

# WHILE HORSE AND HERO FELL

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I WAS A COMPUTER nerd, and she was the world's most beautiful witch. She was in bad trouble, and I had to save her.

Which did not really explain why I was crawling on my belly along the second floor of the headquarters of the Magical Legion. Nor did it explain the mackarov in my hands, the Glock in my underarm holster, and the two tempered blades on ankle holders.

I was not a man of action. All right, I was—through a series of mistakes—a member of the Magical Legion. But my job was to sort, file, and enter into the computer four hundred years' worth of records on legionaries, on operations, and on supernatural outbreaks combatted without ever disturbing the normal world.

I did not go out into battle, I did not throw hexes, I would not know how to weave a spell, and I had absolutely no power with which to power a jinx.

What I did have was the gun butt growing warm in my hands and an intimate knowledge of the layout of headquarters. It wasn't as easy as it might seem, since the thaumaturgically expanded space connected the sixteenth floor of a high-rise in Denver, the attic of a townhouse in Vienna, a warehouse in Madrid, the backroom of a restaurant in France, and who knew how many other forgotten, lost, or invisible spaces.

I was crawling on my belly because I knew—from diagrams and records I'd entered—that the magical sensors started at knee level and went all the way to the ceiling. They would give an alarm at my unauthorized entry. And then they would activate spells to make me into a pile of steaming cinders. But the floor couldn't be activated because that would make the joined spaces fall apart.

I wriggled down the hallway connecting to the Madrid space and felt the tiny magical jolt—like a low-wattage shock—as I made it over the partition and each half of my body was, for a moment, in different continents. And then I was over it and crawling along a smooth cement floor.

The Madrid warehouse had been divided with the sort of partition used to make multiple cubes out of vast offices. The only light came from above, from skylights set into what looked like a corrugated tin ceiling. In the middle was an empty area, which was set up exactly the same as the hallway back in Denver. Sensors at ankle level and above. I crept on my belly and counted the doors set into the openings of the cube.

Three, four, five. The sixth belonged to Lyon Zaragoza, the greatest invoker in the Legion. The man I needed. The man who—whether he knew it or not, was going to help me.

I took a deep breath. There would be no sensors on the door or the wall opposite. Just in case a magician woke up, sleep befogged and forgot to turn on his own personal protection before opening the door. If he were so crazy as to take a step down the hallway like that, then he would die. But there was

no reason to thin the personnel more than the operations already did.

The narrow space in front of the door being safe, I pulled all of myself into it, till I was kneeling in front of the door. Most mages were paranoid enough that they had their own personal alarms in this area—ethereal eyes roving above and watching for intruders, ears that amplified every sound, or simply a floor hex that rang of intrusion.

So it had to be done quickly. I'd dressed carefully, for quick movements, in loose black sweat pants and a black T-shirt. The elastic fabric molded to me as I jumped and, in a smooth movement, kicked the door open. I didn't hear any alarms, but then I wouldn't. The alarm would be tuned for Lyon Zaragoza's ears only.

I don't know if that's what woke him or the sound I made as I slammed the door open. But he sat up in bed, with a springlike motion, as I entered his room. And I had my gun out and pointed at him.

He'd made his room cozy by moving it to another time and another continent. Once through the door, I was in an all-stone cell, from which the rounded window of a medieval building opened onto endless fields and vineyards in gently rolling hills. I glanced at it and had a hard time not staring at the pastoral scene in the moonlight. There was no way in hell that was anywhere in the world in the twenty-first century. Damn it, they weren't supposed to do that. I'd read—and archived—the regulations about time travel. Strictly forbidden. Almost as forbidden as making your fellow legionaries practice their magic at gunpoint.

A trickle of sweat formed somewhere at my hairline and drifted down my forehead. I held my gun in front of me, the arms just slack enough to accommodate the kick if I had to fire it. My father, who was a wiser man than I'd ever been, had told me when I was little more than a boy never to point a gun at a man unless I intended to use it.

I didn't want to have to use it. Dead, Lyon wouldn't actually do me any good. But if I had to—if I absolutely must—I'd splash the brains in that handsome Spanish gentleman blinking confusedly at me, against the stylish stone walls of his dormitory. And if that left me stranded in the Middle Ages, so be it. I couldn't live in the twenty-first century and let Gwen be killed.

"Who are you?" Lyon asked, more in puzzled tiredness than in shock. "What are you doing in my room?" His dark eyes beneath the straight black eyebrows were staring above and to the side of me. Trying to see my magical aura with his second sight. More the fool he, as I had none.

"I'm George Martin," I said. "Legionary third class."

He frowned harder, bristling his luxuriant black mustache and glared down at my gun. "Why can't I see your magic, boy? And why are you pointing that toy at me?"

"You can't see my magic because I don't have any," I said. "I'm the archiver." It all had to do with my foolishly answering an ad for a computer wizard, and their being so desperate for someone who actually would archive that they hadn't checked my pattern. They assumed I was powerful enough to hide it. But I wasn't about to explain it to Lyon, if he didn't know it.

He made a sound of disgust. "The paper pusher?" he asked. "Bah. And you dare wake me?"

He had some reason for his outrage, as he was a captain of the Legion. Which meant that, since the commander had died last week in the Hell gate closing, he was one of the three leaders of the Legion. And I was as low a rank as one could be and still be called a legionary.

But I was long past paying attention to rank or propriety. You have to understand, Gwen Arcana, the world's most beautiful witch, wasn't my girlfriend. She wasn't even a friend. Friendly acquaintance, perhaps, as she smiled at me as she walked past my vast, paper-choked office. And she would never expect me to rescue her. But she was... wondrous, with her thick red hair that fell to the middle of her back, her sparkling green eyes, her quick intelligence, her musical laughter. At twenty years old, she didn't deserve to be left to the lack of mercy of a drunken centaur band. To be honest, no one did. But if it weren't Gwen, I might not have summoned the courage to act.

"I need you," I told Lyon's irate expression. "I need information from you, and your help."

He waved his hand. Like that—without warning, my gun vanished from my hand. Damn. Of course I anticipated that and before he could move again, I'd reached into my shoulder holster and brought out the Glock. Small and deadly like a viper, it fit into my hand, filled with a sense of viciousness. I'd gotten it from the archives where it rested as evidence of a magical crime. It was spelled to stay with the person who said certain words over it.

Lyon must have seen the spell, because he didn't even try. Instead he said, very slowly, as though speaking to a small child, "What will you get if you shoot? Do you think I don't have life protection and healing spells?"

"Silver bullets," I said. "And I know enough anatomy to know where your heart is."

"But you know then you'll be lost in eleventh-century Saxony."

"Indeed. And isn't that forbidden?"

"I'm one of the three principals. Who'll punish me?"

And this was exactly what was wrong since the commander had bought his peace everlasting. "I will," I said, between clenched teeth. "I will, right now, unless you agree to do what you must to help me find Gwen Arcana and get her back."

He got out of bed, revealing that he was wearing an ankle-length nightshirt which billowed around hairy ankles and large feet. "But, my dear man, Gwen Arcana was taken by centaurs. We didn't count on them when there was that supernatural outbreak in Italy. We counted on a dragon or an out of control saint. Instead, it was the damn centaurs and their ancient magic. Only the commander knew that type of magic. He's dead. We haven't recruited a replacement classical magician. Until we do—"

"Stop," I yelled. He'd been edging toward me as he spoke in a soothing tone. "Stop, or I will shoot off your right hand."

"How do you know I'm right-handed?"

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. "How not? I'm the archiver." I made my voice slow and thoughtful. "I know all about you, Captain Zaragoza." I saw his minimal flinch, as he realized that I knew the reason he was in the Legion. He'd been tracked down and brought to ground by the magical authorities after a streak of animating recently deceased people who were then forced to make wills in his favor. I wondered how he'd feel about having other people know about it. "And you're going to help me bring Commander Lars Oktober back, so we can figure out how to get Gwen."

He looked at me, his dark eyes so wide open they appeared to be bulging. "You want to reanimate the commander?"

"No," I said. "I'd do quite well with calling his shade."

He grumbled something under his breath, then said, “And if we manage that, what do you think you can do? A ghost cannot wage magical war. And the girl was captured by centaurs, not ghosts.”

“And you’d just leave her behind...” I said. I’d heard the discussion between Lyon Zaragoza, Maria Alsas, and Pierre Grenoir, the three highest ranking captains in the Legion, and equally sharing command since the commander had died. I’d hate to say it, but though it was rumored the three of them couldn’t agree that the sun rose in the East, there had been no complaints about leaving Gwen behind after the lost skirmish against the centaurs.

Lyon shrugged, and in that moment I almost let fly with the Glock. Except being left behind in medieval Europe wouldn’t help her. “You do what you have to do. Should we have risked the life of other legionaries to save her when she was as good as lost?”

“And yet,” I said. “When I enter the records of past raids and past battles, time after time the Legion doesn’t leave one of its own behind, when it can save them. We don’t. There was the journey of a detachment across the parched deserts of Africa where the natural magic of the land didn’t allow the opening of magical portals. One by one they fell unconscious, victims to thirst, and had been dragged or carried by other legionaries scarcely less stricken than themselves, till they’d come upon a secret oasis and all been saved. And we’re not afraid of dying. In 1643, in the battle against the forces of hell, the Dutch detachment died, one by one and man by man, until the last one of them directed his power outward to kill all of the enemy and died from it.”

Lyon looked at me with the look a sane man might give a fool or a child. “Those are very pretty stories,” he said. “But the truth is, no one joins the Legion because he wants to. We are all rogues; we all have a past.”

He looked at me with the sort of look that meant surely I, also, had one. I wasn’t buying. I’d joined the Legion because I’d been determined to get a job during the computer job bust a few years ago. Somehow, in a way no one could explain, this had caused me to see the invisible sixteenth floor in the building. It hadn’t occurred anyone I wasn’t a magician until I’d had the job for two weeks.

So I stared at Lyon and said, simply, “We’re not going to leave Gwen with the centaurs.”

He sat back on his bed and looked at me. “It’s been two hours,” he said. “Since she was taken. She might be dead.”

“Or she might not,” I said. “We don’t leave her.”

He blinked. “Why won’t a spell take on you, Martin?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve tried to cast a spell on you three times now. Oblivion spell, aversion spell, and even a disappearance spell. And yet there you are, holding your little gun and telling me we won’t leave Gwen Arcana behind. How? You have no magic.”

I shrugged. “We won’t leave Gwen behind,” I said.

He opened his hands. “So be it,” he said.

Ten minutes later, he was walking ahead of me—far enough ahead that I judged he couldn’t just turn around and take my gun. He’d deactivated the spells in the hallway and walked me down it, till the floor changed to dark red tile, the far-off roof of the warehouse to a rounded brick tunnel. “Tuscany,” Lyon told me. “Maria lives here.”

I must have looked blank because he added, “Sangre Dios. Are you stupid? Even if we wake the commander and he tells us the hexes needed to immobilize the centaurs long enough to get Gwen we won’t be able to translate it on our own. Maria will understand the language, at least, even if ancient magic is not one of her specialties.”

“And will she cooperate?”

He gave me an exasperated look. “If she can’t spell you,” he said. “And if I can’t, I don’t see why she should be able to.”

But Maria couldn’t. Or at least I’ll assume so from the fact that she fell in, next to Lyon. Her incongruous pink robe was only slightly less strange than her pink, fluffy slippers. Not exactly what one expected the most powerful witch in the world to wear at night. She shuffled along, her small, peaked face showing above the pink robe with an expression like an angry bantam hen. She muttered things—mostly, I think, curses at Lyon, who gave back as good as he got. The source of her anger seemed to lie in the fact that he couldn’t spell me. “Well, why can’t you?” she said, at one point and, to his shrug, “All Spanish men are impotent.”

“You can’t either,” he said and I realized part of the reason he’d insisted on her presence was that he hoped she would be able to spell me.

“I’m a woman,” she said darkly—as if that explained everything.

“We must get the commander to speak,” I said. “And tell us how to get Gwen. Until you do, I’ll be holding both of you at gunpoint.”

This started another round of bickering, but in the middle of it several rational facts emerged: we didn’t have the commander’s body, so spelling near his body or ashes, or even thinking of reanimating him was pointless. However, we did have his portrait in the grand gallery. And Lyon said the portrait would help his concentration. “Candles,” he said. “We need candles. There will be some in the larder.”

A few minutes later, after what seemed like much too long a trudge through bits of headquarters located in several other countries, we found ourselves in the gallery, the candles lit in a complex pattern on the floor.

For a minute or so, I was accidentally in the middle of the central pattern of candles, but when Lyon started muttering incantations, I stepped out. He looked a little surprised, making me wonder whether he’d been trying something magical again. I really had no idea why it wasn’t working, if he was.

And then I started worrying that the same raid in which Gwen had been lost had, somehow, damaged Lyon’s powers and that he wouldn’t be able to summon Lars Oktober.

I shouldn’t have worried. After a few words and half a dozen incantations, the commander appeared. He was, or rather he’d been, a tall man, spare and blond, with the sort of features that speak of fjords and ships departing through ice-choked waters.

He wore his hair very short and he always dressed in black. I knew, because I had access to his file, that he’d come to the Legion after his youthful enthusiasms had made him the right-hand man to the dark Lord that controlled most of the magical world of Europe for seventy years—and, incidentally, by the principle of sympathetic reflection, made the Soviet Union possible. However, as I’d known him,

he'd seemed like a totally different person, one always ready to fight for justice and proper treatment for his legionaries—one who'd managed to keep even the smoldering rivalry between Lyon and Maria in check.

Even now, as his form spiraled out of thin air, seeming to assemble pale hair, long face and square shoulders from the shadows and the scant light of candles, Maria and Lyon stopped their bickering.

"You dared summon me," Commander Oktober spoke. It wasn't so much a voice, as a normal thing, made of sounds. It was a whisper of dark, and intimation of shadows, the sound light would make rubbing on dark, if either of those could be heard. And yet it was his voice, down to the Eastern German accent. His pale blue eyes—not really there but looking as substantial as a reflection in a clear mirror—stared at Maria and Lyon.

I cleared my throat. "I made him summon you," I said.

He turned to me. Did I imagine that a smile creased his lips? We'd always gotten along. He'd told me I could stay in the Legion even if I wasn't a true wizard. He'd told me I fitted in better than I thought. I hadn't understood him, but I appreciated his acceptance.

"Ah, George," he said. "And why would you interrupt my well-deserved rest?"

"Gwen Arcana was left behind in a raid on centaurs," I said.

"It was just a magical eruption," Lyon said. "We didn't know what it was."

"In Italy, it's more likely to be an out-of-control saint these days," Maria put in.

"And we didn't have the knowledge to deal with centaurs," Lyon said.

"We were retreating," Maria said. "Well, not us personally, of course, but the small raiding party that we'd sent."

"And they grabbed Gwen and galloped away with her."

"And it wasn't worth it to try to rescue her," Maria said. "The whole party could have died. And if we'd sent people after her, they could have died."

Lars looked toward me, "And yet you woke me?" he asked gravely.

"A legionary doesn't leave a legionary behind," I said. "We're all rogues or orphans." In my case an orphan since my mother had died when I was a child and my father just before I joined the Legion. "Or both. We're all the other one has. We have to stand up for each other, because no one else will."

"Well, Lyon," Commander Oktober asked.

"The young man is clearly a romantic," Lyon said.

"An armed romantic," Commander Oktober said and again the not quite a smile crossed his ghostly lips. "And I'd say you'd best do as he wishes, or he will not let any of us rest. What you need," he said, "is the Apollo invocation, Maria. Done properly, to break through their magical defenses. I can't give you anything to bring them down physically, though. They are almost pure magical creatures, and amazingly strong ones, to have survived these last two millennia and still be able to manifest in the flesh. So they will fight. I can give you the spells to pull down the magic around their hideout. The rest will have to be fought out by you with your hands and brains and wits. And you will need more people." He

looked at me. “George, I would advise you to keep the gun on Lyon and threaten to kill him, and get an assault party ready.” Waving aside Lyon’s protest, he added “I don’t know how much they care about him, but it will give them an excuse to obey you. I will guess the men and women in the ranks won’t be too happy about leaving one of them behind. And Maria, take it two hours back in time. Get her just as they pull her into their hideout. Or it will be too late.”

“We can’t use time travel,” she said virtuously.

“Oh, really?” Commander Oktober asked and looked first at her and then at him. I knew his room was in violation of that statute, but I wouldn’t even guess at what she had done. “Right,” he said. And then he started talking in what was, in effect, a foreign language, giving Maria instructions on how to deal with centaur magic.

The raiding party was much larger than we’d expected. Almost a hundred people had claimed a great concern for the life of Captain Zaragoza—whom I was still holding at gun point—and offered to go rescue Gwen.

Most of them opened their own portals from the bland and utilitarian inside of the part of headquarters that was located in Denver and which looked like a beige-carpet-and-blonde-wood office of the twenty-first century.

I crossed through the one Maria opened, with Lyon just ahead of me.

On the other side of the portal it was night in some rural part of Italy. It was summer—the sky above velvety blue shot through with stars, the air warm and carrying with it a smell of flowers and ripening fruits.

The place where we’d come through was at the base of a small hillock. At the top of the hillock stood what looked like Roman ruins. Bits of columns and remnants of wall covered in ivy seemed incongruously animated. Light shone from the middle of them, and song in an ancient language burst forth.

We were so far from civilization that those songs, and the distant barking of a dog, were the only sounds we heard. But I could see far in the horizon, the lighted ribbon of a highway stretching. From this distance it looked like a flickering strand of light crossing the darkness. Humans. Who might very well fall prey to these centaurs, since the centaurs were so strong as to manifest even now, millennia after anyone had last believed in them.

And they had Gwen, I thought, and shuddered.

I shoved the gun in the middle of Lyon’s back. I’d taken the precaution of binding his hands, particularly the right one. “Forward,” I said.

In fact, I could sense, more than I saw, the whole group of people—who had crossed over in a big circle ringing the hillock—start to move forward, like a noose closing on the ruins.

Behind us, Maria was chanting in Latin so old that no historian or priest would recognize it. She had an instrument made from animal horns and played it with a plaintive effect, while calling on Apollo. The smell of strange herbs emanated from her general vicinity.

Stumbling on rocks, but moving ever forward, we slowly, slowly approached the hill.

We were halfway up the hill when the singing stopped at the top.

“They know we’re here,” Lyon said, and tried to throw himself back against me and push us both over down the hill.

“Good,” I said, and pressed the Glock against the middle of his back. “We know they’re there, too. Your point is? Gwen is still up there, and we’re going to get her.”

He made a sound of terror. “You don’t know what they’re like.”

“Then it’s just as well they don’t know what I’m like,” I said, and pushed him forward. Truth was I was scared. But if I was scared, what would Gwen be feeling? After all, the centaurs’ reputation with women was still well known in my time.

We had moved forward another ten steps when out of the skies, in a noise like sheets unfolding, a fury of pegasi descended. For those of you out there so little acquainted with arcane art that a pegasus reminds you of cute and cuddly plush toys favored by little girls, let me assure you these pegasi were quite different.

For one, they smelled. It was a smell of fresh kills, a smell of spilled blood and ravaged flesh. And then they dove out of the sky, in a flurry, aiming at our men, with teeth bared and hooves kicking. They looked like large horses with black, glossy wings which, in the dark night looked like barely glimpsed phantoms.

I had a second to think. Maria was far back behind us. And Lyon was in front of me. I didn’t know if there was anything we could do to physically banish the pegasi or if the pegasi were material or not. But I knew that no one was actually in command of this mission and that was a bad thing. Commander Oktober would be disappointed in me if I let any other legionaries be hurt or captured.

Before the thought had fully run through my mind, I yelled, “Everyone duck.”

There was the sound of several bodies hitting the turfed ground just in time for the pegasi to fly over them and miss them. And then a scream, from my right.

I turned. It was Helen, a young legionary from Ireland. A pegasus had grabbed her by the back of her jacket and was lifting her up in the air, feet kicking, blonde hair gleaming in the moonlight.

I didn’t think. I aimed and fired. The pegasus shrieked. Helen fell—fortunately only about five feet—and landed with the grace of someone who’d been through the Legion’s boot camp. And then the pegasi gave a sort of cry.

I thought that meant they would attack us again, but instead, they fell on their stricken brother. I didn’t look. The sounds were as of a several hungry mouths tearing at prey. “Move,” I yelled out. “Move forward, all of you.”

They did. Legionaries were well trained. Legionaries obeyed.

We went twenty steps and then the rain of arrows started. The one thing I can say for the centaurs was that they were lousy shots, though perhaps that had something to do with their being drunk. The smell, even that far, was unbelievable. It stank of overheated horse slathered in liquor—that’s the best way I can explain it. It was clear they’d found some wine reserve to raid.

They ran at us, firing their bows, then retreated, then ran again. From the crowd, I started hearing weapons fire. Every legionary was armed with a gun, of course, a gun loaded with silver bullets. Silver, for whatever reason, was immune to magic and could kill even the most magical of creatures.

Centaurs started falling, left and right. Some ran back into the building, though.

And then a centaur emerged. He was holding Gwen in front of him. She looked like she was in a trance. “You will let us go,” he shouted. To be honest, he looked like an Italian peasant, even if he were an Italian peasant built on two and a half times the normal scale. “And you will not follow us. Or the girl will die.”

He wore only a loose red vest on his bare trunk, so it was easy enough to see his huge, muscular arm holding Gwen around the waist, while his right hand held a knife to her throat.

Our entire group stopped its advance. “He’ll kill her,” Lyon said. “He’ll kill her.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. My dad had taught me several things. One of them was accurate shooting. The other was that a gun could be far quicker than a knife. Of course, I’d never risked so much.

Gwen looked lovely, even then. Her eyes were wide open, unseeing, but it seemed to me that she was looking straight at me, hoping...I didn’t know what she was hoping.

I let out a quick prayer to whichever local saint might be listening. To believe the others, in Italy there was always a saint listening. And then I raised the Glock quickly and fired.

The centaur looked surprised. The knife clattered to the ground. And Gwen snapped awake and ran. Toward us. Toward me.

The rest of the rescuers took aim and fired at the centaurs.

Gwen hit me mid body, her lips touched my skin. “Thank you,” she said.

I didn’t even notice Lyon’s sound of disgust.

Of course, when Gwen thanked me, it was just for her immediate rescue, not for having assembled the rescue party and forcing them to go back for her. That she found out about two weeks later, through office gossip. Which is when she asked me out for the first time.

That was six months ago and since then we’ve received a note from higher up—the Council of Magic, a group of wise magicians that governs us as well as the thaumaturgic police and all the other branches of supernatural authority—dictating that I was to become commander in place of Commander Oktober. It seems that my inability to perform magic was outweighed by my organizational aptitude and by the fact that I was so stubborn that hexes and spells slid off me. And perhaps, the note said, stubbornness of that order was almost magical.

So, next week I’ll be putting an advertisement out. Looking for a computer wizard with good administrative skills.