

Book III
The Devil and the Angel

Prologue In The Little Town of Pointville

History has forgotten who discovered that the mountain range isolating the tiny desert called Ylelon from the rest of its continent had incredibly rich mineral and metal deposits, or who realized that their proximity to the small port town foreign traders had established there made them ideal for mining. What it does remember is that in the span of a breath Ylelon went from being a tiny afterthought of a settlement to a bustling center of commerce. Travelers of every ilk came from all over the world to find work (or benefit from the efforts of those who did) and mines sprang up like weeds all across the mountains. Mining contractors, merchants and harbormasters became very rich, while miners, sailors and other laborers stayed very, very poor. Landowners and claim jumpers waged a perpetual battle for resources in the mountains while moneylenders and con artists fought a similar conflict in the city. Scoundrels of every sort preyed upon the weak and unwary and Ylelon became known as a haven for pirates. As the ages passed and the need for industrial materials advanced along with the world community's technological levels, Ylelon remained at the top of the market for high-grade ores and high quality jewelry. Thus did the independent city-state rise to a place of prominence in the world economy.

In modern times the towns in the mountains were quieter and still poor. Modern mining equipment greatly increased work efficiency and minimized hazards to workers and at the same time ensured that the necessary wage-earning work force was kept to a minimum. Thus, the mining towns of Ylelon, so vital to the economy of the country, remained ramshackle communities of middle and lower-class families that struggled to make ends meet.

The town of Pointville, located halfway up the eastern face of the mountains, was a textbook example of this. It had existed in one form or another for more than eleven hundred years and was little more than a loose collection of old houses and buildings that covered a disproportionate amount of land area for a community of just over two thousand. Very few families lived in houses that were less than eighty years old and the average income was just above the poverty level. Roads were narrow and worn and wound across the mountain's face with buildings typically situated much higher or lower on the mountainside than the road itself.

Just two nights after the Crown of Thorns launched her attack on George Manor a solitary figure walked down one such road, lit only by the moons above and the occasional streetlight that was still working. He was dressed entirely in black: black t-shirt, black jean shorts, black sandals. His unhealthily pale skin was a sharp contrast to the clothes he wore. He stood six feet, three inches tall with a broad build in the shoulders, but he walked with so much of a slouch as to appear smaller than he really was. He was morbidly obese, depressingly ugly and wore thick, dark-rimmed glasses that didn't quite fit his head right. While he walked he hung his head low and looked at the ground.

As he rounded a bend in the road a battered two-story house came into view. Several young men sat around the porch while bawdy music played from a stereo sitting on the railing. One of them happened to see the tall fellow on the road and called out, "Hey, 'Tiny!'"

"Aw, crap," the tall man said and stopped. The six men quickly abandoned the porch and sauntered up the house's driveway to the road.

"Where you goin,' Tiny?" asked a lanky fellow almost as tall as the one in black.

"My name isn't 'Tiny,' and that's not your concern," the tall fellow said.

"Ooh, that's so smart," drawled a diminutive chap with short blonde hair in a mocking, slurred voice. "'Oh, look at me! I'm so smart I can use big words! Duh!'"

"That's right, Trevor, piss me off. See what it gets you," said the man in black.

"Oooh, was that a threat?" chortled a lad with severe acne. "Quick, call the sheriff. Tell him Tiny's threatening to kill us!"

"Yeah, you're trespassing. I think you should go another way before we kick your ass," the tall skinny one added.

"I'm not trespassing. I'm in the street. This is your last warning, Lee."

Lee leaned in close to the tall man and shoved him. "What are you gonna do, you fat retard?"

“Me?” the tall man said over a cacophony of jeers and insults from the others. “Very little.”

Someone clapped a hand onto Lee’s right shoulder. He thought it was one of his buddies until it clenched in an iron grip. He shrieked in pain, accompanied by the sickening sound of the bones in his shoulder snapping.

“What the--” Trevor began as he turned to face his friend. The hand jerked Lee to his left and his forehead smacked Trevor over his eyes. Then it reversed its motion and tossed Lee into Acne.

“Lee! What...?” one of the others began, but the tall man backhanded him across the face. The owner of the mysterious hand was a blur, dashing about striking the stunned young men as they tried in vain to fight back. Trevor took a punch to the face that broke his nose and three teeth. Lee was brutally stomped on while he lay on the ground whimpering and the stomp broke his other shoulder. Acne had a shin broken by a kick and his neck sprained by an elbow jab. In the span of a few seconds, half a dozen men lay broken and bleeding on the street. When it was over the tall man walked slowly to stand over Lee, stepped on his chest with one foot and kicked him hard in the temple.

“I warned you, white trash,” he said, and began to walk down the road again as though nothing had happened. The shadowy man went with him walking at his side, not saying a word.

Chapter I Individuals Unknown

Early the next morning Cynthia, Will and George stood on the firing range in the Workshop. Cynthia had just come from jogging laps around the Wall. Will would normally have been working out with her but he was still taking time off to allow his ribs to heal properly. Now the three of them held loaded pistols, wore goggles and had ear protection draped around their necks.

“Ok, once again,” Will was saying. “What’s the first rule of gun safety?”

“Never point a gun at another person,” Cynthia said perkily.

“No, that’s rule number two. What’s number one?”

“Um...there’s no such thing as an unloaded gun.”

“Right. Guns are always loaded, and always demand respect. Always treat a gun like the deadly instrument it is. Every gun you see is loaded, and when you unload a gun and set it down, it loads itself while you’re not looking.”

“Jeez,” Cynthia laughed, “you’re starting to sound like George.”

“Hey!” Will and George protested together, then did a double take at each other.

“If Cynthia is done stirring up dissent within our ranks, I think we should get on with target practice,” George said. Cynthia giggled.

“All right, check your chamber, safety, and targets,” Will instructed. Cynthia looked at the paper targets hanging in the firing range with amusement. The images on the three target sheets were of a vampire, a furry wolf-man she assumed was a werewolf and a grotesquely lumpy, hideous monstrosity.

“Now, bearing in mind the previous rules,” Will continued, “not to mention everything else you’ve been taught, forget what you’ve seen in the movies...”

““A single shot usually won’t kill a person or even stop their forward motion.’ We’ve been over this every day for a week, Will.”

“Nevertheless, Cynthia, it bears repeating,” George said gently. “People don’t drop dead when they get shot, most of the time. As you appear to have learned by rote, a single shot won’t even stop a target’s forward motion most of the time. That goes tenfold for a creature that has the strength of five men and won’t go into shock when wounded.” He indicated the targets with a sweep of his hand. “These creatures are examples of this. There’s no margin for error when dealing with the monsters we fight. When something like this comes at you, don’t waste time with warning shots. Forget about trying to shoot them in the leg like in the movies. You hit them in the body if you want to stop them. What do we call that?”

“Center mass,” Cynthia recited.

“Right, center mass, and shoot to kill. If one shot won’t stop or kill a normal person, then several may not stop or kill any one of these. If a monster comes at you, you unload a full clip into it. Then you load another clip as fast as possible. You keep shooting until your target is lying on the ground, and not moving. DON’T try to get in close to make sure it’s dead. You get away and get backup. Understand?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it already,” Cynthia groaned. “Can I practice shooting now?”

“You have to admire her enthusiasm. Go ahead, Cynthia,” George said.

Cynthia breathed a sigh of relief. She really did appreciate Will wanting to make sure she was safe, but she was tired of getting the same speech every single morning before practice, usually from Will and now from George. She already knew how not to shoot at the wrong person. It was time for her to learn how to shoot at the right thing. Why couldn’t they just trust her?

She stepped to the firing line and checked her pistol again. She was getting used to the feel of a pistol in her hands, but she couldn’t get over how heavy the things were. Steadying herself, she took a stance and fired off three shots in quick succession. She aimed at the vampire target, out of familiarity if nothing else. When she was done, she lowered her pistol, stripped off her goggles and said “There! How was that?”

“Let’s see,” George said and trundled to where the targets hung. He returned quickly bearing the vampire target, which had three neat holes grouped together right over the vampire’s heart.

“Ok, that’s...that’s pretty good, actually,” Will said as he examined the expert placing of the bullet holes. “How the heck did you do that?”

“I’ve been practicing for a week. If you spent less time giving me speeches and more time watching what I did, you’d have noticed that I’m pretty good,” Cynthia moaned.

“Presupposed natural talent aside, Cynthia,” George put in to cut off anything Will might be about to say, “you must keep in mind that this is only the first stage in our firearms training. Once you’ve mastered hitting a stationary target, you must then move on to targets that move on.”

“You mean there’s more of this?” Cynthia whined. “It’s not like I need to know any of this anyway. I don’t need guns to fight monsters. I never have.”

Will balked openly at that. “You will if you want to fit in with this group. Using your telekwhosit isn’t a good idea in any setting, much less in public.”

“Will,” George said soothingly. “Cynthia. This is important for you to know. You know as well as I do that your powers are finite. You’ll need to know how to handle other means of offense and defense before you actively take to the field.”

“Her powers are finite?” Will asked.

“Psionic powers utilize the mind, Will. Just as exerting yourself physically will eventually cause fatigue, using psionics over a prolonged period of time can tire out the brain, so to speak.”

“Not me!” Cynthia said proudly. “My brain is in great shape. I’ve got buff lobes!”

“Yeah, that’s what Marc keeps saying,” Will muttered.

“What was that?” snapped Cynthia.

“Children, please,” George said. “That aside, this is far from being expert work.”

“What do you mean? I got the shots close together. That’s good, right?” Cynthia complained.

“Yes, in ordinary target practice. With the case of undead, you must remember that you are trying to destroy an object, not injure a living thing. These three shots most certainly hurt our toothy friend here but they might not have done enough damage to out and out destroy him. I’m also fairly sure that your skillful grouping of shots would not impress him so much as piss him off.”

“Some of the monsters we run up against are really fast healers,” added Will. “You can stand and watch wounds close on their bodies, in some cases.” He indicated the lumpy thing that leered at them from its place on a sheet of paper. “You need to use overkill with things like that. If you leave it alive at all, even enough to crawl into a sewer and hide for half a night, it may heal and come looking for you.”

“Wow,” Cynthia said. “You did that really well. Have you ever thought about doing drama?” Will sighed and shook his head. As though to break the tension in the room, an intercom on a wall nearby buzzed and Sullivan’s voice sounded over it: “*George, there are some gentlemen at the front gate asking to see you.*”

“Oop! That’ll be the contractors!” George said. “Keep training, you two, and try not to kill each other.” He hurried off to the staircase.

““Contractors?”” Cynthia asked. Will shrugged.

George jogged at a brisk pace until he had worked his way around the Mansion to the front gate. Sullivan was there waiting for him on the inside, and on the outside stood two very indignant looking men in business suits. A black sedan was parked behind them on the road.

“Good morning, gentlemen!” George called cordially. “How are you this fine day? It’s all right, Sullivan, they can come in.” He took a tiny remote from his pocket and pressed a button. The gates quickly opened. “Thank you Sullivan, that will be all.”

Sullivan nodded and headed back to the Mansion. One of the two men got in the car and drove it to just inside the gate. George keyed his remote again and the gate closed.

“I must apologize, gentlemen,” George said as the first man emerged from his car and walked to stand by the other. “I hope you understand. For one of my position, it is imperative to keep security tight.”

“We understand,” the first man said. “I am Mr. Wiggins, and this is Mr. Harrow. On behalf of our employer, Mr. Jerald Rowland, I would like to apologize for our lateness in answering your request. Mr. Rowland has been very busy of late and he needed our assistance with his business matters.”

"I quite understand. Will Mr. Rowland be able to fulfill my requests?"

"That's what we are here to determine," Mr. Harrow said. "Will you be able to show us the damage at this time?"

"Well, there's part of it," said George as he pointed at the front door. Even from the gate, the damage to the door the Crown of Thorns had kicked open was visible and the gap where the other door should be was a blemish in the face of the otherwise neat and symmetrical Mansion.

"There's some over there, too," George remarked casually as he pointed to the western stretch of the Wall that was pockmarked where the sentries had tried to gun down the Crown. Mr. Harrow and Mr. Wiggins looked at George with expressions of amazement.

"I really should learn to be more careful with my homemade fireworks," George said in answer to their questioning stares. "Would you care to assess the rest of the damage? It's all inside."

"Certainly. If you will excuse us for a moment, we will give Mr. Rowland a call and let him know that we have arrived," said Mr. Wiggins.

"Yes, of course."

Jake knelt by the center of the upstairs hallway wall, examining it inch by inch with a magnifying glass. This was the sixth time in two days he had gone over the wall, seeking the hiding place of the sentries that had chased away the Crown of Thorns. He knew where the door was because he had seen it open, but now that it was closed again it was nearly impossible to find. This puzzled him to no end, as the wall was ordinary drywall--or at least, it appeared to be. The seams of the door were visible up close, but only just barely. They looked like nothing so much as the ordinary scratches and depressions one naturally finds in a plaster wall. How could two pieces of drywall fit together so neatly as to be indistinguishable from each other, yet be able to separate into a door?

The problem plagued him. He had done nothing for the last two days except examine the door and others like it around the Mansion. Will had told him about the two doors flanking the Armory doors, and he already knew about the ones covering the alarm lights throughout the Mansion, but had he not known exactly where they were he would never have been able to find them. Why would George go to such lengths to make a security system so difficult to find?

Moreover, what were the robot sentries they had all seen? They were obviously more advanced than Sullivan and they had the firepower of a marine platoon. Normally Jake could accept George's unwillingness to talk about himself and his possessions but this was a little much. The combination of his curiosity and his feelings of betrayal over George's not telling them about something so important led him to the decision that he must find out for himself what was going on in the Mansion.

So every day while George worked with Will and Cynthia, Jake snuck about the rooms and hallways examining the hidden doors and hatches looking for any clue to their real nature and purpose. He hadn't been able to find any clues in the Library. The only other thing he could think of would be trying to break into George's Study, which was something Jake wouldn't even consider at this point. He would find out sooner or later, though. The clues were everywhere.

For one thing, there was the layout of the Mansion itself. The huge rooms, the ridiculously high ceilings, the hallways that were so narrow in proportion to the rest of the rooms--clearly this wasn't ordinary architecture. Now the sentries had given Jake an idea why. When he drew out the dimensions of the Mansion on drafting paper and then laid out the dimension of the rooms within, he was left with a considerable amount of extra space. Some of that was accounted for by the thick walls (walls obviously thick enough to have robots standing inside of them). Mostly, though, there were simply huge areas that weren't accounted for as part of normal rooms, but which were much too large to be things like air vents or crawlspaces.

Then there was the third floor. It had long been something of a running gag with the group wondering what it was George kept up there. Most assumed that it was simply private living spaces for George and that he had a staircase to it locked up inside his legendary Study. Opinions and theory aside, the third floor was a huge space almost the size of a city block. What in the world could George need that much space for, especially something that he wouldn't ever allow anyone else to see?

The mystery was going to have to wait. Jake heard voices coming toward the front door so he sprinted just out of sight around the corner at the top of one staircase.

"This is rather more damage than you made it out to be on the phone, Mr. Manor," one of the voices said as George walked through the door accompanied by two men in black suits.

"Yes, well, I'm told I have a penchant for understatement," George replied. "Speaking of which, there's a bit more damage in here."

The two men surveyed the Foyer with wide eyes. The room looked like a battlefield. Dozens of craters and long narrow troughs were blown or burned out of the floor and huge sections of the shag carpet were scorched. The walls around the door were pockmarked with small craters and bullet holes and a semi-circle of stone was missing from the banister overlooking the balcony.

"So, gentlemen, do you believe that Mr. Rowland will be able to help me with my little housekeeping problem? I have some additions I will want to make if possible," George said casually.

Wiggins and Harrow exchanged glances. "I hope you understand, Mr. Manor, that while Mr. Rowland values his working relationship with you, what you require is far from the small touch-up job we expected," Mr. Wiggins said. "On top of that, Mr. Rowland's construction interests are occupied this time of year and diverting them will have a very negative effect on business for him."

George waved his hand. "I quite understand. Mr. Rowland has a business to run, and he trusts you two gentlemen to ensure that it runs smoothly." He reached into his pocket and to Jake's amazement produced a wad of bills the size of Jake's fist, which he handed to Mr. Harrow.

"I trust this will serve as a token of my good will and demonstrate my willingness to compensate both Mr. Rowland and his employees for their time and discretion in this endeavor."

Harrow and Wiggins exchanged another set of wide-eyed glances. "I'm sure that Mr. Rowland will consider this when prioritizing tasks for his construction interests in the near future."

"Glad to hear it!" George said cheerfully. "Will you gentlemen need anything else? I assume that you have other errands to attend to."

"Yes, of course," Mr. Harrow said. "Have a nice day, sir." With that he and Mr. Wiggins headed for their car. George keyed his remote from where he stood and opened the gate long enough to allow the car to leave the grounds. Then he turned and headed down the east wing toward the Library.

Another mystery, thought Jake. He had wondered for the last two days why George had neither had Sullivan repair the damage to the Mansion and grounds nor hired outside help to do so. Now, he had sought outside help from a source that was evidently not entirely on the up and up.

What was going on?

George plopped into his seat at his computer in the Library bearing a brandy snifter full of fruit punch in one hand, took a sip and pulled up his online news reports. He was just thinking that his punch could use a shot of rum when a headline caught his eye. He spat a mouthful of punch across the screen and coughed. Setting the glass down and wiping the red liquid off of the screen, he read again, hoping he had been imagining things. He had not. The article read:

Pointville Youths Injured in Mysterious Attack

Pointville, Ylelon--A half-dozen young men were brutally attacked by unknown assailants last night at approximately 11 p.m. Lee Parker, 23, of Pointville, and five of his closest friends were relaxing last evening on the porch of Mr. Parker's house when they were attacked by individuals unknown to them.

"We were minding our business when these guys came driving down the road. They looked like one of those gangs from the city. They stopped and said we had to give them my stereo. When I told them to get lost they beat us up with tire irons and left us lying in the road," Parker said.

Parker suffered seven broken bones in his thoracic and shoulder regions. Injuries among his companions included broken teeth and bones,

several sprains and a mild concussion.

Police Chief Jerry Hicks of Pointville is currently leading an investigation into the attacks. "We have not yet received any other reports of sightings or other attacks by the individuals in question," Hicks said. "We are currently looking into what motives these individuals may have had for their assault, along with why they came all the way to Pointville."

The six men are currently in intensive care at Sun Vale Hospital in Ylelon City. Doctors expect them all to make complete recoveries.

George set the article to print out, leapt up from his seat, grabbed it and ran out of the Library. A moment later, he returned, picked up his glass and left again.

He ran as fast as he could go up the stairs and down the jog of hall to his Study. In one smooth motion he took the Study key from his pocket, opened the lock, slipped inside and locked the door again. Once inside, he ran to a bookshelf and took down an old box full of files and worn notebooks. He began to scatter the contents on the floor, dropping them in order by chronology. There were newspaper clippings that were yellow and brittle with age, old notebooks in which George had written shorthand notes in several different languages and old police files stuffed to overflowing. When he had laid everything out properly, he reviewed dates, locations, and other vital details, all the while making more notes in one of the newer notebooks. When he was ready he piled everything back into the box and took it to the Situation Room. Once there he activated his silent alarm (with lots of personality): "Red alert. All hands to the Situation Room immediately. This is not a drill."

Jake waited for a few moments before going into the Situation Room. He had hidden again when he heard George coming and saw him run into the Study. That was yet another little mystery about George. He was old and Jake had never seen him exercise, but he was as fast and strong as any gymnast.

At the moment, Jake supposed that didn't matter. He walked into the Situation Room after Sullivan and just before Marc and sat at his usual place. There was no doubt in his mind that he would find out what George was hiding sooner or later. In fact, he had a thought as to a little project of his that he might be able to make work to his advantage in this regard.

Marc came in and plopped into his seat. To George's surprise, he wasn't carrying any liqueur. "Nothing to drink today, Marc?" he asked.

"I just had a six-pack," Marc replied. George decided not to bring up the fact that it was 8:30 in the morning. Will and Cynthia came a few minutes later.

"I just don't see why I can't vary it a little," Cynthia was saying. "You only let me work with the pistols. Why can't I try the shotguns for once?"

"I keep telling you, you need to have practiced with basic firearms before you can move on to anything more advanced," Will replied in open exasperation.

"Oh look, the newlyweds are having a spat," Marc chuckled. Cynthia blushed bright red and Will gave him a menacing stare.

"It will have to wait until later to play out," George said, and smirked when Will turned his cross look on himself. "We have something to investigate for now."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Jake said.

"I can understand that," George said. "But this is not as bad as last time. At least, I don't think it is." He took his notes out of the box and laid them on the table, then began to hand out various articles from the box.

"These are the history of a series of killings that have taken place in Pointville, one of the older mining towns in the mountains," he said and waited patiently while the others passed the old clippings and police reports around the table.

Jake looked from a clipping in one hand to a second in his other, and back again. "George? These cases go back over a hundred and sixty years!"

"Yes, precisely," said George. "This is part of the nature of the murders. They have taken place

over the course of several generations but all share a similar modus operandi.” He laid out several more police reports on the table. Some of them were so old they were written entirely by hand and crackled as they were moved.

“All of the victims were beheaded and usually also mutilated. The coroners’ reports disagree on a number of points, including what weapons may have been used in the killings. However, they all agree on one point: the actual cause of death in almost every case was blood loss.”

“A vampire,” Will said solemnly. “That explains the time frame.”

“Well, partially,” Jake corrected him. He was shuffling around groups of reports with amazing speed. “These attacks tend to happen in groups. They’re either several people all killed together in the same place, or several people killed in different places all within a few days of each other. But there’s just one problem. The groups of killings are all several years apart. Here’s one, ‘Third Mutilated Body found in Field Outside Local Farm.’ Dated January 26, 1921. ‘Rash of Slayings Baffles Police,’ from October 1896. ‘Local Socialite and Family Murdered in Home,’ March of 2015.”

Will picked up one of the files Jake had laid aside and looked it over. “That doesn’t make sense. Vampires will starve if forced to go without blood for much more than a week. There’s no way that some vampire is hiding in the mountains gorging itself once in a while and then sitting around for a few years.”

“Could it be a crazy vampire?” Cynthia asked. “Maybe it just hides in a cave, or something.”

“Doubtful. Crazy or not, a vampire needs fresh blood regularly.” George replied. “A vampire cannot muster the willpower to abstain from its food for months or years any more than you could.”

“What about the Crown of Thorns?” Sullivan suggested and the tension level in the room raised a notch at the mention of the name. “This fits her pattern of coming and going over time.”

“Yes,” George affirmed. “But where are the little crowns she leaves behind? Besides, since when does the Crown favor low profile killings?”

“Something else, then? Another vampire with a habit of migration, or whatever?” Jake proposed.

“Perhaps,” George mused, his eyes wandering in space.

Jake picked up the news article from the previous night, and read it. “I’m guessing this is why you bring all this up?” he said to George.

“Yes. The attacks lead me to believe whatever is behind all this is active again in Pointville.”

“But there’s a problem, George.” Jake passed the article to Will. “None of the men attacked last night were killed. That doesn’t sound like our monster.”

“Be that as it may,” replied George, “the oddities of the report are glaring indicators that the victim’s accounts are not wholly truthful. Did you catch them?”

Will and Jake did have to agree on that one. “A gang from the city.” George was implying that the victims were hiding something. If they couldn’t or wouldn’t talk about whatever it was that had attacked them they were trying to hide it behind a flimsy story playing off of local prejudices. Even the police chief’s statement subtly showed skepticism: Why was a “gang from the city” in a little town almost two hours outside city limits?

“I suggest we start by going to the hospital,” continued George. “Will and Jake will accompany me. We’ll interview the victims and see if we can get them to spill anything useful. Sullivan?”

“Yes?”

“I want you to contact Detective King when his shift starts today. Find out if he knows anything and if he’s willing to work with us on this case.”

“Of course,” Sullivan replied somberly. She knew why George had included the phrase “if he’s willing” in his last statement. After the way Detective King had reacted to the Crown of Thorns debacle, George wasn’t certain that King was still an ally to the operation as a whole and George in particular.

“We will keep in contact. See you in a few hours. Let’s go, gentlemen.”

The trio was silent as Will drove them all down the deserted highway toward Ylelon. Jake typed away on a laptop, putting the finishing touches on an A.I. program he’d been tinkering with for some time. He smiled to himself as he worked and occasionally looked at George, who was riding shotgun.

“There may be a construction group coming to the Mansion within the next few days,” George

said suddenly. "I'm not sure when, exactly. They'll be coming to work on the damages and make some alterations I've had my mind on for a while. This is just so you know."

Neither Jake nor Will said anything.

"I know things have been rough lately," George continued, "and I haven't been straightforward with you boys about everything. I just want you to know that I'm doing it for your sakes. I wouldn't keep anything from you if I didn't think it was for the best."

Silence.

"Will? Jake? A little feedback here?"

"We're used to you doing your own thing," Will said sourly. "As far as we can tell, you've kept secrets since the beginning, including when exactly the beginning was. Just keep doing your thing. If nothing kills us, we'll keep doing ours."

George wilted. "That's really harsh, William."

"Yes? What are we to think about robot juggernauts hiding in our house? Is that something we're supposed to be comforted by? Because personally, it creeps the hell out of me."

"As I told Detective King, I wouldn't betray your trust unless I had to."

"We'll just have to trust you on that. You don't give us much other choice," said Will. All the while Jake listened and typed.

"I see," George said sadly. "I don't suppose there's any way that I can regain your trust?"

"A detailed biography and history of the operation would be nice," Jake muttered.

Nothing else was said until they came to the hospital.

"Hello, we're here to see some patients," George said cheerfully as he and the others approached the receptionist's desk on the hospital's first floor.

The nurse at the station looked up at him from her magazine briefly and then flipped a page. "Sign in. Your names, time of visit and the patient in question," she droned.

George picked up a pen on the counter and scrawled something on a nearby clipboard with amazing speed. He smiled at the receptionist, who took the clipboard and told him which room to look for Lee Parker in, and walked away. Jake caught a glimpse of what he had written. It was the same flowing-line script that George used when he made the tombstones back at the Mansion.

"You know," George said as he led them into an elevator at the rear of the reception area, "the first elevators were wire cages. You could look around the building you were in as you went up. Nowadays you ride up and down in a big steel and plastic box. The world outside changes while the doors are closed. We live in the post information age, but the simplest changes in the simplest things keep us from seeing what goes on around us. We deprive ourselves of knowledge of the things happening in the world."

No one else got on the elevator for the entire ride. They stopped at the seventh floor and went right to room 714, a single bed intensive care ward. A tall and slender man slumbered in the bed with thick cage braces on each of his shoulders. Numerous balloons and "get well soon" cards and gifts were arrayed around the room.

"This presents a problem," George said softly as the trio entered the room. "I haven't the heart to awaken a man sleeping in intensive care."

"I'll do it!" said Jake. "What do you think? Boat horn or starter pistol?"

"That's not funny, Jake," Will chided.

"Wait, you don't actually have any of those things with you?" asked George.

"Well, not on me..."

"What's going on in here?" demanded an orderly who came marching into the room suddenly. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Your pardon, ma'am, we came to visit Mr. Parker," George said.

"Mr. Parker is resting now," the orderly said as she shooed the three of them out of the room. "You'll have to come back later."

"Oh, well...could you please point us to one of the other's rooms, then?" George asked.

"Ugh!" the orderly growled. "What is it with you people? Coming and going at all hours, making

enough noise to wake all the patients within four floors. Fine! Your friends are in each of the next five even numbered rooms on this floor. Now get going and try to keep it down to a low roar!" The trio skittered down the hall to 716.

"Man! I feel sorry for her patients," exclaimed Jake.

"Apparently Mr. Parker's friends have been causing quite a ruckus when they visit," George remarked.

"I doubt it was as much of a ruckus as that," Jake grumbled.

716 was nearly identical to 714, except there were fewer balloons and the patient was awake. He was sitting propped up in bed, reading a sports magazine. He was on the short side with dark brown hair. His left arm was in a cast and he had bandages and padding stretched around his forehead.

"Who are you?" he asked George as the three entered the room.

"Friends," George said. "Also detectives. Friendly detectives. Or would it be better as 'detecting friends?' Where was I?" Will put a hand over his eyes.

"Oh, right. We want to ask you about what happened last night."

The young man looked away. "The cops already came. They talked to Lee. He told them it was a gang. What more do you want?"

George sat down in a chair across from the bed. "To find out what happened," he said softly. "You weren't really attacked by a gang, were you, Chris?"

"How the hell do you know my name?"

"It's written on your charts at the foot of the bed."

"Oh." Chris looked at George, then at Will and Jake. "It was a gang. Really. Like, twenty guys."

"I see," George said and picked up one of the charts. "They attacked you with blackjacks, didn't they?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure."

"But the paper said it was tire irons," said Jake. Chris looked away again.

George was already reading the second page of the charts. "You have a broken radius, a mild concussion and a very loquacious doctor. He opines freely here that you and your friends' injuries aren't consistent with blunt trauma from a hand held instrument." He crooked an eyebrow as he read the next section. "In fact, he remarks that the bruise patterns and shapes of the injuries themselves are more characteristic of damage done by an unarmed individual, except that the force involved is more commonly found among mining equipment than barroom brawlers."

"So what?" Chris said defensively.

"Someone did this to you without using any weapons," George said resolutely. "I think you know who it was."

"Why?"

"Because you're protecting someone--that, or you're too afraid to admit what happened. If someone you didn't know had done this to you and your friends, would you be so reluctant to speak of it?"

"Good point," Chris admitted with a sigh, closed his magazine and laid back in bed. "There's this guy in town. He's a total loser and everyone hates him."

"One man did this to you?!" Will said incredulously. "By hand?"

"No, it wasn't him," Chris said. "It's, I don't know...this guy is a total retarded loser, you know? Everybody hated him in school. The guy's the ugliest thing you ever saw and he walks like a gorilla. Everybody makes fun of him. He came walking down the road last night, past Lee's house."

"You taunted him," George said.

"Yeah. We were just messing with him the way we always do. Then, bam! Suddenly this other guy is wailing on us."

"He had someone with him? Why didn't you mention him before?" asked Jake.

"No, that's the thing," Chris said. "It was just this guy--his name is G.R.--by himself, walking down the road. There wasn't nobody with him. Then Lee is arguing with him and this guy was just there suddenly. He beat the crap out of us and walked away."

“What did this mystery man look like? Had you ever seen him before?” pressed George.

“No, we didn’t know him. We know everybody in town, ‘cause the town is little, you know? This guy was big like G.R. but he wasn’t fat like him. But I couldn’t see him well. He was moving too fast.”

“He moved too fast for you to see him?” Will asked with wide eyes.

“Yeah, he was like a martial arts movie on fast forward. He beat up Lee and some of the other guys. I tried to grab him and the next thing I know I’m lying on the ground and I can’t feel my arm.”

“The two of them just left you there?” George wondered aloud.

“Yeah. I don’t know why. They coulda killed us if they’d wanted to,” Chris said with a shudder.

“Can you tell us where this G.R. lives?” asked Will.

“No way!” Chris cried. “What if he finds out I told you? He might come back!”

“It’s alright, Chris,” George said soothingly. “We just need to talk to him. Can you at least tell us his last name so we can look him up?”

Chris eyed George suspiciously. “You’re not cops, are you?”

“No, lad. We’re private investigators and we want to make sure this won’t happen to anyone else.”

Chris rolled onto his side. “His last name is Herald. G.R. Herald.”

“Thank you, Chris. Get well soon,” George said, and the team left. Chris went to sleep a few hours later and dreamed of a shadowy figure that chased him down the dark and lonely roads of Pointville.

“Well, that wasn’t encouraging,” Jake said on the walk across the parking lot to the car.

“It doesn’t sound like a vampire, but what else could it be?” Will wondered. “It sounds like the attacker was helping this ‘G.R.’ character, or fighting for him maybe? I can’t see a vampire doing that.”

“Indeed,” George agreed. “This case is growing more curious by the moment.”

“But if it’s not a vampire then this isn’t the same thing that has been killing people in Pointville,” said Jake. “It just doesn’t fit the pattern.”

“Could G.R. have made some sort of pact with a vampire, or a demon?” Will asked George as they got into the car.

“It certainly sounds feasible,” George admitted. “The outcast, angry and ostracized, learning enough magic to be able to communicate and bargain with a powerful supernatural being. This definitely would not be the first time such a thing has happened.”

“So, what? The town loser has some kind of martial arts demon following him around to beat up people he doesn’t like?” Jake said.

“I don’t know, Jake. I think the only way we will find out will be to speak with Mr. G.R. Herald. First thing first. We head back to the Mansion, brief the others and collect Marc. We will go from there.”

Chapter II In The Mountains

“Assessment of the situation is as follows,” George said from his seat in the Situation Room. He had reassembled the team the moment he and the others had come in the door. “The victims appear to be in stable enough condition, such as they are. We have a lead on a possible target in Pointville. Therefore, as of now we are in reconnaissance and preparation mode until 5 p.m., at which point Jake, Will and Marc will depart for Pointville.

“I want armor, extra provisions and a full range of weaponry prepared. Jake, take the Eye and a standard load of sensory equipment. Marc, double the tool count you usually carry. Sullivan, get them the credit cards and ten thousand in cash. Also, take camping supplies and several changes of clothes for everyone. You may have to camp out while you look for whatever it is we seek.

“Will, I want you to watch those ribs. Muster all the willpower it takes to break your habit of jumping to the front of any confrontation. Now, this just leaves the question of which vehicles to use...”

Jake clapped his hands together and held his mouth open in a wildly exaggerated expression of happiness. George blanched at that. “No, Jake, there is no way,” he said. Jake didn’t move or change his expression one bit.

“I said no, Jake, there is no feasibility to it!”

Will, Marc, Cynthia and Sullivan exchanged bewildered looks. Jake still didn’t move.

“All right!” George said finally. “All right! I give! You can take the APC.” Jake leapt out of his seat and began to do a happy dance.

“I’ll be recording the news while you’re gone,” Sullivan said.

“You’re no help at all!” George shot at her. “Go to work, folks.”

Sullivan, Marc, and Will left the room with Jake to gather their accoutrements. George settled back in his chair and sighed.

“You’re letting Jake take the APC?” Cynthia asked with open amusement.

“It will make him happy,” George said absently. “It’s one of his favorite toys and he never gets to use it. Besides, as odd as it looks, there’s no one who can say it’s not just a customized SUV or recreational vehicle. Not in the mountains, where it can’t do much damage, anyway.”

“It will give them plenty of space for things,” Cynthia said with a coy tone.

“Yes,” George said. He wasn’t really listening.

“So...do I get to go?”

George jumped up from his chair. “Absolutely not, Cynthia! You’re nowhere near being ready to journey into the field actively with the team! You’d be in too much danger without proper knowledge of how to handle yourself!”

“You mean more danger than when the Crown of Thorns was running around in here a couple of days ago? Or when I *was* in the field and I saved Will from having a burning building fall on him?”

George balked. “This is entirely against my better judgment.”

“Not to worry, George. I can take care of myself. I’m better protected than any of them. Will has two cracked ribs, Jake is antsy about something lately and Marc is...well, Marc. I’ll be all right. I’m part of the team now. Besides,” she added with a smirk, “You know I’ll go, one way or another. You can’t keep me here without resorting to force. I think in your heart you know you don’t need to.”

“I hope you’re right, Cynthia. If I let you go, you must adhere to one caveat.”

“What’s that?”

“Will is in charge,” George said firmly. “You will obey his orders and do exactly as he says. Stray but a little and I will be *very* cross. Understand?”

“I got it,” Cynthia said meekly.

“Very good.”

“She’s *what?!?*” Will shouted. He and Sullivan were standing outside the APC in the Workshop, and Will was loading supplies. Marc and Jake had gone back to the Mansion to get the final load of

provisions.

“George informed me that Cynthia will be going with you,” Sullivan repeated. Will grumbled something under his breath and heaved a heavy bag of ammo into place under a seat.

“I understand how you feel, Will,” Sullivan said.

“Really? I don’t think you do.”

“Don’t blow me off, Will. I run numerous subroutines including directives to monitor the emotions and speech patterns of the residents of the Mansion. My whole purpose is to watch over you and the others. I don’t claim to know exactly what you’re thinking but I do believe I have a pretty good idea of what you’re feeling.”

Will took a moment to ponder Sullivan’s remark. “All right, give it a shot. Tell me what you think.”

“I think you’re weary. You’ve been doing a very hard job for a long time and it has worn you to the bones.”

“What does that have to do with Cynthia?”

“Cynthia makes you guarded, William. I think you have more conflict going on inside over her membership than you’re willing to admit.”

Will hopped out of the APC and stood next to her. “That’s thin ice, Sullivan.”

“You sometimes have to brave thin ice to save a drowning victim. We all know that Cynthia’s sweet on you, Will. But what’s interesting is the fact that you are uncharacteristically harsh towards her.”

“Yeah?” Will said sharply as he heaved another bag into the armored vehicle. “So what?”

“So, that is very revealing. I think you’re attracted and maybe even a little interested in her.”

“What if I were? What does that have to do with anything?”

“You feel that you’d be betraying Tina if you ever admitted it to yourself.”

Will stopped his work and stared at Sullivan.

“That’s quite a remarkable young woman you have following you around,” Sullivan continued. “But I think you feel that you’d be betraying the memory of Tina if you were so much as polite to Cynthia. That’s why you’re so short-tempered with her. If you acknowledge the woman with feelings for you now, you’re afraid you’ll forget the woman who once loved you.”

Will looked away and picked up another satchel. “There’s no one like Tina. There never will be. Besides, you don’t know everything about Cynthia.”

“Of course I don’t. I just draw conclusions from what I see. You still miss Tina, that much is clear. But I think there’s both a desire in you to trust Cynthia and a fear of doing so. I hear both in your voice.”

Will had to think about that. Sullivan was a good listener and had proven time and again that she could tell a great deal about a person just by listening to the tone and stress of their voice. “Is there a point to this?” he asked. He realized it was a copout, but he was anxious to put this conversation behind them.

“Just one,” Sullivan replied. “You can either deal with whatever is bothering you, with or without talking to Cynthia about it, or you can keep being upset. The choice is yours.”

“Has anyone ever told you it’s glaringly obvious that you were programmed by George?”

“In this case, William, I will take that as a complement.” Will had the distinct feeling that Sullivan would have been smiling at him if she could.

“We’re back!” Marc shouted triumphantly as he ambled through the Workshop door carrying several knapsacks and two backpacks. Jake and Cynthia followed close behind, each lugging their own loads. “Check it out Will, Legs is goin’ with us!”

Will sighed while Cynthia rolled her eyes at Marc’s latest pet name for her. Marc threw his baggage unceremoniously into the APC and stretched. Jake climbed inside and let Cynthia hand off her bags to him, then took a notebook out of his pocket and began to check off what they had.

“Tools, extra ammo, MRE’s...”

“What’s an MRE?” Cynthia asked.

“Meals, Ready to Eat,” Jake answered as he tossed her a hand-size package wrapped in silver foil. Several loose objects shifted inside as she looked at it. “Field provisions, freeze-dried food that can be eaten any time with a shelf life of five years. That’s in the event we can’t simply waylay a burger stand

while we're in the mountains."

"Or catch a moose," Marc said with a smile.

"You would beat up a moose and cook it, wouldn't you?" chortled Cynthia.

"I have before," Marc said seriously. Cynthia stopped chortling.

"Well, that's it. Now we're just waiting to leave. What did George say? Five o'clock?" asked Jake.

"That's the one," Will said as he checked his watch. "We still have almost two hours. Want to review the data with me?"

"Sounds like a plan," Jake replied.

"I'm gonna make a sandwich. You want something, Legs?" asked Marc.

Cynthia carefully considered the difference between what she really did want and what she could actually say before she spoke. "Yes, that would be very nice," she said slowly. "Go ahead and start yours. I want to go with Will and Jake and do some more research. I'll be there in a little while."

"All right, we're back here at four forty-five, sharp. Don't be late," Will instructed.

Will, Jake and Cynthia went to the Situation Room, where they found George reading back over the old files in his box. They wasted no time going into research mode.

"How did you come across this case, George?" Jake asked absently as he read a coroner's report from 1918 detailing the finding and autopsy of a decapitated woman's body.

"I've been keeping tabs on it for some time," was the reply. "I discovered it some years ago when I ran across one of those articles. I sent the team of the time to investigate, but they found nothing even though they investigated for three days. We assumed at the time that some vampire or other unsavory creature had been in the mountains for whatever reason, taken prey, and left."

"Let me guess: a few years later, you came across another article with a similar M.O.," Will said.

"Exactly. I began to research every source I could--histories of the town, newspaper clippings, old diaries and journals I managed to get hold of. The more I looked, the more it became clear that there was something that lurked in the town, committing the occasional massacre and hiding the rest of the time. I have sent the team several times in the past to hunt the killer. Never once have they found anything."

"So this vampire, or whatever, has a knack for staying hidden," Cynthia observed.

"Are we really sure it's a vampire?" Jake asked. "All we know is that the victims died of blood loss. You could kind of expect that from someone that had their head cut off."

"The coroners knew what they were talking about, Jake. A body that dies from lack of blood has different telltale signs than one that has been separated from the brain. The bodies were beheaded after the victims were killed," George explained.

Will put down the news clipping he was reading: Butchered Remains of City Family Found at Campsite. "Why is the killer doing that, I wonder?" he said. "It's probably just to keep the victims from rising as vampires themselves, isn't it?"

"I'd have to agree. If our boy wants to keep hidden, then having a bunch of progeny running around would make it hard to keep a low profile," said Jake.

"Indeed," George said thoughtfully.

"What I don't understand," Jake continued, "is how no one has noticed all this going on. How many times can whole families be killed in a small town before someone catches on?"

"That report you were reading before, Jake, the one from 1918. Do you have the clipping for it?" George asked.

"Yeah, right here."

"Hand it to me."

Jake did so. George laid it on the table in front of himself, then sifted through the disorganized piles in front of him as he looked for specific files. As he found them, he laid them in chronological order. When he was done he handed the finished pile to Jake.

"Read the headlines of each out loud," he said.

Jake picked up the first article and read. "'Headless Woman's Body Found in Field Outside Local Farm, January 19, 1918.'" He laid it aside and read the next ones in order. "'Local Farmer and Wife

Found Dead in Home, January 21'. 'Local Widower Third Victim of Beheading Murders, January 22'. 'Sheriff Announces Plan to Stop Pointville Killer, January 24'."

Jake swallowed and took a breath as he read the next headlines. "'Coroner's Body Found on Sheriff's Porch, January 25'. 'Sheriff, Wife and Daughter Latest Victims in Series of Brutal Murders, January 27'." Jake laid the clippings aside and looked at George.

"Read the articles through and look at the stories that unfold." George said. "The first victim, the woman, was never identified. They assumed she was a drifter, just passing through. The next victims were the farmers who found her body in a weedy ditch just beyond their fields. The widower was the couple's elderly neighbor who publicly expressed his outrage at the killings.

"The coroner had to work around the fact that the woman's body was frozen, but he believed that she had been dead for nearly a week before she was found. She was killed and the killer was quiet, but the moment the act came to light, other people started dying.

"Then the sheriff makes a big noise to the press. He's going to stop the killer operating in his quiet little mountain town using the latest crime fighting techniques pioneered in the city. What's pivotal to his plan? The evidence the coroner is collecting for him, of course. Together they will hunt down the killer and bring him to justice. Early the next morning the sheriff walks onto his porch and finds the mangled body of his friend, neighbor and fellow investigator, the coroner."

George reached into his box of files and took out an old book. It was a small journal with a cover lined in felt worn around the edges.

"The town was in a complete uproar. People refused to leave their homes. There is even a report of one incident where a traveling salesman was beaten by a panicked miner who took him to be the killer because he was unfamiliar." He laid his hand on the old book.

"This is the diary of the sheriff's wife. She kept fastidious records not only of her own thoughts, but also of the activities of her family. Never in three years did she miss an entry for a day. She writes of how her husband began sleeping with his gun at the bedside and wouldn't allow her or their daughter out of their rooms. For the two agonizingly long days of the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth, there was silence. The town was completely quiet while people cowered in their homes and snow fell constantly. The poor woman writes of the fear the family lived in, wondering if and when the killer would come for them. Then in the journal entry for the evening of the twenty-sixth, she mentions her husband sitting up late, staring out the window as she wrote by candlelight. Her entry cuts off in mid-word.

"These people know all too well about this, Jake. They have been watching it happen for a very long time. They know that whenever they get too close to the killings they will die as well. I suspect that is part of the reason, historically, this operation has had so much trouble collecting information about the killer."

"That's why Chris was so hesitant to tell us anything," Will said. "He's afraid of what will happen if he talks." He thought of Chris's remark about how he and his friends could have been so easily killed, and the way he had trembled at his own observation. "He may even be amazed that he's still alive."

"Quite possibly, especially if he has grown up hearing tales of the Pointville Devil." George leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his chest. "The thing that will work for us is that the killer is either determined to remain non-confrontational, or is a complete coward."

"How do you figure?" Jake asked thoughtfully.

"Studying the cases shows that the killer has a preference for victims. Nine times out of ten, the victims are alone and/or unarmed and/or elderly or very young. The sheriff of 1918 is one of the few cases we know of where the victim had any sort of weapon."

"That doesn't sound like any self-respecting vampire I've ever heard of," said Jake.

"I agree," Will said. "It seems strange that a vampire would be bold enough to hide in a small town, where it would be more likely to be discovered, but only attack 'weaker' individuals."

"Personally, I still don't think this pattern matches the attack last night," Jake put in. "There were a large number of men together in one place, and while they weren't armed they weren't old or small children, either. Most of all, none of them were killed."

"True," George ceded. "But the facts remain. The attacker was capable of waylaying half-a-dozen

able-bodied youths. Our witness has described the attacker as moving too fast to be seen clearly. The attacker was a stranger in a small town where everyone knows everyone else.”

Will picked up a clipping and surfed it with his eyes. “How should we confront this ‘G.R.’?”

“With consummate caution, I think,” replied George. “Rampant theorizing aside, we have no idea who this G.R. might be or what his connection may be to this attacker. He may try to conceal the act from you, threaten you, attack you with powerful magic, sic his creature on you or any combination of the above. Shake his hand with your right, but keep a gun in your left.”

“More ancient philosophy, George?” Cynthia quipped.

“Actually, it’s the resolute ideal of a determined monster hunter,” George said.

Funny you mention that, considering you never do the hunting yourself, Will thought sourly.

At 4:38 Will and Jake returned to the Workshop. They double-checked equipment and provisions and gave their shoulder cameras a quick test. A few minutes later, Cynthia and Marc joined them. Cynthia was munching the last part of a veggie sub with mustard.

“We’re all set,” Jake said. “Where’s George?”

“*Standing by,*” came George’s voice out of Jake’s camera, and Jake jumped.

“Don’t *do* that!” he shouted.

“Let’s load up,” ordered Will.

“Shotgun!” Cynthia said quickly.

“Shotgun!” Marc said a split second later, then, “Drat.”

Jake smiled. “After you,” he said to Cynthia and held the side door open for her.

The APC was similar in dimensions to a large full-conversion van. Whereas the outside was a series of blocky armored plates, the inside walls were lined with computer monitors and scanning equipment, and here and there was a weapon rack with several rifles or pistols mounted on it. The back had a quartet of swiveling chairs at various monitoring stations, while the front two seats were deeply cushioned. The windows and windshield were all made of bullet-resistant glass. The passenger and drivers’ windows were very small, about the size of dinner plates, and the only other window was one of about average size set in the center of the back wall.

“Neato!” Cynthia said and settled into the shotgun seat. The dashboard in front of her was covered in dials and switches. “What does this one do?” she asked as she rested her index finger on a toggle.

“That’s the passenger ejection seat,” Jake said as he climbed into the driver’s seat.

“You’re kidding, right?” Cynthia chuckled.

“Think about Jake and ask that again,” Will said. Cynthia stopped chuckling.

“*Are you all set?*” George’s voice emanated from thin air. Cynthia searched for the source of it with her eyes, and discovered tiny speakers placed among the other instruments.

“We are packed, loaded and dieseled up,” Jake declared. “Time to rock and roll.”

He punched a button on the dashboard and the garage door on the front of the Workshop rumbled open. Then he put two different keys into two different ignitions and fired up the engine, which roared like a racecar. He slammed it into gear and barreled out of the Workshop.

“Seatbelts!” he shouted jovially. The APC tore across the thin trail to the driveway like a tiny storm cloud and thundered to a stop in front of the gate. Jake hit another button on the dash and the gate rolled open ceremoniously. Jake didn’t move forward, but sat revving the engine. The APC vibrated with the power running through the drive train.

“What the heck is all that?” Cynthia asked. Her voice ululated as though she spoke through a fan.

“*That* would be an engine meant to power a tank instead of a van with some armor plating on the side,” Will muttered disdainfully.

Jake chuckled and threw the APC into gear. The passengers were slammed back into their seats as the over-powered APC roared onto the dirt road leading to the highway.

Back in the Situation Room, George sat next to Sullivan, watching the wall monitors. When Jake blasted out the gate kicking up a small sandstorm in the process, George buried his face in his hands.

“What was I thinking?” he lamented.

“Look on the bright side,” said Sullivan soothingly, “maybe Jake will flatten the mountains with that monstrosity and make the search a little easier.”

“Oh, that’s a comforting scenario,” George whimpered. “I can see the headlines now: ‘Shifting Land Masses and Altered Weather Patterns Overshadow Deaths of Thousands at Hands of Technophile Armed With Super Mutant Go-cart.’”

“I rarely know what you’re talking about, George.”

The journey to the Sentinel Mountains was uneventful, although the APC did pass a few cars and semis and received a number of curious looks from other travelers. When the highway finally reached the base of the Sentinels it broke into a series of small roads that wound up the mountain face. These in turn segmented into smaller roads that led to individual mining towns. Jake took the road to Pointville, then took a side road that broke off just outside of the town and weaved below it on the mountain face. He parked off the road in a thick grove of trees, close enough to the town to walk but out of the way and hidden.

“All right, we’ve got about two hours of daylight left,” Will said as the others filtered out of the APC. “Minimal equipment, Jake and I will carry our cameras in our pockets. The rest of you, hidden small arms only, one each. Remember, we’re in a small town. Everything sticks out here and everyone knows everyone. We’re conspicuous just by being strangers. The first time we fire a shot, everyone in the mountains is going to know it.”

“And the award for the best George impression goes to…” Cynthia said with a flourish.

“Hey!” Will complained.

“Hey!” George said through the camera in Will’s hand. Will grimaced and stuffed it in a pocket.

“This is reconnaissance only,” he continued as Jake muffled a chuckle. “We have the name of the person we’re going to speak with. We keep out of any confrontation if at all possible. That includes raised voices and threats, *Marc*. We ask what this person may know about what’s happening and then we leave. If there are any problems, we immediately return to the APC. We’ll be back here at 8 p.m., thirty minutes before sunset.”

“Yes, sir!” Cynthia chirruped and snapped to attention with a salute. Marc and Jake laughed, and George did too, muffled in Will’s pocket.

“Your pants are laughing,” said Cynthia and Marc cracked up.

“Move out,” Will snapped and put on his sunglasses. Jake took out the Osborn Eye and punched a button. The APC made a sound suspiciously like a car alarm activating.

They hiked up the mountainside through the trees. The forest was light growth with mostly deciduous trees. The air was cool and the sun filtered in streams of light through the canopy above.

“This is great!” Jake said enthusiastically. “I haven’t been to the mountains in ages.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice break from the heat,” Marc said idly as he swung a stick at nearby branches. The rusting remnants of a car melted into view through the branches of a bush that had grown around it. The car was little more now than a rusted skeleton and some bits of glass covered in moss. “Course, all the local rednecks make it kinda crummy.”

Cynthia noticed Will tensing visibly. She knew what he was thinking because she was thinking it to. They both expected George to jump all over Marc for his comment, but to her surprise he said nothing.

“Marc,” Will said plaintively, “maybe you could keep down the derogatory comments while we’re in town?”

“Sure, George,” Marc muttered. Will tensed again and Cynthia with him, but still George said nothing.

Isn’t he listening? wondered Cynthia. *I know he can hear us. Did he stop watching?*

George and Sullivan were still in the Situation Room. The sounds of the team walking and talking came through the room’s speakers muffled and the pictures, predictably, were dark. Sullivan was watching the monitors impassively, apparently not caring that there was nothing to look at. George was

filtering through his box of files, rearranging them by date, location, victim type, number of killings and brutality. Again and again he failed to find any discernable pattern.

“Aren’t you going to say anything, George?” Sullivan asked.

“About what?” George replied absently. He spread out a pile of folders arranged by the victim’s financial and social status into a fan. Nothing meaningful there, either.

“I was assuming you’d want to say something to Marc after his most recent slur.”

“That will come in time, Sullivan,” said George. “Marc is slowly learning to be more accepting of others and he will do so more freely if he doesn’t feel me breathing down his neck even when I am not personally present.” He laid a group of folders together according to the victim’s property types--farmhouse, ranch house, duplex. Nothing.

“If you feel that’s best, George. Are you making any progress?”

Cases according to gender. No pattern. “Not a damn bit, Sullivan. I don’t understand this.” He leaned back in his seat and stared at the ceiling. “I had assumed that our killer or killers would have some purpose for remaining in the mountains for so long. Based on that theory, I assumed that there was some method to the victims chosen. The killings themselves are almost ritualistic in their methodology, but the people chosen as victims don’t seem to have any connection. Within the basic pattern is chaos.”

“Perhaps that supports Cynthia’s theory regarding a crazy vampire. One that maintains a serial method of killing but has no real preference of victims. Except for weak ones, of course.”

“I don’t know...” George rocked his chair back and forth slowly. “I’m at a loss, Sullivan. For the first time in quite a while, I have to admit to not having the answers here.”

“At least you admit it freely,” Sullivan said wryly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Victims by age. Nope.

“You’re a bit of a know-it-all, is what it means. It annoys the others sometimes.”

“Many of the things I do annoy the others. I’m not prone to worry about just one.”

“Suit yourself.” Sullivan remained faced toward the screen, impassive. George kept sorting.

“What’s bothering you, George?” Sullivan asked, still motionless.

“It’s not important.” Sullivan noted his evasiveness and recorded it as a sign of some deeper trouble that he was not ready to address. When he sighed softly a few moments later she noted that, too.

The team pushed through the last of the brush after about twenty minutes of hiking. They stepped out of the trees onto a narrow road on the very edge of town, just beyond the most outlying buildings.

“All right, Jake, give us some direction,” said Will.

Jake retrieved a folded map from a pocket and opened it. “We’re on Main Street. If we shimmy to the general store over yonder, I think we can dig up a phonebook to find our Mr. Herald’s address.”

“Over yonder?” Marc teased as the group walked down the cracked sidewalk to the store.

“Trying to blend in with the locals,” Jake answered wryly.

“Why would you want to?” said Marc, and Will sighed.

A pay phone stood at the corner of yonder general store and Jake wasted no time in retrieving the phonebook hanging underneath.

“Let’s see here...Ok, we’ve got three Heralds here. Herald, Tom, Herald, L., and Herald, G.”

“G.R. Herald, that’s our man,” Will said. “Got an address?”

“1265 Demagogue Road,” Jake replied. “Geez! What kind of a name is that for a place to live?”

“Hicks,” Marc muttered.

Jake looked over his map briefly. “Here it is. It’s a long one. Toward the end of this street and it runs for several miles up the mountain. We may be in for a long walk.”

“Then we’d better get going,” said Will.

Occasionally the collection of mismatched individuals received a curious look from a local as they marched down the street. The air cooled as the evening wore on. A steady breeze rustled the leaves in the trees. As the shadows grew long and the sunlight dimmed, Cynthia began to feel strangely out of place and a sense of foreboding creeping into her mind. It seemed odd to her that such an idyllic setting as this little country town would feel so threatening when the turmoil of the inner city only felt like home.

Aged buildings scrolled by as the team walked, brick and wood affairs with broken windows and cracked siding. Many of the storefronts they passed were empty and just as many houses were vacant and falling in, burned out or boarded up. Cynthia felt a strange welling of emotion as she looked at the rural ruins and with some surprise she realized it was pity. She had been living for almost three weeks in the lap of luxury and she now was face to face with the poverty so many of the people in the mountains lived with. *Is this how George thinks?* she wondered. *No wonder he's depressed all the time.*

Demagogue Road was almost all the way on the other side of the main body of town, where the buildings began to thin again. The road was barely wide enough for a single lane and the street sign was a dented hollow pole with a sign made entirely of rust. The brush alongside the road looked like it had never been trimmed. Long branches and vines grew out over the road as though hoping to ensnare unwary passersby. The foliage canopy above cast deep shadows over the path.

"Well, this isn't encouraging," Jake said. "In fact, it's kind of cliché."

"This is where the mystery dude lives?" Marc snarled.

"Maybe we should rethink the small arms only policy," suggested Jake.

"We have to keep a low profile, Jake," said Will.

"Yeah, but we didn't know our quarry was located on the pathway to hell."

"It's just a road, troops. We're just going to try to find this address and ask Mr. Herald a few questions. If anything seems out of place, we head back to the APC," Will said soothingly.

They started down the road. Marc kept flexing his fingers as they walked. The branches and foliage were constantly in the way. No traffic came by as they walked. The first house they came to was abandoned. It had been gutted by fire and the roof had long since collapsed into the second story. There was no mailbox but the street address was visible in old metal markers that still hung on the porch: 1198.

"At the rate we're going, by the time we get there, it will be time to turn back," Jake observed.

"Then we'll just have to pick up the pace," countered Will.

The next handful of houses was few and far between. They were mostly old-fashioned wooden farmhouses, many of them high above or below the road on hills or in miniature valleys. Half of them were nearly invisible from the road, hidden by the dense trees. Sometimes it was only the mailboxes standing forlornly at the end of narrow driveways that gave any indication of a residence. Some of the mailboxes had numbers missing or had no markings at all. Cynthia didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed when they came to one clearly labeled 1265 directly in front of a weathered two-story that stood out in the open. The house was layered in peeling white paint and the roof was made up of large sheets of tin bolted crudely together. The lawn was freshly mowed but clusters of weeds grew along the edge of the porch and around the mailbox.

"Jake?" asked Will. Jake produced the Osborn Eye from a pocket and began taking readings.

"There's nothing unusual so far as I can tell. It's a house in the woods," he said.

"All right, then. Cynthia and I will do the talking. You two hang back and watch for trouble," he said to Jake and Marc. "Let's go, Cynthia."

They walked up the driveway and down the stepping stone pathway to the front porch. An old table and chair stood on the broad porch between the steps and the door. The storm door was closed, but the front door was open.

"This is cool!" Cynthia chuckled as she skipped onto the porch. "I finally get to see some action!"

"Keep your cool," Will warned. "We're just talking to this man. We have no idea how he's going to react, so don't get any ideas about threatening him. We just want to see what we can find out."

"You won't let me have any fun," Cynthia whined.

"This isn't about fun. I didn't bring you with me to cause problems, I brought you because I was hoping you might help diffuse the situation."

"What do you mean by that?" Cynthia asked. Will looked away and raised his hand to knock on the storm door's frame.

"You think I'm pretty!" Cynthia exclaimed in delight.

Will froze in place with his hand raised. "What?"

"You hope that I'll put this guy at ease, or something. If you bring a couple of guys with guns, it

would look threatening. But you're hoping this guy will be distracted by me."

"What are you talking about?" Will said evasively.

"You think I'm pretty. So you hope this G.R. will too. Then maybe he'll talk instead of summoning a demon, or whatever."

"*She has a point, Will,*" George said through Will's camera. Will took out the camera, switched George's voice feed to "mute" and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"So what?" he snapped. "We're here to do a job and if this is the only way you'll be useful, that's fine with me. Now keep quiet." As Will knocked Cynthia made a show of sulking, but inwardly she was smiling.

Will's knock echoed in the house. The interior seemed dark from outside and they couldn't see anything moving. Will knocked again after a few moments and shortly afterward they could hear heavy footsteps on a staircase somewhere out of view.

"Here we go," Will said under his breath. A looming figure appeared around a corner inside. The ancient floorboards of the house creaked under its weight with each of its steps. As it walked toward them it suddenly moved into stronger light and they saw it for the man, G.R. Herald.

"Yes?" he said cordially.

Cynthia and Will exchanged glances.

"Uh...Mr. Herald? G.R. Herald?" asked Will.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"We wanna ask you some questions!" Cynthia said enthusiastically. Will bumped her with a hand to quiet her.

"We're investigating an incident that occurred in town last night," Will said. "A group of local residents were attacked and injured near here."

"You're from the city?" G.R. asked.

"Yes, that's right. One of the victims mentioned you when we interviewed him."

"I was mentioned?" asked G.R. His voice was full of very believable surprise, but Cynthia found herself feeling suspicious. She very nearly peeked into his mind before she remembered she was standing next to Will. She swallowed and looked around nervously.

"The gentleman we talked to mentioned that you had walked near the house, just before he and his friends were attacked." Will chose his words carefully. "We hoped you might have been close enough to be a witness to what happened. We're having trouble finding the individuals that did this."

"Individuals?" G.R. asked.

"The account given by the victims states that a gang from the city was responsible for the attack."

"Interesting. Were any of the victims killed?" asked G.R. impassively.

"No, they have all been hospitalized and are expected to recover."

"That's a damn shame," G.R. said coldly.

"You knew them?" Cynthia asked. She wanted very badly to wander around inside this guy's head.

"Unfortunately. Everyone knows about Lee and his idiot friends. It's a shame none of them died."

"Why is that?" asked Will harshly.

"Because they're a bunch of jackasses. Being beaten to a pulp by a gang is too good for them," G.R. snapped back.

"I see. Did you by chance see their attackers?" Will pressed, despite the bile rising in his throat. "Would you be able to identify suspects in a lineup?"

"I didn't see any gang. Even if I had seen anyone attacking that jackass Parker and his friends, I sure as hell wouldn't do their attackers the disservice of turning them in. Come to think of it, I'd probably buy them a drink. If that will be all?" He stepped back and closed the inside door.

Will took his camera out of his pocket and clicked George's voice feed back on. "George," he said, "I think we have a problem."

"What happened?" Jake asked as Will and Cynthia walked back to where he and Marc stood in the

road.

“He’s hiding something. I don’t think he was the attacker himself, but he knows more than he’s letting on,” Will answered.

“*His words were very deliberately chosen. Did you catch them?*” George asked through Will’s camera. “*He didn’t see any gang. He wouldn’t admit to seeing anyone attacking the victims even if he had and oh, how fortunate, he knew who was attacked--because everyone has heard of it, of course.*”

“That is very suspicious,” Jake said.

“I kinda got the impression that he knew who or what did it,” Cynthia put in.

“Same here, and the feeling that he doesn’t care that those men were hurt, just because he doesn’t like them,” Will agreed.

“So what do we do?” asked Jake.

“*I fear that we have come to the proverbial ‘hard part,’*” George said. “*Since you were unable to find anything out, you must now fall to observing the behavior and habits of Mr. Herald. If he is in league with our quarry, then you may be able to catch them meeting at some point in the near future.*”

“I suppose so,” Will said.

“Hey--where’s Marc?” Jake suddenly asked.

Marc crept through the copses of trees behind G.R.’s house with impressive stealth. He set his boots on tree roots to avoid rustling leaves and bent and twisted around branches with amazing fluidity.

He had slipped away from the group the moment George started talking about the “hard part.” George always wanted to do things the hard way. “Let’s stand around for a few days, see if a monster walks around with a sign around its neck saying ‘I eat people.’” Then we can talk to it nicely over a cup of tea and some crumpets, or whatever the hell it was George liked to eat with tea.

Forget that. If this G.R. had beat up a bunch of weakling white trash from a hick town, that was one thing. Beating Marc in a fair fight would be something else altogether. If Mr. Tough Guy wanted to hide out in his little house, then Marc would just have to go in after him. Maybe battering a dent in his skull and dropping a refrigerator on his head would make him a little more willing to talk about the attacks.

He slipped behind a bush that was only a hop away from the back door of the house and set down his duffle bag, then took a length of pipe and a set of brass knuckles out of it and stuffed it into the brush. Putting the knuckles on his right hand, he pulled the screen door open as quietly as possible. The inside door was locked but the wood was old, so Marc braced his shoulder against it and pushed on the lock until the wood around the handle broke with a sharp crack. Marc listened as the door drifted open, waiting for any indication that someone inside the house had heard him and was coming to investigate. No one came, so he gripped his pipe tightly and stepped inside.

The house was minimally furnished and quite gloomy. Marc was in a laundry room with a washer and dryer and some shelves with dry goods on them. He snuck through a door on his right into a kitchen and from there into a living room. There were no lights on and no one anywhere on the first floor that he could see, but he heard heavy metal music playing somewhere upstairs. In one corner of the living room was a staircase, and he took it. He walked on the edges of the steps along the walls to avoid having the wood creak and announce his presence.

Only one of the rooms at the top of the stairs had any lights on, which showed around the seams of a door that was only open a sliver. It was from this room that the music came. The song that had been playing ended and another one started, this one a sentimental bit of alternative rock. Marc winced when he recognized it: one of the latest ballads by Adam Walker.

People all think he’s so great, Marc muttered to himself as he edged to the partially open door of the lighted room. *If only they had any idea--*

He cut himself off to focus as he leaned to see inside the room. A figure he assumed was G.R. was sitting at a computer desk with his back to the door. G.R. had an impressive set of speakers on his computer and the music was coming from them while G.R. surfed the Net, flipping though numerous windows simultaneously.

Marc chanced leaning through the door to get a better look at the room. There was no one else present. The walls around the room were lined with bookshelves. The light came from a standing lamp in one corner. G.R. continued to surf, blissfully unaware of the intruder in his asylum.

Marc inched up behind him step by step. He took note of everything in the room as he went, the proximity of heavy objects in the room, the stack of gaming magazines on the floor next to the computer table, the half-dozen empty beer cans on the printer table. Marc grimaced at the last part. If G.R. were drunk, he might have a much higher pain threshold. Then beating him up wouldn't be nearly as much fun. He stopped a single pace away from G.R. and tapped him on the shoulder with the pipe.

"Back so soon?" G.R. said casually as he turned around and Marc bashed him in the face with his brass knuckles. G.R. flopped out of his chair onto the floor with a comical cry of pain. Marc quickly grabbed G.R. by his collar, lifted him to his feet and hurled him face-first against a bookcase.

"What the hell are--" G.R. began to say. Marc jabbed him in the upper lip with his pipe.

"I'll do the talking now, thanks," he said, grabbed G.R.'s shirt with his right hand and hauled him to his feet. "First up: what do you know about what happened to those guys last night?"

"What are you--" G.R. said again. Marc slammed him backwards against the bookcase again and then hauled him forward. G.R. was a good inch taller than Marc, but Marc held him high enough that G.R. was perched on his tiptoes.

"Wrong answer, punk!" Marc said. "This is very simple. If you don't tell me what I want to know, I'm going to break things until you do. Now, one more time. The guys that got beat up. Did you do it?"

"No! I kicked Lee while he was down, but I didn't beat them up."

"If you didn't, then who did?"

"I can't tell you!"

Marc shook his head. "You geeks always wanna do this the hard way." He let go of G.R., who toppled backwards onto the floor. Marc walked to stand by the computer and looked at the screen.

"What's this? Comics? Something about a card game? A bunch of news clippings about planets and moons and stuff." He turned the chair around and straddled it. "You really need a life, you know that?"

G.R. was inching backwards across the floor away from Marc. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" he gasped.

"Man, you just don't get it!" Marc blared and stood again to stomp and loom menacingly over G.R.. "I'm asking the questions, and since you're taking so long to give me answers, I'm getting kinda thirsty. So before I kick your ass some more, how about you fetch me some of that beer?"

A strangely knowing smile crossed G.R.'s face. "It's not mine," he said.

"Oh yeah? Then who's it?"

"That would be me," said a vibrant baritone voice from behind Marc and someone hit him in the back...*hard*. So hard that he was knocked forward above G.R. into the bookshelves. Two of the battered shelves broke after being assaulted by so many large bodies and a rain of heavy hardback books followed Marc on his plunge to the floor.

"What the--?!" it was Marc's turn to exclaim. A grip unlike anything he had ever felt seized him around the back of his head and lifted him off the floor.

"You are trespassing," the mysterious voice said and Marc was flung through the door out of the room into the hallway. He fell into a roll, came up on his feet brandishing his pipe and swung wildly through the dark at the heavy footsteps he heard coming. The shock that ran down his arm told him he had hit something, but the pipe was stopped cold and Marc thought for an instant that he had somehow hit a piece of furniture. As his eyes adjusted to the gathering dark of the hall, he saw that he had not struck an inanimate object, but a tall figure, not heavyset like G.R. but powerfully muscled like Marc was. Marc's pipe had struck him just at the base of the neck. The figure regarded him impassively with black eyes, like those of a doll. Then he moved with blinding speed and Marc's pipe clattered to the floor.

"I don't like this," Jake was saying as the team walked together up the driveway to G.R.'s front door. "We said not to split up, now Marc's gone."

“He’s wandered off, like he always does,” Will grumbled. “I’d bet real money that he came here.”

“I don’t hear a bar fight, are you sure he didn’t go in another direction?” Cynthia asked as they neared the porch. Glass shattered somewhere overhead and Marc fell from above and landed squarely in a bush around the corner of the house.

“Holy crap!” exclaimed Jake as the team ran to his side. Marc was covered in bruises and cuts from the glass. He scampered out of the bush and flopped onto the ground.

“Where is he?!” he demanded as he got to his feet. “I’ll break him in half!”

“Who? What’s going on?” Cynthia asked frantically.

“Dude! You’re bleeding!” Jake said in horror.

“What’s happening, Marc? Were you fighting G.R. in there?” demanded Will.

“No, there’s somebody else. He’s got a friend--” Marc said as he tried to shove his way past Jake and Will toward the front door. Presently something heavy thumped on the roof above them. As one, the four team members looked up and saw a massive figure standing on the roof, silhouetted in the fading evening light, still as a stone.

Marc pointed an indignant finger at the shadow and roared, “Give me back my pipe!” The shadow moved then, apparently flexing its arms between the team and the light behind it, so they could not see what it was doing. Then a small object landed on the ground at their feet with a soft *thump*. Jake picked it up and they saw what it was: Marc’s pipe. It was twisted and bent with a series of ripples across its length.

“Um, yikes,” said Jake.

In a flash Will had his pistols out from under his trench coat and fired into the air at the figure, which flipped backwards over the roof and out of sight. “Go! Back to the APC!” Will shouted, and the team ran as fast as they could go away from the house.

“What the hell is going on?” Jake shouted as the four frightened monster hunters ran almost blindly back down the road they had walked only a few minutes before.

“It wasn’t a vampire,” Marc puffed. “Damn thing was stronger and faster than anything.” He ducked to avoid a low hanging branch as he ran. “He’s definitely on G.R.’s side, though.”

“I don’t think I hit it,” Will said. “We’ll get back to the APC and set up a watch for the night. Tomorrow we’ll come up during the day while it’s bright, and start recon--”

“Quiet!” Jake shouted suddenly as he stopped in his tracks. The others continued on for several paces before stopping themselves.

“What?” Will asked, but Jake silenced him with a raised finger.

“We’re not alone,” Jake said softly. In the eerily quiet forest night the team listened and heard what Jake had meant: something rustling in the woods off to their right, keeping pace with them as they went.

Will cocked his guns and in the silence they seemed to roar like thunder. Marc brandished his brass knuckles and didn’t appear to care that they were covered in blood from the many cuts he had gotten flying through a window. Jake produced a pair of silenced pistols with scopes from under his jacket. Cynthia snuck behind Will and readied the most powerful weapon any of them had: her mind.

The rustling had stopped and the only sounds were crickets chirping and the occasional gust of wind in the branches overhead. Each of the four looked nervously about, waiting for something to happen. Cynthia decided that what Will didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him and reached into the trees with her mind.

First she sought the taint of evil that so many monsters carried about them. To her surprise she found nothing, so she switched to telepathy and tried to listen in on the thoughts of whatever was hunting them. To her amazement she still found nothing. She gasped out loud, then clapped a hand over her mouth and looked nervously at the others to see if any of them had noticed. None of them had.

Cynthia wrung her hands together and fidgeted as the seconds crawled by. How could there be nothing? Everything had thoughts--people, monsters, and even most animals, especially the more intelligent ones. Animals tended to think in very simple concepts and pictures, but there were still images in their minds that a telepath could read. Even undead had thoughts as their brains still functioned. But this thing, whatever it was, had no thoughts that Cynthia could read. What could it possibly be? It was obviously animate and intelligent, so it had to be thinking...but where were the thoughts?

A huge branch cracked loudly right behind the group and Will, Marc and Jake spun on their heels. Will and Jake instinctively fired into the darkness before getting hold of themselves. Again the ominous silence crept over the road and even the crickets began to sing again after a few moments.

“He’s toying with us,” Will whispered. “Jake!”

“Yeah!”

“Take Cynthia. Make your way to the APC as fast as you can go.”

“Are you flipped?” Marc said harshly. “We can’t split up now!”

“We’ve got no choice! This thing seems to be afraid of us, or at least our firepower. We’ll all go together, but at the next sign of this thing Marc and I will stop and keep it occupied while you go for the APC. We’re going to need shelter and extra weapons to take it on.”

Slowly they began again, working their way along the road, then moving faster to a jog as the moments passed. With each moment that there was no sign of their pursuer they began to feel more confident. Jake even began to wonder if he and Will might have actually wounded it with their last shots when a tree with a trunk as thick around as he was toppled onto the road ahead of them with an earth-shaking crash. The tree was old and dead and the broken pieces of the trunk wobbled on the blacktop.

“Where is it?” Marc rumbled frantically. The night was quiet again--even the crickets and the wind were holding their breaths.

Will traced the tree line with his eyes, keeping his pistols aligned with his line of sight. He stopped as he came to face directly into the trees to the team’s left. The figure was standing there, just inside the edge of the trees, watching them. It did not flee when he pointed his pistols right at its head, but looked impassively at him, as if waiting for him to make the next move.

“Step out where we can see you!” Will commanded, and the others started at the sound of his voice. When they saw what he was looking at, Jake and Marc came straight to Will’s side, keeping Cynthia behind them.

“I said, come out now!” Will demanded. The figure still didn’t move or speak.

“Will,” George said through Will’s pocket camera, “*try to get away. See if it will let you go.*”

“No way!” Marc shouted suddenly and pushed past Will and Jake. “I owe this guy some payback!”

“Marc!” Will called, but it was too late. Marc rushed at the figure and threw a right straight at its head. It weaved aside from the blow and struck Marc soundly in his solar plexus with the base of its palm, knocking the wind out of him and pushing him back three steps. Will leapt to his left to get a shot at the attacker but by the time he had a clear line of fire it was on Marc again, grabbed him and threw him onto his back at Jake’s feet.

“Jake! Go!” Will ordered.

“But what about--”

“GO!” Will fired two shots at the dark figure and it raced back into the trees in a blur. Jake and Cynthia took off, running together down the road and not looking back.

Will turned to check on Marc, but the big man was already regaining his feet and struggled to say something through his shortness of breath. He wheezed out his words again, and Will stepped closer, trying to make out what it was he was saying.

“Behind--you!” Marc gasped, and Will spun guns raised. The attacker was there, barely a pace away from him and knocked his guns out of his hands with an open palm. They skittered down the pavement like tossed pebbles and came to rest at the edge of the road in the leaves and sticks.

The attacker came at Will with a straight punch, which Will tried to parry the punch. It was a very basic concept in hand-to-hand combat: push an attack aside just enough that it missed you. Will had done it countless times with all sorts of adversaries.

This was like trying to push aside an oncoming train. He only shoved his opponent’s arm a little to the left and the fist clipped his shoulder. It felt like a large rock hitting him and the force of the blow twisted him halfway around in place. Fingers with grips like hydraulic presses grabbed him by the back of his neck and his right arm. Then a shock ran through that horrendous grip and it loosened. A thumping

sound like something striking a cushion came from behind him and he turned around to see what it was.

The attacker had turned to face Marc, who was repeatedly bashing him in the face and temple with his brass knuckles. Will had seen Marc flatten huge bikers with single punches and take arrogant vampires off their feet with ease, but for all the effect he was having here he might have been trying to punch out a mountain. A look of disbelief worked its way onto his face even as he struck the creature again and again. Suddenly the attacker raised its left hand like lightning and seized Marc's fist. It twisted it around until Marc's hand was upside-down and bent backwards as far as it would go. Then the attacker twisted in place and grabbed Will by the throat and he couldn't breathe enough even to cry out in fear.

Cynthia and Jake hustled through the single block that made up the downtown of Pointville. For the first time Cynthia was glad for the morning exercise routines George put them all through. By now the shops were closed and traffic on the street was non-existent. Jake took them on a shortcut through the woods, which Cynthia *really* didn't think was a good idea considering they had no light and didn't know the area: but Jake carried the Osborn Eye, which blipped and whirred constantly and he seemed to know where he was going. *Maybe he has a homing device or something in it*, Cynthia thought and trusted his judgment.

They plunged through the trees and hurried as fast as they could without falling down the mountain. Cynthia was very relieved when they finally broke into the clearing where the APC waited. Jake switched off the APC alarm with the Eye and they climbed inside.

"All right, time for some heavy firepower," Jake said triumphantly as he keyed the engine. "George? Are you getting all of this?"

"*Hurry, Jake,*" George said through the dash speakers, and his voice was almost choked with worry. "*Will's camera went offline a few moments ago.*"

Jake looked at Cynthia. Then he punched in a long access code on a control panel on the dash.

"All right, Janice, time to rock and roll!" he said.

"Who's Janice?" Cynthia asked. She yelped when a female voice filtered through the speakers:

"Welcome! What do you want to level today?"

"We've got to go, Janice. I'll explain on the way." Jake slammed the APC into gear and roared onto the road. He hooked into a sharp u-turn and small trees on the far side of the road cracked and toppled as the left side of the APC swung out over the edge, then roared up the road and around the bend into town. Given that there was no one else around, Jake took the liberty of driving at breakneck speed down the street until he could whip around the turn onto Demagogue Road. The APC took up nearly the entire road and the many branches that hung in the way were broken or tossed aside violently as the war machine rumbled to where Jake and Cynthia had left Will and Marc.

"Bring all the weapons on line, including the mortars," Jake was saying. "Whatever this thing is, it's fast, so clear out all the memory needed to have the tracing programs at peak ability. I want thermal and motion scanners working overtime and watch for traces of metal, too. If Will hit him, we may be able to zero in on the bullets. By the way, Cynthia, this is Janice. She's the APC's artificial intelligence program. She helps reduce task loads so that I can do more at once. For example, I can be driving while she shoots at this thing when we find--" He stopped short.

"Oh, no," Cynthia said and covered her mouth.

The headlights of the APC had fallen over Will and Marc, who lay in heaps in the road. There was no sign of the attacker anywhere.

"Marc! Will!" Jake shouted as he leapt out of the hastily parked APC and ran to them. "Guys! Speak to me!"

He knelt beside Will and rolled him onto his back. Will looked like he'd been in a fistfight with a biker gang, but he was still conscious.

"Will? You ok?" Jake asked frantically.

"...fine..."

"Cynthia! How's Marc?"

Cynthia had caught up with Jake and reluctantly left Will's side to check on Marc. Marc had been

beaten too, and he wasn't conscious, but when Cynthia checked his pulse she found he was alive.

"He's still with us," she said. "What do we do?"

"Help me get them in the APC," Jake grunted as he helped Will to stand. Once Will was laid out on the floor in the back of the APC, Jake and Cynthia dragged Marc inside as well.

"Janice! Get the door!" Jake commanded.

"Acknowledged," replied Janice and the door slammed and locked with a rumble.

"George! I've got medical systems working now. What do we need to do?" Jake said as he dashed back and forth between workstations and attached various sensors to Will and Marc's arms and necks. Along the ceiling, a long bar mounted in parallel tracks, like the scanner of a copier, rolled along the ceiling, taking x-rays of the two fallen warriors.

"Stand by." Several tense moments passed as George and Sullivan reviewed the information Janice was feeding to the Mansion. "*Strange. Very strange...*" George could be heard muttering.

"What is it, George? Time's wasting!" Jake spat.

"*They're fine, Jake,*" George said to Jake's and Cynthia's amazement. "*They've been thoroughly beaten, but they are merely bruised and battered. They have no broken bones, no internal bleeding... whatever did this knew expertly how to harm a person without causing permanent damage.*"

Jake, who had been steeling himself to hear that his friends were mortally wounded, breathed a huge sigh of relief at the strange but not unwelcome news. Cynthia went to Will's side and touched his forehead gently. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"...be...fine..." he groaned. He twitched suddenly and moaned in pain.

"Hold still," Cynthia said soothingly as she sat by his side and closed her eyes. The sensations of the outside world melted away as she tuned herself to Will's pain. As seconds passed Will felt the burden of his injuries growing less until after a couple of minutes he was able to sit up unaided. He looked in disbelief at his hands and arms and felt his sides. He was still bruised, but the pain had faded to a distant numbness. He stood up and stretched a bit and found that despite a few tender places, he felt ready to fight again.

Cynthia beamed at him with pride until she remembered Jake. He was staring slack-jawed at Will, who also suddenly remembered what was going on.

"Er...thanks, Jake. I guess I got my second wind, or something," he said weakly and cast a suspicious look at Cynthia.

"Sure, ok," said Jake in open confusion. "Can't look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose. C'mon, we're getting out of here."

"No! Wait!" Will said, and tugged at the side door. It held fast. "Janice! Open the door!"

"Acknowledged."

Will hopped outside and vanished into the night. Jake and Cynthia exchanged bewildered glances, then Will appeared again carrying his twin pistols.

"Now we're ready," he said.

"Janice! Lock the door and get ready for travel." Jake said.

"No!" Will countered. "We can't leave."

"*Will, far be it from me to go over your head, but perhaps you should consider the situation more carefully,*" George said. "*You all are clearly out of your league and right now is definitely not the time for you to fight this thing.*"

"We can't let him get away, George," Will said. "We don't know if we'll ever find him again."

"*This goes against my better judgment,*" George complained.

"Duly noted," Will said. "Back to the house, Jake. Slowly, and with the lights down. We'll see if we can track him."

"Right," Jake said in a less-than-confident tone.

Cynthia was working on relieving Marc's pain now, but deep in the back of her mind she couldn't help but wonder about something Jake had said earlier, at the meeting. None of this seemed to fit the pattern of the thing they were chasing. A killer that decapitated its victims and preyed on children and

families didn't seem to have much in common with a fighter that went out of his way to avoid crippling two guys that attacked him with pipes and guns.

"Guys," she ventured weakly, "maybe this really isn't a good idea..."

"I've got something on the tracker," Jake said, giving no indication that he had heard her. "Janice, are those mortars ready?"

"Affirmative."

Jake let out a contented sigh. "Ah, a woman who speaks in military lingo."

"What have you got on the tracker?" Will asked as he settled into the shotgun seat.

"It's hard to tell with all these trees, but it looks like we have a single body moving back toward the house a stone's throw to our right. It looks like a very gentle slope with light trees." He steered the slowly moving APC with one hand while fiddling with various instruments on the dash.

"Is he running?" asked Will.

"I don't think so. He's moving at a walking pace."

"What's he doing? Going for a walk in the woods?" Will asked. He checked the chambers of his guns as he spoke.

"I guess so. The good news is, he'll be an easy target while he's moving slowly," Jake replied. He took hold of a joystick on the dash and leaned it to the right. On top of the APC a paired set of auto-mortars that had emerged from a hatch in the armor began to swivel clockwise with a dull buzz of machinery. Jake's eyes were locked on a quartet of small screens on the dash that constantly fed him information: target direction and motion, wind speed, the angle of the mortars.

"*Make certain you get him with your first shot, Jake,*" George warned.

"No problem, I--hey!" Jake exclaimed. "He's gone!"

Stunned, Will leaned in his seat to get a better look at the screens. The screen for the motion detector was a black field with a large blue dot in the center to represent the APC. Before there had been a small white dot on the right side of the screen to represent the target. Occasionally there was a blip where a wild animal moved or a large branch swayed in the wind, but the steadily moving dot had vanished.

"What the hell?" Will growled.

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. Stand by," Jake said as he parked the APC and punched a series of controls. Topside, in front of the mortars, a rig of cameras, a searchlight and a night vision scope rose out of another hatch in the armor.

All this time Cynthia had remained focused on Marc, who came to with a gasp and a jerk. He grunted as he sat up, rubbed the back of his head and looked around.

"Ugh...where am I?" he groaned.

Will turned in his seat to face Marc and Cynthia. "We're in the APC. Are you all right? That thing knocked you out cold!"

"Yeah, I feel fine," Marc said. "Where is he?! Let me at 'im!"

"We're tracking him now, buddy," Jake said reassuringly. "Or we will be, once we figure out where the hell he went." He was sweeping the night scope back and forth, examining the field where the mystery attacker had been. The trees constantly blocked his view. The image on the screen was made up entirely of various shades of green and cast an eerie light on Jake's face as he watched it.

When he couldn't find the target in the immediate area, he started scanning further along in the direction of G.R.'s house. Before long a wooden structure loomed on the screen and he twisted a dial on the controls, reducing the night scope's magnification. The building was a large barn, very old by the look of it and apparently abandoned. Part of the wall facing Jake had collapsed. The whole of the structure was weathered and decrepit.

That must be it, Jake thought. He ran for the barn while I was distracted. Now I just have to figure out how to flush him out of there so... "What the...?"

"What is it, Jake?" Will asked, once again leaning over to look at the little screens.

"He's on the roof of this barn!" exclaimed Jake.

"He's on top of a *barn*!?" Will said and looked at the display screen. Sure enough, the attacker was standing on the apex of the roof. "How the heck did he get up there so fast?"

"It doesn't matter. He's about to come back down again in a hurry," Jake said as he grasped the mortar firing controls.

He stood perfectly still atop the barn, staring into the night. When he finally moved, it was to rub the slowly drying blood on his hands between his thumb and fingers. His skin creaked like leather as he rubbed it together.

It was then that he heard the sound. It was a distant roar, followed by a faint whistling. As the seconds ticked by he tilted his head slightly to listen to the sound, which quickly grew louder and became a harsh screech. Realization dawned on him then and he crouched and leapt backwards, flinging himself along the full length of the roof to land standing on its edge just as two mortar shells struck the roof and exploded exactly where he had been. The mortar shells blasted a hole in the roof and he could feel the heat of the explosion over the chill wind. Shards of ancient timbers and bits of tin pelted him until he stepped backwards and allowed himself to fall from the roof.

When he landed the soles of his feet drove into the soil up to his ankles under his weight. He straightened and listened for the sound again. Sure enough, within just a few seconds he heard the whistling, sharper this time: the sound of several shots in succession. He spun on his heels and ran away from the barn into the field. Half a dozen anti-personnel shells exploded all around the area where he had just been, blasting ugly craters in the ground and the walls of the barn.

Deciding he'd had enough, he turned and ran at top speed toward the road.

"Nuts!" Jake snarled.

"Did you get him?" Cynthia asked. She and Marc were leaning around behind Jake and Will's chairs to see what was happening.

"I can't tell. I gave him a pretty good spread, but he's so damn fast and I can't see a thing through all these trees." He kept searching around the barn for his target as he spoke.

The motion tracker beeped and a small white dot flickered once quite a distance from the APC, then once much closer.

"Stupid peace of junk!" Jake growled as he slapped the dash. "I can't read a thing in here, maybe if we found a break in the foliage--"

Something slammed against the right side of the APC like a freight train and made it rock up onto its left wheels. Will nearly came up out of his seat. Cynthia fell into Marc, who fell against the instrument panels along the left wall.

The armored side door was hit again even as the APC settled with a crash. The sound of the impact echoed inside the vehicle. Over and over again the armor was pounded and the APC rocked like a shaken rowboat. The door contorted inward in small blisters with each impact.

"Janice!" Jake shouted over the thundering blows. "Damage report!"

"Severe damage to personnel door. All other systems nominal."

Ominously, the pounding stopped just as Janice finished her report. Jake braced himself for another hammering assault like the first, but none came.

"What's going on?" Cynthia cried frantically as she got back into her seat. As if in reply, the APC rocked again, but gently and quietly, as though the right side tires had rolled up onto a curve while driving.

"Now what?" Will muttered. Jake shook his head. The APC shuddered again and began to tip slowly and steadily to the left.

"It's *lifting* us?!" Marc shouted.

"No way! We weigh close to five tons!" Jake said. The APC stopped tilting when it reached a sharp enough angle that Marc and Cynthia were no longer standing on the floor but leaning against the left wall, and Will was practically hanging from his door handle to stay in his seat. The great vehicle trembled for a heartbeat, then dropped back onto its tires, flinging the four teammates around like rag dolls.

We were too heavy to flip, Jake thought and wasted no time shifting into forward gear. He stomped

the pedal into the floor and the APC roared down the road.

Without needing to be told Will grabbed the dash camera controls and started turning the rig around so he could keep watch behind them as they went. Jake abandoned all pretences of stealth and turned on the high beams. Low-hanging branches crashed and broke against the bullet-resistant windshield as they hurtled through the tunnel of trees around the tiny road.

"I can't see a thing!" Will exclaimed. His eyes flickered from the camera monitors to the motion tracker, neither of which showed any sign of their attacker.

"It doesn't matter," Jake answered over the engine's howl. "We just need to keep away from him long enough for me to turn around and get us the hell out of here."

"We're fools," Will whispered to himself. "We should have examined the situation more closely, found out what we were getting ourselves into."

"What the hell is it? How can it be that strong?" Marc blurted.

"Who cares, as long as it stays back there," Jake said. He was watching the motion tracker as he barreled down the road. It was ominously quiet.

Is he just standing in the road? Jake wondered, and then a terrible thought occurred to him. As he reached to change the motion tracker's scanning mode, something heavy hit the APC from above.

He can fly! Jake thought as he slammed on the brakes. The tires screamed as the APC skidded to a halt. The attacker sailed off of the roof and landed on the road ahead of them, rolling with his momentum until he stopped a stone's throw away.

"Everyone ok?" Will asked.

"That's subjective," Jake said softly. The attacker slowly rose to his feet and came walking back toward them down the road. He didn't appear angry, or afraid, or hurt, he just walked right toward them with clear self-confidence. Jake's fingers clenched on the wheel and gearshift, but Will held up a hand.

"Don't run," he said. Jake looked at him as though he had lost his mind.

"He could have rushed us again, but he's standing in full view, Jake. Let's not panic just yet."

"Don't panic," Jake muttered. "Sure, no problem."

As he came closer, illuminated in the APC's high beams, the team got their first good look at him. He had a solid, muscular build set on a broad-shouldered frame, and dark brown hair that was almost a military short length. He wore a simple gray shirt and denim shorts that were torn and singed in many places. His feet were bare and on his hands were black fingerless gloves. Cynthia noted with a raised eyebrow that he was rather handsome.

His most striking feature, though, were his eyes. At first they appeared to be simply dark brown, but as he drew closer the team could see he had no irises or pupils, just two perfectly round black spots within. He stopped walking with his legs almost touching the front bumper and looked at each team member individually. When he looked at Cynthia she thought with a shudder that it seemed more like he was looking through her than at her.

"Should I back away, Will?" Jake asked.

Will was holding his pistols beside his knees. "Yes, go slowly and see if--"

All four teammates jumped at a sudden series of thumps on the side door. Cynthia cringed away from it and Marc took to turning a length of pipe over in his hands. Cynthia saw out of the corner of her eye that the man outside had turned his head to look at something outside the door.

The pounding came again and it seemed, now that Cynthia thought about it, like an ordinary knock. Will leaned forward to glance out of his window and he looked first surprised, then confused at what he saw.

"Janice, open the door," he said slowly.

"Acknowledged."

Jake gave Will another disbelieving look as the side door opened. It made painful screeching sounds as it slid along its warped track to reveal G.R. standing just outside.

"I think we should talk," he said.

Chapter III The Angel

Will climbed out of his seat and into the back between the open door and Marc and Cynthia. He held his guns out visibly but kept them lowered. "What do you want?" he asked G.R..

"I was about to ask you that same question!" G.R. said. "What the hell are you doing shooting at my friend? Or breaking into my house and assaulting me?"

"I can pick up where I left off, punk!" growled Marc. He made as if to move toward G.R. but Will held up an arm in front of him. The mystery attacker had walked around the front of the APC and now stood by G.R., watching Marc intently.

"That's what got you into trouble in the first place, 'punk,'" G.R. said coldly. "I suggest you pull this thing into my driveway so we can talk."

Jake scoffed. "Why would we do something like that?"

"Because," G.R. replied, "if we wanted to hurt you, we could. Like it or not, you're at our mercy. Well, his, anyway," he said with a nod to his companion. "Instead of retaliating all we want is an exchange of information." With that he turned and walked away, followed by his silent friend. As she watched them go Cynthia realized something: they had stopped just up the road from G.R.'s house. *Is that why the big guy landed on us?* she wondered. *Was he afraid we were going after his house?*

"What do you think, George?" Will asked the dash.

"A curious predicament. I'd suggest proceeding with extreme caution."

Jake did a double take at the dash speakers. "You're not suggesting that we actually follow them?"

"Why not? As Mr. Herald so capriciously pointed out, he and his ally definitely had the upper hand in facing you. If they had wanted to do you harm, they certainly could have. Instead they have extended an offer for peace, after a fashion."

"George, are you forgetting a few minutes ago when you were so worried about Will and Marc?"

"I was uncertain of their condition then, Jake, and feared the worst. Now we have witnessed a being capable of surviving assaults with anti-armor weapons sparing the lot of you. I think that warrants speaking with him and Mr. Herald at their request."

Jake looked at Will, who seemed pensive, if not enthusiastic. Marc and Cynthia were both quiet.

"Well, captain?" asked Jake.

Will sighed. "Let's do it. Park in the driveway. I'll get out, then you lock the doors while I talk to them. If they do anything suspicious, pull out and don't stop running until you're in the Workshop. Understand?"

"I gotcha," Jake said solemnly. He drove very slowly down the road and up into G.R.'s driveway. G.R. and his friend were there and motioned them to pull past the end of the driveway and up among some trees behind the house.

When they had stopped Will hopped outside and closed his door and Jake hit the locks. Will walked around to the front of the APC and waited for his hosts to come to him. Jake tapped on the windshield to get his attention and then tossed out his camera. Will put it on and turned up the speaker volume on it.

"All right then," G.R. said as he and his friend walked around Jake's side of the APC. "I think introductions are in order."

"My name is William Thatcher," said Will. "My companions are Jake Osborn, Marc Schaeffer, and Cynthia Arden."

"Hello William, I am Fierce Herald, and this is Nails." Nails gave G.R. a strange look when his name was mentioned but said nothing. "Now that we know who we all are, I think it's fair to have a rotating series of questions, don't you? One question at a time for each, what do you say?"

"Fine. I'll go first," Will said savagely. "Are you the one who attacked those men last night?"

"No. He is," G.R. said casually. "My turn now: why were we attacked just now?"

Will's jaw dropped at the audacity of the question. "You're the ones who attacked those men!"

"That's your concern, how, exactly?" G.R. said loftily.

"We are protectors of the innocent and defenders of the public interest. That makes it our business," George said suddenly.

"Wow. The voices in my head are a little louder than usual," G.R. said. Nails slapped him upside the head.

"Who is this?" Nails asked as G.R. rubbed his head.

"My name is George Manor. I am the patron and mentor of the brave souls before you."

"Why did you send them here, George?"

"As Will said before, we are investigating the attack of the young men last night and we had cause to believe Mr. G.R. Herald was in some way involved."

"My name is *Fierce!*" G.R. snapped, but Nails held up a hand to quiet him.

"We were both involved. What do you mean to do now that you know?"

"That, my forward friend, is a very complicated matter. Partially it will depend on exactly what your motives for the attack might have been."

"Hey, they were in *our* faces--" began G.R., but Nails silenced him again.

"To quote you, that is a very complicated matter," he said. "The long and the short of it would be the men in question attacked Sullen on his way home from the bookstore and I protected him. You know that none of the men were killed or permanently crippled?"

"Yes," George said slowly. *"To be honest, that has been puzzling me."*

"It was deliberate. If you want to know more, we could speak in person. In private."

"Oh, that's nice," said Will sarcastically. "Get all of us together in one place. Might make it easier for another massacre."

Nails narrowed his eyes and walked toward Will. Whatever he was, he seemed to be very heavy, as each of his footsteps thumped loudly on the ground. The team inside the APC held their breaths as they helplessly watched Nails walk until he was eye to eye with Will.

"I could have reduced those men to twitching stains on the pavement last night," Nails said with cold menace. "I could have killed you and your friends and left your bodies hanging in the trees. Instead I gave you a mild thrashing and left you. You could try showing a little respect on account of that."

"A little respect?! You beat up six people!" Will said defiantly. Though he stood his ground Cynthia could almost feel the repressed fear coming off of him without even trying. "Not to mention, throwing Marc through a window and attacking us!"

"Oh, I'm *sorry!*" Nails snarled. "The next time a skinhead breaks into my cousin's house and starts throwing him around the room, I'll just mind my own business, how about that?"

"Gentlemen, please. This bickering is pointless. I suggest a truce, if you are willing. I will come meet with you on your own turf, on the condition that no further hostilities be directed at my people."

"Agreed," G.R. said, "with the additional caveat that the same conditions must inversely be observed by your own agents, verbatim."

"Huh?" Marc muttered.

"No punchy, no fighty," explained Jake.

"Ah, shoot," Marc whimpered.

"You're one to talk," said Cynthia. "You look like you've been in a hatchet fight without a hatchet."

"Hey, he just got some lucky shots in. I coulda taken him."

Jake looked from Marc's bruised face to the mangled personnel door and back. "You think so?"

"Well...maybe I coulda used a little bit of help."

George meanwhile had accepted G.R. and Nails' terms and agreed to meet them in ninety minutes time. In the interest of peace the two groups would segregate themselves from each other until then. G.R. and Nails went back into their house and Jake let Will back into the APC.

"So, we're just waiting?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, we're just waiting." Will rubbed a small cut over his left eye and rolled up his coat sleeves to look at some very ugly bruises. "You want to clean up?" he asked Marc.

"Yeah, might as well," Marc replied as he unfastened a first aid kit from its housing under a sensor

panel. He handed Will some bandages and sterile pads and then began to dab at his own wounds. As much as doing so might conflict with his macho mindset, he understood from experience and numerous lectures from George the benefit of preventing infections.

“The thing I don’t get is how you two have gotten over this so quickly,” Jake said as Will pressed a bandage over his cut. “You guys look like you’ve been hit by a truck but you don’t even act like you’re in pain. Not that that’s a bad thing or anything.”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering about that myself,” muttered Will. Cynthia thought she saw him give her a very brief, pointed look. “I can’t even feel my ribs.”

“What do you think? Does this Nails guy just land punches that make you numb, or something?” Jake asked.

“Could be. What do you two think?” asked Will.

“I just figured it’s ‘cause I’m so tough,” said Marc.

Cynthia didn’t say anything.

“That certainly sucked,” G.R. said as he and Nails walked though G.R.’s house to the stairs.

“You’re one to talk!” was the angry reply. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, talking to them like that?”

G.R. rounded and faced him. “I’m sorry, I forgot I’m supposed to just take abuse like that lying down. Which leads me to wonder why you’re here in the first place.”

“I will not go through this with you again, Sullen. You know we’re supposed to keep a low profile. Last night was bad enough, but you have no business advertising my existence like that! What the hell are you trying to accomplish?”

“All I want, Nails, is to be left alone. I know I made a mistake last night. I should have just walked away from those idiots.” G.R. hung his head for a moment, then straightened uncharacteristically. “But I’m tired of taking crap from rednecks and morons. All I want is to be left alone!”

“You’re forgetting what’s at stake for me just by being here. Are you trying to put an end to me?” He loomed threateningly near G.R. in the house’s gloom. “If that’s what you want, just tell me and I’ll leave now, rather than risk it. I don’t need this sort of trouble, damn it! I was just shot at with explosives! I came here for one purpose and you’re making it extremely hard for me!”

G.R. scowled. “If you’re so worried about secrecy, why did you ask that man to come here? Are you out of your mind?! You’re always furious with me for even mentioning you, yet you stand in the open and offer to have tea with a total stranger! What are you going to do, ask him to write your biography?”

“We’re kind of past the point of no return on the whole secrecy thing. By talking to their leader, I might at least get them all to chill out a little.”

“I hope so. I don’t fancy tangling with the pugilist again. Hey, did you get a look at the redhead?”

“Oh, yeah. I’d keep an eye on her, if I were you.”

“Why is that? Not that I’d mind.”

“Let’s just say there’s more to her than meets the eye.”

G.R. stopped in mid-stride, halfway up the steps. “What? What does that mean?”

“Never mind. Just watch what you say around her.” He gave G.R. a shove to get him going again. “In fact, when that George Martin fellow gets here, let me do the talking. Just keep to yourself.”

“I thought he said his name was George *Manor*,” G.R. said offhandedly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. What kind of name is ‘George Manor?’ Anyway, it doesn’t matter. When he gets here, I’ll take care of him.”

Sullivan came into the Situation Room carrying a box full of items George had requested. He was there waiting for her and dumping all of his Pointville Devil files back into their box.

“Here you go, George,” she said and set the box down on the table next to his. “Are you sure you don’t want any weapons with you?”

“Positive,” said George absently. He reached into the box, took out an enormous wad of bills and

tucked it into his pocket. He did the same with a Jakecam™ and a SmileypHONE™. “If Mr. Rowland’s representatives call again, call me immediately. Otherwise do not contact us except with information related to this case. Do not allow anyone on the premises under any circumstances, even former operation members.”

“Understood, George. Forgive my asking, but do you really think this is a good idea?”

“Which part, Sullivan?” George asked without looking up.

“For one thing, is it a good idea to leave the team there? They were just attacked by a creature powerful enough to take on the APC one-on-one. Shouldn’t you have them heading back here, in case that thing turns on them?”

“If he--or it--attacks them, at least they’ll be expecting it there. Running may lead them into a false sense of security. We’ve already seen that they can neither outfight nor outrun him. We have to take him at his word that he will behave himself.” He thumbed over his shoulder at the monitors. “If he doesn’t, I want you to notify me that same instant.”

“What if you get there and this juggernaut is our mysterious killer?”

George set the equipment box on top of the file box and picked them up. “Then I will find the proper way to deal with him,” he said and walked out the door.

The team whiled away the time until George arrived with anything they could find to distract themselves. Marc retrieved his bag from the brush behind G.R.’s house and proudly revealed the deck of cards he had stowed in it to the others. Jake took stock of the damage to Janice while the others played and was able to join them for their fourth game. Will had expected Jake to be upset about the damage, but he actually seemed to be pleased. Apparently he took the damage as an excuse to overhaul the APC and give it a number of upgrades.

By the time George arrived it was well into the evening and Ylelon’s stars gleamed gloriously in the sky. All the constellations were bright and clear: The Tiger, The Ship, The Quadratic Equation. George pulled his nova blue luxury sedan into the driveway and parked unceremoniously in front of the porch. Will hopped out of the APC and went to meet him.

“Hello, Will!” said George cordially as he climbed out of his seat. “I trust things have gone well in the interim?”

“It’s been quiet this entire time,” Will said and glanced at the house. A light was on in a single upstairs window and the faintest hint of a techno song could be heard.

“Good. I want you to go back to the APC and wait with the others.”

“But--”

“No buts! I want you safe. I will deal with these two. Keep quiet and out of sight. Don’t make any moves except to defend yourselves. Wait for word from me.”

Will stared for a moment at George, then marched back to the APC.

“What happened?” Jake asked when Will sat down and said nothing.

“We’re still waiting,” said Will sourly.

“Still? What’s George doing?” asked Cynthia.

“He neglected to tell me. He is going to talk to G.R. and Nails himself.”

“He didn’t include you?” Jake asked, clearly confused.

“No. He didn’t. He didn’t tell me why, either.”

“I’m sure he has a good reason,” Cynthia said meekly. “Right?”

“Yes. Just like he does for everything,” Will growled and said no more.

While Will stormed back to the APC George walked to the porch and rapped soundly on the door. He only waited the span of a few moments before knocking again, hard enough to make the frame around the door tremble. Through the panes on the door he could see a light come on somewhere in the depths of the house, shining down the stairs and soon G.R. came stumbling down the steps toward the door.

“Yes! Yes! Just a moment!” he grumbled, and opened the door. “What?”

“Mr. G.R. Herald?” George said.

“Fierce Herald, that’s right,” G.R. said. “Are you George?”

“I am. I’d like a word with your friend.”

“He’s busy at the moment. If you want to come in and wait, you--”

George seized him by the collar and walked him backwards into the house. G.R. gasped, sputtered in surprise and nearly fell over his own feet as George pushed him backward. “What--ow--what are you doing?” he demanded.

George abruptly let go of G.R., who staggered backward a few more steps.

“What we have here is a failure to communicate,” said George. “To reiterate: I want a word with your friend. You know the one, he attacked my people a few pages ago?”

“Hey, we were attacked first! We just defended ourselves!”

“Oh, I see. You did it too.” George walked step-by-step closer to G.R., who likewise backed away. “Are you the one that defenestrated Marc?”

G.R. suddenly lunged at George with a clumsy punch. George slapped G.R.’s fist away with one hand, seized his elbow with the other and tugged. G.R. lost his balance, toppled forward and landed flat on his face on the hardwood floor. The furnishings in the house trembled and shook from the impact.

“Let’s try this again,” George said as he jabbed a neon orange sneaker into G.R.’s back. “You and your little friend attacked my warriors and--”

He stopped talking and listened intently. Upstairs, heavy footsteps were moving quickly toward the stairs, then were replaced by a rush of air as something hurtled over the steps rather than running down them. Nails landed with a crash at the foot of the steps that shook the house again. He looked about, tensed and ready for a fight, but when he saw George he froze in place.

George lifted his foot and allowed G.R. to scamper away along the floor and roll himself against a wall. He sat there panting and shouted, “Get him, Nails!”

Nails didn’t move. He was still staring at George with his great black doll eyes. George for his part looked right back with the tiniest traces of a smile on his face.

“Sullen,” Nails said at last, “go upstairs and wait.”

“What?” G.R. said exasperatedly. “What are you--”

“Now!” blared Nails. G.R. reluctantly but quickly got up and trundled up the steps. He gave the back of Nails’s head one last disparaging look and climbed out of sight. The ceiling overhead creaked and rumbled as he stormed back to his office.

“What are you?” Nails finally asked.

“Funny. I was going to ask you the same question,” said George coldly.

“All right, something easier. Why are you here?”

“Myself personally, or my people?”

“Both.”

“My people came here hoping to connect the attacks last night with a series of murders in the town’s history. I came in response both to your attacking my team and your asking me to.”

“They came here looking for the Devil,” Nails said pensively.

“You know of it?” said George.

“Not really, just some stuff because Sullen knows about it. He knows a lot about it, too, dates, events, body counts...” George tilted his head and narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, whoa! It’s not like that. He’s just--I can explain--ah, crap. This is no good.”

“Take your time,” George said sardonically.

“Ok, look,” said Nails, “I can explain, but I think we should go someplace else. Do you mind taking a walk?”

“Alone, in the middle of the night? I suppose you’ll give me scout’s honor that you won’t try to waylay me?”

Nails looked George up and down with open apprehension. “Only if you’ll do the same for me.”

They left the house and walked down the driveway to the road, then turned away from town.

“All right, first thing first: are you the Pointville Devil?” George asked.

“Not really much for subtlety, are you?” Nails remarked.

“Usually, I am, but we’re past much pretence at this point.”

“That sounds familiar. No, I’m not the Devil. I don’t know who it is, either.”

“All right, why were my people attacked?”

“I was protecting Sul--G.R.. It’s kind of my *raison d’etre*.”

“Are you a demon, or some other supernatural in his service?”

Nails stopped dead in his tracks. “I beg your damn pardon! I am quite the opposite.” He lowered his eyes. “I’m his guardian angel.”

“Some subtle metaphor?” George said through a grin.

“A literal truth!” snapped Nails. “I’m here to protect him. That’s all.”

“That’s why you attacked Marc?”

“Is that the skinhead? Yeah, he was beating Sullen up so I put a stop to it.”

“If you’re supposed to protect him, why did you fight those men last night?”

Nails sighed. “That’s complicated. Really what it comes down to is protecting Sullen--I mean, G.R.--takes more than simply stopping skinheads from beating him up, physically.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Sullen is very self-destructive. He’s been suicidal for most of his life and he tends to be a glutton for punishment.”

“He was going to take on those men himself,” mused George. He was remembering some of the things Chris had told him that morning. *Everyone hates him. We always mess with him.*

“Yeah,” Nails affirmed. “He’s hated those guys since before he was a teen. They’ve always given him a hard time. Them and everyone else. Damn, I could use a beer.” He reached above his head and began to idly pluck the leaves from an overhanging branch.

“He’s so mad at those guys. He was walking home last night from his mother’s bookstore, where he works. He stays there until late sometimes, like he did last night. He likes to read. He doesn’t have many friends anymore. The friends he had in high school have all moved on, so he stays in the bookstore until the moons have risen and then he walks home. The shortest way is down the road where that ass Parker lives. They were there last night and started taunting him.” By now he had stripped one branch of leaves and broke it off of its parent bough with a sharp *crack*.

“They threatened him, but I don’t think they really meant to hurt him. They were just being the shallow jerks that they always have been. But Sullen’s blood was boiling.” Nails turned to look at George. “I don’t suppose you know what it’s like? To be the odd man out, the one everyone makes fun of? To be pushed to anger so often that you never stop being angry?”

“Actually, yes. I ran into that in my youth,” George said.

Nails didn’t seem to have heard him. He was looking at the branches above again, slowly picking the leaves off of another, one by one.

“He was furious. He was mad enough to take them on but there was just enough of him that was still rational to hold back. The part that knew that if he did anything, even threw a punch, he would be the one in trouble. Because that’s the way it works with bullies. They taunt you for days or months or years and get away with it. But the moment you retaliate, even for a moment, that’s when the principal or the sheriff saw you starting trouble.”

He broke another branch off--*crack*.

“But he didn’t care anymore. He was tired of their crap. Most of all, he had me. So he got ready for a fight, in his mind.” He threw a handful of leaves on the ground at his feet.

“He was going to fight until either he had killed one of them or they had hurt him too badly to fight. The bad thing is, he could have done it.”

“How do you mean?” George asked. He had long since stopped grinning.

“Sullen’s always been strong. Very strong. He studies martial arts, not that you could tell by looking at him. I don’t think he could take on six guys by himself, but if he really meant to hurt someone--if he wrapped his hands around someone’s neck, and squeezed, and wouldn’t let go...”

Crack.

“G.R. was going to murder one of them?” George asked, deadly serious.

“That’s kind of murky,” Nails said, starting on another branch. “He wasn’t determined to kill anyone, but he was *so angry*. He only wanted to hurt them for hurting him. There was no good way that it could end...but he knew that I was there.”

“You were with him?”

“Always. I follow him, stay out of sight. I’m not supposed to be seen. But he was going to be hurt or hurt someone else and I’m supposed to keep those things from happening to him. So I jumped in.”

“Let me get this straight,” said George. “In order to keep anyone from being hurt, you beat up a bunch of locals?”

“There’s more to it than that,” snapped Nails. “Hell, you’ve seen the damage I can do. You can imagine what I could have done to those guys if I wanted to.”

Crack.

“The thing is, I didn’t have to hurt them. I’m a superior fighter, because I was made that way. I could have laid them out without leaving a bruise. All I really wanted to do was keep Sullen from being hurt. That’s what I’m here for.”

Crack.

“The problem, the real problem, is that Sullen *couldn’t let it go*. Just beating those guys up wouldn’t have been enough. He’d have tried to come back later and hurt them. He was *so angry*...”

Crack.

“So I did the only thing I could. I hurt them, badly. Not enough to do permanent damage, but enough to calm him down.” He looked at George again, and in the darkness George thought he saw sadness in those black bottomless eyes. “I gave them injuries that they would remember. Broken jaws, concussions, things that will make them think twice about messing with Sullen again. I also caused injuries that would satisfy Sullen. So now in his anger, he takes a perverse comfort in knowing that his tormentors are laying in hospital beds because of what they did to him.” He went back to stripping leaves from the bough overhead, which was now almost bare.

“That’s your answer. I put men who didn’t know me, men who’s only crime was being mindlessly cruel, in the hospital to keep a tortured soul from doing something worse.” He reached up with both hands and took hold of the stripped bough, which was as big around as Cynthia’s waist. Grasping it with both hands, he broke it neatly and flung it casually over his shoulder. It turned end over end as it arced above the trees and out of sight. Moments later they heard it crashing through the foliage.

“Want to go back to the house now?”

Chapter IV Tortured Souls

“Am I to understand,” said George levelly, “that an act of violence such as the one you perpetuated last evening was actually a favor to both sides?”

“You can call it whatever you want,” growled Nails. “I’m not proud of what I did and I don’t take pleasure in hurting people. I was dropped into this situation with very little preparation. I just do the best I can at my job.”

“Which is what?”

“What are you, thick?” Nails snapped and kicked angrily at the leaves and branches around his feet. “I told you. I’m his guardian angel.”

George raised his eyebrows.

“What? You don’t believe me? I’d expect a guy who fights monsters to be more open-minded.”

“Oh, I’m open-minded,” George said with a sly smile. “It’s just that, in all my long years, I’ve never met an actual angel.”

“Maybe you haven’t been looking hard enough. Anyway, I haven’t always been... like this.”

“Do tell.”

Nails sighed, very Will-like. “I’m actually G.R.’s cousin. Or I was, when I was alive.”

“You’re some kind of undead?”

“What the hell?!” blurted Nails as he kicked one of the branches at his feet. “Why do you keep insulting me like that?”

“I’m just applying my own frame of reference,” George said softly. “I meant no offense. Please, continue.”

“Like I was saying, I was G.R.’s cousin. We were born less than a year apart and we were best friends growing up. That was until my father killed me when I was twelve. He got drunk and started hitting my mother. When I tried to take him on, he ran for his guns. He came back at me with a shotgun. We wrestled with it and it went off...”

He trailed off and stared at the leaves at his feet. George didn’t say anything but watched very closely.

“I don’t remember much after that,” Nails continued at last. “I did that whole tunnel of light thing, but I never got to the end. This huge dude met me, all shining white robes, surrounded in light. You know the cliché.

“He said he was an angel and his name was Rogziel. He told me that I wasn’t intended to have died when I did. It just kind of came out that way, what with free will and all. I said, hard cheese, because I like the looks of what I’m headed toward and if you think I’m giving that up to go back to an abusive family that killed me with a shotgun, you’re totally flipped. That’s when he showed me something.” He stopped talking then and looked at the leaves hanging overhead. He was quiet for so long that George finally cleared his throat to get his attention.

“Rogziel showed me my life, all of it. Who I was, who I was supposed to become. I saw Sullen’s life too, who he was supposed to end up as. We were cousins for a reason. Seems the folks upstairs had plans for us both, we were supposed to become special people. We both had hard backgrounds, so we were put close together in life, so we could help each other make it to who we were supposed to be.

“The problem was, I was kind of his hero. With me gone, all he had was a low self-esteem and a miserable life at home and school. He wasn’t going to have the will to make it through the rest of his life. So, Mr. Rogziel very politely asked me if I would give up paradise for a shadowy existence keeping a temperamental nihilist from self-destructing. Here I am.”

“How did G.R. react to this?” George asked, genuinely pensive.

“Are you kidding?...of course you’re not. You might say he didn’t take it very well.

“I was quiet for the first two years. I would put images in his dreams, add to his thoughts. I can do that. Little subtle things to cheer him up. He thought he was just having fond memories of his lost best friend when he was feeling down. Imagine his surprise when I first revealed myself to him.”

“How did you do that?”

“I stopped him from killing himself,” Nails said blankly.

“You talked him out of it?”

“No. I took the knife away from him.”

George didn't have anything to say to that.

“He refused to believe in me at first. Can you believe that? He convinced himself that I was some kind of delusion. He wouldn't even talk to me and he kept trying to hurt himself. So I kept stopping him from hurting himself. Eventually he had to face the possibility that the thing keeping him from self-destructing was not a personal delusion. I have to tell you I felt it was about damn time. Do you know how insulting it is to have your best friend tell you you're just a figment of his imagination?”

Inwardly, George had to admit to himself that he did not.

“On reflection, maybe I should have just gone to heaven. As it is, here I am, risking my existence for Sullen when he doesn't do anything to better himself.”

George raised his eyebrows again. “Your existence is at risk?”

“I am my soul,” Nails said simply.

“What?”

“My body is my soul,” Nails said as though he expected George to catch on, but George just stared at him.

“Ok, look. All the worlds, or universes, or dimensions, or whatever you call them are laid out together in Creation.” He made motions with his hands as if trying to illustrate his point. “Then there's a...region, something, I don't know how to describe it, but it's like a single layer of existence just above everything else. This is where everything's soul is. Your body doesn't have a soul in it. That's just primitive misunderstanding. Your body is like a remote camera. Your soul, what's really you, is far away, but it experiences things through the lens of your living body.”

“Interesting,” George said distantly as he stroked his chin.

“It's basically a safety feature, I guess,” Nails continued, more to himself than to George. “People think their souls are like ghosts or misty light or something, but the fact is they have substance like everything else. So they're kept separate from all the other dimensions for their own safety. You kill someone and all you do is send his or her soul where it's supposed to go. But destroy a soul--”

“The person is gone completely, forever,” George finished.

“Right. For me to be here, I had to be *me*. They made me powerful, but if anything ever “kills” me...”

“Why is that? You had to be you?”

“Hell, beats me, man. I just do my job. I don't have it in me to worry about it anymore.” He kicked absently at the leaves and twigs around his feet again. “Not that I expect you to believe me, or anything.”

“Actually, after that last bit, I'm a bit more open-minded,” said George. “That's some rather interesting existential thought you have there.”

Nails looked at him askance, but he didn't say anything.

“What's interesting is that it answers a number of questions I've been pondering for a long time,” George continued. “I assume that what you've told me here is in a strict confidence? That I may tell you similar things, under the same conditions?”

Nails nodded.

“Ah.” Now it was George's turn to look around idly at the tree branches swaying in the dark. “It's simple, really. My parents were...well, we never really got along. But they were both very gifted mages. They passed those gifts on to me.

“As I got much older and slightly wiser, I began to ponder existence, the soul, God, life, death--you know, occupational thinking. I always wondered, what is the nature of the soul? Does it have a physical existence? Look far and wide, as I have--and by that I mean, *far and wide*--and you'll find primitive people mostly hold to the basic belief that the soul is housed within the body. More “advanced” cultures, if such a thing exists, very rarely expand much on this concept.

“That’s all well and good for primitive people, or jaded folks in cultures that are technology-based like this one. But what about those with advanced levels of magic available to them? Shouldn’t someone with the ability to bend reality to their will, based on their knowledge and reserves of internal power, be able to discern the nature of the soul? The more I searched, the more the answer was no.

“That always bothered me. Not in cultures primitive by our standards, but with great traditions of magic, nor in those like this, advanced in their understanding of the languages of the universe, could I find a definition for that central point of what an intelligent, living thing is.” He looked Nails dead in his eyes. “If what you have told me is true, my friend, then you have given me some very interesting answers to my ancient unsolvable conundrum.”

“That’s good, I guess,” Nails said. “Wait. What the heck is so secret about that? So you’re an armchair philosopher. So what? Spend an evening with Sullen sometime, you two can chat.”

“That’s not it,” George said in a low tone. “I keep who I am from my team. For them to know too much about me would cause...complications for them.”

Nails raised his eyebrows in curiosity.

“Let’s just say, my young friend, that there are forces that work against myself and the team as a whole as we work to protect others. There is a very delicate balance kept in place largely by the fact that the team doesn’t know certain things about me.”

Nails flinched slightly. “That’s what that was before! Just for a moment. It was magic, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure what I was facing in you and I wanted to avoid a direct confrontation if possible. I have safeguards in place that keep people of certain gifted persuasions from being able to see the abilities I have. I dropped those in case you’d be able to see them. I hoped they would convince you to think twice about rushing headlong into anything unfortunate.”

“It sure as hell worked. I can see things in people, sometimes, when I look at them. Like that cute little redhead. She’s psychic, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She’s very talented. Which is one of the reasons I have my safeguards working all the time.”

“I could see it in her. I’ve seen it a few times, but never as strongly as in her. Most people just have a little touch. I’ve seen magic too, on trips to the city. People will have a tiny bit of ability, from where they’ve practiced with what little magic their grandparents taught them, or whatever. Seeing you there in the living room, you were glowing like a star.”

“I’ve been practicing for most of my life. I ought to be fairly good at it by now.” George was smiling again, but it was a strangely hollow smile.

“I guess so! Like a real wizard. Wow,” Nails chuckled. “Why not tell them? Why not just use that power to protect them?”

“That’s part of the problem in itself, my friend, one which I would think you might understand. G.R. knows you will fight to protect him, even if it means manipulating you into thrashing his enemies. My team fights for the common good using their own talents and strengths. If they knew they had a powerful wizard watching over them, would they be as diligent of their own safety? Besides,” he said and suddenly, there was unmistakable sadness in his voice, “there’s only so much even I can do to protect them.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’d really like to go back to the house now. I think I could drink a rain barrel full of scotch after tonight.”

“I know the feeling,” George replied. They started walking back the way they had come. “Tell me, what happens when, er, ‘Sullen’ finally does die? Through whatever means?”

“Beats me, man. I only got the bare minimum information before I came here. It was a couple of months before I even found out I could fly. Hey, you tell me something. Do you still think I’m the killer you’re looking for?”

“I confess to having doubts,” answered George. “On an objectivist level, I have to consider the possibility that you’ve been lying to me this entire time. Personally I feel your story may be true, remarkable as it is, and if so the mere time frame of your existence makes it impossible for you to be the killer. Out of curiosity, why do you ask? Are you afraid I’m going to turn on you?”

“A little. It’s not in me to be afraid of much of anything, but after seeing you before...so, are you

guys some kind of government agency?"

"No. We're completely independent and anonymous. Emphasis on the anonymous. We're called the Lonely Winds and we charge ourselves with the task of destroying public menaces that society as a whole does not or cannot deal with effectively. You said before that G.R. knows about the Devil?"

"Yeah, a lot actually. He's even visited some of the historical sites in his spare time. His interests tend to be pretty morbid like that. Monsters, demonology, serial killers. It's just part of his mentality, I guess. It's kind of funny, he hates it here but he's too poor to leave. What you guys do would be a dream come true for him. Seeing weird things up close."

"That's a bit obvious, don't you think?" George said.

"I'm just saying. Sullen can be pretty irritating, but he's damn smart. That, and if your team couldn't stand up to me, even with their guns and training and whatever..."

"Then you should be more than a match for the things we're used to facing," George finished.

"I'm just saying," Nails repeated wryly. "I don't know how your organization works, but if you ever need an extra set of brains and muscle, we're not doing anything. If you want to get me to join you, it would have to be because I was following Sullen. If he comes, it's the perfect excuse to follow."

"Thus you both have more purpose to your existence."

"Right."

"I'm afraid, Nails, that it's not that simple. Even assuming that it is proven you and Sullen are in no way involved in the Devil murders, joining the team is an involved process. Usually."

"How's that?"

"Technically, I have ultimate authority over the workings of the team. I am every part the benevolent dictator," George said as he smiled to himself. "Traditionally, I have almost always involved the active members of the team in the decision of if a new member will be admitted. After all, they are the ones who will be fighting and sometimes dying together."

"I see. You don't think they'd be overly enthused about the idea of letting an introverted anti-social twerp and a mysterious whirlwind of violence into the club."

"Er--that precept had crossed my mind, yes. First thing's first, I think. We will see how the team reacts to the idea that the thing that tried to kill them didn't really try to kill them. Even then, I have to admit I have reservations about membership for anyone as issue-laden as G.R. appears to be."

"Right. Just so you're thinking about it."

Will stalked among the brush at the edge of a copse of trees near the barn Nails had stood upon before attacking the APC. He had finally lost his patience after the fifth game of cards and decided to check out the scenes of their recent battle to see how bad the damage was. From where he was hidden, he could clearly see the open field and the barn with little worry of being seen himself.

The barn and the grass around it were burning freely and Will thought he could see the occasional flicker of lights from police cars on the far side of the tree line along the road. This is what Will had been worried about. In the team's over-enthusiasm to stop Nails they had left more evidence of their activities than they would have liked. Will had come back to observe the local authorities and watch for any sign that they might be heading in the team's direction. Will had no doubt that George would be upset that his orders had been disobeyed and not too long ago Will would never have done such a thing. Right now, though, he found he didn't really give a damn.

He worked his way from cover to cover, sacrificing speed for stealth. He wanted to get close enough to the investigators to get some idea of what they were doing and how much they already knew, but he wouldn't risk being seen. The team had made enough of a mess tonight as it was.

As he came closer he could hear voices on the cruiser scanners. A couple of police officers were standing at the heads of their two cruisers, which were parked on the road across from the barn. They chatted idly as they watched the ancient building slowly burn into an unrecognizable mass of charred wood.

Will frowned as he inched his way closer. Surely it couldn't be this easy. Not only had the APC inflicted tremendous damage on private property, it had done it using certified weapons of war. Shrapnel

and chemical traces from the anti-personal shells would be everywhere, if any half-hearted effort were made to find them. Aside from that, the APC had probably left copious tire-tracks when it ran from Nails and braked near G.R.'s house. Any half-hearted investigation could trail the APC directly to where it was parked. Why weren't they doing anything?

Will stopped when he was finally close enough to hear what was being said. Dressed in black or not, if he came too close he'd be painfully visible, so he kept hidden and listened to the officers bickering.

"Old Man Benson'll be ticked," the first was saying. "It's always one thing or another about his property. The man don't shut up for a week if some kids play on his lawn. I don't even wanna be around when he starts gripin' about *this*."

"The chief says not to worry about it," the second replied. "Guess he's got something in mind for dealing with the whole mess. Besides, it's not like Benson was using the thing anyway."

"So, what? We just gonna stand here and watch the thing burn up completely?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. Chief'll talk to the old man in the morning. Meantime, we just make sure it doesn't spread and nobody gets near it."

"Yeah, yeah," the first cop drawled as he lit a cigarette. "What do you think? Some school kids messin' around did this?"

"I never heard of any kids around here doin' something this bad. Even that Morgan girl isn't this destructive."

"Yeah, yeah...hey, maybe that city gang from last night did this!" Will wasn't close enough to see the man's face, but he was fairly certain he heard sarcasm in his voice.

"Could be," the second officer chuckled. "Or hell, maybe even the Devil did this."

"Don't even kid about that," the first officer said quietly. A heavy silence hung in the air as Will began to inch away again. When he was out of sight of the police cruisers, he boldly stepped out onto the road and walked with his hands in his pockets.

Things are falling apart, he thought. George is getting more unpredictable, Marc is uncontrollably violent, Detective King is distancing himself from us and Cynthia can't keep her powers to herself. Although to be fair, I do feel a lot better. I had no idea she could do things like that...

He rolled up his coat sleeves and looked at his arms. Even in the moonlight, his bruises were still visible. He was amazed how pale his skin looked by comparison. Once upon a time, he had been very tanned from spending time outside hiking, exercising and walking with Tina...

He pushed the thought out of his head and gingerly prodded a bruise on the inside of his arm. It was as big around as an apple but only slightly darker than the surrounding skin. He poked it solidly and found it was only a little tender. Cynthia hadn't merely eased his pain, she had actually partially healed his wounds.

Will found himself scowling. He had mistrusted Cynthia almost from the moment he had met her. His impression of her had been that she was self-absorbed, arrogant and flighty. Following him around like a love-struck schoolgirl hadn't helped, either.

Lately, however, Will found that his image of her was changing. Just two nights ago when the Crown of Thorns had laid waste to the team with casual ease, Will had thought they were all dead. In the back of his mind he'd expected Cynthia to either turn tail and run or try to do something even more foolish, like fight the Crown. Instead to his amazement she had stood her ground by the team. Although he knew Cynthia hadn't realized what she was up against, he also wasn't sure if even he would have been brave enough to do what she had done. Part of him was ashamed for so badly misjudging her.

He'd also been irritated with her for continually using her powers despite George's request. His assumption had been that she was just being willful and stubborn, but tonight she had not only healed Will, but Marc as well--and Cynthia's growing dislike for Marc was no secret. George, meanwhile, was continuing his modus operandi of keeping the team in the dark while he made unfathomable decisions. Will began to wonder if he was being distrustful of the right person.

He rolled these things around in his head for the entire journey back up the road to G.R.'s driveway. He had barely started up the drive when he heard a familiar voice just up the road, stopped and listened quietly.

“Be that as it may, I fear my people’s acceptance will not come easily,” said George. “After all that has transpired, it will take an extraordinary show of benevolence on your part to demonstrate that you are not a threat.”

“I still think we should pool our resources on this, though,” said Nails. “You may have old police reports and such, but we know the area. Sullen has actually been to most of the murder sites. He even has a big wall map of town with photos and pins for each case.”

Will took a moment to ponder the similarity of this behavior to the team’s own methods while listening to George’s next comment.

“One thing at a time. The team may not be comfortable close to you. I will see if--oh, hello, Will.”

“Hi,” Will said plainly.

“Is everything all right?” George asked, clearly puzzled.

“Fine. Status quo, in fact,” Will replied coolly. “I just went for a walk to survey the damage and monitor the authorities.”

George glanced at Nails, who was watching Will. “Did you learn anything?” he asked finally.

“There are two police cruisers parked near the barn. Either they haven’t noticed or don’t seem to care about the tire tracks.” Will spoke quickly and evenly as though he were making a military report, but there was a definite edge of sarcasm in his voice.

“Why is that important?” Nails asked.

“The treads on all of our vehicles have been filed and treated so as to not leave telltale marks that could be traced back to us,” George explained.

“Oh. Cool,” Nails said. “By the way, sorry about the, uh...” He made a muted punching motion in the air at Will.

“It’s ok. No harm done,” Will said blankly.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Nails said with raised eyebrows. “You guys must be really tough if you can shake a beating like that.”

“We get by,” replied Will. An awkward silence followed.

“Well, then, if everything is in order, we should check in with the team. We have rather a lot to discuss,” George said finally.

“Oh, hey, I almost forgot,” Nails said suddenly and reached into his pocket. When he withdrew his hand he held it out to Will. “I believe this is yours,” he said as he dropped something small and heavy into Will’s hand. It was one of Will’s high silver content bullets, distorted from impact with a hard surface.

“Where did you find this?” Will asked.

“Right here,” Nails said and fingered a rib through one of the holes in his shirt. “The darn thing stuck halfway in my gut.”

“I didn’t think I hit you,” Will said in astonishment.

“Then you’re a better shot than you give yourself credit for. I hope you guys won’t hold tonight against me. Like you said, no harm done?”

Will looked at the enormous man that had punched dents in tank armor standing in front of him. “Uh, yeah, sure. Truce.” He shook Nails’ hand.

“If everything is all well and good then,” George said, “Nails has agreed to sequester himself and G.R. until the morning for the sake of the team’s mindsets. I will brief you and the others on the current situation, and then we will get some much needed rest.”

“Sounds good. See you tomorrow, Nails,” Will said. He and George went to the APC while Nails went into the house. Will rapped on the personnel door to get Jake’s attention and the door opened.

“Hey guys,” Jake said jovially. “What’s up?”

“There is a standing truce,” George said levelly. “We’re going to camp here tonight. In the morning we will reconvene and decide on our next course of action.”

“That guy isn’t coming back here?” Marc asked suspiciously.

“He has given me his word that he is no longer a threat. Both sides overreacted to the others’ hostilities. Nails and G.R. may in fact be of some aid in our current case.”

“Yeah, by turning themselves in,” Jake muttered.

George shook a finger. "From what Nails told me I don't believe he is the killer we are searching for. He doesn't have a killer's vibe for one thing, and he isn't old enough."

"Yeah, what, 'cause he says so?" Marc growled. "Of course he says he didn't do it! How do we know he won't come back here while we're all asleep?"

A ghost of a smile ran over George's face. "Trust me, Marc. Nothing more will happen here tonight."

Chapter V Bending Certain Rules

Will, Cynthia and Marc set up their tents around the APC, while Jake opted to sleep in the APC itself. George stayed close by until everyone was situated, then walked back around the corner of the house to his car. He settled into the driver's seat and fixed his eyes on the house. Although he hadn't let it on he still had some deep misgivings about remaining at the house overnight. However, he also didn't feel comfortable trying to move the team under the present circumstances. He didn't like having to be present, but it would have to do for tonight, so he sat in his seat and watched the house to make sure nothing else happened. He was still watching when the sun came up.

Cynthia was the first to awaken. The cool air and the hard ground brought her to just as the rose-red light of the morning sun began to creep across the sky above the peaks. She crawled out of her sleeping bag, stretched and took a look around. Will and Marc's tent flaps were closed and all was silent. Cynthia rolled up her sleeping bag and tied it closed, then began to wander around the house out of boredom. The house itself was dark and quiet. The air was still and the birds were only beginning to sing.

Making her way around the house kicking idly at loose rocks and humming she came into view of George's car and stopped. George was sitting in his driver's seat, watching the house intently. His eyes suddenly swiveled to settle on her, but he otherwise stayed completely still.

Good morning, George, Cynthia thought to him telepathically with a smirk. To her surprise, he answered, ***Hello, Cynthia.***

Cynthia closed her eyes and shook her head. She still couldn't get over how powerful his mind was. *What are you doing?* she asked.

I am watching the house.

Why?

Cynthia, feel around inside and tell me what you find.

Shrugging to herself, Cynthia reached into the house with her mind and felt around for any conscious thoughts she could touch.

G.R. is up already. He's been awake for a while.

What else?

Cynthia didn't need to feel around inside the house anymore. She knew what he meant.

I can't read Nails.

Exactly. He doesn't seem to be readable the way most beings are. So to ensure the team's safety I have kept watch since last evening.

I thought you trusted those guys.

I told Will I didn't think they carried the vibes of killers. That doesn't necessarily mean I trust them. Besides, even if they are harmless, that only means that the killer we seek is still at large.

Do you really think he would come after us? He only goes after kids and old people, right?

It's a chance I can't afford to take, Cynthia. There was an edge to his thoughts that hinted at something deeper, troubling him.

What's eating you, George? Cynthia asked.

Nothing you need to concern yourself with. If you'd like I can help you prepare breakfast. The others should be awake soon.

Ok.

At George's suggestion, Cynthia gathered firewood from among the trees while he crept into the APC to retrieve some fresh goods. They built their campfire at the head of the driveway and sat with it, cooking eggs, sausages, mushrooms and onions while they waited for the others to join them.

"George," said Cynthia as he stirred the contents of an antique cast iron skillet he had brought with him. "Tell me what's bothering you."

"What makes you think there *is* something bothering me, Cynthia?"

"For one thing you've arranged the eggs into the word 'bummer.'"

"You are remarkably perceptive," George muttered as he hastily scrambled the eggs. "Put simply,

I should not be here.”

“Why is that?”

George sighed as he forked a helping of mushrooms onto his plate. “That is very complicated. There are...extenuating circumstances for me. Things that keep me preoccupied with more than just being a monster hunter.”

“Is that why you never go out with the team?” Cynthia asked brightly, then shriveled when he eyed her sharply.

“What do you know about that?” he asked.

“Just what Sullivan told me. She said that you had private reasons for not going on missions.”

“Quite right,” George said, lowering his eyes back to the fire. “I’m bending certain rules just by being here. But when I saw what Nails could do, I couldn’t leave you all alone here.”

Something about George’s manner seemed familiar. Cynthia thought for a moment before she realized what it was: this was exactly how he had sounded on her first night with the team, when he had shown her the graveyard.

Is that what he’s thinking about now? She wondered. Maybe he feels so guilty about all those people dying that he’s breaking whatever rules so he can protect us.

But who the heck makes rules for George?

“Morning, all,” said a voice behind her. Cynthia turned to see Jake stretching as he walked toward the fire. “Hey, are those sausages I smell?”

“Indeed,” George said and began preparing a plate for Jake.

“Are the others awake?” asked Cynthia.

“Yeah, they’re coming,” Jake yawned. “We all woke up about the same time. Marc wanted to go hunting but Will and I smelled the food.”

“Then we appear to have saved the life of some innocent forest creature,” George said under his breath and Cynthia giggled.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” asked Jake.

“Once we are assembled we will confront G.R. and Nails directly. First we should eat, then arm ourselves.”

“We’re going to greet them with guns?” Jake said as he surveyed the quiet house. “Not that I have a problem with that, but doesn’t it kind of send the wrong message?”

“After seeing what the two of them are capable of, Jake, I will feel more comfortable facing them on our own terms. If the events of last evening were in fact the result of a misunderstanding then our new friends should be able to accept our bid for our own security. If not, we will be prepared.”

“Good point,” ceded Jake.

Will and Marc joined them shortly. Marc was muttering something about bringing extra beer rations along. He sat between George and Jake by the fire while Will took a seat between Jake and Cynthia. Cynthia handed Will a plate and to her surprise he actually smiled at her.

Once they were settled in George gave them a quick rundown of the situation. He omitted the personal details that Nails had shared with him, only telling them that G.R. was apparently a regular person and that Nails was his powerful, but essentially benign, protector. He admitted to them that he wasn’t certain as to the nature of what Nails was and that for their own safety they would all be armed for the remainder of the time they were in the mountains.

“Gear up,” he said, “in ten minutes time we will approach the door.”

“Only you could make knocking part of a battle plan, George,” chortled Jake.

“Thank you, Jake,” George retorted as he stood. Cynthia began cleaning up while the others went to the APC to gather their weapons. Again, to her surprise Will approached her just as she finished gathering up the supplies and utensils.

“Here,” he said stiffly as he offered her the pistol she usually practiced with in its belted holster.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, took the weapon and checked the chamber. When she looked back at him he was shifting uneasily from foot to foot and staring at the ground.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

“What? Oh, yes, I’m fine. I just wanted to say, you healed Marc and I, right?”

“Yes,” Cynthia said, and it was her turn to stare at the ground. “Just a little and I took the edge off the pain. I could have done more but, you know, George doesn’t want me to make a big deal about my powers.”

“Yeah, well. I just wanted to say thank you,” Will said, “and I know I’ve been kind of mean to you lately. I wanted to apologize for that.”

“Wow, thanks,” said Cynthia. A smile was beginning to form on her face. “What brought this on?”

“I was talking to Sullivan before. She said that I was being mean, and you’ve been really nice to me, so that’s all I wanted to say.” With that he turned and trotted back to the group.

That was interesting, Cynthia thought. She set the gun down and stooped to pick up the dishes, but she stopped when a glint of light near the fire caught her eye. It was the lighter George had used to ignite the kindling for the fire, laying on one of the rocks that ringed the pit. Cynthia picked it up to look at and was amazed at its level of detail. The casing appeared to be made of silver, crafted in lines so smooth that it looked almost organic. An image of a snowy, forested landscape on a mountainside was hand-painted in panorama all around the casing. On one side a blonde woman of incredible beauty wearing robes of light green smiled outward at the viewer from among the trees. The painting was so perfectly detailed that Cynthia almost expected the woman to wave at her.

Wow, can’t let George lose this, she thought.

“Yo, Legs! You comin’ or what?” Marc called from where the group was gathering near the front porch. George was carrying his box of files and the others all had small arms in holsters.

“Coming,” Cynthia called back, stuffed the lighter in a pocket, hastily gathered the cooking supplies and ran them to the APC. A quick trip back to the fire later and she had her pistol on and joined the group.

Once fully assembled, the team marched onto the porch and set themselves in a line in front of the door. Cynthia felt fairly secure knowing that George was with them, but Will, Marc and Jake were tense. Without a word George stepped forward and rapped on the doorframe.

The inside door opened a few moments later and there stood Nails, looking back at them with his empty black eyes. “Good morning,” he said pleasantly as he pushed the storm door open for George.

They filed inside and looked around. G.R. was seated at a large table in a dining room adjacent to the entryway. Many old newspapers, printouts and a couple of books and notebooks were arranged haphazardly in front of him.

“Good morning,” he said blandly. “Nails tells me that there is a truce of sorts in effect.”

“In a sense,” replied George. “Our standing non-violence pact is now dependent upon you two proving to us satisfactorily that you are in no way responsible for the Pointville Devil killings.”

“That should be easy enough,” replied G.R. “I’ve collected most of my paraphernalia pertaining to the Devil. Personally, I look forward to a possible resolution to this mystery. It’s been a hobby of mine since I was twelve.”

“Indeed. Given that we all know each other now, I think, er, the first thing, that is...holy cats! Is this really what I sound like?” George exclaimed.

“Yup,” G.R. said, while Will and Cynthia nodded enthusiastically.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” lamented George. “All this time I’ve thought I sounded astute. Instead I speak like a poorly written episode of ‘Quasar.’”

“We thought that was the point,” Cynthia said quietly.

“I just do it ‘cause it’s fun,” G.R. said proudly.

“Getting back to the issue at hand,” Nails chided G.R., “I want to say I’m sorry about last night. No hard feelings, I hope.”

“Easy for you to say, monster,” Marc snapped and held up an arm covered with bruises, cuts and bandages. “Does this look like ‘no hard feelings’ to you?”

“Look, I’m just trying to be civil,” Nails snapped back. “I thought it might help to ease the tension after what happened.” He rubbed his eyebrows with a forefinger and thumb. “You know what? Forget

this! I'm getting some rum."

"Rum?" Marc said, suddenly perky. "You have rum?"

"I have everything," shrugged Nails. He cast a sideways glance at G.R.. "Because booze is one of the few things I can enjoy being cooped up in this house all the time."

"Get stuffed," G.R. shot as Nails ambled toward the kitchen, followed by Marc.

"Well, now that that's out of the way," Jake said as he rolled his eyes.

"Quite," said George.

"As I was saying before, these are virtually all of my resources pertaining to this subject. I assume those are yours?" G.R. said, pointing at George's box, which lay on the table between them.

"Correct," affirmed George.

"Excellent. I'll be interested to see what you have put together. I'm afraid I don't have many rare items pertaining to these events. They're mainly mundane articles and books about the killings, along with photos and notes I took at the actual crime scenes..." G.R. trailed off as George, with a wry smile, took several books and coroner's reports out of his box and laid them on the table. With the enthusiasm of a small child at a birthday party G.R. grabbed the stack and began to rifle through it.

"This is fantastic!" he said, eyes wide with enthusiasm. "Are these genuine?"

"As genuine as their owner," Cynthia said with a smirk. Will and Jake both chuckled.

"Yes, well," muttered George. "I've made good use of my connections to gather some rather unique artifacts relating to this case."

"I'll say. Wow! Is this really a diary belonging to Rebecca Hicks?" squealed G.R. as he flipped through the worn book. "The murders aside, the historical and anthropological value of these items alone..." He raised his eyes from the ancient text to George. "Sir, I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you after all."

"I don't know about that." George said levelly. "You said you have photos and notes from observations of the sites themselves?"

"Oh, right." G.R. shuffled through his files and passed around a couple of notebooks. They were filled out in the style of journals with headings detailing the location, date and time each entry was made. Here and there were glued photographs--some on inauspicious roadsides, others exterior and interior views of numerous houses--which were captioned with labels like "Morley Road killings site; visible from Tucker Mill" and "Simmons House parlor; were the bodies dragged here as a morbid joke?" The entries were copiously detailed but G.R.'s handwriting was a barely readable mess.

"So this is your hobby, huh?" Will asked as he flipped through one of the texts.

"It's one of them. I'm also fond of history, archaeology, Card Game: The Compulsion..."

"Hey, what's this?" Will asked as he unfolded a large piece of drawing paper and laid it on the table. It was a hand-drawn map of the town and it appeared to have the location of each and every Pointville Devil killing labeled and detailed.

"You really do know a lot about this case," George remarked. "This is very well detailed."

"You have no life at all, do you?" asked Jake.

"No," said G.R. "No, I really don't."

"What's this?" asked Cynthia, pointing to an entry that rested nearly dead center in the map. Unlike the other entries, which were written in pencil, the center entry was done in bright red ink.

"That is the focal point of my pet theory regarding the killer," G.R. said with much pomp. "It's the home of the third victim in the 1918 round of deaths."

"That was the coroner, right?" Cynthia said thoughtfully.

"Actually, it was the widower, Kent Idleman, if I recall correctly," said George.

"Very good," observed G.R. "My research has shown that he was a respected member of the community--the local wise elder, if you will. His death had a larger impact on his neighbors than you'd guess from reading the post clippings of the time."

"Killing him was a calculated act," Will said somberly.

"That's part of it," replied G.R., "but you also have to consider something else. Do you notice a pattern to the killings?"

George's eyes narrowed as he looked at the map. He couldn't believe that he had never seen it before, especially given that this technique was one he routinely used. Were he not so angry with himself he would have been very embarrassed.

"The frequency of the attacks increases in direct proportion to proximity to the house," George said, and he was right. The closer one came to the old widower's house, the closer together and more frequent the killings had been.

"That is the crux of my theory," G.R. said. "I believe that who or whatever is responsible for these deaths is located in or around that house."

"The house is still standing?" Jake asked.

"It is, plus it's in remarkable shape for having stood empty for over one hundred and twenty years."

"It sounds as if you've been there yourself," Will said.

"I have, on several occasions," G.R. said proudly. "Nails and I have made a few trips there, taken photos, made some notes, and so forth."

"What have you found that will help us here?" George inquired with a hopeful look.

"Er...not so much," said G.R. sheepishly. "Except, like I said, the house is still in good shape, and that's something, isn't it? If nothing else it means someone has been maintaining it for a long time, right?"

"Well, it was a novel idea," Jake said after a brief silence.

"Let's not rule anything out yet, Jake. It is certainly out of the ordinary for such a structure to remain intact despite the entropy that would act upon it over twelve decades. Besides, as seems to happen to us with startling regularity, we have only the one lead at this point."

"Maybe you and Will should go check it out, George," Marc called from the kitchen.

"Make sure someone shoots at me at some point," Nails joined in. Cynthia thought for just a moment that she saw George blush.

"So, tell us more about this house," Will said. "Where it is, who's nearby, that sort of thing." He was hoping to get back on track with the case. The others seemed to have settled right into this situation, but being so close to Nails after what he had done last night made Will feel very nervous.

"It's in a shallow valley, due west of here along the ridge," G.R. explained. "You can actually see the top of the tin roof from my kitchen window. As to who's nearby, no one, really. The place itself is empty and the nearest inhabited structure is a five minute hike away through light forest."

"Outstanding. That should make recon fairly easy," Will said.

"Quite," George affirmed. "If we wait to work under cover of dark this evening we will have the entire day to prepare."

"Is that a good idea?" asked Jake. "If it really is a vampire, I'd much rather have all this warm cheery sunlight as a backup."

"You think this is a vampire?" G.R. asked, and Jake groused at his mistake.

"Er, what I mean is, rather..."

"Don't sweat it man, I know you're not crazy," G.R. said sardonically. "Nails has killed quite a few nasty things out in the woods from time to time. He claims he does it to make the mountains safer, but I think he does it for sport, really."

"But you don't think he's ever dealt with the killer we're after?" Will put forward.

"It's hard to say. The Pointville Devil was last active roughly seven years ago, and Nails has only been hunting for the last three."

"Hunting?" scoffed Will.

"William," George said warningly. "I suggest we take a brief recess. We'll take ten minutes for some fresh air and to stretch out. It's still early yet."

George, Will, Jake and Cynthia filed out the front door and spread out. Jake and Will walked to the APC to discuss their opinions on the events of the last twelve hours. George sat on the porch steps rubbing his chin with his thumb, his brow furrowed in thought. Cynthia walked around the porch and

leaned against the wall next to the open kitchen window. She could hear Marc and Nails inside, clinking glasses and singing a very bawdy drinking song.

She sighed and sat against the wall. The road ran directly in front of her and the landscape beyond furled away in hills and wooded knolls. In the distance she could see the brown and gray panels of a rusted tin roof in a small clearing.

Sighing again, she hugged her knees. The tension in the team was becoming too much. When she had joined the group a little less than three weeks before everyone else had seemed to be fairly well adjusted. Sure there were some issues between the four of them but they had seemed to get along pretty well, for the most part.

Since the Crown of Thorns debacle, though, the magic was gone. George was more distant, Will was more reserved, Jake was preoccupied and Marc was chanting a rather vulgar verse in chorus with the bizarre creature that last night had tried to kill them all. That was another thing Cynthia agreed with Will on, although neither of them knew it: Nails made them both very nervous.

So now what happens? she wondered. *Are they just going to keep arguing about where and when to look for this thing?*

She looked again at the tin roof in the distance, ringed by swaying treetops. It was only a few minutes' walk away. All they had to do was stroll over there and take a look. Vampire or not, it would be safer and easier to do in broad daylight.

As these thoughts bounced around inside her head she could hear Nails and Marc switch to a very sentimental ballad about two old friends and helicopters. *What a weird situation*, she thought. *These two are getting along like old college buddies and everyone else is ready for a fight.*

Ah, to heck with it, she thought, and set out across the road.

Chapter VI The Devil

Twelve minutes later, Cynthia found herself gazing up at the old house from just beyond the front steps in the center of a fairly large clearing. However pompous he might seem, G.R. had been onto something: the house really was in unnaturally good shape. It still showed signs of age: the windows were all broken, some of them even missing their frames. The paint had peeled and faded into a memory of its original shade. Still, the house itself stood straight and regal and the roof, though rusting, seemed to be intact all the way around. The walls and siding were all in good shape too, with none of the holes or rotted places that Cynthia had seen in so many houses in town.

So much for the visual. Cynthia reasoned that she should start with the basics and reached with her mind into the dilapidated house. She started by searching for the taint of evil. She found it immediately, menacing and quiet, at the far end of the house. It may have been something different than what the team had actually come to find, but there was definitely something supernatural here. She looked again, this time with telepathy and found not organized thinking but a jumble of distorted images that were vague and weak, like a static-ridden television picture. Cynthia had enough experience sneaking peaks in the minds of others to know what that meant. The creature was dreaming.

She walked up the front steps through the open doorway and looked around. The inside of the house looked much like the outside, weathered but not deteriorating. The rooms were bare and the floors covered with dead leaves. When Cynthia stepped forward into the room the floorboards bowed under her weight. She skipped to the side where the floor was stronger and when she looked back at the floor she saw that the nails at the ends of the two boards she had trod upon had been loose. When the ends of the boards had moved upward the nails had moved freely. The nails' heads now stood out above the floor like tiny mushrooms.

Cynthia shrugged to herself and moved further into the house. She followed the sense of evil through the empty rooms but made certain to check each section of the floor before she stepped on it. The source she followed was straight ahead but as she approached the back wall of the house it seemed to her that it was further away from her than the wall was. Her puzzlement only grew as she stepped through the back door and continued outside. She walked ten paces away from the house and stopped, more confused now than ever: she was standing in the middle of the clearing, halfway between the house and the trees, but her sense of closeness to her quarry had reached its peak. Moving one step in any direction only made it seem one step more distant. Even more confusing was that the sense came from beneath the ground.

Cynthia began to turn in circles, looking all around for some explanation to what she was feeling. She knew that unlike in the city many mountain houses had basements, but she wasn't near the house.

Maybe it's just dug itself into the ground, she thought. Then she remembered the loose floorboards in the house.

She ran back into the house, stopping at the door to the front room. Maybe the nails hadn't been raised by the boards, or perhaps they hadn't been set very well to begin with. She seized the boards with her mind and lifted. They came up easily, as did the boards next to them, exposing a wide hole in the earth beneath.

Cynthia leaned over the edge and peered down into the hole. It was a fairly deep pit about as wide as the new hole in the floorboards, with a tunnel leading off under the house. She hopped down into the tunnel and took her pistol out of its holster. The tunnel ended a few paces away at a roughly crafted wooden door framed by thick timbers that helped to support the tunnel. The door sported a simple C-shaped handle and opened inward easily.

The tunnel continued for a handful of steps beyond the door, where it appeared to open into a larger space, but the sunlight filtering down from the house was too weak to see any further. Cynthia fretted over this just long enough to remember that she still had George's lighter in her pocket. She took it out, struck the light and walked forward in the darkness.

The chamber beyond was about the size of a large dining room. Like the tunnel, it was a simple space in the earth with walls and ceiling supported by rough-hewn timbers. Torches stylized in the shapes

of skulls were set in sconces hung from the rafters.

What really got Cynthia's attention, though, were the two long oak bookcases in the middle of the room. They faced each other as they stood flanking the path from the doorway to one just like it, across the room. The shelves were lined top to bottom with dark shapes that glinted in the weak light.

Curious, Cynthia turned to the nearest torch and looked inside. To her relief the bottom of the cup was lined with cinder and ash. She lifted it out of its sconce and lit the cinders, then let the lighter cool for a moment before tucking it back in her pocket. The torch blazed up into a bright flame, illuminating the shelves and their contents. Cynthia gasped when she saw them.

The objects on the shelves were large jars made of yellow-tinted glass and capped with wooden lids. Each jar was full of a jaundiced orange liquid and floating inside of each was a single head. Countless peoples' heads, their final expressions of terror and agony forever etched on their faces, adorned the shelving in perfectly ordered rows, as though they were prized books meticulously arranged by a dotting collector. There were old men and women, children and youths, and others whose faces were so twisted by fear they were harder to identify.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a voice to Cynthia's right said and she froze in place. Her mind raced wildly as she listened for the voice to speak again. Her danger sense would warn her if she were about to be attacked; still, the last she had checked, the single entity in this pit had been asleep and dreaming, unless there were something else here that she couldn't read, like Nails...

She slowly turned toward where the voice had come from and beheld a lone figure standing at the edge of her light in the entrance to the far tunnel. He had pale skin and thin black hair and wore a suit such as a wealthy gentleman might wear to a formal dinner party two hundred years ago. Cynthia watched him for a while as he looked back at her before she finally asked, "Who are you?"

"Oh, surely you know the answer to that question," the figure said as he took a few slow steps forward. "I am the Pointville Devil, Terror of the Sentinel Mountains. I am he who is called X. Inferis."

Cynthia crooked an eyebrow.

"Surely, you know who I am." He sported a half grin, bearing a polished fang. "After all, you came here to find me, did you not? It was the touch of your mind that awakened me."

Cynthia took a step back from the slowly advancing vampire. "You're psychic?"

"Oh, no, not at all," X. Inferis said. "I possess a bevy of skills taught to me by my creator. You may have heard of her. The Crown of Thorns."

Cynthia swallowed and nodded.

"She made me the man that I am, so to speak, many years ago. She educated me in the ways of her powers, to heighten my senses, to increase my strength, and most of all, to sleep through the ages."

"You sleep? What do you do, hibernate?" asked Cynthia. She had stopped backing away but kept her torch brandished between herself and her host.

"Nothing so crude. I have the power to extend my daily rest to as long a period as I like. This has allowed me to haunt this proletariat village through the long years. Of course, one must provide for one's defense and so I have other powers that will rouse me should I be touched, physically or mentally, while I rest. Were it not for you, I would have slept for two more years."

"Why would you want to haunt the town?" Cynthia asked. She ran her eyes over the rows of jars again, wondering what was in them and if it would burn...

"Ah, at last you show signs of sense, girl," Inferis said. "The Crown of Thorns and I quarreled often. She claimed that she had chosen me for my cruelty to my servants. She believed that I would make an ideal marshal for her forces-at-arms." He raised a clenched fist and growled softly. "But she cast me out in time, saying that I did not have the spirit she required in a lieutenant. To think that commoner doubted my abilities! I came here from the city and fashioned my lair beneath a newly raised farmstead that I might work my wrath upon the locals and carve my name into legend."

"Right," Cynthia drawled as she eyed the bases of the bookcases. They were broad and thick, but they appeared to rest on the floor, rather than being affixed to it. "So, what's with the jars?"

"These are the trophies that mark my reign," Inferis said with a sweeping gesture. "I demonstrate my majesty to each of my victims, then I preserve their looks of awe here in my Museum of Glory."

You have got to be kidding me, thought Cynthia. She took another step away as she watched Inferis, who was now just past the edges of the bookcases. “So you only scare old ladies and orphans?” she taunted, hoping he would take a few more steps toward her.

X. Inferis’s face darkened. “I prey upon the weak to increase my prestige. The base elements know to fear me for the ferocity I visit upon the least of them. I wreak my vengeance upon them so my name will terrify them forever.”

For a long time the only sound in the chamber was the soft cracking of the embers in the torch. Then, very abruptly, Cynthia began to giggle, quickly working her way up to full-fledged laughter.

“I beg your pardon? What is so amusing?” demanded X. Inferis.

“You are!” chuckled Cynthia. “You’re so pathetic, it’s funny! We came here looking for some mysterious monster and you’re just a big coward.”

X. Inferis began to growl under his breath. Hidden in the shadows at his sides his fingernails lengthened into slender black claws.

“I mean, really! I’ve met the Crown of Thorns,” Cynthia continued. “*She* is scary. The whole city’s afraid of her. You know why? Because she’s not afraid of anyone. You’re afraid of anyone that might have even a chance of fighting you. I bet that’s why she kicked you out, isn’t it? So you came here and dug a mud pit under a farm. Then you sleep for what, like fifteen years at a time, go out and kill some old ladies and hide in your hole again. I bet you’re even afraid of any competition and that’s the reason you take their heads. Did you kill the old man that lived here because he found out about you? Afraid he might lead a peasant revolt?”

X. Inferis growled again.

“You know what else?” Cynthia rambled on despite her danger sense kicking in. “These people aren’t afraid of you. When you aren’t making them think that there’s just some regular loony running around they forget all about you. You’re a cliché to these people, a hobby for nerds. Oh yeah, the eighteen hundreds called and they want their leisure suit back.”

“You, wench, shall have the honor of seeing my true glory!” X. Inferis snarled and leapt at Cynthia. He hurled across the path toward her, talons flashing, only to smack against an invisible force in the air and flop onto the earthen floor, dead center of the path between the bookcases. He roared in inarticulate fury and flailed comically at Cynthia.

“Wow, did you ever fall for that. I’ve been waiting to try this thing out forever,” Cynthia said as she drew her pistol. “Go to hell ex-Ferris wheel, or whatever your name is.”

She quickly fired ten shots in rapid succession, spacing them around X. Inferis’s torso. He howled with rage while the first five rounds tore through his body then fell limp on the floor as the last rounds ripped him nearly to shreds. Cynthia lowered her pistol and gave one of the bookcases a healthy mental shove. It toppled over with a thunderclap of cracking wood and shattering glass and landed squarely on what was left of X. Inferis. Cynthia tried not to think about the contents of the breaking jars as she threw her torch towards the wreckage and ran back down the tunnel towards the exit. The torch hit the floor just inches from where the fluid from the jars was oozing across the packed dirt and the embers tumbled out of the cup.

Cynthia raced down the hall to the pit opening and jumped. She had just activated her telekinesis to give herself a boost when the fluid in the chamber reached the embers. The shockwave from the resulting explosion rushed down the tunnel and flung Cynthia up out of the hole, knocking the wind out of her. She tumbled head over heels in the hot air and landed flat on her back on the floor by the front door. As she scrambled to her feet and shook her head to clear her vision she heard a great crash behind her and saw that most of the next room had collapsed into the pit beneath it. Long tongues of flame lashed out of the gaping pit at the crumbling woodwork of the room.

Cynthia turned to flee from the house, ran smack into someone taller than she was and flopped back onto the floor. He leaned over and reached out toward her and she saw to her mild surprise that it was Will offering to help her up. She took his hand and together they ran out into the clearing where George and Jake were waiting for them.

“Cynthia? What the hell is happening?” George blurted.

“No time for that, George! We have to get under cover, now!” Will shouted as he and Cynthia ran past. He led the four of them at a brisk run through the trees back to the house. G.R. was waiting for them in the yard.

“I see you found her,” he said. “Is anyone following you?”

“We kind of figured we’d deal with them if they showed up,” quipped Jake as he followed the others into the house.

Jake kept watch by the front door while George checked Cynthia for injuries. She was fine and no one appeared to have seen or followed them, so they gathered in the dining room to hear Cynthia’s field report. Marc and Nails were still singing in the kitchen. Marc had picked up a considerable slur.

Cynthia laid it all out, from leaving to take a look out of boredom to encountering the Pointville Devil himself. She was careful not to mention her powers and as she made it out she discovered the entrance to the tunnel by serendipity and caught X. Inferis off guard by pushing a bookcase onto him.

“The fire you set. What was the intention behind that?” George asked dourly.

“Uh, well...I thought that was what we were supposed to do. Burn down a place after we find a monster there,” Cynthia said as she smiled weakly.

“You’ll notice I’m not laughing,” George said darkly.

“Give her a break, George,” Jake put in. “She was in a cave with a bunch of people’s heads in jars. I think any of us would have been shaken by that.”

“I have to agree with that. We didn’t damage property that actually belonged to anyone and for whatever reason no one seems to be taking much interest in all the havoc we’ve been wreaking since last night,” Will remarked. “I for one am glad. It’s nice to not be playing hide-and-seek with the local authorities for a change.”

Cynthia stared at Will in amazement. She had fully expected him to be livid with her for what she had done, not be defending her from George of all people.

“Nevertheless, one of the conditions of Cynthia’s attendance on this trip was her staying in line. This is the second time since joining us that she has run off and acted on her own accord.,” George said, his eyes narrowed.

“I didn’t mean to cause trouble. I was just gonna scout and save time,” Cynthia said softly.

“Let it go, George,” said Jake. “Aren’t you the one who’s always saying it’s all right to make mistakes, as long as we learn from them? Besides, I think she’s shown a knack for taking care of herself. Heck, she went toe to toe with a vampire by herself today and there she sits, not a scratch on her. Yeah, I know what you’ll say, maybe she’s just lucky. Well, which would you rather she be, lucky or dead?”

A pointed silence broken only by Nails and Marc’s singing followed. George shifted his gaze to each other person at the table. Gradually his face softened to a much more George-like expression and he lowered his eyes.

“Perhaps you’re right, Jake. Heaven knows I haven’t shown a great deal of connection with you all lately,” he said with a pointed look at Will and Jake. “Perhaps I’m losing sight of my goals. At any rate, I will try to remember that you are the ones who must deal with the consequences of your actions in the field.” He let the ambiguity of his comment sink in for a moment before continuing. “For the time being we can only wait to see if the local constabulary trace the damage to us.”

“How did you guys find me so quickly, anyway?” Cynthia asked.

“When we couldn’t find you to start the meeting again we assumed you had gone to take a look around. Of course, the house exploding as we walked out of the trees was a little disorienting,” said Jake.

“We’re just glad you’re all right,” Will said and smiled wanly when Cynthia met his eyes.

George looked at the two of them, then at the table again. “He’s right, of course. Your safety comes before all else, Cynthia, and I’m sorry I haven’t expressed that. I can’t imagine what you must think of me. Will you accept my apology?”

“Sure, George,” Cynthia said quietly. “I know you’re looking out for us.”

“Thank you,” George said with a sigh. “If you will work with me later I will want to document your experience. In the meantime there is another matter to place before the team.” He looked at G.R.,

whose expression had brightened to one of hopeful expectation. "Nails and G.R. have voiced an interest in joining the team. I will now open the floor to discussion of this possibility."

"Well, now that's something," said Jake. "This trip just keeps getting better."

"No offence, G.R., but have you thought this through? This is a serious job we do. It requires a huge commitment," said Will.

"I'm up for it," G.R. said quickly. "You lot have seen that I know how to research and Nails has been teaching me how to fight. Plus I don't have much keeping me here anyway."

"Well, we can always use new members," Jake said. "The thing is, you can join, but Nails...well, he did beat up a bunch of guys the other night. I'm not sure we can trust him."

"Nails has made it clear that he will only join if G.R. joins, and he goes where G.R. goes. I believe it is fair to say that the two will join the team together, or not at all?" George asked. G.R. nodded.

"I still don't know, George. You're quite sure he seemed safe to you?" Will asked with an askance look at G.R..

"We spoke at length. There is no doubt in my mind that Nails will behave himself in our company," George answered.

"If you're not certain, then just give it a try," G.R. said hopefully. "Let us come back to your base or whatever and see what you do for a few days. You can decide if you feel safe with us around then."

"It's a thought," Cynthia conceded.

"I would say, I'd rather have Nails fighting with us than against us," Jake said.

George was drumming his fingers on his lips in thought. "What do you think, Will?" he asked.

Will's mind was working furiously. Why did George seem so willing to admit them, when normally it took long deliberation before a team member was admitted? Was it more of the strange behavior that had led to him drafting Cynthia? Or did he know something about Nails that the rest of them didn't? Will did have to admit one thing: lately his trust in George had gone out the window. Once upon a time he had trusted George with his life and even though that had diminished greatly since Tina was killed, George had never let them down. Except when Tina was killed...

That aside, Cynthia had turned out to be a real asset to the team. Saving him from the booby-trapped house's pit, facing down the Crown of Thorns, healing himself and Marc, dispatching the Pointville Devil. As George had once hinted, she had incredible potential. Maybe she could rise with Nails to become the most powerful members of the team--or at the very least help protect the others from him.

So all Will said was, "Let's give it a go."

George nodded and leaned back in his chair. "Very good," he said slowly, and looked at G.R.. "You do realize the gravity of this? Even if you do not join the others in the field, even if you don't join at all, your involvement will require secrecy and intensity like you probably have never known."

"I understand," G.R. said solemnly. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get out of this cesspool."

"Yes, quite," said George, pursing his lips. "In that case, we only need Marc and Nails's input on this. Marc! Would you come join us, please?"

The singing in the kitchen stopped and was followed by muffled speech and a burst of laughter. At length Marc shuffled into the room, carrying a liquor bottle with the last few sips sloshing around at the bottom. He staggered slightly as he went. Nails walked behind him, as steadily as ever.

"Hey George!" Marc said as he shambled to George's side and threw an arm across his shoulders. "Check this out! Nails and I have the coolest idea! We should let him 'n' G.R. join the club! That would be awesome! Hey, you wanna sip?"

"No thank you, Marc," said George. "Very well, then. Jake, I want you back on lookout duty while Will, Cynthia and Marc pack up. Nails, G.R. and I have quite a few things to go over."

While the others made ready to leave George laid out the tenets of team membership for Nails and G.R. in the dining room. Secrecy and loyalty to the team were of utmost importance. Theirs was not a campaign of extermination of the supernatural but a fight to destroy those supernatural elements that

would do harm to the weak and innocent. Most of all George stressed the value he ascribed to compassion and to keeping violence a last resort.

“I want you to understand that we are open and accepting,” he said. “I’m not telling you these things because I’m judging you, but there is a code of conduct you will have to obey as long as you are with us. Paramount in that code is the sanctity of life, especially sentient life.”

He leaned forward in his chair and lowered his voice. “I understand the tensions that led to the events of two nights ago. What I must say is that repeats of the incident will not be tolerated.”

G.R. half rose out of his seat to protest. “Hey, that was--” he began, but George silenced him with a raised hand.

“As I said, I’m not judging anyone. But I cannot condone violence unless it is in self-defense. We are fighting to protect others, not to take out our issues on them. Please bear this in mind as you consider membership in the following days. Now, G.R., if you don’t mind I’d like to say a few things to Nails.”

“Sure. I have to pack anyway,” G.R. said sullenly as he got up and walked to the stairs.

“That went poorly,” Nails said when G.R. was gone.

George raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“I’ve got sort of a link with his mind. Part of the whole protector thing,” Nails explained. “He’s in a really sour mood. He thinks we’re picking on him.”

“Aren’t we?” George said. “The others are nervous about you, but they don’t know what we do. You were merely the instrument. G.R.’s rage and manipulative nature were the force behind it.”

“Yeah, I guess...” Nails said, his eyes lowered. “We’ll work on that. I can help to keep him in line. He’ll behave if he thinks you’ll kick him out otherwise.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” George said. “Nails?”

“Yes?”

“You do know that I don’t hold what’s happened against you. I’ll try to respect your mission, and your obvious mental poise in doing so. You understand?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“Then you’ll also forgive me for saying that if you ever, *ever* harm one of my people again, I will personally retire you.”

Nails looked dejected for just a heartbeat before he grinned broadly. “No problem. I gotcha, George.” He hopped up and started for the kitchen. “You want anything to drink? We might as well empty the fridge now.”

“No, thank you, Nails,” George said. In spite of himself he was smiling.

Epilogue

The journey home was smooth and uneventful. G.R. brought a couple of suitcases to subsist on for the next few days while Nails didn't appear to need or want anything more than a few changes of clothes. Sullivan was mildly surprised to see the group return so early and slightly more surprised that they had returned with new recruits but more than cheerfully went about setting up two more of the empty bedrooms for G.R. and Nails.

George gave them the basic tour, then left them to settle in by whatever manner each saw fit. The last he looked, Nails was taking stock of the equipment in the Gym and G.R. was playing video games with Jake in the Rec Room. Will and Cynthia each went to their own devices, but George noted a glance and a smile between the two of them before they parted.

When he was sure no one was around, he slipped into his Study. He went to his journal, picked up his quill, and began to write.

Friday, October the Fifteenth, 2043 T.E.

It is a strange time for the team.

Two new members joined us today. One is laden with personal issues. The other is easily the most unique individual to ever be admitted into our ranks. Both have remarkable potential, but they will also bear very close watching until I can be certain they are no danger to my people. The one has the strength and the other the (here, George paused for a moment) fierceness to be serious threats to those around them should they choose. As with everything that happens in these troubling times I must wait and watch.

I find in light of mistakes I have made in the recent past that the team's faith in me has diminished. Where Will would never have challenged my decrees only a few weeks past, he now openly derides my decisions. Jake sneaks about the Mansion, searching for the secrets I keep hidden. Cynthia seems torn between her naturally inquisitive nature and my dictates that she keep her abilities resigned.

I have let them all down. Their trust in me is gone and with that, their focus will wane. If the troops do not believe in their commander, they lose direction and become more vulnerable to the enemy, and our enemy does not need any more advantages.

I would give anything I have to amend this situation. To not have to exclude them from my lines of reasoning. To not be forced to make them face the dark in ignorance. To have them trust me again, to believe that I will fight and even die for their sakes. I would give anything for these things.

I hope that the next few days, at least, will be quiet. Perhaps that will give me some time to find a connection with my people again. Maybe I can salvage something from this situation.

He laid the quill aside and closed the book. Then he poured himself a brandy and sat in his ancient chair to think. He did not move again until the next morning.