

Book II
The Crown of Thorns

Chapter I In All Her Glory

It's amazing, she thought, how much more you can see at night.

She stood facing out the living room windows of a lavish penthouse atop Kerrigan Tower, one of Ylelon's tallest buildings. She had been a beautiful dark-haired woman with soft green eyes and a light dusting of freckles when she was alive. That was before a chance encounter with a vampire in a back ally almost four hundred years ago, in a time when the ships docked in the harbor were made entirely of wood and ownership of a single-shot pistol was a status symbol. Now she was no longer a person, but a thing, a soulless corpse that drank the blood of the living--simply put, a vampire. The shine of her eyes and the tone of her skin had faded long ago, leaving a gleam of predatory cunning and the pallor of death. Her hair, still full and beautiful, fell to nearly halfway down her back. She wore a sheer purple dress that drifted on the slightest breeze and a bodice of deeper purple beneath it, just visible through the fabric. She had long ago abandoned her name from life and now called herself the Crown of Thorns.

The night is so much more honest than the day, she thought. In the daytime, all you can see is an empty sky and the thrice-damned sun. At night the stars in the heavens are revealed in all their glory. Light reveals some things, but leaves others shrouded in shadow. Darkness hides everything equally and the world is that much more interesting for it. In daylight, people strut about, secure in their belief that they have conquered the universe simply because they can see it clearly. In darkness they lie huddled in corners because they know the real masters of the night are awake and looking for them.

She turned from the window and walked back into the room. The living room, like the rest of the penthouse, was lavishly decorated to the point of sickening excess. Everything was plush, silk, crystal or glass, new wave, imported, hand-crafted, antique, collectible, one-of-a-kind and/or a somebody's "original," and presently it was all covered in blood.

Six bodies lay strewn about the room, those of the former occupant and his friends. The body of a young woman was draped backward over the couch with her legs dangling over the headrest and her head hanging a few inches above the floor. The owner himself lay in a heap face-down on the floor, framed by the broken and shattered remains of the coffee table. The others lay wherever they fell when the Crown finished with them. Blood flowed freely from the bodies and dribbled down furniture and *objets d'art*, leaving grotesque stains in the pristine white carpet.

The Crown of Thorns surveyed all of this and found it very pleasing. From around her arm she took a circlet woven from the branches of a thorny bush that grew in the desert and dropped it on the penthouse owner's head as though discarding a gum wrapper. Then she walked casually into the elevator and pushed the button for the ground floor. As the doors closed, she thought: *It's good to be home.*

Joseph "Monster" Brooks was bored out of his skull. He was a vampire too, a six-and-a-half-foot mountain of undead muscle and flab with a bushy black beard and a habitual no-nonsense scowl.

Tonight was a night like any other. Rise at sunset, plop in the same easy chair, smoke the same opiates and review the same business numbers. Monster ran a very popular and infamous brothel called the Dark Side, located near the southern end of the docks. The place had a reputation for wild parties and gang violence and if it was also known for the occasional odd disappearance, well, it was in the very worst part of town and bad things happened to people there. The women at the Dark Side were all secure in the knowledge that any john that didn't behave himself was prone to have a very bad "accident."

That was where Monster came in. He headed the troop of vampires that kept tabs on things and made sure that the wild parties didn't get *too* wild. Their job was to provide security; Monster's was to make sure that they didn't get out of hand and start snacking on the "talent." Aside from trouble with the police (which was kept to a minimum, thanks to the generous greasing of certain palms) and the occasional bouncer getting out of hand (which was also a minor problem, due to Monster's reputation as a brutal disciplinarian) business was smooth and very lucrative.

Monster hated it. He hated being rooted to one spot by responsibility. He hated having to work alongside trollops and not being able to rip into one whenever the mood struck him. He hated having to

spend time working with useless things like account ledgers. Most of all, he hated the Crown of Thorns for forcing him into this predicament. But as much as he hated her he was more afraid of her, so he sat in his two room lair, a Spartan and claustrophobic space constructed at his orders under the brick apartment building the Dark Side had once been, and stoned himself silly night after night to pass away his endless existence.

This evening he had finished reviewing the ledgers for the previous week's intake looking for any sign he was being slighted by any employees and had found none. He was just about to light up when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Enter!" he bellowed, annoyed at the possibility of having to deal with anything else this evening. He turned his swiveling easy chair away from his desk to face the door to his chamber.

The door clicked and creaked open and there stood Eric, Monster's burly second in command. He didn't enter the room but remained standing at the threshold, staring emptily into space.

"What is it, Eric?" Monster demanded. Eric didn't answer, but nodded his head as if drunk, then suddenly hurled into the room to land face down at Monster's feet. His back was shredded, gouged deeply in many places by something lengthy and cutty. Monster bolted from his chair with his fangs bared in rage, but he froze in place when he saw the Crown of Thorns standing in the doorway. She regarded him with amusement, then walked to a love seat opposite his desk and sat down.

"Hello, Joe," she said. Nearly four centuries of undeath had not diminished the softness or sweetness of the voice she'd had in life. "What do you know?"

Monster grit his teeth. Who did she think she was? His anger was only tempered by the fact that she knew exactly who she was: the most powerful vampire in Ylelon, possibly in its history.

"He was useful," Monster said, nudging Eric with his foot and at a loss to think of anything else to say that might not get him eviscerated.

"He was also rude. When a lady asks to see one of her employees, a gentleman should comply."

You're no lady, Monster thought. "He was acting on my orders. I left *orders* not to be bothered."

"Yet, I outrank you, Joe. While we're on the subject of manners, it's considered courteous to offer your guest something to drink. Your best stock, at that." She leaned back in her seat and began to pick at her teeth absent-mindedly.

Damn her! Monster thought, kicking Eric's remains away from his chair. She'd had plenty of blood tonight; he could smell it all around her. Yet she came here, disrupted his evening and demanded he serve up his star attraction on a platter. How was he supposed to run a business (one that she had bullied him into, no less!) if she insisted on pulling these stunts every time she came back to town?

On the other hand, he might be able to outwit her. Since she was out of town most of the time, she probably had no idea who was who at the Dark Side. If he called upstairs for one of the second tier girls...

He sat back down and swiveled to the desk. Picking up the phone, he dialed the extension for the phone that hung on the wall upstairs by the front door where Tony, his chief bouncer, stood.

"What?" Tony answered, after taking six rings to pick up.

"Tony, tell Ginger to come down here," Monster said, then jumped at a sharp noise like a switchblade snapping open. With eyes wide, he turned to face the Crown of Thorns. She was still calmly picking at her teeth, but she had extended her pinkie finger straight up into the air. That finger's nail had lengthened and thickened, becoming a delicately curved claw as long as one of Monster's fingers.

Monster took a moment to compose himself. He imagined that had he been alive he would have been sweating profusely.

"T-Tony? Never mind Ginger. C-could you send Sophie down, please?" Very slowly, he laid the receiver back in its cradle and turned to face the Crown. "How did you know?" he asked.

"I know *you*. Haven't you got it yet?" she chided. "I had you figured out a long time ago. You're as predictable as you are boorish. That's what makes it so much fun to torment you." She switched to scraping her fangs with her new talon, which made a sound like a knife blade dragging across pavement.

"What do you want?" Monster asked, his impatience overwhelming his good judgment.

"The same thing I always want, Joe," the Crown said. Scrape, scrape, scrape. "To shake things up and have a little fun."

"All right, that's good," Monster said with a sneer, "but why do you have to come bother me to do it?" The Crown started to reply, but was cut short by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Monster bellowed, and in came Sophie. She was a lovely dusky-skinned woman, with beautiful full lips and exotic eyes. She wore a low-cut evening gown and her skin was as soft and silky as her hair. This was why Monster valued her so much as his main attraction. She didn't look like a hooker who worked the worst part of town, she looked like a model, one the johns came in droves for.

"Boss? You wanted to--" She stopped at the sound of the Crown's improvised dentistry and followed the noise with her eyes to the bizarre sight of the Crown's taloned little finger. "Um, you wanted to see me?" Her eyes flickered back and forth between Monster and the Crown.

Monster could understand her trepidation. She knew as well as anyone else at the Dark Side who and what Monster was, not to mention the fact that very few individuals--mortal or vampire--were ever allowed into his lair. The fact that she was the Dark Side's main draw probably provided little comfort.

"It's all right, Sophie," Monster said. "I've got a...uh, guest...that wants to meet you." He looked to the Crown of Thorns, who was openly amused by his feeble attempt at consoling Sophie.

For her part, Sophie was obediently moving to stand at the Crown's right. Just for a moment there was silence, then Sophie looked at Monster and said, "Is she a--"

With lightning speed the Crown seized Sophie's right arm just below her shoulder and hauled her over the arm of the love seat. Sophie let out a terrified shriek that became a strangled gurgle when the Crown clamped her teeth on Sophie's throat. She thrashed with her free arm and legs and gasped for air, but she was helpless against the cold iron grip of the Crown.

Monster watched her struggles with detached irritation. He had experienced that grip and bite himself once. The Crown of Thorns might be made out of the body of a slender, petite woman, but she was stronger than your average bear...or vampire.

As Sophie's struggles grew weaker and her choked cries became quiet sobs, Monster grew more and more impatient. He was actually relieved when the Crown tossed Sophie's body onto the floor. Blood trickled from the wounds on her neck onto the carpet. Monster observed that, as usual, there was no blood anywhere on the Crown's outfit. He had known her for over one hundred years and never once--not while torturing someone, not during the bloodiest fight, not while eating--had he ever seen her get a single drop of blood on one of her damn purple dresses. How did she do it?

"If you're done depriving me of my livelihood," he growled, "maybe you'd like to get back to telling me why you're here."

The Crown smiled and wiped a tiny dab of blood from her lips. "But if I told you, Joe, that would ruin the surprise." She stood up and stretched. "It's enough for now to say that I'm going to paint the town red." She reached down, picked up Sophie's corpse with one hand and slung it over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Then she turned and strolled out the door. As she crossed the threshold, she looked back over her shoulder and said, "We're going to drive him crazy."

Bloody hell, thought Monster when she was gone. *She's going to bring that great beast down on us all.*

He immediately loaded his pipe and lit up.

It had been two weeks since Cynthia moved into George Manor. She continued her training under George and Will, working toward becoming a full-fledged member of the team. She had plenty of time to train because the group hadn't had any notable encounters since the incident at 918 Devonshire. The last vampire any of them had seen was the one Will had destroyed on the night he met Cynthia and they had seen nothing else supernatural since then. So the group whiled away time with their various chores and hobbies, awaiting the time when they would need to be active again.

The group as a rule was not given to spending leisure time together, but after Cynthia had been with them for a week George dictated that they should begin eating breakfast together at a regular time to create a sense of unity. This elicited some complaining from Jake and Marc, who were used to keeping very late hours, but when George pointed out that he covered all of the costs of their livelihood and then some they grudgingly complied.

Thus, the morning after the Crown of Thorns returned to Ylelon, George, Will, Cynthia, Jake and Marc sat together in the Mansion's Kitchen eating a simple meal of eggs and ham prepared for them by Sullivan. Jake wasted no time in regaling the lot with details of his latest creation, which had Cynthia intrigued, George pensive and Will and Sullivan downright nervous. George had just asked the penultimate question regarding Jake's projects: "How much will this cost?" Jake was artfully filibustering when the doorbell rang.

Everyone except Cynthia froze in place. George actually stopped with his fork midway between his plate and his mouth. Everyone still remembered what had happened the last time the doorbell rang unexpectedly and four pairs of eyes and one advanced sensor array reflexively turned toward Cynthia.

"Well? What are you looking at?" she snapped.

"George?" Sullivan asked. "Any appointments today you haven't told me about?"

"I don't believe so, unless I've lost my mind." He suddenly realized he was still holding his fork in mid-pose with a hunk of ham impaled on it and with a sheepish grin he set it back on his plate.

"Ok, then," Sullivan sighed. If she could have rolled the eyes in her faceplate, she would have.

"I suppose I should go see who it is," George said and moseyed out the door.

His mind raced as he walked down the hall. The seconds ticked by without another ring from the doorbell, which only made him more nervous. It probably meant that the person at the door knew that a single ring would definitely bring someone to the door eventually. George could count the number of people in the outside world who knew the workings of the Mansion that well on one hand and any one of them turning up unannounced was almost certainly bad news. George hoped against hope that he was wrong. He often found himself doing so and he figured he ought to be getting pretty good at it by now. It didn't help because when he opened the door the person there was Detective Samuel King.

King was pushing fifty. His hard-lined face bore all the wear one could expect from someone with a decades-long career of policing Ylelon. His short-cropped hair, once jet-black, was run through with ripples of gray. He wore a beige suit and black shoes. He was incredibly stocky and broad and the whole of his appearance gave the impression of a man who neither promoted foolishness nor tolerated it.

"Detective King!" George said. "Good morning! We're just having breakfast and you're more than welcome to join us. Come in!"

"We need to talk, George," King said. He stepped over the threshold as though he believed his well-being depended on a painfully slow and measured gait.

"I'm glad you're here!" George ran on. "You can meet Cynthia and see some of the new additions to the Armory..."

"George, she's back."

George stopped short. There was a long moment of dread, empty silence. Then George said, "Are you sure?"

King reached into his suit jacket and produced an unmarked evidence bag, which he tossed to George. His heart sank when he saw what it contained: a simple crown woven from thorny branches.

"I'm pretty damn sure," King said.

Without a word, George withdrew a small metal cylinder from his pocket and pressed a button on its side as he spoke into one end. The microphone transferred his voice to powerful speakers hidden in the ceiling of every room in the Mansion so the very walls shook with his words: "Red alert. All team members report to the Situation Room immediately. This is not a drill."

"What the hell was *that*?" Cynthia exclaimed.

"*That* was George's silent alarm," Will said as he joined the others in hurriedly dumping their partially empty plates in the sink.

"His SILENT alarm?!" Cynthia said.

"That's what he insists on calling it," Jake said on his way out the door. "It's his silent alarm, with lots of personality."

Cynthia shook her head, set her plate on the counter and hurried after them. When she got to the Situation Room the others were already seated at the table. George stood behind his chair. Next to him

stood a very blocky, very serious-looking man.

"Cynthia, this is Detective Samuel King. I'm sorry you had to meet under these circumstances," said George.

"So what's the emergency?" snickered Jake. "Renegade lawn gnomes? Demonic toothpaste?"

"The Crown of Thorns has returned," said George.

Jake turned white. "Sorry I asked."

"What do we know?" Will asked.

"Samuel?" prompted George.

"This is rumor control, here are the facts," King began. "At approximately 11:30 p.m. last evening, Stanley Derrick was murdered in his penthouse, along with five visitors."

"Stan Derrick?" Jake asked. "The bon vivant who lives--um, lived--in Kerrigan Tower?"

"The same," King said. "I won't waste time with the identities of the victims or any other details you'll be seeing all over the tabloids. What I will tell you is this: while the causes of death for each victim varied, most of them were related to severe blood loss. Also, this was left at the scene. I believe I was able to retrieve it without any of the other investigators seeing it." He tossed the evidence bag containing the thorny crown onto the table. It lay there on the under-lit plastic surface and seemed to mock the assembled team by its very presence.

"The bitch is back," Marc said.

Will stared at the crown in silence. In spite of the trepidation he felt at the return of the Crown of Thorns, he also felt a surge of respect for Detective King. Will knew full well the severity of removing evidence from the scene of a crime--after all, once upon a time, he had been a rookie cop partnered with King. What King had done could land him in serious hot water, but he knew what was at stake otherwise.

This was the Crown's modus operandi. After disappearing from sight for weeks or months at a time, she would return to Ylelon and make her presence known by committing some high-profile atrocity. On one occasion, she slunk into a midnight screening in a suburb movie theater and slaughtered thirteen people, leaving the bodies in their seats for the ushers to find.

The last time the Crown was in Ylelon, the police department was plagued by a rash of disappearances from their own ranks. Officers on duty and off vanished from their homes and while on patrol. One woman even vanished out of her own headquarters. She left her desk for the ladies room and was never seen again.

A total of seven officers went missing over three days. The departments were in an uproar, unable to find any clue how the disappearances were taking place or who might be responsible. The answer came in the form of a call from a north-side couple that had just returned home after a two-week vacation. There were bodies on their bed, they said. They were badly mangled, some of them almost beyond recognition. Many of them were dressed in the shredded remains of police uniforms.

The incident had police out in force with a vendetta against whomever had killed so many people and was now a cop killer. Their only clue was that the murderer always left the same calling card: a crudely woven crown made from a desert weed, adorning one of the victims.

Ylelon's finest tracked the killer to an abandoned townhouse. They found more bodies there and proceeded to comb the premises. Early the second evening gunshots rang out from the basement of the house, which was being used as an impromptu crime lab and morgue. Other officers at the scene went to investigate and a pitched battle ensued between the police and...something. What transpired at that fight was never made public, but what was known was that five police officers, a forensic psychologist, and three police special forces members were killed in the melee.

The crown was what led the police to the townhouse. While most of the crowns were maddeningly devoid of additional evidence such as fingerprints the townhouse crown had been dusted with flakes of paint. Advanced forensics had led the police to one of the very few buildings left in the city to still contain lead paint, and the Crown of Thorns had been waiting for them.

King was one of the survivors of that incident. He never spoke of it, and he became irate if anyone mentioned it. Will knew that the investigation of the penthouse murders would likely drag on without resolution, because aside from that little bramble the Crown of Thorns almost never left any evidence. If

King had not taken the crown that now lay in the middle of the table the other investigators would have had something to go on, or at least know who left it. Given enough time (which Will knew was largely determined by how soon the Crown *wanted* to be found) they might find their way to her again and that was exactly what King was trying to protect them from. When the opportunity arose, King didn't hesitate to risk his career over a charge of obstructing justice if it meant a chance to spare the men and women he worked with a meeting with the Crown of Thorns. That was why Will respected him so much.

"So what do we do now?" he asked, without taking his eyes off of the evidence bag.

"Now," George said, "we analyze the hell out of that sample. If the Crown of Thorns wants to lead a group of heavily armed defenders of personal rights to where she sleeps, that's what she'll get."

"I'm for it," Marc said. "I say we find where the bitch sleeps and burn the place down around it. I bet Osborn could build us a nuke."

"Well, it might take a few days..." said Jake thoughtfully.

"Is there concern that any of the victims will rise as vampires?" asked Will. "You said the causes of death were blood loss."

King glowered. "I don't think so. The blood wasn't in the bodies because it was all over the room. I'll keep an eye on the morgue, but right now I think we oughta focus on finding that tramp and gunning her down."

"Hold it," Sullivan said. "Have we all forgotten what happened the last time the Crown left one of her clues lying around?" She paused to look at King, who had visibly tensed. "In case you've lost your minds, you'll remember she left that clue expecting *us*. The fact that a small army of constabulary turned up instead did nothing to deter her."

"It,' Sullivan," Marc snapped. "Not 'her.' That thing ain't no person."

"Very well, it. But the point is that the Crown of Thorns is smart enough to manipulate us and just about anyone else to serve its whims and powerful enough to deal with the situation when its plans go awry. I don't think kicking the door down and charging in is the most favorable solution."

"Yeah, but it'd be fun," Marc said.

"If I may make an observation," said Jake. "We won't have anything to go on until we analyze this sample. Even then, it's possible that this is simply the Crown's time-honored means of letting us know that she's home and won't tell us anything more. So I suggest that while George and I are running laps in the lab the rest of you start preparations for a field trip. With emphasis on heavy armor and anti-tank weapons."

"You're right of course, Jake," George said. "Except possibly for the anti-tank weapons part. Everyone to your regular assignments, and bear in mind as you work what we're dealing with."

"Who's the Crown of Thorns?" Cynthia asked.

Chapter II Vampire 101

“Isn’t it a bit late for this?” Cynthia asked as Will and George escorted her into the Library. “You guys have been training me for two weeks and instead of monsters all I’ve learned about is a bunch of army stuff.”

“Before you can join us on missions in the field, Cynthia, you need to have basic espionage, security and medical skills,” George said.

“And gun safety,” Will added.

“And gun safety,” echoed George. “But the Crown of Thorns being back in Ylelon constitutes nothing short of an emergency. You need to have an in-depth understanding of vampires as a whole, probably much more than you picked up fighting them in back alleys for kicks.”

“But what about the Crown?” Cynthia said dejectedly. “Shouldn’t I know about her too?”

Will and George stole a quick glance at each other. “All in due time,” George said, “but first the basics.” He motioned toward his own chair at the head of the Library table. “Please.”

Cynthia sat with a resigned sigh and swiveled the chair to face the computer. George leaned over her shoulder, took the mouse and began to buzz through folders at a dizzying rate. He finally stopped with a folder filled with hundreds of icons, each of which appeared to be a picture of George making a different silly face. He clicked on one labeled “Vampire 101” and said, “Come find us when you’re done.” As he and Will departed the desktop was replaced by a black field in which hovered a tiny animated George.

“Greetings!” Digital George said in George’s exact voice. “Since you’re seeing me, either you’re being punished for something or I’m too busy doing something else to teach you something important. So while I’m working, I’m going to tell you about those blood-sucking, soulless undead monsters, trademark lawyers! Ha! You like that? I make the joke!”

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” Cynthia said.

“The first thing we must do is separate fact from fiction. Actual vampires are quite different from what you’ve probably seen in movies, role-playing games and Sue Wheat novels.”

“Do tell,” Cynthia said.

“With no further ado, I will recite a listing of facts on vampires in no particular order...”

“Vampires are truly undead, that is, *dead*. Contrary to what some fictional sources would have you believe, they are not mutations, a separate species, possessed corpses or the victims of b-movie viruses or radiation. Unlike some less intelligent forms of undead, vampires often retain a semblance of the personality that they had in life, albeit a twisted, evil and perverse one. Sources such as Sue Wheat suggest that they may retain morality, compassion, or other virtues they may have had in life, but in fact such qualities are lost to them. Vampires are simply corpses: the soul is gone, leaving behind only an ambulatory cadaver. Never trust a vampire that claims to feel guilty or want to “change its ways.”

“Despite the way many sources portray them, vampires are not immune to physical injury. While it is true that they are dead and therefore need not worry about such results of injury as blood loss and shock, the injury itself still presents a problem. A vampire that has been shot or stabbed has still suffered physical damage. While a single wound of this type is not necessarily unlife threatening, enough of them together are the same way that a puppet or robot shot or stabbed once will probably not “die,” but if harmed so enough will fall apart or cease to function. Thus, if you must resort to using a gun, ax, sword, club, or even fisticuffs against a vampire be prepared to inflict enough damage to destroy it. This does not necessarily imply total annihilation of the vampire, only sufficient damage to disrupt its supernatural “motive force,” and therefore destroy it, similar to the robot scenario (See essay U-5, “Animating forces of the undead.”) This “motive force” is essentially a property of the supernatural corpse and is thereby tied to the physical structure and condition of the corpse itself. In simpler terms, do enough damage, and the dead bastard goes down for the count.

“A vampire is created when an existing vampire drains a living person of blood to the point of death. There are countless stories of vampires rising due to having been wicked individuals in life. Stories

also abound of individuals that became vampires upon a natural death days, months or even years after having been fed on (but not killed by) a vampire. However, in truth it is only death by exsanguination (through feeding) that creates a vampire. Typically it takes several days for a corpse to rise as a vampire. Traditionally, this time frame has been regarded as three days, but this is by no means an absolute and the time it takes for the corpse to rise has been observed to be plus or minus as much as forty-eight hours.

“If the heart of a vampire is ever removed from its body or destroyed, the vampire is also destroyed. Also, driving an object (traditionally a stake) made of wood or silver into the vampire’s heart can paralyze it! For this to happen the object must actually pierce the heart, inflicting damage and lodging there. A crossbow bolt that tears through the body or a stake that is yanked out after striking will not cause paralysis. Be advised that while a vampire will almost always succumb to this paralysis, one of exceptional willpower and fortitude may be able to stay active long enough to wrench the offending object from its flesh. Never turn your back on a vampire because you managed to plant a stake in its chest!

“Silver is the bane of vampires as it is of all undead. Weapons made primarily of or thoroughly coated in high-grade silver will burn vampires and other undead creatures as though they were red-hot. Even simple contact with silver is harmful and typically quite painful.

“As legend and popular culture suggests, sunlight is an extraordinarily effective weapon against vampires. Contrary to what some movies will have you believe, it is NOT ultra-violet light that harms them, but true sunlight itself; artificial light, as well as other natural types (such as bio-luminescence and firelight) are not effective against them. Sunlight burns vampires on contact; the only comparable phenomena among living humanoids are burning resulting from exposure to fire or extreme heat. It must be noted that while sunlight itself is harmful, daytime in and of itself is not. Contrary to some folklore, vampires are not paralyzed, rendered unconscious or otherwise limited during daylight hours. As long as they avoid direct sunlight or areas well lit by indirect sunlight vampires can function normally.

“Legends attribute countless abilities to vampires, ranging from preternatural strength to the ability to control minds, shape-shift and command wild beasts and the weather. These tales carry as much variance as the tale-tellers themselves and in fact have only one common denominator: they’re all lies. Vampires, like most other supernatural beings, do possess unnatural physical strength, but any other talents such as those mentioned above in use by a vampire indicate such things as magic use, psionics, legerdemain or other learned abilities, not any inherent powers.

“Got it? Good! Movin’ on...”

“How do you think she’s doing?” asked Jake. He was seated at one of the tables in the Lab, with the crown set under a microscope in front of him.

“Assuming she didn’t immediately quit the program and pull up solitaire, she should be learning a great deal,” George replied. He was assembling a plethora of chemicals and instruments to test the crown. “How are you doing?”

“So far, so far,” Jake said. He stared intently at the crown through the microscope and occasionally scrawled observations in a round notepad with a camouflage cover. “There are some discolorations that might be chemical stains, but otherwise...oh, whoa!”

“What is it?” George asked.

Jake had pulled open a drawer in the table and fished around until he found a hobby knife and forceps. “There’s something here!” he said excitedly. He grasped the crown with the forceps and began to make an incision along one of the stalks.

“What do you see?” George asked. He walked to Jake’s side, careful not to crowd him.

“These stalks are hollow,” said Jake. “This one has been cut and then glued back together. So if I cut along the seam like so, I’ll find,” he pried open the stalk and held up a folded slip of paper, “this.”

George took it quickly, opened and read it.

“Well? What does it say?” Jake asked.

“Today you will irritate the people you work with. Lucky numbers 3, 5, 7, 8, 15, 20.”

“George!”

“Ok, ok,” George said. “Look. It just says ‘The Dark Side.’”

“In purple ink. That would be our girl now, wouldn’t it? Her and her damn purple dresses.”

“Indeed. Right now I’m more interested in the nature of the clue itself.”

“What? The Dark Side? I thought that was just that party shack down by the docks,” Jake said.

“Yes. But why, of all places, would the Crown want to bring it to our attention? Is it her home? Or the site of her next atrocity?”

“I dunno. We haven’t ever had a case near there, have we?”

A look of horrified realization fell over George’s face. “No, we haven’t. Not within a radius of several blocks, if I recall correctly.”

“Well, your memory is just about as good as documentation. Breakfast time notwithstanding. Do you think this means something?”

“Yes, I certainly do,” George said as he fished the silent alarm mike out of his pocket.

Will and Detective King had been on the firing range in Jake’s Workshop since the meeting adjourned. They used target practice as an excuse to get away and spend some time chatting. It was rare the friends were able to talk at length and they relished a chance to spend time together.

“What do you think?” Will asked. He had just unloaded a clip into a target at 100 yards.

“I think we’re in trouble,” said King. “I think that every time we fail to take that bitch down, it costs innocent lives and it lets her know that she can get away with what she does.”

“I meant my technique,” Will said.

“Oh,” King said. “You’re still holding your guns too tight, son, and you’re working the triggers too hard. Remember, pull, don’t squeeze.”

“Yeah, ok. Don’t you think we’ll find her eventually if she keeps leading us to her?”

“I’d like to, kid. But the fact is, the Crown of Thorns has been around for a long time. I’ve done some snooping around the station’s older files, and near as I can tell they were finding those little crowns at murder sites over a hundred years ago. A hundred years is a lot of time for someone to learn to be sneaky. She’s even outsmarted George, and crazy as he is he’s probably one of the smartest blokes on the planet. I want to see that bitch burn as much as anyone, Will, but I think by now that she’ll only be found when she wants to.”

Will pondered his erstwhile mentor’s words. He knew that King was wise, worldly and tended not to speak unless he knew what he was talking about. On the other hand, he was terminally conservative and more than a little pessimistic. Will desperately hoped that King was wrong, that even a timeless, seemingly unstoppable evil like the Crown of Thorns could be destroyed and the lives it might ruin saved. Otherwise, what was the point of what they did?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of George’s voice thundering through the building.

“Red alert!...no, wait! I used that already! Um, fuchsia alert! All hands to the Situation Room. This is not a torque wrench.”

Will and King both sighed as the echoes of George’s voice faded from the enormous Workshop.

“I’m not sure what to hope for,” Will said as he unloaded his pistols.

“Hope for the best, plan for the worst,” said King. “That’s all anyone can do in this life.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Chapter III The Dregs of Society

George and Jake were in the Situation Room before George's voice had stopped echoing. Marc followed first, plopping in his seat and dropping a six-pack of Red Moon beer onto the table. Cynthia came next, to sit quietly with a strangely haunted look on her face.

"I'm sorry, Cynthia," said George. "I was so distracted I forgot about your lesson."

"That's all right," Cynthia said distantly. "You finished the lecture and then you started break dancing..." Jake and Marc both stared at George, but he ignored them. Sullivan joined them then, followed closely by Will and Detective King.

"All right, George, what have you got for us?" King asked.

"A clue," George replied. "It's a strip of paper that was hidden in the crown. It says, 'The Dark Side'."

Marc snorted at the name of the infamous brothel and Cynthia saw George shoot him a look she was pretty sure could kill vipers.

"We don't know yet what exactly it means," George said. "However, I have reason to believe it is a valid indication of the Crown's whereabouts. I will elucidate."

He typed away on his console and the screen descended from the ceiling, clicked into place, and flickered on, displaying the tactical map of Ylelon they were so used to. A plethora of colored checkmarks, dots and X's popped up all around the map.

"This is a five year case history for this operation," George said. "Notice anything unusual?"

Will studied the map. He knew many of the cases. Black Xs for vampires, different colored dots for other types of monsters. There were no real patterns: vampires tended to stick to the bad parts of town, but various types of monsters turned up about anywhere. No part of Ylelon was immune to weirdness, it seemed, except for...

"There are no cases anywhere within a block of the Dark Side," Will remarked.

"So what?" asked Cynthia. She blanched when everyone in the room fixed their gaze upon her.

"Cynthia," George said. "Ylelon is an oddity. On a world nearly devoid of magic and the supernatural, Ylelon is a showcase for these things. Yet, within this small area we have no record of any such occurrences. Why might this be?"

"Because a powerful force is keeping the area clean," suggested Jake. "Something with enough firepower, subtle influence or both chases away anything else paranormal."

"But it might not be the Crown," King said. "This might be an enemy of hers she's guiding us to."

"That, too, could be beneficial," George said. "It does not necessarily lead us to our end goal of destroying the Crown, but the opportunity to eliminate a powerful being or beings that even the Crown feels is a threat is one we must not pass up. If we do not find ourselves forced to fight, we may even be able to glean some useful information from whatever it is we're facing."

"I doubt that the Crown of Thorns would deliberately guide us to a source of information useful in destroying her," Sullivan remarked.

"Which is why we won't be going unprepared," replied George. "Jake feels that there are other avenues of investigation open to us by way of the sample. Therefore, Jake will continue his analysis, and notify me immediately if he finds anything else."

"What will you be doing in the meantime?" Sullivan asked.

"Will and I will be surveying the Dark Side and the vicinity. Hopefully we can determine just what, if anything, we are supposed to find there, and that will lead us to our next step. We will establish contact every thirty minutes, otherwise I expect to be notified the instant any breakthroughs are made."

"What's the point?" Marc muttered. This time Cynthia was quite sure that George was trying to strike Marc dead with the force of his gaze.

"What's the point?" George said with a very unpleasant edge in his voice.

"Yeah, man," Marc said. "It's just a bunch of whores."

Uh-oh, thought Will.

"I think Marc has a point," King said. George said nothing and hung his head.

"Our efforts are better directed toward preparing and researching rather than skulking among the dregs of society in the slums by the docks," King continued.

All hands, assume crash positions, Will thought and took a step away from Detective King.

"How *dare* you?" George growled. He raised his head and Cynthia flinched. His expression was so contorted by rage he was barely recognizable.

"The Crown may have already struck. Had you thought of that? Perhaps she slaughtered a dozen people there last night and nobody's heard about it yet. Do you know why?"

Silence in the room, broken suddenly by George roaring louder than anyone should be able to without a bullhorn.

"Because bigots like you don't care! The job of the police is to protect the people! Not judge them. A spoiled socialite and his friends are killed and the department and all of society are in an uproar. But a drug addict, a prostitute, a homeless person, an *orphan* dies in the gutter, and what does anyone have to say about it? 'Good riddance.' Why do you think I chose Will to go with me?"

Silence again.

"Will doesn't judge people superficially," George snarled. "He helps people. Not men, or women, or children, or the rich, or poor, or politicians or junkies or florists or sailors or DJ's or priests or hookers or lawyers or rapists or homeless or dictators or porn stars or physicists or ballet dancers or liars. PEOPLE. Will is the one among you that has taken my lessons to heart: we should value people for the fact that they are people, not what they do or any other 'virtue' or 'flaw' that we may see in them. That's evident in the fact that we all know that the Crown may have hurt or be about to hurt a lot of people...and none of you seem to care."

King glared at George but said nothing. Jake, Sullivan and Cynthia were quiet and Marc seemed intent on studying the featureless surface of the table.

"Contact every thirty minutes," said George. "Come along, Will. My ivory tower has suddenly become very stuffy and I wish to go slumming."

As George's words trailed behind him out the door and down the hall, Will exchanged glances with everyone else in the room. Then he turned and followed George without a word.

George was already on the stairwell when Will caught up to him. Without stopping or turning around he said, "I'm sorry to have embarrassed you like that, Will."

"It's ok. I don't know that I would have yelled," (*In fact, I'm quite sure that I couldn't yell like that,* he thought) "but they *were* being pretty heartless."

Will retrieved his coat and sunglasses from the back seat of his car, checked his pistols, and they were off. The endless dunes were bright in the autumn desert sun and in the distance the mountains loomed, ever vigilant over the country's borders.

"We'll start with the locals," George said as he gazed out the window at the timeless sands. "Those that will speak with us. We'll see if any of them have seen anything unusual or if they know of anyone who's vanished recently, then we'll head to the Dark Side. What time is sunset?"

"Around 8:30," Will replied.

"12:27 now. Eight hours of daylight to work with. We'll have to be quick"

"George?"

"Yes?"

"What if she's ready for us?" Will asked. "The Dark Side's a brothel. That means windowless rooms and closed doors, away from the sun. What if she's in there, hidden from daylight, waiting for us?"

"If she's hiding from the sun, then she can't go outside, or even close to a window or door," George said. "At the first sign of her, I will burn the place to the ground."

"Isn't that a little extreme?" Will said. A dust devil blew across the highway in front of them and wandered into the desert. "I'm all for taking her out, but burning a building in the middle of town..."

"It's a last resort, Will," George said. "You know me better than that. I don't believe the end justifies the means, but desperate times do call for desperate measures. She's taunting us, Will. For as long as I've been fighting her she's taunted us. Now she's telling us what she's doing and where, and I

still can't stop her." He watched the dust devil as it hurried on its way to nowhere. "I should be able to stop her."

Will wanted to say something reassuring but couldn't think of anything that sounded sincere. They rode in silence to their destination: the slums of Ylelon in the southeastern part of the city just north of the docks.

They left the car in a parking garage about two blocks from the borderline where the warehouse and factory district became a tightly packed morass of dilapidated brick buildings and urban ruins. They walked together, the quiet man in trench coat and dark glasses and the old man in lime green slacks and bright purple golf shirt. They drew quite a few stares at first, but progressively fewer as they moved into a part of town where an uninvited look was an invitation for trouble. They stopped at an alley entrance a block away from the Dark Side. The roar of the waves in the bay could just be heard over the wail of distant sirens and the occasional gunshot.

"We'll step off the street here," George said. "Go ahead and make first contact. After that, I have a hunch on a possible source of information near here."

Will walked twenty feet into the narrow, trash-strewn alley and pulled one of Jake's custom-made satellite phones from a pocket. He used the alley both for privacy and because Jake's phones were crafted to resemble yellow smiley faces.

"George Manor, this is Will calling. Respond please."

"This is George Manor. The chanting just started but we haven't sacrificed the goat yet."

"Jake!"

"Sorry, dude. But George always says something strange when he answers the phone and I'm trying to fill in."

"I can understand that. Sort of. But George is usually more weird and less...disturbing."

"I said I was sorry. I got this call logged in. Anything to report yet?"

"No, we just got here. We're a block from the Dark Side. George thinks he has a lead nearby."

"Is he going to commune with the rats?" quipped Jake.

"I almost wouldn't be surprised. Talk to you in thirty minutes. Out."

The phone buzzed off. Will dropped it back in his pocket and went to join George where he stood, leaning against a wall at the alley entrance.

"I'm not weird," he said defensively.

Will shrugged. "You say weird things on the phone."

"I am merely trying to enliven the telephone experience!" George said. "Can I be faulted if others cannot fathom my sophisticated sense of humor?"

"Your sense of humor isn't sophisticated, George. It's just strange."

George held up his hands in defeat. "Fine. Make fun of the old man who supports you, bought your car, saved you from the wolves that raised you..."

Will smiled. "So, what did you have in mind as a source?"

"Not what, Will, whom. Although Jake was correct about my intentions to speak with a rat."

Will blinked twice. "What?"

George motioned for Will to follow and walked out of the alley. "We're looking for a homeless man," he said as they walked. "He's lived in these alleys since the 20's. As far as most folk know, even he doesn't remember his real name anymore. Everyone just calls him Rat."

"How do you know him?" Will asked.

"I knew him before he was homeless. He had a job, a wife, four beautiful children..."

"What happened?"

"Lar--uh, *Rat*, was always prone to bouts of severe depression," explained George. "He got better after his children were born, partially due to regular medication, and stayed fairly stable for about eleven years. That's when he was laid off without notice from his job in company downsizing."

"That's when the depression hit him again?"

"Hit him, put him down and kept him there. He couldn't afford his medication anymore and his self-esteem fell through the floor. He couldn't get through an interview, much less keep a job. As money

got tighter for the family he became so crippled emotionally that he had trouble just leaving the house. His wife took the kids and left him, he lost the house and ended up on the streets. He's been here ever since."

"Wow," Will said. "That's...I don't even know what to say about that."

"Tell me about it. I've been offering for years to help him get treatment and get his life back in order, but he just won't accept it. I don't know if it's pride, or shame, or if he's just too lost to feel that he has a way out...or if he feels so worthless that he doesn't think he deserves a way out...but for whatever reason, he stays where he is."

"I see," Will said. "Why are we looking for him, specifically?"

"Rat's severely depressed a lot of the time. But in his better moments, he's sharp enough to keep an eye on everything that happens around here. He's been here long enough know just about everyone and everything that goes on. If there are vampires or anything else operating out of the Dark Side he should know about it."

They came to a corner and stopped to look around. A tireless, windowless car skeleton sat rusting along the curb to their right. A young woman dressed in blindingly bright and clashing colors stood on the opposite corner. What little traffic went by went quickly and with windows rolled all the way up.

"Where do we start looking?" Will asked.

"I believe this young lady is a good start," George said, indicating the woman on the corner. He glanced up and down the street and started over the crosswalk.

"Uh, George?"

"Yes, Ignatius?"

"She's a prostitute."

"Precisely. Society deems her part of its lowest strata for her station in life. She in turn will naturally associate with other people she feels stand at her level--such as those who are of little value because they commit the unforgivable sin of not having a roof over their heads."

"Ouch," Will said.

"My apologies," said George. "I'm simply adhering to my policy of finding revulsion in the things that people do to each other."

"Cheer up, and be happy with the things that people do *for* each other."

"Ever the optimist," George said. "You are a tribute to what an open mind can achieve, William."

"Aw, shucks," Will said.

The woman might have been pretty once, but living and working on the streets had taken its toll. She looked fifteen years older than she probably was. She had layered on cheap makeup and eyed George with open suspicion and Will with something that made him feel very uncomfortable.

"Excuse me, young lady," George said. "I was hoping you could help us."

"I dunno, old timuh," she said. "I don't think you can afford my help."

Will closed his eyes and shook his head.

"I think you misunderstand," said George. "We're looking for a fellow who's a bit of a celebrity around here. He goes by the name of Rat. Do you know him?"

The suspicion in her eyes doubled as she took a step away. "Depends. You boys cops?"

"No, my dear. We're just looking for an old friend."

"I ain't yer 'dear,' geezer, and I ain't tellin' you nothin'." She turned and began to walk away.

"Wait. He...we need his help," Will said and looked to George for support. George only nodded.

"We need him to tell us what he knows about the Dark Side," Will continued. "We think...we think someone might be planning to kill somebody there."

At the mention of the Dark Side, the woman stopped in her tracks. After Will's explanation she turned and walked back to them.

"People die all the time at the Dark Side. What do you care?" she asked.

"We care," said George resolutely.

"We think it's a woman with long, dark hair who always wears purple," Will said.

The young woman's eyes went wide. "You mean *her*," she said softly.

“You know her?” George asked. The woman looked around quickly, then leaned close and spoke in a hush.

“Everybody ‘round here knows her. She comes by every coupla months. Makes sure we all see her, walks down the street, smilin’. Any time we see her, we know somebody’s gonna be gone next mornin’.”

“Has anyone ever confronted her?” asked George.

“You mean like a fight? Yeah, coupla years ago. She shows up one night, all walkin’ down the street, smilin’ at everybody. Then come next day, a girl’s gone. She used to stand right over there.” She pointed across the street at the corner Will and George had traversed moments before. “So, word gets out, and some guys from the Bay Sharks, they get on a nod and decide they’re gonna go have some fun with her. Eight guys. They get their guns and knives and go lookin’ for her.”

“Did they find her?” Will asked.

“Must have, man. Ain’t nobody ever seen ‘em again.”

“Can you tell us where Rat is? We think he might be able to help us find her,” said George.

“Naw, I ain’t seen him.” She looked around again. “He gets days where he don’t want to talk to nobody and he just hides. I ain’t seen him in like two weeks.”

“Do you know of anyone who knows him well? Someone who might be able to help us find him?” asked George.

“Naw, I only know him ‘cause, you know, everybody ‘round here does.”

“We need to find this woman,” Will said with uncharacteristic force. “It’s *very* important. Can you tell us *anything* about her, or about the Dark Side?”

“No way, man.” Another step away. “I don’t go near that place, and if you’re looking for her I’ll buy a flower for your graves.” She turned and hurried away.

“That wasn’t very encouraging,” Will said.

“Indeed. Quite ominous,” said George. “The Crown of Thorns is known here. Well enough to be feared, anyway. I’m concerned about Rat now, as well.”

“You think his disappearance has something to do with the Crown?” Will asked.

“I’m not certain. His dropping out of sight sporadically as described by our friend fits with his condition. However, it would also fit with the Crown’s terror tactics to strike at someone well known in the local community. I fear that the circumstances dictate that we cannot know for certain until we see Rat again, one way or another. In the meantime, we keep searching for information.”

Search they did, for four more hours. They spoke to prostitutes, drug dealers, homeless and runaways--the people who really knew what happened in this part of town. Those that were willing to speak with George and Will all said the same thing: stay away from the Dark Side and stay further away from the woman in purple. If any of them knew the true nature of the woman or the brothel they declined to say so, stating only that both were terrible things around which people tended to die violently or disappear altogether.

It was during this time that they finally met Rat. As they walked down a side street past a narrow alley a cry of surprise issued from within. George exchanged a glance with Will and jogged into the alley. A moment later he returned and gestured for Will to follow him.

Will found George standing halfway down the length of the alley at the feet of a black man who was half-laying, half-sitting among a cluster of ancient trashcans. He was tiny, dressed in the rags and worn clothing of a person that has lived many years on the streets. He smiled pleasantly up at them from his makeshift nest even though half of his teeth were missing.

“Well, I’ll be! George Manor!” he said, so slowly and evenly that each word seemed to be a separate statement. “How you doin’, George?”

“Great, Rat, great,” George said cordially. “How are you?”

“I’m just fine, all things considered. Who’s your young friend, George? He another one o’ your little monster hunter friends?”

“Yes, this is William Thatcher, Rat. He’s my star pupil. Will, this is Rat.”

Rat extended a hand wearing an old glove that was missing two fingers. "Hello, Will!"

"Hello," said Will.

"So, what brings the great George Manor down to my humble home?" asked Rat.

"Well, Rat, we're, um...we were worried about you," George said sadly.

"Worried about me? Why in the world would you be worried about me, Mr. Manor?" Rat teased.

"We, uh..."

"We're looking for someone," Will interjected softly. "A woman who wears purple dresses. Do you know her?"

Every trace of mirth melted off of Rat's face. "Yeah, sure I know her. She around here again?"

"Yes, we think so. We were hoping that you might know something about her," replied Will.

"No man, I ain't seen her. She done hurt anybody yet?"

"Yes," George said simply.

"That's a damn shame, man. George here been chasin' that monster since I can remember. Hope you can catch her, George."

"We have some information, Rat, a tip of sorts. We think she might have something to do with the Dark Side," said George. "Do you know anything about that?"

Rat was pensive for a moment. "No, I don't think so. But it kind of makes sense. Lotta people get hurt in there. Might be where she lives."

"Is that all you know?" Will asked fervently. "I don't mean to be rude, but it's very important that we find her."

"You don't gotta worry 'bout bein' rude, man. You're ok by me. Let's see: no, I don't think I can remember ever seein' or hearin' 'bout the Purple Woman at the Dark Side. Best I know, don't nobody ever see her in *any* building. She just goes walkin' down the street, always grinnin' at people. I stay away when I know she's around, myself."

"I'm...I'm glad you're all right, Rat," George said. He reached into his pocket, took out a little pad of folded bills and handed them to Rat. "Here's a little something so you can have a nice dinner tonight. I wish I could stay longer, but we have work to do."

"That's all right, George. Don't be so long comin' 'round again. I always love to hear from you."

"And I you, Rat," George said. "Farewell."

He turned and walked quickly out of the alley. When Will jogged to catch up to him, he saw that there were tears in his eyes.

"Damn her," George said under his breath. "These people have little enough good in their lives, without such monsters terrorizing them. Damn her. *Damn her...*"

Will continued to make reports to the Mansion every thirty minutes. Every time it was a little harder to make the call and admit that they were that much closer to sundown and that they didn't know any more than when they had set out for the city.

While George and Will busied themselves gathering information throughout the afternoon, Jake and Sullivan continued to analyze the crown in the Lab. Sullivan studied its surface under a microscope while Jake worked with a small clipping that featured the stains he'd noticed earlier. Close examination had revealed the discoloration covered an entire arc of the crown, but ended in parallel lines that ran perpendicular to the crown's curve. In other words, the crown had been dipped, like a donut, in whatever had been used to stain it. The stain was only slightly darker than the crown itself, but its deliberate nature had Jake certain that it was a clue.

The problem was that he was having trouble getting clear results from the analysis. He had to separate the substance to be analyzed from the crown, which was difficult because it involved a dried liquid on dead vegetable matter. The second problem was that the mystery substance was actually several substances. As near as Jake could tell, a number of liquids and chemicals had been mixed together and the crown dipped in them. He recognized several of the elements and ingredients presented to him by the computer he was using for his analysis, but he didn't have a complete enough understanding of what fluids they might represent to deduce from a simple list of them what they might represent as a whole.

Given different circumstances the process might have been much more efficient, but Jake was working with limited resources and he was a mechanical engineer and tinker, not a chemist. Thus, he was reduced to filtering through science books and engineering journals trying to narrow down what chemical trace in the mix represented what fluid. Sullivan eventually finished her examination of the crown and joined him, but even then the task was painfully tedious.

Shortly after five o'clock George and Will took a break to eat, stopping in a local greasy spoon. Will ordered a cheeseburger and a root beer. George had a Rueben, a bowl of tomato soup, an order of fries with vinegar and, when informed brusquely by the waitress that their particular establishment did not, in fact, have a wine list, settled for fruit punch.

"Growl," he said as he wolfed down his Rueben. Will crooked his eyebrows.

"I'm at a loss, Will," George said in response to the look. "We've been questioning everyone who didn't run from us, spit on us or pull a gun on us for three hours. If any of them knew something useful to us, they aren't talking."

"I doubt that they'd hold out on us. It's pretty clear that they're afraid of the Crown. I think they'd give her up if they could."

"Your naiveté is refreshing, Will. They certainly are afraid of her, which is why they won't give her up to us." He paused for a moment while he dipped a fry.

"To live at this level of society is to live in fear. These people know that to survive here is to avoid gaining the attention of those that can cause trouble, be it cops, gangs or those that tend to react poorly to being looked at the wrong way. The inhabitants of any such place have an unwritten list of who they shouldn't piss off for fear of reprisal. I'm fairly certain that the scary woman who walks alone without fear through the most violent part of town at night would be rather high on that list." Their waitress came to the table and picked up their glasses. She looked at George's empty glass, then at George, shook her head and walked away.

"What about the Dark Side? It's well known as a place where folks come to bad ends, but that's true of this entire side of town."

"True," George affirmed. "But it's pretty clear just from the way people react to the mention of the place that they know something they aren't telling us. I think it's time we paid the Dark Side a visit."

Will checked his watch. "We've got about three hours of daylight left. Let's hope that gives us some kind of real advantage."

George polished off his soup and fries and dropped a crumpled wad of bills on the table. Curious, Will picked it up and straightened it out.

"George?"

"Yes, Tyrone?"

"This is almost two hundred chips."

"I know," George replied. "Hazard pay."

King dropped the phone receiver back in its cradle with a grunt. No one at the precinct could tell him anything new about the case and there had been no similar cases since. So he sat in the Office, mad at George for his liberal views and holier-than-thou attitude, mad at himself for being so useless and mad at the Crown of Thorns for putting them through all of this to begin with. Every half-hour he checked in with Jake to see what Will and George had reported and every time they left the same damn message: "Nothing yet. Stand by." It was beginning to get on his nerves.

Checking in at the morgue had been little comfort. He asked casually if the coroner had found anything meaningful on the bodies. He hadn't, of course, which suited King just fine--he knew the Crown didn't leave much evidence and the fact that there was "nothing new" meant that the bodies had not jumped up and attacked anyone.

He kicked around the idea of driving back to the city and trying to find out what he could at the precinct, but that would put him too far out of the loop if something did happen. Besides, he desperately needed to rest. He worked the night shift, and would normally have gone to bed as soon as he was done.

Instead he had come here and been up for nearly twenty-four hours straight. He caught himself dozing more and more often. He was getting too old for this.

He looked out the twin pair of tall, thin windows intended to lessen the stuffiness of the Office. Already the sun was on its descent, planning to rob the world of the light that kept the Crown and her ilk at bay. Soon it would be gone, and the freaks of the night would have free reign of the city.

He was getting too old for this.

George and Will stood on the front steps of the Dark Side. The place was a very old converted apartment complex of red brick that dominated the face of an entire block. The windows were all closed and the shades drawn. There were no signs or street number. Such things were unnecessary here.

Will had checked in with the Mansion a few minutes before from across the street. Now here they were, as ready as they'd ever be to face whatever it was the Crown had lured them here to find. George knocked and momentarily an aging but poised woman in a green dress opened the door.

"May I help you?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"Actually, we were hoping we might help you," George replied.

"Confident, are we?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so," said George. "May we come in?"

"You may. But in case you are wondering, sir, we do not make special consideration here for rodeo clowns."

"Are you suggesting I'm out of style?" quipped George indignantly.

"Nothing of the sort, gentle sir. I am Madam Vera. Welcome to the Dark Side." She stepped back through the door and motioned for them to follow. The duo stepped inside and took everything in.

The Dark Side lobby was decorated with plush couches and chairs, lewd paintings and mirrors. Everything was pink or red and soft music funneled into the building through speakers set on end tables here and there. Around the room lounged nearly a score of women wearing swimsuits and lingerie.

"See anything you like?" Madam Vera asked.

"That's a very involved question," said George. "As to our purpose here, we were actually referred by an acquaintance."

Will tensed. He hadn't expected George to play this card so early.

"I see," said Madam Vera. "Do you have something special in mind? We have a variety of theme rooms to match any," she eyed George's outfit, "individual taste."

George raised his eyebrows. "Is that so? Well then, perhaps you can help me fulfill a very specific fantasy."

"I'll do my best," Madam Vera said.

George leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. "I was hoping to meet a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a purple dress that flows like the night wind."

Madam Vera went pale. "E-excuse me," she stuttered. "I-I must--there's something that I--" she broke off and scampered away down one wing. The women in the lobby began to murmur and point.

"What are you doing?" Will whispered. "We just lost any hope we had of surprise!"

"We never had any such hope, Will," George replied in a level but quiet tone. "Whether or not it's the Crown that's here, you can bet whatever we were led here for knows we were coming. After all this wandering around, I'd prefer a straight-up encounter."

Speak for yourself, Will thought.

Madam Vera ran until she was halfway down the hall. She stopped at a door that looked just like all the others and took a chain hung with a single key from around her neck. She opened the door and stepped into a room that contained nothing but a stairway down. Every fiber of her being screamed with dread at what she was about to do, but she saw no other recourse after what had just happened.

She raced through the doorway at the bottom of the stairs and across Monster's office to his chamber door. She grabbed the knob and twisted in mid-stride. Not having taken into account that the door was locked, she smacked her nose soundly on it. Cursing through the tears, she pounded on the door.

“Monster! Monster! Wake up! We’ve got trouble!”

A groan rumbled from the other side. “Ugh! Who’s that knocking at my chamber door?”

“Monster! It’s Vera!”

“Vera? What the hell do you want? What time is it?”

“It’s almost five thirty. Listen, there are these guys upstairs--”

“FIVE THIRTY? What in the hell are you waking me up at five thirty for?!”

“Monster, shut up and listen! There are these two guys upstairs and they asked about *her*.”

“Her who?”

“Who do you think?” Vera shrieked. She had no idea why vampires, of all things, worked as bodyguards to a bunch of hookers, though she had to admit they did an excellent job of it. Vera’s girls were safer than anyone had a right to be in this part of the city. The exception to this rule was any time the woman in purple showed up. Everyone in this part of town knew her, and everyone--*everyone*--was afraid of her. She was a living (well, unliving) urban legend, a factual boogey woman. It was a challenge to find anybody living within five blocks that hadn’t at some time in their life had a neighbor, friend, or family member that had disappeared when she made a visit. The people all knew her and they all hid when they knew she was around.

What wasn’t well known was that every time in living memory the purple woman had been seen walking the streets she had already been to the Dark Side. Every time she came Madam Vera lost one or two girls, young women whom she had laughed and eaten with, and sometimes whom she had saved from life on the streets. Others feared for themselves when the woman in purple was in town, but Vera feared for the poor young women she took care of, who had very little to lose except for what that monster came to steal: their lives.

Last night Sophie, Vera’s friend of almost three years, had been called away from the lobby. A short while later the woman in purple strolled through the lobby carrying Sophie’s lifeless body over her shoulder. She flashed her fanged grin at the horrified women and patrons, several of whom fainted at the sight of her, and walked out the front door without saying a word.

The thing that puzzled Vera and at times made her shake with frustration was that Monster and his cronies never lifted a finger to stop her. Most folks knew she was a vampire (the ones who believed in vampires to begin with, anyway), but very few people knew about the gang of vampires at the Dark Side. Vera almost wondered if they weren’t the woman’s buddies, but if they were why did they seem so afraid of her?

“They want the purple woman,” Vera continued. The door swung open and there stood Monster, looking bleary-eyed and very irate.

“What?” he growled.

“Don’t give me ‘what,’” snapped Vera. “Get your ass upstairs and take care of this.”

Monster’s eyes narrowed to slits and he bent at the waist, towering over the tiny woman. “I *know* you aren’t talking to *me* that way.”

“You want to tear me up? Fine!” Vera said defiantly. “I used to get paid good money for that. But your job is to protect my girls. Every time that bitch turns up my girls die, so if these weirdoes have something to do with her then they’re your problem! Now move!”

For just a moment, Monster hesitated. He would love to rip this pushy blood bag in two, but he was rather confused by the situation. As far as he knew no one was aware of the Crown’s association with the Dark Side. She’d made comments in the past about the great pains she took to keep people from seeing her entering or leaving the building. This made sense to Monster, because he hadn’t yet heard about the Crown parading Sophie through the lobby. So who was upstairs asking for her?

“Did they say what they wanted?” he asked absently.

“No, they just acted really strangely. At least, the one guy did. The other one didn’t say a word. Then the strange one described her perfectly.”

Monster frowned. Had he a little more brainpower, he might have made the connection between what the Crown had said the night before and the current events. However, between being groggy and being Monster he didn’t have a clue.

“Bring them to the room upstairs,” he said, “and have Crusher and Steve meet me there. We’ll take care of this.”

Vera hurried off, leaving Monster standing in his doorway, muttering to himself.

“That tramp causes me more trouble...”

“What do you think she’s doing?” Will said nervously. He and George had moved to stand by one of the lobby walls but they were still the center of attention. Curious glances, suspicious stares and out and out mean looks kept coming their way from the women clustered together in small groups, whispering amongst themselves.

“With any luck she’s getting us the Crown’s home address and credit history,” George quipped.

“I don’t like this, George. She looked pretty shaken when you mentioned the Crown and she’s been gone for too long.”

“Relax, Will. We know that the Crown of Thorns is infamous in this locale, so I doubt the madam is up to anything, at least not to benefit the Crown.”

“What if she’s here? What if she comes at us right now?” Will wasn’t normally one to waver in the face of danger, but given what they were up against he didn’t feel ashamed to be a little shaken.

“Then we deal with her to the best of our abilities,” George said. “You have your pistols, correct?”

“Yes,” Will said softly.

“I’m fairly certain that I have my rapier wit with me.”

Will sighed.

“See? My merest jab has left you speechless.”

At length Vera returned. She approached them slowly and never took her eyes off them. “If you gentlemen would come with me, please,” she said when she reached them, then immediately turned and walked back the way she’d come.

Will and George looked at each other. George shrugged and followed Vera. Will took a deep breath and followed George.

Vera led them halfway down the hall to a door that was standing open. She stood to one side and met George’s eyes.

“After you,” she said. George made a chivalric bow and walked inside. Instincts Will had honed over several years first as a cop then as a monster hunter screamed warning at him and the look on the madam’s face did nothing to reassure him. He braced himself and entered the room right behind George.

The room was an empty square block with a bare floor and walls. Its only features were a staircase leading down in the middle of the room and two muscle-bound vampires in biker clothes standing by the far wall. Will’s eyes went wide at the sight and wider still when he heard the door close and lock.

“Oh, pooh,” George said.

Chapter IV

Snap

Cynthia and Marc sat in the Rec Room, flicking through channels on the 88" TV. Five thousand channels from every corner of the globe and not a darn thing on. They'd been here most of the day, whiling away the hours and trying to distract themselves.

"Man, I could use a smoke," said Marc.

"You smoke?" Cynthia asked. She couldn't remember ever seeing him with a cigarette.

"I used to. George made me quit. Part of his whole, 'You have to be in perfect health to fight monsters' thing."

"Yeah, the working out gets old after a while. If I have to run one more lap around the Wall, I'm going to scream."

"Yeah," Marc droned as he sipped a beer. "So, what's up with you and Will?"

Cynthia's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"Oh, come on," Marc said with a wicked grin. "We all know you've got the hots for him. We can tell by the way you look at him!"

Cynthia blushed deeply. "What, um...you all...what does Will think?"

Marc rolled his eyes. "Will's totally out of touch, man. He's hung up on Tina still. I mean, sure she was a real nice girl, but she's been gone for almost two years now. Get over it already!"

"It might be kind of hard to forget someone you love," Cynthia said thoughtfully.

"Hey, I'm not sayin' he oughta forget her, just move on. Look at me. I lost Stacy, and she was the only woman who ever cared about me. I ain't gonna let it ruin my life, though. I'm a swingin' bachelor." He scratched his stomach and belched loudly.

"You don't say," Cynthia said, crooking an eyebrow.

"Sure. Will could be the same way if he wanted to. Every time we go to the city I see a bunch of hotties watching him. But does he notice? No, he's still hung up on a dead girl. Now he's even got you following him around."

"I don't follow him around!"

"Yeah you do, you're out in the yard with him every morning."

"We're training and working out!" Cynthia protested. "George assigned him to be my instructor!"

"Yeah, like you don't flirt with him the whole time."

"I don't! He doesn't even ever talk to me except to tell me what to do!"

"Whatever. The point is, if I had a pair of legs like yours after me I sure wouldn't ignore them."

"Thanks. I think." It was at times like this that Cynthia was glad that George had talked her out of reading the minds of the group. After a few days of living in the Mansion, Cynthia had decided that ignorance was bliss when it came to what Marc was thinking about her.

Marc guzzled the rest of his beer in three gulps, crushed the can and dropped it on the floor. "Eh, there's nothin' on. I'm goin' to the gym. Want to join me?"

"No thanks. I think I'm just going to hang around," Cynthia said. Marc ambled out of the room, not missing an opportunity to belch loudly again.

Cynthia sat mired in thought for a while. It wasn't long before she had a hunch she couldn't wait to test. She hopped out of her seat, clicked off the TV and ran downstairs to the Library.

She sat at George's computer again and began searching for the files she'd seen earlier. It took her a while to find them, buried as they were in folder after folder of twisting pathway. When she finally found the right folder, filled with thousands of tiny Digital George icons, she sorted them alphabetically and started looking for one titled "The Crown of Thorns." She found it as much by the icon as by the title. Of the rows of tiny pictures of George, most of them depicted him making various faces. The one titled "Crown of Thorns" however, showed a very solemn George with a single tear running down his cheek.

Cynthia crooked an eyebrow and double-clicked on the icon. The screen went black again, only when George appeared this time it was really him, not Digital George. He sat on a wooden chair in an empty room, facing the camera.

“Hello, gentle viewer,” he said, his tone almost apologetic. “If you’re watching this it means...well, it means I’m not doing my job well enough.

“We’re going to talk about the Crown of Thorns. As I’m sure you already know, the Crown is a vampire of unprecedented cunning and power. Although my research has not been entirely conclusive, it indicates that she is at least three hundred years old as a vampire and probably considerably older than that.” He leaned forward in his seat and reached below camera. When he straightened again he was holding a colossal brandy snifter that was almost entirely full.

“The first thing you must always bear in mind regarding the Crown is that she is extremely crafty, streetwise and unpredictable. She has made a centuries-long career of terrorizing Ylelon’s populace and taunting its authorities with campaigns of unsolvable riddles and maddening clues. Whereas most vampires in contemporary society must live in fear of mortals and take great precautions to prevent their own destruction, the Crown seems to take an almost sophomoric joy in flaunting her continued existence to the people who are her prey. Her confidence shows in her actions, which by their own success serve only to reinforce the notion she is so proud of: she cannot be caught.” He took a long, slow draught of his brandy before continuing.

“We don’t know exactly how the Crown stays ten steps ahead of the police, private eyes, gangs and numerous other entities that seek her destruction. Some of my associates have suggested that she has moles--informants in place within various organizations, particularly the police, which keep her privy to their activities. Personally, I believe her talents stem from nothing more than a combination of predatory wiliness, a centuries-old understanding of psychology and a keen native intelligence.” Another drink.

“Whatever the case, the Crown combines the tactics and methodology of a serial killer, a dictator and a lioness. She has become something of an urban legend among the people of Ylelon City, who, as I have mentioned, she takes great joy in terrorizing.

“Part of her campaign of terror is the use of agents, both mortal and undead, that she bullies into various activities on her behalf. It is not unusual for her to use such minions in the cat-and-mouse games she plays with her victims and would-be executioners...”

“You know, I really should have seen this coming,” said George.

“No kidding,” Will grumbled. The two vampires were stalking across the room toward them, snarling as they came. Will had his pistols at the ready, which seemed to be the only thing keeping the vampires from committing to an all-out charge. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t suppose you boys would care to discuss this over a drink,” George said sardonically.

“Monster!” one of them shouted suddenly. “Get up here!”

Downstairs in his chambers, Monster groaned when he heard the summons. He was seated at his desk with his head buried in his hands. It was too damn early to be awake. He had hoped his boys could handle this themselves but it looked like they needed his help tearing up two idiots from off the street.

He growled, rose to his feet and shambled to the door. He wanted to make this as quick as possible. With a grunt he flung the door open and vaulted up the steps three at a time.

The smell hit him immediately. It was a sharp metallic tang he knew all too well: silver. That must have been what his lackeys were whimpering about. They were afraid of two guys with jewelry. There was another smell too, something he wasn’t familiar with, but which almost resonated with power...

The realization dawned on him just as his line of sight crested the floor of the room. He almost stumbled over his own momentum as it carried him up three more steps. Straight ahead of him were two men: a tall man in a black trench coat, brandishing two pistols that reeked of silver and a little old man in funny clothes who looked nothing more or less than irritated at the two vampires approaching him from either side of the stairs.

Realization finally dawned on Monster. “No!” he bellowed as he turned and leapt back down the stairs.

Will reacted purely on instinct. He had been keeping a gun trained on each vampire but he was caught off guard when a third, the largest, most primal-looking monster he had ever seen came vaulting up the steps at him. He turned his flinch into a targeting motion by bringing his pistols together and firing.

The shots missed as the vampire shouted and jumped back down the stairs. Jake's Saturday Night Dinner Special silver rounds hissed through the air just above the vampire's head.

The other two vampires saw the opening and charged. Will leveled his pistols at the one closest to himself and fired. Both rounds hit it dead in the chest and burned huge, ugly holes as the mystically pure silver reacted violently to the supernatural impurity of the vampire. It barreled into Will and knocked them both prone and Will lost his guns in the fall. He took a gamble that his foe would be distracted by his wounds and cracked him across the jaw. The wager paid off by giving Will time to knee him in the ribs and roll him off. Though his foe was several times stronger than he was Will knew he would be all right as long as he kept his head and made good use of his martial skill. He rolled and went for the guns.

George, meanwhile, was still facing his own opponent. The vampire growled, but held his ground. Something about this old man didn't smell right and he was acting far too confident.

"Are you waiting for anything specific?" George asked. The vampire took a chance and rushed him, letting fly with a wild roundhouse punch. A split second later, he was down on one knee with George standing behind him. George was holding the vampire's arm straight up with his left hand pressed against his victim's elbow and his right hand holding the ring and middle fingers bent backward.

"You waited too long," said George.

The vampire twisted and tried to strike George in the torso with his left elbow. George responded by pulling with his right hand and pushing with his left. A sharp pop came from the vampire's arm as George twisted it in an unnatural angle.

"It's always seemed like a waste to me," mused George. "You undead have the potential to live literally forever, but you never take the time to learn anything worthwhile...like martial arts. What do you devote your time to? Hurting people." The beast's arm popped again as George applied more pressure.

"I'm only going to ask you this once," he said fiercely. "Where is the Crown of Thorns?"

Will rolled over his guns and came up to a kneeling position. His opponent was gathering himself up slowly and seemed to really be feeling Will's shots. George appeared to have the other one under control, pinning him to the floor by holding his arm in a position that was painful just to look at. There was no sign of "Monster."

"Stay where you are!" Will warned. His opponent scowled at him. "George? How are you doing?"

"I'm fairly confident that my dance partner doesn't know anything useful to us," George replied. He had bent the vampire's arm backwards almost to a forty-five degree angle. The vampire's face was pressed against the floor, his mouth agape in a scream choked off by pain.

Will winced at the sight. He had only seen George, normally so gentle and compassionate, pushed to this level of cruelty and violence once before...but it was best not to think about that now.

"What about you?" asked Will of the vampire he held at gunpoint.

"Go to hell," the vampire said and spat in Will's general direction.

"What do you think, George? Want to apply a little persuasion?" Will quipped.

"Might as well," George said and dropped his victim's arm. The wretched creature curled into a fetal position and cradled its arm, whimpering like a wounded animal.

George walked toward the other vampire as casually as one walking outside to pick up the paper. The vampire was nearly frantic, perched on his toes as though ready to fight or flee and constantly switching nervous glances between Will, George and his maimed comrade.

"Who are you people?" he demanded, but began to shrink backward as George drew nearer.

"Of course. Where are my manners?" George said. "I forgot the introductions. This is Will Thatcher, musician, poet and monster hunter extraordinaire. My name is George Manor, owner, inhabitant and wine stocker of George Manor, and you, my friend, are in a *lot* of trouble."

By now George had backed the vampire nearly into a corner. "One more step and I'll rip you in half!" he snarled.

"Yes, they all promise that," said George dreamily. "But after you break all the bones in their arms and legs and set them on fire, do they keep their promises? Nooooooooo!"

The vampire bumped up against the corner walls and his fierce expression dissolved into one of fear. "What-what do you want?" he stammered.

“Many, many things, only two of which you can help me with. The first would be telling me absolutely everything I want to know.” George was within arm’s reach now.

“Yeah? What’s the other?”

“The longer it takes you to talk, the madder I’ll be when you find out,” George said savagely.

The vampire looked at Will, who was still aiming his two pistols, then at his friend, lying crumpled on the floor.

“Ok,” he whimpered.

“Who was the ogre on the stairs before?” George asked quickly.

“That was Monster. He runs the place.”

“What, exactly, were you three planning to do with us, and why?” The vampire looked at the floor.

“Sir William?” said George. Will fired a single shot and the bullet buzzed by the vampire’s temple close enough to ruffle his hair before lodging in the wall.

“Ow! Hey! Ok! Back off! Monster just left a message for us to meet him here. We were supposed to take you two apart. That’s all I know! I swear!”

“Why would this ‘Monster’ want to hurt us? Does he know about us somehow?” asked Will.

“I don’t know, man! He just tells us what to do. He gets real rough if any of us get out of line.”

George raised an eyebrow. “Out of line?”

“Yeah. We just play bouncer here. Monster makes sure we keep things cool and that we only eat the bums ‘round here, not the bit--”

George cut him off by smashing the heel of his palm into the vampire’s chin. The vampire’s head snapped back and punched a small, round hole in the plaster.

“These are PEOPLE, do you understand?!” George roared as he had this morning at the Mansion. “They are not ‘bums’ and ‘bitches!’ They are living, thinking, feeling people, and they deserve respect!”

“Yeah, sure, ‘people,’ man, whatever!” the vampire struggled to articulate past an aching jaw and throbbing head.

“Where is the Crown of Thorns?” George demanded.

“Who?”

“Will!” George shouted as he took three steps back. Will leveled his pistols at the vampire’s head.

“No! WAIT!” the vampire shouted, raising his hands. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The! Woman! In! Purple!” George roared as he walked so close to the cringing undead their noses almost touched. “Where is she? What does she have to do with this building?”

“I don’t know.” The leather-clad brute looked close to tears. “She just shows up now and then and kills one of the bit--girls. I don’t know where she is.”

“Wasn’t Monster supposed to help you?” Will asked. “Why did he run away?”

“You think I know that, man? I don’t even know what the hell this is all about!”

“Yes, yes, so you keep reminding us,” George said. “One last question: what’s downstairs?”

“Just Monster’s rooms, man. Office and bedroom.”

“Oh really? That would be nice, because if it turns out that there’s an ambush of twenty vampires down there, I’m going to be rather upset.”

“No way, man! We aren’t even allowed down there! It’s just Monster, I swear on my grave!”

“Just Monster,” said George.

“Just Monster, man.”

“Thank you. Will?”

The vampire didn’t have a chance to protest. Will fired two more shots and the walking corpse went down in a heap. Without prompting, Will walked to the other vampire, put a pistol to the back of its head and put the beast out of its misery.

“Now we can get on with our evening,” George said. He clapped his hands together as though dusting them off and started for the stairwell.

“Stay with us, George,” said Will.

George froze with one foot on the first step. “Pardon me?”

“You’re getting out of hand. Making threats? *Breaking bones?* This isn’t like you.”

“These are monsters, Will,” George said with his lips pursed. “They’re dead monsters that used to be people. Now they mock the memory of the people they came from by hurting others. So excuse me if I go a little overboard trying to stop undead murderers.” With that he started down the stairs again.

Simple concrete walls lined the stairwell. The steps were bare concrete and there was a single open door in the wall to the left of the claustrophobic landing.

“Ready?” George asked. Will nodded. George stepped down onto the landing in front of the door with the ball of his foot and immediately bounced back onto the first step. A worn office chair hurtled through the door and smashed against the opposite wall so hard it was completely twisted out of shape by the impact. It clattered to the floor and lay there in a heap.

“If you think that we’re insurance salesmen,” George called through the doorway, “I can set your mind at ease right now.”

“Keep away!” a deep voice rumbled from somewhere inside the room.

“This can be easy or hard. It’s your choice,” Will called.

“Go to hell!” the voice roared and a huge weathered desk sailed end-first through the doorway, crashed against the wall and landed atop the crumpled chair.

“Er...can I interest you in some property insurance?” George asked.

“If he wanted to keep us out so badly why didn’t he just lock the door?” Will asked. A slapping sound, rather like an idiot hitting himself in the head, emanated from the room.

“Unless you’re planning to throw a porcelain bathtub at us, I suggest you make this easy on yourself by surrendering right now,” George said.

“Right! Like you were easy on my guys upstairs?” A worn love seat smashed against the doorframe and tumbled back into the room.

“My reputation preceeds me,” George observed.

“As happens with natural disasters,” said Will. “Monster! Give up! There’s nowhere to go!”

“Funny you should mention that,” Monster snarled. “Soon as the sun goes down my other boys will be down here and then we’ll all have some fun.”

“Hmm,” George hummed. “That only leaves us about three hours to take you out. I suppose we’d better move quickly.” He hopped up on the desk and threw himself against the wall opposite the door. He was vulnerable for just an instant--the same instant in which Will leaned over the desk and laid down suppressing fire. As Will leaned over the desk he saw Monster standing near the far wall and hoisting what was apparently the only piece of furnishing left in the room: a battered metal filing cabinet. Will’s first couple of shots were wild to give George cover, but as soon as he saw Monster, Will aimed for his legs. One bullet caught the thug dead in the kneecap just as he heaved the cabinet over his head. When he reflexively grasped at his leg as he crumpled the cabinet crashed down on his head. The end result was a mound of flab and old ledgers leaning against the wall, moaning in pain.

Wasting no time at all, Will hurtled though the door and raced to where the monster lay. He braced one foot against the filing cabinet, which now lay across Monster’s chest, and leveled his guns inches away from the face that was partially visible under scattered folders. “Don’t move!”

Monster’s face was a mask of pain, his eyes glazed over in a thousand yard stare. Slowly he fixed on the matching guns pointing at his face and his expression changed to one of frustrated resignation. “Damn it,” he said and rested his head against the wall. The only sound in the room was Will’s rapid breathing and the soft padding of George’s sneakers as he came near.

“Monster, I presume,” he said and stopped at the edge of the circle of paper that surrounded Monster on the floor. He bent down, picked up a handful of them and read quietly. “Financial records? Intake, overhead...hey Will, want to know which guys in your old precinct are on the take?”

“Almost all of them,” Will replied without taking his eyes off of Monster.

“Actually, yes.” George walked to stand next to Will. Monster glared at the two of them but remained in a sullen heap.

“What is all of this, Monster?” George asked softly. “Why are you here, playing the Maitre’D?”

Monster’s eyes wondered in space. “It’s hers,” he said.

"The Crown of Thorns," said George.

"Yeah." Monster seemed almost relaxed now. "She set all this up and made me be in charge about a hundred years ago. Says I have to keep these women here and tear up anybody that tries to hurt them, but she always kills some whenever she comes by!" George's eyes widened and he dropped the papers.

"I mean, what the hell is that?" continued Monster. "I gotta protect whores' lives but she can tear through them whenever she wants? It's bull!"

George didn't seem to be listening. He had turned and was very slowly walking away. As he went he said something under his breath. Will thought it was "A hundred years," but he was too focused on Monster to be sure. "George?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"A hundred years, Will. All this has been here for a hundred years." George stopped his meandering and looked back at Will. "It's not like the work itself isn't demeaning enough."

"George, what are you--" Will began. He stopped short as realization dawned on him.

The Dark Side was a century old. Many people came and went and a cadre of vampires oversaw it all. The vampires were forbidden to harm the prostitutes who worked at the Dark Side, who were kept safe except when a certain vampiress visited, usually before hitting the town. They were cattle. A full century worth of women had lived and died here and their sole purpose in doing so had been to be so much fast food. Will felt sick.

"Monster," said George. "I am going to ask you some very important questions. Where is the Crown of Thorns now?"

"I'd tell you if I knew," Monster grumbled. "She's made my unlife hell. I'd give anything for some payback."

"But you don't know where she is?" asked Will.

"Last I knew, she said something about driving you crazy," Monster said pointedly to George. As he spoke he subtly shifted his right arm under the filing cabinet.

"About me," George said, eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, man. You're her favorite hobby. She loves doing things just to mess with your head."

George looked like someone had kicked him in the stomach. He was quiet for several moments before finally saying, "I see. Well, I suppose this--"

Monster heaved his right arm outward, sending Will toppling head over heels backward and the filing cabinet hurling across the room. Will came down on the back of his head--*hard*--and flopped onto the floor while the cabinet smashed against the far wall and thundered to the floor.

"I'm not going down without a fight!" Monster roared as he stood on his good leg. His right shin was barely still attached to the ruined and singed remains of his kneecap.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," George replied to the tower of muscle and flab looming above him. "Let's see what you've got."

Monster leaned as far forward as his balance would allow and reached out to strangle George. His reach fell a pace short. George flashed a smirk that would have done Cynthia proud. Monster reared back and hopped, landing just in front of George, grabbed his collar and hoisted him into the air.

"This may be my last day, but at least I get to kill the legendary George Manor!" he bellowed triumphantly and drew back his massive fist for a punch.

"I think you're forgetting something," George said calmly, his voice muffled slightly by the folds of his shirt bunched around his face by Monster's grip.

"Yeah?" sneered Monster. "What's that?"

"In focusing on the little old man, you have forgotten the pistol-wielding monster fighter."

Horried, Monster snapped his attention back to Will, who stood braced in a firing stance in the middle of the room, pistols at the ready. Monster dropped George as Will cut loose with a hail of bullets that slammed him against the wall. His furious roar was drowned out by Will's guns. Eight bullets unloaded with expert precision into Monster's body and he toppled forward onto the pile of paper, a mass of charred flesh.

"Thank you, Will, that was very thoughtful of you," George said as he readjusted his shirt.

"He claimed there were others," Will said as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Indeed. I think we know what our next step is. Make a report. You have quite a story to tell.”

While Will relayed the events of the last fifteen minutes to an astonished Jake George lost himself in thought. What to do now? In spite of all that had happened they didn’t have any new leads on where to find the Crown. As anxious as George was to continue the search for her, he couldn’t in good conscience leave a building full of vampires sitting around, especially not ones that had only been checked from slaughtering the populace by the enforcer that now lay unlifeless at George’s feet. On the other hand, Will had run through a lot of ammo and they hadn’t expected to take on an unknown number of vampires hiding in a huge building.

Then there was the question of the rest of the team. Even if Jake and Marc came and brought extra weapons and ammo it would take them over an hour just to arrive, much less pack. Even then a quartet of vigilantes running around inside a brothel firing off small arms would likely attract the wrong sort of attention even in *this* part of town. How to deal with this problem? How to find the Crown?

In his reverie, George thought of Madam Vera, so shaken at the mention of the Crown, and of a fire station in the hall upstairs which included an ax...

“Will?”

“Hang on a sec, Jake,” Will said into his Smileyphone™. “Yeah, what’s up, George?”

“Let them know we won’t be back for a while. We have work to do here.”

Chapter V The Curtain Falls

“Beyond the merits of the Crown as a leader and criminal mastermind, she has demonstrated tremendous power as a typical mage and has displayed use of a wide variety of spells.”

Spells? thought Cynthia, more than a little confused.

George took a long draught of his brandy. “As if all this were not enough the Crown also has a number of abilities that are neither magical in nature nor possessed by typical vampires. These powers are tied to her vampiric nature, however, and her ability to use them is the result of mental conditioning and physical training, much like a martial discipline. Without going into too much detail these powers allow her to alter her body in beneficial ways by accelerating her absorption of consumed blood. In other words, rather than let blood slowly be consumed within her body like food would in a living person, she can expend a larger quantity very quickly for a desired effect. The more blood she has available the more varied and spectacular the powers she has to use.” George took another drink.

“The Crown of Thorns is conservative about using these powers in front of witnesses, ones she doesn’t kill, at any rate. However, enough accounts of her particular talents have survived to give us the following catalog of known abilities for her.

- * Altering her skin tone and body temperature. These minor cosmetic abilities have proven very useful in the past, allowing her to pass for one of the living and probably accounting somewhat for her ability to hide among the populace.

- * Lengthening and hardening her fingernails into knife-like talons. This is one of the Crown’s favorite tricks. She seems to take as much joy in mocking the stereotypical image of the vampire with long, sharp fingernails as she does in the claws’ utility as weapons.

- * Increasing her already considerable physical strength, agility and sheer running speed. The Crown often uses these powers to grant her an edge in combat, or to bully others.

- * Increasing her capacity to withstand physical damage as well as increasing the hardness of her skin to the level of treated leather. The Crown typically uses these powers for their most obvious application, to become a juggernaut in combat. However, she also makes more creative use of them as well, such as to intimidate underlings.

- * Increased healing. The Crown has demonstrated the use of a power that greatly accelerates her own healing process. Whereas a typical vampire can usually heal the injury of a knife wound or small bullet over the course of one or two days, the Crown has in the past healed the same type of wounds in the same number of *minutes*. This combined with the previous abilities make her a fearsome opponent not to be underestimated in any direct confrontation.

- * Accelerating the rising of her victims. As stated in my essay on the nature of vampires, it can take anywhere from twelve hours to more than five days for a victim of a vampire to rise as a new vampire. The Crown of Thorns has in the past shown that she can shorten this time period to as little as one or two hours. She has been known to use this ability to create shock troops and disposable minions on command.

- * Altering her vocal cords. This series of powers allows the Crown of Thorns to do everything from throwing her voice to imitating others’ voices to mimicking animal sounds and bird calls, to screaming loud enough to shatter glass. If you don’t think that this contributes to her ability to raise havoc, you haven’t been paying attention.”

George took a sip of his brandy and set the snifter on the floor. “Keep in mind that this list is not exhaustive by any means. My research suggests that the Crown has a plethora of other abilities available to her, many of which are more subtle and devious than these. Expect the unexpected when dealing with the Crown of Thorns and never, ever underestimate her.

“Moving on, I will recite the case history of incidents involving the Crown. Bear in mind that this will not include cases where the Crown’s participation is merely suspected. These are cases wherein she is definitely known to have been involved, whether by her own admission through the clues she leaves or through testimony of reliable witnesses.”

Cynthia listened to George recount the long and bloody history of the Crown's exploits for about five minutes, which was all she could take. She cancelled the program, cutting George off in the middle of describing a beach party massacre, and sauntered back upstairs to the Rec Room. She suddenly felt very lonely and more than a little nauseous. She'd encountered quite a few vampires in her time and the impression she'd been left with every time was that the lot of them were brutes, driven by hunger to hunt and kill when the need arose. Most of them had an almost palpable aura of malice about them, a feel of genuine evil that was an inherent part of their nature. Cynthia had never thought much about these things, disturbing though they were. When she passed by an abandoned building and sensed the presence of something unnatural and sinister inside, she wrote it off as unimportant. It didn't affect her, so why should she care?

Now she was beginning to understand. Whenever she had sensed one of these creatures she had been very close to a monster much like the Crowns of Thorns, perhaps even the Crown herself! All this time while she was flitting about the city guided only by whimsy, the monsters that her companions worked so hard to track and destroy had slipped through her fingers. Many of them were probably still out there.

Feeling lonely, guilty and miserable, Cynthia turned the TV on and tried to forget where she was.

Jake set the test tube he was working with back in its holder while resisting the urge to hurl it against the wall. He and Sullivan had spent the entire day analyzing samples and had come up with absolutely nothing. They knew they had a mixture of chemicals, including motor oil and what appeared to be standard petroleum. The two of them had been unable to find out much else regardless of their attempts. Jake ran his fingers through his hair and looked at his Jakewatch™. 8:37 p.m.

"I'm done," he said. "Really, I'm done. I don't have the experience to figure this out."

"We've done the best we could, Jake," Sullivan said reassuringly. "There is no shame in that." She got up from her seat and walked to his workstation to help him put his equipment away. "Part of me suspects that we aren't meant to decipher this 'clue.' It's a tease, I think, after the fashion of a serial killer. It's a very obscure lead we have no way to follow. Then when we don't the killer laughs at us, having proved her superiority."

"Well *that* doesn't make me feel any better. I'm going out to my Workshop for a while. Maybe some mindless droning work will take my mind off of all this mindless droning work."

"Very well. I'm going to clean up."

"Ok. See ya later."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"Set?"

"Yes, I'm set."

"On your mark."

"George..."

"Get set."

"Open the door, George."

"Um, aim..."

Will sighed and walked past George to the door of the room containing their last target. He held a fire ax in one hand while grasping the doorknob and bracing himself against the wall.

"You take all the fun out of being eccentric, Will," George whined.

Will flung the door open and leapt inside. George followed carrying his own ax casually draped over his shoulder.

The room was a converted apartment, now little more than an empty space with a bed against the far wall. A single vampire lay there in the mock sleep of the undead. Will had been worried that this one would be awake like the last two, but he was sleeping late, as it were. With consummate stealth Will stole to the bedside, raised his ax and decapitated the vampire with a single blow.

“Nothing worse than a bad case of bed head,” said George. He turned to Madam Vera, who stood framed in the doorway. “Are you certain this was the last of them?”

“Yes. He was the last,” she answered. For the last two and a half hours she had been leading them throughout the Dark Side to each of the hiding places of the resident vampires. Though there were only a few handfuls of them it was an arduous process. Each vampire had his own resting place, often secreted behind locked doors and even one nestled in an unused air vent. Once Vera led George and Will to a hidey-hole, they then had to dispatch the resident as quickly as possible to avoid a ruckus that might raise alarms. The previous two guards had awakened with the setting of the sun and had met Will and George with fierce, but thankfully uneventful, melees. This last late sleeper had been a pleasant surprise.

When George had explained to Vera that Monster had been destroyed and had asked for Vera’s help in exterminating the others she reluctantly agreed. Will wasn’t surprised. As near as he could tell Vera had no idea why Monster and his cronies had worked here as bouncers, but she did appreciate their presence. The Dark Side’s legendary rough and ready security team was the only thing keeping the more unseemly elements of Ylelon at bay. Now that they were gone it was only a matter of time before the word was out and gangs, drug pushers and worse started encroaching on the undefended women of the Dark Side. Will didn’t like that thought one bit but he wasn’t about to leave a band of vampires free to prey on the local homeless, and neither was George.

“So what do we do now? We’ve lost the sun and we’re no closer to finding the Crown than we were when we left this morning,” Will said. He and George looked at Vera.

“I don’t know where she is,” Vera said in reply to their unspoken question. “I’ve never even spoken to her. I just wish she’d leave my poor girls in peace.”

“I don’t understand this,” Will said as frustration showed through his normally mellow exterior. “Why would she lead us here to disrupt her...a regular stopping point for her, but not be here herself? It just doesn’t fit her pattern.”

“It is strange. Very strange...” George mulled, and his brow furrowed as he grew silent in thought.

Will was also feeling pensive. Why had the Crown of Thorns led them here? She hadn’t been lying in wait to ambush them. But then what was the point? If she’d wanted to send them on a wild goose chase she could have led them to any number of places. Had she expected Monster and company to take them out? It sounded possible, but everything Will knew about the Crown and the way she worked made it hard for him to believe that she could miscalculate so badly.

I suppose we’ll never know, he thought resignedly. She definitely threw us off track for a day. Heck, maybe that was her plan! Just at the thought that anyone was going to be hurt, we dropped everything and left...

...left the Mansion...

Will gasped and dropped his ax, which thumped hollowly on the floor next to his foot.

“Will? What’s wrong?” George asked, but Will was already gone. His voice echoed down the hall behind him as he raced for the front door:

“We’ve got to go, George!!”

George and Vera shared a double take at each other and the door. Then George bowed, handed Vera a folded piece of paper and followed Will. For a long moment Vera stared at the doorway before tucking the paper into her pocket and going about her evening, such as it was.

Will dashed past a multitude of astonished faces in the lobby and out the door into the night. He cursed himself for his foolishness even as he ran with wanton abandon through the most unsafe neighborhoods Ylelon had to offer. As he ran he dialed the Mansion’s number on Jake’s Smileyphone™. An automated voice shortly informed him that the line was not in service. He kept running.

Jake left the front door unlocked on his way to the Workshop. The sun had slipped beneath the sea, branding sunset across the western sky. The wind was blowing softly, the tall grass in the yard waved slowly and the sky above and to the east was turning deep purple, a color Jake didn’t want to think about.

When he got to the Workshop he flicked on all the switches of the panel to the right of the door. The building illuminated quickly as row upon row of lights flickered to life on each level, making Jake

feel a little better. The Workshop wasn't exactly cozy but it was a place all his own.

As he walked toward the stairwell something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye and he did a double take. A number of cans and spray bottles were sitting out on the workbench located at the back of the garage. The cabinet where chemicals were normally stored on this level stood on the workbench's right, the door hanging wide open. Gaps showed in the meticulous arrangement of the containers inside.

For a moment, Jake stood and stared. He wasn't a neat freak himself, but George had *very* strict rules about shop maintenance and keeping unused materials in order. This was a building the size of a large library full of fuel, ammunition and explosives, after all. George was fond of saying that he would prefer not to have his home reduced to a glass crater. If Jake ever left so much as a tube of lithium-grease out of place when he left the shop George would remind him of it for a week. How such a mess had been left out without being noticed and put away--particularly since it must have been here for a while, as Jake hadn't done any garage work for several days--was beyond his ken. He finally decided it wasn't worth worrying about and headed for the workbench to clean up.

As he got closer, however, he became more and more puzzled. There were more containers laid out on the table than he at first had thought, several dozen, in fact. They were spaced out in staggered rows like a display in a museum, in no apparent order. Glass cleaner, hydraulic fluid, stain remover, leather treatment, motor oil, axle grease, brake fluid and several gas cans were laid out seemingly at random.

Jake had a horrible thought that sent his pulse racing. Then he saw it: near the back of the table behind the rows of assorted garage implements was an oil pan half-full with a dark fluid. Jake's heart was in his throat even as he dipped a finger in the substance. There was no doubt in his mind what it was. He ran as fast as he could to an intercom panel nearby on the wall. He punched the address button and shouted, "Sullivan! Marc! Anybody there?" Static in reply.

Jake understood now what was happening. They were under attack and their lines of communication had been severed. For an instant he considered calling Will and George before remembering he had left his phone in the lab. The sun had set so he didn't dare go outside--not that he was particularly safe in here. There was one other course of action. He ran for the stairwell.

George stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Dark Side and stood there, ignoring the steady trickle of people into and out of the building. He didn't know what Will was so excited about, but he had his suspicions. He could only hope that they were both wrong, that the entire team had not been played for such complete fools. Not when there was no way that he and Will could return in time...

With a shriek of tires Will roared around a nearby corner and skidded to a halt in the street in front of George. Without a word he climbed into his seat and they sped away.

The Mansion's front door clicked and swung open. Desert winds blew across the threshold and chased and tussled with the almost imperceptible specks of dust on the Foyer floor. A lithe figure walked into the great room, making no noise as her leather sandals paced over the tile. She stopped in the center of the room and the light fabric of her dress swirled around her on the breeze like lost dreams.

"Spread out," the Crown of Thorns said. "You know what to do."

Six shadowy forms crept through the doorway behind her. They split into three pairs that headed into the Mansion as a loose group, but one of them stopped in her tracks when the Crown spoke to her.

"Stay with me, Sophie."

After she finished cleaning up in the lab, Sullivan decided to see what the others were up to. She found King dozing peacefully in the Office, slumped forward on a desk by a computer. She left for the supply room and returned with a blanket, which she draped over King's shoulders. He would probably be upset with himself for falling asleep, but Sullivan knew he had a tendency to push himself too hard and could use some time to rest.

Next Sullivan went to the Rec Room. In the colossal Gym next door she could hear the

unmistakable thudding and clanging sounds of Marc working out. Cynthia was in the Rec Room, channel surfing with a mesmerizing rhythm as though she changed the channel with each beat of her heart.

"Hello, Cynthia," Sullivan said cordially. Cynthia yelped and dropped the remote, which clattered on the room's hardwood floor.

"I'm sorry, dear, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right," Cynthia said as she picked up the remote. "I'm just a little jumpy with all that's been going on. When's the last time we heard from the guys?"

"Seventeen minutes and thirty-two seconds ago."

"Wow. It's really easy to forget that you're a machine until you say things like that."

"I shall take that as a compliment," Sullivan remarked. "Out of curiosity, why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just worried about Will and George. If this Crown is so dangerous, was it really a good idea for those two to go in by themselves?"

"To be honest, I don't think that it was. The Crown of Thorns is far too cunning and dangerous to engage with anything less than a large, well-armed war party. I feel that George has allowed the anger and frustration he feels at his responsibility for the Crown to cloud his judgment."

"Why in the world would George feel responsible for *her*?" Cynthia asked.

"You may have noticed that George likes to act as a civil bodyguard for the whole country. Usually he's able to do a pretty good job of it. The Crown of Thorns is, if you'll pardon the pun, a thorn in George's side because she constantly does something your average target cannot."

"She outsmarts George," Cynthia offered.

"Exactly."

"But why rush off like that? Why not put the team together and go out in force?"

"Hmm. I suspect George would say something like, 'While the ambient light of the sun proves utilitarian in our determined trek to exterminate the vile fiend that is the Crown of Thorns a large and conspicuous group of heavily-armed and snappily-dressed ruffians traipsing among the domiciles of fair Ylelon City's populace might draw undue attention from the local constabulary in the form of questioning, incarceration and strategic saturation bombing.'"

Cynthia laughed out loud at Sullivan's imitation of George. Even the voice was good.

"But I'm afraid," Sullivan continued, "that what has really happened is that George has allowed his feelings to get away from him. He did something he very rarely does--make a decision in anger--and as a result he's put himself and Will in potential danger."

Cynthia's eyes wandered in space. "Do you think they'll come back soon?" she asked.

"I'd imagine so. Now that George has had some time to cool down the fact that he and Will no longer have the advantage of daylight should be foremost on his mind."

"That's good to know," replied Cynthia. "Care to join me?"

"I'm not really one for television, Cynthia, but I'd be glad to sit and visit for a while."

"Ok." Cynthia switched off the TV and dropped the remote on an end table. "So, what's new?"

The Crown's five minions stalked down the second floor east wing as a tight group. They could hear activity from various rooms in the wing and they knew that they had the element of surprise, but that was all. None of them had been undead for more than three nights so they were new to their awesome strength and endurance. The Crown of Thorns had warned them that the mortals they would be hunting here were experienced in the destruction of vampires. She didn't know how many would be left behind when George went off on his wild goose chase. She'd expected her lackeys at the Dark Side should be able to keep whoever showed up there busy for at least a few hours, but time was a huge x-factor here so they had to move quickly. The Crown had shown them the layout of the first two floors of the Mansion and told them where to meet her when they had accomplished their tasks.

None of them had questioned why the Crown wanted them to do these things, or why she hadn't mentioned that the house had a third floor or any way to get to it. None of them dared question her. She had brought a total of six minions with her tonight, but originally there had been seven. The seventh one had demanded in a moment of habitual defiance of authority to know why he should do what the Crown

told him to. After seeing what the Crown had done to him, the others had resolved never to anger her.

The first door on their right was slightly open and sharp vampire ears picked up the sound of quiet snoring from inside. A pair of the vampires broke off from the group and slipped inside. Two of the remaining three then went through the next door, one on their left, into a room where two female voices could be heard. That left the odd man out to go to the last door on the left, into a colossal gymnasium.

The first team of vampires found themselves in a large computer room. The only person in the room was a man wearing a beige overcoat, asleep at one of the computer tables under a heavy blanket. He looked like an older man but was built like he'd been chiseled out of a block of granite. They nodded to each other and crept up behind him. Even as they stood over him he slumbered peacefully, blissfully unaware of the eminent danger.

One of the goons yanked the blanket off of him, grabbed him by the shoulders, jerked him backward and shoved him forward, smacking his head against the table. The man awakened with a cry of pain and surprise. He tried to struggle but his captor pivoted in place and threw him against the wall by the door. He landed on his hands and knees, panting like a battered dog. He fought to catch his breath as he fumbled under his coat for his service pistol in its holster but his assailants were on him again too quickly. The one that had thrown him cuffed him in the temple and he lost consciousness. The lead vampire grasped the man by a wrist and the other followed as the poor fellow was dragged out the door and down the hall.

Marc shoved the last weight onto the bench press bar and sighed. He'd been working out for hours and his anxiety was finally beginning to overcome his boredom. When George left him behind this morning in favor of Will, Marc had been furious. This was the first decent action they'd seen in weeks and he was going to miss all the fun! Besides, this wasn't any everyday critter. This was the Crown of Thorns! What they needed was to get the entire group together, load up with weapons and drive the APC down Main Street until they found the bitch and gunned it down. Wandering off to talk to some crack whores wasn't going to get them anywhere.

He lay back on the bench and lifted the bar out of the cradle. George would have a fit if he knew that Marc was lifting without a spotter but Marc didn't care. Everyone was a little too out of sorts to have around. Jake was cool, but he was busy with geek stuff. Besides, Marc needed some time to mull things over.

He pressed almost twice his own weight in three sets of ten repetitions each. To Marc's mind, working out for definition was a waste of time. Developing tone was the way to go. It had always bothered him that his own strength was nothing compared to most supernatural beings'. He was strong enough to participate in world-class weight lifting competitions, but he was still only about half as strong as Joe Average vampire. How was it that a bunch of freaks, monsters and dead bodies were stronger than he was?

He set the bar back in the cradle and sat up. What to do now? He was bored with lifting, but there wasn't much else to do. Maybe he'd just see if Cynthia wanted to go get a drink with him. She'd probably turn him down, being stuck on Will, but it was worth a try anyway. She had a great pair of--

He heard a sound come from somewhere behind him and jumped to his feet. Instinct honed by years on the street made his senses sharp. He knew someone had made a noise somewhere in the room and the fact that he couldn't see them meant they were hiding, which was all he needed to know to be on guard. Looking all around the Gym at the exercise machines, weight trees and racks of sports equipment revealed nothing suspicious. He stooped to pick a huge dumbbell near his foot off the floor. As he rose he saw something fly at him from the corner of his eye. He ducked just in time and a large weight sailed over his head and smashed against a leg press machine.

Undaunted, Marc kicked into high gear, running toward where the weight had been thrown from. He had no idea what was going on, but he did know three very important things:

1. Someone had just tried to kill him.
2. That someone was crouching behind a weight tree about fifty feet away, apparently thinking

they were better hidden than they actually were.

3. Marc was carrying a very heavy blunt instrument.

As he crossed the distance between himself and the weight tree, he half-expected his assailant to pop up and lob another weight at him. It didn't happen and rather than charge it head on, he suddenly broke left and headed for a nearby bench, all the time keeping an eye on his opponent. Whoever it was must have been doing the same, because he started to stand just as Marc changed direction. Marc reached the bench before Mister X finished standing and jumped, vaulted off of the bench into the air and hurled his dumbbell. The weight caught the poor sap square in the mouth, shattering several teeth and breaking his jaw. He howled in pain and flopped onto his back, clutching his ruined mouth.

Marc wasted no time in pressing his advantage. As soon as he landed, he was off like a shot to where his opponent lay. He grabbed a large weight off the tree, raised it over his head with both hands and hammered it repeatedly into his foe's ribs. He didn't stop until several seconds after it stopped screaming.

Marc dropped the weight aside and took a moment to catch his breath, then knelt and examined the body. From its wild mane of dirty black hair, tattered clothing and numerous tattoos, it was clear that this had been a street tough. His teeth were no clue, obviously, but the fact that he was cold to the touch made it clear he was a vampire. He hadn't been a vampire for very long, though, because he still had a healthy skin tone. Besides, it was a rookie mistake for anybody to be caught off guard with such a simple feint. Marc would never admit it to anyone, even to himself, but he had been very, very lucky.

That wasn't important now. What was important was that a vampire had gotten inside the Mansion and that had never happened before. If this one was all the way at the far end of the east wing then he might have done a lot of damage on the way. Or worse, he might have friends. If Jake and the others didn't know that they were under attack...

That was enough deep thought for Marc. Now it was time for action. He grabbed a nearby weight bar and twirled it like a quarterstaff as he ran for the hall.

The second vampire squad entered what was clearly a recreation room, but it was unexpectedly huge. Video games and game tables lined the walls. In the middle of the room was the most enormous TV either of them had ever seen. Two large armchairs were situated facing the TV with their backs to the door. Two female voices, one with a faint artificial quality, could be heard coming from the chairs.

The Crown had told them about the robot, warning them that she was a great deal more powerful than she looked, but she hadn't said anything about the girl. Was this somebody's chick? They stalked slowly and quietly across the room, taking their time to avoid being noticed.

"Yeah, they're good," the woman was saying. "I like Adam Walker more, though. He's great."

"Oh, he's wonderful!" the robot replied. "You can tell he's felt much freer since he ditched those losers in his old band."

"Yeah. I can't wait 'till he's in concert again. I'm gonna pounce on him on stage."

"Goodness, Cynthia! That's rather scandalous. What would Will think?" The speaker sounded amused.

"Will can get over it. He looks good in a trench coat, but he doesn't have big brown eyes and croon to his own guitar. Besides, he--is someone here?"

The vampires were still several paces away from their victims but they knew the jig was up. The one focusing on the robot bull-rushed her chair while his companion attempted a clumsy running kick on the woman's. Both victims were pitched onto the floor as their chairs toppled forward onto them.

"Nobody move and nobody gets hurt!" shouted the vampire attacking the robot as he lifted her chair above his head. Without a word, the robot picked herself up and turned to face him, standing with her feet apart and her arms at her side.

"Get back on the floor!" demanded the vampire, whose name was Rusty. The robot didn't say a word or move a servo, so Rusty brought her chair crashing down on her head. Wood snapped and upholstery tore as the armchair cracked in two from the force of the blow. The wrecked remains clattered to the floor at the feet of the robot, which still stood undaunted. Meanwhile, the woman was skittering out from under her own chair on the floor.

“Sullivan?” she whimpered. “What’s going on?”

“I’m just cleaning house,” the robot replied. With blinding speed she stepped toward Rusty, twisting her torso toward the step and thrusting the heel of her palm into his chest. He hurtled backward six feet through the air and landed flat on his back. Disoriented and in pain, he staggered to his feet just in time to be hit by the other vampire (whose name was Darryl), who flew into him upside down and backwards. They hit the floor in a tangle of limbs.

“Are you all right, Cynthia?” asked Sullivan as she helped the redhead to her feet.

“I think so,” was the reply. “What’s going on?”

“We appear to be under attack. I’m switching modes from ‘motherly caretaker’ to ‘motherly war machine’.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

By way of reply, Sullivan turned and leaped to where Rusty and Darryl were clambering to their feet, grasped them both by their throats and hefted them into the air.

“I’m only going to ask this *once*,” Sullivan said, with a brutal neck squeeze for emphasis. “How many of you are there?” Aside from a few choking and gagging sounds, the two vampires said nothing.

“Ok, that was a bluff. I’m really prepared to ask as many times as necessary to find out what I need to know,” confessed Sullivan.

“Sullivan! Cynthia!” a coarse voice called from the doorway.

“Marc?” Sullivan said.

“Holy crap, there *were* more of them!” the voice said, as the body the voice occupied, a skinhead wearing sweat-drenched clothing and carrying what looked like a weight bar, walked into view.

“Are you all right, Marc?” Sullivan asked flatly while still keeping her eyes on her two playmates.

“Yeah, I only got one of these guys. You seen any more?”

“No. I’m trying to find out how many there might be.”

“Have we heard from Jake or Sammy?!” Marc said with sudden urgency.

“We’ve not had time to look for them. We have to deal with these two first.”

“What about it, boys?” Marc snarled at his captive audience.

“Not--telling you!” Rusty spat and kicked Sullivan hard in the stomach. She dropped her victims as she lost her balance and keeled over backwards. To her credit her ruse had actually lasted longer than she’d thought it would. Like Marc, she had deduced from the vampires’ appearance that they were newly dead. She had gambled that this meant they were naïve about their abilities--which in turn meant that they wouldn’t realize that they were in fact much stronger than she was.

Rusty and Darryl both landed on their feet and came back swinging. Unfortunately for them, Marc was ready. Rusty came at him with a straight punch, but Marc fainted away while spinning his bar, bringing it up to smash Rusty in the face. Marc then jabbed the low end into Darryl’s knee and pulled up hard, cracking him under the jaw.

Now Sullivan was back on her feet. She backhanded Darryl, who was still reeling from Marc’s attack, then turned and wrenched a leg from the remains of her armchair. When she turned back again she saw Marc and Rusty locked in a tug-of-war over the weight bar, a battle Marc was clearly losing. With blinding speed she grabbed the bar with one hand for leverage and hammered the chair-leg into Rusty’s chest. Blood and necrotic flesh sprayed out of the gaping wound the impromptu stake made. Rusty let out a single agonized shriek and collapsed on the floor.

Darryl had been about to attack Sullivan again, but when Rusty was staked he turned and ran. Neither Marc nor Sullivan pursued him, instead turning their attention to Cynthia.

“He--is he?” she stammered.

“Is he what, dear? Paralyzed?” Sullivan asked.

“Not a chance!” Marc declared triumphantly. “After that shot his heart’s in shreds. Dead bastard’s down for good. Way to go, she-bot!” he exclaimed and clapped Sullivan on the shoulder.

“Are you ok, Cynthia?” Sullivan asked again.

“Yeah, I’m ok,” Cynthia lied through her teeth. Even when she wasn’t actively looking for trouble, she had a precognitive ability that warned her without fail when something life-threatening was

about to happen to her. It had warned her this time too, but she had been so relaxed and distracted and the feeling so oddly unfocused that her own mental alarm bells had startled her.

The experience had rattled her so badly that she stood by and watched while Marc and Sullivan fought. Cynthia normally would have been hesitant to join the battle anyway, because she still kept her promise to George not to reveal her powers to the rest of the team. She would normally have broken that rule to help the others in a life and death situation, but her fright kept her from being decisive. She didn't fully understand the psychology behind it, but George could have summed it up quite succinctly: it was a terrifying experience for someone so powerful to feel helpless.

"All right, our first concern is finding Jake and Detective King," Sullivan said. "The last I saw Jake, he was headed for his Workshop, and Detective King was sleeping in the Office."

"Oh crap!" exclaimed Marc. "He's right across the hall! If they found us, they found him!"

"Then they may be between us and the Armory. All right, Cynthia, follow us but keep to the rear. If there's any fighting I want you safe, understand?"

"Uh-huh."

"Let's go, Marc."

Sullivan led them out of the room, peering up and down the hallway first to make sure the coast was clear. As quietly as they could, the trio slipped into the Office.

"This is not good," Sullivan said as she picked King's blanket up off the floor. "This is the blanket he was sleeping under."

"Yeah, it was rude of him not to put it away," Marc said.

Cynthia turned and kicked him in the shin. "No, dumbass! This means they got him!"

"Uh, yeah, I knew that."

Sullivan, meanwhile, had picked up a phone and dialed frantically. She laid the phone back in its cradle slowly. "They've killed the phones. We can't reach George and Will."

"So what do we do?" asked Cynthia.

"We have to find Detective King," Sullivan said. "If he's still alive, his welfare depends on us. If George and Will aren't already returning, then presumably they will when next they attempt to report in and can't get through. You two come with me. We'll see if we can rescue Detective King and find Jake."

"We've got trouble!" Darryl shouted as he rushed into the Situation Room. Sophie lounged in George's chair at the far end of the table. The other two vampires, Luke and Jay, stood next to their hostage, the geezer they had captured and tied to a chair. The old man struggled against his restraints and shouted into his filthy rag of a gag as Jay and Luke took turns tormenting him.

"What's the matter, Darryl?" Sophie asked as she rose to her feet.

"The robot got Rusty! I think the skinhead took out Kevin. Where's the boss?"

"She's busy. She left me in charge," Sophie said. "Did you see the mechanic, or the goth man anywhere?"

"No, we didn't see them. They got somebody new, too, some skinny little woman."

"That's bad. Jay! Luke!" Sophie said. "You two get yourselves ready for a fight."

"Yeah, why should we do what you say?" Jay said indignantly.

"Because our cover is blown, fool! The boss says these guys have a lot of guns, right? How long do you think it's gonna be before they come running in here with a bunch of machineguns?"

Jay and Luke traded glances. "Oh, right," Luke said.

"Get yourselves together, we gotta jump them," Sophie commanded. The old man shouted into his gag in protest; Jay backhanded him across the face.

"When you're ready, go together and try to surprise them. I'm going to look for the others," Sophie said and hurried out of the room. The trio turned the old man and his chair sideways, stuffed them under the table and hustled out into the hall.

Sophie glided down the stairs into the Foyer. She had a hunch about where to find the mechanic. The Crown had warned her and the others about him: of all the residents of the Mansion, after George, he

was the most dangerous. Not only was he very capable in hand-to-hand combat, he had a real fetish for weird super-spy gizmos and heavy weaponry. Sophie had decided she didn't feel comfortable with him running around loose, so she was going to find him before he found them.

She didn't see her own initiative as one of the qualities that had prompted the Crown to make her second-in-command. All she remembered was the Crown biting her, the world going black, and then waking up in an abandoned building. The Crown had been there along with her current companions. They were her servants, she told them, and they were to help her have some fun at the expense of some rich white guy named George Manor. She showed them maps and pictures of their victims. They were warned to work together and beware--the victims were dangerous, for mortals. The Crown expected that all or most of the people here had gone on her wild goose chase, with the robot and maybe one other member left behind. She had seemed almost disappointed to learn that most of the crew had remained behind in the Mansion. "Aren't I worth going out in force for?" she had mused aloud, and while her tone of voice was sad her wicked smile was full of glee.

When she showed the newly risen vampires her sketches of the Mansion's layout, she also gave them their instructions. Spread out once they were inside and find everyone that had not been lured away by the Crown's legerdemain. They were to be taken alive to the Situation Room and held there until the Crown said otherwise. The "alive" part had been emphasized when the Crown crushed a brick in her fist.

Sophie didn't know where the Crown was now, but she supposed it didn't matter. The important thing right now was to neutralize the local gun bunny before he could mess up their plans any more than they already were. She only wished she'd had a chance to change: she was still wearing the clothes she had died in. A low-cut tube dress and spike heels were not the ideal things to be running across the desert in. Once she was out the door, she kicked off her shoes and sprinted around back to the Workshop.

Jake clicked his helmet on and powered up his armor with a triumphant chuckle. It had taken seemingly forever to get suited up, but now he was ready to rock and roll. He did have some misgivings about facing the Crown of Thorns himself, but, as he thought to himself with a wry smile, it was the best circumstance to give his armor's weapons their first field test.

He punched on the Heads Up Display and ran down his systems' status. All smiley faces. He snapped his pistol-grip controller into a holster on his hip and ran for the stairwell.

Ok, situation assessment, he thought as he flew down the stairs. I don't have any way to warn the Mansion and they don't know that I'm on my way. If the Crown is already here, Sullivan might be able to hold her own for a while, but Marc, Cynthia and the Detective don't stand a chance--

He stopped dead on the last bend of stairs just as the door came into view. It was open enough that a sliver of the late evening sky could be seen. Had he left the door open?

Damn right he hadn't, the same as he hadn't left a bunch of chemical containers out on a workbench. He grabbed his controller and punched the button to activate the guns. His weapon pack buzzed to life and the guns snapped into place over his shoulders. As he inched toward the door with his back to the wall he kicked himself mentally for not having built a motion tracker into the armor. He watched for any signs of movement (or anything that was purple) and all the while his guns looked where he did. When he reached the door he turned to dash outside and that was when a ball peen hammer smacked against the door inches from his face.

Damn! he thought as he spun on his heels. A female vampire charged him at breakneck speed, grabbed him and slammed him against the doorframe. He was rattled in his armor but not hurt and he answered by upper-cutting the vampire under the jaw. She flipped head over heels backwards and landed flat on her face.

Jake almost breathed a sigh of relief. This wasn't the Crown of Thorns--wrong ethnicity, no purple. In his armor he wasn't quite as strong as she was, but he did have some really big guns. Of course, he didn't dare fire them in here, so he did the only thing he could: take fight outside.

The vampire was still getting to her feet as Jake grabbed her by one arm and her hair. He muscled her headfirst into the door, which slammed open against the outside wall as she flipped head-over-heels and landed on her back. She somersaulted back into a standing position and met Jake head-on as he

rushed outside after her. He threw a wild haymaker that she sidestepped, but he caught her with a follow-up knee to her stomach. She staggered backward two steps, then shook off the pain and charged again, kicking up little sprays of sandy soil as she ran.

Jake was ready: in fact, he was counting on this. This vampire was obviously young and inexperienced, but Jake still wasn't a match for her physically. He needed her to be somewhere he could cut loose with his guns without having to worry about collateral damage.

With that in mind, he bashed her in the temple with a left hook as she came at him, but she hit him back hard with a right straight punch. He lost his footing in the loose terrain and toppled over backward, dropping his trigger as he fell. No sooner had he crash-landed amidst the savannah grass than the vampire was on him. She grabbed him by the shoulders as she knelt with her knee in his stomach and shook him, repeatedly slamming his helmet into the ground. The world became a blur of pain for Jake as he flailed his right arm about, desperately seeking the trigger. His fingers finally closed around it, just at the edge of his reach, and as he grasped it he stuck his left thumb in the vampire's eye. She howled in pain and let go of Jake, clamping her hands over her bloody eye socket and Jake twisted in place just enough for his right gun barrel to line up under the edge of her chin and pulled the trigger. The front of her face disappeared in a spray of gore and she fell backward shrieking in agony.

Jake clambered to his feet and shook his head, trying to clear his vision. The vampire staggered about in the tall grass, holding the ruins of her face in both hands. Blood flowed through her fingers down her arms and dripped onto the grass. Jake jogged in a quarter circle around her so she was between him and the right stretch of the Wall and fired off a quick burst of ten rounds, five from each gun, confident that a spray of bullets would make up for his blurry vision. The undead monster that had been a gifted young woman was ripped almost to shreds and collapsed on the ground.

Jake took a deep breath to steady himself. Then he opened a panel on the left leg of his armor, revealing a tiny secret compartment. He took a pen out of it, along with a small black notebook with fuzzy black covers, which he opened to the front page. It read:

Things to get around to

Tune up APC

Prepare campaign notes for "Dungeons With Unpleasant Things In Them" game with Marc

Prepare schematics for Secret Project

Field Test Armor Weaponry

Finish Programming Eric

Buy Eggs

He crossed off "Field Test," scratched out the words "build motion detector into sensors," put the notebook back and ran for the Mansion.

Will roared down the highway toward the Mansion at better than ninety miles an hour. His knuckles were white and the leather covering on the steering wheel creaked in his grip. George by contrast had a hard and distant look. He stared out the passenger's window and sat very still but his mind was a raging storm.

She's there, he thought over and over again. *She's there and they don't know. I can't warn them! I can't! I shouldn't have been so easily duped! Now she's there, in my home, able to do as she pleases. Of everyone there, Sullivan's the only one who'd even have a prayer! Cynthia has no idea what they're up against and Jake might be able to hold her off with time to prepare if the Mansion were locked down. But I can't go to lockdown! I can't! They'll find out too much and it will put them in too much danger---*

More danger than having the Crown of Thorns amongst them? he asked himself. *Either way, they're in mortal danger because of me. If only it weren't the only way to save them...*

"So, which way do we go?" Jay asked as he followed his companions aimlessly down the hall.

"I keep telling you," Darryl blurted, "We're going the wrong way! They're back in the TV room!"

“Cool it, moron,” Luke said as he slapped Darryl upside the head. “Do you really think they were gonna wait around for you to come back? We gotta go where the guns are.”

“But ain’t that downstairs?” Jay looked back at the western staircase.

“Hey, that’s right! The big metal doors!” said Luke.

“Uh, guys,” Darryl said as he tapped Luke on the shoulder.

“Not now, idiot,” Luke snapped. “Ok, you’re right, we’ll go wait for them by the big doors.”

“Guys!” Darryl cried frantically as Luke and Jay started for the stairs.

Luke growled, turned around and grabbed Darryl’s shirt. “What’s your damn problem, man?” he demanded. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye down the hallway in the direction they’d come and when he turned to see what it was the butt of a weight bar hit him in the chest and knocked him prone. Darryl came tumbling after, pulled in Luke’s grip by his shirt.

Sullivan stood over Luke and Darryl brandishing Marc’s weight bar, daring Jay to challenge her. Jay snarled but held his ground while his two companions got back on their feet.

“Rush it!” Luke shouted, and the trio blitzed Sullivan. Luke came at her first and she met him with a brutal jab of the weight bar to his forehead. She followed up with a high swing that knocked Luke into Darryl and sent them both bouncing off the wall. Jay tried to grab her and she ducked, stuck the weight bar in his stomach and heaved upward, using Jay’s momentum to flip him over her head.

When the trio picked themselves up again they found Sullivan still standing in their midst, holding her weapon at the ready. She wasn’t as strong as any of them, but she was faster and had the superior fighting ability. In the right circumstance the three of them could literally tear her into scrap, so she had no choice but to hold them off.

“Son of a bitch,” King grumbled as he massaged his wrist to restore circulation. Sullivan had spied the vampires leaving the Office and had heard King’s struggles. She went to face the vampires and keep them from doubling back so Cynthia and Marc could free King and run to the Armory. While King was none too happy about being slapped around and stuffed under a table, he seemed to be effortlessly shaking off the trauma of his ordeal. Cynthia was impressed. The old man was definitely as tough as he looked.

“Payback time!” he said triumphantly as he took out his service piece and checked the chamber.

“Hold up, Sammy,” Marc said, and King scowled at him. “We gotta get some guns and find Osborn.”

“We don’t have time for that, Marc. We don’t know where Jake is and Sullivan probably needs help. And don’t call me ‘Sammy!’”

“We can do both at once, sir,” Cynthia put in. “Think about it. Where will Jake go in an emergency? Or in any situation, really? Where all the guns are.”

“Good point,” King admitted as he led them out into the hall where Sullivan could be seen tussling with three vampires at the far end, near the living quarters. She was fighting very defensively, luring her opponents away from the group.

“I don’t see the woman with them. She must still be here somewhere,” King said.

“Who? The Crown?” asked Cynthia.

“No. There was a different woman in the room before, when I was tied up. Looked like a hooker.”

“Hey, is that Osborn?” Marc asked and pointed at the front door. A shadowy figure was inching through the barely open door.

“Let’s go!” said King. They ran downstairs to meet Jake, who raised his visor and looked very relieved to see them.

“Is she here?” he blurted. “Is everyone--holy cheese, what happened to *you*, Detective?”

“I fell out of a blimp,” King snapped. “Listen up. Sullivan’s keeping three vampires busy upstairs so we can get some weapons. There’s a woman vampire here somewhere too.”

“In a black dress, right?” Jake asked as the team ran to the Armory doors. “I took care of her. What about the Crown of Thorns?”

“What about her?” Marc said. The great metal doors opened for them and they headed as one for a display case that was loaded with small arms.

“She’s here! Haven’t you seen her?” Jake said in exasperation. “The clue she left, the chemical stain, was a mixture of all the chemicals I use in the Workshop! She’s been here since at least yesterday!”

King stopped cold in the middle of opening the gun case. “She’s been here?” he said in horror.

“At least once before she hit Kerrigan Tower yesterday,” Jake affirmed.

King’s eyes glazed over in a look of deep thought for just a moment. Then he leapt to action, handing a pistol to Cynthia and a sawed-off shotgun to Marc.

“We have to go now!” he said. “Marc, get yourself and Cynthia some ammo. Sullivan’s up there by herself so we have to hurry. We go up as a group, nobody gets separated. Anything that ain’t the robot or us moves, we shoot it ‘till it stops moving. Go!”

Marc ran with Cynthia to the door of the Vault while King and Jake picked out extra weapons.

Will’s tires screamed as he roared into a hard right onto the dirt road leading to the Mansion. Behind him a huge cloud of dust loomed like a lost fogbank underneath the two moons.

Sullivan bonked Darryl soundly on the forehead with the weight bar and shoved him away. She and her trio of adversaries had reached a shaky stalemate. She could probably batter any one of her opponents into a sludgy substance but she was afraid to focus on any of them long enough to do so. Thus, she kept them at arm’s length with quick jabs and thumps designed as much to be painful as damaging.

The trio on the other hand kept making half-hearted attempts to catch her off guard. They weren’t confident enough in their abilities to fight her all-out, but they didn’t dare try to walk away from her either. Sullivan was just beginning to wonder if she should make a break for it and make certain the others were all right when she heard Jake call to her from the staircase: “Sullivan! The marines are here!”

Sullivan turned at the sound of his voice and Luke, seeing her distraction, came at her with a hard right. Sullivan saw it coming and swung the weight bar in a crushing line drive. Luke had already taken quite a pounding and this final blow was enough to crush his ribcage. With a guttural shriek he fell in a motionless heap.

Jay and Darryl were right behind Luke and as his body fell they each grabbed one of Sullivan’s arms, but before either of them could act they each took a bullet in the chest from King’s pistol.

“Back off!” King roared as Marc and Jake stepped to either side of him and brandished their weapons to emphasize his point. Even Cynthia had a gun trained on the two miscreants from her position behind the three men. Her sleek silver assault pistol seemed freakishly large in her slender fingers.

“Get down on the floor, now!” King ordered, and Darryl and Jay swapped nervous glances.

I wonder why he doesn’t just blow them away? Cynthia thought. *Is he going to question them, or--*

She was rudely interrupted by her danger sense screaming in her head. It wasn’t weak and unsure like before. There was no doubt that something bent on death and destruction was coming their way.

At that moment unseen by anyone, behind Darryl and Jay in the corner of the hall the door to one of the unused bedrooms began to open.

The front gate ratcheted open as Will came on and zoomed through the slowly widening opening with barely three inches to spare on either side. Will decided to skip the formality of the driveway and drove straight across the center court to the front steps.

“I said, get down! I’m not warning you again!” King shouted.

“Maybe we should blow one away to make sure the other one understands,” quipped Jake.

“Hey, good idea!” Marc chimed in. “Eney, meeney, miney, moe...” He trailed off abruptly and dropped his shotgun on the floor.

A delicate figure in purple had just emerged from the empty room. Without making the slightest sound she strolled to stand between Jay and Darryl. Time swam like an insect trapped in amber as she locked eyes, one by one, with everyone present, including Darryl and Jay.

Sullivan came at her suddenly, swinging the weight bar. The Crown of Thorns stopped the swing dead. She didn’t duck under it, or dodge away, or turn it aside in a parry, she merely extended her left arm

and let it slap against her palm. Sullivan's feet actually left the floor for a second as the force of her blow was redirected back into her. As she settled the Crown raised her right arm and brought it down again in a blur of purple. Sullivan had just enough time to process the nearly unperceivable fact that the Crown had extended her claws before the weight bar came apart in two pieces in her hands and three little cylinders of steel bounced on the rug at her feet. The Crown grabbed Sullivan by the neck with her right hand and slammed her against the wall to her right without moving her own body. King raised his pistol and took aim at the Crown's head and she responded by tossing Sullivan into him with blinding speed.

The seconds seemed to crawl by as Jake activated his guns. They swung up and over his shoulders at a snail's pace and locked in synch with his helmet. He began to squeeze the trigger: right then the Crown screamed, a super high-pitched wail that made the plastic visor of Jake's helmet crack in a thousand spider web fracture lines. The Crown was on him in a flash, grabbed his armor's right set of gun barrels and bent them into a 'V' shape, then flung him into Marc like a rag doll.

Only Cynthia was left standing now, facing down three vampires with only her pistol. She looked at the four bodies that lay at her feet. Sullivan recovered the quickest and was on her knees checking King for injuries. The two vampire henchmen were grinning broadly now, while the Crown of Thorns surveyed the scene with a look of detached satisfaction. Then with a sharp snap she had claws on her other hand and began to walk toward the fallen warriors.

With a resigned sigh, Cynthia tossed her pistol aside. The Crown saw this and stopped in her tracks. She hesitated for just a heartbeat before flashing a fangy grin.

Yeah, keep it up, Cynthia thought with an inward smirk. We'll see how much smiling you're doing while I'm bouncing your ass off of the ceiling.

She focused as the Crown of Thorns came toward her.

Will came through the front door into the Foyer at a run and called: "Jake! Marc! Anybody!"

George was right behind him, walking briskly but with a pronounced rigidity. He walked aimlessly across the huge Foyer while Will called frantically for his friends and he thought: *Where are they? Why don't they answer? Are they here? Are they alive? Has the Crown already...? I can't, I can't! But I have to! I can't take the chance! If I don't stop her, I'm going to lose them all!*

He took his silent alarm mike out of his pocket, and shouted into it.

Upstairs, everyone--Cynthia, the Crown of Thorns, her peons, the wounded rising to their feet--stopped in place when they heard the strange things George said echo through the Mansion, loud enough to rattle tooth fillings. What he said was:

*As he wandered in the desert,
Terek Domar found a fortress,
In the lost and winding pathways
Of a cavern deep and red.
When he saw the workings left there
By a culture wise and ancient
And he understood their meaning,
Terek Domar turned and fled.*

The very instant he stopped, the entire Mansion sprang to life. All throughout the rooms and hallway oscillating lights that were red, yellow or blue emerged from hatches set at regular intervals across the walls and ceilings. A high-pitched klaxon screamed from unseen speakers and metal shutters slid out of seamless storage spaces to slam closed over every window in the building.

"What the flippin'..." King began. He was cut off by a feminine voice droning over the intercom.

"Taya dore. Iseimen intaer. Riiska, Rin. Riiska, Rane. Riiska, Occor Pe..."

"What the *hell*..." Jake said as he looked at the chaos all around him. Then another hatch began to open in the hallway, right in the middle of the wall opposite the banister overlooking the Foyer. The hatch

was slightly larger than a regular door and was indistinguishable from the surrounding tan plaster until it moved. Beyond the hatch was a shallow recess, out of which stepped a colossal figure. It stood a full head taller than Will and appeared to be made entirely of shiny black metal plates. Its face was very abstract, a grouping of curves and subtle shapes that only vaguely resembled a real person. The landing trembled under each of its footsteps as it strode with purpose to the banister. It stepped up onto the banister with ease and dropped out of sight over the other side.

“Uh-oh,” said the Crown of Thorns.

When George had begun his impromptu poetry recital, Will had started from the noise and stopped shouting for the others. When the Mansion suddenly became a schizophrenic discothèque, Will stared at George in confusion. When two sliding panels opened on either side of the Armory doors, revealing two massive robots and a third jumped down into the Foyer from the balcony above, Will rolled up his coat sleeve and pinched himself.

The three colossi marched to the center of the Foyer and stood in a line, in the same place Will and the others traditionally stood before going on a mission. They waited patiently while George paced back and forth in front of them.

“The Mansion has been invaded by a hostile force of unknown strength,” he said. “Terminate it, with *extreme* prejudice.”

The robots broke ranks and ran back across the Foyer. Two of the three each ran up a flight of stairs, while the one that had dropped from the second story made a tremendous running leap back up onto the balcony. The female voice on the intercom had stopped now, leaving only the wailing siren.

Will continued to stare at George, who met his eyes briefly, then looked away.

“What is going *on*?” Jake exclaimed. He, Marc, Sullivan and King were back on their feet. Jay and Darryl were fidgeting nervously, while the Crown of Thorns just scowled.

“Sullivan! What the hell *is* all of this?” King demanded.

“I have no worldly idea,” Sullivan said calmly as the robot they had seen before flew back into view and landed on the balcony, which rumbled under the impact. Two more automatons raced up the stairs into view then and all three marched toward the amazed spectators.

“Does anybody have any idea what the hell is going on?” Jake asked. When he looked around at those assembled he noticed that the Crown was gone.

The three robots lined up shoulder to shoulder as they walked so that their combined width took up nearly the entire hallway. By now everyone was beginning to shrink away from the encroaching behemoths, especially Jay and Darryl, who were backed up against the wall. When the robots were almost close enough to Cynthia to touch her, they stopped abruptly.

“Do not be alarmed,” the middle robot said in a deep voice and then sprang from a standing position all the way to the end of the hall. The floor shook when it landed. With lightning speed it grabbed Darryl, clamping the palm of its hand over his forehead and digging the tips of its fingers into his skull. Darryl thrashed and flailed wildly and his eyes rolled up in his head.

“We are here to serve and protect,” the robot said, crushed Darryl’s skull and pulverized his spine by bending him in half backwards.

The other two robots raised their right palms and pointed them at Jay. Thick metal projections like shotgun barrels extended from the base of their wrists.

“Eek,” Jay said. Thunder roared in the hallway as the robots’ rail guns tore him to shreds. The powerful rounds punched huge holes in the wall behind him, pulverizing the drywall and striking something beneath with the ear-splitting sounds of metal striking metal at high speeds.

When the last echoes of thunder had faded from the hall, Marc, Jake, King and Cynthia took their hands from their ears and looked around in bewilderment.

“What the hell *is* all of this?” King repeated.

“Yeah, and where did the Crown go?” Jake queried. The two robots that had destroyed Jay lowered their arms and re-sheathed their weapons.

"She's still here!" George shouted as he ran down the hall from the staircase with Will in hot pursuit. "Occor Pe! Find her!"

The robot that had crunched Darryl walked back to stand among his brothers. The many colored lights flashing in the hallway made the three of them glitter and sparkle in bizarre patterns.

"Scanning mode," the machine named Occor Pe said, and the three robots locked at attention.

"Motion scanning inconclusive," Occor Pe stated flatly.

"Thermal scanning negative," said one of the others.

"Radar scanning ineffective," said the third.

"Damn it!" George cursed. "Spread out and find her! Did anyone see her leave?!"

"She just disappeared!" Jake said. "Marc! Did you see her go back into that room?"

"I didn't see her, and I'd have noticed that!" Marc growled. Occor Pe and company were on the move, running in a tight cluster down the hall.

Damn! George thought. *She's still here! She's taunting us! The only way out is the front door, so either she's snuck into a room or...oh, no!*

He turned on his heel to shout a warning, but he was too late. The Crown flickered into view just as she bashed Will in the chest, slamming him off of the nearest wall. In a flash she was running down the hall at incredible speed.

"Stop her!" George cried frantically. By now, the robots were clear down the hall on the other side of the stairs and they spun around at the sound of their master's voice. When they saw the Crown running for the stairs, they rushed after her. All across their bodies hatches opened, joints shifted and barrels extended as the robots became two-legged arsenals.

"*Shoot her!*" George screamed as the Crown vaulted over the banister. One of the robots unleashed a swarm of tiny missiles from a chest panel. They screamed after the Crown and slammed into the banister, blasting it into rubble as the Crown sailed past the explosion and into the air over the Foyer.

While the robots launched into the Foyer after her, George shook with indecision. The people here might need medical attention, especially Will, who lay on the floor moaning in pain as Sullivan tended to him. On the other hand, his robots were running a series of protocols for defending the Mansion which included never going beyond the Wall. Without George to override their programming, the Crown could escape merely by fleeing into the desert. With a sharp curse he was off and running for the stairs.

The Crown landed in the middle of the Foyer and ran straight for the doors. Bullets, angry red energy beams and small explosions scarred the air and floor all around her as her pursuers cut loose with everything they had. When she was ten feet away from the doors she hurled herself into a flying kick that broke the left door off its hinges and sent it turning end over end as it sailed into the driveway. The Crown landed in the drive clear of the steps and bounded off to the left into the yard.

George saw her go from the stairs and swore. He was furious with himself for being so easily fooled again. He had thought that by releasing the sentries he would catch the Crown off-guard and hopefully drive her into a panic, allowing the team to destroy her. Instead, in true Crown of Thorns fashion she had hidden in plain view, so to speak, with an invisibility spell that was powerful enough to keep her hidden even from the sentries' plethora of scanners. When the sentries were far enough away for her to make good an escape she injured Will to distract everyone else and made a break for it. The spell had been inherently fragile, doing so much work, and she had willingly broken it merely by committing an act of violence--something she no doubt considered a calculated bit of psychological warfare.

George ran out into the yard thirty paces behind the sentries, who were hot on the heels of the Crown. She bobbed and weaved through the yard as the sentries unloaded their entire payloads, scorching the tall grass and blasting craters out of the Wall. The Crown jumped to the apex of the Wall and jumped again, streaking into the night air and vanishing as she plunged back to the desert sands beyond. The robots bounded up onto the wall and stood there in a line, blasting away. The night beyond was lit as though by a fireworks display while the three tried to hit the Crown as she ran through the arid scrub beyond the Wall.

George's heart sank. He had missed his chance. He could run to the Wall and order the sentries to follow her...but Will might need help. Should he press on and try to destroy the eternal evil that always

escaped him? With a sigh of frustration he decided it wasn't worth abandoning a friend in need, turned and ran back into the Mansion.

"Will? Can you hear me?" Sullivan asked gently. Will swallowed and nodded.

"You have two broken ribs. We're going to take you to the Infirmary. Can you make it?"

Another nod.

"Good," Sullivan said. "Marc, go and get a stretcher. Jake, King, you're on point. I want you to blow away anything that gets between us and the Infirmary."

"I can't use my guns," Jake lamented. "They're keyed to fire together and this one is ruined."

"Here," Marc said and handed Jake his shotgun. They clasped hands and Marc was off.

"Cynthia?" Sullivan said.

"Yeah?"

"You watch our backs. Anything tries to sneak up behind us, you let us know."

"There's no need to worry about that," George said as he walked to stand among the group. "The Crown has fled. We're all safe now."

"Is that a fact?" King snapped. "Are we just supposed to take your word for it?"

"It is a fact," said George. "You have nothing more to fear. We are well protected."

"Yeah? By the security team you never saw fit to tell us about?" Jake sneered. Cynthia did a double take. She hadn't understood why everyone was so surprised by the sirens and lights. This was why--they had no idea the things existed.

"The sentries were kept a secret for a reason, Jake," George said as he moved to kneel beside Will at Sullivan's side. "It doesn't matter now. We're all safe. The Crown is gone. Nothing else matters."

"I think that's interesting," King said pressingly. "Our lives were in danger and a bunch of Sullivans on steroids were hiding in the walls, but none of that matters. What the hell were those things, George?"

"I told you. They are a last line of defense against any foe that brings a fight here to our home."

"That's bull and you know it," Jake said. "I know as well as you do, Sullivan is top-of-the-line, state of the art technology. There's *nothing* more advanced than her and sure as hell not anything that can leap around a two-story balcony and has machine guns in its arms! You can afford just about anything that exists but you can't buy something that no one knows how to make yet!"

"It doesn't matter, Jake," George said, still patient. "What's important is that you are safe. The Crown lured us away so she could have free reign here. Now that she knows what awaits her, she will never return."

"Oh, that's comforting," Jake snapped. "While we're on the subject, what the hell was she doing in this room, anyway?" He ran to the door, kicked it open and leaned inside.

"Well?" King asked.

"Um...nothing," Jake said. He pulled the door shut. "There's nothing out of place. That I can see."

"I think you'll find, Jake, that the Crown was merely searching for any of us that may have still been in the house. That, or looking for access to any weapons or other resources she could find. We simply interrupted her search."

"I'm glad you're so confident, George! What happens when she turns up at my apartment tomorrow, looking for a little payback? Or maybe at an orphanage?" King checked the chambers in his pistol and re-holstered it. "You take Will out this morning and find nothing, all while she's been hiding here for who knows how long, waiting to carve us all into lunchmeat!"

"I didn't know she was coming here, or I would never have left. I did what I did to save others from danger, not to place them in it." George took out his silent alarm mike and spoke into it again. "Stand down." The siren stopped wailing and the many lights receded back into the walls. Moments later, Occor Pe appeared climbing the steps at a jog. It nodded to George as it turned and backed into its niche. The panel slid shut and fit seamlessly with the surrounding wall.

"Lest you forget, Detective," continued George, "the entire point of this operation is to destroy monsters like the Crown of Thorns. I dedicated myself to doing this job a long time ago and I do the best I

can. You of all people should appreciate that after all we've been through together. I'm not perfect, and I don't claim to know everything. I just do what I can with what I have, which is a lot more than most people. If that means I have to keep some secrets, so be it. If the Crown of Thorns returns, or if she turns up elsewhere, causing trouble, we will fight her, as we always have."

"Is that what you call this? 'Causing trouble?' We could have been killed, George! And you conveniently weren't here for it!"

Cynthia flinched as George gave King the same look he had given Marc earlier that morning. "Are you implying something, Samuel? Because if you are, you know I prefer straight talk from my friends."

King straightened and set his jaw. "No, George. I have nothing further to say."

"Glad to hear it. I was beginning to think that you resented my saving your lives. Now if you don't mind, I think Will would appreciate a little medical attention."

Come midnight, George sat with his brandy snifter on a folding chair on the front porch. He and Sullivan had patched up Will with their usual skill and he rested in his bed, lightly medicated and watched over by Sullivan. Detective King had left immediately after making sure that Will would be all right, in an even more sour mood than usual. Jake was also very distant now, at least to George. George knew that he probably felt betrayed that George had not told him about the technological wonders he kept hidden in their home. *How funny*, the old mentor thought whimsically. *If he knew the reasons I had kept them hidden from him, he'd likely be furious I hadn't waited longer to bring them out.*

A pungent wisp of wind blew over him and he curled his lip in a sneer. He'd had Sullivan drag the vampires destroyed in the earlier melees into the scrub outside the wall to be burned. Every now and then, a little trace of the smell of burning flesh drifted to him on the air.

He sighed and set down his glass. Today had been the worst day he'd had in a very long time. The others, especially Will, had seen a side of him today that he was ashamed of to no end. People had died horrible violent deaths and George had been unable to avenge them. Yes, he and Will had destroyed a number of vampires in the city, but the Crown of Thorns was still out there and now he had alienated the people he protected as well. Will was hurt, and it wasn't the first time Will had suffered because George hadn't been fast enough. Jake might never trust him again and he certainly didn't need any more friction between himself and Detective King. They had a rough enough history as it was. Even Marc had seemed shaken by the whole ordeal. In fact, about the only soul George could think of that he had not done wrong today was the one standing behind him where one of the doors should be hanging, watching him.

"Hello, Cynthia."

"Mind if I join you?" she asked as she walked to his side. "I brought a chair."

"You are most welcome," George said sadly. "I would have been glad to offer you my own."

"I know, George. You're generous like that." She set her chair next to his and sat. George saw that she also carried one of his brandy snifters. The liquid in it was a bright red.

"Fruit punch?" he asked.

"Yeah, I thought I'd try this sitting and sipping thing you like so much." She smiled warmly at him. "So...how are you feeling?"

"Such a strange question," George replied. "So multi-faceted, with so many possible answers, almost all of them untrue."

"Are you talking about right now, or everybody all the time?"

"Both."

"Wow, you are feeling deep tonight."

"I try to always be deep, Cynthia. Heaven knows I don't always do a good job."

The breeze picked up slightly and a ripple ran through the grass. It was broken in the places where the grass was burned away or had been trampled by the sentries.

"You did a good job today, George," Cynthia said.

"Did I? I didn't accomplish a thing I set out to do."

"Is that right? Didn't you say before that the whole purpose of this operation is to fight monsters? That's what you did today, isn't it? You took out a bunch of vampires at the Flip Side."

“Dark Side.”

“Whatever. My point is, you saved a lot of lives today. I mean, think about it. What would those vampires be doing right now? They’d be torturing and killing people, right?”

George took a sip of brandy. “Yes, I suppose they would.”

“And like you said before, about the prostitutes. Nobody cares about people like that. I hadn’t ever really thought about it until you said it today, but they’re people too. They live in slums and no one cares when they die. That’s why the Crown of Thorns can get away with what she does. Do you think you scared her today? Maybe it’ll be a while before she hurts anyone near here again?”

“I imagine, to some degree, that is true, yes.” A dark look fell over his face. “At any rate, if she’s half as smart as she lets on, she’ll know better than to come near here again.”

“Then you did a good thing. Just because you didn’t take out one monster, doesn’t mean you’re a failure. You helped a lot of people today, and that’s what counts. We can’t be perfect, so what matters is that we do the best we can.”

George smiled. “Now who’s being deep?”

“Actually I’ve just been reading your philosophy books. Will keeps giving them to me when he finds them lying around.” She took a sip and sighed. “Hey, this is pretty nice.”

“Yes, it’s rather therapeutic,” George affirmed. “I still feel I fell short of my abilities today. Will was hurt because of me.”

“How is that your fault?”

“The Crown could have killed him, but she didn’t. She knew if she did, that I--that we, would come after her with renewed fervor, instead of just chasing her off. When she injured him, she knew it would distract me, and that’s what allowed her to escape.”

“I see. The monster that hurts and kills on a regular basis hurts someone, entirely because of you.”

“Well, no--”

“You can’t keep blaming yourself, George,” Cynthia said, taking his hand and squeezing it. “Even you can’t do everything. How many millionaires dedicate their lives to helping everyone they can?”

“I’m a billionaire, actually.”

“Whatever. The point is, you do a lot with what you have, and that’s a good thing, right? The Crown of Thorns is going to hurt people. That’s what she does. The fact that you’re at least trying to stop her is a good thing, and so is the fact that you’re doing it for a good reason. Detective King and Marc are in this for the fight, not because it saves lives.” She gave his hand another squeeze. “You did ok today.”

George took a long draught. “I don’t think it matters. The others may never trust me again.”

“So what if they don’t?” laughed Cynthia. “What are they going to do about it? We all know you have secrets, George. I don’t think anyone was really surprised to see what we did today. It was just kind of a shock at the time. The Crown was about to smear us all over the walls and suddenly the walls were moving. That was kind of weird to go through. The way I see it, the others can go back to trusting you, or they can leave. Either way, I think you’ll deal with it. You’re spiffy like that.”

“You’re quite the therapist tonight, Cynthia. What brought this on?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t take a psychic to see that you were upset by everything that’s happened. We’re all a bunch of misfits in this group, so I figured if I didn’t say something nice to you, no one would.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the grass blow in the breeze. The stars in the heavens blinked in and out of view as thin wisps of cloud raced by, driven by winds from the sea. Cynthia was starting to understand George’s obsession with things of beauty. They were addictive after a while.

“George?”

“Yes?”

“Will you ever be able to tell us what you’re hiding now?” He stared at her blankly. “No, I mean, do you think there will ever be a time when what you’re hiding, you don’t have to hide anymore?”

“Why do you ask, Cynthia?” George said wryly.

“I’m just curious,” she answered. “You’re so willing to tell us some things, and so hesitant about others. It’s like you’re going out of your way to keep us from learning about you or this place for our own

protection.”

“Why, Cynthia, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you could read my mind.”

“That’s not funny. I feel like I’m blind, not being allowed to read people here. Do you go through the same thing? Having abilities you keep secret?”

“You have no idea, my dear.” George took another drink. “I appreciate your coming out here tonight, Cynthia. It’s not often I get a chance to speak with someone who understands me.”

“Oh, I never said I understood you. I’m not crazy. I just thought it would help if you had someone be nice to you, instead of being mad at you for a change.”

“Thank you, Cynthia.”

“George?”

“Yes, Esmerelda?”

“What was that poem you shouted that set everything off?”

George took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “In my homeland, they tell stories about a dragon called Terek Domar. He was a vicious beast who destroyed whole villages’ crops and terrorized a countryside for the sheer malicious fun of doing so. I use the poem to remind myself that even the most seemingly invincible monster has a weakness. Even a dragon that terrorizes a country, or a vampire that no one can catch, has something that it must fear. Sometimes it’s all that gives me hope when I think about some of the things we face.”

“Wow. George? I just want you to know that I believe in you. I may not be able to read you, but I don’t have to know that you mean well for us. For what it’s worth, I’ll stick with you.”

“Thank you again, Cynthia.”

They sat for a while and enjoyed the breeze.

Epilogue

Madam Vera slumped onto her bed and sighed. It was 5:43 a.m. This had to have been one of the longest nights of her life. No one had openly mentioned that they noticed the bouncers were gone, but Vera did catch some of the johns looking about curiously. There was also the problem of how to get rid of the vampires' bodies. She obviously couldn't leave them to rot, but there also wasn't a practical way to haul several dozen bodies out of the building without catching someone's attention. Gross logistical problems aside, it was only a matter of time before word got out that the Dark Side's bouncers were gone, and then all hell would break loose. She didn't know what she'd do then, but she supposed she'd manage. She always did.

Vera almost felt too tired to change before going to bed. Out of habit as much as anything else, she reached into her pockets to empty them. Along with some change and a calculator, she found a folded piece of paper. At first she didn't recognize it, but she remembered when she opened it that it was the note the bald man had given her when he left. It was a letter to her, in a hand practiced and smooth. It read:

Madam,

I have taken a moment to compose this missive to you just prior to requesting your aid in destroying the undead that dwell amongst you and your charges. This is done for no other reason than to apologize for adding chaos to your already hectic lives. It was never my intention to add tension to your daily routine, nor am I ignorant of the colossal changes this will bring about for you.

I have included a phone number with this letter. Should the ramifications of our actions today prove to be insurmountable, feel free to call us. Unless I miss my guess by the time we leave tonight you will have seen that we are uniquely suited to deal with problems such as yours. In time of need, good lady, we are at your service.

George Manor

Vera couldn't help but smile as she read the note. The funny old man had done her the favor of getting rid of Monster and his morons, but he really was nuts if he thought she'd ever have him anywhere near this place again. She laid the note on her bedside table, stood and almost jumped out of her skin. The Crown of Thorns was standing against the far wall of the room, between a closet door and the bathroom. She was so still that Vera almost thought she was imagining things out of fatigue until the Crown spoke.

"It was worth a try," she said to herself. "I didn't find what I was looking for and I lost a great picnic spot. But at least I had fun." She walked to Vera's bedside and Vera cringed at her presence.

"Still, it's going to haunt me. I searched almost every room on the second floor and I couldn't find any way up to the third. I'd have searched the Study, too, but I think he'd have safeguards in there." She looked Vera dead in the eye. "Isn't that interesting? There's that entire third floor that no one has ever seen and no way to get to it. What in the world is he hiding up there?"

"I--I don't--" Vera stammered.

"Oh, shut up," the Crown said and began to pace around the room. "Funny. He didn't bring the whole lot of them looking for me. What was that about, I wonder? I thought for sure a clue like that would have him after me in force. Maybe the old lunatic is smarter than I give him credit for. Maybe I'm just outsmarting myself at this point." She walked back to stand by Vera again, so close they were almost touching. "I mean, terrorizing people with the unknown is one thing, but when you start getting so unknown people don't know to be afraid you've lost your touch."

"What are you--" Vera began, and the Crown seized her by the throat. Her grip was so strong Vera was certain her neck would break and the world went red.

"See what I mean?" the Crown said. "People stop cringing and start asking stupid questions. I guess I'm just not the terror I used to be. I'll have to work on that." With her free hand she flicked off the room's light switch. In the darkness, there was a brief cry of pain from Vera, then silence.