giving a wink. "Talk about poisoning your bullets!"

As the roomful of men laughed, the door to the Shop was slammed open as a dozen more Union soldiers poured into the room, their revolvers and shotguns sweeping for danger. One large sergeant was actually carrying a Stovepipe rifle, the gaping maw of the titanic .75 barrel looking larger than a Napoleon cannon.

"At ease, gentlemen," President Lincoln commanded wearily from his chair. "And put that portable Howitzer away, sergeant. The assassin has been neutralized."

"So it was an assassin, sir?" the sergeant asked curtly, lowering the Stovepipe. Then he caught sight of the naked, bloody, legs sticking out of the folded India rug. "Who was it, sir, a rebel spy?"

"Time to find out," General Scott muttered, advancing upon the rug. "Mr. Hey, you may want to leave the room for this."

"No, sir," the secretary said, swallowing hard. Going to the map table, he lifted a Colt and tested the weight in his hand. "I shall stay right here, and see it through. In for a penny..."

"...in for a pound. As you say, old friend."

"Just don't get between him and the window," a private suggested to a friend in a stage whisper.

Kneeling on the bloody floor, General Scott took a fistful of bloody hair. Wiggling the head out of the rug, he lifted it high for everybody to get a look. There wasn't much of a face left after the accumulated damage.

"Anybody know the blackguard?" the general asked gruffly, squinting at the remains of the slack features.

Everybody murmured in the negative.

Placing the head in the wicker basket full of coal near the fireplace, Scott flipped open the rug, and began to arrange the body parts until the chopped up corpse was laying in a somewhat more orderly fashion.

Comparing the length of the body to that of the squatting general, Joshua could tell that the intruder had been a big man, almost six feet tall. Although as a devil dog, the fellow had been much taller. That was interesting.

The corpse had very pale skin, as if he hadn't seen the sun in years, and the arms were covered with tattoos, some of them quite indecent. The nose was lumpy, obviously broken many times in the past, and the left hand seemed disfigured until Joshua realized that the pinkie was missing, gone at the first knuckle.

"So he was a sailor, eh?" Joshua said, thoughtfully chewing a lip. *And a deuced clumsy one, too*. As a young boy, Joshua had seen sailors with missing fingers before, usually from them tying off a rope incorrectly and when it tightened the line would pinch off a finger clean as picking a grape.

"How could you possibly know he was a sailor?" asked Welles craning his neck for a better look.

The butler pointed. "See? Right there on the shoulder, sir, that's a Union Navy tattoo."

"Where?"

"Just under the topless mermaid."

So it was. "Navy, eh?" Turning the torso over, Scott grunted at the sight of old scars on the dead man's back, the brutal remains of numerous disciplinary whippings. "He was a sailor, by gum," the general agreed. "And not a very good one, by the looks of these marks."

"And a Freemason," General Halleck added. "I recognize that square and compass symbol on his shoulder."

"As do we all," President Lincoln stated in an even tone. "But I find it highly unlikely that the Freemasons would try to assassinate me. They detest slavery. Even the Southern lodges."

"Mayhap the tattoo is a trick," the vice president suggested, leaning forward in a chair. "A ruse to try and get us fighting among ourselves. That's just basic military strategy."

"Divide and conqueror. Julius Caesar did that," General Scott stated. "So did Hannibal, Attila the Hun, William Wallace..."

"And Sun Tzu," Hamlin interpolated.

The Union general raised an eyebrow. "The son of who?"

"Tell you later."

"Well, whomever our unwanted guest is," Joshua said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "There was no way he could have gone through Washington in his birthday suit. The constables would have nabbed him within a block."

"He might have still been a devil dog," Welles suggested hesitantly. "Maybe he only changes to human when dead."

"And nobody noticed an eight-foot-tall dog running through the streets of Washington?" Joshua asked skeptically. "In a city already on the alert for rebel spies, advance agents, and Confederate saboteurs?"

Rising from his chair, General Halleck went to the door and flung it open. "Guards!" he bellowed.

Almost instantly, a dozen soldiers arrived, automatically thumbing back the hammers on their Springfield rifles.

"Is there a problem, sir?" a beefy corporal asked, trying to see into the crowded room.

"Damn right there is," Halleck replied gruffly. "Take some men, and do a sweep around the Mansion for a block in every direction. There should be a pile of clothing somewhere, probably hidden under a rock, inside a bush, something like that."

"No, they'll be someplace high," Joshua interjected. "Where the damp can't reach. Nobody wants to wear soggy clothing."

The general grunted. "Fair enough. Search the window ledges, saddle bags on horses, and of course any carriages or buckboard wagons. Find those garments, and bring'em back here."

"Yes, sir!" the soldier replied crisply. The group of armed men moved off, exchanging puzzled looks.
First silverware, and now lost clothing. What was this, a war or a scavenger hunt ?

* * * *

In a dark alley across Pennsylvania Avenue, a shadowy figure watched the activity inside the Executive Mansion with intense displeasure. Obviously, the werewolf had failed. *Another supernatural being would have to be sent to finish the matter .*

Glancing down at the pile of clothing the werewolf had taken off before the metamorphosis, Drell adjusted the thick scarf masking his own features before reaching for the garments. But suddenly a squad of heavily-armed soldiers carrying lanterns burst out of the mansion and started across the cobblestone street.

Without a sound, Drell moved deeper into the darkness. A burst of electromagnetic radiation filled the alleyway for a split nanosecond, and he was gone, leaving behind only a dry patch on the ground that the damp quickly filled until there was no remaining sign that he had ever been there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Excusing himself, Joshua stepped into the hallway.

"Well, this fellow should be easy enough to identify," Stanton declared in relief, shooting the cuffs on his shirt. "A sailor, and Freemason, missing a pinkie. A simple advertisement in the local newspaper will—"

"There'll be none of that!" President Lincoln snapped, fluffing out his beard in an attempt to fill the missing patch. "This matter has to remain strictly on the Most Secret list."

"But sir, how will we find out who he is, if we don't spread around his portrait and description?" Hey asked in concern.

"A description of what?" Vice President Hamlin demanded, massaging his temples. He felt a real corker of a headache coming. "A devil dog who attacked the president inside the Executive Mansion? Oh, the rebels would love that. They'd claim that God has abandoned the Republic, and was now on their side, and all sorts of similar nonsense."

"That kind of propaganda could prolong the war for months," General Scott said, cracking his knuckles. "By thunder, it could make the blasted thing last for years!"

Everybody scowled darkly at that notion. A civil war that lasted for years? It was too horrible to even contemplate.

Sounding a polite cough, Joshua returned with a small army of maids armed with buckets of soapy water

and mops.

"Perhaps we should adjourn to the Blue Room, gentlemen," Joshua suggested, gesturing at the open doorway.

"Good thinking, son. And remove *that*," Lincoln commanded, pointing at the crimson-soaked rug. "Build a bonfire behind one of the Jefferson Mounds in the back yard and burn the body to ashes. I want the Shop ready for business by the morning."

There was no discussion in the matter. Everybody wholeheartedly agreed. As the War Department left the room, a couple of privates carried away the gory rug, and the grim maids got to work.

In the hallway, a platoon of soldiers armed with pistols and rifles saluted the President, and crowded around the lanky politician as he led the way to the Blue Room.

Pausing outside, the War Department waited as two soldiers entered the room and scouted for possible danger. Joshua went with the men to close the window shutters and unlock the liquor cabinet. There was little chance of hidden assassins. The Blue Room was deliberately kept mostly empty as this was where the president held formal balls for visiting diplomats. But that was why Joshua had recommended the Blue Room instead of the Oval Room, where they served tea every Sunday. There were plenty of divans and couches, more than enough for the War Department and their escorts, but there were also way too many damn windows for the place to ever be properly secured. On the other hand, all that light would make the Oval Room a fine office.

"All clear, Mr. President," a corporal reported crisply.

Grunting in reply, Lincoln strode into the room and deposited himself in a cane chair that looked about as comfortable as a bamboo *strappado*. The rest of the War Department chose similar chairs, or simply sat cross-legged on the bare floor, their weapons laid across their laps in plain view.

As a maid delivered a bowl of ice, Joshua immediately started making drinks. Mint Juleps were his specialty, but under the circumstances, Joshua made a round of Manhattans.

"Well, gentlemen, as I see it, we have two problems," President Lincoln said, accepting a glass of iced water from the butler. "The first is a need for absolute secrecy on this matter. Think of the panic that would ensue if the word got out that the South was using trained dogs as assassins. Much less if the truth was learned!"

"Whatever the truth is," Mr. Stanton spoke, sipping his drink. "But you're quite right, sir. This must be of the highest secrecy. War Department only, Burn After Reading, that sort of thing."

"I can assign a couple of U.S. Marshalls to investigate," Vice President Hamlin suggested, pulling out a cigar. Joshua struck a Lucifer and lit the slim panatela for the man. "We need somebody trustworthy to find out who this person is ... was ... whatever, and search his home for any clues to..." Here the vice president ran out of steam. *Clues to his origin? His pedigree?*

"To find whatever they can," Joshua suggested, going to the fireplace and stoking the coals to a cheery blaze. "Was he alone? Are there more of these devil dog running about?"

Devil dogs? Good name. "My people will get straight to the matter," General Scott declared, brandishing the LeMat revolver in his fist. "By thunder, I'll send a full battalion to..."

"You will do nothing of the sort," the president countered gently. "That is exactly what I don't want, Winnie. We're in the middle of a war, and any place that soldiers go, the people take note, and reporters take notes." Lincoln gestured at the closed door to the hallway. "Do you really want the ... what did you call it again?"

"Devil dog," Joshua supplied, over a shoulder.

The president nodded. "Right. Do you really want this devil dog story on the front page of the *Morning Chronicle*, or *New York Times*?"

"But surely the gunshots have been heard," a major stated, leaning forward in his cane chair, both elbows resting on knees.

As if in reply, there came a string of crackling explosions from the Rose Garden outside, closely followed by a whizzing and sharp whistles that ended in soft bangs.

"Fireworks?" the president asked, glancing at the closed windows. Ever so slowly, the man turned. "Is this more of your work, Joshua?"

"Yes, sir," the butler replied, stepping away from the roaring fireplace and wiping the coal soot from his hands. "I passed along the word to have the groundkeepers stage a little celebration. A party to celebrate our great victory against the rebs."

"What victory?" General Scott demanded suspiciously.

"Does it matter?" President Lincoln asked, starting to smile. "Good work again, Joshua."

"Just doing my job, sir."

Oh no, you're not. You're doing everybody's job tonight.

From the roof there came a chorus of drunken singing, the bawdy songs building in volume, until breaking into a rousing rendition of 'The Union Forever.'

"See? Just some drunken revelry at the mansion," Joshua said, pocketing the handkerchief. "The upper crust of Washington society already holds our noble soldiers in low esteem. For once, that will work in our favor."

The members of the War Department nodded in approval.

"As I was saying, gentlemen," President Lincoln went on in a measured tone, templeing his fingers. He watched the blood-stained butler go around the room lighting candles, but ignore the new kerosene lanterns. *Those would make too much light, and betray our presence in the room*. "What this matter requires is a clandestine investigation. A plain clothes detective. A private agent, if you will. Somebody whose presence on the streets will not ignite a blizzard of rumors."

"Somebody who knows how to keep secrets," Vice President Hamlin said, glancing sideways at the butler moving a candle from behind the president so that it wouldn't throw his famous silhouette against the closed curtains. *This man thinks faster on his feet than a tap dancing mathematician*. "A local man who can talk to servants, soldiers, merchants and politicians with equal ease."

"Somebody who knows the complex workings of Washington society," Mr. Stanton added, beginning to smile at Joshua. "The backroom politics, the good ol' boy network, and the secret lodges."

"It should be a soldier," General Halleck stated, resting a hand on his dress saber. The protection of the president was the job of the Army, not the cleaning staff. They needed a man armed with a gun, not a nancyboy carrying a mucking featherduster!

"No, Henry, this special agent should be a civilian," General Scott corrected, stoically grinning, stroking his beard. "Somebody outside the chain of command, so that he can move quickly, and get things done quietly." A couple of soldiers had run away from the fight in the Shop, and one had fainted, but this butler charged into the fray and attacked a thing from Hell armed only with a tea tray. A mucking tea tray, by jingo!*Give me a thousand such men and the South would fall in a week.*

Using his pocket knife to cut the seal on a fresh box of Cuban cigars, Joshua tried to conjure up a possible candidate for this August, but highly dangerous position, when he suddenly noticed that everybody was looking directly at him.

"Something wrong, gentlemen?" Joshua asked, checking his clothes. Aside from some rips and stains accumulated from the recent brouhaha, nothing seemed amiss.

"Nothing that you can't fix," General Scott grinned devilishly.

Joshua felt himself blanch.*Oh no. Impossible .*

"An invisible man," President Lincoln said softly, beaming a pleased smile. "Able to converse with the high born and common folks. A man loyal to the Republic, somebody who has already demonstrated his quick thinking, and cool nerves in combat."

"All those in favor?" Vice President Hamlin intoned.

Every member of the War Department gave a solemn nod, even General Halleck after a moment. To be honest, the general didn't like the idea, but he was a patriot, and Halleck would walk naked through a Turkish prison if Lincoln asked.*Well, I'd run through one, anyway .*

Lowering the cigar box, Joshua tried to speak, but nothing come out.*Were these people serious ?*

"Care for a promotion, son?" President Lincoln asked smoothly.

"B-b-but I'm the*butler!*" Joshua cried, his voice rising slightly into a squeak. "I ... I ... I serve the tea!"

"And the president used to work on a ferryboat for a living, and Scott used to be a grocery clerk," Vice President Hamlin added, dismissing the objection with a wave. "I sold hardware, and Grant raised corn. We were all something else before entering government service."

"You may be a butler," Mr. Hey stated forcibly. "But you're a damned good man in a fight, none the less, Calvert."

"Witherspoon, sir," Joshua corrected, slightly woozy. "Calvert was the other fellow."

"Oh yes. The drake with the spoons. Sorry."

"What exactly is your full name?" General Scott asked, placing one hand behind his back in a formal posture.

"Didn't know that butlers had names," General Halleck muttered petulantly. But nobody paid him any attention. Especially the president.

"Joshua, sir," the butler said softly. "Joshua Parnel Witherspoon."

"A powerful name." Stiffly standing, the president went to the bookcase and took down a leather-bound Bible. "Please raise your right hand, Mr. Witherspoon," Lincoln requested, proffering the volume in his bandaged hand. "And place your left on this holy book." Using his wounded hand was a bit theatrical, but Lincoln hadn't beaten Douglas in the election just because of his exceptionally witty jokes. A strong leader must know when to ask, when to insist, and when to cajole. It was part of his job to find people to do the work he personally could not. *And sometimes*, the president sadly added, *to send them to their deaths*.

"Sir, is this really a good idea?" Joshua asked, doing as instructed. His face felt hot, and there was the most curious ringing in his ears.

"Two points," General Scott stated, lifting a finger. "One, yes, it is a good idea, so shut the Hell up. In the military, we promote for excellence in the field of battle. You've done that tonight."

"But, sir," Joshua hedged uneasily. "Really, I only..."

"Two," Scott interrupted, lifting another. "This is not a move the enemy could possibly have foreseen, and thus they could not have taken any measures to hinder your work."

"Move fast, Worthington, and you'll grab 'em by the jollies!" a Navy admiral said, pantomiming a painful squeezing.

"Witherspoon," Joshua corrected, looking at the faces that were confidently looking right back. *Did I really attack a demon with a tea tray?* he mentally croggled. *I must have been out of my mind!*

Pursing his lips, Lincoln could see the confusion in the young man's face. Perhaps a bit of *noodging* was in order. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their nation," the president said solemnly, extending the bible. "Well, Mr. Witherspoon? Will you answer America's call to duty?"

Mister Witherspoon. At those words, Joshua felt his last reservations slip away. With his heart beating fast, the butler walked over to the president and placed a hand on the bible. The leather was cool under his palm, and Joshua almost felt like he was going to cry there were so many emotions bubbling inside. *Or else I'll rush to the window and do a Mr. Hey.*

"Repeat after me," he heard the president say from someplace very far away. "I, Joshua Parnel Witherspoon..."

A minute later, it was done. Suddenly, Joshua was surrounded by the leaders of the nation, laughing and pounding him on the back in congratulations.

"Welcome to government service, Mr. Witherspoon," Welles chortled. "You are now a U.S. Marshall."

"Thank you, sir," Joshua said, still feeling a little drunk from the rush. *Marshall Witherspoon. How the world changes with the addition of a single word .*

"Is this legal?" General Halleck demanded. "Doesn't Washington already have a U.S. Marshall?"

"Mr. Lamon, yes. But Mr. Witherspoon is a special investigator assigned to the War Department," President Lincoln explained coldly, impatiently tapping the bible against his trouser leg. The politician was obviously annoyed at the reticence of the general. "There is no jurisdictional conflict."

"Do you have some decent civilian clothing?" Vice President Hamlin asked, studying Joshua's bedraggled outfit. "Something other than this butler's uniform?"

"Of course, I do," Joshua replied haughtily, suppressing a flash of anger. *Sort of, anyway .*

"Then wear them from now on, Marshall Witherspoon," President Lincoln said, returning the Holy Bible to its place on the bookcase, right between Plutarch and Thomas Paine. The president had his own unique way of organizing books and so far, nobody had been able to crack the code. "To feel like a law officer, dress that way. Clothes help form a template to guide our demeanor."

Did they? Joshua wondered. Actually, that made sense. "Yes, sir."

"And you will report directly to me," Lincoln added, turning around. He tried to hide a wince from his aching ribs the action caused, and failed miserably. "Not the War Department, or the Cabinet, mind you. Me, personally."

"And why is that, sir?" General Scott asked, frowning.

Trying to behave casually, the president crossed his arms to support his ribs. "We're dealing with something unusual here, Winnie," Lincoln said, keeping the pain from marring his speech. "The usual lines of communication can not be trusted. Mr. Witherspoon, you are to report only to me. Is that clearly understood?"

Unaccustomed to being the center of attention, Joshua simply gave a nod. A special agent to the president of the United States. *My father would roll over in his grave .*

"In turn, I'll inform the War Department of anything pertinent," the president went on, walking over to ease down into the cane chair. It creaked slightly under his weight. "Marshall Witherspoon, you will pursue this devil dog matter as your sole concern. Meanwhile, you other gentlemen will please concentrate on defeating Jefferson Davis and his rebel army."

The War Department murmured general assent, admirals included.

"Our new marshall will probably require some additional financing for this assignment," the vice president added tactfully, giving a little cough.

"My current salary is quite sufficient, sir," Joshua said quickly, trying to be helpful. "I know how expensive the war is becoming, and I'm more than happy to do my part."

"God save us from amateurs," General Halleck muttered, looking upward to address the ceiling.

"Mr. Witherspoon, you'll need additional funds for bribes," President Lincoln explained bluntly, casting a

stern glance at Halleck. "You can get more information with a golden Double Eagle, than with smile and a gun."

I'm going to be armed? The new Marshall blushed. "I see, sir. Sorry, I hadn't thought things through that much yet."

Leaning back in the chair, Lincoln gave a smile. "You'll learn, Mr. Witherspoon," he said gently. "We are all a little rattled tonight. Being attacked by a demon has that effect on most folks."

Smiling at the lame joke, Joshua felt the tension leave his shoulders. *All right, if Abraham Lincoln says I can do this, then by God in Heaven, I can!* Hopefully.

"What if we are indeed facing magic?" Mr. Hey asked, wringing his hands. The man looked pale, and everybody stepped away with all due haste. "The supernatural, monsters, voodoo, and such?"

"That's for our new marshall to confirm, or deny," the president stated, touching his sore chest. The pain was growing, and he needed to lay down as soon as possible and get some liniment on these bruises or else he'd be stiff for a month. "Mr. Witherspoon, I strongly suggest that first thing in the morning you find Sgt. Montgomery, and get a weapon. You'll need a sidearm, or two."

At least two. "Yes, sir."

"Can you shoot?" General Scott demanded gruffly, pointing a stern finger.

"Absolutely. A crack shot," Joshua boasted. *With a hundred-year-old, muzzle-loading horsepistol. Better get something just a tad more modern that doesn't shoot once and then take half an hour to reload.* "Er ... any problem with me getting two handguns, general? Mayhap even three?"

"Now you're talking like a goddamn soldier!" General Halleck stated, somewhat mollified by the response. "There's no such thing as too much firepower."

President Lincoln scowled at the profanity, but said nothing. There was a time and place for vulgarity. This was one of them without a doubt.

"And I'll need that tea tray, sir," Joshua added, feeling a rush of power. The promotion was starting to sink into his brain. He could demand things now, and expect to receive them promptly.

"Damn it, man, you're not the butler anymore!" Vice President Hamlin snorted, annoyed. "Leave the cleaning for the maids!"

"The tray is for making bullets," Joshua interpolated, keeping his tone cool from the implied insult. "If this creature was vulnerable to silver, then perhaps a silver miniball could kill the next devil dog." *At a nice safe distance.*

"Ah, I see," Hamlin muttered thoughtfully. "Well then, better make a hundred additional rounds for the Executive Mansion bodyguards. I'll have my wife send over a few items that can be melted down. Candelabras, and such."

"Thank you, sir."

"Will silver work as a bullet?" Hey asked in real concern. "Wouldn't it jam and make the gun explode?"

"There isn't a lot of difference between silver and lead, except for their price in gold," Joshua replied in a sing-song voice that clearly indicated he was quoting from memory. "I remember that from my father."

"He was a scholar?" President Lincoln asked curiously.

Embarrassed by the slip, Joshua blushed. "No, sir," he replied hesitantly. "He was a forger. Specialized in fake silver coins. One day he was caught and hung." *Right before me, too. Shazam, instant orphan.*

"So you know something of the criminal underworld?"

Do I ever. Joshua forced back a bitter laugh. "More than you'll ever want to know about, sir."

"Most excellent!" the vice president grinned in delight. "An intimate knowledge of the criminal class, eh? Obviously, you have skills beyond that of any common soldier."

"Then you've never meet a quartermaster," General Scott muttered softly, and all of the other soldiers present mumbled in hateful agreement. Union soldiers killed Confederate soldiers, but the real enemy of any army was the goddamn quartermaster corps. Even during combat, they held onto vital supplies like starving limpets.

"Best proceed swiftly on this matter, Marshall Witherspoon," the president directed, rising stiffly from his chair. The dark purple blotches were plainly discernable through the rips in his shirt, but nobody dared to mention that. "The sooner started, the sooner done, eh?"

"I'll wake up the rooster, sir," Joshua stated confidently. *Always did anyway. Who did these people think warmed their bathwater every morning, and got the coffee brewing, elves?*

Inhaling slowly, Lincoln gave a nod. "Good man. Every dog has a master. I want this one found, and dealt with harshly."

Did I just receive an executive order to kill? "Yes, sir!" Joshua replied smartly, starting to bow. Halfway, he changed his mind and began to salute, the combination resulting in the comical impression of a marionette operated by a drunk puppeteer.

The members of the War Department broke into guffaws, and Joshua felt his cheeks burn with shame. *Oh, I'll be a wonderful U.S. Marshall. I'm certain to make the devil dogs laugh themselves to death.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Stumbling through the billowing clouds of gunsmoke, Dr. Eugene Parker moved through the Virginia battlefield searching for wounded soldiers. Countless bodies from both sides of the conflict were strewn across the cold grass. But there was only death to be found this night.

Cannons roared, miniballs hummed through the air, men shrieked, and everything seemed to be exploding. Temporarily lost amid the thunder chaos, Dr. Parker could not precisely remember why he had first thought that volunteering for the Union Army Medical Corps had been such a good idea. *To serve my country, and save lives.* Fine words, noble ideals. But those didn't help a lot when rebel

bullets were flying past a man in the darkness, and the screaming of the fallen soldiers never seemed to stop. *Not even in my drunken dreams* . How the Surgeon-General William Hammond could endure it all without becoming a drunkard, Parker had no idea.

Stopping alongside a riddled corpse, Dr. Parker knelt in the mud and used a pair of pliers to remove a .577 miniball from the gaping chest of a Union lieutenant. Dropping the bloody lead sphere into a tin box packed with red-stained cotton, he tucked the grisly object away, and continued looking for more dead soldiers to harvest.

With every step, the little boxes in his greatcoat rattled from the accumulated bullets. The box in the right pocket held rounds from dead Union soldiers, while the left side held ones extracted from the Confederates. That was his idea, to check the dead on both sides. Every avenue of investigation must be pursued if they were to find a solution to these mysterious deaths. Perhaps the rebels weren't using poisoned bullets. Mayhap it was something else. So the question became, was the same thing murdering the Confederates? The only way to know for sure was to check all of the dead, Northerners and Southerners. *Blue or gray, they bleed red* , Parker noted, shuffling through the muddy terrain. There were bare human limbs strewn about the woods and field. An eyeball here, some teeth over there, a boot with a foot still inside. In spite of his work with cadavers, Dr. Parker felt sick, but pushed that thought out of his mind through sheer willpower. *Get in, do the job, get out and retch later. That was the creed of every surgeon* .

Just then, the cannons paused for a moment, and blessed peace ruled the battlefield. *Probably just letting the barrels cool*.

Sporadic gunfire peppered the night, and Parker ducked low behind a splintery tree stump. His hat bore the symbols of both sides, declaring him a non-combatant, but miniballs were notoriously egalitarian in the dark.

A low moan of pain sounded from nearby, and Dr. Parker rushed forward, clutching his medical bag. Somebody was still alive! His orders from the War Department were clear and concise: get the bullets from dead men and ignore the living. But that's not why he became a physician. *To Hades with my orders* , Parker thought resolutely, scrambling past a burning troop wagon full of roasting bodies. *With any luck, I might be able to save a life tonight!*

Dodging around the dead horse, Dr. Parker discovered several men laying in a hollow depression behind a fallen tree. None of them seem to be wounded, merely bloody, muddy, and frantically reloading their Confederate rifles. *Oh crud* .

"A Yankee!" a soldier cried out, swinging up his Enfield rifle and cocking the hammer.

"Neutral observer!" Dr. Parker shouted, raising both hands in surrender.

With a finger tight on the trigger, the private frowned at the cry, then squinted at the symbols decorating the physician's hat.

"Get moving, sawbones," a corporal drawled in a thick accent. Opening a Navy telescope to its full length, the man scanned the tumultuous battlefield. "No business for you here."

"Not yet anyway," another private muttered, ramming a nimrod down the steaming barrel of his weapon, to tamp down a fresh charge of black powder. A crimson-soaked rag was tied around the left sleeve of his gray uniform, but the wound didn't seem to be slowing down the reloading process.

Silently nodding assent, Dr. Parker ran away from the rebel soldiers as they began to snipe at the approaching Union ranks. Hiding behind a boulder, Dr. Parker paused to catch his breath, then dangerously jerked up his head at a familiar sound. There it was again, a whimpering cry of pain.

Squinting through the roiling gunsmoke, Dr. Parker spotted a still figure laying on the torn-up grass only a few yards away. Moaning softly, the wounded man was dressed only in burnt rags, and covered with so much blood that it was impossible to tell which side he belonged to.

Licking dry lips, Parker debated trying to sprint through the hail of bullets when the stricken fellow shuddered and went terribly still.

In the nearby woods, a bank of Union cannons roared, throwing hellfire and smoke across the landscape. The brass Napoleons jumping up, their two wheels actually leaving the ground from the recoil of the blast. They hung suspended in the air, then came crashing back down. Instantly, the Union cannoners rushed forward with damp swabs to clean out the hot barrels, and shove in a fresh load of death.

Far across the open field came the roar of the Confederate Napoleons. "Front line ... volley fire!" somebody yelled in a Southern accent.

Through the murky atmosphere, Dr. Parker could dimly see the line of Confederate troops advance, level their British-made Enfield rifles, and fire just slightly out of sequence. It sounded almost like a stick being racked along a picket fence.

Emerging from the trees, Union soldiers flew backwards from the incoming lead. The Union cannons thundered in dire response, the tin canisters of buckshot releasing hundreds of miniballs at the Confederate lines. As the swirling columns of acidic smoke reached across the battlefield, there could be seen gaping holes in the ranks. The men on either side of the gaps recoiled in shock at the realization of what had just happened to their brothers-in-arms only inches away.

Standing unharmed in the middle of a large gap was a young soldier. With shaking hands the teenager raised his Enfield to shoot, then lifted his rifle high overhead and gave the dreaded rebel yell and charged the Northern cannons. Taking heart, the rest of the Confederate battalion joined the rally. At the sight, the Union troops broke ranks to rush out and eagerly meet the enemy. Bugles blared, drums rumbled, and thousands of men began shouting, the ground shaking beneath their boots. Cannons roared, guns fired, bayonets gleamed, blood sprayed, bodies dropped.

Brave men, brave fools. More goddamn bullets to harvest. Wiping sweat from tired eyes, Dr. Parker turned away from the furious combat. They were all so young. Beardless youths playing at the most dangerous game of all.

Looking down a grassy side of a hillock, the doctor saw the effluvia of war everywhere; broken rifles, knapsacks, hats, canteens, bedrolls, burnt paper, and endless pieces of corpses. Bloody swords jutted from the ground like some kind of horrible military flower, the colorful tassels fluttering jauntily in the bitter wind. Roiling gunsmoke drifted across the hills and fields like clouds, and the moonlight gave everything a silvery hue. *Silver was the colors blue and gray combined*, Dr. Parker noted philosophically. *Humanity could learn a lot from that ol' rock in the sky.*

Flinching from the slap of the passing cannonball, the doctor dropped to a crouch. *Ruminant later, ya damn fool. Dodge bullets tonight!* A crossfire of rounds from the North and South hummed

dangerously close, the miniballs leaving little contrails in the smoky air. Fueled by fear, the physician dove at the ground and hugged the mud.

As the fighting paused, Dr. Parker lurched to his feet and ran for the nearest depression in the ground. Cannonballs never hit the same place twice. *Well, almost never*. A bomb crater was the closest thing to a safe haven that existed in the mad violence of combat.

Throwing himself into the hole, Parker landed hard, just missing a jagged rock. He rolled away quickly, trying to catch his breath. Glancing about, the physician saw that there were others in the crater, a Confederate colonel minus a head, and a panting Union soldier holding his stomach in both arms.

"Doc, I seen him..." the soldier whispered, red drool flowing out of the corner of his mouth.

"You'll be all right, son," Dr. Parker said soothingly, exactly as he had been trained. The response was automatic. The lad was probably talking about his commander, or mayhap Jesus Christ. Hell's Bells, who wouldn't have hallucinations in this madhouse?

The soldier reached out a trembling hand that dripped blood. "Don't let it get me ... don't..."

Ah, he meant Death, the Grim Reaper himself. Of course. Scurrying forward, Parker knelt by the wounded man, trying to check the damage. The pale soldier flinched from his touch, so Parker swung around his canvas medical bag and poured a dose of laudanum into the man's mouth. He sputtered, and coughed out some of the fluid. But after a few seconds, the twisted features eased and the soldier slumped unconscious. Gingerly easing away the soldier's crossed arms, Dr. Parker cursed at what he saw. *A belly wound. Those were almost always fatal.*

Rummaging in the kit, Dr. Parker slapped on the biggest cotton bandage he had. There was still a chance, if he moved fast enough and the Fates were kind. Tying a pressure bandage on the damage, Parker then liberally poured a tincture of lime mixed with boiled water. While the Apothecary-General did not believe in this new theory of 'germs,' Parker had seen the remarkable results firsthand of sterilizing wounds, and surgeons washing their hands between operations with diluted carbolic acid. The survival rate of patients shot through the roof, and that was more than enough proof for him. Parker didn't give a damn why washing wounds saved lives, just as long as it did.

In spite of being stupefied by the drugs, the soldier groaned at the stinging touch of the tincture, so Dr. Parker gave him another taste of the laudanum. Dangerous for a belly wound, but there was no choice. Laudanum was nasty stuff, terribly addictive, but there was no better painkiller in the world than liquefied opium.

Shouting a battlecry, Union soldiers raced past the blast crater, firing their rifles. Hot lead swarmed above the depression like angry bees, often followed by the angry splat of a man hit.

Somewhere in the distance, the deep-throated roar of a Seacoast mortar sounded its presence. Holding his breath, Dr. Parker looked at the starry sky, trying to spot the incoming shell, but the black bomb was invisible against the night. Then a telltale whistle started building into a sharp keen to the left. *Too close!*

Desperately, Dr. Parker threw himself on top of the wounded soldier just as the massive 220-pound bomb impacted. The entire valley seemed to jump from the titanic explosion, the strident blast so loud that the world went silent for a moment. Then the concussion hit with savage fury, slapping Parker off the bloody soldier. High overhead, the leaves in the trees rustled from the halo of iron shrapnel, and a dozen voices cried out in pain, only to be instantly silenced forever.

Crawling through the sticky mud, Parker found the soldier miraculously still alive, but the bandage had come loose and the belly wound was bleeding again. Frantically fixing that as best as possible, Dr. Parker risked a peek out of the crater to survey the area. There was no sign of a field hospital, or even of a corpsman moving through the combat gathering the wounded in a cart. But there was a stand of pine trees only a dozen yards away. There was no fighting nearby, and the big trees would offer some meager protection from shrapnel as he operated. The damage to the man's stomach needed to be flushed out and stitched closed, and the sooner the better. Every passing second put the boy closer to a coffin. Parker knew there was no choice. He would simply have to risk a run across the open field. *God help me .*

Gently cradling the limp soldier in his arms, Dr. Parker awkwardly waddled out of the crater, then crouched low in the weeds, waiting for a lull in the firing. When it came, he stood and raced across the battleground. At every step, Parker expected to feel the punch of a miniball. The physician couldn't believe the luck when he reached the copse and slipped into the cool shadows of the pine trees. *Safe, by jingo!*

Catching his breath, Dr. Parker looked around the open area inside the stand of trees. As expected, other people were already here, Blue and Grey soldiers laid out in neat rows on the ground. *As if this was a hospital ward .* Parker angrily scowled at the patients laying on bare ground instead of canvas cots, and there were no nurses or doctors in sight. There wasn't even a fire to warm the night air. The only illumination came from the full moon directly overhead.

Holding the bleeding man in his weary arms, Dr. Parker walked along the lines of soldiers looking for someplace to place down his patient. Then he caught a glimpse of their faces and froze motionless. Every soldier present was dead, their stiff bodies twisted into unnatural positions as if they had died in wracking agony, the lips drawn back to form a hideous rictus of pain. More victims of the poisoned bullets? But there were so many—who had been out collecting bodies? Perhaps his opposite number from the Confederate Army? That could be good news if the fellow would cooperate and exchange medical notes on the matter.

Noticing a movement in the shadows, Dr. Parker turned to see a large man glide out of the bushes. The fellow was wearing a greatcoat and boots, with a wide-cloth hat and knitted scarf that hid his face. But a black leather doctor's portmanteau was held firmly in one gloved hand.

A fellow physician! Thank the lord. At the welcome sight, Dr. Parker sighed in relief. Then a chance breeze pushed open the coat revealing two additional arms inside the garment.

Four arms? Tightening his grip on the unconscious soldier, Dr. Parker turned to flee. But he only got a few feet towards the trees before white hot pain slammed him in the spine. *Shot! I've been shot in the back! B-but there was no noise of a pistol...*

Dropping the wounded soldier, Dr. Parker fell painfully to the ground and struggled to look backwards, desperately hoping this was just a hallucination from the laudanum fumes. Bathed in moonlight, the approaching thing knelt by the dying soldier and removed the thick scarf to expose the obscene horror waiting underneath.

"No ... impossible..." Dr. Parker gasped, raising a protective hand.

Pausing at the words, the grotesque monster turned to look directly into his face. Their gazes locked, and the inhuman thing began to crawl forward. That was when Parker started to wildly scream, but the sound went unheard amid the deafening chaos of the furious battle.

CHAPTER SIX

Joshua awoke yawning and stretching. Birds were singing outside his attic room, and in the half-world of the waking mind, the butler started planning the activities for the day. *Order more bread, hire another groom, kill more rats, polish the silverware ... holy crud !*

Sitting bolt upright in bed, Joshua felt the events of last night coming rush back like a slap in the face. *I'm not a butler anymore* , he extolled in amazement, wiggling his bare toes under the blankets. *Today, I hunt devil dogs* . He paused. *And hire a new butler to replace me* . That was a sobering thought.

Flipping back the covers, Joshua swung his bare legs out of the warm bed and vigorously scratched his scalp. His mind was filled with wild images, mostly of the devil dog and the naked corpse. *The unknown assailant* , Joshua mused. *But surely not unknown everywhere. The fellow was a sailor, and a Freemason, and who knew what else* . On top of which, the would-be killer was missing a pinkie.

Now how in Hades could a demon who regenerated bullet wounds be missing a finger?

The answer was obvious. The damage must have occurred before the man became a devil dog, or when he was human and vulnerable. *If that was how these things worked. What do I know about magic aside from a few card tricks ?*

But, either way, this gave Joshua a way to track down the identity of the man. The Navy paid a bonus, compensation really, if a sailor lost a finger, leg, whatever, during their term of service. That meant detailed bookkeeping, and they might have not only a name, but an address, where the payment was sent. *If he lost the finger in combat and not a bar fight* . All right, it was a shot in the dark, but worth checking out, none-the-less.

Rising from the bed, Joshua dashed off a note to Commodore Welles on the matter, and summoned a boy to deliver it forthwith. He had no idea how long the record search would take, and decided to proceed with other avenues of research, just in case.

Quickly performing his morning ablutions, Joshua chose his clothing carefully and donned his best Sunday clothing. Long black trousers, a clean white shirt, and a tattersal vest. His Brogans were polished, teeth brushed, freshly shaved, and his black hair slicked down with lilac pomade. An expensive, old, gold watch was tucked into a pocket of the vest, with a cheap new bronze chain, looped across the front, a Roman coin bearing the likeness of Julius Caesar dangling as the fob. The Beurquit watch had come from his father, won in a dice game. Joshua purchased the chain and fob himself.

Glancing in the cracked mirror above his marble washstand, Joshua had to honestly admit that he still resembled a butler on his day off, and not a U.S. Marshall. Maybe a moustache would help? *Probably not* .

Trundling downstairs, Joshua started for the kitchen, then switched directions and went to the dining room. One of the new maids, Millie something or other, brought him a bowl of hot porridge and a mug coffee. Joshua dug in with gusto. More than likely, it was going to be a long day, and he needed to fuel the inner man.

When he was finished, Joshua left the dirty dishes on the table feeling rather scandalous. That wasn't his job, anymore! Then Joshua got a hollow sensation in his chest. That wasn't his job, anymore. He had changed households before, but never professions. What exactly did a U.S. Marshall do for a living?

Uphold the law, protect the innocent, *and kill monsters*. He felt sure that last part of the oath last night had been added by President Lincoln off the cuff. As of this morning, Joshua Witherspoon was now officially on assignment to stalk the creatures of the night. A monster hunter. *Just call me Agamemnon !*

Going to the rotunda, Joshua looked across the rose garden at the distant horizon. But there was no sign to indicate the outcome of the battle last night. Either side might have won, or it could have been another of the endless series of draws. This most un-civil war was fast becoming a war fought over inches of land, with men dying to advance the front lines the length of their corpse. *Some clever wag had suggested that the whole matter should be settled by Lincoln and Jefferson Davis having a duel armed with socks filled with moist dung. What a splendid notion. Nobody would die, and they could probably sell tickets. Politicians were experts at handling bullshit, so it would be a most spectacular battle.*

Heading for the front door, Joshua opened it to find a troop of soldiers walking up the gravel driveway, a smug lieutenant carrying an armful of wrinkled clothing.

"Well done, Lt. Smith!" Joshua said in unabashed pleasure. "Well done, indeed. Where were the garments hidden?"

"And what is that to you?" the officer sneered, curling a lip. "This is a military matter, and has nothing to do with mopping the floors, boy."

Starting to accept the caustic rebuff, Joshua suddenly remembered the president shambling along the corridor last night, beaten and exhausted, but still resolute. *I speak with his voice .*

"At-ten-tion!" Joshua barked in a whipcrack tone that normally was delivered at him during parties.

Automatically, the soldiers obeyed, then frowned.

"Hey..." a corporal began, furrowing his brow.

"Shut up!" Joshua snapped, placing both hands behind his back. "Last night President Lincoln made me a U.S. Marshall, a special agent for the War Department. I am in charge of the investigation dealing with the..." *Demon*. "...visitor last night. Everything goes through me." He stabbed a stiff finger at the soldiers. "Every-bloody-mucking-thing. Do I make myself clear?"

"Of course ... ah, sir," Lt. Smith said hesitantly. "No offense meant."

"None taken." Impatiently, Joshua snapped his fingers like a foreign dignitary demanding more herbal tea. "The clothes, please, sergeant."

"I'm a lieutenant, sir," Smith replied, passing over the items.

"We'll see about that," Joshua muttered, carrying the clothing inside the foyer and laid them out on a marble table normally reserved for the mail.

"Where exactly were they found?" Joshua asked, systematically going through the pockets. He placed the lint and loose threads aside into a neat pile.

Watching intently, Lt. Smith waggled a hand in a vague direction. "Across the street, sir, hidden inside an empty rain barrel."

Good thing it hadn't rained. "Folded, or tossed in a pile?"

"Neatly folded."

"In the military style? Ready for inspection?" Nicely folded would confirm the possibility the hirsute intruder had served a hitch in the Navy. It also meant that the devil dog had been planning on returning to reclaim his clothing. *After the kill .*

"How the Hades did you know how they were folded?" the lieutenant blinked in surprise. Then he hastily added, "Sir."

"I know many things," Joshua said cryptically on impulse, checking inside the shoes. But nothing was hidden there except stink. *Whew! Devil dogs had really smelly feet .* No reek of brimstone, though. Just normal, ordinary stinky feet. There must be a serious shortage of lye soap in Hell. *That would explain a lot of things ,* he guessed.

Fingering the hat band, Joshua found a slip of paper with the Executive Mansion address written in black pencil, but nothing else. Now that was curious. Why would he need to write down the address? Unless somebody else had given it to him. Was the devil dog a mercenary hired to kill the president? That would mean there could be other attempts. *Damn .*

Opening his pocket knife, Joshua carefully cut open the seams of the jacket looking for secret pockets. But there was nothing hidden inside aside from a few dead ticks. Mayhap devil dog blood was deadly to the little parasites. *Good. The last thing I want to face is a bulletproof bedbug the size of an Alabama plowhorse .*

"Empty," Joshua said in disgust, throwing the clothing upon the table in frustration. "Not a tailor's label, cobbler's mark, pawn ticket, or anything useful." Then he looked again. *Well, son of a gun .* The difference was so subtle, he had missed it at first. But there it was all the same.

Picking up the odorous shoes, Joshua turned them over and smiled faintly. The soles of the shoes gently curved, one was made specifically for a left foot, and other just for a right. Incredible, but true. Only the very rich could afford hand-tailored shoes of like this. Most army recruits had never worn shoes before. Some of the men were so confused by the whole concept of left and right that the drill sergeants often tied hay to the left boot, and stray to the right, then trained the troops to march by shouting, 'Hayfoot! Strawfoot!'

"I'll keep the shoes, lieutenant. You can burn the rest," Joshua whispered, beaming at the footwear. *A clue. I have a genuine clue!* Then Joshua added, *Unless the shoes were stolen from somebody he ate*

"I'll burn them myself, sir," Lt. Smith replied through clenched teeth, his feelings about the command blatantly obvious.

"Ah, Marshall Witherspoon, sir," a private added, leaning on his rifle. "We also ... I mean ... by the conservatory..."

"There were ten more dead men outside in the bushes," Lt. Smith spoke quickly, trying to deliver the news himself. "Torn to ribbons, they were. We got an Army doctor to take the ... well, the pieces away, and a stableboy is washing the blood off the conservatory windows."

With a flip of the stomach, Joshua felt his rush of power fade at that shocking dose of reality. This was not a puzzle game to solve for amusement, but a deadly serious matter of life and death. *Get tough, JP, you're in the army now! Well, almost .*

"I am so very sorry about your fallen brothers," Joshua said from the bottom of his heart. "If it is any consolation, we got the killer, and believe me, he did not have a pleasant passing from this life."

"Yeah?" Lt. Smith asked, squinting suspiciously.

"God's truth, and then some."

The soldiers eased their aggressive stance a little at the pronouncement. Dying was as much a part of their job as marching. But they really didn't want to do either, unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Lt. Smith, please get the groundskeeper, and have him start washing the rest of the conservatory windows," Joshua added thoughtfully, brushing back a lock hair. "That will help hide the fact that we're only interested in the one section."

"A diversion, eh?" Lt. Smith muttered, rubbing his unshaven jaw. "Smart move. We'll get on that right away, sir."

Sir. If people keep calling me that, I may get used to it in a couple of hundred years, Joshua noted wryly. Respect was a new sensation after so many years of anonymity.

Picking up the clothes with the tips of their bayonets as if the garments were infested with lice, the soldiers proceeded down the East Wing, and Joshua left the mansion again, shoes in hand.

Leaning against a Doric column on the front porch, Joshua waited, and soon a dozen men and boys arrived with buckets and rags to begin washing down the entire conservatory. The sight reminded Joshua of the aftermath in The Shop last night, and he quickly started for the armory, located behind the horse stables. *Time to find Sgt. Montgomery .*

Walking along the gravel driveway, Joshua watched the busy traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue. Milk trucks, ice wagons, hansom cabs, people on horseback, and even some damn fool riding a whatchamacalit, a bicycle. *Silliest thing in the world. The front wheel was so big you needed a ladder to get into the seat. Where was the sense of that ?* Science had created many wonderful inventions, the bicycle was not among them. *Now, the French Tickler, on the other hand ... ?*

Starting along a flagstone path, Joshua noticed a large man standing in a brick-lined alley across the street. Although hidden in the shadows, the fellow was obviously huge, easily over six-feet-tall. The man was wearing a greatcoat with the collar turned up, a dark slouch hat with the brim turned down, and a scarf wrapped around his neck that effectively hid most of his face. He was also carrying the black medical bag of a physician in a gloved hand.

Well-well, could that be the alley where the clothes of the devil dog had been discovered? Joshua wondered, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck start to rise. *I'm going to have a quick word with this secretive doctor .*

As if hearing the thoughts, the dark man looked directly at Joshua and a wave of cold swept the new Marshall as if winter had entered his soul.

Shivering all over, Joshua felt a pang of fear, then a flicker of rage welled within and he grimly started forward. The physician seemed to be startled by that. *Don't like being on the receiving end, do you?* Joshua sneered. *I've been shouted at and badgered by the best in the world. A cold stare isn't going to make me pass water. By God, I hate bullies!*

Still staring at Joshua, the physician stepped backwards into the shadows and vanished from sight.

Coming to a halt on the sidewalk, Joshua raised an eyebrow at the disappearing act, then raised the other. One moment the doctor was there, the next, he was gone. Poof. Just like a stage illusion by a master magician. *Master magician*. The president's words from yesterday came rushing back with shocking clarity. *Every dog has a master*. Army generals often watched battles from distant hilltops to keep track of the fighting. Could this have been the person who dispatched the devil dog? Had Joshua just seen the true face of the enemy?

And if he was, exactly what would I have done if a man twice my size resisted arrest? Joshua thought in galvanizing clarity. *Used harsh language? Written him a citation? His pocket knife weighed heavily in the vest pocket. I could have always trimmed his cigar, or whittled a flute.*

Turning abruptly around, Joshua headed directly for the armory once more. *Guns. I want guns. The biggest available.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Located just behind the stables was a large sheet of stained canvas covering a huge mound of fresh green hay for the horses. But that was just camouflage. If the Confederates ever discovered that the armory for the Executive Mansion was located inside the hay, they'd have snipers shooting at it day and night. However, the stockpile of munitions was located far enough away from the Executive Mansion that if it exploded, the blast wouldn't kill the President. Hopefully. *Guns, it seemed, were a two edge sword*, Joshua quipped privately. *I should remember that bit of wisdom.*

Maneuvering through a maze of hay bales, Joshua reached the canvas sheet, and pushed aside a flap. A short passage lead through more bales and ended at a wall of sandbags with a Union corporal standing behind holding a brace of pistols.

"Password!" the man barked menacingly, but then he smiled. "Oh, it's you. Come on in, Marshall. The president told us to expect y'all today."

"Personally?" Joshua asked, surprised. *Honest Abe was the soul of efficiency. I expected him to send Mr. Hey with a note.*

"Yas, sir," the corporal replied in a thick Southern drawl, holstering the weapons. The Union soldier was wearing black leather gloves, and the guns appeared to be a hodge-podge of spare parts, either half-built, or half melted. It was difficult to say. "But y'all should know better than ta enter without announcing yourself first. Been mighty jumpy around here since last night."

Joshua grinned. "True enough. Is Sgt. Montgomery here yet?"

"Since dawn!" the man shouted from behind the sandbag wall. "Get your arse over here, son, and let's

make you a man."

That had a rather ominous ring, and Joshua moved warily around the barrier. He had never been inside the arsenal before and had no idea what to expect.

Past the bulwark, the spacious interior of the makeshift redoubt was packed with additional sandbags along every wall, and massive oak beams supported a riveted ceiling of cast iron. Safety lamps hung above open barrels of water, tin buckets of sand rested in niches, and numerous hand-lettered signs proclaiming swift and terrible retribution to anybody fool enough to light a match. One strategically-placed placard bluntly stated: 'Smoking won't kill you. We will.' *Ah, the delicate subtlety of the military mind .*

Controlling a smile, Joshua had to admit that he was impressed. He had never seen a more fireproof room in his life. *And folks were afraid a sniper could make the armory explode? The rebels would have to hit it with a SeaCoast mortar to even dent this hidden fortress, which was probably the whole idea .* Hmm, multiple layers of defense equaled safety. That sounded important, so Joshua made a mental note to try and remember the sage bit of wisdom.

Gleaming weapons were everywhere. Racks full of rifles, pistols and shotguns, crates of cavalry swords, baskets of French petards, and a small mountain of black powder kegs.

In the center of the armory, Sgt. Montgomery sat behind a battered desk covered with journals and ledgers, the mounds of paperwork looking as incongruous among the impressive array of deadly weaponry.

"Sorry about the mess," the sergeant apologized, easing down the twin hammers of a shotgun and placing the smoothbore on the desk. "We're moving to our permanent quarters in the Treasury building next week. Packing, you understand."

"None better," Joshua said honestly, taking a seat on a long packing crate of bayonets positioned before the desk. "And we keep this arsenal alongside the Executive Mansion because..."

"Are you honestly asking me that after last night?" the sergeant retorted gruffly, crossing his arms. Both sleeves were rolled up, exposing numerous tattoos.

"Yes, I see your point," Joshua conceded graciously. "When we need guns, we will need them fast."

"It's a balancing act," the sergeant admitted, raising and lowering his hands as if weighing objects. "Is this danger bigger than that one? We make calculated decisions, and hope for the best. Smart soldiers don't prepare for what the enemy might do, but for what they can do."

That sounded like good advice. *I'm going to need a journal soon .* "And last night proved you chose correctly."

"Too bloody right, it did," the corporal boasted proudly, brandishing a gloved fist.

"Johanson, go water the horses," Sgt. Montgomery sighed, wagging his blunt fingers in dismissal.

"Sir!" the corporal replied, snapping a brisk salute and disappearing behind the sandbags.

"Hayfoots," the sergeant snorted, using the slang term for a new recruit. "Greener than persimmons, and

only half as smart."

"Well, I'm new to being a Marshall," Joshua said amiably. "How about giving me a handgun, and let you get back to work?"

Sgt. Montgomery grinned in amusement. "Just like that, eh?"

"Of course. What else is involved?"

Leaning back in his chair, the sergeant gestured at the vast array of weaponry on the wall. "Feel free to take anything you want."

I have to choose? "To be honest, sergeant, I can't tell a Springfield from springwater," Joshua admitted. "I don't even know what the corporal was carrying. Deuced odd thing, I must admit."

"You wouldn't want one of those." Opening a drawer, Sgt. Montgomery pulled out a thick ledger. "That was a Savage .36 revolver. Notice the gloves Johanson was wearing?"

"Yes. They're need to operate the weapon?"

"Try that the other way around. He needs them to operate the gun. The Savage is a weird gun, you cock the hammer by using a forefinger, from below, not with a thumb on top."

Joshua chewed on that. "So why the gloves?"

"Because he has no thumbs," the sergeant explained, opening the ledger and starting to turn pages. "Last month, the boy was issued one of those triple-cursed Colt revolving rifles, and all six chambers ignited with the first shot. The very first! Poor Johanson is lucky to have kept so much of his hands."

The rifle blew off his thumbs? "Is the Colt Firearms company working for the rebs?"

"Not officially," Sgt. Montgomery muttered in dark humor, dipping a quill into a colony of ink. He started to scratch in the ledger. "Just another wild arse design. Scientists, eh?" The sergeant looked up with a fiendish grin. "However, last week I sold all of our Colt repeating rifles to the rebels at a very low price. Now it's their blessed nest of bees."

And their thumbs. Joshua was quiet. *This was not a job for the squeamish.*

"Care for some help choosing?" Sgt. Montgomery asked, head down while writing.

"All I can get," Joshua asked, glancing over the gleaming collection of deadly ironmongery. "What do you suggest?"

With a flourish, the sergeant finished writing and closed the ledger. "First things first," he said, throwing the quill at the colony of ink. It flew like a dart and hit dead center. "You are now officially in the log book. What's going to be your new name? I'll need it for your pay voucher."

"Why in the world would I require a new name, sir?"

"I'm a sergeant," Montgomery growled dangerously, his bushy eyebrows joining in the middle. "My parents were married."

More military humor. Joshua repeated his question with the appropriate correction.

"Because, if you live to retirement, unlikely by the way, you will not want all of the enemies you've made over the years to come hunting you down for revenge."

"Revenge?" Joshua squeaked, his throat going tight.

The sergeant grinned. "Don't worry about it. Besides, the Army has a lovely funeral plan for U.S. Marshalls. Granite headstone, real wood coffin, twenty-one gun salute, the whole magilla. They spare no expense shoveling you into the ground."

"How delightful. Any chance of a drink?" Joshua muttered, massaging his temples. Before she passed away, his mother had always told him not to do that, because it would give you gray hair at that point. Of course, that was just an old wives' tale. Then again, his mother had been an old wife.

"This is the army, son. Do you need to ask?" Montgomery chuckled, opening a drawer in his desk. Pulling out a half-filled brown bottle and two relatively clean glasses, the sergeant set them on the desk, and filled both tumblers.

"Here you go," Sgt. Montgomery said in a friendly tone, pushing one over. "Try some of this Kentucky whiskey. Want a water kicker?"

In marked disdain, Joshua glanced at the water barrel where a lazy bluebottle fly was buzzing above the scummy surface. "Good Lord, no."

"Smart move. Confusion to the enemy!"

"Confusion to the enemy." Taking the glass, Joshua let the rich peaty aroma waft, then knocked it back in a shot. A gentle warmth spread across his body, and he slid the glass forward. Courteously, the sergeant refilled it and the marshall downed it again.

"Pretty good, eh?" Montgomery grinned in pride.

"Yes. Although that isn't whiskey," Joshua said, raising the glass to inspect the fluid in the light of the safety lamp. "And it has never been near a map of Kentucky, much less the actual state. But still, it warms the heart, and that's a truth."

"Not whiskey?" Sgt. Montgomery said, holding the bottle close to his face and scowling at the label. "But I paid top coin for this!"

"Sorry, but it's moonshine," Joshua advised, taking a sip and holding the homebrew on the roof of his mouth for a moment before swallowing. "Mmm, I'd say ... late autumn corn mash, too much beet sugar, cooked in an old copper kettle, and filtered with charcoal made from maple trees."

Unable to confirm, or deny, the outrageous statement, the sergeant decided to accept it as fact. Lincoln didn't hire fools for his household staff. "You know booze the way I do guns," the soldier laughed, putting aside the bottle.

"One of my many duties here," Joshua smiled, turning the glass watching the amber fluid swirl. "Make that my former duties. I have a new job now, so perhaps a new name would be appropriate."

"Trust me, it is. What is your full name, anyway?" Sgt. Montgomery inquired. "Never heard you called much of anything but 'hey you,' or 'more!'"

"Joshua Parnel Witherspoon."

"That's a mouthful. And memorable. You need something more bland. John Doe, George Smith, James Bond, something dull like that."

"A name easily forgotten?" Joshua asked, leaning forward on the crate and resting the glass on a knee.

The sergeant smiled. "You catch on fast for a hayfoot."

"Strawfoot," Joshua replied, gesturing with his left hand. "What kind of pseudonyms do the other U.S. Marshalls use?"

The sergeant took another sip, smiling as innocent as a preacher on Sunday.

Blushing, Joshua felt a rush of comprehension. *Right ... Stupid question. Wheels within wheels, and all that. Welcome to the secret service of America.*

"Sergeant, have we ever tried to kill President Jefferson Davis?" Joshua asked out of the blue, his tongue loosened by the potent liquor.

Aghast, the soldier stopped drinking. "Are you insane?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Thank you, that's what I needed to know." *Then the devil dog was not a retaliatory gesture.*

Suddenly, a woman's high-pitched scream cut the air, and both men stood. Then the scream came again, and they relaxed, recognizing the source. *Mrs. Lincoln must have just learned about the ruined India rug.*

"That is not a happy woman," the sergeant muttered, holstering his weapon.

Finishing the drink, Joshua nodded agreement. "And wait until she finds out about Mr. Hey and the bushes."

Another piercing scream came, even louder than before.

"She knows," Sgt. Montgomery smiled. "Now about your name..."

Back to business. "Well, my first job was fetching refreshments for the gentleman patrons of a private club for, ahem, soiled doves..."

"You were the beer boy at a brothel. Go ahead," Sgt. Montgomery said, pouring them both another libation.

Guilty as charged. Accepting the generous refill, Joshua chewed a lip in thought. "Anyway, I recall how laughable it was when somebody called out a fake name that the men used to register, and they didn't respond."

"Drunks are never clever," the sergeant agreed, raising his glass. "Rich drunks, doubly so. Here's to the Republic!"

"Soiled doves in cream sauce!"

Caught in the middle of a swallow, Sgt. Montgomery blew whiskey out his nose, and spent the next few minutes fighting for air.

"Sorry, old brothel joke," Joshua grinned impishly. "Couldn't resist."

"Hells bells, don't apologize," Sgt. Montgomery gasped, wiping his face on a sleeve. "I'm looking forward to using it on a smug lieutenant I know who desperately needs taking down a peg or two."

"Smith?"

"You've met the unctuous little toad?"

"Wait until a regimental dinner," Joshua suggested. "Hot soup coming out the nostrils should prove highly memorable."

The sergeant smiled. "Nice touch."

"Thanks." Taking another sip of the moonshine, Joshua pursed his lip. "My new name must be similar enough to my real name, so that in a moment of stress I will respond and not give myself away," he said, thinking aloud. Zounds, this was a dangerous game. But also exciting. There was a tingle in his stomach that had nothing to do with the moonshine. Perhaps he was beginning to understand his father's fascination with crime. Living by your own rules, working outside of society. The poor fellow had never realized that a man could have just as much fun protecting the rules, as breaking them.

"Cream sauce," the sergeant said aloud, jotting down a note on a scrap of paper. "All right, got a name yet?"

"J.P. Withers," Joshua said out loud, testing the flavor. It rolled smoothly in his mouth, and fell with a familiar comfort on his ears. *Yes, that would do fine.*

"Nice choice," Sgt. Montgomery said, adding that to the ledger. "And what's your birthday?"

"May Fifth," Joshua replied puzzled. "Why?"

"No reason." The sergeant turned to make a notation on a calendar, then took a small leather notebook out of his shirt pocket and scribble inside.

Code. I've just been entered into a code system based on calendar dates, Joshua realized uneasily. If the rebels ever take the Executive Mansion, they'll never learn the real identities of our undercover agents. Mayhap I should join a group of merry men, or report my whereabouts to Sir Henry Fielding. All for one, and one for all! Lord, I'm getting obscure.

"Done, and done," Sgt. Montgomery said, finishing with a flourish, laying aside the quill and closing the book. "Now, let's get down to the important things. Give me your hand."

Hesitantly placing aside his glass, Joshua did as requested. The sergeant seized his hand in a firm grip

and began to painfully squeeze. Startled at first, Joshua got angry and gave back as good as he received until the Union soldier released the grasp with a chuckle.

"By God, you'll do," Sgt. Montgomery grinned, shaking his wrist. "Being a butler must be harder work than I imagined to give a grip like that! You'll have no problem with a handgun."

Another mystery explained.

"So, any preferences?" the sergeant asked smoothly.

Joshua sensed a friendly test. "Anything but a Savage?"

"You're learning," Sgt. Montgomery complimented, wiggling a thumb.

Going to a nearby trunk, the sergeant flipped back the lid to move things about inside, then returned to lay some handguns on the desk top.

"Both of these are top notch," he said, pulling out a satiny steel revolver. "This is a Starr .38, it's one of those new double-action pieces, and can use both loose powder and shot, or a paper cartridge."

"A double action? Excellent," Joshua said in admiration, then added, "And that means...?"

The sergeant sighed deeply. "Civilians," he murmured, as if the word meant something a gentleman would scrape off his boot before entering the home of a friend. "All right, listen up, strawfoot. A single-action pistol means that first you cock the hammer, and then you pull the trigger to make it go bang. With me so far?"

"Yes. Pray continue, Euclid."

"Don't get snotty, son," the sergeant growled. "I work with artillery and know Euclidean geometry."

Still waters run deep. "Sorry."

"S'okay. Now, a double-action pistol means that pulling the trigger cocks the hammer and then fires the gun."

"So the single-action is safer, but the double is faster."

"Very good, Aristotle."

Studying the guns, Joshua let that pass. "Tell me about the big one," Joshua asked, touching the strange looking double-barrel revolver. General Scott carried something similar. It was a huge weapon, suitable for use as a club in an emergency.

"By jingo, now we're talking guns! This is a French-made .445 LeMat, and what I carry myself," Sgt. Montgomery boasted, patting the red leather holster at his side. "It 's a single action, but has a couple of special features." Reversing the weapon, he offered it for display. "First and foremost, it has nine chambers for ammunition, instead of six."

"Nine?"

"Which can come in mighty handy in a tight squeeze," the sergeant said, unconsciously touching his shoulder. "Most fools will charge at you after six shots. Sure catches them by surprise when you keep banging away."

"Three of them at least."

"That's usually more than enough. The LeMat loads just as fast as a six-shooter, and is as reliable as going to Hell."

"Sounds exemplary," Joshua muttered, accepting the titanic pistol. There was a fancy spur on the handle that at first he thought was merely some useless French decoration, then realized it was for attaching a strap so the gun wouldn't fall away. This must be a cavalry pistol. If a foot soldier dropped his weapon, he only had to bend down again to pick it up. But if a cavalry trooper lost his gun while the horse was at a full gallop, it could take minutes before he was able to slow down, go back, hop off and find the weapon again. During which, the enemy would probably still be shooting at him in a most impolite manner.

"And the second barrel under the main one?" Joshua asked, hefting the gun. It was big and heavy, with a feel of barely-contained power. This was no mere pistol, but a handcannon.

"That's a smooth-bore 10-gauge shotgun," he said. "There's only one trigger for both, but this selector pin changes from firing one, to the other."

"This miniature shotgun can't have much range," J.P. muttered, changing the selector pin, and dry firing the weapon several times.

"About two yards," the sergeant admitted. "But it'll blow a man's chest open like stomping on a bag of worms."

Lowering the gun, Joshua forced a grin. "How ... poetic."

"Thanks. Got a knife?"

"Oh yes. A jackknife."

The sergeant gave a humph. "That's for trimming candles. Get yourself a real knife like an Arkansas toothpick, and learn how to throw it."

"Is that important?"

"Mucking vital," Sgt. Montgomery stated, as if that was a requirement of any job in the military. "All right, Marshall Withers, which do you want?"

Thoughtfully lifting the two revolvers, Joshua knew that his life might depend upon the correct decision. Safety, or firepower. It was a tough choice. "Any problem with me taking both?" he asked hesitantly. Previously, he had joked about having several handguns. Now it seemed his boast was coming true.

"None whatsoever. Take 'em," Sgt. Montgomery stated, bending over to scribble in the ledger. "The President said to give you anything available."

Finishing the notation, the sergeant threw the quill at the colony without looking, and opened a desk

drawer to start rummaging about. "Here it is!" he beamed, pulling out a wadded ball of leather straps. "I just happen to have a nice double shoulder-holster that was made special for a government courier who ... well, we cleaned it up some. Hardly any stains visible."

Accepting the leather harness, Joshua had the unnerving feeling of a ghost standing by his side. "What happened to the fellow who owned these before me?" Joshua asked, trying to untangle the straps and buckles.

"Why, nothing," Sgt. Montgomery replied with a poker face. "Those guns are brand new!"

And yet they are covered with scratches. It was such a blatant fib that Joshua found himself gratefully accepting the untruth. The man just hoped he was good enough not to join the ranks of the previous owners. Of course, the proof of the pudding was in the eating. Joshua just hoped he didn't get eaten himself. *Calling a lump of coal a diamond didn't make it shine .*

Standing, the Marshall slipped off his jacket and fumbled with the leather straps of the shoulder holster until discovering that he was holding it upside down.

"Wondered how long that would take you," Montgomery grinned in obvious amusement, opening his pocket watch and checking the time. "Four minutes flat, a new record."

"My thanks for your kind assistance," Joshua muttered, reversing the array and slipping it across his shoulders. The former must have been a much larger man. Joshua had to adjust the buckles a few times to make it fit snugly.

"Feels wrong somehow," Joshua muttered, raising and lowering his arms.

"That's because it's empty," Montgomery said, passing over the revolvers.

The holsters were identical in size, so Joshua choose the smaller caliber Starr .38 for the left side where his right-hand to get it, and tucked the massive LeMat .445 in the right for his left hand. Even then the rig fit awkwardly until he shrugged and it moved into position as comfortable as an old sweater.

"Perfection," Joshua said in surprise. "Fits like it was made for me!"

"We only buy the best," Sgt. Montgomery stated, placing a canvas bag on the desktop. "Here are your bullet molds, powder, and nipples."

"Nipples? Oh yes, the copper percussion caps that ignite the black powder when the hammer falls."

"Right. Your nipples. Be sure to walk with your back stiff," Sgt. Montgomery advised, throwing out his chest as an example. "I can always tell an armed man on sight by the telltale hunch of hauling all that iron under his arms."

A wise tip. More data for the journal. Joshua drew the LeMat only to holster it again. The LeMat moved easily, but the Star caught a little. He'd have to fix that.

"And don't forget these," the sergeant said, holding out a set of commission papers and a tin star. "President Lincoln had them sent over at dawn."

Without comment, Joshua tucked the envelope of stiff bond into his jacket, and pinned the badge onto

his shirt. There, it was done. He was officially a U.S. Marshall. Joshua really didn't feel any different. Just heavier.

"Here's a little something to get you going," Sgt. Montgomery asked, opening another drawer. He placed a leather bag on the desk with a clank. "Three hundred in gold."

Good Lord, it was a mucking fortune! Opening the drawstring, Joshua started counting the coins inside the purse. "By the way, did Millie deliver the silver tea tray?"

"Sure did. And Mrs. Hamlin sent over a couple of hairbrushes and a snuff box. I'll have everything melted down and made into miniballs by tomorrow."

"Excellent," Joshua said, sliding the coins back into the purse and pulling it closed. Three hundred in gold coin as promised. As a butler, Joshua had learned the hard way to count everything and trust nobody. "By the way, sergeant, I see that you have several tattoos."

"More than you'll ever see," Montgomery replied with a chuckle. Flexing a thick forearm, he made a topless mermaid wiggle, and then waggle.

"And one of them seems to be Masonic," Joshua added suggestively.

"Sixth level, Scottish Rite," the sergeant said proudly, reaching into a pocket and extracted a slip of paper. "I had this ready for you in case you, ah, forget to ask. It's the address of our Grand Lodge here in DC. Ask for the Tyler, he might be able to help identify that deceased sailor."

"Thank you, this will help tremendously."

"Anything for the Cause," the sergeant declared resolutely. "Chains are for dogs, not men."

Tucking the slip of paper into his wallet, Joshua started to add that the reasons behind the war weren't quite that simple, but decided that this was not the time or place for a heated political discussion. *Not with so many loaded guns and whiskey close at hand.*

Thanking the sergeant again, Joshua took his leave and went to obtain a horse from the stable next door.

Rousing a sleepy groom, Joshua obtained a black Arabian gelding named Dexter, of all things, and saddled up to gallop toward downtown Washington DC. His new guns were formidable weapons. But would either of those be effective against monsters and magic? Joshua needed something more until those silver bullets were cast.

Now where can I find a stationery store?

CHAPTER EIGHT

"There is something mighty strange going on at the Executive Mansion," the reporter declared, standing in front of his editor's desk.

"Yes, and her name is Mary Todd Lincoln," the bald man replied, busy proofreading the copy for today's *Daily Morning Chronicle*. An unlit cigar dangled from his mouth, and many people believed it had been there for years, even when he slept. When a soldier became an officer in the military, he was

given a sword and told never to be without it in uniform. In the newspaper game, when a reporter became an editor, he was given a cigar and told the same thing. Nobody had ever seen the editor without the fat Cuban, or seen it lit.

The disheveled offices of the DC newspaper reeked of sweat, coffee, oil, and ink: the four cornerstones of the Fourth Estate. But the heart of the daily paper lay on the editor's desk. Roughly the size and shape of a tombstone, and just about as heavy, the front page of the *Chronicle* was almost finished. The wrought-iron frame was locked tight, the neat rows of lead letters firmly secured in place and ready for the press. The fact that the editor had to read the copy backwards was not a problem after so many years. Sometimes, the man found it difficult to read a book the normal way, and was forced to use a mirror.

However, this was going to be a special edition of the *Chronicle*, double their usual size. Eight full pages! Professionally paranoid, the editor wanted to check over everything before committing to a print run. Better a delay in the release, than another glaring typo on the front page like before. "Lincoln Promises To Eat General Lee!" A single missing 'B' in the headline, and the *Chronicle* was the laughingstock of DC for a month. *Never again!*

"Look, that midnight celebration was highly suspicious," the reporter continued with emphasis. "And there are a lot of guards running around washing trees. Now what is that all about?"

"Maybe somebody on the roof watered the oaks again," the editor growled, using a hexagonal screwdriver to loosen the frame and switch the position of a couple of letters. The United States had a 'War Department' not a 'Raw Department.' It was always the same, the faster you laid type, the slower you laid type. He should have that embroidered on a pillow.

"Well, I think something crafty is afoot," the reporter said in a suggestive manner.

Afoot? "Look, if you feel there is a mystery going on, then find out what's happening, and write me a story," the bald man said, tightening down the frame again, his hands freckled with ink stains. "But a real story, mind you, full of heart and hope, laughter and tears, war and..."

"Just a little bit of sex," the reporter sighed, removing the pencil from behind his ear and stuffing it into a shirt pocket. "Yes, yes, I know what sells newspapers."

"Good."

"But what about the Truth?"

Groaning all the way down to his ulcer, the editor could hear the gratuitous use of the capital letter. "If you want to write about Truth, become a philosopher. Or better yet, go work for the *National Intelligencer!*"

Giving a crooked smile, the reporter scratched his head. "Actually, I thought this was the *National Intelligencer*," he admitted sheepishly.

"Out!" the editor screamed, gesturing dangerously with the screwdriver. "Get out! And don't come back without a story, you godless heathen!"

As the young man hastily departed, the grumbling editor went back to work. Dagnabit, that kid was never going to become a good news reporter until he learned there were shades of truth in every story. A

spectrum of honesty going from the cooling indigo of peace, all the way over to the fiery red of war. A good reporter should stay in the middle, and only deliver the green truth. Minty fresh, and clean as spring!

Shifting the cigar to the other side of his mouth, the editor frowned. Then again, considering what was at stake in the current conflict, perhaps it would be wise to lean a little towards the war. Just a touch. A tiny nudge. They should be practicing yellow journalism. Sure, what could be wrong with that?

* * * *

Finished with his shopping, Joshua felt better now that he was properly armed. Stopping off at a bank, he had exchanged one of his gold Double Eagles for silver dimes. Then going to a dry goods store, Joshua purchased a leather bag, the sort that kids used to keep marbles. Pouring the dimes into the bag, he knotted the drawstring tight, and experimentally tapped the homemade blackjack against a palm. It hit with stinging force. *Yes, this would do nicely .*

Pocketing the illegal kosh, Joshua hoped that the leather wouldn't hinder the effect of silver on a devil dog. *And I have some nice, fresh, hot lead for the mysterious physician .*

Taking the north road out of town, Joshua galloped through endless autumn fields before reaching a covered bridge spanning a shallow creek.

Slowing his horse to a walk, the Marshall scowled at the Dutch hex symbol painted above the entrance to the old bridge, but said nothing aloud. The colorful symbols were supposed to bring good luck. The peaceful Amish painted them on everything they built. However, Joshua wasn't taking anything for granted anymore. He was quickly earning a newfound respect for the spirit world, tempered by a healthy dose of fear. *Magic was tricky stuff .*

As Dexter went clumping through the weathered structure, the hoofbeats echoing loudly in the darkness, the Marshall half expected to be attacked by a devil dog. Easing the Star .38 from his shoulder holster, Joshua thumbed back the hammer, and laid the handgun in his lap. Riding through the dappled shadows, Joshua strained to hear anything unusual, and finally allowed himself to exhale the breath he had been holding when he exited out the other side into sunlight.

Mayhap the Amish know what they're doing with those hex signs, Joshua chuckled, holstering the gun. *Wonder how much they would charge to do the entire Executive Mansion?*

Kicking the horse into a full gallop once more, Joshua turned west and cut through a dense forest, the wildwoods slowly thinned to rolling hills that eventually spread to flat cropland. Grain silos, barns and smokehouses marked the boundary for the country estate, and soon the dirt road smoothed out, the potholes and rain gullies disappearing. Precariously balanced on ladders, young boys were picking the last of the autumn fruit in the orchards, and a group of men were herding a couple of fat sows towards the smokehouse. It was going to be a one-way trip for the pigs, although the doomed animals didn't know that yet. For some reason, the sight gave Joshua an ominous sense of foreboding, and he urged Dexter on to greater speed. *In the world of the supernatural, was I the farmer, or the pig ?* Perhaps a little of both. An observation that brought no joy.

After a few miles, the farmland gave way to manicured lawns, and a great house rose from behind a low hillock. The red brick mansion was five stories tall, absolutely colossal, and granite lions flanked the iron gate in the granite wall surrounding the property. Slowing his horse to a walk, Joshua rode through the open gateway and nodded in passing to a gardener trimming hedges. The wizened man grinned a toothless smile in reply and went back to his work. Keeping a straight face, Joshua tried not to laugh. How very sad. The old fellow had obviously gone senile. The hedge he was trimming resembled a giraffe.

Bushes shaped like zoo animals? That just broke your heart.

The gravel driveway crunched under the iron horseshoes, and the Marshall went past the open front door and around back. Reaching the water pump, Joshua slid off the saddle, and tethered Dexter to an iron ring alongside the trough. Going to the servant entrance, he politely scraped the mud off his boots, straightened his cuffs, and knocked loudly. This whole long trip would be pointless if Peter wasn't available. But this was his best chance at tracking down the identity of the devil dog.

If it could be done at all, Joshua admitted in blunt honesty.

There came the clack of a bolt disengaging, then the servants' door to the mansion swung wide revealing a neatly dressed man with bushy sideburns. The fellow looked like a Tory out of *Punch* magazine.

"Sorry, no handouts today ... Joshua!" Peter Danvers cried in delight, breaking into a grin. The head butler for the Van Houghton estate grandly threw open the kitchen door, and made a sweeping gesture. "Come on in. Long time no see! There's tea on the stove, and fresh ginger cake in the cookie jar."

"Both sound great," Joshua smiled in return, shaking the man's hand and walking into the noisy kitchen.

Copper pots and pans hung from the ceiling along with bunches of drying herbs, the tile floor was spotless, and the air was rich with tantalizing aromas. More than a dozen servants were scurrying about, carrying trays, preparing food, chopping meat, and mixing things in bowls. Joshua was filled with envy. It made the kitchen at the Executive Mansion look like the galley on a prison ship. But James van Houghton was fabulously rich, something to do with silk from the Japans, spices from India, and rum from Jamaica.

Nothing else from Jamaica, just rum .

The estate was larger than most villages, and the Dutchman had personally donated three ships to bolster the Union Navy for the war. In anybody's book, that was wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.

"Grab a seat," Peter said, dropping into a chair at the servants' table and crossing his legs at the ankles. "Consider this liberty hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

"As ever, the soul of tact," Joshua laughed, sitting down. His guns clunked against the wood, and Joshua tried to behave as if nothing had happened.

Half of the table was covered with silverware in the process of being polished; the rest was piled with freshly-boiled linens, still steaming slightly. But a small area was left clear. There was a cookie jar, a pewter tankard filled with coffee, and a china bowl of white sugar. *White? Wow .*

"Is this a social call?" Peter asked, placing a clay pipe in his mouth, and flicking a Lucifer alive with his thumbnail. "Or have you finally quit that awful rat hole, and come to work for us? I can promise you a massive pay raise. James van Houghton wants only the best, and is more than willing to pay cash on the barrelhead." The head butler then grinned. "Of course, I'm the best in the world, but you'll do in a pinch."

"Nice to be appreciated," Joshua chuckled, resting an arm on the table.

"And he probably won't pat your arse," a cook snorted, walking by, her hands busy smearing lard in a shiny copper skillet.

"Be quiet, Sheila!" Peter commanded in an imperial manner. "How dare you address me in such a manner!"

"Ha!" she replied, then hit the man gently on top of the head with the frying pan.

"Old friend?" Joshua asked, taking a slice of cake from the jar on the table. It was still warm, and at the first bite filled his mouth with a memory of childhood. One of the few good ones.

"New playmate," Peter chuckled, giving a wink and rubbing the sore spot on his crown. "She plays rough, but I like a woman with fire in her blood."

"And other places, too, I'll wager."

"A gentlemen never speaks of such things!"

"Naturally. So you'll tell me everything?"

"Of course! Do you want detailed descriptions, or would pictures do? I have some chalk here...." As Peter pulled out a piece of laundry chalk, Joshua took it away from the man and tucked it into a vest pocket. The last thing he wanted was Sheila knocking the fellow unconscious for boastful indiscretions.

"Actually, this is business," Joshua whispered, glancing about to make sure the other servants weren't close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Business?"

Stuffing the rest of the cookie into his mouth, Joshua opened his coat to reveal the two guns underneath. "Business."

Still massaging his scalp, Peter went pale, his pipe drooping. "Are you in the Army?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'm a U.S. Marshall," Joshua mumbled, flashing his brand-new badge.

"It's upside down."

Feeling like a dolt, Joshua swallowed the last of the cake and turned the badge over. "All right, so I'm a brand-new marshal," he admitted honestly. "Just promoted this morning, in fact."

"From butler to marshal in one day?" Peter asked in surprise. "Look, I can take a joke as well as the next fellow, but honestly..."

"God's truth, old friend, and then some. This is real."

"Lord almighty," the butler exhaled, then quickly added, "Is Mr. van Houghton in trouble? I can assure you that he is a staunch supporter of the Republic, and..."

Joshua waved that aside. "Nothing like that. To be blunt, I need something from you."

Blowing a stream of smoke out of the corner of his mouth, Peter spread both hands wide. "Name it."

"This is big, top secret, the family would sack you if they heard."

"What in mucking Hades do you want?" Peter asked, removing the pipe and leaning closer. "The secret

shipping routes to Japan? The combination to the family vault?"

Glancing about, Joshua made sure nobody was near, then quickly whispered, "I need the address of the very best cobbler in town."

"Never!" Peter cried, recoiling in horror. "Mrs. van Houghton would sack me if I told you that! My god, have you never dealt with society folk before? They're insane about dress-makers, silversmiths, and such."

"Please?" Joshua implored. "I'd check the directory at city hall, but the better merchants never register. And this fellow is a master craftsman. He actually makes left and right shoes. He's an artist. I need that name, and you know who he is."

Laying aside the pipe, Peter shook his head. "Impossible. Out of the question."

"This is for the War Department," Joshua stated, laying his commission papers on the table and unfolding the parchment. With anybody else, Joshua would have offered a reward for the information, but knew that would not work here. This was a not commerce, but a matter of honor. Butler to butler. *Man to man*

Scowling suspiciously, Peter took a quick glance, then stared at the signature on the bottom. *Honest Abe signed them personally*? Filled with conflicting emotions, the butler pulled in a long breath, and let it out slowly.

"And how can I say no to him?" Peter relented, slumping in submission. "All right, there's this little German fellow over in Georgetown..."

CHAPTER NINE

Walking on the dirt road, Kelly McTeague felt like he was sleepwalking, floating in a dream and unable to control the movements of his body. Ever since he had crossed the river into Maryland, the man seemed impelled to travel deep into the misty foothills. Kelly had no choice in the matter, no will of his own. There was a growing itch deep inside his mind that could only be scratched by moving in that particular direction.

Shifting the haversack on his back, McTeague knew in grim certainty that this bizarre summons had something to do with the supernatural. He had experienced it many times before near graveyards, or abandoned houses. It was a sort of sixth sense that warned him to stay away from certain people or places. But the compulsion tonight was the exact opposite. He was being dragged along, helpless as a fish on a hook. McTeague could wiggle in rebellion, but every move only took him further towards the dark forest.

Perhaps Hell has finally decided to claim my miserable soul, McTeague thought, shuffling along the irregular ground.

Even as a child, he had been able to hear music that others could not, and saw things, people and creatures, that couldn't possibly exist. Monsters and demons, ghosts and angels. A wandering gypsy had claimed that the boy was blessed with the second sight, and could someday become a powerful mage! But upon learning about the bizarre visions, his father had thrown the weeping youngster into an insane

asylum where McTeague learned the true meaning of horror. After many years, the teenager killed a sadistic nurse, and escaped into the night. A few days later, McTeague returned home and demonstrated to his hated father everything he had learned from the madmen in the asylum. McTeague hid the remains of the body in a manure pile, but carried the bloody knife as a cherished memento.

Since that night, McTeague traveled alone, taking whatever he needed to survive, and killing when it was necessary. But he always avoided the dark places, and refused to listen to any of the music whispering on the wind. *Until today* .

The sun was warm overhead, but a chill breeze moaned through the treetops, carrying with it voices from the beyond. More than once, McTeague tripped on some unseen rock and fell to his knees, ripping his pants. But he kept going. The clarion call in his mind deafened McTeague to the details of the real world. *I'm a prisoner again, and this time there will be no escape* .

Starting across a stone bridge over a foggy river, McTeague paused at the sight of a crumbling old house squatting in a weedy field. What a dump! The windows were cracked, the gables sagged, there were holes in the roof, and the chimney tilted dangerously. The termites would be doing everybody a favor when they chewed through the last support and made the ramshackle building finally collapse.

Sneering at the abandoned ruin, McTeague almost didn't notice that the urge to proceed was fading away, and soon his mind was clear. *Incredible, I'm free once more!* But even as the man hastily turned to leave, he caught the sight of a body lying on the misty ground. It was a woman dressed in riding clothes, the crop still in her dainty hand.

Must have been thrown, McTeague guessed, looking about for the horse, but there was no sign of the animal. Or anybody else for that matter.

Slowly advancing closer, McTeague could see that the unconscious woman was beautiful, long golden hair and classic features. *Gentry* , he decided, feeling a flare of hatred for the wealthy landowners.

With a low moan, the woman raised an arm to block the sun from her eyes. This caused the rip in her blouse to well open and a bare breast came into plain view. *A rose floating in milk* .

After so many years alone, McTeague found the sight hypnotic. She wasn't wearing a corset, or anything else under her tight pants and loose blouse. Not a member of the gentry then, just some whore taking a ride after a night of sinful debauchery.

A rich whore, he quickly corrected, spotting the rings on her fingers, and the sparkling necklace around her ivory throat. *Well, well, it seems that Christmas has come early this year* .

"Help me..." the woman whispered hoarsely, raising a trembling hand.

Not likely, slut. "Are you alone, miss?" McTeague asked in false concern, glancing about the river forest. There was nobody else in sight. Nobody at all. Only the crumbling mansion, and the blazing sun.

"Yes ... my horse..." She raised a trembling hand. "But I can't move. I ... I think my back is broken."

How delightful! Stepping closer, McTeague bent down and ripped off her necklace. The woman cried out as the gold chain broke, and tried to push him away.

Pitiful. Grabbing the arm, McTeague started pulling off the rings and shoving them into his pockets.

"What are you doing?" she wept, tears flowing as her hands feebly batted at the stranger. "Thief!
Miserable blackguard!"

"Much worse than that," McTeague chuckled, sliding a hand inside the blouse and cruelly fondling a plump breast. The satiny flesh was soft and warm. The nipple hardened under his harsh administrations, and the man felt a stirring in his loins.

"Please, let me go!" she wept, struggling to escape. Tears were flowing down both cheeks, her emerald eyes wide with stark terror.

"Say pretty please," McTeague chuckled, squeezing the breast in a crushing grip. "Say pretty please, with sugar on top."

He expected a scream of pain in response. Instead, the woman stopped crying and began to smile. It was not a pretty sight. McTeague quickly let go and backed away. *What the Hades was going on here?*

"Cruel, and a coward. Oh, yes, you'll do fine," she whispered, standing with ease. "Many things are drawn to this location, but it has been a long while since a suitable human came this way."

"What ... who..." McTeague stammered, clutching the handle of the knife at his side. Suddenly, the thief had the feeling this was a set-up, a trap of some kind. *Did she work for the constables? Was she a bounty hunter?*

"I am the Lady Amanda Colbert," the woman said, easing the ripped blouse off her smooth shoulders. "And I need you as a replacement for David."

David? Before McTeague could ask who that was, Lady Colbert released the buckle on her belt and the torn clothing tumbled down to puddle about her slim ankles. Unashamed, she stood naked in the bright sunlight, her long hair billowing in the gentle breeze.

His lustful urges long gone, McTeague felt only a growing terror. The second sight was coming back strong, and it urged him to flee from this thing disguised as a human female.

"Look, I don't want no trouble," McTeague gushed, shoving a hand into his pockets and pulling out the stolen jewelry. "Here! Take it back! Just let me go!"

"Too late for that now," Amanda growled, lowering her head until the blonde hair fell across her pleasant features. With a start, the woman began to breathe rapidly, her breasts rising and falling unnaturally. Then her face started to change, the muscles swelling all over her body. Coarse hair began to grow out of her satiny skin, and curved fangs extended over black animal lips....

Throwing the jewelry at the monster, McTeague turned and ran for his life. He only got a few yards before something heavy slammed into his back and drove the man to the ground.

Struggling desperately, McTeague tried to grab the knife at his side, then he froze in horror as sharp teeth sank into the back of his neck. *Oh god please!*

Pinned helplessly, McTeague waited for the crunch of death. But after a few seconds, the teeth withdrew and the weight was removed.

Rolling over panting McTeague stared at the hairy she-beast towering above him, her fangs dripping red blood. *My blood !*

"Why ... did you do that?" McTeague whimpered, clutching his burning throat. He felt nauseous and exhilarated at the same time. It was like being drunk, yet his mind was crystal clear, filled with strange and chaotic thoughts. Rivulets of sweat began to trickle down his face as McTeague sported an enormous erection, but that vanished just as fast as it had arrived.

Thoroughly entertained by his obvious discomfort, Lady Colbert gave a guttural laugh. "This is how I recruit new slaves," she said in amusement, the inhuman mouth pronouncing the words clearly. At his blank expression, she added, "Don't worry, little kitten, you'll soon understand."

Grinning feebly, McTeague started crawling backwards to get away from the talking animal, then he violently shook all over. Ice cold adrenaline flooded his veins while his skin burned with heat. His heart began to thunder in his chest, and every joint throbbled. *Rabies! The whore has given me rabies, and I'm going insane !*

Crouching on her hairy haunches, Lady Colbert calmly watched as the shaking man fought to retain the last remnants of his humanity, and lost.

Groaning in pleasure, Kelly McTeague yielded to the waves of searing ecstasy coursing through his altering body. *Yes, oh God, yes!* His clothing seemed to shrink as his muscles grew, and his body expanded. The buttons popped off his shirt like firecrackers, displaying a massive chest thick with dark hair. His shirt ripped into pieces, and his boots split at the seams. Then his pants burst, and his belt snapped, throwing the buckle into the bushes.

In the nearby forest, wild animals took flight from the unexpected appearance of a new predator. Even the owls shut up, and the crickets went silent, until there was only the sound of the babbling stream under the stone bridge, and the whisper of the wind through the trees.

Then it was over. Drawing in ragged gulps of air, McTeague slowly stood and the remaining few pieces of his clothing fell away, carrying with them the last remnants of his humanity. Terrible to behold, the newborn werewolf stood naked and magnificent on the lonely dirt road.

In the distance, the smashed windows of the ruined house stared down like the empty sockets of a skull.

Pulling in the crisp air, McTeague could not believe the amazing rush of power in his veins. He felt more alive like never before. *Strong, swift, invincible !*

Inspecting his hands, the werewolf watched sharp claws slide in and out of his fingertips at will. And the forest was no longer silent to his pointed ears, McTeague heard every living thing for miles, he could almost hear the trees growing and the worms digging in the moist earth. Plus, there was a whole spectrum of exotic aromas filling his senses, most of them strange and unknown. There was blood on the wind, hot and sweet, still inside the veins of some frightened animal. He could smell it, almost taste the rich coppery fluid.

"What am I?" McTeague growled, flexing his powerful arms.

"Mine. You are mine," Lady Colbert replied, padding closer. "I made you, I own you."

"*Never!*" McTeague snarled ferociously, towering over the smaller female. Savagely, he backhanded a

paw at her face.

Contemptuously, Lady Colbert knocked that aside, and grabbed him by the throat, squeezing until his breath was gone, and his eyeballs threatened to explode from his head.

"Please..." McTeague whimpered through a crimson haze. "F-forgive me ... m-master."

"Better," Lady Colbert stated, releasing her grip and casting him aside.

Hitting the ground hard, McTeague gasped for breath, then his stomach clenched, and he groaned in unimaginable hunger.

"You have much to learn, kitten. But first, I must feed you," Lady Colbert said, her tail lashing about as she looked past the duly-subjugated male. "The Change drains a lot from a person, it even steals the very moisture from the air. In time, you will learn to eat before the Change. But at the moment, you need food and water quickly, or else you'll starve to death in a few minutes."

Wracked with incredible pain, McTeague dumbly nodded. Yes, anything she said. Just stop the agony in his gut!

"And after we feed, you shall meet my master," Lady Colbert added, looking into the forest. Her whiskers spread like antennae as she smiled, black lips peeling back to reveal rows of sharp fangs.

"Is he ... like us?" McTeague wheezed, holding his aching belly. He was weakening rapidly, the need for raw meat stronger than ever before.

"A werewolf? Oh no, but you shall soon understand," Lady Colbert said, caressing his face with a single claw. *If you survive the experience .*

"Werewolves," McTeague repeated, the river breeze ruffling his thick coat of fur. "Is that what we are, wolves?"

"We are gods!" Lady Colbert shouted at the universe, the words seeming to echo across the landscape.

Startled birds took flight from the nearby trees, and rabbits erupted from some laurel moving at lightspeed. The woman was amused. She could catch them if she wanted, but a rabbit was hardly a mouthful. Her slave need hundreds of pounds of meat. Just then, her ears perked up at the sound of a deer running through the pine trees to the west, and she sniffed to catch the scent of the prey. *Female, four years old, ripe and healthy. Excellent .*

"Hungry ... gods..." McTeague whispered, starting to sag. His stomach was a cavernous pit, and his marvelous strength was flowing from the new body like blood from a wound. "M-master ... please..."

Gauging the slave had suffered long enough to truly break his spirit, Lady Colbert sprang into the woods.

Left alone again, McTeague crumpled into the dirt, and his vision was starting to fade when something red and hot thumped down in front of him. *Raw meat!* Grabbing the bleeding haunch, McTeague savagely attacked the twitching flesh. Soon the pain diminished and reason returned to his beleaguered mind.

As more of the deer was placed before him, McTeague ate, and ate, slowly coming to understand that

she had come back. For the first time in his life, somebody came back to help him. *I'm not alone anymore* .

Looking up with tears of joy in his slanting eyes, McTeague gazed upon the beautiful female as she handed him the last quarter of the dripping fresh kill.

"Command me, master," Kelly McTeague declared, putting a hellsworn oath into the simple words.
* * * *

The little bell above the door to the Georgetown cobbler's shop merrily jingled as Joshua entered the building. Out on the street, Dexter was tethered at a public stock, his head buried in a canvas feed bag, contentedly munching away.

The interior of the shop was brightly illuminated from the afternoon sunshine slanting through the front window, the panes of glass casting a dozen tiny rainbows across the counters and display tables. The air was thick with the pleasant aroma of leather goods, rich and sweet, almost like being in the smokehouse on a farm.

"Good afternoon!" Joshua hailed, closing the door to another ting-a-ling. "Mr. Mingle, are you open?"

There was no reply.

Checking the guns under his jacket, Joshua walked through the still establishment. The shop was quiet. Too quiet. He was starting to get the feeling that the place was deserted. Nobody had answered the door, and there weren't any hammering sounds coming from the workroom. Of course, Mathew Mingle might take a late lunch, and had simply forgotten to lock the front door. Unlikely, but possible. People did stupid things. *Even master craftsman* . Another possibility was that he was walking into a trap.

Heading for a curtain that lead to the back room, Joshua was astonished by the sheer variety of shoes for sale; ladies button-top, riding boots, slippers, dancing shoes ... but nothing for the military. And the price cards alongside each pair could not possibly be correct. *A year's salary for a pair of shoes* ? Rich folks were potty in the head, and that was all there was to the matter. The man looked down at his sturdy black Brogans, and decided they were just fine.

Stepping around a circular table piled high with socks and garters, Joshua jerked to a halt at the sight of a pair of legs laying underneath the rear curtain. With a mounting feeling of dread, Joshua clumsily drew his LeMat and cocked back the massive hammer before advancing and carefully pushing aside the curtain.

The work room was empty, except for the body on the floor of an old man with white hair. His clothes were well appointed, and a gold watch chain was draped across his brocade vest. But the face ... !

Staggering against the wall, Joshua felt ill, and wiped the back of a shaking hand across his mouth. The old man was bizarrely contorted, his arms and legs twisted into unnatural positions, and the face was locked into an insane rictus, a permanent expression of stark and absolute terror.

Just like the War Department said our soldiers were found on the battlefield. Joshua had trouble breathing at the realization, and couldn't think or move, or do anything but stare in horrid fascination at the grotesque dead man. For a long while, his thoughts were jumbled and chaotic. But slowly a single clear thought percolated through to the surface. *No devil dog had done this* . The clothes were immaculate, not a rip or a tear. The beast in the Executive Mansion had clawed his victims into pieces,

and tore out their throats.

"There's something else in town," Joshua said aloud, drawing courage from the sound of his own voice in the quiet shop. But what could be doing this?*Or, should I say, who was doing this ?*

The answer came like a fist from the dark. He knew the person responsible.*I looked into his face this morning .* The doctor in the alleyway. From a hundred feet away, the physician's gaze had chilled Joshua to the bone, and now a man was found with an expression of unimaginable horror. Just like the Union soldiers. Suddenly, it all made sense. The mysterious doctor with the scarf was the battlefield killer!*Only now he's loose in DC murdering cobblers .*

Pulling over a chair, Joshua sat down to think. Obviously, the devil dog and the mysterious doctor were in cahoots. The shoes of the monster came from this shop, and the owner had just been slain by the physician. Mingle must have been removed to hide the connection between the two.

Unfortunately it worked, Joshua noted sourly, worrying a loose thread on his trousers.*Mingle is dead, and the trail is gone .*

The dead face stared upward blankly and Joshua involuntarily remembered the ghastly sensation he felt looking at the dark physician. It had seemed as if some secret portion of him was being forcibly siphoned away. Almost as if ... ?

Almost as if the demon was eating my soul from across the street. A fiercely determined will seemed to hold the demon at bay. Could that be why only wounded soldiers were being attacked? The doctor found it easier to feed upon those too weak to resist? Glancing downward, the white hair of the elderly cobbler spoke volumes. Apparently, just being very old was good enough for the cowardly hellspawn.*Merciful Heaven, what was next, cancer patients in the hospital? Small children? Babies in their cribs ?*

A wild rage swelled from somewhere deep inside Joshua at the hideous possibility, and he tightened his grip on the revolver.*Unacceptable! The doctor dies today .*

Rising from the chair, Joshua walked across the workroom. All right, step one was finding the son-of-a-bitch. Mingle was dead, but he could still communicate with the living. Every good craftsman kept detailed notes on their work, including the all-important address of where to send the bill. The soles of the shoes found in the alley weren't worn much, four, mayhap, six months worth of wear. That wouldn't take long to search through the sales ledger. With any luck, there might even be a name for the devil dog who wore size ten shoes. Possibly even the doctor, too. That would be nice.*Just not for him .*

Pragmatically, Joshua understood there still remained the matter of exactly how to kill a demon. Would lead miniballs or a silver blackjack do the trick? A thrown bible had done nothing to the devil dog, but hopefully the same was not true for the doctor.*However, I better find a church before visiting the lair of the demon. Get a crucifix, holy water, things like that .* Joshua briefly wondered if a Catholic priest could be convinced to bless a handgun?*Never hurts to ask .*

There were several worktables in the small room, each of them covered with scraps of leather, tiny wooden pegs, hammers, knives, saws, and numerous partially finished shoes of every size and description. The floor was covered with wood shavings, a Franklin stove sat in the corner with a copper pot of chicken soup simmering on top, and alongside was a Shaker desk, the cushioned top covered with papers.

Sitting in the chair, Joshua rifled through the stacks of papers finding nothing of interest. The lockbox contained only money, a small fortune in cash and coin, and there was no sign of a sales ledger in the bookcase. Just some technical volumes on leatherworking, the collected works of Sir Walter Scott, *excellent historical adventures*, a copy of the Kama Sutra, *banned in nineteen countries*, and a trilogy by Alexander Dumas, *how do you pronounce his last name anyway?*

Checking the drawers, Joshua found one stuck and had to yank very hard to get it open. As it slid out, he heard a rough scratching noise and saw a flash of fire. Joshua took a long spit second to observe the burning Lucifer jammed into a crack of the wood paneling, and the sizzling length of greasy twine, *fuse*, shrinking rapidly towards a tiny vial filled with a glowing blue liquid. *Glowing?* More magic!

Erupting from the chair, Joshua charged through the shop and slammed through the front door just as the entire building pulsed with an ethereal light that seemed to fill the universe.

CHAPTER TEN

Evening was just starting to darken the sky over Richmond, Virginia. The bustling city was alive with commerce, horse drawn wagons packed with goods filled the streets, steam locomotives blasted whistles in the distance, and thousands of Confederate Army soldiers marched through the sprawling metropolis keeping cadence by singing, 'Dixie,' the unofficial anthem of the newly-formed independent Southern government.

A thousand homes across the stately capital glowed with the light of kerosene lanterns in their windows, and the fragrant aromas of countless cooking dinners wafted into the starry sky, filling Richmond like a sweet summer fog. A full moon was just starting to rise on the horizon, the lunar orb just as bright as ever on this second day of its monthly trek. Soon enough, the moon would begin to wane, and darkness would sweep across the unsuspecting world.

Near the center of town, the people of Richmond smiled as they passed by the demure white house on the corner of East Clay Street, and 12th Street. The civilians beamed with pride at the plain-looking home, and threw out their chests at the sight of the Confederate flag hanging from a post just above the front door. This was no Presidential Palace, Executive Mansion, or any of that republican claptrap. This was just a house, no more and no less, the simple home of President Jefferson Davis, and the official headquarters for the High Command for the Confederate Defensive Army.

The unadorned walls of the White House rose directly from the public sidewalk, sans a front lawn, ornate bushes, or elaborate conservatory. There were no fences to hold out the neighbors, and the window shutters of the three-story building were thrown open wide to admit the refreshing afternoon breeze. A whitewashed brick wall separated the horse stables from the traffic on 12th Street, and behind the stable was a sprawling vegetable patch with a small cottage for the elderly gardener. The friend, of a friend, of somebody's nephew, but that's how these things go.

The tomato stakes were bare at this time of year, as was the grape arbor. But the rows of cabbages were coming along nicely, a swarm of honeybees buzzing about the large hive nestled inside an old dogwood tree, which was surrounded by dogwood bushes, which were surrounded by dogwood flowers. But that's how these things go.

Smoking clay pipes, a dozen armed soldiers stood on the flat roof of the White House, laughing and telling jokes. There was no danger of invasion from the Union Army, even though they were only a

couple miles across the Potomac River. After their recent drubbing at Leesburg, the Southerners were quite positive that those damn Yankees would think twice about ever trying to set foot in the Confederacy again! In only a matter of weeks, perhaps days, the South would be free!

Then would begin their massive internal struggle over whether, or not, to free the black slaves. Some of the states detested the very concept of slavery, while other states cherished it wholeheartedly, almost fanatically. But according to the original Constitution written by the Founding Fathers, that was a decision for each state to arrive at individually, and not something to be dictated to them by some imperious federal government like Zeus sitting atop Mt. Olympus. The federalists versus the secessionists was a very old battle in America, and had been around since before the colonists decided to tell King George of England to go sit on a ripe green apple, and like it.

In a clatter of hooves, a rider came flying around a corner on the back of a galloping horse. Instantly, the Confederate soldiers came alert and aimed their brand-new Enfield .577-rifled muskets at the stranger even though he was wearing the uniform of a government courier. The North had tried that sort of dastardly trick before in Atlanta, which was the main reason the White House had been moved to Virginia. The Yankees would never think of looking for the Confederate headquarters only a stone's throwaway from Washington, DC!

Pulling hard on the reins, the rider slowed his mount and trotted directly to the front door of the White House. Staying in the saddle, the cloaked man threw back his hood to show his Confederate uniform, and then the major saluted the two privates standing guard on either side of the stoop.

"Halt and be recognized!" a sergeant growled, thumbing back the hammer on his rifle, the stock pressed tight to a gray shoulder. From atop the White House came a musical crescendo of more metallic chirping as a dozen more rifles were cocked and made ready for action. One wrong move and the rider would be blown straight out of the saddle and straight into Hell.

"Inalienable rights," the major said, raising only his right hand in recognition.

"An' to Hay'll waw Lincoln," a private replied, giving the countersign. "Y'all can dismount, sawr. We've bean 'xpecting ya."

Dear God, what an awful accent! The poor fellow must be from the Deep South. Virtually a foreigner. "And you asked the password anyway?" Major Gilland asked, sliding off his mount. As he landed on the brick road, there rose a small cloud of dust from his clothing. The officer beat at his uniform with an open palm to try and remove some of the accumulated dirt.

"Those yankees are mighty tricky," a burly sergeant replied, easing down the hammer of his Enfield. "But there's not a man alive can get past us, sir!"

Glancing at the six-foot-tall goliath, Major Gilland grinned as he tied the reins of his panting horse to a wrought-iron hitching post. "I have no doubt of that, sergeant," Gilland stated honestly. Every soldier in sight was armed with a Enfield rifle, and two Colt revolvers. What the North did with a thousand men, the South did with twenty who knew how to shoot.

"Drink, sir?" a corporal suggested, proffering a canteen.

"Are you mucking insane?" Major Gilland demanded, glancing at the open windows on the second story of the White House. "I'm not going to see *him* with hard liquor on my breath!"

The soldier shook the canteen, making it slosh. "Just springwater, sir."

"That I gladly accept. My deepest thanks." Taking a sip, the major gargled his mouth clean, spitting the brown residue into the gutter. Dagblasted road dust got everywhere on a man, even inside his unmentionables! Able to taste something other than mud again, Major Gilland took a long swallow. *Ah, better.* Cupping a hand, Gilland poured some water into a palm, and rubbed his hands clean before wiping down his face.

"Are they all here?" Major Gilland asked, wiping himself dry with an embroidered handkerchief before tucking it into a brocade-covered sleeve. The lovingly-added decoration was not a part of his uniform, but a gift from his wife. A memory of home and better times for him to carry into bloody combat.

Sometimes, that was all that kept me sane .

Closing the canteen, the corporal grew stern. "Now that wouldn't be for me to say, sir," he replied, stiffly formal.

Good man. "Just checking," the major smiled ruefully, straightening his collar. "Thanks again for the drink."

"My pleasure, sir. Hope it's good news you're bringing!"

Keeping his face rigidly neutral, Major Gilland stomped up the short flight of stone steps and carefully cleaned the soles of both boots on the cast-iron scraper before knocking on the whitewashed door.

There came the sound of a heavy metal latch being dragged aside, and the thick portal was swung open by a bald man roughly the size and shape a gorilla. Bonaparte Higgins was stuffed into an English butler's uniform way too small, and from his expression, the Southern colossus was clearly unhappy about the situation.

"Good evening, major," Higgins drawled in a molasses-thick Tennessee accent, giving the last word two syllables. There was a bulge under his coat just about the correct size and shape for a handgun. "The High Command has been expecting you. Second floor, sir."

"Thank you," Major Gilland said, entering the foyer.

Pausing a moment to soak in the warmth, the major noted that a sliding door to the left was ajar. In the parlor, a pretty woman was sitting on a divan near a crackling fireplace. Holding a book, she was reading to three attentive children sprawled on a huge India carpet. As the lady glanced up to turn a page, the major nodded politely at Mrs. Varina Davis. Never pausing in her recitation, the First Lady smiled in reply and returned to the fairytale.

Things were looking very bad for Goldilocks, the major chuckled mentally. *Watch out for those chairs, young lady !*

The major gave Higgins the dusty cloak, which the giant butler accepted as if receiving a week-dead opossum. Gilland straightened his cuffs, smoothed back his wiry hair, and started up the circular staircase. On the second floor landing, two soldiers were busy doing paperwork on a mahogany table. Concentrating on the reports, the men seemed unaware of his approach, but as Gilland stepped onto the landing, both privates pulled LeMat pistols into view, the hammers already cocked.

"Philadelphia freedom," the major said.

"Let it shine on me," the corporal replied flatly. But neither man moved their weapons an inch. "Second door to the right, sir. He's expecting you."

Striding down the corridor, his spurs jingling on the carpeting, Gilland ran stiff fingers through his hair in crude ablution. He had carried a lot of messages to and from the White House, but never one that went directly to President Davis. The prospect of personally addressing the Hero of the Confederacy was rather unnerving.

Arranging fresh flowers in a vase, the head maid for the White House, Mary Bowser, gave a curtsy as the major passed by, and Gilland flashed a smile in response. The free black nodded in return and continued her work, humming a little song. Just for a split second, Major Gilland thought the tune was "The Star Spangled Banner," the anthem of the North. *Nyah, couldn't be .*

Reaching the presidential office, Major Gilland knocked twice and entered without waiting. Jefferson Davis didn't like a lot of poncing about in needless ceremony.

Sitting around a large table, a group of officers glanced up from their work, then went right back to studying the quartermaster reports. The great George Washington, a Virginian, had been fond of saying that amateur soldiers talked about tactics, while professionals discussed logistics. The lack of vital supplies had caused the loss of more wars than all of the stupid kings and over-confident generals combined. A strange fact, but true.

Discreetly sitting in a corner, two guards openly held pistols in their laps, and a bony sergeant stood by an open window, smoking a pipe, a Remington shotgun resting on his broad shoulder.

"Mr. President, sir!" the major said with a salute, all the while wondering about the heightened security.

"At ease, son," President Davis replied from behind a map of the New York coastline. "Are those the dispatches?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

The president lowered the map. "Just one sir at a time will do fine," he said wearily, placing it on a map of Pennsylvania. "Give them to General Lee, please."

"Sir!" Marching closer, the major pulled out the sealed envelope and handed it to a bearded gentleman at the head of the table.

There was embroidery on both sleeves of General Robert E. Lee's uniform, but no tassels or other finery. Aside from his insignia of rank, the general looked ready to hit the frontline and charge Northern guns.

Taking the thick sheet of vellum, General Lee slit open the wax seal on the envelope with a pocket knife, and pulled out the paper dispatches.

"God preserve us," the general muttered, frowning as he flipped through the scribbled pages. "Mr. President, it has happened again. Several times, in fact."

"More of our wounded killed by poison bullets?" General Thomas Jackson growled angrily, moving his jaw from side to side as if chewing into the vitals of the enemy. "The cowardly scum! I swear, if I ever

get my hands on the Yankee responsible..."

"I don't think it is poison," General Lee countered, passing over the pages. "Read these, Stonewall. We have a report about some sort of mysterious doctor, who..."

"Dr. Who?"

A shotgun blasted, a man screamed.

Turning about with hands on pistols, the High Command gasped at the sight of the sergeant near the window stumbling backwards with a large dog tearing out his throat. Red blood sprayed in every direction, and as the soldier fell, his chest was ripped open, the vital organs slithering to the floor. With sharp fangs dripping gore, the colossal beast looked up at the people in the room and grinned in a shockingly human manner.

"By thunder, that's a werewolf!" President Davis cried, kicking back his chair, and grabbing a sword from a nearby rack.

Caught by surprise, the monster blinked. *They know what I am ?*

Lunging forward, the president plunged the silver-edged saber straight through the muscular arm of the beast. The werewolf howled at the touch of the deathmetal, and the guards cut loose with their handguns, the barking Colt revolvers throwing out a hellstorm of .36 lead miniballs that smacked into the animal and literally did nothing.

"In the name of God..." Stonewall Jackson whispered, lowering his own LeMat pistol to make the sign of the cross.

"No guns! Use swords!" President Davis bellowed, pulling back his blade and slashing again at the beast. "Only silver can harm the demon!"

They knew about that, too? Amazingly fast, the werewolf ducked out of the way of the sword. But General Lee kicked it soundly in the face, sending the animal stumbling into a mirror. The silvered glass shattered, and the beast howled as blood flowed from a score of tiny cuts.

Snarling a bitter oath, Stonewall Jackson threw his LeMat at the mirror and more glass rained down upon the crimson-streaked beast.

"Charge!" General Lee bellowed, brandishing his sword.

Every officer in the room drew a saber and attacked. Confused by this totally unexpected tactic, the werewolf tried to dive under the conference table. But President Davis flipped the furniture over and an instant later the beast was riddled with silvered steel, the swords penetrating it from every direction. Raising its muzzle, the dying werewolf defiantly clawed at President Davis, missed, shuddered and died.

Pulling their swords free from the hairy corpse, the officers gasped in astonishment as the huge animal shimmered and changed into a naked man covered with cuts.

"What in Hades is that thing?" Burton Harrison snapped, still clutching a handful of documents. As the only civilian in the room, the Executive Aide was unarmed, and mighty close to wetting himself from the incident. *Gun. I'm getting a gun tomorrow! No, a sword. Two swords!*

"Gentlemen, that is a werewolf," President Davis panted, exhausted from the brief battle. His health was poor these days, his body weak from a lingering disease, but his fighting spirit was still as strong as ever. The president turned to an aide. "Corporal, sound the alarm! Get Mrs. Davis and the children into the barracks on the third floor!"

"And put more men on the roof," General Lee added, wiping his sword clean on the flanks of the dead man. "And keep adding soldiers until the building groans from their weight!"

"Yes sir!" the soldier replied, and dashed from the room.

As the corporal departed, a full platoon of North Carolina sharpshooters poured into the office, their Enfield rifles at the ready, bayonets gleaming.

"You, you and you, close the window shutters!" General Jackson commanded gruffly, the bloody sword still tight in his gloved hand. His uniform was covered with decorations and military medals, none of them for good behavior. "Seal this house tighter than a frog's arse at a bean-eating contest! Then check every room for intruders! Any man ... no, scratch that. *Anybody* at all who does not know today's password, kill them on sight."

"Anybody?" the soldier asked in surprise. "But sir..."

"Anybody and everybody! Man or woman, black or white, soldier or civilian," President Davis commanded, gesturing with his borrowed sword. "And no guns! Lead means nothing to these monsters. Only silver harms them. Use your sword, oh Hells Brazen Hinges, none of you have a sword."

"Only officers carry swords, sir," the soldier began hesitantly, unsure if he should mention the fact.

"Never mind being polite!" President Davis roared. "We've no time for niceties! Go to the armory, and issue a sword to every manjack on duty in this house! Is that clearly understood!"

"No, sir!" the corporal replied honestly. "But I'll do it anyway, sir!"

"Good enough," the president grunted, draping a weary arm across the back of a chair. "Get moving, son. Godspeed."

"Yes, Mr. President!" the man saluted briskly. He took off at a full run, with the other soldiers close behind, confused, but determined.

Taking a duvet off a sofa near the fireplace, General Lee covered the dead sergeant, then took the shotgun and reloaded the weapon. The .69 smoothbore had seemed to have almost no effect against the thing on the floor, but the sheer force of the blast must have slowed it down. That was why it had landed on the sergeant rather than the president.

"He died to save my life," President Davis said in a hollow voice.

"As would we all, sir," General Lee replied brusquely, finished with one chamber and starting on the other.

"This was a close call, Rob," Stonewall muttered angrily, reclaiming his thrown handgun. "Too damn close." The weapon was undamaged, merely filthy with blood and matted fur.

"Agreed, Tom. Anybody have some silver pennies?" General Lee asked, even as Harrison handed him a fistful. The general gave the civilian an approving nod at the quick thinking, then commenced to load the shotgun again. *A double load for a double barrel .*

Wiping his sword clean on a handkerchief, Captain Sandie Pendelton scowled at the nude body on the floor. The red blood had ceased flowing from the wounds, but the captain was ready to attack again the instant the beast showed any signs of rousing.

"What did you say this was again, sir?" Pendelton asked incredulously.

"A werewolf," the president answered, taking his chair and laying the dirty sword on the table. The blood on the blade flowed off to cover a small town in Tennessee named Chickamauga. For some unfathomable reason, that greatly disturbed the president, so he moved the sword to some town in Pennsylvania named Gettysburg. *There, much better .*

"A werewolf," General Lee said as a question, tamping down the load of loose change into the weapon. "As in beware the wolf, or is this thing some distant relative of the Grendel?"

Eh? Oh, the Beowulf legend! The benefits of a classical education. "That I can not say, Robert. All I know about the beasts comes from my mammy. She told me about such creatures when I was a child,"

Davis said, pouring himself a stiff drink from a decanter on the table. "Werewolves, vampires, fairies, gremlins..." He drank down the Kentucky rye in a single shot, and then pushed the decanter towards the others. "A werewolf is an ordinary man cursed by gypsies to turn into a monstrous wolf when the moon is full."

"Are gypsies fighting for the North?" Stonewall demanded, clearly growing more angry by the second. "Are we battling magic now? Hexes and curses and hoodoo?"

"It's called voodoo," President Davis corrected.

"Who do?"

"Voodoo."

"Do what?"

Having had a similar conversation about the topic once before in a tavern, the president scowled in irritation. "Please stop that at once, Tom."

"Sir!" the general replied crisply, giving a salute.

"Bedamn the gypsies and all their ilk! No amount of evil magic can harm a good Christian," Harrison stated with conviction, loosening his silk cravat. Then the executive aide looked at the dead soldier laying under the duvet, only the torn and tattered boots showing. *Hmm, hadn't the sergeant been a reverend before joining the army, and still taught bible studies to children ?*

"Then again, perhaps it can," Mr. Harrison relented grudgingly, nervously rubbing the St. Christopher medallion hanging as a fob from the end of his watchchain.

"Trust me, Burton, magic can kill as swiftly as any bullet," President Jefferson stated firmly, clenching a

hand into a hard fist. "Maybe even faster."

"Monsters," Captain Pendelton sneered as if there was a bad taste in his mouth. "I know the northerners were godless heathens, but this ... !"

"Cow flop. There is more to this than meets the eye," General Lee stated, resting the loaded shotgun on a shoulder.

"You don't have to convince me of that, Robert," the president decried wearily. "Not even Lincoln would traffic with the devil to beat us. He's a son of a bitch, but an honest man."

"But if this isn't the doing of the republic," Stonewall Jackson said, thoughtfully worrying his jaw, "then some third party has entered the war."

"Blast, you're right. This is exactly what we did not need, what with our lads already dying on the battlefield of insignificant wounds..." President Davis stopped talking and furrowed his brow in a manner well known to the High Command.

"You suspect a connection, sir?" General Lee asked cautiously, laying the shotgun on the conference table.

"In this accursed war, I've come to suspect everything," the president growled, rising to pour himself another drink. Taking the glass decanter, he frowned and pushed it aside. Lucid minds were needed now, more than ever. "We'll have to do something about this immediately."

"But how?" Pendelton asked pointedly. "Do you know where it ... he ... it came from?"

"We could round up every gypsy camp below the Mason-Dixon line," Major Gilland hesitantly suggested.

"That would only tip our hand," Stonewall Jackson stated, grasping his sword and pulling it out a few inches, only to slam it back in again. "Mr. President, if we're facing the supernatural again, sir, then I suggest that we unleash The Hammer."

"Excellent idea," General Lee declared, resting a boot on a hassock. "The Hammer has handled this sort of thing before, and very discreetly."

"As well I know," President Davis said with due conviction. "But just in case, let's send more spies into DC. We must never underestimate the North, they're ruthless in battle."

"That may be true, sir," Pendelton stated, warming to the notion. "But I'm not worried. They're just rabble, not real soldiers like our boys."

"Real enough," General Lee added grimly, glancing at the weekly death toll written on a chalkboard. The number had been erased many times, and rewritten, as the total steadily climbed, and climbed ... ?

"Sir, what else can you tell us about werewolves?" Stonewall Jackson asked, leaning forward intently. "Do they have any other weakness, or vulnerabilities, that we can exploit?"

"Aside from silver, none that I know about," the president stated with a heartfelt sigh. "How about any of you gentlemen?"

Most of the responses were in the negative, but a few of the officers postulated wild theories, and a heated debate began on the possible origin of the supernatural beast.

Endlessly arranging the same flowers, Mary Bowser kept nearby the office, carefully listening to every word uttered by the High Command. All of this fantastic information would have to be included in her monthly report to the Union War Department. The lady spy only hoped it would arrive in time to be of some use. *And who in Hades is The Hammer ?*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Landing on the sidewalk, Joshua felt something crack, *my ribs!* but forced himself to keep going. *Run, boy, run !*

Frantically rolling into the cobblestone street, Joshua covered his face against the brilliant green light emanating from the building. Sizzling emerald stilettos of power radiated from the structure, piercing the walls and roof as if they were a colander. Still tied to the public railing, Dexter gave a muffled whinny of terror through the feedbag, then oddly went silent.

Cradling his side, Joshua crawled further away, his skin prickling from the intense radiance ... and then it was gone. Poof. Like blowing out a candle.

Daring to sneak a peek, Joshua was surprised to see the cobbler's shop looking undisturbed. Somehow, he felt cheated that it was still standing. Then Joshua recoiled as the entire building started dripping watery rivulets from the roof and walls. The gooey fluids were the exact color of the shingles and bricks. *Those were the shingles and bricks !*

Forcing himself to stand, Joshua watched in horrified fascination as the entire structure started to ... He paused. There was no other word for it. The whole mucking place was beginning to melt . Wood, stone, glass, even the flowers in the windowbox ... everything was sagging and dissolving, merging into a gelatinous sludge that was forming a thick pool on the ground.

Just like a watercolor in the rain, Joshua realized in sickened dumbfoundment. *Impossible! Incredible! I ... I think I'm going to do a Mr. Hey .*

One hand covering his mouth, and the other holding his aching head, Joshua backed away from the unnatural, *supernatural* , phenomenon. Reaching the other side of the street, Joshua sat down on a public bench and watched as the rainbow pool started shrinking, seeping into the soil. A minute later, it was gone and nothing remained of the store but a bare patch of dry earth.

That could have been me, Joshua thought furiously, a feral glint in his eyes. Somebody, *probably the doctor* , had left a lethal booby-trap for anybody investigating Mingle, and Joshua had nearly been the booby to win the deadly prize.

Brushing the loose hair from his hair, Joshua still could not believe what had just happened. The neighborhood seemed perfectly normal. *Aside from the fact that a building was missing* . How was that possible? That vial in the desk had been no bigger than a Vienna sausage. What combination of acids or chemical reagents could possibly dissolve an entire building?

None. *There's no sense denying it anymore*, Joshua scolded himself. *Face the facts, JP. You're up against the dark arts. Hocus pocus, whim wam, the ol' oogie-boogey*. Magic.

Mulling that over, Joshua gingerly felt his ribs for any breaks, and discovered that the earlier crack he heard was only his pocketwatch breaking. The pain was from the cracked glass stabbing him in the side.

Pulling the shard loose, Joshua cast it into the gutter. That was when he noticed the casing of the watch was peeling apart into layers. This isn't a gold watch, only varnish-covered tin! Even on his way to the gallows, his father had pulled a scam on his own son.

"Good one, dad," Joshua chuckled glancing heavenward. Then he paused, and repeated the compliment to the sidewalk between his shoes.

Hefting the watch, Joshua saw that it was beyond repair, springs and cogwheels dangling loose from the works. *Somebody else might take this as an omen that I was running out of time*, Joshua noted sourly, removing the timepiece from his chain and dropping it into the gutter. *Thank goodness I'm not superstitious*. Then he crossed two fingers for luck, and spit thrice to the left.

Attracted by the early flash of bright light, people were beginning to gather around the vacant lot, murmuring nervously and pointing. Parents wisely restrained excited children from stepping foot on the exposed dirt, dogs were barking frantically, and somewhere a horse whined.

Dexter! In a rush of adrenaline, Joshua stood and charged back across the street. But stopping at the public watering trough, Joshua found only a half-dissolved horseshoe and a strip of leather that had previously been part of the reins. The gelding was gone, melted into the earth the same as Mingle, the shop and the sales ledger.

Wherever in Hades it had been hidden, Joshua fumed. Mingle must have been cooking the books to hide his enormous profits from somebody. Mayhap a wife? Suddenly, that copy of the Kama Sutra took on a whole new connotation. *Why, Mingle, you old dog*. Only a Georgetown cobbler could afford a mistress.

From around a corner came a huge constable with a fiery red handlebar moustache. The goliath looked more like a Royal British Marine than a simple street copper, the metallic buttons on his blue uniform gleaming in the fading light.

With a cool river breeze blowing, Joshua wisely decided to leave the area. *If I tally any longer, somebody will remember that I came diving out the store just before it vanished*. Joshua had just missed catching the doctor by a scant few minutes today. If he spent the night talking to the village constables about the disappearing store, who knows how many people would be dead by then? The broken watch had been prophetic. *I am running out of time*.

Trying to gawk like the other people, Joshua slowly worked his way along the rear of the crowd, and slipped around a corner. Starting to walk down the street, Joshua surreptitiously checked his two handguns, and then the blackjack in his pocket. His fingers encountered an unexpected piece of paper. Pulling it out, Joshua saw that it was the note from Sgt. Montgomery.

Unfolding the sheet, Joshua read the address and slowly raised an eyebrow. Well, well, it would appear that the Freemason clubhouse was located right here in Georgetown, only a few blocks away. *Coincidence? Not mucking likely*. The dead man must have been a member of the society, and used the cobbler because it was so close. *Location, location, location!*

Briskly walking along the sidewalk, Joshua started checking house numbers to make sure that he was heading in the appropriate direction. Now all he had to do was find Green Street. *If the Freemason building was still located in Georgetown, and not oozing its way down to China .*

As Joshua headed towards the Potomac River, a large man slipped out of a dark alleyway and followed close behind, staying in the shadows as much as possible.

On the horizon, the moon began to rise above the cityscape and into the cloudy sky. A storm was coming, and soon.

An hour later, Joshua found the Freemason building. Quite naturally, he had expected some kind of imposing, nigh-ornate, structure for the August fraternity. But in truth, the clubhouse was a rather drab stone building, discreetly set between a bookstore and a ladies' millinery shop.

The front door was bronze, a row of Doric columns lined the raised stoop, and the roof was a dome, making the place curiously reminiscent of the Capital Building. A broad granite lintel was carved with the same symbols as the tattoo on the dead man, a square and compass forming a sort of diamond pattern, along with the legend: **Potomac Lodge 5, established 1806.**

"Not a very secret society with a banner like that," Joshua muttered, going to the front door and pulling the bell handle.

That was when Joshua noticed there were no windows. None at all in the building. The revelation was unnerving. Even military forts had windows. Did the Freemasons dislike fresh air that much, or did they have that many mysteries to protect?

Waiting patiently, Joshua tried to smooth his unruly hair again, wishing he had some pomade to make himself a tad more presentable. The Freemasons were an eclectic lot, including ordinary soldiers like Sgt. Montgomery, and powerful members of Congress. Over in England, they ranged from bootblacks to the actual king himself. *Which must make for some mighty interesting meetings .* The fraternity was known world wide for their charitable works, mostly with widows and orphans. There were also rumors that they dabbled in forbidden magic. Those accounts did not jibe well, and Joshua wondered if the truth lay somewhere in the middle.

After a few minutes, Joshua pulled the bell again, and the door was opened promptly by a dour-faced man in a black suit, and armed with a featherduster.

"Good evening," Joshua said, smiling widely. *A fellow butler! How very nice .*

"May I help you?" the man asked courteously.

"Most assuredly. My name is J.P. Withers. I'm a U.S. Marshall and need to speak with a Mr. Tyler."

"The Tyler is a post, sir, not a man's name," the man replied politely, but clearly not amused. "Mr. Harvin is the record keeper for this lodge."

"Is he in?"

"Yes, I am," a tall man answered, stepping into view. Harvin was drying his hands on a towel, his fly buttons misaligned. "My apologies for not answering the door, Brother Evan, I was, ahem, indisposed."

"The barn door is still open, Brother," Evan said, looking elsewhere.

Glancing down, Harvin gasped and spun around to adjust his clothing. When he turned about again, his face was red with embarrassment. "Sorry about that," Harvin muttered in chagrin.

"Not a problem," Joshua replied, trying not to chuckle. "Did the same thing myself once at..." *On the day President Lincoln formally declared war on the Confederacy*. "...my birthday," he finished lamely.

Slinging the towel over a shoulder, Hr. Harvin pursed his lips at the obvious lie, but said nothing.

"Could we go somewhere to talk privately?" Joshua asked, pulling back the lapel of his coat to show the tin star pinned to his shirt.

"But of course, Marshall," Harvin stated. "Brother, would you be so kind as to get us a pot of coffee? I have a feeling this is going to be a long discussion."

"As you say, Brother," Evan replied, taking the towel and walking out of sight.

"The butler is your brother?" Joshua asked curiously, easing a shoe into the doorway. If Harvin tried closing the door, Joshua was going in anyway. *With guns drawn, if necessary*. These people had information vital to his investigation, and nothing was going to stop him. *Not even another magical bomb*

"My brother? How droll. No, Masons consider every member their brother," Harvin replied, noticing the shoe. Briefly, he wondered if the Brogan could really stop the solid bronze door? It would be an interesting contest, but extremely painful for the Marshall to witness. "And he's not the butler. Evan Davis is our junior warden." He wrinkled his brow. "Although I do suppose there are a lot of similarities between to the two positions."

"An ombudsman?"

"Exactly," Harvin chuckled, pleased that the Marshall knew the obscure phrase for an all-purpose-problem-solver.

There came the echoing sound of a door closing somewhere inside the building.

Beaming a gallant smile, Harvin stepped out of the way. "But I am being remiss with my manners, sir. Please step inside out of the chill. I am James Harvin, the Tyler for this lodge."

Allowed to enter only after doors were closed, eh? Fair enough I suppose. Stranger in the house, and all that. "I'm Marshall Jos..." Joshua said, crossing the threshold, then bit his tongue. Darnit, almost blew his cover on the introduction. "J.P. Withers," he went on, pretending to cough. "Marshall J.P. Withers."

"A pleasure, sir," Harvin said, giving no notice that he detected any gaff.

As Joshua stepped inside the building, Harvin saw a large man hidden in the bushes across the street. *Was that a comrade of the marshall, or was the lodge under surveillance? This did not bode well.*

Closing the door, Harvin indicated a collection of wingback chairs in an alcove across the spacious

foyer. "Pray have a seat, marshall. If I know Brother Evan, he'll be back shortly with brandy and cigars to go with the coffee."

"All of which will be welcome," Joshua replied honestly, rubbing his hands. Nights got cold fast in DC.

As the men started across the foyer, Joshua had to admit to himself that he was impressed. Unlike so many other gentleman's clubs, which often were a cross between a pigsty and an exploding brewery, the interior of the Freemason building was almost painfully clean. The wood panel walls gleamed with polish, the stucco ceiling was freshly painted, the black and white floor tiles spotless.

"If I can ask, who are those gentlemen?" Joshua asked, pointing at a line of paintings along a wall. The men were all middle-aged, well-dressed, and wearing Masonic aprons covered with mystical symbols. Most of the men were white, but a few were black, and one was Oriental.

"Those are former grand masters for this lodge," Harvin answered proudly, puffing out his chest. "I hope to be among them some day."

"Er..." How do I put this tactfully? "Were all of those men them?"

Tolerantly, Harvin controlled a smile. "Yes, indeed. We accept any man of good character, regards of faith or skin color."

"Must not have a lot of members in DC," Joshua quipped in a friendly manner.

His eyes twinkling in amusement, Harvin said nothing.

Ah, they have a zillion members. This idea of having an open membership seemed to make a lot of sense. Joshua decided that if he ever started an organization, the first rule would be to accept anybody of good character, regardless of what they looked like. Appearances were not important, only depth of character.

"If you're shocked at the scope of our membership, then you may find this rather impressive," Harvin announced, going to a small display case.

Behind the tempered glass was a plain wooden gavel resting on a velvet pillow. Alongside was a small portrait of George Washington wearing a Masonic apron, and holding a very similar gavel. On the opposite side, a charcoal sketch of the Capital Building.

"And this is?" Joshua prompted, bending over for a good look. Yep, it was a wooden gavel, all right. He could buy ten of them for a dollar at any dry goods store.

"The pride of our lodge," Harvin said, placing a hand reverently on the case. "That gavel was a gift from President Washington, a former member of this very lodge."

"Really?"

"Absolutely true. We're extraordinarily proud of the fact."

"I would think so," Joshua muttered, then noticed the clock on the wall. *Tick, tick*. "But perhaps I should get to the point of my visit."

"Please do," Harvin said, going to the alcove and taking a seat. "What is the problem, and how can we help?"

An auspicious-enough beginning. Accepting a wingback chair that would have done the Executive Mansion proud, Joshua folded his hands and choose his next words carefully. "Mr. Harvin, I am looking for a man who may have been a member of your club."

"Fraternity," Harvin corrected primly, reaching over to turn up the wick on the kerosene lantern on a nearby table. Bright light banished the shadows in the corners. "May I ask about the nature of this inquiry? Is the gentleman perhaps, deceased?"

Activating his Friday night poker face, Joshua tried to hide his reaction to the probe. *No lazy brains here. This was going to be like trying to negotiate a fair price for carrots with a Delaware green grocer.* "I'm sorry, but that information is privileged."

"Then perhaps our member list is also privileged," Harvin murmured, lowering his head in a saurianesque manner.

"This is War Department business," Joshua stated, tapping the badge under his coat.

"Is it, indeed?" Harvin said with a neutral expression. "However, I'm sure that you know many people in the north support the fledgling Confederacy."

That startled Joshua. *The Freemasons were copperheads ?*

"But not us," Harvin said, breaking into a half-smile. "Chains are for dogs, not men."

"How odd, a friend of mine said the exact same thing this morning," Joshua admitted, leaning back in the soft chair.

"A wise fellow," Harvin acknowledged, taking hold of an elbow and scratching his chin while closing an eye.

Utterly baffled, Joshua looked at the fellow as if he was suffering brain fever. Then he realized those were signals to identify a fellow Mason.

"Not a member, sorry," Joshua stated quickly, raising both hands. "Sorry for the confusion. I wasn't pretending to be anything I am not."

"My mistake," Harvin demurred with a nod.

A cough announced the arrival of Evan carrying a tray filled to overflowing with refreshments. Without comment, the Junior Warden relayed a wine decanter, coffee urn, a cigar box, and assorted dishware to the table. Then he departed through a door under the stairs.

"Doesn't say much, does he?" Joshua asked, watching the fellow disappear.

"My Brother is the soul of discretion. But please help yourself, Marshall," Harvin said, choosing a fat cigar.

Expertly rolling the Cuban near an ear, Harvin listened to the crinkle reveal the true age of the seasoned

leaves. Frowning in disapproval, the man set the reject back among the rest and chose another. That cigar passed the test, and Harvin neatly trimmed off the end with a fancy little mechanical device, instead of biting the tip and spitting it away like most people.

Striking a Lucifer, Harvin let the chemicals burn off until the flame was only feeding off wood, then applied the match to the end and puffed the cigar alive.

Taking a cigar from the box, Joshua took a sniff and his stomach roiled in rebellion. Breakfast had been a long time ago. He needed to eat first, before enjoying a smoke.

"Perhaps later," Joshua muttered, putting it back in the box. "Now about this man I'm looking for. All I need is a name."

"Which confirms that he is dead," Harvin sighed from behind the swirling cloud. "I'm sorry to hear that a Brother has fallen. This foolish war has claimed too many lives already."

With that assessment, Joshua agreed wholeheartedly.

"Can you describe him for me? We're a rather large fraternity, but I know most of the members from the District of Columbia."

Gathering—*marshalling*?—his thoughts, Joshua poured a glass of port from the crystal decanter. Crystal, not glass. The Masons were wealthy, but tried to hide the fact. Tactful or covert?

"The man I am searching for has pale skin," Joshua said, taking a sip. "He's medium height, rather skinny, a lot of scars on his back, heavily tattooed, brown hair, green eyes, missing a pinkie on the left hand, and might have been a sailor."

"Oh dear. Sadly, I know this man," Harvin sighed, tapping the ash from the cigar into a brass bowl. "A most disagreeable fellow. His name is David Kendal." His mouth contorting into a sour expression as if biting into a sour apple. "And he is most assuredly no longer a member of the Craft."

"The what?"

"He's not a member of this lodge," Harvin corrected hastily. "We kicked him out for thievery, and ... well, several other small offenses, but stealing was the big one."

David Kendal. At last, the devil dog has a name. "What did he steal from you?" Joshua asked eagerly. Finally, he was getting some hard information, instead of wild speculations.

"Us? Oh, Kendal took nothing from the Brethren," Harvin spoke, the puffed words forming little clouds in the air. "David stole rare books from libraries and private museums. Even from the bookstore right next door! A neighbor! Now, I ask you. Really."

"Rude," Joshua agreed.

"However, we do not tolerate any criminal activity. If any member is convicted of a major crime, they are immediately removed from the roster."

"What were the other offenses, the minor ones?" Joshua asked, cradling the glass in both hands. *And did David have any friends dressed like a doctor? Maybe somebody really ugly?*

Removing the cigar, Harvin inspected the glowing tip and frowned, clearly unhappy to discuss the delicate matter to a profane outsider.

"He kept requesting to learn magic," Harvin blurted out, as if ashamed to admit the fact. "We told him a thousand times that whatever he had heard about Freemasonry and the occult was wrong. But he thought our denial was just a test of his loyalty. So the more we insisted, the more he persisted. It got rather ugly at the end."

"But that's not why you tossed him out?" *Kendal was hot to find magic? Looks like he located some. Mayhap from one of those stolen books?*

"Stupidity is not a crime with us, marshall. Annoying, but not illegal."

"That's not very forgiving."

"We are not a religious order."

Weren't they? "By any chance do you happen to know where he lived?" Joshua asked. *Idiot! Stop using the past tense!* "Lived at the time when he was a member, I mean," he corrected lamely. *Sweet Jesus, I'm terrible at this .*

Smoking for a few minutes, Harvin considered the suggestion, then removed the cigar. "Brother Evan!" he called out loudly.

A moment later, the Junior Warden appeared as if he had been waiting just out of sight. "Yes, Brother James?"

"Would you be so kind as to get me the roster for 1858?"

Evan blanched. "W-what was that?" he stammered.

"Just do it, Brother."

"Of course." Clearly displeased, the man shuffled away, casting back suspicious glances at Joshua. The marshall gave a toothy smile, but it was not returned.

"You will have to excuse Evan," Harvin said, shaking his head, leaving smoky contrails. "Our Junior Warden is a tad hidebound in the ancient ways. Nobody but a fellow Mason should ever see the roster, or cross the threshold, that sort of thing."

"Have I?" Joshua asked, sipping the wine. It was French, western vineyards, four, maybe five years old, improperly turned, but still excellent.

"Have you what? Crossed the threshold?" Harvin asked, and then laughed. "Of the outer building, yes, of the inner temple, no."

"I thought you weren't a religious order?"

"We are not."

"But you have a temple?" Joshua asked, confused.

Removing the cigar, Harvin gave a smile. "How's the port?" he asked.

Raising his glass, Joshua acknowledged the rebuff. Everybody was entitled to a few secrets. *Even a U.S. Marshall.*

Panting for breath, Evan returned. The scrawny fellow was carrying a leather-bound volume larger than a Gutenberg Bible.

"As requested," Evan wheezed, depositing it on the table with a crash of dishware. Then he dusted the volume off with both hands and left to go lurk some more.

Putting his cigar into the brass bowl, Harvin wiped his hands on a cloth napkin before folding back the cover to start flipping through the pages. "Let's see ... May, June, July, August ... here we are. Hmm, when still a member, Kendal listed his address as the SeaHawk Boarding House, a sort of retirement home for wayward sailors."

"Do you know where it is located?" Joshua asked urgently, placing aside the glass.

Raising the tome to the light, Harvin squinted at the cramped writing. "It seems to be right here in Georgetown, down by the docks, near Lafayette Street. About ten blocks away to the west."

That close? "Excellent," Joshua said standing. "Then I'll be taking my leave."

Must be in a hurry to search the rooms. Yes, Harvin could see it in the Marshall's face. Withers was a man on a mission. What in the world had that fool Kendal stolen this time, Plymouth Rock?

"Glad we were able to help," Harvin said, closing the register and also rising. "However, Marshall, I feel impelled to add that Kendal has always been trouble, and more than a bit of a coward. If he should have any, ah, associates, in this matter, be wary. They will be criminals, and not to be trusted."

"My thanks. I'll remember your candor," Joshua replied honestly, offering a hand. "And the hospitality." The two men shook.

"Anything for the war effort," Harvin replied, letting go. "If you need further assistance, call on me. If Kendal broke the law, I would be remiss in not trying to set the matter right." *And in keeping anything the blackguard has done from besmirching the good name of the Masons.*

"Again, my thanks."

As the men headed for the front door, Evan was already there, holding it open. "Have a pleasant evening, Marshall," he said, almost sounding sincere. "Please do come again."

"If only for your scintillating conversation," Joshua replied, buttoning his collar against the chill, and starting down the steps to the sidewalk.

Refraining from a comeback, Evan managed to generate an even more somber glower than before at the snipe.

Watching the U.S. Marshall stride into the deepening night, Harvin observed a shadowy figure leave the

bushes across the street, and follow close behind. "Brother, did you see..."

"Yes, I did. Should we offer assistance, Brother?" Evan asked, reaching behind his back and pulling out a Colt .36 revolver. The stainless steel weapon was brand new, absolutely state-of-the-art, and gleamed like polished sin.

"Yes, we should," Harvin muttered in consternation. "But to which one of them?"

Unable to answer that conundrum, Evan replied by shutting the massive bronze door and locking it tight with a muffled boom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Hold onto your darn water, I'm coming!" the caretaker snorted irritably. Carrying a lantern, Old Ed swung open the front door of the Executive Mansion and staggered backwards at the sight of a brass Napoleon cannon, the huge muzzle pointing directly at his heart.

"Alarm! The rebs are here!" Old Ed cried, rushing forward to shove the door closed. "Call the guards!"

"Oh stop that, ya fool," Sgt. Montgomery chided, gently pushing the elderly man aside. "Now be a good fellow and get us a rug or something to lay under this rolling blunderbuss so we don't scratch the floor."

"The cannon is coming *inside*?" Old Ed gasped, clutching a fistful of his shirt as if having a heart attack.
"No! I won't allow it! Why the very idea ... !"

"Listen, friend, we need this in case *something*," the sergeant said stressing the last word, "tries to get inside. Understand?"

His face brightening as comprehension dawned, Old Ed started fiendishly grinning. "Do you have it loaded with canister?" he asked, craning his neck for a better look down the muzzle. "That's much better than cannonballs for killing folk."

If only we were fighting people. "She's loaded with a mixture of buckshot, grapeshot, silver spoons, and rusty nails," the sergeant grunted, pushing the wizened obstruction away again.

"Lord Almighty! That mixture should send a man to Hell faster than passing water on the pope!"

"That was the idea, Ben Franklin," Sgt. Montgomery said, unlocking the second door and swinging it aside. "All right, boys, get moving!"

"One-two-three-heave!" a corporal sang out.

Groaning from the effort, the newly-renamed Dog Platoon hoisted the massive cannon off the two-wheel carriage and awkwardly carried the Napoleon into the foyer.

"I've had fun before," one of the privates whispered through his teeth, "and this ain't it."

"Welcome to the Mansion," Old Ed said, throwing an India carpet on the floor. "Mind the furniture! We just dusted."

Biting back a sarcastic comment, the corporal merely glanced at Sgt. Montgomery, who shrugged in resignation. Weather and civilians, both were pains in the arse of the military, and there was nothing a soldier could do about either.

Grunting and groaning, the struggling Dog soldiers placed the piece of field artillery on the rug as if it were made of glass. Wiping off their hands, the Dogs shuffled back outside to disassemble the wheeled carriage, and set that also on the carpet. Then the soldiers reassembled the weapon under the stern observation of Sgt. Montgomery.

"Having fun now?" the sergeant asked pleasantly.

The other Dogs glowered at the offending wiseacre and continued the work.

Once they were finished, the Dogs trundled outside to bring in kegs of powder, and the tools of their trade: tin-foil canisters of grapeshot, cannonballs, chain-shot, rolls of fuse, lanyards, water buckets, ramrods, and a lot of Lucifer matches. Soon enough, the India rug was piled high with deadly ordinance, making it resemble a military Stonehenge.

When the deadly Napoleon was ready for combat, the soldiers formed a ragged line to the porch and began transferring in dozens of sandbags. Lending a hand, Sgt. Montgomery helped construct a crude redoubt around the cannon.

"That'll do, boys," Sgt. Montgomery said at last, walking around the emplacement. "Yes, by jingo, that will do nicely."

With the shiny brass muzzle peeking over the sandbag wall, the Napoleon could easily be maneuvered to swing about to fire in any direction, through any window, or down either hallway. Old Ed seemed less than thrilled, but the Dogs approved. Massive overkill was only common sense in the Union Army.

Just then, Private Johnstone arrived, dragging a heavy duffel, and hauled out several tinfoil canisters marked with bright red lines, the paint still damp on a few of them.

"Those are full of silver dimes, boys," Sgt. Montgomery boasted, adjusting the officer's cavalry sword hanging uncomfortably at his side. "So don't miss, or it'll come out of your pay voucher!"

The weary soldiers gave a ragged laugh at the old joke, but then saw the sergeant was serious. Holy crud, there must be a hundred dollars worth of dimes in each canister! It would take the whole platoon a month to pay back that colossal a sum.

"Will this do the trick?" Old Ed asked, with a worried tone in his voice.

"With everything else we have in, of course!" the sergeant boasted confidently. "The grounds are full of hunting dogs, the bushes are rigged with spring-loaded bear traps, half the Cassius Clay battalion have silver-edged swords, and a couple of armed frigates are sailing up the Potomac to anchor nearby. It would take a thousand devil dogs to get through these defenses to reach the president!"

"I just hope the monsters don't agree to pay that devil's bargain," Old Ed said hesitantly, looking nervously through the front doors into the night. "Sacrifice a thousand to kill our Mr. Lincoln."

"Amen to that," the sergeant whispered so softly that it was almost a prayer.

Just then, a ghostly chuckle seemed to come from the freshly-washed rhododendron bushes. The soldiers drew their pistols and swords. Old Ed rushed forward to close the front doors securely.

"Just the wind," Old Ed explained. "Nothing more, eh? Just the silly ol' river wind." But nobody believed the lie, not even President Washington in his frame on the second floor balcony.

* * * *

Night had fallen along the Georgetown riverfront. Dotting the length of the boardwalk, crackling torches cast pools of flickering light along the wooden planks, revealing shadowy piles of rope, rusty chains, and drying fishing nets.

Turning up his collar against the damp chill, Joshua wrinkled his nose at the clean smell coming off the freshwater Potomac River. Born and raised in Boston, he expected every boardwalk to smell of salt. In his mind, Joshua knew this was a river, but in his heart, it just seemed wrong. *Home is not under your hat, it's in your heart.*

On the moonlit river, an ore barge loaded with coal drifted lazily along with the current heading for DC, while one of the new steam-powered paddlewheels steadily traveled upstream. Neither paid much attention to the other. *Ships that pass in the night*. Joshua hoped it wasn't an omen.

Passing a tavern with a placard that announced a buffet, Joshua felt his stomach make its presence known again. Slipping out of the night air, Joshua paid for a tankard of beer, but left the drink undisturbed on the counter, and made a sandwich from the cold meats and breads available for the paying customers. The pickled eggs looked fresh, but Joshua had once spent a week in the privy from a bad tavern egg, and decide the risk was too great. The Marshall couldn't battle evil from inside the crescent moon hotel. *Hey you, stop in the name of the law! ... and pass the bog roll, please?*

Munching the repast, Joshua walked briskly outside again, and continued along the boardwalk looking for the SeaHawk Boarding House. Dozens of sailing ships were docked at the harbor, their tightly furled masts rising into the sky like winter trees. Somewhere, a buoy clanged out on the Potomac warning about a hidden sandbar. A seagull called from above, and the waves gently slapped against the wooden pylons.

The loading and unloading of cargo done for the day, the boardwalk was sparsely inhabited. A bar here, a tackle shop over there, a tattoo parlor packed with sailors, a couple of brothels, a pawn shop with the three balls gleaming in the moonlight, another seedy tattoo parlor ... ?

Caught short, Joshua froze at the sight of a familiar design in the window and rushed over. Nearly filling the array of window panes spanning the front were colorful pieces of paper glued to the glass. The majority of the sketches were a nautical design of some kind, along with the mandatory wild animals, skeletons, and a plethora of flags. Union, Confederate, British, etc. *Something for everybody. Don't be afraid, folks. The pain only lasts a few minutes, but the infection stays for weeks! Step this way!*

Racking his memory, Joshua felt a surge of excitement at the sight, his mind comparing the artwork on display, and the bloody designs on the nude dead man. Yes, he was certain, this was it. He had found the skin-artist!

Eagerly trying the door, Joshua found it locked. Closed.

I hope. Pressing his face against the glass window, Joshua squinted past the display of sketches to check the dim interior. The only illumination was from the torches on the boardwalk, the light streaming through

the sheets of paper and casting a wild profusion of ghostly images on the tables and chairs inside the little shop.

As his vision became acclimatized, Joshua bitterly cursed. A pair of feet wearing moccasins were sticking out from behind a toppled over table, a twisted arm sticking straight up into the air. The forearm was garish with tattoos, the fingers clawed and twisted, as if trying to block a nightmarish attack. Exactly the same as the cobbler's shop.

The doctor had been here! Pulling his gun, Joshua aimed for the door lock, then reluctantly paused, and holstered the weapon. Turning around, he walked briskly away. There was nothing Joshua could do for the dead artist. But if he hurried, Joshua might be able to reach the boarding house before the killer, and stop him from striking again!

Unless this had happened before the cobbler, he added darkly. *The boarding house might already be a pool of goo .*

Lengthening his stride, Joshua was almost running along the riverfront, dodging stacks of crates, and the occasional cast-iron anchor. It was beginning to seem farfetched that the Southerners had anything to do with these deaths. Jefferson Davis was a true gentleman, and always proported himself with highest dignity. Joshua shook his head. Nope, the Confederate president would never make a deal with the devil just to beat the North. Not even the bullheaded 'Stonewall' Jackson would do anything as dastardly as that. It was positively un-American! *But if that was so....*

"You there!" a stern voice commanded from behind. "Stop in the name of the law!"

The tone was so commanding that Joshua almost obeyed. Then he turned around fast, pulling both the Starr and LeMat.

"Put those away!" the darkness barked. "And don't be making me tell you twice there, laddy me buck!"

As a village constable stepped out of the moonshadows, Joshua eased his stance, but still didn't holster the guns. The redheaded man was a colossus, even larger than Sgt. Montgomery, with a handlebar moustache that would have made any Royal British Marine proud. However, just because the big Irishman looked human didn't mean a blessed thing. Joshua was slowly learning not to trust the obvious. *Seeing is believing. But after what I've seen, I don't know what to believe anymor e.*

"All right, laddie, put away those hoglegs and start talking!" the constable demanded, brandishing a billy club large enough to dispatch dinosaurs. "Who are ya? What are you doing here? Now be quick about it, or else I'll be giving you a taste of hickory that'll last a week!" The club was quite intimidating enough, but the shiny Colt .44 revolver holstered at his side promised even swifter justice on a more permanent basis.

"At ease, officer. I am a U.S. Marshall," Joshua replied, tucking away the Starr to pull back his coat and show the tin star. "Now why are you are interfering with a federal investigation?"

"A marshall?" the constable muttered, sounding surprised. The badge looked real enough, that was for sure. "Whose your chief? Give me a name, or by thunder...."

"President Abraham Lincoln," Joshua whispered, showing his commission papers.

Staring at the signature, the Irishman suddenly tried to grin and failed miserably. "Sorry, sir," he said in a

rush, tucking the billy club behind his back to deny its existence. "Constable Henry Tresham, at your service, sir. I've been following you, sir, ever since I saw you dive out the window at Mingle's shoe shop, sir."

One more 'sir' and Joshua thought the man would implode. "At ease, Henry," he ordered, holstering the LeMat. "I can explain about that...."

"No need, sir," Tresham said quickly, trying to cover his blunder. "At first I thought you were running away from setting off the..." The constable paused in consternation.

"Bomb," Joshua supplied.

The two men shared a look, and decided to accept the untruth.

"As you say, sir, the bomb," Henry said with a wink. "But after seeing you find that dead man at the tattoo parlor, I knew you were hunting the real culprit. Must have missed him by only a few minutes, I'd say, sir."

"How could you possibly know that?" Joshua demanded, offended and intrigued at the same time.

"No flies were buzzing around the body." The constable leaned closer and lowered his booming voice to a rumble. "Who did it, sir, copperheads? Rebel saboteurs? Was Mingle a traitor?"

Joshua briefly struggled with his conscience. It would be so easy to lie, but the tale would spread quickly and besmirch an honest man's reputation forever. "No, constable," Joshua replied. "Mr. Mingle was not wanted for anything, as far as I know." *Aside from having a collection of erotica*. "He was killed by a traitor, a man disguised as a doctor. I'm trying to find the fellow."

"Dearie-dear, we may be having a bit of a wee problem there," Tresham muttered uneasily, rubbing the back of his head with the nightstick. "There was a big fellow following you, but when he jinked that I was tagging along, he disappeared. Sorry, sir, guess I mucked up the matter like a hayfoot."

Saved my life from an ambush is more likely. So the hunted was now the hunter. "And he was dressed like a soldier?"

"No, sir, like a doctor. Had a black medical bag and everything."

"Yes, that's the fellow," Joshua growled, furiously debating in his mind. He weighed options, calculated percentages, and finally decide to act on his gut. *Some things just can not be analyzed like a new recipe for cornbread*.

Crossing his arms, Joshua gazed at the taller man. "Look here, constable, I could use some help in this matter. But to be honest, the mission is so incredibly dangerous that..."

"Anything for *him*, sir," Tresham interrupted, using the billyclub to tilt back his cap. "When do we start?"

"Immediately," Joshua said, grinning in relief. "Even faster if you happen to know where the SeaHawk Boarding house is located."

"Certainly, sir. This way." In a rolling gait more fit for a muscle-bound stevedore, Constable Tresham started along the boardwalk heading boldly into the night.

Keeping a short distance from the law officer, Joshua hoped he was doing the right thing. This matter was top security, but it felt mighty good to not be alone anyway. Hunting demons was a two man job.

Nervously, Joshua fingered the blackjack in his pocket. *Unless, of course, the big constable is also the mysterious doctor and leading me straight into a trap .*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Moving silently through the swirling fog, a pack of monsters stalked the Wildwood Cemetery. The full moon was directly overhead, but a thick river mist defused the illumination into a cold blue glow that gave the landscape an unearthly appearance.

Gravel paths meandered through the autumn grass like gray arteries losing their sense of direction, and tall pine trees sporadically dotted the property, each marking the location of a low hillock. Blockish mausoleums squatted like granite toads on the elevated ground, bloated and obscene. Situated around the hillocks like pagan worshippers were thousands of plain headstones in orderly rows, the misty symmetry broken only by an occasional patch of undisturbed grass, virgin soil patiently waiting for the arrival of the next permanent tenant into the wormy bosom of Mother Earth.

Less than a mile away, the city of Laurel could not be seen because of the intervening forest. The land of the dead had been carefully hidden from the sight of the living. The true joy in life was forgetting that all flesh must die, and that nothing was eternal except the stars.

Checking a list of names in her hand, Lady Colbert paused at a freshly dug mound of dirt to read the name on the headstone, only to growl in annoyance and keep walking.

Perched low in an elm tree, a terrified owl refused to hoot at the sight of a fat mouse scampering across the foggy ground, and let the tasty meal escape rather than reveal its presence to the four predators. High overhead, a flock of bats winging through the cloudy night sky abruptly changed direction and started circling around the graveyard, unwilling to chance catching the attention of the dreadful things marching among the human dead.

"*Zoot, mon amis!* Here is one!" Gaston Pierpont announced grandly, kneeling by a tombstone. The mound of freshly-turned soil was decorated with flowers, along with a few envelopes of stiff parchment sealed with dark wax.

Goodbye letters to the deceased, McTeague scowled. Bizarre custom. *In the Navy we said a short speech, blew a little tune, then threw ya to the fishes and go had a drink. Nice and dignified .*

"No, we did him already," Lady Colbert declared, tucking the paper away. "Keep moving." To facilitate the work tonight, the queen werewolf was wearing the decidedly masculine clothing of shirt, pants, and boots. Her only concession to femininity was the red silk ribbon holding back her cascade of blonde hair.

"Hold a tick, I gotta go," Steven Kissel said, fumbling at his fly buttons. Turning away, the male began to noisily relieve himself on the tombstone.

Brushing back his stringy black hair, Gaston chuckled. "*Mon du!* You mark the territory, eh, *mon ami* ?"

"*Qui, qui!*" Kissel laughed, jiggling the stream in mirth.

Thoroughly disgusted by the base act, Kelly McTeague turned away from the pair of fools. This was embarrassing! His associates were complete poltroons. *And werewolves were supposed to be the elite of the supernatural world?* He thought that highly unlikely.

Returned to human form, McTeague was wearing his spare clothing recovered from his backpack. The garments were old and worn, but clean. In contrast, Kissel and Pierpont were dressed in elegant finery stolen from their victims, the rips badly sewn, and there were still bloodstains from the previous owners. Not to mention food stains, spilled beer, and other assorted offal. Seemingly proud of their silken filth, the barrel-chested men walked with the rolling gait of sailors accustomed to a ship being tossed about on a stormy ocean. Both of them sported lewd tattoos, and gold rings dangling from pierced earlobes.

Just like pirates in a penny thriller, McTeague thought snidely, frowning in disapproval. These landlubbers would have crapped in their pants at the sight of a real pirate. A howling mob of Barbary Coast pirates coming over the side of a sailing ship with knives in their teeth, and murder in their eyes. *Rings in their ears. It's a wonder they weren't wearing bells on their toes, eyepatches, fake peglegs and a mucking stuffed parrot!*

From the moment he met them, McTeague didn't like the other male werewolves. The sailors acted like they were royalty just because Lady Colbert had turned them first. Big deal. In werewolf form, McTeague was twice their size, and planned to teach the two fools exactly who was the real boss of the pack at the first opportunity. Far away from the sight of that deadly blonde witch.

And Drell, McTeague added, involuntarily flinching. After feeding in the woods, Colbert had escorted McTeague back to that weird old house and introduced him to their master.

Dressed like a physician in greatcoat and cloth hat, Mr. Drell never spoke. He simply stood patiently, holding onto a medical bag, while Lady Colbert talked about finding McTeague. Then Drell charged, snatching up McTeague as if he was a child. Helpless in the monstrous grip, McTeague soon realized Drell was not a man, not even human, and he began to struggle wildly. But it was useless, the doctor was stronger than the werewolf. When McTeague eventually became exhausted, unable to fight back, that was when ... from that obscene mouth ... ?

Raising a hand to his face, McTeague tried not to remember what happened next. *My soul. That thing ate some of my soul!* And then Drell gave a portion of the life-energy back to McTeague. The man felt violated by the return, unimaginably foul, and could sense some sort of dark stain upon his heart. *Like a slave branded with the mark of his owner. Drell owns me now, and there is no escape.*

"All done!" Kissel announced gaily, buttoning his fly closed.

"About time," Lady Colbert snorted, hopping over the tombstone and heading deeper into the misty graveyard.

Not wearing a corset, her ample figure jiggled freely at every bouncy step, the undulations making Kissel and Pierpont leer in frank appreciation. McTeague didn't feel the slightest urge to ogle the busty woman.

The curvaceous blonde was indeed beautiful, but just about as sexually desirable as a razorblade. She had given him the greatest gift of all, the ability to Change, and then ripped away every ounce of his dignity. If given the chance, McTeague would happily kill the lady. *Slowly is possible, fast if necessary.* But the man considered both possibilities as likely as him growing wings and flying to Mars for high tea with Cleopatra, Bethseba, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

"Here she is," Lady Colbert announced, halting at an ornate headstone. The polished slab of granite was covered with carvings of roses, and fresh flowers lay on the mound of loose dirt. "Rosalie Cartwright, died yesterday of the flu."

"All right, Mr. T, dig her up," Kissel grinned.

"*Qui, qui!*" Pierpont chuckled, tossing a shovel at McTeague. It landed at his boots.

"And why do I have to do all of the dirty work?" McTeague growled, bending to get the shovel.

"Initiation," Kissel chuckled, rubbing his unshaved face.

"Cut the chatter," Lady Colbert snapped, her eyes changing from human to wolf for a terrible moment. "The old fart needs fresh bodies, so as the new guy, you dig. End of discussion."

What did the wizard need corpses for anyway? "And when we've bitten some other bastard and turned him into a werewolf?" McTeague asked, shoving the blade into the soft earth.

The woman gave a humorless smile. "Then he does the digging. Understand?"

"Fair enough, I suppose," McTeague grumbled. "At least I don't have to spend any time in a barrel."

"*Qua?*" Pierpont asked, tilting his head.

"Nothing," McTeague muttered, embarrassed at the slip.

Putting his back into the job, the man started to transfer the soil off to the side. Why were they still in human form? The work would be a hundred times easier as a werewolf. The others said it was important that nobody saw them Changed, but there was nobody in the cemetery at this late hour of night.

Well, not anymore, McTeague gave a burp. *Morticians, the other white meat*. Tasty, but not very filling.

"Back to work, kitten," Kissel laughed, and Pierpont gave a nosy Gallic chortle.

Mucking arseholes. "How come we don't use dead soldiers?" McTeague asked, speaking in the rhythm of the work. "There certainly should be enough of them laying on the battlefields."

"Too torn up to do any hard work," Lady Colbert replied, lighting a handrolled cigarette and drawing the smoke deep into her lungs. "Besides, soldiers are stubborn. Civilians meekly do what they're told. Drell likes abject obedience."

Yeah, I noticed. McTeague wisely said nothing aloud. The blonde was not Drell, but she knew more about giving pain than a blind Mississippi dentist.

Striking Lucifers on their boots, Kissel and Pierpont both light cigars, but did not offer one to McTeague.

Cheap dastards. "I was wondering, if the old man works for us," McTeague spoke, busy at his task, "and we work for Drell, then who do they work for?"

The werewolves exchanged glances.

"Keep digging," Lady Colbert ordered, blowing out a cloud of sweet Jamaican smoke. The fumes mixed with the fog, and hid her expression from sight.

The shovel hit wood. "Does silver kill him like it does us?" McTeague asked, clearing away the top of the new coffin.

"Nothing harms Drell," Pierpont whispered, glancing over his shoulder as if their master might be nearby. But the graveyard was empty, except for the rolling fog and thick shadows.

Removing the cigarette, Lady Colbert started to speak, then changed her mind, and went back to smoking. She had a slight buzz going and didn't want to lose it. The plant hemp was a major cash crop for the South, good for ropes, duffel bags, and all sorts of things. But this was different, something called marijuana. *Mighty tasty*. Should be very popular once Virginia started growing large crops of the stuff. Someday, it could even replace tobacco. *Now why do I suddenly want a brownie?*

Grabbing hold of the lid, McTeague yanked open the coffin to expose a pretty young woman laid out in a white dress, a lacy veil covering her face. *A bride? How sad*. Then the smell of rotting flesh hit him like a raw sewage blown up his nose, and McTeague scrambled out of the grave, hacking and retching.

"The stench!" McTeague cried, covering his nose with both hands. The body looked fine, but the escaping reek was awful! Beyond description. *Worse than New Jersey in the summer*.

"You have the senses of a wolf, little kitten," Lady Colbert harshly reminded, scratching under a plump breast. "Food tastes better, music lovelier, beer sharper, ah, but then there are the smells!"

"Nothing is free," Kissel said amiably, removing the cigar to blow a smoke ring. It vanished in the thick fog as if going home.

"This is why we smoke, *bon ami*," Pierpont grinned as if telling the punchline to a joke. "Pity you do not have a cigar, eh?"

Trying to breathe through his mouth, McTeague gave a reply that was physically impossible even for double-jointed werewolves who could defy gravity.

"If it gets too bad, rub some laudanum on your nose next time," Kissel smugly suggested, patting a bottle in his frilly shirt pocket. "That'll kill your sense of smell for days."

"And you also can't hunt after using the drug!" the woman scolded, placing her fists on both hips. "Never use laudanum!"

In the distance, dogs began to howl, picking up her flaring emotions.

"Just say no!" she ordered, wagging a finger. "Stay clean, and get the job done. When this matter is settled, we'll own this country, and be worshipped as gods. The food will offer themselves to us. We'll bath in their blood!"

Yuck. How unsanitary. "Sounds good," McTeague coughed, tearing a handkerchief into strips and stuffing the cloth up his nostrils. That helped, but not much. "Somebody wanna lend me a hand getting the

corpse out of the grave?"

As the others laughed, Lady Colbert grinned evilly.

"Not necessary," she stated, pulling a vial from her pants pocket. The container was small, about the size of a Vienna sausage, and the blue fluid glowed like a liquefied firefly. Thumbing off the stopper, Lady Colbert poured the iridescent contents into the coffin.

Thick purple fumes immediately rose to block the view. The stench lessened, and a low groan of pain sounded from within the swirling cloud. With a startled gasp, McTeague stepped back as the deceased bride sat up, straightened her veil, and began to crawl out of the grave on her hands and knees....

* * * *

Reaching the end of the Georgetown boardwalk, Constable Tresham gestured with his nightstick. "There she is, sir."

Resting a shoe on a pile of coiled rope, Joshua squinted across the weedy lot. Situated by itself on the edge of the riverbank was a three-story clapboard house that had clearly seen much better days. The roof shingles needed replacing, the shutters needed painting, the weathervane was a rampart dolphin, *if that was such a thing*, missing a fin, and the gap-toothed picket fence would only stop a lame dog who wasn't really trying very hard. *If Kendal could afford hand-tailored shoes, then why was he staying here? Was the devil dog trying to keep a low profile, or simply because the former sailor loved the water? At least the building was still standing. And not a rainbow pool of aspic dribbling into the harbor.*

"Nice view," Joshua offered diplomatically.

"Faith, it's a dump. I know, sir," Tresham sighed, starting across the bare ground. Apparently there were a lot of seagulls in the area, and they had gotten a hold of something that really disagreed with their stomachs. "But in truth, the old lady is a dear, and a corker of a cook, if somewhat, ah..."

"Absentminded?"

"Palliardic."

Blinking, Joshua stepped around a hole with a small tree growing at the bottom. "She's a what?" he asked, unable to place the word.

Tresham seemed hesitant to reply. Weren't U.S. Marshalls supposed to know everything? "Cheap," the constable explained. "She squeezes nickels until they weep dimes."

Must be a relative of Mrs. Lincoln. Pushing open the front gate, Joshua stepped through. "You better stay here, constable," he directed. "Don't let anybody in, and watch the shadows."

"Whatever for, sir?" Tresham asked, sounding more amused than curious.

"Because they kill," Joshua said, closing the gate with a hard click.

The constable started to chuckle at the obvious joke, then saw the serious expression on the Marshall's face. The shadows can kill? Muttering a prayer, Tresham drew his Colt, and then pulled a crucifix from under his shirt and let it hang outside his uniform.

Not a bad idea, Joshua noted, approaching the sagging porch. *I really should get one of those .*

Climbing precariously to the front door, Joshua saw a brass plaque alongside the bell proclaiming that the owner was Mrs. Captain Herman L. Scoville, and rates were reasonable. Sailors only. Tories were not welcome. *Tories? Just how old was the woman?*

Because of the hour, Joshua knocked on the front door instead of using the bell. There was no sense in waking everybody in the place unless absolutely necessary. *Or alerting the doctor that armed company had arrived .*

A few moments later, the door was answered by a little old lady dressed in black, a fringed shawl draped across her stooped shoulders. She was holding a kerosene lantern, and had a Manton .33 flintlock pistol stuffed into her belt. The gun looked older than Egypt, and more useful as a paperweight than a weapon anymore. *She probably stole it off a Tory during the Revolutionary War and is afraid the owner might return to want it back .*

"Mrs. Scoville?" Joshua asked politely, trying not to chuckle.

"Yes?" the elderly woman replied in a quaking voice that only little old ladies who ran boarding houses ever seemed to get correct. "It is very late, young man. What is this about? If you want a room, we're full. Try the SeaShanky down the street."

With glacial speed, Mrs. Scoville started to close the door, so Joshua blocked it with his shoe. She glared at the obstruction as if it was a steaming pile of offal, then looked at him with what might have been a permanent scowl. "Now see here, young man, I told you that..."

"This is War Department business, ma'am," Joshua stated, pushing open the door, and stepping inside to flash his badge in the hallway light. "I'm a U.S. Marshall. Do you have a David Kendal living here?" He knew she didn't. David didn't live anywhere anymore, but that wasn't common knowledge yet.

"Is he in trouble, Marshall?" Mrs. Scoville asked, looking frightened, and excited, at the same time. "I run a quiet house. No drinking, no cards, no ladies. A nice quiet house."

And sailors lived here? "This is just routine," Joshua lied, closing the door. "Is Mr. Kendal at home?" There was nobody in the parlor—down a long hallway was an empty kitchen, and a flight of stairs went to the second story. The hallway at the top was dark with shadows.

"Oh no, he went fishing this morning and hasn't come back yet. But I should be hearing from him soon."

Not likely. "I need some papers in his possession, ma'am," Joshua said, watching the shadows for any suspicious movements. "Would you take me to his room?"

"Well ... I don't know..."

"This is very important."

She wavered momentarily, then relented, curiosity overwhelming her reticence. "All right, since it is for the War Department," Mrs. Scoville sighed, turning to start up the stairs. "Follow me, please."

"Yes, ma'am." *Looks like I have been given the keys to the kingdom with this badge*, Joshua noted,

feeling a rush of authority. *I'll have to make a concerted effort not to let it go to my head like so many DC politicians. This much power could drive a man insane over time .*

Trundling up the steps, Joshua kept a respectful distance between him and the landlady's impressive rump. At first, he thought she was wearing an oversized bustle. But no, it was all Mrs. Captain Scoville, God bless her.

At the top of the stairs, she turned to the right, and proceeded to a door at the end of the hallway. Snoring could be heard coming from behind most of the other doors, along with the smell of tobacco and stale beer. Apparently, the landlady was not quite as stringent a taskmaster as advertised.

"This is it," Mrs. Scoville muttered unnecessarily, jingling a ring of keys, and trying several until finding the right one. "Please try not to make any noise, I have other gentlemen staying on this floor, and they need their sleep."

"Absolutely, madam, no problem," Joshua said, stepping back slightly to reach for the LeMat under his coat.

The landlady swung open the door and shuffled into the darkness.

In the nimbus of the kerosene lantern, Joshua saw her go to a bureau and pull a piece of oakum from a dress pocket to relay the flame from the lantern to a brass lamp on top of the furniture. As the wick caught, a warm glow flooded the small room. Mrs. Scoville adjusted the flame until it was high and bright.

Inhaling sharply, Joshua tightened the grip on his weapon and entered the bedroom. *Now what in the world was going on here ?* Every wall was covered with newspaper clippings, some of the articles yellow with age. Stepping closer, Joshua studied the clippings. None of them were about the war. Instead these were reports on ghost sightings. Fairy lights in cornfields, haunted houses, disappearing riverboats, eerie sounds in abandoned coal mines, and so on. Anything that had something to do with the supernatural in the DC area.

"My walls!" Mrs. Scoville shrieked, rushing over to start peeling off a clipping. "What has that fool done to my beautiful wallpaper!"

"Stop that at once!" Joshua bellowed, holstering the weapon.

His words rang in the small room. Mrs. Scoville paused to glance timidly over a shoulder. "Sir?"

"Touch nothing," Joshua ordered brusquely, taking the landlady by the shoulder and gently urging her away from the wall. "In fact, give me the key, and leave. Don't come back under any circumstances. This bedroom is now sealed by order of the War Department."

"But I'll have to replace all of this expensive wall paper!" Mrs. Scoville wailed, theatrically wringing her hands. "And I, an old woman, poor in health and poverty-stricken. Woe is me!"

Oh give it a rest, Camille. "This should cover any repairs," Joshua reaching into a vest pocket. Taking out a gold coin, he flipped it towards her.

Faster than a striking mongoose, Mrs. Scoville snatched the Double Eagle out of the air, bite hard to test the authenticity, then tucked it away into her ample bosom.

Safer than the Philadelphia Mint. "That should pay the rent until next year," Joshua stated, taking the woman by both shoulders and steering her out the door. "Now go away, and brew a nice pot of tea."

"But I hate tea!" Mrs. Scoville complained, dragging her heels. "Don't want any tea!" Squinting hard, she tried to read the articles in passing.

"Then pour it down the drain! Who said to drink any?" Joshua said, shoving her into the hall and closing the door gently out of deference to the other tenants.

"Shiver me timbers, what's with all the mucking noise?" somebody shouted, the voice muffled with sleep.

"Shut up!" another man bellowed in reply.

"No, you shut up!"

"Both of ya better stuff it!" a third sailor added furiously. "Or I'll personally hammer a cork into your bung-hole!"

Whatever the nautical threat meant, it worked like a charm and silence returned. Locking the door, Joshua pocketed the key. Then he stuffed a handkerchief into the keyhole to prevent any unauthorized peeking. Landladies were famous for being snoops, and Mrs. Scoville appeared to be their reigning sovereign.

Taking the lamp from the bureau, Joshua went back to the clippings and started reading. Most of the articles had sentences underlined in red pencil. Those always seemed to be the details of where the haunting occurred, and what spectators had been present.

"Still hunting for magic, eh?" Joshua mused, lifting the lamp higher to view the assortment pasted along the ceiling. *Mayhap the stolen books had proven useless*, he postulated, *so Kendal had turned to the newspapers to seek the occult*. Could the tattoo-covered thief have actually found something, a person, or a place, of true magic? Joshua felt a tingle on the back of his neck. Somewhere in this mess could be the source of his strange ability to become a wolf. Perhaps even the name of the mysterious doctor!

Behind him, a floorboard creaked. Setting down the lamp, Joshua irritably turned around to scold Mrs. Scoville for trying to sneak back inside. But he went cold at the sight of a doctor standing in the shadowy corner.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Freeze, y-you are under arrest!" Joshua declared, pulling a gun. "Turn around and face the wall!"

Without a word, the doctor stretched out his gloved hands, and charged.

Fear clenched his guts, but Joshua grimly yanked the trigger! Nothing happened. *Hades! This was the single-action LeMat, not the double-action Starr!*

Dodging out of the way of the doctor, Joshua drew the Starr and fired several times into the side of the physician as he passed by. The soft-lead miniballs drove the doctor into the corner, cracking the plaster

under the newspaper articles. A few of the clippings came free and fluttered to the floor. But the doctor seemed unharmed, aside from a couple of holes in the flapping greatcoat. *Another devil dog !*

Snarling something in an unknown language, the doctor spread his arms wide, then impossibly did it again, exposing a second pair of arms hidden under the coat. The hands weren't covered with gloves, and shiny black claws extended from the blunt fingers to reflect the dancing lamplight.

Gasping at the sight, Joshua dropped the empty Starr, and pulled the trigger of the LeMat to fan the hammer with a palm. Whatever the creature was, it certainly was no devil dog! *Four arms. How could anything on Earth have four arms ?* The big-bore revolver thundered in the small room sounding louder than doomsday, the massive .445 miniballs slamming the doctor into the bureau. The furniture smashed against the wall to the sound of splintering wood. Once again, the doctor seemed to be undamaged. But very annoyed.

Oh goody, I'm making him angry, Joshua thought insanely, firing twice more into the chest of the thing. *That's sure to help .*

Starting forward, the doctor caught his scarf on some splinters and it came off, to reveal an inhuman mouth shaped like an anus, the puckered opening alive with wiggling tendrils.

Sweet Mother of God! Blind panic bubbled within Joshua, and he frantically kept shooting.

Ignoring the heavy miniballs slapping into his torso, the doctor circled around the bed, going wide to avoid the lamp on the floor.

He shrugs off bullets, but doesn't like fire? Switching the LeMat to the shotgun, Joshua aimed low and blew the lamp apart.

Burning kerosene and glass exploded across the doctor, the brass reservoir bouncing off the wall to loudly clang against the back of his head. Howling in torment, the doctor staggered backwards, and Joshua rushed forward with his blackjack and smashed the thing across the face. With yellow blood smearing its ghastly features, the doctor raced past Joshua and dove straight through the open window.

Rushing after the monster, Joshua looked down at the street as the flaming doctor landed on the ground, his greatcoat fluttering like leather wings. Grimly, Joshua fired twice into the thing's back. But it disappeared into the night, leaving a contrail of wispy smoke.

"What ... are you..." Joshua wheezed, struggling to catch his breath. Lead miniballs had passed through the demon without effect, so why had it run away? Could the silver blackjack have done that? *No. It was already bleeding when I hit the thing across the face. Was it the fire? Did natural elements banish the supernatural ?*

Lost in a cascade of wild thoughts, Joshua jerked his head at the smell of wood smoke mixing with the acrid fumes of the blackpowder discharges. Spinning around, he saw that the floor was ablaze, the pool of flames spreading out towards the walls and newspaper articles.

Holstering the gun, Joshua frantically rushed over and whipped off his coat to beat out the fire. As it went out, a steady pounding could be heard from beyond the locked door. Somebody was running up the stairs. The doctor was coming back!

Yanking out the LeMat, Joshua switched back to the main cylinder, trying desperately to recall if he

used all nine shots, or only seven. *Keep track of your ammunition, hayfoot!* Joshua mentally scowled, licking dry lips. *That is, if there was a next time.*

The door crashed open, the busted lock spraying across the bedroom, and there stood Constable Tresham brandishing his Colt and billyclub.

"What happened, sir?" Tresham demanded, looking around the room. "I came running when I heard the ruckus."

That's why the constable wasn't standing at the front gate when the doctor landed, he was already running into the house. "Seems that I found the man I was looking for," Joshua declared, holstering the LeMat and starting to reload the Starr with shaky hands. The light coming in from the hallway filled the bedroom with ghostly shadows. Trying to ignore them, Joshua concentrated on his work.

"Did you, now? Well done, sir." Going to the window, the constable looked at the street below. "Did you throw him out, or did he jump to avoid capture?"

"A little of both, actually."

"Typical." Removing his hat, Tresham stuck his head out the window. "What happened to the body?"

"He ran away."

Looking over a shoulder, the constable arched an eloquent eyebrow. "After a three story drop?"

"Landed on a horse," Joshua muttered, pulling a fresh charge from the ammunition box on his belt. *Powder, lead, paper, tamp. Repeat as necessary.* The words sang in his brain as he moved to the next chamber of the cylinder.

"Must have been a very strong horse," Tresham muttered, turning from the window and placing his hat on at a tilt. "Pity you missed him."

"He ducked."

"Yes, they do that sometimes," Tresham agreed, holstering the Colt at his hip. "Me too, whenever possible."

The cool river breeze was blowing the curtains into the room, and Joshua fought a shiver. The lace material was fluttering like the doctor's coat. *Had there been wings underneath the garment? Gargoyles on church roofs had wings. Was the fellow a gargoyle? A demon? Satan himself?*

"What's this?" Tresham asked, stooping over. Rising, the constable lifted a Confederate Army canteen. Removing the cap, he took a sniff. "Kerosene," he said in disgust. "What was the other man planning on doing, sir, burn down the house?"

Caught in the act of biting open a paper cartridge, that simple observation almost made Joshua drop the Starr. *Not burn down the house, destroy the newspaper clippings!* Adrenaline flooded his body at the realization, and Joshua started to holster the half loaded gun, then forced himself to continue the work. *I have a better chance of living to read the articles with a loaded pistol in my hand.*

"I'd say yes," Joshua demurred, trying to sound casual.

The constable caught the shift in tone. Seems like he had trumped the Marshall's ace by accident. That was always getting him in trouble with his superior officers. *Ah well, why change the habit of a lifetime? I'd rather be right than polite .*

Holstering the Starr, Joshua started purging the spent blackpowder from the LeMat when he spied wisps of smoke coming from the sagging bureau. For a split tick, he thought the furniture was melting, but closer inspection showed it was actually ... ah....

Crumbling into dust. Every place the yellow blood of the demon had splashed, the wood was turning into dust and sprinkling to the floorboards in a fine rain.

"What is that, acid?" the constable said, reaching out an inquisitive finger.

"Don't touch it!" Joshua barked, bringing the other man to an abrupt halt. "That's..." *The blood of a demon .* "Poison. That's poison. He was carrying a bottle. It must have broken." The explanation sounded lame, but the constable seemed to accept it at face value.

"Is that what the Confederates are smearing on their bullets to kill our lads?" Constable Tresham said in a dangerous tone. "Those stinking, yellow, rebel scum!"

How did a street constable know about the poison bullet theory? The information must be more widespread than anybody in the War Department believed possible. Not good. "I think so," Joshua lied, working on the reloading.

Suddenly, there were shapes in the doorway.

Spilling a charge of blackpowder on the floor, Joshua swung up the partially-loaded LeMat. Constable Tresham did the same with his Colt. Side by side, the two men thumbed back the hammers, then relaxed as Mrs. Scoville entered, along with several barefoot men dressed in sleeping gowns. Carrying a lantern in one hand, the landlady was armed with her flintlock horsepistol, the others carrying brass candlesticks and a spittoon as makeshift bludgeons.

"We heard gunshots," Mrs. Scoville started, when she screamed and pointed the pistol downward. "Look at my floor! My beautiful imported floor!"

"Stop right there!" Joshua yelled, holding up a palm. "Everybody get out, and stay out!"

"But my floor...!" Mrs. Scoville wailed petulantly.

"And the bureau," a scruffy man in a beard added, indicating the partially-disintegrated furniture with a candlestick.

Clutching her throat, Mrs. Scoville screamed again.

"Henry, get them out of here," Joshua whispered urgently. "I don't want this room disturbed until I have done a thorough search."

"No problem, chief," Constable Tresham stated, advancing upon the civilians. "All right, folks, nothing to see here. Move along and let the marshall do his job."

"But my room!" the landlady howled, trying to see around the colossal man.

"Send a letter to your congressman, ma'am."

"Leave the lantern!" Joshua added, as the constable blotted out the hallway light.

"Why?" Mrs. Scoville demanded suspiciously. "You already have one ... aiye! My antique imported lantern! A gift from my late husband before he died in the service of our glorious nation!"

The other tenants rolled their eyes, and Joshua briefly wondered if Capt. Scoville had actually died at sea, or simply run away from the parsimonious harpy? Rummaging in his vest, Joshua found another Double Eagle and passed it over. "Now I own everything in the room," he declared brusquely.

"And much obliged for the light, ma'am," Tresham added, taking the lantern from the unresisting fingers of the landlady, who was gnawing on the new coin. Passing the lantern to the Marshall, the constable herded the civilians into the hallway and pulled the door closed. It swung open again, the remains of the lock dangling impotently.

Sliding a chair under the latch, Joshua got the door to stay in place, and placed the kerosene lantern on a marble washstand. Cracking his knuckles as a prelude, the man finished reloading the LeMat, then began to read the newspaper articles. If Joshua was correct, these represented Kendal's lifelong ambition. He must have wanted them on display to gauge his progress towards ...*whatever the thief eventually found* .

Some of the articles went back for a decade, and several came from other countries, England, Canada, and France. Kendal must have been ghost hunting around the world when he was in the Navy.*Mayhap some of his whippings came from being off the ship without permission while he was searching for the occult* ? It was a logical possibility.

Proceeding along the wall, Joshua saw the clippings become more recent, and then specifically centered around Washington.*After he had been discharged, and became a Freemason* . The man had been a fanatic on the subject, buying, probably stealing, dozens of newspapers in his fanatical quest. The locations of spectral sightings were underlined in red pencil, mysterious deaths in blue pencil. But every article was crossed out in black pencil.*Investigated, and proven useless?*

There came raised voices from downstairs, then a bellow from Constable Tresham, followed by silence. Henry was obviously keeping the civilians in line.*Good man* .

Time slowly passed as Joshua worked his way around the room. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of clippings pasted to the walls, but every article was marked as a failure. Had these also been a dead-end for Kendal, the same as the Freemasons? *Mayhap the stolen books were the answer. I'll search for them next* .

Finishing a sweep of the bedroom, Joshua reached his starting point and frowned deeply. Nothing. Then he remembered how the stablehands at the Executive Mansion often liked to hide French girlie posters behind the furniture in their room. Every one of them thought that idea was clever and original.

Going to the washstand, Joshua lifted the lantern and pulled the furniture away from the wall to find more articles. Every one marked as useless. With fading hope, Joshua went to the wrecked bureau, and used a shoe to shove it aside. Sure enough, there were more articles pasted to the wallpaper, all of them crossed

out.

Joshua looked again—except for one. That article had been circled several times with red and blue pencil, the impression almost digging a hole into the plaster. Hallelujah!

Kneeling on the floor, Joshua was extremely careful of not touching the bubbling blood, or bizarre dust.

The clipping was from the *Baltimore Daily Sun* about six months ago, and was a report of strange happenings at someplace called the Hoffman Estate. Weird lights, graves disturbed, the walking dead ...
Spooky stuff. But no mention of devil dogs, or a mysterious doctor .

Pulling out a notebook normally used to jot down the dinner menu, Joshua took the pertinent details. The haunted house was over in Laurel, Maryland, along the Patuxent River. *Say, twenty or thirty miles away. Too far to walk, I'll have to get another horse .*

Tucking the book inside his jacket, Joshua pressed a palm against the clipping until the flour-based paste underneath grew warm, then he carefully peeled it free. There was nothing on the back but half of a recipe for Scottish Hermit Cake. It sounded tasty, but was not germane to the investigation, so he folded the paper lengthwise and tucked it into a vest pocket for safekeeping. Hoffman—the name was unknown to him.

Surveying the littered room, Joshua squared his shoulders. Now came the fun part. As a butler, Joshua had searched a thousand rooms for stolen spoons or missing liquor bottles, but this was the first time he ever looked for clues. Starting with the sagging bureau, Joshua went through the drawers, using extra special care not to touch the yellow residue. The dried blood had stopped sizzling, but that didn't mean it was safe.

Wary of any boobytraps, Joshua found only clothing, a few personal items, and a lot of bottles of Prof. Miracle's Amazing Hair Tonic, half of them empty. *To keep his coat glossy?* Popping a cork, Joshua took a sniff and reeled from the pungent alcohol fumes. Good lord, the elixir must be ninety proof! These were for keeping a man company on long lonely nights, not for restoring hair. Pocketing a bottle of the elixir for further examination, *possibly with soda water as a chaser* , Joshua pulled out the bureau drawers and checked underneath them. That was a favorite hiding place by the Lincoln boys for their collection of French postcards. Scandalous stuff! Between the family and staff, Joshua had a set of fifty by now.

Hidden behind the top drawer, Joshua found a detailed map of the Executive Mansion and the surrounding grounds. *A genuine clue* . That went with the bottle of hair tonic into his coat pocket. Mental note: get equipment bag.

Joshua went to the chair next, but it was solid wood, with nothing hidden underneath the cushion. *Pity* . The outside shutters were clean, and the spittoon was dry, along with the chamber pot. *Thank goodness for small favors* .

Going to the bed, Joshua used a gun barrel to prod the pillow, and warily flipped over the mattress. Nothing. Crossing the room, Joshua checked the closet, and found only more shoes made by Herr Mingle. Feeling inside, Joshua found a wad of cash tied with string. *Kendal might have been an inhuman killer* , Joshua chuckled to himself, *but the man was certainly no master criminal* . Tucking your wallet inside a shoe for safety was standard practice for any customer at a gentleman's club.

Spreading out the bills on the bed, Joshua counted over a thousand dollars in Union greenbacks. It was a fortune, more than most folks earned in their entire life. *Was this his fee for trying to kill President*

Lincoln? If so, where did the demon doctor get this sort of ... ?

Spitting an inarticulate noise, Joshua dropped the money as if it was covered with nightsoil. These bills had come from the pockets of the soldiers slain on the battlefield! It was literally blood money.

Staring at the greenbacks, Joshua struggled with his ethics, then relented and stuffed the cash into a pocket. There was no possible way to give the money back to the families of the deceased soldiers, so Joshua would use the cash to finance his mission and bring the four-armed monster to justice. Somehow, that seemed fitting and proper. The idea carried the sharp taste of justice.

The urge to leave was strong, but Joshua resisted. There was one last place to check. Pulling out a pocketknife, Joshua crawled along the floor hunting for loose boards, and found one under the bed. *Ah ha! as they say in the penny thrillers .*

Half expecting an arrow to shoot out, Joshua lifted the board and moved the lantern closer. Tucked among the crisscrossing braces was a cloth bundle tied with string. Gingerly taking it out, Joshua laid the object next to the lantern and cut the string. Peeling back the cloth, he found four slim books, each marked with the seal of a different library. All of them were about ghosts, Satan worship, and the supernatural. The stolen books without a doubt. Flipping through the pages, Joshua noted a lot of sections underlined in black, but nothing was circled in red pencil. Kendal must have considered these useless. *Interesting . A trip to the Hoffman Estate was becoming more imperative by the moment. If it isn't Lake Hoffman by now .*

Stuffing the tomes into his bulging pocket, Joshua stood and checked over the small bedroom one last time. Satisfied that nothing important had been missed, Joshua removed the chair that was blocking the door and headed for the stairs.

Raised voices could be heard coming from outside the boarding house. Joshua paused on the landing, a hand reaching for the Starr. Filling the front doorway, Constable Tresham was standing on the porch calmly telling a crowd of torch-wielding villagers that Mrs. Scoville had been cleaning her antique flintlock when it accidentally went off. There was no rebel sneak attack, no invasion, and nothing interesting to see.

Aside from one slightly singed demon, Joshua added privately, releasing the weapon and continuing to the bottom step.

At the end of the hallway, Joshua could see Mrs. Scoville making coffee in the kitchen, the yawning tenants clustered around a table and sneaking in shots of Prof. Miracle's Amazing Hair Tonic when she wasn't looking. Truthfully, Joshua was still a bit rattled and felt like taking a drink himself. But this was not the time, or the place. *Well, not the time, anyway .*

"Everybody go back to the tavern," the constable ordered in a no-nonsense voice, tapping a palm with the billy club. "Or I'll be giving you a taste of hickory that'll last a week!"

Obviously previous recipients of a lathering from the ominous shillelagh, the entire crowd gulped and hurriedly dispersed, shuffling away with their torches into the darkness of the night.

And that was how to handle an unruly mob, Joshua noted with a pang of envy. *Speak with conviction, never flinch, and have a reputation for keeping your threats .*

Not for the first time today, the U.S. Marshall felt like a rank amateur. Henry Tresham was a real officer

of the law. A professional, trained by professionals. *I'm just a butler with a gun. Well, if I ever want to also become a professional ... ?*

"Hey, Henry!" Joshua called out, starting that way.

The constable turned at the sound of his Christian name. "Sir?"

"How would you like a promotion?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Twinkling stars filled the heavens as U.S. Marshall J.P. Withers, and Deputy Marshall Henry Tresham galloped across the rolling Maryland countryside. The ground had been made crisp from the midnight cold, and every step of the horses sank into the earth with a soft crunch.

Back in Georgetown, Joshua had not been surprised to find almost every livery stable closed. What had caught Joshua off guard was that the one stable still open flatly refused to rent him a horse. Apparently, the owner was a copperhead, and the fellow had actually tried to spit on Lincoln's signature on Joshua's commission papers. Deputy Tresham had gone berserk at the action, and Joshua had to physically step between them to stop the former constable from pummeling the stable owner to death.

"Traitor!" Henry snarled, being pushed away.

"Go read the constitution, idiot!" the man sneered in defiant reply. "If gorillas can read!"

"Read this, Benedict Arnold!" Henry bellowed, making the most amazingly rude gesture.

"That is not how we represent the president of the United States," Joshua gently chided, leading the furious man back onto the cobblestone street.

"Sorry, sir," Henry growled, flipping his billy club by the tether in a complicated maneuver. "It won't happen again."

Joshua knew the man meant it, but he was also well aware that Henry was still imagining the adroit application of hickory on head. *And some folks claim that I had a temper !*

Walking along the cobblestone streets, the men discussed what to do, and finally went to the precinct stable. Henry saddled his horse, Estelle, a roan mare with dappled withers, and Joshua commandeered an Appaloosa stallion named Thunder. Young and strong, Thunder rippled with muscles, but didn't seem that bright. On the other hand, Estelle was a seasoned veteran and clearly bridle-wise. Joshua could tell that Henry was more proud of Estelle than his recent promotion. *I just hope it was legal .*

Stopping off at a Union Army base, Joshua's commission papers got the two men a fast meal of beans, bacon, and blessed coffee, while a couple of Double Eagles pressed in the right hands obtained them enough kerosene lanterns to melt the North Pole.

With their saddle bags packed with deadly cargo, Joshua told Henry everything as they sloshed across Maryland in a midnight ride that would have done Patrick Henry proud. In return, Henry started instructing Joshua on the basics of police work.

"...and that is how you can tell if somebody is tailing you," Henry finished, both hands resting on the pommel of the saddle. Two canteens of water were draped across his shoulders, and a long scarf was tied about his neck, making the man resemble a French grenadier.

"I see," Joshua said slowly, holding onto the reins. His canteens hung from the pommel, and kept bumping his knees. "So if I was to do this technique in reverse..."

"Then nobody could trail you. Yes, sir."

"By thunder, that's useful information!" Joshua exclaimed in delight. "I knew it was a good idea to recruit you."

At the sound of his name, the stallion nickered.

"Sorry, boy," Joshua chuckled, stroking the animal's muscular neck. "Wasn't talking to you."

With equine grace, Thunder accepted the apology.

Reaching the Patuxent River, the armed men slowed the horses to a trot and proceeded along the muddy banks until entering a dense forest. A damp wind ruffled their clothing and hair, carrying the smell of rotting plants. A mile later, a bridge came into view, the other side masked with a thick fog that oddly did not cross the river. The cloud flowed precisely along the bank as if restrained by an invisible wall. The effect was more than somewhat disturbing.

"More magic?" Henry asked nervously.

Joshua nodded. "It would appear so."

Pausing to let the tired horses drink from the river, Joshua and Henry took a few sips of Prof. Miracle's elixir to ward off the evening chill. Wiping the stinging brew from his mouth, Joshua was surprised to feel stubble on his cheek. *Had it really been that long since he shaved, or was the tonic actually working?*

"According to the directions in the newspaper, this is it," Henry said, pulling his Colt to check the load. "The Hoffman Estate should be right across that bridge."

"Hidden in the fog," Joshua murmured, loosening both of the pistols in his shoulder holster. He felt the urge to take a little more Dutch courage from ol' Prof. Miracle, but was afraid a second dose of the brew might make his teeth dissolve. *Or make me resemble the wildman from Borneo.*

As the horses stopped lapping at the water, both animals raised their heads to shuffle their hooves on the ground. Estelle and Thunder clearly did not want to be here, but unfortunately had no choice in the matter.

"Let's do it," Joshua said trying to sound confident. Nudging the rump of Thunder with his heels, he started the horse moving forward at a slow walk.

Shaking the reins, Henry made a clucking noise with his tongue and Estelle did the same without any other inducement. "Good girl," he whispered, thumbing back the hammer on the Colt. "Nice and slow, Estelle. Easy now."

"Odd name for a horse. Why do you call her that anyway?" Joshua asked as they approached the bridge. He was trying not to think about what might be hidden in the swirling mist. "Is Estelle your, ah, lady friend?"

"My sister," Henry sighed. "There is an uncanny resemblance between the two."

"Really? I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Her, too."

As the horses stepped onto the wooden bridge, the fog thinned and suddenly the men could clearly see the other side of the river. A crumbling mansion stood in a weedy clearing. The porch was sagging, dozens of shingles were missing from the roof, and the whole place was generously speckled with bird droppings from countless avian generations.

"Doesn't look haunted," Henry said thoughtfully, pushing his hat back with the gun barrel.

"Only one way to find out," Joshua muttered, shaking the reins. *Wish we had gotten a hundred rifleman as escorts from the Army base. But the president wanted this kept secret, so we're on our own. Besides, there really was nobody else better qualified for the mission. Heck, there was nobody trained for it at all !* As far as Joshua knew, he and Henry were the only occult investigators in the world. *When we recruit ten more men, we can buy a boat and call it the Argo. Just hope we don't get fleeced on the price.*

Starting to cross the bridge, the two men stopped as the crumbling mansion wavered, as if the building was underwater. Reining to a halt, Joshua blinked in surprise, while Henry muttered something in Celtic while making the sign of the cross.

The ruined structure was gone, replaced by a magnificent house surrounded by a high stone wall. The Hoffman Mansion was now six stories high, with wings that extended for hundreds of yards. Numerous brick chimneys rose into the sky, and winged stone gargoyles glowered down from every gable. There was even an observatory on top, a long telescope pointing upwards at the distant stars. Nothing below the second floor could be seen of the mansion because of the marble wall surrounding the massive estate.

Impressed beyond words, Joshua tried not to whistle, but nothing came out. *A marble wall. In-mucking-credible .*

"Not even the czar of Russia could afford something like that," Henry stated bluntly.

"And harder than Hades to batter through," Joshua added, shifting uncomfortably in the saddle. A castellated wall, turrets, barbican with portcullis ... this place isn't a country estate, but a fortress!

"Chief, how was that illusion of a crumbling ruin done, anyway?" Henry asked, a slight quaver marring his words. "Smoke and mirrors, like some carnival trickster?"

Joshua checked his weapons. "No, my friend, we're facing magic. Real magic. The dark arts."

"Then ... you weren't joking about those devil dogs?" Henry sounded hopeful. "Just a little josh between friends?"

"Sadly, I was not."

"Sweet Fanny Adams," Henry whispered, blowing air through his handlebar moustache. They actually were going to fight a demon. No wonder the marshall had sworn him to secrecy! Monsters from the Abyss. *Now how did that go again? Ah ... the Lord is my ... er, shepherd, I shall not want, he maketh me lay down in grace ... no, green ... yeah, in green ... orchards? No, that wasn't right.*

Green beans, green grass, greenbacks. Shoot a monkey, I've forgotten the Lord's Prayer!

Hunkering low in the saddle, the Irishman blushed, glad that his deceased father hadn't seen the embarrassing lapse. Or at least, he hoped that his father hadn't seen. Henry peeked heavenward. *Papa, can you hear me ?* He waited for an answer, but none was forthcoming.

There weren't any lights showing in the windows of the stately mansion that Joshua could see, nor any smoke rising from the chimneys. That was good news. Squinting in the darkness, he couldn't locate any guards standing duty on the wall, or rooftop. *At least, none that I can see .*

With the wind whispering in the trees, Joshua and Henry walked the horses off the bridge, and cautiously started along a curving brick road that lead to the front gate. Weapons at the ready, the men stayed alert, but there was no sign that their approach had been observed. As they drew near the barbican, there came the metallic ratchet of gears, and the gate lowered to the ground invitingly. Beyond was only darkness.

Welcome! Now if you'll just stick your head into the mouth of this cannon ... "We're not going in there," Joshua declared, reining Thunder about. "Hoffman keeps his home hidden by using magic, but welcomes unannounced visitors?"

"Faith, and be sure it's a trap," Henry agreed, laying his Colt on a thigh. "We best get off the road, sir, in case some thing comes charging out."

"Looking forward to it," Joshua declared, his pulse quickening at the prospect of a fight. Trained and honed to be a gentleman's gentleman since he was a teenager, Joshua was quite perturbed by this previously unknown tendency towards violence. *Then again, perhaps I should embrace the feelings. Nobody goes hunting with a falcon scared of field mice .*

As the horses moved off the roadway into the weeds, the ratchets sounded again, and the gate raised. Frowning slightly, Joshua nudged Thunder back on the road, and down came the gate again. Off, and back up it went.

"It's an automatic response," Henry exclaimed. "Like stroking a cat. One touch, and up she goes!"

A poetic visual. "Well, we're still not using the front door," Joshua stated, pulling out his LeMat, only to slam the gun back into the holster again. But a marble wall ten feet tall, and who knew how thick.... "Any clever ideas how to get inside?"

"Of course," Henry replied, and began walking Estelle through the weeds, heading along the wall. After catching burglars for a couple of years, it soon becomes second nature for him to always think about how to break into a home, or business. *Crooks and cops, the only real difference was our clothing .*

Riding through the misty weeds, Henry studied the wall as if trying to see the other side by sheer will power. Kicking Thunder into motion, Joshua followed along, eager to see what the man had in mind. There certainly wasn't going to be a coal chute, or a stout tree conveniently close to the imposing barrier, that they could use.

Reaching the end of the wall, they turned the corner into a bank of shadows, and Henry silently signaled for a halt.

"If the moon behaves, we'll be out of sight here," Henry said, sliding off the mare. "I didn't have burglary in mind when I packed this, but it should get us inside."

As his sight became accustomed to the darkness, Joshua watched the trees and bushes for any suspicious movements. "Are we going to tunnel under?" he asked.

"Better." Going to a saddlebag, Henry pulled out a coil of rope and started knotting it into a lasso.

Fascinated, Joshua watched as the big man twirled the rope about, adjusting the knot a few times. Going to the wall, Henry made like a Mexican gaucho and let fly. The lasso sailed over the wall, and promptly came slithering back to puddle at his boots. Changing position, the Deputy Marshall tried several more times, fishing blindly for a purchase on the other side, until it caught on something. Testing delicately, Henry tugged on the rope, then pulled hard enough to lift himself off the ground a few inches.

"Wa-la!" Henry whispered, mispronouncing the word.

"Now where did you learn to do that?" Joshua said in frank admiration.

"My grammy taught me French."

"I meant the rope thing."

The big man grinned sheepishly. Oh that. "Ever since I got shot in the knee a few years ago, I don't run so very well," Henry said apologetically. "Too many of the wee thieves were escaping from me clutches. This sort of makes things even again." He gave the rope another tug. "Faith, this seems secure enough, but I better go first. If the rope supports me, it'll certainly hold you."

And the horses. "Fair enough." Pulling out both guns, Joshua kept a sharp watch for anybody, or any thing, coming their way, while Henry slung the pair of clinking saddlebags over a broad shoulder. Taking hold of the rope, the man twitched his moustache, then scaled straight up the side of the wall, and wiggled over the top.

Alone with the chuffing horses, Joshua held his breath until Henry reappeared and motioned for the Marshall to come up.

Loosely tethering the horses to a bush so they could break free and run if necessary, Joshua draped one saddlebag across his chest, and started awkwardly climbing. The rope was rough in his hands, which helped a lot, but it was slow going because of the extra weight. However, Joshua steadfastly refused to fail in front of the other man. *Come on, you're not polishing the silverware now,* Joshua mentally commanded, digging in the toes of his sturdy Brogans. *Put some muscle into it and climb. Climb!*

When the wheezing Marshall finally reached the top, Henry did not offer any assistance over the side. Instead, he stepped aside and stood guard with the Colt. Sometimes, it seemed that the DC lawman was trying to impress the Georgetown constable. Which made no sense whatsoever, unless Mr. Withers was a brand new U.S. Marshall. *Don't be ridiculous,* he scolded. *The War Department would never send a rank beginner on a mission this important. That would be suicide!*

"Big ... wall," Joshua panted, wiggling between two of the castellated blocks and crawling onto the flat top of the wide barrier. He had been afraid they might have to do a balancing act on a few feet of room, but the wall was a good ten feet wide.

"Seen better in Dublin," Henry lied with a straight face.

"Yeah, right." Not even a SeaCoast mortar could hammer through this American Gibraltar in less than a day.

Moving to the middle of the span, Joshua waited for a wave of vertigo to pass before rising into a crouch and studying the interior grounds. They seemed extensive, which was not surprising. *Big wall, big house, big estate* .

There was no fog on that side of the wall, which gave the estate a strange enclosed feeling, as if it was a ship in a bottle. An island in the clouds. In spite of the lateness of the season, the lawn was green, dotted with iron-lace benches and splashing water fountains. Colorful flowerbeds were everywhere. Along with a horse stable, carriage house, and several buildings of unknown function. *Tact rooms? Bridle shop?* There was no way of telling for sure. Tall hedges hid the rest of grounds.

"No signs of guards," Henry muttered, sounding unhappy about the matter.

"A hell of a place," Joshua agreed, hoping that was not an accurate description.

"Faith an' I can smell the money," Henry stated, hitching up his gunbelt. "I'm surprised the driveway isn't paved with gold. Who was this Alexander Hoffman anyway? Some kind of a foreign potentate?"

Drawing the LeMat, Joshua set the selector pin from the 12-gauge shotgun to the .445 miniballs. "Let's find out and ask."

"If he's still alive," Henry noted sagely.

Scrutinizing the layout, Joshua noted a side door with a transom overhead. That was probably a heat vent for the kitchen staff. Aristocrats rarely considered the servant's entrance a weak spot in their defenses and the kitchen often only had cheap locks. Easy to break, and even easier to break into.

"How about going in through the kitchen?" Henry asked, pointing a thick finger.

"Unless you would rather try the front door."

"I was once dropped as a baby, but not on my head. Thank you, but no."

"Wise man." Creeping to the edge of the wall, Joshua peeked down to see that the rope had snagged around the tail of a bronze scorpion bigger than a bathtub. The statue was in a flower garden full of tropical orchids. In October? Suddenly, Joshua realized that he could no longer see his breath. The air was warm atop the wall, and smelled of exotic plants. *More magic? Perhaps the dark arts did have some a few positive aspects* .

"Smells like the other Estelle," Henry chuckled softly, shaking the lasso free from the barb of the giant arachnid. Coiling the rope, he firmly attached it to one of the blocks along the outer part of the thick wall. Then he got busy knotting the rope every few feet.

Joshua started to ask why when he caught a glimpse of something racing across the lawn. He tried to track whatever it was, but the thing moved too fast. A blink, and it was gone.

"What in the name of St. Switzens was that?" Henry demanded scowling.

"Guard dog," Joshua guessed. "Or some unearthly thing that serves the same function."

A ghostly chill swept over the men that had nothing to do with the river fog only a few feet away.

"Marvelous." Henry said nothing as he tossed the knotted rope down the inside of the wall.

Going to the edge, Joshua took the rope in both hands, eased his legs over the side, and began to descend. Landing in the moonshadow of the scorpion, Joshua waited with a drawn gun until Henry arrived with his clinking saddlebags.

Tucking the loose end of the rope behind a rhododendron bush, Henry pulled out a knife instead of the Colt, and gave a knowing look. Nodding in agreement, Joshua holstered the LeMat and pulled out the blackjack. Silence was essential.

Crouched low in the bushes, two men began to slip through the greenery, uncaring of the exotic plants trampled underfoot.

Carnations, mums, heather, tulips ... flowers grew in profusion, affording them excellent cover. Easing through a waving stand of lupines, Joshua found a bronze statue of a naked woman holding two big water jugs. That was a symbol of the zodiac, the same as the scorpion. Decorations, or guards? With magic, anything was possible. Wisely, Joshua decided not to bump into any of the statues. *Nobody was ever eaten by a sleeping tiger* .

"You know, I used to be a Virgo until I meet this girl with a nice Taurus," Henry softly whispered. "But I had to Libra when I got Cancer."

Ignoring that, Joshua concentrated on being stealthy. He'd heard the members of the War Department talk about battlefield humor before, but puns? Bah. Those were like passing wind, only the creator found them inoffensive.

Reaching a heavily-laden grape arbor, the men paused to make sure the coast was clear, then dashed across the open lawn as quickly as possible. The distance was only a few yards, but Joshua and Henry felt like it was miles before they reached the rose bushes alongside the mansion. Ducking carefully into the foliage, they waited a breathless minute to make sure nobody was going to raise an alarm. Then the men crept out of the roses and tried the kitchen door latch. Locked.

Pulling out a knife, Henry went to work, and a few clicks later, there came a metallic clunk, and the door swung open.

"A man of many talents," Joshua smiled, peeking inside. The kitchen was dark, but the reflected moonlight filled the room was empty of people.

"Catch enough criminals and a little rubs off," Henry replied smugly, stuffing the slightly-bent knife back into the sheath.

As the two men slipped into the kitchen, the door silently closed casting them into darkness. Standing

amid the cutlery and chopping boards, Joshua strained to hear any movement in the house, but there wasn't a sound. No laughter, snoring, or footsteps. The mansion was quiet as a tomb.

And too damn dark, Joshua noted, disgruntled. He was afraid to move, positive that he would knock over something extraordinarily noisy.

"Incoming," Henry whispered, scratching a Lucifer alive with a thumbnail. In dancing light of the tiny flame, the kitchen appeared ominous and gloomy, full of sinister and mysterious things, like an abattoir on Halloween.

Interior decorating by Torquemada. Pulling a kerosene lantern from his saddlebag, Joshua struck a Lucifer and adjusted the wick to the lowest setting. The small flame was a reddish ghost in the glass flue, the glow only permeating the darkness for a few yards.

Henry did the same. In the combined illumination, Joshua saw the kitchen was spotless. Absolutely spotless, as if it had never been used. *Or scrubbed by fanatical servants*. If this drudgery had also been done by magic, the former butler found himself warming slightly to the concept. An automatic dish washer, now that really would be something!

"Nine o'clock," Henry said, jerking his chin.

Puzzled, Joshua almost checked the time on his watch before realizing that the man was giving military directions. *Something wrong with say left or right?* Leveling his LeMat, Joshua advanced in that direction to see an open doorway appear from the shadows. Thumbing back the hammer on the gun, Joshua held the lantern high and proceeded on tiptoe.

Entering a short hall, Joshua emerged into a spacious dining room. The lantern could only cast weak light across the room, but this also appeared vacant. However, there were dishes on the table, a meal for two. Salad, entree, desert, sidedishes, goblets of wine, rolls in a basket, gravy boat, the works. But everything was covered with a thick patina of dust and cobwebs.

Moving around the table, Joshua fought the urge to correct the positions of the silverware. Somebody's dinner had been interrupted and never finished. He stopped. Mayhap the real owners of the mansion? Could the doctor merely be using the place as a point of refuge, stolen at *claws and tendrils*, gunpoint from the rightful occupants? It was a disturbing notion. And the meal certainly wasn't for the doctor, not with his ... ah ... substitute for a mouth.

"What is that stuff in the bowl?" Henry scowled suspiciously. "Is that brains? Were these heathen scum eatin' human brains?"

"Cauliflower. Although, there was a remarkable similarity." *At least I hope it's mucking cauliflower*.

Scouting the room, the men found a sliding panel that refused to budge, without a lock in sight to jimmy. Placing the lantern on the table, Joshua took the bottle of oil from alongside the withered salad bowls and liberally poured it along the track on the floor. Letting it seep in for a minute, they tried the panel once more and it slide aside easily.

"Were you always a Marshall?" Henry asked, sounding bemused.

"Not when I was a child," Joshua evaded smoothly.

"That wasn't a proper answer, sir."

"It wasn't a proper question."

The soft ticking of a clock could be heard as the men moved into a hallway. A red carpet lined the parquet floor, and oil paintings of wizened old men and even older women hung on both walls. There were no doors.

Suddenly, chandeliers above flared with light. Trapped in the glare, Joshua and Tresham braced for an attack, but nothing happened.

"Sneaking around here is as pointless as marinating a rock," Joshua whispered hoarsely, holstering his gun to turn the wick up all the way in his lantern. *At least now I won't have to worry about the kerosene not igniting when I throw this at the doctor .*

Henry, his nostrils flaring as if trying to ferret out any evil inside the sprawling mansion. But there were only faint traces of dank, dust, rotting plants, wet dog, and by gum, something that smelled an awful lot like bay leaves. *Bay leaves?*

Keeping near the walls to not interfere with each other's line of fire in case of trouble, Joshua and Henry reached the end of the hall and found themselves in the foyer. The front door was to their right, a good escape route if necessary. Wall niches contained medieval suits of armor, and a couple of vases filled with dead flowers. A huge mirror was flanked by a circular stair going to the next level.

"Faith, that's being just incredible," Henry whispered, stepping closer. "How can any smithy roll a sheet of glass that size, I'll be asking you?"

Joshua started to answer when he saw their reflections in the mirror smile, and draw guns. That took a full heartbeat for his mind to process, then Joshua dove to the side, shouting a warning.

Lightning fast, Henry turned around with his colt at the ready, and the images of the Marshall and Deputy in the mirror laughed as they shot him pointblank in the back.

The doppelganger guns made no noise, but smoke and flame blew out of the glass. Red blood sprayed from the front of his shirt as Henry staggered, and fell to the parquet floor, coughing and hacking. The two reflections silently turned towards Joshua.

Not knowing what else to do, Joshua fired at the mirror. *Insane problem, insane solution !* The LeMat boomed, and the glass exploded. The combination was deafening and seemed to echo throughout the entire building, following every hall and passageway to the end.

As the shards rained down in the foyer, Joshua protectively covered his face with a raised arm, and blindly fired again and again. This time, Joshua heard the duplicates of himself and Tresham thinly scream. Risking a peek under an elbow, Joshua saw the remaining tortured images, in the few remaining pieces of the mirror frame, twist about in agony and then eerily fade away.

Rising from the glass-covered floor, Joshua scrambled over to Henry and desperately felt for a pulse. It was low and erratic.

"Never ... saw 'em," Henry groaned. Then the big man went still, his head lolling to the side as a rivulet of blood flowed from slack lips.

"Henry," Joshua whispered, feeling utterly helpless.

There came the sound of running footsteps. A lot of them.

Forcing himself to stand, Joshua grimly leveled his two guns as a blinding white light flooded the foyer.

Backing away, Joshua could vaguely see a doctor approaching along a side corridor that hadn't been there a moment ago. *More sliding panels, eh?* The inhuman thing wasn't wearing an overcoat, just street clothing with extra holes cut in the white shirt for the additional limbs. Three were raised, claws extended for battle, and the fourth carried a short metallic tube, the bright light coming from a glass lens in the front.

Snarling in rage, Joshua aimed both guns and fired, missing the doctor, but smashing the device. The light winked out. But a split second later it returned, only from a new direction. Swiveling at the hip, Joshua fired and a second doctor slammed into the wall, losing his hat. The exposed pate was covered with quills like a porcupine, and as the thing looked up, the quills bristled.

Shooting constantly, Joshua hammered the first, and then the second doctor. The miniballs knocked them down, but weren't doing any damage. *Just like at the boarding house.*

Frantically, Joshua looked about. His lantern lay sideways on the floor near the mirror, the sputtering wick almost extinguished from the excess of fuel. Henry's lantern was awash in the white beam of the light-tubes, and Joshua could not tell if it was still burning or not.

Firing again at the doctors, Joshua felt his stomach knot as a fourth doctor appeared with a light-tube. Then a fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth ... An army of the demons were coming his way, with more arriving every second!

Something howled overhead. Joshua looked up to see four werewolves leering down, their fangs bared, drool oozing over black lips, bushy tails lashing about eagerly. *Oh crud.*

The urge to stay and fight to the end filled Joshua, but self-preservation overwhelmed that adrenaline-fueled bravado. *I'm outmanned and undergunned. This was Agincourt all over again, only I'm the French!* Time to leave.

Backing towards the hallway, Joshua fired into the leather saddlebags still draped over the motionless form of Henry Tresham. For a long moment nothing happened, then the lanterns exploded, and the doctors stopped advancing, flaming kerosene spreading across the broken pieces of mirror on the floor.

Already half-way down the stairs, the werewolves howled in fury and backed away from the rising flames. But the mob of doctors jumped onto the walls, and started crawling along the woodwork above the fire.

At the icy sight, Joshua swallowed his last bit of reluctance. *Sweet Mother of God, what were those things?* Retreating swiftly into the hallway, Joshua yanked off his own saddlebag and smashed it on the floor, then again used the revolvers to ignite the wreckage. Crackling flames rose to completely fill the passage. Clinging to the ceiling and walls, the doctors stopped just outside the crackling nimbus and stared intently at the human intruder with inhuman eyes, the tendrils in their hideous mouths wiggling furiously.

Explosives. Should have brought explosives! Joshua thought, holstering the empty Starr, and firing the LeMat directly into their twitching faces.

The demons fell from the ceiling as they were hit, only to stand again undamaged just outside the shrinking pool of fire.

Just then, gunshots came from the entranceway, and the doctors jerked about, a few of them jumping off the wall to fly away as if pulled by invisible strings.

Confused, Joshua wondered if there was somebody else attacking the demons, then realized the shots were simply the ammunition in Henry's revolver, cooking off from the intense heat of the fire. Deciding this was a perfect opportunity, Joshua pulled out the bottle of Prof. Miracle and smashed it on the burning wreckage at his feet. The flames swelled from the infusion of alcohol. Then Joshua tossed in a handful of paper cartridge reloads for his guns. The blackpowder flared brightly, and Joshua took to his heels. *Hopefully unseen. If the doctors were supernatural, they might think I was too, and had simply disappeared* . It was a stupid idea, but the best available. The rest of his beleaguered brain was screaming non-stop for Joshua to get his pale Bostonian arse out of this hell house and head for the Yukon.

Charging back into the kitchen, Joshua gawked at a sight of a devil dog squatting on the counter near the exit. Abundant with curvaceous feminine charms, the monster grinned evilly and licked her chops hungrily.

A girl? Every fiber of his being rebelled at the concept of striking a woman, but there was no time for chivalry. Ruthlessly, Joshua shot the bitch in the bosom, big targets, and the beast tumbled to the floor howling in pain. As Joshua raced by, the snarling creature stood again and he smashed her across the face with the blackjack. Fur and fangs went flying, and the monster dropping unconscious to the tiled floor. *It worked, the blackjack worked !*

Energized by the small victory, Joshua bolted into the night, and jumped squarely into the rose bushes. Holding his breath, he ducked low. *When pursued by dogs, act like a fox* . The ancient adage had never made more sense.

A moment later, a group of charred doctors burst out of the mansion, holding more light-tubes, along with some sort of pistol-like device that also had a lens in front. *A light gun? What would that do, give me a nasty sunburn ?*

A snarling devil dog jumped into view from the behind the hedges, and the doctor with the gun shot it with a shimmering beam from the light-gun. The beast briefly glowed incandescent, then faded away, leaving a pair of smoking footprints in the blackened grass.

His thoughts jumbled and chaotic, Joshua started reloading the Starr. That was the worst case of sunburn he had ever seen.

Chattering in their strange language, the doctors separated into teams, and spread out into search parties, each going in a different direction round the mansion. *A pincer movement. They're trying to trap me like hunters do a stag* . The moment the demons were out of sight, Joshua sprinted across the open lawn and dove into the flower garden beneath the granite skirts of a towering Virgo. The sight made his heart ache at the remembered puns, but Joshua kept moving. Live today, mourn tomorrow.

Lights were starting to come on now in every window of the mansion, the darkness of the night steadily retreating. *Same as me* . Darting from shadow to shadow, Joshua prayed the rope was undiscovered, and almost laughed in relief at the sight of it still dangling in place. *Thank you, Henry Tresham !*

Scurrying up the knotted length, Joshua crawled across the top of the wall, checked to make sure the ground on the other side was clear. Tossing down the rope, he descended at breakneck speed. As Joshua touched the ground, the evening cold came back with a vengeance, along with the swirling clouds of river mist. Perfect cover for the escape. By jingo, he loved fog. Nothing better in the world!

Slipping into the cloudy bushes, Joshua bit back a curse. Thunder was gone, fled into the night. But Estelle remained, the police horse calmly chewing a mouthful of brown autumn grass. She looked up at his approach, but did not nicker in greeting. *There was something better than fog, a loyal horse.*

Scrambling onto the mare, Joshua dimly saw strange shapes moving along the misty top of the wall. Forcing his hand away from the Starr, Joshua shook the reins exactly as Henry had done before, and Estelle obediently broke into a full gallop.

Charging out of the meager cover, Joshua urged the mare on to greater, and still greater speed. Those devil dogs were fast, but there was no way they could catch a well-rested horse. *On the other hand, the doctors could sort of fly*, he amended, *and there was nothing faster than a beam of sunlight*.

As they pounded across the bridge, the billowing fog was left behind. Bending low in the saddle, Joshua felt naked and vulnerable, wondering if he would know when the light beam hit, or simply cease to exist.

Reaching open ground, Joshua breathed a sigh of relief and gave the mare free rein. Sure enough, his hunch proved to be correct. The trained horse seemed to know this was a life or death situation, and her hooves hammered against the frosty ground like pistons in a steam engine. *Go, Estelle, go!*

Cold miles passed in tense silence. Sharply alert, Joshua anxiously watched the dark forest; half expecting swarms of the doctors to charge out, shooting their light-guns, disintegration pistols, whatever the infernal devices were called. *Why hadn't the doctor at the boarding house used a deathray? I'd be stone dead if it had. Fast fried like a flounder on Friday. Vaporized*. Perhaps they only had the one gun? Thinking back, Joshua could not recall any other doctor armed with a similar death ray. That brightened his mood a little. Only one gun among the lot of them. Excellent. Smash that, and they'd ... ?

Still kick my arse, Joshua finished lamely, slumping his shoulders. *I'd need the entire Union Army carrying thousands of firebombs to fight a dozen of those damned things. And there could be more of them in the mansion. Mayhap a lot more*. Enough to topple the nation? Conqueror the world? He would have to inform the president about this immediately.

And why in Hades was a demon carrying a gun?

Lost in thought, Joshua barely noticed when they reached the main road to Laurel. Easing on the reins, the tired man slowed Estelle to a walk and let the panting mare catch her breath.

"You're the best horse in existence," Joshua praised, stroking her sweaty neck. "Did you know that, girl?"

Snorting casually in reply, Estelle was not impressed at the obvious statement. Compliments were nice, carrots were better.

Twisting about in the saddle, Joshua looked backwards into the moonlit night. There was no sign of pursuit, but that gave the man small comfort. Henry was dead, shot in the back by a mirror ghost, spirit, whatever. The loss of words filled Joshua with a maddening rage. How could anybody fight the

unknown? He didn't even know the name of the things he was battling, much less how to stop them.*If the doctor could be stopped .*

Brushing the damp hair from his face, Joshua gave a scowl. Make that doctors, plural. He had never guessed there might be more than one of the foul things.*And that's all I really have*, the man grumped peevishly.*Guesses, hunches, and wild speculation .* Trying to get a handle on the problem, a crazy idea began to slowly percolate in his mind.

Cresting a hill, the sleeping city of Laurel came into view, the street lights twinkling like stars in heaven.

"Hi-yah!" Joshua shouted, shaking the reins. Estelle immediately broke into a gallop again. What he needed most was information. Hard data on the supernatural. Detailed knowledge that the U.S. Marshall could turn against the forces of darkness.

Racing towards the town, Joshua was filled with a renewed determination. In these highly scientific days of the 19th century, there as only one place where the Marshall could possibly learn about magic and the dark arts.*I only hope it's still open this late at night .*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Inside an abandoned barn, just outside the city limits of Washington DC, a shimmering oval of light slowly pulsed into being above a pile of hay. As the haze cleared, seven faces peered out inquisitively. Then somebody raised a digital camera to start taking pictures.

"Raul, you did it!" Ed Alvares cried, slapping the skinny wizard on the back. "We're actually looking at the first Bureau 13 headquarters before it was destroyed!"

"Took a bit of doing," Raul Horta grunted, both hands full of crystal balls that glowed and crackled with miniature lighting storms trapped inside. "But a promise is a promise. Happy birthday, Ed."

"Are your balls All right?" George Renault chuckled, one arm tucked contentedly around the warm hips of the statuesque blonde.

"*Da*, balls are fine," Katrina Sommer said in her heavily accented English. "There is no danger. Besides, Jessica gave nightmare until he pay off. Right,*tovarishch*?"

"A promise is a promise," Jessica Alvarez replied, a hand resting on her swollen belly, the other holding a Nikon digital camera. Around her neck, a jeweled necklace glowed with ethereal pseudo-life, and the telepathic woman beamed with motherly pride at the sleeping child inside her body. The unborn baby gurgled happily at the attention.

Then, the shimmering oval darkened slightly.

"Damn, it's starting to fade," Raul grunted, the balls hot and heavy in his hands. "Can't ... hold the portal ... much ... longer..."

"Faith, Edwardo, can we help in any way, change the flow of Time just a little?" Father Donaher asked, tightening his grip on the new Neostad shotgun resting on a broad shoulder. "Toss through a spell book, a bazooka, suitcase nuke, something like that?"

Instantly in motion, Mindy Jennings threw the bulky canvas bag in her hand marked with the name of her dojo. But the duffel full of 21st century military ordinance weapons rebounded off the immaterial barrier of the portal as if colliding with a brick wall encased in cement.

The oval flickered, and the members of Team Tunafish in their Chicago penthouse began fading away.

"Guess not," Ed said, twitching his moustache unhappily. "Well, the chief told us that Time doesn't like being altered."

"Then the poor bastard is on his own," Jessica sighed, lowering the camera.

"Damn," George growled in annoyance. "And we never even found out how..."

With a musical pop like that of a well-tuned champagne bottle, the oval was gone and darkness returned to the barn.

Sitting high in the rafters, an owl fluttered its wings, and a field mouse skirted along the baseboard. Both animals had seen time portals before, and probably would again.

Outside the barn, dawn was beginning to break, and there came the sound of boots crunching on loose gravel. Walking directly to the door, a fat man in a badly fitting suit scowled, and debated whether or not to post the sale notice, or just tear the place down for firewood ... ?

* * * *

"Marshall?" a soft voice asked. "Marshall Withers?"

Sputtering awake, Joshua blinked at the murky figure and clawed for the guns under his coat. *Hey, where was my coat ?* Waving the Starr about, Joshua slowly became awake to discover the coat was draped over him like a blanket. Oh.

"Easy, my son," Father Giacomo said soothingly, holding out a tin cup of steaming coffee. "Sorry to wake you, I really am, but lauds will be starting soon, and it would be highly disconcerting to my parishioners to find an armed man snoring in the pews."

Lauds? Pews? "Sorry," Joshua mumbled, holstering his gun and gratefully accepting the battered cup.

The brew was hot and strong, without sugar or milk to retard the galvanizing effect, and to the former butler it was like mothers milk. *Ah, delicious !*

As the last foggy tentacles of sleep left his mind, Joshua suddenly recalled his dismal failure at the Hoffman Mansion, and the subsequent gallop into Laurel. Riding through the town, Joshua went to the first church he could find, and pounded on the rectory door until rousing the sleepy verger. The young man had been extremely reluctant to wake the head priest at the ungodly hour. But the heavily armed U.S. Marshall insisted, and soon Father Giacomo arrived, shuffling, and yawning, and asking who had died? Quickly correcting the natural assumption, Joshua established his bona fides, and the somber father lead the Marshall into the church where their discussion would not disturb the other people sleeping in the rectory.

"Ghosts, you say, and demons?" Father Giacomo muttered, genuflecting at the entrance. "These are very serious matters, my son."

Joshua muttered, "So is murder." Entering the church, the man felt a peace fill his body. Gazing at the simple altar, alight with candles, Joshua noticed for the first time how much the cross of Jesus resembled a crossbow. Well, an arbalest actually, considering the sheer size. *There was a good idea, a holy crossbow. I wonder if the priest would bless my handguns? Couldn't hurt to ask .*

"Now, my son, these are not topics normally discussed openly," Father Giacomo admitted, hitching up his cassock to sit in a pew. "But since this is for the War Department, I believe allowances can be made. *Tempus fugit , eh?"*

Since he didn't speak any Latin, Joshua merely nodded in agreement, and the lessons began. Saints, angels, cherubs, devils, imps, Protestants, the two Catholics talked through the night about the strange world of the occult. Somewhere along the way, Joshua realized that he must have passed out from sheer exhaustion. He dimly remembered a rainbow glow infusing through a beautiful stained glass window of Noah, and then an awful buzzing sound, which Joshua now recognized as himself snoring.

"That was wonderful, father," Joshua muttered, returning the tin cup. "My heartfelt thanks." *Cheap beans, hand ground, unwashed pot, egg shell added to cut the acid .*

"After what I learned of last night, I hardly blame you, my son," Father Giacomo replied, sadly shaking his head. "Devil dogs attacking the president ... !"

"That's a government secret," Joshua interrupted sternly, lowering his brow.

The priest waved that aside. "Yes, yes, my son. But keeping secrets is my stock in trade. Have no fear. I consider your story as being told to me under the sanctity of the confessional, and would not divulge its details even to the pope."

"Good enough," Joshua said, forcing himself to stand on wobbly legs. He reached into a pocket and withdraw a fistful of greenbacks. "Here, father, for your troubles."

"No need for that, my son," the priest admonished, pushing the money away. "I am a Catholic, but I'm also an American."

No conflict of interest there, Joshua supposed, shoving the cash back into his jacket. "My thanks again."

"Now come this way," Father Giacomo said, giving a sweeping gesture. "I had my curate prepare a basin of hot water and a razor in the rectory for you, in case you wanted to freshen up before leaving."

Rubbing the stubble on his chin, Joshua gave a lopsided grin. "Once more, I am in your debt, padre."

"Pax vobiscum, my son."

Stumbling out of the church, Joshua paused near the altar and sheepishly looked upward. "Sorry about the crossbow remark," he whispered, and hurried to the rectory.

In a small room, Joshua found the washbasin and toiletries laid out and waiting. Placed among the items was also a small velvet bag. Assuming it was for him, Joshua looked inside to find a clearly marked bottle of Holy Water, a silver crucifix, a rosary, and a pack of what he thought were crackers until he figured out they were actually communion wafers. Tucking the bag into a pocket, Joshua really wasn't sure what

good holy crackers would do against the creatures of the night, but anything was worth a gamble at this point.

Cleaning up as well as possible under the circumstances, Joshua heard vespers begin in the church, Father Giacomo delivering the morning mass in fluid Latin, the words rising and falling like a song.

"Might make a nice code in a fight," Joshua muttered thoughtfully, artfully scraping the straight razor along his throat. During the night, it had occurred to him that if he had shouted a warning for Henry, the mirror people would have shot him anyway. *What I need is some sort of code to use in a fight*, Joshua contemplated, wiping the shaving soap off his face with a thin towel. Maybe 'mallard' could mean 'duck', and 'bustle' could mean 'behind you', that sort of thing. Something that would mean nothing to the enemy until it was too late. He would work on that. *Oh yeah, sure. In my copious free time* .

Tidying up after his washing, Joshua left by the rectory door.

Circling around the church to the front door, the man stuffed the wad of greenbacks into the poor box. Joshua knew that he was probably going to Hades, but the one sin he flatly refused to ever commit was ingratitude.

Searching about for his horse, Joshua found Estelle in a small stable with two other horses, a swayback and a yearling, both of whom were watching the young mare with lustful intentions. But the middle-aged Estelle was clearly not interested.

Opening the gate of the small paddock, Joshua timidly held out a hesitant hand. "Still friends?" he asked softly.

Nuzzling the offered palm, the horse then licked his face and farted loudly.

Recoiling slightly from the mixed signals, Joshua finally decided to accept them as the supreme gesture of friendship. *After all, only the closest friends showed each other their more base side* .

Carefully checking over Estelle for any damage incurred from the hard ride last night, Joshua then saddled the horse and rode out into the bright morning. Flinching, he blink at the touch of sunlight, but kept going. Washington DC was a good three hour ride away, but Joshua could be there by noon if the roads were good. He had to inform the President about the demon infestation, then re-arm and go back to the Hoffman Mansion. *This time with enough high-explosives to blow it out of the history books* .

Riding along the cobblestone street, Joshua caught the smell of frying bacon in the air, and immediately felt his stomach make its presence known in a long drawn out grumble. Stopping for breakfast at a hotel that advertised Jonnie Cakes in Hoe sauce, Joshua ate a meal that would have slain a lesser mortal, and soon was feeling more like his old self. Finishing his umpteenth cup of coffee, Joshua got up to leave and tipped the pretty waitress generously. The petite redhead flashed him a beguiling smile, and the Marshall departed feeling ten feet tall.

Feeding some Jonnie Cakes to Estelle, sans the spicy Hoe sauce, Joshua noticed a poster across the busy street advertising a circus in DC. Acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and gypsy fortunetellers. Interesting. Wiping his hands clean on a handkerchief that had seen better days, Joshua took out his notebook and jotted the location. The Catholic priest had been very helpful, but there were several subjects that he wouldn't, *or could not* , openly discuss. If he got the chance, mayhap Joshua should go to the circus in DC and see if the gypsies knew anything about the supernatural. *Every little bit helps* .

Climbing back onto Estelle, the Marshall started across downtown. Almost as if riding through an invisible barrier, he entered the Jewish section. The people on the sidewalk were noticeably different. Everybody was more serious, but happier. Their clothing was drab, but exceptionally clean, which was quite a feat these days.

Stopping at an intersection to allow a wagonload of giggling kids pass, Joshua noticed a Jewish church on the corner, and suddenly had the urge to ask the padre there if he knew anything about the supernatural. It couldn't hurt, and would delay visiting the President to admit his colossal failure for a few more precious minutes.

Leaving Estelle tied near a water trough, Joshua went to a door covered with mystical symbols and politely knocked. The door was opened by a large man with curly sideburns of the most amazing design, the tinniest hat Joshua had ever seen, and some loose fringe hanging off his belt. Very similar to the buckskin fringe that cattle ranchers used to help brush away the flies. *Did Jews do a lot of ranching?*

"Yes, can I help you?" the man rumbled in a deep stentorian bass.

"Hopefully," Joshua answered, showing his badge. "I'm with the U.S. War Department, sir, and I know this is a shot in the dark, but I really could use some information about the supernatural." He quickly added, "That is, if you have the time, father."

"Rabbi," the man corrected, leaning closer to inspect the badge. "Well, this seems to be real." He swung the door open wide. "Please come in Marshall..."

"Withers," Joshua said, offering a hand. "Joshua Withers." For some reason, he just didn't feel like lying to the priest.

"Rabbi Larry Gelfand," the bearded fellow replied as they shook. "Come in, come in, that's what doors are for."

Entering the church, Joshua looked about and saw he was actually in the rectory, the home of the priest.

"So, Mr. Gelfand," Joshua started, then stopped as the fellow frowned in disapproval. "Father ... Reverend Gelfand?"

Rabbi Gelfand chuckled. "You truly know nothing about our religion, do you?" He stated it as a fact.

Since it was the truth, Joshua nodded agreement.

"Rabbi is not my name, but my title. I am the rabbi here. A teacher, not a holy man. I have a wife, and children."

"Really?" Joshua said in a shocked whisper. "But ... I mean..."

"We take no vow of chastity like our Catholic brethren," Rabbi Gelfand laughed again. "But then they drink a lot more. There's probably some sort of connection there, I am sure, but who am I to cast aspirations on the faith of others? Come and sit. We'll have tea, and I'll try to answer your questions."

"Thank you, sir."

"Larry."

"Rabbi Larry."

The rabbi rolled his eyes in exasperation. *Goyim, mashugenah!*

Moving into the dining room, the men sat and the rabbi leaned comfortably back in a chair. "What exactly do you wish to know?" he asked, folding both hands.

Joshua kept waiting for the 'my son' part to be added, then realized it wasn't going to happen. *Different religions, different rules*. That sounded important, so he quickly jotted it down in his notebook.

"This will be hard for you to believe," Joshua said, pulling the chair closer to the table. "But I..."

Pushing open the door with a hip, a beautiful woman walked in carrying a tray filled with cakes and cookies. In the steamy kitchen, Joshua caught a glimpse of a gorgeous young girl with raven black hair and midnight eyes. She was bent over a table folding bread dough, her loose blouse hanging down just enough to raise his eyebrows. *Gadzooks! I'm certainly awake now.*

"My wife, Hannah," the rabbi said, gesturing.

"Good morning," she smiled in greeting, laying down the platter.

"Smells wonderful, ma'am," Joshua smiled politely, crossing his legs.

"And why shouldn't they?" Hanna replied brusquely.

That flustered him. "Why, ah, no reason ma'am. I mean just ... I..."

"*Goyim!*" she cried walking away.

"And a happy goyim to you too, Mrs. Gelfand!"

Snorting coffee out his nose, the rabbi seemed to be having a seizure. Joshua shrewdly guessed he had goofed again. *I guess the word goyim was not a Jewish goodbye. Better remember that.*

"Thank you, Marshall, that was the best laugh I've had in a year," the rabbi chuckled, wiping tears from his eyes. "Happy Goyim! Oy! Hannah looked ready *toplotz*."

Keeping quiet, Joshua ate a cookie, unsure of what any of that meant.

"But back to business," Rabbi Gelfand said, dipping the cookie into the black coffee and biting off a piece. "So tell me, Marshall, has there been some sort of strange death in Washington?"

"What? You know about the attack on the president?"

"No," the rabbi sighed, finishing the snack. "But strangers often come to us asking questions if there has been a bizarre killing." In frustration, Gelfand took another cookie and bit it savagely. "This is an old story. Many fools believe we use blood in our ceremonies, and other mad things."

Sort of like the nonsense I heard about the Freemasons. "I have to admit hearing a similar rumor, but I discounted it completely. My father taught me that the Jews of today were the Jews of the Bible. Our

Old Testament is your, ah—” His brain spun like a whirligig, but yielded nothing. “—Testament?” Joshua muttered, taking a cookie and nibbling.

Shaking his head in amusement, Rabbi Gelfand chuckled. “Close enough, Marshall. We call it the Torah,” he said at last. “Such a babe in the woods I have never met before. Hannah!”

“Yes?” the woman said, peeking through the kitchen doors.

“Could you bring us something for lunch in a few hours. This gentleman and I have a lot to discuss.”

Wiping her hands, Hannah beamed a smile. “Of course! Perhaps he would care to stay for dinner? Dina, our beautiful and unmarried daughter, could easily cook him something special. Maybe a nice brisket?”

“No matchmaking, woman!” the rabbi barked in a friendly tone. “Go! Sandwiches!”

“Make your own!” Hannah responded with a flounce. “I’m busy!”

The door slammed so hard the men flinched, and the cookies danced on the china plate.

“Wives,” Rabbi Gelfand sighed deeply. “I really do not know how the Mormons do it.”

“Do what?” Joshua asked, leaning forward curiously.

“Have multiple wives.”

Stunned beyond words, the Marshall dropped the half-eaten cookie. “They do what?” he cried, spraying out crumbs. “B-but that ... that’s...”

“Permissible in their religion. Good god, man, don’t you know anything about other faiths?”

“Not really,” Joshua admitted sullenly. *Actually, my hometown priest had taught us there were no other religions. Which turned out to be a ... well, let’s just call it an untruth.* Lie was such an ugly word. *I wonder what else he tried to shield us from?*

Chewing on a lip, the rabbi drummed his fingers on the table. “Not really,” he repeated. “Not really, the man says. I can see why the good Lord sent you to me.” Gelfand leaned closer, resting his elbows on the table. “All right, listen and learn, my happy goyim friend. Take notes in that little book I see in your pocket, because I am going to give you a crash course in basic mythology and contemporary theology.”

“Excellent! Thank you very much, sir,” Joshua grinned, then added, “So what’s a theology? Do they bite?”

The rabbi groaned something in another language, and reached for the decanter of whiskey on the sideboard. This was going to be a very long day.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Clacking and clanging, the lone rider noisily came around the curve in the dirt road. Instantly, he was covered by the rifles of a platoon of Union soldiers.

"Advance and be recognized!" the sergeant demanded, raising his Springfield rifle. The bayonet was shiny along the edges.

Razor sharp. "Yes sir." Kneeing his horse slightly, the rider slowed the mount to a walk. The lonely dirt road was blocked by pointy caltrops a yard high, the starburst of spears impossible for a horse to jump over, and behind a sandbag redoubt were a dozen Union soldiers armed with rifles, and shotguns. A formidable combination. Warily, the rider noted the bullet holes in the nearby trees, and the rectangular areas of smooth dirt dotting the autumn grass alongside the road. It was abundantly clear that others had tried to rush the Union roadblock, and paid heavily for their failure.

Stopping his horse a few feet away from the caltrops, the rider raised both hands.

"Who are ya?" the sergeant demanded gruffly, the muzzle of his rifle never wavering from aiming at the chest of the man on the horse. The beast was a magnificent stallion in desperate need of a wash and curry. The elderly rider had a gray beard down to his belt buckle, his clothes patched and streaked with dirt. Behind the old man, the saddlebags were stacked with pots and pans of every description.

"Just a tinker," the ancient looking fellow wheezed, folding back both thumbs. "Not a soldier or a sailor."

The sergeant became alert at that. "You been sick?" he asked hesitantly.

"Since April fifteenth," the tinker replied, giving the date the Confederacy fired upon Fort Sumter.

Giving a half smile, the sergeant shouldered his rifle. Yep, that was the countersign for this month. Must be a government courier. "Let 'em pass," the sergeant ordered, stepping aside. "He's one of ours!"

Oh no, I'm not, The Hammer thought as the Union soldiers cleared the way. With a polite nod to the bluecoats, the Confederate special agent continued his interrupted journey toward the city of Washington DC.

* * * *

It was late afternoon when Joshua finally left Temple Beth Shalom, full of brisket and a date with Dina on next Wednesday.

Shuffling to the sidewalk, the man's throbbing head was still spinning out of control with the details of Kali, thugees, the Latter Day Saints, Martin Luther, Orthodox Jews and Reform Jews, *not* reformed Jews, the Torah, Rabbi Hillel, the Kabbalah, Samson, druids, Aztecs, shamanism, witchcraft, Satanism ... The list of religions and gods seemed to go on forever. The world of the supernatural was every bit as complex as the real world. *Make that the mundane world,* Joshua glumly corrected.

Reaching Estelle, the man slid a pound of kosher salt into a saddlebag. The rabbi claimed it was good for stopping zombies, along with a wide assortment of various undead creatures. *Good for chicken soup, too.* Afterwards, Rabbi Gelfand explained what a zombie was, and then went on to cover vampires, werewolves, gargoyles, ghosts, bunnyips, spirits, liches, Medusa, cyclops, krakens, harpies, the Mayans, voodoo, The Ancient Ones, the Squid God of Lost Dutar, pagans, Hottentots, and druids.

Written on a slip of paper in his vest, Joshua also had a list of books to read, and a leather-bound Torah in the pocket of his coat. The rabbi had promised to try and get the Marshall a copy of the Kabbalah, the Jewish book of magic. However, there were rules about reading it, and a lot more about possessing a copy. Lots of rules, with the big one being: Only Jews. For the sake of the war effort, the rabbi was

willing to let that pass. Damn nice of them Joshua had to admit. But the second rule was that you had to be at least forty-five years old, otherwise the tremendous knowledge was too much for a young man, and you could go insane. That didn't really make Joshua overly excited to read the Kabbalah, so the longer the council of rabbis took debating the matter, the better.

Climbing into the saddle, Joshua started for the Executive Mansion again, attempting to sort out his thoughts. Until this day, Joshua had always considered himself a well-educated man, but now he felt like a trout in the ocean, completely out of his depth. Apparently, magic was everywhere. But hidden behind a facade of normalcy. The rabbi had been astonished that silver killed a werewolf, which Joshua now knew was the name of the creature. But apparently there were several types of werewolves. If a werewolf bit you, you turned into a mindless beast every full moon. Or a gypsy could curse you, and then anything was possible, depending upon the wording of the curse. There were also magical spells to make a person into a shapeshifter, and then you could turn into any animal you wished on command. That seemed to be the case here, since Kendal's clothing had been found neatly folded in the alleyway, and not ripped in shreds. *Shapeshifters. Very nasty. The president would not be happy to hear about all this mashugenah .*

A horse without a rider walked by just then, and Joshua reached for the Starr inside his jacket until it was gone. Oddly, the rabbi said there were limitations to magic. Such as, shapeshifters could not get smaller in size; a man could not become a mouse. But a man could become a giant by drawing the moisture from the air. What moisture had to do with muscle tissue Joshua had absolutely no idea. People were made of flesh and bones, not water. *Then again, sweat was water. Were people made out of sweat? That was a disgusting notion .*

A soft breeze brought an unexpected chill, and Joshua clutched the Holy Cross and the Mogen David hanging under his shirt. The two religious symbols keep tinkling against each other in a nice musical combination that he found oddly comforting.

Taking a side road to avoid the military soldiers marching southward on the main roads, Joshua followed a dirt road that cut through an orchard. The dappled sunlight peeking through the thick coverage of foliage was alive with dust motes. The air smelled of apples, and the turning leaves rustled in the autumn breeze.

Relaxing to his surroundings, Joshua slowed Estelle as they entered a covered bridge crossing a wide gully with a sluggish creek at the bottom. During the spring rains, the creek would be a raging torrent, but now it was only a babbling brook barely deep enough for crayfish.

It was dark inside the bridge, but there were enough slits of light shining through the cracks to show that nobody was hiding in the shadows. As Estelle clomped across the loose wooden boards, the sounds echoed loudly inside the covered bridge and Joshua never heard the others until it was too late. In a flurry of motion, they dropped from the rafters above and knocked Joshua off the horse. *Ambush !*

A dozen blows rained upon Joshua before he recovered from the fall. Grimly, the Marshall went for his guns, when something very hard hit him on the head and a dizzying blackness swirled around and around until swallowing him whole.

* * * *

Mumbling ... murmuring ... babbling ... splashing ... running water. The sound of a brook slowly permeated his thoughts as Joshua struggled to awake. He seemed to be lying in mud, and there was a terrible throbbing at the back of his skull.

Joshua sluggishly fought his way back to consciousness and tried to rub his eyes only to discover his hands were tightly lashed behind his back. And there was a terrible taste in his mouth. The blurry man tried to spit, but was a rag holding what seemed to be a sock in place. *Bound and gagged* .

Suddenly very wide-awake, Joshua looked about and saw that he was lying on the sloped bank of the bubbling brook underneath the covered bridge. Bright sunshine shown on either side, but he was in the belt of shadow directly below.

So the doctors took me alive, Joshua silently raged, anger overwhelming his chagrin. *Well by thunder, I won't go down without a fight* ! However, from the lightness on his chest, it was clear that both of his guns were missing. Along with his blackjack, gunbelt, and darn near everything else.

Observe, think, plan, and then strike. The childhood advice from his father came unbidden to his mind, and Joshua heeded the sage counsel. Breathing through his nose, Joshua pretended that he was still unconscious, and tried to locate his attackers.

Four shadowy figures stood on the opposite bank of the creek, doing something. Between the noise of the brook and the ringing in his ears, it was difficult to hear. But concentrating hard, Joshua could just make out what the others were saying.

"Look at all this gold!" a man chortled, followed by the ringing of loose coins tumbling together. "We're rich, boys! Rich as Ceres!"

"Rich as Jesus?" a young voice asked in confusion.

"No, Ceres. He was an olden king from ... aw, read a book sometime, ya idjit."

"These here guns will fetch a pretty penny, or two, I'll wager," another man chuckled, the hammers of the Colt and LeMat clicking as they were pulled back into the firing position, and then came a clack as they were gently released.

"Pity about the horse," a gruff voice added, stomping on the mud. "But these shoes fit me just fine. Good luck there!"

With a jolt, Joshua wiggled his toes. *My shoes! That dirty son-of-a-whore stole my shoes* !

"I told you boys this job would make us rich!" the young man chortled in glee. "When I saw the stack of greenbacks in his wallet when he tipped our sister, I knew it was our lucky day. Yes sir, our lucky day!"

The words so casually said sent ice-cold clarity through Joshua. *Gold? Greenbacks? These weren't the werewolves, or the doctors, but footpads* ! Just plain, ordinary thieves waiting for travelers to go through the bridge and jump them from ambush. Then the statement about tipping a woman bubbled to the surface of his thoughts. By thunder, this was no random attack, but patrons from the inn where he had stopped for breakfast! They must have been following him all day waiting for an opportunity to strike. When Joshua left the main road and headed for the covered bridge, they raced ahead to set a trap, and he strolled in as innocent as a hayfoot.

Gotta get loose before they slit my throat, Joshua stormed, fighting against the ropes on his wrists. A civilian they would leave alive to be found eventually, but attacking a U.S. Marshall was a hanging offense. Their best move then would be to remove the only witness. *Which was me* .

Joshua experimentally bumped the muddy slope to check what was left in his pockets. But the footpads had stripped him of anything valuable, right down to his socks! The former butler cursed himself for a complete and utter fool. He had been concentrating so hard on battling the supernatural, that a common everyday danger had bitten him squarely in the arse. In bitter fury, Joshua vowed that he would never make this kind of idiotic mistake again. *If there was a next time.*

Arching his back to try and find a sharp rock in the slippery mud, Joshua felt a lump in his coat pocket and a glimmer of hope returned. Lucifers! The greedy fools had ignored the matches in his pocket. The angle was awkward, but straining every muscle, Joshua managed to fumble a Lucifer free. It slipped from his muddy fingers and fell into the creek. As the wooden stick swirled away, Joshua tried once more. This time he kept a firm grip on the Lucifer, and scratched it alive with a thumbnail. As the match flared, he held it against the rope praying to heaven it wasn't too damp to burn from the prolonged contact with the mud. Angling his body to hide the light, Joshua grit his teeth and kept hold of the Lucifer until his fingers spasmed from the searing heat. Desperately, he got another match and tried again, then again. The smell of charring hemp filled the air, along with the stink of burning hair. His fingers throbbed with pain, but Joshua bit the rag in his mouth to keep from screaming, and kept going. Burned fingers, or a slashed throat. That choice was easy.

"Hey, our guest is trying to get loose," one of the thieves laughed, wadding across the brook. There came a flash of light reflecting off polished metal. "Guess we better let him taste steel."

Straining with every ounce of strength he possessed, Joshua heaved for his life and the weakened ropes parted.

"Shitfire and honey cakes, boys, he's free!" the thief spat, sheathing the blade to pull out the LeMat.

Diving into the creek, Joshua grabbed a rock and whipped it forward. Dropping the gun, the thief shrieked and clutched his face, blood streaming from a ruined eye. Cocked and primed, the LeMat clattered onto a rock in the brook and discharged, the muzzle-flash brightening the darkness like a lightning strike.

Splashing forward, Joshua snatched the LeMat before it slid off the rock and into the water rendering it useless. *Gotcha!*

"I'll get him, pa," another man snarled, raising a rusty hatchet.

As the thief came his way, Joshua grabbed the massive revolver, thumbed back the hammer and shot the man in the face. Or rather, he shot at the face. But the gun jerked in his burned fingers and the miniball missed entirely, embedding itself into the underbelly of the bridge with a loud *thwack*.

Cursing loudly, the thief charged forward, and Joshua fired at the man's belly. The muzzle-flash from the powerful LeMat extended to almost reach the footpad as his head literally exploded, throwing out a horrible spray of bones, brains and blood.

Dropping the hatchet into the water, the decapitated corpse took a few steps, then collapsed into the brook with a tremendous splash. Red blood pumped from the neck stump to wash away in the current.

"He done kilt Billy!" another man screamed. "Get him!"

Pressing down the trigger, Joshua fanned the hammer and fired a fast six times at the shapes coming his way. With the first flash, he aimed for the knees of the men, the recoil showing the gunbarrel up so that the

.445 miniballs hit their chests. He missed twice, but the rest of the bullets slammed home. A moment later, Joshua was alone with the four oozing corpses, the air smoky with spent blackpowder.

Clutching his stomach, Joshua dropped the LeMat into the stream and yanked off his gag just before violently losing his breakfast. *A soldier's stomach*, he dimly remembered some general saying. Perfectly normal. But that didn't help any. Joshua convulsed for what felt like hours before his churning stomach finally calmed down.

Covered with blood and sickness, Joshua sat down on a rock feeling wretched beyond belief. Waiting to gather his strength, Joshua washed out his mouth with clean water coming from upstream, stared at the collection of dead men splayed in the creek. The chilly water foamed about his bare toes, and his thoughts were chaotic for a long time before Joshua finally accepted the fact that he had miraculously won. The thieves were dead, and he was alive. *Alive!*

Joshua waited for a rush of victory to arrive, but nothing happened. He only felt wet and cold. *Killing the enemy was not as wonderful as advertised*, Joshua observed, massaging his temples. *But then, these were people. Fellow human beings, not monsters from the Abyss*. Some part of him wanted to feel guilty, but it wouldn't take. *I'm not the villain here. This was self preservation*. Alone in the shadows, tears came to the man, but not very many, and for a long while Joshua sat listening to the creek and thinking about life.

As cold set in his bare feet, Joshua rose to grimly retrieve his shoes. Pondering the mysteries of life was all well and good, but a man should not forget to live while doing so, or else the whole process became rather pointless. Drawing a deep breath, the man searched the bodies, and reclaimed his belongings. A grim chore.

Splashing upstream a short distance, Joshua washed the filth and mud off his clothing, rinsed out his shoes, then climbed out of the creek to get dressed. Stepping into the bushes, Joshua replied to a call of nature, and emerged from the sylvan latrine in a much better mood.

Heading for the road, Joshua left the bodies where they lay in the creek. A military patrol would find the corpses soon enough and deduce what had happened. He never wanted to think about the incident again.

Reaching level ground, Joshua started walking briskly and flapping his arms to keep warm. The air was brisk, and his clothes were dripping wet, the perfect combination for catching pneumonia. *I have enough mucking problems without having to battle demons while sneezing*.

The sound of hooves pounding on the wooden floorboards of the covered bridge brought an abrupt end to the line of thought. Incoming! Joshua swung around and drew both guns. Were these comrades of the thieves? Or worse, had the werewolves found him? Both revolvers were low on ammunition, but his blackjack was intact, and whatever was coming would get a fight to remember!

"Come on, ya cowardly custards!" Joshua roared, thumbing back the hammers. "Here I am! Let's finish this!"

Calmly walking out of the covered bridge came a chestnut mare without a rider, the reins flapping loosely.

"Estelle?" he gasped, lowering the weapons.

At the sound of her name, the horse broke into a trot, and approached to muzzle the surprised man. Chuckling in relief, Joshua holstered the guns and hugged the animal tightly. *And some people claimed that dogs were loyal.*

"Nice to have you back, girl," Joshua smiled, kissing her on the snout.

Playfully tossing her mane, Estelle nickered happily. Apparently, the feelings were mutual.

Taking the reins, Joshua stiffly climbed into the saddle, his stomach muscles aching from the recent strain. And the burns on his hands were forming blisters. Rummaging in a saddle bag, Joshua found a relatively clean cloth, and clumsily ripped it into strips to bandage his hands. The excess cloth he used to dry his face, and tie his hair back. *Good enough. Although I must look like the Wild Man of Borneo after a week of hard drinking in a hurricane .*

Shaking the reins, Joshua made a clucking noise with his tongue and Estelle started along the road leading to the Washington. Checking the Starr, the man began to awkwardly reload the LeMat. The crude bandages kept getting caught in the tamping lever, but eventually he got the job done. *Faster every time , he noted with a touch of pride. I am learning .*

Joshua holstered the weapon just as the horse left the apple orchard. The sun was bright and strong. Stretching like a house cat, the man luxuriated in the soothing warmth seeping into his sodden clothing. *Land o'goshen, I'm a mess , Joshua observed, picking a muddy leaf off his pants. A bath seemed appropriate before reporting to the President . Then straight back to Hell.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Riding along Pennsylvania Avenue, Joshua had expected the Executive Mansion to seem different for some reason after his trials and tribulations. But everything appeared perfectly normal. *Guess it's just me , he reasoned, urging Estelle off the street and towards the carriage house. Change the observer, and you alter the observations .*

Using a pitchfork to shift a load of hay out a wagon and onto the floor of the carriage house, a stablehand paused in his work to raise a single eyebrow at the arrival of the former butler. "Is ... that the same horse you left with?" the man inquired, leaning on the pitchfork.

"Absolutely," Joshua replied, hopping down from Estelle to guide the horses into a stall and close the door. "Give her a good wash and curry, please. I'll be leaving again in a few hours."

"No problem, sir," the stablehand said, rubbing his chin. "One question, though. Dexter was a stallion, and this is a mare."

"It's been a long day," Joshua answered wearily, snatching an apple from a wooden barrel full of fruit. Polishing the apple on a damp sleeve, the man hesitantly took a bite. When his stomach did not complain, the Marshall tried some more.

"Hey, those are for the horses!" the stablehand scolded, shaking a stern finger.

Giving a whiny, Joshua left the carriage house contentedly munching.

Heading for the armory, the man saw a dozen dogs chained to trees around the Executive Mansion, and the two guards at the front door had been replaced by a full platoon. He highly approved.

Sgt. Montgomery was out doing chores, but Private Johanson gave Joshua a bag of .38 silver bullets for the Starr. Joshua then deposited a wad of damp greenbacks on the desk, and ordered ten barrels of blackpowder, tins of fulminating mercury, a hundred sticks of guncotton, a gallon of nitro glycerin, and one fuse.

"Just one?" the private asked confused, making a crease in his forehead. "Did I hear that right, sir?"

"One. I'm giving a surprise party."

"Guess so," Johanson replied, scratching his head. "And it's sure going to be a surprise to everybody else within a hundred miles."

I certainly hope so. Going around to the servant's entrance of the Executive Mansion, Joshua ordered a meal sent up, then went to his room and washed for a hour until he felt clean again. At least, on the outside.

Covering the numerous blisters on his hands with dabs of sticky plaster, Joshua slid on a pair of soft leather gloves to help keep them in place. The gloves were a Christmas gift from a former employer, and he had never felt quite right wearing them. Just a little too fancy for a butler. But now, the gloves seemed perfect.

A few minutes later, Millie arrived with the food. Hurriedly stepping into underclothes, Joshua pulling on a robe, and took the tray from the blushing girl.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Millie asked in real concern, studying his face "You seem ... different."

"Everything is different," Joshua replied honestly, giving her the bundle of his dirty clothes to wash, then scooting the maid into the hall.

The horse apple had done nothing to appease his stomach, and Joshua sat at his desk to eat like a ravenous beast. He was nodding sleepily during the rice pudding, and stiffly rose to stumble straight to bed. Unconsciousness came instantly. Thankfully without dreams.

Sometime later, Joshua awoke feeling thoroughly refreshed. Stretching under the warm blankets, he could see from the position of the sun that it was late afternoon. In the distance, children were laughing, birds were singing, and Henry Tresham was standing in the middle of the attic room.

"Jesus Christ!" Joshua screamed, tumbling out of bed. He hit the floor and came out with his guns cocked and ready.

"Helloo ... chieff..." Henry moaned, the transparent figure disappearing for a moment as it walked through a ray of sunshine.

"Deputy?" Joshua asked incredulously, keeping his weapons level, but easing his grip on the triggers. "Is that really you?" He could see holes in the apparition, two punctures that went completely through. *The bullet wounds that killed him .*

"Must warn you..." Henry whispered urgently, extending a ghostly hand. "Hoffman ... tunnel..."

"Tunnel. What tunnel?" Joshua asked, lowering his guns. Then he shivered from a draft, his skin becoming covered with goosepimples. The apparition radiated an aura of cold. *The infamous graveyard chill* . Only Henry wasn't laying in a grave, he was burned to a crisp on the floor of the Hoffman Mansion. *Your fault* , a little voice chattered in the back of his head. *Your fault! Your fault !*

"Please forgive me," Joshua started in apology. But the deputy marshall twisted madly around, as if trying to escape from something unseen.

"No...!" Henry moaned, thrashing about. "The Drell have found me again! Stop them before ... Free us!" With a wordless scream, the Deputy Marshall faded away, his words echoing as if coming out of a long tunnel. "Free us ... us ... us..."

The attic room went silent, the sounds of the chirping birds returned. Somewhere outside, a dog barked, and marching soldiers sang a bright cadence count.

Trying to catch his breath, Joshua sat down on the bed. Then he got right back up, and started quickly dressing. If Henry had crossed over from the spirit world to give a warning, then Joshua would darn well take it to heart. Buckling on his gunbelt, Joshua slipped on the shoulder holster. *Help us, Henry had said. But help whom? Other people killed by the mirror? The victims of the werewolves? Could he have meant the werewolves themselves? And who in Hades were the Drell ?* Those insect-like doctors, or somebody, *some thing* , that Joshua hadn't meet yet. Drell. The name carried an ominous ring.

Muttering curses, Joshua had a little trouble working the buttons on his shirt wearing the gloves, but with perseverance he mastered the technique. Properly attired, Joshua opened the door to leave and found Millie standing there with a bowl full of assorted objects.

"Found these in your washing, Marshall," she said, offering the bowl. "Didn't know if anything was important or not."

In a rush, Joshua started to brush past the maid when he noticed a piece of the busted mirror among the chalk, skullcap, and broken Lucifers. It must have fallen into his pocket when the big mirror exploded.

"Thank you," Joshua said softly, taking the shard of mirror and turning it about in the sunshine. "Place the rest on the washstand, please."

Millie gave a curtsy, and did as requested, leaving the Marshall alone with the piece of glass.

Feeling ridiculous, Joshua lifted the irregular chunk of glass to his face. "Henry, can you hear me?" he whispered, but there was no response.

Looking directly at the shard, Joshua could only see himself. Spinning around, he relaxed when there was nobody else in the attic bedroom. Frowning thoughtfully, he started to place the shard on the washstand, then decided against leaving the magical fragment alone and unguarded in the Executive Mansion. *Who knew what strange properties it might still have? Best to get it far away from here, then smash it to dust .*

Wrapping the piece of mirror in a clean handkerchief, Joshua tucked it deep into a vest pocket. Leaving the room, he closed the door tightly. *I'll report to the president, then leave immediately for Laurel* , he decided, starting down the long staircase. *With or without those explosives. I will just have to improvise something along the way .*

Eventually reaching the rotunda on the second floor, Joshua could see there was a gun crew down in the foyer, the soldiers busy polishing a Napoleon cannon inside a sandbag nest. Smart move. In passing, he felt like bringing them a plate of sandwiches, and had to resist the urge. *Old habits die hard.*

"Rabies?" one of the soldiers below asked in horror. "You sure?"

"Good god, haven't ya heard?" a corporal snorted, leaning against the brass cannon. "The president was attacked last night by a mad dog. It almost bit him."

"General Scott kilt it," another private said with obvious pride. "One shot, bang!" He pantomimed the execution.

"It's the worst, rabies is," the first private muttered, rubbing his jaw. "A dog bites ya, and you got it."

"And there ain't no cure," the corporal agreed dourly. "Except a bullet in the head, and burn the body."

Exactly like being a werewolf, Joshua noted, considering the matter. And also a lot of being a vampire, if Rabbi Gelfand was correct. People with rabies are extremely sensitive to bright light, so they only come out at night. Anything shiny repels them, such as; the sight of running water, a silver cross, or a mirror. The similarities between rabies and vampires were incredible. Once you know how to look at such things. I wonder if that is how the legends about werewolves and vampires were first created. Some poor peasant got bitten by a rapid bat, or wolf, went mad and started chomping on his neighbors, spreading the unknown disease. Hells bells, maybe the supernatural had a natural origin and something just went horribly wrong along the way. Pity there wasn't a cure for rabies. Who knows, it might also work on werewolves.

Reaching the west wing, Joshua saw that every trace of last night's brouhaha had been neatly removed. The blood washed away, the bullet holes patched with plaster, the walls freshly painted.

Maneuvering past a few packing crates, Joshua spied Mrs. Lincoln in the Oval Room arranging vases full of flowers. Was the woman insane, making festive decorations after an attempted assassination? *No, after a secret assassination attempt, Joshua corrected himself harshly. Life would go on in the mansion, as would the government, and the war. Everything was supposed to be as normal as possible. Although, that cannon in the front hall was going to be a little difficult to explain to dinner guests.*

Straightening his gloves and necktie, Joshua knocked on the open door before entering the room. "Mrs. Lincoln?" he asked respectfully.

Looking up from trimming roses, Mrs. Lincoln scowled at the butler in displeasure. "Witherspoon, whatever are you doing in those clothes?" she snapped, then furrowed her brow. "Oh yes, I had forgotten that my husband mentioned you were joining the War Department. Some kind of a special assignment. I thought it was a joke."

"No, ma'am," Joshua replied, putting both hands behind his jacket. "Mrs. President, you know plants pretty well, have you ever heard of wolfbane?"

Placing aside the shears, the First Lady primly sat down in a cushioned chair and placed a finger to her cheek. There was black loam under her nails. "Let me see..." she began. "I've heard of dogwood, catspaw, cattail, and wolfweed, but that's a poison used by soiled doves to ... well, it's not something we discuss in polite society."

Joshua knew what it was for. Drink a hot tea made from wolfweed every day and a woman could not get pregnant, no matter how many lovers she took. He had boiled a thousand gallons of the stuff for the working ladies at the Boston gentleman's club. Smelled awful, tasted even worse.

"No, Witherspoon," Mrs. Lincoln finally stated. "I do not know of any plant referred to as wolfbane. Why?"

"Just checking on some information," Joshua sighed. It had been a long shot, but worth the try. The marshall would have considered himself a fool if he went searching for the plant, when there was a grove of it blossoming in the Executive Mansion conservatory only a few yards away. "Thank you for the help, ma'am." With a polite bow, he turned to leave.

"Oh." She seemed disappointed that he wasn't spilling War Department secrets. "Good day, Witherspoon."

"Withers, Mrs. President," Joshua corrected firmly, standing partially in the doorway. "From now on, please refer to me only as Marshall J.P. Withers."

There was an indelicate pause, and the atmosphere in the room noticeably altered between the two people. Master and servant no more. Now they were equals, of a sort.

"I see," Mrs. Lincoln said slowly, her expression clearly indicating total disapproval. "All right then, have a good day, Mr. Withers."

Close enough. "Thank you, Mrs. President."

Squeezing past crates in the hall, Joshua thought the unfinished portrait of George Washington gave him a nod, but it may have just been a trick of the light. Then again ... ?

Reaching The Shop, Joshua was pleased to note that the honor guards had been increased to a full platoon, every manjack of them armed with a silver-edged cavalry sword.

"Halt and be recognized!" Lt. Smith ordered, smacking his rifle stock against the carpet. "Password, please."

"I don't know the password," Joshua explained. "But you know me, Smitty."

"Mayhap I does, and mayhap I doesn't," the lieutenant growled petulantly. "But St. Peter himself couldn't get past us without the password."

Crossing his arms, Joshua sadly shook his head. "By gad, you really are a total arsehead," he stated plainly.

Turning bright red in their faces, the rest of the platoon strained heroically to keep from laughing out loud, while Lt. Smith visibly bristled.

"What was that you said, boy?" the officer growled, a hand going to the pistol on his belt.

The door to the office opened.

"Alpha omega!" President Lincoln barked, waving the Marshall inside. "Now get in here, Joshua, and tell me what the heck is going on!"

"Alpha omega," Joshua repeated smugly, sauntering past the furious lieutenant.

As expected, the President was alone in The Shop at this time of day, surrounded by the usual of paperwork, maps and governmental effluvia stacked everywhere in neatly ordered mounds of chaos.

"Well?" President Lincoln snapped eagerly as the door closed. "Talk man, don't stand there like a tailor's dummy."

Taking a deep breath, Joshua haltingly launched into his report, giving as many details as possible. When he was done, the president sighed.

"Two points to consider," Lincoln said, templeing his bony fingers. "First, I do not have infinite time. I applaud your enthusiasm, but please just give me the important points. A field report should be no more than a hundred words."

About a page. "Yes, sir. No problem."

Reaching over to a Hoban drum table, the president expertly pulled a red folder from the middle of the two-foot high stack without disturbing the other reports. His first effort at that had resulted in disaster. Now he could do it asleep. "Here's a good example," President Lincoln said, passing it over. "The field report of the Apothecary-General about the poisoned bullets."

Joshua gave it a glance. The first soldier who died of the so-called poison bullets had appeared in the western battlefields. Only recently had the bodies been occurring closer to Washington as the warfare moved further towards the Atlantic coastline.

"Secondly," Lincoln muttered, tightening a fist so hard the knuckles cracked. "I have news, and it is not good."

"About the war, sir?"

"Yes. The number of barely-wounded dead is escalating. More and more troops are being found with hardly a scratch on them, but contorted like a carnival freak."

Or the circus. Mayhap the gypsies were the key to this whole matter, Joshua wondered pensively. *If I come back from that hellish house, I'll stop by the circus and have a chat.*

"Joshua ... no, Marshall Withers, you've done a splendid job, especially on such short notice. My faith in you was not misplaced," President Lincoln said with obvious pride. But whether it was for Joshua or himself was unclear. "So it seems that I have no choice in the matter." Raising stiffly from the chair, the president went to his desk and hastily scribbled a note. Lighting a candle, he dribbled hot wax on the paper and stomped it with the Great Seal of the Presidency.

"Congratulations," Lincoln declared, passing over the document. "You are henceforth a Special Agent for the United States of America, answerable only to me, and able to command the military."

Stunned by the promotion, Joshua accepted the decree. *And just like that, I'm not a Marshall anymore.* "A special agent," he said carefully, tasting the word. "For what department, sir?"

"Just tell folks you work for ... Bureau 13," President Lincoln said, laying a finger alongside his prominent nose and giving a crafty smile. "Never give a specific name, and they'll always assume the worst."

"And if somebody asks what the bureau does?" Joshua inquired, tucking away the document into his jacket.

"Tell them you're in charge of Reallocations," President Lincoln said, taking a different chair. "That'll fool anybody who can be fooled."

"And what exactly are reallocations?" Joshua prompted.

Smiling, the president spread his hands. "Who knows, son? That's the beauty of the word. Nobody is sure what you do, which means you might have power over them. Just ask if their records are in order, and you'll have them running scared. Nobody's records are ever in order."

If you can't blind them with brilliance, then deluge'em with dung. "Understood, sir. Ah ... why thirteen?"

"For our thirteen original colonies. You defend Americans from supernatural evil. All Americans, north and south."

In spite of himself, Joshua smiled broadly.

"Yes, I thought that would go down well," President Lincoln chuckled in agreement. "However, let me strongly recommend that you keep a low profile. If the word gets out that I started a Department of Magic, the religious community would have my jollies to toast ... well, they would be less than thrilled."

To say the least. It could cost the north the war. "I'll become invisible, sir," Joshua stated resolutely. "What are my legal powers, restrictions?"

"For the moment, carte blanche," the president said, scratching his stomach. The bandages were itching something fierce. Mary Todd was brewing some kind of an herbal poultice to ease his misery, but it wasn't here yet.

"Just get the job done," Lincoln said irritably, forcing his hand away by sheer will power. "We'll figure out the rest afterwards. Just don't stir up too much trouble."

"Yes sir." *A license to kill. That certainly removes my legal problems about gunning down the footpads .*

"I'll have the War Department assign you a room," the president continued, then waved a hand as if erasing a blackboard. "On second thought, go find yourself a suite of offices somewhere far away from the Executive Mansion. That way—"

"...if something wicked this way comes, it'll be chasing me, and not you," Joshua finished in a rush. "A wise precaution."

Pulling a printed slip from a pocket, Lincoln spread the paper on his leg and wrote a short note. "Give this to the paymaster. He'll assign you extra funds for the offices. Perhaps you could also live there to

save rent."

"Offices?" Joshua asked, his voice rising to a squeak on the last syllable. "As in, more than one?"

The president gave a curt nod. "Certainly. This is a lot bigger than I had ever imagined. No single man could possibly handle this. You'll need a staff. Better handpick 'em. This is nothing I am an conversant with. You'll know best."

Oh sure, I'm the world's best at running away from monsters. Always start with the left foot, people! Hesitantly taking the slip, Joshua bit his lip, then tore it to pieces. "Thank you, sir, but Bureau 13 has acquired sufficient funds for such a place," he stated. "Please don't take a dime out of the war chest. The nation may need every cent we have."

"This is not standard procedure," Lincoln said frowning deeply.

"The Bureau is not a typical department."

Stroking his scraggly beard, the president finally acquiesced. "Fair enough," Lincoln said rising, then placed a fatherly hand on the other man's shoulder. "And on a personal note, while I have never fought in battle, I do know how it feels to have a man die by your orders, or worse, because of your mistakes. Just try to remember that is was not by your will, but the will of others that constable..."

"Deputy Marshall," Joshua interrupted.

"I stand corrected," Lincoln replied with a gentle nod. "Always remember that it was by the will of others that Deputy Marshall Henry Tresham perished."

Joshua tried to speak, but the mixture of emotions choked in his throat.

Yes, I thought the man was bottling things up unnecessarily. "If a farmer sets a bear trap on the public green of a village," the president continued, "and you go walking with a friend, and your friend is killed by the trap, whose hand took his life? Not yours, but the fool who set a trap where it shouldn't have been."

The words were true, but did little to lighten the mantle of responsibility Joshua felt draped over his shoulders. Henry had died because of his overconfidence, and now the man was some sort of ghostly slave.*I'll never rest until Henry Tresham is free. That is a solemn vow .*

Trying not to scratch his painfully itchy chest, President Lincoln pulled over the top folder and started reading. "Keep me posted when you have something to report," he directed, turning a page. "But brief posts, mind you, brief!"

"Yes, sir," Joshua replied, accepting that as a dismissal. Leaving the office, the special agent quietly closed the door trying his best not to disturb the great man in his work.*I only have monsters to deal with. He's trying to save a damned nation .*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Leisurely riding at a slow canter, Major Logan Randal moved along the dirt road filled with laughing

people. An endless trickle of folks was constantly joining the happy throng that surrounded him until the major was engulfed by a joyous mob of cheerful Yankee civilians. *Lord, give me strength* .

Brightly colored posters nailed to the trees alongside the dirt road had large arrows for the patrons unable to read, but those were quite unnecessary. Steadily increasing in volume, calliope music could be heard coming from the tents down the road, along with gales of laughter, applause, and the pervasive aroma of freshly roasted peanuts. A lion roared, and fireworks crackled brightly in the afternoon sky.

The sights, the sounds, the smells! The circus was in town!

There were muscular farmers, pale shop clerks, lean maids, plump gamblers, and burly gandydancers, their heavily callused hands unnaturally large from swinging a sledgehammer for the railroad every day.

Mothers cradling babies in their arms, while the fathers carried the older children on their shoulders. Scattered among the civilians were a handful of Union soldiers walking with young girls on their arms, her parents close behind to keep a watch on the activities of the healthy couples. There was even the occasional Amish family, and one American Indian who seemed extremely saddened by all the trash along the side of the road. Most of the people were traveling on foot; only a select few rode horses, or carriages. But everybody was talking, pointing and gawking at the striped tents flying colorful banners visible down the road.

In spite of the annoying hubbub, the Confederate secret agent could not have been more pleased. There was no better place to hide than in a noisy crowd.

After so many long hours masked as an elderly tinker, the major was delighted to be back in proper clothing. The disguise eased Logan through the fields of combat unmolested, but in DC he needed to appear affluent to move in the right circles and find the man he was looking for. *Two men actually* , the major corrected grimly. *My Northern counterpart, and whomever in Hades was killing our boys on the battlefields. Most likely that same cowardly scum that sent a werewolf to attack President Davis in his home!* Tensing his left arm, a cobalt-blue derringer slid into his palm. Relaxing the muscles, the major sent the trick weapon back up his sleeve and out of sight. Oh yes, he most sincerely wished to meet that person. *At pointblank range* .

Tall and slim, Major Logan Randal was dressed like a rich country squire in a green jacket and black brocade vest with a silver watch chain across the front. His gray trousers had a sharp crease down the front, and his black boots shone with polish. His wavy blonde hair was recently cut, his dapper moustache and goatee neatly trimmed. Logan appeared to be the epitome of contemporary fashion.

The secret agent was also packing more ironmongery than an Confederate battalion. A red leather gunbelt was slung low about his waist, an ivory-handle Colt revolver resting in the holster. An Italian stiletto was tucked low in a boot, worn brass knuckles filled a vest pocket, and a straight sword hung in a plain scabbard at his side. The world famous Wilkerson Blade Company called the blade style a musician's baton, because it moved so quickly through the air. In homage to his parents, Logan privately referred to the deadly blade as Elisa, and his handgun as Jebediah.

A constable in the crowd observed the arsenal of weaponry, and moved a little closer to the rich squire. Guns and money. That was the classic formula for trouble. *His left arm seems odd, too* , the constable noted, but could not quite figure out what was wrong with the limb.

From atop his stallion, Major Randal observed the constable's scrutiny, and tried to act more casual. This was just a recon mission, nothing more, and the last thing the Confederate agent wanted was to be arrested by a Yankee copper. *Well, he could try* , Logan amended in amusement.

Everybody in the happy crowd was jabbering away about the wonders and marvels they were about to witness. Church fairs and barn dances were held often enough in DC, but a carnival or circus was a rare treat. Most of the people had only heard rumors of the exotic delights the traveling show offered, acrobats, sword-swallowers, lions ... and if they were really lucky, there might even be one of those new things from France called a mime. Nobody in town exactly knew what that was, animal, vegetable, or mineral, but since it came from France, mimes must be truly spectacular.

In the crowd, squealing children dashed about constantly getting underfoot. More than once, Major Randal had to tighten the reins to keep the huge stallion from stepping on a scurrying kinder.

"Easy, Abraxas," Logan said soothingly, stroking the muscular neck of the titanic roan. "Just colts at play, old boy, non-combatants." As if understanding every word, Abraxas nickered in reply and slowed to a walk.

Appearing from nowhere, a spidery man with thin fingers was walking alongside Logan and his horse. Dropping the derringer into his palm, the major clicked back the hammer.

"Move along," Logan growled, displaying the weapon for a split second.

Weakly smiling, the pickpocket stealthily removed his hand from the buckle of the saddlebag and faded away to seek easier prey.

Watching until the fellow disappeared, Logan tucked away the miniature gun. *Damn fool. But there was one in every crowd.*

Steam whistles keened, and the calliope swelled into a musical crescendo as the newcomers reached the boundary of the circus. There was no ticket booth or rope line present like at a carnival. The midway was wide open to all comers. The more the merrier!, was the philosophy of the circus. Agog and aghast, the patrons eagerly spread out for the different attractions, seeming to actually increase the volume of their excited chatter if that was humanly possible.

Heading over to a roped off paddock, the people in wagons drove their bouncing wagons inside, and handed a burly roustabout a copper penny to stand guard over their animals for the duration of their stay. His bald head gleaming in the sunlight, the circus roustabout greeted everybody politely, but there was a stout wooden club hanging at his side. The civilians were impressed, but Logan was not. Stealing a horse was a hanging offense in Washington, so the club was there mostly for show. Only a desperate madman would try to steal a horse in these civilized days.

Sliding down from the saddle, Logan flipped a dime to the roustabout, who beamed a big smile in return, and took personal charge of the roan stallion, leading Abraxas to a secluded spot where there was plenty of fresh hay and buckets of spring water.

Merging with the chattering mob, Major Randal put on a silly grin, and started a dutiful sweep of the circus tents. However, Logan studied the faces in the crowd instead of the garish amusements on display. Logic dictated that, sooner or later, the Union Army would send somebody to seek the council of the gypsies about these strange events happening, and then ... Major Randal allowed himself a thin smile. *Well, that's when things would get interesting .*

The overpowering smell of peanuts reminded Logan that lunch had been a stale cheese sandwich about a million years ago. He sniffed the air hopefully. But if there was any place serving actual food, it was not readily evident. There was only the all-pervasive aroma of goobers.

Those are almost a food, Major Randal hesitantly theorized, nearly yielding to the salty temptation. But after some consideration, the Confederate secret agent keep walking. *Nope, I'm not quite that hungry yet.*

* * * *

In the Executive Mansion, Joshua ignored the glowering Lt. Smith at the doorway, and started briskly weaving through the obstacle course of packing crates. There seemed to be more of the blasted things every minute! Were they breeding?

Skirting the rotunda, the Bureau 13 agent started down the stairs until he encountered Millie. The young woman seemed nervous, even a little frightened.

"Mr. Witherspoon, can I talks to yawl for a spell, shar?" she gushed out, as if holding in the words for too long. Then she scowled. "May I speak to you for a moment, sir," Millie tried again, in a flat Washington accent.

Joshua tried not to grin. Originally from *Bawsten*, or more colloquially referred to by the rest of the world as Boss-tin, he knew exactly how she felt trying to master the dull nuances of the American version of the English language.

"Of course," Joshua said graciously, moving down a step so that they would be on equal footing. "Is something wrong?"

"No, sir. But I heard about what happened last night," Millie said timidly. Then she thrust something at him. "Here!"

"What is it?" Joshua asked curiously, accepting the leather bag. It was a cheap pouch, the kind used to carry coins, or loose bullets. The hide was discolored with sweat, but pleasantly smelled like a spring garden. Joshua vaguely remembered that this was what she had started to give him yesterday at breakfast. The contents must be something of extraordinary value for her to need so long in deciding that he needed it. *Whatever this is*. Tugging on the drawstring with his gloves, Joshua tried to peek inside.

"Don't open it!" Millie cried, grabbing his big hands with her small fingers. They were surprising strong for such a petite woman. She roughly took the bag away, only to gently stuff it into his jacket pocket.

"That's a juju bag, sir," Millie explained, looking embarrassed at his expression. "Full of old African magic. Graveyard soil, moon dust, chicken bones, stained glass from a church window, crow feathers, salt, and special things. It'll help protect you."

Joshua looked at the lumpy pocket. *A good luck charm*? Why not? There was evil magic trying to stop him, only made sense to counter it with some protective magic.

"Thank you," Joshua said slowly, choosing his next words carefully. "But why don't you give this to the president? He certainly needs it a lot more than me."

"Got one last night," Millie shot back proudly, placing hands on both hips. "But you'll need some juju, too, going after werewolves, and such."

That stopped the man cold. "You know what they're called?" Joshua demanded suspiciously.

Millie shrugged. "Course. My mother taught me a lot about the nighthunters. Boogums, she called them."

Boogums? Good name. "Well, if that is the case," Joshua said, buttoning the pocket closed. "Thank you very much, Millie. Although, I certainly hope I never have occasion to use it."

"Better to have and not need, then need and not have," she answered in a singsong voice as if quoting something from memory.

"By God, that's the truth," Joshua smiled, a crazy notion already simmering in his mind. "Any chance you could make more of these?"

"Sure enough. But why you want another?"

"For other special government agents to use." The idea emerged fully formed, and he liked the look of it. *I can't be in two places at once, and really will need a base of operations to work from, keep records, and store supplies like silver bullets and wolfbane. Besides, she would never, ever, be sent on a mission.* "Want to come work for me?"

"Sir?" Millie asked, drawing away slightly.

He repeated the question.

"That's powerful kind of you, sir. But I work for the president."

"As do I," Joshua grinned, hooking his thumbs behind his suspenders just like the president always did when posing for the newspapers. "And this could help the war effort."

"Well, I dunno..." she said, clearly wavering.

"Less work, more pay, and no bathrooms to clean."

"Really?" Millie asked in a small voice full of questioning hope. "And my job would be making juju bags?"

"Absolutely."

"And nothing else?" she asked pointedly, her black eyes sharp and full of suspicion. "Nothing?"

As comprehension dawned, Joshua recoiled in shock. "Good lord, miss, I'm a gentleman!"

"Those are usually the worst," Millie stated with conviction, but then smiled. "However, I kin ... can see that you truly mean it. All right, when do I start, sir?"

"Please, call me Joshua."

Millie crossed her arms at that and frowned in concentration. "Don't like it," she declared. "Seems improper."

"Then call me Fred."

"But that ain't your name."

"Neither is sir."

Covering her mouth with both hands, Millie burst into a giggle. "Anything you say, chief."

Chief. That brought a stab in his heart, but Joshua forced an outward grin. "Welcome to Bureau 13," he said offering a hand, and they shook. "All right, Millie, your first assignment is to find us somewhere to work, preferably outside of town." He pulled out the stack of cash from the Seahawk, and peeled off the top bills. "Here you go. Try to get an abandoned barn for our horses, perhaps with some rooms in the back for you to create ... ah ... make the..."

"Brew more juju bags," Millie smiled, taking the money. Artfully, she fanned the greenbacks like poker cards. "Lord almighty, how much is this?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Thousand!" she gasped. "That's enough to buy a whole farm, instead of just a barn."

"Then get us a really nice barn," Joshua replied. "Perhaps on a farm well known for having poor crops, so nobody will get suspicious when we don't raise anything. Lord knows, I'm no farmer."

"Neither am I, but we could hire one. Why not get a good farm, and raise something?" Millie suggested, tucking the cash into the skirt under her apron. "Earn a little extra money to help pay the bills. War is expensive."

"You have no idea," Joshua agreed from the heart. "Just don't spend it all on a hat, All right?"

Outraged at the accusation, Millie went stiff. Then she got the idea, and relaxed enough to accept the jibe. "Be the best damn hat you ever saw iffen I do," she laughed. "A hat to stop the war!"

"Then buy two," Joshua grinned back.

At the sound of footsteps, the two Bureau agents had to step aside as a bedraggled military courier stomped up the stairs carrying a leather tube used for battlefield dispatches. Both man and dispatch were covered with mud, and the soldier's coat was tattered by countless bullet holes.

"Which reminds me," Joshua muttered, pulling out his notebook and scribbling a short message. "Before you go anywhere, take this to Sgt. Montgomery and get yourself a handgun."

"A gun?" she asked in a small voice.

"Why not? As a free woman working for the War Department, you certainly have the legal right to carry a handgun."

"Lord almighty," Millie whispered, wringing her hands. "A black woman carrying a gun. I dunno about that...."

Sensing that she was backsliding, Joshua acted on a hunch and grandly motioned up the stairs towards the portrait in the second floor. "I'll bet George would approve."

Pursing her lips, the former maid nodded in agreement. Sometimes, when the light was dim, she could

almost swear the portrait of the First President was smiling at her. And once when she got a skirt caught on a nail, as she hitched it up high to get the fabric loose, the painting seemed to avert his gaze. Yassur, a true gentlemen, even though he was dead. Millie thought the man would have made a wonderful king. Congress had offered, but George turned it down. *Strange man, but a good man. Guess that made him strange. Damn few men were good. Most men were just good and damned .*

"Look, Millie, I should have said this at the beginning," Joshua admitted sheepishly. "But there is some danger working for me. You need to carry a weapon. That thing last night was not alone. So I fully understand if you would rather stay here..."

"Oh, hush," Millie scolded, tilting her head to the side. "If we're going to be hunting werewolves, then we better get some dogs."

"Dogs?"

"Big dogs," she corrected, tapping a finger against her cheek. "Always fight fire with fire, my pappy said. If a werewolf attacks our barn, let's see what a dozen Irish wolf hounds can do."

"Or mastiffs," Joshua suggested, spreading his arms wide to indicate the size. "Those are gigantic."

"And dumber than rocks. Of course, there is a circus in town," Millie added, chewing a fingertip. "Mayhap I could buy us a couple of lions, and a hundred chickens."

That took a minute before Joshua realized the woman was serious. "Why in the world would we need a hundred chickens?" he demanded in total confusion.

"To feed the lions," she replied simply, starting down the stairs. "Honestly, you men never think ahead."

"Guilty as charged," Joshua admitted, keeping in step with the smaller woman. "Perhaps you should be in charge."

"Can you brew juju bags?"

"Nope."

"Then you hunt the boojums, and I'll do the potions."

"Deal," Joshua chuckled, holding open the front door. "After you, Miss ... say, what is your last name?"

"Scott. Millicent Winifred Zenoba Scott."

And I got jokes about Joshua Parnel Witherspoon! "After you, Miss Scott."

"Why thank you ever so, Mr. Withers."

As they stepped outside, Joshua added, "When you find us a place, leave notice with the sergeant. I'll get the message eventually and meet you there." *If I'm still alive .*

"No problem."

In a swirl of skirts, Millie started for the armory, and Joshua headed for the carriage house. He had a

quick word with the head coachman and arranged for a horse for Millie. The woman had a powerful lot of traveling to do, and Joshua wanted her safely back home at the Executive Mansion before sundown.

Afterward, Joshua went along the line of stalls to find Estelle, sound asleep, stand up and snoring. There was fresh straw on the floor, and the mare appeared washed, scrubbed, curried and combed. The tangles were gone from her mane, and even her hooves were polished. Joshua approved. *The presidential treatment, eh? Well, Estelle deserved it, sure enough. I'm only sorry that I can't leave you behind with Millie .*

The mare woke up as Joshua entered the stall, and snorted in friendly recognition. "Been fed yet, girl?" Joshua asked, patting her smooth coat.

She nickered softly.

"Good. Let's go kill some boogums." *I like that word .*

Putting a clean Army blanket on her back, Joshua swung a saddle over Estelle and buckled it tight. A well-trained animal, the police horse didn't play any games with the belly trap. She accepted the weight of the saddle like an old soldier donning a uniform.

Draping over the saddlebags, Joshua added a canteen of water, and a small bag of oats. Any further supplies that he needed could be purchased in Laurel. It was already early afternoon and he didn't want to dawdle anymore. There was a military post near the town, just outside a cemetery. With luck, they might have a supply of guncotton, but he would take whatever they had in stock.

Leading the mare outside, Joshua met Millie as she came out of the armory. A Remington smoothbore shotgun was resting on a dainty shoulder, a gunbelt holding a Starr revolver slung over her hips. The woman looked like a pioneer ready to battle desperadoes on the frontier. Gingham and guns, the mixture was oddly erotic. Furious at the lapse, Joshua banished the improper thoughts from his mind, and tried to radiate an aura of the purest innocence.

"Bad news, chief," Millie called out, walking closer to the nervously smiling man. "Sgt. Montgomery couldn't locate any nitroglycerin, or filymint ... fintyman..."

"Fulminating mercury."

She blushed at the farble. "Yes, that's it. But he found a dozen sticks of guncotton hidden under a pile of greenbacks, whatever that means." She knew, but didn't want to get the soldier into any trouble.

Joshua understood that she knew, and played along. "I'll explain later," he lied. *So Montgomery has a connection to the blackmarket, eh?* Made sense. Stable guncotton was rare and valuable, which meant there would always be some sold under the table to shady buyers. Stability was the mitigating factor. Guncotton was the most powerful explosive on Earth, but not even the great chemist Henry DuPont knew how to make the stuff safe to handle. Some batches behaved as expected. But the next batch would detonate for no darn reason whatsoever.

Which was a good thing in a twisted way, Joshua considered ruefully. With their limitless supply of cotton, if the Confederacy ever learned how to convert bales of ordinary cotton into the high-explosive guncotton, the war would be over in about a week. With them the undisputed winners.

"Anyway," Millie continued, reaching out a timid hand to stroke the horse. After taking a sniff of the

fingers, Estelle permitted the familiarity. "Sgt. Montgomery sent off a telegraph, but the guncotton won't get here for a couple of hours. But you can have the blackpowder now. All you want."

"Two hours," Joshua muttered unhappily, leaning forward in the saddle. He hated to wait that long, but it would be worth the delay for that much stable guncotton. *Decisions, decisions* .

"All right, I can spare the time," Joshua growled in resignation. "Do you need any help looking for a farm?"

"Me? No sir."

"Good. Then I'm going to the circus."

Her face ran a gauntlet of expressions. "Going to buy us a lion?" Millie asked half-joking.

"I'll check into it," Joshua said cryptically.

Shaking the reins, the man started Estelle along the curved driveway down to Pennsylvania Avenue.

Two hours to kill with nothing to do. This was the perfect opportunity to go talk with the gypsies. Knowledge was proving more useful than guncotton when dealing with the occult. *And I'm going to need plenty of both to handle those Drell* .

As Millie sashayed into the carriage house, the dogs around the Executive Mansion began to howl as if some unseen predator had just passed by the property.

Keeping a hand on the Starr, Joshua nudged Estelle into a brisk gallop. Suddenly, a lion didn't seem like some an outlandish notion. *I wonder if a hundred chickens would be enough?*

CHAPTER TWENTY

Charging through the gunfire, a Confederate officer jumped over a blast crater and dove into a clump of bushes. A heartbeat later, a hail of miniballs tore apart the leaves a few inches above his head. When the fusillade stopped, the lieutenant rose and quick-fired his Colt revolver at the onrushing Union soldiers.

The Yankees buckled and fell to a man.

"Learn how to aim better in the next life, boys!" the lieutenant laughed, holstering the empty weapon. Then shame took him for the heartless taunt, and the man quickly removed his cap to say a fast prayer. *These aren't my enemy, just the foe. There was a powerful heap of difference between those two words* .

"Amen," the Confederate officer muttered, just as a footstep sounded from behind.

Drawing his sword, the lieutenant spun around to see a doctor standing in the bushes. A big fellow in a greatcoat and soft hat, carrying a civilian medical bag. *Not a military-style canvas bag, and no badges of neutrality* .

"And just who in Hades are you?" the lieutenant demanded, prodding the other man with the curved blade. That was when he noticed the ragged bullet holes in the physician's shirt, and the gaping holes in the exposed flesh closing all by themselves.

Recoiling in fear, the officer brandished the sword wildly. Knocking the edged weapon aside, the doctor grabbed the lieutenant by the throat and slammed him against a tree. The stunning blow knocked the wind out of him, and the officer fell to the ground gasping for breath.

Incredibly, the doctor then dropped to his knees directly onto the legs of the Confederate officer, the bones audibly cracking under the crushing impact. *Pain !*

Grabbing the screaming food by the head, the Drell extruded its feedings tendrils. Writhing about, the filaments caressed the waves of heat coming off the shrieking food. Then they sank into the main entrance points of eyes, ears, mouth. Rendered deaf and blind, the food passed out, and the delicious feeding began.

But after only a moment, the Drell forced itself to stop draining away the precious life-energy. Withdrawing the tendrils, the Drell kept a firm hold on the dying food as it reached out with both lower arms to slowly open the black bag ... ?

* * * *

Tossing the roustabout a nickel, Joshua left Estelle in a public paddock, and strode into the hurly-burly of the circus.

Drell, Drell, Drell, the name beat like a gong in his mind. Was that their family name, where the doctors came from, or the species? Knowing so much, and knowing so little, was exceptionally frustrating. Joshua tried hard to control his rising temper. *Going to get into trouble someday if I don't .*

Moving through the jubilant crowd, Joshua's boots crushed peanuts shells into the beery mud as he diligently searched for the tent of the fortuneteller. *If any gypsy knew about the occult, it should be her .* On the whole, women seemed to be more in tune with the supernatural than men. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing, or a bad thing, so simply noted the observation and filed it away for further consideration.

Passing a stand selling slices of fresh rhubarb pies, Joshua found the sickeningly sweet smell almost overpowering, and held his breath. He could not believe the happy people shoveling those thick gooey slabs into their mouths. Sprinkle sugar on top, and most folks would eat anything. Heck, the folks in Ohio consumed buckeyes, and those were a deadly poison unless boiled for a week. Exasperated at the foolishness, Joshua lit a cigar. Rhubarb! Didn't people ever pay attention to what they put in their bodies?

Just then, the throng parted as some clowns dressed in Confederate uniforms appeared, honking and running in terror. Close behind came a midget in a Union army uniform, pedaling a tricycle and waving an American flag. Everybody cheered and applauded. Except for Joshua. War was serious business and should not be treated lightly. Good men were dying on the battlefield, and ... He paused at the sight of another frowning face in the mob. A tall dapper man with a blonde goatee and moustache. The clothing said country squire, but the fellow was festooned with weapons, including something-or-other hidden up his left sleeve. His tailor had blatantly cheated the gentleman on the alterations. Feeling a prickle of unease, Joshua loosened the Starr under his coat and started that way.

The blonde man turned to vanish into the crowd.

His hackles on the rise, Joshua looked among the happy faces, but the big fellow was gone. Merged with the other patrons like a drop of water hiding in a stream.

Either that was a ghost, or a professional criminal, Joshua speculated, ill at ease. Or mayhap a ballet dancer, acrobat, or one of those Oriental fellows in pajamas who beat you up with their feet . There were a lot of people in the world capable of moving with such speed and grace. But darn few of them also had trick guns hidden up their sleeves. Joshua frowned. By thunder, I've just seen a Confederate spy! He's probably here to watch troops movements, or track ammunition trains .
The Bureau 13 agent exhaled in relief. *Sure glad he's not after me .*

Returning to his hunt for the fortune teller, Joshua kept a careful watch on the crowd, but nobody seemed to be watching him in return.

Flamboyantly dressed in shiny clothing, barkers maintained a constant barrage of outrageous promises about the thrills, chills, and spills, available inside each tent for a fantastic price of a single penny. On the midway, everybody cheered as an elephant lumbered into view wearing a collar made of peacock feathers, a monkey sitting on top eating a banana. In the distance, a giraffe rose above the tents to nibble on a leafy treetop.

Outside of a tent selling beer, mudlarks dove into a watery puddle, and a small boy arose victoriously with a dropped coin gleaming in his dirty fist. Close nearby, several men were down on their knees rolling dice on a wooden plank. Every few minutes they would groan or cheer, and greenbacks would be temporarily exchanged.

With pockets turned out to show that he was completely broke, a young man shuffled away in defeat from the grinning proprietor of a three-cat booth. Standing demurely in the shadows behind a public privy, a rather unattractive woman in a red dress smiled invitingly at Joshua, radiating an invitation older than Human speech. Removing the cigar, the Bureau 13 agent politely shook his head to show a lack of interest in doing business. The soiled dove accepted the rebuff and smiled beguilingly at the next potential customer.

Passing the freak show, *with a genuine mermaid in a bottle, and a live unicorn !*, Joshua breathed in the wonderful aroma of freshly roasted peanuts. Glorious! Then he stopped in his tracks. Situated between two wooden stalls was a tent adorned with a motif of crescent moons and shooting stars. A placard hanging from a pole proclaimed that this was the abode of Madam Olga, Supreme Master of the Occult! One cent for ten questions. Another sign apologized that she was out to lunch. Next show in an hour. Please come again.

Too bad, Joshua mentally declared, dropping the cigar, and crushing it under a boot. Squaring his shoulders, Joshua tromped closer, then paused at the entrance. The flap was down. Should he just go inside, or politely knock first? *And how exactly do I knock on canvas, genius ?*

"By stomping on the ground!" a woman shouted from within. "Please enter, seeker of the hidden truth!"

Pushing back the flap, Joshua warily stepped into the smoky interior. The misty air was sweet with incense, the fumes swirling about in a pungent clouds. *At least I can't smell the rhubarb anymore .*

A round table was covered with a faded tapestry, the worn velvet adorned with mystical symbols, and the prerequisite crystal ball was placed prominently in the middle, on display for all to see in wonder and amazement.

Sitting behind the table was a mature woman chewing a cigar, and dealing tarot cards from the bottom of the deck.

Closing the entrance, Joshua guessed that Madam Olga had once been a phenomenal beauty, but that time had passed. Her curly black hair was highlighted with gray, and held off her face with a blue silk scarf knotted on the side. A green dress reached to her chin and wrists, *no peep show here*, and a dozen necklaces fought for supremacy on her ample bosom. Every finger carried a ring, and her wrists jangled with bracelets. *Probably bells on her toes, too*. The mature woman looked exactly the way a gypsy fortuneteller should appear, and the Bureau 13 agent didn't trust her any further than he could comfortably throw a steam locomotive.

"Have a seat, man whose father was bald," Madam Olga said, placing aside the cards.

Sorry that he had gotten rid of his own cigar, Joshua took a wooden chair. It creaked slightly under his weight.

"Nice try," Joshua said, leaning forward slightly to put more weight on his shoes. "But I'm not impressed. Most men go bald in old age. You guessed my age, and took a shot on the rest."

Arching a penciled eyebrow, Madam Olga scowled in clear dislike. Joshua noted that he seemed to be having that effect on a lot of people these days.

"A disbeliever, eh? All right then, orphan from Boston," she retorted hotly. "How about ... your father was ... left handed, slightly deaf, tattoo of a flag on his chest, and walked with a limp because a mule bite him on the arse. You used to be a butler, and now you are on a dangerous mission for a bearded man with a cranky wife." Madam Olga started panting as if she had just run a marathon, and took a handkerchief from a sleeve to mop her damp brow. "Is that better, man-whose-real-name-I-should-not-know?"

Totally flummoxed, Joshua sat there gaping like an ape. "And how the ... who the ... Do you know me?"

"No, I do not," Madam Olga replied haughtily, removing the cigar to inspect the end, then put it back again. "But sometimes the deudonic barriers part, and I see the unseen, know the unknowable."

"You can actually see the future," Joshua asked skeptically, resting his chin on a fist.

"Yes, and no. Some things happen naturally, while others...." Madam Olga frowned. "Do you know the concept of karma?"

Karma? Yes, the rabbi had covered that. "The Hindu belief that your destiny is already cast, and can not be changed."

"That is correct," Madam Olga replied, pleasantly surprised. She had pegged the man as a constable, or a law officer of some kind, but he spoke like a schoolteacher. "Karma is absolute, yet it can be countered by yarma, the ability to change your destiny through sheer intelligence. Not by force of arms, or bravery, but through your will and mind."

"So we have free will, but the future is set into stone."

"Exactly."

"Those two philosophies seem to contradict each other," Joshua muttered, unsure if this was a test of some kind.

She grinned in an affable manner. "Confusing, isn't it? Well, that's life," Madam Olga declared, leaning back to cross her legs under the table. There came a musical tinkling from below the tapestry.

Unable to stop himself, Joshua sneaked a peek. *Yep, bells on her toes. Hey, a tattoo of a battleship!*

"Please stop that, young man."

Bolting upright, Joshua blushed crimson. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Oh, you're forgiven. Everybody tries that at least once," Madam Olga chuckled, dismissing the matter with a jingling wave. "Why, only last week, a senator...." "Abruptly snapping up her head, the gypsy stared in horror at his stomach. "And what in the name of the Great Spirit is that ...*thing* in your pocket?"

Startled, Joshua grabbed the juju bag in his coat pocket.

"Your vest pocket," Madam Olga corrected bluntly, pointing with an unwavering finger.

Pulling out the handkerchief, Joshua laid it on the table and folded back the cloth to reveal the piece of broken mirror from the Hoffman Mansion.

"Jesus, Allah and Buddha," she whispered, staring at the little piece of reflective glass. "I haven't seen a one of those in...." "Madam Olga looked directly at Joshua. "You had to kill to get this." It wasn't a question.

With a dry mouth, he gave a solemn nod.

"Thought so," she muttered, reaching under the table to withdraw a brown bottle. Popping the cork with her teeth, the gypsy took a long drink, then shoved in the stopper again, and stowed the bottle away.

"Any chance I could buy if off you? No, didn't think so," Madam Olga quickly amended, answering her own question at his malevolent expression. "Fair enough, I suppose. Goddess knows, I never would."

Joshua picked up the shard, careful of the sharp edges. "What does it do?"

"Ah, to learn that, you must first cross my palm with silver."

"Is that part of a spell?" Joshua asked, rummaging in a pocket to extract a dime.

"Exactly. That's how I magically pay the rent," Madam Olga replied, dropping the coin down a hidden slot in the table. It clattered away to somewhere safe from any possible demand for a refund from a frustrated customer. "All right, use a knife to scrap off the backing. This must be done by you personally. Be careful! Obtaining another piece should prove to be ... quite injurious to your health."

To say the least. Taking out the knife, Joshua opened the folding blade. The hinge was slightly rusty from the recent immersion at the creek. *Mental note: take better care of my weapons .*

"That's not a silver-edged knife, is it?" Madam Olga demanded to know. "Never touch a deudonic lens with silver!"

"No, ma'am. Plain steel." *Why did she call this a lens?*

"Fine, then proceed."

Carefully as if removing the splinter from the trembling finger of a crying child, Joshua cleaned off the broken piece of mirror. Exposed underneath the gray backing was a diamond pattern cut into the transparent material. Interesting. "Now what?" he asked, folding away the knife.

"Look through it," Madam Olga commanded, waving about the tent. "And prepare to see wonders beyond imagination!"

"Ah ... it's transparent, ma'am."

She gave a hard smile. "Think so, do you?"

Hesitantly lifting the glass, Joshua saw the tapestry, and his own hand. Seemed normal enough.

"Try my crystal ball," she suggested pleasantly.

Framing the gypsy instead, Joshua found her surrounded by a faint glow tinged with hints of green. Astounded, he swiveled to the crystal ball. No longer clear, the sphere was a whirlwind of rampaging colors in every color of the rainbow, and a few more besides. He lowered the lens. Transparent. *Clear as crystal*. But through the magical lens ... ?

"This is some kind of a prism," Joshua guessed, watching the technicolor hurricane inside the sphere.

"Clever fellow. Yes, it is, but not in the way you mean," Madam Olga said in baffling explanation.

"What?"

Scratching under her scarf, the woman marshaled her small repository of knowledge on the occult gleaned over the long years dealing with stage magicians and carnival tricksters. "With the alchemy backing removed, the lens will now break apart the aura of a magical object, the same way a prism does sunlight."

Lowering the shard, Joshua checked the interior of the tent. Everything was normal. "Then this can show me if something has been cursed?" he asked, using the magical lens again. Colors abounded.

"Cursed, blessed, naturally magical ... and the hues have specific meanings," Madam Olga stated, warming to the subject. "Purple is bad, very bad. Black means dangerous, but not bad or evil, merely dangerous. Green is neutral, neither good or bad."

She was neutral, that was good to know. "What about blue, or yellow? Magenta, puce and mauve?"

Madam Olga blinked. *Those were colors* ? "I have no idea whatsoever," she apologized. "But then, if I was the all-seeing oracle of Delphi, I would be rich and living in Paris, instead traveling with the circus to endlessly tell young girls that they'll soon meet a tall dark stranger, and promising farmers their corn will be plentiful next year."

Joshua was swayed by the frank honesty. *She admitted to being a fake? Well, the gypsy certainly seemed to be on the mark today*. Pulling out the crucifix and Star of David from under his shirt, Joshua saw that each of the talismans radiated blue. *Defensive magic*. Digging out the juju bag from Millie, it gave off brilliant green, laced with streaks of gold. Neutral magic with something else. *Good luck,*

perhaps? This was amazing!

Then out of the corner of his vision, Joshua saw something move inside the crystal ball. Scooting forward on the chair, the Bureau 13 agent stared at the pulsating orb. Faces and places keep drifting in and out of view within the technicolor hurricane. Gazing into the sphere was like looking through a distorted window into another world. It was also starting to give him a splitting headache. His brain was throbbing, and Joshua was beginning to feel queasy.

"See something in my ball?" Madam Olga asked sweetly.

"Some thing," Joshua agreed hesitantly. Switching the lens to his other eye gave the man some relief, but then the pain came crashing back worse than before.

"I'll be more than glad to help," Madam Olga smiled beguilingly, extending a palm. "One dime, please."

Lowering the shard, Joshua scowled. "The sign outside said ten questions for a penny."

"Ah, but you want answers," she explained gregariously. "Those always cost more."

"Ever been a green grocer?" Joshua grumbled, yielding to the genial extortion. He forked over a coin, and it disappeared like the earlier payment.

"Now be still!" Madam Olga commanded, gesturing at the crystal with both hands and sounding like a wind chime factory during a gale. "I have to concentrate ... concentrate....*concentrate!*"

"Yes, but are you concentrating?"

"Shut up, idiot," she muttered, the muscles in her neck tightening from the strain. "This isn't as easy as it appears."

In the furthest reaches of her soul, something gibbered in stark terror, warning the gypsy not to make the attempt. An open doorway could be used in both directions! Ignoring that, Madam Olga poured in her every ounce of feeble powers. For the first time in many years, she was in direct contact with the ethereal plane. A trickle of deudonic power was flowing through her veins like a sweet wine. *By the Goddess, I'm cooking today!*

Watching the gypsy as much as the crystal ball, Joshua withheld using the lens. Every passing moment eased the painful throbbing in his head, and settled his roiling stomach. The prismatic lens was amazing, but he would have to use it very sparingly. *This thing would kill me in an hour.*

"Ah ha, the gateway is opening..." Madam Olga moaned, sweat dripping off her face to stain her dress. "Ask your questions..."

"Will I defeat the Drell?" Joshua asked urgently, then bit his tongue. "Forget that!" She had already said that the future wasn't set in stone. *The revenge of yarma.*

"How can I defeat the Drell?" Joshua demanded, feeling inspired.

"Behold!" Madam Olga cried, dramatically raising both arms to the usual musical accompaniment. "See the unseeable! Know the unknowable!"

There was a stomp at the entrance of the tent.

"Go away, I'm busy!" she yelled. "Come back tomorrow!"

There was nothing visible in the crystal ball. Having no other choice, Joshua inhaled deeply and summoned his pluck to use the lens once more. Icepicks of pain instantly stabbed into his temples.

Deep inside the rampaging maelstrom of hues and tints, he could dimly see a beautiful woman in a golden cage. Surrounded by a swirling mist, the prisoner had long black hair tied back in a simple ponytail, and a pale complexion. Pacing back and forth within the confines of the cage, the woman was dressed in a sleeping gown covered with multiple food stains, some of them clearly overlapping. It didn't require the honed instincts of a professional butler to tell from the sad condition of her laundry that she must have been held a captive for a very long time. Weeks, perhaps even months.

"Who is she?" Joshua demanded hoarsely, trying to discern any background that might give the location. It was becoming difficult to focus his vision. Joshua couldn't see any background details through the billowing clouds. That seemed to jog a faint memory, but nothing came to his pounding mind at the moment.

"More importantly, where is she?" Joshua asked urgently. "How can she help me defeat the Drell? Does she know where they come from?"

"One question at a time!" Madam Olga snapped irritably, breathing heavily. "I'm not the flipping Shell Answer Man!"

Holding his temper in check, Joshua accepted the rebuff. The gypsy was clearly trying her best. "Where are you, dear lady?" he said plaintively to the image in the crystal.

Incredibly, the woman lifted her head upward as if able to see Joshua. She mouthed a silent question.

Feeling as if he had just been poleaxed, Joshua stared at the tiny woman. "C-can you hear me?" he stammered, having trouble saying the words.

"Don't be an arsehead," Madam Olga snorted rudely, "Of course she can't!"

But the tiny woman nodded yes, and asked her question once more. This time, he watched her lips. *Can you free me ?*

"Where are you?" Joshua asked, his heart pounding like a triphammer. "Tell me where you are, and I'll do my best." He yearned to ask about the Drell, but sensed time was short. Madam Olga was soaked in perspiration, and couldn't possibly last much longer. *Me either .*

"Are you claiming to hear her speak?" Madam Olga demanded incredulously. "That's impossible! Unless...."

Something dark walked out of the fog, and the beautiful prisoner screamed. The man-shaped creature was wearing a greatcoat, but the hat was gone, revealing a spiny head without ears, cruel eyes and an anus-like mouth filled with writhing tendrils.

"A Drell!" Joshua gasped in horror.

At the cry, the thing stared directly at him, and the forehead opened to reveal a third eye with a square pupil. A familiar wave of arctic cold swept over Joshua, and he recoiled in fear. Then his temper flared, and the Bureau 13 agent snarled defiantly at the image. The same as before, the Drell appeared startled by the resistance. Then it started boldly walking closer, increasing in size until it filled the crystal.

"A demon!" Madam Olga screamed, her eyebrows threatening to push the scarf off her head. She waved frantically at the crystal ball. "Begone foul thing, I banish thee!"

"No, don't!" Joshua barked, leaning even closer. "I must find out where she is first!"

But grabbing the tapestry, the frightened gypsy threw a fold over the sphere to break visual contact.

Spitting a curse, Joshua reached for the cloth when it bulged outward in the shape of a clawed hand.
Holy Hannah, the mucking Drell was coming through!

Wildly shrieking, Madam Olga threw herself away from the table. Joshua stood and pulled the LeMat. There came the sound of shattering glass, and claws began ripping the tapestry apart as something large rose from the table to loom above the people. Holding down the trigger, Joshua fanned the hammer and blasted away hoping for the best.

"My crystal!" the gypsy howled from behind her chair. "My precious crystal!"

"Run!" Joshua shouted, over the roaring pistol. "Get as far away as possible!" But if the gypsy heard, she didn't obey.

In tattered shreds, the tapestry fell away and the Drell crashed through the splintering table to landing heavily on the dirt floor. The feet were bare with too many toes, and a lot more claws.

"You!" the creature growled in an oddly distorted voice. The word almost sounded mechanical.
"Hum-man that break mirror!" The three eyes glared hatefully at Joshua.

It could speak? "Freeze, Drell, you're under arrest!" Joshua commanded, pulling the Starr to fire both revolvers directly into the chest of the demon. Some tiny analytical section of his mind noticed that the order of those events were slightly out of sequence. But the Bureau 13 agent really didn't give a damn. There didn't seem to be any lanterns in the tent, only a few candles. *I should have brought one. That's my mistake.* Hopefully, it wasn't going to be his last in this world.

Howling in pain, the Drell was driven backwards by pounding impact of lead and silver, and went sprawling on the ground. Bending its limbs at impossible angles, the Drell stood and charged, the bare feet crunching across the fragments of crystal on the ground.

Dodging out of the way, Joshua maintained the barrage, blowing off chunks of the demon's face. But the holes filled almost instantly. The Drell swung three arms at Joshua. The man dropped and felt something brush his hair as he hit the ground. *Too close!* Aiming with care, Joshua shot the Drell right in the crotch.
It was a dirty trick, but this was war.

Completely unaffected, the Drell grabbed Joshua by the throat and start squeezing with two hands, while the other two began pummeling the man in the stomach forcing the air out of his lungs.

Struggling to breathe, Joshua desperately fired both guns until they clicked empty. Dropping the guns, he pulled out the blackjack and smashed it across the face. The three eyes glaring hatefully, the Drell only

squeezed harder.

Straining against the iron fingers, Joshua fought to draw his pocketknife, but couldn't open the hinged blade. He was weakening fast. *No air ... ?*

Black spots danced in his vision. Madam Olga screamed. Raising its head, the Drell began to pull Joshua closer to wiggling tendrils. Now he could see that the tips were barbed like fishing hooks, and the Bureau agent knew that once they became embedded in his flesh, they would never let go. Flooded with adrenaline, his gloved hands opened the blade and Joshua slashed at the filaments. The knife severed two of them, and the Drell screamed louder than doomsday. Then the deathgrip tightened even more, forcing out his last reserves. The universe started spinning....

"Hello! Thought I heard gunfire," a strange voice called out in a thick Boston accent. Sunlight flooded the tent as the flap was pushed aside. "Is something amiss, or ... Great day in the morning!"

Vaguely, Joshua could discern the blonde man from before. *Oh great, the Confederates have arrived. More bad news .*

Muffled by the blood pounding in his ears, Joshua dimly heard muted gunshots, and felt the stinging muzzle-flash from the Colt revolver fired only inches away from his cheek. The Drell jerked at the arrival of each miniball, and the vise-like grip loosened ever-so-slightly admitting in a tiny sip of air. Precious wonderful air!

The Drell backhanded Logan, and he went flying across the tent to land in a tumbling roll. Coming up in a crouch, the Confederate agent threw a slim knife. The Italian stiletto slammed into the third eye of the Drell, gushing watery fluids everywhere. Burbling in agony, the creature dropped Joshua and grabbed the handle with all four arms to wrestle the steel loose. With a nauseating sucking noise, the third eye came along with the knife. Shuddering all over, the Drell gently slid the eyeball off the stiletto, and tenderly wiggled it back into the empty socket.

Coughing and wheezing, Joshua grimly pulled out his blackjack. Across the tent, Logan jerked his wrist, and the derringer dropped into his waiting palm. Joshua cast a brief look at blonde man. Logan looked at the disheveled fellow sprawled in the dirt. They shared a nod of agreement, and then both of the special agents attacked.

Whistling sharply, Joshua threw a fistful of loose dirt into the face of the Drell as it looked down. Snarling and spitting, the Drell clawed at its eyes as Logan put a .45 miniball directly into the thing's neck. Yellow blood spurted as Joshua smashed his blackjack across a knee. The bones shattered and the doctor stumbled. Lunging forward, Logan slashed at the demon cutting off an arm.

The three remaining limbs splayed in pained response as the severed arm fell away, more inhuman blood spraying onto the tent walls. The canvas began to immediately rot, dry dust sprinkling onto the ground.

Smashing the other knee, Joshua saw the dropped stiletto, and dove for the blade. Grabbing the floundering limb, the Drell jammed it back into place and flexed the blunt fingers. Black claws extended, and the doctor reached out for both men.

Ducking out of the way, Joshua stabbed the Drell in the mouth, then hit the stiletto with the blackjack driving it in deeper. More tendril fell. Firing the last round in the derringer, Major Randal lunged forward to run the sword through the demon seeking the inhuman heart.

Retreating from the combination attack, the Drell crouched and the quills on the head bristled. Instinctively, Joshua and Logan both ducked a split tick before the quills launched in a silent explosion. The barbed needles missed the two men and shot through the canvas walls. Outside the tent, people began to scream.

"The bag!" Madam Olga shrieked from under the smashed table. "Use the bag, you fool!"

"What bag?" Logan grunted, stabbing the creature in the belly and throat. The wounds closed around the blade, and not a drop of yellow blood was spilled.

Frantically ripping open his jacket pocket, Joshua whipped out the juju bag and threw it at the monster.

The Drell tried to duck, but the moment the bag left Joshua's hand it burst into a dazzling light that bathed the demon. Blinded by the lambent glare, Joshua and Logan raised arms to protect their sight. But a moment later, the heavenly pearlescence faded away.

Slowly lowering their arms, the two men were utterly dumbfounded. The Drell was gone. Nothing remained but some jumbled footprints in the dirt, and a few drops of sizzling yellow blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Is it dead?" Logan panted, his sword quivering in the air like a military divining rod seeking an invisible enemy.

The interior of the tent was dappled with tiny dots of light streaming in through the numerous holes in the canvas walls. There was no sign of Madam Olga.

"Dead, or gone," Joshua wheezed, massaging his aching throat. "Thanks for coming to my rescue. I ... I owe you my life."

"Glad to be of assistance," Logan demurred, sheathing the blade. "When I saw that circus freak throttling you..."

"Please, sir, let's not play games," Joshua interrupted in a raspy voice. He swallowed, wincing slightly. "You know perfectly well that was no Man in any sense of the word." Common sense told Joshua to stop there, but he was swept up in the rush of words. "Exactly the same way that I know you're not a country squire, but a Confederate spy."

"A what? Are you calling me a copperhead, sir?" Logan drawled in a thick Boston accent, managing to sound absolutely scandalized. *Remember: it's-a far-h to the-a bar-h .*

"No, I'm claiming you are a Confederate special agent." Joshua started ticking points off with his fingers. "Come now, a heavily armed man arrives just in the nick of time, doesn't flinch at battling a demon, has a fake Boston accent..."

"Fake?"

"...and seriously dislikes civilians making fun of soldiers. What else could you possibly be, a drummer from Peoria?" Gingerly massaging his throat, Joshua waited expectantly. Logic dictated that the blonde

man must be his counterpart, a Confederate secret agent sent to investigate the strange battlefield deaths. If so, this was the perfect time and the place for them to join forces against the Drell. *Or else I'm an idiot, and this is just the toughest farmer in all of Christendom .*

Maintaining an unruffled demeanor, Logan smiled patiently, pretending to wait for the punchline of some obscure joke. But internally, he was seething. *So the Yankee had seen me in the crowd before? Damn! This could compromise my entire mission! I'm supposed to be interrogating him, not the mucking other way around .* The major paused in reflection. *Then again, if that creature wasn't the cause of our troubles, then God help us all .*

Since he was not getting the expected reaction, Joshua decided to go for broke. "All right, I'll go first. Has Jefferson Davis been attacked by a werewolf?"

That caught the major totally by surprise. *They knew ?* Rallying an arsenal of possible replies, Logan finally decided to go with his gut instincts. They had never failed him before.

"You claim to be in my debt, sir," Logan said slow and deliberate. "If so, then I ask for repayment right here and now. On your personal honor, has the Union Army been using poisoned bullets?"

"Good Heavens, no! We thought the South was."

"Utterly absurd!" Logan declared in outrage. "Our soldiers would horsewhip any officer insane enough to dare suggest such a cowardly action!"

"And the werewolf...?"

"I can state with supreme confidence that the noble President Jefferson Davis is alive and unharmed," Logan stated proudly. But then he felt obliged to add, "However, I must confess that his silver-edged sword is badly in need of a sharpening."

Somewhat mollified with the diplomatic answer, Joshua had to admit that he was impressed. *So much for the myth of the garrulous Southerner. This man could teach clams reticence .*

"And President Lincoln..." Logan asked pointedly, gesturing as a prompt.

Joshua smiled. "The same, I assure you." Then he pointed at the scorch mark on the ground. "Unfortunately, the death of one Drell does not end the matter."

The major could not contain his curiosity. "Was that the name of the foul creature?"

"Yes."

"And there are more of them?"

"Oh lord, yes. Both Drell and werewolves. Dozens, perhaps hundreds," Joshua said with a sigh. "I didn't really have a chance to get an accurate count." *What with running for my life through a burning haunted house, and monsters swinging from the chandeliers .*

"Hundreds..." Logan's expression grew hard. General Lee had been correct in his assumption; a third party has entered the conflict. A foe more terrible than any Northern army of aggression. An invasion of monsters from the very bowels of Hades.

"It seems that we have a common enemy," Joshua said.

"So what exactly did you have in mind?" Logan asked, crossing his arms. "A temporary cessation of hostilities? Don't shoot me, and I won't shoot you?"

"No, a full truce. More, we need to work together." Joshua glanced at the burned patch of ground. "This is definitely a two-man job."

Seeing the direction of the look, Logan gave a half-smile. "The enemy of my enemy, eh?"

"Exactly."

Hundreds of Drell. Great day in the morning, just this one creature made that vampire I killed last year seem like Father Christmas. "We would have to be equal partners," the major insisted, ready for an argument. "You and I share all information, with no strings attached. And when this is settled, there will be no recriminations. We go our separate ways, free and clear."

"Absolutely. How else could we work together?"

In spite of his natural caution, Logan could find no obvious flaw in the proposal. Nine times out of ten, the Confederate agent could tell if somebody was lying to him, but this had the honest ring of truth. There was no guile in the face of the Yankee. He appeared to be a man of honor. *In the North? Incredible. Must have some Southern blood in him .*

"Done and done," Logan stated, holding out a hand. "The name is Major Logan Randal, special agent for the Confederate High Command."

Removing a glove, Joshua accepted the gesture and the men shook, sealing the deal. "Special agent J.P. Withers, Bureau 13, Union War Department. Joshua to my friends."

"Call me Logan," the major grinned, warming to the amiable fellow. *This might just work. And if not, I can always kill him later .*

Thinking along the same lines, Joshua released the grip. "Let's find our weapons and get moving. We have a hard ride ahead of us to reach the Drell before dusk."

"So they're in Maryland," Logan muttered, pulling out his pocket watch and checking the time. "Excellent news."

Caught off guard by the casual remark, Joshua started to demand how the other man knew the location of the Hoffman Estate, then suddenly realized he had just told him. If the Drell were below the Mason/Dixon line, Logan would have already known about them. Which put the creatures in Union territory. And once you factor in the time limitation, shazam, Maryland.

"Laurel, actually," Joshua said, picking up the LeMat to inspect the weapon for any damage.

"On the Patuxent River? Hmm, that's roughly forty miles from here." Putting away his watch, Logan frowned. "Shouldn't take us that long to reach Laurel with fresh horses. Are we stopping off somewhere for supplies, perhaps more of those little exploding bags?"

"Unfortunately, that was the only available juju bag," Joshua lied, checking the action. "And it would take my assistant a month to brew another." Which was only a half-lie. President Lincoln had a juju bag, but that was a state secret.

Reclaiming his derringer, Logan stuffed it up a sleeve. "One bag a month? Blast, and we'd want hundreds of them before attacking the Drell base camp." The major shook his head. "Time we can not afford. Every day, more men die at the hands of these freakish abominations." Thoughtfully, the major stroked his beard. "So what kind of a substitute do you have in mind?"

"Guncotton." The LeMat was undamaged, merely empty. Joshua tucked it away, and started hunting for the Starr. "But considering the circumstances, we don't dare use any explosives. Not at first, anyway."

Briefly, Joshua told about the vision in the crystal ball.

"A raven in a golden cage," Logan mused, yanking his stiletto from the ground. The blade was streaked with an oily yellow fluid. "Sounds like a Nashville whorehouse."

Turning over a smashed chair, Joshua cast a glance at the dapper Southerner. "And how exactly would you know that?"

"Hearsay, old man. Pure hearsay." Logan plunged the dirty blade repeatedly into the ground, until the Italian steel was clean, then returned the stiletto to his boot. The major would have preferred to boil the knife for a week in lye soap and Holy Water, but that was not feasible at the moment. *Better make darn sure to only stab people I really don't like for awhile.*

Finding the Starr under a smashed chair, Joshua tucked it into his shoulder holster just as there came a sharp whistle. He turned and Logan tossed over the blackjack. Joshua made the catch and slipped the weapon into a pocket. It had proved useless against the Drell, but there could be a werewolf attack at any moment.

"Any idea why the Drell fear this woman so much, but haven't simply killed her yet?" Logan asked, pulling out his Colt and starting to purge the dirty chambers of the revolver. Spent powder sprinkled to the ground like black snow.

"Mayhap the cage is holding them out, instead of her in."

Both hands busy, Logan chewed that over. "Possible," he relented, but didn't sound very convinced.

While the major began to reload the gun, Joshua went to the destroyed table and started rooting among the splintery wood until locating the piece of occult glass. Thankfully, it was intact, just slightly cracked along the edge.

Briefly scanning the sparkling fragments of crystal scattered about, Joshua didn't see the faintest hint of an ethereal glow from any of the curved shards. The crystal ball was dead. *Er, destroyed. Oh, whatever.* Turning ever-so-slightly, Joshua sneaked a peek at Major Randal. Just in case.

Joshua was relieved to see nothing magical about the Southerner, except for a small green patch radiating from the fob hanging off his watch chain. Lowering the lens, Joshua saw that it was a plain wooden disk. *A good luck charm? Well, we're going to need all the luck we can beg, borrow or steal find the prisoner. If she was the key to defeating the Drell, they'd be simpletons not to have her hidden and under heavy guard.*

Pocketing the precious lens, Joshua noticed the still legs of Madam Olga sticking out from underneath the ripped tapestry. Lifting the tattered cloth, Joshua inhaled sharply at the ugly sight of a black quill sticking out of her cheek.

Respectfully, Joshua bowed his head as the grim events unfolded in his mind. The gypsy must have been dying when she shouted out how to stop the Drell. That was twice somebody died protecting him. *Never again .*

Taking out the crucifix and Mogan David, Joshua mumbled a quick prayer for the dead. Somehow, he felt certain that God would hear. With this much Hell on Earth, surely the good Lord was paying close attention to his flock, if only to try and figure out why so many of them were unexpectedly knocking on the Pearly Gates. A hand touched his shoulder. *Henry ?*

"Let's go," Logan urged gently. "There's nothing we can do for her."

The words struck a resonating cord deep inside. It was true, there was nothing the special agent could do for Madam Olga. But mayhap there was something Joshua could do for the nameless prisoner. He was going to find the raven-haired woman, and bust her out of that mucking cage even if Satan himself barred the way!

His throat hurt, but not for the same reasons as before. Standing slowly, Joshua wondered why he wasn't feeling the usual flare of rage this time, and there was no trace of a soldier's stomach. He was only a little numb, as if he had consumed too much wine. Not enough to become drunk, but just the right amount to insulate him from the world. Everything felt disconnected, as if in a dream. *Am I becoming complacent about seeing people die ?* Joshua wondered if he looked into a mirror, would he recognize the man looking back.

"We better inform somebody before we leave," Joshua suggested woodenly, forcing himself to stand. "The ringmaster, or a barker..."

A soft rustling, like silk bird wings in a satin tree, interrupted the man. Then Joshua and Logan both stared in horror as the woman began to crumble apart. A moment later, there was only a dusty outline of the body on the bare dirt floor.

"Sweet Mother of God," Logan whispered, the derringer slapping into his open palm. "Is that what happens if a quill hits you?" The major nervously touched the small hole in his stiff collar. *Saved by a extra rinse of starch. Mental note: send thank you card to laundry .*

"Dead is dead," Joshua said in a hollow voice. "What do the details matter?" Turning about, he exited the tent.

Logan arched an eyebrow at that reaction, then hurried after the Yankee. The fellow must be new at this. *Great. I teamed with a hayfoot .* What the Northerner needed was a stiff drink, and a boot in the arse. That would put him back on track! Seeing people die was like eating Scottish cooking, horrible at first, but slowly a soldier learned to ignore it. Everything would be fine as long as Joshua didn't start enjoying his rage. That was a twisted pathway that always led to madness.

Pulling out a flask, Logan rushed outside and nearly collided with Joshua. The man was standing still, transfixed by the sight of dozens of people kneeling alongside piles of dust. Scores of them. The mounds forming a rough circle around the riddled gypsy tent. Men were cursing, women had fainted, children were crying.

"Canvas walls," Joshua muttered, his face tightening.

Then somebody screamed. The awful noise rippled across the crowd rapidly building in volume and fury until raw pandemonium filled the midway. Fistfights broke out, and shots were fired, as people began to stampede away from the disintegrated bodies of friends and family. Along with a couple of clowns, a horse and a small giraffe, from the shape of the dusty mounds.

"Hey, I have a thought," Logan said in a conversational tone of voice, tucking away the unnecessary flask. "Let's go kill some fucking Drell."

The frank vulgarity from a Southerner startled Joshua, then he broke into a weak grim and nodded.

"Absolutely," the Bureau 13 agent agreed wholeheartedly. "It'll be a pleasure."

As the two men merged into the shouting mob of frightened people, something inhumanly large loomed inside the shadowy doorway of the tent for a brief moment. Then it was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Striding through the terrified civilians, Joshua and Logan exchanged what meager information they had gleaned so far in the matter, all the while keeping a sharp watch for any suspicious movement in every shadow.

"A tea tray?" Logan gave a bitter laugh. "You attacked a werewolf with a tea tray?"

"Well, it seemed like the thing to do at the time," Joshua said defensively, massaging his neck. *So the Confederates called their presidential home The White House? That was a much better name than the Executive Mansion. I'll have to mention that to Lincoln.*

Shouting warnings, the running people spread the tale of the disintegrating bodies in every direction, the story constantly changing until it become a plague unleashed by red demons armed with pitchforks.

Which oddly wasn't that far off the mark. A soldier cursed the rebels, while a copperhead blamed Lincoln. Which got him a punch in the mouth from the soldier. A delighted Amish man was dancing and cheering that The Rapture had finally arrived! A couple of Quakers were shaking, and the Shakers were praying. However, everybody else was leaving in a hurried mass exodus. Running, screaming, crying and pushing in an expanding tidal wave of mounting hysteria.

Battling their way to the paddock, Joshua and Logan found only destruction and chaos. In spite of their speed, the mob had gotten here first. The ropes were down, and the roustabout was long gone. Men were fighting over the few remaining horses, and a carriage was on fire. There was only one small island of calm. A fairly large area of empty field surrounding two horses that were calmly chewing grass; an Appaloosa mare and a roan stallion. Lying on the ground nearby were several men clutching their stomachs, and one big fellow was laid out spread-eagle with an ugly bruise on his dented face in the shape of a horseshoe.

Drawing their handguns, Joshua and Logan walked straight at the failing fistfight. Reluctantly, the angry men parted and then quickly scurried away, leaving behind some blood in the mud, along with a few broken teeth.

"Civilians," Logan muttered in disgust, holstering the piece.

"I hear you," Joshua sighed. He was terribly embarrassed that the good people of Washington had behaved so poorly in front of a Southerner.

"What I can't understand is why the Drell are using werewolves?" Logan commented, stepping over the moaning thief. "Guns and swords don't cause permanent harm, which seems to imply..."

"...that they're vulnerable to something else," Joshua interrupted, finishing the chain of thought. He felt a flicker of excitement. "Something we have can kill them."

"Only we don't know what it is ... yet."

"Exactly. Who would thought the silver dimes in our pockets could stop a ten foot tall werewolf?"

"That Drell at the boarding house bled profusely. So was that caused by the fire, the brass, or the kerosene in the lantern?"

"Who knows? I might it could have been the blackpowder from my guns," Joshua wildly theorized, patting Estelle in greeting. "That could be deadly poison to them, and we keep burning it up to shoot the Drell with harmless lead."

"It's a strange world," Logan chuckled, climbing onto Abraxas. The big stallion nickered at the rider, and he scratched him behind the ears.

Just then, a shape lunged out of the smoke. Both men instantly drew their weapons, only to falter at the sight of a singed bear dressed in a pink tutu frantically pedaling a tricycle.

"And getting stranger every minute," Joshua murmured, lowering the revolver.

Heading back towards Washington, the men held an impromptu war council. Both of the special agents agreed that speed was essential to catch the Drell before they decamped from the Hoffman Estate. However, charging in ill prepared would be tantamount to suicide.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, a rough battleplan had been established. At a fork in the road, Joshua headed for the Executive Mansion, while Logan went straight towards downtown DC.

Less than hour later, the two men rendezvoused at an isolated tavern on the north road called the Drunken Badger. Located far from the sight of proper society, it was a favorite watering hole for the servants in DC, where butlers and maids could swap gossip, exchange recipes, date, complain out loud, and generally let their hair down to behave like free adults. The only house rule of the Drunken Badger was: No Corpse, No Crime.

There were a dozen horses tethered at the wooden railing along the front, either asleep, or contentedly chewing inside their feedbags. The porch was empty, but bright lights streamed around the edge of the door. A tinkling piano could be heard inside the tavern, and a drunken crowd tried to sing along with the music, but failed miserably. Giggles and delighted squeals were coming from the lit windows on the second floor, along with a great deal of highly poignant silence from the unlit.

Smoking a cigar, Joshua was leaning against a buckboard wagon, the rear stacked high with barrels,

crates, and canvas bags. A matched team of chestnut geldings was harnessed at the front of the wagon. The reins wrapped about her pommel, Estelle stood nearby, rifles jutting out of her bulging saddlebags.

"Marco," Logan said, halting a safe distance away.

"Polo," Joshua replied, meaning that it was safe to travel closer. The two men had worked up an assortment of simple codes to use in battle on the long trip from the circus. During a fight, that would give them an extra edge. *If we don't accidentally use the wrong word and kill each other.*

"Busy place," Logan said in displeasure, sauntering over to the buckboard wagon. "Was this a wise choice?"

"The best," Joshua declared, removing the cigar from his mouth and dropping it to the ground. Estelle crushed it under a hoof as if she had done it a hundred times before for her former rider. "We need to stay low key. In Washington, this is the place. Nobody alive can not see something like a happy servant. Heck, the Badger is not even on the military maps."

"An excellent choice, then." Logan surveyed the mounds of supplies filling the buckboard wagon. "Leave anything for the rest of the Union Army?"

"Just barely," Joshua smiled wearily. Sgt. Montgomery had been reticent at first, but once Joshua explained about the rescue mission, the soldier stood back and let the munitions flow. Which was a good thing, because their task had just become twice as hard. There was a deadly world of difference between a long-range bombardment, and a covert infiltration.

"And how about yourself?" Joshua asked, tugging the leather gloves on tighter. The cuts were itching like crazy, which meant they must be healing. *Why did getting better always make you feel worse?*

"Oh, mission accomplished, I can assure you." The major gave an impish grin. "There is very little that gold and guns can't get a man these days."

"So I hear."

Starting to open the containers, the two men began to parcel out the recent acquisitions. In short order, they were armed for battle, and started briskly along the north road out of town.

"Just remember that the unmarked tubes are filled with fulminating guncotton," Joshua repeated from the seat of the buckboard. He shook the reins slightly, urging the team to go faster. Daylight was fading, time was short. "The tubes that say DuPont are merely filled with blackpowder and dimes."

"Silver shrapnel for the werewolves. Not full charges, I assume?"

"Nope. Quarter sticks. I'd rather not blow myself trying to kill the hairy bastards."

"I heartily agree," Logan said, flipping a DuPont tube in the air before tucking it inside his vest. Gunnery crews always said that warm blackpowder had more force than the cold stuff. Of course, that may have just been their clever way of also staying warm during winter combat. True or not, the major decided to lean in its favor. "These petards should fit nicely on the crossbows that I ... ah, recently acquired from the friend, of a friend."

Acquired? Stole was more likely. But Joshua decided not to push the point. Needs drive, where the

Devil must. "And what about the lens?"

"It took some wheeling and dealing," Logan said, pulling out a cigar to start chewing. There were far too many explosives around to dare lighting a Lucifer. "The Hungarian oculist I found was having dinner at a restaurant, proposing marriage to a lady friend. However, I managed to convince him to leave her for a few minutes and go back to his shop."

"Lord almighty. How much did that cost?"

"You don't want to know," Logan said, leaning sideways in the saddle to pass over a small brown paper box. "Here it is."

Wrapping the reins around a peg, Joshua took the package and carefully cut it open with his folding knife. Inside was a small jewelry box containing a monocle. Lifting it to an eye, Joshua saw that the occult lens worked the same as before.

"I tried looking through it and saw nothing," Logan said enviously. "The gypsy was right. It will only work for the person who scraped it clean."

"Sorry." Tying the precious object to a sturdy piece of silk ribbon, Joshua tucked it away inside his vest. For emergency use only. And just in case, Joshua had a small packet of willowbark tea to counter the expected headaches. The Apothecary-General at the Executive Mansion had tried to press some heroin on the Bureau 13 agent, but Joshua didn't trust those newfangled drugs. Willowbark tea would be just fine. Besides, everybody knew that heroin gave a man terrible wind.

Evening fed into night as the two special agents headed into Maryland. Soon, the roads became dirt as the farms changed into wildwood. A curve brought a covered bridge into view, and Joshua cocked the hammers of the Remington shotgun lying across his lap.

"I hate these things," Logan muttered, studying the rafters overhead. "Can't tell you how many men I've ambushed in one."

As the buckboard rattled across the wooden planks, Joshua hunched his shoulders and said nothing. He had deliberately omitted telling the major about the incident before. *Let the dead bury the dead*.

Sensing that something was bothering his companion, Logan decided to tactfully chance the subject. "Out of curiosity, what did you do before, ah..."

"Stalking the night fantastic?"

The major gave an easy laugh. "Yes. Were you a military courier, or a bounty hunter?"

"Protocol administer," Joshua said smoothly, the words flowing trippingly off his tongue. In a way, that was quite true.

Logan blinked in surprise. "A butler? I'm working with a butler?"

"A head butler," Joshua corrected stiffly, relaxing as the wagon rolled out of bridge and back into the starry night. "So what did you do before...."

"Blockade runner. For the Confederacy, of course."

"No ... Really?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm no Rhett Butler, but I did well enough."

"Who?"

"Nice fellow, strange ears, bad taste in women."

"That must complicate his life."

"You have no idea."

On through the night, the two men rode across the Maryland countryside, discussing tactics, and the possible weaknesses of the Drell. Along with where the bizarre things might have come from.

The moon was high among the stars by the time Joshua and Logan reached the sleeping city of Laurel. Finding an inn, they fed and watered the horses, then went inside for a quick plate of Brunswick stew, and copious amounts of coffee. Empty bellies made empty heads, as the old saying went.

Fortified for the coming battle, the men rode east with growing trepidation. They were in enemy territory now, and every moonshadow seemed to hold a Drell, a werewolf, or some even more ghastly creature of the night. Twice they almost fired their guns at a squirrel, and once at a scarecrow fluttering in the breeze.

"So tell me, how did you get this plumb assignment?" Joshua asked, trying to keep his mind off things that went bump in the night. "Dally with some brother officer's wife?"

"Mind your tongue, sir. I am a gentleman from the Old South!" Logan shot back, sitting upright in his saddle and radiating a fine Carolinian fury. Then he recanted with a smile. "And yes, I did. However did you guess?"

"People are people."

"Not always," Logan replied with a heartfelt sigh. "I sought the lady's favor only to get close to her to confirm she had been bitten by a vampire."

Those Joshua know about from the rabbi. "Did you save her from turning? Er ... I mean, Turning?"

"Sadly, no," Logan growled, tightening his grip on the reins. "I barely managed to kill her before she reached General Jackson. My gun and sword did nothing, so I grabbed a tent peg and hammered it through her heart with my empty pistol right there in Stonewall's tent. I only wanted to pin her helpless, but she exploded into ash. The general promoted me to Lt. Major right on the spot, and I've had the awful nickname of The Hammer ever since."

Joshua chewed a lip. "Well, you could always tell people it comes from your accuracy with a pistol," he suggested.

Startled, Logan's eyes went wide. "Why, yes, that's what I meant," the major backtracked glibly. "I'm a hell of a shot. Even Stonewall Jackson calls me The Hammer."

"Very impressive," Joshua grinned back amiably.

"And we could nickname you the Tea Tray Killer."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Tea Tray Killer." Logan frowned. "No, that seems a bit long. How about the Anvil?"

"The *what*?"

"Goes well with The Hammer. Would you prefer to be called The Tong? How about The Nail?"

"I am armed, you know."

"Just asking," Logan chuckled easily, rocking to the gentle motion of the stallion.

Taking a curve, the two men tensed as dim figures appeared ahead in the darkness. But the special agents eased their stance when they saw it was only a couple of barefoot teenagers guiding a milk cow along the dirt road. The two groups nodded politely as they passed at a respectful distance.

"How far to the mansion?" Logan asked, holstering the Colt.

"Another couple of miles," Joshua said grimly, placing aside the Remington shotgun. "We'll get there long before dawn."

"Good. We need the cover of night, and I would dislike waiting another day." Pulling a canteen off the pommel, Logan took a drink of cold coffee. Mexican beans, indifferently ground, beet sugar. Still, it kept his mind alert, and that's a fact.

Just then an owl hooted, and both men went deathly silent. Owls were supposed to be omens of good luck, but tonight they wouldn't have trusted a shining angel from above. With weapons in hand, Joshua and Logan stayed on the alert, and didn't speak again until reaching the Patuxent River. The dark waters rushed past the rocky shore, the surface alive with wisps of misty fog.

Nervously pulling out the monocle, Joshua studied the forest carefully, but the area seemed clear. There was no sign of anything magical in the vicinity. *Or else the aura was so purple that I can't see it in the night.*

Notching an arrow into the crossbow, Logan rested the weapon on a shoulder. "See anything?" The ancient weapon held a plain wooden shaft with a steel tip. The sharp metal had been blackened in the flame of a candle so that it wouldn't reflect moonlight and give away their position. No blackpowder charge was attached to this arrow. From here on, stealth was the watchword for the rest of the mission.

"Nothing magical," Joshua murmured, tucking the monocle away, and rubbing his burning eye. Even a brief use brought pain.

"Well, stay sharp, my friend, there's something in the wind," Logan muttered uneasily. "I can feel it in my bones."

Reaching down, Joshua lifted a loaded crossbow from the floor. "When your bones start talking, let me know, because mine aren't saying a word." The man could feel the old panic bubbling in his mind, quickening his heart. He would not fail this time. *Free the girl, kill the Drell, blow the house. Would*

could be simpler than that?

Proceeding along the bank of the river, the special agents noticed a mist rising from the damp ground. Soon a fog covered the landscape, and they rode through a billowing cloud, the trees only dark shapes in the swirling clouds.

Cresting a low hillock, the two men brought the horses and wagon to a halt as a bridge came into view. The river could be heard splashing below, but the other side of the river was an impenetrable barrier of fog.

"Something wrong? You look pale," Logan said, tucking a handful of Lucifer's into a vest pocket, strategically near the dangling gray fuse for the blackpowder stick, sticking out of his belt like a Japanese war sword.

"Must have been the Brunswick stew," Joshua muttered, checking the draw on the LeMat, and then the Colt. "I don't think they used real hedgehog."

"They so rarely do these days."

Chucking the reins, Joshua led the way across the bridge, the hooves of the team clumping preternaturally loud in the mist. *Here we go*

But as the wagon reach the middle of the span, Joshua saw the clouds part to expose a vast and empty field of weeds. The Hoffman Mansion was gone.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Logan demanded, then waved that way. "Never mind. I can see in your face that it was."

"Now why did they destroy the mansion?" Joshua demanded rhetorically. He felt cheated. They were all revved up for battle, only to find the enemy had skedaddled. It wasn't fair!

Leaving the bridge, Joshua and Logan spread out to advance to the field. But there was no sign of wreckage, or ashes, or even a foundation. There were only compressed weeds, roughly in the shape of a rectangle, with an outer box about five yards thick.

"The Drell didn't burn the place," Logan muttered, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck start to rise. "They spirited it away somehow. Perhaps it flew like the castles in fairy tales."

"Or is it just invisible?" Joshua muttered, stoically using the monocle. Nothing.

Climbing off Abraxas, Logan slung the crossbow behind his back, and pulled the Colt to slowly walk forward with his hand outstretched. Reaching the cloudy limit of the depression in the ground, the major paused before taking a single step forward. He crossed the line without incident, feeling only the misty air.

A breeze rustled through the evergreen trees, almost sounding like laughter. Estelle snorted unhappily, then so did Abraxas, and the team of geldings, the horses obviously agreeing with each other's opinion on the matter.

"It's gone," Logan cursed, lowering his hand. "Where in Hades could they be now?"

"If the building really did fly away," Joshua said in pensive thought, "then it could be anywhere on Earth,

from Tasmania to Timbuktu."

"All right, when you don't know what to do next, always start again at the beginning," Logan declared gruffly, turning up his collar to the chill breeze. "What do we know about the owner, Alexander Hoffman?"

Extracting his notebook from an inner pocket, Joshua flipped through the pages, until finding his notes taken from the newspaper article. "Alexander Hoffman ... born in Harper's Ferry, Virginia ... yadda yadda ... went to school, blah, blah, blah ... self-made man ... eccentric millionaire ... recluse ... never seen again ... oh, this is useless." He tucked the book away once more. "I'm stumped. Any clever ideas?"

"Not a mucking ... wait a second. Where did he come from again?" Logan demanded sharply, his eyes flashing. "What was the name of that town?"

"Ah ... Harper's Ferry. Why?"

The major closed his eyes in pain for a moment, then snapped them open again. "I've seen the medical reports on the wounded soldiers," Logan snarled, beside himself with rage. "Unless I'm mistaken, the first case was reported just after a battle in Harper's Ferry."

"Us, too," Joshua whispered, remembering the Surgeon-General's report that President Lincoln had shown him in The Shop. "And Alexander Hoffman came from Harper's Ferry..."

"It seems that stupidity is its own reward," Logan snarled. "May God damn our foolish pride! We've known the source of the monsters for twelve hours. Twelve! Carried it about in our pockets like children with stolen cookies, neither of us willing to share." The major seemed ready to burst. "From now on, we're full partners. Brothers in arms!" Pulling out his cigar case, Logan thrust it at Joshua. "Here, read 'em. Read all of my secret reports!"

"Thanks, perhaps later," Joshua countered, climbing off the buckboard and starting to release the team of horses from their harness. "If we're right, the Hoffman Estate has been taken back to where it came from, Harper's Ferry. That's over eighty miles away on horseback. It would take two days, mayhap longer, to haul this wagonload of explosives that far." As the animals came free, Joshua slapped them on the rump. "Git!" he shouted.

Bolting for their freedom, the geldings needed no further prompting to breaking into a full gallop and disappear into the dark woods.

"What about the explosives?" Logan asked, climbing back onto the stallion.

"Leave 'em. I can send a note to Sgt. Montgomery to retrieve them later."

"Fair enough." Pulling out his pocket watch, Logan checked the time. "If we hurry, we can catch a westbound train at the Baltimore station."

"Washington is closer," Joshua said, getting onto Estelle. The mare nickered in greeting, and he patted her neck.

The major shook his head. "No good, my friend. Confederate saboteurs will be blowing up a critical railroad junction in exactly ... oh, five minutes ago."

"Is the South invading?"

"Not yet, my friend," Logan muttered, stuffing away the watch. "Just trying to slow down the advance of you damn Yankees."

"Come on!" Joshua shouted, shaking the reins hard. Estelle exploded into motion, heading for the bridge. "There's a special track there reserved for military supplies! It'll take us to Baltimore. My commission papers should get us on board!"

Matching pace, Logan and Abraxas stayed alongside. "And if they don't?"

"Then we steal the mucking train at gunpoint!"

"Now you're talking," Logan grinned fiendishly.

But as the men neared the bridge, it vanished, dissolving into the fog without leaving a trace.

"Whoa, girl!" Joshua cried, yanking hard on the reins. Whinnying in fright, Estelle stomped to a ragged halt only a yard away from the rushing water.

"They're here!" Logan cursed, pulling the Remington from the gunboot. "We've walked into a trap!" The major glanced at the wagon full of blackpowder covered with fog. One miniball into any of those barrels and nobody would ever find enough pieces of them to bury in a thimble. The hunters were now the hunted.

Yanking out the monocle, Joshua scanned the area. There were two blotchy purple and green silhouettes standing at the edge of the forest. The hulking shapes were enormous, slightly bent over, with elongated snouts, clawed hands.

"Werewolves," Joshua sneered contemptuously, dropping the monocle to dangle from the silk ribbon. Confidently, he drew the Starr and cocked back the hammer.

But Logan flexed his arm and the derringer slapped into his palm. He fired both barrels, and twin lances of flame thundered in the night. In spite of the distance, the major hit a werewolf in the chest. With a howl, the beast flipped over, only to stand again completely undamaged.

"So much for bullets dipped into Holy Water," Logan cursed, tucking away the spent weapon away and pulling a waxy tube from his vest. Then he jammed the blackpowder petard away. The silver shrapnel could ignite the barrels just as easily as a miniball. With a frustrated growl, the major drew his silver-edged sword.

Taking careful aim, Joshua held his breathe and fired the Starr. The second werewolf jerked back as the silver miniball slammed into a shoulder. The man-beast staggered, and Joshua fired again, a direct hit to the head. *Of course, I was aiming for the chest, but still ... ?*

Making a strange expression, the werewolf puckered and spat out the shiny silver ball onto the misty ground.

Joshua felt his jaw unhinge. Then he stared at the Starr as if it had just fired a baked ham at the monsters. *How was this possible?*

"Charge!" Logan bellowed, waving his sword and kicking Abraxas into a gallop.

Quickly separating, the grinning werewolves converged upon the men on horseback, their deadly claws raised for a fast kill ... ?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kicking at the chain attached to his ankle, Ernest Dillard turned away from the bubbling caldron to open a squat box on the rocky ground. Haphazardly, the wizard start pulling out bottles and jars. Every day, every blasted day, it got worse. *Don't know how much longer I can keep this going* , Dillard complained privately. *But I have to try! There was no other choice* .

Taking a pinch of herbs from a jar, Dillard placed it on a deliberately overstocked shelf. The heavy jar proved too much, and the shelf collapsed, sending all of the containers smashing to the stone floor.

Excellent! That ought to buy him a day or two until replacement supplies could be found. *Or stolen* . Dillard didn't know where the Drell got half of their supplies, and he didn't want to ask.

Crumbling the dry leaves into the caldron, the wizard watched as the concoction turned a bilious green, then blue and finally a brackish blue swirling with clouds of silver.

"Hmm, more eye of newt, less bats blood, slightly fresher wombat spleens," Dillard muttered aloud, then reached into the brew to pull out something and toss it away. *Goddamn bay leaves* . The wizard really didn't know what they were good for, but every spell in existence called for their use. Most cooking recipes, too. Mayhap the scribes who wrote the grimoires were in the pay of the bay leaf importers? Demons of fire, he may have just solved the riddle of the ages!

With stiff and unnatural gait, a zombie shuffled up to the area where Dillard was working.

"What do you want now?" the wizard snarked angrily, pulling a book out of his sleeve and spreading it flat on the thin air as if it was supported by a table. "Has somebody's arm fallen off again? Or are rats stealing your eyes, I should only hope?"

"More," the animated corpse mumbled, a mouse running out of its shirt to disappear in the wild nest of uncombed hair.

Using a ladle, Dillard took some of the brew in the caldron, and added exactly three drops into the pail. Then he added water to the brim. He was very careful of the measurements. If he diluted the potion any further, it would be too weaker to work at all.

Without comment, the zombie departed, shuffling back to the pit and the never-ending work.

The moment the zombie was gone, Dillard dropped the grimoire into the blazing fire under the caldron. The wizard watched it burn, then continued his daily campaign of dragging his feet, losing supplies, and generally wasting time with every fiber of his being. *Mayhap I could get sick again? No, too soon* . The Drell would never believe he had gotten cancer a second time. *Perhaps pneumonia?* Experimentally, he tried a sneeze. *Yes, double pneumonia would do nicely* .

With grim certainty, Dillard knew that the moment the project was finished he would be killed. And if the

Drell discovered that he was stalling, their revenge would be beyond belief. Yet if the Drell succeeded, the world was doomed. Doomed!

No matter what happened, things were looking bad for the elderly wizard. But all that Dillard could do was delay the inevitable, and hope for a miracle. *Lord knows, there certainly isn't anybody mounting an expedition to rescue my scrawny arse !*

* * * *

A locomotive screamed through the cold Maryland night.

Crouching in the middle of a drafty boxcar, Joshua angrily fed more wood to a makeshift hearth, while Logan dutifully sharpened his sword. Estelle and Abraxas were situated nearby, the exhausted animals snoring softly as they swayed to the motion of the train. The walls of the boxcar were piled high with burlap sacks containing turnips, an edible Gibraltar that could have stopped a Confederate cannonball fired at pointblank range. However, the night wind gained easy access to the men, whistling through every tiny crack and crevice.

In spite of the Presidential *carte blanche*, this had proved to be the only available space to be found on the seriously overcrowded train. The other seventeen carriages were jammed with Union soldiers being moved to the western front, along with countless tons of supplies. It seemed that a big push was going to start at Bull Run again, this time hopefully catching the rebels by surprise. But their damn spies seemed to be everywhere.

"How is it going?" Logan asked, running a whetstone along the length of the blade. His words were visible in the cold air.

Hunching over the small pile of bricks serving as a hearth, Joshua's reply was merely a string of vulgarities.

"Now, now, you got robbed. These things happen," Logan said, inspecting the edge for feathering. "Apparently, the silversmith that the sergeant had melt the tea tray into bullets obviously thought you wouldn't notice if they were only silver-coated miniballs, instead of solid silver."

"Well, the mucking werewolves noticed!" Joshua snarled, holding a battered frying pan over the fiery hearth. The collection of loose bricks served to keep the blazing lumps of coal safely off the wooden floorboards. Inside the U.S. Army skillet, a handful of silver pennies were slowly beginning to melt. *Rule 1: Always make your own bullets.*

Lowering the whetstone, Logan almost smiled at the memory. "Well, they sure were surprised, I can tell you that."

"That make two of us," Joshua muttered, carefully tilting the fry pan to pour the molten silver into the top of a bullet mold. The trickle hissed as it flowed inside.

"Thank goodness you had that kosh," Logan commented, pausing as the locomotive released another keen of steam into the Maryland night. "A blackjack full of silver dimes. By thunder, that was some powerful good thinking!"

"Yes, I'm fairly brilliant for an idiot," Joshua sighed, topping off the .38 mold for the Starr, and moving to the .45 mold for the Colt used by the major.

When the silver was gone, Joshua placed the hot skillet on the hearth, and added more dimes from the blackjack. The pure silver took awhile to melt, but by then the miniballs in the molds would be cool enough to remove, and Joshua would start the whole process over again.

"Pity we couldn't find their clothing," Logan said wistfully, studying the razor-edge of his saber in the reddish glow. The Toledo steel shone like polished sin. "We might have learned something interesting. The creatures must have a chain of command. If we knew who was in charge, we go concentrate on him."

"Or her."

"Her?"

"Plenty of women commanders throughout history," Joshua stated. "Boudicca of the Britons, Cleopatra of Egypt..."

"...Mrs. Lincoln."

Bursting into laughter, Joshua almost dropped the skillet. "Damn it, Logan, not when I'm working!" he scolded in a friendly manner.

"My apologies," Logan said smiling, pleased that his barb had gotten the desired response. "But you're right. I was being hidebound. If this job teaches a man anything, it's to keep an open mind. A woman could most certainly be in charge."

"Makes me wonder if the Drell have somebody they obey?" Joshua said softly, shifting the skillet to another gloved hand.

"Or *something*," Logan added, sheathing his sword. "Well, we'll find out soon enough. That is, if this journey isn't a wild goose chase."

"Marmalade."

"What?"

"Marmalade. Wild goose in orange marmalade sauce. Delicious."

"Ah."

"And if this is a bust," Joshua continued, "then we simply find the biggest battle happening and stand guard over the wounded soldiers until a Drell comes for them."

Pulling out a cigar, the major paused in the act of striking a Lucifer. "That's a good plan," he murmured in amazement.

"Thanks."

"Been sitting on that for long?"

"Just made it up this instant."

"Well, it's an excellent strategy."

"You already said that. How long until we reach Harper's Ferry?" Joshua asked, awkwardly shifting his position. The rocking motion of the train when it took a curve made it difficult to stay on his feet. Only his many years of ferrying trays through drunken Washington parties allowed Joshua to keep from falling over and spilling the molten silver.

Pulling on the gold chain, Logan opened his watch. "Let's see, we switch trains at Westminster ... and calculating in a water stop at Frederick, I'd say about six hours."

Tossing some more coal into the hearth, Joshua grunted in reply. That was more than enough time for two more batches of miniballs, then he'd be out of silver. With luck, Joshua could catch a few precious hours of rest before they started the hunt one last time. *Melting buildings, flying mansions, three eyes, acid quills, exactly who in Hades were the Drell anyway ?*

"Sure hope Millie is okay," Joshua said softly, placing the pan back into the flames.

"I'm certain that she's fine," Logan said, puffing contentedly on the cigar. "After all, nobody knows she works for us."

"And if she isn't?" Joshua asked, watching the tiny faces of George Washington get blurry as the dimes softened.

"Fortunes of war, my friend. A soldier's burden."

Arching an eyebrow, Joshua gave the major a stern look.

"No, I don't believe that either," Logan admitted honestly, giving a sigh. "But we have to tell ourselves something to keep from going mad when our friends die."

"I guess," Joshua demurred unhappily, balancing the skillet on top of the bricks. Sitting against a lumpy burlap bag, the Bureau 13 agent pulled out a piece of beef jerky, and started savagely gnawing off some breakfast.

"Control yourself, brother," Logan said, puffing steadily. "I know that look in your eyes all too well. I've seen it in my shaving mirror many times. You're frustrated, and want something to do right now. Doesn't matter if it's right, or wrong, you just want something to keep your mind off the people who are dying."

Breathing hard, Joshua continued chewing on the resilient jerky, then relaxed his shoulders. "Never knew I had such a temper before," he admitted sullenly. "I must learn to stay calm." *Cool and collected, that was the key .*

"Calm? Heavens forbid!" Logan admonished, crossing his arms. "Get as angry as you can. Become insane with fury! But learn to control those feelings, to channel them upon the enemy. That's the secret to surviving combat."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. You've heard old soldiers talk about the song of war? Well, it's true. Combat has a sort of rhythm to it, like playing music. Move too slow, or too fast, and you're dead. But if you obey the tempo, and move with the song, not against it, then when the fighting is done, you will still be standing."

"But I'm tone deaf."

"Then it's been nice knowing you." Logan pulled his hat over his eyes. "Better catch some sleep after that next batch. Soon enough, we'll be in the thick of battle, knee deep in blood."

"Just as long as it's yellow," Joshua stated, pouring out the next batch of silver bullets. "That's all I ask."

"Amen to that, brother."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A strident roar shattered the night, then the front doors of the Executive Mansions were slammed off their hinges by a huge werewolf standing on the porch.

"Readyaimfire!" Sgt. Montgomery yelled, dropping his tin cup of coffee and pulling put a sword.

Behind the sand bag redoubt, the gun crew hurriedly thrust their cigars at the stubby green fuse sticking out of the Napoleon. It caught with a hiss, and the brass cannon fired, blowing a double-load of lead grapeshot, rusty nails, broken glass and silver dimes directly into the chest of the startled werewolf.

The hellspawn monster seemed to vanish in the smoky discharge. A few moments later, bloody gobbets of werewolf rained down from the starry sky to wetly patter onto the rooftops of downtown Washington.

Standing on a shadowy rooftop across Pennsylvania Avenue, the two Drell turned away in disgust and stepped into a pool of blackness to disappear.

* * * *

With a squeal of brakes, the Union train jerked hard.

Instantly awake, Joshua and Logan clawed for their guns. It took a moment for sleep to leave their minds before the men realized the boxcar was empty aside from themselves, and the horses. The soldiers had disembarked at Westminster, taking along all of the supplies, including the turnips. Yet the sharp smell remained, lingering like an unwelcome houseguest.

"Took us long enough to reach Frederick," Joshua asked, yawning. "Must have been trouble on the tracks."

"This is Harper's Ferry," Logan said, rubbing his eyes. "You slept through Frederick hours ago."

"Now why in Hades did you let me ... I mean, thanks."

"Hey, no problem."

With a loud grinding of metal on metal, the train shook several times, then began to noticeably slow.

Stretching and scratching, Joshua and Logan rose from their beds of piled hay and started pulling on their boots. The ceiling lantern was still lit, but there was a soft light coming through the wall slats. The hearth was out, and the empty boxcar was bitter cold. Winter must be coming early this year.

A piercing whistle sounded, the train rocked again, followed by the grinding of the brakes, then a clanging brass bell, and another whistle blast. The boxcar rocked as the train raggedly jerked to a halt, the shuddering motion setting the hanging lantern swinging about wildly.

"Is the brakeman drunk?" Joshua demanded, standing and stomping his boots into place. His words hung misty white in the air before vanishing.

"More likely the tracks are in poor condition from all the fighting," Logan said around a yawn. "The Ferry has seen more action than any other place in the whole goddamned war."

"Strategic position?"

"And a vital supply of coal and iron."

"Any coffee?"

"I don't think they raise coffee out there."

"I meant, any coffee left in the canteen?"

"Ah! No, sorry."

"Damn." Shuffling to the gate, Joshua lifted the iron latch, and slid the door aside. The view was magnificent, rolling hills, spreading forest of green pine trees, and a few jagged escarpments of raw granite jutting upward. They were deep in the countryside, and there wasn't a building or a road in sight.

"Welcome to the Ferry," Joshua muttered sarcastically, as dawn began to crest on the horizon.

"Trouble?" Logan asked, lighting a fresh cigar.

"See for yourself."

A wooden sign alongside the tracks came into view. It almost bore the name of the town they wanted, but they couldn't be sure because of all the bullet holes. Behind it was a pile of bricks and smoking timbers where the Harper's Ferry depot should have been. There was only a loading ramp near the tracks, and a water tower standing tall nearby; everything else was charred timber, with the occasional chamber pot, or spittoon shining in the hot piles of whispering ash.

"At least it's warmer outside," Logan noted, exhaling on his bare hands. "Let's saddle the horses."

Pulling on gloves, the two men got to work, and led Estelle and Abraxas down the charred loading ramp just in time to catch the arrival of the conductor.

"Good morning! We're an hour ahead of schedule!" the fat man beamed happily. "That's a record!" The civilian was wearing a heavy coat, with a thick wool scarf wrapped around his neck. He seemed to be enjoying the morning cold, while the special agents were clearly one button away from freezing solid.

"What happened to the depot?" Joshua asked, fighting back a yawn. Hungry and sleepy, Estelle and Abraxas stomped their hooves on the frosty ground, their breath puffs of white streaming from black nostrils.

"The Union Army blew up the bridge when they got kicked out yesterday," the conductor replied, pulling a leather bag from his vest and reaching inside to withdraw two fingers of shredded tobacco. The fat man stuffed the fibrous mass inside a cheek until he resembled a squirrel hiding a prized nut.

"Why did they blow it up?" Logan demanded, moving a little closer to the burned wreckage. The waves of heat made the morning temperature almost tolerable.

"Who knows? But they always do. However, the Confederates will rebuild it," the conductor explained, juicily chewing. "When the Union boys take the town back, the rebs will burn everything before they leave. Happens all the time." He said it with a note of pride.

"And where's the bridge across the river?" Logan inquired, getting a bad feeling that he already knew the answer.

The conductor spit a long stream of brown juice into the weeds. "Burned."

"Is there a ferry?" Joshua asked hopefully.

"Nope. We had a rowboat once, but..."

"The military burned it," Logan finished for him.

"Fraid so."

"If the bridge is gone, and there's no ferry," Joshua continued doggedly. "Then how do we get across?"

"Swim!" the conductor answered, heading back to the front of the train.

Swim the Potomac in October? As the engine crew took on water from the tower, Joshua and Logan walked their horses closer to the ruined depot. The waves of heat coming off the smoky ruins almost made the morning temperature bearable.

Studying the city across the river, the special agents saw dozens of civilians rushing about the streets, along with hundreds of soldiers, numerous cannons, and a colossal, black, monster of metal, that could only be a SeaCoast mortar. There was also a slightly tattered Confederate flag flying above city hall.

"Guess you're in charge now, major," Joshua said, out of the corner of his mouth.

"Wasn't I always?" Logan chuckled, tightening his collar. The breeze was blowing down his neck through the hole in his collar. *The revenge of the Drell* .

After a few minutes, the locomotive started huffing and puffing, quickly building up steam and speed. Joshua and Logan watched until it was out of sight. There was no turning back now.

Walking to the brink of the sloping embankment, the two men cast a forlorn look at the rushing water of the Potomac River. The choppy surface was dotted with piles of broken masonry, and rusty iron beams rose like enemy spears. Snowy-white ice lined the shore resembling crystalline lace, sparkling and delicate.

"Any idea how we get across that?" he asked hopefully.

"You heard the juicy fellow," Logan replied, taking Abraxas by the reins and leading the stallion down the brick embankment. "We swim."

"And exactly how far away is Timbuktu, anyway?" Joshua muttered, following close behind with Estelle.

Reaching the icy shore, they searched for some place to safely ford the river. But it seemed hopeless. The jagged rocks and broken masonry extended in both directions for quite a distance. In a few spots, the surface of the water was invitingly smooth and calm, but they knew that only meant deep pools and possibly rapids.

Heading upstream, Joshua and Logan inspected the crumbling remains of the bridge, the broken support columns rising above them like siege towers from the Middle Ages. A few twisted railroad ties extended from the end of the destruction, dangling impotently in the chilly air.

"Seems like the locals were prepared for this event," Logan observed, pointing with a gloved finger.

About fifty paces upstream from the remains of the bridge, a rope was stretched across the river, both ends tied to thick trees.

"We needed a bath anyway," Joshua grumbled, starting to unbutton his jacket. "Better use our belts to lash the weapons to our heads. With luck, they might stay dry."

"Why not strap them to the horses with our clothing? Wet clothes weigh a ton," Logan asked, slipping out of his jacket. "No, wait, I see. We stand a good foot taller than the back of a horse. And every inch counts."

"That's what my fiancée used to say."

Stepping out of his pants, the major seemed shocked. "Sir!"

"Besides, wet powder takes days to dry properly," Joshua said, yanking off his boots. His socks squished in the frigid mud, sending shivers along his body. *Behold! The king of the goosebumps!*

Finished with their disrobing, the naked agents walked their horses to the edge of the river, and dipped a toe into the rushing stream.

"Merciful God!" Joshua yelled, yanking his bare foot out again. "That's almost frozen!"

"There's n-no almost about it!" Logan chattered. "If I had any b-brass monkeys, they'd never go s-swimming here!"

Keeping one hand on the rope, and the other on the reigns, the men braced themselves, and walked into the Potomac. The current tried to knock them over, and the broken masonry shifted dangerously with every step. Once Logan went sideways, and it was only his grip on the rope that kept the bundle of guns and ammo on his head safe. Reaching the middle span, Joshua stepped onto a rock only to have it drop away from underneath and he sank to his chin in the icy water. *Sweet Mother of God!*

Awkwardly, Logan helped his gasping partner out of the hole, and the shaking men slogged and slipped as quickly as possible along the path of destruction until reaching the muddy shoreline.

Rushing to the lee side of the support tower to get out of the wind, the shivering men found the remains of a campfire. Obviously, others had made the crossing before them. Rushing about, they gathered sticks, branches, anything made of wood, until they had amassed a respectable pile. Raiding a saddlebag, Joshua liberally poured kerosene on the wood, and Logan touched it off with a Lucifer. There was a rush of flames that rose skyward in a smoky mushroom cloud. But soon the fireball settled down into a cheery blaze, and the area behind the mound of broken bricks grew comfortably warm.

Moving quickly, Joshua and Logan vigorously dried themselves off with spare clothing from the saddlebags and got dressed. Estelle and Abraxas seemed impervious to the morning chill, and nickered at each other in what was probably equine amusement at the strange antics of their frail human riders.

"W-what n-now, Ben Franklin?" Joshua asked, over the castanets of his teeth.

"We l-look for the biggest tavern in town," Logan whispered hoarsely, huddling closer to the crackling fire. "Bartenders a-always know where the haunted houses are. They make great b-bar stories."

Smoothing back his damp hair, Joshua weakly climbed into the saddle, and checked the reins. He was still shivering, but it was getting less pronounced every minute. "Then let's get g-going. There is no way of knowing how far away the Hoffman Mansion could be located."

"If it is here at all," Logan amended, mounting the stallion. "But it's im-important to think positive."

"Especially when we have no idea what we're talking about."

"Absolutely."

Taking a dirt path along the shoreline, the two men found a gravel road and climbed through the thin forest until reaching the outskirts of town. Confederate soldiers were everywhere, and twice the agents were stopped and questioned. Coughing and rubbing his throat as if he had a cold, Joshua said nothing, and let Major Logan do all of the talking. Most of the lieutenants leading patrols believed the story about the special agents being lost merchants. But one grizzled sergeant demanded to see inside their saddlebags for any contraband.

Maintaining a neutral expression, Joshua slid a hand closer to the stick of guncotton nestled inside his jacket pocket. As a spy, the Bureau 13 agent would be hung on the spot, sans a trial. However, Major Randal's commission papers signed by President Davis sent the astonished sergeant into an energetic salute that threatened to tear off his arm. Beaming eagerly, the sergeant offered to escort them around town, but Logan whispered something to the man that made him wink knowingly, and lead his grinning patrol further into the autumn woods.

"You told him we were going to a brothel," Joshua accused, heading towards the city.

"Works every time," Logan stated, giving an evil smile. "No gentleman likes to get in the way of other man's ... um, peccadilloes."

"I should hope not!"

The rising sun was warming the air, but not fast enough to suit Logan. His guts felt frozen and the major wanted to get around something hot; soup, buttered rum, even English breakfast tea, he didn't care, as long as it was extremely not-cold.

Riding into the town, the two men watched the noisy crowds to make sure that nobody was paying any special attention to their arrival. But everybody was too busy working. Confederate troops were building sandbag redoubts, and civilians were sweeping up rubble, or painting over the recent damage incurred in the latest take-over. Bullet holes seemed to be in everything. On the city green, a newspaper reporter was using a photographing camera to take a daguerreotype picture of a triumphant colonel posing alongside a Napoleon canon. The big lens in front reminded Joshua of the sunbeam gun used by the Drell. The man felt a shiver go down his spine that had nothing to do with the easing cold.

"By the way, have you taken a look around?" Logan asked pointedly, shaking the reins. "You know, a *real* look around?"

Getting the subtle hint, Joshua slipped on the monocle and scanned the nearby people and buildings.

Harper's Ferry was actually quite an impressive town, even though it was located in the middle of nowhere. Joshua saw three grain and feed stores, a two-story library, four dry good shops, a gunsmith right next to a goldsmith—good planning there—a huge music store, tonsorial emporium for the men, and a millinery shop for the ladies. There was even an antique dealer with a two suits of medieval armor standing in the front window, the iron sentries mutely flanking an array of Revolutionary War memorabilia: British uniforms, colonial militia jackets, flintlocks, tricorner hats, and faded parchment maps. Here in the heart of the current conflict, the wanton display of war memorabilia seemed incongruous and totally inappropriate. *Still, that armor was rather interesting ... ?*

"Nothing unusual in sight," Joshua reported, tucking the lens away. "Everybody seems human."

"Even the officers?" Logan asked in mock disbelief. "How very odd." *Another myth disproved .*

Turning a corner, Joshua and Logan stopped their horses to respectfully remove their hats as a Confederate Army medical wagon rolled by, the back filled with still figures draped in blood-stained cloth. North, South, private, general, it didn't matter. Every soldier was a brother when they were walked to the grave.

"And how many of them died of poisoned bullets?" Logan whispered, his expression a fearful mask of raw hatred.

Joshua knew that was a rhetorical question, and didn't really know how to respond, so he felt a profound sense of relief when a tavern came into view just then. "Incoming, three o'clock," he said, indicating the direction with his chin.

"Good," Logan growled, heading towards the Delta Emporium. "Let's find those stinking Drell and end this madness today."

"That is the plan, my friend."

Tying their horses at the railing, Joshua and Logan tromped inside the Emporium and were hit by a rush of hot air, cigar smoke, laughter and music. The infusion of warmth felt better than the Fourth of July.

As expected, the tavern was still busy from the night before. Every table was jammed with celebrating soldiers, and nearly every lap was filled with a giggling woman in way too much face powder and rouge.

"A hooker?" a lieutenant chuckled, smacking the girl on the plump fanny. "Is-a that what the yankee boys call yawl?"

"Among other things," the girl laughed, wiggling in every direction at the same time, delightfully defying the laws of physics.

"It seems that the sexual antics of General Hooker have become public knowledge," Joshua muttered out of the side of his mouth. "I just hope this never gets back to the president."

"God bless Jefferson Davis!" a drunk corporal shouted, obviously only hearing the last word. "An' God bless the Stars and Bars!"

Jubilantly, the entire bar erupted in cheers, with Joshua following the example of Logan.

"There now, did that really hurt?" Logan asked, draping an arm around the fellow.

"Ask me again when the blindness goes away."

Belying up to the bar, the special agents rested their forearms on the scarred wood. Before they could place an order, a bald man in a short sleeve shirt and a leather apron came over to place two tankards of foamy ale before them.

"Cash only, no freebies," the bartender declared, wiping his hands on a rag tied to his belt. The action seemed to be done without conscious thought, as if was something accomplished a thousand times a day.

"No problem," Logan said in his natural voice, rummaging in a pocket. The major laid several gold coins on the counter and let the bartender get a good look, then he covered with a hand.

"However, we'd rather have hot coffee." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And some information."

In a deft move, Logan removed his hand and it was replaced by the bartender's to disappear into his apron.

"Only got homemade coffee," the man apologized, "The yankees took the last of the real stuff with 'em. But I have lots of hot sassafras tea. That'll take the chill off your bones."

"Tea sounds good," Joshua drawled lugubriously, trying to fake a southern accent.

Taken aback, the bartender scowled. "Are you from Boston?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Blockade runner," Logan smiled, kicking his partner in the ankle. Then the major flashed a badge. "We're working for the High Command, on special assignment for General Jackson."

"Ol' Stonewall his damn self? Well, we're rebels this week," the bartender shrugged in compliance. "So how can I help the glorious cause?"

"The glorious Cause," Logan corrected sternly.

A sigh. "That's what I said."

"Get the tea."

Taking the tankards of ale down the counter, the bartender gave them to a couple of very drunk lieutenants, then stepped into the back room. He returned with a couple of ceramic mugs full of a

steaming black liquid with a cinnamon stick sticking out.

"Hot damn, that smells like home. Gimme a mugga," a drunk demanded, a moth-eaten coonskin cap almost completely hiding his features.

"And me!" another man shouted, closely followed by several requests for the same. Then, lots more.

For almost an hour, hot tea out-sold cold beer. Absorbing the warmth of the tavern, Joshua and Logan impatiently sipped their tea, feeling the circulation return to their vitals as the bartender briskly served memories to the homesick soldiers.

When the demand eventually died down, the bartender returned to his waiting customers. "All right, what were we talking about?"

"Know any haunted houses in the area?" Logan asked bluntly.

Rubbing a freckled hand across his bald head, the bartender gave a rueful grin. "Sure 'nough, Hell House. But nobody sane goes there. Not even the Blues, and dem yankee-boys be crazy as bedbugs. No sawr, never go to Hell House, not even in the brightest day, or Christmas morning. T'aint safe."

"Why not?"

"Nobody ever comes back from the Hoffman Mansion," the bartender whispered, resting a hairy forearm on the counter. "Nobody. Ever."

It took every ounce of self-control Joshua and Logan possessed to keep their faces blank. But inside, they were dancing a jig. *The Hoffman Mansion* ! The shot in the dark had scored a bullseye. They were back in the fight!

"Sounds like a good place to stay away from," Logan agreed solicitously, sipping his warm tea. "Now where exactly is this Hell House, just so that we can be sure never go there?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A few hours later, Joshua and Logan were on the western road out of town. Canvas bags full of supplies hung off their saddlebags, and a brand new hunting knife was strapped to Joshua's waist, the length of the Arkansas Toothpick almost making it qualify as short sword.

Warmly dressed in heavy coats and thick woolen scarves, Joshua and Logan headed into the wildwood, the untamed wilderness of west Virginia. Snowy mountains rose sharply from the thick pine forest, and numerous streams often became cascading waterfalls alive with playful rainbows.

But the sylvan beauty of the landscape was despoiled by the litter of war. The dirt road was potmarked with blast craters, and unmarked graves dotted the green fields. A mill had been burned to the ground, the waterwheel still creaking as it turned, attached to nothing. There were gaps in a stonewall where the big rocks had been blown outward for dozens of yards. A broken gun carriage lay abandoned in a ditch. A Union cap dangled from a thorn bush with a bullet hole clean through, the rear blackened with blood. A Confederate boot lay in the frozen mud, the leather horribly alive with feasting ants. A smashed pair of spectacles. The splintery rifle stock with broken teeth embedded in the wood. A dirty bayonet driven into

a tree.

"Must have been a hellacious fight," Joshua whispered, making the sign of the cross. Every sound they made seemed unnaturally loud, an unwanted intrusion into the dreadful peace. The hills and forest had been violated, but now were asleep, slowly healing the dreadful wounds made by the insanity of Humanity.

Nodding in agreement, Logan didn't speak for a minute. Then the major lifted his head. "They glad the song eternal," he sang in a gentle voice, "and strove to drums infernal." The cadence of the words seemed to perfectly match the clip-clop of the horses. "Then they marched-marched-marched, to the edge of the world. The damned fools sang, as they eagerly charged, to the end of their world."

That seemed to say everything, and the two men rode in silence until leaving the solemn field of combat. Thankfully, the further away from town the two men traveled, the less pronounced the destruction became until they were riding through virgin forest once more.

"So what was that from, anyway?" Joshua asked, hands crossed at the wrist on the pommel.
"Shakespeare? Voltaire?"

Deep in thought, Logan shrugged off the question. "Just a poem," he said. "Just a silly little poem about war."

"Well, it was very pretty. But rather grim. It was pretty grim," Joshua quipped, trying to lighten the mood. "Is the author a soldier?"

"He was."

"Dead, eh?"

In spite of himself, Logan twitched a smile. "Well, I certainly hope so. They buried him last week."

Joshua chuckled at the old joke. "Burial is a strong indication of death."

"Nine times out of ten."

As the miles passed, the day slowly started to warm, and the men gratefully loosened their bulky jackets. Pulling packages of heavily greased paper from their pockets, the agents ate cold turkey sandwiches, and stopped to water the horses at a bubbling creek.

The day wore on, the miles passed. Comparing their directions against a slightly tea-stained map of the area, the special agents took a compass heading, then left the main road and headed cross-country over fallow fields. Following the directions from the bartender, the agents looked for the burned-down farm, then headed north. A few hours later, Joshua and Logan saw a stony rill on the horizon. Heading that way, they easily located a narrow valley cutting through the steep hills and exited upon a grassy vista of flat land that stretched for acres. Soon, the rotting gables of the dilapidated old house rose into view from a sea of gently waving weeds.

"Behold, the Hoffman Mansion," Joshua snarled, feeling his hackles rise at the sight.

Swishing her tail, Estelle snorted loudly. The animal did not want to be here. Agreeing with her assessment of the matter, Abraxas nickered in reply.

"Quiet, boy, easy now," Logan said pulling out a Navy telescope. He extended the device to its full length. It was a recent purchase from the town, along with several other items. "Success, my friend. We found them."

"Looks like."

"Aren't you sure?"

"Lord yes, I'd know it in my grave," Joshua stated, pulling the waxy stick of blackpowder from his vest. The man had already cut the fuse in half. But he did it again. Reduced to a nubbin, Joshua would have about five seconds before the stick exploded. Just enough time to toss it over a wall, or around a corner.
Then run like the dickens !

"No guards on patrol," Logan reported, sweeping the grasslands with the spyglass. In the middle of a war zone, the precious optical device had cost more than the rest of their gear combined, including the raising and feeding of both men from the day of their birth. "No guards can mean only one thing."

"Snipers and boobytraps," Joshua said, swinging around the crossbow. Pulling the drawstring into place, he nocked a quarrel into position.

Compacting the telescope, Logan glanced at the cloudless sky. "I hate waiting until night for the cover of darkness. However, I am also not particularly fond of walking up to their front door like a couple of traveling salesmen looking for the farmer's daughter. Any idea how we can sneak inside?"

"A few," Joshua replied, placing the monocle in his eye. He cursed, and yanked the glassware from his face.

"What's wrong?" Logan demanded, pulling out the Remington shotgun. Cocking both hammers, he looked around for anything amiss. "Are we under attack?"

"No, just too much magic," Joshua wheezed, rubbing his stinging eyeballs. "The whole mansion shines with every color imaginable, and then some. It was like staring into the sun. For a moment, I thought my head was going to explode." Tears were running his cheeks, and his temples pulsed.

"Can you see? Are you blind?" Shifting the Remington to his left hand, Logan pulled out a silver flask and passed it over.

Painfully shaking his head, Joshua blinked a few times. "No, the glare is fading," he said hesitantly. "I'll be okay." Then the man saw the flask and gratefully took a sip before returning it to the Southerner. *A little demon rum for the demon-slayers. Are we fighting fire with firewater?*

"This is a very clever strategy to keep others from seeing where the Drell are," Logan muttered, tucking away the flask. Stroking his goatee, the major studied the creaky old building dominating the field of weeds. "Throw enough magic around, and supernatural beings become invisible, like a diamond hidden in a glass of water."

More like a whisper lost in thunder. Summoning his resolve, Joshua tried to sneak a peek at the house again, but the glow was too intense.

"We can try to sneak close by circling around those trees," Logan suggested, pointing out a stand of

oaks to the far left. "Try a flanking maneuver to sneak close to the wall. Wish it was spring and the branches had some foliage."

"Wish we didn't have to search for the raven-hair woman, and could simply have an artillery battalion blow the place apart," Joshua replied with a growl. *But as my daddy always said, wishing is like milking an old cow, utterly useless .*

Logan arched an eyebrow. "Something funny?"

"Not really," Joshua demurred, avoiding an explanation. "All right, let's try your plan. Anything is better than charging in like a couple of hayfoots."

Logan started to speak.

"Anything except skinny dipping in the Potomac," Joshua amended quickly. It still felt like there was pieces of ice in his ears. *Along with a few special places that not even the mortician would find after I'm dead .*

Drawing their crossbows, the special agents backtracked a mile, then swung wide through the pine trees, and came in from the south. The thick greenery hid the crumbling mansion from their sight, and hopefully vice-a-versa. But the men stayed rigidly alert and nearly shot a rabbit that dashed from its burrow at the sound of the horse hooves.

"There goes four good luck charms," Logan said, staying low in the saddle.

"A man makes his own luck," Joshua replied, the crossbow cradled in his lap.

"Yarma, not karma," the major agreed, squinting into the distance. There was no sign of any pursuit.

"You know about yarma?"

He glanced sideways. "I read a book once."

"Me, too."

Staying behind the cover of the pine trees, the special agents reached the meager foliage safely. In the shadows under the bare oaks, they tethered the horses with loose knots, then got busy pulling out the explosives and weapons from the overburdened saddlebags, draping themselves like medieval knights going into combat.

"I must weigh a ton wearing all this," Joshua grumbled, adjusting his shoulder holsters. "Do you think we should also put on the...?" He left the question hanging.

Hitching up his gunbelt, Logan snorted robustly. "Not yet. We don't want to get them dirty."

"Good point."

Creeping to the bushes hemming the trees, the two men took a step on the dried grass. Exactly the same as before, the creaky old house vanished with an eerie rippling effect. Suddenly, the real Hoffman Mansion faded into view. Looming above them, it dominated the entire countryside like a mauled fist.

"Great day in the morning," Logan whispered aghast. "I ... I think we need more explosives."

In heartfelt agreement, Joshua started to reply when something dropped from the trees to land directly between the two men. A werewolf!

Fueled by raw adrenaline, Joshua shoved his crossbow under the creature's jaw and fired. There was a twang, and the bloody tip of the arrow came out the top of the monster's head. Only a tick behind, Logan lunged forward with his silver-edged sword and skewered the beast through the heart. With his mouth nailed shut, the werewolf could only whimper as he fell impotently to the ground shuddering, all over. Melting, changing, and diminishing in size, the hirsute monster became an ordinary man once more.

"It would seem that somebody knew this was a weak spot in the defenses," Joshua panted, studying the treetops as he reloaded the crossbow. There did not seem to be any more surprise guests waiting to drop in for a visit. *At least, none that I can find.*

Muttering something in Latin, the major wiped the sword clean on the bare arse of the dead man. "You know," Logan said gruffly, sheathing the blade, "we're getting rather good at this."

"Darn well hope so," Joshua retorted, placing a boot on the man's face and yanking the arrow free. The retrieval made the corpse roll over to face the sky as if the dead man was trying to work on his tan.

"How very interesting," Logan said, stroking on his goatee. "A Jewish werewolf. Well, I shouldn't be surprised. Everybody has heroes and villains."

"Now how in Hades do you know his religion?" Joshua demanded curiously, looking at the stark naked corpse lying spread-eagle in the weeds.

The major refrained from chuckling. Obviously, there are still significant gaps in the butler's education. "I'll explain later."

Waiting a few minutes to make sure there was no reaction to the slaying, the two special agents then dropped to their bellies and crawled through the weeds, down into a creek, and back up again to continue through the dry grassland. Luckily, there were no crickets to announce their advance. But unfortunately it seemed that the Jewish werewolves had eaten a lot of bran lately, and the men had to do a lot of careful zigzagging to finally reach the wall unscathed.

"Can you really do this?" Logan asked, his crossbow and sword at the ready. Kneeling in the dirt, his clothing was streaked with mud, making a sort of crazy camouflage pattern.

"Just watch," Joshua whispered confidently, twirling the lasso around a few times and letting it fly.

The loop sailed over the wall, and slithered back. He tried again several more times, but always with the same results. Moving resolutely down the wall several yards, Joshua tried again, and this time the rope didn't come back.

"Lucky thirteen," he grinned, tugging to make sure the anchor was secure. There was a snap, and the lasso came back holding a broken tree branch.

"We can still blow down the gate," Logan suggested politely, tapping the stick of guncotton inside his vest. "No trouble. Be my pleasure."

"Shut up," Joshua muttered. He scowled and let the lasso fly once more. When the rope didn't return of its own volition, he gingerly gave it a little tug. The rope seemed secure, so he yanked hard, but it would not come back.

"Told you, it was easy," Joshua said, grinning in triumph.

"At some future time, we shall discuss your curious definition of the word easy," Logan countered, trying to hide a grin.

Removing the heavy saddlebag and crossbow from his shoulders, Joshua grabbed the rope tightly and climbed up the wall. Wiggling onto the top, he stayed low and scanned for any sentries. Nothing and nobody was in sight. Easing forward, Joshua rose just enough to study the mansion and grounds. The estate appeared deserted. But since Joshua knew that wasn't true, it only meant that he couldn't spot the guards. *At least that mucking telescope on the roof wasn't pointing our way.*

Crawling across the stonework, Joshua checked to see what the lasso had caught. The rope was snug and tight around the neck of a marble statue, a bare-breasted woman with eight arms, every one brandishing a scimitar. Vaguely, she reminded him of some foreign goddess Rabbi Gelfand had mentioned, but the name of the deity eluded him. *Whoever you are, milady, thanks for the assistance !*

Checking along the interior of the wall, Joshua noticed more statues among the flowering gardens. In the daylight, some of them he could recognize as signs of the zodiac, while others were completely unknown. That gave the man pause. A hundred marble statues stood in a lush garden surrounding the estate. The Bureau 13 agent was thankful for the cover, but confused why anybody would use magic to disguise the mansion, only to then make it ridiculously easy to infiltrate. *Unless those were done by two different people .*

Three tugs on the rope from Logan silently asked if everything was fine. Joshua tugged back twice to say it was. The rope went taut, and a few seconds later the blonde major came into view.

"Marco?"

"Polo."

"Hallelujah," Logan grunted, crawling onto the wall. Turning around, the major started pulling on the rope tied around his middle. "Give me a hand with this, will you?"

Working together, the men hauled up the saddlebags and crossbows, maneuvering through a gap in the blocks. Dragging the supplies across the stonework, they carefully lowered them into the flowering bushes. The bag of kerosene lanterns clinked upon landing. They quickly followed.

As the warm air took away the autumn chill from their clothes, Joshua and Logan prepared their weapons, and anxiously waited for some reaction to their covert arrival. But the only sounds they could hear were the splashing fountains, and the whispering breeze.

"So far, so good," Joshua said, shrugging off his fur-lined coat. The scarf and hat followed. But the gloves he kept, the old cuts and burns still in the process of healing.

"Quite true. Now comes the interesting part," Logan agreed, shucking his winter jacket. Loosening his cravat, the major then glanced at the marble statue. "My, my, how delightfully scandalous!" Reaching upward, Logan gave her a friendly pat on the buttocks.

"Too plump for me," Joshua said, pulling out the Navy telescope to check the windows of the mansion.
"I prefer much smaller women." *Brunettes, wearing gingham* .

"Nonsense, my friend. Bones are for dogs, a man needs meat," the major lewdly chuckled, using the Navy telescope to study the estate and mansion. "How big did you say the cage looked again?"

Checking his crossbow, Joshua frowned thoughtfully. "If the woman was of average height, then ... I'd guess the cage was fifteen feet tall, about twenty wide."

"That's too big for them to have in the observatory, or the attic," Logan muttered, trying to gauge the size of the room by the spacing of the windows. "In point of fact, that's too large for them to have anywhere inside the mansion. Unless they tore out some walls and floors?"

"I didn't see any signs of remodeling, but we ... I was only on the ground level."

Changing the focus, Logan heard the change and duly sympathized. On a couple of early missions, he had gone out with a platoon of soldiers, and been the only man to return alive. That wore a man down something fierce. It was like having lead weights attached to your soul.

"Could be in the basement," the major suggested, knowing it was unlikely. *Unless, they built the mansion around the cage to keep it safe* .

"Could be invisible."

That was an unpleasant thought. "It's a mighty big place," Logan admitted honestly, collapsing the telescope. "Finding our raven is going to like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Don't be absurd. You can always burn down the haystack and shift the ashes afterwards with a magnet."

"If you don't mind retrieving a partially melted needle."

"Details, details."

The major pulled in a bushel of air, and let it out slowly. *Showtime* . "Shall we begin?"

"Absolutely." Kneeling on the grass, Joshua opened a saddlebag, and carefully extracted a pair of brand new greatcoats, along with plain black gloves, sloth hats and gray scarves. Donning the disguises only took a moment. Now the men resembled the Drell, aside from the slight hunchback effect of the saddlebags slung over their shoulders, and the lack of a medical bag. Not even a single physician's bag had been available for purchase, at any price. Both men hoped that these small discrepancies would not prove to be fatal.

But just in case, each of them was keeping a stick of guncotton and a Lucifer close to hand. They had no idea what the writhing tendrils of a Drell did to a man, but they had seen the end results—twisted corpses wracked in unimaginable agony. A fast explosive death was infinitely preferable to that sort of ignoble demise.

Minutely inspecting each other, Joshua and Logan made a few final adjustments until they were fully satisfied.

"Ready?" Logan asked, already starting to swelter under the heavy garment.

"I was born ready," Joshua boasted from behind his scarf, sweat trickling down his back.

"How disquieting for your mother."

"Tell that to my father."

Gripping their crossbows under the coats, the special agents moved to the wall, and started to casually stroll through the lush garden. First, they would do a swept of the perimeter to check the layout. Then, and only then, would they risk going inside to face the Drell. There were still no guards in sight.

Walking past the statue of Virgo, Joshua pointed to a patch of scorched grass on the lawn. Logan frowned at the sight, but said nothing. *A device that could emit a beam of energy hotter than molten steel*. Jed and Elisa seemed like toys in comparison. Briefly, the major wondered if he would ever see the outside world again?

Reaching the back lawn, the two men paused at the sight of English-style hedge maze. The leafy green labyrinth was dotted with fountains, sundials, a gazebo large enough to hold the entire Philadelphia Harmonic Orchestra. The rear of the Hoffman Mansion was even more like a park than the front.

There was even an astrolabe of amazing complex design. Parts of it were bronze, but the rest was steel, and there were way too many armillaries. *Almost as if the antiquarian device had been rebuilt*, Logan noted curiously. *How very strange. Why would anybody bother? No self-respecting astronomer used an astrolabe in a hundred years.*

Starting towards the entrance to the maze, Joshua froze at the sight of several mastiffs sprawled on a flagstone patio near the back door of the mansion. The huge dogs were sound asleep, their pale bellies exposed to the afternoon sun, paws twitching, tails wagging. Chasing prey in their dreams.

Exchanging glances, the men debated their options. The special agents might look like Drell, but there was absolutely no way they smelled like one of the doctors. If the animals caught their scent, they would probably attack immediately. If they were lucky, the men might be able to kill two dogs, possibly three, before the rest started barking. But then all Hades would break loose, and Joshua and Logan would find out the hard way if the disguises worked. Something both men wanted to delay for as long as possible.

Reluctantly withdrawing, they eased back into the garden and started around the house in the opposite direction.

Passing the ornate front door, Joshua remembered this was the place where he had spotted something dashing across the lawn. *Must have been a mastiff.*

Going behind the carriage house, Joshua and Logan paused to make sure they were not being observed before removing the scarves and wiping the sweat from their faces.

"I can see the hedge maze from here," Logan said panting slightly. "Looks like we have to go inside."

"We'd be fools to try the kitchen again," Joshua stated firmly, scratching his neck. The wool scarf was soaked with sweat, and starting to smell like an ill sheep.

"And we'd be idiots to try the front door."

True enough. "How about the mud room?" Joshua asked brightly, gesturing at the carriage house. "Rich folks always have an underground tunnel connecting their mansion to the carriage house to keep the rain off their elegant finery."

"That seems a rather obvious ploy," Logan replied hesitantly, twitching his moustache. "Then again, the last time you were here, they left the servant's door virtually unprotected."

"Exactly! The Drell have a bit of a blind spot regarding the lower classes."

Almost as if they didn't expect ordinary folk to fight back. That was a very elitist attitude. *Were the Drell royalty in their homeland, or just blissfully ignorant of American history?*

"The door is yours, Houdin," Logan said, fumbling for the weapons under his coat. "I'll stand guard."

Trying to appear as if he belonged here, Joshua tried the door. Locked. *Of course.* Kneeling on the warm grass, Joshua pulled out his brand new kit of lock picks and went to work. After a few moments, there came a series of clicks as the tumblers yielded to the adroit manipulations. A minute later, the lock gave a clunk and disengaged.

"That was quick," Logan said quite impressed. The major had honestly expected they would resort to using the bottle of acid in his pocket. *Every drop saved meant more for the cage.*

"Aw, shucks, this was easy," Joshua replied smugly, putting away the tools. "Try picking the lock on a rolltop desk with your employer's two-year old daughter trapped inside from playing hide n' seek with her older brothers."

"Thank you, but no."

"A wise decision." Dusting himself off, Joshua checked his scarf, and lifted the latch. Instantly it was torn from his grasp as a swarm of hideous creatures rushed out of the carriage house to engulf Joshua and drive him to the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Rushing forward, Logan almost fired at the creatures when some small section of his brain registered the fact that none of the things were moving under their own volition. Every one of them was motionless. Dead. As he watched, more bodies tumbled lifeless through the open doorway of the carriage house.

The building was a mausoleum, chock full of corpses in every size and shape imaginable. The major identified a vampire by the teeth, but there was also a perfectly ordinary tramp in ragged clothing, a bear, a Delaware Indian, a winged horse, a Viking in furs and a horned helmet, and even a Spanish conquistador! After that, the major could only take a wild guess at the species from story books and myths: gargoyle, imp, lich, troll, gnome ... And all of them were withered into a dry husk, the features twisted into grotesque expressions of pain and horror. The implications were obvious. *These were killed by the Drell.*

Reaching out, Logan sadly lifted a tiny four-inch long female, her delicate rainbow wings quivering with

every motion. It was a childhood memory turned into reality. *Daddy, mommy, come quick! The cat has killed the Tooth Fairy!* But that had only been a butterfly. A strange harbinger for today.

The mound shifted. Logan dropped back with the crossbow. A pink human hand was thrust into view. Smiling in relief, the major hurried over to assist Joshua in crawling free of the assorted mummies.

"Are you hurt?" Logan asked, brushing the dust off his friend's coat.

"Just disgusted," Joshua coughed, pulling out a bottle of Prof. Miracle and taking a long swig. The searing hair tonic cleared his throat and he breathed easier.

Behind the two men, the warm breeze moved gently through the flowering bushes. In the distance, the tiered fountains playfully splashed.

"Well, this certainly seems to put us at an impasse," Logan said grimly, resting the crossbow on a shoulder. "The only safe way inside is blocked." He scowled at the avalanche of dead stretching into the carriage house. Every few moments, another tiny body would come rolling into view and cascade along the others to land on the grass. There didn't seem to be an end to them in sight. *How long have the Drell been here? And more importantly, why did they wait until now to leave the mansion? Food seemed to be coming to them in droves. What could have recently changed in the world that might have drawn them to the outside world ... oh .*

"The war," Joshua cursed bitterly, clearly thinking along the same lines. "The blasted war. The Drell must have smelled the blood on the wind, heard our death screams, whatever, and rushed out to their new hunting grounds."

"Makes sense," Logan grumped. "The larger the prey, the greater the harvest. A grown man is easily ten times the size of ... is that a leprechaun?"

"Pixie," Joshua guessed

Not sure if that was correct or not, Logan accepted the glib identification. "I wonder where the werewolves come into this?"

"Perhaps they surrendered to the Drell. Became their slaves instead of dying," Joshua muttered, touching his bruised throat.

"Mucking cowards."

"Agreed." Studying the gruesome pile, Joshua pulled his gloves on tighter. "Unfortunately, this changes nothing. We're still going in."

"Come again?"

"This is the best way into the mansion," Joshua declared, kicking at a gnome. "And there's certainly no way we can stuff these back into the carriage house." For a moment, he had entertained the notion of tossing the bodies into the bushes. But there were just too many of them. *Was this why supernatural creatures weren't seen much anymore? They all came here to die?*

"Well, if that's so, then we better use some misdirection," Logan said, rummaging in his coat. Extracting the bottle of acid, the major popped the rubber cork and splashed the watery fluid across the inside of

the door. The wood and metal lock sizzled as they began to dissolve.

"With luck, the Drell will think it happened naturally," the major said, carefully sealing and tucking the bottle away. "Possibly as a side effect of storing so many different species together."

"Highly doubtful," Joshua replied hesitantly, setting his hat. "But one chance in a thousand is better than no chance at all."

"Sad, but true." Opening his coat, Logan swung around a saddlebag and pulled out a lantern. Lighting the wick, the major set the flame low, then yanked off his ascot to knot it around the handle and hang the lantern behind his back. *If the carriage house was stacked full of bodies, the interior is going to be extremely dark.*

Using his necktie, Joshua did the same thing. Then he tightly tied the woolen scarf around his mouth. He had already received an inadvertent taste of death, and that had been more than enough. There was nothing analogous that he could compare the taste too. *Aside from eating a million year old dust bunny*

Checking the area to make sure they were not under observation, Joshua and Logan took a deep breath, and started resolutely forward. Wading into the pile, the men pushed the smaller bodies aside, then began climbing on top of the larger forms. Dried bones cracked under their shoes, and a few of the leathery chests collapsed, exhaling the final breathes of the ancient corpses. The smell was stupefying, but their knowledge of the source made it even worse. Quickly, both men lit up cigars, the rich Salem tobacco banishing most of the foul stench.

Near the corner of the mansion, a shadow moved, and then was gone.

Awkwardly climbing through the doorway, Joshua and Logan now began shifting corpses behind them to make a path. More withered forms tumbled down from above into their places, but the two men kept doggedly going, advancing slow but sure. Nothing was said aloud, but both men were extraordinarily thankful that they were wearing gloves.

Crossing the threshold, Joshua and Logan moved into darkness. Snapping off the desiccated arms and wings, the special agents puffed steadily as they strove into the shifting jumble, their eyes stinging from the clouds of ancient dust. Straight ahead was only gloom, and the yellow light from their lanterns shown off a thousand teeth and claws in a snarling nimbus around them. It was like digging through a nightmare. Inhuman faces stared at them with blank eyes from every direction, the reflected light making the dead seem eerily alive. *Or where they?* With a low rumble, the tunnel behind them collapsed, sealing off the exit and darkness ruled.

Trapped inside the mountain of dead, Joshua and Logan grimly dug onward. Dust trickled down their collars, and tiny hands snatched at their clothing. A barbed stinger snagged Joshua's scarf, almost yanking it loose, and the spiraling horn of a unicorn nearly impaled Logan. The dusty clouds of decaying flesh were getting worse, and breathing was becoming difficult.

In a crackling lurch, their footing gave way, and the two special agents dropped several feet to land on the ridged back of something large and reptilian. *A dinosaur?* A moment later, the bodies from above came crashing down in a pummeling rain. Crawling on hands and knees, they took the beating and bullied onward, driven by sheer determination. Grotesque faces stared from every side, and mouths exhaled at every step. A sudden lurch made Logan cursed and he pulled a fang from his thigh, blood trickling down his leg. Even through their greatcoats, the lanterns were uncomfortably warm against their backs, and

both men tried not to think about what would happen if their clothing caught on fire with them trapped inside the hellish carriage house.

Slowly, time passed, minutes or hours, Joshua and Logan had no idea. Their universe was condensed into the endless task of moving bodies and tunneling forward, ever forward. Their arms were growing tired, and the air was stifling, their aching lungs unable to pull in enough oxygen. The special agents dropped their cigars, and kept going. If they lost momentum now, the men might never start again, sinking down to the bottom to lay entombed, lost among the decrepit multitude.

Snapping off the clawed leg of a winged harpy, Joshua wearily shoved it aside, exposing blackness. For one horrible moment, the man thought he was staring down the open gullet of some monstrously large creature. Then cool air touched his sweaty face. With renewed vigor, Joshua eagerly scrambled forward and burst out of the bodies to stand in open air. *Success !*

Yanking off the filthy scarf, Joshua greedily pulled in the deep breathes. Less than a yard away, the sloped pile of bodies tumbled away and Logan emerged, panting and wheezing.

Watching for danger, the men pulled their guns and waited. But after awhile, they relaxed and holstered the revolvers. There was nothing alive in this foreboding charnel house. Except for them.

Pulling around their lanterns, both men turned the wicks up all the way. In the combined illumination, the special agents could see the gloomy interior of the huge carriage house. The mountain of corpses reached to the ceiling, extending hallway across the brick floor. The few windows were closed and thick with a gray layer of dust. An old-fashioned coach stood near the bolted doors, with a withered team of horses entangled in the cracked leather reins.

Exchanging their guns for the crossbows, Joshua and Logan notched a quarrel and started down the tricky slope, bones snapping and bodies crushing with every step.

Reaching the solid footing of the brickwork, they rested a moment to let the dust settle before starting across the carriage house. There were more bodies scattered about here and there, but those were small and easy to avoid.

As expected, the stables contained only the remains of horses, along with a few dogs. Approaching the tack room, Joshua and Logan slowed. The door had been smashed off the hinges. Easing carefully around the doorway, the special agents peeked inside and saw the corpse of an old man huddled in the corner. *Hoffman ?*

Joshua shot his partner a silent question, but Logan shrugged in reply. There was no way of knowing.

The gnarled hands still clutching an axe, the features of the elderly fellow were forever locked in a rictus of pain. But there were also a few flakes of yellow along the edge of the blade, showing that he had not succumbed to the Drell willingly. Kneeling down, Joshua checked the pockets of the corpse for any sort of identification. Empty. Then Logan pointed. Partially hidden in the loose straw behind the old man was the body of a small child, a young girl hugging a ragdoll. She also had been slain by the Drell. The two men looked down upon the grim tableau, mentally recreating the sequence of events. The adult must have been trying to hidden her when the Drell broke down the door. He fought, and died. Then the things found the helpless little girl, alone in the dark.

Joshua and Logan left the tack room shaking with suppressed fury. Any consideration towards a treaty with the Drell was gone. This was a fight to the death, without quarter or pause.

Watching from the pile of straw, black button eyes mutely followed the special agents across the carriage house until the blackness swallowed them whole.

Locating a door bound with iron straps, Joshua and Logan listened for any movement on the other side before trying the handle. Locked. While Joshua went to work with his recently purchased assortment of skeleton keys, Logan pulled out a crucifix, a vial of Holy Water and said a quick prayer for all of the dead in the carriage house. It wasn't much, but better than nothing. As he finished, the lock clicked.

Placing the lanterns on the brick floor, the men readied their weapons, then pushed open the door. The mud room was empty.

With lanterns held high, and the crossbows low, the special agents eased into the Hoffman Mansion. Several coats hung from wooden pegs along the wall, and luggage was neatly arranged on a wooden bench. A barrel contained several folded umbrellas, and a shelf held a wide assortment of hats and scarves. Some crumpled towels lay on the floor.

"This was easy," Logan said in gallows humor.

"Which is why we don't have one of these at the Executive Mansion," Joshua said, moving towards the only other door.

"Neither do we, but then, President Davis isn't afraid of the rain," Logan replied, watching the shadows for any suspicious movements.

"Snob," Joshua chuckled softly.

"No, it's true. He really isn't." But just then, the major realized exactly what was hanging off the wall pegs. Not capes, or jackets, but tan greatcoats with wool scarves sticking out of the pockets. There were black sloth hats on the shelf above, and the luggage proved to be leather medical bags.

"Well, I'll be," Joshua whispered, gazing about in wonder. "This is their wardroom."

Logan frowned. "The Drell must have been positive that nobody would ever see this room."

"Nobody alive, anyway."

"More the fools, they," Logan added curtly, his finger tight on the release level of the crossbow as he approached the medical bags. He counted thirty-four of them on the two benches, but there was room for a lot more.

All of the bags were open. The first contained medical equipment, obviously stolen from a human doctor. Another was full of the black gloves that the monsters wore, the price tags still attached. A couple of the bags were packed with rusty handguns, both Union and Confederate models, and several bags only had loose dirt at the bottom.

"That's to give them weight," Joshua expertly guessed. "There is a noticeable difference in the way a man carries an empty bag...." His voice faded away. The last bag in the contained a severed human head.
Could this be Hoffman?

"Well, whoever the poor fellow was, it's clear that the Drell didn't kill him," Logan stated, studying the

smooth, unmarked face. The expression of the head was peaceful, the eyelids closed as if the man was in slumber.

"Must have found it rolling around loose on a battlefield," Joshua said, sniffing the air. There was a definite smell of blackpowder from the grisly object. "But why would they keep such a thing?"

"Perhaps they're just as curious about us, as we are about them?"

"All I want to know is how to kill 'em," the major muttered. Then he gave a hard grin. "But it was rather nice of the creatures to leave us these spare coats to use."

"Every little bit helps," Joshua agreed succinctly, placing the crossbow on the bench.

Shucking their filthy outer garments, the men took replacements from the wall pegs. The greatcoats were clean, but carried an odd smell. Not unpleasant, just different, like spices from a foreign land. Somehow, that seemed even more offensive than the halitosis of the ancient corpses.

Lighting a candle set in a wall niche, Joshua and Logan then extinguished their lanterns and prepared for battle by eating a communion wafer, sprinkling Holy Water over their clothing, rubbing garlic on their necks, and pouring kosher salt in their shoes.

"Does this make us seasoned warriors?" Joshua asked over the thumping of his heart, trying to keep his tone jaunty. Hell House waited for them beyond the door.

"Only if we have the thyme," Logan rejoined from behind his new scarf. Two sticks of high-explosive guncotton jutted from his gunbelt like Japanese war swords, and his vest pockets were packed with Lucifers. "By the way, if you see a candle flame turn blue, that means a ghost is nearby."

"Thanks for the tip," Joshua said, hiding his crossbow under the greatcoat. Hanging from his shoulder by a leather strap, the bulky weapon dangled to his knees. "I'll keep a watch for any blue-flamers."

Choosing a medical bag, Logan couldn't stop himself from snorfling a laugh. "Don't have any brothers, do you?"

"No," Joshua replied, placing a stick of blackpowder into a bag of dirt and closing the top. "How ever did you know?"

"Tell you later," Logan chuckled, adjusting his greatcoat. With five brothers, having beans for dinner had been forbidden in his household for a very long time.

When the special agents were finally satisfied with their preparations, they listened at the door, then checked the latch. This time it was unlocked. Since Joshua had taken the lead in the carriage house, Logan opened the door and stepped into a carpeted hallway, brightly illuminated a row of chandeliers overhead. Across the hall was a solarium, the dying sun in the windows painting the hedge maze in reddish hues. To their right was a double set of glass-pane doors giving access to a courtyard decorated with statues and flowerbeds. A long corridor extended to their right, the walls lined with bookcases and closed doors.

Holding themselves stiff, Joshua and Logan tried to hide their backpacks, and started marching like Drell along the hallway. They had only reached halfway when a door opened and out walked a werewolf chewing on a bloody haunch of meat that resembled a human leg.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ripping off a mouthful of horse, Kelly McTeague paused at the sight of the two Drell standing in the hallway. Damn and blast! After their recent harvest at Leesburg, he thought all of the masters were asleep in the ballroom, hanging from the rafters in those loathsome, slimy, cocoons. Quickly, the despondent werewolf started rallying an arsenal of lies. The Drell didn't like the guards to snack while on duty, and the punishment ... ?

His nose twitched. Strange, there was a faint smell of deathmetal on these Drell. But they never carried silver, knowing it upset the werewolves too much. *Deathmetal, blackpowder and ... garlic?*

Trying his best, McTeague repressed his grin of delight. *Excellent!* If these stupid vampire hunters wanted to try and kill the Drell, he wished them very best of luck. If they miraculously succeeded, he would be free from their odious clutches. And if they failed, McTeague would certainly be no worse off than he was at the present. *The enemy of my enemy...*

Padding closer, McTeague frantically tried to think of any way to assist the norms, without endangering himself in case they failed.

* * * *

"Masters," the werewolf growled, bowing slightly and going back inside the library again. *The enemy of my enemy was an idjit. The risk was too great. Say nothing, do nothing. Slaves only dreamed of revenge, never freedom .*

As the door closed, Joshua and Logan eased their stance.

"Apparently, these disguises work," Logan said, sounding unsure. His hand released the handle of his sword.

"Mayhap yes, and mayhap no," Joshua muttered, fingering the Starr under his jacket. It was almost as if the man-beast had decided to ignore them, even though he knew they were fakes. He had seen other butlers act the exact same way right after they had accepted a position with another household.

"Think the Drell might have a mutiny brewing?" Logan postulated, walking past the closed doors to the ballroom. "That could be very useful in the right circumstances."

"Would you want to work for them?"

"I'd rather join the Union Army."

Continuing down the hallway, the two men entered the foyer.

Prepared for the ghastly sight of Henry's gnawed bones, Joshua felt a little lightheaded when nothing seemed out of place. The Deputy Marshall was gone, along with the pools of blood, the pieces of the busted mirror, scorch marks, bullet holes ... ?

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Logan demanded, sounding slightly miffed. "Doesn't look like a fight ever happened here."

"Yeah, this is the right place," Joshua stated testily, squinting around suspiciously. *Or am I going insane?* "They must have done a tremendous job of repairing everything."

Logan frowned. "Or perhaps not," he said hesitantly, pulling out the stiletto. Going to the wall, the major dug a long gouge in the wood paneling. Even before he finished, the damage was smoothing over, the wood repairing itself like living flesh.

"Just like a werewolf, or a Drell," Joshua snorted in annoyance. "So much for burning the place down."

Just then, a door opened on the far side of the foyer, and out walked a stark naked man. "Good evening, masters," the fellow said, placing a hand respectfully to his chest and bowing his head.

Standing still, Joshua and Logan remained imperious and said nothing. A master never returned the salutations of a lowly slave.

Padding across the floor, the man began to swell and Change, becoming a Herculean werewolf before reaching the stairs going to the second story. The men watched, hoping for the best.

Resting a paw on the banister, the werewolf paused with a perplexed expression. Nostrils flaring, he sniffed the air, then did it again. *There was fear in the air. Along with red blood, blackpowder ... and Deathmetal!*

Spinning around fast, the werewolf growled at the fake Drell just as Joshua swung up the crossbow and fired. The quarrel hit the man-beast in the stomach, making it double over in pain, and Logan danced forward in a lunge to impale the thing on his sword. Gushing blood, the werewolf grabbed the silvered blade and tried to yank it free, two of his fingers slicing off in the attempt. Yanking the blade free, the major plunged it in again as Joshua swung his blackjack caving in the back of the hairy skull. Crumpling to the floor, the werewolf stopped breathing, and began to revert into a human.

Tossing the fingers onto the dead man's chest, Joshua and Logan took the body by the feet and dragged it over to a broom closet. Stuffing it inside, they grabbed aprons hanging from a rack and made a pass at cleaning the floor. The only sounds were the ticking of a clock somewhere.

Tossing the bloody rags into the closet with the corpse, Joshua surveyed the work, deciding that it was good enough for now. *Although, this would never pass the muster in any home where I ran the staff*

"Well, well, and what do we have here?" Logan whispered, going over to the wall set between the two flights of stairs. According to his partner, there had been a mirror here before. He had really been interested in obtaining an occult lens for himself. But the busted mirror had been replaced by an oil painting of an Italian villa on the shore of a lake. *I guess magic mirrors don't heal like everything else in here .*

Walking to the center wall, Joshua frowned pensively. Any housewife knew that the walls in a home collected dirt. If you removed a picture, the outline of it was always left behind. But that was not the case here. The frame of the oil painting was the same size and shape of the demonic mirror. Not even larger, exactly the same. That wasn't a coincidence, it was impossible.

"I wonder what they're hiding," Joshua muttered, running his hands along the frame. *It must be here somewhere ...* Near the lower corner, he found a switch and pressed it hard. There was a click and the

painting rose into the ceiling, revealing a solid slab of bronze, sans a latch, lock, or hinge.

"Well done," Logan smiled behind his scarf. "What better place to hide a prisoner than a secret room."

Joshua reached out to stroke the metal. "If only there was a keyhole, or..."

Logan smacked the hand away. Joshua blinked at the rude admonishment.

"Watch and learn," the major said, pulling out a paper cartridge and biting off the end. Pouring out three fine-grain military blackpowder into a palm, he blew the explosive charge across the golden-hued barrier. As the material sprinkled down along the shiny metal, the vague black outline of a five-finger hand appeared just off-center.

Joshua gave a silent whistle of appreciation as Logan pulled off a glove and placed his bare hand on the same spot. Nothing happened.

"Try asking nicely," Joshua suggested, only half in jest.

"Open up, damn you," the major cursed, pressing hard.

The unyielding metal grew warm at his words. There was a click, a low grinding noise, and the seamless expanse of bronze split apart, revealing a short alcove that led into a room ablaze with light.

Looking over the alcove for any traps, Logan drew his sword, and proceed slowly towards the bright room. Watching both hallways for any sign that they were being watched, Joshua backed into the alcove, his crossbow primed and ready. As he cleared the entrance, the two thick pieces of bronze slid back together, sealing it closed.

Warily, the two men walked into the hidden room. The place was enormous, extending the entire depth of the mansion and reaching to the rafters. A circular staircase made of iron reached from the tile floor to the distant ceiling, ending at the observatory. Set prominently in the walls, glowing crystal rods gave off a pleasing light. And those were the only things in any kind of order in the entire place. The rest was chaos.

Every other inch was jammed with ceramic figurines, bronze bowls, knick knacks, thingamabobs, and gewgaws beyond description. Marble statues battled for space with glass-display cabinets. A blackboard was covered with mathematical equations, totally incomprehensible. Piles of books were everywhere, in stacks, laying open on tables, draped over the edge of a display case as if trying to escape. Black marble tables dotted the room, an archipelago of bubbling chemical beakers, braziers, cauldrons, microscopes, dissection boards, retorts, scales, and a thousand sundry items. Most of which the two special agents couldn't even hazard a guess about. One table was covered with grinding wheels and stacks of convex and concave lenses. Hoffman must have built his own telescope. Impressive. There were sea charts, star maps, scrolls, parchments, animal skins, skulls, jars, bottles, and a hodgepodge of candles in every size and color imaginable. Some of them quite brazenly obscene.

Adorning the walls were hand-drawn charts showing the terrible insides of humans, animals, and demons. But unfortunately not the Drell. On a golden pedestal was a sundial with a tiny flaming sun floating above. As the men watched fascinated, the orb moved a little bit and the shadow changed position with a subdued click.

Hanging from the ceiling was a stuffed Bengal tiger with wings, incense sticks jutting from around the mouth instead of whiskers. Directly under the skylight was an iron statue of a hulking gargoyle, incredibly

equipped with the reproductive organs of both sexes. And mayhap a third, as well. Standing rampart on a ivory pedestal was a stuffed dragon, exhaling red glass flames. In a far corner stood the unfinished granite statue of a beautiful nude woman, her face oddly blank. A glass tank held the skeleton of a shark with two heads, the skeleton of a smaller fish in its belly, which had the skeleton of an even smaller fish in its belly, and so on. If there was an end to matter, it could only be seen with a microscope.

There was no sign of the cage, or the prisoner.

"What in Hades is this place?" Joshua asked in amazement, walking among the outlandish exhibits. It was as if a museum had mated with an insane asylum.

"I'd say a workshop of some kind?" Logan guessed, the crossbow held tight in both hands. The weapon gave little comfort. "Perhaps even a magical workshop. Could this be the source of the illusion that hides the mansion?"

Checking inside the greatcoat, Joshua saw the monocle blazing with colors from within a vest pocket. "I'd say that was a great big yes," he confirmed uneasily.

Moving among the tables, the special agents noticed that the floor was laid out in a swirling mosaic, a tightening spiral that culminated at a wooden globe of the world set in the middle of the workshop. The colossal sphere was over six-feet tall, the painted continents and seas covered with a fine gridwork of silvery lines that wavered and changed positions even as they watched.

Easily finding North America, Logan saw that all of the lines along the east coast took sharp turns and headed straight for western Virginia.

"Whatever those are, they all come here," the major muttered, twitching his moustache. "Or do they start from here?"

"No, look at the angles," Joshua said excitedly, pointing with the crossbow. "The lines cover the world, but only the local ones head for Harper's Ferry."

"As if something was drawing them in," Logan said thoughtfully, walking around the world. "Like a magnet pulling in iron filings. Could these be lay lines?"

Joshua knew about those from Gelfand, although the rabbi had said the existence of lay lines was purely theoretical. *Not anymore*. A mage could cast spells anywhere, using the deudonic energy of their own body. But there was a theory that streams of occult forces crisscrossed the world like a million invisible rivers. If a mage knew how, and could find a lay line, they could then tap into those conduits of power to perform stupendous acts of magic; freeze time, sink an island ...*make a mansion fly?*

"Hey, Logan," Joshua began slowly. "Do you think that..."

But the major was on the move, running briskly through the maze of tables and display cases, both weapons drawn.

Loosening the stick of blackpowder tucked inside his vest, Joshua followed close behind.

Over in the dirty corner of the room the floor and walls were covered with burn marks, the floor tiles partially melted in spots. The pattern of the destruction radiated outward in a zigzag similar to lightning bolts, one of them ending in the slagged remains of a bronze statue with only a cloven hoof intact. The

men frowned at the sight of black quills sticking out of the marble walls, along with several piles of charred ash that might once have been bookcases and chairs.

"Somebody had a fight with the Drell," Logan stated with conviction. "Just can't tell which side won."

"Might have been Hoffman," Joshua said slowly, rubbing at the charred marks with the toe of his shoe. "But was he defending himself, or subduing them to obey his commands?" A fight in the corner only indicated that Hoffman was losing the fight at one point, nothing more.

"Then again, this might have nothing to do with the Drell. If Hoffman was human, then he had enemies. Nobody is universally loved."

"What about Jesus?"

"Ask a Moslem that question."

"Good point." Thinking back to yesterday, *was it only yesterday*?, Joshua remembered the interrupted meal in the dining room. There was no way to be sure, but it certainly seemed like the Drell had been unexpected guests, catching Hoffman and somebody else at their evening meal completely by surprise.

"Could the woman in the cage be Mrs. Hoffman?" Logan extrapolated.

Starting to reply, Joshua paused, and then used the crossbow to gesture at the floor. Almost lost among the general disarray were a couple of smudged footprints on the tiles, the scuff marks leading directly to a blank section of the wall. *Another secret door, eh?*

Easing closer, both men searched until Logan found a button behind an African tribal mask. With an hydraulic sigh, an entire section of the wall rose, revealing a flight of steps descending into darkness.

With their weapons in hand, Joshua and Logan started down the wooden stairs, staying close to the wall where the steps would be the strongest and least likely to make any noise. As expected, the torches along the stone block walls burst into flames at their approach, and died out behind. Trying not to hold their breath, the men traveled through the underground passage inside a bubble of illumination, with blackness in front of them and behind.

"Spooky," Joshua whispered, the word echoing slightly.

"Want me to hold your hand?" Logan chided gruffly.

"Not on the first date."

"Tease."

Reaching the bottom landing, the men looked across a vast wine cellar. Hundreds of racks full of bottles stood like dominos, and massive casks of wine rested in cradles, suspended safely above the damp floor. One of the spigots was broken and dripping a puddle on the floor. In the torchlight, the wine fluid looked like blood, but the smell was overpoweringly that of an unimpressive French merlot.

"Why would anybody hide a wine cellar?" Logan wondered aloud, studying the murky depths of the cellar. Anybody who stocked cheap wine could not be trusted.

"Never had any servants, did you?" Joshua asked, thinking of the endless thievery that went on at the Executive Mansion.

But the major didn't answer. He was moving laterally towards a dimly lit area located behind a titanic beer barrel, a hogshhead cask easily holding a hundred gallons. In the light of the crackling torches, Logan saw there was a large gap in the stone foundation, and some sort of a subterranean tunnel stretched into stygian blackness. The rim of the irregular opening was rough, the granite rife with claw marks as if something had dug its way into the mansion from below.

Almost imperceptibly, the men thought they could hear a dim pounding coming from the tunnel, a soft thumping that could have been distant cannonfire, or an inhumanly large heart.

"This way to the Abyss," Joshua whispered, proceeding through the hole in the wall.

Muttering a prayer, Logan stayed close, and the men descended into the bowels of the Earth.

As they disappeared from sight, all of the torches in the wine cellar fluttered briefly, then turned blue in color before winking into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Following a curve in the tunnel, Joshua and Logan were surprised to encounter another curve, and then yet another.

For a moment, the men thought they were going around in a circle, then realized the tunnel was descending in a tight spiral. Ever going downward, but never straying from underneath the sprawling mansion on the surface. The observation made them feel a little claustrophobic, as if Hell House might come crashing down upon their at any second. The pounding grew constantly louder.

Joshua and Logan slowed as soft light appeared from around a gentle bend, and the unsettling pounding suddenly resolved into the sound of hammering. Hundreds of sledgehammers working on stone. There was a pause, and the noise started once more.

"I thought this might be an underground dungeon, or perhaps the lair of the Drell," Logan whispered, turning up the wick on his lantern. "But it sounds like an ordinary coal mine."

"There's not a goddamn thing ordinary about this place," Joshua snarled, doing the same. The kerosene lanterns wouldn't be needed in the bright lights, unless they met a Drell. Then they wanted the wicks burning strong to make sure the crashed lanterns would explode on impact.

Checking over their weapons, the men started at a creep. That was when the smell hit them, an odd combination of rotting meat and acidic chemicals.

"Smells like a tanning factory," Logan muttered, scrunching his nose.

"Mixed with bay leaves," Joshua added, not trying to be funny.

Logan snorted at obfuscation, but reluctantly was forced to agree. Actually, there was a definite aroma of bay leaves. *Perhaps the cook for the miners was making stew?* He just didn't want to know the

origin of meat.

Nearing the mouth of the tunnel, the light and noise and smells increased until they were nearly overpowering. Tightening their scarves, Joshua and Logan let their sight grow accustomed to the brightness before easing along the wall and sneaking a peek outside. The tunnel ended at a rough ledge, a ramp sharply inclining downward to the left. The hammering was coming from below.

Setting the lanterns aside, the men went on their bellies. Brushing some loose pebbles out of their way, they crawled forward to look over the edge. A circular shaft went straight down into the Earth for hundreds of yards, and a big crowd of miners were working on the bottom, the sledgehammers rising and falling steadily, in an almost dance-like motion. The angled ramp followed the rough hewn wall all the way to the bottom, several other ledges along the way clearly marking the former bottom of the receding shaft. There was no safety rope along the stone ramp—a single misstep would mean a deadly fall.

"A mine my hairy arse," Logan scoffed, trying not to breathe. "It's an mucking excavation!"

Bobbing his head in agreement, Joshua watched the miners in fascination. They never seemed to pause for water, or even to rest. They moved like machines, the sledgehammers endlessly rising and falling. A system of rope pulleys were hauling up the loose material, depositing it into a side tunnel. When the floor of the shaft was clear of rubble, the workers smeared some sort of paint over the rockface, and it promptly cracked into large chunks. Then the sledgehammers were used, and the process endlessly repeated.

"Three feet in ten minutes," Logan said, closing his pocketwatch. "And without the use of explosives. That's a world record."

"And there is how it's done," Joshua said, wiggling a gloved finger to the left. "See him?"

Logan grimaced. "Yes, I do." Near the bottom of the ramp was a small ledge stacked with wooden boxes. An elderly man in black clothing was cooking something in a large cauldron, and as he moved, a thick chain could be seen attached to his ankle. *Another prisoner, eh? Interesting.*

Every ten minutes or so, a miner would shuffle stiffly over the ledge and the prisoner would ladle some of the bubbling fluid in the cauldron into their bucket. Then he would add what looked like water, filling the bucket to the brim, and the miner would return to the bottom of the shaft to brush the mixture onto the rockface. A moment later it would crack apart, and the workers attacked with their hammers.

His shoulders hunched, the prisoner went back to his cooking, occasionally adding things to the roiling brew from the assortment of boxes and barrels.

Having seen enough, Joshua and Logan pulled back from the ledge and into the tunnel.

"Think that's Hoffman?" Joshua asked, wrinkling his nose. The reek from below was getting worse.

"Makes sense," Logan added, ripping apart a silk handkerchief to stuff bits up his nose. Covered by the wool scarf, nobody would be any the wiser. *How could the people below work with such a stench in the air?* "Somebody had a magical fight with the Drell, and here is a sorcerer, wizard ... whatever, being held prisoner by the Drell."

"And I'm willing to bet that one prisoner knows where the other is located," Joshua postulated, hoping it was true.

The major pulled out his Colt .38 revolver to spin the cylinder, and then tuck the weapon away once more. "Let's go ask."

Taking the lanterns with them, the two men proceeded along the spiraling ramp keeping as low as possible until reaching the curve just above the prisoner. They waited until the floor loudly cracked apart, and when the zombies rushed to start their hammering, Joshua and Logan eased over the edge to drop behind a stack of boxes. If any of the workers heard the noise, they paid it no heed. But the old man turned around to defiantly cross his arms.

"Well?" Ernest Dillard demanded impatiently. "Are you going to show yourselves, or..."

"Shut up!" Logan whispered from around a box. "Go back to your cooking and pretend nothing is wrong."

"My ... cooking?" Dillard asked more puzzled than amused. "Look here, dog, I'm sick and tired of all the new werewolves coming around to bust my arse. Now go away before..."

"We're not werewolves," Joshua said, setting his lantern on the rocky ground to step into view. "We're government agents here to rescue you."

Dropping his spoon, the wizard balked at the sight of a Drell, two Drell! *Was this some sort of joke?* Then the scarves came off to reveal human faces. *Ah, men disguised as Drell. No werewolf would ever dare to do that. The punishment would be ... unspeakable .*

"Who are you?" Dillard asked, his heart quickening with fear and hope combined.

"Marshall J.P. Withers, Major Logan Randal," Logan said brusquely, putting his lantern down where it could easily be reached.

"We've been assigned to destroy the Drell," Joshua added proudly, puffing out his vest.

"To do what?" Dillard laughed, his voice rising slightly in hysteria. "Destroy the Drell? And how in Hades do you propose to accomplish that miracle?"

"Keep it down!" Logan hissed, palming the air. "Those men will hear you!"

"Men? Oh, don't worry about them," Dillard snorted, glancing over a shoulder. "I'm the only person here which fits that description." He raised a hand to his mouth and shouted, "Hey look, the Army is here! I'm about to escape! Hurry! Stop me!"

Flicking Lucifers alive, Joshua and Logan pulled out sticks of guncotton and prepared to be rushed. But not a head in the group turned in their direction. The miners kept diligently at their task as if deaf. In slow comprehension, the two special agents saw that the workers were both men and women, all of them dressed in what had once been formal clothing: suits and jackets, ballgowns and uniforms. But the clothing was now tattered and torn, some of it shredded to threads, leaving the person virtually naked.

This close to the rockface, the special agents could also see a thin crevice in the granite, the irregular opening seeming to go straight down. The shaft almost seemed to be following the path of the crevice.

With mounting unease, Joshua and Logan frowned at the sight. *If the Drell had tunneled up from below, and now were digging a shaft back down into the Earth ... ?*

"See? We're free to talk," Dillard stated casually, sitting on a wooden box. He kicked the chain aside and leaned forward, placing elbows on knees. "The dead have a very limited attention span."

"The dead," Logan repeated suspiciously. "So those people are ... zombies?"

The wizard sneered contemptuously. "No, they smell like this because we're making cheese. Penny a pound. How much would you like, sir?"

Zombies, the walking dead. Hopefully, Joshua looked in the crowd of zombies for Henry, but if the Deputy Marshal was present, he could not be seen in the milling throng of dirty faces. *There were so many of them ... ?*

"Look, don't get snotty with me, Hoffman," Logan started angrily, his Boston accent slipping a little.

"Dillard."

"Beg pardon?"

"My name is Ernest Dillard. Hoffman was my..." *Insane* . "...uncle. I inherited the estate after he died."

"Killed by the Drell?" Joshua prompted, checking the ramp above as if invoking their presence by just saying the word. But the stone incline was clear at the moment.

"No, bourbon got him. Got drunk while fishing, and fell into the Potomac." Dillard shook his head in disbelief. "The man once flew to the moon, but never learned how to swim. Ironic, eh?"

"He flew to the moon?" Logan asked sounding dubious, then gestured at the softly bubbling cauldron. "And from this I assume that you are also a sorcerer?"

Askance, Dillard raised both white eyebrows. "Good heavens, no! I am a wizard!" The old man slumped, his moment of pique at the implied discourtesy already gone. "Although, I'm little more than an alchemist these days. The Drell only want potions. They seem to distrust ethereal conjures." *Quite understandable considering how many death spells and lightning bolts I hit them with when the foul things first appeared .*

"What kind of potions?" Joshua asked, sniffing at the cauldron. *Yep, this was the source of the bay leaf smell. Was the herb magical? Lord knows every recipe in the world seemed to require the things. I wonder if ... ?*

"Kind? Oh, nothing special," Dillard interrupted with a shrug. "Boring stuff mostly. Stone Flow, Invisibility, Reanimation, House Fly ... I mix up whatever they want." Then almost too soft to hear he added, "I don't dare to refuse."

The special agents exchanged a meaningful glance. This explained the disappearing mansion in Laurel.

"So why did they need a flying mansion?" Joshua prompted in a gentle tone. Little urging seemed to be needed to make the man talk. *He must have been alone down here with the zombies for a long time. Probably going a little stir crazy from the lack of social discourse, and plain old-fashioned loneliness .*

"To gather them," Dillard said, looking over a shoulder at the toiling workers. His expression was that of a father who had discovered his child was an axe murderer, pride and sadness combined. "Werewolves have no thumbs, you see, which makes them very clumsy with tools. So the Drell sent them to out to collect fresh bodies for me to animate. Zombies are hard workers, they never rest or pause. But they also wear out pretty quickly. So there is a constant need for fresh me..." Dillard paused in embarrassment. "A constant need for fresh workers to move away the rubble."

"But why the whole mansion?" Logan insisted. "Why not one of the smaller buildings?"

"Sometimes the werewolves collected fifty or sixty corpses. Only the mansion could hold that many at a time."

Some things were starting to make sense to Joshua. No wonder so many of those newspaper articles had seemed to be describing the same haunted house over and over. They actually had been the same house, the Hoffman Mansion flying through the misty night, raiding graveyards.

"What are they digging for?" Logan asked, studying the crack in the rockface. There was a hole in the foundation of the mansion where something had clawed it's way inside from below, and here were the Drell tunneling straight down. There had to be a connection.

"For some reason, the Drell fail to keep me abreast of their intimate plans," Dillard said, drenched in sarcasm. "They issue orders, and I obey. All I know is that this shaft has to be no less than two hundred feet wide. Bigger is better, but any less and..."

A shadow appeared on the ramp above.

"Be still!" Dillard hissed, snatching up his spoon and rushing back to the cauldron. "Say nothing!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ducking out of sight behind the boxes, Joshua and Logan leveled their crossbows as a werewolf padded down the ramp. He stopped on the ramp above to watch the industrious zombies for a while. Then the monster snarled threateningly at the wizard, who cringed appropriately, and the werewolf departed. Tracking the man-beast with their weapons, Joshua and Logan waited until he had disappeared into the main tunnel before standing.

"He didn't smell us," Logan muttered incredulously.

"I can't smell us," Joshua retorted, crinkling his nose under the thick scarf. If the zombies were any more pungent, the air would have be chewed instead of breathed. With a stride, the special agent returned to the small island of herbal sweetness surrounding the bubbling cauldron of bay leaves.

"Look, whoever you are, leave while you still can," Dillard said hurriedly, laying aside his spoon. "If a werewolf spots you, he'll call the Drell."

"Oh no, he won't," Logan stated confidently, patting the Colt under his jacket. "We can handle werewolves."

"And we've already wounded one Drell, and killed another," Joshua added brightly. *Which wasn't*

exactly the truth, or a lie, but nestled somewhere in-between .

Standing perfectly still, the wizard tried to speak for a while, but nothing came out. "You ... killed a Drell?" he finally managed to squeak. "Killed. As in dead?"

"Banished it, at least," Joshua corrected honestly. He told about the incident in the gypsy tent.

"A juju bag? I do not know this type of magic," Dillard muttered in annoyance. "When the Drell attacked us during dinner, I hit them with every conjure in my grimoire. But they kept coming, and coming. Boiling out of the basement by the dozens! Nothing I used seemed to stop them for very long, and when I finally became exhausted..." Dillard hung his head in shame.

"They put your wife in a cage," Logan said, taking an educated shot in the dark.

The wizard nodded glumly. "If I do anything the Drell dislike, if I'm slow, or disobedient in any way, if a potion fails, then Catherine is ... punished."

Joshua narrowed his eyes in rage. The raven-haired woman wasn't a prisoner, but a hostage to force his good behavior. She wasn't what the Drell feared, it was the wizard! But why? His magic had been already proved to be useless.

"If you truly do hate the Drell, then join us," Logan said with alacrity. "Help us fight them!"

Dillard said nothing, the silence eloquent.

"At least we can get those chains off you," Joshua offered, reaching for the skeleton keys.

Throwing back his head, the wizard roared in weary laughter. "What, this rubbish? Please." He waved a hand and the locks disengaged, the shackles falling in a clatter to the rocky ground.

Frowning, Logan crossed his arms. "But if iron chains mean nothing to your magic..."

"If only Catherine was in chains!" Dillard cried, a sob catching in his throat. He looked upward for divine intervention, but saw only unyielding granite. "There isn't a spell in existence that could set her free," he said wistfully. "The accursed Drell have her locked inside the Cage of Solomon. Not some flimsy duplicate, mind you, but the actual Cage of Solomon!"

The wizard paused, expecting a horrified reaction from the announcement. But the two men just stood there, impatiently waiting for further information. *Good grief, I'm dealing with rank amateurs .*

"The Cage of Solomon is why this estate exists," Dillard said in a rush, trying to compress his library of information into a few succinct sentences. "My crazy uncle was tracing the lay lines of the world when he found the Cage sitting in the middle of a stormy valley. It must have been following a lay line itself, and got caught here like everything else. To hide the Cage, he built a hut around it, and then a mansion, and then an estate around the house, and then a wall around the estate."

A zombie shuffled up the ramp, and the special agents hid while the wizard refilled the pail. As the corpse walked stiffly away, he continued. "The Cage is eons old, and supposedly is what King Solomon used to capture the king of the Djinn and force the genies to obey his seal."

Letting the man unburden his heart, Joshua and Logan could see that the wizard was clearly warming to

the subject. "The bars are pure gold, but steeped in deudonic energy of an unknown type. It twists the very fabric of the Time/Space continuum. One touch, even the slightest contact and *pft!*" He raised both hands to mimic a puff of smoke rising into the sky.

"It disintegrates you?" Joshua asked, remembering the sun gun of the Drell.

"Much worse than that," Dillard said lowering his voice. "Much, much worse. It removes you from the stream of Time." He paused to let that sink in. "You become nonexistent, a phantom entity."

"Oh, anything you accomplished in life is still there," Dillard added quickly, as if cutting off an expected objection. "A picture that you painted, a stolen apple, a sired child.... Reality has not been altered. But nobody knows where that picture or child came from anymore. You're utterly and completely forgotten. Erased from existence, wiped clean from the book of Life."

"Merciful Heavens," Logan whispered in horror, making the sign of the cross.

The cauldron stopped bubbling for a moment at the gesture, then it continued unabated.

"If Heaven was indeed merciful, the Cage would never have been created," Dillard muttered petulantly, stirring the roiling brew. "Once I realized what we had inside the house, I sealed it away, barricading The Cage behind a dozen walls protected with hexes, runes ... The work took me a year! But the Drell somehow knew it was there anyway. Perhaps they have senses we do not."

Bending down, the wizard took a pale root from an open box and tossed into the cauldron. The mandrake dissolved in a crackle of electricity. "When my wife and I were taken captive, they forced me to tell them everything about it that I knew. I held out for as long as I could, but..." Dillard stopped speaking. Some things could not be spoken aloud.

Joshua felt himself blush in sympathy. He knew what coercion had been used. *Feeding*. "I've been in the clutches of a Drell," he said. "I understand, sir."

At the startling admission, Dillard looked directly into the other man's face and incredibly saw that it was the truth. *That's how I looked afterwards*, the wizard remembered in dismay. *Soiled and befouled. Beaten and ... raped*. "They threatened to ... use me again, unless my wife went inside and closed the door. It has to be closed from the inside, you see, nothing can touch the Cage except from that direction, or else ... *pft!*"

"Do they let you see her?" Logan asked, hoping for the location of the Cage. Magic was strong, but the major had a lot more faith in fulminating guncotton.

"I begged, but they refused," Dillard said, reaching down to take a handful of leaves from an open barrel and crumpling them into the cauldron. "I don't think they have emotions similar to ours. Lord knows they have no concept of mercy." The wizard rubbed a plain copper bracelet on his wrist. "We were able to talk with each other for awhile, so I knew she was alive and unharmed. At least until last week, but the Long Whisper spell is exhausted. Magic does have limitations."

"And what are the limitation for the Cage?" Joshua demanded, pulling out his notebook.

"Nothing," Dillard admitted glumly, stirring the potion. "The cage is unique."

The bottom of the shaft cracked apart, the zombies started pounding the chunks of rock apart with their

worn sledgehammers.

Tucking away the book, Joshua tried to control his mounting frustration. This was like some horrible nursery rhyme. *To stop the Drell, we need the wizard. To use the wizard, we need the wife. To free the wife, we smash the Cage. To break the cage ... ?*

"And magic has no effect?" Logan insisted. "Not even your potions?"

"Do you have dung in your ears, boy? Nothing can touch the Cage. Thus, nothing can harm the Cage! Acids, blackpowder, cannonballs, hexes, runes, conjures, potions..." The wizard became more and more agitated. "Hellfire and damnation, that's why my uncle had to build a house around the Cage merely to study the bedamn thing. The very air was being destroyed as it touched the bars, creating a constant hurricane. The Cage of Solomon is invulnerable! Invincible! Untouchable!"

The special agents mulled over the pronouncement, their faces registering an array of conflicting emotions.

"Cow flop," Joshua finally declared. "Utter nonsense. If anything that touches the cage is eternally destroyed ... ?

"Then how does it sit on the ground?" Logan finished in accusation.

Startled, the wizard stopped stirring the potion. "Why it ... ah ... that is..." In exaggerated slowness, the wizard turned around. "I have absolutely no idea," he said in painful honesty.

"So perhaps this Cage has other weaknesses, vulnerabilities that we can exploit to free your wife," Logan theorized brightly. He had negotiated deals with pirates during gunbattles at sea. This should be a cake walk in comparison. "If we do, will you help us fight the Drell?"

"B-but it can't be done!" Dillard burred in panic. "Nobody has ever escape from the Cage of Solomon in the history of the world!"

"Yet," Joshua countered. "And if we succeeded...?"

Peevishly, the wizard gestured and the flames under the cauldron rose in fury to mark his consternation. He desperately wanted to feel angry at the loutish persistence, but kept stumbling over the same line of reasoning. Exactly how in Hades did the Cage sit on the ground? *I've been studying it for twenty years and never thought to look underneath* . Perhaps he spent too much time staring at the stars. Or mayhap these gun-toting mundanes could accomplish what no mage ever could. *What I could not* , he amended. *Was it even remotely possible to defeat the Cage of Solomon? More importantly, would the attempt endanger Catherine ?*

"Well?" Joshua asked in a gentler tone, sensing the indecision in the wizard. If Madam Olga had been right, then the special agents desperately needed the assistance of the wizard. *Either the Drell were making a tunnel to release some monstrous two-hundred-foot-wide King Drell, or worse, they were building a highway to start ferrying down human beings to feed a nation of their kind. A subterranean cavern where people would be bred, and slaughtered, like fatted cattle* . There briefly flashed in his mind the image of the little girl trying to hide in the pile of dirty straw. *Never again !*

Surreptitiously under his greatcoat, Logan slipped a hand out of his pocket and fingered his Colt. *If the Drell needed this man alive, and he would not assist them ... ?*

"I'd have to see her alive with my own eyes," Dillard hedged, wary of some clever trick.

"Absolutely. No question," Logan agreed with a smile, releasing the weapon. "But answer us plainly, sir. If we succeed, will you join us?"

The wizard drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling as if his very life was in the balance. But much more than that was at stake this time. *My life, or my wife?* That choice was easy.

"Yes," Dillard said in a barely audible voice. "Free Catherine, and I'll fight by your side to the death. I would gladly pay any price to see her out of that demonic Cage."

"Your word as a gentleman?"

"And your oath as a mage?" Joshua added, trying to cover any possible loopholes. He'd known far too many people who used the terms 'gentlemen' synonymous with 'fool.'

"Freely and without any reservations, I give you my word and solemn bond," Dillard stated in a formal manner. Gesturing with a finger, the wizard wrote a shimmering rune in the air, the burning icon of his true name.

As it faded away, Logan removed a dusty glove to hold out a hand. "Done and done, sir."

Taken aback, Dillard looked at the gesture for a moment. It had been a very long time since anybody had offered the wizard such an ordinary gesture of good faith. These men trusted him implicitly. "Done and done," the wizard repeated, feeling oddly moved.

With a thundering crash, the rockface shattered, and the army of zombies started shoveling up the debris. But then they paused and began to lower their sledgehammers to the busted ground.

"Master, we see thing!" a zombie in a wedding dress called out from the bottom of the pit.

Jerking their heads towards the cracked floor, the three men saw the dark crevice pulsating with an unearthly blue glow.

"By the goddess, they've found it. Whatever it is that the Drell have been digging for," Dillard made an automatic gesture to grab the wand in his belt. But that had been taken from him long ago. "Hurry, free Catherine!" the wizard snapped, turning around. "When I'm no longer needed, we will both..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

The special agents understood. When the wizard was no longer needed, he and his wife would be killed. Fed to the Drells, and tossed to the werewolves while still warm. *There would be nobody to stop the Drell*, Logan grimly realized. *And we don't honestly know nightsoil from nutmeg about fighting these accursed things.*

"Where's the Cage?" Joshua demanded, pulling out the Starr to check the load of silver miniballs.

"North wing of the mansion. There's a cupboard hidden under the stairs."

"Can you slow down the zombies any?" Logan asked hopefully, yanking on his glove. "Buy us some time?"

"And what do you think I've been doing for all of these months?" Dillard expelled. "If the potion was any weaker, it wouldn't work at all!" But watching the zombies shuffled around the eerie glow, the wizard licked dry lips, "But I'll do what I can." *Although, exactly what that is I have no idea .*

Suddenly, there came the echoing sound of running feet from high overhead, and then the flickering light of torches. Distorted shadows were thrown on the wall of the shaft opposite the entrance to the shaft, and a group of people in bare feet began running along the inclined ramp.

Werewolves! Joshua and Logan drew their handguns, and cocked the hammers. This was not a problem.

However, then there was the hard slap of heavy boots on stone, and the special agents cursed bitterly. So much for subterfuge and rescue attempts. The Drell had arrived, and there was only one way in or out of the shaft. They were trapped.

"Been nice knowing ya, Yankee," Logan drawled in a thick Southern accent, using his left hand to pick up his lantern.

Extracting a stick of guncotton, Joshua scratched a Lucifer alive and lit the stubby fuse. It smoke and sizzled, shrinking fast. "See you in Hades, reb," he replied curtly, preparing to throw.

Grabbing fistfuls of hair, Dillard felt a surge of blind panic. *How could this be happening when he was so close to freeing Catherine !* Then inspiration hit. Digging about frantically in his dirty clothes, Dillard yanked out a tiny vial. The contents radiated a iridescent green. He really hated to waste this. The wizard had been saving the potion in case he had ever been allowed to visit his wife. But now it was her only chance at life. Closing his eyes, Dillard give the vial a goodbye kiss and smashed it on the ground directly between the two government agents. There was a flash of light, a puff of smoke, and the two men vanished from sight.

A moment later the Drell arrived. Dozens of them.

CHAPTER THIRTY

As the fumes faded away, Joshua and Logan were startled to find themselves standing in the cold, outside of the main gate to the estate.

"Well, I'll be damned," Joshua whispered in amazement, then remembered what he was holding and quickly yanked out the sizzling fuse to throw it away. *Whew, that had been close!*

"Dillard must have been saving the potion for his wife," Logan said, feeling incredibly guilty.

"Then let's save her," Joshua stated, shoving a spare fuse into the stick and tucking it inside his vest. "Come on, the rope is this way!"

The Bureau 13 agent started running for the corner, but then stopped. Oh Hades, the rope was dangling inside the wall to facilitate their quick escape. Joshua had never considered they might need to get back inside the estate.

"No choice. We have to use the gate!" Logan cursed, heading towards the barbican.

Holstering the guns, both men raised their crossbows. Once again, their best hope was silence. With any luck, the Drell would be busy in the shaft, and they would only be dealing with werewolves. Dillard had given them a fighting chance. It was their job to see the task through. A deal was a deal. What the Drell would be doing with the old wizard they tried desperately not to think about. *A soldier's burden* .

As Joshua and Logan stepped on the road, the portcullis raised and the gates swung open wide. Pausing in the entrance, the men watched the decorative bushes set on either side of the front driveway for any suspicious movements. A tense minute passed and a bush shook ever so slightly, and a werewolf stepped boldly into view.

"Masters," it said bowing.

Without a qualm, both men raised their crossbows and fired. Clawing at its face, the gasping werewolf stumbled backwards with quarrels sticking out of its throat and forehead. As Joshua reloaded, Logan drew his sword and charged, his shoes crunching on the loose gravel. Gurgling crimson, the beast yanked the quarrel from its throat, and the major swung his blade with all of his might. With a quarrel still in its face, the startled head went flying to roll along the lush grass, Changing into a bearded Chinese man with tattoos on both cheeks. It came to a rest in a flowerbed of orchids, the expression more one of surprise than remorse.

Joshua reloaded as he approached, and Logan wiped the blade clean on the rose bushes. Something shifted into the greenery, and the major hacked wildly in response. Another sentry!

Bleeding profusely, a werewolf fell into view, just as another monster stepped around the greenery and charged, claws extended.

"Imposter!" it snarled, foaming at the mouth.

As Logan lunged with the sword, Joshua aimed and fired. The first werewolf doubled over, clutching a bloody stomach, and the second gagged on the quarrel sticking out of its open mouth. The wounded beasts tried to shuffle away. Moving fast, the special agents finished them off with their silver-loaded blackjacks.

The werewolves were still Changing back into human form while Joshua and Logan strode onto the porch of the Hoffman Mansion. With blood all over the lawn, it was pointless for them to hide the bodies. Time was now against them. Soon, the grisly remains would be discovered and then all Hades would break loose. Speed was their best defense.

The front door was unlocked. Suspecting another ambush, Joshua and Logan kicked it open and entered with weapons drawn.

Standing in the middle of the foyer was a female werewolf fumbling with a Remington shotgun. Designed for ripping and tearing, her paws were ill-suited to work the hammers.

Shooting in unison, the men coolly put two quarrels into the werewolf's face. With a gurgle, the she-beast toppled over. The loaded shotgun clattered to the marble floor and thunderously discharged. Across the foyer a vase of flowers was blown apart, spraying ceramic shards and wilted carnations everywhere.

As the shotgun blast echoed down every hallway, Logan skewered the werewolf through the heart while Joshua released the crossbow to pull both guns. *Oh well, we were low on quarrels, anyway. Silly name, why weren't the things simply called arrows ?*

Sheathing the bloody sword, Logan pulled out his own crossbow, and placed a shoe on the smoking barrel of the shotgun to fire a quarrel into the wooden stock. Getting the idea, Joshua heartily approved. Holstering the LeMat, he used the Toothpick to cut off the leather cord supporting the crossbow right at the stock. Sheathing the blade, Joshua then threw the crossbow out the open front door to land on the porch. Hopefully, it would seem as if somebody had fired the crossbow from outside and run away. The scenario made no sense, but it might take the werewolves several minutes to figure that out. Precious time wasted as the monsters searched for a non-existing sniper hiding somewhere on the estate.

Avoiding the spreading puddle of blood, Joshua and Logan hurried past the oil painting, and easily located the cupboard under the stairs. It was locked, but the skeleton keys made short work of that problem.

Heavy footsteps sounded coming down the stairs, and the special agents slipped inside to pull the flimsy hatch closed, leaving it open only a slim crack.

Nervously, Joshua and Logan cocked the hammers on their guns as a couple of Drell strode into view, followed by a dozen werewolves. At the sight of the smoking weapon, the Drell chattered in their unknown language, while a busty female werewolf sniffed inquisitively at the wooden quarrel. Then a Drell pointed at the front door and barked something. Moving in a pack, the werewolves obediently charged outside, spreading in different directions.

Grinning in delight, Logan couldn't believe their luck. *The decoy was working !*

But Joshua tightened his grip on the Starr at the sight of the large Drell carrying a black medical bag. The greatcoat was spotless, but the clothing underneath had several bullet holes, and the cuffs of the pants were badly singed. This was the monster from the boarding house. *Come a little closer, arsehead. I have a some lovely kerosene waiting for you .*

Sensing the other man's heightened agitation, Logan gripped him by the shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. Joshua jerked at the contact, then accepted the friendly warning and eased back. There would be a time for retribution later. Oh yes, he would make sure of that.

With a curt gesture, the largest Drell barked a command. Another Drell raised the oil painting, and the others marched into the hidden workshop, their voices cut off as the frame slid back down, sealing the alcove.

Closing the hatch, the special agents raised the wicks on their lanterns and looked around. The cupboard proved to actually be a small room. The inner wall was composed of granite blocks breached by a large hole, the edges congealed with cooled rivulets of molten stone.

"The sun gun?" Logan guessed, with a sideways glance.

Swallowing hard, Joshua gave a glum nod.

With their weapons at the ready, the men stepped through the hole and encountered a brick wall penetrated by a similar puncture. Next came a wall of iron plates, another stone wall, bricks again. At this point, a dim light could be seen in the darkness ahead. Cautiously, the men proceeded.

After six more walls, Joshua and Logan eased into a large room filled with pearlescent light. The ceiling was bolted iron, the walls were brick, the floor parquet woodwork, but dominating the enclosure was a golden cage with a sleeping woman laying inside on a military-style cot.

Creeping closer, Joshua and Logan watched for any boobytraps, or hidden guards, but the area seemed clear. The men found that unsettling. It meant the Drell were confident there was no way the prisoner could escape.

Then again, Logan mused, The fools had been positive that nobody could get inside via the carriage house. Hopefully, the Drell were wrong a second time .

"Mrs. Dillard?" Joshua whispered, loosening the scarf as he approached the hatch. "We're here to rescue you." The old-fashioned lock was ridiculously simple, and would be childishly easy to trick open. *All you had to do was touch it first. A deadly trap for the unwary .*

"Your husband sent us, ma'am," Logan added in reassurance, removing his hat to show human hair instead of quills. Placing the headgear on the floor, the major felt a slight breeze rushing towards the bars and pulled back. *Erased from the book of Life. It was a terrifying concept .*

Rousing with a yawn, the woman turned over to reveal a face of unsurpassed beauty, in spite of the accumulated filth of not having washed in a month or so. "Go away," Catherine mumbled in irritation. "I told you bastards before that..." Her azure eyes went wide at the sight of the two men. Then she focused on Joshua. "You! The man in the clouds!"

"Crystal ball, actually," Joshua explained, placing the lantern on the floor. "We're here to set you free."

"How?" Catherine laughed, her voice shrill with desperation. Then she grew pale and slumped weakly onto the bed. Holding a hand to her face, she breathed for a minute before speaking again. "My apologies, gentlemen. I have been throwing away my meals in an effort to starve myself to death. If I can die, then my husband would be free to escape."

Blushing, Catherine glanced at the empty plate on the floor. "But I can not see it through." A tear trickled down her cheek. "I would gladly throw myself against the bars, but the knowledge that Ernest would not even remember me is too great to bear." She turned from them, a sob in her voice. "I am a coward."

"Madam, your bravery shames us," Logan stated in heartfelt honesty, placing the lantern down. *A prisoner of love. The trap was hellish .* "By thunder, we'll get you out of there, or die trying!"

In wordless dismissal, she shrugged, unable to believe any promise of release.

Studying the bars, Joshua fished out a coin and flipped it through the air to see what would happen. Then, reaching into a pocket, Joshua fished for a gold coin and flipped it through the air to see what would happen. Reaching for a coin, Joshua found his pocket empty. But his purse had been filled with gold ... oh. *They must have hit the bars and were destroyed. Sweet Jesus, I don't even remember trying !*

Logan frowned. "Hey, did you just..."

"Yes."

"And they..."

"Uh huh."

The major gave a low whistle. *This was going to be tricky.*

"Gentlemen, before you both gallantly perish trying to do the impossible, I have a suggestion," Catherine said, rising to shuffle across the Cage.

"We're certainly open to suggestions," Logan admitted, thoughtfully stroking his goatee.

Joshua asked, "Do you know a spell, or..."

"No," Catherine said, looking out between the bars. "There is only one solution." She drew in a breath and spoke quickly. "Do what I can not."

That took a moment.

"Kill you?" Logan gasped, almost dropping his lantern.

"Never!" Joshua agreed, offended by the very suggestion.

"Please, I beseech you!" Catherine begged, dropping to her knees. "Slay me to free my husband. There is no other way!"

A crude retort came to mind, but Logan couldn't use that sort of language in front of any lady.

"You know what I think the problem is, madam?" Joshua shot back, livid with outrage. "You and the wizard live in the world filled with magic. I'll bet that you have a spell for doing the dishes, and changing the bed linen."

"Why yes, we do," she said hesitantly, unsure of where he was heading. "But I don't see any of that has to do with...."

"Then pay attention. I've heard politicians argue for days over how a problem was unsolvable," Logan interrupted, pulling out his Colt to check the load. "When what they really meant was, the problem could not be solved from a political viewpoint."

"Exactly! You have to learn to see things as they really are," Joshua finished, bending down to scrutinize the thin layer of material forming the bottom support of the Cage. It was hard to tell in the fluctuating glow, but the bottom reflected like silver. *Or it could be platinum, steel, white gold, even polished tin ... ?*

"Shall we give it a try?" Logan asked, leveling his weapon.

In response, Joshua drew the Starr and took aim. "On my mark," he said, cocking the hammer. "One, two ... three!"

The men fired, and the lock exploded, driving the hatch aside to violently slam against the bars in a ringing crash.

"By the bones of the goddess..." Catherine whispered in stark disbelief, staring at the open hatchway.
"Lead was the answer? Common, ordinary, lead?"

"Silver, actually," Joshua corrected, reloading his weapon. "There had to be some sort of insulator, like the mica and guta-perch on a telegraph key." He felt flushed with victory, almost giddy.

"And you just happened to have silver bullets?" Catherine asked, creasing her forehead.

"For the werewolves," Logan explained, jauntily tucking away the Colt. *Legends conquered while you wait. Miracles handled by appointment.*

She blinked. "Werewolves?"

"Servants of the Drell."

How odd, she would have sworn those were Blink Dogs outside the dining room when the Drell attacked. "My deepest thanks, gentleman," Catherine said, sliding a frayed strap off her shoulder to expose the swell of a breast. "Now if you would be so kind as to turn your backs for a moment..."

"M-madam?" Logan stammered, almost dropping his gun. "What in the name of God a-are you doing?"

"The Cage is still live and deadly," Catherine replied, removing the other strap. "If a loose thread should touch a bar by accident, I die. So I'm going through disrobed." Wiggling her hips, the garment dropped off completely to puddle around her ankles.

Instantly, both men spun around and crushed their eyes closed.

"Ohmigoddess!" Catherine gasped. "Look there!"

"Madam, I can assure you that we are not peeking," Logan insisted, throwing an arm across his face.
"Honestly, we're not."

"No, you idiots! A Drell!"

Snapping their eyelids open, both men pivoted towards the hole in the wall just as a Drell stepped through. Moving away from each other, Joshua and Logan hammered the thing with lead and silver miniballs. But the fusillade barely even slowed the advance of the Drell. At each impact, yellow blood blew out the back, the blood sizzling on the wood floor turning it into dust. But the gaping wounds promptly closed in just a few seconds.

"Get away Cage!" the Drell haltingly snarled, flexing all four arms. The third eye opened to stare hostility at the men, the feeding tendrils writhing about madly.

For a split second, Joshua and Logan both felt the strange draining sensation, like a wave of cold from beyond the grave. Then they shouted battlecries, and charged, firing their weapons.

Dodging the miniballs, the Drell hunched down and fired a halo of quills. The men dove to the sides, and came up shooting. When the Colt clicked empty, Logan pulled a stick of blackpowder, lit it and threw. The Drell caught the explosive stick in a hand, and plucked out the fuse.

Kicking a lantern towards the thing, Joshua shot it with the LeMat. The lantern exploded into a fireball.

Moving around the flaming wreckage, the Drell tossed aside the stick of blackpowder and fired off another halo. With a cry of pain, Catherine collapsed near the open door.

Spinning around, the Drell raised all four arms in a gesture of shock, then rushed closer. The prisoner must not be harmed yet! With Catherine directly behind the thing, Joshua and Logan both had to hold their fire. A miss could easily kill the woman. Scrambling to their feet, the special agents raced towards the monster, Logan pulling his sword and Joshua his blackjack.

Stopping at the open hatch, the Drell reached down to shake the female when Catherine reached up to grab the monster by the shirt and pull sideways. Caught off guard, the Drell stumbled, and she released the fabric a split second before it hit a bar.

Twisting about in unimaginable agony, the Drell silently screamed as the clothing vanished to reveal the inhuman body covered with scales and odd ridges. Those disappeared to expose layers of black muscles lined with yellow veins. As those faded, beating organs came to sight, along with strange bits of machinery mixed with the muscles, complex blue wiring and crystal boxes set among the multiple hearts. A second brain was visible hidden behind the pelvis, and a squarish eyeball stared out from within the quivering mass of tissue.

The Drell was still screaming as the organs went away, leaving behind only a bizarre skeleton made of flexible plates instead of solid bones. There were two spinal columns. In a swirl of yellowish vapor, the Drell disappeared completely, the death scream hanging in the air for an unnaturally long period of time. But eventually, that also faded away.

With a startled cry, Joshua and Logan spun away from the sight of the naked woman standing triumphant in the hatchway of the Cage.

"Madam, please cover yourself!" Logan implored, then felt a trickle of wetness on his cheek. Touching it, his finger came away red with blood. *Now how in Hades had that happened?* Dabbing the cut with a handkerchief, the major smelled gunsmoke and was startled at the sight of a smashed kerosene lantern burning a few yards away.

"Did ... we just fight a Drell?" Joshua asked in confusion, looking around the room.

"Darned if I remember," Logan muttered, stuffing the bloody cloth into a vest pocket.

"Yes, we did," Catherine said pressing a hand between her breasts, gasping for breath. "Thankfully, it seems that even the Drell can be killed by the Cage of Solomon." She had been planning that maneuver for weeks, and was amazed that it actually worked. "Now please let me get out of this accursed thing!"

A minute passed in silence, another five.

"The Cage can kill Drell," Joshua mused, reloading the spent Starr. "Think we can blow it apart with a stick of guncotton tossed inside?"

"Even if we could, the loose pieces might not work anymore," Logan answered, closing the Colt and holstering the gun. "And even if they did, we couldn't pick them up to use as clubs. Unless you conveniently happen to have a couple of silver mesh gloves in your backpack?"

"Sadly, no."

"Pity."

There came the patting of naked feet on marble, then the dulcet rustling of clothing. "All right, you can turn around now," Catherine announced.

Turning around carefully, the special agents saw that the woman was thankfully dressed again in her soiled nightgown. However, it was obviously cold in the room and the men tried very hard not to stare.

"Any chance of something to drink?" Catherine asked, walking closer. She could see where they were trying not to look and appreciated the attempt at courtesy.

"Only cold coffee, I'm afraid," Logan said, blindly offering his canteen. There was some single malt Scotch whiskey in his flask, but after a prolonged fast, that would hit the woman like a rock to the head. *We need her awake and moving, not drunk and giggling.* The major balked at the mental slip. *Giggling! I meant giggling!*

"Coffee! Thank the goddess!" Grabbing the canteen with both hands, Catherine drank deeply, the excess tricking down her cheeks and staining her already soiled clothing. A damp area began to spread across the front with alarming results.

"Marvelous," Catherine sighed, lowering the canteen to wipe her mouth clean on the back of a hand. "Like blood to a vampire!"

"You're quite welcome," Logan muttered, refraining from reaching for the canteen. Without taking a look, he might accidentally encounter something totally inappropriate.

"Here, you go, ma'am," Joshua said, shrugging out of his greatcoat, and holding it randomly out at arm's length.

"Again, my thanks," Catherine said, accepting the garment. Then she could not resist adding, "It is rather chilly in here, isn't it?"

Neither man dared to risk a reply, and decided to check over their revolvers once more. The loss of the greatcoat was actually not a great inconvenience. With Catherine out of the Cage, the cat was out of the bag, so to speak, and trying to pretend they were Drell would be quite impossible. Besides, shooting straight would be extremely difficult for them with the buxom woman pointing, er, leading the way.

"All right, let's get out of here," Catherine stated, buttoning the greatcoat closed. "Before some thing comes to investigate the gunshots."

Sneaking a peek, the special agents relaxed the muscles in their shoulders. Fighting the urge to look backwards had been exhausting. Her feet were still bare, but there was nothing they could do about that under the circumstances.

"I think the Drell are too busy for us at the moment," Logan countered, brushing back his hair. "Whatever they have been digging for has been reached."

Adjusting the collar, Catherine frowned. "The lay line magnet?"

"I'm afraid so," Joshua said

"But that would mean my husband..." *Was no longer needed* . Fear stabbed through her vitals like a spear. "Quickly, we have to reach the workshop! In the display cases are magical items that we will need."

"Magical weapons?" Logan asked with a scowl. "But I thought those had already proven useless."

"There are weapons," the woman said cryptically, staring off in a determined stride. "And then, by the goddess, there are weapons!" *If the Drell haven't confiscated them yet* .

Rushing forward, Joshua and Logan caught up with the woman and took the lead. With their handguns sweeping for targets, the two men half-expected to be attacked at any hole. But the group reached the cupboard without incident.

Getting a spare lantern from his backpack, Logan lit the wick, while Joshua peeked outside. "Werewolf by the front door," he whispered, jerking a thumb in that direction. "No shotgun."

"Excellent. I'll shoot, and you rush him," Logan said, pulling out his crossbow. There were two quarrels left, so he loaded one into the weapon and placed the other in his teeth.

Sliding off his bulky back pack, Joshua pulled out his blackjack and tested it on a palm. "Try not to miss," he suggested, bracing for a fast sprint across the foyer. There were a good fifty feet to cover in only a few moments.

The major hefted the crossbow. "Hef fi feva?" he mumbled around the quarrel.

"A werewolf? May I take a look first?" Catherine asked, edging close to the hatch.

Not seeing how that could hurt anything, Joshua and Logan politely moved aside. Placing her face to the crack, Catherine made a guttural noise of displeasure at the sight of the man-beast guarding the front door, then threw open the hatch and boldly stepped into the hallway.

"You there! Dog-boy!" Catherine snapped imperiously. "Over here!" There came the sound of autumn leaves being walked upon, followed by silence.

Caught by surprise, Joshua and Logan rushed outside to attack the beast. But the werewolf was gone, replaced by the stone statue of a werewolf turning around at the waist with his ears sticking straight up in astonishment.

Logan removed the quarrel from his teeth, and gaped.

"How in the world..." Joshua began hesitantly, lowering his gun.

"I'm a Medusan," Catherine said, strolling to the oil painting and working the hidden release. "Not the Medusa of Greek mythology, of course. She was a Gorgon. My people come from the island of Medusa, and can naturally turn living creatures into stone."

"But you're not hideous!" Logan objected softly, watching the side corridors. There was nobody in sight.

"How sweet of you to notice," Catherine dimpled, starting through the alcove. "But as I said, my people are not cursed."

Staying close behind, Joshua started to ask a question, then bit his tongue. The woman must have already tried to turn the Drell into stone, and obviously failed. So the creatures were also immune to that, too. *Was there anything that could harm them aside from juju bags and legendary Cages?*

Zigzagging her way across the workshop with the sure knowledge of ownership, Catherine ducked around the circular staircase to snag a pair of slippers from a bookcase, and an embroidered vest from a table filled with assorted pieces of clothing. Racing to keep track of the woman, Joshua and Logan briefly saw Catherine toss away the greatcoat and don the vest before disappearing behind the big globe. When they finally caught up with her, Catherine was studying a glass case full of sparkling jewelry.

"Are these the weapons?" Joshua asked breathless. The stuff was pretty, but hardly seemed dangerous.

"Like you've never seen," Catherine stated, placing a hand on the transparent lid. She waited a moment, then lifted the hand to show a white outline of it on the clear glass. Using her forefinger, Catherine tapped the outline in several places, then quickly stood back as the display case gave a low hum and the lid raised with a soft exhalation of trapped air.

Reaching past the diamond earrings, emerald necklace, sapphire brooches, and jade pendants, she choose several plain copper bands from the rear. Wiggling two onto each wrist, Catherine opened and closed her hands a few times as if testing the action on a pistol.

Raising an arm, Catherine commanded. "Ernest, come to me!" The bracelet glowed brightly, then faded away inert and cold.

"Does this mean..." Logan fumbled for the correct word.

"Nothing! It means nothing!" Catherine flared in denial. "I must have done the spell wrong." Which was a lie. The only reason Ernest hadn't come was because he could not hear her. Which meant that he was either unconscious, or.... *Oh goddess, please let him be unconscious !*

Tossing the dead bracelet away, Catherine shoved on another. But before she could do anything with it, a loud bell started to ring, the strident clangs steadily increasing until the sound filled the mansion.

"Why would anybody sound the dinner bell?" Catherine asked in confusion, brushing back her long hair.

"I think that's the escape alarm," Joshua declared, thumbing back the hammers on his guns.

Logan frowned. "Somebody must have found the statue, and are telling the Drell that you're free."

"But then my husband..." She went pale. "Quickly, this way!"

As the three people surged across the workshop, loud voices could be heard coming from the secret door in the wall. The words were indistinct, but there were a lot of pops and clicks.

The Drell! Moving behind some exhibits, Joshua and Logan took cover and prepared for battle. Their luck had just run out. The long-delayed showdown with the Drell was finally here, and the special agents still had no possible way to kill the things aside from the thrown lanterns. Which they weren't really sure worked.

"Keep firing, and retreat to the Cage," Joshua ordered, aiming both guns at the wall past the charred

section on the floor.

"Save the explosives," Logan added, resting the cross on a marble pedestal, the Colt filling his other hand. One quarrel, six shots, then it was time to run. "We'll try to blow them against the bars." The voices were louder now, closer, and much more angry. *Well, we have been mucking up their plans for quite a while. The Drell should be pretty furious at us by now .*

"That might get us, too."

"Yeah, I know," the major growled. "Got a better plan?"

"Lord, no."

"Wait, I do," Catherine whispered, grabbing both of them by the shoulder and squeezing very hard. "Stand still and say nothing. Do you understand me? Nothing!"

The wall rose and out of the cellar marched a dozen Drell, with a large one in front openly carrying the sun gun.

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...closely followed by a pack of werewolves, and a dozen or so naked men and women armed with pistols and shotguns, plus five more Drell bringing up the rear. It was an army of monsters, over fifty strong.

"Say nothing, and keep out of their way!" Catherine hissed from nowhere, tightening her grip.

Glancing at the woman, Joshua couldn't see her anywhere, even though he felt her hand on his shoulder. Then the man realized that he couldn't even see his own legs and feet, or anything else. *Holy cats, I'm invisible !*

Without even glancing at the three humans, the Drell and their entourage proceeded across the workroom.

They're moving in a combat formation, Logan noted, tracking the group with his revolver. *With outriders and flankers, just like a Confederate Army platoon on field maneuvers. Which should mean ...* Walking in the center of the group was a large Drell carrying a medical bag. New greatcoat, old ripped clothing underneath. The major marked the creature as the leader, the monster that Joshua had fought at the boarding house. *When the balloon goes up, you go first* , the major silently promised.

Joshua also saw the big Drell, but couldn't take his attention off the creature carrying the sun gun. It was smooth and shiny and seemed to be made out of alabaster. *With that, we could burn the foul things down at our whim .*

As the Drell stomped by, the weapon was tantalizingly close. Holding onto Catherine, Joshua leaned forward as far as he could reach, straining for inches until his arm threatened to dislocate from the shoulder. Victory was inches away. *Only a little bit more...*

Just then, a naked woman cradling a shotgun moved between them, and Joshua was forced to withdraw.

The priceless opportunity lost forever.

Stopping to check the open display case, a werewolf almost bumped into Logan. It took every bit of his self-control for the major not to flinch. Sniffing at the jewelry, the werewolf growled and closed the lid before padding away.

Strange, Logan mused. It was almost as if the creature could smell silver. Good thing we were near the case. The jewelry masked the odor from our weapons. Then he frowned. But if that was true, then the werewolf in the corridor before must have known for certain that he and Joshua were invaders. And it hadn't sounded the alarm? It seemed the special agents had an ally in the enemy camp. *I wonder how much we can depend upon the creature in case of trouble?*

Maneuvering past the maze of tables, the Drell and the werewolves exited through the alcove. When they were gone, Joshua and Logan eased the grip on their weapons.

"Don't know where they're going," Joshua said, rubbing his jaw with the back of a hand. "And I don't care. But this is the perfect chance to reach Dillard."

"Stay close to me," Catherine directed, shuffling forward. "And don't break contact! This spell works on surface tension."

Awkwardly moving around the tables and bookcases, the three people made it to the African mask. Catherine nudged Logan to press the hidden button, then wrapped her arms tightly around the men so that they could squeeze through the opening.

The wooden stairs creaked at their descent. Walking out of the shadows, a couple of armed werewolves stared quizzically at the mysterious noise, then went pale and turned into stone, static-electric discharges crackling over their ossifying forms.

"Does that hurt?" Joshua whispered, glancing at the horrified statues.

"Only if I want it to," Catherine declared.

Pursing his lips, Logan said nothing, but tried to slide his hands to a more neutral location on her ample curves.

Reaching the crack in the wall, the three people switched to holding hands and proceeded single-file along the tunnel until reaching the excavation. Looking down, they saw the floor of the shaft alive with zombies swinging sledgehammers to smash apart rocks. However, there was no sign of the wizard.

Urged along by a worried Catherine, the three people descended the curving ramp until reaching the small ledge. Everything looked the same as before, bubbling cauldron, stack of wood, crates and boxes and barrels. But no Dillard. Checking behind the stack of crates, Joshua inhaled sharply at the sight of a crumple body.

Dragging the others along behind, Joshua holstered his gun to gently turn over the still form. Catherine stifled a small noise at the sight of her husband. Blood covered his clothing, and his right hand lay at an impossible angle, unless the bones had been broken. His skin was shallow and bruised. Blood dripped from his ears, nose and eyes. Incredibly, Dillard was still faintly breathing, red bubbles rising and falling on his split lips.

"My poor Ernest," Catherine said with a catch in her voice.

"Catherine.... ?" the wizard asked hoarsely, the word almost lost in the din of the feverishly working zombies.

Holding onto Joshua and Logan, the woman knelt by his side. "Yes, my darling. I'm here."

A weak smile touched the ruin of his mouth. "The Drell..." Dillard whispered. "Know something is wrong in the mansion ... thought it was me ... asked if I conjured demons..." His voice got softer, barely above a hush. "N-nothing," the wizard exhaled, going limp. "I ... t-told them n-nothing..."

Tears flowing down her cheeks, Catherine shifted Logan's grip to her shoulder, and removed a copper bracelet to tenderly slip it onto the broken wrist of her husband. "Live," she commanded from the very center of her being. "Live, old man. Don't you dare leave me."

The bracelet started to glow, the warm light spreading across the mangled body of the wizard, seeping down into his flesh. Joshua and Logan looked on in wonder as bones straightened, cuts healed, bruises vanished, and the blood ceased to flow.

As his color returned, Dillard opened his eyes to draw a deep breath. Slowly sitting upright, the wizard looked around and focused on the invisible people. "My beloved," Dillard smiled, reaching out to stroke her wet cheek.

"Old fool," Catherine smiled, hugging the hand. Just to touch him was like feeding a hunger.

Savoring the delicious contact, Dillard felt drunk with emotions. "How did you escape?"

"Nothing to it. Piece of cake," Joshua boasted, watching the ramp above. If the Drell attacked now, they would be trapped.

"They used silver bullets, dear..."

"Silver?"

"We'll give you the details later," Logan interrupted, keeping track of the zombies below. "Ready to keep your side of the bargain, sir?" Holding onto Catherine and his gun, the major itched to get the bag of salt from the saddlebags slung over his shoulder. It was a two pound bag, but Land o' Goshen, there were a lot of zombies.

"Absolutely!" Dillard said, rising into a crouching position. Carefully, he made sure that the zombies could not see them hidden behind the crates. "But first things first...." He began to rummage about in his clothing, then grimaced. *Damn! I already used that vial on the two government agents .*

"Here, I got this for you," Catherine said, pressing a short wooden stick into his hand.

"My old wand!" Dillard said, grinning in delight. "Thank you, oh, thank you." His six-foot-long iron staff had been vaporized by the Drell with some sort of energy pistol. With that loss had gone most of his spells. The staff contained every major conjure he had learned over the years. Without it, the wizard was down to his natural talent, *useless*, and a few basic hexes. However, this piece of oak had been his training wand as a child. It only held some very basic spells, but that was a cornucopia in comparison to

what he could do at the moment. A wizard without a wand was like a revolver without bullets. *You could bludgeon somebody to death with an empty gun, but let them reload, and watch out !*

"Goodbye, my love," Dillard said, giving his wife once last hug. Releasing her, the wizard tapped Catherine on the head, and the startled woman vanished.

"What did you ... where..." Logan haltingly began.

"Sent her to Australia. She'll be safe there," Dillard growled, pushing up his sleeves. "All right, let's see what we can do about the Drell. I have a few things here that..."

There was a flash, and Catherine reappeared, the second copper bracelet on her wrist going dark and inert. "Did you really think that I would leave you?" she demanded angrily, stomping a slipper on the ground.

"B-but that was the only Teleport I can do!" Dillard whispered in exasperation, waving the wand. "Now you're trapped here!"

"Exactly. We stand together," Catherine said, glancing at the special agents. "I owe these men my life, and will not abandon them." She smiled gently. "Or you, dear heart."

The wizard turned beet-red. "Look here, woman..."

Her black hair flexed wildly at that remark. "Don't you dare use that tone with me!" she said with a hiss.

Frantically motioning the warring couple to keep quiet, Logan noticed a foggy image moving in the air and realized that it was his hand. *The invisibility spell was wearing off!*

"Will you please keep quiet," Joshua urged softly, starting to materialize. "This is not the time or place to—"

"Alert!" a zombie shouted from the ramp, pointing a rotting finger at the wizard surrounded by misty figures. "Intruders! Summon the masters!"

In ragged stages, the entire crowd of zombies stopped their work to turn and stare at the people on the ledge.

Aiming their translucent weapons at the undead mob, Joshua and Logan thumbed back the hammers and took aim.

"Don't bother. I made these things, remember?" Dillard snorted, supremely confidently. Stepping out from behind the crates, the wizard waved his wand and sent a technicolor ray to wash over the amassed zombies.

Nothing happened.

"Ah, they seem to be no longer under my control," Dillard said with a pained expression. He tried to counter the resurrection potion again with similar results. *Oh, Hades. This was going to get ugly .*

Glassy-eyed and surrounded by flies, a thousand men and women started up the sloping ramp.

"Let's move!" Logan ordered, leading the way.

But as they started for the ramp, a sledgehammer flew by, nearly decapitating the major. He spun around and fired, blowing the face off the zombie with an outstretched arm. As it fell, another took his place and throw her sledgehammer at Dillard. The wizard dove flat, and the hammer hit the cauldron instead, making it ring like an election day welkin.

Dropping into a crouch, Joshua and Logan gunned down the front rank of the zombies. But the rest kept coming, and more sledgehammers flew from the crowd. Rock chips exploded as the tools slammed into the walls and ramp. Forced into retreat, the people took refuge behind the stack of crates on the ledge.

"The dead are smarter than they look," Logan muttered, shrugging off the greatcoat.

"Let's hope we are too," Joshua growled, doing the same and dropping his backpack. Yanking out a bag of kosher salt, he tested the weight in his palm. *Time to see if Rabbi Gelfand knew what the Gahanna he was talking about .*

Brazenly standing, Joshua threw the bag. When it was over the zombies, Logan cut lose with the Colt and the bag exploded, sending out a wide cloud of salt. As it sprinkled onto the zombies underneath, they went stiff and collapsed into smoking mounds of carrion. A hundred dropped, but the rest kept coming, walking around the piles of offal, swinging their sledgehammers and picks in a menacing manner.

"All right, new plan," Logan muttered, throwing his bag in a different direction.

Tracking it in the air, Joshua blew the bag apart with the smoothbore 12 gauge barrel of the LeMat. The salt rained down across the foot of the ramp, and the army of zombies stopped, glaring hatefully at the white coating.

Stuffing supplies into his shirt from the open boxes, Dillard had to admit he was impressed with the fast thinking. *The zombies have us cut off from the ramp, but now they can't get above us. Neither group can go anywhere. A classic stalemate. At least that bought us a few minutes for me to —*

A sledgehammer crashed through the topmost crate in the stack, impacting onto the rock wall behind the crouching people. Rare herbs and splinters sprinkled onto Catherine as the hammer clattered to the ground alongside.

Rising into view, Joshua and Logan fired their guns into the crowd. Every miniball took out a zombie, but another always filled the hole in the ranks.

Patting the dry components into a crude sphere, Dillard scowled. *Enough of this drek .* Standing, he threw the little ball at the zombies and gestured with his wand. "Die!" the wizard commanded. The ball of herbs spread out into a black fog that descended over the zombies with no result whatsoever.

"Smooth move, Ben Franklin," Logan admonished, shooting into the crowd. "But they're already dead!"

"Well, I got rattled!" the wizard retorted, dodging out of the way of a sledgehammer. "I'm not a combat cleric, ya know! Just an amateur astronomer."

"A what?"

"An astronomer! I make telescopes and study the stars."

Switching guns, that gave Joshua pause. *The observatory on the roof must belong to Dillard, not his uncle* . That tickled something at the back of his brain. *Why were the Drell afraid of an astronomer ?*

The fusillade of hammers paused, and Catherine stood to stuff two fingers into her mouth and sharply whistle. As the zombies looked her way, the woman grimaced, her long hair flexing into an ebony corona. With a crackle, half of the zombies turned into granite.

Without hesitation, the remaining army of females began using their sledgehammers to batter down the intervening statues.

"Can't you turn women?" Joshua demanded, squatting behind the crates to start reloading.

"Apparently not dead ones," Catherine said in rank irritation, adjusting the last copper bracelet on her wrist. *One spell left. Have to save it until there is no other choice* .

Dropping to his knees, Dillard started going through the boxes, pulling out ingredients and making several piles.

"No time for half-way measures," Logan declared, holstering the empty Colt and flicking a Lucifer alive. Pulling out the warm stick of blackpowder from his vest, the major lit the fuse and flipped it over the stack of crates.

A tremendous explosion filled the shaft. Statues and female zombies fell in doves. Then the concussion hit the crates, toppling them over the four people. As they clawed out from underneath, billowing smoke spread across the ledge, closely followed by a rain of body parts. The rotting gobbets wetly smacked onto the ledge and ramp, a couple of the larger chunks hitting the wall to slither down and leave behind a ghastly contrail of congealing gore.

"That should do it," Logan declared, shoving a box off his backpack. There came the wet spot and the sharp stink of kerosene. A lantern must be busted. Damn!

Sailing out of the thinning cloud, a sledgehammer hit the ramp to skitter along for several yards. More followed, randomly hitting the wall and ledge as the zombies threw their makeshift weapons blindly through the dissipating fumes.

"You got fifty, mayhap sixty," Joshua corrected, reloading the LeMat. The Starr was down to its last reload of silver bullets. He would have to save that for the werewolves. *Which should be arriving here any moment* .

"Is that all?" Grunting in annoyance, Logan pulled out a thick stick of guncotton, then shoved it away again. There wasn't enough distance to use that. The blast might collapse the entire shaft and only finish the job started by the zombies.

Spitting on his hands, Dillard began rolling the diced herbs and powdered roots into small cubes, sealing each with his thumbprint. Catherine rushed to help. *By the goddess, the man was a genius! And not just in bed, either* .

Several picks were thrown by the zombies, but apparently those were more ungainly than the sledgehammers and they went off in tangents, often striking other zombies instead of the people.

"Time to make a run for it," Joshua decided, pulling a Sharps Repeater from the backpack. "You two move when Logan and I start..." His voice trailed off at the sight of a female zombie laying down a large slab of broken rock over the field of salt. She stood on top of rock and another zombie passed her a second piece to lay in front of the first. They were making a bridge?

"They're making a bridge!" Logan cursed, yanking out his Sharps and working the hammer. Aiming carefully, the major took out the lead zombie, then the one behind her, and so on until he ran out of ammunition.

As additional zombies moved to complete the job, Joshua took over and soon there was a pile of bodies blocking the ramp. More sledgehammers came flying from the rear of the crowd, as the zombies in front began shifting the corpses out of the way.

Reloading the Sharps, Logan saw some of the zombies crane their necks to stare above the ledge. Spinning around, the major looked upward to see a naked man jump off the curve above and come hurtling downward. *A werewolf!*

His body still Changing, the muscular werewolf landed heavily on the pile of crates, then raked a handful of claws at Logan. Dropping the empty Sharps, Logan jerked his hand and fired the derringer directly into the belly of the man-beast. The double-report of silver and lead knocked the werewolf off the boxes and sent it tumbling along the ledge to smack against the iron cauldron. The wood blaze underneath ignited his hair and the dying man-beast jumped up, shrieking insanely. Slapping his head, the werewolf raced about and went straight off the ledge and into the crowd of zombies.

Recoiling in terror, the undead women started pounding the burning corpse with their sledgehammers. But the blaze quickly spread to their old clothing, and climbed to their ratty hair until hundreds were covered with licking flames. As the searing heat cooked the animation potion from their decaying flesh, the roasting zombies began moving slower and slower, until they stopped completely and simply stood there, sheathed in flames.

Leaving the cubes for a moment, Catherine grabbed a lantern from a backpack. Stepping away from the spilled kerosene, she lit the wick, preparing to cast it at the zombies.

"Save it!" Logan ordered brusquely, tamping down blackpowder and wadding. "We'll need those for the Drell."

Lowering the lantern, Catherine scowled in confusion. *Since when did the Drell dislike fire?* She had seen them use a torch to clean their quills.

Another werewolf landed on the other side of the crates and raced around the barrier towards Dillard. Stepping in the way, Joshua fired the LeMat into the chest of the monster. The werewolf recoiled, and Joshua fired the Starr directly into the open mouth, the silver miniball blowing out the back of the head in a horrid geyser of bones and brains and blood.

A sledgehammer flew by, missing Catherine by inches. Closing the cylinder of the Sharps with a hard click, Logan returned the attack with deadly accuracy.

Gathering up the assortment of damp cubes, Dillard blew on them trying to hurry the drying process. For the past month, the wizard had been secretly brewing various compounds to use in an escape attempt. However, none of them had ever been tested. Without a grimoire to follow, the components had been made entirely from memory. Dillard possessed thirty lumpish squares of pure chaos. *These might work,*

or they might blow off my head. Still, it was better to die a bull than an ox .

Just then, a decaying face appeared above the rim of the ledge. Joshua was startled to see the zombies stacking the granite statues of the men into piles, using the crude ladder to reach the ledge. *Dead, but not stupid .*

"Move!" Logan bellowed, blowing the zombie away.

Starting towards the cauldron, Dillard and Catherine hesitated for a precious second, then changed their minds and bolted for the ramp. Grabbing the backpacks, Joshua and Logan covered their escape, firing into the zombies every step along the way.

As the wizard and his wife started up the incline, Joshua threw a stick of blackpowder. The explosive landed along side the glowing crevice, and detonated. A dozen zombies were blasted into pieces, and the illumination from the crevice dimmed. The concussion blew the determined climbers off the ledge, and made the cauldron rock dangerously back and forth, almost tipping over.

Starting quickly up the ramp, Joshua and Logan attempted to reload their guns on the run. More powder and shot was spilled than went into the firing chambers, but the task was completed just as they reached the top. Dillard was throwing small wads of something at the zombies far below, and Catherine was standing impatiently in front of the shadowy mouth of the tunnel.

"Hurry, the coast is clear!" Catherine shouted, waving a hand.

A shotgun roared from the darkness. The woman cried out, dropping the lantern. It smashed on the rocky ground, igniting into a fireball. Staggering backwards, Catherine fell at the feet of her stunned husband, her nightgown and vest ripped to pieces, blood everywhere.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The world seemed to condense into a crystalline point of time and space for Dillard. There was no sound, no movement of any kind. The entire universe seemed to be frozen, waiting, holding its breath. Then reality came rushing back and Dillard felt his heart crack as his wife collapsed.

"Catherine!" the wizard screamed, reaching for her.

The shotgun boomed again, spinning the man around, blood spraying into the air.

The oak wand went flying into the shaft as Dillard reeled out of control, heading for the edge of the ground. Dropping the backpack, Joshua dove forward and tackled the wizard before he tumbled over.

Swinging around the Sharps, Logan aimed at the tunnel. Smoking a cigar, a nattily-dressed man strolled into view, calmly reloading a Remington smoothbore. Firing from the waist, the major put three fast rounds in the fellow. The lead miniballs hit and punched clean through, doing virtually no damage.

Another mucking werewolf!

Giving a nasal French chortle, Pierre tossed aside the smoothbore. He hated weapons. Killing should be done by fang and claw, so that a man could taste the terror. Commanding the Change, his elegant clothes began ripping at the seams as his body swelled with inhuman muscles. Six feet tall, eight, nine ... ?

Dropping the rifle, Logan drew his silver-edged sword.

"He's mine!" Dillard bellowed, pulling away from Joshua.

Almost berserk with rage, the wizard ignored the throbbing pain of his wounded arm, and fumbled in his pocket to withdraw one of the herbal lumps. Dabbing it into his own blood, the wizard croaked a spell, and flicked it at the approaching werewolf.

Filled with contempt, Pierre didn't even try to avoid the ridiculous little missile. But when it hit, he was slammed against the wall as if being struck by a steam locomotive. Every bone shattered as his muscles convulsed. Then his stomach heaved, and the terrified Pierre spread his jaws wide as his guts began to inexplicably rise and come out of his mouth: stomach, organs, muscles, bone fragments, fur ... Impossibly, the werewolf turned inside-out, the noise of the inversion beyond description.

Falling limply to the ground, the inverted monster flopped helplessly about, veins pulsating, heart pumping, lungs flapping loosely, the tendons attached to the pulverized jaw working as if the werewolf was trying to scream.

Pausing for only a split second in debate, Logan mercifully plunged his sword through the exposed brain. The quivering thing shuddered all over, then went blessedly still.

Trying to hold some of the wounds closed with a handkerchief, Joshua pulled off his necktie to make a tourniquet.

"Knife!" Dillard commanded, kneeling alongside.

Grimly, Joshua passed over the Toothpick. If the wizard wanted to end his wife's misery, that was his prerogative.

Slashing open the palm of his bad arm, Dillard pressed the cut to the worst of the buckshot wounds. "My blood is your blood," he whispered. "My life flows to you." Instantly, his gray hair began to turn silvery, then white, as the mutilated flesh of the woman began to close, the skin becoming smooth and unblemished.

"No..." Catherine gasped, pushing the hand away. But it was too late. She was healed, and her husband appeared to have aged fifty years. His back was stooped, and deep lines etched his weary face.

"My last breath is yours, dear," Dillard declared simply, his head bowing in exhaustion.

Starting to berate the man, Catherine saw his bloody arm and quickly took hold of the ruined limb. She concentrated hard. There could be the slightest mistake. Her hair stirred gently, there came a soft crackling noise, and the spurting arteries stopped as the limb turned to solid granite.

Nodding in thanks, Dillard awkwardly stuffed the rigid limb into a pocket. She could convert it back once they were safe and had brewed some more healing potions. *Once, if, when* . Until then, he would have to make do with one hand.

The dwindling pool of burning kerosene flickered out.

Glancing down, Joshua swore at the sight of a zombie successfully reaching the lower ledge. Gathering

one of the previously-thrown sledgehammers, the undead woman began shuffling quickly up the inclined ramp.

"Time to go," Logan reiterated, starting for the tunnel.

But he stopped as four huge werewolves appeared out of the darkness, along with two Drell. Their hats were off, and the third eyes glared with raw hatred. A wave of cold hit the wizard and his wife, but Joshua and Logan stepped between the Drell and their intended victims, summoning a wellspring of defiance. The Drell recoiled at the open resistance. The special agents advanced. The werewolves crouched for a spring.

...and ten more Drell strode out of the tunnel, the thirteenth armed with the sun gun.

Everybody ducked as that Drell triggered the weapon and a scintillating beam of corrosive energy swept the ledge, melting a path of destruction along the ground. As the monster raised the weapon for another try, Joshua and Logan held down the triggers of their revolvers and fanned the hammers. The barrage of hot lead peppered the Drell, smashing the sun gun. There was a dazzling purple flare ... and the Drell was gone, vaporized from the waist upward.

"Kill!" the largest Drell commanded, pointing with two different arms at the humans.

The slaving werewolves charged. With a grimace, Catherine turned the beasts into stone. Moving around the statues, the Drell removed their scarves to reveal the writhing nest of feeding tendrils.

Making a small noise, Dillard pulled out a handful of cubes, praying to the goddess they worked properly. Catherine clenched her hand into a fist, the copper bracelet shining brightly. Joshua switched handguns. Flicking a Lucifer alive, Logan pulled a lantern from the saddlebags.

"Master, we come," moaned a zombie, appearing at the top of the ramp.

Swinging her empty hand, Catherine cut the zombie in half with her ethereal sword. The two pieces fell away to reveal another undead. The zombie swung the sledgehammer and she pulled back, barely getting out of the way, the breeze caressing her face. Lashing out, Catherine cut the head off the tool, and the iron hammer fell away, leaving the zombie holding a wooden stick. She swung again, and cleaved the zombie in twain.

With sword in hand, Logan went to the ramp and joined her in the fight. The shuffling zombies fell before the two blades. But two more rose from behind, and there was two more behind them, and still even more ... ?

Suddenly, a low rumble sounded from the floor of the shaft.

Casting a fast glance over the edge, Logan saw an inhuman eye with a square pupil filling the crevice. *What in the world was that ?* As the orb saw him, the major felt weak as a kitten and the man hurriedly moved out of sight. Now he knew what they had been trying to unearth, a giant Drell. *Oh swell, we're barely able to fight off the fleas, and here comes the mucking dog ... ?*

More werewolves appeared in the mouth of the tunnel. Dillard threw a cube and one was encased in ice, but the rest kept coming. Joshua gunned them down with the last of the silver bullets. With no time to reload, Joshua kicked the saddlebag across the ground and blasted it with the 12-gauge mini-shotgun on the LeMat. Flames erupted.

Walking around the charred patch on the stone where the earlier kerosene lantern had been burning, the Drell stopped outside the conflagration and removed their coats to release all four arms. Sans clothing, the monsters were even more frightening than before.

In the middle of lighting a stick of blackpowder, Joshua frowned at the sight. *Why would the Drell go around where fire had once been? There was nothing on the ground but some warped brass and the shattered reservoir ...* The fight in the boarding house replayed in his mind, then the slaughter in the foyer. *Ohmigod, the answer had been in front of me since the very beginning*, Joshua realized. *The Drell hadn't been avoiding the fire, but the glass! They didn't like plain, ordinary, glass!* The man felt his adrenaline levels peak. *Hadn't Millie mentioned that there was church window, stained glass, inside a juju bag?*

Stuffing the stick of blackpowder inside his vest, Joshua yanked out the bottle of Prof. Miracle and whipped it at the nearest Drell as hard as he could. One of them dodged, but the other Drell was too slow and got the bottle in the face. It shattered, and the Drell howled, fountains of yellow blood from the widening cuts.

The Drell stopped walking.

"Acid!" Joshua called, holding out a hand.

The large Drell, carrying the medical bag, turned and walked into the tunnel.

Ducking under a sledgehammer, Logan rummaged in his clothes, and retrieved the bottle to toss it to his partner. Joshua made the catch and flung it at a Drell. The bottle hit the monster on the chest. As the burbling acid spread, the shirt began dissolving, but that did not affect the torrents of yellow blood gushing from the deep cuts in the scaly hide.

Teetering blindly, the first Drell went off the ledge and dropped out of sight. There came a sickening crunch from below that was beautiful music the special agents had ever heard.

"Glass? So that's why..." Dillard cut himself off. Crushing a herbal cube in his fist, the wizard opened his aged fingers to reveal a shining convex disk of the purest glass. The wizard spun around, and released it like a discus to catch a Drell in the throat. Yellow blood spurted everywhere.

Tingling with excitement, Joshua cheered at the death. This was why the Drell had been scared of the old wizard—the amateur astronomer could conjure glass out of thin air! The wizard had said that he made his own lens for the telescope. *I just didn't think that he meant it literally.*

Spreading out, the Drell hunched over. Knowing what was coming, everybody ducked. The quills blasted out in a deadly halo, ricocheting off the stone wall, and annihilating two zombies.

Mumbling words of power, Dillard shoved something across the ground, and a glass dagger stopped in front of the man. *Yes!* Snatching up the weapon, the grim special agent scrambled to his feet and launched himself at the nearest Drell.

Backing away, the Drell tried to fight off Joshua, clawing at his belly. The vest and shirt were torn loose, exposing an iron breastplate purchased from the Harper's Ferry antique shop. The sharp claws rebounded, barely scratching the surface, and Joshua laughed insanely as the glass blade rose and fell mercilessly. *Die you stinking thing from Hell die die die!*

Confused by the unexpected resistance, the other Drell hesitated to assist their brethren. The food was armed with Holy Stone, and sheathed in iron? This had never happened before!

Just then, another spinning disc hit a Drell in the face, the flying shrapnel wounding two others.

Lurching away from Joshua, the badly-slashed Drell tumbled to the ground. Wearing a demonic expression, Joshua held the head of the creature, the barbed quills on top clenched tightly in his gloved fist. Dangling from the roughly severed neck, veins and ligaments oozed golden fluids.

"Next?" Joshua roared, brandishing the glass shard. The edge dripped blood.

The Drell broke ranks and raced into the tunnel. Joshua took off in hot pursuit, shouting obscenities.

Laughing in triumph, Dillard started to follow after the special agent when he caught a whiff of brimstone in the air. That stopped him cold. *Oh no, it couldn't be ... ?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Rushing to the edge of the ramp, Dillard cast a glance into the shaft. He recoiled at the sight of the huge eye and made a protective gesture. But the square pupil locked onto him anyway, and a mental command thundered in his mind to rush down and offer himself as a sacrifice. For a split second, Dillard wavered.

"Try this instead!" the wizard screamed, squeezing a cube. As the material metamorphosed, he threw down the lump of glass. It missed the eye, but hit the rocks nearby, showering the inhuman orb with sparkling debris.

With a burbling noise, the eye withdrew, leaving the crevice empty.

Snorting with pleasure at the sight, the wizard started to smile, but that quickly changed to a scowl. *Eh? What was this ?*

On the bottom ledge of the spiraling ramp, a Drell lay sprawled in the campfire. The greatcoat and clothing was burned off completely, and three arms were extended through the crackling flames. Next to the smoldering corpse, the empty cauldron rolled back and forth on the rim. In the rocky ground was an irregularly-shaped hole.

"Jesus, Buddha and Allah," Dillard whispered, making a complex gesture on his chest. *The potion. The dying monster had knocked over my cauldron and spilled the entire batch .* Whether it was done deliberately to try and free the huge Drell trapped underground, or purely by accident, made no difference. They were doomed, everybody in the entire Potomac River valley, straight to the Atlantic Ocean. Doomed. *How could this have happened? the wizard raged. To have our victory against the Drell stolen at the very last second ... ?*

"We have to end this fast!" Logan snarled, his sword flashing mirror bright in the air. "Before they kill Joshua!" His partner was a damn yankee, but as true blue as they came.

"Or before the Drell escape," Catherine added, the ethereal blade slicing the zombies in ruthless

efficiency. The woman gave the briefest glance possible towards the mouth of the tunnel. The headless body of the Drell on the rocks made her heart sing. *We know how to kill them now. It's a fair fight*. Which naturally meant that the monsters would start using dirty tricks.

"They're not going to escape," Logan promised, through clenched teeth, hacking and slashing like a madman. Lifeless bodies were strewn across the ramp, but there was no blood on his blade. The dead did not bleed. However, Logan and Catherine did. Both of them were covered with countless tiny cuts made from the flying stone chips thrown off by those accursed sledgehammers when they hit the wall.

"I've got a lovely hat, if you have the shoes," Catherine said cryptically.

Logan got the message. *Clever lady*. Expertly blocking a clumsy attack with a pick by a Chinese zombie in a ballgown, the major cut off her arm, then ducked low.

Swinging with both hands, Catherine aimed high and sliced through three zombies at the same time. As the bodies fell, the top of the ramp was temporarily clear.

His sword already in the scabbard, Logan lit a stick of black powder and tossed it down the incline. The advancing line of undead paused at the appearance of the bouncing cylinder, then attacked the stick of high-explosive with their sledgehammers. The charge detonated and a dozen zombies were blown apart, clearing the ramp all the way to the next curve.

Excellent. Lighting a second stick, Logan dropped it straight down the shaft. The charge exploded in midair, flattening a hundred zombies. But as the smoke cleared, the survivors struggled to their feet and began shuffling up the long ramp once more.

"Determined lot, aren't they?" the major said in grudging admiration.

"No, just under a geas of obedience," Catherine panted, trying to catch her breath. "They have no free will."

"Yarma versus karma."

"Something like that," Catherine demurred, bemused by the allusion.

Grunting in acknowledgement, Logan turned and headed for the tunnel. Pulling out his revolver, he started reloading. The zombies would need at least five minutes to reach the top. That was more than enough time to hunt down the Drell and finish this forever. But then the major saw Dillard standing motionless at the very edge of the precipice. He was surprised the wizard hadn't gone to help Joshua. *Oh mucking Hades, what was wrong now?*

"Trouble?" Logan demanded, heading that way.

Unable to speak, Dillard gestured at the shaft.

Scowling impatiently, Logan took a look. "All right, the cauldron spilled. Is that important?"

"That held two hundred gallons of pure StoneFlow," Dillard said emotionlessly. "Not the diluted drek I gave to the zombies, mind you. That was cut a hundred fold, a thousand! Any weaker and the potion wouldn't have worked at all. But this..." He ran out of words.

"So it makes a big hole in the ground," Logan admonished, closing the Colt, and tucking the gun into his holster. "Who cares?"

"A really deep hole," the wizard corrected. *Really, really, really deep* .

"Hells Bells, sir, are you trying to say that the big Drell might escape?"

"Nobody is going to escape," Dillard said, rubbing his stone arm.

Just then, Catherine arrived. Scowling in puzzlement at her husband, she looked down the shaft and went pale. "Mother of mercy," she whispered, reaching for her husband. "Ernest, fix it! Stop it!" As her hand opened, the ethereal sword vanished, and the copper bracelet went inert.

"Stop a volcano with these?" the wizard said scornfully, hefting an herbal cube.

Volcano? Logan could see the couple were taking this extremely seriously, but the major was finding very hard to believe that any magical potion could sink deep enough into the planet and penetrate the crust. That was absurd!

A reddish glow began to permeate the irregular hole in the bottom ledge, and there came an fast upswelling of hot air tainted with the pungent reek of brimstone, raw elemental sulfur. The lava couldn't be far behind. *By thunder, we actually are standing in the mouth of a volcano* .

"Move!" Logan bellowed in his best battlefield voice, grabbing the couple and pulling them along. "We're not dead yet!"

Impelled into motion, Dillard and Catherine came awake and broke into a run to join the major in a frantic dash for the tunnel. Stopping at the entrance, Logan let the couple proceed on ahead. In grim deliberation, the major lit a stick of guncotton and tossed it down the shaft. Pivoting on a heel, he raced into the darkness, hoping and praying that Henry DuPont was every bit as good as the North said he was.

Logan caught up with the man and woman by the third turn. Dillard was wheezing badly, his face an ashen color. Dropping his backpack, the major scooped up the wizard and started running for his life. The old man felt light in his arms, as if made of sticks and cloth. A few minutes later, there was a distant *whomp* .

The universe seemed to shake, the quake nearly knocking Logan and Catherine off their feet, and there came a strident rumble that built in fury, then faded away, lasting an inordinate length of time.

The longer the better, Logan noted, his legs pumping. With any luck, the shaft had collapsed and sealed the shaft solid with rubble. That would stop the zombies forever. *Heck, it might even stop the lava* , the major lied to himself. But deep down inside, the Confederate officer knew the truth. The blockage would buy them time, but it had also changed the lava flow into an eruption.

Brushing along the rough hewn wall to guide them through the pitch blackness, Logan kept expecting to encounter the body of Joshua, or a Drell ambush. Taking the last curve, Logan slowed at the sight of the hole in the foundation. Torchlight could be seen flickering through the jagged opening, but there was no sign of the yankee. Only patches of darkness on either side.

Lowering the wizard to the ground, the major pulled his sword. But Dillard pressed a smooth object into

his hands. *A glass dagger? Excellent*. Sheathing the steel, Logan took the glass and squeezed the wizard's shoulder in silent thanks.

Advancing to the brink of the shadows, the major hefted his new weapon, the glass heavy and smooth in his gloved hand.

"Marco," Logan whispered anxiously.

"Polo," Joshua replied, rising in the shadows. There was a soft rustling noise, and the man appeared from the gloom, keeping a hand flat on the opposite wall. The beam of flickering light from the basement shone between them like a ghostly barrier.

"Where in Hades have you been?" Joshua demanded, wiping the stinging yellow blood off his forehead with a dirty sleeve. The iron breastplate showed through the tatters of his shirt. There were deep gouges in the metal.

Catherine started to speak, and the major bumped her with a hip. "Where are the Drell?" Logan countered, sidestepping the question. If the cave-in worked, wonderful. If not, there was nothing his partner could do to help.

"In there, somewhere," Joshua grimaced, jerking his head towards the basement.

"Good place for an ambush," Logan drawled, patting his clothes for any sticks of blackpowder he might have missed. But those were gone, only the guncotton remained.

"Same there," Joshua said, reading the other man's dour expression. Solemnly, he pulled out a fat waxy stick. "We'll need a diversion."

Taking off his green brocade jacket, Logan handed it to Catherine. She nodded in understanding.

Turning their backs to the hole, the special agents lit the sticks and moved to the foundation, pressing their backs against the cool, smooth stone. The air smelled of merlot, the torches along the walls crackled softly, spitting occasionally. The shrinking fuses on the guncotton sticks sparkled like party fireworks, casting Joshua and Logan in strobing illumination. The two men shared a glance, but said nothing. There was nothing that could be said.

With a glass dagger in his good hand, Dillard swallowed hard and tried not to think of what the Drell would do if they captured him alive. *Or my wife*. Resolutely, the old man dropped into a knifefighter's crouch. *Then they mucking can't have her!*

Tenderly stroking his sunken cheek, Catherine said a private goodbye to her love, and got ready. *This was going to be bad.*

Trying not to hold their breath, the special agents waited, and waited, until the fuses were down to tiny nubbins.

"Now!" Joshua shouted.

Catherine threw the coat. As it crossed the light, a black cloud of quills exploded from the basement, ripping the garment into tatters.

Boldly stepping into view, Joshua and Logan threw the sticks in opposite directions, trying to arch them as far away from each other as possible in the spacious wine cellar. They jerked behind the foundation again just as another swarm of quills blasted out, along with several crossbow quarrels, and the sizzling beam of a second sun gun.

There came the sound of running footsteps approaching the breach, bare feet and heavy boots, then a double explosion rocked the house, the expanding fireballs annihilating anything near them, then shattering thousands of wine bottles, spraying out a deadly hellstorm of broken glass. Drell and werewolves screamed, the sound barely audible in the rumbling chemical thunder.

In the tunnel, Catherine sharply whistled and the three men looked at her, instantly turning into stone. Crouching behind them, the woman covered her face and prayed to the goddess to let her live long enough to turn them back into flesh afterwards. *If there was an afterwards.*

A heartbeat later, a stentorian river of glass, flame, stone, wood, and tattered bodies vomited out of the breach, blowing down the tunnel and into the blackness. The noise was deafening, but in her mind Catherine could still hear the foundation crack, walls collapse, floors give way, and the entire mansion groaned as if delivered a mortal blow.

Long seconds passed, minutes, hours, there was no way for Catherine to tell, but the staggering force of the titanic detonations finally eased and a thick silence filled the pitch darkness. Softly, something began to drip. *Blood or wine?*

Fumbling about to find her husband, Catherine nervously checked to make sure the man was undamaged before turning him back alive. Still braced for the explosion, Dillard recoiled in panic, then rushed forward to hug his wife. Whispering endearments, they savored the existence of the other, then stopped as a footstep sounded in the smoky ruin of the basement.

Using the last of the herbal squares, Dillard filled his hand with a glowing ball of radiant light. In the clear bright light, Catherine quickly affirmed that the government agents weren't missing anything vital, then also converted them back into living men. It took Joshua and Logan a moment to collect themselves, then Dillard pointed wordlessly into the murky basement.

Staggering into view, four Drell weaved about drunkenly, colliding with each other, their clothing only charred remnants, deep gashes trickling yellow life onto the cold stones. One of them held a Remington shotgun twisted like an insane pretzel, but another sported the sun gun. Blindly, he fired the beam about, vaporizing random chunks of the foundation and floor. The sagging ceiling groaned, and a section dropped, a dozen bookcases crashing onto the basement floor.

Charging out of the breach, Joshua and Logan buried their daggers into the back of the first Drell, then slit his throat from behind. As the monster fell, they moved onward, attacking the next, buried their blades into its throat. With a ghastly human-like gurgle, the Drell sagged into a pool of its own stinking blood.

Nervously, Catherine and Dillard stepped into the basement. The wizard held his light high for the government agents, and she stood guard, thrusting her glass daggers at anything that moved.

Two more Drell staggered from the swirling fumes, trying to fire double-action handguns by merely pulling the triggers. Knocking the guns aside, Joshua and Logan sliced open their bellies, then buried the daggers into their necks as the monsters bent over in pain. There was no quarter given, no honor, no finesse, or mercy. This was a slaughter, a ruthless extermination, and the reeling Drell fell before the determined men in confused terror.

Minutes later, there was only a single Drell remaining, crouched in a corner, his naked body studded with broken bits of bottles, the feeding tendrils hanging lifeless from the obscene mouth—armed with the sun gun.

"Sir ... rendia..." the last Drell gasped, dropping the weapon to weakly raise the four arms. "I ... surrender you."

That caught the special agents off-guard, and they glared hatefully at the wounded monster. Neither man had ever expected one of the damn things to ask for clemency.

Conflicting emotions battled within Logan. It was his duty to kill the thing, but honor demanded he accept the plea. *If I refuse, can I ever consider myself a gentlemen again ?*

"Remember the little girl in the carriage house?" Joshua demanded, feeling madness pound in his temples.

The Drell slowly nodded.

"Did she beg for mercy?" Joshua demanded furiously

Confused, the Drell paused. "Yes..." it began.

With a cry, Joshua dove upon the creature, driving his glass weapon deep into the chest of the monster.

With an undulating cry, the Drell convulsed, gushing blood in every direction. Yanking the blade free, Joshua found tears on his cheeks as he stabbed the dead creature again and again, over and over, until his arm was too tired to strike again.

"Easy now," Logan said, helping the Yankee off the mutilated corpse. "Now, I don't mean to be critical, but you really have got to learn to control that temper."

"Be the death of me yet," Joshua wheezed in agreement. Strangely, the Bureau 13 agent had a gut-wrenching feeling that the pronouncement was incredibly going to come true. Joshua would be the cause of his own death someday. But not today, he added, tucking the gory blade into his belt.

As if handling a new breed of snake, Logan picked up the sun gun. The housing of the device was smooth, with no openings. There was an integrated trigger and a few dots on the top, but nothing more.

With his jacket gone, the major tucked the weapon inside his shirt for safe keeping. *If I can get it to work, I'll be needing a double shoulderholster .*

"Well, they're all dead!" Dillard shouted, almost skipping in joy. The light in his palm increased with his happy state. "By the goddess, you've done it! And even better..."

The ceiling groaned once more, and a bathtub crashed alongside Catherine, missing her by inches. *That was from the third floor !*

Moving fast, the four people headed for the stairs. As expected, those were gone, smashed to kindling. None of the wine racks seemed strong enough for the job, so they dragged over one of the bookcases, throwing out the irreplaceable volumes along the way. Tilting it against the cracked wall, they climbed it like a ladder one at a time, and crawled into the workshop. Since Logan had the sun gun, Joshua brought up the rear. He made it to the top and lurched through the broken doorway just as a dull red glow began to illuminate the littered tunnel, steadily increasing in brightness.

Closely followed by a low inhuman growl.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Logan offered a hand and pulled Joshua onto to the tiled floor of the workshop. The special agent saw the place was wrecked. The tiled floor was sagging in spots, and completely missing in others. Exhibits were toppled over, glass shattered, and the metal staircase leading to the observatory on the roof had broken loose from the floor to swing across the room like a surrealistic pendulum. *Guncotton, the eighth wonder of the world.*

Smashing a vase, Catherine grabbed at the jewelry hidden inside, and Dillard recovered a vial stashed within a book. He popped off the cork with a thumb and drank the sparkling contents, then cast the vial aside. *Blah. Bay leaves.*

"Now how do we close this?" Logan demanded gruffly, struggling to pull down the trick door.

Getting to his feet, Joshua tried to help when he felt a hot wind from below. Suddenly, the man remembered reading about the deadly blasts which proceeded volcanic eruptions. Superheated air and sulfuric ash. Hotter than Hades and ten times as deadly. They started as a gentle breeze.

Joshua brutally shoved Logan aside as the roiling deathcloud rose from the basement and ... stopped a yard away. The man stared in wonder. It was like watching a hurricane through a window. Slowly, a graveyard chill began to radiate from the doorway and the ghostly figure of Henry Tresham dimly appeared. Arms held wide, the spirit was blocking the raging maelstrom.

"Well done, Henry!" Joshua cried, but then saw thick lava began to seep into the wine cellar. The glowing flow was orange-hot and thick as suet pudding. Immediately, the foundation blocks started to slag and melt.

"Thank you, Marshall," Logan said, pulling Joshua away.

If the Deputy heard, there was no reply. But Tresham seemed to stand a little taller.

As if his shoes were encased in cement, Joshua slowly began to run across the workshop, leaving the constable behind for the last time. *Henry Tresham, the first Bureau 13 agent .*

As the men reached the alcove, Dillard slapped a knot on the wood paneling and the oil painting hissed as it rose into the ceiling, revealing a naked man smoking a cigar.

"Who in Hades are you?" Steven Kissel growled, removing the stogie.

Joshua shot the werewolf in the face as a distraction, and Logan skewered it through the heart with his sword

The body fell, and the group rushed into the foyer. Catherine waved a bejeweled hand at the oil painting and it descended to lock in place.

"All right, that'll buy us some time," Dillard wheezed. But the noise was less pronounced, and there was

a touch of color to his pale cheeks.

"An oil painting?" Joshua demanded curtly.

"A painting that guards the workshop of a wizard," Catherine said, striving for the front door. "There's not a cannon in existence that could puncture that canvas."

"How about lava?" Logan asked pointedly.

She gave a hopeful grin.

Guess that answers my question, Logan realized, checking the side corridors. But there was only destruction in sight—not a soul could be seen.

Reaching the porch, Joshua kicked the crossbow aside, and Dillard closed the front doors for no sane reason. *This has been my home for twenty years, I will not leave it open and abandoned!*

Rushing after the others, the wizard saw the dead werewolves decorating the front lawn, and the live one standing in the middle of the gateway. Even as the people raced along the gravel drive, the werewolf slashed out with her claws, severing the support ropes. The portcullis slammed to the ground, and it firmly locked into place.

Crouching low, Lady Colbert waited for the killers to come into her reach. The Drell were gone, and that was excellent, but all of her kittens had been slain. All! Slain by these men. Ordinary men! The queen werewolf knew that she could escape the coming apocalypse, her nose tweaked at the sulfur fumes minutes ago, but that was unacceptable. Intolerable! These fools would have to die, needed to die, under her claws. Even if it meant her own life.

"We've no time for Balador on the rainbow bridge," Dillard muttered, and threw a fistful of cubes. The werewolf dodged the barrage, and the gravel behind her became dotted with pools of fire, patches of ice, and a small palm tree laden with coconuts.

The recipe for coconut pudding flashed through his mind, as Joshua fired the LeMat with the expected results of lead hitting a werewolf. Confidently, Logan pulled the sun gun, but the trigger refused to budge. Increasing his efforts, it shifted a smudge, then shoved back into place. *Blasted weapon was designed for the Drell, not humans!*

"CLOSE!" Catherine bellowed, gesturing with both hands. The two gates promptly slammed shut on the slavering she-beast, cutting her in half.

"Open! Raise!" Obediently, the gates swung aside and the portcullis glided out of the way.

"My house, my rules," Catherine stated, jumping over the writhing werewolf sections.

Going around the tree, Logan went to stab the beast, but missed. *Oh well, the lava would finish her off*, the major noted pragmatically. *Us too, in all likelihood.*

Leaving the estate, the cold hit them like a physical blow, slowing their progress for a heartbeat. Then the people redoubled their speed. With the master and mistress gone, the portcullis and gates both closed and locked tight.

"The river is this way!" Catherine shouted, pointing with a musical jangle.

"No! Head for the rill!" Dillard yelled, angling off the road and heading for a break in the hills surrounding the estate. "If we can just reach the escarpment, we'll be fine!"

Unbuckling his gunbelt, Logan let slid away. Speed was the key, not firepower.

Just then, a low shudder shook the landscape. Dust jets rose from the ground, trees toppled over and there came a horrendous crash of glass, wood and brick being destroyed from the other side of the stone block wall.

"We'll never make it," Catherine panted, losing a slipper.

"Gotta try," Joshua huffed. The breastplate that had saved his life before was now dangerously retarding his speed. He yanked out the Toothpick, and slashed at the leather straps holding the antique in place. It came free and dropped behind in a clattering ring.

Stuffing two fingers in his mouth, Logan sharply whistled, then did it again, even louder. A moment later, Abraxas and Estelle came galloping around the corner with their reins flying.

"Over here!" Logan called, waving frantically.

As the nimble horses caught up with their gasping riders, the special agents grabbed the pommels and hauled themselves into the saddles. Reaching down, Joshua helped Catherine behind him, and Logan did the same for Dillard.

Kicking the horses with their heels, the special agents drove the animals towards the break in the rill. The shuddering ground slowly began to climb. Behind them, the ground started cracking, the damage radiating outward like lightning bolts. Steam hissed from the vents. Then everything stopped, and a strange quiet ruled the land.

"Here it comes!" Joshua shouted, hunching over slightly.

...and the Hoffman Mansion erupted as a geyser of lava rose into view. The roof and gables went flying as the molten deluge blew out the windows, carrying away burning pieces of furniture and the ever-resilient third-floor bath tub.

"Our home," Catherine said, with a catch in her voice.

Suddenly, huge dogs blinked into existence outside the wall. Running for their lives, the colossal animals disappeared, and reappeared, fleeing across the cracking soil. But they were caught in the fiery umbrella of the lambent fountain and perished.

"Blink Dogs!" Catherine snarled, hugging Joshua tighter. "If they attack, don't shoot at them—they're never there!"

Trying to puzzle out the conflicting advice, Joshua kicked Estelle again, urging the stallion onto greater speed. Blink Dog?*Great. More good news.*

The smell of brimstone was making it difficult to breath, and sizzling droplets began falling onto the weeds, starting a thousand small blazes. Abraxas and Estelle needed no encouragement to try and

outpace the encroaching doom.

"There!" Dillard shouted, pointing with a healthy young finger. "Over here, behind the copse!"

Through the pine trees, Joshua and Logan saw a switchback trail leading up the side of the rill, and headed that way. As they rapidly climbed, Catherine looked back to see that the lava had completely destroyed the mansion and grounds. Even the statues of the Zodiac were gone, *my birthday present!*, the marble returned to the primordial chaos of their birth.

Only the outer wall remained, the magically-reinforced granite stubbornly resisting the lake of fire. However, the molten rock was starting to slop over the top in spots, and more lava was rising from the great cracks in the weedy ground. The hot blood of the world. Once unleashed, there was no recalling Mother Nature.

Nickering in terror, Abraxas reared as a rock slipped under a hoof, and Dillard nearly fell, but pulled himself back with one strong hand. Logan cast a glance at the young man clinging to his waist, but didn't ask any foolish questions. If that potion had restored the wizard fully, then they would already be somewhere safe on the other side the world.

A wave of searing heat rolled over the people, stealing the sweat from their skin and the air became foul with sulfur. Bubbling eruptions dotting the lava flow, and the flaming geyser steadily increased in size and fury.

Reaching a granite escarpment, Joshua and Logan wheeled the horses about for a fast reconnaissance. The lava had overflowed the wall and was spreading across the ground destroying anything it reached: rocks, trees ... ?

Scrambling with both claws, a werewolf climbed to the top of an oak tree. The trapped monster looked pitifully at the humans on the high ridge as the tree began to sink into the molten rock.

"Help me!" McTeague screamed. "I let you pass in the hallway! I never told! Now help me!"

Joshua and Logan looked at Dillard, who shrugged. There was nothing he could do. There was nothing anybody could do.

The tree sank lower.

"Please!"

Brushing back her hair, Catherine tried to clearly see the monster. As a statue, his demise would be at least be painless. But the smoke and fumes from the lava were too thick.

"Curse you!" McTeague shrieked, his fur beginning to smolder. The lava was a yard away. "With my dying breath I curse you all to Hell!" The monster howled in agony as his fur burst into flames. Then the oak toppled over and the werewolf vanished in a puff of smoke.

"But there really was nothing we could do," Joshua whispered, clenching and releasing his hands.

Logan gripped the man's shoulder and squeezed hard. "The creature did redeem himself in the mansion," the major said softly. "Perhaps that will count in his favor..." He glanced skyward, then downward. "Wherever he goes."

"Good thing we don't believe in curses, eh?" Dillard said with a strained voice.

The lava continued to rise, reaching halfway up the rill, but then its own tremendous weight started flattening out the flow, and the molten rock began to spread towards the narrow valley in the nearby hills.

"All right, we're safe," Logan said testily, climbing off the saddle. "But that lava is going to roll straight to the river and take out Laurel..." He shook his head. Wrong town. "And take out Harper's Ferry. Thousands will die unless we do something!"

"Such as what?" Catherine demanded, her black hair flexing wildly in the hellish wind. "Pray for rain?"

Chewing a lip, Joshua pointed. "Down there! See?" he cried, rushing to the side of the escarpment. "If we can make an avalanche, get those boulders rolling, they might just block the entrance to this valley!"

"And hold back a volcano?"

"Got a better plan?"

"Ah ... the town is quite safe," Dillard said, trying to interrupt the frightened people.

Unstoppable, the flood of lava moved along the hills of the valley flowing towards the rift. Oak trees puffed into ash at the approach, and the pine trees exploded like bombs, when the sap inside the trunk instantly converted into steam from the overpowering heat.

"By jingo, if only we had some more guncotton," Joshua snarled, pounding a fist in a palm.

Reaching into the gunboot of the saddle, Logan pulled out two waxy sticks. "For emergency use only," he explained glibly.

"Then this is the time," Joshua muttered, rummaging through the remnants of his clothing. "Damnation, I'm out. You?"

"Same," Logan cursed, turning out his pockets. Gold, bullets, chalk, beef jerky, everything was gone. *Here we stand, confronted by a volcano, and we're have no Lucifers to make fire. Who said the Lord God didn't have a sense of humor ?*

Dangling a fuse in front of his gun, Joshua fired. Flame leapt from the muzzle, but the fuse stayed unlit.

"Look, the town is fine," Dillard repeated, starting to shout. "Are you people deaf? Safe! We're safe! The town is safe. Every mucking body is safe!"

"What in the name of the goddess are you babbling about, my dear?" Catherine demanded, then she scowled. Something was happening to the lava.

Bubbling and roaring, the lake of molten stone had slowed in the advance for the river. Impossibly, incredibly, the wall of molten rock paused, then began to recede.

"Take cover!" Logan shouted. "It's building for another eruption!"

"Oh no, it's not," Catherine said, slowly turning to gaze at her calm husband. "Ernest, when did you

figure it out?"

"Only a moment ago. We have been rather busy, you know."

"Magic?" Joshua asked, grabbing the wizard.

"Yes and no," Dillard replied hemmed. "You see..."

"Look at that!" Logan cried, pointing.

Down below, the lava was shrinking fast, darkening in sections as it cooled. Small islands of stone began dotting the lake of fire. Incredibly, the geyser started to dwindle, then it came back full force for a moment, only to sink away completely. The writhing flames disappeared from the lambent surface of the lava, and the dark areas extended, touching, joining ... In short order, a black crust had formed across the irregular surface, creating a lumpy plain of steaming rock. A single, homogenous whole that filled the valley half way up the sloping hills.

"How is this ... what could do..." Joshua smacked himself in the forehead with a gloved palm. "The Cage!"

"Of course," Dillard said, an odd note of pride in his voice. He frowned. "Or at least, I think so." Events were buzzing about in his cranium.

"Destroyed from within," Logan drawled, tucking the stick of guncotton into his belt with the sun gun.

"Let's see that big Drell dig out of that!" Catherine snorted in triumph, patting out a few burning spots on her soiled dress. Logically, since she could still remember the lava, the Cage must be in some sort of a bubble cave, the onrushing flow congealing until the cursed artifact was enclosed in a seamless container of solid rock that never actually touched the shiny golden bars. *Or else all of it would eventually vanish, and be forgotten .*

But that raised an ugly possibility to the woman. *Had the Cage been brought here to slay the Drell, and the person responsible was destroyed instead ?*

Risking a peek through his monocle, Joshua thankfully saw that the valley registered normal, without the slightest flicker of magic in sight. Just to make sure, Joshua checked Ernest and Catherine. Yep, both glowed green. Good enough.

"How thick would you say the lava bed is?" Dillard asked, brushing back his wavy crop of coal black hair.

"Fifty, mayhap sixty feet," Logan guessed, hitching up his belt. "We shouldn't have to worry about things for..." Yanking loose his sword, the major lunged at the furry shape creeping behind a bush.

Stabbed in the heart, the werewolf started Changing even as it staggered backwards and fell off the escarpment, to bounce off a couple of boulders and finally land with a meaty thump on the cooling lava.

"Think that was the last?" Joshua asked, lowering his LeMat.

"I doubt it highly," Logan replied, sheathing the blade. "Would blowing up Washington destroy every Yankee?"

Unfortunately, Joshua agreed. There could be dozens, even thousands of Drell loose in the world. "Someday they will come back here to start digging again," he said, the sentence changing into a question halfway through.

"Indeed," Logan muttered. "We'll have to do something about that. Establish patrols, and set a guard up here to kept watch for anything suspicious that occurs."

"By dawn I can Teleport us to Finland," Dillard gushed at his wife. "Great skiing, wonderful food, excellent view of the stars."

Scowling, Catherine crossed her arms.

"Or New Zealand? Beautiful country, friendly people, and that Southern Cross...!" The wizard grinned hopefully.

"Of course, I'll go wherever you wish, dear," Catherine said humbly. "Even if it means cowardly running away from the people who saved our lives."

Rolling his eyes, Dillard pleaded for salvation from above. But none was coming this day, and the wizard sighed all the way down to his shoes. *So much for my retirement .*

"All right, gentlemen," Dillard said. "Exactly how would I go about joining your ... what is the government agency called again?"

Joshua and Logan exchanged glances, then flipped a coin.

"Welcome to Bureau 13," Joshua smiled, extending a hand.

EPILOGUE

A week later, it was raining outside of Ardmore, Maryland.

The brougham carriage full of people rolled along the muddy road to stop in front of the old farmhouse.

Sitting in a rocker on the porch, Millie stood and walked over, resting her shotgun on a shoulder.

"Welcome to Bangor, Maine!" she called out merrily.

Stepping down from the carriage, Joshua arched an eyebrow at the woman. "Beg pardon?"

"It's a joke," Millie said, jerking a thumb at the foreclosure notice tacked to the front door. "Apparently, the former owners were Michael and Judith Banger, and they hailed from Maine..."

"Most amusing, Miss Scott," Logan said politely, joining his partner in the swirling puddles of mud. *Where had the rain been when we could have used it last week ?*

Walking closer, the major viewed the farmhouse with disdain. Back in South Carolina, he had a fishing shack that was bigger and in better shape. "Is this our new headquarters?"

"Oh no, just the farm house. The barn is this way." Lowering the barrel of the shotgun to keep the powder dry, Millie walked off the porch and through the chilly rain.

Yanking off his greatcoat, Joshua gallantly offered it to the woman.

"I'm not made of sugar," Millie said, displaying previous unknown dimples. "Now put it back on, honey, you're ruining that pretty jacket."

Slightly befuddled that the gesture was so cavalierly rebuffed, Joshua slid the greatcoat over his damp jacket. *Wait a minute ... did she just call me honey ?*

Glancing sideways to see if Joshua had gotten her not-so-subtle flirtation, Millie hid a pleased smile. Often time, men were like mules, sometimes you had to clunk them over the head with a rock just to get their attention. And the more honorable their intentions, the more clueless they were. Sad, but true.

Observing the play between the two people, Logan withheld a laugh. Joshua was going to chase that pretty young girl until she caught him. This should afford weeks of prime entertainment.

Sloshing across the marshy lawn, Millie threw open the barn door, and strolled inside. "Like it?" she asked, waving around.

Stepping out of the downpour, Joshua and Logan surveyed the warm interior and approved. The place was enormous, with more than enough space for horses, carriages, ordinance and supplies. The support beams were brick, instead of wood, and the walls were double-thick oak.

"I figure the winters are mighty bad in Maine," Millie guessed, seeing where they were looking. "I figure the upstairs can be the barracks for you men. There's a little room in the back where I'll live and brew juju bags."

"How many are you making?" Logan asked pointedly.

"Fifty."

The major beamed a smile. "Most excellent!"

"And what about the house?" Joshua asked, examining the empty stables. There were no little girls hidden in the straw. This was a new beginning, a fresh start. "Who stays there?"

In a flash, Dillard and Catherine appeared.

"We do, of course" Catherine stated. "After all we're the only married couple."

"What a dump," Dillard said, stifling a yawn.

Gasping in shock, Millie swung up the shotgun and thumbed back both hammers.

"Friends! They're friends!" Logan cried, grabbing the barrel and pointing it upward. "That's the wizard we told you about in the telegram."

"So I see," Millie said hesitantly, easing her grip on the trigger. The Remington smoothbore went back to

her shoulder. "Sorry about that, Mr. Dillard, sir. My apologies. I'm not used to folks ... popping out of thin air."

"Then we'll try to give some advance warning next time," Catherine said, pushing back the cowl of her hooded raincoat. Her hair joyously moved and flexed in the delicious freedom.

Millie stared at that, her eyes going wider and wider. "Excuse me, ma'am, but are you a Mudsan?" she asked uneasily.

"How do you know of my people?" Catherine asked, quite surprised.

"I hear things," Millie demurred, giving a shrug.

Did she? That was interesting. Twitching uncomfortably, Dillard felt his skin crawl from the residue of a deudonic field in the atmosphere. There had been a dimensional window in here. *By the goddess, I hate those things! A man can't work with somebody peeking over his shoulder all the damn time.* Waving his new wooden staff, the wizard shouted a word of power and the entire barn glowed as the ethereal energy seeped into the structure. Done! Nobody would ever spy in here again.

Joshua asked the wizard a silent question.

"There was a weird odor," Dillard said, almost telling the truth.

"I've been cooking juju bags in the back," Millie said hesitantly. *Along with several other items.* "Maybe that was what you smelled?"

Hesitantly, Dillard took a sniff, but could not detect any bay leaves. *Was that arugula? Interesting.* "Your brew is like no magic I have ever encountered before," he said, tucking the wand up a sleeve.

"Then perhaps Miss Scott would be kind enough to teach you her potions," Catherine suggested, "and you could show her a few basic spells."

"Pool our knowledge?" Dillard asked askance. "Why, the other wizards would plotz!" He grinned. "So I'm in. Haven't had a colleague to chat business with in a hundred..."

Catherine cleared her throat.

"...days," Dillard finished lamely, fooling nobody. "Is that acceptable to you, Miss Scott?"

"Yes, sir, please," she said in barely suppressed excitement.

"Excellent! Now show me these juju bags. Do you use an iron cauldron?"

"Oh, lordy no, that wouldn't do. Copper is the thing."

"Copper? But doesn't that neutralize the *ergdusqd* matrix..." Their voices faded as the two mages retreated into the back and closed the door.

Strolling about the barn, Catherine inspected the ladder to the hayloft. *Soon to be our War Room.* "All right, now that the mages are gone, let's talk turkey," she said, addressing the men. "This place will do fine for the moment, but it is way too vulnerable to both physical and supernatural attack. The walls aren't

thick enough, or the floor. We need stone protection at least five-feet thick in every direction.” She looked upward. “Including the roof.”

"A stone roof?" Logan asked, casting a worried glance at the support beams.

"And we have to get the work done secretly. If everybody knows our defenses..." She didn't need to finish the sentence.

"Well, I do know some fellows who can keep their mouths shut," Joshua said slowly, worrying the Roman coin fob on the replacement watch in his vest. "Mayhap a few of the Masons happen to be actual stone masons."

"Oh, I think that is a guarantee," Logan said with a twinkle in his eyes. "No problem there."

Him too? The Freemasons were everywhere. "There is, however, the matter of funding," Joshua added hesitantly. "The modifications you're suggesting would cost a fortune." He still had a thousand in cash from the boarding house. That would have sufficed for himself and Millie. But with five people now living here, it seemed like pocket change.

"Oh, don't worry about money," Catherine smiled. Rising, she walked to an anvil in the corner and gave it a playful smack. Her bejeweled bracelet sparkled, and the black iron turned golden.

"Is that..." Logan had trouble with the word.

"Pure gold? Certainly. Just hack off a piece when you need cash. Let me know when we're low and I'll make more."

"Which raises a rather delicate point," Logan said, turning towards his partner. "Officially, our mission has been accomplished. We stopped the killings." He paused. "We were not assigned to hunt down monsters forever." The major paused again to drive the point home. "Legally, we should disband and go our separate ways."

"Technically, you are correct," Joshua agreed, scratching the back of a hand. The stick plaster had just been removed this morning. He couldn't wait for Dillard to cook up some more Healing potion. "However, morally, ethically, realistically, and from a purely military viewpoint..."

The major grinned. *Excellent. The yankee understood. Sometimes, the rules had to be bent, even broken for the greater good.* "So, where shall we put the armory?" Logan asked, removing his hat and hanging it on a wall peg.

* * * *

The next day, President Lincoln and President Davis both received coded messages that the cult of demon worshippers, who had been using poison-tipped blow gun darts to kill people, was totally eradicated. But several of the leaders had managed to escape. The special agents swore to find the insane murderers, and to bring them to justice, no matter how long it took. Additional updates to follow when feasible.

Extremely busy dealing with the steadily mounting complexities of the civil war, the two presidents wearily accepted the report at face value and moved on to more pressing matters.

Demon worshippers, alive and well, in these enlightened days? That was just incredible. They

certainly hoped the problem wasn't beyond the abilities of a butler from Massachusetts, or a South Carolina gandydancer.

ADDENDUM

For those who might like to learn more about the American Civil War, and are sadly unable to visit the Library of Congress, (lovely place, very clean bathrooms), here are a couple of Internet sites that I can heartily recommend.

www.CivilWar.com

www.MrLincolnsWhiteHouse.com

May good fortune grant that no nation will ever again have to suffer through such a monumental trail by fire.

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