

Turn Down Your Lights
(Where Applicable)

Book I
The Team

Prologue

Al Wilson sighed as he let himself into his apartment. He'd just returned from a blind date set up by a coworker but the whole thing had been a joke. The woman was taciturn, boring and had nothing in common with him.

Oh well, Buddy thought as he hung his coat by the door. *At least I still have the rest of the weekend.*

He tossed his keys on the coffee table and plopped into his chair in front of the TV. He was just about to pick up the remote when he heard a soft high-pitched chattering coming from behind him.

Oh great, he thought. *Now a squirrel's gotten in.*

He got up to look for it, aware he was unprepared to deal with a wild animal in his home but unwilling to leave it loose in the dark. He'd figure out what to do with it when he found it, he supposed.

He checked the kitchen first, half-expecting to find a cabinet door open and cereal spilling out of a gnawed box. To his surprise, it was just as orderly as he had left it. He stopped and listened for the sound again. After a moment he heard it, faint and distant, down the hallway. He went quietly, hoping he wasn't simply scaring whatever it was into dashing around the apartment.

The sound was steady now. He could hear it constantly as he made his way into the hall. It sounded closer and he realized that it was not a clicking or chattering as he first had thought, but more of a throaty rasping. It was almost like laughter...

He leaned into the bathroom on the right and flicked on the light. Nothing. Leaving the light on, he walked the few more steps to the bedroom. Turning on the light revealed nothing unusual, no disturbed belongings, no displaced city critter. He started to move into the room to look under the bed, then stopped and did a double take.

Buddy's dresser was positioned opposite the door. It had a large vanity mirror on the back, where he kept favorite pictures pressed into the edges. Usually it was loaded all the way around with images of vacations, parties and ex-girlfriends he didn't want to forget. But now all of the pictures were missing, save one.

The remaining photo was of Buddy and his two brothers on a fishing trip to the mountains last summer. The three of them were huddled together, smiling broadly at the camera. The picture was still in its usual place, near the top left corner of the mirror, but something didn't look right about it. As Buddy stepped closer, he saw what it was: the photo had been carefully torn along a line just beneath the three men's chins. Both strips of photo had been placed back on the mirror, with the decapitated trio's grins now a finger's width above their bodies. Buddy could not fathom why anyone would do such a thing, or how they might have gotten here to do it. He was so unnerved by what he saw that he could not form coherent thought at all.

Then there was a soft crunch, something heavy struck him in the head and the world went black.

Chapter I A Day's Work

Often in life we find ourselves making odd choices. We put ourselves in the midst of things we dislike, even detest, for the sake of doing something we feel is important. The more one works to remove an action, a presence, or a state of being, the more one may find oneself surrounded by it, immersed in a world composed of the very thing that person is trying so hard to eliminate. This is the strange dichotomy of those that work to change the world for the better: they find themselves by their own doing surrounded by that which they may detest the most.

Case in point: Will hated guns.

The young man had previously been a police officer, an idealistic individual driven to help others in the crime-ridden city he grew up in. He knew that serving the public trust was a task that was undertaken but never truly done. This had not hindered his determination in the least: as a rookie cop William Thatcher was honest, sharp-minded, and brave.

His tenure with the Ylelon City Police Department had nevertheless been brief. Too many of the other people there were not as devoted to their duties as they were to abusing their power. Will may have been idealistic, but he was not naïve. He knew that his time with the force would be limited, one way or another: sooner or later, the corruption around him, whether within or without his own precinct, would lead to serious conflict.

Will's time with the YCPD had thus ended over two years ago, yet he was still surrounded by wickedness in his nightly life. Wickedness, and a lot of guns.

Every night, Will prepared himself for one more night of fighting a battle that could never truly be won. He did this preparation in a truly unique room, a massive vault that was as much a museum as it was an arsenal. The Armory, as it was called by those who knew of it, was a space large enough to contain most ordinary houses. The walls were bare, painted a lifeless brown: the floor, concrete. Overhead buzzed a grid fixture of uncovered fluorescent lighting. Below ran row upon row of glass display cases filled with virtually every object of mayhem one could imagine. Starting at one end of the room, one could view the very earliest instruments of conflict: simple stone axes and spears, graduating to bows and atlatls. Walking from case to case was a journey through the eras of warfare. Here was the Bronze Age, here Iron: in one case, a crossbow, a row over, a blunderbuss. On ran the catalog of death through the ages, up to the implements of modern arsenals, including some models that were still considered experimental and in some cases, highly secret: a rail gun that could be carried by a single man, an experimental particle beam weapon.

Every night Will engaged in the same ritual: marching past the rows of display cases to a vault door on one wall near the back of the room. After opening the door with an access code entered into a security panel on the wall, Will would retrieve special ammunition from the room within. The space was long and narrow, lined with shelves stacked high with countless containers of ammunition for virtually every weapon found in the outer room. Will only used a specific set of ammunition, custom rounds meant specifically for his sidearms. Every night without fail he took a box of these bullets from the vault and carried them to a work table at the back of the great Armory. There he loaded clips for his pistols, which were themselves unique. They were sleek, black, and heavy, notably void of any serial number or distinguishing marks. He also kept a long knife with a singular shine in a sheath in one boot. Once he was satisfied that he was suitably armed, Will returned what munitions remained to the vault and locked it again. Such had been his habit for many months, every night without break, without fail: a man who detested guns and other weapons for the harm they could bring to people, surrounding himself with them.

On this particular evening, after fully thirteen months of observing this lonely ritual, Will finished his preparations and left the Armory. The front doors of the room were quite unusual, like so much else in this place: doubled blast doors that slid horizontally into the thick walls of the building at Will's approach.

Will walked with his eyes lowered. Long gone was his police uniform, now sitting unused on a

storage closet shelf in his old precinct. Now he dressed in black, the better to blend into the night he worked so fervently in. He wore a long black trench coat with many additional pockets sewn into the lining, the better to hold his extra ammunition, as well as dark sunglasses. Will's skin was pale after so much time sleeping in the day and going out in the evening, a sharp contrast to his dark apparel. His blonde hair, once worn long and wavy, was now kept short and spiky for quick maintenance.

Stepping out of the Armory was like stepping into a different world. Beyond the sterile arsenal was a vast foyer, framed by two massive curving staircases that led to a second-floor balcony. Rich carpet covered the floor and all of the décor was in warm colors. If the Armory was huge, the Foyer was truly enormous, open and empty to the second floor ceiling fully four stories high. Great hallways like tunnels led down vast wings both above and below the balcony. Opposite the Armory entrance was a set of finely-carved doors that seemed tiny set into their high, bare wall.

Will was approaching these doors when he saw George. He slowed to a stop and waited, dreading a confrontation but not sure how to avoid it.

At first glance, there was little to George. One might guess him to be a man of robust health in his 60's. He was short and mostly bald, with only a light ring of silver hair running around the side of his head. Large, horn-rimmed glasses framed thoughtful eyes. It was the man's custom to dress in bizarre, clashing outfits, as he did now in a green polo shirt, faded jeans and blue sneakers. He had been waiting for Will just outside the Armory doors. There was silence for a moment as he looked at Will with the odd expression of paternal concern he so often wore.

"You're going out again?" he finally asked. "You could take a break tonight, you know. One evening of rest won't hurt anyone."

"I can't take that risk," Will said softly. "You used to say yourself, this isn't a job we can take breaks from, or chances with."

"I regret saying some of that now."

Will sighed. "I don't have time for this, George. Sundown is in less than an hour. I need to be going."

"Can I talk you into at least taking someone with you? Jake is busy, but I'm pretty sure Marc is sober. For Marc, anyway..."

"Marc has all the subtlety of a tank platoon," Will chided. "I need to blend in."

"Blend *in*? Look at you--spiky blonde hair, black trench coat, sunglasses--you look like the hero of a bad cyberpunk novel!"

Will took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He and George had been through this conversation many times nearly verbatim. He walked past George toward the front doors.

"You know," George said without turning around. Will froze in place with his hand on the doorknob. "It's been said that a fanatic is one who redoubles his efforts while losing sight of his goals."

Will turned, took off his sunglasses, and looked George in the eye. "And those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it."

"Damn. I knew I shouldn't have left my philosophy books out where you could find them."

"I'll be in touch," Will said as he walked out the front doors.

His car was parked out front, sporty, sleek and glossy black: an LMB 5000 Hartebeest. Will looked about the grounds at the tall grass, the changing leaves of the sparse trees, the setting sun. As well-kept and stately as the house and its grounds were, the beauty seemed to have gone out of them. Everything seemed less beautiful and lonelier since he had lost Tina.

Even the Mansion itself seemed dreary in the fading light. The colossal building was a solid block of a house, built of bricks and marble. In daylight, its many tall windows and central door were inviting and displayed a quiet architectural elegance, but in the gathering gloom the Mansion looked like a derelict ship, stranded and forgotten in the heart of the desert.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath to steady himself. Then he got into his car and pulled away from the house, rounding the circular drive that came nearly to the front steps on his way toward the main gate. He drove very slowly, pausing only long enough to activate the gate remote. Then he was rolling down the dusty road that led away from the immense and strangely named George Manor.

George watched him go through the towering windows of his Study on the second floor to the east of the Foyer. His eyes followed the black speck crawling across the dun-colored desert until it vanished over the horizon.

Remember your own words, my friend, he thought glumly. This sort of bull-headed determination is what caused us to lose Tina.

George decided then that he could use a stiff drink.

Will drove slowly, alone with his thoughts. The only sound in the car's gray interior was the muffled drone of the engine and plik-plik-plik of sand blowing against the doors. A confrontation with George was the last thing he had wanted this evening. Such interventions on the old man's part brought back too many bad memories. Will knew he meant well and probably didn't understand why Will was always so angry with him, even after all that had happened.

The corruption in the police force had not been the only reason Will had left them. Once upon a time, a young and idealistic rookie cop named William Thatcher had been introduced by his partner, one Samuel King, to George and what he did. George and his associates were servants of the people like the police should be, but they did things even the cops couldn't. There were no bribes being taken or abuse of power among this tiny group: just an open and honest determination to do the right thing for the sake of the common good. More than that, there was Tina.

She was lovely, sweet, gentle and brave. Will had never met anyone so full of life, yet so willing to risk that life to help others. A fast friendship grew between them and soon afterward, love. Though some of the others worried that they were moving too fast, Will and Tina were confident that their relationship was soundly built. Besides, they reasoned, what they did was dangerous. Life might well be too short to move at a cautious pace. It wasn't long before Will officially resigned from the YCPD and moved out into the desert, into George Manor.

Will still remembered those days fondly. All of George's students worked together then as a team, a well-oiled machine. They lived in the immense Manor where their every need was provided for. They trained together, fought together, gave Will the purpose he had so longed for while struggling against the evil in the city. He was a young man in love, doing what he felt was right.

Then Tina was killed.

Will couldn't take the silence anymore. In a desperate effort to drown out his thoughts, he clicked on the radio.

"...listening to XRCK, X-Rock! Coming up next is the number one hit by Philched Karbon Byrdhowsse, 'Your Love Whacked Me Upside the Head!'"

This wasn't the sort of distraction Will had been hoping for.

He ran the dial around until he found some classical piano music. Ahead of him on the horizon loomed the city of Ylelon. The sprawling metropolis had its southern and western edges on the ocean, and stretched for miles to the north and east. Skyscrapers dominated its skyline and countless houses laid close together in urban sprawl were just beginning to fade from sight in the gathering twilight. The sky was deepening in color from red to purple and the chain of mountains that boxed in the desert became great burgundy shadows on the horizon. In the sky above both moons began to shine with their respective colors--blue and green, and a deep red.

Will couldn't help but feel his spirits lighten just a little. With the music playing and surrounded by the beauty of the desert, he was reminded of his belief that there is always goodness in life if one can only find it. There were times that even he had to reflect on how careless his actions were, foraying into the city without the team, stubbornly determined to do a job that was almost suicidal.

Then he reached the end of the dirt road from the Mansion where it merged with the highway and determination filled him again. If Will had to suffer loss, he would at least make sure no one else did.

The highway ran west by northwest, a simple four-lane affair used mostly by trucks bringing ore

from and supplies to the mining towns in the mountains. It was deserted now, which was the way Will liked it.

He came to the edge of town right as the last sliver of the sun vanished beneath the horizon. Almost immediately he went from being alone on the road to being in the middle of weekend traffic. It took him another half-hour of driving to reach his final destination.

Will had a regular circuit, a series of places he would investigate while he worked. On this list were various nightclubs, bars and even the city library. He usually chose the places he went to on a given night by instinct. Tonight he was headed for a singles bar that sat not quite in the seedier part of town called The Wet Whistle.

Wet Whistle, Hartebeest, Philched Karbon Byrdhowsse, Will thought as he parked in the bar's side lot. *What is it with people giving things stupid names these days?* He checked his gear again and went inside.

The Wet Whistle's décor was done in cool colors with a lot of glass surfaces. Everything seemed to be either transparent or severely backlit. Here and there high-mounted TVs that were too small to see and too quiet to hear showed news, sports and sitcoms that no one really cared to watch. The place was easily large enough for sixty people, but the crowd tonight was about half that many.

Will strolled in and made his way to a side booth. When a waitress came by he ordered a soda and gave her a very generous tip. Then he settled in and watched the crowd one person at a time, taking in each individual's appearance and mannerisms. He was looking for certain telltale behaviors that would give a specific sort away and mark a target. It wasn't long before one presented itself.

He came in about a half-hour after Will did, a twenty-something fellow of average height, wearing a powder blue shirt and jeans. He made a play at socializing, introducing himself here and making small talk there, but the sharp, predatory way in which he eyed others as he moved around the room made one thing perfectly clear to Will: he was prowling for a victim.

Will watched him for twenty minutes before he finally zeroed in on a target, a young woman sitting alone in a booth. She was strikingly beautiful, with fiery red hair that hung down nearly to her waist. The man approached her as she sat quietly, apparently lost in thought. When he spoke to her, she looked at him briefly with an odd, blank expression, then smiled brightly and motioned for him to sit.

Damn, thought Will. He had hoped the man would leave alone, which would make him much easier to trail and deal with.

As Will watched, the two of them made small talk, laughing at each other's jokes and nodding sagely at each other's abbreviated life story. Soon the man leaned forward and said something with a smirk. The woman gave him a coy look, said something back and to Will's dismay they got up and began to leave together.

Damn it, Will thought.

He waited until they had gone, then got up and hurried out. The number of people on the sidewalk had tripled since he had gone inside. The crowd was oppressively thick and fast moving. Will might have given up hope of finding the couple if he had not known what to look for. He raised to his tiptoes and cast his gaze up and down the street until he saw a shock of red hair. They were moving briskly through the crowd, heading into a less favorable part of town.

Will was off after them, dodging and darting through the crowd as quickly as he could without slamming into anyone. Even moving at his best pace, he was having trouble keeping them in sight. He chased them for three blocks before they turned right at a corner, heading out of the crowd down a smaller street. Will didn't know whether to be relieved that they were now out of the thoroughfare or dismayed that they were quickly disappearing into the maze-like overbuilt downtown. He decided to stick to the practical problem of keeping up with them now and worry about other things later.

He turned the corner and stopped dead in his tracks. They were nowhere to be seen. The street stretched out before him, wide and nearly empty. A stark contrast to the neon-emblazoned nightclub district he had just left, it was lined on both sides with one-story buildings housing small businesses, most of them with bars in the windows and screens on the doors. Will was wondering what to do next when a pained cry from a narrow alley entrance just ahead of him gave him the lead he needed.

In a flash he had his guns out and dashed for the alleyway. He rounded the corner and was shocked when his target landed in a heap at his feet. He stared dumbfounded, first at the motionless form in front of him, then at the young woman. She was standing dead center in the alley with her arms crossed, looking very pleased with herself.

Will's target sprang to his feet with astonishing speed. He lunged at Will, hate blazing in his cold eyes and baring his teeth. Will didn't have time to bring his pistols to bear. He instinctively raised his arms between himself and his opponent, who grasped his wrists with vise-like strength and forced them apart with ease. Will was held with his arms spread-eagle, unable to defend himself or flee. The man was as strong as a bull. As he leaned forward Will braced himself for the pain he knew was coming.

At the last instant, he felt the grip on his wrists disappear. His attacker suddenly hurled backwards as though he had been thrown, flipped head-over-heels in midair and slammed into a utility pole next to the building to Will's left. The attacker let out a cry of pain and fell to the ground. He gathered himself up slowly and rose to one knee, his head hung low.

It was the pause that Will needed. He raised his pistols and took aim at the ominously still, crouching figure. He was too slow: his target sprang again, this time at the woman. Will reflexively pulled both triggers, knowing in that instant that there was almost no way he could save her.

He needn't have worried. His target stopped in mid-lunge, hanging in empty air several inches above the ground and a good three steps in front of his victim. One of Will's shots missed, but the other one caught him in his side as he flailed his arms in a rage, trying to reach the woman. He howled in agony and turned his head toward Will to unleash a barrage of barely coherent curses and threats. The foul odor of charred flesh filled the air.

Will looked at the woman again. She was still facing him with her arms crossed. When she saw the expression on Will's face, she crooked her head and smiled.

When she tilted her head, the monster lashed out at her again, scraping her earlobe with his nails. She flinched away with a yelp, stumbling over her own feet and falling against the wall behind her. In that same instant the monster dropped to its feet with a triumphant snarl and pounced. Two more shots rang out as it bore down on her and Will's rounds tore through the brute's torso, burning his flesh. He let out a final shriek as his momentum carried him toward his would-be victim, then toppled forward and smacked into the wall beside her. The creature lull as though staggered by the impact and then slumped over across the woman's lap.

The woman's face twisted in disgust as she heaved the thing off of herself, letting it roll onto the alley floor and lay still. The bullet wounds smoldered as though they had been inflicted by red-hot irons. The woman simply brushed at her clothing, dusting away tiny clumps of ash. She looked mildly annoyed but no worse for wear.

Will re-holstered his arms, walked over and offered her a hand despite the throbbing in his wrists. She regarded him with her smug expression, then took his hand and stood.

"Thanks," she said caustically. "I could have handled that, you know."

Will looked from her, to the still-smoking corpse on the ground and back. "You think?"

"Hey, I had everything under control before you came barging into the alley!"

"Was that before or after that ear-splitting scream you let out a moment ago?"

The woman huffed and turned to walk away from him. "Look, just mind your own business, ok? I can take care of myself."

"Leaving bars with strangers that intend to attack you?" Will said. "I'd hardly call that taking care of yourself."

"Says the guy running around with guns in this neighborhood. You're just asking for trouble, you know. You think I don't know what we just did? You think you're the hero running to the rescue?" The woman leaned forward and looked Will right in his eye despite his sunglasses. "You're doing this alone, and think that what *I'm* doing is dangerous?"

It would be an exaggeration to say that Will took much pride in anything about himself. He had too much humility (and slightly too little self-esteem) to really be proud, but he did have a certain

confidence in his own level-headedness. In violent, stressful or just plain weird situations Will knew he could remain calm and collected when many people might panic. That was why standing here staring at this woman and not being able to think of what to say or do was very frustrating for him.

“Is something wrong?” she finally asked. Will tried to evaluate the situation levelly. Normally, he would make sure there had been no witnesses and then find a way to dispose of the body. This usually involved checking it for I.D., stripping it and then hiding it or if possible, destroying it with fire. Of course, standing here gawking at an obvious witness didn’t leave him much opportunity to dispose of the “evidence.” As he saw it, he had only one option.

“We need to be moving,” he said abruptly. He took hold of her arm and began to march her toward the other end of the alley.

“What’s the rush?” she asked. “I doubt anyone will call the cops over shots in *this* neighborhood.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is? Getting me someplace out of the way so you can convince me I didn’t just see what I saw? Or are you just hoping for a little more action?”

He stopped and gave her a sharp look. His reward was more of that self-satisfied, cocky smirk.

“I *knew* that would get your attention,” she said. “Look, there’s no one left here who can complain about the gunshots” (she glanced at the body), “there’s obviously no need to try to talk me down out of some hysteria and we both want to find out more about what’s going on, so relax, all right?”

Ok, Will thought, taking a deep breath. *The danger’s past, and however she did that--whatever she is--*

“I’m Cynthia,” she said abruptly. Realizing how rude he was being, he shook her hand.

“I’m Chett.”

“Well, Chett, is there someplace you can think of that we could relax and talk?”

“We could go back to the Wet Whistle,” Will suggested.

“Ah,” said Cynthia. “So you followed me clear from there?”

Damn! Will thought. “Er...what I mean is...” he stammered, “I go there to hang out sometimes...”

“It’s all right. I saw you there,” Cynthia said.

“You did?”

“Looking like that?” she asked incredulously. “You aren’t exactly subtle, you know. You look like something out of a bad novel.”

Will blinked twice.

“You might as well wear a neon sign saying ‘monster killer’,” she continued, then walked past him toward the end of the alley. After a moment’s pensiveness, he ran to catch up.

“How do you know about vampires?” he asked.

“You just saw me throw around a walking corpse with nothing but willpower and you’re surprised I know there are weird things in this world? Anybody ever tell you that you’re very naïve?”

“Every day of my life,” Will said absently. “Did you know he was a vampire when you left with him?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

“What? You mean aside from the beautiful tan and the minty-fresh breath? I read his aura.”

“His aura? Is that some new age thing?”

“Nothing new age about it,” Cynthia snapped. “I’m psychic, moron. How do you think I was throwing that guy around?”

“I didn’t know. Some things occurred to me, but...”

“It’s called telekinesis. Moving things with my mind. Get it?”

“Yeah,” Will said. George was a walking library of data on paranormal phenomena and the supernatural. Will was pretty sure he’d heard him mention *telakawhatsit* now and again.

“I can do that, and I can read auras,” Cynthia said, once again sounding very pleased with herself. “I could tell he was dead by looking at his aura the same way I can tell how thrown you are by yours.”

“Really,” said Will. “What else can you tell about me, just by looking?”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Cynthia said, wagging a finger. “That would be telling.”

By now they were around the corner and back in the crowds. They walked in silence until they came to the Wet Whistle. Will opened the door and stepped aside.

“After you,” he said.

“A gentleman after all.” She led him through the crowd toward the booth where she had sat before. Will caught himself reflexively scanning the crowd again, taking in each face, each style of dress, each manner of motion. He snapped his attention back to the present and sat across from Cynthia.

“So,” he said, keeping his voice low, “Why did you go with him if you knew he was,” he glanced around to make sure no one might overhear them, “dangerous?”

“To take him out,” Cynthia said. She made no effort to keep her voice low.

Will’s eyes widened slightly. “I suppose that’s what one does in a place like this, but--”

“No, dumbass! To get rid of him. I was bored, he came on to me with some really lame lines, what else was I going to do?”

Will stared at her, speechless.

“What?” she said.

“You went into a bad part of town with a...guy...that you knew was dangerous just so you could ‘have some fun’?”

“Well, like you said, that’s what one does in a place like this.”

“This isn’t funny,” Will said. “You could have been hurt, or worse. This isn’t something you should be playing around with.”

“Who are you to lecture me?” Cynthia snapped. “I’ve been doing this for years. I’ve never had any problems, and I’ve never run into anything that could take me. I’m in less danger using my mind to fight these things than you are using your little guns.”

“That scratch on your ear says otherwise,” Will said. Cynthia put a hand to her ear, where a small but very conspicuous trickle of blood had dried on the lobe. She scraped it away with her fingernail, then gave Will an oddly hollow look.

“Would you excuse me?” he asked, feeling the need to put some space between the two of them. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Be my guest,” she replied. For the first time, her voice was completely empty of any inflection. It was flat and lifeless, as though she were in a trance.

Will got up, made his way through the crowd to the phones, picked up a receiver and dropped in some loose change. When the vid-screen prompted him, he selected audio only. Then he dialed a number and waited. Within moments he heard George’s plucky voice on the line.

“George Manor, there is no parking.”

Will sighed.

“Will?” George blurted. *“Izat you? Everything ok?”*

“I’m not really sure. We have a bit of a situation here.”

“Are you hurt? Trouble with the police?”

“No,” Will said levelly. *“We have a witness.”*

“Someone saw you in action? Will, you’re better than this.”

“I know.”

“This sort of thing can cause all sorts of problems--”

“I know,” Will said again, massaging his temple.

George sighed. *“All right, who was it?”*

“A would-be victim,” Will replied, glancing about to make certain no one in the crowd was close enough to overhear. “I saw her leave the Whistle with a vampire. I followed them toward the docks, and it attacked her in an alley.”

“Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. She took care of it.”

“She took care of it? How?”

"She has telekawsit," Will said.

"Really?" said George. He suddenly sounded very interested. "*What did she do? Levitate a piece of wood and stake it?*"

"No, she threw him around. I've never seen anything like it."

"*She's that powerful?*"

"I guess so. But it almost got her when she got cocky and I had to gun it down."

"*She saw you use the guns.*"

"Well, I was considering letting it eat her first, but that would defeat the purpose of my going out tonight, wouldn't it?"

"*Easy, Will,*" George said. "*First thing's first. If neither of you are physically hurt, then you need to be certain of her state of mind.*"

"Oh, her state of mind is just *fine*," Will grumbled.

"*Good. That being the case, I don't think we have to worry too much about her saying anything.*"

"Are...you sure?" Will asked. This sounded too easy.

"*What is she going to say? 'I was fighting off a vampire with my amazing psychic powers last night, when a mysterious stranger appeared and destroyed it with silver bullets.'*"

"On the plus side, she doesn't know they're silver," said Will.

"*You see? Progress. Make double sure she's ok, then head back whenever you're ready.*"

"Right," Will said, gazing at Cynthia. She was absent-mindedly watching the crowd as she had when he first saw her--at once thoughtful and strangely empty.

"George? How much do you know about psychic powers?"

"*Oooh...a little,*" George said.

Will suppressed a sigh. This was another of George's annoying traits. Whenever he wanted to fake modest knowledge regarding something he actually knew volumes about, he always said, "Oooh...a little."

"All right, I'll see you in a while," Will said, and hung up.

He walked slowly through the crowd back to Cynthia's booth, never taking his eyes off of her. Her gaze continued to wander the room, never stopping but never focusing on anything in particular. She glanced up suddenly just as he reached his seat and looked him in the eye. Slowly, she smiled.

"So, who did you call?" she asked with a playful tone.

"A friend," he said as he retook his seat.

"Still mysterious. You do realize how annoying it is when you won't give straight answers?"

"Possibly," Will said. In spite of himself, he smiled.

"You're just full of surprises," Cynthia said wryly.

"I aim to please, ma'am," Will said, tipping an imaginary hat.

"You certainly do. I assume you'll be leaving us now?"

"Actually, yeah. Will you be here again tomorrow?"

"Only if you will."

"I can't guarantee it."

"Ok, be that way," Cynthia said, smirking.

"I'll see you around," Will said as he started to get up.

"Hey, wait a minute," Cynthia said, and Will stopped short. "Don't you want my number?" Will crooked an eyebrow.

"For emergencies, moron," she said. "You gotta admit, I could be handy to have around in your line of work."

Good point, Will thought. *This way I could keep an eye on her--or at least check every now and again to see if she's still alive.*

"Ok," he said. She produced a small notepad and a mechanical pencil from a pocket and flipped it open to a random page. She scrawled out her name and a local number, tore out the page and presented it to Will.

"There you go," she said.

“Thanks,” he said as he tucked it into a front pocket.

“Aren’t you going to give me yours?” asked Cynthia.

“I really can’t,” Will said.

“Oh, c’mon,” Cynthia said. “At least tell me how to get to the general area where you live, just in case.”

Will paused. She was obviously trying to get contact information out of him, but why? At any rate, he had screwed up enough tonight. He couldn’t betray his team by letting her find out any more about himself.

“Sorry,” he said. “But I’ll be sure to watch for you when I’m here again. It’ll probably be a few days.”

“All right,” Cynthia said, sounding disappointed.

“See you around, and *be careful*,” Will said, turning and walking away.

“I will,” Cynthia said. “Take care of yourself, Chett.”

At least I did something right tonight, Will thought as he waded through the crowd to the door.

His drive back home was quiet and uneventful. Instead of listening to the radio and letting his thoughts wander to come down like he usually did, he found himself thinking about Cynthia. He didn’t know whether to be amazed at her powers, worried for sake of her carelessness or irritated at her callousness. He also found himself wondering if she was actually as shallow as she allowed herself to seem. Did she really leave a singles bar with a dangerous monster just out of boredom? Was there a reason she sat in a place where lives go to touch each other, yet seemed so distant?

Chapter II

Rest for the Righteous

Will arrived home well after midnight. The heavens shone brightly and clearly as only the stars above a desert can, but Will was too tired and befuddled to notice. He parked in his usual spot and shuffled up the front steps, yawning. He wasn't a bit surprised to find the lights on in the foyer, or a familiar figure standing in the middle of the room. Will blinked and squinted in the sudden brightness. Faded black t-shirt, camouflage fatigues, bright yellow sneakers. Yep. This was George.

"Good morning, Will," he said dryly.

Will put his sunglasses on. "Good night, George," he said, heading for the right column of stairs.

"That's it? No formal report, no request for orders, no kiss goodnight?"

"Not now," Will said from the third step. "I've had a rough night."

"Oh? Rougher than a typical night flitting about the shadows of society, killing monsters?"

Will stopped on the seventh step and turned to face him. "What is it you want, George?"

"The same thing I always want, Will. To see how you feel. You've had a very odd and unsettling experience, even for someone in our line of work, and you're not showing any outward sign of dealing with it. That's become pretty standard for you lately."

Will threw up his hands. "So that's it. We always come back to this, George. Ever since Tina died, you're constantly on me about how I feel, what I think, how I'm dealing." He spoke with a sharpness George had rarely known him to use, especially as he said the phrase, "Tina died."

"Ever since Tina died, you've been a completely different person," George snapped back. "What we do is very hard on a mind. You've seen terrible things happen to people and you face the prospect of having something terrible happen to you every day. Unless you find a healthy way to deal with all this emotional baggage you are going to waste away and die."

Will sighed. "I'm going to bed, George," he said. He turned and climbed the stairs, quickly disappearing down the hall at the top.

"Don't dream," George said softly. Then he was off to check on Jake.

Jake's Workshop was a separate building about a hundred feet behind the Mansion proper. It was a three-story cinderblock affair that took up an area half the size of a sporting arena. It would have been an imposing structure had it not been so close to George Manor, but it was dwarfed by the colossal house. The side facing the Mansion had two doors, one for normal entry, and a large roll-up, as the Workshop also doubled as vehicle storage.

The ground floor was a simple open garage, with ample space for storage and repair and rimmed by tools of every description. A vehicle rack dominated the center of the floor. The garage currently stored George's luxury sedan, Marc's pickup, Jake's severely customized SPS 9800 Desert Rain sport car and a pet project of Jake's, a homemade armored personnel carrier. Around back were two enormous fuel tanks, one standard petroleum, one diesel for the APC.

The upper two floors were open mezzanines sporting a crane mounted on ceiling tracks. These two levels were where Jake kept his huge assortment of shop machinery as well as current and past projects: weapons, field kits, custom sensor equipment and gimmicky gadgets. The second level also had a generously sized firing range. Just as George entered, he heard a rapid succession of gunshots followed by a dull explosion and an enthusiastic shout. Luckily, George knew it was simply Jake at work. Otherwise, he might have been alarmed.

He found Jake on the firing range. Laid out without partition, it more resembled an outdoor range than an indoor one, allowing sound to reverberate throughout the building. Jake was standing facing the targets, wearing a glossy black helmet with a large visor that covered his face and a suit of black ceramic composite plate armor, augmented by a portable power core and hydraulic endoskeleton--an A.R.E., or Armored Robot Exoskeleton.

Jake was also wearing a bulky metal device flanked on each side by a duo of metal tubes strapped on his back and was holding a device in his right hand that resembled a pistol without a barrel. On the

back of the device there was a small pad of brightly colored keys. Jake hit one with his thumb and the tubes on the pack moved up and forward over his shoulders, supported by scissoring mechanical arms on the pack itself. As he moved about, pacing and twisting, turning and rolling his head, the tubes would angle about on their supporting arms, pointing where Jake looked no matter how he moved. Then suddenly he thumbed another button, jerked his head to face one of the targets across the room and pulled the trigger. A burst of machine gun fire raged out of the inside set of tubes and tore into the target, shredding it. In quick succession, he destroyed all of the targets with only the effort of turning his head and pulling the trigger. Once the paper targets were gone, Jake turned his attention to the last one, a crude wood and straw mockup of a person that had been concealed behind the other targets. He thumbed two keys and pulled the trigger. This time, instead of bullets, a tiny bolt of fiery plasma erupted from each of the outside barrels. The target burst apart in a flash of flames, pieces raining down on the floor in a shower of glowing embers. Jake let out another triumphant shout and began to do a happy dance.

“Working late?” asked George. Startled, Jake turned to face him and the guns did the same, leveling directly at George.

“It was just a question, Jake,” George said without flinching.

“Oops,” Jake said and keyed off the guns. They settled back into their storage positions with a relaxed *whoosh*.

“Everything seems to work, I see,” George said.

“Yeah!” Jake replied enthusiastically. “I’ve got the commands all set, the power supply is reliable, the recoil suppression system works like a dream...not bad for something cobbled together mostly from scratch.”

Jake unfastened his helmet’s chin strap and took it off as he spoke. He had dark brown eyes and thick, curly brown hair. He also sported a beard and mustache so bushy George was always amazed that he could fit it all in a helmet.

“No explosives?” George asked.

“Nope. I wanted to include some RPGs or something, but this thing is heavy enough as it is. I need the suit’s strength just to carry it. Besides, I won’t feel comfortable carrying large quantities of explosives with it until I’ve had the chance to test it some more. For the moment I’ll be happy with the guns and plasma.”

“Good man,” said George. “HUD work ok?”

Jake looked quizzical. “Housing and Urban Development?”

“Heads Up Display,” George said without missing a beat. If there was anyone on the planet that could match George’s weird sense of humor, it was Jake.

“See for yourself,” Jake said as he handed the helmet to George, who donned the helmet and was greeted by an interesting version of a HUD. Where a normal Heads Up Display would show things like sensor information and technical readouts inside the visor, this one featured a vertical row of a dozen digital smiley faces on the left side, each with a small label, such as “ammo count” or “core temperature.”

“Interesting.”

“Check *this* out,” said Jake. Reaching around his back, he flicked a small switch on the pack. Immediately, a smiley face on the HUD with the label “hydraulic pressure” became a grimace, then a frown, then finally sported tiny X eyes and its tongue hung from its mouth.

“Neat,” George said.

“How ‘bout this!” Jake said, flicked the switch again, then activated the guns. On the HUD, a face labeled “weapon status” ceased smiling and clenched its teeth, which now held a smoking cigar. Its eyes were fierce and it wore a colorful bandana.

“Novel,” George said as he took off the helmet. “Disturbing, but novel.”

“I’ve also improved the party favors,” said Jake as he handed a small metal cylinder to George. The “party favors” were compact fire bombs used by the group in close combat. Once activated by pressing a small button on top, they would detonate on impact, splattering their target with various flammable substances. The sample George held had Jake’s customary ingredient table on it. Feeling both curious and apprehensive, he read it.

“I Can’t Believe It’s Not Napalm’?”

“That’s the active ingredient,” Jake said. “There are some others in there, too. Mostly for color.”

George raised his eyebrows. “You’ve been busy.”

“Yeah. It’s amazing what you can accomplish in,” Jake glanced at his watch, “four months of feverish work.”

“Congratulations,” said George. “You have obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

“Look who’s talking,” Jake shot back.

“Do you know what your next project will be?”

“Oh, I’ll be refining the suit and weapons for a while. You know, fixing bugs, adding sensors, that sort of thing. Once I’m done with that, I’d like to add a zeppelin attachment to the APC--”

“Vetoed,” said George quickly.

“Ok,” Jake said, grinning widely. “But seriously, I’ll probably go back to tweaking the APC’s sensors.”

“Excellent. Now, don’t you think it’s time for some well-deserved rest?”

“You know, for a guy that never sleeps, you’re big on worrying about how much sleep the rest of us get.”

“I sleep,” George said. “It’s just that people tend not to notice when I do.”

“Ah,” Jake said, fiddling with a gauntlet, “George’s bizarre and cryptic statement for the day. A time-honored tradition.”

“You have no idea. See you in the morning, Jake.”

Jake looked up from his gauntlet to return the farewell, but when he did George was gone. “I hate it when he does that,” he said to himself.

He was on the verge of panic.

He was climbing the steps as fast as he could go. Her scream echoed through the stairwell again, but this time it wasn’t a cry for help--it was a shriek of agony. He pressed on, pushing to his limits, winding up and up the staircase that mocked him by never ending.

After what felt like an hour of climbing he hit the top and burst through the landing door, dashing into the hall with his guns ready. He scanned up and down, looking for trouble, looking for her.

For a painful eternity, there was nothing. Then a final, choked shriek echoed from the hall to his left and was suddenly silenced.

Forgoing all caution, he dashed down the hall. His boots crunched in the trash and dust littering the floor. The light from the moon and the city lights streaming through skylights and windows in the hall’s rooms threw his shadow crazily against rows of lockers as he ran. The door of the third room on the left was open, and he rushed inside--

--and stopped dead in his tracks.

She was lying face down on the floor, completely motionless. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was splayed about her head in a grim halo, one that changed from gold to crimson as it soaked in the pool of dark liquid spreading from her neck.

He tried to think clearly (he always could) but his mind was blank. He tried to say something, to move, even to scream, but nothing came out. In the back of his mind, he felt his guns fall from his hands.

Then he heard the door behind him slam shut. Something that had been hiding behind the door leapt on him and knocked him prone. A grip fixed on his neck, as strong as iron, as cold as ice. Squinting through the pain, he saw a face looming in the corner of his eye. The face had fangs stained red--stained with the blood of his beloved--and with the last of his breath, he screamed.

Will came awake with a start. His heart was beating so hard his chest ached and his sheets were soaked in sweat. He picked up a small picture frame from his nightstand and gazed at it in the moonlight. It was the woman in his dream, smiling and stunningly beautiful.

In the stillness, Will held the picture and wept softly.

Chapter III A Bright New Day

The rising sun crept over the mountains, changing the desert from a shadowy abyss to a shimmering sea of dunes. Inside George Manor, George's Study gradually brightened from pitch black to simply depressingly dark. The room's long row of tall windows, facing parallel to the course of the sun, allowed in just enough light to illuminate the ancient hand-woven rug, the antique writing desk and chair, and the thousands of books neatly arranged on the shelves which lined the room.

George sat in his favorite chair, a great overstuffed monstrosity that based on its worn appearance one could be forgiven thinking predated the steam engine. He stared intently at an unspectacular spot on the rug while swirling an enormous snifter of brandy in his right hand, every now and then taking a tiny sip. He was meditating, pondering a problem both philosophical and practical that had been bothering him for some time. He typically spent several hours a day on it, usually the time most people slept. Every time he thought he was making headway, some new aspect of the problem forced him to begin anew. On many occasions, he had considered sharing the problem with Will--but that would require telling Will quite a few things that he wasn't ready to know yet.

As all this rattled around in his mind, the antique phone on the table flanking the chair rang. He checked his watch: 9:13 a.m. Almost six hours sitting here with no discernable progress. Quickly, he grabbed the receiver and answered.

"George Manor, specials today on infrared wine and visible light beer."

"*Good morning, George,*" said a voice that hinted at suppressed annoyance.

"Detective King!" said George. "What can I do for you?"

"*Got a case for you,*" King said without preamble. "*I doubt you've heard of this one. We've been keeping it under wraps as much as possible.*"

"Oh goody, secrecy and legerdemain. My favorite."

"*I doubt you'll be as happy when you read it.*"

"Why? Is someone stalking rich, eccentric geniuses?"

"*Just read it, George. It's on its way now. I'm at the usual number if you need anything else.*"

Click.

That was interesting, George thought as he polished off his brandy in three long draughts and put the snifter back in his liquor cabinet. Then he keyed an intercom button next to the phone.

"Sullivan?" he said.

"*Yes, George?*" replied a tinny sounding feminine voice.

"Please wake up Will and Jake, and tell them to meet for a briefing in thirty minutes."

"*What about Marc?*" asked Sullivan.

"I'll wake up Marc," George said.

"*Oh, thank goodness,*" Sullivan said and the intercom clicked off. George paused long enough to grimace at the snide remark, then snapped off his end of the intercom and walked to a cabinet. Among the emergency supplies within was a large metal briefcase with black letters in military font painted across the front: MARC WAKE-UP KIT. George carried it with him as he left the Study, locking the door behind himself with an ornate key. Then he headed towards Marc's room, whistling happily.

Marc's room, like those of the others, was in George Manor's left wing. Also like the others, it was well-suited to the tastes of its occupant. This probably had something to do with the fact that the other inhabitants of the Mansion avoided the place as much as possible.

George knocked on Marc's door purely out of protocol. He would actually have been very surprised to have gotten an answer. Hearing none, he quietly turned the knob and stepped inside. The first thing he noticed was the sound. No matter how often George encountered it, it always amazed him. He had experienced quite a few bizarre things in his time, but nothing like Marc's snoring.

As usual, the room was a wreck. Empty beer cans and soiled laundry lay everywhere, nearly concealing the floor and furniture. Here and there lay old magazines, most with their covers torn off, and

a layer of food and candy wrappers blew about freely at the slightest breeze. A worn punching bag hung on a chain in the middle of the room. George had never been able to fathom how Marc could use it considering the mound of refuse that had formed under and around it.

A single bed stood against the wall at the far end of the room. The burly figure of Marc lay sprawled atop it with his left leg dangling over the edge. He wore his customary worn jeans, heavy boots and white t-shirt. Across from him on his dresser was a small TV set tuned to the local sports network, at least as far as George could tell by looking at it. The sound was completely drowned out by the snores.

“Hey, Marc,” George said, barely able to hear himself over the ruckus. Marc continued to snore.

“*Marc*,” George said again, attempting to match the volume of the snores without actually yelling. And failing.

“MARC!” George shouted. Marc snorted, rolled over onto his right side and resumed snoring with increased vigor.

It was about this time that George’s distaste for being outdone kicked in. He set the wake-up kit down at his feet and snapped the locks open. From within he removed a set of earplugs and a pair of boat-horns. He put the earplugs in, held the boat horns at arm’s length and shut his eyes. He began to play out a rhythm on the horns, going for a blues riff but getting something more like a bad traffic jam in a marina.

Oh well, George thought, and opened his eyes. Marc was sitting up rigid on the bed, with his fingers locked in a death grip on the sheets. His normally slate-gray eyes were blood-shot and as wide as dinner plates.

“Dude!” he shot. “Damn it! Why do you always do that? All you have to do is talk to me!”

“Silly me,” George said as he put the horns and earplugs back. “Late night?”

“Naw,” said Marc as he rubbed his eyes. “Celebrating Harbor Day.”

George blinked at that. Harbor Day was an old Ylelon holiday, dating back to when the city-state was little more than a port-town. The day was originally a festival to celebrate the preceding year’s good commerce, but in recent centuries it had fallen to little more than an excuse to revel and drink. There was only one problem.

“Marc, Harbor Day is next week.”

“I know,” Marc said. “I wanted to get an early start.”

“We’ve got a case,” said George. Better to abandon this conversation as soon as possible, to preserve one’s own sanity.

“Combat?” Marc asked.

“Possibly.”

“Good. I’ll grab a shower and join you guys.”

“Outstanding,” George said. He grabbed the wake-up kit on his way out. He stopped at the door and turned back to Marc. “One more thing.”

“Yeah?” Marc asked as he yanked an outfit identical to the one he wore out of his dresser.

“Remember, no liquor in the Situation Room.” Marc began to protest, but he was cut off as George deftly stepped out the door and pulled it shut.

That was close, George thought. *I almost had to use the horns again*. Smiling to himself, he set out for the Office.

The Office was located halfway down the Mansion’s right wing on the second floor. It was of considerable size and well-supplied with equipment: a dozen state-of-the-art computers; numerous phone lines and fax machines; shelves and file cabinets all around the room.

One of the fax machines had a stack of sheets freshly settled in its receiving tray. George picked it up and looked it over: three police files complete with officer’s reports, crime scene photos and coroner’s reports. George’s expression progressively darkened as he scanned through them. As soon as he finished speed-reading the file he was out the door to the Situation Room.

The Situation Room was located directly above the Armory. It was about the same size as the

Office, modeled after a modern military control center. A long table with an illuminated plastic surface sat in the center of the room, flanked by chairs with deep blue padding. The only light came from the monitors set in the walls around the room and a single fluorescent housing that hung above the table itself.

Will reached the room first. Despite his late night he had already been awake when Sullivan came to get him. Jake came a few minutes later and somewhat less willingly. He rubbed sleep from his eyes even as Sullivan spurred him on by jabbing him in the back with her fingers. Sullivan herself did not show much sign of caring either way. Her face was soft, fixed in a solemn expression, her eyes hard, showing no sign of any deep thought or feeling, her skin a flat gray tone. She was, after all, a robot.

“So,” Jake said as he pulled his chair away from the table, turned it around and straddled it. “Any idea what this is all about?”

“None whatsoever,” replied Will. “Sullivan?”

“George didn’t say,” Sullivan said. She had taken her usual place in the seat to the left of George’s at the head of the table. “He simply did me the favor of awakening Marc.”

“Uh-oh,” Jake said. As if on cue, a cacophony of boat horn blasts echoed down the hallway. The three of them exchanged glances, then Jake burst into laughter and Will rolled his eyes.

“Great. Now Marc will be surly and irritable,” Will said.

“So everything’s normal,” quipped Jake. “Did George tell you I’ve been improving the party favors?”

“Wonderful,” Sullivan said. “Just what you need, bigger and better explosives. I swear, Jake, you would build a neutron bomb if George would let you.”

“Don’t be absurd!” Jake retorted. “If I did that, I’d want an orbital platform to launch it from, and those are a pain to design.” Sullivan didn’t reply, but Will somehow had the distinct impression that she would have sighed if she could have.

They waited patiently for several minutes before Marc staggered in. The heavy clomping of his boots gave him away several seconds before he lurched through the doorway. He made a half-hearted effort to stifle a yawn and plopped into the chair opposite George’s. He was carrying a six-pack of beer, which he dropped onto the tabletop and tore a can loose from.

“So, what’s up?” he asked.

“We were just wondering that ourselves,” Jake said. “He didn’t tell you, either?”

“Nope,” Marc replied. “All he said was we got a case and it might not be so boring this time.”

“Translation: you might get into a fistfight,” Sullivan remarked.

“Call it what you want,” Marc snorted. “I’m tired of this rollin’ around town for hours and findin’ nothing.”

“Then I certainly hope this is to your liking, Marc,” George said from the doorway. “That way, at least one person would find it pleasant.” He walked quickly to his seat and dropped the file on the table. “I thought I had reminded you about the liquor...?”

Marc looked from George to the beer and back to George. “I though you just meant hard liquor.”

George sat without replying. He pressed a stud on the side of the table and a section of the tabletop in front of him slid back into the table itself, revealing a computer console embedded beneath it. A simple typed command later, a large screen descended from a slot in the ceiling along the rear wall. It switched on with a soft buzz, displaying a map of Ylelon. George folded his hands and laid them on the table’s edge.

“Over the last eight days, there have been three murders of a peculiar and brutal nature.” He typed briefly on the console and the numerals one, two, and three appeared on the map. One sat in a fairly nice beachfront district uptown from the docks. Two was almost due north, in a middle-class residential area, and Three was in a less favorable section, a few blocks from the Wet Whistle.

“Each of these homicides shares a single bizarre characteristic with the others,” George continued. “I will elucidate.”

He took several sheets from the file and inserted them into a slot by his keyboard. He typed in some quick commands and two photos appeared on the map, next to Location One. The first photo was a portrait of an attractive black woman. The second was a crime scene photo, depicting a body lying in the

middle of a kitchenette floor, covered by a white sheet. Dark stains ran in splotches across the sheet and in an erratic band around the sheet's edges. Copious amounts of dried blood marked the linoleum floor.

"Abigail Twitch," George said to the silent room. "Twenty-eight years old, single, hair stylist by trade. Lived in her apartment here on Twelfth. She was killed eight days ago. With her mirror."

"Excuse me?" Sullivan said after a brief silence. "With her *mirror*?"

"Essentially," George answered. "The chain of events investigators have put together is this. At approximately 8:30 p.m., Miss Twitch passed by a full-length mirror hanging at the end of the hallway that led to her bedroom. In doing so, she triggered a tripwire strung across the hallway above the floor. This released a hook that had been put in place of the normal wire the mirror hung from. A number of small metal objects--tools and such--had been glued to the back of the mirror, making it very top-heavy. The mirror also had a strip of wood nailed to the wall beneath it. When the catch released, the weighted slab of glass tilted forward and fell directly onto five-foot-four Abigail."

He paused. No one said a word.

"The injuries she sustained included the loss of both eyes and severe bleeding from numerous lacerations. Bloodstains on the carpet and walls leading into the kitchen suggest that she fell, then got up and groped her way toward the kitchen phone. At 8:37 p.m., an emergency line operator answered a call from her number, but no coherent message was received. Speculation is that Ms. Twitch managed to stand long enough to pick up the phone and dial before passing out. The EMTs that arrived at 8:52 found her dead."

George took a long breath and began typing again. The two pictures of Abigail were replaced by two new images. This time, the two pictures were of an average-looking middle-aged man and another body covered by a sheet, this one at the base of a flight of stairs.

"Victor Weber, thirty-nine years old, divorced, auto-mechanic. Lived alone in the apartment complex on West and Tenth. Killed last Tuesday at roughly 4 p.m.. Evidence suggests that he was removing or replacing something in his hallway closet. The light inside the closet was operated by a pull string. The bulb itself had been drilled and gasoline had been poured inside. The hole was covered with packing tape. Several pounds of insulation had been taped to the ceiling around the light."

Jake's eyes went wide. "Jeez."

"What?" asked Marc.

"You know, insulation," Jake said. "The itchy stuff you put in your attic?"

"Yeah? So?"

"It burns like wool," Jake said. "It's almost explosive. So, this guy leans into his closet, turns on the light, the filament heats, the fuel ignites..."

"The bulb bursts," George continued. "The tape melts and spongy, fiery fiberglass rains down on Victor's head."

"As near as investigators can tell, Victor's hair and clothing ignited almost instantly, probably before Victor himself realized what was happening. The burns were severe, but not enough in and of themselves to be lethal. Victor, evidently in blind panic, ran out of his apartment and to the building stairwell, where he stumbled, fell and broke his neck."

There was silence in the room as George began typing once more. Again, two photos on the screen, one of a living person, one of a covered corpse.

"Albert Wilson, thirty-two years old, single, accountant. Albert was killed when a sledgehammer suspended from his bedroom ceiling by a hook through the handle struck him in his left temple. The hammer was supported by a strip of balsa wood, which was connected to a tripwire strung across Albert's bedroom floor. Albert evidently tripped it while examining a vandalized photograph on his vanity mirror."

"Vandalized?" Will asked.

"Albert apparently kept keepsake photos on his mirror. A number of such pictures were found in his bedroom wastebasket, but one depicting Albert and two other men remained on his mirror. It had been torn laterally so the three were decapitated."

No one spoke. Will's face was a mask of melancholy. Jake's trademark jocularinity was gone,

replaced by the expression of someone who has just witnessed a terrible car accident and knows he cannot help. Even Marc was quiet. He had put down his beer and was looking ruefully at the table. As for Sullivan, her metallic facade remained impassive, but her silence spoke volumes. Finally, Will said what everyone was thinking.

“What the hell are we dealing with?”

Chapter IV A Welcome Burden

“You’ve failed to clarify something for us, George,” Sullivan said. “These are brutal and tragic cases, to be sure. But what leads Detective King to believe this is the result of something paranormal, as opposed to the work of a very sick individual?”

“Or individuals,” added Jake.

“The complete lack of evidence to support such a theorem,” George replied. “The departments’ forensics teams have gone over the three properties with fine-toothed combs, or so they claim. They have found utterly nothing. No fingerprints, no footprints. No hairs, tissues, or bodily fluids. None of the tools used to construct the traps were found at any of the scenes.

“Extensive interviews with the residents in the three complexes have not produced accounts of suspicious strangers, sightings of stalkers, unusual activity or anything out of place in the last two weeks. All three neighborhoods were middle to lower-middle class. None has a history of violent crime.”

“In simpler terms,” said Jake, “there is an astounding lack of evidence regarding any possible perpetrators.”

George nodded. “That, and the lack of any apparent connection between the victims. None of them are believed to have known any of the others. They differ in race, gender, age, education, occupation and lifestyle. They lived in different neighborhoods, made disparate salaries, associated with different groups of people. As near as investigators have been able to discern, they did not attend the same church or shop at the same stores.”

“In simpler terms,” Jake repeated, “we have a series of murders by someone with no extant preference in victims and a talent for leaving very little evidence, beyond the tools of murder themselves.”

“In so many words,” George said.

“Ok, before we rule out completely that this might simply be a serial killer--” Jake began.

“Already done. There’s nothing serial about these killings,” said Will.

“True,” George said. “This is like the work of a serial killer, in that it shows premeditated intent, forethought in application, intelligence and guile in execution. However, it is unlike the work of a serial killer, in that while the killings share the trait of being traps left for unsuspecting people, are different each time, as are the victims themselves. Serial killers do the same thing to the same type of person over and over. That’s why we call them ‘serial.’”

“Ok, so they don’t meet any of the fancy descriptions in your books. So maybe it’s just a new kind of psycho,” Marc snorted.

“Perhaps,” George said. “But until proven otherwise, I suggest we follow Detective King’s example and assume that the oddities of this case indicate a supernatural agent at work.”

“Ok,” Jake said. Once George made up his mind about these things, there was really no sense in arguing the point with him. “So what do we do now?”

“Now, we hit the database. Detective King assures me in his notes that the site of the third killing will be vacant of investigative activity tonight, so we will conduct a standard search after sundown.”

“Hey, this...this sounds familiar,” Marc muttered. Every pair of eyes in the room fixed on him. “I mean, we’ve heard of this right? This sounds like those little creatures. The ones that sneak around and cause trouble. You know, like on airplanes.”

“You mean gremlins,” George said.

“Yeah, those! They run around when no one’s looking and break things.”

“Exactly, Marc. They break things. They don’t set up lethal booby traps.” Sullivan said.

“Besides,” Jake added, “if there were such little creatures running around, they would have left evidence that the cops would have noticed.”

Will looked from Jake to George. George had tented his fingers in front of his face and his eyes were glazed over in deep thought.

“Not necessarily,” he said. “The investigators--minus Detective King, of course--are looking for a jerud perpetrator and therefore, jerud evidence. They might have overlooked physical evidence, scratches

from claws or scales for example, left by such creatures, thinking it inconsequential animal detritus.”

“That would be pretty sloppy forensics work,” said Jake.

“Which is about par for Ylelon City,” Will said. “I swear we couldn’t do what we do if even half of the police department did what they were supposed to.”

“But then if they did, Will, we might not need to do what we do anyway.” George smiled in a fatherly way at Will. “Now, get started.”

Solemnly and silently they left for their assignments.

Any time the group as a whole went on a field mission, each member of the team had a set task to perform beforehand. Jake, for example, was in charge of equipment. It was his job to determine what supplies, weapons, equipment and even clothing the group would need for the assignment they would be undertaking. Since they assumed this would be a simple reconnaissance trip, Jake was packing with that in mind. Mostly.

He operated out of the Storage and Equipment rooms, which were across the hall from each other at the far end of the Mansion’s west wing on the ground floor. He worked mostly in the Equipment Room, which was essentially a closet the size of a cottage used to contain anything for fieldwork that wasn’t weaponry or medical supplies.

Jake didn’t set out any special clothing or uniforms, because the team would wear black on a trip like this. He did lay out three light flak jackets in case they ran into any nasty surprises. He also laid out flashlights, infrared goggles, two first aid kits and after a quick side-trip to the Armory loaded clips for Will’s pistols and his own submachine gun.

The last item on his list was sensory equipment. From the wide array of gadgets in the Equipment Room, many of them of his own design, he selected a trio of “Jakecams,” miniature camera/walkie-talkie combinations each about the size of a clip-on flashlight. Then he added a pair of military motion trackers and another of his inventions, the “Osborn Eye.” This was a monstrously ugly mess of wires, circuits, and short antennas hanging out of what looked like a cannibalized hand-held video game. It was a very versatile tool, capable of measuring everything from wind speed and humidity to the temperature of an object relative to its surroundings (which could be very useful in guessing how long ago something had been handled, sat on or walked across). He double-checked everything for working condition and power supply and when he was satisfied, carried it all to the Foyer to await distribution to vehicles in the evening. Then he checked his watch, which interestingly enough had a cartoon version of himself pointing out the time: 10:09 am. Deciding his job was well enough done and that a mind that functions properly is one that is well-rested, he headed back to bed.

Marc’s chore by contrast was to be ready to leave at the appointed time and to stay sober. This was more of a challenge for Marc than you might think until you got to know him. Suffice it to say that his history with the group had prompted George to lay down a simple edict: on any day in which the group would travel together into the field, Marc had the responsibilities of abstaining from alcohol for the entire day and of being prepared to leave when the team was. Marc actually managed pretty well, shrugging off the urges to guzzle beer and pass out by working his punching bag and packing his gear for the job. As the group’s muscle, he was the one that carried most of the equipment and tools they used on missions. This typically included a hacksaw, a hammer, a lock-picking kit, screwdrivers and wrenches, a blowtorch, extra ammo and whatever else Jake felt they should have handy. Marc also packed his own weapons, which usually consisted of a hatchet, brass knuckles and several lengths of pipe. All of this he would load into a large black duffle bag, which he could sling over his shoulder with almost casual ease. Marc’s job with the team may have been merely to provide brute strength, but it was a job he did very well.

Will and Sullivan spent their preparation time with George in the Library in the Mansion’s east wing, adjacent to the Armory and every bit as large. Unlike the Armory, the Library was very homey and welcoming. The level of lighting was low, but the place was immaculate. Its furnishings were mostly couches and easy chairs. Here and there the monotony of the stacks was offset by a piece of art--a

painting, a sculpture or a bust, often of a dragon. George *loved* dragons.

The trio was nestled at the room's only table just inside the Library's double doors, each operating a computer to search George Manor's enormous database. This represented a mind-boggling sampling of information on nearly any topic one could imagine, from dictionaries of entire languages to shipbuilding to physics to crocheting to TV repair to gardening to history and politics. Incidentally, it also had references for magic, the occult and the supernatural. The database itself was largely made up of text scans of the actual books in the library. Will had never seen the point in keeping a huge room full of books when the same amount of information could fit in a single desktop computer, but he had learned long ago to avoid the vertigo that came from one of George's bizarre merry-go-round explanations.

"Thoughts?" George asked casually, without looking up from his screen.

"Nothing so far," Sullivan said. "I've searched for 'booby traps,' 'trap construction,' 'guerilla warfare,' even 'improvised home security devices.' There are a lot of how-to guides and histories, but I can't find anything about mysterious booby-trap serial killings."

"How about you, Will?" George asked. "Faring any better?"

"Afraid not. There are more supernatural beasties and magical creatures in here than I can shake a stick at, but most of them prefer a direct approach when it comes to killing people. None of them so far is known for building traps from household materials. I even looked up gremlins just for the heck of it. Sullivan was right, they break things instead of building anything. About the only thing they seem to have in common with our killer is they like heights."

"In what sense?" Sullivan asked.

"Gremlins traditionally like high places," Will explained. "They live in tall trees and mountains, which helps explain why people thought they would like airplanes. I just mentioned that because I noticed from the case files that the victim's apartments were all on at least the third floor."

"Interesting," George said. His eyes were glazed over in thought again.

"But not necessarily useful," Sullivan interjected. "A series of murders conducted in various apartment communities would naturally include incidents that didn't take place at sea level."

"Even so, until we have enough data to formulate a more informed theory, I think we should keep open minds and not rule anything out," George said.

"'Open mind' being the operative phrase," Will said. "Wouldn't it be funny if it turned out Marc was right?"

"The day Marc has intelligent insight about anything is the day I swap out parts with a toaster oven," Sullivan said.

Will actually laughed at that. "According to Marc, you *are* made from a toaster oven."

"I rest my case."

"If you two are finished, perhaps you wouldn't mind getting back to investigating the horrible tragic murders?" George said flatly.

"Yeah, sure," Will said, solemn again. "I'm going to get a soda. Want anything, George?"

"Thank you, but no," George said. Will was off without further ado.

The Kitchen was just across the hall from the Library. It resembled the kitchen of a large hotel and its adjacent pantry could easily hold as much food as a small general store. Will headed for one of four refrigerators, the one designated solely for drinks. It was chock full of a variety of sodas, as well as Marc's beer and brandy, scotch and fine wine for George.

I've got to hand it to George, thought Will. He's raised luxurious excess to an art form.

At that moment the doorbell rang and Will froze. The doorbell never rang. Only on extremely rare occasions was anyone that didn't live in the Mansion even allowed on the grounds. Even then, at least as far as Will knew, George had always escorted them personally. Moreover, the Mansion tended not to have many casual visitors drop by.

Will stepped out of the Kitchen into the hall, half-expecting everyone else to do the same out of curiosity. But neither George nor Sullivan came out of the Library and he saw no sign of Jake or Marc. The doorbell rang again more insistently. Shrugging to himself, Will headed for the front door.

He was midway through the Foyer when the doorbell rang again several times in quick succession. Will put aside his apprehension, deciding that if someone was on George's property, chances were it was because George wanted them there. He supposed it was either a friend of George's (not that Will knew of any) or someone here to conduct business. Perhaps it was one of the mysterious contacts George used to acquire weapons, explosives, electronics, vehicle components and who knew what else. Heck, maybe it was even Detective King, dropping by with more evidence or something. Will wouldn't mind a chance to chat with his old mentor. He released all three locks on the double doors, opened the left one and his jaw fell open and hung slack in shock.

"Hello, Will," Cynthia said.

Chapter V
This Is Who We Are

“You...how...what are you doing here?” Will sputtered.

“Looking for you, moron,” Cynthia replied. “What else would I be doing here?”

“How did you find this place? Did you follow me last night?”

“Nice to see you again too, Will.” She sounded bored.

“How do you know my name? I never told you--never mind.” He stepped outside and pulled the door shut. “You can’t be here. You have to leave right now.”

“Oh?” Cynthia said, raising an eyebrow. “You’ll be making me leave how?”

“I’m serious, damn it. I don’t know how you got here but you can’t stay.”

“Why?” Cynthia asked. “Are you afraid George will find us out here?”

Will’s heart skipped a beat. He didn’t know what to say and was almost relieved when George opened the door and leaned his head out.

“Will? Is everything ok? Who was--oh, hello.”

“Hi!” Cynthia said as if she were greeting her best friend. “I’m Cynthia. You’re George, right?”

“I suppose I am. You must be Will’s friend from last night.”

“I suppose I am,” Cynthia echoed. “Mind if I come inside?”

“Be my guest,” George said as he held the door open for her. She stepped inside and the door closed, leaving Will standing on the front porch.

My life has just recently become very surreal, he thought.

He stepped back inside to see George and Cynthia in the middle of the Foyer. George was pointing emphatically in the direction of various rooms. “...that way are the living quarters, and there’s the Storeroom, and the Kitchen is that way...”

“What are those?” Cynthia asked, as she pointed at the Armory doors.

“That’s the Armory,” George said, in the same manner as one would name a potted plant. “It’s my personal collection of this...of the world’s historical weaponry. Everything from sling stones to rail guns to...uh, very high tech sling stones.”

“Neat!” Cynthia said. “You guys use all of this to hunt monsters?”

“Ok, *time out!*” Will shouted. George did some strange things, occasionally some *very* strange things, but he was always very consistent about one thing: he never let anyone know anything about the operation without first taking extensive steps to prepare them for admittance to the group. As for Cynthia? She was Cynthia--which Will was pretty sure at this point was a word meaning “security risk.” Yet here George was, enthusiastically revealing the secrets of the Manor to her.

“What the hell is going on here?” Will demanded.

“Would you excuse me, my dear?” George asked without the slightest change in his demeanor. “It seems I have some business I should attend to.”

“Sure,” Cynthia said.

“All right, Will,” George said as he strode to the young man’s side. “What do you need?”

“What do I--” Will blurted, then reigned himself in. “What I need is a little clarification, George. What the hell is she doing here? Did you invite her?”

“No.”

“Then how the hell did she know how to get here?”

“I imagine it’s because you told her,” George said flatly.

“I--what are you talking about?”

“Haven’t you guessed by now, Will?” George sighed. “She’s a telepath. She reads people’s thoughts as easily as you read a road sign. She probably picked directions here right out of your head.”

“I never...”

“Not consciously, no. But if she asked you about your house, or anything similar, you would have instinctively thought about it, the same way your eyes will move toward something of yours that I mention. If you lived in a house in the suburbs, just a mental image probably wouldn’t have helped her

much. But a gigantic mansion at the end of an unmarked dirt road off the northern highway, now *that* stands out in a person's mind."

Will's head was swimming. "Ok, I guess that explains how she found us...sort of...but why...?"

"Why bring her in and show her around? Think about it. You've seen how powerful she is. I'd bet that the powers we've seen represent just some of what she's capable of. If she wants to get in here, she has a number of ways to do it. Did you notice that the front gate was still closed?"

Will admitted that he hadn't.

"That just tells us that she couldn't have walked or driven onto the grounds. I imagine she used her telekinesis to float right over the wall! If I didn't invite her in, who's to say she wouldn't pick the locks with her mind? Or even mind control one of you, to get what she wants?"

"She--could she do that?" Will asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised." George said. "She's of a mindset to do whatever she feels like. Why else would she simply turn up here? She's willing and able to do whatever she wants, so this way we can keep an eye on what she's doing when she's doing it, at least for the time being."

Will was quiet as he pondered what George said. His words seemed to make sense, or at least as much sense as anything else that was happening. "Can she really read minds?"

You bet I can.

Will was so startled he flinched and yelped. The words were there in his mind, the same way a thought would be. It didn't sound like Cynthia because it wasn't a sound, but it had a definite Cynthia-ish quality. When he looked at her she was standing next to the Armory's door looking back at him, smirking.

"That's how you knew my name," he said.

Well, that and a name as hokey as Chett had to be a fake.

Will grimaced at that. "Chester is my middle name."

William Chester? Cynthia broadcast with a hint of amusement. *No wonder you have so little self esteem.*

"Er, Cynthia," George cut in, "far be it from me to stifle my guest's free spirits, but I'm afraid I must ask you to refrain from using your gifts when you meet our roommates."

Do I haveta?

"I'm afraid so," George said apologetically. "You see, my compatriots are not used to dealing with people who boast talents such as yours. I fear overt displays of such abilities may unnerve them."

"Do you always talk like that?" Cynthia asked out loud as she strolled leisurely back toward where Will and George stood.

"Which? My pretentious diction? Quite often and with tremendous exuberance, I'm afraid." George smiled, and Cynthia smiled back.

Oh, brother, Will thought.

"I heard that!" Cynthia quipped, then balked at the annoyed expression George gave her. "Sorry, force of habit."

"You just walk around all day reading people's minds?" Will flared.

"Well, yeah. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal? It's the worst possible invasion of privacy! Worse than reading a person's mail, or their diary..." He trailed off as a detail of their meeting the night before came back to him. "That's why you carry a notepad. So you can write down things you pick out of people's heads!"

"Will," George said.

"What are you? A thief? A con artist? Do you manipulate people into thinking about their ATM passwords? Or do you just find out where they hide extra house keys and when they won't be home?"

"Will," George said again, "I hardly think this is the time--"

"No, I think this *is* the time!" Will shouted. "Pulling stunts like last night is one thing, but this is ridiculous! She shows up here because she can after reading my mind--how do we know she's not here to spy on us? Maybe the monsters we hunt got together and decided to infiltrate us, had you thought of that?"

"As a matter of fact Will, I had." George sounded blasé. "I can guarantee you, even if that's why

she's here, there is nothing she can find out that could threaten this operation."

"How can you be sure?" Will asked.

"Because you never have, either."

Will was stunned. He was the most trusted and privileged member of the team, allowed access to Mansion rooms, equipment, and files that even Jake and Detective King couldn't touch. Yet, in his entire time with the team, he had never been able to find out anything meaningful about the operation itself. He had no idea who George really was or where his money came from. He didn't know how George knew so much about magic and the supernatural, things which contemporary science considered nonsense but which were undeniably real. Heck, he'd never even been anywhere on the third floor. Now George was making it perfectly clear that he was completely secure (or at least thought he was) and certain that no individual, foreign or domestic, could threaten his operation.

So for the moment Will resolved to let the matter drop. Despite the rudeness of the comment, not to mention how insulting it was, he would save his issues for later. He just said, "Ok, now what?"

After Will's outburst, George and Cynthia left him to continue their impromptu tour. Still agitated and leery of Cynthia and her sense of privilege with the minds of others, Will went back to researching. Sullivan was as flummoxed as he was when he explained to her that George was showing a woman from the city around the Mansion, largely because Will neglected to mention her abilities. In the end, however, Sullivan seemed to feel that George knew what he was doing and left him to his business. So Will and Sullivan continued to research as they waited for seven o'clock, when George had dictated the group should meet again, in preparation for the evening's activities.

"So, why can't I read you?" said Cynthia as she and George climbed one of the Foyer's stairs.

"Hmm?" George hummed, without looking at her.

"Oh, don't even," Cynthia said. "Seriously, why can't I read you?"

"What part of me?"

"Any part. I can't read your thoughts or emotions and according to your aura, you're a lump of clay."

"Oh, *that*," George said. "I would think it would be obvious. To our right here is the Office..."

"You're psychic too?" Cynthia blurted. "Can you do anything else?"

"Oooh...a few things. But I haven't done most of them for quite a while."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't need too. I get along pretty well with the skills and other natural talents I have. I've also learned to respect the sanctity of other peoples' minds. Although granted it took me a dismally long time to learn..." George trailed off, a mark of sadness in his voice.

"Oh, no," Cynthia groaned. "Don't tell me you're going to start lecturing me."

"Wherever did you get the notion that I would, young lady?"

"From Will's head."

"Ah yes, of course. In this case, I think the nature of your talent will teach you in time to hold other people in high regard for their individuality."

"I doubt it," Cynthia said. "People are all the same, George. I've been looking into people's heads since I was two and I never heard anything new after the first day. Guys think about sex, girls think about money and everybody thinks about what they want, all the time. People aren't different or special, they're all the same trash-talk TV show wrapped up in different packages."

"If that's true, then let me ask you something. Why did you come here after Will?"

"I wanted to see this place. It looked pretty wild in his mind."

"Sure," George conceded. "But if you had found Will to be as boring as everyone else, I doubt you'd have wandered around in his thoughts long enough to find it. You must have seen something interesting in him."

Cynthia blushed at that. "He's...deep, you know? When most guys see me for the first time they usually, uh...try to picture me topless."

"I can understand that," George said so flatly that Cynthia couldn't help but giggle.

"But Will...the first time he saw me, he thought I was in danger. The only thing he thought about was how to save me. He's always like that, you know? He worries about you guys, he wants to protect me...or shoot me, I'm not really sure...I think I even caught a stray thought in there feeling bad for the homeless. I haven't once caught him thinking about himself."

"Yes, Will is quite a selfless fellow," George said. "Too much so, in fact. That's the Rec Room, my dear, and this is the Gym."

"How can anyone be too selfless?" Cynthia asked.

"Cynthia, I think that in time you will find that too much or little of anything is bad. We tend to think of selfishness as a bad thing and in large quantities this is true. But without some degree of self-interest people have little motivation to do anything. They waste away, sink into depression or simply neglect their own well-being. So it is with our Will."

"Will neglects himself?" Cynthia asked.

"He no longer cares for his own safety," George replied. "He lost someone he was very close to. Since then he has very little drive to live. He constantly goes out alone like he did last night. He no longer spends much time with the rest of us. I wish you could have seen him before! He was the life of any party. He has an amazing sense of humor, and did you know that he can sing? In a beautiful tenor voice, and he can play the piano like no one I've ever known..."

"Who did he lose? Is it this 'Tina' he keeps thinking about?"

"Yes," George said solemnly. "She was here when he came to the group. They were in love by the end of their introduction, I think. They were engaged after four months and never left each other's side. They were going to be married seven months later..." he trailed off.

"What?" Cynthia said.

"You must understand, I am only telling you this so you do not stumble over the subject talking to Will and it would be *completely* unacceptable for you to probe his mind for it. Understand?" There was no sign of humor in his eyes as he spoke.

"I understand," Cynthia said.

"Do you know the Edward G. Tanner High School?" he asked.

"Yeah, the place on the south side, right?"

"Yes," George said. His eyes wandered in space. "The one they were supposed to have torn down many months ago..." He focused on her again and there was an intensity in his eyes that was almost frightening.

"About eighteen months ago, the team tracked a vampire back to the school. It turned out there was a nest of them there. The team found themselves in a fight to the finish with a half-dozen vampires. They came out of it unscathed, well-oiled machine that they were, but Tina was overconfident and rushed off to scout for more. There were more, three of them. They caught her without a sound and waited until they heard Will calling for her to start...before they hurt her."

Cynthia said nothing.

"Will followed the sound of her voice to a room on the third floor. She was already gone when he found her and they attacked him." George quickly wiped a tear away. "The others were too far away to help..." He trailed off again, and seemed to wake up and realize where he was. "This concludes the tour, my dear. The third floor is off limits, I'm afraid. I think we should check with Sullivan and Will to see if they've made any headway." He started toward the stairs.

Cynthia was flabbergasted. "Well, what happened?" she blurted as she trotted up behind him.

"What happened?" George echoed hollowly.

"Urg!" Cynthia groaned. "Yeah, what happened that three vampires caught Will and he didn't die?"

"I happened," George said. Cynthia couldn't get him to say anything more.

"Anything yet?" George asked as he and Cynthia entered the Library.

"Still nothing," Sullivan replied. "Whatever we're facing, I don't think it's in here." She swiveled

in her chair to face George. "Now what?"

"At this point, I don't think there's much else we can do until this evening. By the way, Cynthia, this is Sullivan."

"Wow," Cynthia said. "A robot?"

"Top of the line," George said proudly. "She has a fully developed personality based on a very kind matron I had when I was younger. However, she does tend to overexert herself. I hadn't even known it was possible for a robot to have a hernia..."

"I can also speak for myself," Sullivan remarked.

"Sorry, Sullivan."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Cynthia," Sullivan said. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"I don't know," Cynthia said. "I came by to see," her eyes flickered from Sullivan to Will to George, "the place, but I wouldn't mind hanging around for a while."

"You're most welcome, I'm sure," said Sullivan.

"Now that we've all been introduced, I think we should have some time to ourselves," George said. "Has anyone seen Marc or Jake?"

"I imagine Jake is either asleep or in his Workshop. I have no idea where Marc is," Sullivan said.

"In that case, I'm going to look for them to catch them up," George said.

"All right. I'm going to walk the grounds," Sullivan said. She went with George, leaving Will and Cynthia in the Library. Will continued clicking away at his computer, neither looking at nor speaking to Cynthia.

"Hi, Will," she ventured weakly after several moments of uncomfortable silence. He cast a withering look at her, then returned to his work.

"How are you doing?" she asked and slowly sat in George's chair.

"What?" said Will. "You couldn't just read my mind and find out?"

"Will," Cynthia said. Her voice cracked a little as she spoke. "We don't have to do this. I came here to see you again."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Because you're deep!" Cynthia blurted out, then reigned herself in as he trained a quizzical look on her. She took a deep breath and started again.

"You're the first person I've met in a long time who doesn't dress like he is."

Will still looked puzzled.

"Ok, look," Cynthia said. "Most people are really shallow and they dress like it, snobby or trendy or flashy or whatever. But you're not like that. You go out in all black in that trench coat and sunglasses. Most guys that do that are just trying to look cool, but you're trying to hide."

"Trying to hide? I'm trying to be--"

"Inconspicuous, I know. That's what you tell yourself. But what you're really doing is hiding. You wrap yourself up in the color of night and you sit in dark corners by yourself, like you did last night."

"Is there a point to this?" Will snapped.

"I'm trying to tell you I think you're unique! I think it's a shame that you shut yourself off, because there's so much good in you that isn't in other people."

"I don't think you're in any position to judge that," Will said as he stood up. "You may see what's in people heads, but what I've been reading says you can't see what's in their hearts and that's what really counts." He stormed out of the room, saying, "I have work to do," as he pulled the door shut.

Cynthia just sat for a while. She drifted into a brief melancholy that quickly gave way to curiosity. Going to the terminal where Will had been working, she saw what he had been reading: an enormous file detailing known psychic powers and phenomena. Highlighted at the top of the screen was this:

Telepathy (Continued)

although certain naturally endowed psionic races demonstrate (occasionally, much) greater range as a whole.

While this power reveals the surface thoughts of an individual to the

psychic, it does not in and of itself reveal memories, deeper thoughts, or any of an individual's other, less immediately prominent cognition, and so is not necessarily reliable for determining personal information such as character traits, repressed memories, etc....

Cynthia stared at the screen for a long time before switching it off with a sigh and leaving the Library.

She found George in the Situation Room. He was talking to a fellow he introduced as Jake, resident gizmoteer and freelance nice guy. In light of recent events, she found it easy to shrug off the habitual temptation to read his mind.

"So, Cynthia," Jake asked, "what do you do for a living?"

My family's a bunch of crooks and they spoil me rotten because they know how much trouble I can be if I'm not happy, she thought. "My family's wealthy," she said.

"Yeah?" Jake said. "Must be pretty nice, huh?"

They don't really spoil me. My father knows I know about all of what he's into and he hopes that by covering my every need and keeping me quiet he won't have to have me killed, she thought. "It's ok," she said. "I have a little place in the East Heights. It's nice, but it's on the opposite side of town from my folks." *That way I'm less likely to catch them thinking about any more of their dirty dealing. Or wondering what to do about me.*

"Wow. You must get really lonely, then, huh?" Jake asked.

I spend all my time wandering around trying to find someone I can connect with. But people are all the same...or at least I thought so until I met Will and read that paper, she thought.

"Yeah, sometimes," she said.

"Bummer," said Jake. "Well, you'll have us to visit with, I guess. Ok, George, you were saying?"

"That there is nothing new at this point to say," George said. "The three of us researched through the morning and most of this afternoon and didn't find anything useful."

"Well, does that mean what we're looking for isn't supernatural?" Jake asked. "If you can't find something in those archives, it doesn't exist, right?"

George smiled. "I'm flattered by your confidence, Jake, but it would be sheer hubris to assume that something doesn't exist simply because I don't have a book about it."

"Ok," Jake said. "So...I guess we're just waiting for the trip, then?"

"Quite. In the meantime each of us should relax in the method most preferred to our character. Speaking of which, where's Marc?"

"Right here," Marc said from the doorway. He scratched his stomach and belched loudly. "Hey! Who's the hot chick?"

Cynthia's eyes widened, then narrowed in irritation.

"Picturing you topless?" George asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Marc, this is Cynthia," George said, talking past Marc's bewildered expression. "She's here visiting Will."

"Will's got a woman?" Marc said as he gave Cynthia a very blatant once-over. "All right, Will!"

"She's just visiting, Marc," said George, making no effort to hide his amusement. "She's going to observe our operation tonight, as well."

"Oh, come on!" Marc said. "This work's not for a little girl like her."

"That's a rather antiquated point of view," Jake said.

"Uh...that mean he don't agree?" asked Marc.

"In essence," George said. "Really, Marc, I suppose you want us to believe, even after all of your experiences here, that women are too fragile to partake in our task?"

"Yeah," Marc said. "This ain't a woman's kind of work. What do you think?" Cynthia and Jake both looked expectantly at George.

"I have heard it said that a woman's place is in the kitchen," said George. "However, I personally find it unwise to place the victim of such a sexist remark so near the cutlery."

Jake laughed out loud. Cynthia smiled. Marc looked like gears were churning in his head trying to think of a comeback. None came.

"At any rate, Marc," George said, "I was just telling Cynthia and Jake that we have the next few hours before we leave to ourselves."

"Table tennis?" Jake asked.

"Table tennis!" agreed Marc. "I'm gonna kick your butt!"

"I doubt it. I've been working on a paddle attachment for my suit..." Jake mused.

"Stop picturing me cage dancing!" Cynthia shouted, making the three men jump.

"Why don't you boys run along?" George said. "Cynthia and I are going to walk around the grounds." He put his hands on Cynthia's shoulders and began to guide her out the door. She was trembling slightly and her eyes were locked on Marc, who still looked very confused.

"What was that about?" Jake asked after the pair had left.

"Beats me," Marc said. "Chick must just be uptight." He flinched again when Cynthia's voice echoed into the room from a little way down the hall:

"Augh! No leather!"

"That was a little over the edge, my dear," George said. Cynthia was walking unguided now, but stiffly. "Marc may not be the sharpest fellow around, but with clues like that he will eventually figure out that you know what he's thinking."

"Sorry, habit," Cynthia said. "Geez, that guy's got a dirty mind!"

"Yes, Marc is...a very colorful character," said George.

"Yeah, really blue," Cynthia grumbled. "Three years I've been hanging around singles bars and I've never read drivel like that in anyone. Do they even actually *make* outfits like that...?"

She stopped at the front door and allowed him to open it for her. The sun outside was bright and warm. A soft desert wind was rustling the trees and blowing the grass in waves.

"You know, I don't mean to be rude, but this place is kind of strange," Cynthia said. "The layout of your house is so symmetrical. Does it even have a back door?"

"Actually, yes. On the third floor."

"And what's with the grass? It's so sparse the way it grows but it's long and healthy. It's like it's from a savannah or something."

"A mountain valley, actually," George replied. "It's transplanted from where I grew up."

"Really? Where's that?"

George wagged a finger. "That would be telling, now wouldn't it?"

"You're going to be really obnoxious with this whole mysterious guy routine, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so. I've put a great deal of time and energy into making this place all my own. Speaking of which, here comes Sullivan."

Cynthia followed his gaze toward the gate and saw that Sullivan was indeed making her way across the grounds toward them. She was pushing a large wheelbarrow that was almost certainly loaded beyond safe capacity with large white plastic bags, which she wheeled to where they stood and set it down. Its legs settled deeply into the sandy soil.

"Hello Sullivan," George said cordially. "What do we have here?"

"Mulch," replied Sullivan. "The delivery truck left it outside the gate. Is there any news?"

"Unfortunately, no," George said. "I'm afraid we're just going to have to learn what we can reconnoitering tonight."

"All right, then." Sullivan stooped and took up the wheelbarrow again. "If you'll not be needing me, I'll attend to the greenery now."

"Please," George said, and Sullivan trundled away with a load most people Cynthia knew wouldn't have been able to lift.

"Wow," Cynthia said. "Ok, tell me this--why are you all here?"

“We live here.” George was grinning broadly.

Cynthia took a deep breath. “I mean, how is it that you all live here and do this whole secret agent monster hunter thing?”

“Ah, the inevitable question.” The breeze gusted briefly and the grass rippled in a wave across the yard. “One with an involved answer. I founded this team some years after I came to Ylelon. Membership has varied over the years, from seventeen at its peak to the current three, its all time low.”

“I suppose there are long sagas about how each person came to join the team?”

“Indeed. But luckily, they can be broken down very simply.

“Will was a young police officer in the city. He was partnered with a former team member, the now Detective Samuel King. Put simply, one night on patrol they surprised a vampire attacking a homeless man. King felt Will could be trusted with knowledge of the group. Will felt that his place in life was with us. Plus, there was Tina.

“Marc was a rampant white supremacist. Gays, Yedem, blacks, foreigners...name any ethnic group that isn't white Ylelon radical, and he'd beat them to a pulp on principle.”

“Hard to believe anyone like that could get very far in a place as mixed as Ylelon,” said Cynthia.

“Indeed,” George said again. “Which probably has to do with the fact that he lived in a little rat-hole with his girlfriend. They were out bar-hopping one night...”

“Let me guess. Vampire?”

“Pounced on them from an alley. He killed her almost before they knew what was happening. Marc tackled him, but strong as he is he's no match for your average vampire. The creep decided to have some fun at Marc's expense. Guess who happened to be close enough to hear the commotion?”

“Will?”

“Along with the rest of the team at the time. Boom, pow, whap zack zorch slam crash crunch and it was over. A well-oiled machine.

“Marc was still alive but he looked like he'd been in a train wreck...as one of the trains. The others brought him back here to patch him up because they couldn't risk the questions they'd face at a hospital. Marc had no family, no real friends and no mentionable life to go back to so he ended up staying with us.”

“Is he still a racist?” Cynthia asked.

“To a degree. Over time, I've tried to teach him tolerance and acceptance but mostly what's happened is that his rage and prejudice have shifted from poorly defined types of people to the very broadly defined category of 'monster.' He still tends to be very unpleasant to homosexuals, but otherwise he usually manages to be civil toward others.”

“What about Jake? What's his story?”

“Jake has a less tragic story. His family split up due to internal problems when he was a teen. I met him while attending a lecture given by his father, a physicist at Ihuu University in Attenz. He astonished me with his understanding of the higher sciences and modern mechanics. I took to funding his hobby, which consisted of building mechanisms whose functions were based on theoretical principles, some of which actually worked. He was very willing to join the group and swear secrecy in return for a sense of belonging and nearly unlimited access to raw materials and state of the art equipment. He builds and designs many of the weapons and equipment that we use in the field. Will's guns, for example.”

“Yeah, what's the deal with that? Those are strange guns.”

“They are designed to be able to use silver bullets, Cynthia.”

“Why do they have to be special for that? What's the point?”

“Cynthia, as I'm sure you'll discover, silver is the bane of many unsavory things--not the least of which are vampires and other types of undead. The problem with silver is that it's a soft metal. Modern firearms have too high a muzzle velocity for silver ammunition to be practical. That is, the silver is so soft, being fired out of a modern gun squishes the bullets. Jake designed Will's guns with a special firing chamber to allow for this. Their design also makes them untraceable, should that become a problem.”

“That's cool. So, do you guys have a name for yourselves?” Cynthia was smirking again. “Something cool and witty, or are you just the 'Georgeites' or something?”

“We do indeed, Cynthia. While I find your suggestion both flattering and intriguing, our given

title has been established for some time. We are the Lonely Winds.”

“The Lonely Winds?”

“Wow, I didn’t know my front yard had an echo. Yes, it has not escaped our attention that the name for our little city-state is an anagram for ‘lonely.’ Since we have always striven to protect our society, but at the same time must remain invisible, one of our members in the past poetically likened us to the wind. Thus, Lonely Winds. Not terribly imaginative, but functional.”

“Oh. What’s this mission tonight?”

“We’re investigating some murders that have been kept under wraps by the police department. Detective King, whom I have already mentioned, is no longer an active member of the team, but he keeps us apprised of goings on in the city--what cases may need our particular attention, when and where we should go or not go to avoid trouble with the department, and so on.”

“Why would you have trouble with the police?”

“Cynthia, are you honestly that naïve?”

“Humor me.”

George sighed. “The first thing you must learn here is that the police are not our friends. This society is one that does not accept the existence of the supernatural and paranormal. It also does not tolerate shadowy individuals running around in back alleys with concealed weapons. So when a cop finds one of us standing over a corpse with a smoking gun, obviously it is a case of murder and should be dealt with appropriately. We have had some very unpleasant incidents with authority figures in the past. Detective King helps to keep such occurrences to a minimum.”

“That makes sense. So this is what you do, huh?” Cynthia asked.

“This is who we are,” George corrected. “What we do is defined by that.” He looked around, drinking in the beauty of the late desert summer. “So little time left in the day.”

“What are you talking about? The sun won’t go down for like four more hours.”

“I have learned to appreciate the value of every moment, Cynthia, for I will not live forever to enjoy it.”

“Yeah, like you haven’t already lived forever.”

“As that is clearly an age joke, I will pointedly ignore it.”

The breeze gusted again, blowing Cynthia’s hair out behind her like a veil. “So, how long will you let me stay here?” she asked.

“As long as you’d like, I suspect.”

“Really? Will the others be comfortable with that?”

“Not at first. It’ll take some time for them to get used to you, particularly given your gifts. But never in the history of the group has any new member been welcomed openly. Suspicion and paranoia tend to breed within the confines of this job, I fear, and in turn the manic-depressive rookie cop, the compulsive gadget-man and the habitually violent fascist each found their suitability for membership questioned. So it will be for the precocious psychic.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to join,” Cynthia grumbled.

“True, but I think you know better than to ask about staying here without meaning to.”

“Good point,” she admitted. “So what do we do now?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m going to stand here for a while and enjoy this breeze. In a couple of hours the team will assemble and fall out. You will see what should hopefully be a routine reconnaissance mission, which should in turn help you decide whether or not you want to join us.”

“Ok. What about it wouldn’t be routine?”

“Well,” George said ominously, “It’s always possible that they will run into whatever has been constructing these traps...”

Chapter VI

A Well-Oiled Machine

Come seven o'clock, Marc, Jake and Will were long since ready to depart for the city. They had all done as George suggested and tried to relax throughout the day, but as the evening wore on and anticipation built, even Will began to become fidgety and anxious. Thus, when George strolled into the Situation Room at seven accompanied by Cynthia and Sullivan the three men were already seated and waiting, each dressed entirely in black and with their backpacks (in Marc's case, his duffle bag) handy and loaded with their individual supplies. Marc, true to form, had torn the sleeves off of his shirt. George went to stand at the head of the table while Sullivan and Cynthia took seats.

"All right, gentlemen," he began. "You know the drill: low profile reconnaissance. Make contact when you reach the domicile. Above all, be careful."

Off the team went to the garage. They tested their cameras by clicking them on and speaking to George. He confirmed that he could see and hear them on monitors in the Situation Room by responding through receivers on each camera. Then they left to rendezvous at Albert Wilson's address.

"So what will they do when they get there?" asked Cynthia. The room's monitors were still sending and receiving signals from the cameras, showing the inside of each vehicle. Marc's camera was propped up on his duffle bag, displaying a panoramic view of the sky out the passenger's window.

"Hopefully, nothing more than gather information," George said. "They will enter the crime scene and look for anything the police may have missed. They'll take sensor readings, collect any evidence they judge to be pertinent, then return."

Once the trio reached the city limits, they split up and took separate routes to the apartment complex. Marc parked on the street a block away, Jake left his Desert Rain in a parking garage a block in the opposite direction and Will stopped in a church parking lot across the street.

"Everyone set?" Will asked into his camera.

"Set," Marc said.

"Yo," said Jake.

"All right, I'm going in first. Jake follows at three minutes, Marc at seven. Out." He dropped the camera into a pocket, slung on his backpack and headed across the street into the building. He took the stairs instead of the elevator and waited for the others in the stairwell. Going in separately from the others helped him to keep a low profile but also presented the problem of how to kill time. Will couldn't very well stand outside a door criss-crossed with police tape while he waited for Marc and Jake. The stairwell provided a convenient alternative: it was almost never used, so Will could wait out the minutes there.

In due time Jake joined him, having come in through a side entrance. They watched through the window in the stairwell door until Marc appeared in the opposite window and gave them a thumbs up, signifying that his stairwell was quiet.

Will was out the door and in the hallway in a flash. He headed for the elevator and pressed the down button. The doors dinged open momentarily and to Will's relief there were no passengers. He dropped his pack against the door and signaled Jake, who exited the stairwell and hustled to the crime scene door midway between the elevator and stairs. Momentarily they were no longer worried about anyone surprising them by coming up the stairs or out of the elevator, but there was still the possibility of someone leaving their apartment at an inopportune moment. Jake pulled a skeleton key from his pack and pushed it through the web of police tape. He was confident that the key would work without having to resort to a full lock-picking kit, and he was right. The door popped open and he crouched almost to the floor, crawling under the tape and dragging his backpack behind himself.

Will signaled Marc, who burst through the door and came down the hall at a dead run. He did a stage dive through the door and was gone.

Will grabbed his pack, ran to the door and dropped it in. Then he ducked under the tape and the door closed and clicked behind him.

Three flashlights switched on in the apartment. Early evening was only just beginning to darken the sky outside, but the shades were drawn in the apartment, leaving the rooms a series of caverns shrouded in twilight. Each man took out his camera, clipped it on a shoulder and tested it as he had at the Mansion.

“*You’re all loud and clear,*” George said through Will’s camera. “*See anything so far?*”

“Nothing overt,” said Jake. “This place looks pretty clean.” He swept his flashlight beam down the hallway. “Let’s see. The resident was killed in his bedroom, right?”

“*Correct,*” replied George. Jake took out the Osborn Eye and led the others to the first doorway, which turned out to be the bedroom. A chalk bodyline marked the dull gray carpet in front of the dresser. A telltale dark stain overlapped the head.

Jake ran his light along the ceiling. The sledgehammer and tripwire had been removed. All that remained was a series of eyehooks that ran from above the bodyline across the ceiling and down one wall.

“Well, we won’t be learning much about the trap’s construction,” said Jake. “Have you guys found anything yet?”

“Nothing so far,” replied Will. He was sweeping his light back and forth looking for anything of note while Marc was inching around the room studying the walls.

The Osborn Eye was working overtime providing an exhaustive list of absolutely nothing. Air content, temperature, chemical content of the carpet--nothing turned up as unusual, except the blood and chalk, of course.

“Any ideas, George? We’re coming up dry here.”

Marc stopped short. He had just come to a hanging picture and right below the bottom right corner of the frame was a round hole about the size a large nail would make. The odd thing was that the material of the wall was pushed *out*, forming a tiny anthill of powdery drywall around the hole. *What the hell...?*

“*I’m not certain,*” George was saying. “*Perhaps you’ll find some residue on the hooks?*”

Marc knelt below the picture. There was a bit of powder on the wall and carpet. The hole had definitely been pushed out from inside the wall. Perplexed, Marc stood again and leaned to look into the hole.

He flinched and nearly dropped the flashlight. As his light fell over the hole something moved inside, a glint of sickly gray where there should have been darkness. Marc leaned right up next to the wall and looked inside. There was nothing now, but he could hear a faint scrabbling coming from the wall to his right. He walked with it, following it as it slowly moved along the wall. When it stopped suddenly, Marc set his duffle bag down as quietly as he could and drew back his left arm.

“I think even the Ylelon police would have thought of that, George. Maybe we could--” The sudden sound of something crashing through drywall startled Jake so badly he dropped the Eye. It thumped on the floor and beeped once as if in protest.

“Marc, what the hell...!” Jake began, but stopped short when he saw that Marc had his arm buried in the wall past his wrist. A muted squalling came from within the wall itself. Marc hauled his arm back and chunks of drywall fell away amidst a cloud of dust. The big man was clasping something in his hand that struggled wildly, something that was all talons and spit and rage. It clawed and kicked at Marc even as he dropped to his knees, pinned it to the floor and fished in his duffle bag with his free hand.

Will and Jake were aghast. They both had instinctively drawn their guns at the sound of the fight but kept them lowered for fear of an accident. Will moved to assist but before he could even cross the room Marc had found one of his lengths of pipe and raised it above his head. He bashed the creature in the head with a dull *thud*. It stopped screaming and its head lulled drunkenly. Blood trickled from an ugly wound in the middle of its forehead and its breathing was labored and ragged. As Marc raised his pipe again, it buried its tiny claws, five on each hand, four to a foot, in Marc’s forearm. Marc brought the pipe down again and crushed the creature’s head with a sickening *crunch*. It went limp. Marc shook its claws loose by flexing as he stood up. The creature dangled like a rag doll from his clenched fist, its cataract gray hide a sharp contrast to the thin streams of blood that dribbled onto it from his wounds.

“Holy gouda!” exclaimed Jake. “What the hell is *that*?”

“*I’m going to hazard a guess that it’s our perpetrator,*” George said.

“How the heck did you find it?” Will asked.

“He made himself a peephole,” Marc grunted and pointed at the hole under the picture. “I caught him spyin’ on us.”

“He was watching us from inside the wall?” Will said as he swept his flashlight to and fro around the room. He finally brought it to rest on an air vent over the door.

“That’s how he kept from leaving much evidence,” Jake observed. “He can travel through crawlspaces, air ducts, electrical access ports...he can sneak into just about anyplace, set up his contraptions and leave without being seen.” He leaned down and shined his light on the creature. “There’s just one thing I want to know.”

“*Was he working alone?*” proposed George.

“Exactly,” Jake said. Realization dawned as he and Will exchanged glances. They opened their backpacks as one and took out their motion trackers.

“Nothing,” Jake said, turning slowly around to scan a three-hundred-and-sixty degree range. “The only things moving are large and far away enough to be the creatures known as next-door neighbors. I guess this guy was working solo.”

“Uh, guys,” Marc said. He pointed his flashlight at the ceiling. Just visible next to the light fixture behind the shade was another hole, much like the first one. Marc then pointed his light at the molding at the base of the wall by the door, where there was a third hole. In the narrow strip of wall between the closet door and the corner was a fourth. The team counted seven total around the room.

“George?” asked Will.

“*I see it, Will,*” George replied. “*Are you certain you’re not getting anything on the trackers?*”

“Mine is set high enough to read a sneezing butterfly,” Jake said. He paused in thought for a heartbeat, then set his tracker down. Taking a pillow from the bed, he stripped off the case and held it open. Marc unceremoniously dropped in his prize, which was dripping some very unsavory substances.

“Cover me,” Jake said. He walked to the door as if to leave the room, but at the last moment he crouched and rapped soundly on the wall by the hole at the door’s base. Instantly Will and Jake’s motion detectors beeped to report a cat-sized entity moving through the wall, straight down.

“They’re watching us,” Will said in horror.

“They’re completely still. They may not even need to breathe,” Jake said softly.

“So what now? Do we try to catch them all?” Marc asked.

“*Negative!*” George came through suddenly. “*You boys clear out of there, now!*”

“But George--” Jake began.

“*No buts! We just got a call from Detective King. Some neighbors heard the racket a minute ago and called the police. You’ve got about three minutes before you’re up to your necks in cops! Move!*”

As quickly as they could the team began collecting their gear and stuffing it back in their packs. They slung them on, clicked off their flashlights, Marc grabbed the pillowcase and they dashed through the twilight to the front door. Will held the door open while the others dove into the hallway and ran for the stairwells. Then he weaved through the tape, hauled the door shut and ran after Marc.

They flew down the stairs and into the parking lot where they slowed immediately to a brisk walk. They already looked like cat burglars. Fleeing the scene of a crime would only help make them memorable to anyone the police might question later. Once they reached the street they split up, Will crossing to his car, Marc trotting down the sidewalk to his truck. As he crossed, Will looked up the street and saw Jake making his way through the sparse crowd with his hands in his pockets. Will smiled to himself as he dove into his car and pulled away. Moments afterward, two police cars pulled into the complex parking lot.

“*Status report,*” commanded George.

“Away and clear,” Will and Jake said in turn.

“I’m clear, and I got the critter,” Marc said.

“*Good. I just talked to Detective King again. They’re processing the pre-investigation right now and it’s not going to be pretty. Apparently they’d be willing to write it off as vandalism were it not for the*

blood stains in the rug.”

“They won’t find anything,” Jake said confidently. “Even if they manage to lift one of my prints from the pillow or Marc’s from the plaster, they don’t have our records and won’t be able to analyze the blood of a creature so different from natural life that it does not breathe air.”

“Let’s hope so. Detective King will keep us informed of any further developments. See you when you get back.”

George leaned back in his chair and exhaled slowly. The team members had all turned off their cameras. The three monitors now showed black and white test patterns with George’s head wearing a feathered headdress as a centerpiece.

“Is that what you call a typical reconnaissance mission?” quipped Cynthia.

“No, that’s what we call a train wreck,” Sullivan retorted.

“It could have been worse,” said George. “They could have set fire to the building and then become involved in a mob shootout, for example.”

“At least we have the sample. That should tell us something,” Sullivan said.

“I did notice one thing, Sullivan,” said George. He swiveled in his chair to face her and put his hands behind his head. “The skin coloring is different and I think the shape of the head is too--I couldn’t see it very well--but otherwise Marc’s creature bears a startling resemblance to a gremlin.” He smiled wickedly.

“I’ll be in the Kitchen,” Sullivan said.

When the team members returned, they found George and Cynthia waiting for them on the front steps. Jake arrived first, as befitted a speed junkie with a sports car, and waited for the others. Marc and Will arrived together a few minutes later. Marc strutted with his duffle bag and gory pillowcase like a triumphant hunter.

“Holy hand grenade!” George exclaimed. Marc’s left forearm was pinstriped by thin streams of dried blood. The claw marks themselves were hidden beneath blood clots the size of raisins. “Do you want us to take a look at that?”

“Do I look like a damn sissy?” snapped Marc. “Here’s your monster. Can I have him stuffed when you’re done?”

“We’ll see. First we must see what we can learn from our mangled friend here.”

“Where’s Sullivan?” asked Will suddenly.

“In the Kitchen, I believe. I understand we’re having grilled cheese sandwiches for supper.” Grinning broadly, George led the group inside.

Chapter VII Eyes in the Dark

For lack of available information on whatever the creature might be Jake and Will scoured the Mansion's archives for the closest thing available: data on gremlins. They brought it all to the Lab, where everyone had gathered to see the creature's examination.

Now George sat at one of the Lab's tables with the creature in its tray before him. He wore a surgical mask and gloves and spoke into a microphone as he worked.

"...would stand approximately thirteen inches tall and weighs seven-point-three pounds. Cause of death appears to be repeated blunt trauma to the anterior of the cranium, an unfortunate side effect of meeting Marc."

"Hey!" protested Marc.

"The creature is bipedal humanoid in structure," George continued. "Its feet appear to be at least partially prehensile with four toes each, while the hands feature a pentadactyl formation. That means four fingers and an opposable thumb for those of you with the blank stares. Each digit is equipped with a single non-retractable claw, which rather resembles that of a cat: curved, slender and opaque.

"The head, although badly damaged, is still intact enough to give us some idea of its structure. The skull is rounded in back, but the front consists of two large, fin-like ovular projections, giving the face a "V" shape. Along the bottom of the "V" is the mouth, which is a small slit equipped with one, two, three rows of teeth, which are themselves little more than needles. There is an eye in the center of each fin. These are quarter-sized solid black orbs with no apparent irises or pupils. There are no external ears, nor can I see any ear holes. Barring a snake-like sensitivity to external vibrations, it would seem that the creature is partially or entirely deaf."

"That explains why they were willing to make so many obvious little holes to watch the room," Jake interjected. "If they can barely hear, the only way for them to keep tabs on what's happening is to be able to see."

"Around the waist is a narrow strip of cloth, which is wrapped very tightly and held in place with a safety pin." George removed the pin and set it aside. "Closer inspection reveals that it is several layers deep and a variety of objects have been secured within the wrapping. At a glance, these include: an assortment of nails of varying sizes; a razor blade; several different heads from interchangeable screwdrivers; a small ball of twine; a very small and rusty crescent wrench; and a plethora of small plastic and metal objects in a wide range of shapes and weights. Here we must surmise that this whole comprises a crude tool belt. Its compact nature and body-hugging structure would seem to facilitate the creature's apparent tendency to travel through confined spaces. For the sake of those assembled I will forgo dissection until a later time."

Jake picked up a handful of items from the tool belt and turned them over in his hand. "This is scrap," he said. "There's nothing here you couldn't find in any toolbox or trash bin. We won't find anything useful here."

"What about the body?" Will asked. "Maybe something in his stomach will tell us where he eats? Or something on his skin will tell us where he's been?"

Following Will's suggestion, George lifted one of the creature's tiny arms with a pair of forceps. He started at the shoulder and prodded with a scalpel as he worked his way down. There was a great deal of dust and grime smudged on the skin, with a few fibers clinging here and there. These George picked off with tweezers and laid beside the body. He finally came to the claws, still caked in Marc's blood, and twisted them in the forceps. At the base of each talon were tiny clumps of spongy material that immediately piqued George's interest. He pulled a gob loose, laid it in the tray and poked it with the scalpel. Even soaked in blood, its texture was unmistakable.

"I'll be damned," George said to himself.

"Quite possibly true, but what specifically are you referring to?" said Sullivan.

"Asbestos," George replied.

"God bless you!" Marc said.

“No, dumbass!” said Cynthia. “Asbestos is that thin vegetable.”

“No, that’s asparagus,” George corrected. “Asbestos is a very old type of insulation long since abandoned and reviled for its pronounced carcinogenic properties.”

“Huh?” Marc said.

“Cigarette wall-stuffing,” explained Jake.

“Our advantage here is that any structure containing asbestos at this point would be extremely dated and possibly uninhabited,” George said.

“So these things grow and hang out in an old abandoned building. That narrows it down to, what? All of downtown?” muttered Jake.

“No need for hyperbole,” Sullivan said. “I’m sure that no more than half of downtown is that decrepit.”

“Do the two of you have anything constructive to add?” George berated.

Cynthia picked up one of the scraps and held it in the palm of her hand. She reached out with her mind to touch it, reading in it the owners it had had and through them the places it had been--a talent which she had no name for, but George would call psychometry. The sound of conversation in the room faded to a distant whine as she focused on the jagged shard.

“Is there any way to get into the city’s records?” Will was saying. “Construction records, auditor’s office, that sort of thing?”

Cynthia’s mind’s eye filled with a schizophrenic kaleidoscope of images. Split-second snippets of the shard’s history flashed before her. She saw the metal scrap, lying on a bare dirty floor in a darkened room. A familiar hand picked it up and Cynthia felt the malice in the mind behind that hand. She saw hints of long hours spent confined within walls, where the shard’s master used it and countless other objects in the tasks it continuously, almost compulsively, labored on. Everywhere there were eyes in the darkness, black orbs that shone a dull gray in the shadows.

“Possible, but I don’t know how much useful information we could glean from such sources,” George answered. “Asbestos is flat out illegal. Once its toxic nature became a matter of public record, governments all over the world enforced its replacement with safer substitutes in the middle of the last century. If a building containing asbestos is still standing, it’s probably either because its construction records were lost sufficiently for it to be passed over in the purges, or more likely destroyed by a politician bribed to cut the costs of renovation.”

Still lost in her vision, Cynthia saw the creatures hard at work in a sick montage of borrowed memories. Setting a hook behind a mirror. Taping insulation to a closet ceiling. Working in tandem to stack furniture and climb a pyramid of each other to set a row of hooks in a wall. She saw each victim die through the eyes of the monsters and felt the perverse pleasure they took in watching those people suffer. That was their motive, their drive for putting so much effort into their creations: the final reward of seeing their prey in the throes of death. When they were done, they lingered to savor the experience, then returned to the building where the scrap had lain. They rested until they were ready to move again, crawling through the bowels of the city until they found a random victim they could observe and prepare a trap for. Their nest became a place familiar in her mind, something she knew like her own name, or which color red was. A place called...

“918 Devonshire Street.” She broke out of her trance to find everyone staring at her. “Um...that’s where I think this comes from.”

“How exactly would you know that?” Will said coldly. He scowled at her while the others only looked perplexed. Only George had a mild, almost expectant expression.

“Um...the place is haunted!” Cynthia said in sudden inspiration. “Everybody stays away from it because weird stuff happens in there. Uh, weird lights and stuff. Everybody knows that!”

“You surmise that these creatures are the cause of the odd phenomena?” George asked. He was smiling now.

“Interesting that they would have only just begun killing people, yet been around long enough to become an urban legend,” Will said. Cynthia set the shard down and stared at the floor.

“Nevertheless,” cut in George, “I feel that this may be worth looking into. If my memory serves,

that section of the city is quite dilapidated. Devonshire is in the southeast near Broad Street, is it not?" he asked Sullivan. She nodded.

"Then it stands to reason that this address is a good candidate as the abode of our diminutive friend here. As we have no other specific leads, I suggest we begin with a full investigation of this one."

"A trip tomorrow, then?" asked Jake. "We rest, refuel and reload?" George let his eyes flick to Cynthia. Her expression told all.

"We can't wait," George said resolutely. "We have no idea when these creatures may attack someone else. They may even accelerate any timetable they use in a form of retaliation. If this is where we might find them, we need to act before anyone else is harmed."

"Reconnaissance?" Jake asked. George looked to Cynthia again.

"Combat. You'll go in as soon as you can. Take a full complement of weapons. We have no idea what to expect, so be prepared for anything. This could be their lair, a fortress, an outpost of sorts or nothing at all. Jake, will you feel comfortable taking your armor?"

"It still has a few bugs, but I can use it as basic body armor if nothing else."

"Do so. We must assume that these creatures will be prepared for any interlopers and have suitably nasty surprises in store. Also remember that these things are crafty. They left a sledgehammer hanging from Albert Wilson's bedroom ceiling--a fairly obvious 'booby trap'--yet they apparently knew Mr. Wilson's habits and tendencies well enough to keep him from noticing it until it was too late.

"Test every floorboard before you step on it. Watch for tripwires. Don't flip a light switch, turn a doorknob or open a window until you are positive it's safe, and stay in touch at all times. Start preparing, gentlemen. You know the drill."

Marc, Jake and Will filed out to prepare and Sullivan went to assist as they worked and provide possible insight from what she had seen while watching their monitors as they searched the apartments.

"Another close call, my dear," George said.

"I'm sorry," Cynthia said. "But I thought it was important for us to know. Are you mad at me?"

George blew out his breath slowly and leaned back in his chair. "By the letter of the law, I should be. But this is not a black and white situation, as so few in life are. I asked you to refrain from using your powers to minimize friction within the group until they were ready to accept you, but here you may have given us a vital lead. Is internal strife in the team a good price to pay to prevent the brutal murders of others? Certainly, at face value. But what if that friction grows pronounced enough to cause real problems for the team? What if those problems, in turn, eventually cost other lives, because the team ceases to function properly? In the end, the situation is like most in life--too big to judge as a whole. So, like most difficulties in life, all we can do is deal with it to the best of our abilities as it comes."

Cynthia smiled. "The cryptic wise man routine really works for you, you know that?"

"Why thank you, Cynthia. Usually when others describe me, they use the phrase *wise guy*."

"George, there were--you were right. About the traps."

"How so?"

"I saw them being built. I lost track of them, there were so many. The minute the guys go in the door, they'll be in danger."

George stood, walked to Cynthia and laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We'll help them as much as we can, Cynthia. We'll watch from here and be extra eyes for them. In the meantime we'll trust in their abilities and instincts. One doesn't usually fight monsters for a living without learning how to take care of oneself."

"Yeah, I guess." Cynthia looked at her shoes. "George? There's an *army* of them."

"Yes," George replied. "Yes, I was afraid of that."

Marc, Will and Jake's task was relatively easy. Their usual provisions were still packed, so most of their remaining preparation consisted of work in the Armory. On top of their standard armaments, Will and Jake picked out a pair of hunting rifles and Marc selected a 10-gauge shotgun. This done, Jake led them to his Workshop where he helped them prepare bandoliers of party favors and double-checked his armor. It worked to his satisfaction. After much internal deliberation he decided to leave the suit's

weapons behind.

They gathered in the Foyer less than twenty minutes later. Will was decked out in his trench coat and sunglasses. Marc had finally cleaned and dressed his wounds, and his bandages, bandolier of Jake's party favors and torn black clothing made him look like a refugee from a commando movie. Jake was a futuristic knight, an armored super-hero in his exoskeleton.

The trio lined up at attention in the middle of the Foyer facing the front door. Cynthia wondered at this behavior, a ritual Sullivan explained was a team tradition, until she saw George on the stairs. He was dressed in an old-fashioned general's uniform complete with a netted helmet, puffy pants and riding crop.

"All right, boys!" he shouted in a fake gravelly voice as he paced back and forth in front of them. "We're facing a merciless opponent! They strike without warning! They prey upon civilians! They use cowardly guerilla tactics! They always vote republican!"

Marc rolled his eyes.

"You'll be going in on their home turf! They have the advantage! Trust nothing but your instincts and each other! Be conservative with firearms use if possible but be prepared to use any means necessary to exterminate the enemy! Above all, watch out for peach cobbler! Now move, move, move!"

Will, Marc and Jake broke ranks and charged out the door to their vehicles. Cynthia watched them go, then looked at George with her trademark smirk.

"You do know you are completely crazy, right?" she asked.

"Stand up straight, mister!" George yelled. Cynthia looked to Sullivan.

"At least he didn't wear his tribal war chief getup this time," said Sullivan.

"Hey, yeah! I forgot I had that!" exclaimed George. "I should wear that when they come back!" He ran up the steps to his Study.

"He has a lot of personality, doesn't he?" asked Cynthia.

"Don't get me started," said Sullivan.

"So, do we go back to the, uh, command center and wait for the guys to get there?"

"The Situation Room? You are free to, if you like," Sullivan replied. "I'm going to make some preparations in the infirmary. I want to be ready in case something happens."

"Are you their doctor?" Cynthia asked. She couldn't help but think about what she had seen in the shard. There were deadfalls and springs and false patches of wall, and something about a bathtub...

"I have combat medical programs and George knows more things about medicine than I can keep track of. He also insists that every team member be competent in at least first aid," Sullivan said. "We've patched up quite a few nasty wounds here in my time."

Cynthia's thoughts turned from shadowy eyes and jury-rigged traps to George's tale of Will and Tina. "Doesn't George ever go with them? If he's a doctor, shouldn't he be there?"

"George rarely goes. He's never explained why, at least not to me."

"That seems like something pretty important to me," Cynthia said gloomily. "If they're putting their lives in danger he should at least be there with them."

"There's no one alive that worries about others more than George," Sullivan replied. "I've been operating for seven years now. That's long enough to see some hints of what's working underneath all that eccentricity. There is a definite method to his madness. He has his own reasons for not venturing out into the field but he makes sure to always provide for those that do. The proof of this is all around you."

"But he does go with them, sometimes."

"Yes, sometimes."

"Is George a fighter?"

Three vampires. What happened?

"A fighter? George?" laughed Sullivan. "George is such a pacifist I don't think he could fight anyone or anything even if he wanted to."

I happened.

"Ok, I'll see you in the Situation Room," said Cynthia.

"All right then," Sullivan replied and went on her way.

Cynthia went to the Situation Room, where she lost herself in thought while waiting for the others. For as long as she could remember, she had always been sure of herself in practically any situation. She almost always knew exactly what others around her were thinking and her bevy of other talents was enough to get her out of just about any trouble she got into. Self-doubt was a state of mind nearly foreign to her until she came to this place.

Now she found herself surrounded by people that dealt with even stranger things than her abilities on a regular basis. Leading it all was the funny old man who seemed to know everything whom no one seemed to know anything about. Her pondering led her to the conclusion that she would simply have to wait and learn what she could.

She decided that she hated this situation.

“Status report,” George commanded. He sat in his chair in front of the monitors in the Situation Room with Cynthia and Sullivan on either side of him. He still wore his archaic general’s uniform. His helmet was draped over his knee.

“*Marc and I are ready,*” Will’s voice filtered through the monitor’s speakers. His and Marc’s cameras were on and active. The pictures blurred and shivered as the two men shifted around, taking in their surroundings. The lazy sun had finally made its way behind the horizon and desert evening had at last given way to desert night.

“*We’re in a holding pattern across the street from 918. Jake’s driven a few blocks away to park. He didn’t want to leave the Rain in this neighborhood.*”

“I can’t say I blame him,” remarked George. “Every structure around you looks ready to collapse.”

“*Yeah, I bet nobody’d mind if we did some urban renewal,*” Marc muttered.

“Now, Marc, what have I told you about that?”

“*Urban renewal is a necessity, not a pastime,*” Marc droned like a scolded child.

“Very good. What does the witness situation look like?”

“*This place is deserted,*” said Will. “*We’ve seen a handful of pedestrians and cars go by but mostly it’s dead.*”

“What about the house, Will?” Sullivan asked. Will turned so that his camera pointed directly at 918. It was a plain-looking middle-class suburban homestead, very old and dilapidated.

“*So far this is the closest we’ve gotten to it. At this point we haven’t seen any weird lights, either.*” George glanced at Cynthia. She blushed.

“*I do have one other thing to report,*” Will continued. “*There’s no sign of anyone or anything moving inside. Most of these houses have spots of movement that could be squatters and there’s rat and cat-sized movement all around here. But 918 is totally still.*”

“Indeed. Most ominous,” observed George. “When Jake arrives, have him go first and check the door very carefully. If these things are serious about defending their turf, you may be hit by something just going in.”

“*Will do,*” Marc said.

“*Marc don’t,*” Will said. George cracked up.

“*Sorry, Marc,*” Will apologized. “*I was in the moment.*”

They waited out the tense moments until Jake arrived. He had snuck through the back alleys until he came to one flanking 918. A small stone pelting Marc in the chest announced his presence.

“I hate it when he does that,” growled Marc.

Will squinted as he peered at the alleyway, looking for signs of Jake’s glossy black armor in the pitch black between buildings. Jake stepped into the street lights’ dim glow just enough to be seen and held up his right index finger vertically in front of his open left palm. This was the team’s signal for “I have found a safe door/path.”

Will glanced up and down the street for oncoming vehicles and bystanders. There were none, so he and Marc set off across the lanes and disappeared into the alley.

Jake was standing about halfway down the house’s length, barely visible in the gloom. As Marc

and Will came closer, they saw that he stood by a side entrance, with the door wide open.

"I picked the lock," he said. "Nothing else happened. It looks like this leads into the kitchen."

"Take point, and don't forget your camera," said Will.

"Oh, right." Jake unslung his pack, dropped it on the filthy alley floor and took out his camera. He snapped it into place in a housing on his right shoulder and clicked it on.

"George? Can you hear me?"

"Live from Jake's shoulder, it's a dark alley! Staring Marc Schaeffer as Guy You Wouldn't Want to Meet #1!"

"I shall take that as a yes," Jake said. He re-hung his pack on one shoulder while swinging his rifle from the other. He checked the sights, safety and clip and clicked on the flashlight fastened along the barrel. Then he nodded to the others and stepped inside.

The room was a typical small kitchen. It was bare and dingy with old floorboards and cheap wall paneling. There were single doors to Jake's left and right. The left doorframe had the unmistakable divots caused by painting over a door-hinge recess.

Jake looked all around the room, checking for tripwires, hooks, pulleys, counterweights, or anything else indicative of a trap. He spotted one quickly, a single strand of fishing line glimmering in his light. It was taut and hung at ankle-height, running into two tiny holes in the walls. It ran parallel with the left doorway, which it was about fifteen feet away from.

Jake held up his left fist. Will and Marc, who both had just inched into the room, froze in place.

"I've got something here, guys," Jake said. "I guess this is our creature's hideaway."

"It's not showing up very well, Jake. Fishing line?"

"Yeah, heavy duty, too." replied Jake. He knelt and leaned down next to it until his face shield was almost touching it. "I'd guess fourteen or sixteen hundred pound test."

"But where does it go?" Will asked, tracing the line with his light. "It runs right into the walls."

Beneath his visor, Jake stroked his beard in thought. He looked at one wall, then the other, where the line disappeared, and all about the room at the lack of any sign of what the line was supposed to do.

"This doesn't make sense," he said. "Will? Marc? You guys clear out. I'm going to set this off."

"Have you lost your mind?!" Will, George, Cynthia and Sullivan shouted as one.

"Dude! Right on!" Marc said, giving a thumbs up.

"Look, guys, we don't know what this contraption will do," explained Jake, "so we don't dare leave it active. One of us could set it off by mistake when we're not ready for it. This way we have a better chance of avoiding injury, plus we can learn about the types of traps they build in their own home."

"I really have to disagree, Jake," put in Sullivan. "There's no telling what these things have been up to. For all we know, that wire is going to dump a bunch of chemicals together under the floorboards and produce chlorine gas. Or drop a suspended crate of old dynamite in the next room."

George leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands over his chest and swiveled just far enough away from Sullivan that she couldn't see his face. "Poison gas," he said as though musing to himself and looked Cynthia in the eye through the corner of his own. Almost imperceptibly, she shook her head no.

"Explosions...in their own home," he said thoughtfully. Again Cynthia shook her head. On screen, the team began to fidget while they waited for George to work through what appeared to be just another one of his internal dialogues.

"Hmmm...such things don't seem to match their M.O. Nevertheless, the situation calls for extreme caution." Cynthia nodded so violently that her hair bounced around her shoulders. Sullivan noticed and did a double take, which made Cynthia blush as red as her hair. Seeing this, George quickly moved to defuse the situation.

"I'm sorry, Sullivan, I appear to have second-guessed you yet again," he said and swiveled around to face her. "I hope you aren't too offended."

"To be around you is to be second-guessed," Sullivan said with an amused tone. "That's why you're the leader and most of us have been in therapy at some point. Please proceed."

"I want you boys to do as Jake suggests," said George. "Jake, go ahead, but be ready for

anything.”

“No problem. I think I know how these things think. Besides, my armor should be able to handle anything these little booby traps can dish out.”

Marc and Will stepped out the door and leaned against the wall on either side of it. Will took his motion tracker out of his pack and clicked it on.

Ok, thought Jake. It seems pretty clear that this is meant for someone entering or leaving this door. Ergo, whatever effect triggering it may have will be centered in front of the door in the middle of the room and I will be safe standing against the wall and stomping on the line, thusly.

There was the briefest moment of resistance from the line before it went limp. An old-fashioned claw-foot bathtub crashed faucet-end first through the ceiling above the line, sending bits of wood raining down around the room. It smashed the floor beneath itself into kindling and plunged into blackness beneath it. A heartbeat later, it could be heard shattering somewhere far below on a hard surface.

“Ok,” Jake said and gingerly lifted his foot off of the line. “I admit that would probably have given my armor a run for its money.”

“Jake, man! What the hell just happened?” Marc shouted on his way back into the room.

“Just plumbing the trap,” Jake said.

“That’s ten demerits for carelessness and fifty for the bad super-spy pun, Jake!” George scolded.

“So much for simple little traps,” Will said as he peered through the holes in the floor and ceiling. “What the heck is this, anyway?”

“It looks like a basement,” Marc said.

“This is the desert. Buildings here don’t have basements,” Jake retorted.

“Something our little friends dug out?” Will suggested.

“Only if they can operate heavy excavating equipment,” Jake replied. “This space is immense.”

“Wonderful,” groaned Will. “More surprises. Speaking of which, folks, I have some bad news.”

“Like we need it, right?” said Marc.

“When Jake set this off, my motion tracker went nuts. I half expected it to start smoking because it was tracking movement in so many places. It all stopped after about three seconds, but for just that long the entire building was jumping. So we know one thing for certain.”

“They know we’re here,” Jake and Marc said together. Quickly, they faced each other. “Jinx! Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneight...”

“Watching these three is kind of like watching a bad reality show, isn’t it, Sullivan?” George commented.

“‘Bad reality show’ is redundant, George. This one just leaves a worse aftertaste than most.”

“Yes, that’s a hard point to argue. If only people half a century ago had known better than to watch reality shows our current prime-time lineups wouldn’t be made up entirely of them. What do you think, Cynthia? Cynthia?”

Her chair was empty. The Situation Room door was open.

“Oh, crap,” George said.

“What’s wrong? Where’s Cynthia?” Sullivan asked.

“She appears to have decided to tour the place again on her own. Let it go. We have more important things to worry about right now.”

Sullivan shrugged and went back to watching the team. George leaned back in his chair again and sighed contentedly. It took every ounce of his willpower to keep from grinding his teeth together.

Cynthia ran as fast as she could down the stairs. The front doors clicked open and swung wide while she was still a stone’s throw away. She flew out into the yard and raced for the gate.

She couldn’t stand it anymore. She knew what the three of them were facing, but she couldn’t remember exactly where and what each trap was. There were too many of them and the images of them from the shard were too disjointed--a sixty minute film cut into two second clips and taped together again

at random. Maybe seeing the place in person would help her put it together. Or at least being there might help her keep Will alive. Either way, she couldn't stay here.

When she was thirty feet from the gate, she jumped in the air and kept going up. She floated in a long arc over the wall on the force of her will and set down right next to her car. The humble little green two-door was still where she had left it that morning, parked just off to the side of the road. In the span of a heartbeat, she was speeding down the road toward the highway.

"Ok, George, we need your input," said Will.

"I'd opine that little has changed. You're still in tremendous danger, badly outnumbered and surrounded in enemy territory. Please, continue as before."

"Look, I'm sorry, ok?" said an exasperated Jake.

"What should we do? Should we just burn the building down?" asked Marc.

"That's a little extreme, I think," Will said.

"Yeah, but if the whole place is full of them, it might be the only way to get them all," Marc said.

"Not a chance," regaled George. *"The scenario is overkill and there's too much chance a structure fire would spread. You boys will have to figure something else out. Go through every room and shoot each individual through the wall, if necessary."*

"That's just great," Marc groaned.

"Well, captain, what do we do?" asked Jake.

"Try infrared," suggested Will. "Let's see if they'll show up that way."

They sifted through their packs and donned their goggles. To each other's sight, they became bright red, orange and yellow silhouettes floating in a sea of black and dark blue. Walls, floors and ceilings were thin sheets of deep blue floating in the cold black background. Faint shadows marked window frames or insulation in walls, but there were no other spots of heat in the building.

"Nothing!" Jake spat and tore off the goggles in frustration. "They don't breathe, they don't move, they don't have body heat. How the hell are we supposed to track them?"

Will didn't answer, but pulled his motion tracker out of his backpack again. He studied the screen, which showed an ominously still building all around them.

"They moved when the trap went off, then stopped right afterward. We don't know if they can hear, but they knew somehow that the trap had been set off."

"Well, there are a lot of cracks in the ceiling," Jake observed, "and in the paneling and such. If any little guys are using these holes to watch us, they would have known, but how did everyone in the building know? Is it just sensitivity to vibration?"

"*Posit,*" said George. *"The creatures have some means of quick and efficient communication that you are not privy to."*

"It can't be visual if they're in the walls," Will said.

"Or olfactory based," Jake agreed. "Which means it must be audible...of course!" He slapped his forehead in realization, which turned out to be a bad idea as he *was* wearing a helmet and gauntlets.

"Ow! Anyway, it's so simple! They use super-high frequency sound, like bats. They're in constant communication and we don't have any way to keep track of it. Any of them that were near the tub when it fell could have alerted their comrades to the fact that they had company."

"So the lot of them are ready, *and* waiting for us," Will said.

"Ya know, this is real friggin' interesting. Or it would be, if I was a scrawny little nerd with buck teeth and glasses," Marc growled impatiently. "When do we get to kill something?"

"Momentarily, I suspect," quipped Jake. "Well, captain, we've learned a little but we don't seem to be accomplishing much just standing around here. Which direction do you think we should take?"

Will eyed the shattered floorboards around the gaping hole, then the doorway behind it. "This looks like it was set to catch somebody using this door."

"I had the same thought. Since this is an outside entrance and the front door is behind us, it seems to me that this is meant to stop someone from entering that room from this side."

"You think they have something important in there?" asked Will.

Jake shrugged. "For all we know, they nest in the open and that room's a nursery. George?"

"We can't be certain of anything yet. You boys go ahead, but you know what I'll say..."

"Safety first," Jake, Will and Marc recited.

"Jake?" Will prompted.

Step by step Jake made his way to the door. As he went he constantly scanned the floor and walls for any hint of a trigger. When he got to the threshold, he looked the room over.

There was a window in the left wall, two doors on the back wall and an archway to the right. The window was covered with shutters that, oddly enough, were attached on the inside of the frame. Jake looked around the room nervously for several seconds, but he couldn't see any tripwires.

"I think it's safe, guys," he said. Marc and Will made their way in after him.

"Now, what's wrong with this picture?" asked Jake as he eyed the window.

"It does seem a little obvious, doesn't it?" Will remarked.

"So, we set it off, right?" Marc asked.

"Good ol' Marc, getting right to the point," Jake said. "I got it."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Jake? What if a kitchen cabinet and dinette set hurtles through the window at you?"

"I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"

"Not as long as I'm alive."

Jake groaned, stepped to the side of the window and signaled for Will and Marc to be on guard. They moved to the far corners of the room and crouched to make themselves the smallest targets possible.

Jake set down his pack and held his rifle at arm's length. He leaned toward the window just enough to hook the shutters with the sight. At his slightest tug the shutters sprung open and slapped against the wall as a crude lattice of rotten boards and twisted scrap metal fell forward into the room. It was hinged at its bottom edge to the base of the windowsill and bobbed several times before coming to rest, hanging into the room at an angle.

"Is it me, or are these traps starting to lose their punch?" asked Jake. Will walked to the lattice and raised it with one hand while shining his light on it. The back of it was weighted with metal objects the same way the mirror in Abby Twitch's house had been. The haphazard structure of wood and metal was lined on the bottom with chunks of broken glass, old razor blades and rusty broken tools.

"It's just you," Will said.

"So, which way now?" Marc muttered.

"I'm thinking that one," Will said and nodded toward the archway. "We're near the back of the house, so I'm guessing these two doors are closets or some such."

"Shouldn't we open them to make sure?" asked Marc.

"Only if we have to," Will said.

"Yeah, man, think about it. Do you really want to open doors into little cramped spaces in a house of things that like sharp objects?" said Jake.

"Good point," admitted Marc.

Will went first through the archway while Jake reclaimed his backpack. Will knew that all of the traps they had encountered so far were reactive in nature. Something had to be *done* in order to set one off, so he felt confident that he could stand in the archway and look around without getting a spear through his head. He leaned into the next room and shined his light around. It was much larger than either the kitchen or the room they were in now, so Will figured it was probably a dining room. Off to his right was a large archway. Through it Will could see the front door, standing alone in a living room that was devoid of detail except for a cheap chandelier in the middle of the room.

Will took a deep breath, walked two steps forward and fell out of sight as the floor gave way beneath him. He cried out in surprise and plunged into darkness.

Chapter VIII Fire and Knives

Cynthia blazed down the highway at seventy miles an hour, a tiny speck of headlights and engine noise in an endless ocean of desert night. At the rate she was going she was just under ten minutes away from the city, which was just under ten minutes too long for her. She's have gone faster if she could, but her car was straining as it was. She kept wanting to distract herself somehow, but there was nothing good on the radio and she couldn't bring herself to stop the car long enough to root around the pile of CDs in the back seat for a Long Way Home or Adam Walker album. So she held the pedal down, fixed her eyes forward and raced through the night toward a house she'd never been to but knew in her mind.

Will's mind was a haze of pain. He'd had enough wherewithal to brace himself for a landing as he fell, but he'd fallen quite a distance. He had landed on concrete after falling at least a story and a half and jarred his left knee while landing because he hadn't been able to tell when he was going to come to a stop. When he landed he'd toppled over and landed on his backpack, which had filed protests in the form of a cacophony of crunching and tinkling sounds. He was just slipping out of the pack and trying to stand up when a brilliant light flashed in his eyes.

"Dude! Will, you ok?" called a familiar voice.

"I think so," Will called back, and nearly fell when his knee threatened to buckle under the pain of bearing his weight.

"Aw, dude, we thought you were a *goner*." The voice was followed by a sound not unlike a gauntleted hand slapping the back of a shaved head. Then came another voice, a level tenor.

"Will? It's Jake. How are you doing?"

"I think I'm ok. I may have sprained my knee, but nothing's broken. Where the heck am I?"

"You fell through the floor, dude!" Marc called.

"How far down am I?"

"I'd say roughly two stories. We were afraid you'd landed on stakes or something." There was a burst of muffled speech up above that Will realized must be George. Then Jake called down, "Will! Is your camera still with you?"

Will looked about the field of light shining down around him from above. Sure enough, a few feet away on the floor lay the shattered remains of his Jakecam™.

"It's K.I.A.," he called up.

"All right. George says to consider this a bust. We'll clear out of here and try another approach."

"No! If we leave now, these things may nest somewhere else and we'll never find them! You two keep searching. I just need one thing."

"What's that?"

Will looked at his rifle, which was lying a few feet away. The stock was cracked and both the scope and the light were shattered. Beyond the tiny ring of light he stood in was an immense wall of blackness.

"A flashlight," he said.

"What do you think, George?" asked Jake.

"*Once Will's made up his mind he's as stubborn as I am. Let him go, but be ready to pull him out at a moment's notice if you have to.*"

Jake took a lose flashlight from his pack. "Catch, Will!" he called and dropped the light. Will caught it and gave Jake a thumbs up.

"Well," Jake said to Marc, "Should we see if one of those other doors is a basement stairway?"

"After you, dude," Marc said. He followed Jake back into the previous room and joined him in staring at the doors.

"Here goes nothing," Jake said, walked to the side of one door and flung it open. Nothing happened.

“Empty closet,” Jake said. “So, by process of elimination this other door must be a step.”

It was. The problem was, they only led up.

“Aw, nuts,” Marc grumbled. “What are they, covered in grease or something?”

“No, they look clean,” Jake said, leaning closely. “I don’t see any tripwires. Thanks to Will, we know to check for another feature.” He raised his rifle over his shoulder and struck the stock soundly on the first step. The whitewashed wood stood fast. One at a time, Jake worked his way up, testing each step’s solidity. His patience paid off at the seventh step, about halfway up. The wood broke into kindling at the force of the blow. Jake shone his light into the space beneath it. On the floor below was a broad slab of wood that sported rusty nails and broken knives that faced skyward. Jake grimaced at the sight, then tested the next step, and the one after that. They both broke too, their undersides sawed thin from beneath. Jake had to grasp the handrail and lean over the opening to test the tenth step, but it held firm. He simultaneously jumped and hauled himself up using the rail. He tested the remaining steps on the way up, but they were all untouched.

The stairs ended at a small landing that led directly to a hallway on the right. Jake covered every inch of visible surface with his light, but no obvious tripwires or triggers revealed themselves. Four doors, two in each wall, lined the hall at odd distances.

“Where to, Cap’n?” Marc asked. He shifted uneasily as he spoke. The contents of his bag rattled loudly in the quiet house.

“I have no idea,” replied Jake. He shone his light from door to door, looking for some sign that any of them was noteworthy, or at least not lethal. “Any suggestions, George?”

“How about this: do you see an attic entrance anywhere?”

Jake ran his light along the ceiling. Two-thirds of the way down the hall was a single hatch.

“Yeah, right here. What are you thinking?”

“Consider: Our little friends tend to place their traps in places frequented by their victims. If they have an open space that they claim for themselves, it seems reasonable to assume that they would do so in an area not frequented by normal foot traffic. Such as the attic.”

“Or a basement!” Marc said. “We should go check on Will! What if the critters jumped him?”

“I would trust that Will is fine for the moment. He’s still armed, so you would likely have heard gunfire if he had been attacked and he can take care of himself in any event. For now, just worry about finding a nest or workshop for these things.”

Jake and Marc shrugged. Jake walked beneath the hatch, grabbed the cord and nodded to Marc, then stepped as far to one side as he could and pulled. The hatch swung down amidst a choking cloud of dust. Along with the hatch, several small shapes plunged through the opening and landed on the cheap shag with a series of thumps. As the dust cleared, Jake turned his light on the floor. The fallen objects were small knives and sharp tools, about three dozen of them. Many of them had stuck in the floor and now pointed upward.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m beginning to dislike these little twerps,” Jake said.

“Aw, the ladder’s gone!” lamented Marc. The ladder was missing from the hatchway, bolts and all.

“That’s interesting. Do you think they’re hoping to keep anyone out this way?”

“I guess so,” said Marc as he eyed the opening with apprehension.

“So, how to get up there?” Jake thought aloud. “We don’t have any rope, I haven’t seen any furniture that we could climb...it’s not that high up, maybe I could stand on your shoulders...?”

While Jake was thinking, Marc opened his duffle bag and laid his shotgun inside, leaving the zipper open in case he needed it in a hurry. Then he crouched on the balls of his feet and jumped, duffle bag and all, up to the level of the hatch. He caught the edge of the opening and pulled himself up and over.

“...or we could do that,” Jake said.

“C’mon up, dude!” Marc called after a moment. “You’re not gonna believe what’s up here!”

Jake checked his pack to be certain it was secure, clicked off his light and slung his rifle over his shoulder. Then he flipped open a panel cover on his left gauntlet, exposing a keypad, and typed in his

armor's activation code. Circuits hummed and servos whirred as the armor powered up to its maximum strength. Jake took a moment to test it, moving back and forth, then crouched and leapt as Marc had. When he jumped, the armor's hydraulic strength propelled him up through the hatchway, where he landed with nonchalant ease straddling the opening.

"Dude! That was awesome!" Marc exclaimed.

"Yeah, I know," Jake said as he switched the suit back off. "Now, what's all this?"

The attic covered the whole of the house, but it had a low, angular ceiling that made it feel very claustrophobic. The only illumination came from the dim glow of streetlights filtering through an air vent a few feet away in the front wall near the peak of the ceiling. Strange shapes were arrayed around the room, some of them evidently boxes, others harder to identify in the gloom. Going for the simple solution, Jake clicked on his rifle light.

"Holy crap," he said.

Will hobbled about the space under the house looking for a way out. He had mastered a sort of slow lurch, walking on his right leg while only using his left for enough support to stay upright.

The basement, or whatever it was, was huge. It covered an area as large as the house above. Looking up Will couldn't see what he thought were sufficient supports for the house to remain suspended over the pit. It was braced around its foundation, along the edges of the pit, but there was nothing holding the house up in the middle. He tried to push that unsettling thought to the back of his mind as he explored.

The walls and floor of the pit were uneven, crudely poured concrete. The only real feature in the room was the shattered remains of the bathtub, which were widely scattered. Will limped around the room, looking the walls up and down for some means of escape. There weren't any ladders, stairs, or ropes and no doors that he could see. Leaving aside the question of who built this place and why, one still had to ask: how the heck did they get in or out? The only obvious ways were the two holes in the ceiling that had been made by a bathtub and a Will falling through the floor above. But there had to be some way out, something the builders would have used, assuming the place hadn't been constructed before the house was.

Will kept searching.

Cynthia recognized the house at a glance and parked out front. Actually, it would be more accurate to say she screeched to a halt in front of the house and a little on the sidewalk. She hopped out, barely taking the time to slam her door shut and ran for the alley entrance. She tore through the door into the kitchen only to realize that she hadn't brought a flashlight or anything else, so she waited impatiently while her eyes adjusted to the dark then dashed past the hole in the floor with careless abandon. She didn't know which way Will and the others had gone, but there were only two doors leading out of the room. She took the door on the right, which led her into the living room. The room had a front door, a cheap chandelier, an open archway into the next room and no Will. Cynthia kept going into the dining room in such a hurry that she didn't even notice the trip wire she barely managed to miss when she stepped over it.

The next room's only notable feature was a square hole cut into the carpet in front of the other door. Even in the poor light the space where the carpet was cut seemed too dark to be the floor underneath.

Feeling curious, Cynthia knelt by the hole. The floorboards under the carpet had been sawed out. Beneath was only a vast expanse of darkness but for a single cone of light slowly swaying back and forth far below. As her eyes adjusted, Cynthia could just make out the figure holding the light.

"Will...?"

Will stopped. He'd come across what appeared to be a seam in the wall. At first he thought it was just a crack, but it was very straight and even, leading upward from the floor to another seam over his head. The second seam was just as straight, running horizontally to his left. He followed it with his light and wasn't really surprised to find a third seam at the end leading back to the floor.

All right, I found a door. But where's the handle?

He studied the space encompassed by the seam, but there were no hinges, locks, or handles. He pushed against the door, but it didn't budge. He took a step back and pondered, wishing he had Jake's proclivity for solving puzzles when a shout startled him so badly that he dropped his flashlight.

"Will!"

He looked up at the holes in the ceiling. Someone was framed in the one he had fallen through.

"Jake?"

"Will, it's me!"

Will sighed. A long, deep sigh.

"What are you doing here, Cynthia?"

"Helping you, dummy. How did you get down there, anyway?"

Will struggled to articulate through gritted teeth. "I fell. Why are you here? Is George here too?"

"No, I came by myself. Hang on, I'll get you out."

Get me out? Will thought, and then a wave of queasiness hit him. He suddenly realized he was no longer standing on the floor but rising into the air and drifting toward Cynthia as gently as a soap bubble. He felt an odd pressure all across his skin, as though every part of his body rested on a supporting surface. He rose out of the opening and settled on the floor next to Cynthia.

"There you go," she said as though she'd just handed him a drink. "Say, where are the others?"

"Continuing the mission. Which is where I should be. What the hell *was* that?"

"What was what?"

"You just lifted me out of there with your telekawhatsit!"

"Excuse me," Cynthia groaned. "I thought you'd appreciate the help."

"Never mind. You need to be going before--oop!" In the midst of floating out of the pit, Will had forgotten how uncooperative his knee was being. It flared with pain when he put weight on it and he crumpled to the floor at Cynthia's feet. She knelt next to him and put his arm behind her neck to help support him as he stood.

"C'mon Will, I'll help you--jeez! You're heavier than you look! Hey, didn't you have a bunch of stuff with you when you came in here?"

Sigh. "It partially broke my fall. I left my rifle down there too, so now it's just me and--" he patted his sides under his coat, "--my pistols. Ow. We need to find the others. I think I found something."

"Hey, what's that sound?" interrupted Cynthia. Will had to take a moment before he heard what she was talking about. A muted but rapid scratching sound was coming from the walls all around them. Will dropped to his right knee and drew his pistols. Nothing crawled out of a wall, but the sound grew steadily louder. All of it seemed to be moving upward.

"What's going on?" Cynthia asked.

"I think we've got trouble," Will said.

"Dude! It's a bunch of eggs!" Marc exclaimed.

Indeed it was. Littered across the floor and most of the boxes in the attic were bits of shredded cloth and newspaper, like a rat's nest. Here and there the shreds were gathered into small mounds. Some of the mounds were empty but most held clutches of eggs. Each egg was about the size of a chicken egg and they were the same sick gray as the creatures, with leathery and coarse shells.

"George? Are you seeing this?" asked Jake.

"I am now. I had to work through a little hysterical blindness."

"We found the nest!" Marc said. "So we break all the eggs, right? Kill the next group?"

"I don't see any empty shells. I think this is a whole new generation ready to go," Jake said.

"I agree. You boys need to be cautious."

"Why's that?"

"This is their future, Jake. If there's one place they would defend above all others, this is it."

"Traps?" Marc asked.

"I don't know," admitted Jake. "Would they put traps in a place with eggs and babies?"

"I guess not, but then how would they--" Marc began, then exchanged a horrified glance with

Jake. Jake went to his pack for his motion tracker while Marc dug for his shotgun. He was loading shells as fast as he could when he heard Jake's tracker activate.

"Dude, we're gonna have company," said Jake.

"*Clear out, lads!*" said George. "*Grab Will any way you can, and go!*"

"But we have to--" Marc started to say, but was cut off when a screwdriver flew past him, just missing his face. It bounced off of the ceiling and clattered to the floor. Marc spun on his heels and fired in the direction the tool and come from. Tattered pieces of attic stuffing flew up in a cloud and something squealed in the darkness.

Jake trained his light on the spot. Sprawled on top of a crate was one of the creatures. Marc's shot had been just enough off target to maul its right leg and sheer off its right arm. It thrashed and hissed at them weakly, bits of spittle mixed with black ichor flying from its mouth. Jake put it out of its misery with a single shot to the head.

Just then something dinged off of his helmet from behind and he spun instinctively. His light flashed around the walls in time to give him a glimpse of three small figures hopping off of boxes and out of sight. Jake was advancing after them when Marc cried out. When Jake looked, Marc was kneeling and clutching his knee. A large steel file lay by the toe of his boot, still rocking after its fall.

"This is--yikes!" Jake shouted as a rusty steak knife twirled out of nowhere and smacked against his face shield, leaving an ugly scratch in the plastic. "That's it! We're gone!" he growled. "Marc! Go!"

Marc fired off a few shotgun blasts at random into the darkness even as he ducked and weaved through the increasing barrage of thrown objects. When he reached the hatch he jumped, shotgun held overhead. He landed heavily on his feet, but as he came down he bent over just enough that his shoulder hit the button and tripped the safety on one of the party favors in his bandolier. Thinking fast Marc grabbed the whole bandolier and tossed it through the nearest doorway. The dark room suddenly blazed brightly with angry red flame. I Can't Believe It's Not Napalm! splattered across the carpet and walls, creating a miniature inferno.

"Oops," said Marc.

Jake, meanwhile, was taking a last look around the attic before jumping. Everywhere he turned his light, the creatures ducked and jumped out of the way and small pairs of dull gray eyes glared at him from the darkness. He gave one last look at the eggs he knew he should destroy and hopped through the hole to the second floor. When he landed, everything was bathed in orange light. Tongues of flame brushed at him through the door to the burning room.

"I swear, I can't take you anywhere!" he yelled at Marc.

"It was an accident!" Marc shouted back.

"*There's no time for this!*" George's voice could just be heard over the roar of the fire. "*You have to get Will and get out of there!*"

They were off down the stairs like a shot.

When the creatures started moving, so did Will and Cynthia. She helped support him as he lurched along toward the front door.

"We--we have to find the others," protested Will.

"No way!" Cynthia said. "I can come back and look for them, but you aren't safe in here--"

A shotgun report reverberated throughout the house. A rifle shot followed a moment later.

"They're in trouble!" Will shouted. "I have to help them!" He tried to twist free of her grasp, lost his balance and fell. He and Cynthia were dead center of the living room and as he fell Cynthia's heart skipped a beat. In the instant it took him to fall she saw the glint of starlight off of a strand of fishing line beneath him. The world went into slow motion, Will falling, the line bending down under him and then suddenly going limp. Cynthia looked all around, hoping to catch some glimpse of whatever mechanism was about to assault them. Then it dawned on her: they were right under the chandelier.

She threw herself over Will and looked upwards. The chandelier was plunging toward them with cruel deliberateness. In the weak light, her senses enhanced by adrenaline, Cynthia could see glints of light on unusual shapes and projections taped and tied like teeth around the fixture.

Knives there are knives on the chandelier

Cynthia ducked her head instinctively. The chandelier struck and shattered. Knives came loose and toppled over in every direction.

“What--?!” Will exclaimed and twisted to look upward. To his amazement the chandelier was hanging in midair three feet above them. Bits and pieces of glass and metal skittered away from the center of the wreckage and slid over and down as they followed the contour of an invisible dome to the floor. Will looked at Cynthia in bewilderment.

“Force field. It’s like moving things, except I’m sort of pushing in every direction at once. I don’t even have to concentrate on it!” she said proudly. “Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

As she helped him up again the trashed lighting fixture hurled away from them and smacked against a wall while the front door clicked and swung open. Step by step they made their way out to the porch.

“Hey, do you smell smoke?” asked Will.

At the same time Will and Cynthia were stumbling through the front door, Jake and Marc reached the base of the steps and ran for the hole where Will had fallen. Marc dropped to his hands and knees and called out: “Will! Man, we gotta go! The place is on fire!”

“Where is he?” Jake said.

“*You don’t see him?*” George’s normally mellow voice was edged with panic.

“I can’t see his light!” Jake replied, nearing panic himself. “Will! Marc, do you see a way we can climb down, maybe?”

“Guys, we’re out here!” a faint but familiar voice echoed through the empty rooms.

“Dude!” said Marc, as he leaned to one side so he could see through the dining room arch into the living room. “The front door is open!”

Jake’s eyes flashed to the stairs, where he could see the yellow and orange light of the fire playing on the walls. “Let’s go!” he shouted. He and Marc raced out the door onto the front lawn, where they found Cynthia and Will.

“Cynthia? What are you doing here?” Jake asked.

“Hey, hot mamma!” Marc said.

“She went *there*? What in the world was she *thinking*?” Sullivan blurted. George was tight-lipped.

“I came to help,” explained Cynthia. “I helped Will out with, um...rope.”

“Why is the house on fire?” Will said. “Did you guys spring another trap?” Jake scowled at Marc.

“You set the place on *fire*?” Cynthia said incredulously.

“It was an accident!” Marc protested.

“Never mind. Move out!” Will led the retreat from the burning house with Cynthia’s help. By now the flickering of firelight could be seen in all the second story windows. A dull red glow shone in the attic air vent.

“I guess that should take care of the nest. In the attic,” Jake added for Will and Cynthia.

“They really did like high places,” Will said. “We should wait to see if any of them come out...”

“*No way!*” George said. “*You’ll have cops and firefighters on you in a moment and you may have already been seen!*”

Jake and Cynthia helped Will into her car so she could drive him to his own. Then Jake and Marc ran for their respective vehicles. It was 11:13.

By 11:43, the fire had spread throughout the house and was thoroughly gutting it.

At 11:47, the fire department received an anonymous call regarding a fire on Devonshire Street. Due to its location, it was given low priority.

At 11:59, the attic collapsed into the second floor, creating a huge box of flaming rubble.

At 12:28, the fire department finally arrived and made a half-hearted effort to douse the flames. They reduced the burning rubble to smoking rubble.

At 12:45, two police cruisers arrived. Acting on direction from the chief of police, the firefighters and law officers did not investigate the fire, but instead strung police tape around the property. On what remained of the walls they hung notices warning of the dire consequences awaiting anyone caught trespassing. Unceremoniously, they left.

At 5:41 a.m., the wreckage finally stopped smoldering. No one noticed.

Chapter IX Learning Things

Once the team returned to the Mansion, Sullivan tended to Marc and Will, then everyone assembled in the Situation Room.

“Let’s recap,” began George as he paced around the table. “We have failure to confirm the destruction of the colony of creatures, an unknown number of possible civilian sightings, *yet another* residence *burned to the ground* by Marc...”

“It was for a good cause,” Marc said weakly.

George walked back to the head of the table and leaned on it. “While I am not happy with the outcome of the mission,” he said sternly, “I also cannot express how relieved I am that none of you were seriously hurt. Sullivan?”

“Marc has a nasty bruise on his knee, but that’s all. Considering all of the things that were flying around the room it could have been much worse. However Will landed, he wasn’t hurt too badly. It’s a pretty minor sprain. Knowing Will he’ll be walking without a limp inside of three days, healed or not.”

“Glad to hear it. Will, do you have anything to tell us about what transpired after you were separated from the team? Where exactly were you?”

“I don’t really know. As near as I could tell, it was just a huge concrete box. The walls were sloppy and the only detail was a door.”

“A door?” George said incredulously.

“Apparently. There was a seam shaped like a door but there wasn’t any way to open it. I was trying to figure out what it was when Cynthia, uh, insisted that I come along.”

“Interesting,” said George. His eyes shifted to Cynthia and there was a hardness to them that made her very uncomfortable. “It’s a shame we won’t be able to investigate it any further.”

“But George, this could be vital!” protested Sullivan. “If this door was used by those creatures for something, we should find out what it is! We might be able to really wipe them out this time, if we can find them wherever they go. No offence,” she said to the guys.

“Investigate how, Sullivan?” asked George. “Should we try to excavate our way through the ruins of a burned house? In a bad neighborhood?”

“But we have to try, George. This is obviously very important. It’s too far out of the ordinary for it not to mean something...”

“Let it go, Sullivan,” George said softly but sternly. “If an opportunity to examine this supposed portal presents itself, we will certainly take it. In the meantime we have other issues to consider. How did your armor perform, Jake?”

Jake was quiet for a moment, stunned at having been the target of such a wild non sequitur. “Well, great, I guess. I didn’t use any of the advanced systems very much, but just walking around, using normal motion and letting the suit support its own weight, it was top-notch.”

“Excellent,” said George. “Feel free to continue working on it and let me know if you need any more funds or special components. Now, as to the creatures and the case itself. I want all of you to make detailed reports on the events of this evening, including Cynthia. I will continue with the examination of the carcass and compile the data into a new archive file. Until such time as these creatures are named or confirmed to be a previously identified species, they will be listed as Supernatural Species #7209.”

“Don’t you think that we should look a little more into the ultimate fate of the colony? Some of the creatures may have escaped, possibly even with some of the eggs,” Sullivan said.

“Only if it becomes necessary,” George replied. “Detective King will keep us notified if any attacks with a similar M.O. occur. In the meantime, it may serve to put our minds at ease if we assume that the fire did our work for us. Are there any further questions, comments, death threats?”

There were none.

“Then I have a happy announcement to make. Cynthia will be joining us effective immediately.”

Cynthia’s eyes went wide. Everyone else stared at her in amazement.

“What?” Cynthia said.

“What?” echoed Will.

“Cynthia and I have spoken at length. I believe that given time she will become an invaluable member of the team. She has already demonstrated tremendous courage and...initiative this evening in helping Will. Had it not been for her, Will might not have been able to escape the pit before the police arrived--or worse, before the house collapsed.”

“Do you think that’s wise, George?” asked Sullivan. “I don’t mean any offense, Cynthia, but we’ve only just met you, and joining the team involves a great deal of training and preparation--”

George raised a hand. “I am confident that she is up to the task. So, please have faith in my judgment. The team has been at an all time low with regard to membership for quite some time now. I hope this will herald the beginning of a turnaround in that situation. Now if you all will excuse me, I have some other business to attend. We can discuss these issues further tomorrow.” He left quietly, but the air in the room was heavy somehow until he was gone.

“Well, that was interesting,” Jake said.

“Tell me about it,” Cynthia said.

“I still don’t understand all of this,” complained Sullivan. “George is making sweeping decisions here in a very casual manner. He decides that we will not attempt to follow a lead that could be vitally important and in almost the same breath he introduces a new team member. I apologize again, Cynthia. I’m not trying to cut you out of this conversation.”

“No problem,” said Cynthia. She was feeling very distracted and wasn’t really paying attention.

“You weren’t so apprehensive this morning when the two of them were touring the Mansion,” Will said coldly.

“Having a guest over and inducting a new member of a secret paramilitary anti-supernatural operation are rather different things, Will,” was the retort.

“Well, as George said, we really haven’t been at our strongest lately membership-wise,” Jake said. “We really could use some new blood, so to speak. If Cynthia is willing to join then I think we ought to let her have a shot.”

While they argued, Cynthia watched Will. He was distracted too, staring at the tabletop in deep thought. *Is he thinking about Tina?* Cynthia wondered, and was startled to realize that she had not reflexively probed his thoughts. *Maybe just a little,* she thought. *Just to see what he’s thinking, then--*

Cynthia.

Cynthia held her breath. She had encountered a small handful of other psychics in her time. They had been as varied and different as a small handful of people can be but one thing had remained consistent: Cynthia had outstripped them all in sheer power and the variety of her abilities. There had been nothing in her experience to make her doubt that she had the most powerful mind on the planet.

The voice in her mind said otherwise. She could feel the power behind it the way one can feel the strength in the handshake of a weightlifter. It was also unmistakably familiar.

Would you come join me, please? It wasn’t a request.

As unobtrusively as possible, Cynthia got up from the table and slipped out. The subject of the increasingly heated debate was not missed from it. With one last look at Will, she was out the door.

She made her way through the dark hallway, out the front door and into the cool desert night breeze. The stars above shone brilliantly, a million diamonds on black velvet.

Cynthia walked down the front steps and across the drive into the tall grass, which waved wildly in the wind. Her eyes traced the grounds, running along the wall until she saw him, standing in the middle of the yard off to her left. She went to him quickly, even though the chill breeze made her shiver and whipped her hair around her face. He stood completely still, watching her as she came.

“Hello, George,” she said solemnly.

“Walk with me, Cynthia,” he said and started toward the rear Wall. She followed close behind.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

“Yes, I am. In fact, I am furious.” There was no trace of anger or any other emotion in his voice.

“Am I in trouble?”

“You are not. You do, however, need to be shown something.” He led her around the Mansion

until they walked in the shadow of another enormous building.

“Is this it?”

“No. This is Jake’s Workshop. I am taking you to see something I had hoped to put off until later.”

They walked around the Workshop. Cynthia was surprised to see that the yard between the building and the back Wall was easily as large as the yard between the house and the gate.

George stopped suddenly with the Workshop at their back and turned to face her. “What you did tonight was very careless,” he said.

“I had to help Will,” she said weakly.

“I understand that. I really do. But we’re fighting a war, Cynthia. In war carelessness gets one killed. Have you ever seen another person killed?”

“No.” *Not through my own eyes, anyway.*

“Then you are very fortunate. I have seen a lot of people die, Cynthia. Many of them were my friends. One of them was my wife.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. But remember this: when you join this team, you take not only your life in your hands, but those of all the others as well. I keep a journal of the events surrounding the workings of this Mansion. In far too many places, the entries are written with the blood of people that I loved.” He turned again and waded away through the waist-high grass. Cynthia started to follow him, but stopped when she caught a glimpse of something dark, a small object that faded in and out of view as the grass waved around it.

She looked back at George. He was facing her again, standing a short jog away. Shrugging, she parted the grass with a thought and when she saw the object again she realized what it was: a headstone. It was small and simply shaped, but its face and back were completely covered in tiny letters. It wasn’t any language she had ever seen, with characters that were simple, flowing lines.

Cynthia looked at George again, then around the yard. As she looked she began to see more headstones, laid out in rows and columns, dozens of them. They were standing in a graveyard.

“These are the past members of the team who died in action, Cynthia,” George said above the whistling wind. “When each of them died, I carved their stories on their stones, so that their part in our fight would never be forgotten. I didn’t want to show you this yet, but you must understand. What we do is not a game. It’s dangerous. It’s frightening. Sometimes it’s lonely. We are the front and only line in a war that most people don’t know is being fought. We live and work outside of society, of normal lives. We put ourselves in mortal danger every night fighting monsters that are more than willing to kill us for our trouble. Far, far too often, the end reward for all our trouble is to end up buried here, in the sand.

“I’m not trying to frighten you off, Cynthia, but this is the way it is here. If you think you can’t handle it, then leave. If you can’t deal with the fact that I occasionally give orders that **MUST** be obeyed, then leave.

“If you stay with us, you’ll have to truly become one of us. It’s an intense experience, like college and boot camp rolled into one. You’ll have to get into peak physical shape and start learning about the monsters we fight. There will be qualifications to meet before you can join us in the field. You will have to learn to work as part of a cohesive unit, operating together and watching each other’s backs. If you can do that, I think you will be an invaluable asset to the team. But if you think that by your actions you will serve to put the team in even more danger than they usually face, then leave now without guilt or shame.”

Cynthia thought about what he said. She thought about Will, one of the most beautiful and remarkable men she had ever met, both inside and out. She wanted to know him, to be closer to the wounded innocence that haunted his eyes. The others seemed like good people and it might be nice to have some real friends for a change, though she was pretty sure if she caught Marc picturing her naked again she was going to kill him. This life might be dangerous, morbid and sometimes a little gross, but the alternative was to go back to her lonely life of sitting alone in her apartment during the day and going out at night in desperate hope of finding someone she could connect to.

“I want to stay.”

George smiled. “I had hoped that you would.”

“So, what happens now?”

“Now, you go find Sullivan. She’ll help you fix up a bed in a spare room. Tomorrow you can head back to the city and collect any personal effects that you care to keep. I take it you will have little difficulty emotionally or pragmatically leaving your old life behind?”

“Does that mean I don’t have a job or anything to tie me down and not even my family will notice I’m gone, much less care where I went?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Yup.”

“Excellent. We’ll give you a day or two to acclimate to life with us before we start your training.”

“Ok. Thanks, George,” she said and turned to walk away.

“You’re going to love it here, Cynthia,” George said. “Oh, one more thing.” Cynthia stopped and looked back at him.

“Have patience with Will. He just needs a little time.” He smiled and she blushed. Then she smiled herself and went to find Sullivan.

George stayed put for a long time. He savored the beauty of the night sky, the feel of the wind and the light touch of the valley grass. It was long into the morning after all the lights in the Mansion had been turned off before he left to return to his Study. Once there he stood at an antique podium that faced out the tall windows and wrote with a quill pen into a large tome whose countless pages were yellow with age. His script was perfectly even and flowed with practiced grace. He wrote:

Sunday, September the Twenty-Sixth, 2043 T.E.

It has been a very interesting day. Our most recent case seems to be at an impasse. I will catalog a new species, but we lack closure as to the ultimate fate of the creatures themselves. Should we be forced to deal with them again, however, we will be better prepared.

Our first new member in almost two years is accompanied by mixed blessings. Her name is Cynthia Arden. She is one of the most powerful psychics I have ever met. I believe she will be a tremendous asset to the team, especially should she take advantage of her incredible potential. At the same time, her abilities by their very nature pose a threat to my facade. A little more about me has been revealed and I fear it is only a matter of time before the team begins to discern that there is much more to this operation than meets the eye. When that time finally comes, will they be ready to learn of our higher purpose here? Will they be prepared to learn of the ancient and terrible powers that manipulate their fates like puppet masters? Most important: Will they be ready to learn who I am?

He laid the pen aside and slowly closed the book. *A drink*, he thought as he pondered all that he had just written. *A very stiff drink.*

Epilogue

The south-easternmost region of Ylelon was little more than a vast expanse of docks and warehouses, many of which had not been used in living memory. Some of them were so neglected and crumbling they weren't safe to walk in or around. The entire region was infamous as a breeding ground for the worst elements of society: gangs, pimps, drug dealers and worse. One generally didn't come near the maze of crumbling storehouses and offices unless one was looking for trouble.

In the midst of the sea of empty buildings, just an hour before dawn, a lone figure walked the twisting pathways between the endless labyrinths of walls. It was completely covered by bulky dark blue robes. The hem of the hood and sleeves were decorated with strange and complex sigils and glyphs of silver thread. He (or she) walked alone and without apparent fear through alleys and pathways populated by people who would do harm to someone traveling alone on principle. She (or he) headed directly for one of the many buildings, choosing it with detached casualness. The warehouse itself was ancient and dilapidated. It was enormous, two stories tall, nearly the size of an entire city block and looked as though it were ready to collapse under its own weight. The figure approached a rusted side door from an alley, and from the folds of his (or her) robes produced a key. This the figure used to open a padlock on the door, one that was surprisingly new and heavy-duty for being used on an obviously empty building.

The robed figure hung the lock on the latch, stepped inside and pushed the door closed until it was only open a crack.

"Are you here, old friend?" he (yes, he) called.

The warehouse interior was one enormous shadow. The weak light filtering around the door only provided illumination for a few feet into the building. Except for the brief echo of the man's voice, everything was completely still.

"You know, punctuality is a virtue," the man called.

Far away, near the back of the building, two enormous eyes suddenly opened high in the air. They were each as tall as an eight-year-old child, blazing from within with a fiery red light bright enough to reveal the silhouette of a colossal, winged reptilian form. The creature's head swayed atop a neck like an ancient oak and it flowed like a wave when it moved.

"That's better," the man said.

"Do not presume to condescend to me, Atla," the creature growled. It did not so much speak with a voice as it did produce thunder that formed words. It walked toward the man with deliberate slowness, each fall of its enormous, clawed feet making the cement floor shiver in ripples that were almost visible. It carried its head just higher than the level of its shoulders, but its horns still nearly scraped the ceiling, two stories high.

"Oh, pish posh," the robed man said. "You dragons and your egos."

"It was a cunning gambit," the dragon said.

"True," replied the man, "but in the end it lacked any real punch. Those little creatures just weren't up to the task. What with being weak and stupid and all." He sighed in mock resignation.

The dragon growled, a sound not unlike the desert thunder rolling across the distant mountains. "Your minions will not harrow me forever, Atla. I have claimed this city, this whole world, as my own. Neither you, nor anyone else, will be allowed to take it from me. This land is mine."

"We'll see," Atla said. "You continue your depredations, keep manipulating your peons. In the meantime, all that I have worked to put in place shall remain, and all your efforts will be for naught." He turned and slipped back through the door, which closed and clicked behind him.

"As you said, we shall see," rumbled the dragon. It blinked once and the light from its eyes strobed in the warehouse: dragon, darkness, dragon. Then it turned and walked, step by earth-shaking step, back toward the rear wall. When it could walk no further, it closed its eyes again and the warehouse was dark and quiet once more.