

Book VIII
Power and Madness

Chapter I Appearances

She couldn't get away.

When she'd staggered out of the bar, a little tipsy and feeling strangely tired, her only priority had been to get back to her apartment and crawl into bed. In her mildly impaired state she had walked two full blocks before realizing she was being followed. They kept their distance and stayed in the shadows, so she never saw them well enough to know any more than that they were a couple of big guys dressed entirely in black. As she turned first one corner, then a second on her way home, they followed behind, never coming closer and never giving up the chase.

The second turn was all she needed since it brought the downside apartment complex where she lived into sight. A quick sprint would put her on the steps to the door--

--but a hand as cold as ice clamped around her wrist as she ran past the entrance to the narrow alley flanking the complex and pulled her inside. She felt her shoulder pop as she was thrown to the alley floor. She was trying to get back to her feet when something grabbed her by the shoulders and bit her on the neck. Her whole world turned to deep red pain.

"Drop her, freak!" said a coarse voice from somewhere nearby. The teeth in her neck and the cold iron grip on her shoulders withdrew and she toppled forward onto the concrete alley floor. For just a moment she lay there panting and bleeding while strange, horrific sounds, screaming and fighting, filled the alley around her. After a few seconds she managed to scramble on her hands and knees to the complex's wall, where she propped herself up to watch what was happening.

The two big men that had been following her before were teaming up to beat the tar out of a third man, a Nydi in ragged clothes with unnaturally pale skin and sallow lips. The only color on him was an ugly smear of blood across his lips and chin, which was flung away from his face in a fanned spray of drops as the big guy wearing sunglasses dealt him an impossibly powerful blow. The other fellow, whose scalp was clean shaven and dotted with old scars, took a turn beating the pale one with a length of pipe before grabbing him, shoving him toward the guy with shades and running from the alley.

She watched as the shade-wearing man seized the mugger by the collar and lifted him clear of the ground with one arm. "Run," he said to her. Then, awe-inspiringly, he rose unaided into the air with his swearing, struggling captive. In a heartbeat both were lost between the stars.

Though weak and unsteady, she managed to get to her feet and run back to her apartment. She took a long hot shower, cleaned and bandaged her bite wound, and swore to herself that she would never, *ever* go out at night alone again.

"Situation assessment, please," Nails said jovially as he drifted through the starry night sky high above most of Ylelon's skyline. His vampire captive fought vainly to free himself from the grip of the lone hand grasping his shirt despite the fact that actually freeing himself would result in a very long drop.

"*This is no laughing matter, Nails,*" said George forcefully through Nails' Jakecam™. "*Having an eyewitness to field operations is never something to be taken lightly.*"

"Relax, George. I've got it under control." The struggling vampire clamped his jaws onto Nails' forearm as he finished speaking. His fangs sank less than an inch into the angel's arm.

"That hurt, ass!" Nails snapped and popped his captive on the nose with a fist. "Look down, idiot. That's a forty story drop you're looking at. Do you *really* want me to let go of you?"

"Bastard!" the undead said and spat. Nails let go of his shirt and weaved out of the way of the spittle with casual ease. The vampire plunged helplessly out of sight into the poorly-lit slum below. His trailing scream ended abruptly amidst a clatter of metal.

"I warned you," Nails said and clapped his hands together.

"*This is unacceptable, Nails!*" George snapped. "*You're being completely reckless.*"

"Would you settle down? Everything is under control," retorted Nails. "I'll find the body and get rid of it before I go find the others. The witness was half-drunk and we couldn't save her without being seen, so *please* stop nagging."

George stayed quiet while Nails descended into the alley below to search for the vampire's remains. It had only been three days since the Lonely Winds had faced off against the Order of the Moonless Night in the ruins of Edward G. Tanner High School. Tonight was the first time since then that they had seen anything supernatural. Nails felt a tiny bit guilty for being so uncharacteristically rude to George, but the fact was that the things he had seen in the school had bothered him a great deal more than he was willing to admit, even to himself. For all the monsters Nails had fought in his time, the previous Sunday evening had been the first time he had been so close to such pain and misery. The stalwart guardian angel had reflected more than once that it was fortunate that he didn't sleep or dream. He had no doubt that if he did, the look in the eyes of the girl that died as he tried to help her would haunt his nightmares.

Before long the mangled body of the vampire came into view where it lay, sprawled atop an old dumpster in a filthy, narrow alley. Nails gathered it unceremoniously into an empty trash can, then added what nearby detritus he could find that would add weight before crumpling the can's lid closed. Nails didn't know all of the techniques used by the team to dispose of the bodies of monsters destroyed in the field, but as he flew out of the alley and out over the bay with his weighted canister he decided that some methods were definitely more ideal than others.

"What's the story, George?" Marc asked as he joined Jake, Will, Hawk, Crow, and Cynthia in an alley near where he and Nails had first spotted the vampire.

"I give it a B+," George said dryly. "*Nails is eliminating the carcass and the young lady seems to be all right, if a bit shaken.*"

"Excellent," declared Will. As he briefly inspected the other monster hunters, he stole a slightly longer glance at Cynthia, who was standing a little way apart from the others, staring into space. Will knew better than anyone else present the effect that their lifestyle could have on a state of mind. When Nails had emerged from battling the Moonless Night a battered, solemn wreck, and Cynthia had been unusually quiet, Will had resolved to keep an eye on both of them and watch for signs of a breakdown.

The school itself was a total loss. The edifice, long an eyesore and mark of shame for the city, had been consumed by flames that burned for two days, until the previous evening. Though the fire department had managed to keep the blaze from spreading to the surrounding area, they had not been able to quench it until the school building had been almost completely reduced to a huge pile of smoking rubble.

Public outrage had quickly followed and remained current. The horrifying accounts of those few escapees from the school's "pens" who were not merely vagrants had spread through the city's consciousness like wildfire. An appropriately passionate-yet-vague outcry had followed: find those responsible and punish them. True to history, the collective Ylelon authorities only promised that they were conducting an "intensive, ongoing investigation." In the meantime, those prone to interest in unusual events and conspiracy theories were having a field day inventing a myriad of hypotheses about what had happened in the supposedly empty high school while the remainder of the city's jaded and indifferent population had gone back to their lives.

The only element of the survivor's accounts that was a possible cause for concern for the team was the description of Nails--which fortunately was widely varied and often contradictory. Still, the fact that there was now one more person this evening who had seen not only Nails, but Marc as well, brought the Lonely Winds that much closer to becoming urban legends in their own right. Will knew that once the team returned to the Mansion, George would likely give them a stern lecture, if not outright scream at them, and Will had to agree--public exposure was something they absolutely could not risk.

"So, do we head back?" Hawk asked.

"We might as well," said Jake. "I keep hoping that we'll see some sign of the Order. I still can't believe that they set fire to their own HQ and didn't make it out."

"I've been wondering something," Crow put forth. "Could the Order have been responsible for the summoning circles we've been looking for? They're the first mages we've seen in a long time, and they sure had the interest to flood Ylelon with monsters."

Jake shook his head. "It doesn't fit their pattern. The Moonless Night's philosophy is all about how superior vampires are to the living. It kind of flies in the face of their entire belief system to suggest that they would need anything more than themselves to conquer a settlement. Other than the odd enslaved elemental, that is," he finished sadly.

"Funny you should be discussing this," said a voice from behind the group, toward the dark end of the alley. The Lonely Winds spun on their heels with their weapons at the ready. Even Cynthia snapped to with her pistol drawn. She instinctively opened her mind to sense what had surprised them and felt a heavy aura of magic from nearby.

Standing only a few steps away from the team in weak light was a lone figure garbed in a heavy hooded robe of muted silver, with the hems of its hood and sleeves adorned with odd arcane sigils of golden thread. The speaker's voice had been masculine, but his robe concealed him completely. He raised his arms at the sight of the weapons trained on him, but his sleeves still hid his hands.

"Please, don't be alarmed," he said calmly. "I'm not here to harm you."

"Funny, sneakin' up on us in a dark alley tells me different," Marc growled.

"If I wanted to harm you, couldn't I have done so without alerting you first?" the robe-wearer asked, sounding amused. "My name is Atla. I've been following your exploits for some time. If your minds are open, we have a mutual dilemma I think we can help each other with."

The team members exchanged a series of skeptical looks. "Sorry, pal," Jake said at last, "our mothers told us never to take intrigue from strangers."

The group half-turned and began to move away from the strange man while keeping a sharp eye on him. They stopped dead in their tracks when Atla began to recite a verse most of them had heard before:

*"As he wandered in the desert,
Terek Domar found a fortress,
In the lost and winding pathways
Of a cavern deep and red..."*

Jake was the first to turn around. He stared wide-eyed at Atla as the mage continued to recite:

*"When he saw the workings left there
By a culture wise and ancient,
And he understood their meaning,
Terek Domar turned and fled."*

Will, Cynthia and Marc had joined Jake in staring at Atla. Hawk and Crow exchanged confused glances. "Did we miss something?" exclaimed Hawk.

Atla laughed. "I see you're catching on. You know the old ballad, or a very small part of it. Tell me: have any of you ever seen a dragon?"

The Lonely Winds all looked to Will as a way of chickening out instead of answering the delicate question. Will inwardly wondered why George had yet to say anything.

"A friend of ours saw one recently," he said simply.

"The dragon your friend saw is an ancient being of tremendous power," Atla said somberly. He took three steps toward the team despite the fact that they kept their weapons trained on him.

"I am a mage of considerable ability, but I must watch my words carefully for fear of reprisal," he continued. "I came to Ylelon long ago, but my own work has been stifled by the monster that controls the real power here."

"What are we, your biographers?" sneered Marc. "Somebody remind me why we can't just blow this loser's head off."

"Because I hold the answers to many of your questions," replied Atla, and Will could hear the smirk in his voice. "I understand you have been recently flummoxed by a series of chambers housing

summoning circles the likes of which you have never seen?”

A stunned silence followed, broken promptly by Hawk: “Hey, hold up! Just how the hell do you know so much about us?”

Atla chuckled. “If I told you that, it would undermine my status as a mysterious robed wizard-type, wouldn’t it? It’s enough to say that your recent work has drawn my attention. I can tell you much if you are willing to do something for me in return.”

“*That’s highly dubious, Mr. Atla,*” George’s voice emanated out of Will’s Jakecam™. “*You want us not only to believe you and trust your word, but also to perform tasks on your behalf?*”

“Ah! Is this the esteemed George Manor? I’ve been a fan of yours for quite a while as well, Mr. Manor!” said Atla pleasantly.

“*Indeed.*”

“If you aren’t certain, I invite you to take some time to discuss it among yourselves.” Atla reached into one of his sleeves and tossed something to Will. “When you’re ready, give me a call.” He turned and walked until he was lost in the shadows.

Will stared after him for a moment before looking at the object Atla had tossed to him. It was some sort of medallion made of gold with a small white gem set in the center, attached to a delicate gold chain.

“Thoughts?” he asked.

“*Think no more of it,*” George advised. “*A mysterious man skulking around back alleys is hardly a reliable source of information.*”

Will slowly closed his fingers around the medallion. “Yet, he knew the little poem to activate your robot soldiers, George.”

“The ones you never saw fit to tell us about,” Jake added. “Not to mention, he seems to know about the dragon you claim not to.”

George was quiet. Cynthia had her trademark distant stare, which Will was coming to associate with her thinking deeply.

“George?” she said. “Didn’t you tell me they tell stories about tear-eck dough-mar where you grew up? Is this Atla guy saying the dragon Nails saw is the same one from those stories?”

“*I would shudder to think so,*” George said somberly.

“There you guys are!” Nails said as he drifted down from above to alight on the ground among the team. “Did I miss anything?”

“No more than we did,” mumbled Hawk.

“Follow me back to my car,” instructed Will, “I’ll explain on the way.”

As promised, Will explained to Hawk, Crow, and Nails the oddity from the previous weeks that none of them had been present for: how George’s mysterious robotic sentries had only appeared when George had recited the same poem Atla just had. Silence hung heavy over the team as they split up to return to their vehicles.

George was waiting for the team in the Foyer with Sullivan when they returned. G.R. was there too, but stood guardedly to one side with his arms crossed, as was his habit.

The team members came in a few at a time; Jake, Marc and Nails, Will and Cynthia, Hawk and Crow. No one spoke until everyone was assembled. The team stood in a rough line, staring down George.

“All right, out with it!” Will said at last.

“What exactly would you like for me to say, William?” George asked helplessly.

“I’ve got an idea!” said Jake sardonically. “Why don’t you start with how you seem to know so much about what’s going on and why you don’t seem able to share that information!”

George shook his head. “Is there anything I can say at this point that will make a difference?”

“Yeah, you can tell us why you’ve never told us about the dragon,” Jake said. George said nothing, only turned his head away. He looked to Cynthia to be so sad she thought he might cry.

“Fine. If you won’t tell us anything, I know someone who will,” snapped Jake. “Anyone have any objections?”

No one did. Will took the medallion Atla had given him out of a pocket and held it dangling by its chain in front of himself. "Crow, do you have any idea how this thing works?"

"No, he never said anything about it," was Crow's reply.

"Terrific," sighed Will. "What are we supposed to do when we want to talk to Atla?"

The gem in the medallion suddenly flashed from within with a light of its own. An image of Atla appeared in front of Will: life-sized, three dimensional and in living color, but also slightly transparent. He was turned to one side, facing away from both the team and George, bent over at the waist with one hand hidden beneath his hood.

"Uh...Mr. Atla?" Will ventured. Atla held up the index finger of his free hand in a gesture for patience. A moment later he straightened, made a series of quick, mime-like motions in front of himself and turned to face the team.

"All right, what can I do for you?" he asked politely.

"Was...was that some kind of spell?" Jake asked.

"I was brushing my teeth," replied Atla. "Are you ready to discuss my offer?"

"Damn right! We need some info!" Marc blurted.

Atla chuckled. "You're forgetting, first you must do something for me. I warn you, it's not a task to undertake lightly."

"We'll be the judges of that. Just give us the details," Hawk said blithely.

"Very well." The image of Atla waved its hand and another image appeared in the air before it: a rotating, three-dimensional mock-up of a palatial mansion and its surrounding estate.

"This is the home of one Mr. Chris Knight," Atla began. "He is quite wealthy, eccentric, and rather reclusive. He's also one of the most dangerous men in Ylelon. Mr. Knight is a very talented practitioner of the mystic arts, showing a particular aptitude for magic that influences the mind. Those familiar with him often refer to Mr. Knight as the 'Master of Madness.'"

"Lovely. What does he have to do with us?" Jake asked.

"Nothing, yet." Atla snapped his fingers and the image stopped rotating and quickly enlarged until the mansion was the size of a large dollhouse. Its lines and surfaces faded until it was wholly transparent but for a large round door in the forward center of the third floor, marked in red. "This is Mr. Knight's vault. In it he stores a trove of magical artifacts, tomes and other objects, some of truly reckless power."

George and the team listened carefully as Atla's words grew darker. "I need the use of many of these items, but Knight and I are not on the same page philosophically. I need you capable souls to enter Knight's house and steal the things I require from the vault. Do this, and I will tell you of the dragon."

"That's...that's really something," Jake mused distantly.

"This is a joke, right?" Hawk groused. "You want us to break into someone's house and commit burglary?"

"It's no joke, I assure you," Atla said. "The choice is entirely up to you, but bear in mind, no one can tell you what you want to know but me." Again he snapped his fingers and a large scroll, double-rolled around two rods, appeared hovering in the air before Will. Hesitantly at first Will reached out toward it, then quickly grabbed it out of the air.

"These are your instructions, should you choose to proceed," explained Atla. "I'll be waiting for word from you. You know how to reach me." His and the house's visages faded to nothing as the medallion's gem became dark again.

Will eyed the medallion in his one hand, then the scroll in his other, then looked at George. "Well, maestro?" he asked.

"Oh, suddenly you want my opinion?" George huffed. "I'd say listening to anything this fellow suggests goes against all good judgment. But then, trusting me doesn't seem to be a hallmark of your judgment of late."

"I don't like it. There's too much wrong with the whole setup," Hawk said.

"Whatsa matter? I thought this spy stuff was your thing," Marc teased.

"It is my thing, but there's a difference between sneaking into an enemy base camp to set a bomb and breaking into a private residence just because some guy in a bathrobe told us to."

“Still,” Jake said as he stroked his beard in thought, “he knew about the dragon and that’s information we want. Not to mention, it probably wouldn’t hurt our cause to do some damage to a guy called ‘the Master of Madness’.”

“Why don’t we put it to a vote?” asked Crow. “It’s kind of a weird situation, but I don’t think it sounds any more dangerous than our regular routine. I vote we try.”

“I’m in. This is valuable info we’re being offered and this Atla might even prove to be an ally,” Jake said.

“I’ll do it,” said Nails.

“Ditto,” Marc said.

Hawk shrugged. “Someone will have to show you losers how it’s done.”

“I think we can do this,” Will said and turned to Cynthia. “You in?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly.

“All right, everyone get some rest,” Will instructed. “Tomorrow we’ll gather in the Situation Room at noon and start planning.”

With that the team split up and went to their rooms. G.R. tagged along with Nails and Sullivan left to attend to other matters, leaving George standing alone in the Foyer.

“This is going to be *bad*,” was all he said.

Chapter II

Images

The team gathered in the Situation Room at noon the next day to discuss their course of action. The scroll that Atla had given them turned out to be a very useful collection of information. Within were floor plans of Mr. Knight's house, descriptions of the numerous household staff and a number of tips for infiltrating and navigating the mansion. After a brief and somewhat awkward discussion, the team agreed upon the list of equipment to take on the "invasion" and the time they would leave.

Thus, at five-thirty that evening, at the very beginning of the sun's descent toward the horizon, the Lonely Winds lined up along the top of a hill overlooking Knight's mansion. The house was a spacious three-story estate of classical architecture, with swept-forward left and right wings flanking a courtyard of coarse grass. A large cast-iron bell hung from a mount in the center of the courtyard, casting an ominous shadow that reached almost to the expensive front doors. Two outlying buildings flanked the house itself; one a garage, the other evidently a double-storied servant's quarters. The property itself was located in the rough terrain that composed much of the landscape south of the city. The skyline of the city could be seen from the crests of the hills here but the team hadn't come for sight-seeing.

Each of them was clad in their mono-black field outfits with a full compliment of supplies and ammunition and had a Jakecam™ in place on their shoulder. George had remained adamantly against the mission, but he insisted on being connected to the team during their "felonious little errand," as he put it. Marc had his duffle bag, full to bulging with tools, equipment and extra rounds. Jake was wearing his armor, which glistened in the evening sun as he lay down on the hill above the mansion with a set of binoculars, scrutinizing the building.

"How does it look, Jake?" Will asked softly.

Jake continued to scan the property. Occasionally he would see a hint of someone moving inside, but for the most part the place was still and quiet. Presently a man walked from around the far wing of the mansion and into the courtyard. He was a short, portly fellow, with unkempt gray hair and dressed in the stiff formal wear of a butler. In one hand he carried a clipboard, which he abruptly brandished and consulted as he crossed the courtyard. Suddenly he stooped, picked up a large stone from the rough grass of the courtyard and, taking a tape measure from a pocket, began to meticulously examine every one of the irregular surfaces of the stone, occasionally scribbling down his findings on the clipboard. At last he tossed the stone away and began to walk back around the far side of the house again, shaking his head as he continued to scrawl notes.

Jake slowly lowered his binoculars. "This may be interesting," he said.

"All right, here's how this goes," Will began authoritatively. "Angie, Nails, Cynthia: you three stay here and keep out of sight. We need a smaller group to keep a lower profile, but listen for the signal in case we need backup."

"You got it!" Crow said. Nails nodded and Cynthia saluted with a grin.

"Marc, Hawk, Jake, we're together. Hawk, I want you to take the lead. We're going to be in close quarters in there, so I'm trusting those black ops instincts of yours to keep us out of trouble. Jake, Marc, once we find this vault, it'll be your jobs to get us in as quickly as possible."

"It would have been nice if we had some advance idea what to expect," Jake complained. He wasn't exaggerating--Atla's scroll contained plenty of details about the mansion itself, along with exacting descriptions of what he wanted from the vault, but there were no hints on how to breach the vault itself.

"We'll worry about that when we come to it," Will replied. "Let's go, troops."

"We'll be back," Hawk said as he gave Crow a quick kiss goodbye. Then the four men were off, running along the ridge toward the rear of the building.

The scroll had highlighted a servant's entrance at the back of the manor and strongly suggested that it be used as the means of entry. The scroll also specifically warned against waiting to work under cover of darkness, promising that "household activities more than doubled after sundown"--whatever *that* meant. Still, the instructions did map out the quickest route to the vault and gave an excellent overview of

the activities of the servants. Theoretically, this “mission” should be simple.

The four Winds reached the base of a hill that faced the back wall of the manor and stopped there to examine their surroundings. The ground between them and the door they wanted was flat and level with nothing to provide cover. On the plus side, unlike the mansion’s front, which was covered with many large windows, the back was mostly solid wall.

The team members took all of this in for a few moments before Will questioned Hawk with a glance. Hawk nodded and was running for the door in a flash, covering the open space at a very impressive pace. In no time at all he reached the door, listened, opened it a crack and peered inside. He closed the door again slowly and signaled the others to join him, then led them inside, as quietly as shadows.

The interior was very dim in contrast to the bright desert exterior. It took the team’s eyes a few painfully long moments to adjust. Once they had, Hawk signaled for the others to follow.

The décor was done mostly in darker tones and cool colors. Expensive tapestries and paintings of every imaginable description virtually coated the walls, illuminated here and there by light fixtures stylized to resemble antique candle sconces. The place was as quiet as a tomb, leading Jake to wonder where everyone that the scroll had described was.

As the four quietly padded their way down a hall in search of their first goal, a narrow set of stairs, they passed an open door to the kitchen. Marc, who was last in the progression, leaned through the door out of curiosity. The center of the room was dominated by a massive chopping block that had been abused by having a gigantic butcher’s knife driven down into the edge. The room was otherwise orderly but for a comically large pile of dishes in the sink.

Marc made his way to the refrigerator in the hope of pilfering a beer or three, pulled the door open and froze. The interior of the fridge was entirely filled with empty cans. Beer, soft drink and food cans were meticulously arranged, in random order, in perfect rows on the shelves and in the door.

As Marc stood, vainly attempting to puzzle out the meaning of this bizarre spectacle, Jake appeared in the doorway. “Psst! Marc! Let’s go!” he whispered. Marc was only too happy to comply.

The two jogged as quietly as they could to where Will and Hawk were tensely waiting for them at the base of a flight of stairs. Amazingly, they still had yet to see any of the household staff or “Mr. Knight.”

Hawk led the way up the carpeted steps. The elite agent swept the second-floor hall with his gaze as it came into view, then waved the others along with him. On they climbed to the third floor, the only sound the soft padding of their boots on the carpet and the pounding of their pulses in their ears.

The third floor, at a glance, was just as barren and quiet as the first two. Hawk crouched atop the landing and held up a hand in signal for the others to wait, only waving them forward when his finely honed instincts were satisfied that the way forward was clear. The only way to reach the vault was to work through the halls to almost the center of the building, where the only door to the vault was located. Once again Hawk took point, leading the others by several steps as he followed the path outlined by the scroll.

They had traversed roughly half the distance when Hawk suddenly stopped. A rough, sporadic rustling noise was coming through the open doorway of a room ahead to the left. Hawk made the team stay still for an agonizingly long time while he tried to evaluate the sound. As the seconds crawled by and the rustling neither increased nor abated, Hawk crept forward as silently as a cloud and, ever so slowly, peered through the open door.

The small room within was devoid of furnishings. Its only feature was that the walls and ceiling were completely covered with sheets of paper that appeared to have been taped in layers, haphazardly atop each other, all around the room. Each sheet had a different design or logo as a header and each was covered with neatly arranged lines and margins. They reminded Hawk of the papers G.R. used for one of his nerd hobbies. What were they called? Character sheets, or something like that.

The rustling was caused by a single young woman dressed as a maid. She was attacking character sheets at random with a very old and worn-out feather duster, working in no discernable pattern and often returning to one sheet several times while missing nearby ones completely. The whole scene was

illuminated by a single naked light bulb dangling from the center of the ceiling by a long cord, which also had a character sheet taped to it crookedly.

Hawk watched this bizarre scene for several seconds before waving the others on. The maid never turned from her frenetic work or gave any indication that she had heard the team, which suited Hawk just fine. He was a veteran monster hunter and a special ops soldier of high caliber, but this place was beginning to spook even him.

The team made it the rest of the way to the vault without incident. That might have been good news, but as they rounded a corner and the vault door came into view, their hearts *really* sank. The “vault” was aptly named, for its door was a massive round affair like that in a bank. A keypad and display screen were mounted in the wall next to the door.

“You’ve gotta be kidding!” Jake hissed in exasperation.

“Shh!” Will reminded him. The four sauntered up to the door, where Will and Marc stood guard while Hawk and Jake looked over its various components.

“There’s no way,” Jake whispered after an extremely long forty seconds of examination. “This is top of the line stuff and I’m no safe cracker.”

“I concur,” said Hawk. “If we took explosives to this thing, we’d level this section of the building before we dented it.”

Will gnawed on a knuckle in thought. “We’ve got to try. This thing’s obviously electronic. Are you sure you can’t hotwire it, or whatever?”

Jake and Hawk looked at each other. “We can try,” Hawk said. “No promises, though.”

“Marc? Tools!” prompted Jake. Marc unslung his duffle bag from around his shoulder and tossed it to Jake, who plunked it down on the floor and began to eagerly root through the available tools with Hawk.

Long seconds turned into longer minutes as the two strove to figure out a way to open the door without setting off any alarms. Will began to sweat slightly as the moments dragged past. He knew that they might be discovered at any moment, yet the hall remained empty and still. Had Atla’s instructions been wrong? Had he somehow exaggerated the size of the household?

Even Marc was becoming visibly tense. He paced back and forth restlessly across his end of the hallway as he watched for trouble. He and Will both knew how ludicrous this “guarding” was--should they be discovered, having sentries posted would do them little good. In the tension, cravings from old vices took hold and Marc found himself searching his pockets for a pack of cigarettes before he’d even realized it. He looked down at his empty pockets in dismay and when he looked up again, he froze.

The maid from the character sheet room was standing at the end of the hall, staring at him. She would have been pretty but for her terse and haggard expression. Her large brown eyes were wide and devoid of expression, like a cow’s. Marc’s heart raced as he waited for her to flee or raise alarm, but she simply stood, staring at him.

Marc chanced a look at the others. None of them had noticed what was happening. Jake and Hawk had pulled the vault’s wall panel open and were tinkering with the components, while Will was watching his end of the hall.

Marc turned back to the maid, who had not moved in the slightest, and he even began to wonder if he was imagining things. Hesitantly, he started walking toward her. In a few heartbeats he had come close enough to touch her, but she still stood completely unmoving, as though catatonic. Marc waved a hand before her eyes, snapped his fingers and even tapped her on a shoulder. Still, she did not react.

“*That was VERY foolish, Marc!*” George whispered, speaking for the first time since the team had entered the house.

Marc shrugged and began to walk back toward the others. “Hey, guys!” he whispered. “Get a load of--”

A shrill, ear-piercing scream split the air. Jake and Hawk both jumped and dropped the tools they had been working with: Will spun in place. The maid was emitting a steady, monotone wail with little apparent effort. Marc waved his hands, trying to quiet her, but she paid him no heed. Desperately he clamped a hand over her open mouth, which only partially muffled her scream. Will, Jake and Hawk

looked on helplessly while Marc could only remove his hand from the woman's mouth and shrug.

"Get clear!" Will ordered. Jake and Hawk repacked their tools in record time. Marc continued to try desperately to quiet the maid, pleading in a whisper, waving his arms and even shaking her by the shoulders, which succeeded only in giving her continuous scream a ululating quality. Marc finally gave up and let go of her to join the others as they ran past him toward the stairs.

"Be ready to move!" George suddenly warned the outside team through Crow's Jakecam™.

"What's wrong?" asked Nails.

"They found the vault, then someone else found them," George explained. *"Be ready to go for your conveyances the instant they reach you. This whole fiasco is a wash."*

In the span of only a few moments Jake, Hawk, Will and Marc came running from around the side of the house and charged the others. "We're gone!" Will puffed, almost without stopping.

"Guys," Cynthia said and pointed toward the front door of the mansion. The others had been in the midst of turning to run, but stopped in their tracks to look at what Cynthia had indicated: a man had emerged from the front doors of the house and was very casually making his way toward them.

"Dig out!" Jake cried. The group turned again to run for their vehicles--

--and stopped dead as the man from the yard below suddenly appeared directly in their path in a puff of black smoke and a peal of thunder. He was short and stout, with a smooth-shaven scalp and a disarming smile. His garb was a simple black cloak draped casually over brown robes.

"Heys!" he said brightly.

"Uh...hi," Jake said as he and the others took a simultaneous step away from the strange man.

"You folks lost?" the robed man, whom the team could only take for Mr. Knight, asked. "Most people would ask for directions at a gas station. Looking for a gas station in my safe was a strange idea. I don't think I have a gas station in there. Lots of movies, though."

A palpable silence followed, broken suddenly by the thunderous sound of Marc cocking his shotgun. His boots scraped loudly across the rough desert ground as he marched around the rest of the group toward Mr. Knight. When he stopped he raised his shotgun one-handed and pointed it at Mr. Knight, with the barrel only inches from the man's face.

"Scratch one freak!" Marc declared triumphantly.

"Are you sure that's a good idea," Mr. Knight said calmly, "with those scorpions all over you?"

Marc scowled in confusion, and then he saw it: a hideous black scorpion, half the size of his own hand, crawling up his arm toward his face. He raised his other hand to swat the pest away and saw to his horror that another, larger scorpion was clinging there. Desperately he dropped his shotgun and shook his arms, trying to rid himself of the vermin. That was when the largest scorpion yet crawled across his scalp and came eye to mindless black eye with him.

"Help! Get them off me!" Marc shrieked as he flailed about at the empty air.

"Marc? Buddy, what's wrong?" Nails asked frantically.

"What the hell did you do to him?" Jake demanded as his armor's guns rose into firing position.

"Nothing I would do to any of my friends," replied Mr. Knight. His spell was on Jake and took effect at the speed of thought. A switch fell over in Jake's head, altering a single, vital aspect of his perception.

"Get back! I'll cover you!" he shouted to Mr. Knight and turned his guns toward Nails.

"Jake?" Nails asked, "what are you--"

A sudden blast of high-caliber rounds tore into Nails' chest and knocked him off of his feet. Nails was back up in the blink of an eye and managed to reach Jake before the next shot. The two grappled viciously and Jake's guns fired several times, kicking up trails of little sand geysers on the ground.

Hawk pulled his combat knives, not wanting to risk friendly fire, at the same time Will was trying to take aim at Mr. Knight around the bizarre spectacle of Nails and Jake fighting and Marc swatting at nothing. Will couldn't feel the surge of magic as Mr. Knight cast another spell, the way Crow and Cynthia could. All he knew was that as he raised his pistols, his hands went completely numb. When he held them before his face, he was horrified to see his skin shriveling and blackening. The numbness began to spread

up his arms as the last shreds of skin on his fingers rotted away, leaving only sickly white bone.

This isn't real. This can't be real! he told himself, but he couldn't make himself believe it.

Hawk had already charged Mr. Knight. He fully intended to gut the bald freak for whatever he was doing to the others, but he hadn't counted on the madness mage being armed. As Hawk bore down on his would-be victim, brandishing his knives, Mr. Knight reached into his robes and drew a gem-encrusted metal tube with practiced grace. A blade of what appeared to be bright red energy erupted from one end, making the tube into the handle of a two-handed sword which Mr. Knight swung to meet Hawk's attack. Tempered steel met magical energy in a burst of sparks.

"You can't outfight us forever!" Hawk snarled, wishing now that he had just taken the risk of shooting the man.

"I don't have to," said Mr. Knight blithely. "Tell me: is there anyone here whose safety you value above your own?"

Horried, Hawk looked to Crow, who had been watching the melee for an opportunity to help.

"Joe?" she said weakly, as her husband quickly drew his sidearm and placed the barrel under his chin.

"I love you," he said sadly and pulled the trigger.

Crow's shriek pierced the air, even startling Nails and Jake as they wrestled and almost distracting Will from the sight of the bones of his arms crumbling into dust. She ran to Hawk, heedless of being so close to Mr. Knight, and cradled the body in her arms, weeping and crying his name.

"Angie? Angie, it's me! I'm all right!" Hawk shouted in confusion as Crow held him in a death grip, soaking his shirt with her tears.

All the while, Cynthia stood behind the others, helplessly watching the bizarre, bloodless defeat of the team. From the moment Mr. Knight had appeared in the team's midst, he had neutralized them all in less than thirty seconds. Marc was still brushing frantically at dozens of imaginary scorpions. Nails had out-wrestled Jake and was forced to hold him in a full nelson to keep the guns pointed away from everyone present. Will was still trying to convince himself that the sight of his body rapidly decomposing wasn't real. Crow continued to mourn her husband regardless of his efforts to console her.

The moment Mr. Knight looked at Cynthia, her danger sense began to buzz. An instant later she felt a familiar pushing at the edge of her consciousness, a mind-influencing spell that her own formidable mental might instinctively resisted. Cynthia thought she saw a wave of surprise on Mr. Knight's face just before his energy sword reformed into a massive, wicked double-bladed axe. Her danger sense went from warning to screaming alarms.

Back off! she shouted mentally into Mr. Knight's mind. Again there was a hint of surprise as he seemed to reconsider whatever he was thinking.

"I think I've made my point. Good luck finding those directions!" he said politely. The strange weapon in his hands changed again, becoming the shaft of a walking stick. Mr. Knight strolled casually away, leaving Cynthia wide-eyed and the other Lonely Winds decimated on the hilltop.

Chapter III In the Mind's Eye

Twenty minutes later, the gem on the medallion Atla had given to Will flashed again. Though the light was unseen, nestled as the jewel was in Will's coat pocket, Atla's image still appeared among the team. The Lonely Winds had returned to where their vehicles were parked in a depression just off of the road about a five minute hike from Mr. Knight's mansion. Marc was stretched out on the hood of his truck, giving the open sky a very nasty look. Will sat in the driver's seat of his car with the door open and his feet on the ground, apparently lost in thought and occasionally rubbing his hands together. Nails presented an odd sight: several of Jake's rounds had lodged in his body instead of passing through it, and Nails was only just finishing the painful task of digging each bullet out of the wounds with his fingers before his rapid healing sealed them in. Jake had removed his helmet and weapons pack and sat leaning against his car on the ground, occasionally casting a guilt-laden glance at Nails. Hawk and Crow were nestled in the cab of Hawk's truck, where he held her as she sobbed softly into his shoulder. Cynthia was sitting on a low hillside a few paces away from the group of vehicles, staring into space.

"I take it things didn't go well," Atla said.

Ever so slowly, Jake turned to glare at the wizard. "You might say that," he growled.

Marc hopped down from his truck and marched to where the visage of Atla stood. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, mister!"

"About what?" Atla said calmly.

"About why we weren't given proper intelligence to run this little errand of yours," Jake said acidly. "You didn't happen to mention what Mr. Knight was capable of doing to us," (here he cast another involuntary guilty look at Nails) "or that we would have been further along to bring heavy mining equipment to use on the safe!"

Atla sighed, though in irritation, frustration, or resignation, no one could tell. "I gave you all of the 'intelligence' I had regarding the vault," he said slowly. "As for Mr. Knight, I assumed your particular vocation would have prompted you to take measures to ensure your own safety. You have dealt with magic-using foes before, have you not?"

A shamed sort of silence fell over the team. Only Crow, quietly listening while huddled against Hawk, was not shaken by Atla's barbed remark. Yes, the Lonely Winds had dealt in the past with dangerous magic-users but none of them had displayed the awesome practiced skill that Mr. Knight had. The typical mage in Ylelon (if a word like "typical" could be applied to such a rare thing) was an individual who had somehow managed to achieve a low-to-mediocre level of skill in magic. From the ease with which Mr. Knight had humbled the team, gracefully casting spells Crow had only passing familiarity with, it was clear that he was far beyond the level of the clumsy amateurs the team had dealt with in the past. Atla had to have known this, knowing as he did so much about the team, which led Crow to wonder what else he was keeping from them.

"That point is moot now," Will spoke up. "We weren't able to do what you wanted. We're probably lucky to be alive, in fact, so this is where we part ways."

To punctuate this point, Will pulled into his car, closed the door and started the engine. Marc spat contemptuously on the ground at Atla's feet and began to stomp his way back to his truck.

"This land is mine," Atla pronounced, loudly and forcefully.

Will looked back at the mage's apparition. "What?"

"When Terek Domar came here long ago, he pronounced his claim in a simple phrase: 'This land is mine.' Granted, it's a little more ominous-sounding when you say it in Dragon..."

Hawk and Crow exchanged glances. Everyone else watched the enigmatic robed mage, wondering what point he was trying to make.

In answer, he made a sweeping gesture with one arm toward the mountains. "Look to the north and east," he said. "See the mighty Sentinels, that have guarded these sands since time immemorial? Look to the west and south. See the desert and beyond it, the endless sea? Everything you can observe from where you are, even the sky above, is claimed by Terek Domar. Every shrub that grows, every creature

that draws breath, every object that casts a shadow is *at his mercy*.”

Atla paused as though to give his words proper effect. No one else spoke, so he continued.

“I am the only thing keeping Terek Domar from having absolute free reign over this country. Much like yourselves, I have long waged a shadow war against an opponent I have little hope of truly thwarting, only of keeping in check.”

“Well, that’s nice and dramatic, assuming it’s even true,” said Jake coldly, “but what the hell does it have to do with us?”

“The dragon knows about you,” replied Atla. Once again a stunned silence fell across the team. When Atla continued, he sounded more forceful than he had before.

“Oh, yes, it’s true. Didn’t you ever wonder why the dragon came close enough for you to catch a glimpse of him? The answer is simple: *he was watching you*.”

Cynthia felt a sudden chill.

“Judging by your expressions, I’ve piqued your attention,” Atla continued. “The simple fact is that you have the creature’s interest. Your own efforts have had a profound effect on the interests of the city-destroying monster I oppose. You want information about the creature that only I can give you, and I *need* your help in acquiring the things listed in that scroll.”

“If you’re such a big shot, why don’t *you* get the stuff you want?” Marc snarled.

“Do you think I would have bothered to reveal myself to you if I could waltz into that house and take what I want?” Atla snapped. “There are forces at work here that limit even myself. I need capable outside agents to do what I cannot.”

Where she sat on the hillside away from the team, Cynthia’s eyes went wide. The things that Atla had just said were eerily similar to something George had told her when they met Nails and G.R. in the mountains, that there were forces at work that limited what he was allowed to do.

“Ok, assuming all this is true, we’re still at an impasse,” Jake observed. “We couldn’t get into the vault, and even if we could, there’s nothing to keep Mr. Knight from melting our brains.”

“He didn’t get me,” said Nails. “I don’t think he could.”

“That’s fine for you, but it won’t help us,” Will said. “Besides, it still leaves us with a safe we can’t open.”

“How would it work?” Cynthia asked suddenly.

“What’s that, Legs?” asked Marc.

Cynthia answered while still staring into empty space. “The door to the safe. How would it work? It’s basically just a big lock, right? Shouldn’t it have those metal bars?”

“Tumblers, yeah,” Jake affirmed. “Why?”

“I think I could open them,” Cynthia replied. “It might take me a few tries, but I bet I could make them open with a little willpower.”

“Awesome! I don’t think that the wizard got her either,” Nails said with rising enthusiasm. “We could take point and give you cover when that wacko turns up again!”

Will sighed. “Interesting, but it still doesn’t protect the rest of us. Besides, I’m still not sold on how vital it is for us to try again.”

“I can’t go,” Crow said suddenly, with her face still half-buried in Hawk’s chest. “I’m sorry, but what he made me see, I just...I can’t watch that again. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Angie,” Will said sympathetically. Crow hadn’t told the others exactly what she had seen, but Will had pieced together that it had to do with hallucinating something horrible happening to Hawk, which Will could identify with.

“Perhaps I need to impress upon you more the importance of this task,” Atla began, but Jake cut him off with fiery words:

“Perhaps *you* need to just lay off! You keep hitting us over the head with this task of yours, but you don’t seem interested in helping us out much or even telling us exactly what you need it done for!”

“*Easy, Jake*,” George interjected, and Will was surprised to realize that their mentor had not yet spoken during the conversation. “*Cooler heads will prevail here*.”

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

“Once again, I must advise against this course of action. We have no idea of the veracity of Atla’s claims and the mission he has sent you on has already proved to be quite perilous.”

“These people are always in peril,” Atla retorted.

“He *did* know about the dragon,” said Nails. “I still think this is worth trying again. As long as,” he added, gazing steadily at the image of the mage, “Mr. Atla keeps his end of the bargain.”

“We could...we could try a distraction.” Jake’s head was bowed in thought as he spoke. “Maybe cause some commotion in one of the outbuildings. If we drew Knight’s attention away from the house, that might give Cynthia a chance to do her thing.”

“This is still against my better judgment,” George complained.

“Mine too, actually,” Will said. “But we need any information we can get if this Terek Domar is as bad as it sounds, George. Besides, I’m beginning to like the idea of anything that hurts this ‘Master of Madness.’”

“I can be the distraction,” Hawk said slowly after a brief pause. When Crow held him more tightly, he petted her hair to soothe her. “I’ll make some noise in the servant’s quarters, draw everybody out and be gone before they know what’s happening.”

“You sure they’ll fall for that?” Jake asked.

Hawk brandished one of Jake’s party favors and began to roll the powerful incendiary device between his fingers. “Trust me.”

Jake began to stroke his beard in thought. “All right, good. That still leaves us the question of how to get back inside. I really doubt they left the doors unlocked for us.”

“Wasn’t there a skylight or two on the roof?” Nails grinned.

“I think so, but you aren’t suggesting...?” Will said in disbelief, but Nails only grinned more broadly.

“An airdrop. Innovative,” Jake remarked.

“Dude, you rock!” exclaimed Marc.

“Damn right,” chuckled Nails. “We wait for Hawk’s party to start, then I fly everyone to the roof and we raid the safe.”

“It’s very risky,” mulled Will.

“But worth the risk, in my estimation,” Jake added.

“All right, we’ll do it,” Will said. “Marc, you’re with Hawk. Crow, you can stay here or go too, it’s your choice. Nails will take Jake, Cynthia, and I to the rooftop. When Hawk starts his distraction, Jake and I will drop in first. If the coast is clear, Nails will come in with Cynthia. She gets the door open, we get the things we need as quickly as possible and run for the hills. Questions? Comments?”

“Good luck,” George said softly. Atla merely faded away noiselessly.

Forty minutes later the team again scrutinized the bizarre household, this time from a different hillock behind the house itself. Even in Ylelon, a desert not far from the equator, early November often brought chilling cold in the form of a softly moaning wind blowing in from the sea. The wind kicked up wisps of sand over the rough terrain like wandering ghosts that materialized and vanished in the ever-so-slowly dimming light of the setting sun. The team had less than half an hour of light left, which prompted Will to wonder again what Atla had meant when he’d warned the team not to wait for nightfall. Will reassured himself with the thought that if all went well they would be done with the job and gone long before the sun set, then signaled Hawk and Marc to begin. The two veteran monster hunters slipped away and sprinted along the bases of the hills on the far side of the house toward the servant’s building.

“Take us up,” Will said. Nails held out his hands to Will and Jake.

“Hold on tight,” he said and rose steadily into the air. Within seconds Jake and Will were hanging suspended in the air by their holds on Nails as the angel flew in a high arc from the hillside to the flat, expansive rooftop of the mansion. The flight was smooth and quick. The science enthusiast in Jake found himself wondering what forces held Nails aloft and how much weight he could support. The three set down on the roof as softly as possible to avoiding alerting anyone below and tiptoed to the nearest skylight where they carefully peered down through the glass. When Will was satisfied that the area below

was empty he signaled Nails to go after Cynthia. The two arrived less than a minute later, Cynthia giggling as Nails set her down.

“That was great!” she whispered. “Let’s do it again!”

“How will we know when to go in?” asked Nails.

A thunderous explosion shook the rooftop as a massive, billowing ball of flame and smoke rose into the air above the servant’s quarters.

“Oh, right. Never mind,” Nails said.

“What did they do? Toss a grenade under a propane tank?” snarled Will.

“You say that like you would be surprised if it were true,” Jake said.

“Hold tight, I’ll be right back!” said Nails as he hurtled into the sky. He stopped high enough to easily see the entire surrounding area. Far below, the servants’ quarters burned in two separate fires, one on the rooftop, one burning against the far wall facing away from the mansion. Even from his vantage point Nails could hear the frantic cries of the people beginning to pour out of both the servant’s quarters and the mansion. Before long there were easily two dozen people scrambling about the grounds. Many of them only screamed and ran about frantically; one took to scooping handfuls of sand from the ground and hurling them uselessly at the bright blue chemical fire clinging to the far wall. Most of those on the ground wore formal servant’s clothing, though Nails thought he could see the smooth scalp and dark robes of Mr. Knight. Nails could also see the two dark spots of Hawk and Marc jogging across the hills back toward the vehicles. He hurried back down to the others on the rooftop.

“I think they’re distracted,” he said.

“All right, in we go!” exclaimed Will.

“Right on! Action hero moment!” Jake chuckled and hopped over the skylight. It shattered under his weight, falling with him into the hall below in the form of thousands of tumbling glass fragments that glanced off of his armor and fanned across the carpet like shards of diamond. Jake landed in a standing position and the floor trembled under his weight. Will dropped into the hall beside him and Nails drifted down with Cynthia clinging to his side.

“How was *that*?” laughed Jake.

“Awesome!” Nails replied. “That would have looked incredible in slow motion!”

Jake’s brow furrowed under his face shield. “You think so? I was thinking more normal speed, you know, guns blazing, mowing down a dozen bad guys without ever taking a single hit.”

“Why would you not want to take any hits? Isn’t that what the armor is for?” Nails asked.

“Well, you know, it just looks cooler that way.”

“*Ahem!*” said Will.

“Oh, right. Home invasion for fun and profit,” Jake said, exchanging glances with Nails.

Will led the others at a dead run through the halls. The entire floor appeared deserted and finding the vault door again was easy.

“Ok, do your thing, Cynthia,” Will said.

“Sure, no problem.” Cynthia touched the safe door and opened her mind. Her hope was to quickly gain an impression of the password to open the door, but that hope died when she learned that the only password involved in the door’s operation activated an I.D. panel that identified the user’s handprint, as well as scanning...a character sheet?

Far from being defeated, Cynthia switched back to her original plan, that of telekinetically coaxing the mechanisms of the door to open. This was easier said than done, however, as the interlocking parts were complex, forcing Cynthia to mentally feel her way around the door in an effort to make it work, like solving a clever puzzle by touch. With no choice but to focus harder and keep trying, Cynthia tried not to look too much like she was having as difficult a time as she really was, while the others gave her increasingly anxious looks every few moments.

Mr. Knight looked extremely cross as he walked to the far side of the servant’s quarters. His staff continued to run around completely ineffectually. The archmage looked at the blaze that was quickly destroying his staff’s home with the sort of mild annoyance most people would give an unexpectedly high

phone bill. Muttering angrily to himself, Mr. Knight cast a specific spell repeatedly: an area-affect magic that snuffed flame with the efficiency of large quantities of chemical foam. Seconds later he stood staring at the blackened, partially gutted servants' quarters, still muttering to himself. The sand-throwing servant was still hard at work despite the fact that there was no longer any fire.

A sudden steady beeping emanated from Mr. Knight's robes. He reached into a hidden pocket and withdrew an ornate silver disk the size of his own hand, with surfaces decorated with graceful carvings and symbols. It ceased beeping and a long strip of paper began to slide out of a slot on the disk's edge accompanied by a sound suspiciously like a printer working. Mr. Knight tore the completed strip free and held it up. It read:

Your home has been invaded.
Again.
Reminder: buy butter

"Ok, now I'm pissed," Mr. Knight grumbled as he put the disk away, then sharply snapped his fingers. The very instant he did so every last one of his servants stopped whatever maniacal thing they were doing, grouped together and marched into the mansion in single file. Mr. Knight watched them go, then looked up at the windows of his home's third story. Muttering to himself again, he quickly cast another spell.

"Whoa, what the hell?" Jake suddenly exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" asked Will, holding his pistols at the ready.

"I just lost power!" Jake spat in frustration. "I can barely move!" He sank to one knee as he struggled under the weight of the suit and its weapons pack.

"Did your battery die?" Nails asked helplessly.

"I don't know," grunted Jake, "nothing like this has ever happened."

"That's not good. We may need to get out of here," Will said. "George? Any thoughts?"

There was no reply from the Jakecams™. Will checked his tiny camera and found that it appeared to be completely dead. "What the hell?"

"Um...would this be a bad time to mention that the power just went out in the door?" Cynthia asked meekly.

"Yeah, that's definitely bad. Don't mention that," grumbled Nails.

Back at George Manor, George, Sullivan, and G.R. were nearing franticness in their worry. They had been quietly observing the second effort to open Mr. Knight's vault when the signals from Nails, Jake, Cynthia and Will's cameras had simply stopped. Despite George and Sullivan's desperate efforts, they had been unable to restore the signal.

"Crow? Hawk? Marc? Can you hear me?" George barked as he continued to work at his computer console.

"*Loud and clear, chief. What's up?*" Hawk's voice came through.

"We've lost the other team's camera feeds," Sullivan explained.

"*Oh, crap! We've gotta go help them!*" Marc blurted over the sound of a shotgun being cocked.

"No! Stay where you are!" George ordered. "I'm going to head to you."

"*What? That'll take almost an hour!*" Hawk protested. "*They might need help right now!*"

"We've seen some of what Mr. Knight is capable of," George explained. "If the worst has happened, the three of you charging in will not help. If the others are all right, placing yourselves in the middle of whatever is happening may only make things worse."

"*But--*"

"No buts! I'm not taking any chances. Stay where you are, I'll be there soon."

Hawk and Marc made a series of crude sounds that appeared to be both an acknowledgement of George's instructions and a veiled questioning of his parentage. Ignoring the less savory elements, George

turned to Sullivan.

“I want you to go to the Office. Check the feeds, make sure this isn’t just a terrible fluke. G.R.?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re with Sullivan. You’re a second set of hands, understand? Do anything you can to help her.”

“Ok, got it.”

“Maybe I can keep this madness from going any further,” George said absently. “Maybe...maybe I can still save them.”

He hurried out of the Situation Room without another word. G.R. shrugged, then followed Sullivan on her way to her own work.

In a familiar enormous warehouse in the downtown of the city, the side door with the new lock opened and Atla strolled into the dim interiors, the hood of his silver robe pert as he carried his head high.

“Ta da!” he announced to the abyssal darkness toward the rear of the warehouse as though he had just performed a particularly impressive card trick for a small child. “What do you think of *that*? George’s troops are well on their way to helping me score a major victory against you, we may forge a working relationship out of it, and it’s *all* within the rules!”

Only silence answered him. After a few seconds, Atla held up a hand and his tightly-wound scroll appeared there. Casually he unrolled it, and it unfurled out longer than most men were tall. Atla held it before himself as if to read it to some imaginary masses. “Yes, quite masterful, if I do say so myself. I guess you weren’t as clever in writing out all these rules as you thought you were.”

Again there was only stillness in reply. After several seconds Atla began to idly kick at some of the rubble littering the floor.

“Oh, come on now,” he finally said, letting the weathered parchment dangle at his side from one hand. “You’re about to suffer your worst setback in a *very* long time. Don’t you have anything to say?”

A low, rhythmic rumbling sounded in the darkness, which Atla took at first for a growl. The sound was eerily much more content than that, if not more pleasant to listen to. The dragon was chuckling. Then, before Atla could say anything, Terek Domar opened his eyes frighteningly close to the startled mage. He continued laughing, a sound like a landslide in the mountains.

“What’s so funny?” Atla demanded. Inwardly he had to admit that the words did not come out sounding as brave as he had hoped.

Terek Domar held one massive clawed hand up before Atla, almost threateningly close. Clasped between the tips of the claws of its thumb and forefinger was a scroll identical to Atla’s, looking comically tiny dangling from the enormous talons. The scroll was covered with miniscule text, grouped tightly and formally like the contract that it was.

“You’ve done very well for yourself,” Terek Domar laughed, “but now it is my turn.”

“What?” shouted Atla. “There’s no room for you to act here. The Truce--”

“Is very clear on this point,” Terek Domar cut him off. Before Atla’s astonished eyes tiny snippets of text began to glow the same red as the dragon’s eyes: sentences, sub-paragraphs, definitions of clauses and statements that referred to other statements. Atla grabbed the scroll in both hands as it dangled in front of him and read the illuminated sections in disbelief as the dragon continued:

“You were free to act as you did under your own clauses. But should you acquire the artifacts you seek, my empire will be threatened, and a threat to myself,” the dragon growled so low that the smaller bits of rubble on the floor trembled, “lets me act.”

“But that’s--I was quite certain--” Atla stammered helplessly as the complicated loophole laid out before him spoke the truth of the great creature’s words.

“Tell you what,” Terek Domar snarled and let go of the scroll. The top drifted down to drape itself over Atla, who was too busy reading to notice. “You figure it out on your own and we will discuss it when I return.”

The implication of those words shook Atla from his reverie. He turned and ran as fast as he could toward the door.

Terek Domar began to laugh again, a sound that started as a low rumbling but quickly rose to become a deafening crash of thunder. Spreading its gigantic wings wide, the dragon gave a final triumphant roar and began to gallop through the warehouse toward the front door. The entire building trembled with each step the monster took. In only a few bounds it had covered the length of the structure. Terek Domar lowered his head just before he reached the massive cargo doors at the front of the warehouse and butted them open. They swung outward with a crash that shook the walls. The great beast hurled into the empty street and with a single leap was clear of the ground, flying above the neighboring warehouses. In defiance of physics the monster gained speed and altitude with each beat of its colossal wings and with another deafening roar it banked toward the southwest and Mr. Knight's mansion.

Atla leaned against the wall beside the small door he used, struggling to catch his breath. His hands were shaking as he searched through his robes, but he finally managed to find a medallion that was identical to the one he had given to Will. He tried to ignore the pounding of his heart as he grasped the medallion and concentrated.

"Still nothing?" Nails asked. He had a panel open on Jake's weapon pack and was following Jake's desperate instructions for making adjustments in hope of restoring power. It had been less than a minute since all the power in the hallway had mysteriously ceased to work, though it was unlikely that any of the team members would have believed that if it were told to them.

"Cynthia?" Will asked frantically.

"I'm *working* on it!" She was leaning with both hands against the door, pouring her concentration into it. With power gone, the locking mechanisms were now completely sluggish, making the already daunting task of trying to telekinetically coax the locks to open without being able to see them that much more difficult.

Will gave an exasperated sigh. "Work faster! We have no idea how long it will take to--"

"Flee! You must flee!" Atla's apparition shouted as it suddenly sprang into being next to Will, who yelped in surprise and jumped back. Unlike before, the image was opaque and shimmered wildly, and Atla's voice was muted and distorted. The whole effect was similar to the image on a TV that had very poor reception.

"What?" exclaimed Jake. "We can't leave yet, we haven't even--"

The image spoke overtop Jake's words: "You're in terrible danger! Secure--" His voice faded so the team missed the next thing he said. The sound came back with, "--is headed for you right now! Take what you have and go!"

There was a sharp popping sound and the image winked out. Standing in its place, looking mildly annoyed, was Mr. Knight.

"Don't you *hate* those damn telemarketers?" he said casually. "It was bad enough when they'd call during supper, but now they project themselves right into your home!"

"I've got him! Help Jake!" Nails shouted to Will, who was quickly backpedaling to get away from the Madness Mage. Mr. Knight had his jeweled metal tube drawn with practiced speed and slashed Nails across the chest with his newly-activated two-handed sword as the angel blindly charged him.

"That's not the proper way to ask directions," Mr. Knight said reproachfully.

Nails looked down at the mark the strange weapon had made across his chest. It was little more than a cut that ran diagonally from his shoulder to his hip. He saw the follow-up chop coming, and gracefully stepped out of the way, then ducked a swing aimed at his neck.

"Sorry, one freebie is all you get," he taunted. "Say goodnight, freak."

He threw a punch that would lay a man twice Mr. Knight's size out cold. His fist stopped dead in empty air a foot from the mage's face.

"Goodnight, freak," Mr. Knight said as he pointed the palm of one hand at Nails. There was a flash of white light and Nails hurled backward a good twenty feet down the hall.

"Now, about those directions," said Mr. Knight menacingly as the blade of his weapon became a hatefully spiked flail. Will had been trying to help Jake stand, but he quickly drew his pistols and began firing a barrage at the wizard. Round after round ricocheted off of Mr. Knight's force field. The barrier

flickered into sporadic visibility as each bullet struck it, but it held firm until the clicking of Will's empty pistols sounded in the hall.

"Are you quite finished?" said Mr. Knight petulantly.

"I am real!" Nails yelled as he hurled down the hallway at breakneck speed to slam shoulder-first into Mr. Knight's shield. The magical barrier shook in wild bright ripples, but held, and Nails was forced to duck a swing from the mace. Before Mr. Knight could attack him again, Nails hammered his fists down onto the floor at the base of the field as hard as he could. The floorboards under the carpet cracked and buckled violently as they gave way, causing Mr. Knight to lose his footing as the top layer of the floor disintegrated beneath him. As his weight settled through the crumbling boards onto the lower layer of the floor--also known as the second floor ceiling--it collapsed under him as well, causing him to plummet into the room below with a cry that sounded strangely like "Sauerkraut!"

"Running time!" Jake huffed. Nails ran to him, threw one of Jake's arms over his shoulders and half-dragged, half-helped him run after the others back to the skylight. Will jumped up and pulled himself up through the opening, then Nails followed with Jake and Cynthia. The sun was half-hidden behind the horizon and the sky above was steadily changing progressively deeper shades of blue.

"Take them first!" Will ordered as they ran to the edge of the roof. Nails dropped Jake and Cynthia off on the ground as quickly as possible, then returned for Will.

"I am real?" Jake mocked as the angel set down on the ground with the team leader.

"What? I was trying out a new battle cry!" Nails snapped as the four ran for the hills--or, more accurately, as Cynthia and Will ran while Nails flew with the still quasi-paralyzed Jake draped across his shoulders.

"Yeah, I'd keep trying," snickered Jake.

"Oh, fine, 'Mr. Action Hero!'" retorted Nails. "Think the bad guys will still miss you while you're lying in a heap on the ground?"

"*Would you two cram it?!*" Will screamed as they crested the first hillock on the way back to the vehicles. The four of them could see Hawk, Crow and Marc waiting for them atop another hill a stone's throw away.

"What happened?" Crow asked desperately as the two groups ran to meet each other in the shallow valley between the hills.

"The power went out across the whole floor," Jake explained, still laying across Nails' shoulders. "Then the wizard came after us again. We barely got away. We never even got into the safe."

"Hey," said Marc absently, "do you guys hear thunder?"

Within Mr. Knight's mansion, activity had risen from the typical tomb-like silence to a frenzy of organized chaos. The household staff rushed about the rooms of the manor seemingly at random, but an observer, had there been one, might have noticed that the population was gradually preparing for war. Aprons and feather dusters were traded for flak jackets and stilettos; tuxedos were covered by a layer of riot gear and supplemented with a variety of firearms and a smattering of melee weapons. A truly random assortment of weapons appeared in the staff's hands as the moments raced by.

None of this mattered to the one servant who was not participating in the frenetic activity: the butler. As he had been when Jake had seen him earlier that day--and indeed, as he had been doing nearly every waking moment for a very long time--he wandered the grounds with his clipboard, measuring objects at random, writing down what he found and always fretting over the result.

Right about the time the two groups of Lonely Winds were meeting on the dunes a short jog away, the butler had once again wandered into the front courtyard. He was shaking his head over the measurement of a withered blade of grass when a distant sound, a long deep rumble like thunder, resonated through the heavens.

The butler froze where he stood and listened. For several long moments, the only sound was the soft whisper of the wind. Then, just as the butler relaxed, it came again. It was much closer this time; not thunder, but a roar much like it, the voice of something huge, ancient, and very, *very* angry.

The little man dropped his clipboard and tape measure and ran to the bell that hung in the center of

the courtyard. As he grasped the worn rope that hung from the bell, he repeatedly muttered under his breath the only fragment of an ancient warning that remained lodged in his addled brain:

“His name is Terek Domar...‘The Thunder that Stalks the Plains’...he is near when there is thunder, but the sky above is clear...”

With a surprising strength born of primal terror, the butler began to ring the bell. It pealed with a deep, clear tone that warned of danger as it echoed in the desert twilight.

“What the hell was that?” Hawk exclaimed. He could barely hear himself over the ringing in his ears left by the deafening sound seconds before.

“Yeah...and is someone ringing a bell?” asked Jake.

“Who cares?” growled Marc. “Let’s just get the hell out of here!”

“No! We need to make sure it’s not a signal to come after us. Everyone together. Quickly!” Will said.

They followed close behind him as he sauntered back up the hill facing Mr. Knight’s mansion. Everyone laid down at the crest of the hill so they could just make out what was going on and watched quietly. The butler was still ringing the bell in the courtyard as though his life depended on it. He appeared to be staring up at the late evening sky.

“What’s he doing? Signaling UFOs?” Marc said sarcastically.

Cynthia gasped. A horrible feeling had just washed over her like a flash flood, a sense of something with incredible power coming, a raging star plummeting from the sky above. It was almost horrific in its sheer volume alone, for no mystical power Cynthia had ever witnessed--not in George, the Crown of Thorns, the members of the Order of the Moonless Night, not even Atla--none of them even *approached* the magnitude of what was now descending on them.

Crow had heard Cynthia’s gasp and turned to her. “Cyn? Are you--”

Another roar shook the air, so loud that the team covered their ears and screamed. The sound rolled across the dunes and was still echoing on the horizon as Terek Domar dove out of the sky above and landed in all his terrible majesty just beyond the courtyard. The impact made the earth tremble and caused many of the first and second story windows of the mansion to shatter in a rain of glass fragments. Terek Domar reared back on his hind legs and spread his wings, towering over the mansion and casting a shadow that covered nearly the entire grounds. The dragon’s baleful gaze bathed the area in blood-red light as it scrutinized the mansion.

All the while the butler continued single-mindedly ringing the bell as he stared upward at the mythic terror looming above him. For a single moment their eyes locked, then the dragon leaned forward and lowered its head almost to ground level in one fluid motion. The Lonely Winds watched in horror as the creature breathed forth an enormous torrent of flame that engulfed both butler and bell. The bell was blown free of the stand and tumbled backward in the river of fire until it crashed through the front doors with a final solemn toll.

Terek Domar reared up again and let out a roar that seemed to make the stars tremble. The grass of the courtyard and much of the front wall were now burning. The firelight mixed with the otherworldly light of the dragon’s eyes to create eerie shadows dancing over the ground and walls.

“What the hell is--?” Marc whispered, but Will silenced him with an upheld hand.

Terek Domar settled onto all fours and took one earth-shaking step forward, so that the flames of the courtyard grass lashed at its great clawed feet. The creature made as if to lunge toward the building, but it was interrupted by a new sight: the remainder of the household staff, marching in tight formation around the right wing of the house, brandishing their hodgepodge weaponry. The dragon watched them impassively as they lined up in front of the right wing in ranks like the firing squads of old. One of the men in the front row, a cook as thin as a promise with sandy blond hair, shouted an unintelligible command. The staff attacked in unison, firing modern and antique weapons alike and throwing knives, tools, and even a fireplace poker. A sparse few of the many projectiles made tiny, sting-like wounds in Terek Domar’s side, but most of them bounced off harmlessly or ricocheted away from the dragon’s massive, glistening black scales. A low growl sounded in the monster’s throat as it began, very

deliberately, to turn away from the tiny people arrayed before it. The team silently wondered why it was turning its back to its attackers, then realized to their horror that its colossal tail was swinging along the ground toward the staff as they prepared for a second attack. Only a handful of them had the presence of mind to run for cover or dive out of the way. The rest were struck by that enormous ridged tail as it swung inexorably as a tidal wave, carried along and crushed as it slammed into the right wing and plowed halfway through it. The forward half of the wing collapsed as Terek Domar pulled his tail smoothly free of the wreckage. The surviving staff members were running in all directions, blindly fleeing the monster that continued to shake the ground with every step it took.

“Run!” Will whispered. The team turned and scrambled away, painfully aware of how visible they were, clad completely in black on the dun sands. Spurred by her curious nature, Cynthia lingered behind the others to see what happened next, and a single, terrified thought ran through her mind.

Oh, no. It sees us...

The dragon watched the fleeing team members, then tilted its head ever so slightly to look down at Cynthia where she stood staring back up at him.

“Turn, hell beast!” Mr. Knight shouted as he appeared in a puff of smoke on the ground beyond the left wing of his house, facing the dragon. Terek Domar turned his gaze from Cynthia to the Master of Madness, who raised his hands and fixed his eyes forward in an expression of utmost concentration.

“Begone!” he cried and unleashed a wave of force, long, dark trails like streamers of midnight that rushed forward with a sound like the wailing of the damned, only to scatter harmlessly against the scales of the dragon’s breastbone. Terek Domar answered by breathing forth another huge gout of flame. Cynthia thought she saw Mr. Knight vanish in another cloud of black smoke at the very last instant before the fire washed over the ground where he had stood, burning the sparse scrub to ash and fusing the sand into a layer of glass.

Terek Domar shifted in place, turning back toward the mansion. Cynthia breathed an involuntary sigh of relief to see that he had apparently forgotten her. The dragon trod the fire still burning in the courtyard and raised to his full height again, towering above the mansion as it burned.

Mr. Knight appeared again on the roof of his house. Terek Domar growled at him, but the growl stopped short as another Mr. Knight popped into being next to the first one. They were joined by a third, then a fourth and fifth, then an increasingly rapid progression of Mr. Knights appearing in puffs of black smoke until a small army of identical short, bald, black-robed mages covered the rooftop, glaring up at the dragon.

“Leash laws are in effect!” they yelled together with an almost humorous stereo quality. Then they raised their right hands in unison and a thread of golden light sprang from each of them, streaming outward to meet at a single point just before the dragon’s neck and merge into a thick golden band that wrapped around its throat like a collar. The many Mr. Knights grabbed each of their lines like lassos and hauled on them as if to lead a stubborn beast of burden. The golden band pulsed with a brilliant light as it shifted to conform to the dragon’s throat while the creature thrashed about, roaring in pain. For just that moment, Mr. Knight and his many clones seemed to have done the impossible, holding the dragon in their eldritch thrall. Then Terek Domar’s eyes flashed with a pulse of light that lit up the darkening sky like red lightning. The golden band burst, spraying apart in a million tiny motes of golden energy and sending a shockwave of power back down each of the lines of light. Every last one of the magical clones burst into puffs of smoke as the shockwave reached them, leaving Mr. Knight alone as the same power hurled him off of his feet and onto his back. A huge shadow fell over him and he looked up to see one of the dragon’s claws plummeting toward him. Once again, the Master of Madness escaped death at the last instant by teleporting away. Terek Domar’s clawed hand crashed through the mansion’s roof, smashing through two floors with frightening ease. He roared again and this time there was an undeniable tone of triumph in his voice.

A mechanical rumble to the right of the mansion drew Cynthia’s attention away from the scene of devastation before her. Terek Domar looked too and they both saw the strange sight of a very old-fashioned limousine, lined with the long side-mounted exhaust pipes of a drag racer, smash through the bay doors of the garage and hurl away down the road toward the highway. Cynthia caught a glimpse

of the strange lettering on the oversized license plates--“Gonev5”--and then the vehicle was lost in the cloud of dust it kicked up as it fled toward the city.

With a satisfied huff Terek Domar turned back to the burning mansion. He began to tear away the front wall as though it were tissue paper, ripping apart plaster, wood, glass and steel and letting it tumble into a growing pile of burning rubble. In seconds the brute had torn away enough of the house to reveal the door to the vault. Terek Domar raised one hand, drove his claws into the wall around the door and ripped it free with an ear-splitting squeal of tearing metal, then flung it over his shoulder like so much trash. It hurled through the air, toppling end over end like a gigantic coin until it crashed into a hilltop hundreds of feet away and lodged there upright like a bizarre tombstone.

If Terek Domar noticed that the Lonely Winds had started and turned at the sound of the vault door landing or knew that Cynthia was still standing on the hill behind him too terrified to run, he didn't seem to care. He drew a breath like the rush of hot wind above a wildfire, then breathed forth a blast of fire directly into the vault. Mr. Knight's entire collection of mystic artifacts, relics and weapons, objects of vast power, some of them older than any of Rond's existing civilizations--as well as Mr. Knight's collection of over eight hundred and fifty videos--burned and melted and evaporated and shattered as dragon fire washed over them. The flames blew back out of the vault and raced down every open pathway on the third floor, blowing out what windows remained intact in many great blossoming clouds of fire and hot glass.

Cynthia finally turned and ran, hurrying across the sands, followed by bellowing laughter like thunder.

Chapter IV Cause and Consequence

Will, Jake, Marc, Nails, Hawk and Crow reached their vehicles at a dead run moments later. The dreadful laughter had finally stopped only seconds before. The last echoes of that terrible sound could still be heard rumbling on the horizon. The team members staggered into the improvised parking area wide-eyed, trembling and gasping for breath.

“What the hell--what *was* that?” Hawk exclaimed through breaths that were short and sharp from fear far more than exertion. “Is *that* what Nails saw *watching* us?”

Crow looked haunted. “We can’t help Atla. We can’t *possibly* fight something like that...”

“Look, it doesn’t matter,” said Jake urgently. “Let’s just get back to the Mansion before--”

“Wait! Where’s Cynthia?” Will said suddenly. Everyone looked around, but the sassy redhead was nowhere to be seen. Will frantically began to run back up the hillock the team had just come down.

“You don’t think the dragon got--” Marc began. Jake cut him off with a savage look.

Will turned and came back down the low hill as soon as he reached its apex. “She’s coming. She’s just lagging behind.” He sounded very relieved.

As though taking a queue, the image of Atla appeared in the team’s midst. “At last! There you are! Are you all safe?”

“I think so,” Will said, trying not to sound as aggravated as he felt. “We got your warning just in time.”

“Good, good! Where are my items?” Atla sounded almost ecstatic.

“We didn’t get your damned items!” Jake half-shouted. Nails had propped the still-paralyzed tinker against his own car and they were desperately trying to get the uncooperative armor off.

“What?!” demanded Atla. “You didn’t get *anything*?!”

Jake was almost snarling as he spoke. “No, we didn’t get any of your shopping list, and we don’t have time to sit around here and discuss it! Now back off so we can get the hell out of here!”

He helped Nails toss the haphazardly disassembled pieces of his armor into the trunk of his car, then jumped into the driver’s seat and roared away. Nails ran to Marc’s truck and they sped away just behind Hawk and Crow, leaving Will and Atla alone for the few seconds it took Cynthia to catch up. Once she did, she gave Atla a quick disparaging look, then rode away with Will, leaving Atla wordlessly behind. As Will’s car sped down the sandy road toward the highway Atla’s image slowly faded away. Mr. Knight’s once-fine home continued to burn and somewhere high in the night sky, a peal of thunder that was not truly thunder shook the heavens.

Once Will reached the highway, he raced far enough to keep the taillights of Hawk’s truck in sight, then slowed to a healthy cruising speed. As he drove he held tightly to the steering wheel to keep his hands from trembling.

“I’m sorry I keep running off.” Cynthia’s sudden remark caught Will completely off-guard.

“What?” he asked.

“When I keep going off on my own,” Cynthia replied. “I know that worries you, so I want you to know that I won’t do it ever again. And,” she took a deep breath, “and I won’t bother you anymore.”

Will took a deep breath of his own before replying. “What brought this on?”

“Nothing,” Cynthia lied. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him that she knew what he had gone through in the high school, or that she now understood his animosity toward George, but seeing the dragon and the horrific destruction it had wrought and knowing that the creature had some interest in the team had her thinking inescapably of her own mortality.

“I want you to know that I promise to be more helpful from now on. Just do me one favor?”

“What’s that?”

“If anything ever happens to me, try to remember me fondly, ok?”

An aching silence gripped the interior of the car. Nothing more was said.

George was just beyond the halfway mark between the Mansion and Mr. Knight's manor when he saw blue-tinted headlights, like those on Jake's sport car, followed at some distance by faded yellowish lights: Marc's truck. He signaled by flashing his luxury sedan's lights three times and was very relieved when Jake reciprocated. Slowing gradually to a stop, he lowered his window and waited until Jake came to a standstill next to him on the deserted highway.

"What happened?" he asked urgently.

"I haven't the words!" Jake nearly snapped at him. "See you back at the Mansion!"

He rolled his window back up and roared away, leaving George sitting forlornly on the highway. He waited patiently for the others to pass by, then turned around and followed Will's car at a distance.

Presently he opened his glove compartment and took out a Smileyphone™. He hit the speed dial for the Mansion and waited.

"*You have reached George Manor,*" Sullivan answered quickly. "*If you would like to declare war, press one. If you have embarrassing photographs you would like to blackmail the proprietor with, press two. If you--*"

"Not now, Sullivan!" George snapped. "What's your status?"

"*G.R. and I are still checking hardware. We got the team's signal back a few minutes ago, but by then they were already in route.*"

"Excellent. Don't worry about the signals for now. I'm following the team back. I want you to be ready with medical supplies, just in case."

"Understood."

George hung up and dropped the Smileyphone™ on the passenger seat. As he followed the others on the return trip to his home, he occasionally glanced in his rear-view mirrors, though there was no sign of anyone or anything behind them.

Medical supplies proved unnecessary, so the team members gathered in the Situation Room and waited for George. When he arrived he walked wordlessly to his seat at the head.

"I won't say, 'I told you so,'" he said flatly.

"Stuff it, baldy!" Hawk said. "We are *seriously* not in the mood!"

George raised his eyebrows. "What happened?"

"It was like a nightmare," Cynthia drawled absently. "We ran out of the house because Atla warned us about something. I could...I could *feel* it coming. Then it dove out of the sky and it...it killed all those people..."

"You saw the dragon? It attacked Mr. Knight?" asked George.

"It attacked his *house*," Cynthia said.

"Is it going to come after us? Is that why it was watching us in the alley before?" Crow asked.

As expression of dawning realization fell across Jake's face. "That's what the armor is for!"

"What's that?" said Will.

"I found out a couple of weeks ago, when they were putting the new doors in." Jake looked at George, who nodded somberly, then continued.

"The walls here are armor-plated. This house is a *fortress*. I never understood why until now."

George smiled. "One of my many secrets, Jake. Despite its outward appearance, the Mansion is quite secure. We will all be safe here."

"That's easy for you to say, George," mumbled Hawk. "You didn't see this thing. How do you know it won't come here next and tear the roof off the place?"

"I grew up listening to children's songs that warned about Terek Domar, Hawk. I am well aware of what the creature is capable of," George said grimly.

"That's all well and good while we're here, but what happens the next time we go out in the field?" said Jake.

"The dragon has no *interest* in you!" Atla blurted as his image suddenly appeared in the team's midst. In spite of himself Jake smiled at the surreal sight of the robed and hooded mage's illusory self standing in the middle of the table, visible only from the waist up. "Terek Domar's only motive was in

keeping me from obtaining the items on that list. *You* were never a target.”

Hawk scoffed. “Oh, really? Before, you kept using the threat of the dragon to get us to do your dirty work. Now, suddenly, we don’t have to worry about it!”

Judging by the way Atla’s hood shifted from side to side, he was shaking his head. “Let’s go over this again, shall we?”

“The dragon Terek Domar and I are locked in a very shaky stalemate. The creature is one of the mightiest forces this world has ever seen, but he doesn’t care about hunting you down. He wants to be rid of *me*, understand? I’m the only thing keeping him from imposing his will on this entire country. Terek Domar attacked Knight’s home because the artifacts I needed would have helped alter the balance of power.”

“It would seem that you underestimated your enemy,” George said coldly.

Atla turned, very deliberately, to face George. “Yes, it seems I have. At any rate, I will not underestimate him again. Your next assignment will be much easier and clearer.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Our ‘next assignment’?!” said Hawk. “There is no *way* you think you’re gonna pull this stunt with us again!”

“Perhaps I still haven’t impressed upon you the importance of--” Atla began.

“Blah, blah, blah,” Will cut him off with uncharacteristic forthrightness. “You know what you impressed on me? The fact that you’re willing to manipulate us to get what you want and send us into an incredibly dangerous situation without even explaining why. Oh, by the way, I also notice you have yet to make good on your part of the bargain. I mean, sure, we didn’t get what you wanted, but we *did* almost die.”

There was an agonizing silence as Atla stood facing Will. Cynthia realized that for the first time in quite a while she desperately wanted to compare that someone was thinking with what they had actually been saying. Finally, the robed mage held out a palm and another scroll appeared there, real and solid. It fell ignominiously to the tabletop when Atla quickly withdrew his hand.

“Do a little reading and see if you feel differently,” Atla said coolly.

“Don’t call us. We’ll call you,” Will said and tossed the medallion onto the table as Atla’s image faded.

“That was a slap and a tickle,” muttered Marc.

“Indeed,” George affirmed. “I, myself, am only relieved that nothing too ill befell any of you on this fool’s errand.”

“I can’t go again,” Crow blurted. Every eye in the room turned to her. “I’m sorry, it’s just...I can’t. I can’t do this again.”

“Honey, I don’t think this is--” Hawk began.

“He made me watch you die!” Crow almost shrieked. “That bastard got inside my head, and he made me watch you put a gun...” She broke down again into wracking sobs. Everyone was at a loss for what to say.

“I can’t do this anymore, George,” Crow said through her tears. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to let you guys down, but I can’t...I can’t face that again. I can’t. I can’t.”

“It’s all right, Angela,” George said gently. “You know that you may come and go as you please with us. Do you wish to remain here during your sabbatical?”

Hawk and Crow looked at each other. “I don’t think so. We’ll move back into the apartment and call you in a few days,” said Hawk.

“Fine time for you two to go on vacation!” Marc snapped.

“Marc!” George shouted and half-rose out of his chair. Quickly, he closed his eyes, calmed himself, and sat back down. “There is no need for this discussion. Each of you is and has always been free to come and go as needed, as long as doing so did not jeopardize the security of this operation. So, if Joseph and Angela need to take some time to recover from their experiences today, no one here will say a single derogatory word to them at any time. *Understood?*”

With that, George settled back into his chair and took a deep breath. “Now comes the hard part. I need you all to tell me *exactly* what happened tonight.”

George, Sullivan, and G.R. listened somberly as the others recounted the events that had occurred after the four Jakecams™ and Jake's armor had failed. George was of the opinion that Mr. Knight had used some sort of spell designed to cripple technological devices. Crow agreed, though she'd never heard of a spell powerful enough to knock out every device in an entire hallway at once.

When Jake described Nails' tactic for removing Mr. Knight from the hallway fight, George praised the big fellow for the initiative and ingenuity he had shown, which had almost certainly saved lives.

Then came time to describe what had happened after Jake, Will, Nails and Cynthia had left Mr. Knight's mansion. It was Will, ever stalwart and brave, who found the words for what had transpired. With the horrified clarity of a disaster survivor, he described the arrival of Terek Domar and the devastation the dragon had wrought with such casual ease. Cynthia took over at the point where the others had run. She told of how the dragon had humbled Mr. Knight with a laughably small effort and how he had torn into the vault, destroying it and most of the house along with it. She did not, however, mention the brief, terrifying moment when Terek Domar had watched the team fleeing across the sand.

When Cynthia had finished, George leaned back in his chair, looking contemplative. He didn't seem to know what to say.

"Well, *this* should make for interesting reading," Jake remarked as he picked Atla's scroll up from the table.

"Great," Nails said. "You read whatever's there, then what? I mean, I don't want to wimp out here, but I don't relish the thought of setting foot outside this house now that I know what's out there."

"Do we really need to worry?" Jake said thoughtfully. "I've never heard of a dragon in the city."

"Yeah, uh, question for you," growled Marc, "when Nails was carrying you over his shoulders, did he hit your head a few times? We just *saw* the dragon, you idjit!"

"That's precisely my point," replied Jake calmly. "Think about it. The city is infested with monsters, yet they only ever turn up in the occasional urban legend. I think that something as noticeable as that dragon would be spoken of...unless it makes a hell of an effort to stay inconspicuous."

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

"Not much, just what I said. If the dragon wanted to hurt us, he's had at least two opportunities now, but the only thing he's done is counter his apparent enemy's move."

"I see your point," said Will pensively.

"I suggest everyone take a sabbatical, then, in light of recent events," George said. "We've had an extraordinary couple of weeks. The altercation with the *faux* Crown of Thorns, the as-yet unexplained recursion of the Order of the Moonless Night, and now the paradigm-shattering revelation of the presence of Atla and a dragon in Ylelon--all of these together, in my mind, constitute sufficient reason for us to take some time to gather our thoughts."

"Yeah, good plan. We'll cool our heels here while some fairy tale lizard stomps around outside," mumbled Marc.

"That's enough, Marc," said George firmly. "If I may. It's late. Today was the longest of many recent long days. Perhaps it would be beneficial if we all were to adjourn to the Kitchen and ask Sullivan to prepare something wholesome for us."

Though none of the others said a word, they seemed to agree that this was a good idea. Through the heavy silence that followed everyone made their way to the Kitchen. Everyone, that is, except for George, who stayed in his seat, looking pensively into empty space, and Jake, who watched George closely until the others were gone.

"There's just one thing I can't figure out," Jake finally said without preamble. "Of course, by that I mean there's a lot I still don't really understand, but only one thing that really matters to me."

"What's that, Jake?" George asked the inventor without looking at him.

"How you knew about Terek Domar," was the reply. "You've got ultra-tech in the Mansion, and you won't tell us where you got it. Ok, super. I feel kind of slighted by that, but I can live with it. You've all sorts of mysterious habits and business connections. Great, the better to fight a shadow war with. But

you *know* about Terek Domar.” Jake leaned forward in his chair and his eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the enigmatic old mentor. “You’ve known for a very long time, that much is clear. We may be safe here in the house that George built, but it might be nice to know why the folktale monster from wherever you are from just happens to be in Ylelon.”

“Jake, I--”

Jake raised a hand. “Please, George. We’re past all the cryptic explanations and evasive half-answers. I’m not attacking you, I’m just saying what’s on my mind. The others trust you, so I guess I should, too. I just hope that whatever it is you aren’t telling us doesn’t get us all killed.” With that, Jake solemnly rose from his seat and went to join the others.

George let out a sad sigh, stood, and wandered slowly from the room. Eric found him as he descended one set of Foyer stairs and came at a dead run to nuzzle the old monster hunter’s ankle. George smiled weakly and picked the energetic toy up as he walked.

“What am I going to do, Eric?” he asked as he held the duck at arm’s length. “Should I be happy the team is all right, or worried about retaliation?”

“Quack.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” George walked to the front door and out into the yard. An icy breeze, brought from over the ocean in the late hour, billowed through the sparse trees and tall savannah grass of the Mansion grounds. If the cold air bothered George, he showed no sign of it as he walked to stand next to a tree that was little more than a sapling. Though the night was cold, the sky above was clear and full of stars gleaming in all their celestial glory. George gazed at the heavens for a long while with Eric cradled in his arms.

“How long are you going to stand there, Cynthia?” he said at last. She had come looking for him as soon as she had finished eating and had been standing quietly behind him for the last several minutes, watching him watching the stars.

“Tell me why, George.”

“Why, what?”

“You know what!” Cynthia exclaimed and stamped a foot in frustration. “I was *there*, George. I was there in the school, and I saw what happened. Tonight I saw the dragon you’re so afraid of. I believe in you, George. I believe you’re a good man. But I’m terrified of what I’ve seen. Please, tell me what’s going on.”

George turned and walked to stand an arm’s length away from Cynthia. “I can’t,” he said sadly. “I don’t even know whether to wish I could.”

“All right,” Cynthia replied and shook her head. “Good night, George.”

George watched the precocious psychic make her way back inside. When she was gone, he went inside too and climbed the further flight of stairs from his Study. There, he set Eric on the floor, then ran to his Study doors, unlocked them and slipped inside before the frustrated Mechanicritter™ could catch up to him.

The Study was as always peaceful and quiet, but for the first time since he could remember George wished there were something in the room to distract him. He switched on an antique floor lamp before walking to his journal. The massive, ancient tome waited for him as it always had down through the many long years, but try though he might George could not think of what to say or where to begin.

Epilogue

In the darkest hour of the early morning, before any hint of the rising sun could be seen on the mountainous eastern horizon, Atla again walked through the warehouse district to the building he had fled out of earlier. The warehouse's front cargo doors were closed again, though they were noticeably dented and slightly twisted now.

Atla walked swiftly, lacking the relaxed grace he normally moved with, and hastily opened the new lock on the side door. He stormed inside, slamming the door behind himself.

Immediately he was greeted by an unsettling sight. Whereas normally Terek Domar waited for Atla in the shadows at the back of the warehouse, now the beast was curled up in a huge mound just inside the door. Slow, rhythmic breathing like the rumbling of a geyser sounded in the air in time to the steady rise and fall of the dragon's sides.

"I suppose you think you're very clever!" Atla nearly shouted.

Terek Domar unfurled and rolled onto his stomach like an enormous housecat lazily rousing from a nap. The dragon slowly twisted in place to look down at the mage, who was visibly shaking with anger, even through his heavy robes.

"This changes nothing, you understand?" raged Atla. "It's a setback, nothing more! I still have the upper hand in this conflict, and I *will* drive you out!"

Terek Domar blinked once and stayed quiet.

"What are you looking so smug about? Say something!" Atla demanded.

For a long moment, Atla, Terek Domar, and everything around them was as utterly still as a photograph. Then, with dreadful slowness, a deep rumbling sounded in the quiet air, beginning very low but steadily rising to deafening volume.

The dragon was laughing.

Atla was taken aback, but he held his ground in the face of the chilling sight of Terek Domar's teeth being bared as the great wyrm reveled in his victory, laughing like a volcano. The walls shook with the sound until at last Atla's courage broke. He fled out the door and into the cold night, away from the thunderous laughter that seemed to chase him as he ran through the lonely city alleys.

The Lonely Winds
Will Return