

Book IV
Ancient and Terrible Powers

Prologue

Occupational Hazards

“See you guys Monday,” Brady called after two of his co-workers as they left the locker room. They waved back at him as they disappeared out the door and he was alone.

When he was done changing he stepped out of the one-room shack that served as the locker room into the cool evening air and stretched. The shoreline oilrig where he worked was composed of more than a score of separate buildings arrayed where the beach melded with the desert. The constant, steady hum of the rig machinery blended with the ocean’s soothing rhythm and the city lights of Ylelon could be seen dotting the skyline a few miles up the coast. Brady worked long hours: the first stars were appearing in the sky overhead as the sun settled beneath the horizon.

With a deep breath and a long sigh Brady started for the cabin that housed the kitchen and lunchroom. He made good money at his job, but the long days took their toll. Maybe a cup of coffee and a few minutes off his feet before he went home would make him feel better.

As he walked he trod upon sandy ground cratered and scarred by years of booted feet and vehicle treads. He was so used to the coarse terrain that he did not notice a new series of patterns among the many ordinary prints. They were pairs of crescents with points that faced each other like twin moons. On one end the points were slightly thicker than the other and the sand in a small area around them was smudged smooth. The tracks were slightly smaller than the footprints around them and some ran in paired sets, some two or three pairs together.

Brady used his employee’s key to open the kitchen door and slipped inside. He flicked on the light-switch by the door, turning on the lights both in the kitchen and the lunchroom, which were separated by a wall with a single door. The designers of the cabin had gone to great lengths to make it a pleasant place. The lighting was soft, the floor carpeted and there were even a few framed pictures hanging on the walls.

As Brady was searching through the cabinets for a mug he heard the sharp peal of glass shattering in the lunchroom behind him. He peered through the door and saw that one of the room’s numerous windows had been smashed. The glass was lying in countless shards on the floor beneath the empty frame. Brady came closer, looking for whatever had broken the window. He saw the first clue as he made his way among the many chairs and long tables: there was mud among the glass. He knelt beside it, growing more puzzled by the moment. The mud ran in sparse, crescent-shaped tracks into the room.

Brady traced the trail for a few steps before it dwindled to nothing in the aisle. After a moment he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, straight across the row of tables from him against the wall, but when he looked at it directly there was nothing there. He started to walk through the aisle but stopped when the wall in front of him moved. Shaking his head and wondering if he was imagining things out of fatigue, he looked again and saw that it was not the wall itself but something up against it, something that had taken on the appearance of the paneling so perfectly that it was almost invisible until it moved. It turned toward him, an odd illusion of wood paneling twisted around a thin, spidery body, and as it moved Brady could see the one part of it which apparently lacked the camouflage ability: a gaping mouth full of slender fangs in the center of its body. The creature leapt and Brady had time for a single scream before it was upon him.

Chapter I Hawk and Crow

The sun rose on the morning after the Lonely Winds returned to George Manor from the mountains much as it usually did. The morning light spilled through the gap where one of the front doors had hung to sparkle on the metallic skin of Sullivan where she stood guard. Since the first night after the Crown of Thorns had kicked the door off of its hinges Sullivan had stood watch in the Foyer from dusk to dawn. She knew that George was in the process of contracting to have a new set of much heavier doors put in but until then he wanted her to keep an eye on things at night. The nights themselves weren't cold enough yet to chill the entire Mansion without the door and George didn't see the point in re-hanging a door that was going to be replaced soon anyway. It made no difference to Sullivan: working and being still were all the same to her.

"Good morning, er...Sullivan, was it?" said Nails as he walked to stand beside her.

"Good morning, Nails," replied Sullivan cordially. "How was your first evening with us?"

"Pleasant enough. What I mean is, I don't sleep and I didn't want to go wandering around my host's home, so I was bored for most of the evening. But the room you fixed up for me is very nice."

"Thank you," said Sullivan. "I imagine George will be accommodating about allowing you free run of the Mansion at night. Particularly since you apparently suffer from the same insomnia he does."

"George doesn't sleep?"

"Rarely, I believe. I see him walking the Mansion and its grounds sometimes in the dead of night."

"Does he even have a bedroom of his own?" Nails asked.

"Not that I know of. However, I have never been inside the Study or anywhere on the third floor, so it's possible that he rests there. Would you excuse me, please? I'm getting a call."

"Oh...of course," Nails said, slightly confused. George had a special option built into the Mansion's phone lines: he could switch the lines so that any incoming call was routed into Sullivan's CPU. She could then answer the "phone" as anyone else would, except that the signal was internal. In other words, the person on the other end of the line could hear and speak to Sullivan but no one in the room with her would be privy to what was being said.

"George Manor, you reached the machine," Sullivan said on the line.

"*Good morning, Sullivan,*" said a petulant bass voice.

"Detective King! It's good to hear from you again. Did you get the messages I left for you?"

"*Yeah, I got them,*" King said. "*Tell George that--just tell George I'll talk to him later.*"

"Of course." Sullivan took it as a good sign that King was answering the messages she'd left for him over the last two days, particularly after the silence between him and George following the Crown of Thorns debacle.

"*Listen, the reason I called is, I have another case for you,*" King said. "*I sent the file with Hawk and Crow. They're on their way right now.*"

"Wonderful! It will be a delight to see them again."

"*Yeah...I just wish they were coming with good news. See you soon.*"

Click.

"All right, I'm done," Sullivan said to Nails.

"What's up?"

"We're going to be visited by two of our previous members. They're coming with a file on a case."

"Another one?" Nails said with a smirk. "Don't you people ever take a break?"

"Actually we've been very busy lately. The last few months were very quiet up until about three weeks ago, when monsters started coming out of the woodwork. Literally."

"Really? It sounds like you folks lead interesting lives."

"You might say that."

Will got up at dawn and dressed as usual, then waited for Cynthia and George on the balcony.

When twenty minutes passed and neither of them turned up, he briefly considered knocking on the door of George's Study. He decided against it and opted instead to go to Cynthia's room. Hesitating when he reached her door, as he realized that he had not even been to this room since Cynthia had moved into the Mansion, he knocked, stepped back and waited. After a few moments Cynthia answered. She was still in her nightgown, her eyes were bleary and her hair was tied back in a ponytail.

"Oh, hi, Will!" she said brightly. "What do you need?"

"I was waiting for you and George to go train, but neither of you showed up."

Confusion drifted briefly over Cynthia's face, followed quickly by realization.

"Oh, I forgot to set my alarm! Come on in, I just have to change."

Will's eyes widened in horror. But Cynthia rolled her own eyes and grabbed his hand. "In the bathroom, dumbass," she said, and pulled him inside.

Cynthia's room was thoroughly decorated. Two of her walls were completely covered with posters depicting popular bands and actors, while a third one was covered by dozens of license plates. Some of them were rust-covered, slender strips of metal dating to the 1920's.

"You collect license plates?" Will asked.

"Yeah, it's a hobby. They're one of those things people just throw away, so they're easy to get."

She went to her CD changer and stereo atop her bureau and turned on some soft mystery music. Then she pulled some jogging clothes out of one of the drawers and headed for the bathroom.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said as she closed the door.

As Will patiently waited he couldn't help but notice some of the posters around the room. A number of them depicted Adam Walker, an Ylelon-based musician who was widely regarded as both a living legend of alternative rock and quite the young woman's heartthrob. As Will looked at the boyish, brown-eyed face smiling back at him from a large poster declaring "Adam Walker: Rock's Good Boy," he wondered: *Doesn't she know about him? Nah, someone must have told her.*

Still, when Cynthia emerged he said "Hey, did you know that--"

"Everyone, please come to the Foyer right away," Sullivan's voice interrupted over the PA system. "This means you, Marc."

With a look Cynthia asked Will for the meaning behind the summons. He answered with a shrug, so together they set off for the Foyer.

When they arrived they found Sullivan and Nails speaking with two black people, a man and a woman of about their own ages. The man was wearing military fatigues, wire rim glasses and a no-nonsense expression. He was heavily muscled and his posture gave the impression of a man confident that he could handle himself in any situation. He was holding hands with the woman, who was both painfully thin and astonishingly pretty. She was letting the other three do most of the talking, but there was a glimmer of intelligence in her eye that was unmistakable. She wore faded light-blue jeans and an old yellow t-shirt and was looking at everything around her very thoughtfully.

"Well, I'll be!" Will said as he and Cynthia hit the bottom of the stairs. "It's been too long."

"It sure has," the man said, shaking Will's hand and giving him a solid pat on the shoulder. "You sure have gone in for the black thing since we left. Decided it's the way to go, eh?" he chuckled.

"It goes with anything," Will replied offhandedly. "You still put up with this maniac, Crow?"

"Usually," the woman replied with a sly smile. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, how rude of me. This is Cynthia, one of our new members. I see you've met Nails. Cynthia, these are two of our retired members. We always called them by their codenames, Hawk and Crow."

"Wow, codenames!" Cynthia said as she shook Hawk and Crow's hands. "I knew you guys were cool when I saw you. None of these losers have codenames."

"It's just what we called them in the field, Cynthia," Sullivan explained. "Hawk is a Harbor Storm."

"Wow," Cynthia said slowly, her eyes wide with amazement. The military forces of Ylelon were small, but also very well-funded, owing to the country's need to protect its vast mineral resources. The elite of Ylelon's Civil Defense Corps were trained with an emphasis on stealth and espionage over brute

force tactics. According to legend, one admiral whose sixty ship invasion fleet had been crippled by sabotage inflicted by a tiny number of these elite warriors had described them as being as unexpected--and as harmful--as a sudden hurricane in a safe harbor. The term had stuck and the Harbor Storms had acquired nearly legendary status in the minds of the public.

"Hawk is also Crow's husband," added Sullivan. "She was our mage while she was with us."

"Wow! You can do magic?" Cynthia said, her eyes wide again.

"I can hold my own," Crow said modestly. "You're familiar with magic?"

"Not really. George mentions it a lot in the training files he has me reading."

"He should," Will put in. "This lady pulled us out of the fire with her talents quite a few times."

"So why aren't you on the team anymore?" Cynthia asked brightly, but Hawk, Crow and Will suddenly looked very crestfallen.

"They lost someone very dear to them," Sullivan answered, and with a glance at Will Cynthia understood.

"So what's your story?" Hawk asked Nails to change the subject.

"The short version is that my cousin and I are here for a trial run with this lot," Nails replied.

"George is still gathering new recruits, then," observed Hawk. "I hope Jake and Ol' Beer Haze are still here."

"Believe it," George said from the stairs. "They've trudged on through good and bad with us but I daresay that things haven't been the same since you left."

"There he is!" Hawk said as he walked to George to give him a firm handshake. "How're you, you old lunatic?"

"As crazy as ever," said George. "What can we do for you fine young people?"

"I wish we had better news, George, but the fact is we have a case for you," Crow said.

"Another one already," George said thoughtfully. "After months of comparative silence, suddenly we have odd events happening every few days."

"Hey, I don't count!" Nails snapped. "I got in a fight in the mountains, they thought I was a vampire," he explained to Hawk and Crow when they looked at him wide-eyed.

"As opposed to someone in desperate need of cleaning his contacts, I'm guessing," Hawk said.

"Right...let's just say that's an ethnic thing, all right?" Nails muttered, but for the first time since Cynthia had met him Nails seemed to feel very self-conscious.

"Regardless, I think a good start to the day is in order," said George. "Tell me, have you all had breakfast yet?"

"We came straight here from the site," Crow said.

"We didn't even make it outside to exercise. We were waiting on you," said Will.

"Oh, of course! I'm sorry, Will, Cynthia, I'm afraid I was carried off on my train of thought. Very well, Sullivan, if you will lead our friends to the kitchen, I will try to track down Marc, Jake and G.R. We'll have a nice reunion breakfast before we get down to any more unpleasant business. Plus, on the positive side you and your cousin will get to see more of how we operate," George said to Nails.

"As long as no one shoots me we should be in great shape. Long story," Nails said in answer to Hawk and Crow's questioning stares.

George found G.R. just waking up in his room and told him where to find the others before going to look for Jake and Marc. When he didn't find either of them in their rooms or the Gym, he went to look in the Workshop. Marc had been helping Jake finish making repairs to the APC, doing muscle work such as holding new armor plates in place against the superstructure so Jake could attach them. Replacing the personnel door had been the hard part. Once that was done all that remained was repairing the track and some minor fixes and additions. When George told them that Hawk and Crow were visiting, they were only too glad for the chance to see their old friends again and hurried off to wash up.

The group enjoyed hot cakes, fried potatoes and orange juice prepared by Sullivan and George. The reunion seemed to have picked Will's and Jake's spirits up considerably even though they knew their friends had come with bad news. When they finished they tromped to the Situation Room for a formal

briefing. Hawk ran to his car to pick up his camera, while Cynthia lagged behind the others with George.

“Did Hawk and Crow really leave because of Tina?” she asked with her voice low.

“That came out, did it? Yes, Hawk and Crow departed shortly after Tina died and the team’s sniper left. Crow was Tina’s best friend, you see. Everyone here loved Tina and losing her was very hard. Crow and Hawk felt bad about leaving, but they couldn’t face staying and watching their friends die. Besides, Hawk had just passed his exams to become a Harbor Storm and Crow was taking classes working on a psychology degree, so they went back to their own lives.”

“That’s so sad,” whimpered Cynthia. “Is that how the team ended up being only three people?”

“Correct.”

“That’s a shame. They all get along so well. Even Marc was well-behaved.”

George smiled. “That’s the doing of Hawk and Crow. Do you remember my telling you how the team rescued Marc from a vampire?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hawk and Crow were the first ones there. Hawk was cutting the brute to ribbons with his knife-fighting talents and Crow performed some first aid on Marc while the others caught up. Marc was furious to wake up in a bed here with two black people standing over him, but in time their kindness and patience forced him to reevaluate his worldview. After all, if two non-white people had saved him from a slow and agonizing death, they couldn’t all be bad.”

They had come to the Situation Room now and sat in their regular places. Hawk returned a few minutes later with his digital camera, which he handed to George, who removed the image clip and plugged it into his tabletop computer console.

“At this point I will cede the floor to Hawk and Crow,” he said.

Hawk plopped into his seat. “Here’s the situation, ladies and gents. Last night a worker was killed at the number two rig of the Silver Shores Oil Company.”

There were looks of recognition all around the table. Silver Shores was the oil branch of the largest natural fuel interest in Ylelon.

Hawk pointed to George, signaling him to load the first picture from his camera onto the wall screen behind him. The image was of the employee’s lunchroom at the rig.

“The worker, a Mr. Brady Daniels I think, was killed in this building sometime after nine p.m.,” Hawk continued. “Detective King called us about four this morning. He knew I was on leave and wanted to help us get photos before the place was swarming with cops.”

“Someone found him at four in the morning?” Will asked.

“The way King tells it, a manager saw the light on in the building before leaving and went to turn it off. When he got there he found this.”

Hawk pointed again and George cycled to the next photo. Everyone in the room except for Hawk and George grimaced and looked away from the horrific images on the screen.

“Whatever did this didn’t leave much of the poor fool behind,” Hawk said slowly. “The official story the rig is going to present to the next of kin and the press is that some wild animals broke into the room and surprised Daniels.”

“Then why is this a problem for us?” G.R. asked sharply.

“Two reasons,” said Crow. “One, there aren’t supposed to be any animals living on the beach that can do this. Two, because of these.” She pointed and George mercifully changed the photo to a close-up of the room’s floor, following a trail of bloody, twin crescent tracks to a shattered window.

“What the heck? Are those cloven hoof-prints?” exclaimed Jake.

“No,” George said, leaning closer, “they appear to be claw marks.”

“Whatever makes them, they’re all over the place at the rig,” Hawk said. Another point, another photograph, this one of the ground outside illuminated by several little trails of the same crescent marks.

“Unfortunately that’s all we were able to get before other officers started showing up,” Crow said.

“Very well,” George said. “If that’s all we have to go on, I believe a standard reconnaissance trip is in order. Jake, did you ever get your armor’s weapons working again?”

“I replaced the bent guns with some spares yesterday,” Jake said without looking up from the file

Hawk and Crow had brought, which he was flipping through intently.

“No kiddin’! You finally got that thing working?” Hawk chuckled.

“Yeah, but the Crown of Thorns destroyed one of the guns,” muttered Jake.

Hawk and Crow’s jaws went slack. “You were in a fight with *her*?” Crow said. “Were you hurt?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Jake said with a pointed glance at George.

“That aside,” George said sheepishly, “will the two of you be able to join us on this endeavor? I think your experience and input would be invaluable.”

“You know we’re in it to the end, George,” said Hawk.

“I’d be insulted if you hadn’t included me,” Crow put in.

“Good. I want Jake to take his armor and accompany Hawk and Crow back to the rig,” said George.

“Begging your pardon, George, but whatever did this literally tore a grown man to pieces. If there’s a chance we might run into it, I’d prefer to have strength in numbers,” said Crow.

George looked at the faces arrayed around the table. “I assume that the rig is closed for the weekend?” he asked.

“Until further notice, actually. Detective King said that the investigation there should be done by noon today,” Crow said.

“Very well,” George said. “We’ll take the next two hours to prepare supplies and research, after which Hawk, Crow, Jake, Will, Marc and Nails will journey into the field.”

“But--” began Cynthia.

“No buts!” George cut her off. “Cynthia and G.R. will remain behind. Neither of them is yet conditioned enough for active field work.” Cynthia opened her mouth to protest but withered under the look George gave her.

“Now, you...you each know your respective assignments and I want Hawk and Crow to offer observations about...which provisions and armaments...*egad*, does anyone know why there is a toy duck watching me?” exclaimed George.

“Quack,” said the gold-painted mechanical duck, which was sitting in one corner of the room behind George, looking at him intently.

“Eric!” Jake shouted as he ran around the table and picked up the gleaming toy. “There you are!”

“Quack,” Eric said emphatically.

“What the heck is that?” asked G.R. as Jake sat back down.

“This is Eric. He’s my new mechanicritter™,” Jake said.

“Quack, quack,” Eric said as Jake set him on the table, then turned to watch George again.

“Aren’t those the toys from Attenz with the reprogrammable AI?” Nails inquired.

“The very same!” said Jake proudly. “I got him a few weeks ago, and I’ve been putting the finishing touches on his personality routines over the last couple of days. He wandered off this morning.”

“Quack, quack, quack.”

“You and your toys, Osborn,” chuckled Hawk.

“Everything said and done, I think we should start getting ready,” Will said.

“Quite right!” Jake affirmed. Everyone rose to go about their jobs. There was a great deal of chatter and laughter as team members new, old and retired became reacquainted and shared news of their lives. In the end George was left alone with Eric, who still sat at Jake’s place at the table, watching him.

“Quack.”

“You are very creepy, do you know that?”

“Quack!”

George got up to leave, and as he did so Eric turned to watch him go. When George turned around at the doorway and the duck was still looking at him with its beady black eyes. George shook his head and left the room with a shudder.

“So what happened with the Crown of Thorns?” Hawk asked. He was working with Jake and Will in Storage, selecting field outfits and provisions.

“Long story short, she left us a bogus clue and tried to get us to leave so she could ransack the place,” Jake said offhandedly as he tossed Will an armful of black fatigues.

“Wait, she was *here*?” Hawk said and looked around as though he expected her to jump out at him from among the shelves.

“Yeah, but it gets weirder. Tell him, Jake,” said Will.

“George has some kind of giant super robot warriors hidden in the walls. He used them to chase the Crown off. That’s where all the damage in the front came from.”

“No kidding,” Hawk said thoughtfully. “Sullivan did say it was all from George’s little eccentricities. Here I thought she was just covering for one of your failed experiments.”

“Har har. Wherever George got the things, he kept them secret from us until he used them. They’re in storage bays in the hallway walls. He’s made doors out of the drywall somehow,” Jake said. “I haven’t even been able to figure out how he did that, much less where the things came from.”

Hawk was skeptical. “Really? You sure he didn’t get them from the same place he got Sullivan?”

“No way. You didn’t see these things, man,” Will said. “They’re bigger than Marc or Nails, they’re huge. They were leaping off the balcony and they had more weapons than some small countries.”

“Careful man, or Osborn will start drooling.”

“Not funny!” retorted Jake. “The point is, George has got these super weapons hidden from us, and he won’t even tell us where he got them from. Just like he won’t tell us anything else. So, I’ve got a plan to learn a little more.”

“Oh?” Hawk said without looking up from the knapsack he was filling with MRE’s. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Will and Jake both stopped what they were doing and looked at Hawk. “How’s that?” Jake asked.

“Look man, I’m in the military,” Hawk said, still without looking up. “That means raw discipline and doing what we’re told. If your CO yells ‘Get down!’ you don’t stop to ask why, you just do it.”

“What’s your point?” asked Jake.

“My point is you might not need to know, or you might be better off not knowing. Hey, I disagree with George on a lot of things, but I’ll be the first to admit he sure knows his stuff. So he’s got some big robots he won’t talk about. Big deal, man. Maybe that’s what he’s got on the third floor and he’s making an army of monster-fighting super robots. If it was me, I’d just be glad George had the things, rather than let the Crown get me,” Hawk finished with a shudder. Jake and Will exchanged glances.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Jake admitted. “Maybe I can let it go for the time being.” *I can still keep my plan as a backup, however,* he thought.

“What’s the story with that Nails guy?” Hawk asked. “He’s not jerud, is he?”

“What clued you in? The crazy eyes?” snickered Jake.

“That, but also, let’s just say it’s not often I run into somebody who makes me grit my teeth when they shake my hand.”

“We found him in the mountains,” Jake muttered. “We were looking for a serial killer that had been around for hundreds of years.”

“Did you find him?”

“Yes, but not before we found Nails. We thought he was the monster we were looking for. We ended up fighting him.”

“All of you? One guy who walks around barefoot took the whole team on?” laughed Hawk.

“He took the APC on first,” Will said blankly.

Hawk blanched again. “He did *what*?”

“He did some damage to the APC. With his bare hands.” Jake paused for emphasis. “Then George showed up and they went for a walk in the woods. When they came back they told us that Nails was joining, along with his twerp of a cousin.”

“All right...that is weird. Did you find out exactly what Nails is?” Hawk asked slowly.

“No, George didn’t tell us and Nails kind of keeps to himself,” Jake replied.

“Meanwhile, G.R. won’t shut up, but he doesn’t say anything useful,” Will muttered.

“Do you know why George let those two join?”

“He seems to think that Nails would make a good ally,” Will said thoughtfully.

“There you go, man!” Hawk said. “I’d bet you real money George is thinking the same thing. Nails sure ain’t normal, but if he hasn’t hurt any of you and he’s willing to fight on our side, then he’s really just like any other team member if you think about it.”

“Really? Last I knew Marc couldn’t punch a dent in the side of the APC. Not that he wouldn’t if he could,” said Jake.

“See what I mean?” chuckled Hawk. “That’s the difference. If Nails could easily take any of us out, but he hasn’t, then he can’t be all bad.”

“Are you suggesting that George knew that it would be safe to admit those two into our ranks?” Jake said.

“Could be,” Will admitted. “Let’s face it. I have as many issues with George as anyone, but he’s done ok by us so far. Maybe when they talked, Nails told him something that made him believe that he could really be a help to us.”

“Since when do *you* defend George, Will?” Jake.

“I’m just trying to give him a fair shake,” Will replied. “He’s led us all this far.”

“Yeah?” grumbled Jake. “I’m more worried about where he’s leading us to.”

Once the groups had assembled their gear they gathered in the Foyer to wait while Will and Hawk went to the Library to confer with George. He and Sullivan had been researching but made little headway. All they really had to go on were the footprints, which weren’t exactly the main focus of the archives. So Sullivan left her work to join the group in the Foyer while George ran to his Study.

“He’s not going to do the dress-up thing again, is he?” Hawk muttered. “I always hated that!”

“I think it’s cute,” Crow remarked.

““Dress-up?”” G.R. wondered aloud, with a glance at Nails.

“It’s one of the Lonely Winds’ traditions,” explained Crow. “George likes to dress up in different outfits whenever we leave on a mission. He says it’s to inspire us, and...” she stopped abruptly when she saw him on the steps and began to giggle.

George was dressed exactly like Will--the black clothes, the worn black trench coat, even the same brand of sunglasses. He walked down the stairs with his hands in his pockets and when he reached the group he heaved a great sigh.

“All right team, let’s get ‘em,” he said. “Remember to speak softly and as little as possible. Stay out of sight, and don’t smile.”

Marc was guffawing wildly, Nails smirking and Cynthia chuckling. Will only looked annoyed. “Are you going for inspirational or depressing?” he asked sarcastically.

“I could ask you the same question! Your old friends are here, try to smile a little for a change,” George said pointedly. “Be cautious, folks. This should primarily be a recon mission, but be ready for combat. We have absolutely no idea what you’re facing, so stay together and watch your backs. Sullivan, Cynthia, I’ll see you in the Situation Room. Nails, a moment aside if you please.”

Nails, George and G.R. waited while the others left the Foyer. It was not until they were alone that George finally spoke.

“You realize the great risk I am taking by letting you go along,” he said.

“Sure, no problem,” Nails said casually.

“This is not a time for levity!” snapped George.

“Said the man dressed up like Will as a gag,” scoffed G.R.. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that my retired members are not familiar with Nails and my current ones are not comfortable with him yet. Lest you forget, they were battling to the death less than two days ago.”

“Relax, George. I haven’t forgotten your terms for our coming here,” Nails said. “I’ll behave.”

“That’s good, because I also need you to restrain yourself as much as possible. The others are used to fighting against individuals with super-strength and durability, not with them.”

“So, on top of being low-key to keep from spooking them, you want me to be low-key to keep them from depending on me too much.”

“In so many words, yes.”

“Then why are you sending him along? What’s the point if he can’t do anything?” G.R. sneered.

“Because if it comes down to it, I’ll risk their personal sense of security for the benefit of sending a dreadnaught along with them,” George snapped back. His expression softening, he laid a hand on Nails’ shoulder. “I’m trusting you to look after my people,” he said.

“Like I said, no problem, George,” said Nails. “Protecting people is what I do, remember?”

“I’m glad to hear it. Go safely,” George said.

Chapter II By the Seashore

Hawk and Crow led the way in Hawk's black three-quarter ton pickup. Will and Jake followed in their own cars while Marc and Nails went together in Marc's truck. Hawk took them to a rest stop and picnic area about ten minutes' walk south of the rig on the beach. There they parked and set up their Jakecams™, George confirmed that their signals were all loud and clear and they set off hiking down the beach toward the rig. The last half of the journey was along a cave-riddled cliff face that ran parallel to the edge of the beach and ended barely a stone's throw from where the rig began.

"So what exactly are they up to?" G.R. asked as he sat with George, Cynthia and Sullivan watching the monitors in the Situation Room.

"This is a standard reconnaissance mission," replied George. "We usually begin a mission this way if our original lead and research doesn't clarify what we are facing. Each of them is armed for their own safety, but ideally they will be able to gather information about our foe unmolested."

"Really? You have a gun with you, tough guy?" said G.R..

"*What for?*" Nails quipped.

By now the team was only a short jog away from the outlying buildings of the rig, so Hawk and Will went ahead to scout while the others waited half-hidden in a cluster of trees at the base of the cliffs. There was no one else around. The only sounds were the soothing rhythm of the waves and the faint drone of the rig machinery.

"*The coast is clear,*" Hawk broadcast through his Jakecam™ a few minutes later.

"*Great pun!*" George said as the rest of the team went to join Hawk and Will.

"*What? I--oh, jeez,*" grumbled Hawk. He and Will were waiting for the others outside the employee kitchen. Marc took the lock-picking kit from his duffle bag and handed it to Jake, who got them inside by picking the lock around the bands of police tape.

"Four seconds flat!" Jake said triumphantly. Hawk went first, brandishing a huge assault rifle, followed by Will and Jake with twin pistols and submachine gun.

"This structure is secure," Hawk called after a moment and the others moved in.

The eating area was much the same as it had been in Hawk's photos. A chalk bodyline was drawn on the carpet in the center aisle. Everything in sight was covered in bloodstains. Salty sea air wafted into the room through the broken window which, like the front door, was covered with police tape.

"Is it just me, or is this place kind of weird?" Crow asked. "Not to go too far off-topic or anything, but you don't really think of an oilrig being on the beach?"

"*Actually, that's a good point, Crow,*" George said. "*Normally, the shoreline is the last place engineers want to put an oilrig. The problem with it is that any sort of a major spill will not only pollute the ocean but the beach as well. There are also the problems involved with trying to mount any sort of permanent facilities on such unstable ground as sandy soil.*

"*But this particular rig, if memory serves, is an exception. The particular formation of the underlying strata would make it extremely difficult to reach from further inland to where the oil deposits in question are located, and being out at sea makes for a similar problem. This particular rig was constructed with the understanding between Silver Shores and the local environmental defense groups that extreme care would be taken in making certain no such accidents ever occurred.*"

"Are you getting anything?" Will asked Jake, who was studying the Osborn Eye intently.

"Not a lot," he replied. "There are some faint chemical traces in the air here which might be pheromone signatures. On the other hand, it could also be from somebody's deodorant. In my professional opinion whatever did this is long gone and didn't leave many traces behind."

"Anyone else find anything?" asked Will.

"Nothing so far," Hawk said. He and Marc were working their way around the edge of the room, checking the walls and floors.

"What about you, Crow?" Will asked. Crow was standing in the middle of the room by the chalk line, looking around slowly and thoughtfully.

"I'm not seeing anything unusual," she said quietly.

"How's that?" Nails asked from the kitchen doorway, where he stood watching the others.

"I know a spell that lets me see invisible things," Crow said. "I'm inclined to agree with Jake. Whatever killed this poor man is gone."

"That sucks. What do we do now?" grumbled Marc.

"George? What do we know from Detective King?" Will asked.

"At last contact he promised to send us any new information available to him at the precinct. However, assuming he gets a day's sleep after his shift we should not hear from him for several hours."

"Then the next step is to examine the grounds," Will said. "We'll go in groups of three. Hawk, Crow, Nails, you're a team."

"Team pretentious names!" laughed Jake.

"Keep in touch as you go. Move out," said Will.

"G.R., Cynthia, note that Will as field commander has divided up the groups," George instructed.

"What? Pretentious names?" chuckled G.R..

"Each group of three has a lookout: Jake with his sensor array, Crow with magic. While they search, each of them has two strong fighters giving them backup. Learning this sort of teamwork is essential before you take to the field."

"Yeah, yeah," G.R. muttered.

Twenty minutes of searching revealed very little. The two groups began by following specific sets of claw prints. Any given set appeared to meander around the rig at random and also seemed to switch randomly in number of prints: two, six, two, four, six. So the groups broadened their search and began to look for anything they could find out of the ordinary.

"I don't like this," Will said quietly as he knelt by one pair of prints that suddenly became two. "Are we following one creature with several legs, or are there several of these things running around?"

"Can't say," Marc muttered. "Kill first, count toes later."

"Tell me again what time this man was killed?" Jake said suddenly.

"Around nine p.m., I think. Why?" Hawk's voice filtered through Jake's Jakecam™.

"The victim was killed after dark, and it's getting dark earlier," Jake mused and scratched his beard.

"What are you thinking, Jake?" Will asked.

"Whatever this thing is, it's left tracks all over the place," Jake thought aloud. "But the police interview with the manager in the file indicated that neither he nor anyone he knew of had seen any animals around here. Maybe the thing making these tracks is nocturnal. Maybe it prowls around here at night and it came across the victim because its hunting pattern and his shift happened to overlap."

"An interesting theory," George said. *"Have you any thoughts?"*

"No happy ones. If I'm right it means we won't see this thing until sundown."

"What about a lair? If this creature is hiding from the sun somewhere, maybe we can follow its trail back to its den," Crow suggested.

"Good thinking. Everyone spiral out and see if you can find a trail that leads away from the rig," said Will.

After a few minutes Hawk's voice came over the Jakecams™. *"Bad news, troops. We've only found two sets of tracks, and they lead straight to the cliffs."*

"Any sign of where it headed after that?" Will asked.

"They go right to the rocks and the trail ends. The rock face is rough enough that any of us could climb it easily," Crow said.

"Which means our quarry could have gone anywhere," Jake groaned.

Will sighed. "All right, we're not making any headway here. We head back to the vehicles and set up watch. If Detective King comes through with anything new, we'll go off of that. Otherwise, we'll have to scout the place after dark."

The team marched back to where they were parked and stowed their weapons out of sight. Marc broke out his deck and everyone enjoyed a picnic lunch and played cards while they killed time.

Detective King called in the early evening. He had deliberately cut his sleep short in an effort to update the team as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he didn't have much to tell them that they didn't already know.

The investigation was still being conducted under the assumption that the killing had been done by a large animal of some sort. The attending coroner had confirmed that animal-like claws and teeth had inflicted the wounds on what was left of Brady Daniel's body but could not specify what species they belonged to. Her findings concluded that the size and shape of the wounds were most consistent with those left by animals such as big cats or bears. She posited that while such animals were certainly not found on the beaches of Ylelon, the attack might be attributed to a zoo escapee. However, since the Ylelon City Zoo did not have any residents unaccounted for, the case was still in the air.

In the meantime there were no plans within the department to make any more investigative trips to the rig in the near future, so the team members were safe staying where they were for the time being. Detective King spoke to Sullivan via her internal line, but through her he promised again to speak with George in the near future.

"And so we come to the next juncture," George said through Will's Jakecam™ to the assembled group. *"It is now in your hands to decide how you will proceed. I recommend staying put until early evening and then making a concerted foray to find the creature."*

Will thought quietly for a moment. "I agree," he said finally. "Does anyone have any objections?" There were none.

"All right then. We start getting ready for combat. We've still got a couple of hours before the sun sets, so we have plenty of time. Everyone goes with weapons, plenty of ammo, flak jackets and first aid supplies. Jake, I want you to take point in your armor."

"My pleasure," Jake said through a wide grin.

"We will have to wait for full cover of darkness, we're too darn conspicuous right now. Don't forget we still have no idea what we're facing."

The team split up and went about preparing supplies for their upcoming hunting expedition. All of them that is, except for Nails, who sat cross-legged on a picnic table while the others busied themselves sorting and organizing equipment. He waited patiently at first, but as the sun made its way down the sky toward the horizon he began to feel the weight of the boredom he had labored under almost non-stop since the day before yesterday. He had prodded George to allow G.R. and himself to join the team mostly for G.R.'s sake. It would get him out of the house and out among some real people, where he might learn to fit in better and possibly find some inner peace. The problem with the plan was that like so much else Nails did, it required tremendous sacrifice on his part. He had been told to avoid contact with anyone but G.R. by Rogziel and for all he knew he was already in serious trouble just for fraternizing with these people.

Still, he wasn't about to let that stop him. If there were consequences to his actions then he would deal with them when the time came. Until then he was still trying to keep a low profile by staying quiet and reserved as much as possible. The problem with *that* was that ironically he was even more limited now than he had been in Pointville. At least there he had been able to take walks in the woods at night, sometimes jogging down the mountainside to run across the foothills and plains before returning home at sunrise. Now he was limited to the rooms of a cavernous mansion at night for fear of invoking whatever wrath might be hanging over him.

Still, the others were occupied, there was no one else around and the soft music of the waves seemed to call to him. What would it hurt to take a short walk? He could jog along the surf and be back in time to go with the others. So he hopped down from the table and started to walk across the beach toward the rig. He didn't tell the others he was going. He would be back soon and saw no point in interrupting them.

It wasn't long before he was walking beside the cliffs again. As he went he smelled the air, picked

up seashells and ran to feel the sand under his feet. Having no idea how long it would be before he had this much freedom again, he wanted to enjoy it. Occasionally he would pick up a flat stone or shell and send it skipping across the water.

When he was about midway between the rig and the rest area he stopped in his tracks. He had happened across the trail the team left while walking to and from the rig. There was a new set of tracks, a pair of twin crescent marks weaving back and forth over the team's trail before heading into the distance. From where he stood Nails traced their course with his black eyes. They approached the team's trail from the cliff face somewhere behind him and headed for the rig.

Nails stared ahead at the rig but saw no sign of the tracks' owner. Looking back over his shoulder he could just make out the team as they moved about their vehicles. As he stood there on the beach, a wicked grin began to work its way onto his face.

Oh well. It's their loss, he thought and started running at awesome speed along the crescent trail. He followed it in a more or less straight line to the outermost rig buildings, where it began to wander back and forth, sometimes leading to a wall just below a window before moving off again. Here too the pair of tracks sometimes became two or three pairs, changing seemingly at random.

As Nails stalked among the buildings, following this new trail as it crossed older ones, he peered around a corner and there it was. It was a spindly, lanky thing with six limbs and a thin torso. The creature walked propped up on its two lowest limbs, while the middle pair, mounted at the midpoint of its torso, and the upper pair near the top twisted and flexed in the air. Each limb was identical, having four joints--one at the base on the torso, two along its length, and one at the very tip where the limb ended in a fleshy knob bearing two thick claws the size of small bananas. It was these claws the creature stood on and which made the crescent tracks. The whole of the beast was encased in dark gray-green chitin plates with many spines and knobs at each joint and running along its back. As the thing walked it flexed its torso forward very fluidly and its other claws came to rest on the sand, letting it walk very low to the ground.

Nails kept out of sight while he followed it. Before long it led him to the broken window of the employees' lunchroom. It trundled up to the wall, raised to its bottom legs and made a harsh rasping sound that Nails could only assume was it sniffing the air. Then it gripped the window frame with its numerous claws and pulled itself inside, ripping the police tape free and pulling it along with it as it went.

Nails walked to the window, placed his hands upon the sill and pulled himself through the empty frame with the fluidity of a practiced gymnast.

He landed with a soft thump on the carpet, never taking his eyes off the creature. It didn't appear to have noticed him. It was making the raspy sniffing sound again, this time as it hovered over the chalk bodyline and bloodstains on the carpet. Nails walked up behind the creature, tapped it on a shoulder and said, "Excuse me, sir, this area is for employees only."

It whipped around to face him. An enormous, ovular mouth like that of a lamprey filled with slender teeth as long as Nails' fingers took up the middle third of its torso. The upper third was covered with dozens of little knobs that glowed with an eerie green light, which Nails assumed were eyes. Without missing a beat he dealt the creature a blow that would have knocked a healthy person unconscious. It staggered backward two steps and hissed at him menacingly.

"Hey, cool, you're tough!" Nails grinned, and kicked the monstrosity hard in the teeth. It hurtled backward and slammed against the wall, shattering the paneling it struck. The beast flopped forward onto the floor and lay there, whimpering softly.

"Right on," Nails said to himself. "This case is about done. First round's on me." He hummed as he strolled leisurely toward the prostate creature, which suddenly reared up on its lower limbs and cried out with a piercing, throaty wail.

"Nice! Can you sing it on key?" Nails mocked. His cockiness faded when two similar cries answered from somewhere outside. Nails turned on his heels in time to see another creature crash through a window into the room, while a third leapt through the other, already empty frame.

"Oh, goody," groaned Nails.

Will ran through a final check of the supplies in his backpack, which he had laid on the trunk of his car. Everything was in order, so he called to the others: "Status report, lady and gentlemen."

"We're good to go," Hawk spoke for himself and Crow.

"All set," called Marc.

"My armor is ready and my gear is set. I just have to get suited up," reported Jake.

"Good, then in about twenty minutes we'll start--hey, wait. Where's Nails?"

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked around. There was no sign of Nails anywhere.

"Did anyone see him leave?" Crow asked. Hawk shrugged.

With a sigh Will clicked on his Jakecam™. "Hello? Anyone in Situation?"

"I'm here, Will," Sullivan answered.

"Quack!"

"Yes, and Eric too. How can we help?"

"Nails has disappeared. Has anybody there heard from him?"

"Give me a moment, I will check."

There were several minutes of silence during which Will assumed Sullivan was talking to the others. By now the sun was a blood red orb hovering just above the horizon.

"No one here has heard from him," Sullivan said when she returned. "It's G.R.'s opinion that he went for a walk to relax."

Will spent a few moments wandering the area. It was not long before he came upon a single set of large footprints leading away from the rest area toward the rig.

"I think I found him," Will said. He walked back to be among the team again.

"All right, Nails has gone for a sabbatical," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "I'm going to bring him back. Be ready to move out, I'll see you in a few."

He walked back to his car, turned off his Jakecam™ and dropped it in his pack. Then he checked his pistols, set them in their holsters and was on his way. "What is it with new team members wandering off on their own?" he wondered aloud.

Will followed the trail for several minutes. The prints twisted this way and that, sometimes heading into the surf or stopping by a patch of wet sand where Will guessed Nails had picked up a rock or shell. When the footprints came to the team's trail, Will stopped. There was a new set of the crescent prints in the sand, weaving back and forth over the trail before heading off toward the rig.

Will drew his pistols and spun around, looking for anything hostile nearby. He was alone on the narrow beach, so he turned his attention back to tracking. As he followed the new trail he saw that it ran along the same course Nails' did. He began to run toward the rig with his pistols held out in front and wishing he had kept his Jakecam™ with him.

As he drew near to the rig he heard a sharp wailing carried on the wind. At first he thought it *was* the wind, but soon after the sound came again twice, followed by a crash of glass. Will raced toward the sound and was not surprised either by the fact that he was still following the footsteps or that he was headed for the lunchroom.

As he rounded a corner and the shack came into view he heard more of the strange screams, accompanied by wood cracking and crashing. He was only a few seconds way from the broken window (wait, two of them were broken now, and the crime scene tape was missing) when one of the most hideous monstrosities he had ever seen slammed crookedly against the inside of the frame and toppled out of the window onto the ground.

This seems very familiar, Will thought. *I hope nobody here has a crush on me too.*

He took aim at the creature, which struggled to its feet and waved its body about as though trying to shake out dizziness. It caught sight of him and turned with a snarl just in time to be knocked prone by a second creature that hurtled backward out of the window.

Will lowered his guns. "Why do I even bother?"

"Heads up, Will!" Nails called as he climbed out the window. His shirt was torn in several places, and numerous paired gashes ran over his neck and arms. One pair ran from his temple across his face, just

missing his eye on either side and ending at his lips. "There's another one of these things inside!"

By now the monsters were on their feet (er, claws) again. One of them leapt at Nails while the other came limping toward Will. Will ducked a swipe by two limbs and went spinning and sidestepping away as the thing chased him, slicing at the air with its many claws.

Nails landed a couple of good punches on his opponent, knocking it silly, but as he grabbed it and set himself for the killing blow the third creature jumped onto his back from the window behind him. It dug into his sides with its lower claws while it slashed at his back and neck with the upper sets. Nails howled in pain. The other creature latched onto him from the front, digging all six sets of claws into his abdomen.

Will heard the howl and took the scene in even as he spun away from more slashing claws. In an instant he made the choice between risking hitting Nails and leaving him on his own and fired off a single round in mid-dodge. The bullet lanced one of the eyes of the creature on Nails's back and the silver burned and bored an ugly hole right through its body. It shrieked and all but released its grip. Nails was grappling with the other monster, but when he felt the one on his back loosen its hold he took the cue and pushed off from the ground with both legs, flinging himself and the monsters attached to him against the lunch shack. The one on his back was sandwiched between his body and the wall and as Nails settled again it dropped off of him onto the ground, stunned.

That left Nails free to deal with his other opponent, which was still hanging on for dear life with all twelve of its claws half-buried in his sides. He grabbed two of the offending appendages, pulled them free with a grunt of pain and tried to break them by twisting them. That didn't work as the limb was too flexible, so Nails twisted them back, forcing their claws into the creature's own mouth. It let go of him and dropped onto its bottom legs while making a sound that was a cross between its characteristic wailing and gargling. It pulled its claws from the wounds in its mouth and began to lop away drunkenly.

Without missing a beat Nails turned and picked up the other creature. It was only half-conscious and struck at him weakly as he lifted it. He set one elbow against its torso just above the mouth, wrapped his other arm around behind it and squeezed. Sickening crunching and cracking sounds filled the air as the light chitin carapace cracked and fractured. The beast wailed and gave a last piteous choke as it finally broke and bent backward. Its eternally waving limbs hung lifeless at its side.

"Duck, Will!" Nails called and flung the limp brute in Will's direction like a rag doll. Will dove into the sandy soil and the creature chasing him filled the space he had been in at the exact moment it was struck and knocked over by its dead compatriot. Will rolled to his feet and ran to where it lay thrashing on the ground, jammed one booted foot into the body on top of it and unloaded six shots from each pistol into it at point blank range.

Will took a moment to steady himself and breathe. Adrenaline was still coursing through his system and he jumped when a hand clapped on his shoulder.

"Come on!" Nails said emphatically. "If we hurry we can catch the last one!"

"No! Wait!" said Will. He grabbed Nails's arm as the big fellow turned to run. "Let's follow him. If there are any more he may lead us to them. Damn, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Ow." Nails looked at the gashes on his arms, all of which looked painful, but none were very deep. Will noted with amazement that even the open wounds looked exactly the same as Nails' skin did and there was no blood anywhere. Whatever Nails was made of, he appeared to be homogenous. "I heal really fast, I mean. Come on, we can't lose him."

"Will's sure been gone a while," Marc muttered as he slung his duffle bag over his shoulder. "I wish he'd bring Nails back so we can get on with this."

"I agree. What's taking so long?" said Hawk tersely. He set two heavy survival knives in sheathes on his belt and checked his assault rifle again.

Jake had just finished donning his armor and powered it up with a chuckle. "Maybe it's just taking a while to catch up to him," he said. "I mean, we know Nails is pretty fast, so if--" A single gunshot, followed by several more in rapid succession echoing across the sky cut him off.

In a flash Hawk had his assault rifle loaded and was barking orders. "Crow, let the Mansion know

what's happening. Marc, Jake, you're with me. Grab whatever's handy and let's move!"

Hawk led Jake in his armor and Marc with his shotgun into the deepening darkness following Will's footprints while Crow clicked on her Jakecam™ and called the Mansion.

The creature shambled over the beach like the wounded animal it was. A steady stream of reddish-gray ichor trickled through its teeth to dribble down its body onto the sand. The tracks it made were now squiggly, spaced unevenly and sometimes at odd angles.

Behind it in the distance followed Will and Nails. They scrutinized its every move and were careful not to be heard. All the thing had to do to see them was turn around, but thankfully it was single-mindedly heading for a stretch of the cliff face not far from the rig. Nails and Will watched it amble around a pair of large boulders that rested next to each other in front of the rock wall and disappear.

Will signaled for Nails to follow him and walked in a ring around the boulders at a distance to get a look at what was behind them. A cave mouth loomed there, wide and low and well-hidden behind the rocks. Will and Nails crept forward together to the edge of the cave mouth, where they stopped and listened. All was quiet but for the lapping of the waves on the shore. Will crouched and began to move into the cave, but Nails stopped him by gently grasping his arm.

"Let me go," he whispered. "I'm less vulnerable."

"We don't know how many of them there are," Will whispered back.

"Let me scout. If I'm not back in five minutes, at least you'll know where to bring the others."

"All right," Will said after a moment's consideration. "Be careful."

"I always am," Nails said with a broad grin. He crouched almost to a sitting position and inched into the cave, vanishing into the darkness.

Sullivan was still sitting in the Situation Room, waiting patiently for news from the team while mulling over the group's current predicament. She often pondered the unique quandaries each individual Lonely Wind dealt with on a daily basis and wasn't above offering aid and suggestions when she thought it would help. She was pondering a possible solution to the current tension in the team when Crow's monitor clicked on.

"Hello! George! Sullivan!" Crow frantically cried through the speaker.

"I'm here, dear," said Sullivan. "How can I help?"

"Nails wandered off, and Will went to find him. Then we heard gunshots and Joe took the others out in force."

"Uh-oh."

"Tell me about it. I can still see them on the beach, so tell George I'm taking the Jakecams™ and running after them."

"I will. Be careful, little girl."

Sullivan clicked the "feed out" switch on Crow's monitor to mute. Then she sat back in her chair and threw an internal switch. It was similar to the one for the phone, but this one gave her access to the Mansion's silent alarm.

George had been in the Library for several hours. He was still researching the strange tracks in the hope of discovering what had made them. Though he read descriptions of the effects each creature had on its environment and studied illustrations of the creatures themselves, he had not yet come across anything that would make tracks like those at the rig.

Pushing his chair back from the table, George took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. He had decided that he needed two things: a stiff drink and a short break. Such luxuries always made him feel guilty when the team was in the field risking their lives but at the same time he knew there was nothing he could do to help them. In fact, he still carried a specter of fear over the possible consequences of his journey to Pointville. The rules he abided by only technically forbade him from fighting in the field with the team or using any of his "extra-normal" abilities openly, but he still worried that his personally venturing to a case site could be interpreted as bending the rules a little too far.

George forced that unsettling thought from his mind as he walked out of the Library and into the Kitchen. He walked to the beverage refrigerator and pulled the door open.

“Quack!” Eric said from his perch on one of the higher shelves and handed George a snifter full of brandy clasped in his metallic wings.

“Oh, thanks. Yikes!” George said and skipped backwards from the fridge. He looked with open disbelief from his glass to Eric and back again.

“Did someone put you up there?” he asked at length.

“Quack-quack,” Eric quacked and shook his head.

“You’re a very clever toy,” George admitted.

“Quack,” said Eric, then “*Quack!*” as George closed the door again.

“But not too clever,” George said with a smirk. Just then Sullivan’s voice echoed through the Mansion:

“*George, Code Red. Come to the Situation Room immediately.*”

Without any hesitation George raced out of the Kitchen.

Chapter III The Door

Nails crept through the twilight of the cave, walking slowly and as quietly as possible. As he made his way beyond the reach of the weak light from outside and the cave became pitch black his only hint that he was still headed in the right direction was the slick feel of the creature's blood on the rock under his feet. The cave widened a few steps in from the entrance, enough for Nails to stand as he walked.

The cave made a sharp bend to the left and with it Nails found himself in utter darkness. He walked with one arm outstretched, touching the cave wall as he went. The air was quiet and still. Nails began to wonder if the creature had simply died somewhere. He still felt occasional spots of that slimy ichor on the floor, so if it had died it was somewhere ahead of him.

The cave bent back to the right again and Nails stopped. Countless green eyes bobbed and weaved in the blackness a stone's throw ahead of him, illuminated from within by the leprous green glow. Several sets of the odd, knobby eyes drifted about the darkness of the cave as though disembodied, like swarms of well-synchronized green fireflies. They moved not only along the ground, but would blink in and out of sight as they traveled in vertical lines, which Nails took to mean they were climbing around a cavern. He counted at least seven separate groups of eyes that he could see. As quietly as he could he turned on his heels and headed for the cave entrance.

Will looked very relieved to see him. "What happened?" he asked.

"It's a big cave," Nails replied nonchalantly. "There are more of them in there. At least seven, I think. What do you guys do in this situation?"

Will looked crestfallen at the number Nails gave, but then he caught sight of something around the boulders where Nails couldn't see that made him smile. A moment later Hawk, Jake and Marc appeared, fully armed and armored and ready for a fight.

"Wow. Maybe you guys should change your names from "Lonely Winds" to "Deus ex Machina," Nails said with a smirk.

"Huh?" said Marc.

"Never mind!" snapped Jake. "What's the story? You guys ok?"

"Fine. Where's Crow?" Will asked.

"She's hailing the Mansion," Hawk explained, "We heard the gunshots and came to see what was happening. You need some first aid, man?" he asked Nails.

"What? Oh no, I'm fine. I'll tough it out," Nails said.

"If you say so, buddy. Looks to me like you're lucky to still have that eye."

Presently Crow appeared carrying her backpack and half a dozen Jakecams™. "Is everyone all right?" she asked.

"Just peachy," Will muttered. "Do we have a line to the Mansion?"

"*We're here, Will,*" George's voice came through Crow's Jakecam™. "*What did we miss?*"

"Long story short, I ran into our monster while walking. He had some buddies with him. Luckily for me Will turned up and helped me take two of them out. We trailed the third one here," Nails said.

"*There were more than one?*" George said, half to himself.

"There still are," said Nails irreverently. "There's some kind of nest in this cave."

"So what now? Do we go in after them?" asked Marc.

Jake smacked the forehead of his helmet. "Damn! I left the night vision goggles in my trunk! I'll have to go back for them."

"Don't you guys have flashlights in your packs?" Nails asked.

"That's too conspicuous. They'll see us coming," Jake countermanded.

"But the light might give us an advantage," said Nails.

"*What makes you think so, Nails?*" George asked.

"I saw these things in the cave. They're crawling around in the dark with no trouble, and we already know they come out at night. I think they're sensitive to light and if they are, shining a flashlight in their eyes might be the thing to even the odds. Which is something we want, believe me. These things

are lethal.” Nails punctuated his statement by feeling the gashes in his sides.

“Anyway, we shouldn’t wait any longer than we have to,” interjected Will. “We’re down to our last light. If we leave now they might scatter.”

There was a brief silence while each team member considered the circumstances. It was broken by the sound of Jake’s guns activating on his armor.

“This is what we’re all about,” he said. “Let’s get ‘em!”

“All right, Jake, you’re on point,” Will instructed. “I want Marc and Hawk behind him with the heavy firepower. Nails, you, Crow and I are going to carry the lights and give these guys supporting fire.”

“Supporting fire?” Nails said as he looked at Crow and her conspicuous lack of a weapon. In answer she pointed at the cliff face a few feet away. A bolt of ruby red energy leapt from her hand to blast off a small chunk of rock and score the cliff black.

“Sweet!” Nails said.

“We’re all set, unless the Mansion has any additional input?” Will asked.

“*It sounds good to me,*” George said. “*Be careful, and Godspeed.*”

“Let me go first,” Nails said. “I can lead you in and show you where to stop for cover.” Crow tossed him a flashlight and the team followed him single file into the cave.

“Now this is something,” G.R. chuckled. He and Cynthia had come to the Situation Room when they heard Sullivan’s page for George. They now sat at the table, tensely watching the screen.

“Something amuses you, G.R.?” George said flatly.

“We finally get to see some action! I was getting tired of this sitting around.”

George swiveled in his chair to face G.R.. On the monitors the Jakecam™ feeds had dimmed to almost pitch-black screens, although the team could still be heard shuffling quietly across the cave floor. “What you’ve seen today is a standard part of a field investigation. Surveillance and reconnaissance are essential in preparing to deal with any supernatural menace we may encounter.”

“Whatever. I’m just glad we get to see something exciting now,” G.R. said dismissively.

George struggled not to grind his teeth. “What you are about to see is real people putting themselves in mortal danger for the common good, not an action sequence in a movie. You might try to show a little respect. While you’re at it, try to realize this is what you are supposed to be preparing for.” He swiveled back to face the monitors. G.R. turned bright red and said nothing in return.

Cynthia and Sullivan kept quiet during the awkward silence that followed. Cynthia’s eyes were fixed on Will’s screen while Sullivan impassively watched each screen in turn. Nails was walking slowly through the cave with his flashlight pointed straight down at his side. The ring of light on the rock provided just enough of a visible area that the team could see where they were headed without being too conspicuous further down the cave itself. Sullivan noted the ingenuity of this move, as no one had suggested it to Nails. The others seemed to be edgy around him for some reason but he had been very polite to her. She left off in the middle of that thought when Nails came to a sharp right turn in the cave and stopped.

“All right, this is it,” Nails said softly as he switched off his light. “They were,” he leaned and looked around the corner, “and still are moving around down this tunnel. It looks like they’re in a big cavern. What should we do now?”

Jake replied with a broad smirk and tossed Nails a heavy cylindrical object. Curious, Nails shone his light upon it and revealed a warning label:

Jake Osborn’s Party Favors
DANGER: HIGH EXPLOSIVE
For Entertainment Purposes Only

“Smoke ‘em if ya got ‘em!” Jake said triumphantly as he tossed other party favors to Marc, Will and Hawk. Each man in turn punched the button at the top of his party favor and tossed it over-handed

into the cavern beyond. Seconds later the resulting explosion of flaming chemicals lit the cave as bright as day and the wailing of wounded monsters filled the air. Jake struck a road flare on the leg of his armor and tossed it into the cave to provide light, then readied another.

“Go!” Will shouted and the team raced into the cavern with weapons at the ready.

Jake was first in, cutting loose with his armor guns and mowing down a creature just beyond the tunnel as it flailed about with its carapace on fire. He switched to plasma even as he tossed a second flare with his free hand and blasted a charging creature dead in the eyes. It squalled and rolled backward away from him. He chased after it, harrowing it with blasts of superheated particles. It continued to scramble away from him and tried to climb up a wall, but Jake grabbed one gristly leg and hauled it back to the floor. Though it was badly burned it sliced at him with two pairs of claws. They dug ragged grooves into his breastplate and latched on as the creature attempted to dig its other four sets of claws into his sides. The ceramic-metal composite plates were too resilient for it and Jake slapped his trigger into its holster and grappled with the beast, pummeling it with rapid blows.

Marc and Hawk charged into the cave just behind Jake. When one of the creatures dropped in their midst from the ceiling, they turned their guns on it simultaneously and blew the living hell out of it. In its death throes the monster lashed out and clipped the end of Hawk’s rifle, knocking it from his grasp as another abomination rushed at him. He drew his survival knives and dodged a lashing double set of claws with ease. As his foe turned in place Hawk stabbed into the top of its body with his right knife, leaving it there while raking its side with his left. He attacked with the left again, jabbing it into an eye while pulling the other knife free and thrusting it into the base of a lower arm with blinding quickness. When the beast shuddered in agony and faltered back a step Hawk yanked the knives free, crossed his arms and stabbed the creature again simultaneously with both knives. The creature screamed in frenzy and lashed at him wildly, so he dropped to one knee and rammed his shoulder into its lowest legs as it came on, sending it tumbling over him to land on his knives, driving them into its own body. In a flash Hawk was back on his feet, kicked it over and yanked his knives free. Marc came on then, planted his shotgun into the creature’s mouth and pulled the trigger. The thing still thrashed about, so Marc blasted it twice more. It made a sick gagging sound and lay still.

“Die and stuff!” growled Marc.

Will and Nails were next into the cavern and immediately faced a duo of monsters. Will was a blur, blasting away with his pistols. He stopped after a few shots and spun away from an attacking creature. Although he had wounded the thing it didn’t miss a beat coming after him. Once again Will found himself on the defensive. His friends were fighting for their lives and he wasn’t going to dance with a monster when he could be helpful elsewhere. The brute lashed at him by swinging all four of its upper limbs in an uppercut motion. Will saw a chance to bait it and dodged back from the attack, then crouched in the hope that the creature would blindly lunge again. It did, and in one fluid movement Will wove around the assault and each claw dug small chips of rock out of the cave floor on impact. No sooner had the monster realized its mistake than Will had jabbed his pistols into its side and fired. Squealing, the abomination staggered away and fell on its side. Will was after the monster in an instant, planted a boot on it, jammed his guns in the grotesque mass of eyes that passed for a face and finished it off.

While Will was dealing with his monster Nails faced down the other one, a familiar specimen that was still dripping sticky fluid through its teeth.

“Hello, beautiful! I felt really rejected after you ran out on me!”

It leapt at him with an eardrum shattering screech, which he answered with a right haymaker to its midsection. It folded very neatly in the middle around his arm and hurtled backwards to crash against a wall. Its limbs twitched and trembled as it fell to the floor and lay there, wheezing. Without hesitation Nails dashed to its side and picked it up. All six of its limbs flailed about weakly and struck at him until he slapped one upper claw away and grabbed hold of another. Nails swung the hapless beast around above his head a few times, then cracked it against the rock wall and let it roll to the floor, where it lay lifeless in a widening pool of blood.

Crow was the last into the cavern, entering just in time to see her husband mercilessly stabbing one monster repeatedly, Jake battering another into a lifeless husk and Will and Nails finishing off

another two. With practiced grace she swept the cavern with her eyes, looking for another foe in the weak red light of the road flares. She found one clinging to the wall near the ceiling almost two stories high. It was hanging with its legs bent behind it, facing down on the massacre below. Crow shined her light upon it and the beast hissed loudly and dropped to the cave floor to face her. Its teeth flashed in her light. Clicking its claws in anticipation it came at her.

Crow's face was a mask of concentration and the advancing monster's movements suddenly slowed. It continued to approach her but she easily stepped aside as it tried to strike her with sloth-like speed. Growing visibly more frustrated with each attempt, it finally let out a raspy growl. Crow raised an open hand, held it toward the monster and a jet of fire sprayed from her palm into the beast. Its wails filled the cavern and the other team members each looked up from their defeated opponents to see what was happening. Crow continued to pour on her power, burning the monstrosity until its cries stopped and it dropped to the floor of the cave, completely enveloped in angry red flames.

"Sound off!" Will commanded. His voice was thunderous in the suddenly quiet cave.

"Hawk here."

"Crow here, I'm fine."

"Jake Osborn, Destroyer of Unpleasant Things, at your service."

"Marc's good, and so am I. Nails?"

"I'm here, no problem."

"That was *amazing!*" G.R. said. He looked as though his eyes were about to bulge out of his face. "They didn't even get a scratch!"

"A well-oiled machine," George said quietly. He was wearing a tiny smile.

"Is anyone hurt?" Sullivan asked.

"I don't think so. Everyone all right?" Will said.

"I think so," Crow said as she shined her light on each person in turn and they nodded.

"Outstanding," said Hawk. "That was easy enough."

"You call that easy?" asked Will.

"No, I said it was easy enough."

Sigh.

"*Don't let your guard down yet, folks. Make certain the area is secured,*" George warned.

With a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other Will led the team through the cavern, sweeping their lights about and looking for anything suspicious. The cavern wasn't even as large as most of the rooms in the Mansion and ran fairly straight back into the cliffs before dead-ending in a sheer wall.

"Hey, looks like we're all set here, George," Hawk said triumphantly. As he spoke the air behind him shimmered slightly, just for a split second. No one noticed it.

"*Excellent. What else can you determine from where you are?*"

Jake deactivated his guns and swept his light back and forth. "This is weird," he said softly.

"What's that, Jake?" asked Will.

"These creatures were living in here, right? Away from the sun which, as far as we know, they didn't like."

"I think that's a reasonable assumption," Will replied.

"Yet, there's nothing extraneous in here. No bedding, no offal, no refuse from eating."

"What are you getting at?" Nails asked.

Jake raised his visor and looked at Will and Nails. "These things lived in here, yet there's no evidence that they were here for very long."

"You're thinking they came from somewhere else?" Crow said thoughtfully.

"That's my guess. Most organisms that stay in one place for very long tend to leave some signs. Unless the organism in question is really obsessive-compulsive about keeping a clean lair."

"*That's an interesting observation, Jake. Do you think it means anything?*" George asked.

"Probably not. Just my tendency to analyze too much in action."

Will was idly wandering, shining his light about. Jake was right: there weren't many indicators that the creatures had been here for very long. He was just about to suggest that they move on when his light revealed something that made him freeze.

"So, should we start cleanup?" Crow proposed.

"Yeah, we might as well," confessed Jake. "Nails, if you'll help me we'll drag the other bodies back here from the rig and make sure we didn't leave any extraneous evidence behind."

"I'll come too," Hawk offered. The air behind him rippled again, a visage of rock turning in the air without really moving. "I was looking forward to--"

The air behind him melted into one of the creatures, which jabbed a set of claws into Hawk's right shoulder as he turned to leave, piercing his flak jacket and lancing his flesh. He stifled a cry of pain, grasped the offending arm with one hand and reached for a knife with the other. Three other sets of claws sliced at him, and Hawk kicked off from the cave floor and twisted. One set of claws ripped across his chest leaving nasty gashes, the other two barely missing him. The monster hissed and pivoted, slamming Hawk against the wall behind them by his skewered shoulder.

Jake attacked from behind and clamped his arms around it. It bent its three free limbs backwards by their many joints and tore at his armor. Jake was forced to let go and jump away after one pair nearly gouged his unprotected eyes. The distraction gave Hawk just enough time to pull one of his knives free and plant it with authority into one bulging, leprous green eye. Bracing his back against the wall, he kicked the creature on either side of its mouth with both boots. It tumbled backward and its claws came free of his shoulder with a wet tearing sound. Hawk let out a roar of pain and fury as he chased after the creature. He reached with his good arm and yanked his knife free of the creature's eye. It hissed just before Will, Jake, and Mark let loose with their weapons and cut it down where it stood. Crow ran to Hawk's side and examined his wounds.

"Jake! Make sure that was the last one!" Will ordered. Jake had his motion tracker out in a blink and scanned the cave.

"There's nothing else moving in here," he declared after a moment, and the others relaxed visibly. "Where the hell did it come from?"

"They must have some kind of invisibility or camouflage ability. Crow!" Will ordered.

Crow scrutinized the cavern. "There's nothing else here. We're alone," she said at last and returned to tending Hawk.

"Ok, that was less fun," Hawk moaned as he sank to his knees. "Anyone have a suture handy?"

"We're on it, buddy," Marc reassured him as he dug through his first aid kit.

"This is bad. We need to get him back to the Mansion," Crow said.

"No way!" Hawk exclaimed. "I'm in it to the end. I can tough this out. I've had worse."

"Honey, this is no time to argue. You're bleeding and you might get an infection. Who knows what that thing had on its claws?"

"It's no problem," Hawk said as he stood again and flexed. "Just bandage me up, we can finish later. Look at Nails, he's taking it pretty well."

Everyone looked at Nails. The two gashes around his eye were noticeably smaller.

"This is foolish, Joe. The case is over. The others can handle cleanup and make sure there aren't any stragglers," snapped Crow. "Will, back me up on this."

"I'm afraid I can't."

All eyes fixed on him. He was standing where he had shot the creature from, with the rear wall of the cavern just behind him. He stepped to his right and shone his light on the rock, using it to trace a trio of thin seams that formed a familiar outline.

"I found a door," he said.

In the Situation Room George dropped his brandy snifter. It shattered loudly enough that the team heard it through their Jakecams™.

"*What's happening? Everything ok there?*" Jake asked.

"George? What's wrong?" Sullivan said.

“Nothing. Just a little butterfingers,” said George, but he was trembling slightly. “William, is this like the door you saw a few weeks ago?”

“It’s identical. The same size, shape, everything.” Will poked at one seam with his finger and looked at his colleagues. “Any clues?”

“I’m lost,” Hawk said. His shirt was off and he had propped himself against the wall. Crow was still treating his wounds. “Fill me in. What’s this about doors?”

“A few weeks ago we had a case that took us to an old house in the city,” explained Jake. “Will ended up falling into some kind of pit underneath it. It was all lined in concrete.”

“As I tried to find a way out, I came across three lines in one wall, like a door,” Will continued and indicated the seams on the wall. “Just like this.”

“Now *this* is a hell of a thing,” Jake said.

“I still don’t get it,” Hawk muttered.

“The last one of these we found we couldn’t investigate because a burning house covered it. We found it while fighting a group of creatures we had never seen or heard of before. Now, in the same situation, we find an identical door,” Jake thought aloud. “There’s no way this is a coincidence.”

Marc sneered. “There’s no handle. Are you sure it’s really a door?”

“It’s too even to be natural,” Will said. “Random cracks don’t happen to be perfectly straight most of the time. What do you think, George?”

“*Whatever you do, be very careful,*” was all George said.

“So, do we try to open it?” Crow offered.

“What for?” scoffed Hawk. “What, do you guys think you’re going to find an entrance to an underground kingdom of monsters or something?” Marc chuckled, but Jake and Will were quiet.

“What do you think? How should we try to open this thing?” Will asked Jake.

“Well, I don’t have any heavy explosives with me and that probably wouldn’t be safe anyway.”

“Yeah, like that’s ever stopped you,” snickered Hawk.

“If it is a door,” Jake continued with a wry smile, “then it should have hinges of some sort.”

“But it doesn’t have hinges or anything else,” Crow said.

“Not on this side, no.” Jake walked to the wall and shone his flashlight into a seam, then moved to the other. “Here, Will, take a look at this.”

Will peered into the seam and saw what Jake was talking about. The seam was an even space that ran several inches back into the rock. At several points round cylindrical shapes Will guessed must be hinges bulged in the opening.

“Great. Now all we need is some leverage. Any ideas?” Will said.

“I have a crowbar,” Marc suggested as he took said tool out of his duffle bag. He handed it to Jake, who set one end in the seam without the hinges.

“This is crazy. Who would build a door made of stone inside a cave by a beach?” Hawk mumbled.

“We’re about to find out,” Jake said and leaned on the crowbar. At first there was no sound but the whine of the servos in his suit, but then a grinding sound almost too low to hear emanated from the wall. The door crept outward slowly and Will, Marc and Nails moved to grip its edge and pulled. Stone grated on stone as the door swung slowly but resolutely open. It stopped when it was hanging out into the cave, revealing a short tunnel leading into a great black space beyond.

Will and Jake stood guard while Marc and Crow helped Hawk to his feet. Jake tossed the crowbar back to Marc and the team went as one into the tunnel.

Chapter IV The Best Laid Plans

Jake struck another flare and tossed it past the end of the tunnel. The space beyond was a great cavern, easily as large as the one they had just left, but it was a perfect hemisphere in shape. The walls rose from a flat and level floor to form the ceiling high above and every surface was so smooth it looked more like brown glass than rock. The walls at floor level were covered with strange murals and glyphs painted in twisting patterns. The paints were dim and mostly dark colors. Vague menacing shapes seemed to leer out at the chamber from among the paintings.

In the middle of the chamber a series of grooves ran over the floor, forming an enormous circle that encompassed several smaller circles and other geometric shapes. Many smaller squiggles and shapes crossed and intersected within the circumference of the large circle, forming an incredibly intricate network of rock grooves. The circle was large enough for several dozen people to stand in it comfortably. Four stone statues shaped like the ancient native Yd tribesmen of Ylelon stood facing inward at the cardinal compass points. They held long spears in their hands, their faces serious and harsh. Nothing moved within the room and the only sounds were the team members' boots scraping on the floor.

"What the hell is all this?" Jake finally said.

"It's a summoning circle," Crow said. "This chamber is used to summon beings from other worlds and bind them to the user's will."

"I think we've just found something rather important," Will muttered.

"Explain this to us, Crow. I didn't think magic actually worked this way," said Jake.

"Not usually," Crow replied. "Most of the time, magic is an application of will. You make the universe bend the way you want it to with sheer willpower and what magical energy you have available to you. You do *that* based on what spells you know that give you the know-how and focus to do the bending. Sometimes, though, it helps to have more to focus on, like when summoning. You can summon a creature with brute willpower, or so I understand it. But bringing a creature from elsewhere against its will is complicated stuff. Most mages prefer to have a little help when they summon anything, which makes the process easier and safer. This circle helps guide the energy of the spell, but it also helps order the mage's thoughts as she does her work. It's kind of like a cross between having a mudra to meditate on and the way circuitry works in machinery to guide electricity in a certain way."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," growled Marc. "Are you telling me that someone brought those things here? Somebody made this place and put those things here on purpose so they'd kill people?"

"I think that's exactly what I'm saying, Marc," Crow said. "A simple circle would work for easier spells, but this is more complex than anything I've ever heard of. Someone made this with the express purpose of gathering a group of creatures at once and forcing them to do what they wanted."

"Whoever did it is almost certainly the one who put the door under that house," Jake said.

Will nodded solemnly. "Someone's bringing monsters to Ylelon," he said. "We've always known that vampires make more of themselves and the odd other creature usually winds up in our world by accident. Someone is doing *this* intentionally. Is there any way to figure out who?"

"Don't ask me. I don't even want to meet the mage that's powerful enough to use this thing," Crow said with wide eyes.

"We might be able to analyze the walls," Jake said thoughtfully. "If we could, it might tell us how long this place has been here."

"Forget that! I say we trash the place!" said Marc. "If we leave this here, whoever did this might come back and use it again."

"Even if we destroy it, there's no telling how many of these circles there might be," Will said. "I found one in the city, and this one is here..."

"Whoever's doing this has a lot of power," Jake said. "Someone was able to form a solid chamber in sand under a house in town without anyone having a clue it was there. Then they turned loose a group of creatures that ran amuck for days before we stopped them."

"Yo! George! What do you think, old man? Speak up!" Hawk called.

"This is bad. Very bad..." George said distantly.

"Well, that doesn't help," said Jake disdainfully. "Ok, captain, all this theorizing isn't getting us anywhere. What should we do?"

"Jake, see if you can get a sample of the wall to analyze. Marc, Nails, you're with me on cleanup duty. We scour the rig and make certain there's no evidence left behind. We'll drag the corpses back here and burn them," Will said.

"What about us?" Hawk asked.

"You stay on your guard, tough guy. There might be more of those things wandering around outside. We'll be back as soon as we can."

"What are you thinking, George?" Will asked as he led Marc and Nails across the dark beach toward the rig. They walked without flashlights on, lest anyone investigating the rig after the fracas earlier notice them.

"Why do you ask, Will?"

"You called me William back in the cave. You do that when something has you really worried."

"You are perceptive as always. In short my thoughts run along the lines of what you said in the caves. We know we are not facing random incursions of supernatural predators, but an orchestrated attack."

"Why is that such a worry?" Marc said. "We've been fighting monsters for years. So someone brought them here instead of them wandering here. Big deal."

"Your point is valid but not completely inclusive, Marc. The underlying questions remain. Why would anyone have a summoning chamber such as the one we've seen? What could their end goal be?"

"It does seem a bit odd," Nails put in. "You could use those circles like a monster factory, yeah? Spit out legions of things that go bump in the night, that sort of thing?"

"Given enough power, yes, that's very possible."

"Then why didn't they?" Nails asked. "What is there to gain from bringing in handfuls of monsters and having them run around? Building that place seems like a lot of effort to just let some nasty creatures kill a worker at an oilrig."

"Or three innocent people in the city," Will added.

"You make some very valid points, which I'm afraid I can't give you answers to. I believe the thing to do at this point is to secure the area. First thing's first. When you return we can begin researching the circle itself and attempt to glean some information about its possible origin."

There was no one at the rig. They collected the two mangled corpses of the creatures, but there was nothing they could do about the boot- and footprints and other signs of what had happened. George assured them that Detective King would look into making sure any possible problems resulting from their activities were taken care of. This would not be the first time that photos and other crime scene evidence the team had left behind was "lost" during one of King's shifts or visits to another precinct.

They dragged the carcasses back to the summoning chamber and piled them with the others, then set them alight. Jake had chiseled free a sliver of the wall and Hawk was ready to travel.

"I think we're all set to leave, then," Will said.

"What about the circle itself?" Jake said. "Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"You can try," Crow replied. "Your typical magic circle is just drawn on a surface. You can ruin it by smudging it. This is a little more permanent and it's going to take a lot of work to undo it."

"Work? You mean, like, work equaling energy? Energy equaling a chemical reaction? Chemical reactions being found in large bombs?" Jake was grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm not certain that's a good idea, Jake. You might not want to treat with this until we know more about it."

"Forget that, George. I'm not leaving this here for someone to bring more killers through. I'll gather some explosives at the Mansion and head back. Anyone that wants to join me can."

"I'll come with you," Will said.

"Me too!" said Marc.

"I'll come. You folks are all right," said Nails with a smile.
"Then we have a plan," Will said. "Let's move out, folks."

They headed back to their vehicles under a starry sky. The western horizon was still stained red by the setting sun. Crow helped Hawk into the passenger seat, then led the return to the Mansion.

Sullivan and George were waiting for them on the front steps. They helped Hawk to Medical where they began to clean his wounds. Nails turned down similar treatment, insisting that they would heal in time. He thought he saw George give him a wink when no one else was looking.

Once they were sure that Hawk was taken care of, Jake, Marc, Will and Nails went to the Workshop to gather supplies. Jake hummed to himself while pondering which explosive to use, then settled for some good old fashioned TNT. Without preamble they left again in Will's car.

"How does that feel?" George asked Hawk as he put his medical supplies away.

"Great!" said Hawk as he hopped off the bed and raised his arm. "Good as new! How long ago did the guys leave? Do you think I can catch them?"

Crow stormed across the room and leaned into his face. "*You*, mister, are not going anywhere. You just had thirty-three stitches and want to go gallivanting out in the middle of the night? You sit yourself down and relax."

"It's good to know who the boss still is in your relationship," Sullivan remarked. Though her tone was flat George was sure she would laugh if she could.

"He may protect the whole country, but I'm still the one in charge. Sit!" Crow barked, and Hawk settled back onto the bed.

"It's been a full evening," said George. "Sullivan, do you know where Cynthia and G.R. are?"

"I believe Cynthia is still in the Situation Room. She wanted to keep an eye on things as the boys went back to the cave. Last I looked G.R. was playing video games in the Rec Room."

"Excellent. We're all accounted for," said George. "I'd like to thank you two for joining the others today. You were invaluable to our efforts."

"No problem. It was like old times!" Hawk said enthusiastically.

"You're most welcome, George," Crow added.

"I think I speak for everyone here when I say you're both welcome to stay as long as you'd like," George said.

"Absolutely," said Sullivan.

"Quack quack," Eric expounded. He was standing on the floor next to George's feet.

George jumped. "What the--?"

"Quack," Eric said and kicked George's ankle.

"You know, that hurt more than I would have expected. What was that for?" George indignantly asked the gleaming toy.

"I imagine it was for leaving him in the refrigerator," Sullivan put in.

"What? How did you know about that?"

"You left that poor little duck in the fridge?" said Crow accusingly.

"He was waiting for me there! This little fiend creeps me out. He's out to get me!" George said and took several steps away from Eric, who came waddling after him, quacking pitifully.

"Aw, you've hurt his feelings. He likes you," Sullivan said.

"He's a robot, he doesn't have feelings!" George blurted. Sullivan crossed her arms and stared at him.

"Uh, perhaps I should rephrase that," said George.

"Same old George. The more things change," Crow giggled.

"I'm getting some brandy. Call me if you need anything," George grumbled, and started out of the room. Eric followed him with surprising speed given his short little legs.

"What the--? Get away from me!" George's voice echoed down the hall. "I'll set up a blind in the Foyer, I swear it!"

“That alone was worth getting stabbed,” Hawk chuckled. Crow gave him a sharp look.

“Oh, you worry too much, honey. I’ve had worse!”

“Yeah, and it put you in intensive care. Watch him for me, Sullivan, I’m going to the Situation Room,” Crow said. “If he tries to go anywhere, beat him over the head with an anvil.”

“But--”

“No buts! You need to rest and not strain those stitches. See if you can keep from being macho for ten minutes.”

“Ok,” Hawk moaned. Crow winked at Sullivan, who waved back, then left the room at a jog.

She found Cynthia glued to the monitors in the Situation Room. The boys had only just reached the rest stop where they had parked before.

“Hello, Cynthia!” said Crow. Cynthia yelped and jumped in her seat.

“Ooh! Sorry,” Crow said.

“It’s ok. This sort of thing happens a lot around here. What’s up?”

“Not a lot. I just finished patching my man. Sullivan is restraining him so he’ll heal properly.”

“A real tough guy, huh?”

“You have no idea. I respect that he’s fit and a natural fighter, but sometimes I think he’s determined to fight until he gets himself killed.”

“Yeah,” Cynthia said, looking at Will’s screen, “a lot of the men around here seem to be like that.”

“So, how did you come to join the team?” Crow asked.

“Oh, uh... Will saved me from a vampire a few weeks back. I kind of held it off until he got there, and George took me in and let me kind of check the place out.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah, but it gets kind of lonely here sometimes. This place is so huge and it’s just the few of us.”

Crow looked thoughtful. “I understand there used to be more members. I guess for a long time it was rare to have fewer than ten active field operatives.”

“Field operatives?”

“Sorry. Being married to a secret agent, I guess those things rub off on you after a while.”

“How did you two join the team?” Cynthia asked brightly.

“Oh, we joined right after... a friend of mine. Her name was Tina.”

“Yeah, I know about Tina. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“It’s all right. If I didn’t think about her I’d never remember the good times.”

“Tina was a student of the same martial arts teachers in Ylelon George sometimes has the team train with. He used to say that the moment he saw her in the dojo he knew she had tremendous potential as a warrior. He took a long time introducing her to what you do now. She asked George if she could tell me about it, because we were best friends at the time. George was more than happy to show us around, because he said he’d seen us training too and thought we had the right spirit to join, or something.”

“You joined just like that?”

“Oh, no. We knew George for months before we had any idea what he did. He used to hang around classes at the dojo and talk to Master McCoy and Master Pana. He spent a lot of time with Tina. He used to ask strange questions like ‘Do you think personal sacrifice is noble?’ and ‘Do you think it’s ethical to break certain laws for the greater good?’ We always thought he was just a scary armchair philosopher.”

“But he was scouting,” Cynthia observed.

“Yes, he was.”

Cynthia’s mind raced as she thought about what Crow told her. “They’ve never told me about Master McCoy and Master... Master...”

“Master Pana. They’re former team members from years and years ago during Detective King’s days, I think. They still help George look for new members and feed him news and rumors from the city. George probably never mentioned them as a way of protecting them. I think he feels the less we all know about each other the safer we are.”

“Do you know who George really is? Why he does this, where all this comes from?”

“I really don’t. I don’t think anyone does. He’s so secretive and private I’d bet that no one could even tell you what his favorite color is. The guys take offence about it, but I know it’s for the best.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because, Cynthia, you can see it in his eyes. Watch his face sometime when something bad happens. You can see he wants to tell us what he’s thinking but he can’t. Or he’d have done it already.”

“Something bad would happen if we knew about all this? Did George steal all of his money from the government or something?”

“Might be,” Crow admitted with a shrug.

Marc, Nails, Jake and Will were moving at a jog toward the cave now and were only a few moments away. The sounds of their rhythmic breathing and their boots on the soft sand drifted into the room through the monitor’s speakers.

“Should we call George in here?” Cynthia asked.

“I don’t think so. They’re just going to set a bomb and leave.”

They watched as the four men finally reentered the cave and made their way to the back. The piled corpses of the creatures were still burning, producing a vile-smelling, acrid smoke. Jake led the way into the chamber and set down the crate of dynamite he had been toting with ease thanks to his armor. He then set out an electric lantern to provide light to most of the chamber and began to set up clusters of dynamite at regular intervals.

“Will that be enough?” Cynthia wondered aloud.

“It looks good to me,” Crow replied with a smile.

“*I’m working off of Crow’s simile of the circle working like circuitry,*” Jake said. “*I may not know much about magic, but I know that if you break a motherboard in as many places as I’m about to it will never work again.*”

While Jake was setting up his explosives and Will and Nails stood guard at the entryway to the chamber, Marc meandered about at random, kicking listlessly at the floor. *What a gyp*, he thought idly. *That fight was too short. How come we never get into any good fights anymore?*

As he wandered he came close enough to one of the statues to examine it closely. Marc was no art critic but even he could appreciate the level of detail worked into the likeness of the ancient aboriginal tribesman. His pronounced nose and aquiline features, his bushy eyebrows, even the lines around his eyes that hinted at his advancing years all were produced in strikingly lifelike quality. He stood with his legs slightly bent and shoulder width apart, as though he were facing an unseen opponent.

What’s the point in putting a statue were nobody can look at it? Marc thought with a snort and leaned one elbow on the statue’s shoulder. Jake was taking his sweet time setting up the detonators. Marc just wanted to get this over with so he could get back to the Mansion and get some beer.

He shifted his footing to lean completely on the statue and slipped. With a grunt of surprise he stumbled forward several steps before catching up to his center of gravity. He shook his head, turned to face the statue again, and stopped. The statue had moved. Before it had been crouching, but now it was standing almost at attention and gripping its spear closer to its body than it had been before. Marc leveled his shotgun at its head and marched forward until the tip of the statue’s nose was nearly inside the barrel.

“Hey, guys! This statue’s alive!” he said, without taking his eyes off of it.

“Not now, Marc, I’m concentrating,” Jake chided him.

Marc’s finger tightened on the trigger. He knew the thing had moved. He looked from it to the other three for reference. They were all in identical stances, the way this one had been before. When he looked back at it, it was still behaving itself, but still standing a little differently than the others. He looked at it cockeyed, then waved a hand in front of its face. It continued to glare at its unseen enemy.

I really need a drink, Marc thought to himself as he lowered his gun and turned away. He caught movement in the corner of his eye and ducked instinctively just in time to avoid the statue’s stone spear as it swung at his head.

“Son of--guys, look out!”

“Damn it, Marc!” Jake said as he fiddled with a detonator. “Just leave--*what the?!*”

Will and Nails spun around in the chamber doorway and both men’s eyes widened in amazement. The room’s four statues were walking and brandishing their spears threateningly. The one closest to Marc had just taken a swing at him and was winding up for another attack. Marc ducked and twisted to avoid the blow, then dashed to stand by Jake, who set down his bundle of dynamite and grabbed his armor’s trigger. The four statues lowered their spears and began to march toward the two warriors in the center of the chamber in perfect synchrony.

“What in the *world?!*” Cynthia exclaimed. Crow leapt up from her seat and ran into the hallway, shouting for George and Sullivan.

“Well, this is not encouraging,” Jake muttered. He activated his armor’s weaponry just as Nails and Will joined him and Marc in the center of the room. The statues were advancing at a steady walk, still several seconds away from the group but drawing uncomfortably close.

“Jake, what’s the word on those detonators?” Will asked.

“I’ve got about a third of them set. I can blow them by remote if I have to.”

“What about the others?” asked Nails.

“They’re still in the crate. What do you want me to do?” The statues were only a few seconds away now. Each one aimed the head of its spear at a different one of the four men’s hearts.

“Crow, do you think what we’ve done will take care of this circle?” Will asked.

“*Crow left, Will! She’s looking for George!*” Cynthia’s voice came through his Jakecam™.

Marc pointed his shotgun at the statue nearest to him and fired. The roar of the gun echoed in the chamber and merged with the sound of buckshot slamming against chiseled stone. The statue still came on though its surface was now riddled with cracks and small holes.

“We can’t wait anymore! Let’s go!” Will shouted. Jake grabbed the crate of dynamite and the four men ran between two of the advancing statues and out of the chamber.

“Blast it, Jake!” Will cried as the four of them took cover around the side of the chamber door, and Jake punched the detonator’s code into his wrist panel. A deafening roar thundered through the cave. Rock shrapnel and bits of stone flew out of the doorway and skittered down the floor of the cave.

“Did we get them?” Will asked.

“WHAT?” Marc shouted over the ringing in his ears.

Jake took his helmet off and shook his head. “There’s only one way to find out,” he said, and trotted away from the chamber, but in front of the entryway. He set down the dynamite crate and knelt with his guns at the ready. The entryway was obscured by a veil of smoke. The chamber was dark; Jake knew the explosion had done his lantern in. The only light came from the flashlights attached to Marc and Will’s weapons, the light Nails carried and the low fire of the burning monsters. Will and Marc flanked him with their weapons ready. Together they stared at the billowing clouds of smoke and dust, waiting for some sign of what was happening. As the seconds ticked by they heard a series of rumbling steps coming toward them. Two of the statues could be seen silhouetted in the smoke, walking toward them side by side with their spears at the ready. As they made their way out of the smoke the team could see that the statues were charred and blackened from the explosion.

“I think we missed them,” Jake said. “You guys get going. I’ll handle these two!”

“You’re going to try to take them by yourself?” said Will.

“I don’t have to,” Jake said with a wide grin as he patted the crate of dynamite. The others smiled in understanding, turned and ran for the entrance of the cave. Jake waited by the crate while the statues worked their ponderous way toward him. There was no sign of the other two and Jake dared to hope that the explosives had taken care of them. Fumbling in a small compartment in his armor, he found a small flashlight and clicked it on. He began to back away one step for every two that the statues took toward him, luring them closer to the crate. When they were only a few paces from the crate and a dozen away from himself, Jake turned and ran for the other end of the cavern. He turned back where the cavern ended at the tunnel. The two statues were still tromping toward him and were just reaching the crate. Jake knelt

by the corner of the tunnel, took aim at the crate, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

A second explosion several times more powerful than the first shook the cave from top to bottom. Jake dove for cover around the tunnel's corner as chunks of rubble and rocky shrapnel crashed and shattered against the tunnel wall. One of the pieces was a flat hunk of stone with a carving of a face on one side. It clattered to the floor and glared accusingly at the ceiling.

Jake shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears and held his breath to listen for any movement. Except for the rattle and tumble of bits of stone settling the cave was eerily quiet. Jake peered around the corner into the cavern with his weapons ready. The space beyond was filled with churning smoke. His light formed strange shapes on the roiling cloud, but nothing else moved.

Sighing to himself, Jake straightened up and lowered his light. Slowly he turned and began to make his way back to the entrance to the cave. Will and Marc were waiting for him there.

"Are you all right?" Will asked with wide eyes. "We thought that last explosion was going to bring the whole hill down!"

"Nope," Jake said and took off his helmet. "The bombs got the last two."

"Rock on. I say we get the hell out of here!" Marc snarled.

"Second," said Nails.

They turned and ran for the rest stop.

George was in the Library, filtering through his computer's files on circle and summoning magic. Next to him on the table was a sheet of paper with a rough sketch of the circle in the cavern. It was nowhere near as detailed as the actual circle, but it had many of the more prominent features laid out so George could research them. He filtered through entry after entry, looking at detailed illustrations of countless examples of circle magic but he hadn't yet found one that matched the subject in the cave. If he found one that was even close enough, he might be able to ascertain where the creatures had come from.

With a grunt of frustration he finally pushed away from the table and leaned back in his chair. There was no point in it anyway. The team had destroyed the creatures and Jake should have taken care of the summoning circle by now. Right now, the problem was dealing with any other existing circles, one of which George already knew about...

The sudden sound of Crow's voice in the hallway startled him: "George! George! Come quick! The boys are under attack!"

George leapt up from his table and raced to the door. Pulling it open, he called back, "I'm here!" He dashed into the hall and met her as she came, then went with her back toward the Situation Room.

"What happened?" he asked as they ran.

"You remember those fancy statues in the summoning room?"

"Yes."

"They came to life and tried to kill Marc."

"Oh, *crap*."

It took them almost two minutes to traverse the colossal Mansion and climb the steps before they came to the Situation Room. Cynthia was there, still glued to the monitors.

"Status report! What's happening?" George demanded.

"*We were thinking about ordering out for diner,*" Jake voice filtered into the room. "*What do you think, Marc? Want to get some Shu-Lan?*"

"*Nah, I'm not up for spicy. I could go for pizza.*"

"What on earth?" George said. "What's going on? Are you guys all right?"

"*We're fine, George. How are you?*" Jake chortled.

"*The statues in the chamber tried to waylay us,*" Will put in. "*Jake caught them with his explosives.*"

"*Aw, shucks,*" said Jake.

"Were any of you hurt?" George asked frantically.

"*Not a one. These guys are awesome. Who else would use explosives as a first resort in a fight?*"

Nails snickered, to a chorus of laughter from the others.

“Very well,” George said with definite annoyance. “Come to the Situation Room when you get back. We will have quite a few things to discuss.”

“Well, back to the salt mines,” Jake quipped as Will pulled back onto the Mansion grounds. “What do you suppose George wants to meet about?”

“Who cares? Just wake me when it’s done,” Marc said.

They left the car out front and went inside to the Situation Room. George was waiting for them in his place at the head of the table. Cynthia, Crow, Hawk, G.R. and Sullivan were there as well, waiting patiently in their seats.

“Have a seat, gentlemen. We have much to talk about,” said George coolly. Will, Jake and Marc sat in their regular places, while Nails opted to lean against the wall behind G.R.’s seat.

“The first order of business: do any of you require medical attention?” George asked.

“I’m good,” Jake said casually.

“No one was hurt, George,” said Will.

“Excellent. Tell me what happened.”

“Well, to put it simply, the statuary took exception to our trying to trash their home,” Jake said as he set his helmet down, leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the table.

“You were able to deal with the golems effectively?” George inquired with an edge in his voice.

“The what?” Marc asked.

“Golems,” repeated George. “Magical statues, animated like robots. That’s what you were fighting. They were set there to guard the circle.”

Crow brightened and leaned forward in her seat. “Did you find out about the circle?”

“I did not. I am making a supposition based on the information available. Both the circle and the golems would require tremendous magical power to create. We are facing an enemy who is organized, powerful and worst of all, cunning.”

“As long as the good rumbles keep coming our way, it’s ok,” Marc chuckled.

“Damn it, Marc!” George shouted and slammed his fist against the table. “Do you all still not understand what we are facing?” Silence and expressions of confusion answered him.

“Then let me make it crystal clear for you. All these long years you have journeyed into the field, risking your lives for the greater good. Is there a one of you that ever thought differently than that you faced wild beasts, stragglers from their home domains, unguided and unintentionally among us?” No one spoke.

“Now we have seen the source of at least some of the fiends we have faced. We know they have been brought here to visit murder and mayhem upon the people of Ylelon. The circle, the golems, the many creatures summoned together and forced into servitude: all of it points toward an agenda that some unseen enemy is working toward.”

“How do you know that, George?” G.R. said. “I don’t see a group of monster way stations as necessarily meaning we’re being invaded.”

“Yeah,” Marc agreed. “We’ve fought some psycho wizards and stuff in the past. Maybe some loony thinks it’s funny to summon monsters now and then.”

George leaned forward and rested his arms on the table, lacing his fingers together. “If you come across this Mansion and see great rooms filled with supplies and weapons, enough for a small army, do you assume that the purpose of such a whole is to fulfill the whims of an eccentric?”

“You have a point, George, but what are you getting at?” Nails asked.

George leaned back in his chair again and sighed. “We know we have a defined enemy now, though we do not know what the definition is. From what we have seen today we can assume several things.

“Our enemy is malevolent. He, she, it, or they have now on numerous occasions summoned dangerous monsters. We know this act was deliberate, because the organization and detail in the creation of the summoning room by the rig demonstrates deliberate intent. If the summoning of dangerous monsters and the subsequent unleashing of them on an unwitting populace was deliberate, then we know

that the perpetrator of this act is one of diabolical intent.

“Our enemy is powerful. The shaping of the stone room, the fashioning of golems, the creation of such a complicated summoning circle--these are not simple acts. It takes time to develop the skill and power in magic to do these things.

“We are no longer fighting skirmishes against lone individuals lurking in the shadows. We are at war with a being or beings of ancient and terrible power, who seek to make war upon Ylelon for reasons unknown.”

He paused to let his words sink in. At last Jake broke the quiet by saying, “All right, George, what do we do about it?”

“I’m glad you asked,” George said. “We can no longer afford to be passive. From this moment forward we will be constantly on our guard. No one leaves the Mansion grounds without consulting me first. In the immediate future, however, you will prepare for another field trip,” he said to the active team members.

“What for?” Will asked.

“You are heading back to Devonshire Street to destroy the circle in the chamber beneath the house and ensure that it is never used again.”

“What’s the point, George?” Jake said. “You once shouted down Sullivan’s suggestion that we do just that based on the fact that merely getting into the chamber would be too difficult. Besides, we don’t have any evidence that any given circle is used more than once and there may be more out there we can’t do anything about.”

“It is better to do all that one can than to do nothing,” George replied. “Replenish your ammunition. Bring plenty of rappelling gear, as well as plastic explosive. You will leave in thirty minutes time.”

“What do you suppose that was about?” Jake asked as he directed Marc and Will to finding the items on his list in the Equipment Room.

“I’d guess that George is reasserting himself,” Will replied as he dropped a rappelling harness into a knapsack. “We haven’t exactly gotten along with him lately, so maybe he’s trying to fix things.”

“To what end? It’s not like we’ll ever go back to thinking he’s on our side again,” Jake muttered.

“Why not?” Will asked.

Marc snorted at him. “You’re kidding, right? Weren’t you here when the robot thing happened?”

“Yeah, actually, I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” Will said. “Nothing’s really changed since then, except for us.”

“You think so?” scoffed Jake.

“Think about it. We all still live here, George still covers all our costs of living and we still fight monsters. The only thing that really changed because of those robots was our outlook. But I’ve been thinking about what Hawk said to us earlier.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Marc asked, but he didn’t really sound interested.

“Hawk was talking about following orders in the military. I think the point he was trying to make was that while George may not tell us everything, he still tries to take care of us.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Marc said as he rolled his eyes.

“Think about it,” Will repeated. “These robots were a big secret, so big that George couldn’t bring himself to tell us that he had such a great security system. But when the chips were down, he came right out and did what it took to save us.”

“Well...you may have something there,” Jake admitted reluctantly. “But until I’ve seen some strong evidence to show he’s really on our side, I’m going to watch him like a hawk.”

“Suit yourself,” Will said.

Chapter V In Over Our Heads

The team gathered in the Foyer at the appointed time. Will, Marc and Jake found George ready and waiting for them along with Sullivan, Cynthia, Crow, Nails and G.R.. Will was surprised to see Crow looking rather upset, but he thought he understood when he saw Hawk was in the Foyer as well, carrying his assault rifle and wearing a new flak jacket.

“You’re going with us?” Will asked.

“Like the old lunatic said, we need all the help we can get,” Hawk replied as he handed Jakecams™ out to each member of the team.

“Shrugging off that injury, huh?” Nails quipped.

“You’re one to talk!” Hawk said sharply. The cuts around Nails’s eye were gone. The only sign he’d ever been hurt was a pair of thin lines of discoloration on his face.

“Oh, that’s an, uh...”

“It’s an ethnic thing,” G.R. said as he rolled his eyes.

“Get going, troops,” George commanded. “Keep in contact with us. Will, Jake and Marc will lead the way, as they know exactly where you’re headed. After safety, keeping a low profile is your top priority. No need to stir up any more trouble than we’re already in. Move out.”

The team filed out through the gap where one half of the front doors used to hang. Will climbed into his car and led the way off through the gate, while the others went to their own vehicles. Crow and Hawk went in Hawk’s truck with Crow driving while Nails rode with Marc again.

George stood on the front steps, watching them go. He sighed softly as Marc’s truck turned the corner around the gate and disappeared.

“Are you coming, George?” Sullivan asked after George stood quietly for several moments. Cynthia and G.R. were waiting as well. When George didn’t answer, they exchanged confused glances.

“I am,” George said at last without turning around. “I have to make some calls first. Please wait for me in the Situation Room. You can get something to drink first, if you like.”

Cynthia and G.R. exchanged looks again. “All right, George, we’ll see you shortly,” said Sullivan. She turned on her heels and led the other two toward the stairs.

When the three of them were out of earshot, George took a Smileyphone™ out of his pocket and dialed. While it rang on the other end George began to walk down the front steps and into the driveway.

“*Detective King, Homicide,*” came the eventual answer on the phone.

“Hello, Samuel,” said George.

“*George? What can I do for you?*” Detective King sounded hesitant and a little embarrassed.

“I’m just letting you know, the team is headed back to 918 Devonshire,” George said. “We’ll try to keep it as succinct and low profile as possible, but there may be larger problems involved.”

“*I see. Is that all?*”

“Not by any means. I hope the awkwardness of this situation will not color our relationship any further, but the circumstances call for brevity.”

“*What’s happening?*”

“We’ve come across new evidence that the creatures at the rig, as well as the specimens that laired at Devonshire, are the forerunners to some kind of organized invasion of Ylelon.”

“*You aren’t serious!*”

“I’m afraid so. Both groups of creatures were summoned by a party of considerable power.”

“*What are you doing now?*”

“The team is headed to Devonshire in full force. We are going to destroy the device by which the creatures were summoned in an attempt to prevent repeat incidents. I know there has been tension between us in the recent past, but if you’re willing and able to work with us again I suspect we will have need of a little selective cover, if you follow me.”

“*I’ll keep an eye on it, George. You and I still have some things to talk about, but you know I’ll do what it takes to protect the innocent.*”

"I appreciate that, Samuel. I think I speak for the rest of the team when I say we're glad you're still willing to work with us."

"Thank you, George. Call me back if you need anything else."

George hung up, dialed another number and waited through two rings before it was answered.

"Harrow here, make it quick."

"Mr. Harrow, this is George Manor."

"What? Mr. Manor? How did you get this number?"

"Never mind. Is Mr. Rowland available?"

"Mr. Rowland is in a meeting now and this number is not intended for use outside this branch of Mr. Rowland's organization."

"That's irrelevant. I've been waiting for word from Mr. Rowland regarding my construction interests for three days now. Please tell Mr. Rowland that if I have not heard from him by this time tomorrow I will be forced to have my projects attended to by other parties. I believe Mr. Rowland would be rather dismayed if I had to turn over the details of our working relationship to one of his competitors."

"What?! You can't do this! We--"

"Have exhausted my patience. The security of my home is compromised and my requests for expediency on your parts have not been taken seriously. You have my terms."

George hung up and walked for a few moments. The long grass of the yard was waving in the night wind the way he liked. It reminded him of simpler times in his youth before he had taken so many strange responsibilities upon himself. At length he came to stand under a small tree. There he dialed his phone a third time. It rang eight times before it was picked up.

"Thanks for calling Tiger Enton Dojo," said a chipper baritone voice with a hint of an accent.

"Hello, Master Pana. This is George Manor."

"George! How are you?"

"I've been better. The team is on its way to destroy one of the enemy's bastions of power."

"Goodness! How has this happened?"

"The team stumbled across the summoning circles that monster uses to bring his little peons to wreak havoc. We only know about one other, which is where the team is headed."

"But this is good news! If the team made the discovery for themselves, then they are safe. The rules of the Truce will protect them, yes?"

"I wish that were true, Master. The truth is the team still doesn't know about the Truce. They don't know what danger they will be in just going into that chamber. To be honest, I don't either."

"I do not think you need to worry, George. The enemy must abide by the Truce, just as we do."

"The enemy is a monster of great power with no morality or sense of fair play, Master Pana. This war has gone on for far too long and I fear that he may forget his agreement if he senses we are finally gaining the upper hand against him."

"I think you are forgetting something, George. The monster we fight is not all-powerful. Do not underestimate who you have become, my friend. Our side has power as well, or we would not have this cold war, we would have a slaughter."

"As always, your wisdom is humbling, Master Pana."

Master Pana laughed softly. *"I am merely sharing my point of view. You are stalwart and cautious, maybe too much so. I think you forget that you need not fear Terek Domar as much as you used to."*

"Please don't say that name."

"My apologies. Nevertheless, remember that you are a force to be reckoned with. The Lonely Winds have done much good in their time, but you are the reason that the foe we fight has not moved to take Ylelon for his own."

"I certainly hope so."

"Surely you did not call to hear me prattle on, my friend. What can I do for you?"

"We have some new members since I last spoke with you. I wanted to see if you would be willing to take them on in training in the near future. I suspect that our actions tonight are going to escalate this conflict and my team will need to be ready."

"It would be my honor to help. You know I am always available to assist you. Would the other team members be returning as well?"

"If I can arrange it. I fear my veteran members have become somewhat apathetic of late. They are in for a rude awakening."

"Such happens in time of war. I will do all that I can to ensure that the team is ready for whatever trials they may face."

"I am in your debt, as always, Master Pana."

"Think nothing of it, my friend. I am glad to be of aid. I will call you this evening after classes are over and we can discuss times for training."

"Thank you. Please give Master McCoy my best."

"I will do so."

George hung up and dropped his phone back into his pocket. He spent several minutes watching the grass wave before he headed back into the Mansion.

The convoy split up three blocks away from Devonshire street and each vehicle parked in a separate inauspicious location. The team coordinated coming together by way of their Jakecams™ and met in the same alley where Will and Marc had stood while scouting 918 a couple of weeks before. The six of them stood looking at the charred ruins of what had once been a humble home.

Will tapped the Jakecam™ he had clipped to the shoulder of his shirt. "Testing, testing."

"We read you loud and clear, Will," George's voice came through.

"Excellent. Jake and Hawk, you're with me. The rest of you wait here," Will said flatly. He looked up and down the quiet city street, lit only by the occasional dilapidated streetlight, then motioned for Jake and Hawk to follow him as he jogged across the street to the ruins. Jake constantly looked about, worried that someone would see them, but the entire block seemed to be deserted. His armor made soft whirring sounds as he trundled a knapsack filled with rappelling equipment across the street.

When the trio reached the ruins they ran around to the side where the kitchen entrance had been in order to be more out of sight. The only sounds were the distant lapping of the waves in the bay and the flapping and fluttering of the ridiculous amount of police tape strung across the crumbling, blackened remnants of the walls. Will tore loose a handful of the tape that hung across the empty doorframe and led the way inside. The interior walls were almost universally charred. Here and there gaped openings in the ceiling where one could glimpse the remains of the incinerated upper floor or the open sky. The kitchen door, now little more than a blackened slab, lay on the floor between the doorway and the hole in the floor that had been punched by a skydiving bathtub. The odor of smoke and burned wood hung thick in the air.

As Will led the way through the kitchen into the room behind it, Jake couldn't help but look around suspiciously. The last time he had been here the lingering fear that any wrong step might set off a lethal booby trap had lurked in the back of his mind. That had been when the house was abandoned, but in relatively good condition. Now it was a crumbling ruin and the walls let drift a fine mist of dust and ash at the slightest touch, yet the three of them proceeded through the structure as though they were going for a walk in a park. The floors seemed secure, at least, but Jake didn't see the harm in treading lightly anyway--his armor and weaponry doubled his weight.

Will passed through the next room and into the dining room, where he waited with Hawk by the square hole in the floor. "We should set up here," he said as Jake made his way into the room.

"All right," Jake replied. "One question. Why don't we use the hole in the kitchen?"

"Because this one was deliberately created. The floor around it is more likely to be stable, and it has a more regular shape to work with."

"Fair enough." Jake set down his knapsack and began to set out equipment. He handed a winch to Hawk, who began to tap at walls and test exposed support struts for an object strong enough to rappel from.

"I believe we're all set here, Crow. You can bring the others to join us now," Will said. A moment later Crow answered, *"On the way."*

By the time Nails, Marc, and Crow had rejoined the others, Hawk had found a support strut that

was still very sound and he and Jake had set the winch in place and prepared the rest of the equipment.

“All right, I will go first,” Will said. “Jake and Crow will follow me. Hawk will remain behind to stand guard.”

“Shouldn’t I go first? I have better protection,” Jake said.

“No,” Will replied. “I’ve been down there before. I’ll take a look around and test the lines. You can join me when I have the lay of the land.”

Jake helped him put on his harness and attach it to the line. Will hopped through the opening and began his descent into the strange space beneath the seemingly mundane house. Hawk turned the crank on the winch smoothly and quickly and in half the span of a minute Will’s boots were resting on the rough concrete floor of the great chamber. He took a flashlight from his backpack and shone it around, illuminating the enormous empty space. He saw the porcelain fragments of the bathtub scattered across the floor and only a few steps away the wood, steel and glass remnants of the equipment and backpack he had lost when he fell a few weeks before. Within moments he was satisfied that the chamber was empty and still. Then he saw the door. Where before it was merely a mystery, now that he stood facing it with some hints of what lay beyond it seemed menacing somehow.

“It’s all clear. You can come down,” he said flatly.

Jake and Crow joined him shortly. “Jake? Crow? Scanners,” he commanded. Crow looked at Jake, who merely shrugged and took out the Osborn Eye. He clicked it on and it immediately began to bleep and whirl enthusiastically at the same time Crow began a series of simple incantations to allow her to perceive things her regular senses did not. Several more seconds passed while the two in turn examined the chamber by their own means.

“Guys, I think we’re clean in here. I don’t see anything we need to worry about,” Jake said at last.

“Likewise,” Crow said.

“Great. Marc! Nails!” Will said into his Jakecam™. “You two head down.”

In short order Marc and Nails slid down the cables and joined the three other warriors. “Nails, you have the honors,” Will said dryly. Marc handed a crowbar out of his knapsack to Nails, who marched nonchalantly across the chamber and planted one end of the bar in the seam of the door. He gave it a shove and the door swung open, so much like the other one had that Will actually had a brief moment of *deja vu*. Beyond the door was another short tunnel much like the first one, and beyond that darkness, out of the reach of the team’s lights.

“Hawk, keep in touch. Let us know if anything happens up there,” said Will.

“Roger that.”

“*Proceed with caution, folks,*” George said. Will and Jake took point at the front, leading the others to stand by Nails in the open doorway. Their collective lights attacked the thick darkness beyond as Will lead them in single file into the chamber.

It was much like the first one, down to the smooth surfaces of what appeared to be stone in what should have been sand. The circle in the floor was different from the first one, with different shapes and curves, but it was just as large and complex as the other one had been. Where the first chamber had four ornately caved statues, here were a series of twelve long plinths or altars, placed equidistant around the edge of the summoning circle. Laid out on each altar was a single body dressed in robes of soft black cloth, covering them from head to toe. Large hoods were drawn up and folded over their faces, so that only their pale hands were visible and their arms were crossed over their bodies. The chamber was as still as a tomb.

“What do we have here?” Jake asked softly and activated his armor’s weaponry. The hissing and grinding of the suit’s machinery seemed ear-splittingly loud in the quiet crypt.

“I’m guessing they’re not feng shui,” Crow remarked. “I don’t see anything else in here. Would these be guardians?”

“Any input, George?” Will asked.

“*None comes readily to mind. Can you tell me the circumstances of the golems in the other chamber becoming active?*”

Will and Jake exchanged glances, then looked together at Marc, who shrugged.

“They just stood around for a while. They only moved when I was leaning on one of them.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a security system,” Crow observed.

“Maybe he violated their personal space,” Nails remarked.

“What do you think, George? Should we proceed?” asked Will.

“Yes, but be on your guard. We have no idea if these bodies are golems, undead or something else altogether. Jake should set up while the rest of you give him cover.”

Will pursed his lips in thought for a moment before responding. “Sounds good to me. All right, Jake, do your thing. Get set as quickly as you can. The rest of you are with me. We’re going to cover Jake from the doorway. Hawk, I want you to be ready to pull us out at a moment’s notice.”

“Roger that.”

“Nobody touch anything. We’re just keeping watch. The first time any of these things moves or anyone sees anything weird, we’re gone, understand?”

“You got it!” Nails said with a salute. Crow giggled and Marc snickered.

Jake deactivated his guns and walked slowly toward the circle. He paced directly between two of the altars with plenty of room on either side. As he went he caught a glimpse of one of the bodies’ hands. The cut of the nails and shape of the fingers hinted that the body was a woman’s. Jake found himself wondering who she had been and how she had come to lie in this place.

“What is it, Jake?” George asked, and Jake started.

“Uh...nothing. These look like bodies, not statues,” Jake addressed the group. He hurried past the altars to the center of the great circle, where he knelt and began to ready his supplies.

The moments crawled by, the only sound in the chamber Jake’s tireless working. He set charge after charge of plastic explosive, molding the substance into the grooves in the stone floor. Once he hit the trigger, the charges would set off the *plastique* in the only way possible, with an electric charge. The explosions would reduce the smooth floor of the room, not to mention most anything in it, to rubble.

The others whiled away the time as patiently as they could. At first they remained attentive and ready for battle, but as the minutes crawled by to become an hour and nothing happened they began to become lax in their watches. Will leaned against the chamber wall next to the door while Crow sat on the floor next to him. Marc and Nails had taken seats on the other side of the door and were swapping bawdy jokes in between bursts of rowdy laughter.

“All right, I’m about finished,” Jake said at last. He stood and punched a code into the wrist panel of his armor. “We’re all set. Now we just clear out and I’ll hit the switch.”

“Finally!” grunted Marc as he got to his feet. “If you took any longer I was gonna run for beer.”

“Yeah, I was beginning to wonder if you were taking a nap down there,” Hawk put in.

“Kiss off,” groaned Jake.

“Are you sure this will do the job?” Will asked as he slung his pack up onto his shoulder.

“No doubt,” was the confident reply. “In fact, I put enough of this stuff down, I’d really prefer to be topside and a block away, just to be sure.”

“Tell me you didn’t set enough charges to damage the adjacent houses, Jake,” George pleaded.

“Nope, I put enough down to shatter the floors in here. I just don’t want to be near the house when the bombs go off. We really don’t know how sturdy these walls are, you know.”

“Hey, do you guys hear something?” Nails asked suddenly. Everyone listened and heard what he was talking about: a low, almost sub-aural rumbling was sounding in the chamber. Instinctively, Jake, Will and Marc trained their guns on the bodies on the altars, while Crow readied her magic. The bodies did not move or act in any way but the rumbling continued, becoming a rough grinding. Will realized too late what it was: the door to the chamber was swinging closed behind them.

“The door!” he shouted, holstered his pistols and ran through the archway. He reached the door itself while it was still open enough to run through. He planted his feet and braced his hands against it, struggling to hold it open, but it continued to close as though he were not there. Nails arrived a split second later and Will actually felt the great stone door shudder as Nails jammed his hands against it and pushed. The door slowed but did not stop. By now the opening was barely enough to squeeze through. Then Marc was at the gap, jamming his crow bar in the open space. The metal twisted, bent, and finally

snapped out of Marc's hands and slapped against the chamber door as it closed and the rumbling ceased, replaced by an ominous quiet.

"This doesn't strike me as a good thing," Nails muttered.

"Will? Jake? What's going on down there?" Hawk's voice sounded over the Jakecams™.

"The door just closed us in!" Will shouted, forgetting himself. Jake was only just catching up to the group, having run from the middle of the chamber.

"How could it close by itself?" he asked incredulously. "It's just a block of stone on hinges!"

"Apparently it's more than that," George said, and Will couldn't decide whether his tone was sarcastic or fearful. "Right now you just have to find a way out."

"Uh, guys?" Crow whimpered from behind the four men. "We've got another problem."

Uh-oh, Nails thought as he turned around. *Ten chips says this is going to suck.*

The four warriors turned on their heels and faced back into the chamber. The stream of their lights played around the great room and showed them that the bodies on the altars were now all sitting upright. Their faces were still covered by the hoods of their robes, but their heads were turned in the direction of the team members. They did not move, but watched the five frightened monster hunters in the eerie quiet of the sealed chamber.

"It's a trap!" Marc blurted. "Let's get the hell out of here!" He turned and threw himself against the door, pushing with all his might. Nails joined him, but where before it had swung open readily, it now stubbornly remained closed.

"Jake?" whispered Will. "What about setting off your explosives? Would that get them?"

"Yeah, sure. Good idea. Except that if the shockwave doesn't kill us, the shrapnel will."

"So we take them on?" Marc said emphatically while cocking his shotgun.

"Do we really need to?" Crow asked. "They aren't doing anything."

Will had his pistols leveled and took a tentative step back into the chamber. Nothing else happened when he did, so he asked, "George? What do you think?"

"At a guess, I'd say you're facing a malfunctioning security system."

Jake had been shoving at the Chamber door along with Marc and Nails, but now he stopped. "Come again?"

"These defenses may simply be faulty. The golems in the other chamber did not activate until long after you had entered. Here, the door has closed, apparently to keep you trapped, but only after you've been present for more than an hour."

"Not to mention these things aren't actually doing anything," Nails added.

"Precisely."

"So, should we take them out preemptively?" Jake asked. "Blast them now before they kick in?"

"I wouldn't recommend it, Jake. Best, I think, to concentrate on getting out. If you can do so without being attacked, then the detonation should take care of them."

"Right, then. Jake, any ideas on how to get this open? Could you set some more explosives and get the door open that way?" asked Will.

"I could try, but like I said, I'm not sure how stable these walls are. We've got concrete on one side and this weird smooth stone in here. Setting off an explosion and the resulting seismic disturbance could have catastrophic ramifications."

"Huh?" Marc said.

"Bombs make monster hunters go squish," Crow explained.

"Ok, we'll need to pry this thing open," Will said resolutely. "You other guys take a break. Jake, you've looked at the hinges this thing works on. See if you can chisel them out, or something. Maybe we can take this thing apart."

"Right."

"We should give them some space to work," Crow said softly and led Marc and Nails a few steps back into the chamber. They stopped at the edge of the archway, looking nervously at the dozen corpses that continued to stare at the exit. The only sounds were Will and Jake's occasional whispering, the sound of tools on stone as they worked and Marc's occasional fidgeting with his shotgun. As the minutes

crawled by, Crow became more and more uneasy.

“Honey? Are you still up there?” she whispered into her Jakecam™.

“I’m here, babe,” Hawk answered. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m just a little nervous. I don’t like being in here with these things.”

“Do you know what they are?”

“Jake said they looked like real bodies, so I guess they’re some kind of undead.”

“Wait,” G.R.’s voice sounded over the Jakecams™. “You think they’re undead?”

“That’s the supposition,” George answered. “Do you have a theory?”

“Aren’t undead supposed to be able to think and act independently? Unlike golems, if they’re created, they will follow basic orders, but they can make their own decisions.”

“That’s a good point, G.R.,” George admitted.

“Wait a minute,” Crow said. “How would you know that? Aren’t you the new guy?”

“Oh, don’t worry. When it comes to things dead, morbid or gross, Sullen knows about it,” Nails muttered and rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, what’s the point?” Crow said quietly. She glanced again at the bodies on the altars, then looked away quickly with a shudder.

“My point is that even if these things are part of a security system that’s not working right, they’re probably still dangerous,” G.R. grumbled. “If these things were in hibernation or whatever and the ‘alarm’ in the chamber woke them up, then they’re awake and aware right now, waiting to make their move.” Nails looked thoughtful for a heartbeat, then began to walk toward the altars with a purpose.

“Hang on there, tough guy! What exactly do you think you’re doing?” George chided.

“I’m just testing a theory. Hold tight, folks,” said Nails confidently.

He stopped with his toes almost touching the nearest altar and leaned over to look beneath the body’s hood. Crow caught her breath. Nothing happened, so Nails held his hand in front of the corpse’s face, made a fist, drew back his hand and let fly. Will gasped audibly and Crow let out a little shriek, but Nails stopped his fist an eyelash away from the dead thing’s hood. Still, nothing happened.

“Seven hundred demerits and trash duty for three months, Nails! What on earth were you thinking?” George demanded.

“Sorry, gang,” said Nails genuinely. “I wanted to make sure these things weren’t just messing with us. The best way to do that was to make one of these things think it was in serious danger.”

“Couldn’t you have told us first what you were up to?” Will snarled.

“Then they might have known I wasn’t serious,” Nails chuckled.

Will sighed. “Let’s just get out of here,” he said as he went back to work with Jake. “Any luck so far?” he asked the tinker, who was chipping and tapping at the seam where the door’s hinges were.

“Yeah, all of it bad. I was hoping I could chisel through enough of this to reach the hinges, but whatever this glass-stone stuff is, it’s pretty solid. I’d need some heavy machinery to get through this.”

“That’s good news, though!” Cynthia said. “If the rock is sturdy, that means you can set your explosives and blow open the door without worrying about a cave-in, right?”

“You read my mind, Cynthia,” Jake said, then did a double take at Will, who made a sort of muffled snort at the mind-reading comment. “Just give me a few minutes and I’ll have this ready for a go.” He began to apply wads of plastic explosive along the seams of the door.

“All right, celebration time!” said Nails as he started to walk back toward where Marc and Crow were standing. The corpse behind him turned its head to look at him and raised one arm, pointing an open, feminine hand at him. An arc of electricity like a miniature stroke of lightning leapt from its fingers and blasted Nails in the back. He was thrown forward to land on his face with a cry of surprise and lay there with the back of his shirt burned open and the skin beneath singed.

“What the hell--?” Marc snarled as he brought his shotgun to bear. Crow took one look at what was happening in the room and began to focus, preparing her magic.

Will and Jake had turned on their heels when they heard Nails shout. The corpses on the altars were all moving as one, swinging their legs around so they could stand on the side of their altar that was nearest to the team members.

“We are the End,” they said in perfect unison. Their voices were full of malice and so dry as to be indistinguishable from one another. “We are the living who are not alive and the dead that do not rest. We are the sum of all lives and the last of all thoughts.” They finished their speech and stood perfectly still, staring emptily into the chamber at the frightened but stalwart warriors that watched them back.

“What the hell? What’s going on? Somebody fill me in!” Hawk called frantically.

“I think we’re in trouble,” Will said.

“Will, get out of there!” George commanded.

“There’s nothing I can do, George! I can’t set off a bomb while I’m standing next to it!” Jake cried. His armor’s guns could be heard activating through his Jakecam™.

The images on the team’s cameras flickered and wavered wildly as each member moved to prepare for a fight. The corpses in the background were no longer moving, only still watching the team impassively. Nails’ Jakecam™ showed a close-up of the smooth stone floor, which gradually receded as Nails began to push himself upward.

“That sucked in so many ways,” he coughed out. He rolled onto his back and faced the corpse that had attacked him as he rose to his feet. His Jakecam™ view fell over it, standing by its altar, watching him. Her face was now visible under the hood and illuminated in the lights Marc and Crow had trained on her. Her eyes were lifeless and empty, yet they swiveled in their sockets to follow Nails as he got to his feet.

“So tell me, what was that for, anyway? I didn’t think you’d take my advances so seriously,” Nails quipped.

“Back away from her, Nails!” George advised. “Don’t provoke them any further!”

“Don’t we have any way to help them?” whined G.R.. “We can’t just sit here!”

“Even if they weren’t an hour away, they’re sealed off. They’re on their own,” George answered, crestfallen.

“Somebody tell me what’s wrong!” Hawk’s voice came over the Jakecams™ again. Nails was standing barely a jump away from the corpse that attacked him, while the others had their guns and lights trained on her to offer support.

“I just got slapped down,” Nails said levelly. “Hold on a moment, I’m going to even up the score.”

“Nails, I doubt--” George began, but Nails leapt forward and bashed the corpse in the face with his fist. She hurtled backward over her altar and landed with a bone-rattling thump in the middle of the circle. For a moment she lay still, but presently she began to rise to her feet, moving stiffly and raggedly like a broken puppet.

“Who else wants some?” Nails challenged as he took a few steps back with his arms extended. The two corpses flanking him each raised an arm and pointed their hands toward him. One unleashed a bolt of energy like the one Crow had used earlier, but this one of a leprous green, while the other one let fly an arc of lightning like the first corpse had used. Nails saw them coming and hurled himself backwards in a leap that covered half of the distance between himself and the wall.

The other team members didn’t miss a beat. While Nails was still in the air, they all let fly with their weapons and magic, tearing into the two corpses that had attacked him. Jake’s machine guns, Will’s silver rounds and Marc’s buckshot made short work of the two dead things while Crow furrowed her brow in concentration. The remaining ten corpses, including the one that Nails had punched, were all raising their hands together, but before they could act a great cloud of roiling black smoke appeared between them and the team.

“That should buy us some time!” shouted Crow. “Jake, get us out of here!”

“Go!” Jake shouted and slapped Will on the shoulder. Will dashed out of the archway to join Marc, Crow and Nails along the wall. Jake turned and began to rifle through his pack, searching for a detonator. He was slapping the components he needed together when something struck the back of his armor and knocked him off balance. Instinctively he put out his hands to stop himself and dropped the pieces of his detonator on the floor. He didn’t dare take the time to pick them up so he jumped to his feet

and wheeled around to face his attacker.

The robed corpses (the End, Jake reminded himself) had marched beyond the reaches of Crow's cloud and were now hurling spells at the other team members with wanton abandon. Jake was familiar with magic, having seen Crow use it a great deal during the time they had worked together, but this was a display of a magnitude beyond anything he had ever witnessed. The End were flinging fireballs, lightning arcs and flashing bursts of energy at the other team members. Crow had thrown up a field of magical force as cover for herself, Will, and Marc, and the three of them were fighting back from within the field, which absorbed attacks from the front while allowing them to shoot and cast spells from the inside. Nails was bounding around the room in a blur of violence, dashing up to one End long enough to deal it a blow before hurtling on to another. Some of the End were shifting their attention from Will and the others to focus on Nails, but he moved so quickly that none of them were able to catch him with a spell.

But what really held Jake's attention was the lone End coming toward him at a brisk walk with both hands held toward him. One of them had an aura of bright yellow energy and the other was crackling with twisting and leaping tendrils that Jake realized with horror was electricity. If it missed a shot at him while he was standing next to the plastique...

He charged directly at the oncoming corpse while simultaneously activating his armor's guns. The End let fly with a burst of electricity that struck Jake full in the chest. Mentally he crossed his fingers, hoping that his suit's insulation would hold out even as the arc burned an ugly pit in his chest plate. He got a nasty zap, but his power supply kept working and he barreled into the End in a tackle backed by the suit's power. He heard a gut-wrenching crunch as they collided and they went down in a heap, Jake grappling with the End as he pinned it to the smooth rock floor. It thrashed around wildly and jammed one hand against his face shield in an effort to shove him away, but Jake's armor was its equal when it came to brute strength and Jake had the advantage in fighting ability. He gripped the offending arm with one hand and when the End raised the other, cracking and glowing with electricity, Jake batted it away and repeatedly hammered his armored fist into its face until its head was a greasy sludge on the stone. Without a moment's hesitation he ran to join the others.

Crow raised another force field as the first one failed. Will and Marc were still firing away and Crow offered what help she could but her force field was taking a real pounding from the End's spells. Nails was on the warpath in his support role. When an End focused on casting spells at the others, he would attack it, often crippling or destroying it before it could react. Three of the End already lay broken and lifeless on the floor, but eight more were still going and were beginning to coordinate their attacks better, alternating attacking Crow's force field and Nails to keep him off of them. Nails was getting fewer and fewer shots in as the remaining undead used more and more organized attacks to keep him dodging and running rather than attacking. As he came at a dead run toward the center of the chamber Jake broke the stalemate by unleashing a torrent of bullets that mowed down the nearest End. It was flung forward onto its face by the force of the projectiles, which broke the concentration of the other End as they focused on Nails. When the remaining seven turned to see where the devastating attack had come from, Nails took the opening and rushed one of them, battering it to a pulp while Marc and Will unloaded on another and Jake turned his guns on a third.

Only four of the original twelve End remained but they moved quickly to re-coordinate their efforts. They ran with surprising speed to stand in a single rank in the center of the chamber and when Nails came at them again all four of them raised their right hands. A brilliant flash of light stopped him in his tracks. As he blinked to clear his vision he was flung away from them by an invisible force that hurled him halfway across the chamber toward the door. He was up again quickly and on his way back into the fray, but Jake stopped by signaling with a raised hand. When Nails mouthed the word, "Why?" Jake pointed at the plastique lining the chamber door, then at the remaining End. Nails nodded his understanding and dashed back toward the door while Jake ran to join the others.

"What's going on?" Will shouted between salvos.

"Nails is going to try to get us out of here," Jake yelled back over a burst of plasma. The End had raised their own force field and the two sides of the fight were barraging each other again. Bullets, buckshot and plasma mixed and mingled with magical firepower in a dazzling lightshow. Shadows played

across the walls and the rolls of smoke in the far side of the chamber.

Meanwhile, Nails reached Jake's toolkit by the door, picked it up and took a spanner from inside. He hurled it at the Ends' force field and shouted, "Hey! Deaths of the party! Share the love!" The spanner bounced harmlessly off of the field, which rippled visibly in opaque waves in the air. One of the End turned to look at Nails, who grinned broadly and waved with one hand while making a very rude gesture with the other. The End raised its hand and a bolt of fire hurled at Nails, who took the shot on his left shoulder. Clapping a hand over the wound and twisting in place, he feigned more injury than he actually had while watching out of the corner of his eye. Another bolt came at him, this one shimmering orange energy that hit him in the remnants of the wounds on his right. It didn't do a lot of damage to him, but this time he didn't have to fake the pain. He grit his teeth and thought he caught sight of a smile on the face under the hood. It hurled a bolt of lightning at him and Nails was off to the rest of the team as fast as he could go, taking the toolkit with him. The lightning bolt hit the plastic explosive and the resulting explosion made every surface in the chamber vibrate and the team's ears pop.

"Nails! Check the door!" Jake shouted. Nails turned where he had been standing outside Crow's force field and hurled back to the chamber door, vanishing into the cloud of dust that veiled the archway. He felt through the cloud and tensed when his hands came to rest on the door. It was pitted and jagged and missing huge chunks on the right side where the plastique had been, but it still stood. With a deep breath, Nails set his feet against the floor and pushed against the top of the door with all his might. For a heartbeat it did not move and Nails feared that the explosion had failed to reach the door's hinges, but then he felt it shift ever so slightly outward. He kept up the pressure and his feet skidded across the smooth, rock-strewn floor. Cursing under his breath, he grabbed the ragged edge of the walls, seeking a hand hold for leverage. His fingers came to rest in a groove high up, near where the top hinge had been. With all his might Nails pulled with that hand while pushing with the other. The door tilted again, ever so slightly, then began to lean as he strained against it. He could hear the gunfire and bursts of energy in the chamber behind him and thought *This had better earn me their trust*. Gritting his teeth, he pushed off from the floor with both feet and put everything he had into a final shove. The door toppled with impossible slowness, rocking upward onto its outside edge with its top edge grating against the inside of the doorway before slamming into the floor of the concrete pit with an earth-shaking crash.

Nails grinned, then hurled himself back into the chamber. He ran straight at the End's force field, which was rippling like a pond in a spring rain from the attacks the team sent at it. Nails reached it just as it collapsed and one of the End began to weave the spell for a new one. He barreled into it while the others were distracted and knocked it prone.

"The door's open! Run for it!" he shouted, leapt back to his feet and tripped one of the other End. Crow took the cue and threw another smoke screen over the End and the circle as the team ran for the doorway. Jake waited for Nails to race out of the cloud before laying down a wave of suppressing fire, sweeping the billowing smoke with oodles and oodles of bullets.

"Do we fight the rest?" Nails called as he ran to Jake's side.

"No need!" answered Jake above the roar of his guns. "They're standing on the bombs!"

Will heard that comment and redoubled his running pace for the door.

Crow and Marc were out first, feeling their way through what was left of the dust cloud around the arch and running around the fallen door to the rope. "Hawk! Get us out of here!" Marc called and stood guard while Crow began to fix her harness to the cable. Will was close behind and waited at the archway for Nails. Jake was still firing sporadic bursts into Crow's smoke screen and dodging the spells that the Ends fired blindly from inside. When he was only a jog away from the archway he deactivated his guns and ran through. As he emerged from the door, he saw Crow working with the cable and shouted, "No! Everyone get down!"

The team didn't need to be told twice. They ran for the corners of the pit while Jake threw himself against the wall beside the door and flipped open his wrist panel. He flipped up his visor and smiled at Will and Marc.

"And now, it's time for everyone's favorite game show..." he prompted, and Will and Marc took up a chant with him, "Fun...with...ARSON!"

Jake hit the trigger on his wrist panel and the detonators in the grooves of the circle set off the plastique. The explosion shook the concrete room's floor. Cracks formed in the walls and dust fell from the underside of the house above, which creaked ominously.

"Did that get them?" Will called.

"What?!" shouted Marc.

"It should have," Jake said as he took off his helmet and rubbed one ear with his free hand. "Either way I can pretty much guarantee that circle won't be causing any mischief again."

"WHAT?!" Marc yelled.

"Maybe we should make sure?" Crow suggested.

"I'm having trouble caring," Nails said, with a worried glance at the creaking house above.

"Yeah, come up here, then we can discuss the issue," Hawk called through the opening in the floor.

"Sounds good to me. I can't recommend this as a good place to visit on a Saturday night," said Jake.

Will and Marc watched the door while the others fixed their harness to the cable and Hawk hauled them back up to the house. Nothing unseemly happened and the chamber was still and quiet as Will, the last to go, was lifted out of the pit.

Will scouted outside to make certain the coast was still clear, then led the team back to the alley across the street. They rested there and reloaded while Will talked to George.

"What's the status, George? Do we have cops coming?"

"Surprisingly, no. We haven't heard from Detective King, but I would keep my guard up if I were you. How are you all feeling?"

"I think we're all good, George," Jake offered. "No one's hurt and we cleaned out the chamber."

"I don't know about you guys, but that was *fun*," Marc chuckled.

"We had fun and violence and no one died. I like this group!" said Nails enthusiastically.

"Glad to hear it. Gather up and head back as soon as you can."

The team returned to the Mansion without incident. Sullivan gave each member a quick inspection upon their return before everyone gathered in the Situation Room for debriefing.

"First issue: no one is hurt?" George asked Sullivan as he stood at his place at the head of the table. He took a sip from his brandy snifter and set it on the table.

"Correct," Sullivan affirmed. "Not a scratch on any of them and Hawk is still in good shape."

"That's a relief. I half-expected him to jump into the pit and try to break open the door with his head when the fight started," Jake teased.

"What's that, Osborn?" Hawk shot back. "I can't hear you. My ears are still ringing from the bombs you use for everything from demolitions to opening stuck pickle jars."

"Hey, it was just the one time!"

"Moving right along," George muttered. "Detective King called during your return trip. It seems there was a call to the station about the noise coming from 918, but as far as he can tell it's being ignored as sounds of the wreckage settling."

"Ah, the ever reliable Ylelon City authorities at work," Jake mused.

"Indeed. While we cannot be entirely certain of the destruction of the circle and its guardians, I think it's a safe assumption that they are no longer a concern for us."

"Right on. I love good news," Hawk said.

"You know it. What do we do now? Are there more of those circles out there?" asked Crow.

"Not that we have seen," George admitted. "We must be ever vigilant in the future. Who or whatever is responsible for the circles may seek retribution."

"So much for going bar hopping tonight," Marc grumbled.

"I thought you'd learned your lesson about that!" snickered Hawk.

"I'm glad to see everyone seems to be in a good mood," remarked Sullivan. "The constant tension

of the recent weeks was getting a little stale.”

For the span of a few breaths, no one said anything. Then Will said, “Look, George, about the last few days...”

“Think nothing of it, William,” said George. “This is a stressful job, so it’s only expected that there would be friction at times. I only hope that this feeling is more or less universal...?” He looked around the table at each member of the team. Though no one spoke, the general atmosphere was one of consent.

“Outstanding. Moving on to situation assessment...”

“There’s really nothing more we can do,” interrupted Will.

“I have to agree,” affirmed Crow. “If we don’t know where any more summoning circles are then we can’t do anything about them.”

“I agree. Which is why, in the future, we must be ever-vigilant. From now on we will know to investigate scenes of supernatural activity for such devices and be able to deal with them accordingly.”

“That should be easy enough. This was like old times, everyone fighting together,” Jake said contentedly.

“Yeah, the old and the new...” Will mused. He turned to face Nails, who looked back at him inexpressively with his black eyes. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about the problems we’ve had. I don’t think we’d have made out as well as we did today without your help.”

Nails blinked once, leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Hey, no problem, man. We did some good work and I got to get out of the house. That’s enough for me.”

“Get bent!” G.R. snarled.

“Patience, G.R.,” George said sarcastically. “I’m glad that you have taken to field work so well, Nails, although in the future I’d prefer it if you curbed your tendency to wander alone.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Nails said, rubbing the back of his head. “Old habits die hard. I’m not used to working with a group.”

“We can fix that,” said George wryly. “Everyone get a good night’s sleep. It’s been a very long day. Tomorrow we will begin a regimen of training and exercise for our new members. G.R., Cynthia and Nails have a great deal to learn about field work and procedure. Hawk, how long is your leave?”

“As long as you need it to be,” Hawk replied blithely. “I’ve got loads of leave time coming I haven’t used and since we’re in peacetime, I can put in requests for extended absences.”

“Excellent. In light of all that’s happened, I’d like to formally invite you and Crow to remain with us for as long as possible. I’m afraid I was a bit brusque before, but what I said was true: we are now at war. We’re going to need every bit of help we can get, until we know exactly what we’re up against.”

“This is a blessing in disguise, then,” Sullivan said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Marc.

“In the last three weeks we’ve had three new recruits,” Sullivan said. “None of us was entirely comfortable with G.R. or Nails at first. Cynthia was brought in rather unexpectedly. However, Cynthia and Nails have already proven their worth. G.R. may do so too, given time. All the uncertainty of the past weeks has been unnecessary, as we have found good help when we need it the most.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, Sullivan,” chuckled George. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going to call it a day. We can pick up here tomorrow.”

“Quack!”

“What the--?!” George shouted and skipped across the floor, away from where Eric stood near the base of his chair. Eric came after him at a run, quacking fiercely. George ran out of the room into the hall, the liquid in his snifter sloshing dangerously against the sides.

“Somebody get this freaking duck away from me!” he shouted back as his footsteps and Eric’s quacking faded in the distance.

“That was a waste of time,” G.R. sneered under his breath as he lumbered out of the room with Nails. “I could have been doing something interesting during all of this.”

“Now, now, be nice,” chided Nails, “or next time I’ll make you take point fighting monsters. It’s not as much fun as it looks, believe me.”

“Got a spare room for us, Sullivan?” Hawk asked with a wink as he took Crow’s hand.

“Yes, in fact, one ready and waiting. I set up your old room just in case. Although the bed may be a bit small for the two of you.”

“We’ll make do,” Crow said with a smile. She left with Sullivan and Hawk.

Marc and Jake left for the Rec Room together. “What’s with the duck?” Marc asked as they walked down the hall. Jake laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?”

“If I tell you, it’s a secret.”

“k.”

“I programmed Eric to think of George as his mother. That’s why he follows him around.” Marc considered this briefly, then burst into gales of appreciative laughter.

After Jake and Marc had left, Cynthia found herself alone in the Situation Room with Will.

“So, what are you going to do now?” she asked.

“Good question. I know I should get some rest, but I’m wired after today.” Will raised his arms and looked at his pale skin. “I need to spend more time outside.”

“Well…” Cynthia said coyly and dragged a fingertip over the luminous plastic tabletop. “We could go for a walk. Outside. If you wanted to.”

Will looked Cynthia in her bright green eyes. “I think I’d like that.”

They got up and walked out together.

The door to George’s Study opened suddenly and George slipped inside, slamming it behind himself. He stood there for a few moments, panting and gathering his thoughts. A steady, plaintive quacking came from the other side of the door.

George wiped sweat off of his forehead and breathed a sigh of relief. He walked to his favorite chair and set his snifter down on the end table next to it, then walked to his podium. Picking up his quill, he began to write.

Saturday, October the Sixteenth, 2043 T.E.

To my great surprise, this has been an excellent day. In the course of only a few hours, friendships have been re-forged, strengths revealed, and trusts renewed. Crow and Hawk have rejoined the team for the foreseeable future and bring with them some of the camaraderie and feel of security of the days before their departure. Nails has proven his mettle beyond any question and seems to have earned some measure of acceptance from the team. Cynthia and G.R. seem less than enthusiastic about my required regimen of training, but they have stayed with us nonetheless, despite the dangers they have witnessed.

We struck a tremendous blow for our side today. The team discovered one of the enemy’s summoning centers and because they found, entered and destroyed it and its companion Will stumbled across some weeks ago without my aid, I am confident that the confines of the Truce will protect them. I never thought that cursed compromise would actually work in our favor, but now that beast cannot strike back against our side without facing severe repercussions. My graceful yet manly script cannot convey the almost smug sense of relief I feel at knowing that we are finally gaining ground in the age-old battle for Ylelon. Dare I think that given sufficient time, we might actually win this war?

On a more personal level, while the situation between myself and Will, Jake, and Marc is still less than ideal, the tension seems to have subsided slightly. As far as I can gather Hawk and Crow seem to have had something to do with this, but I haven’t delved too deeply into the problem as of now. For the time being I will settle for the fact that the team is finally coming together again. We are growing in strength and unity when we need it most, for I fear the time is drawing near when the stalemate will break and we will face our ancient enemy in a final battle. May we be ready when it finally happens.

George set down his quill and sighed, then walked to his chair, sat and picked up his brandy snifter. “Here’s to those that fight the good fight,” he said and took a long draught.

Epilogue

In the wee hours of the morning when the moons had set and the night was inky black Atla walked through the warehouse district. He wore robes of a deep forest green with the same strange glyphs and sigils of silver thread sewn into its hems and the same hood as the blue robes he had worn weeks earlier. When he came to the door of the ancient warehouse, he opened the new lock and pushed the door open. Slipping inside, he closed the door and looked around.

“We’re not playing this game again, are we?” he asked the darkness.

An angry rumbling sounded from the shadows at the far end of the building. The sound was loud enough to be heard anywhere in the structure and so deep it made the lining of Atla’s stomach tremble.

“Well now, that’s hardy friendly,” Atla said.

Angry red light blazed in the dark as the dragon opened its eyes. It began to walk toward him with threatening deliberateness. When it bared its teeth, a fiery glow blazed in its mouth and the temperature of the air in the great expanse raised a few degrees.

“Now you’re just grandstanding,” Atla said derisively. “What’s the matter? Are you worried about George and his cronies? Afraid they’re going to bring your little empire crashing down?”

“Do not quibble with me, Atla!” roared the dragon as it stomped with one foreleg, fracturing the concrete floor into many great loose chunks. “I’m tired of your insults and provocations!”

“No quibbling here. I just think you might be a little upset. I mean, after everything the Lonely Winds have done in just one day, I think you’d have good reason to be afraid of the consequences.”

“Nothing has yet upset the balance between us,” the dragon rumbled. “Taunt me at your peril.”

“Yes? What are you going to do about it?” mocked Atla. “Oh, wait, you’re not going to do anything, because the Truce is still intact. You remember it? The one we agreed on?”

The dragon growled again and the metal siding of the warehouse trembled at the sound. “I will drive you out, Atla. I will find a way to be rid of you and your meat puppets and take back my territory. This land is mine!”

“I really don’t know why we still have these meetings,” groaned Atla. “We never say anything new anymore. You can’t get rid of me and you know it. I have layers upon layers of protection and the moment you step out of line I can ruin everything you hold dear. That is of course, assuming you don’t do it yourself. By listening to the ancient legends, you never guess that the great Terek Domar was such a gimp.”

More growling, so low and loud it resembled a waterfall. The warehouse became a little warmer despite the chilly wind that blew outside. “You try my patience! Truce or no truce, you will push me too far with your games!”

“Poppycock, and you know it. Even without our little stalemate, you still stick to your warped code of honor. It’s no fair fight if the mighty you takes on little old me.”

“This war drains us both. Why not abandon this place? Why trouble me in my home?”

Atla tugged casually at the hems of his robes and adjusted his hood. “Because I have a purpose here, the same as you. The difference is that my purpose is a worthy one, while you only follow your twisted ideals.” He turned and pulled the door open. “See you in a few days. Please try to have some conversation material ready next time.”

He stepped out and closed the door behind him. Metal rasped on metal as the lock was put in place, then the only sound in the warehouse was the dragon’s breathing, like the rapid rush of air from a blast furnace. It picked up one of the fractured slabs of concrete, as large as a person, as heavy as a small car, between two massive digits and flung it with a flick of its wrist, twirling end over end to shatter in the distance with a thunderous crash.

“Your reckoning is coming, meatling,” Terek Domar growled at the door. “I will make you pay, you and all those you make dance on puppet strings.”

It closed its eyes and the warehouse became dark, but the air remained warm for a long time.