

Book VII
The Moonless Night

Prologue

“You’ll never catch me!” Kelly giggled as she dodged among the many trees of Korden Park, Ylelon’s only large free recreational area. Overhead, the two moons glowed in a backdrop of countless stars. Kelly heard her pursuer crashing clumsily through the underbrush behind her, breathing heavily from the chase as she ducked through an arch formed by two low-hanging branches and broke into a small clearing just off one of the many winding paths that ran through the park. Holding her breath to keep quiet, she crouched amongst some bushes and waited.

Before long Terry stumbled into the clearing from another direction, still breathing heavily. Kelly smiled to herself. If she couldn’t get him to go jogging with her, she’d just find other ways to make him get into shape.

She waited until he was very nearby before she grabbed him. He yelped and started in surprise as she threw her arms around him, but relaxed quickly when she kissed him passionately.

“Let’s go back to my place,” he whispered.

“What for?” she answered coyly, pulled free and ran again before he could answer. She heard him laughing as he gave chase. She dashed across the clearing and ducked through a row of trees into another open expanse. Taking a chance, Kelly looked over her shoulder for Terry and tripped. The air left her in a whoosh as she toppled forward and slammed into the grass.

“Kelly?” Terry called from somewhere nearby, “What happened? Are you ok?”

“I fell,” Kelly whimpered as she felt around in the dark for whatever had tripped her. Her hand came to rest on something rigid and covered in coarse fabric. Kelly rose to her knees and turned around, wondering if she had tripped on a pile of junk left behind from a picnic and found herself staring directly into a face. It was a young woman with black hair, her skin drawn taught and drained of color, her mouth agape in a silent scream.

Kelly began to scream with her.

Chapter I Darkness Falls

“Brace the doors!” Captain Cor frantically ordered. Four guards threw themselves against the large double doors to secure them while the others grabbed barrels, chairs and anything else that they could use to secure the entryway.

Private Turg smiled bitterly to himself. Everyone else in the fort was probably already dead. The garrison of fifty-eight men and women on the border of nowhere had been doomed the moment he had arrived. Half of them had died in the first minute after he had descended on the fort from above like a falling star, burning and crushing everything in sight. Many others had perished when they desperately fled into nearby buildings, only to have the structures burn or be collapsed on top of them.

The thirteen survivors had fled here to the mess hall. Captain Cor had tried to rally a defense, but in the end it was all he could do to get these last few inside and bar the door. Now the survivors were desperately trying to add strength to the simple doors of this oversized shack.

Private Turg tried to fight the panic he felt rising within. It felt like years ago he had been sitting outside with countrymen who were now dead complaining of boredom when thunder had shaken the clear skies. In truth, it was less than two minutes ago.

As the frightened soldiers tossed everything they could lift into a barricade against the doors, something crashed against them from the outside, cracking the beam securing them and jarring the makeshift barrier. No, not something, Private Turg thought. He knew exactly what it was.

A second blow forced the doors inward at an obtuse angle, cracking the beam completely in two and causing the barricade to tumble into the room in an avalanche of wood. The sound came again, the roar like thunder, and Private Turg was not the least bit ashamed to flinch.

“Archers!” Captain Cor ordered. It was a laughable command. Only five of the soldiers present had bows. One of them was trembling so violently that when he nocked an arrow the shaft clattered loudly against his bow.

The final blow hurled the doors open, shoving the remainder of the barricade aside like so many dry leaves. In the open doorway loomed a horrific sight: a great reptilian face, crowned with majestic sweeping horns, adorned with fangs as large as men and eyes that cast blood-red light over the cowering soldiers. The creature’s mouth curled into a snarl and it growled, a sound like a rockslide that made the soldiers’ stomach linings tremble.

“Volley!” Captain Cor shouted and the five archers loosed their arrows. All five shafts found their mark: all five shattered or were turned aside harmlessly by the scales on the dragon’s face.

“Close the doors!” screamed Captain Cor, but it was too late. The dragon drew breath in a sudden rush of air and exhaled forth a titanic gout of flame. Private Turg found himself wondering if his wife had received the letter he sent home three weeks ago and then the flames were upon him.

George started awake and tumbled out of his antique armchair onto the carpet of his Study. Tears streamed down his face and his hands trembled as he clambered to his feet and ran to his liquor cabinet. He grabbed a bottle of brandy, uncorked and upended it, taking several long draughts without breathing. Then he set the bottle back on the shelf and leaned against the cabinet while he tried to catch his breath. He was still trying to compose himself when the antique phone on the end table next to his chair rang.

George took a deep breath, straightened and jogged to the phone. “This had better be good,” he said by way of answering.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, George, but the team is getting ready to leave,” Sullivan’s voice came through the receiver.

“All right, thank you, Sullivan,” George said and hung up. For a long moment he stood still, looking about his empty Study. Silence reigned among the many bookshelves and cabinets that lined the room. Everything was still and peaceful in the place, a perfect setting for quiet introspection.

George sighed and quickly left, locking the doors behind himself. His original plan had been to take a power nap so he would be rested and ready for this evening, but he hadn’t counted on having

nightmares. Now he couldn't even seem to stop his hands from trembling. Nightmares or not, he decided that he was going to pull himself together, through sheer willpower if necessary. After all, tonight was an occasion he had both dreaded and looked forward to, one he wouldn't miss for anything: Cynthia's first official sortie with the rest of the team.

It had been ten days since the team's encounter downtown with the animal called Harley and the agents of the Russell Foundation. In that time the Lonely Winds had continued to make nightly patrols, but aside from the odd vampire they had not had any noteworthy encounters. It was becoming difficult not to believe that the Winds were finally coming close to their goal of ridding Ylelon of supernatural evil. George had been relieved, though more than a little surprised, when the team members had asked few questions about the dragon Nails had seen. For the first two days after the incident Jake had spearheaded an effort to research dragons in the Library but there was little on the subject there beyond folklore. This didn't stop Jake from occasionally looking quizzically at one of the many art objects in the Library that were inspired by dragons, and from time to time while in the field one team member or the other would cast their gaze anxiously to the sky.

In the meantime George had directed the others to turn their attention to training. Cynthia had been making tremendous strides in George's training programs, learning marksmanship, hand-to-hand combat, first aid and team procedure. G.R. was learning quickly too, although he still tended to try the others' patience with his occasional caustic remarks and obnoxious behavior. True to form, Will and Hawk both insisted on patrolling after the Harley incident despite the injuries they were still recovering from. They justified their stubbornness by saying that the team would need them should they encounter any such powerful creature again. George relented against his better judgment, knowing the futility of arguing with the two strong-willed and dedicated warriors.

Thus, with Will's approval as field leader of the team, George had scheduled this Sunday evening for Cynthia's first field assignment. The cool weather and last part of the weekend would help ensure fewer people would be out and about in the city, allowing Cynthia to begin her field experience without having to worry about dealing with the crowds of other days.

George found everyone in the Situation Room, decked out in black jumpsuits and flak jackets. Hawk was armed with his assault rifle; Marc, his shotgun and knapsack of tools and ammo; Will, his pistols; Jake, his sub-machineguns and backpack. Crow and Cynthia both had pistols at their sides. Nails as always refused to carry a weapon of any kind. Sullivan was in the room too, standing quietly off to one side as was her custom.

"Attention!" Hawk barked as George entered the room and the team immediately stood up rigidly.

Uh-oh, George thought. *I just came in the room and they're already making fun of me.* "I'm glad to see you're all ready," he said soberly. "This is a great occasion for us, but also a serious one. No amount of training or study can substitute for experience. It will be Cynthia's responsibility to remember what she's learned, but it falls to the rest of you to guide and protect her as she joins you in the field."

For a heartbeat, everyone was quiet. It was Crow that broke the silence:

"Man! Do you *ever* get tired of giving us the same speech every time someone new joins the club?"

"Yeah, you could save a lot of time and effort by just playing a recording of yourself," added Jake.

"At least we haven't had to listen to it for a while," Marc huffed.

They're ridiculing my instructions and mocking my authority, thought George. *The only way things could be any worse is if--*

"Quack!"

George bowed his head as Eric charged into the room and began to nuzzle his legs.

"Ah, good, we're ready to begin," Jake chuckled above the laughter of the others.

"Jake, did I ever give you demerits for programming this thing?" George snapped. Eric quacked sharply and took a step away from George's leg.

"You hurt his feelings!" Crow admonished.

"Oh, not this again!" George moaned. "This little prank of Jake's is driving me up the wall!"

"Like you had far to go on that one," snickered Jake. The others laughed again.

"If you're all done undermining my authority, please gather in the Foyer for your final inspection." George's demeanor was unusually humorless, even as Eric began to nuzzle his leg again.

G.R. looked crestfallen. "This sucks. Why does everyone else get to go and I have to stay here?"

"Because you're a blimp with legs," growled Marc.

"I've lost a little weight," G.R. protested as he blushed a bright red. "I've been training for weeks, but I'm not getting into shape. Is there some great force at work keeping me from losing weight?"

Marc grinned. "Yeah, it's called gravity."

"That is quite enough, Marc!" snapped George. "Everyone to the Foyer, please."

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, George, but you may want to wait a moment," Sullivan remarked suddenly.

"Problem, Sullivan?" George asked.

"I just got off the phone with Detective King," Sullivan replied.

"How is Sammy doing?" snickered Marc.

"He's had better days," replied Sullivan flatly. "He's in Korden Park. A couple out for a jog literally stumbled onto a murder scene."

"What did the detective have to tell us?" Will asked.

"Very little. He's only just arrived. The attending coroner has stated, however, that the victim's body appears to have somehow been almost completely drained of blood."

"A vampire," G.R. whispered.

"Very good, genius! You want your expert consultant fee now?" growled Marc.

"Enough!" George blurted in a near-shout. "Everyone will assemble in the Foyer. *Right now.*"

George's unusually forceful command caught everyone else off-guard. Quietly they left the room and went downstairs, leaving George and Sullivan behind.

"Sullivan, I want you to call Detective King back and let him know that the team is on the way," George commanded, then left the room in a rush.

Not being one to take offence at rudeness, Sullivan wasn't the least bit upset by George's hasty departure. She was, however, programmed with a number of subroutines that analyzed the behavior and psychological profile of the inhabitants of the Mansion. George had clearly been preoccupied and upset even before hearing Detective King's news (more so than usual, anyway), so Sullivan filed that information away as she dialed her internal phone.

George found the others waiting in a neat row in the Foyer--all except G.R., who was standing off to one side scowling with his arms crossed. When George reached the team he began to walk back and forth in front of them.

"This is a most serious situation," he said. "Time is of the essence. As quickly as possible, you must reach Korden Park. Learn what you can from the crime scene and Detective King, but above all, keep a low profile."

"What's the big deal? It's just a vampire," G.R. scoffed.

"G.R.," George said, "it's always important to begin an investigation as quickly as possible while the trail is still fresh. In addition, this case merits special attention."

"Why is that?" asked Cynthia.

"Because the dumbass left the body in a damn park," Marc muttered.

George nodded. "Though callous, Marc's observation is correct. A vampire's survival depends on being able to choose victims discretely while leaving as little evidence as possible. Vampires that leave bodies to be found tend not to last very long."

"Particularly around here," Jake said. There were murmurs of agreement from Will, Hawk and Marc.

"So, you think this vampire is just stupid, or what?" Nails asked.

"Stupid, bold..." George thought aloud.

"Or frighteningly confident," finished Jake.

"Godspeed," George said, and the team started for the door.

“Hey, Cynthia!” G.R. called as Cynthia started across the Foyer and ran to stand beside her.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“I just wanted to say good luck. That and take care of yourself.” G.R. blushed slightly as he spoke.

“Uh, thanks,” said Cynthia.

“Ok, that’s...that’s all I wanted,” G.R. stammered, turned and walked awkwardly away. Cynthia shrugged to herself and ran to catch up with the others.

Korden Park was an oddity in Ylelon. It was very unlike the government of the tiny desert nation to provide luxuries to its citizens, but the park was an exception. The fifty-four acre expanse of artificially watered trees, grass and shrubs was located near the north-western-most edge of the city, with its southern and western sides only a few blocks from the bay and stretching well inland. There were booths and stands for recreational foods around the park’s entrances in the northeastern and southwestern corners, but the rest of the landscape was clean, well-tended greenery crisscrossed by simple cobblestone or blacktop footpaths. Most of the region was flat and level, like the surrounding desert, but there was the occasional artificial hill that added character to an otherwise featureless skyline.

Detective King sipped his coffee and sighed. He was standing just outside the barrier of sawhorses and police tape that encompassed most of the crime scene clearing. Several police cars and an ambulance had been driven across the paths and lawns of the park to the scene. Their flashing lights now cast a morbid display of red, yellow and blue light on the clearing while a chilly late October wind whistled through the trees.

King took another sip of coffee and glanced at the outline of tape marking where the victim’s body had been. King himself was a massive block of a man, barrel-chested and broad-shouldered even in his advancing years. He habitually wore formal clothing and a long beige trench coat and had a permanent scowl of disapproval etched on his face. Thirty-odd years before, an enthusiastic Sam King had joined the Ylelon City Police Force. Now much older and considerably wiser, Detective King had been hardened by over three decades of up-close exposure to the worst happenings in a country infamous worldwide for violent crime.

As he continued to take in the minute details of the scene a small stone pelted him in the chest. King suppressed a grunt of annoyance. This was Jake’s habitual method of getting someone’s attention while keeping a low profile. King looked in the direction the stone had come from and caught a glimpse of Jake peering back at him from the copse of trees where he was hiding.

The detective looked around at the other investigators. No one seemed to have noticed him, so he began to walk along the barrier toward Jake. He moved slowly and kept his eye on the bodyline to make it appear that he was trying to get a look at the crime scene from different angles. When he reached the tree Jake was hiding behind he held his coffee cup close to his face to hide his mouth.

“Fill me in,” he said.

“We’re all here,” Jake whispered from his cover. “Myself, Will, Marc, Hawk, Crow, Cynthia and a new recruit.”

“I’ll be! Joe and Angela are still running around with you ruffians?” chuckled King.

“Yeah. After all the weirdness lately they offered to stick with us for a while.”

“George let the skinny redhead come with you, huh? Who’s the new guy?”

“That’s a long story,” Jake mumbled. “Right now we have other things to worry about. Gimme details.”

King huffed. Usually *he* was the one to get right to business. “We got one victim. Female, thirty-two years old, name of Stacy Qarati. Lived on the south side. We’re trying to reach relatives now.”

“You learned all of that already? That’s some fine detective work, Detective!”

“Not really.” King sipped his coffee. “She still had her wallet and I.D. on her. Thing that did this did nothing at all to hide her identity. Very sloppy.”

Jake murmured in reply, but he wasn’t so sure. The victim’s surname was indicative of the Nydi, the sub-race that had resulted in prior centuries from the inter-marrying of Ylelon’s native Yd with foreign settlers, mostly white ones. The Nydi were a minority in Ylelon and suffered from a terrible

stereotype of being a licentious and violent people despite having both a rich cultural heritage and a legacy of beautiful music and art influenced by their ancestral races.

Jake frowned, mired in thought. It was possible that the vampire that had done this had either been completely careless or had the notion in its head that prejudice would stunt investigation into the death of a Nydi. That was a little hard to believe, however, which still left Jake worried about the mindset of a vampire brazen enough to leave the body of a victim complete with I.D. in a public place where it was certain to be found very quickly. Jake struggled to push that unpleasant thought out of his mind as he pressed for more information. "Anything else?"

King sipped his coffee again. "Yeah. Freak that did this left a card on the body. Layin' right on top of her. Freak."

"A card? You mean like a business card?"

"No, it was one of those over-sized ones. You know, the ones those flaky new age types use to tell fortunes."

Unseen by Detective King, Jake's eyes widened. "A tarot card?"

"Yeah, that's it," King said.

Jake took a deep breath to steady himself. "What did it look like?"

"What? I dunno, some princess in a dress on the ground at night. Weird thing is, the card had the moons on it, but somebody blacked them out with a marker."

"I have to go!" Jake called over his shoulder as he raced away through the trees.

"Wait! You don't even know about the--" King called as loudly as he dared, but the sounds of Jake rushing through the underbrush were already being lost in the whistling of the wind in the trees.

"Monster hunters today. No patience," King huffed as he finished off his coffee.

"What's the word?" Will asked as Jake tore out of the trees into the small clearing where the rest of the team waited.

"We've got trouble," said Jake. "George, have you been listening?"

"*Oh, definitely,*" George's voice drifted out of the Jakecam™ clipped to the shoulder of Jake's shirt. "*I wanted to have some idea of what Samuel will be complaining to me about later.*"

"This is serious, George. A 'The Moons' tarot card, with the actual moons blacked out?" chided Jake. "That doesn't sound familiar to you?"

"*Now that you emphasize it with sarcasm and exasperation, Jake, it does sound vaguely familiar.*"

"It should," Jake replied flatly. "It means trouble, lots of it. I suggest we head back to the Mansion. We're going to want some heavy gear for what's coming."

"All right, everyone," Lord Geoffrey said, "let's take it from the top."

He tapped his baton against his podium and began to conduct with pronounced, fluid movements. He was tall and slender, with poise and regal bearing like that of nobility of old. He had sharp black eyebrows and piercing hazel eyes and was dressed in an antique tuxedo in immaculate condition.

In front of Lord Geoffrey and to his left, nine of his followers sat in a neat row in chairs against the back wall of the large, rectangular, insulated chamber the group occupied. Each of them held their instrument of choice, some common and widely known, some esoteric, like that of the player holding a clay flute shaped like a tropical fish. All of them played and sang in perfect harmony with Lord Geoffrey's conduction, a slow, very mournful dirge. As they played, Lord Geoffrey began his other work.

On the wall in front of the conductor and to his right, adjacent to the wall the players sat against was hung a massive canvas. Arranged in front of it on the floor were a plethora of jars of paint in a wide variety of hues. Next to each jar was a slender brush of the highest quality.

As the dirge began, Lord Geoffrey locked his eyes on the canvas. Many of the brushes rose into the air and dipped themselves into their partner jars, mostly greens and earth tones. Lord Geoffrey's brow creased as he reached an almost trance-like level of concentration. The brushes began to weave amongst each other, almost dancing in the air as they dabbed pigment on the canvas in time with the melody. Lord Geoffrey conducted, the musicians played, the brushes painted and the colors on the canvas took shape.

They became a map of a section of Korden Park, but it was also a landscape painting, done in dark hues to depict the region in moonlight, so perfectly detailed that as the song drew near its close the canvas more closely resembled an aerial photograph of the park than a painting.

Two men stood attentively several paces behind Lord Geoffrey, quietly watching the proceedings. They were identical twins, built like professional weight-lifters with strong, square jaws and closely-cropped brown hair. Both wore identical, very old-fashioned suits of the sort used by menservants of the very wealthy a century-and-a-half in the past. One of them held an enormous sledgehammer with the head resting on the ground, leaning on it like a short staff. His brother wore strange gauntlets with very thick blocks of metal lining the outsides of the fingers and back of the hand.

When the map and song were both nearly finished a door opened in the far wall at Lord Geoffrey's back. The twins' sharp hearing caught the sound of the door being opened and they turned and ran toward it. A servant wearing modern casual dress clothing came through and made as if to call out to Lord Geoffrey, but the twin with the gauntlets held a metal-clad hand up in front of his face to stop him. The servant gave the both of them a disparaging look and began to push between them.

The first twin quickly held up a hand and clenched it into a fist. His brother swung his hammer in a high one-handed arc and the massive head rang with an almost musical note as it struck the bizarre gauntlet barely an inch from the advancing servant's nose. He jerked backward with a horrified expression just as the music finished and the brushes settled back onto the floor.

"Spectacular!" Lord Geoffrey exclaimed as he set his baton down on his podium. "Absolutely spectacular! Well done, everyone!"

Murmurs of thanks and agreement came from the players as Lord Geoffrey regarded his handiwork. The painting was a thing of pure and unnatural beauty, but there was a single flaw remaining, the last touch that Lord Geoffrey had deliberately left to add by hand. He walked to the canvas, picked up a brush and began to add the last details while his followers cleaned and put away their instruments.

The interloping servant turned, jogged around the distracted twins and headed straight for the canvas, all the while calling out, "Lord Geoffrey! Lord Geoffrey!"

"Yes, Todd, what is it?" Lord Geoffrey calmly answered without looking up from his work.

"Master Gabriel wishes to see you in his chambers right away," Todd said quickly.

Lord Geoffrey selected a different brush and began to apply another hue of paint to the canvas.

"It's very important," said Todd urgently.

"I'm sure it is," Lord Geoffrey replied with the tiniest hint of sarcasm. "Tell your master I shall attend him presently."

Todd huffed, turned on his heels and stormed out of the room, shoving between the twins as he went. He slammed the door behind himself hard enough to make the walls tremble.

"The young. No patience," Lord Geoffrey mused. He applied quick dabs from two other brushes, then stepped back to inspect his work. In a clearing on the map, Lord Geoffrey had added a tiny, but perfectly proportioned and incredibly detailed image of Stacy Qarati lying cold and dead in the night.

"Perfect!" Lord Geoffrey pronounced. He turned in place and spread his arms to address his followers. "Another triumph! You excel as always! Well done!"

The musicians all bowed, nodded or said "Thank you." The twins merely watched attentively.

"Hammer, Anvil, please place this with the others when it's dry," Lord Geoffrey said to them. "I have to deal with that pompous ass."

"What does that old fossil want now?" sneered Hammer.

"The same thing he always wants, I imagine. I'll be back later." He left the two retainers grinning broadly in front of a depiction of a murdered woman's resting place.

Chapter II A World of Night

"It will take you more than an hour to return to the Mansion, Jake," George said. *"Perhaps you should just enlighten us as to what is happening."*

Jake took a moment to gather his thoughts. "Ok, look. The Detective said that the body of the victim had a tarot card on her. It was the card called "The Moons." The actual images of the moons on the card had been blacked out. This is the traditional symbol for an ancient vampire cabal called the Order of the Moonless Night."

"Ah, that's why the symbol seemed familiar," mused George. *"It's literally ancient history."*

"Right," affirmed Jake. "This group was based around these really wacky quasi-philosophical writings by this vampire from sometime around the Bronze age. These guys had it in their heads that being a vampire was the best thing in the world and vampires had the right to subjugate everybody else.

"Anyway, what starts out as a fringe cult eventually becomes a secret society with some real power. Long story short, these guys use money, influence, and brute force to take authority anywhere they can. They even end up running some small countries here and there in history. They've got hired muscle, organization and power structures, deep pockets--everything a bunch of lunatics with delusions of grandeur needs to call itself a secret society."

"Sounds like a rough group," said Hawk.

"Very ominous, Jake, but you're forgetting an important fact: the Order of the Moonless Night is extinct," chided George.

"There's a woman lying dead back there that disagrees," Jake snapped back.

"What makes you think the Order is extinct, George?" Crow asked.

"Historical fact and subsequent deduction," George said confidently. *"The Order of the Moonless Night was founded and operated entirely on the precept that vampires were the lords of Creation. They herded people like cattle, considered jewelry and musical instruments made of jerud bone to be status symbols and generally committed acts too heinous to recount on a daily basis."*

"The problem with treating people like livestock is that it tends to piss them off. Uprisings and revolts among the people the Order oppressed were very common through the ages. As populations worldwide increased and society advanced, it became increasingly difficult for a cell of the Moonless Night to even establish itself in a populated area, much less take and hold power. The Order finally failed and passed into obscurity over the course of the last millennium."

"Huh?" said Marc.

"Grouchy mobs curb-kicked yuppie vampires," Will explained.

"Oh," said Marc.

"Ok, George, you're so sure these Order guys are all dead," Hawk scoffed, "then who left their calling card on the dead chick back there?"

"A pretender, a wannabe, if you will. The Order of the Moonless Night is something of a legend to the supernatural community. Countless cults, groups and individuals have desired to rule kingdoms of mortals but the Order was one of the exceeding few to ever do it on a large scale. This wouldn't be the first time a handful of vagabond vampires left a tarot card on a body to scare the locals."

"Aw, man," grumbled Marc. "I was hoping we'd get to fight something interesting tonight."

Lord Geoffrey opened the decrepit door of Grand Inquisitor Gabriel's "chambers." They were actually a linked series of offices in the forward section of the building that Lord Geoffrey and his followers now occupied. They had once been brightly lit, open and clean, but in recent days had been refurnished to fit their new resident's tastes. The walls and ceiling had been painted a red so dark it was nearly black. The rooms were adorned with an excessive number of morbid works of art, such as a tapestry depicting a demon slaughtering an Iron Age peasant family and a statue of a vampire drinking the blood of a young maiden that Lord Geoffrey passed without a glance. The only illumination came from the occasional brazier or candle-stand placed strategically to cast large pools of shadows through the

chambers. The scent of ritual incense hung heavy in the air.

As he had expected, Lord Geoffrey found Gabriel in the rearmost chamber. The private room was cluttered to the point of ridiculousness with more morbid artwork, candle stands and opulent pieces of furniture. Gabriel's four-poster canopy bed took up fully half of the small room, but Gabriel flatly refused to alleviate the claustrophobic nature of the space by moving it. Gabriel himself was seated at his writing desk next to the room's entrance. The Grand Inquisitor was a slender specimen with inky black hair and sallow eyes. Aside from his black robes, trimmed with red, his only outstanding feature was the prominent gold ring with a large black onyx that he wore on his left middle finger. He was writing with a quill pen on a large sheet of papyrus using a gold ink that remained luminous even after it had dried--no doubt another of his long-winded and pretentious speeches. In accordance with etiquette, Lord Geoffrey waited in the doorway to be acknowledged.

"Enter," Gabriel said haughtily without looking up from his work. Lord Geoffrey took the ritual three steps into the room and waited to be addressed again.

Gabriel made him wait for several moments before speaking. "Todd tells me that you had the woman's body deposited in the park as I ordered."

Lord Geoffrey very subtly grit his teeth. Gabriel had not been told anything by Todd, because Lord Geoffrey had dispatched a servant to tell Gabriel the task was complete. Lord Geoffrey was tired of this exercise, but Gabriel had protocol on his side and both of them knew it.

"I oversaw the operation personally," said Lord Geoffrey.

Gabriel snorted. "Yet you did not leave the scroll as I instructed."

Lord Geoffrey grit his teeth again. Gabriel's authority as a Grand Inquisitor was expansive, but it did have its limits, especially here in Lord Geoffrey's territory.

"I judged the scroll to be unnecessarily provocative," explained Lord Geoffrey. "To leave the Order's mark in plain view is one thing, but history suggests--"

"History?" Gabriel shouted as he threw down his quill and jumped up from his seat to stand face-to-face with Lord Geoffrey. "Do not speak to me of history! You have no idea what it has been like to spend the centuries hiding like rats from the mortal pestilence, you pathetic whelp!"

Inwardly, Lord Geoffrey reflected on the absurdity of anyone calling a one-hundred-and-seventy-eight-year-old vampire a "whelp," but he remained silent while Gabriel continued to rave.

"Our destiny is to rule the living, not to cower in fear of them! If you do not cow the filth through fear, how can you expect to receive proper respect from them? Go to the pens immediately. Bleed another one, leave it someplace to inspire proper fear and leave the scroll with it."

Lord Geoffrey's calm demeanor finally broke under the weight of his frustration. "You seem to be forgetting some very important points. I have only been established here for two weeks. It would not do to draw attention to ourselves until we have sufficient strength to hold our own. Also, *sir*, I should remind you that while we are here, I give the orders, not you!"

Gabriel's face darkened. "If you do not comply I will recommend to the Ancients that you be replaced on the grounds of cowardice in the face of your inferiors. Until then, I will take away your servants, your resources and your shrine."

Lord Geoffrey huffed in resignation. "Very well. We will leave immediately."

"Not you," snapped Gabriel as he sat back down at his desk. "If your underlings cannot handle a simple task without your guidance, they should be replaced."

"Your words become my deeds," Lord Geoffrey said as he bowed, turned and walked briskly out of the chambers. Though his outward demeanor was again calm and collected, inwardly he had to restrain himself from lashing out at the art objects in the rooms as he left.

When Jake pulled his Desert Rain sport car up to the front steps of the Mansion, he was not the least bit surprised to find George there waiting. It was comforting in a way to know that even despite their disagreement, George was still willing to make concessions for the team. Jake still felt some consternation over George's keeping secrets like the Mansion's security system and he strongly suspected that George

knew at least something about the dragon that Nails had seen. The fact remained, however, that George still took great pains to ensure the safety and security of the team members. In light of that Jake actually felt a little guilty about the open mistrust he had been directing at George over the last few weeks. After all, he thought, what great leader was not forced to keep secrets? He quietly decided to give the old fellow the benefit of the doubt and go back to focusing on monster-hunting and teamwork. If nothing else, it might help to keep him alive a little longer.

George, by contrast, was not surprised in the least to see Jake return to the Mansion almost ten minutes ahead of the rest of the team. Even under normal circumstances Jake's appreciation for fast vehicles always ensured that he was the first of the team to return from the field. Still, the return trip had taken long enough for George to prepare an impressive array of weaponry from the mind-boggling selection available in the Armory. Laid out on the Armory's worktable in almost mathematical precision was a plethora of knives, throwing weapons, guns and ammunition. Some of the weaponry was mundane, ranging from acid-etched titanium stilettos to powerful sidearms, rifles and a flamethrower. Most of it, however, was specialized in some way, including a large range of weapons and ammo with high silver content. George might not have believed the team was really facing the Order of the Moonless Night, but that didn't stop him from going to great lengths to provide the team with peace of mind. Most people would have been amazed at the spectacle of the arsenal, but Jake, being Jake, merely nodded in approval.

When they returned Jake was happily laying out satchels of armaments personalized for each team member. For Crow and Cynthia he prepared assault pistols specialized to use high silver-content ammunition and a satchel of ten loaded clips for each. For Marc, Will, and Hawk, Jake laid out plenty of extra ammunition along with some silver-alloy knives and a handful of incendiary and fragmentation grenades. Jake was uncertain what to include for Nails until he spotted a pair of short-fingered sap gloves with silver-alloy studs lining the fingers. For a finale, Jake laid out his own sub-machineguns as a backup, then brought his powered armor to the Armory with almost ceremonial reverence.

When the team arrived a few minutes later, George and Jake proudly presented the armaments they had prepared. Hawk accepted his satchel enthusiastically, while Will took his solemnly. Marc casually threw his over a shoulder and seemed to forget about it. Cynthia and Crow took theirs unceremoniously. Nails was very excited about his new gloves and admired them openly.

"Excellent!" George said brightly once the armaments had been distributed. "Now, there's only one thing left to attend."

"Oh, here we go!" scoffed Hawk. "Now George will take ten minutes to tell us that Will and I aren't in any shape for field work. Well, guess what, baldy, if what we're up against is half as bad as Jake thinks it is then we're going to need every trooper we have working together on this. Go ahead! Just *try* to tell us we have to stay here."

"Actually, Hawk, I agree with you," George said dryly. "While I still assert that you are dealing with some deluded vagabonds and not an anachronistic vampire cult, the fact remains that you are facing a dangerous enemy and should work as cohesively as possible for your own safety. I want Hawk, Nails, and Crow--as Jake calls them, Team Pretentious Names--together. Will, you, Marc, and Jake will continue to escort and instruct Cynthia. We still don't know all of what she is capable of and you haven't had enough time to learn to work in unison. It will be very important that you stand by her during this, what may prove to be her baptism by fire."

"Cool! We finally get to see what the hot psychic can do!" Marc blurted. "Hey, we should get her one of those sexy outfits like the superheroes in Fat-Ass's comic books wear!"

"Oh, *hell* no," Cynthia said icily.

"Glad to see some sense still remains with the team," George said with a smirk. "Finish preparing and then gather in the--"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, George," Sullivan said as she approached the group at a brisk walk.

George instantly became somber. "It's all right, Sullivan. What is it?"

"Detective King just called. Another body has been found with a tarot card on it."

George had Sullivan route the phone lines into the Situation Room speakers and dial out a request

to speak with Detective King. They waited more than forty minutes before he called them back.

“Sorry. I couldn’t get away,” he said. “Forensics is in a frenzy over this.”

“I’m here with the active team, Samuel. Fill us in on what’s happening,” George said calmly.

“I’m here in the parking lot of Sun Vale Hospital. A nurse leaving her shift came across the body as she crossed one of the landscape gardens to get to her car. She went to start CPR and realized that there wasn’t any blood in his body. She said the body was still warm when she found him.”

“What have you found so far?” asked Jake.

Detective King’s voice dripped with sarcasm when he answered. “Oh, you’re going to love this. The victim is a black male, aged sixteen to nineteen. There wasn’t any ID on this one, so we’re running a check on his dental records. There was one of those fortune-telling cards on the body, along with a fancy-looking scroll.”

George had grown progressively more somber as Detective King spoke. At the mention of a scroll both he and Jake blanched. “What was on the scroll?” asked Jake.

“Get this. It’s written in some kind of golden glitter-ink in these weird phrases like scripture or something.” There was a brief pause and the soft rustle of paper as the Detective checked a notepad. “It says:

*‘The hated sun shall not always protect you,
For the Long and Moonless Night is coming.
Your towers shall fall,
Your cities shall crumble,
Your blood will fill the gutters
Your screams will shake the stars
Mourn your whelp
Muster your weakness
For the Long and Moonless Night is coming:”*

“Wow,” Jake said after a brief silence. “That would be laughably pretentious if it hadn’t been left on a murdered kid.”

“Quite,” George said coarsely. “Anything else you can tell us, Samuel?”

“Not at the moment. I’ve got to go now. I’ll keep in touch if I can, but the chief is losing her mind over this mess and we have to keep the media out of here. It may be a while.”

“Very well. Contact us if you have anything else. I am sending the team right away. George Manor out.”

George signaled Sullivan to switch off the audio feed and leaned back in his chair. “This is distressing,” he said.

Hawk scoffed. “No kidding! Think we’re up against a bunch of wannabes now, George?”

“No. I confess to having some academic doubt now, but I still also doubt you are facing a group that has not been heard from in several hundred years. Nevertheless, whatever it is you are up against, they are so determined to prove that they are genuine that they have committed two murders in one night. Do *not* let your guard down while you investigate.”

“One question: how are we supposed to find them?” Crow asked. “They’ve already come and gone. We can’t look for clues with the police on both scenes.”

“We may just have to wait,” Hawk put forth.

“Bad idea,” replied Will. “These creeps have already killed two people in a matter of hours. The longer we wait, the more lives it will cost.”

“That might not be a problem,” Cynthia said very quietly.

“What’s that, Legs?” asked Marc.

“Remember how we found the home of those goblins when I met you guys? I actually knew how to find them ‘cause I can kind of tell the history of things by touching them.”

“Kinky!” said Marc.

“No, you perv!” Cynthia shouted and stamped her foot in irritation. “I picked up one of their little tools and I knew where it came from, get it?”

“That’s really cool!” exclaimed Nails. “You think you can find these guys if you touch the body?”

Cynthia shuddered. “Ew, no. But I think I can do it if I can get hold of that scroll.”

“Wait...you know stuff just by touching stuff? Does that mean you know what I’m thinking?” Marc asked worriedly.

“I tried once, Marc, but all I got was static,” Cynthia muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Oh. That’s ok then,” Marc said.

“Getting back on topic,” George chuckled. “The same teams indicated earlier will work in the field. Team Pretentious Names will provide backup for Team Boring Names. Work with Detective King in an effort to get hold of the scroll. Godspeed.”

By the time the team arrived at Sun Vale Hospital the investigation was well underway. The police had cordoned off the entire section of the parking lot where the body had been found. In order to remain inconspicuous the team split up and parked in different lots of buildings near the hospital, then gathered in the darkness of a tree-inhabited median a stone’s throw from the police barricade.

“Ok, we’re all set,” Will whispered into his Jakecam™ after a quick headcount. “How do we get that scroll? We can’t get close to Detective King without being seen.”

“*Stay put, and I’ll get hold of the Detective and have him bring it to you,*” George replied.

“Nah, that’ll take too long,” Hawk said blithely. “Wait here.”

“No! Wait!” Will said, but he was too late. Hawk slipped with impressive speed away from where the team hid along the barrier of police tape and sawhorses. When he came to where a police cruiser was parked near the barrier he ducked under the tape and used the car as a starting point to begin weaving among the double handful of vehicles around the crime scene. The team lost sight of him in a matter of seconds and waited anxiously for one of the officers or medical technicians present to see him and raise alarm. No such panic occurred; the first sign that Hawk had returned was Crow’s startled yelp as he laid a hand on her shoulder from behind.

“Found it!” he declared triumphantly and held up the scroll, now rolled up inside a plastic evidence bag, before the astonished team’s eyes.

Jake looked around at the isolated crime scene and the open, lamppost-dotted parking lot, which Hawk had somehow crossed without being seen. “How the heck did you do that?”

Hawk snapped to attention and saluted. “Special Forces Agent Hawk reporting in. Ok, Red, do your thing,” he said and held out the scroll to Cynthia.

Quietly she took it and opened the bag to expose the scroll at one end. She felt a brief pang of anxiety as she realized that all eyes were on her. Then she swallowed, opened her mind and laid a hand on the scroll. Instantly her mind’s eye was flooded with the scroll’s history.

It was penned two nights before by a dead hand, guided by a mind filled with incalculable malice and hatred for the living. The hand wrote the verses in time to the swaying of the room, which was actually the hold of a ship entering Ylelon Bay.

Other hands carried the scroll when it was finished, the same hands that effortlessly lifted massive crates filled with grotesque artwork and expensive finery into waiting trucks. The scroll traveled in darkness until it reached its destination, the hiding place of the monsters that used it, which Cynthia immediately recognized. She gasped and dropped the scroll.

“Cyn? What’s wrong?” asked Crow.

“I...it’s that...” Cynthia trailed off and looked at the other team members, but her gaze lingered on Will. “I know where to go,” she said finally and looked away from the others to hide her face.

“Killer!” Hawk said as he scooped up the scroll. “I’m gonna put this away. Be right back!” He

hurried away again and vanished into the midst of a murder investigation.

“Does he ever get tired of showing off?” Jake scoffed.

“Not really,” replied Crow, but she didn’t sound entirely disapproving.

“Man…” Marc drawled as he leaned against a tree and crossed his arms. “When are we gonna get to fight something?”

Once Hawk returned the team headed back to their vehicles. Rather than tell them exactly where they were going, Cynthia instructed them to follow Will’s car as she rode with him and gave directions. She had them all park along the street fully three blocks from their final destination. Cynthia knew that she should tell them where they were going, but she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. As Will parked, she watched his face. If he associated where they were with where they were going, his somber expression did not show it.

Once the convoy was parked the Lonely Winds gathered and made their way through the alleyways with Cynthia in the lead. She felt more tense with every step she took through the dark artificial caverns, waiting and wondering when someone would realize where they were headed.

As the team came to the end of an alley only one block away from their destination Cynthia saw movement in the darkness of the next alley across the street and stopped. The others came to stand in a group around her and noticed the same movement right about the same moment Cynthia was reaching out with her mind. She knew in an instant what was happening.

“Let’s go!” she ordered almost instinctively. She charged out of the alley, barely taking the time to check that the road was clear in both directions and drawing her pistol from its holster.

“What’s happening?” Jake asked as he, now clad in his armor, caught up to her easily with mechanically-enhanced strides.

“Vampires. They’re killing somebody!” cried Cynthia, and then they were across the street and close enough to see what was happening.

Three vampires surrounded a middle-aged homeless man in the alley. One of them was biting him on the neck, while another had sunk his fangs into the man’s left wrist. The third was standing before the struggling, whimpering man, taunting him. All three of them wore deep-brown robes that hung open over their shoulders and simple, matching brown pantaloons.

“Let him go!” Cynthia yelled. The taunting vampire turned to see where the shout had come from and in that moment Will drew one of his pistols and put a silver round through his left eye. The bullet burned clean through his skull and the tunnel it left was still smoking when he hit the ground.

The wrist-biting vampire let go of his victim at the sound of the gunshot. “What the f--” he snarled just as Jake plowed into him in a full-body tackle that resonated with the sound of crunching bones. The last bloodsucker, seeing this, dropped the poor man as though he had suddenly become red hot and ran for the far end of the alley as fast as he could go.

“Pretentious Names! Stop him!” ordered Will. Hawk, Crow, and Nails took off after him while Cynthia and Marc tended to the wounded man. Jake looked over the vampire he had crippled, who was laying sprawled in agony on the alley floor and cursing at Jake in some lilting archaic language.

“Can we help him?” Will asked of the injured man, but he already knew the answer. The man’s wounds were grievous and he had lost a lot of blood. As Cynthia applied pressure to his neck in a vain effort to stop the bleeding, he looked into her eyes and tried to speak but his words faded into a death rattle.

Will nodded his head in a moment of silent respect, as did Jake. To her own surprise Cynthia found herself tearing up for a man she didn’t even know. All the while, the crippled vampire raved until Marc drew a hatchet from his duffel bag, marched to where the creature lay and silenced it with a single blow that the others wisely did not watch.

“Quickly,” instructed Will, reluctantly leading the others away from a man who tragically had died the way he had lived--nameless and alone in an alley. They all pretended not to notice Marc staying behind to do something they all knew needed to be done. Having been killed by vampires drinking his blood, it was only a matter of time before the homeless man rose as a vampire himself. Marc knew what

needed to be done to prevent that and while he certainly did not enjoy it, he did not hesitate.

Nails easily pulled ahead of Hawk and Crow as they pursued the vampire toward the end of the alley. The creature was naturally--or rather, supernaturally--as fast-running as a world-class athlete, but Nails was easily faster on foot than any jerud ever born. He reached the fleeing monster just before it left the alley and seized the hem of his robe.

"Gotcha!" he declared triumphantly. The vampire tore right through the sleeves of his robes without stopping. He dashed across the street, ran up the broad steps and through the double doors of the large brick building across the way.

"Ouch. I lose coolness points here. Way to go, David," Nails said to himself. Presently Hawk and Crow caught up to him.

"Did you catch--" Crow stopped in mid-sentence. She and Hawk exchanged glances, then stared at Nails.

"What happened?" Hawk asked severely.

Nails held up the torn robe. "He gave me the slip and ran in there. We can still catch him."

Before there was room for any more words the rest of the team caught up with them. Cynthia looked away from the others while Marc and Jake joined Hawk and Crow in staring at the building across the street. Will froze completely when he laid eyes on the structure. He was so still he might have been a statue of himself.

"George? Have you been following this?" Jake asked.

"*Indeed I have,*" George said solemnly.

"Would someone *please* tell me what the big deal is?" demanded Nails, so George did.

The Lonely Winds were standing across from the long-abandoned Edward G. Tanner High School, where nineteen months earlier Tina McClay, Will's fiancée and the emotional heart of the team, was killed.

Chapter III

A World Without Light

Initiate Shadow Lance was still nearly in a state of panic as he sprinted down the empty high school hallway. He had been a vampire for nine days and was really enjoying it right up until his best friend had his head blown off by a gun-toting maniac and their overseer had been crushed by some sort of space-age riot cop. Shadow Lance wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, but he hadn't been about to wait around for the lunatics outside to gun him down. With any luck, the leaders of this club (or church, or whatever it was supposed to be) would get everyone together and lead them outside to tear those guys apart. The thought was so encouraging that the young acolyte's mood changed almost entirely from fear to trepidation in the time it took him to reach the dining hall.

The "dining hall" was the old gymnasium. Most of the others were there, gathered around makeshift wooden tables. Restrained to each table by crude shackles was a single victim taken from the pens. The shackles were secured to long chains that ran under the tables and through a series of metal rings bolted to the floors. Members of the Order would casually bite the victims on limbs or necks when the mood struck them, unfettered by the screams, which were muffled by gags of heavy gray cloth. The grisly scene was lit by a legion of wrought iron candle stands with shafts forged in strange, twisting shapes.

Shadow Lance paused in the doorway just long enough to get his bearing. Since his "overseer," essentially his commanding officer, was gone, Lance wasn't sure who to talk to, but he figured he should go right to the top. As he looked around he spotted the proverbial "top" near the far end of the hall. The creepy old guy named Gabriel was sitting at a much nicer table than the others had, one of antique oak. Lord Geoffrey and his twin bodyguards were there as well. Gabriel's bodyguard was there too, the colossus with the shaved head. Shadow Lance had no idea where the seven-foot-two, four-hundred-and-forty-pound, habitually silent wall of muscle had come from, but he did know that everyone gave the jackass Gabriel a wide berth because of him.

Lance crossed the distance to the table as quickly as possible by dodging and weaving through the dining room at a brisk jog. He drew more than a few rude glances as he ran but knew that what was happening was too important to care.

"Boss! Geoffrey! We've got trouble!" he called as he ran the last few steps to the table's edge.

"Who is this, who speaks as though he had been invited to do so?" Gabriel said loftily. He absently gnawed on the wrist of the young woman that was chained to the table. She had lost so much blood she was on the verge of unconsciousness and her halter top was completely soaked with blood from bite wounds on her neck. Her head lulled drunkenly as she turned, half-aware, to watch what was going on.

"What is it, Shadow?" Lord Geoffrey asked calmly as he dabbed at his mouth with an embroidered napkin.

"We've got a problem," Shadow Lance babbled excitedly. "Abyss Aldon took Shadow Andrew and I outside to get a bum, 'cause, you know, we're still hungry, so, we get this bum, and suddenly there's about twenty guys with machine guns shooting at us--"

"WHAT?!" Gabriel screamed as he slammed his fist against the table and leapt to his feet.

"Calm yourself, Inquisitor!" said Lord Geoffrey forcefully. "Explain yourself, Shadow. You encountered the police?"

"I-I don't know, they didn't look like cops. Just, the one guy looked like a riot cop with this funny body armor, and they were all in black--"

Lord Geoffrey quickly rose from his chair. "Hammer! Anvil! Alert the others. Prepare for a full siege. Quickly!"

"Stake him!" ordered Gabriel.

"What?" Lord Geoffrey demanded as he spun on his heels.

"There is no place in the Order for such incompetence," Gabriel announced with more pompousness than Lord Geoffrey would have thought possible. "If the Initiate has truly brought our

presence here to the attention of the mortals then he does not belong with us. Stake him, we will determine his proper punishment later.”

Shadow Lance opened his mouth to protest, but he was already too late. Gabriel’s towering bodyguard marched around the table, grabbed Lance by one upper arm, lifted him into the air, broke a long sliver of wood off of the edge of a nearby table with his free hand and effortlessly drove it through Lance’s heart. The tip emerged, coated in dark blood, several inches out of Lance’s back. The huge minion pulled a nearby empty chair out from a table and evidenced a dark sense of humor by dropping the now-paralyzed and insensate Initiate Shadow into place. The crowd in the dining hall had shifted from being morbidly curious to giving the situation their undivided attention.

“What are you waiting for? Prepare for battle!” shouted Lord Geoffrey. The crowd immediately leapt to their feet and mobbed out of the hall. Lord Geoffrey spared the time to give Gabriel a furious look before hurrying off to lead the defense.

“Will? Man, you ok?” Hawk gently asked. Will was still staring intently at the old school building, while the rest of the team was staring at him.

“Look, maybe we should regroup,” suggested Jake, “set up surveillance, plan our assault--”

“No!” Will suddenly exclaimed. “We can’t stall. We don’t know where he went or if he has friends, so our only advantage is speed. We’ve already lost surprise.”

Marc laid a hand on Will’s shoulder. “Are you *sure* you can do this, man?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine,” replied Will. His expression was inscrutable behind his shades. “Jake, Nails, I need you two to run back and get the bodies. We’ll leave them out of sight inside for now. Let’s go!”

Will, Hawk, Crow and Marc hurried as one across the street and up the broad concrete steps to the school’s double front doors. The doors had long ago been secured with a heavy chain through the handles and the broken windows had been covered crudely using old boards and broken milk crates. The barriers had deteriorated over the years to the point of barely holding together and the chain was now absent. Once the four were inside, they waited for Jake and Nails to arrive with their grim burdens. They gently laid the bodies inside the door and fell in around the others.

“Nails, Jake, you two take point,” Will instructed. “Crow, scanners.”

“I’m on it!” chirruped Crow, already focusing on casting detection spells.

Will nodded in approval. “Hawk, Marc and I are flanks. Cynthia, you keep to the middle and help out any way you can. No matter what happens, *stay together*. George, anything you want to say?”

“*Godspeed, and be careful.*”

“Let’s do it!” Nails said as he led the way.

The entryway branched in four directions. Long hallways ran left, right, and straight ahead, while to the team’s left a staircase provided access to the upper three floors of the massive structure. Trash, rubble and animal detritus littered the floors and the whole scene was quiet and dark.

“Jake?” Will prompted.

Jake held up his left gauntlet and tapped on a small keypad. In the weeks since the Crown of Thorns had attacked George Manor, Jake had built a military motion tracker into his gauntlet. It bleeped to life and reported what it found: nothing.

“We’re clear so far,” Jake reported.

“I don’t like it,” growled Hawk. “Is the chump hiding somewhere or is he getting his buddies?”

“It might have been just those three,” Crow offered.

“Or if it really is the Moonless Night, it could be a leader, his bodyguards and a small legion of servants and warriors,” said Jake.

Will grimaced. “You’re not helping, Jake.”

“Sorry.”

“Moving or not, if we get close to any vampires I’ll know it,” said Crow.

“Ditto,” said Cynthia.

“Straight on, then,” said Will, “we’ll search the whole place if we have to.”

The group moved down the hall with Jake and Nails in the lead. Presently Jake brought his guns

into their ready position over his shoulders. The team's lights played across the debris on the floors and the rusted remains of lockers that lined the walls between doorways.

After passing a number of classrooms, some empty, some containing the decaying remains of desks and chairs, the Lonely Winds came to a large set of battered double doors. Jake stood to one side and looked to Will, who nodded. Jake pulled the door open and Nails slipped through first.

The room was an auditorium in complete shambles. Once filled with seats set in orderly rows, the room was now strewn with the broken remains of the seats, many of which had been pulverized and left in pieces or tossed onto one of several large piles. Nails wondered what calamity or purpose had caused such seemingly meaningless destruction, leaving only the odd chair here and there unscathed. A shadow-veiled balcony hung overhead like a black cloud and ahead was a stage draped with the last tatters of rotting, moth-eaten curtains.

The team walked down the center aisle to the stage and looked around. There were exits to the left and right of the stage, but all around was still and quiet.

"Well, where to now?" Jake asked.

"I don't know," admitted Will, "I don't remember the layout here that well. Maybe--"

"Guys!" Cynthia interrupted with a gasp. As if on cue Crow did a double take at the balcony and Jake's motion tracker began registering scores of bodies moving all around the team and drawing closer.

"Mortal filth!" rang a voice from the balcony. "How *dare* you desecrate this place with your presence?"

"Who wants to know?" Marc called defiantly. Footsteps and movement could now be heard across the balcony, along the edges of the room, and on the stage.

"Crass excrement!" shouted the unseen detractor. "Surrender to judgment by your superiors!"

Silence hung heavy in the air. It was Will who broke the quiet:

"Wow. Surrender ourselves to torture and death at the hands of a bunch of sociopathic walking corpses with delusions of their own importance. That is a tempting and thought-provoking proposition. Marcus, would you care to deliver our rebuttal?"

Marc loudly cleared his throat. "Kiss our asses, you big dead bastard!"

"To the pens with them!" the voice roared. Three small orbs of light, like the magical lantern glow Crow often used, winked into being around the team. Unlike Crow's soft green lights, these orbs were an angry red, with patches of deeper color that hinted at jawless skulls which glared as they orbited the team at dizzying speed. The orbs cast morbid red light on the Lonely Winds while keeping the surrounding area dark and hidden.

At once a dreadful howling filled the air. A lone vampire wearing a robe like the one Nails had captured earlier came hurtling out of the backstage darkness, shouting a battle cry and baring his fangs. He plummeted toward the team in a high arc and laughed triumphantly just before Marc raised his shotgun and fired. The vampire's body plopped onto the floor at Marc's feet, minus its head.

"At last! Conflict!" shouted Marc. He cocked his shotgun and a single, still-smoking shell bounced on the floor.

"Kill them!" ordered the disembodied voice. A great cry and rush of footsteps answered, surrounding the Lonely Winds on all sides.

"Crow! Lights!" Will commanded. Crow quickly cast another spell, one similar to her guiding light but much brighter. The shadowy auditorium was suddenly bathed in clean, bright sunlight, revealing a ring of almost twenty vampires that had been only seconds away from reaching the team. They snarled in pain, shielded their eyes and recoiled as their flesh began to blister and smoke in the sunlight.

Without missing a beat Will, Hawk, and Marc turned their firearms on the vampires nearest to each of them, gunning them down before they had a chance to find cover. Jake took quick aim and, with a broad grin that was visible through his face plate, mowed down half-a-dozen cringing acolytes with a stream of high-caliber rounds. Cynthia used telekinesis to seize a lone bloodsucker and flung him away to land with a bone-jarring crash somewhere beyond the reach of the light. Crow drew her pistol with a fluid motion and put three rounds in the face of yet another acolyte.

"Pull back!" called a heretofore unheard voice from the balcony. The vampires surrounding the

team turned and vanished back into the darkness.

“Crunch time!” said Jake.

“That way!” Will ordered, pointing to the exit to the right of the stage. The Lonely Winds began an organized charge toward the door.

“Defilers! Filth!” raved the first voice on the balcony.

Nails stopped, looked back at the balcony, grimaced, then grinned as an idea overtook him. He grabbed a nearby cluster of three chairs that were still connected, turned on his heels and flung the chairs in a low arc up onto the balcony. Loud cursing and frenzied movement was heard from just before the chairs landed until well afterward.

“Have a seat,” Nails chuckled.

“*Too action hero*,” said George.

“Hey, I *am* an action hero,” Nails retorted as he rose into the air and began to fly toward the balcony.

Will turned at the door and called, “Wait, Nails! We need to stick together!”

“I’ll get these, then find you!” Nails shouted as he hurtled up out of sight. He landed on the balcony just in time to see one door slowly drifting closed. With a self-assured chuckle, Nails was off to the chase.

Will turned and hurried through the exit. He was immediately greeted by the flash of muzzle flare and the roar of gunfire as the other Lonely Winds shot down two straggling Order members who were fleeing down the hall. The others were too far ahead to be seen in the gloomy corridor, so the monster hunters were regrouping and checking their weapons when Will joined them.

“What happened?” asked Hawk as he slapped a new clip into his assault rifle.

“Nails went after the loudmouth,” Will replied. “Let’s go!”

“We’re still pretty badly outnumbered,” observed Jake.

Hawk scoffed. “Not if they keep running around like a bunch of vagabonds. Who do they think they’re up against, orphans and old blind people?”

“Then we press our advantage. Take out as many of them as possible before they can mount a solid defense,” Will said. “Ladies? Can you guide us to them?”

“Straight ahead should work for me. That good for you, Cyn?” Crow asked. Cynthia nodded.

“Less talk, more shooting!” grunted Marc.

“Let’s go!” Will said, and the Winds charged down the hall.

Gabriel raved and swore continually as he and Lord Geoffrey led their retainers in a quasi-organized retreat from the auditorium balcony. The Grand Inquisitor had been quite certain that the Order members would make short work of the mortal interlopers and had loudly said so to anyone who would listen on the way to the ambush. When the “filth” had turned out to not only not be helpless, but to be well-armed and capable (as Lord Geoffrey had feared), no one had been more humorously shocked than Gabriel. Unfortunately, Lord Geoffrey did not have the luxury of savoring the overbearing Inquisitor’s failing under the gravity of the situation.

“Cowards!” Gabriel raged. “We must stand and fight! Why do they flee?”

With a grunt of frustration Lord Geoffrey grabbed the rusting door of a nearby locker, tore it free and hurled it across Gabriel’s path. It missed him by a hair’s breadth and stuck, wobbling, out of the locker directly in front of him.

“How dare--” Gabriel began, but quickly found Lord Geoffrey sticking a threatening finger in his face.

“You, be silent!” Lord Geoffrey demanded. “I have had quite enough of you! I warned you that we needed to keep a low profile. I *warned* you that we weren’t strong enough to repel a siege. Now look what’s happened! You blackmailed me into drawing attention to us and these supposedly ‘helpless vermin’ have decimated a quarter of our forces with little effort!”

“If your simpleton workers were not so disorganized--” Gabriel began. Lord Geoffrey silenced

him again by punching a hole through the locker next to his head.

“Enough! Do not say another word!” Gabriel’s towering bodyguard loomed menacingly near but Lord Geoffrey ignored him. “Hammer! Anvil!” he said to his attentive warriors, “make certain we are not followed. Once you are sure our path is clear, come find us at the shrine.”

Hammer saluted by holding his weapon before his face, Anvil by raising a clenched fist.

“Be careful, gentlemen,” Lord Geoffrey said before turning and leading the others away at a brisk run.

Nails kicked the door open and stormed into the hall. The corridor was still and quiet, lit only by starlight and moonlight streaming in through a row of windows set high on one wall. The hall stretched away to the left and right with no sign of anyone. Nails stood, on guard but unsure of what to do next, until he heard someone approaching from the left. Not someone, but two someones--identical twin bodybuilder vampires in antique manservant clothes, one carrying an enormous sledgehammer, the other wearing unusual gauntlets.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Nails said dryly as they approached, “could you direct me back to reality? My plausibility meter just exploded.”

The two did not answer, but marched until they were just out of reach of where Nails stood and stopped abruptly. The one with the hammer slapped its head against his palm.

“Oh, come on!” Nails complained. “Say something! I am so tired of having to be the one doing all the witty banter!”

Hammer grasped the haft of his weapon in both hands and swung it at Nails’ head. Nails dodged the blow by leaning backward and the sledge arced around and slammed into a nearby locker door, crumpling it like tin foil.

The other twin came at Nails with a straight punch at blinding speed. Nails pulled back from the blow, but he wasn’t fast enough to avoid the follow-up punch, which caught him square in the gut. The impact lifted him off of his feet and slammed him back against a row of lockers, leaving a crater-like dent in the metal.

“Now just a damn minute!” Nails snapped as he settled to his feet. He was cut off by the sight of the hammer swinging at his face again and he tucked and rolled just in time to avoid it. The sledge caught his Jakecam™ and shattered it before continuing on to make another massive dent in the already half-demolished lockers. Hammer reversed the swing with incredible speed into a low arc, which Nails barely avoided by somersaulting backwards and onto his feet. The sledge smashed a hole in the floor four inches deep and flung shards of tile everywhere.

“Wait, I’m the good guy--” Nails quipped before catching a punch from Anvil across the jaw, which knocked his sunglasses off. The metal blocks on Anvil’s gauntlets rang with a dull tone from the impact.

“I’ve got fancy gloves too, ass!” Nails roared as he swung. Anvil artfully dodged the punch with the skill of a seasoned boxer, then caught Nails under the chin with a vicious uppercut that snapped his head backward and lifted him several inches clear of the floor. No sooner had Nails settled than Hammer came at him again with a horizontal swing. Nails stopped it by stepping inside the arc of the hammer’s head and letting the shaft strike him. Without batting an eye Hammer shifted his grip and bashed Nails in the face with the butt of the handle, then reversed the motion of his swing and caught Nails in the temple with the sledge’s head. The besieged angel flipped head over heels backward and landed flat on his face on the filthy floor.

“Did I miss something?” he moaned as he pushed himself up into a kneeling position. “Since when do a couple of vampires in goofy clothing get the better of me?”

Hammer and Anvil looked first mildly annoyed at the remark, then, eerily, grinned in perfect unison. Hammer suddenly twisted in place while swinging his sledge underhanded at an upward angle at the same time Anvil swung with a right hook. Fist and sledgehammer met in midair with a clang of tempered steel and a brief shower of sparks.

“Uh-oh,” Nails said weakly as the two warriors came toward him again.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Crow's shots lanced one of the two acolytes that were fleeing down the hall ahead of the team, boring huge holes through his torso. He toppled forward onto the floor with a hideous shriek and lay still. Seeing this, his companion turned and dashed through the nearest classroom door in a desperate attempt to get out of the line of fire, slammed the door shut and locked it seconds before the team caught up to where he had been. While Marc fired two shells into the fallen vampire to make sure it stayed down, the others lined up outside the door, weapons at the ready.

"How're we doing?" asked Jake.

"Seventeen by my count," Hawk replied as he checked his clip.

"Any word from Nails?" Will inquired.

"*He ran into two vampires that were apparently accomplished warriors,*" George said softly. "*His Jakecam™ went offline a few moments ago.*"

"Is he all right?" Crow asked.

"*Nails can take care of himself,*" said G.R..

"Well, the sooner we get done, the sooner we can go find him," Jake said. "I got this one."

The servos in Jake's armor whined as he raised his arm, made a fist, and broke the handle off of the locked door with a single blow. He followed up with a solid kick that demolished what was left of the lock and flung the door wide open.

"Knock, knock!" he called.

Judging by the many shelves lined with glass specimen jars and the enormous front desk equipped with a large sink and gas spouts, the room had been a science lab. There were no student desks in the room, so the obvious conclusion was that the fleeing acolyte had either climbed out one of the room's many broken windows or was cowering behind the large desk.

Jake walked slowly into the room with his guns at the ready. Moving to the desk, he found himself distracted by the gas spouts and turned one on almost on a whim. *No way!* he thought as a soft hissing began to emanate steadily from the spout.

"Any sign of him?" Hawk asked as he led the others into the room.

As if in answer, the acolyte leaped from his hiding place behind the far end of the desk. "Die!" he snarled as he cleared the desk and landed in the midst of the group. Hawk very nonchalantly drew one of his combat knives and stabbed it into the hapless vampire's right eye. The undead wailed and grasped the offending weapon as Hawk, Marc, and Will pointed their guns at his head.

"No! Wait!" Jake yelled. Leaning down so his gun barrels were angled next to the gas spout, he pulled the trigger on his armor's remote. The muzzle flare ignited the residual flow of gas, producing a long jet of bright flame.

"I saw this in a really cool video game once!" Jake said gleefully as he jogged to the screaming vampire, who had just pulled the knife from his eye socket, grabbed him by the hem of the robe, ran back and held the flailing monster in the stream of fire. His robes quickly caught fire and as flames began to spread rapidly across the fabric Jake hurled him clear to the other side of the room. He slammed into a specimen-laden glass case and fell to the floor in a shower of flames and glass shards. Jake followed up with a long burst of fire from his armor's machine-guns that cut the vampire's screams short.

"Pretty cool, huh? Today, class, we're going to test the flammability of a delusional vampire!"

"Jake! That was sadistic! What is *wrong* with you?" exclaimed Crow.

Jake held one gauntlet up in front of his eyes as though he were examining his fingernails. "Tell me, do you think he was one of the ones that killed the woman in the park or the kid at the hospital?"

Crow thought about this for a moment, then turned and fired a single round into the smoldering lump of flesh at the far end of the room.

"*The words of a certain nihilistic philosopher come to mind, but we'll leave them aside for now,*" said George grimly. "*How is your morale as a whole?*"

"Ready to kick more ass!" declared Hawk.

"What he said," Marc chortled.

“Will? How are you doing?”

“Huh?” Will was snapped out of a reverie no one else had noticed. “Oh! I’m fine. I am. Ok, next up, Angie, Cynthia, can you tell us where the next targets are?”

“There’s nothing in range,” Crow replied, “but when they were, I got the impression that they were all headed in the same direction, toward the back of the school.”

“That’s not good,” opined Jake. “If they have a unified goal then they may be trying to mount some kind of defense. What’s between us and the back?”

Will’s brow furrowed as he struggled to remember the layout of the colossal edifice. “I’m not sure. The gym and the cafeteria, for sure, for large spaces.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it, guys,” Hawk laughed. “You’ve seen how pathetic these guys are. This isn’t some powerful cult, it’s a bunch of wimps and cowards in funny bathrobes. All we’ve gotta do is keep takin’ ‘em apart.”

“I wish I shared your confidence, big guy,” Jake said as he twisted the gas spout closed, abruptly ending the fire it was putting forth.

Hawk chuckled again as he walked to stand beside the door while the others exited. “Trust me, we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Lord Geoffrey took his place behind the podium at the far end of the shrine, walking up the five tall steps to overlook the scene. The shrine itself consisted of a long, low black stone altar adorned with a blood red cloth draped over the top and covered with a row of black candles. Various macabre objects were interspersed among the candles, including several rusted torture implements and fetishes made from bone. The center of the altar was dominated by a large, shallow font of the same black stone, which was filled almost to brimming with fresh blood.

All twenty-one of the surviving Order members were present, including Gabriel and his silent guard. They were all lined up in front of the shrine, except for one of Lord Geoffrey’s musicians, who stood to one side of the altar, holding a stone spoon and a cup made from a hollowed-out skull.

“We face a powerful and determined foe,” Lord Geoffrey proclaimed in a loud, clear voice. “But though many of our number have fallen, we may yet be triumphant.”

The musician dipped her spoon in the gruesome contents of the font, ladled it into the cup and handed it to the first Order member in line, who took it in both hands, bowed, and drank.

“We are the Moonless Night, the pinnacle of existence,” Lord Geoffrey intoned ritualistically. “Our strength is the mortal’s weakness; their deaths are the might of our limbs. Let this blood imbued with the power of the endless darkness of the Moonless Night, make us strong and worthy to defeat our foes.”

In turn each of the Order imbibed the mystically charged blood, feeling increased power flowing through their dead veins and muscles. Last in line was Gabriel’s bodyguard, who guzzled the contents of the skull-cup with gusto. The musician took back the cup, refilled it, and offered it to Gabriel.

“I do not need the blessing of our Order to crush the mortal rabble!” he snapped. His manservant grabbed the cup from the startled musician, drank the contents and held it in his open palm for a heartbeat before clenching a fist, shattering the cup into tiny shards of bone.

“Everyone together,” commanded Lord Geoffrey. “We’ll ambush them as they come down the last hallway. They don’t stand a chance.”

Chapter IV Darkest Before Dawn

In a southwest corner of one large block of the high school was an enclosed stairwell. The stairs had not been used since the school had been officially closed. No intelligent being had seen the dark interior since that day. That all changed as Nails crashed backwards and upside down through the second-story door, tearing it free of its hinges and slamming with it into the balcony railing. Nails looked like he'd been trampled by a herd of elephants. His face was battered, his upper lip split and there were numerous tears and impact wounds all across his arms and torso.

Without missing a beat, Nails got back to a standing position and grabbed the heavy metal door before it could topple over the railing. He waited for the paired set of approaching footsteps to reach the gaping doorway, then turned the door sideways and jabbed it through the frame. Simultaneously a huge hammerhead and a gauntlet-clad fist struck the door, slamming it to one side against the frame and causing Nails to lose his grip on it.

"Oh, come on!" Nails lamented as Hammer and Anvil charged into the stairwell. He hopped up onto the dented railing and kicked at Hammer's head. Hammer wove out of the way of the attack at the same time Anvil swept Nails' other leg out from under him with a punch. Rather than falling, Nails gave himself a little burst of flight as he flipped over backwards, just enough to make a controlled drop down to the landing below and facing the door. In the blink of an eye the twins were after him, Hammer by running down the steps, Anvil by hurtling over the railing.

This time Nails was ready. As Anvil plunged toward him Nails unleashed a thunderous punch, catching Anvil dead in the chest. His flesh sizzled as the studs on Nails' gloves punched ugly holes into his torso and the force of the blow sent him hurtling back up the way he'd come. Hammer deftly reached out and caught his brother in mid-flight with one hand and set him down on the stairs.

"That's more like it!" Nails said triumphantly. "I've been getting really tired of getting the crap beaten out of me by everything I run into lately. It's been a real blow to my self--"

With one fluid motion Hammer hurled his sledge at Nails, forcing him to dodge in mid-taunt. In that instant Anvil leapt again, coming down on the angel with both metal-clad fists. The crushing blows slammed him down against the landing floor even as Hammer recovered his weapon. Nails kicked up onto his feet again, only to be greeted by a hail of blows from Anvil that forced him back against the wall. The angel tried to defend himself, but Anvil was a truly superior boxer and even Nails' tremendous speed and strength were not enough to prevent him from taking blow after blow. He couldn't believe his attacker could be dealing well with the wounds in his chest, yet he didn't even seem to notice that his flesh was still smoldering as he continued his barrage. In the span of a few seconds Nails' head and body were slammed back against the wall behind himself over a dozen times. He saw the sledge rising above the attacking vampire's head and made a break for it, diving down the stairs toward the bottom floor just as Hammer brought his weapon down and pulverized the floor of the landing where Nails had just been.

Nails hit the bottom landing at a run and was through the door in a flash. As fast as he could he turned around and threw himself against the door just before powerful blows began to pummel the far side of it, rattling it on its hinges and radically deforming it. One strike from the hammer shattered the door's mesh-screened window, showering Nails with fragmented glass. In mere moments it had been reduced to twisted, pitted scrap. Nails was forced to let go and hop back several feet. The instant he did Hammer and Anvil were through the door, coming out swinging.

The sledge came at Nails in a line-drive: he back-flipped to avoid it, but Anvil cracked him across the jaw in midair. Landing angry and hurting, Nails lashed out with a kick. Anvil saw it coming and dodged backward at the same time his brother swung again, catching Nails dead in the chest and slamming him into the wall behind himself hard enough to shatter the ceramic tiles there. No sooner had Nails staggered forward than Anvil was on him, battering him with rapid hard punches. Nails managed to pull away from the barrage, only to catch the sledge in his gut and be slammed back against the wall again.

On the verge of panic, Nails took off in an almost blind flight down the dark hallway. Fear and

helplessness had been almost foreign feelings to him for a long time, but now both emotions flooded his mind as he careened through the near-total darkness away from the sound of pursuing footsteps. He was stronger and faster than either of them and tougher than both combined--which was good, since it was the only thing allowing him to survive the beating their superior fighting skills were letting them dish out.

Nails decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He would find the others, support them, and hope that the arsenal they were carrying would be enough to deal with the two juggernauts behind him. He also promised himself that if he made it out of the building in one piece he would start taking George and Master Pana's training more seriously.

A set of double doors loomed out of the shadows as Nails flew down the corridor at breakneck speed. Slowing to a rate that most people would consider a champion running pace, he set down and jogged the rest of the way. He didn't hear gunfire from inside, which was an immediate disappointment. On the other hand, this was as good a place as any to start looking for the other Lonely Winds and if the room were multi-storied it would provide quick access to other levels. Feeling slightly better, Nails pulled open one door, stepped inside and stopped in his tracks. If he had still had breath, it would have left him.

He was standing in a candle-lit nightmare. Laid out before him across the enormous floor of the room were almost two dozen crude wooden tables. Chained spread-eagle atop each one was a single jerud being. Every one of them was marked in several places by deep bite marks, many of which still bled freely. Nails dashed to the nearest victim, a Nydi woman of no more than sixteen years. Her breathing was extremely shallow and rapid. Her eyelids fluttered as she looked up at him.

"Hold tight! I'll get you out of here!" Nails said as he tore off her gag and took her hand in one of his own. Her lips moved as if to say something, but then her eyelids fluttered again and she became very still. Her breathing quickly slowed and stopped and her hand went limp in Nails' own. Slowly and ever so gently he reached down and closed her eyes. He was so deep in his respectful reverie that he barely heard the doors behind him open and the footsteps that followed.

Hammer and Anvil came to a stop just out of arm's reach of each other a short jog behind Nails. They waited for him to turn to face them, but he stood over the dead woman, head down, as though frozen. As the moments ticked by the twins exchanged glances before turning back to the silent angel.

"There's nowhere to run," declared Hammer. "Give yourself up. Make it easy on yourself."

"Easy?" Nails growled and finally moved. Though the two enforcers could not see what he was doing they could first hear chains rattling, then sharp snaps as two manacles were broken. The chain began to rattle again, almost deafeningly loud as Nails hauled on one end to thread it through the securing rings on the floor.

"You have no chance!" Anvil growled. Nails answered by wrapping one end of the chain around his palm twice, then making a tight fist. He began to swing the chain, which weighed as much as a grown man, one-armed overhead. With a savage battle cry he turned and charged the vampire twins.

"I don't like this," Jake grumbled as the team made its way down one of the countless identical hallways that crossed the school in a massive grid. "We spend five minutes gunning down cult members left and right, then the next ten wandering through an empty building. Where the hell did they all go?"

"You don't suppose they left the building?" Crow asked.

"I certainly hope not," replied Will. "If they did, any blood they spill will be on our hands."

Marc snorted. "Relax, Thatcher. You've seen these guys in action. They're a bunch of idiots. All we've gotta do is hunt them down and tear 'em a few new ones."

"Let's hope so," Jake said. "I wonder what's keeping Nails?"

"Don't worry about him," G.R. said proudly through Will's Jakecam™. "He's either just lost, or he found the group you're looking for and is beating the hell out of them."

"Getting to have all the fun, as usual," Marc muttered.

"I think we're getting near the back of the school," Will said. "If we don't find anything here, we should start working our way up, one floor at a--"

"Whoa! I got a blip!" Cynthia stage whispered. "Right ahead of us."

The team shone their lights down the hall, but revealed nothing more than filthy floors and more

of the endless rows of wall-lining lockers.

Will crooked his head. "Where are they?"

"In the lockers," chuckled Cynthia. Crow nodded in affirmation.

"Ambush wrecker," Jake said in the fashion of a surgeon asking for an instrument. Marc promptly slapped a party favor into his hand. He pressed the button on top and flung the now-active explosive at the top of one of the rows of lockers. It burst into a bright display of flaming chemicals, liquid fire that ran along the top and down the front of the metal compartments. At first, there was nothing but the crackle and hiss of the flames, but suddenly the air was split by an agonized shriek. An acolyte burst from one of the lockers, hair ablaze. Only a small trickle of the flammable mixture had found its way through the seams of the hollowed-out hiding place to the top of the vampire's head, but the moment she came through the door she was doused in liquid fire and her flesh and robes began to burn along with her hair. Five other acolytes, misinterpreting the screams as the signal to attack, stumbled from their posts and were shocked to find their cohort in flames.

"Time for the big fight scene!" Jake laughed. He joined the others in laying down a wall of fire that shredded the stunned bloodsuckers. So intent were the Winds on their grim work that none of them noticed the paneling of the ceiling behind them mysteriously collapsing in a half-dozen places.

Cynthia's warning sense screamed alarms in her head. She lowered her pistol and looked around just as something unseen grabbed her from behind in an icy vise-like grip. An arm clad in a black, heavy cloth materialized out of the air and in that moment, Cynthia understood. Instinctively she lashed out with bolts of mental energy. The first three went wild and made ugly dents in nearby lockers, but the fourth one bashed her attacker in the face before he could bite her and broke his grip.

"Behind us!" she shouted as she raised a force field around herself, Crow, and Hawk, the others being outside her reach. Everyone whirled at the sound of her cry in time to see several Order members melt out of thin air as they threw themselves against Cynthia's invisible barrier. Will was all too familiar with this tactic--the Order was using the same potent, but fragile, invisibility spell that the Crown of Thorns had used a few weeks ago when she broke his ribs. In a flash he had his pistols aimed and fired off three rounds from each one into the nearest vampire. The silver rounds tore through it like super-heated rivets, but it was still on its feet and angry.

Must be a really tough one flashed through Will's mind as he put four more shots into it, which brought it down for good. Hawk and Marc joined the barrage while Jake watched their backs. In a heartbeat three more of the original six attacking vampires were laying in ruins on the floor. One of the two remaining cast a spell that filled the hallway with roiling black smoke. Visibility fell to arm's length, so the team instinctively huddled together.

"Angie!" Will shouted.

"I'm on it," Crow replied as she focused on casting her own spell. A moment later the air in the hall began to blow in a powerful wind, driving away the smoke. By the time the cloud was gone, there was no sign of the Order members.

"Everyone stay together!" commanded Will.

"They're a lot smarter than we were giving them credit for," Hawk observed.

"Yeah, like that's hard," Marc growled.

"You two can't track them when they're invisible?" Jake asked Crow and Cynthia. They both shook their heads.

"That's not good," said Hawk. "I say we find Nails and pull back before they--"

Bloodthirsty howls emanated from far down the hallway on one side, to be answered by similar cries from the opposite direction.

"How much ammo do we have?" Will asked.

"Enough," Marc replied as he loaded new shells out of his duffel bag into his shotgun. Marc was the one responsible for carrying extra gear and tools for the team into the field. When he said they had "enough," it typically meant "enough to take a small city."

The howls became sharp, rapid battle cries. Dark figures could be seen moving just beyond the reach of the team's lights.

“Big fight scene, take two,” quipped Jake.

Cynthia dropped her first force field and created another one that covered everyone except Jake. It wasn't a moment too soon: an instant later, a barrage of magical energy, fire, and lightning blasts assailed the team from both ends of the hallway. Most of them struck Cynthia's shield, damaging but not destroying it in a brilliant pyrotechnic display. The remaining shots missed the team entirely or struck Jake's armor, either dispersing on impact or defeating the armor's durability and leaving several pitted and melted spots.

The team was naturally only too happy to return fire. Jake laid down several long bursts that he swept back and forth across the hallway. Though it was impossible to tell if he had actually hit anything, the attacks from that direction immediately stopped.

The team members stopped firing to conserve ammunition and waited. A quick series of overly vile threats joined the other venomous shouts, then there was a stampede of footsteps as a sizable group of Order members rushed the Lonely Winds.

“Everybody ready!” Will ordered. Weapons and powers were given a final check and readied. In a heartbeat the team could see those at the front of the advancing group: three Order members in robes as black as midnight. Two of them were male and wore ornate gold necklaces, while the third was female and wore a similar necklace of a pale blue metal. Cynthia and Crow sensed a surge of magical energy from the vampire woman just before a massive wall of ice appeared out of nowhere, sealing off the hallway between the Order and the team.

“What the *hell*!?” cursed Marc.

“I don't like this,” Jake said while continually shifting his vision between the ice wall and his end of the hallway. “They worked hard to outflank us, and now they've cut off one-half of our possible courses.”

“Time to move, then,” Will said. Cynthia took the cue to drop the force field and the team began to shuffle down the corridor away from the wall.

“You realize, of course, this just means we're being herded into a trap,” Hawk said wryly.

Will grimaced. “It's still better than waiting around for whatever they were going to use to force--”

A sharp crack sounded just before the wall and something new appeared: a creature that looked like nothing so much as a roughly humanoid block of ice. Which, in fact, is exactly what it was.

“Oh, no,” said Jake.

The creature gave off a sound that might have been its equivalent to a vocalization, but more resembled thick ice cracking, then charged the team at a lumbering pace. The floor shook under its weight as it came toward them, still making the startling cracking noises.

“I got it,” Jake said sadly. Switching his armor's weaponry over to the plasma cannons, he fired a long salvo into the charging creature, which was quickly reduced to a great deal of steam, a very large puddle and some small bits and chunks of ice.

“Let's go before I have to do that again,” Jake pleaded.

“What's wrong?” asked Cynthia as the team began a steady jog down the hall. No one had the heart to explain to her what had just happened. The creature was an elemental, a supernatural spirit of a natural “element”--in this case, frozen water. Elementals by nature were inoffensive creatures, barely intelligent (at least by what most standards considered “intelligent”) and no more capable of having enemies than a breeze or a frozen lake. The ice elemental Jake had just killed had been at the behest of the elementalist that summoned it and while it had certainly been dangerous and hostile, Jake felt as though he had been forced to step on a small animal.

“Jake? Did you get the ones that were down this way?” Will asked.

“I'm not sure. I couldn't really tell--”

A curtain of angry red flames sprang into being directly in the team's path.

“--offhand I'd say it was a strong maybe.”

“Ok, we're trapped between fire and ice. That's our quota of hokey clichés for today,” Crow said.

“*Assess your situation, troops,*” warned George.

"Two barriers," Jake thought aloud. "The fire is more intimidating..."

"But the ice is the more difficult to pass," Will finished. "No time to lose. How deep is this fire?"

"It's not a problem. Stand back!" Jake said. He grabbed hold of a section of lockers that ran past the blaze and pulled, toppling it forward onto the wall to create a handy, if amazingly skuzzy, metal walkway. Jake seized the initiative in running atop the new bridge and gunning down another elemental, this one wearing a necklace of bright red metal, who was frantically trying to create another fire wall. The moment his shredded and bullet-riddled body went limp and began to fall, the blaze behind Jake flickered and dwindled into nothingness.

That mage, however, had friends. Two of them were on Jake in a flash. He retrained his guns and blasted one of them with a short burst at point blank range, but the other one reached him with a well-aimed punch to the chest. So great was the power of the blow that it shoved Jake backward four steps and left a shallow dent in his armor. The others were only just catching up to Jake's position, having been taken by surprise when the wall of fire suddenly ceased to exist.

"Careful!" he gasped in warning, but his voice was very weak from nearly having the wind knocked out of him by the punch. "That one's...strong!"

Marc gave the Order member in question a derisive look, casually aimed his shotgun at arm's length and pulled the trigger. The blast punctured a large and very gory hole in the vampire's gut, but he didn't even slow down. Genuinely surprised, Marc fired again as the vampire rushed him, this time into his upper torso. Another bloody wound resulted, and the impact was high enough to knock him off balance and onto his back. Hawk and Will fired short salvos into him to finish him off.

"Is it just me, or are these guys suddenly a lot tougher than they were a little while ago?" Will asked as he put a bullet through each eye of another vampire that was only just reaching the team.

"Yeah, stronger too," Jake remarked as he absently fingered the new dent in his armor. He took aim at an Order member that was keeping to the shadows a short jog away and fired off a quick burst. The rounds all impacted on some sort of invisible body armor, leaving the undead startled but unhurt.

"What the--? Dammit!" exclaimed Jake as he held down his remote's trigger. He didn't let up until the machine-gun fire had whittled down the magical armor and shredded the Order member.

"Anyone else starting to find these guys really annoying? Incoming!" Jake said. The team members all ducked as a poorly aimed fireball sailed over their heads.

"Keep moving!" Hawk shouted as he returned fire.

"What's the plan?" Jake asked between bursts.

"We stay on track," explained Will. The nearest group of cult members had been dealt with, albeit at the cost of more ammunition than was usual. The ice wall down the other way suddenly crumbled into eldritch motes of light that quickly vanished into nothing. Behind it, the water elemental and her companions stood, assessing the situation at a distance.

"They seem to be operating in small groups," Will continued as the team ran toward the back of the building. "I don't think they were expecting us to put up so much resistance. They're trying to trap us using barriers of their creation rather than existing ones, so if we stay on the move--"

--then they won't be able to attack us on their terms," Hawk finished. "How're we on pursuit?"

"I've got motion behind us at a slow but steady pace. Expediency may be prudent," Jake reported.

"Huh?" said Marc.

"Run like hell!" explained Crow.

No other Order members appeared to challenge the team's progress, while the ones behind them seemed to be making no real effort to catch up. Presently the team came to the back of the school, where the hallway branched off to the left and right. A broad staircase led the way to the upper floors.

"Which way do we take?" Cynthia wondered aloud.

"Head upward," Will said. "I'm guessing that if they have a central base, it will be away from the ground floor."

"You realize, of course, that the closer we get to anything important to them, the more of a fight they'll put up," said Jake.

"Good!" laughed Marc as he cocked his shotgun.

“All right. Scanners ready, heavy hitters first,” said Will. Jake and Marc led the way up the stairs, with Will covering the back. A horrendous memory struck him like a ton of bricks and he stumbled on an early step.

“Will? You ok?” Crow asked.

“I’m fine!” Will insisted as he picked up his guns. “Keep going!”

Nails landed with a crash on a chair, crushing it into firewood beneath his weight. He was back on his feet in the blink of an eye. His hair was mussed, his clothing torn and covered in blood. The chain still clutched in his fist was several links shorter, dented in many places and spattered with blood.

The twins were looking a little worse for wear as well. Hammer had a nasty gash in the middle of a huge bruise on the left side of his face. Anvil had several more sets of burned flesh gouged across his torso. Both twins’ clothing was ruffled, torn, filthy and covered in blood.

“Who’s ready for round two?” Nails said through clenched teeth.

“Just give up already!” Anvil growled. “You can’t win.”

“Funny, I seem to be holding my own!” Nails nearly shouted as he lunged forward and snapped the chain like a whip. Anvil ducked just in time as the heavy links cracked with a nearly deafening sound in the space where his head had been.

Hammer was already on the move. He reached the end of a table, flipping it up to stand on end and slowly topple forward. It happened to be the table on which rested the body of the girl Nails had tried to help. The chains around her ankles held her legs against the tabletop and acted as a pivoting point, while to Nails’ horror her unsupported upper body listed forward. In a flash he was there, cradling her gently with one arm while stopping the table’s fall with the other. Carefully he laid her down on the hardwood floor. Then he picked up the heavy table, shook its legs free of the chains and held it vertically above his head at arm’s length.

“Your table is ready!” he shouted as he brought the table crashing down toward Hammer. The vampire warrior was barely able to get out of the way before it struck the floor with a horrendous crack and broke into several large pieces. Nails’ chain followed quickly behind and caught Hammer in the head again, tearing open a second gash along his temple.

“You want some too?” Nails shouted at Anvil, who was visibly fuming over this treatment of his sibling. With a snarl Anvil leapt the twenty pace distance to Nails, catching the chain with one hand as it was lashed at him in mid-air. As he landed he broke off a sizable length of the improvised weapon and tossed it away contemptuously.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a bad-ass. There’s only one thing I want to know,” Nails said dismissively.

Anvil came at Nails with three quick punches: a left hook, a right cross, a left uppercut. Nails took the hits, mighty blows that would each cause great injury in a normal person, while wrapping what was left of the chain around Anvil’s neck and under his right arm with blinding speed. He hauled the pugilist forward, bringing them eye-to-eye and interrupting another punch.

“Can you fly?!” snapped Nails as he lifted off, taking the struggling Order enforcer with him.

“Trevor!” Hammer called after them helplessly.

Nails stopped just beneath the girders and rafters of the ceiling, three stories high. Anvil snarled, swore and struggled, but he was held tight in the chain’s crushing grip. Nails head-butted him once, then tipped forward and let them both fall.

“Kiss your ass goodbye!” Nails said just before they landed in the remains of the broken table with a crash of wood and undead bone.

“Ah, that’s better! Nails chuckled as he hopped back onto his feet. He pulled his chain out from under Anvil, who was still lying on his back, hurt and badly stunned. “All I needed to start kicking ass again was a--”

In a blur Hammer was charging Nails again, wailing in fury for his crippled brother.

Nails was ready for him. He snapped his chain in Hammer’s path, expecting him to stop or change course, but to Nails’ surprise the vampire warrior took the blow dead in the chest as he came on, swinging his sledge and screaming like a madman. Nails improvised by stepping inside the arc of the hammer’s

head again. This time, instead of just letting the handle hit him, he brought his elbow up to meet it with a crushing blow of his own. Angel joint met treated wood just a few inches below the sledge's head and the high-quality but well-worn handle broke with a tremendous *crack*. The severed hammer's head came free and shot past Nails' back. With amazing deftness he twisted in place and grabbed the remains of the handle still attached to the head.

"Thanks!" Nails quipped as he launched into a twisting leap that brought him spiraling down where Anvil lay. Anvil cried out and raised his hands helplessly just before Nails brought the sledge-head down on his skull.

Hammer let out an inarticulate cry and rushed Nails again. He caught the angel in the small of the back with a full-body tackle that sent them both sprawling on the floor amidst the shattered remains of the table. Too blinded by rage to fight to the best of his ability, Hammer simply grabbed Nails by the collar and began to beat him with his broken sledge handle. Nails responded by kicking Hammer in the gut as hard as he could, sending the enforcer flying backward in a low arc to crash into a couple of chairs twenty feet away.

"I finally figured it out," Nails said calmly as he kicked up onto his feet. "I kept wondering why you two were so able to beat the daylights out of me. I mean, hey, I know I'm not the best fighter around, but I should have at least been able to hold my own."

Nails casually dusted himself off as he spoke. Hammer had clambered to his feet and grabbed a nearby candle stand, brandishing it like a spear. Nails rambled on as though unaware of the danger.

"At first I thought it was just me. You know, a guy named 'Nails' fighting another guy with a big hammer. The symbolism wasn't lost on me, you know. Then I ran in here and remembered what I was fighting for."

Hammer rushed Nails yet again, running so fast that the flames on the stand's five candles blew out. At the last instant, Nails turned and caught the black iron stand in one hand and Hammer's throat in the other, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"You bastard!" Hammer choked around Nails' iron grip. "You killed my brother!"

"Your brother?" Nails screamed. He lifted Hammer above his head and hurled him to the floor. "Talk to me about killing!" he shouted as he cut short Hammer's attempt to stand by bashing him in the head with the candle stand. "Tell me about causing pain! Tell me about what you did to *all these people!*"

Over and over again the wrought iron candle holder rose and fell in a black blur. When Nails finally regained hold of his temper, the metal was completely bent out of shape and soaked in dark blood. Absently, he let both it and the chain fall to the floor. Both objects had impressions of his fingers pressed into them.

"This has been a rough day," Nails said to himself. Quickly he went to each table to check on the person there. Every last one of them was dead. Nails was quiet for a moment as a gesture of respect, then took a look around. A staked vampire that looked much like the one that had escaped him in the alley was bizarrely posed in a chair at one of the tables, but otherwise the room had no notable features. Nails knew that these people had been used as food by the Order, but where had they all come from? Either the Moonless Night had grabbed everyone here off the streets at dinnertime, or...

Working on a hunch Nails grabbed a second candelabra and ran to the doors of the locker rooms near the back of the gymnasium. He pulled one open and was greeted by a cacophony of mewling cries and terrified shouts as the light of the five wicks unveiled a grim scene.

The room had been completely cleared of lockers, benches, and anything else that it might have once contained. It was now filled from wall to wall with rows of people, manacled and held in kneeling positions by a series of long chains run through rings bolted to the floor. Most of the people were homeless, judging by their clothing and appearance, but some of them looked to have been taken right out of their daily lives and brought directly here. They all clenched their eyes and shied away from the light after being trapped in darkness for so long. Many of them, men and women, began to scream at the presence of a perceived tormentor.

"Hey, hey, no! Wait! I'm here to help!" Nails said quickly. He set the stand down and began to break the chains where they were anchored at one end. When that was done, he ran to the other end and

hauled the chains free of the securing rings and manacles, freeing the prisoners.

“Everybody outside! Go for help!” he ordered. Many of the people immediately mobbed out of the locker room, but some were too afraid, confused, or disoriented to run. Nails decided that they were safe enough to leave to their own devices and went to investigate the other locker room. It was an identical setup, but many of the manacles were empty and there were several large bloodstains on the floor. Once everyone was free, Nails waited until all of them had found the exits before moving on, repeatedly asking them as they left to send the authorities.

Although he didn’t quite understand why at the time, Nails felt compelled to take the ornate ring that he had seen on Hammer’s right hand. He found a similar one when he stripped off Anvil’s gauntlets and pocketed them both. Then he was out the door as fast as he could go to search for the others.

“Report!” Gabriel demanded the instant Todd came through the door. Of over forty original Order members in the cell, only thirteen remained. They had gathered in a third floor classroom to regroup and assess their situation. Gabriel and to a lesser degree, Lord Geoffrey had been confident that the elementalists and their summoned creatures would make short work of the intruders. The mortals’ capacity to quickly deal with the Order’s tactics and the subsequent destruction of fighter after fighter had completely taken the survivors aback.

“The mortals have moved into the east wing of the second floor,” Todd reported. “The last attacking squad was completely lost. The mortals have suffered no casualties.”

“What of my men?” Lord Geoffrey asked with rare overt anxiety.

Todd hesitated briefly before answering. “They both fell in the dining hall. The food in the pens has escaped.”

The silence that followed in the wake of Todd’s report was deafening. It was finally broken by the sound of Lord Geoffrey’s furious cry, accompanied by the sound of him easily hefting an old teacher’s desk and hurling it against a far wall. “You *fool!*” he screamed at Gabriel. “Do you see what you’ve done? You’ve brought hunters here, ones able to take advantage of our weakness. We have to flee while we still can.”

“I will not flee from such rabble!” Gabriel raved with fire in his eyes. “I will lead the way to their defeat myself, and *you* will follow.”

“Follow?” Lord Geoffrey half-shouted. “I have no warriors left, fool! Because of you, even my bodyguards of *eighty years* are lost! Only my musicians are left.”

“They will be more than enough,” Gabriel sneered. “You *will* bring them forth into battle. Afterward I will demonstrate the displeasure of the Order of the Moonless Night on you for your failure.”

“Very well,” bristled Lord Geoffrey. “Lead the way, *Grand Inquisitor.*”

Gabriel huffed proudly and stormed out, followed closely by Todd and his wordless bodyguard.

“Alloria,” Lord Geoffrey whispered to the player of the clay fish-flute as he and the other musicians filed out of the room, “I fear that once the battle is joined, there will be fire in our citadel.”

Alloria and the others nodded quietly in understanding. They and Lord Geoffrey followed Gabriel the rest of the way without another word.

“I’ve got one up ahead,” Cynthia said as the team approached a four-way intersection.

“How many?” asked Will. It had been almost ten minutes since the team had seen any Order members. Will was beginning to suspect something was up.

“Just the one,” replied Cynthia. Sure enough, the team’s lights quickly fell upon a lone vampire standing expectantly in the middle of the hall. He wore elaborate black robes trimmed in red. When he spoke, his voice was familiar.

“I am Gabriel, Grand Inquisitor and Authority Most High of the Order of the Moonless Night. Surrender yourselves to judgment by your superiors.”

“Déjà vu, anyone?” Jake said.

“Not this guy again,” Hawk complained. “A hundred chips to whoever puts a bullet between his eyes!”

Gabriel grinned, revealing polished fangs, and waved a hand as a signal. Behind him, Todd, Lord Geoffrey and the nine musicians melted into view out of thin air.

“These guys sure love their invisibility spells, don’t they?” said Crow derisively.

“Not enough to use them right,” chuckled Marc.

“Oh, Thud!” Gabriel said.

“Thud?” asked Will. The other Lonely Winds shrugged.

Gabriel’s bodyguard suddenly appeared right in the midst of the team, towering above them all. With one enormous hand he grasped Will around the head and lifted him up off the floor like a small child.

“I’m Thud,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Son of a bitch!” Marc shouted as he raised his shotgun. Thud backhanded him across the face with his free fist, hurtling him back against a wall. The rough-and-ready warrior toppled onto the floor, unconscious.

Will struggled and kicked frantically as Hawk raised his assault rifle. Thud slapped it out of his hands, sending it spinning down the hall to be lost in the darkness. Without missing a beat Hawk drew his combat knives and stabbed one to the hilt in the arm that held Will. Thud didn’t even flinch.

“Heads down!” Jake shouted as he trained his guns on Thud. The others dove for cover as he pulled his remote’s trigger. The dual machine-guns on his armor roared as round after round tore into Thud’s torso. Enough firepower to kill a handful of normal people punched bloody holes in Thud’s chest, but that still didn’t even slow him down enough to allow Jake to dodge the retaliatory punch that propelled him twenty paces down the hall. On the plus side, Thud dropped Will, who landed on all fours, gasping for breath.

Crow was quick to continue the attack. She cast a spell that subtly altered the properties of the linoleum in a circle around Thud, turning it into a powerful adhesive. Hawk and Cynthia actually cheered when Thud tried to move and his boots held fast, but the cheers died when the brute hauled his foot upward and the linoleum tiles beneath his feet cracked and came free of the floor in sizable pieces.

Gabriel stood by throughout the melee, grinning smugly. When Thud’s feet became stuck to the floor, Gabriel looked over his shoulder at Lord Geoffrey. “Attack, now!” he ordered.

He turned back to watch the fight and waited. When no one rushed past him he turned and saw Lord Geoffrey’s attendants vanishing into darkness under the influence of magic.

“What is the meaning of this?” he screamed.

“Think of it as my way of making changes in the chain of command,” Lord Geoffrey said with a wink as he faded from sight.

“What are you looking at? Go to his aid!” Gabriel shouted and shoved Todd, who had been staring blankly at Gabriel. Todd pulled a stiletto from the folds of his robes and rushed to help Thud.

Thud, for his part, was holding his own very well. Marc was still unconscious, Jake just beginning to pick himself up off the floor and Will still woozy from an almost literally bone-crushing grip. Hawk was doing his best to hold the brute at bay with his remaining combat knife, but he was barely managing to stay out of reach.

Cynthia created a force field around Hawk just as a ham-like fist came down at him, deflecting the blow at the last instant. She and Crow raised their pistols and fired simultaneously, putting a total of four rounds in the brute’s massive shoulder. Thud let out a sound that was less a shout than a roar as he picked up a nearby cluster of five lockers and hurled it at the two women. Cynthia instinctively created a second force field that stopped the lockers’ fall, but the metal structure remained leaning against the field, obscuring Crow and Cynthia’s view of the fight and leaning at such an angle that canceling the field would have brought the cluster down on their heads. Thud turned back toward Hawk and made a show of pulling the knife out of his arm.

“The Moonless Night will last forever,” he drawled and raised the knife dramatically above his head as though he planned to drive it straight through the force field and strike Hawk dead with it.

He never got the chance to try. A shot rang out in the hall and Thud dropped the knife, which stuck upright in the ruined floor. A sizable hole had been shot through Thud’s forearm, the edges charred

black with a few tiny ridges of flesh that still glowed white hot.

Will stood a few feet away with his pistols trained on the giant. “You remind me of another ‘monster’ I met a few weeks ago,” he said. “He didn’t care for my marksmanship and choice of armaments either. Excuse me, there’s another issue I need to take care of.”

Todd had been sneaking up behind Will and attacked him by clumsily lunging out of the shadows with his stiletto outstretched. Will crouched and turned at the same time, twisting in place so that Todd actually tumbled over him and ended up sprawled on his back on the floor. Without batting an eye Will stood again, lowered a pistol and blew a huge smoking hole through Todd’s skull.

“Now we can get back to business,” Will said smoothly.

The cluster of lockers settled upright with a loud rattle as Cynthia shoved it telekinetically. She dropped her force field so that she and Crow could rejoin the fight by flanking the lockers. Jake joined them and startled them badly by doing so: running out of an unlit hallway clad in a black armored robotic exoskeleton and kicking over a battered cluster of lockers in the middle of a gunfight will do that. He was carrying Hawk’s rifle, which he tossed past the stunned Thud to its owner. The vampire was now surrounded on all sides by angry and well-armed monster hunters.

“Payback time!” Jake said triumphantly.

Thud looked to his master for help, but Gabriel was gone. The Lonely Winds took aim as Thud stared in disbelief down the now empty hallway. “The Moonless Night will last forever!” he bellowed in defiance just before the team opened fire. High silver-content rounds, machine-gun fire and a variety of ammunition of differing calibers burned, bored, and punched until there was very little left of Thud above his floating ribs. His remains had scarcely hit the floor before Will was moving to check on Marc.

“Hawk, Jake, watch our perimeter!” he said. “Crow, with me!”

“How is he, Will?” George asked.

“He took a nasty blow to the head, but I think he’ll be all right,” replied Will.

“Does he need to be taken out of here? We don’t know how many of them there still are,” Crow warned.

Hawk kept both his gaze and his rifle on the section of hall where Gabriel and the others had appeared only moments before. “I counted eleven, plus the runt that Will brought down. Think they’re gonna pull that ‘now you see me, now you don’t’ crap again?”

“Good question. Cynthia, keep your invisible walls around us, in case--” Will stopped and looked around. “Cynthia?”

There was no sign of her. A palpable aura of dread fell across the team as the similarity of the situation to one that occurred almost two years before settled in. Will stood and stared into empty space.

“Will?” asked Jake carefully. “Buddy? Are you ok?”

Will’s brow was furrowed, his teeth clenched. “Why, that little...”

Cynthia ran as fast as she could down the dark hallway. Her flashlight, clasped tightly in one hand, threw light crazily over the walls and floor as she chased after the fleeing Order leader.

Just before Thud had been destroyed, no one but Cynthia had noticed Gabriel turning and fleeing into the darkness. She had been about to mention it to the others when Will had reminded them that Marc needed medical attention. Cynthia knew that she didn’t have enough first aid training yet to really help with Marc, but she was the single most qualified member of the team to track the fleeing vampire. If she could find whatever headquarters the cult members kept running back to then she could lead the team back to it, rather than the tedious searching of room after room that was taking half the night. The only issue had been her certainty that George would chastise her through the Jakecams™ the moment she broke ranks. She had solved the problem by switching off the tiny camera as she began her chase.

Now she hurried down corridor after corridor in pursuit of the single supernatural blip on her psychic radar. Even after weeks of getting into shape it was all she could do to keep up with the fleeing signal, which constantly threatened to move beyond her sensing range.

At length she followed it to a flight of stairs and up to the third floor. The new hall looked like all the others, but something about this one felt...wrong. Up ahead was a region that almost resonated with a

taint that Cynthia could feel--not the stain of the supernatural, but the emotional mark of a traumatic past event.

Unconsciously Cynthia slowed her pace as the strange spot came closer. It was marked not only by strong emotion, but the residue of powerful magic and psionics as well. Presently she reached the spot and saw that it was the interior of a classroom with its door standing open.

Cynthia's natural curiosity took hold. She forgot the chase as she stepped through the door and looked around. Immediately to her right was the front wall of the classroom, cinderblock like the others, but with an enormous hole broken through it. On the floor were cinderblock chunks and rubble along with the strewn shards of the shattered chalkboard. There was no furniture left in the room, but a single enormous dark stain covered the floor near the center. Almost directly across from the door, a huge area of the floor and wall were charred black. At once intrigued and shocked, Cynthia succumbed to her inquisitive nature, tapped into the psychic residue of the room with her mind and saw the it as it had been nineteen months before.

The room, though still shrouded in night, was now brighter, lit by the shine of both moons on a clear evening. The scorch marks, broken chalkboard and hole in the wall were gone, leaving an empty and dirty but intact classroom. In fact, the only thing that was out of place was the corpse of the blond woman lying in a pool of her own blood in the middle of the floor. Cynthia knew with horrible certainty what she was witnessing now.

Somewhere nearby a familiar voice frantically called a name: "Tina!" and racing footsteps approached. Cynthia's heart broke when she saw Will charge through the door of the room only to stop dead at the sight of his beloved lying on the floor. He trembled, his hands shook until he dropped his guns and he stared helplessly at the horror before him.

Tears flooded Cynthia's eyes as she lived Will's worst moment with him. Shock followed sorrow as the room's door was thrown closed with tremendous force by a street-clothed vampire that had been hiding behind it, who tackled Will and threw him to the floor. Cynthia didn't even try to stifle her gasp as the monster pinned Will to the floor and began to throttle him. Two other vampires crept from their hiding places in the shadows, grinning sadistically as Will shrieked with the last of the air in his lungs. Cynthia looked away, unable to take the horror and suspense.

That was when the most dreadful, vicious battle cry she had ever heard split the air. Cynthia was so startled that she actually stumbled and fell. Her reflexive glance toward the furious cry revealed that the vampire gang had been frightened too, recoiling together from the source of the sound. Will lay on the floor forgotten by his tormentors and unconscious, though from shock or strangulation Cynthia couldn't tell. But by far the most surprising thing was the source of the war cry itself.

It was George.

He was dressed haphazardly as usual, in polka-dot pajama bottoms and a pinstriped button-down shirt. His eyes were full of fire and his face was so twisted by rage that he was almost unrecognizable. With a second, deafeningly loud shout of fury he leapt at the nearest vampire, grabbed him by the neck with one hand and hurled him against the chalkboard. The dusty slab shattered and the shards clattered to the floor in an avalanche of slate even as the stunned vampire settled to his feet.

"You're *dead*, you old--" one of the others began. His threat was cut off as George dealt him a punch to his mouth that shattered half of his teeth. He had only begun to scream when George seized him by the shirt collar and with authoritative ease flung him right into his friend, who had been leaning against the wall, trying to shake the stars from his vision. Cynthia shook her head in disbelief as the man she knew to be a gentle, doting eccentric rushed the stunned pair of vampires and punched the one in front so hard that both of them were slammed back against the wall again. It took Cynthia several seconds to realize that George had not punched the first vampire, he had punched *through* him. His forearm was embedded in the undead's gut up to his elbow with his fist buried just beneath the heart of the second bloodsucker. Both vampires screamed and struggled to free themselves, but for all their efforts did they might have been struggling under the weight of a tank.

George shouted again, another eardrum-shattering war cry in a language Cynthia had never heard.

He leaned forward and set his feet as though to push a heavy weight. With his free hand he forced the first vampire's head back against the wall. Impossibly, the exposed cinderblocks directly behind George's buried fist began to crack and crumble, then collapsed with a great crash. George and the two vampires toppled through the newly-made opening and out of Cynthia's sight, but she could still hear the horrific sounds of what was happening in the next room: George raving in the strange language, at once beautiful in the enunciation and grotesque in the anger he spoke through it, the tortured cries of one of the vampires and vile, wet crushing and tearing noises. Abruptly all three sounds stopped and an eerie silence filled the suddenly-still rooms.

The last remaining vampire stood dumbstruck, watching the scene with a mixture of awe, confusion and terror, much as Cynthia did. When George suddenly stepped back through the hole in the wall, both vampire and psychic unconsciously took several steps back. The gentle, compassionate old man was drenched in blood from his shoulders down. He stopped in front of the door and watched the cringing vampire backing away until he bumped up against the wall behind himself.

"You!" George said. His voice almost resonated with his rage. "Burn!"

The vampire's torn and ragged street clothing burst into bright flames, engulfing him in a roaring fireball. Cynthia felt the surge of magic that began the blaze, as well as the following wave of magical force that slammed the creature backward against the wall and held him there, screaming as he burned. George's will held him as the fire burned high and bright, until the floor and walls were scorched black and the monster was reduced to a brittle crust of ash on the floor.

Even though she knew she was only witnessing a memory, Cynthia found herself slowly backing away from the hideous scene. George held perfectly still, staring daggers at the smoldering remains of the vampire. Will finally stirred where he lay on the floor, gasping for air and struggling to sit up.

"George?" he said in confusion as his eyes fell upon the bizarre visage of the old man in his mismatched, blood-soaked clothing. Realization struck him and he twisted and turned on the floor, looking for Tina. Cynthia's heart broke again as she watched Will, who was still gasping for breath and half-conscious, crawl on his hands and knees to Tina's side. He wept as he cradled her body in his arms, her blood soaking his clothing, and Cynthia wept with him. From somewhere far away down the hall Jake and Hawk's voices echoed, calling for Will and Tina. When Cynthia looked toward the door, George was gone. Moments later Jake leaned through the door and his jaw dropped. The vision quickly began to fade as Jake ran into the room, shouting something that dwindled to inaudible as the moonlight dimmed to the darkness of the present and Cynthia was alone again. She sank to the floor, wrapped her arms around her legs and continued to cry softly.

Chapter V
Until the Next Sunset

“Where the *hell* is she?” Will snapped. The team had added finding Cynthia and Nails to their priorities as they worked their way through the school, making their progress even more agonizingly slow. They had seen nothing hostile since the battle with Thud. Combat tension turned more into anxiety and frustration with every passing moment.

“*If I knew, I would tell you,*” George said sharply, clearly feeling a bit on edge himself.

“You did a fine job keeping an eye on her camera,” Will said harshly.

“*I was worried about Marc at the time, William!*” George shot back. Marc shook his head, which was wrapped with a single bandage like a headband. He had come to after only a few moments. Despite a nasty cut and a bad headache, he was both medically fine and ready for more action.

“*Gentlemen, such harsh words will not help.*” Sullivan’s gentle input in the conversation surprised several of the team members. True to her nature, she had been so quiet through the evening that they hadn’t even been sure if she was watching. “*Find your missing companions and finish your tasks. There will be plenty of time for finger-pointing and recrimination later.*”

“*You’re right, of course, Sullivan. My apologies, Will,*” George said.

“Likewise,” Will said without breaking stride.

“Let me take this chance to suggest a different strategy,” said Jake. The team halted to listen to what he had to say.

“I’ve noticed that the Order has a habit of getting the drop on us from above,” he explained. “Being on balconies, dropping through ceilings. Add to that the fact that we haven’t seen any sign of, er, living quarters on these first two floors, and I’m thinking that their real base of operations is probably on the top floor somewhere.”

“Good thinking, Jake,” Will said. Crow subtly watched his face for any sign of distress. Back at the Mansion, George and Sullivan did the same, carefully scrutinizing Will through the others’ cameras.

“We go up the next staircase,” Will continued, “but keep your guard up. If we do find their main sanctum, we’ll also run into more resistance than anywhere else.”

The group formed ranks, marching forward in twos. Each of them was ready for the fight of their lives, should it come to that. Still, Crow managed to keep an eye on Will as they moved ever closer to the scene of the most traumatic experience of his life.

Lord Geoffrey stood at the western edge of the school’s rooftop, facing out toward the bay. His night vision allowed him to gaze at the sea through the gaps between the buildings of Ylelon’s skyline. An icy ocean wind that would chill the most stalwart soul blew across the roof, but it hadn’t the slightest effect on Lord Geoffrey.

The vampire aristocrat smiled to himself. After days of tolerating the fool Gabriel’s nonsense, things had taken an interesting, if dramatic, turn. This seeming disaster could be turned to Lord Geoffrey’s advantage if he acted quickly and decisively. Acting on Lord Geoffrey’s orders, his nine musicians had split into three predetermined groups and gone about selected tasks. The first group went to the fourth floor classroom where Lord Geoffrey’s paintings and personal belongings were kept and began to pack, roll, and tie the possessions with tremendous efficacy. Once this was done they rushed everything to a lot behind the school where an unmarked box truck waited. The second group did the same with the cell’s blood shrine, quickly packing the small items and hefting the stone bowl and altar and porting them all to the truck. The third team stole to Gabriel’s quarters in the old principle’s office. They ransacked it, smashing or crushing everything that could not simply be thrown in a pile and burned. In this way the nine undead artisans removed or destroyed much of the evidence of the Order’s presence. A great deal more was left: the furnishings of the dining hall and pens; the odd belonging in this or that Order member’s room; and by far the worst, the numerous burned, mangled, and mutilated bodies of their fallen comrades. Still, to a society and world that knew nothing of the Moonless Night and did not even accept the existence of vampires those things would all be little more than forensic curiosities, and that was

assuming that the second part of Lord Geoffrey's contingency plan did not do its work as well.

As he stood reminiscing, Alloria quietly approached him from behind. "Everything is prepared, Lord Geoffrey," she said.

"Good," the aristocrat affirmed without taking his eyes off of the sea. "Very good."

"What will we do now, my Lord?" Alloria asked.

"We will return to the monastery. There I will explain to the Ancients that it was Gabriel's error that led to this catastrophe."

"Will the Ancients believe that? Gabriel's rank--"

"Is immaterial, Alloria. The mere fact that we few will be returning...and I, without my loyal protectors of many years...will be compelling enough. In truth, this disaster can be turned to our advantage."

Alloria crooked her head. "How?"

Lord Geoffrey smiled again, but it was a bitter, mirthless smile. "We know now that Ylelon is perilous. As much as there is for us to gain by building power here, there is also threat. There are hunters here, capable ones. We shall return, and when we do we will be far better prepared."

Lord Geoffrey turned and laid a hand on Alloria's shoulder. "Go and tell the others to be ready. I'll be down shortly."

Alloria bowed and hurried away. Lord Geoffrey returned to his silent vigil for a few moments, then sighed softly. Taking a broach-like weave of gold set with a large cabochon red gem from within his robes, he pressed his thumb against the gem and channeled a tiny amount of magical power into it. Like a remote, the odd piece of jewelry sent out a signal that was broadcast all over the school. The receiving objects were scores upon scores of hollowed, cleaned and polished jerud skulls that were carefully hidden in lockers, atop ceiling tiles, and in other innocuous places. Although morbid, the skulls would appear harmless enough, but they had been enchanted with a potent spell that reacted once the signal was received. As one, the skulls all began to glow from within, beams of fiery light shining out of their eye sockets, noses, and between the teeth of their lifeless jaws.

His work done, Lord Geoffrey took one step forward, right off the roof. He very nonchalantly fell four stories and landed gracefully on both feet, facing a small side street. As regally and poised as ever he walked toward the waiting truck, as the many hidden skulls within the school slowly but steadily glowed ever brighter.

Cynthia only cried for a few minutes after the vision faded. The tears stopped, but she remained huddled against the wall of the ruined room, lost in thought. It was only a few minutes more until she felt the approach of the same supernatural presence she had been pursuing before, coming at a brisk pace from the direction it had originally run. Soon Grand Inquisitor Gabriel loomed in the doorway.

"There you are," he said and stormed across the room to stand menacingly over her. "I wondered what had become of the one foolish enough to follow me."

Cynthia didn't answer him or even look up. She stayed huddled on the floor, giving no outward sign that she even knew he was there.

"What's the matter? Finally come to your limited senses?" Gabriel prattled on, apparently unaware that he was being ignored. "Did your feeble intellect finally grasp that you cannot hope to defeat me?"

Cynthia rolled her eyes upward to look at him, but did not otherwise move.

"What are you waiting for?" Gabriel demanded. "Get on your feet, trollop! Have the dignity to greet death on your feet, if you can."

Slowly, Cynthia stood up and faced Gabriel. Their eyes met, but Cynthia's gaze was empty and her expression blank.

Gabriel only sneered. "Of course, you have the same intellect as any other mortal--that of cattle. Do you even have the wit to fear for yourself? Haven't you anything to say, harlot?"

Cynthia's expression darkened, her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "I'm rubber and you're glue," she said an instant before a storm of chalkboard shards rose from the floor and hurled at Gabriel in

quick succession. Many of them missed, but enough of them grazed or struck him directly to distract him, causing him to flinch and stagger away from Cynthia.

"Parlor tricks!" he said through clenched fangs as he snatched one of the larger shards out of the air. He threw it at Cynthia side-armed, and though it broke harmlessly on her flak jacket she still jumped back and shielded her face with her arms.

When Cynthia looked at him again, he was standing with his arms crossed, sneering. As she watched, strange shapes began to appear in the air around him, wispy clots of shadow in the forms of skulls, miniature animals, and other, less recognizable shapes. Soon there were dozens, then scores of the shapes of darkness, each of them flying at blinding speed in its own orbit around Gabriel. Each shadow produced a unique sound according to its form, the animals in their own cries, people shrieking in misery, skulls wailing like the damned.

"Because of you and your cohorts, my own underlings have betrayed me!" Gabriel was forced to shout to be heard over his own shadow play. "You will all suffer for this outrage! I will personally tear you limb from limb before I do the same to that traitor Geoffrey. The Moonless Night will fall upon this land, and you, little whore, will be the first to suffer!"

Why do I always get the egotistical weirdoes that won't shut up? Cynthia thought as she threw the most powerful mental blast she could muster at Gabriel. The raving inquisitor was thrown backward as if he had been bodily tackled. His bizarre shadow display traveled with him as though physically attached to him.

"You *bitch!*" he screamed as he picked himself up off the floor, "do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you for that?"

As if on cue, Nails came flying through the open door. He raced up behind Gabriel, spun on his axis and dealt Gabriel a kick from behind that sent him hurtling across the room to slam against the back wall.

"Is it anything like that?" he quipped.

"Nails?" asked Cynthia. Her expression had gone from her unique blank concentration to surprise.

"Hiya, gorgeous!" replied Nails. He took a moment to look around. "Where's everybody else?"

Cynthia blushed. "Um...we sort of got separated."

"Huh. At least I found you. I could hear this freak's sound system all the way down the--"

Gabriel dashed the full length of the room in the blink of an eye and tackled Nails, slamming him against the chalkboard wall hard enough to make half of the room tremble. Gabriel continued the assault with a flurry of untrained punches to Nails' head and torso, one that was abruptly ended when Nails kicked Gabriel squarely in the stomach, forcing him back several steps.

"You're stronger than you look," Nails observed, "not that that's saying much."

Gabriel clenched his fists and bared his teeth. "I don't know what trick brought you here, construct, but I intend to make an example of you."

A slender finger tapped Gabriel on his left shoulder. When he turned Cynthia hit him dead in the face with a mental blast. More controlled and less powerful than the previous attack, it was still potent enough to knock Gabriel off his feet and break half of his teeth. Tiny bits of his fangs rained down on the floor.

"Wow! Remind me never to piss you off!" Nails chuckled. "Is that the same thing you hit me with during practice, or--"

Cynthia shrieked as though a white-hot needle had been plunged into her heart. She collapsed and lay thrashing and screaming on the floor. Nails rushed to her side but was at a loss as to how to help her.

"Cynthia? What's--"

So quickly that even Nails was caught off guard Gabriel lurched to his feet and seized the stunned warrior by the throat. The Inquisitor's free hand was surrounded by a nimbus of deep red flame.

"First lesson: never let your guard down," Gabriel said coldly and bashed Nails in the face with his flaming fist. Nails flew backward and slammed against the wall and its large window frame, shattering what few panes were left. Gabriel reached down and picked up Cynthia by her hair. He held her at arm's length as she screamed and fought to escape an agony that had no visible cause.

“Second lesson: no matter the parlor tricks a mortal may use, they still crumble under a little simple pain,” Gabriel said with unbearable pomp. “Oh, and third lesson: vampires are your superiors. You cannot stand against us.”

Nails rushed forward and hammered a fist down into the inside of Gabriel’s elbow. Cynthia landed on the floor right about the time Nails swung at Gabriel’s face with all his might. What was left of Gabriel’s head smacked against a wall with a gross sound and tumbled to the floor. After a few violent twitches, his body did the same.

“Thanks for the lessons,” said Nails as he knelt at Cynthia’s side again. “Cynthia? Can you hear me? Are you ok?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, “I’m all right. It stopped when you killed him.”

“What happened? He never laid a finger on you!”

“It was magic,” Cynthia said quietly as Nails helped her to her feet. “I...I felt the spell coming, and I tried to fight it off, but then it had me before I knew it, the world went red...”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” said Nails. “As long as the pain’s gone, that’s what’s important, right?”

“Yeah...” Cynthia looked at what was left of Gabriel. “Man, you were really mad!”

“Oh, that?” Nails said modestly. “I just got an eyeful of what these bastards do to people. Plus, watching him hold you up by your hair made me kind of cranky.” As he spoke, Nails stooped and pulled the onyx ring from Gabriel’s finger and dropped it in a pocket.

“Did he do that?” Cynthia asked absently. She was trembling slightly. “I couldn’t really tell...I’m ok now, though. Really. C’mon, let’s go find the others!”

“Ok. Hey, wait a minute! You still have your camera!” Nails pointed out as the two of them jogged out of the room and down the hallway. “Hey, George! You there?”

Cynthia blushed again. “It’s, um, not on.” She reached up and flicked the switch on her Jakecam™ without breaking stride. Almost instantly George’s frantic voice blared out of the camera’s tiny speaker.

“Cynthia? What happened? Where are you? Are you all right? Why did you turn off your Jakecam™? How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?”

“I’m fine, George,” replied Cynthia distantly.

“I’m here too, chief,” said Nails. “Where’s everyone else?”

“On the third floor in the east wing, looking for you. Where are you?”

Nails looked around as they ran. “I’m not really sure. We’re on the third floor, somewhere...”

“We’ll find them,” Cynthia said, cutting Nails off.

In four minutes flat Cynthia and Nails had found their way to within shouting distance of the others. By that time, the array of Lord Geoffrey’s skulls all around the school were emitting almost blindingly bright red light and many were leaking twin trails of smoke from their eye sockets.

Nails and Cynthia met up with the other Lonely Winds in an open hallway through a combination of George’s directional hints and Cynthia’s psychic guidance. The larger group of Will, Jake, Marc, Hawk and Crow held their ground in the hall and kept their weapons ready to provide cover fire if necessary.

“Hey. How ya doin’?” Nails said casually as he and Cynthia reached the others.

“Good. You?” said Jake.

“What happened?” asked Will tersely.

Nails shrugged. “I ran into a couple of brawlers that kept me busy for a while. Tell me something: does becoming a vampire mean you lose all fashion sense?”

“Says the pot of the kettle,” Crow remarked, staring at Nails’ torn, filthy, blood-soaked clothes.

“I was chasing the leader,” Cynthia said in response to the harsh look Will was giving her. “He ran off during the big fight earlier and I thought I could follow him back to his hidey-hole.” She paused for a moment before she finished. “I didn’t find it. Nails found me and beat up the leader.”

“Smug bastard,” Nails muttered as he pressed a fist into his open palm.

“What are we waiting for?” growled Marc. “Let’s go find the others!”

“Any idea where to--” Hawk began. He was cut off when Sullivan’s normally calm and even voice blurted out of the Jakecams™:

“Everyone there needs to get out of the building and as far away as possible!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Crow.

“Detective King just called. There’s a small army of police on its way to you!”

Nails slapped his forehead. “Oh boy. This is not a good day for me to look cool.”

Every eye (and camera) was on Nails as the team began to run toward the nearest staircase.

“I found the place downstairs where these guys were keeping people as...extra,” Nails said sadly. “I-I couldn’t help myself. I set them all free and told them to run.”

“That fits what Detective Kind is telling me,” Sullivan put in. *“A patrol car ran across a hysterical man babbling about monsters and serial killers in the school. At first they thought he was schizophrenic, but they became more open-minded when similar accounts started being reported and phoned in.”*

“You did the right thing, Nails,” George said as the team passed the second floor on the stairs.

“Can we save the praise for when we’re all sure we’re not going to prison?” Hawk asked sarcastically. The team hit the ground floor running and headed straight for the front doors.

“This is going to be bad,” Nails said, half to himself. “The badges will find all the bodies we’ve left lying around, and the ones in the gym...”

“What ‘ones in the gym’?” Jake asked.

“The people,” Nails replied so softly the others could barely hear him over their own footsteps. “They had all these people chained to tables. I tried to help them, but I couldn’t...”

“Whoa, wait!” exclaimed Jake. The team stopped within sprinting distance of the front doors.

“We can’t leave!” Jake said frantically. “If those people were bitten it’s only a matter of time before they rise as vampires. Not to mention the other Order stooges are still in here somewhere.”

“What’s the alternative, Jake?” asked George calmly. *“To stay and become involved in a three-sided battle between yourselves, the Order, and the constabulary?”*

At that moment, all of Lord Geoffrey’s skulls simultaneously exploded in bright bursts of smoke and flame. Everywhere across the building ceilings collapsed, floors erupted in geysers of fire and locker doors were blasted open as hundreds of morbid magical incendiary devices started fires that began to rage through the structure with frightening speed. The Lonely Winds were startled as numerous goutts of flame turned the hallway they stood in into a surreal volcanic landscape. Though none of the explosions were close enough to cause any injuries, their suddenness nonetheless caused everyone on the team to jump. After a quick series of exchanged glances, each team member turned to stare at Marc.

“Don’t look at me, damn it!” he growled indignantly. “I had nothin’ to do with this!”

“Well, as per usual, a building we’ve been fighting monsters in has somehow managed to find itself on fire,” observed Jake sardonically.

“Right, running like hell, standard procedure,” Hawk said. The team sprinted past the bodies of the two vampires and the homeless man, out the door, across the street and into the alley where they had first seen the Order members. Sirens could be heard wailing in the distance as bright tongues of flame began to flicker in the decrepit high school’s many empty window frames. The team could only watch helplessly as the fires spread with unnatural speed, turning the crumbling landmark that was Edward G. Tanner High School into a colossal structure fire. The sound of sirens came ever closer. Will gave the order to split up and return to the Mansion.

By the time the police arrived two minutes later, great fingers of fire were reaching into the sky through gaping holes in the roof. Inside, Order members, personal possessions and the bodies of victims all burned together. The fire department arrived a few minutes later, but by that time the blaze was too intense to even approach. Much of what evil the Order of the Moonless Night had committed in Ylelon was lost under thousands of tons of fiery rubble...just as Lord Geoffrey had intended.

Cynthia rode with Hawk and Crow in Hawk’s truck on the way back to the Mansion. She sat in the back seat of the massive truck’s spacious cab, keeping very quiet and staring out the window at the

darkened landscape.

“Cyn?” Crow ventured as they drove beyond the city’s limits. “You haven’t said a word since we left the school. Are you ok?”

“I don’t know,” Cynthia said fretfully. She kept her gaze fixed out the window. “Why didn’t George help Tina?” she finally asked in a low whisper.

The air in the cab turned instantly to ice. Crow exchanged a glance with Hawk, then turned in her seat to face Cynthia.

“What do you mean, honey? When we...I mean, by the time we got to Tina...” She trailed off.

“No, the fight...none of it made any sense,” Cynthia whimpered.

“What are you talking about?” Hawk asked sharply. “Will got jumped, set one on fire and took his knife to two others, then he passed out on the floor. Can’t say I blame him.” He took Crow’s hand in his own and held it tightly.

Cynthia tilted her head and stared at the back of Hawk’s head as he drove. “What makes you think all of that?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Crow said. “There were three bodies. One of them was burned, and the other two were...were...”

“Look, just trust us, ok?” muttered Hawk. “Will saw his girlfriend get killed, then passed out on the floor. He was too shaken up to talk about it later and we *don’t* ask him.”

“I still don’t understand why George didn’t do anything to help her,” Cynthia said as she turned to look out the window again.

“There’s no way he could have, Cyn,” Crow said. “George was never there.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way back to the Mansion.

The team parked in the drive in front of the Mansion and went inside together, as was their tradition. To their surprise George was not waiting for them in the Foyer, but Sullivan was.

“George is waiting for you in the Rec Room,” she said.

“What? Did he decide to play a game of pool while we were evading the police?” Will said, his voice dripping venom.

“See for yourself,” said Sullivan. She led the team upstairs and down the east wing to the Rec Room. The group walked past the room’s mind-boggling array of game tables and antique video games toward the TV, whose screen was larger than any member of the team was tall. George and G.R. were both seated in high-backed armchairs facing the screen. Eric was perched atop the back of George’s chair and quacked excitedly as the team approached. The TV was turned up loud enough for everyone to hear clearly as they came closer. A reporter’s voice narrated while the camera swept across the face of the burning school:

“...continues to burn freely. The department has issued a statement saying that while they believe they can contain the blaze to the structure itself, residents in neighboring buildings should evacuate immediately for their own safety...”

George pressed the mute button on the TV remote and stood so he could face the team. “The fire is gutting the building,” he said solemnly. “In all likelihood the police will not be able to gather much evidence beyond the testimonies given by the Order’s escaped prisoners.”

“Is that good or bad?” asked Nails.

“Good,” replied Jake. “Not only does it cover our tracks, it ensures that the police won’t end up tracking down the Order and getting in a fight--which would, of course, be disastrous.”

“Assuming any Order members are left,” snickered G.R..

“I doubt that the Moonless Night would immolate their own base of operation but lack the wit to escape, G.R.,” George chided. “They have proven themselves to be cunning survivors.”

“Yeah, they had you convinced that they didn’t even exist,” Jake said and crossed his arms.

“Touché, Jake. The point is that an unknown number of Order vampires have likely escaped and may attempt to reestablish themselves in Ylelon in the near future. Your future patrols will have to watch for any sign of the cult’s return, as well as be on guard for possible acts of revenge.”

“So, when we’re out running around looking for monsters, we gotta be *careful*,” Marc rumbled.

“I think we can handle that,” Hawk added.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m feeling pretty good,” said Jake. “We just faced down a powerful group of vampire tyrants out of legend. I’d say that gives us some serious bragging rights!”

George smiled in approval. “I’m glad to see you’re in high spirits. Everyone get some rest, and we’ll gather reports in the morning. Marc, go with Sullivan so she can double-check your injury.”

“Aw, man.”

G.R. and Sullivan joined the others in meandering out of the room for some well-earned rest. Cynthia lingered, staring into space.

“Cynthia?” George asked.

“Huh?” Cynthia said as she was startled from her reverie.

“Is something wrong?” George asked.

For a long moment, Cynthia stared at George. He appeared as he usually did, a bald and bespectacled old man in mismatched clothing with a slightly loopy expression and kindness in his eyes.

“Nothing,” Cynthia said at last. “Nothing at all.”

Without another word she turned and left George alone in the room.

Epilogue

In the dark and quiet hours of the morning long after the Lonely Winds had all gone to bed, a nova-blue luxury sedan drove down the deserted streets of Ylelon's warehouse district. It parked without ceremony along an alley wall of a singularly enormous and dilapidated warehouse. There its lights switched off and its engine fell silent.

Beside George in the passenger's seat rested his enormous journal. With a sigh of something like resignation George wrestled with the book until it lay open with one cover resting on the dash and the other against the seat. George took a quill pen from above his visor, dipped it into an inkwell in the cup holder and began to write.

Monday, November the First, 2043 T.E.

The last few hours have been remarkably interesting.

To my great surprise, the Order of the Moonless Night made its presence known in Ylelon through a series of horrific acts of violence. Even I had thought them to be extinct, but proof of their continued existence remains with us in the form of those innocents who have suffered for their evil.

For several hours I watched my charges combat this evil with great pride. The youngsters have become a finely honed fighting machine, working together to triumph against overwhelming odds. Each of these young warriors has become an outstanding example of a devoted soul working to achieve great things for the greater good. Ah, how I prattle on in my old age.

To the best of my ability to discern, the Order has been dealt with for the time being. Their unsettling choice for a base of operations continues to burn, creating a massive white plume of smoke that hangs above the city and reaches to the horizon over the sea. The Winds destroyed dozens of the fiends, yet an unknown number of them remained and likely survived the fire. I must add fear that they will find a way to retaliate for our attack to my list of worries.

True to her history, Cynthia once again ran off alone in the midst of an operation. Though she was not harmed and apparently was of aid to Nails in defeating the Order leader, I find myself at a loss as to how to reprimand her. Past chastising has had little effect and removing her from active duty would deprive the team of a member with tremendous potential--yet another conundrum I am forced to consider.

Yet, in the midst of all this I have come to realize something of crucial importance. Will, who not so long ago suffered a devastating loss in the very school where the Order hid, impressed me to no end with his composure and strength of character. It could not have been easy for him to relive so much of the single greatest tragedy of his life, yet he did so with flying colors.

This has made me consider my own dilemma, my own greatest fear. I have come to this holding of the hated monster that threatens Ylelon and everything in it. Here I will force myself to confront the fear I have lived with for so long. Every instinct I have screams warning to me, but tonight a noble young man showed me the value of standing up to what you fear. If worse comes to worst, at least I know that my foster family will be able to fend for themselves.

George laid the quill down, took a deep breath and got out of the car. Quickly he went to the side door with the new lock and opened it with a key of his own. Then he took another breath and slipped inside.

Within the massive warehouse was pitch darkness and eerie silence. As George walked, his sneakers began to crunch on dust and rubble left from when a large section of the concrete floor had been pulverized.

"I'm tired of being afraid!" George shouted into the darkness. His voice echoed from the sheet metal walls briefly, then faded into the overwhelming quiet again. "I've spent too many years dreading what you might do, living in fear of your power!" Silence answered him.

"Too long," George called, "too long have I had to measure my every move, for fear of the innocents that would suffer for any error I made. No more! I'm not going to be afraid of what you might do anymore! I have power too, and I'm not afraid!"

A low growl, a rumble like a landslide in the mountains, made the walls tremble before fading to nothing. George hesitated for just a moment, then walked briskly out of the building. He closed and relocked the door before jogging to his car and roaring away.

Not long after the sound of his engine had faded into the distance, Atla rounded a corner and walked into the alley. With consummate calm that showed through his heavy black, sigil-covered robes, he opened the lock and the door and strolled inside. Walking until he was nearly in the middle of the floor, he turned to face the back wall.

“Well now, *that* was interesting,” he said.

Another growl, longer and louder than the first, shook the warehouse walls in reply.

“This just keeps getting better and better,” laughed Atla. “Now we’ve got people coming from out of town to stake claims on your turf. That, and even George is finally growing a backbone. So, how long do you think it will be before the poor fool manages to *really* screw things up for you?”

An enormous reptilian forelimb surged out of the darkness into the weak light coming through the open door. Claws as large as men and fingers like trees crashed down into the floor and buried themselves in the concrete, which fractured into huge chunks from the impact. An instant later Terek Domar’s head loomed threateningly close out of the darkness, glaring down at Atla and rumbling like a waterfall. Blistering heat blew through the dragon’s bared fangs and the blood-red light from its eyes shined over the whole scene.

“Careful, now,” Atla said. With one hand he wagged a finger at Terek Domar, while he held the other out palm open. A large, tightly rolled scroll appeared there. “You haven’t forgotten *this*, have you? I’d hate to think of the things that might happen if you forgot to play by the rules. Besides,” he chuckled as he eyed the dragon digits lodged in the floor, “it still won’t be fair if you squish little ol’ me.”

“**GET OUT!**” Terek Domar roared. The entire warehouse shook with his fury. He raised his other forelimb and brought a massive fist crashing down on the floor, breaking free several chunks large enough to serve as small driveways. “**GET OUT!**”

Very prudently, Atla took his scroll and ran out the door. As it closed and the lock was reset Terek Domar continued to roar. Every sleeping person for several blocks around was roused and kept awake for several minutes by what sounded to them like impossibly loud thunder.