

Book VI
The Beast

Prologue

The creature stalked through the garbage-strewn alley like a predatory storm cloud. It was a shaggy, dark-brown furred quadruped with a massive hump like that of a buffalo on its back and enormous black claws that clicked loudly on the concrete alley floor as it walked. Its head was long, with a sharp snout like that of a wild dog and large triangular ears. The teeth of its upper jaw jutted downward out of its mouth and fit neatly around its lower jaw. The thing was hardly stealthy, clicking and snuffling and panting as it went, but with every movement its massive bulk rippled with feral power.

As it rounded a corner into a larger, brighter alley, flared nostrils caught the scent of potential prey nearby. The creature stopped and crouched to scent the air. Its ears swiveled forward to track the soft scuffling noises ahead. Crawling on its belly, the beast inched forward and surveyed the alley.

Less than a stone's throw away a homeless man rummaged through a dumpster. He had a long, ragged white beard and long silver hair, all of which was matted and filthy. He wore a tattered beige trench coat over dingy jeans, an old sweater and on his feet worn, dirty sneakers. The beast watched for several moments while the old man continued his sad search for food, but the man never noticed the creature. It hid its bulk by staying behind dumpsters and piles of refuse until it was close enough to spring on him. Only then did the old man sense danger.

"Who's there?" he called and looked around nervously.

The thing leapt at him with a snarl and the old man shrieked and staggered backward. He lost his footing and fell against the dumpster, causing the thing to miss him by a hair's breadth. It slammed face-first into the dumpster, which resonated with a gong-like sound, and dropped squarely onto its clawed feet. The old man tried to stand and run, but in his panic he stepped on the hem of his coat and stumbled again. As he fell to the alley floor, the beast, angry after denting the dumpster with its skull, zeroed in again and pounced. The poor man rolled over onto his back, his last scream drowned out by the feral, victorious growl of the beast.

Chapter I

A Little Wouldn't Do It

“Will! Look out!” Cynthia shouted.

Will heard the warning and spun on his heels just in time to spot his attacker. The lumbering brute was far more massive than Will but not nearly as quick. He made an awkward attempt to grab Will that was foiled when the warrior dodged smoothly away from his grasping hands and landed a solid kick to his chest. The blow knocked the wind out of the thug. Will then kicked his legs out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor with a grunt.

No sooner had Will's first opponent hit the floor than the next one was on him. Will tried to stop his advance with another kick to the torso. It felt like he had kicked a brick wall and this attacker wasn't deterred in the least. He raised two massive fists above his head and brought them down in a crushing blow. They impacted on empty air several inches from Will's face.

“What--?” the attacker grunted and looked around. He staggered to his right suddenly, then again, then a third time as though an invisible fighter were striking him repeatedly with powerful blows.

Will chanced a glance at Cynthia. She was watching the attacker with her trademark smirk while she pummeled him with her telekawhatsit--so she didn't see the slender figure slipping up behind her.

“Watch out!” Will called, but it was too late. The attacker reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Tag. You are dead.”

Cynthia whirled around, eyes wide with surprise. Then she let her head drop like a scolded child. “Ok,” she sulked.

“Time?” the slender man requested.

“Two minutes, sixteen seconds,” George said. “I'm actually very impressed, Master Pana. The only major flaw came at the end.”

George was sitting next to Marc on a row of folding chairs running alongside a large training mat in the Mansion's Gymnasium. Marc, Will, Cynthia, G.R. and Nails had been engaged in a series of training exercises for the last hour, supervised by George and assisted by Master Pana.

“I agree. Unfortunately, it is the same flaw that has now ended three rounds in a row.” Harati Pana was co-owner and operator of the Tiger Enton Dojo, the martial arts studio where George sometimes recruited new members for the team. He was a very fit and trim man in his early fifties, with short black hair shot through with gray and skin the color of burnished mahogany. His attire was the simple black robe of the Enton discipline and he had the sharp and aquiline features of his people, the Yd--the original native race of Ylelon.

“I saved Will,” Cynthia mumbled crossly.

“I can vouch for that,” moaned Nails. Along with Master Pana, he and G.R. had been playing the part of monsters during the training session. If a “monster” could place the palm of a hand flat against any part of a team member's body, that member was declared “dead” and was out of the fight. Marc had been declared dead after being bested by Nails in hand-to-hand combat moments before.

“That you did,” George affirmed, “but you did it at the expense of your own safety. Consider what would have happened to Will once you were no longer protecting him.”

“Yeah, ok,” said Cynthia.

“If it's any consolation, Cynthia, that really hurt,” offered Nails.

“You need not feel badly,” Master Pana said soothingly. “We practice now so you will not make the same mistakes later.”

Cynthia smirked. “You sound like George.”

“Oh, he wishes,” Master Pana said quickly.

“Have I just walked in on a George-bashing session?” asked Sullivan as she walked at a quick pace into the room and up to the mat. “I think that's very sad.”

“Thank you, Sullivan. I appreciate your support,” George said.

“Actually I think it’s sad because I have to miss out on it,” quipped Sullivan. “You have some visitors, George.”

George hopped up from his seat. “Ah, very good. Carry on, won’t you, Master Pana?”

“I shall do so.”

G.R. was still picking himself up off the mat as George ambled toward the exit with Sullivan. He straightened the shabby jogging clothes he was wearing and said “Nice sweep,” to Will.

“Thank you,” Will replied humbly. Inwardly, he was very impressed. Up until recently G.R. would have been openly angry over his own failing. Will knew that Nails was working with G.R., trying to improve his social skills, mostly by slapping him over the head whenever he said anything callous, arrogant, or just plain irritating. But it seemed to Will that G.R. was also making a genuine effort of his own to improve himself both physically and socially. In fact, he was even very improved today over what he had been two days ago, when his incredibly callous comments about the deaths of two young women on the Pale Wave had made even Will want to hit him. Will chose to appreciate the improvements over dwelling on the flaws, since it wasn’t in his nature to hold people’s past failings against them.

Not most of the time, anyway, he thought and looked at George as the old patron left the room.

“Shall we continue?” Master Pana asked pleasantly. He plucked two arm-length, polished fighting sticks from a nearby weapon rack. “This time we will try something different. I want the monsters to pick weapons to use. The hunters are going to focus on disarming...”

“I assume Crow and Hawk are still in the Library?” asked George as he and Sullivan descended one great curving staircase into the Foyer.

“Last I checked,” was the reply.

“Good. Have you seen Jake?”

“Not since breakfast.”

Though George’s expression remained impassive his mind was a whirlwind. He knew that for the past week Jake had been attempting to unravel the mystery of the three robotic sentries housed within the Mansion. The thing that made that funny now was that if Jake wanted to learn more of the Mansion’s secrets, all he had to do was spend some time around George’s “guests.”

George and Sullivan walked through the empty opening left by the missing half of the double doors and out into the mid-afternoon sun. A number of people and several vehicles were visible through the front gate, including two large vans and a box truck.

“I apologize for the wait, ladies and gentlemen,” George said as he reached the gate. “Sullivan, you remember Mr. Wiggins and Mr. Harrow?”

“I do.” Sullivan nodded to two men in extremely expensive business suits just outside the gate.

“You have the requested materials?” George asked.

“Yes, and all the technicians and equipment necessary to begin installation,” said Mr. Harrow.

“Then by all means, please begin,” said George as he took a tiny remote control from his pocket and pressed a button. The gate swung open smoothly and quietly.

“Welcome to George Manor,” George announced to Harrow and Wiggins, as well as the two dozen or so electricians, masons and engineers standing behind them. “I believe you have each received your individual work orders? Good. Please proceed as directed and feel free to ask myself or Sullivan any questions.”

The masons divided up into two teams, one to repair the damage to the western Wall, the other attending the stone railing on the balcony overlooking the Foyer. Some of the engineers set about helping Sullivan repair the damage to various walls and floors in the Foyer and upstairs hallway, cutting out pitted sections of drywall and replacing them with newer sections. The rest joined the electricians in removing the remaining front door. The entire operation was overseen by Harrow and Wiggins, who were in turn watched closely by George and Sullivan.

After half an hour, while Sullivan was in the hall upstairs, George went to the kitchen for a glass of fruit punch. That was when Jake, who had been watching in secret from down the opposite hallway,

entered the Foyer and approached an engineer. The man was very young, probably fresh out of college. He was scratching his head while looking at his copy of the plans.

“How’s it going?” Jake asked him casually.

“What? Oh, just fine, sir,” the engineer said. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Oh, not ‘sir.’ Jake is fine,” Jake said as he shook the young man’s hand. “I was just wondering if you could outline your progress for me.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m Kyle, by the way. Ok, so.” Kyle held up his plans so Jake could see them clearly. “As far as I know, the mundane stuff is coming right along. We should be mounting the new doors before too long.” He indicated the now empty doorway, where a half-dozen workers were struggling with a new door. It appeared identical to the original it was replacing but the six men were struggling under its weight.

Jake raised an eyebrow. “This...new set is guaranteed to be secure?”

“And how!” said Kyle with open enthusiasm. “I count myself lucky just to be working with this group. The sample of the ceramisteel took an anti-tank shell in field testing before its integrity was moderately compromised.”

Jake didn’t reply. He was staring at Kyle’s plans, and the longer he looked the wider his eyes became.

The plans were essentially blueprints of the first two floors of the Mansion. They revealed everything: the massive rectangular layout; the colossal rooms; water, electricity, computer and phone lines; and the abnormally thick walls.

It was the walls that really caught Jake’s interest. Ever since the Mansion’s three massive sentries had been revealed to be housed in the hallway walls Jake had pondered the nature of the building. Even for as enormous as the structure was, its walls were far thicker than was necessary to support its weight. Jake now saw the reason why, laid out in perfect methodical blue lines: contained within each wall were tremendous, interlocking, solid rectangular shapes. It didn’t take Jake long to consider what Kyle had said about the door and put two and two together.

“Armor plating,” he said aloud. He saw the quizzical look Kyle gave him and covered for himself. “I’m not used to seeing them this way.”

“I heard that. This place is a fortress. Is the owner some kind of militia survivalist or something?”

“Beats me. I’m just a tenant.”

Kyle glanced around the Foyer. “I can’t imagine what the rent must be,” he said half-jokingly.

“The security deposit can kill you,” Jake said dryly. “Are there any other important features you can tell me about?”

“Just this locking mechanism,” Kyle said as he indicated the appropriate part of the blueprints. “These big ol’ honkin’ bars will slide out of both walls and right through the doors. I’m still not clear on how they’re going to set all of it up.”

“I got it. Thanks for your time,” said Jake politely and walked away. He headed for the Library, tucking his hands in his pockets and creasing his brow in thought.

He was more confused now than before. Finally he knew the answer to the riddle of the Mansion’s architecture, but it had only raised more questions. George Manor was a mighty fortress, that much was clear; but what was such a formidable edifice meant to defend against?

Jake entered the Library a few moments later. Hawk and Crow were seated at computers on the long table just inside the double doors. Hawk had wanted to join the others in training this morning and yesterday, but because of the injuries he had suffered on the Saturday before George had confined him to research duty in the Library. Crow was with him both to keep an eye on him and to apply her own mystic knowledge to the task at hand.

The couple were attempting to unravel the secrets of the summoning circles that the Lonely Winds had come across the previous Saturday. The circles had been contained in some sort of subterranean bunkers, each of a design neither George nor Crow was familiar with. While the team had dutifully destroyed both of the specimens they knew of they were left without any idea who created them or if there

were more.

“Any luck?” Jake asked as he turned one of the table’s chairs around and straddled it.

Hawk sighed in frustration and pushed back from the table. “Not a clue. I gave up on the summoning thing a while ago. I’ve been looking for info on the undead we fought. I figured I could get some dirt on our circle maker if I had some idea what the End really were.”

Jake looked hopeful. “Did you find anything?”

“Not a damn thing.” Hawk took off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Near as I can tell there are basically two types of undead: brainless drones like zombies and ‘free-willed’ types like vampires. Drones don’t have a mind of their own so they can’t use magic, and free-wills don’t generally stand around in caves acting like security guards.”

“The End showed traits of both archetypes,” observed Jake.

“Have you talked to G.R.?” Crow inquired. “He *is* our resident expert on undead.”

“I wonder what makes him think he’d know more about monsters than us,” Hawk said scathingly. “Anyway, why don’t you join us? We can use a fresh brain. I’ll get some drinks.”

“Sure. Why not?” Jake plopped in a chair and turned on his computer. “I can always stand to ponder a good conundrum.”

George had returned to the Foyer not long after Jake reached the Library and now stood scrutinizing the workers while sipping fruit punch from one of his enormous brandy snifters. He watched the engineers follow the convoluted installation instructions on the blueprints for almost an hour before Sullivan came downstairs and approached him.

“Detective King is on the phone for you,” she said.

George shifted his gaze from Sullivan to the workers and back again. “Route it into my Study,” he said. “Keep a sharp eye on everything here. If anyone so much as sneezes without their plan telling them to, you come get me straight away, understand?”

“Of course, George,” Sullivan said.

With that, George was off jogging down the stairs. Once on the second level he ran the distance down the east wing to the majestic double doors of this Study. He took the ornate key to the doors out of his pocket, opened one door, slipped inside and relocked the door all in a single smooth motion. Once inside he hustled to his chair and plopped down, then cleared his throat and picked up the receiver of his antique phone.

“George Manor, please pardon our dust.”

“*Good afternoon, George.*”

“Good afternoon, Detective! I’m pleased to hear from you again.”

“*Sullivan tells me you had an interesting vacation earlier this week.*”

“Indeed. I don’t think I’ll ever regard vacations the same way again. At any rate, I believe it’s either very late or very early for you to be awake, Samuel.”

“*Late,*” King said curtly. “*I’ve been awake since yesterday. Something killed four homeless people last night on the south side.*”

George paused before replying, a personal moment of silence. “I see. Vampire?”

“*Doesn’t look like it. Whatever this was, it tore these people to shreds. All within a few blocks of each other. Forensics is doin’ its thing now. They think all this happened in quick sequence.*”

“Pack hunters, then?” George hypothesized aloud. “A group stalking enough prey to sustain the whole?” He stopped and grimaced at the image his own observation evoked.

“*I don’t know. But I’ll tell you this: if these things are eating, they don’t eat much.*”

“I see.”

“*I’ll get the report to you as soon as I can. It may take a while.*”

“I understand. Thank you, Samuel.”

Slowly George hung up the receiver. Then he stood and with a sigh took the PA system remote from his pocket.

“Attention, Manor residents,” he said as he pressed a small button on the microphone. His voice

echoed throughout the great house. “Please come to the Situation Room immediately.”

Chapter II To Live Like An Animal

George went straight to the Situation Room to wait for the others. Before long Master Pana appeared, leading Will, Cynthia, Marc, Nails and G.R.. Jake came soon afterward, followed by Hawk and Crow.

“How did training go?” George asked when everyone was seated.

“The slave driver tried to kill us again!” joked Will.

“I stand by my philosophy that if you can still stand after training for two hours you haven’t trained hard enough.” Master Pana was completely deadpan.

“What about research?” asked George.

“Nothing,” Crow said somberly. “We didn’t find out anything new all morning.”

George frowned. “That’s unfortunate, but it will have to wait. For right now I want everyone to begin preparations for immediate field action.”

“Combat?” asked Marc.

“Investigation and combat. Detective King will be sending some files soon regarding the deaths of four homeless citizens last night. From the sound of it, all four of them were severely ravaged. We’ll know more once the Detective sends the reports to us. For the time being I want you all to lay out provisions for an extended foray. Jake, take your armor. Everyone will meet back here in one hour,” George instructed. “I am sorry to have interrupted your training session, Master Pana.”

“That is quite all right, George. If you don’t mind I would like to stay and observe the proceedings of this case.”

“You betcha,” George said.

In due course the team gathered clothing, equipment, weapons and ammunition and returned to the Situation Room. Detective King had sent the file in the interim and George had browsed through it while awaiting the others. He now sat at his place at the head of the table with the room’s view screen lowered into place. On it was displayed a map of Ylelon City with four black X’s marking various alleys in the south-easternmost region of the city: the warehouse district, near the docks. Master Pana was nowhere to be seen.

“This is where you are going,” George said somberly. “You will leave immediately to make use of the remaining daylight. I want one squad consisting of Will, Jake, Marc, Nails, and Crow.”

“I’m going too,” said Hawk firmly.

George groused. “You are not in any condition to be engaging in active field work.”

“I’m not sitting here while my wife and friends put themselves in danger,” Hawk said coolly. “You want me to stay, you’ll have to wrestle me to the floor and sit on me.”

George looked at Crow. Her expression both spoke of her concern for her husband and the wounds he was still healing and showed her wisdom in knowing it was pointless to argue with the stubborn fool once he set his mind on something.

“Very well,” George conceded. “Jake, you will take point. Nails, watch your backs.”

“What about Legs? She can keep us safe!” Marc said brightly.

“Legs, I mean Cynthia, is not ready for active field work yet,” George chided.

“You can’t be serious! You saw what she did to the Crown of Thorns on Monday!” Hawk said.

“That was sheer luck,” George said evenly. “Cynthia will need to spend a great deal more time learning to work in tandem with the rest of you before she can engage in active sorties. This subject is closed. Now, I want you all to gather in the…damn.”

George had been about to say “in the Foyer.” He had momentarily forgotten that his home was currently full of outsiders who knew nothing of the Lonely Winds.

“We’ll just have to live without the dress-up this time,” Hawk muttered. He hadn’t noticed Master Pana slipping into the room just then. Only George, sitting at the head of the table facing the entrance,

saw Master Pana come in, and he suppressed a laugh. Master Pana had traded his teacher's robes for the patchwork leather jerkin and moccasins worn by Yd war chiefs in centuries past. In his right hand he carried a small round wooden shield that was hand-painted with a swirling pattern of thorny branches. In his left hand he carried a massive war club of chocolate brown wood encrusted with shards of electric blue seashells. Wood had been a status symbol among the desert-dwelling Yd people and the heirlooms Master Pana carried were worth a small fortune, both as historical relics and as hand-crafted works of art.

Marc saw him first. "Aw, not you too," he groaned. The others turned around to see what he was talking about. Jake and Crow laughed, and Hawk rolled his eyes.

"Master Pana, I believe you have stolen my motif," said George.

"Stolen? Nothing! In the past you have taken it upon yourself to wear the traditional warrior's garb of my people before seeing your followers off. I felt inclined to adopt this practice, given that I happen to be Yd, unlike you, you great poseur." Still deadpan.

"George takes a hit!" Marc laughed.

"Perhaps we should all be on our way before George reaches critical mass," remarked Jake.

"Some support at last," George groaned.

"You misunderstand, George. I believe our students hope to avoid the dry cleaning bills that would result from your head exploding," said Master Pana.

"Up and at 'em, folks," Will said. "Master Pana, would you mind helping us carry supplies to the Workshop? We're going to be conspicuous enough without having to make several trips."

"Certainly."

While Master Pana helped the team carry their knapsacks around behind the Mansion to the Workshop, George joined Sullivan in supervising the work crews in the Foyer again. They operated in tandem to provide a distraction by engaging the workers in conversation and thus keeping them from getting too close a look at the parcels the team carried. That didn't stop the workers from giving the Lonely Winds, now clad in their mono-back field uniforms, and Master Pana, still wearing his antique war chief's gear, some very curious looks.

Master Pana waited just inside the door for the others. The garage housed Will and Jake's cars and Marc and Hawk's pickup trucks, as well as George's luxury sedan and Jake's armored personnel carrier, affectionately referred to as Janice. Jake directed Master Pana to drop what he carried into Marc's truck.

"Are you coming with us?" he asked. "We could easily get you some gear."

Master Pana frowned. "I am afraid not. George appears to be in an even more volatile state than usual, if that is possible. I feel that I should remain here to keep an eye on him."

"I hear that. Say, Master Pana, you wouldn't happen to know why the Mansion has armor-plated walls, would you?"

"If I did, I strongly suspect that I would not be willing to tell you," Master Pana said flatly.

"Right," muttered Jake as he climbed into his car. "See you from the city."

Once he had seen the team on their way, Master Pana quickly went back to the Situation Room. George had returned as well and now sat in his chair, studying the case file.

"Have you found out anything new, George?" Master Pana asked.

"Nothing," George murmured without looking up. Master Pana walked to his old chair on George's left and turned it around to sit, but he stopped when he saw what was in the seat.

"George? Do you know that there is a golden waterfowl in this chair?"

"Quack!"

"Oh, that's just Eric. He's one of Jake's toys."

"Quack, quack."

"Interesting," remarked Master Pana. "How have your experiences here been?"

"Quack! Quack, quack, quack quack quack."

"Really? That seems a bit harsh to me. I'm sure George is doing his best." George looked up from his file at Master Pana.

“Quack, quack quack. Quack, quack, quack,” continued Eric.

“Be that as it may, one must look on the bright side. George has room only for improvement,” Master Pana said. He laid his war club and shield on the table and picked up Eric, cradling him like a pet as he sat down. George looked off into space and held his hands out in a gesture of frustration.

“What just happened?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, or lose sleep over,” replied Master Pana. “On the subject of young Jake, he inquired about the fortifications in place here.”

“Naturally. I’d be disappointed if he hadn’t,” said George offhandedly.

“Are you not concerned that he will discover more of the nature of this place?”

“Of course I am,” George snapped, “but we have long since gone past the point of me being able to protect them. We passed that point when Will lost faith in me. Jake is only now following suit.”

Master Pana was silent for a moment, wisely giving George time to deal with the issues on his mind. At length he said, “Remember when you hunted alone?”

“That was a very long time ago,” George replied sadly. “It feels like ages.”

“Things were simpler then,” Master Pana prompted.

“They were.” George leaned back in his chair away from the file, with a distant look on his face. “No Lonely Winds, no Truce, no complicated security measures. Just myself and the forces of darkness in a shadowy war. I was winning, too, before that monstrosity came here and staked a claim on this country.”

“You dwell too much on the past, my friend.”

George took a deep breath and pulled himself closer to the table. “I just wish he would stop. Then it would be me out there facing horrors unknown, not the poor people who suffer on my behalf.”

“You are too hard on yourself, George. Even you cannot do everything.” Master Pana set Eric on the table and leaned forward in his chair. “Is there nothing useful to be found in the file?”

“The coroner speculates an animal attack.” George’s eyes ran across the pages at a furious pace as he speed-read the reports. “Most of the injuries on all four bodies were caused by a biting creature with very large teeth and extremely powerful jaws. There are also bruises, strains and other trauma on all four victims consistent with severe and violent concussing and torsion.”

“These people were *shaken* to death?” asked Master Pana.

“Shaken, bitten, crushed and battered,” George said harshly. “Whatever is doing this is extremely powerful and utterly savage.”

“Could it be a were-beast, perhaps? One that has become completely feral?” Master Pana put forth. He cast a quizzical look at Eric, who was struggling to lift the war club with his metal wings.

“That is an undeniable possibility. We will only learn more once the team is able to investigate.”

“I see. How is the work coming?” asked Master Pana. Eric now had the club propped across one shoulder and was struggling to keep it balanced while lifting the shield.

“I’m going to check on that now,” George replied. He closed the file and passed it to Master Pana. “Please let me know when the team reaches their destination.”

“Quack!” Eric said and saluted George by tipping Master Pana’s shield to touch his head.

In an hour’s time the team had arrived at their destination. Each vehicle was parked in a separate place, the better for the group to keep a low profile. They met in a nondescript alley across the street from the alley where the first victim had been found.

“Camera check,” Jake announced. Each team member took a turn activating and testing a Jakecam™. Once George had confirmed through the speaker on each camera that they were all working properly, Jake set his own camera in its special housing on his armor’s shoulder.

“I’ll take point,” Will said. “We’re too conspicuous together while it’s still light out.”

He slipped out of the alley and quickly crossed the street, which was presently deserted. In a heartbeat he was standing just outside the police tape barrier around the crime scene, which was clearly visible from where the rest of the team still stood across the street. Will unclipped his Jakecam™ from his shoulder and held it like a flashlight, sweeping it back and forth before the crime scene.

Back in the Situation Room, George frowned as he watched the wall monitor that displayed Will's video feed. The crime scene was agonizingly bare. A chalk body outline had been drawn on the concrete alley floor and all around were splatters and patches of dried blood. Aside from an empty cardboard box and some debris against one wall, the alley was remarkably clean with very few other notable details.

"What do you think, Sullivan?" George asked.

"I don't see anything noteworthy," replied Sullivan as she impassively watched the video screen. "Perhaps Jake or Crow should take a look?"

"Jake is too noticeable. Crow, move up by Will and see what you can find."

"Gotcha." Crow checked to make certain the street was clear before trotting to stand next to Will. For the next few moments she was quiet while she focused on casting a series of simple spells.

"I'm not getting anything," she reported presently. "Whatever did this is gone."

"We move on, then," said Will. Hawk and Marc immediately moved to flank Jake and they walked as one to the end of the alley. Nails was internally very impressed by their teamwork: without even speaking Marc and Hawk were providing Jake with cover, however small, during the brief time he was visible on the street.

George has really worked to instill a need to be low-key in this crowd. I can relate, Nails thought wryly as he fell into place behind the others.

"Well, we're here," Jake said once the team was together again, lined up along the crime scene tape. He opened a small compartment in a plate on his armor's leg and took out one of his proudest inventions, the Osborn Eye. It was really only a personal data pad cobbled together with a wide array of circuitry and small sensors, but it made a very effective instrument that could tell Jake a great deal about his environment.

"I don't see anything special here," Jake reported grimly. "I'd say this blood all belongs to the victim. Should we move on?"

"Yes," affirmed George softly. *"The attack pattern is fairly linear. Head to the far end of the alley you are in. Cross the street, turn left, and enter the first alley you encounter."*

"This thing sure spent its share of time running around in plain sight," Hawk muttered as the group jogged across the next street.

"True, but bear in mind that these attacks all occurred close together shortly after four a.m.," George said.

The team hurried to the next alley and quickly disappeared within. This alley was considerably narrower and darker than the previous one and ran between two very old brick buildings.

"This just keeps getting better and better," grumbled Marc.

"Once more unto the breach," Jake said resignedly and led the team into the alley single file. The Osborn Eye beeped and clicked as it provided Jake with a steady stream of data.

"So, find anything useful in that file yet?" Crow asked as she swept the alley with her eyes. Everywhere were heaps of garbage that the intrepid monster hunters had to step over or around. Both walls also had rickety old fire escapes clinging to them. In the gloom of the alley they looked like the dried husks of giant spiders, suspended in the perpetual twilight between the ancient buildings.

"Not a great deal. The radii of the bites on the victim's bodies do appear to coincide with the coroner's theory that the attacks were the work of a very large animal."

"That sounds familiar," said Hawk wryly. "Isn't that the excuse they used for the oil rig last weekend?"

"Fabricating mundane explanations for paranormal occurrences," Jake quipped without looking away from the Osborn Eye. "You gotta love the good ol' Ylelon authorities."

"Bunch o' morons," said Marc.

"Nails, I want you to take point next to Jake," Will said suddenly.

"Nails is watching your backs, Will," George said through Will's camera.

"True, but he's also the strongest, toughest, and fastest of us, not to mention the best subdual

fighter,” replied Will.

“What are you thinking, fearless leader?” Nails asked Will.

“I’m thinking that this thing may have come from one of the summoning chambers. We may need to find a way to track it to where it came from, so we can take out the circle,” explained Will.

“Eh, works for me,” said Nails casually as he sauntered up the line to walk beside Jake. He spoke over his shoulder to Marc, “You got the back ok, buddy?”

In response Marc brandished his shotgun and cocked it to load a shell into the chamber.

“I think I see the next one, guys,” Jake announced presently. Within moments the Lonely Winds were standing around another simple sketch of chalk and barrier of yellow tape that were the only indicators of a brutally ended life.

“This one is kind of remote,” noted Crow. “How the heck did the cops find it so fast?”

“This scene was actually the first one discovered,” George said. *“A homeless woman apparently stumbled across the body while wandering early this morning and ran into the street screaming bloody murder. When the constabulary finally arrived they immediately began to search for the killer and found the other victims instead.”*

“Which means there could be many more victims outside this radius of a few blocks,” said Jake soberly. A low, liquid rumble sounded in the gloom.

Crow turned and smacked Hawk on the arm. “Would you knock it off? This isn’t the place!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Hawk protested.

With a feral roar the beast leapt from its hiding place on one of the fire escapes. It came down squarely on Jake, flattening him on the pavement and pinning him down with its two enormous forepaws. It snarled, seized his right gauntlet in its teeth and jerked, trying to tear the limb free.

“Holy crap!” Nails blurted and bashed the brute on the snout with a punch that would topple a small tree. The creature let go of Jake and turned on Nails, snarling and snapping its jaws. Nails caught it around its neck as it lunged at him, but the beast’s weight and strength were so great that it drove Nails backward, slamming him against the wall behind him and pinning him there. It barked furiously and its teeth snapped shut repeatedly a bare hair’s breadth away from Nails’ face. Gobs of foam dribbled from its jaws as it struggled to reach the angel and it tore at him with its huge black claws, shredding his shirt and lacerating his chest.

In a flash Will had his pistols out and unloaded a salvo of six rounds into the monster at point blank range. The custom-forged, high silver-content bullets were low velocity, but extremely effective against many supernatural beings. For all the harm the mystical purity of silver could inflict to such beings, Will might as well have been firing white-hot rivets at the creature. The salvo slammed into the monster’s flank, riddling it with bloody wounds, but to Will’s astonishment the beast didn’t even seem to notice its injuries.

By now Hawk and Marc had their own weapons trained on the behemoth and opened fire. Hawk’s hunting rifle left several laughably small wounds in the beast’s side, but the creature took notice when Marc’s shotgun gouged a bloody chunk out of its hump. It turned away from Nails, who slid down the wall, leapt at Marc with a guttural roar--

--and flopped clumsily forward onto its belly. Its chin smacked on the alley floor and several of its longer teeth chipped on the pavement.

Jake was standing behind the beast, holding one of its rear paws. He let go when it tugged so it could stand and held his ground as it turned, snarling, to face him.

“That hurt!” Jake snapped and dealt a thunderous right hook to the beast’s snout. He followed that with a quick series of punches that were supplemented by a leaping kick from Nails. The beast staggered from the blows, then suddenly lunged at Jake, seized his shoulder in its jaws and flung him face-first into the wall behind it with a flick of its neck.

“You wanna play rough?” spat Jake as he pushed off from the wall and grabbed his armor’s pistol-grip remote control from its hip holster. With the press of a button the gun mounts on his back snapped into place over his shoulders. The hyenine brute crouched as if to leap at Jake just as he blasted it with his plasma cannons. Bolts of super-heated gas particles sheathed in cohesive-but-fragile magnetic

fields--in other words, really hot balls of fire--slammed into the beast's shoulders and back. The stench of burning fur and the sound of flesh sizzling filled the alley as the beast howled in agony. In a blind rage it shoved Jake aside as it fled deeper into the alley.

"After it!" Marc shouted.

"*Negative! You've made too much noise! Get clear and regroup back here!*" George commanded.

"We can't let that thing get away!" protested Marc.

"*Finding the creature will not help you if the police take you into custody,*" Master Pana said soothingly. "*Return here and you can try again later.*"

"Let's go!" Will said and began to lead the others back the way they had come.

"No, wait!" Jake interjected. He quickly retrieved the Osborn Eye from where he had dropped it when the beast pounced on him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found it was still intact and was even more relieved to see that the set of glass microscope slides he kept in one of its compartments were also undamaged. He knelt and scraped some of the beast's blood between the slides, then slipped them back into the Eye. "Now we can go," he said. The team turned and raced for the end of the alley.

"I thought you'd be stronger than any big old dog," Marc ribbed Nails as they ran.

"I was stronger. That didn't mean I was about to stand around and let it gnaw my face off!"

"Split up, troops!" Will ordered. "Report from the road once you're underway. We meet up back in the Workshop." The team came to the end of the alley, split up and ran for their individual vehicles.

Moments later, each team member reported to the Mansion through their Jakecams™. Everyone had made it back to their vehicles safe and sound and were now headed home.

"What a disaster," George moaned, and covered his eyes.

"It could have been much worse, George," counseled Master Pana. "They could have been arrested, or one of them could have been seriously hurt. Given what they were fighting, I think it's a miracle none of them *were* hurt."

"We had no idea what to expect. I shouldn't have sent them so unprepared," George lamented.

"They *never* know what to expect, George. That's why you train them to work together. You have to stop beating yourself up over things you cannot control."

"Yeah, you're pretty bad about that," Cynthia put in.

George looked askance at Cynthia, then shook his head. "Very well. Master Pana, would you do me the favor of greeting the team? I must prepare the Lab to analyze the sample Jake is bringing."

"I would be happy to help. G.R.? Cynthia? Would you care to join me?"

"Sure, why not?" said G.R. disdainfully. Cynthia grimaced at the brazen show of disrespect for Master Pana, but she said nothing. She and G.R. rose and walked behind Master Pana as he led them across the hall and down the stairs into the Foyer.

"Hello, Sullivan," he said pleasantly as they came to where the robot still stood, watching the workers. "How is the work going?"

"Slowly, but surely," was the reply. The work teams had managed to physically mount the new doors, but they seemed to be having difficulty figuring out how to wire the doors themselves into whatever system George's instructions told them.

"Hmmm. I suspect only George could make replacing the front door of his house a task so involved that a team of trained professionals must struggle with it," quipped Master Pana.

"My thoughts exactly," said Sullivan. "Is the expedition returning?"

"I think 'fleeing' is more the word. They ran into a...problem," Master Pana said with a low voice.

"I see. How large a problem?"

"From what little I could see, it appeared to be a very hairy station wagon."

Sullivan turned her head sharply toward Master Pana. "Were any of them hurt?"

"I do not believe so. I will keep you informed."

Chapter III One More Time Tonight

Master Pana led Cynthia and G.R. to the Workshop where they waited until the team returned. Each vehicle arrived separately and the team waited together for Will, who came last. Master Pana checked each team member to be certain they were unharmed. Jake was only bruised thanks to his armor. Nails showed no outward sign of the trauma he had endured.

Once Master Pana was satisfied that the team was whole and hale he instructed them to leave their equipment in their vehicles and began to lead them back to the Mansion.

“Where are we going?” Marc asked as they ambled through the savanna grass of the Mansion’s grounds.

“To the Lab. I believe George wanted to analyze Jake’s sample right away,” Master Pana replied.

“That’s fine by me. I’m not looking forward to tackling that thing again,” Jake said.

“You aren’t going soft on us, are you, Jake?” Hawk ribbed him.

“Hell no. But you try going a round with Fido, see how you feel.”

“I can second that,” Nails said. “That thing was the ugliest bulldozer I’ve ever tangled with.”

George was still working in the Lab when the team arrived. He had laid out a microscope and a plethora of small instruments on his worktable, along with a number of small jars and vials containing various substances. A large sliver of something that looked like dark brown glass rested in a shallow tray just out of George’s reach on the table. Jake recognized it immediately: it was the shard of the strange rock he had procured from the summoning chamber the previous Saturday. He made a mental note to ask George if he had learned anything later. At the moment they had more pressing problems.

“Have a seat, ladies and gentlemen,” George said pleasantly. The team members took seats around the table while Jake handed his specimen slides to Master Pana, who took them to George.

“Sorry there’s not more there,” Jake said. “It’s surprisingly hard to scrape blood off of concrete and keep it clean.”

“Not to worry, Jake. This should tell us something, at least.” George put the slides in place under the microscope and immediately began to adjust it.

“What do you think it is? I was amazed at how much it looked like normal blood,” Crow said off-handedly.

George suddenly looked up. “That’s because it *is* normal blood.”

“Say *what*?” blurted Hawk.

“This is animal blood,” George explained. “Red cells, killer T-cells, platelets. I’ll have to run more tests before I’ll know for sure, of course, but I don’t see anything abnormal here.”

“But that wasn’t a normal animal,” said Will, almost protesting.

“Not a natural one, no,” George mused distantly.

Master Pana looked even more thoughtful than usual. “Are you suggesting this is a were-beast?”

“I sincerely doubt it,” George said evenly. “There’s no one in the world with that much mass.”

“Excuse me?” G.R. said.

“Were-beings only change shape, not mass or volume, G.R.. If the creature we saw was merely a person in another form, it would require a person who was really that size the rest of the time, only more person-shaped.”

“Meaning someone over seven feet tall and weighing something like eight hundred pounds,” Nails mused.

“Yes, precisely.”

“So, what *are* you suggesting, George?” Jake asked.

“At the moment, I have no idea.”

“Welcome to the club,” quipped G.R..

“If it’s just an animal, that explains why silver didn’t work,” Will observed. “Ok, I want everyone to re-arm. We’re taking heavy caliber stuff this time. High penetration, superior stopping power, take the

most powerful guns we can carry.”

“Correction. Jake, Nails, Crow and Marc will do as you ask. You and Hawk are benched until further notice.”

“Oh, not this again!” Hawk moaned. “We’ve already been through this--”

“This isn’t a discussion!” George shouted as he slammed his fist onto the table. “You have over thirty stitches holding gaping wounds in your chest and shoulder together. Will has two cracked ribs and is recovering from a sprained knee. Neither of you is in any condition to face a beast of such power. You two are benched. Period.”

An uneasy silence hung in the room until it was broken by Master Pana. “To help preserve the team’s morale, then, I will go in Hawk and Will’s place.”

“No one is suggesting that you do that, Master Pana,” said George.

“Of course no one suggested it. I volunteered.”

“Are you sure about this, Master Pana?” Will asked slowly. “There’s no need for you to put yourself in harm’s way.”

“You forget, my young friend,” Master Pana said through a gentle smile. “I was a part of this team for many long years, even before you were born.”

“Very well, then,” said George. “Master Pana, you may equip yourself according to your own preference. The rest of you augment your munitions as Will has suggested. We will have to wait until cover of darkness to renew the investigation, since the police will likely be searching for whomever has just desecrated their crime scene.”

“This just keeps getting better,” Marc muttered as everyone rose to go about their tasks.

While the others went about their business George walked to the Foyer to check on the construction team’s progress. “How goes it, Sullivan?” he asked the stalwart robot as he came to where she stood.

“Very well, I believe. They finished mounting the door a little while ago. I believe they are now in the process of installing the locking bars.”

“Splendid.” George moseyed to where Mr. Harrow and Mr. Wiggins stood supervising the workers. “What’s the word, gentlemen?” he asked and the two men jumped.

“We’re in the last stages, I believe,” replied Mr. Wiggins.

“You have a knack for stealth,” Mr. Harrow said blithely. “You didn’t by any chance spend some time in the service?”

“Who, me? I’m afraid not. Not for very long, at any rate. Military life tends not to agree with me. The truth is I get a kick out of sneaking around and scaring the daylight out of people.”

“Got a bit of a sadistic streak, huh?” Mr. Harrow muttered. Mr. Wiggins gave him a sharp look.

“You have no idea,” George answered with a hint of a smile. “So, what remains to be done?”

“When I asked that a few minutes ago, they said they were trying to figure out your directions for installing the locking bars,” said Mr. Wiggins.

“Oh, perhaps I should assist them, then. If you will excuse me.” George left the two men and ambled back to Sullivan.

“I need you to trade places with me,” he said soberly. “These last few steps are going to require my participation and I need someone to stay with the team.”

“No problem, George. Would you like me to keep you apprised of events as they occur?”

“No. Stay in the Situation Room. Will and Hawk are staying here due to their injuries. Master Pana will be going in their stead. The team is facing something rather unpleasant and while I have the utmost confidence in them, I will need someone to keep track of the members in the field and monitor events as they occur. Only come after me in the most extreme circumstances.”

With that, Sullivan departed for the Situation Room to await the others’ return.

The team assembled about half an hour later. Jake and Hawk had selected an impressive array of large-caliber weaponry for the team to use, while Will and Crow had chosen an assortment of medical

supplies to compliment the basic first-aid materials the team usually carried into battle.

“George is currently occupied,” Sullivan announced once everyone, including Cynthia and G.R., were seated at the Situation Room table again. “I’ll be taking his place for the time being.”

“Unbelievable,” Will snapped. “They’re going to be running around in the dark looking for that thing, and George is doing what?”

“George is tending to the Mansion’s new security system,” Sullivan answered calmly. “He made it clear that he has faith that you will succeed, but he wants me to be his eyes and ears while he works.”

“I guess the fancy new locks are more important than our lives,” Jake said icily.

“If that were true, I’d think George would have made you pay for your armor,” said Master Pana. “Does anyone yet have any idea what we are facing?”

“Nails and I did some research,” G.R. offered. “We, uh...we didn’t find much that was useful. I mean, there are a *lot* of creatures in that database, but we didn’t find anything that quite matched what you guys were fighting.”

“What’s it matter? We’re just gonna kill the thing,” Marc snorted as he kicked up his feet to rest his heavy boots on the tabletop.

“Not if you can avoid it, Marc,” Will chided him in exasperation. “We need to see if we can find out where it came from, remember?”

“Gentlemen, please,” Master Pana said in his usual calming tone. “We must seek a compromise. If we are able to determine where the creature comes from it will be a great boon for us, but our first priority must be to prevent it from harming anyone else.

“We will leave in twenty minutes. When we arrive we will gather near the site of the last attack, the one furthest from where you searched today. Then we will decide what to do.”

In twenty minutes the team again began the arduous task of carrying bundles of powerful and often illegal firearms past the workers in the Foyer. Master Pana had exchanged his war chief attire for a basic black sweater and denim jeans and helped the others carry their parcels while George worked discreetly to distract the engineers. Once the team was packed and ready to go in the Workshop, Master Pana returned to the Foyer to check with George, who was scrutinizing a set of his own installation plans with a scowl.

“We are ready to go, old friend,” Master Pana said under his breath so the workers, who were still tinkering with wires and circuitry in the doorframe, wouldn’t hear. “Is there anything you need?”

“This should be simpler,” George muttered absently as he continued to glare at the blueprints. “I set everything up, I designed the connections, I drew up the plans. They shouldn’t be having this much trouble following my instructions.”

“They are unfamiliar with the systems used here, my friend. I have no doubt that with your help they will be finished soon.”

“I certainly hope so.” George folded his blueprints and walked with Master Pana to the middle of the Foyer. “Do you have any idea what it’s been like for me these last few weeks?”

“I would never presume to,” said Master Pana.

George sighed. “This is supposed to be a sanctuary. It’s bad enough I have to send these young people out in the dark alone, but then the Crown of Thorns comes here and kicks through a door that’s supposed to be secure...” he trailed off.

“You have been fine so far,” said Master Pana. He laid a reassuring hand on George’s shoulder. “I have to go now. Sullivan and I will look after your charges. Clear your mind and make this a safer place for us to return to.”

George nodded sadly. “You’re right, of course. I must keep my mind on my work.”

“Yes, especially given the quality of your company.”

George blinked. “What?”

“Quack!”

George buried his face in his blueprints and Eric began to nudge his leg affectionately as Master Pana turned and walked out of the Mansion with a grin on his face.

"Is everything set?" Will asked without preamble when Master Pana returned to the Workshop.

"I believe so. I will ride with Jake. We should leave as soon as possible," replied Master Pana.

"You take care of yourself," Hawk said as he gave Crow a tender hug.

"I always do," she said, and kissed him.

"I hate this," Will said coldly.

Crow giggled. "I thought you appreciated romance."

"Not that!" snapped Will. "We need to be going out at our full strength to find this thing."

Nails crooked his head in thought. He was idly twirling a tire iron between his fingers. "Marc, buddy? You have a weapon?" he asked.

For the second time that day Marc answered a question by brandishing and cocking a shotgun.

"What about you, Mister O?" asked Nails.

Jake's armor was safely stowed in the trunk of his car, but he did pull two sub-machine guns out of a satchel on his back seat and hold them at eye level.

"Right," chuckled Nails, "we know Crow has her own spirit, I'm fairly certain Master Pana can take care of himself, and as for me..." Nails gripped his tire iron in both hands and smoothly bent it into a "U" shape, then flexed his wrists and bent it again several times until it was a fluid, wavy line.

"Showoff," G.R. muttered.

Nails strolled to Will and handed him the tire iron. "There you are," he said and gave Will a pat on the shoulder. "We'll be ok. Go back to the Situation Room and wait for us."

Will's eyes flickered from the impromptu sculpture in his hand to Nails. "All right," he said and turned to Master Pana. "You'll keep these maniacs under control?"

"I make no promises I do not intend to keep," Master Pana said.

Will sighed. "All right, off you go. Come on, you three."

Hawk, Cynthia and G.R. followed Will as he walked out of the Workshop and to the front yard. They waited there by one of the trees that dotted the grassy landscape until the other team members' small convoy rolled past to the front gate. Will watched the car and two trucks until they had rolled out of sight beyond the wall, then led the group at a brisk march inside to the Situation Room. Cynthia caught Will giving George a brief but very icy look as they passed through the Foyer.

"This is Jake Osborn calling George Manor."

Jake was standing in a tight group with Crow, Marc, Nails and Master Pana just inside the entrance to the alley where the fourth victim had been killed. The team was now fully armed. Even Master Pana had an assault pistol in a holster slung at his hip. The sun was half-hidden behind the horizon and thick clouds hung in the sky, driven over land by ocean winds, veiling the stars and the light of the two moons.

"*This is George Manor, you're on the air,*" Sullivan replied through Jake's Jakecam™.

"*She fills in for George better than you do, Jake,*" Will teased.

"That's not really a compliment to her," quipped Jake. "We're moving in. Wish us luck."

"*Good luck,*" Hawk's voice came through very quietly.

Nails, Crow, Marc and Master Pana clipped on Jakecams™ of their own, then checked their weapons a final time. Jake waved Nails into the alley, then followed with the others trailing behind.

The alley was very cramped and dark and the air cloying. So much garbage filled the narrow space that the ground was barely visible.

"Do we risk a light?" Jake wondered aloud.

"Which is worse?" Master Pana asked rhetorically, "to be more visible to others, or to be unable to see what we're looking for?"

"Good point. Crow?" prompted Jake.

Crow closed her eyes in focus. A moment later a fist-sized orb of bright green light appeared hovering in empty air before her. Though the light was soft, it was strong enough to illuminate the entire team and the area immediately around them. Marc clicked on the flashlight that was affixed to his shotgun

to supplement the lantern glow and the team began to move through the alley.

“So how far do we go?” Nails asked as he stepped over a shapeless mass on the ground. Inwardly he admitted to himself that for once he preferred to be wearing shoes.

“*According to the file, the body was found dead center in the alley,*” Sullivan’s voice drifted through Nails’ Jakecam™.

“That should give us some cover, at least,” observed Jake. He took his armor’s controller from its hip holster and punched in the command for his guns to rise into place.

“The question now is how to find our shaggy friend,” said Master Pana.

“We should have brought Sullen along and doused him in steak sauce,” Nails chortled as he hopped over another mound of refuse. “That would bring it running.”

“*Not funny!*” G.R. protested, but his voice was nearly drowned out in Marc’s boisterous guffaw.

“With all the noise we’re making, we should see it before too long,” Crow lamented.

“Have we heard from Detective King today?” Jake asked.

“*There have been no calls or faxes since this morning,*” replied Sullivan.

“*What are you thinking, Jake?*” Will asked.

“I’m not sure. I just think it’s odd that this creature came out of nowhere last night, went on a killing spree, then fought us and no one’s heard from it since.”

“*I’ve been wondering about that myself,*” said Will. “*I also thought it was strange that we ran into the creature right where it had already been and killed someone.*”

“This is its territory,” Nails said thoughtfully.

“How’s that?” asked Jake.

“That thing was definitely a predator,” Nails explained. “Predators stake out territories. I saw it all the time in the mountains. You’re out walking in the woods, minding your own business, then bam! You step over an invisible line on the ground and suddenly a pack of coyotes or a bear is all over you.”

“I guess that’s...wait, you fought a *bear*?” exclaimed Jake.

“Just once, on the far slopes. For a big girl, she was really quick on her feet,” Nails said absently.

“Ok,” said Crow, “what does that have to do with our creature?”

“Think about it. Wherever this thing came from, it turned up last night and the first thing it did was make a space for itself. It claimed an area, killed what it probably saw as competitors in that area, then hung around to guard its turf.”

“*That’s very insightful, Nails,*” remarked Sullivan.

“I aim to please.”

“It’s also very helpful,” Jake observed. “If this thing really does act like a normal predator, then it probably stayed around here and found a place to hide once it was injured.”

“You don’t suppose it crawled off somewhere to die?” Crow asked.

Marc snorted. “How often do we have that kind of luck?”

“Not often enough!” said an unfamiliar voice as someone stepped out of concealment in the shadows right in front of Nails. He was dressed all in black, even wearing gloves and a black mask with goggles, and he jabbed the barrel of a sleek assault rifle under Nails’ chin.

“Everybody freeze!” an identically-clad man ordered as he stepped from seemingly nowhere into the team’s midst. Two more black-garbed men with automatic weapons melted out of the darkness in front of the team.

“What the hell--?” Marc blurted as he raised his shotgun to aim at the stranger nearest him, but Master Pana reached out a hand and laid it across the barrel.

“Who are you?” he asked fervently.

A fifth man now appeared behind Marc where he stood at the rear of the team. The newcomer was a man of small stature who nonetheless carried an air of tremendous confidence and authority. He wore the same clothing as the other men save the mask and goggles. His nondescript features were marked only by a slim and well-tended mustache that was the same sandy blond as his hair and eyebrows. With piercing green eyes he regarded first Master Pana, then the other team members and finally Crow’s light.

“That’s a neat trick,” he said as he gazed at the softly-glowing, hovering orb. “How do you

manage it?"

"Magic," Crow replied stonily.

"I see." The man turned to face Master Pana. "I take it you're in charge?"

"Yes," Master Pana replied. His calm façade seemed very out of place in an alley full of people pointing guns at each other.

"Not to interrupt the small talk," said Nails sharply, "but I'm not a fan of having a rifle in my face."

"Someone give you permission to speak, punk?" the man holding the gun on him said and jabbed the barrel under Nails' chin for emphasis. Faster than the eye could follow Nails grabbed the barrel, forced it away from himself and crushed it into a mass of wrinkled steel.

"Nope," he said.

The two men behind the first and the one standing among the team all pointed their rifles at Nails while the first stared dumbfounded at his ruined weapon. Marc answered by aiming his shotgun pointblank at the man among the team members and Jake tightened his grip on his remote's trigger.

"Enough!" the mustached man shouted. "Weapons down, now!"

"What? We can't just--" one of the men protested. The mustached man cut him short with a threatening look that Crow was fairly certain would frighten a tiger.

"My name is Matthew Wayne, and I am the man who is going to kick some serious ass if these stooges don't start treating you with a little more respect," announced the mustached man. The others quickly lowered their weapons.

"That's better. My men are a little trigger happy," Matthew apologized.

"No harm done," said Master Pana calmly. "We seem to have similar purposes here, Matt, was it?"

"Matthew, please. 'Matt' sounds like people wipe their feet on me at the door."

"Fair enough," ceded Master Pana. "How should we proceed?"

"Let's start with introductions," Matthew said. "You know me by name already. My underlings here are Hudson, Black, Finley and Waters." He smirked when he said "underlings." "Anyway, we've been hired by a private interest to track down an escaped...project."

"Wayne, what are you doing?" demanded the man whose rifle Nails had ruined, but Matthew silenced him with another fierce look.

"What I am doing is giving out classified information to prevent a slaughter. Do any of you have any objections?" Matthew said sharply.

"We're on camera!" one of the other mercs said as he indicated the Jakecams™ on the team members' shoulders.

"All the more reason to be diplomatic," said Matthew.

"A friend of mine might point out that diplomacy is the art of saying 'nice doggy' until you can find a stick," said Master Pana flatly.

Matthew's face darkened. "In that case we'd better make sure we find the right doggy. Troops, move out. We've been here far too long."

The mercenaries promptly obeyed Matthew's command by turning and marching away down the alley the way the Winds had originally been heading. The merc whose rifle Nails had destroyed drew a pistol as he walked with his compatriots. Crow, Marc, Jake and Nails looked to Master Pana, who in return looked with quiet bemusement at Matthew.

"Shall we?" Matthew said. The team began to follow the mercenaries with Matthew and Master Pana walking together at the rear of the line. The lights of the mercs could be seen sweeping over the walls and floor of the alley in the gloom ahead. Crow's light trailed above and behind her right shoulder.

"So you're seeking the same creature we are?" It was more an open pondering on Master Pana's part than a question.

"Yup," said Matthew. "Her designation is Harlison Beta Series specimen #437. I just call her Harley."

"Where did she come from?" asked Crow.

“To make a long story less long, my current employers produced her. It was sort of an attempt to make a market, take control of the long term, blah blah blah blah.”

Jake stopped in his tracks, forcing those behind him in line to halt abruptly. “You work for the Russell Foundation,” he said thoughtfully and started walking again.

“Very good!” Matthew said.

“The medical company?” Crow asked.

“Medical supplies and equipment, yeah,” replied Jake. “Russell Foundation’s always been quick to take initiative in new developments, though. It’s how they’ve stayed competitive, so genetic engineering is right up their alley. They’re also the only private entity in Ylelon with the resources, interest, and means to commit to something as involved as genetic engineering.”

“Not the only one, but definitely the highest profile,” Matthew corrected.

“So you made a monster, good for you. What the hell was the point of that?” Marc snorted.

“The point,” Matthew said calmly, “was that someone had the bright idea of trying to make a better biological companion and security system for the social elite.”

Crow blanched. “That thing was made to be an attack dog for rich people?”

“Give the lady a prize,” Matthew said in mock celebration.

By now the mercs at the front of the line had reached the end of the alley. They signaled for the others to wait while they made certain that the side street beyond was clear. Crow snuffed her light and everyone went in a hurried rush across the street and into the next alley. This one was wider and cleaner than the last, but it was still very dark.

“Tell me this,” Master Pana said as the two teams continued to sweep the alley with their lights, “what exactly is it?”

Matthew shrugged, unseen in the gloom. “Couldn’t tell you. I was just the security chief for the project labs. The test tube jockeys liked using words like ‘atavism’ and ‘amalgamate.’ All I did was watch the doors and occasionally put one of the ‘specimens’ down when they got loose.”

“Escapes have been a regular thing, huh?” Jake said with razor sarcasm.

“Not exactly regular, but you have to understand something. The Harlisons were bred to have the traits of the strongest, toughest and most aggressive members of the animal kingdom. The Alphas were great successes physically but they were so vicious it was like they were born rabid. Every last one of them had to be destroyed.

“The Betas were a slight improvement, but that isn’t saying much. They have to be kept sedated all the time. None of them like to be caged no matter how big the cage is, and they’re *always* trying to get loose. Harley broke out of the truck she was being transported in the day before yesterday.”

“Transported where?” asked Jake.

“That I’m not going to tell you,” Matthew said firmly. “My point is, you people have no idea what it’s like to try to control a wild creature strong enough to break out of a steel cage.”

Master Pana thought he heard Nails give an amused chuckle, but he said nothing.

“So basically, your bosses let their little science project get loose and now you get to run around blind alleys looking for it?” said Jake, still sarcastic.

“That’s the gist of it.”

“I’m betting they have no intention of coming forward and making some sort of reparation?” Jake muttered icily.

“None,” Matthew replied. There was a hint of real regret in his voice.

“How fortunate for their priorities that the only ones hurt were homeless that no one cared about,” said Master Pana, and his calm tone was somehow more cutting than any sharp remark would be.

“Shouldn’t we be one alley over?” Nails cut in. “That’s where we saw the thing before.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’ll keep moving,” Matthew said. “That’s one of the bugs the lab coats could never work out. The Alphas and the Betas both just won’t hold still, and the more worked up they get the more they move around.”

“Oh. Oops,” Marc said.

“What?” one of the mercs demanded.

“We sort of...ran into Harley earlier and shot her a few times,” Jake admitted.

“What?!” the merc said again. He and his compatriots spun around at the head of the group, forcing the Lonely Winds to halt in their tracks. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Oh, not again,” Matthew moaned. “Boys, sit! Stay!”

“Not this time, Wayne!” snapped the pistol-wielding merc. “They wounded the Beta and let it run loose! That damn thing’s a locomotive now and this is on their heads!”

“I don’t understand, what’s wrong?” Crow asked frantically.

“The scientists wanted to make these creatures as tough as bears,” Matthew explained rapidly. “If Harley didn’t die from her wounds, then she’ll be on the warpath and looking for the scents of the ones that hurt her. She’ll kill anything that moves until she finds them!”

“So, while we’ve been hunting her, she’s been looking for us,” Jake scoffed. “Wonderful.”

“But if she’s this rabid hurricane of death that you say she is, shouldn’t we have seen some sign of her by now?” asked Crow.

Something dribbled onto Nails’ left shoulder, a warm, sticky fluid that looked black in the weak light.

“Not if she took to running around on the rooftops,” Nails muttered just before “Harley” plunged onto him from above with a furious roar. He was slammed down onto the concrete alley floor by the impact. Harley landed with her forepaws pinning him down by the shoulders. She clamped her enormous jaws over one shoulder and around his collarbone.

“Shoot it!” one of the mercs shouted, but the startled soldiers-for-hire were too slow in bringing their weapons to bear. In the time it took them to point their rifles at Harley, the enraged beast released Nails and turned on the nearest mercenary, clamping her jaws around his head. His terrified scream was drowned out by Harley’s growl. The mercs fired their weapons almost blindly at the same time Jake and Marc were running to join the fray. Marc’s shotgun roared in the alley as Jake activated his armor’s guns and Harley shook her victim like a rag.

In the time it took for Jake’s guns to be ready the mercs were peppering Harley with short bursts of rifle and pistol fire. Before Jake could catch Harley in a stream of bullets, she abruptly turned and leapt at a sharp angle upward toward one of the alley walls, still clutching the mercenary’s limp body in her teeth. Unbelievably, she gouged grips in the aged brick with her enormous claws and scaled the building with startling speed.

“That bitch killed Hudson!” one of the mercenaries shouted. He and his compatriots began to fire wildly into the air as dust and fragments of pulverized brick rained down on them. Matthew ran among them screaming for them to stop, but his voice was lost in the din of automatic weapons fire. Marc and Jake kept their guns trained on the dark sky while Crow ran to check on Nails, who was just getting to his feet. His sunglasses were ruined, his shirt had been reduced to tattered rags and his “flesh” was pitted, torn and gouged in scores of places across his chest, shoulders and neck. In spite of herself Crow had to pause at the sight of wounds that on a normal person would be grievous yet on Nails were completely bloodless.

“I’m ok,” he coughed just as Matthew got the mercs to stop firing. They stared at him in awe, having thought him to be dead. Even Matthew seemed quietly impressed.

“That’s why she hasn’t left a trail of bodies,” Jake snapped. “She’s using the rooftops. She came down when she heard our specific voices. She knows our scent *and* sound.”

“Then it’s over,” Crow said mournfully. “There’s no way for us to follow her and we’re just waiting for her to surprise us again.”

“I can follow her,” Nails said in a quiet voice.

“How?” asked Master Pana calmly.

Nails answered by doing something that no one present had ever seen him do and which only Jake had suspected he was capable of: he flew. Without any visible support or apparent effort he rose from the ground and up into the open air. In the span of a few heartbeats he had risen out of sight into the night sky.

“I’ll find her and try to drive her back to street level,” his voice came over the Jakecams™. “I’ll

give you directions and try to keep you with us.”

Master Pana calmly regarded the others. Crow, Marc, Jake, and Matthew were all staring at the empty sky with their mouths hanging open. Judging by the shallow dimples in the mercenaries' cloth masks, they were too.

“I think we should be moving,” Master Pana said in an effort to snap everyone back to reality. “We should find someplace inconspicuous to listen to Nails' reports while we make sure the police will not be drawn by the noise.”

“Ok,” Matthew remarked as everyone began to march toward the far end of the alley, “I've got to admit that was impressive.”

Sullivan, Hawk, Will, G.R. and Cynthia sat riveted to the monitors in the Situation Room. Sullivan had very prudently switched off the Mansion's audio-out feed when the team encountered the mercenaries and had sat with the others in the agonizing forced silence that followed.

“Sullivan,” Will said gently after Nails had vanished into the darkening sky, “I think this is worth telling George about.”

“I agree,” Sullivan answered. In a flash she was up from her seat and out the door.

George had scarcely moved from his original place where he stood watching the workers in the Foyer. Sullivan came to his side at a dead run and told him in a hushed whisper everything that he had missed. George never spoke while Sullivan did, but he was visibly shaking by the time she finished.

“Stay here,” he said. “The installation should be done very soon. When the workers are done, thank them for me, then escort them off the premises.”

“As you wish. What will you be doing?”

“I'm going to go check on our charges and have a little chat with this Mr. Wayne,” George answered. “I'll be taking a Smileyphone™ with me. Run and tell the others what is happening and that I am to be notified if they find the creature again or if anything else noteworthy occurs.”

He handed Sullivan his copy of the blueprints and sent her on her way. When she returned, George went to his study and retrieved his smiley-face satellite phone, then ran for his car in the Workshop.

Chapter IV From Bad to Worse

Nails drifted above the buildings of downtown, out of reach of the streetlights and only accompanied by the chilly winds. The thick cloud cover overhead cast a pall of gray light reflected from the city below back down upon the desert. The same myriad city lights reflected in Nails' black eyes as he scanned the rooftops below for the beast.

Though his shirt was in shreds the cold did not bother Nails in the least. It was part of the strange nature of his being; worldly sensations no longer had the same merit for him as they had when he had been alive. Though he could feel things like external temperatures, he was never discomforted by them unless they were extreme enough to harm him and he never felt hungry or fatigued.

This wasn't without its downside. Though Nails never felt too hot or too cold, he couldn't fully appreciate a breeze in summer or a warm fireside in winter, either. He was able to eat as much as he wanted and he never felt hungry, but he never felt the satisfaction of being full. For the thousandth time Nails found himself wondering if living people ever appreciated the good parts of being alive that came with the bad.

At the moment, he was also worried about the trouble he might be in. When the shining being calling himself Rogziel had talked Nails into becoming what he was now, he had warned Nails to keep as low a profile as possible and to avoid being seen when he could. Nails knew that he was constantly violating these rules nowadays by walking around in public and using his "talents" to help the others fight monsters. He had tried to keep low key by not doing things like flying in front of anyone else, but at present he didn't see the point in hiding what he could do anymore. He couldn't help showing off sometimes by doing things like bending a tire iron. Now there was genuine need to stop this "Harley" before she hurt anyone else and if taking off right in front of the others helped Nails do that then he was willing to take the risk of whatever trouble he might be in.

"*Are you there, Nails?*" Will's voice came through the Jakecam™ that still clung desperately to the remains of Nails' shirt. Startled from his reverie, he pulled the camera/walkie-talkie/who-knew-what-else from his shirt and held it like a microphone.

"Yes, I'm here," he answered. "How're you folks doing?"

"*George is on his way. He wants to talk to that Wayne guy.*" It was Hawk, his calm voice barely audible over the wind.

G.R. came through next, and there was worry in his tone. "*Are you ok, buddy?*"

"I've had worse days," Nails said dryly. "How are the gang on the ground doing?"

"*They're still marching around waiting for word from you. They don't know about us,*" Will answered.

Nails grimaced. "I didn't want to lead them on a chase until I was sure where to go."

"*If you haven't found it yet, you're not likely to,*" observed Will.

"Don't be too sure. It's pretty still up here. All I need to find her--"

Far below on a rooftop, a massive dark shape suddenly vaulted out from under cover in the shadow of some kind of structure and raced to the roof's end, where it leapt across the two-story drop to the next building and ran to hide in the shadows again.

"--is a little movement."

Nails quickly descended, lowering until he was three times the height of a man above the rooftop. He still couldn't see the animal, but the stairway entry, tool shack and various other rooftop structures provided plenty of places to hide and the weak illumination rising from the streetlights below threw shadows everywhere. He hadn't seen any sign of the mercenary Harley had taken earlier, but he knew that it had been a slim hope of helping him to begin with.

"I've got her! Can you pipe me through to the others again?" he said rapidly.

"*Hold tight,*" Will replied and the tiny speaker on the Jakecam™ clicked softly while its signal was rerouted from the Mansion.

"Testing, one two," Nails whispered as he kept his eyes on the roof below.

"You're loud and clear," Jake's voice came through the speaker of his own design.
"We've been waiting for you to call. We thought you had stood us up," Master Pana said.
"I took the scenic route," chuckled Nails. *"I've found our creature. Want some directions?"*
"No need," replied Jake. *"We can follow your signal right to your position. Hold tight."*
Nails looked down at the ominous pool of shadows that concealed a half-ton murder machine.
"Sure. No problem."

In ten minutes' time the field team found their way to the base of the building Nails hovered over. Presently they waited in a narrow alley off to the right of the building's face.

"What's the word, tough guy?" asked Marc jovially.

"I'm a little worried, to tell you the truth," Nails answered.

"Why is that?" asked Master Pana.

"She hasn't moved," Nails said as much to himself as anyone else. *"She's supposed to be hyperactive and violent, but she's not going anywhere."*

"Maybe she died," sneered the merc whose rifle Nails had ruined. *"You should take a closer look."*

"That's actually a good idea." With instinctive ease Nails drifted lower in the empty air, coming ever closer to the shadowy mass of structures beneath him.

"Be careful," G.R.'s voice came through the Jakecam™. Nails suddenly realized that he was gripping the tiny camera very tightly. He relaxed his hold and took a deep breath out of old habit. It wasn't as if he needed the air, but even after being dead for over a decade it somehow still helped sometimes to do simple things like breathe.

As gently as he could Nails set down on the shelter of the stairway and listened. The wind moaned here where it ran across the rooftops and Nails had to strain to hear anything above the sound. He shifted his weight to move and the roof of the stairway shelter creaked loudly under his weight.

Nails froze and gritted his teeth. He was sure he had made enough noise to be heard by anything else on the roof and he wasn't going to move until he knew whether the beast was coming for him. Before long he heard what he had been waiting for: the deep, rhythmic, rasping breath of an animal in pain. It was coming from very nearby, somewhere down below along one wall of the stairway shelter. With consummate caution, Nails twisted and leaned to look over the shelter's edge. All he saw was a great patch of shadow, so he leaned a little more.

A huge black paw erupted from the dark toward Nails' face. He dodged backward just in time to avoid the enormous dirty claws but lost his balance, dropped his Jakecam™ and toppled back off the shelter just as the beast crashed down where he had been. He landed with a thump on the roof below and watched as the beast vaulted off of the shelter and landed just out of arm's reach. With a snarl the beast turned and pounced at Nails, lunging at his throat with its teeth bared. Nails caught its jaws in his hands and struggled to hold it at bay, but it drove him over the gravelly rooftop as it struggled to reach him.

"Nails? What's happening?" Master Pana's voice came over the Jakecam™.

"Bit busy just now!" Nails called back just before the beast drove him into the safety barrier at the edge of the roof. The impact made the barrier bulge outward and several bricks spilled and tumbled into the alley as Nails grappled with Harley.

"Bad dog!" he grunted as he let go of Harley's snout with one hand and dealt her a hammering blow on the nose. Enraged, Harley clamped her teeth onto his forearm and hauled him away from the barrier, then shook him like a rag doll for several seconds before abruptly letting him go. Nails hurtled through the air and slammed against the stairway shelter. He kicked up onto his feet and found that Harley was still standing by the barrier, growling at him. Even in the dark he could see the blood that flowed from the many wounds on her neck and flank. Harley gave a last furious snarl, turned and leapt over the barrier.

"Nails? What's going on?" G.R.'s frantic voice buzzed over Nails' Jakecam™.

Nails grabbed it and was running for the barrier in the blink of an eye. He leapt just as he reached it and hurtled into the sky, all the while watching for Harley. He saw her loping briskly but unsteadily across the rooftop of the neighboring building toward the far side. As she ran she left a trail of tiny

puddles of blood that appeared black in the weak light reflecting from the clouds above.

“*Nails, tell me what’s happening!*” Master Pana demanded with rare overt emotion.

“Follow my signal. I’m bringing her down!” Nails exclaimed as he hurtled after Harley while increasing his altitude. He climbed until he was two full stories above the rooftop and keeping pace with Harley, then dove sharply just as she picked up speed for another jump. She reached the edge of the rooftop and leaped--and Nails came crashing down on her fist-first in mid-air. The Beta twisted in space to snap furiously at the angel, who struggled to keep hold of her, then they both slammed against the building and plummeted as one into the alley below. As they fell they tumbled until Harley was above Nails and when he hit the alley floor all nine hundred pounds of her came down on top of him.

As Harley lay momentarily stunned Nails managed to brace his hands on the alley floor and heaved her off of himself. He rose to his feet battered but intact, and realized that he had dropped his Jakecam™ when he hit the ground. Distracted by it, he was caught off guard when Harley shook off her daze and seized his right forearm in her jaws. She hauled him off of his feet and slammed him against a nearby wall.

“Oh, enough of this!” Nails snapped and grabbed one of Harley’s ears with his free hand. He held tight and used the leverage it gave him, along with the grip Harley kept on his own arm, to slam the top of her head against the wall. Once, twice, thrice Nails drilled the great beast’s skull against the unforgiving brick until her grip on his arm lessened and he was able to pull free. Harley staggered, dazed, and Nails made his move. He bashed his fist against the wall, breaking a hole in it and freeing several bricks. Nails pulled one free and bashed it against Harley’s skull, breaking it in two. Harley swayed drunkenly for a moment before collapsing on the alley floor.

Nails leaned back against the wall and clapped a hand against his forehead. The brute was breathing raggedly but not moving. Nails realized that the others might not be able to find him if his Jakecam™ was no longer broadcasting its signal, so he began to look around for it. His gaze finally fell upon it where it had fallen: a step away from where Harley now lay. Nails looked from the tiny plastic device to the massive beast that lay, bleeding and panting, on the alley floor.

“To hell with it,” he said and leaned against a wall to wait for the others.

The mercenaries arrived shortly, followed closely by Nails’ teammates, Matthew, and Master Pana. Harley had not moved. Her breathing was now very ragged and quick and she lay in a shallow pool of her own blood.

“Holy *crap*,” Marc spat when he saw her. Crow gasped and hid her eyes.

“Looks like you got her,” one of the mercs said casually.

Nails regarded him coolly, not caring that his black eyes were plainly visible. “Yeah, looks like,” he said, his voice tinged with acid.

The mercenaries surrounded the fallen creature with guns leveled at her. Matthew plugged in an earpiece and spoke into a small walkie-talkie:

“This is Agent Shadow reporting. Have secured Lost Puppy in civilian residential area near the warehouse district. One casualty. Please advise.”

“What are you going to do with her?” Crow asked, her voice full of pity. Harley continued to rasp out uneven breaths. If she had any idea she was surrounded she showed no sign of it.

“We ought to just finish the bitch off!” one of the mercs grumbled.

“I agree! Blow her damn brains out!” spat the pistol-wielding merc. Matthew had one hand pressed into his earpiece and held up his other hand to silence them.

“Clean-up is on its way,” he said finally. “We’re to make sure the area is secured, then escort the specimen back to the labs for salvage.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” snapped one of the mercs. “We are not letting this bitch live after what she did to Hudson!”

Matthew’s face darkened again into that fierce expression. “Those are our orders. I suggest you shape up and follow them.” He relaxed slightly and turned to Master Pana. “Thank you for your assistance. Unfortunately, we have reached the point where I must insist that you leave us to our work.”

“Now hold on a minute,” protested Jake, “you aren’t going to suggest that we just up and leave

after everything that's happened!"

"What are you going to do?" Matthew asked sardonically. "Place Harley under arrest?"

"Yeah, we should just put this bitch out of her misery," one of the mercs sneered as he drew back one foot to kick the fallen Beta.

"No, wait!" Nails warned, but it was too late: the mercenary kicked Harley in the hump on her back. With a furious roar she jerked up into a crouching position and clamped her teeth onto the merc's leg. The man shrieked as Harley crushed his shin in her jaws and shook him like a toy.

Nails was the first to respond: he'd tangled with enough wild animals to recognize what Harley was going through. She was exhausted, badly injured and hemorrhaging to death, but like many large predators her natural toughness and adrenaline kept her primed to survive. The two-story plummet and subsequent tussle with Nails had taken most of the fight out of her, but all that was necessary to get her going again was a perceived threat. That threat had been provided by the man that Harley was still shaking as Nails reached her and tried to grab her around the neck. Instead Harley pivoted and struck him--hard--with her victim. Nails felt and heard many of the poor man's bones break against his own body just as Harley released the merc's leg and he and Nails went down in a heap.

The two remaining agents had their weapons ready but had kept from firing to avoid hitting their companion. Once Harley dropped him they shot freely until she spun around and charged one of them, clamping her teeth around his stomach and driving him back against the building behind him with crushing force.

By now Marc had his shotgun leveled and was firing wantonly as he ran toward the enraged Beta. Jake activated his armor's guns and was maneuvering around the others to get a clear shot as Crow ran down her mental list of magic to find the spell that would be the most helpful. Even Master Pana had drawn his sidearm and taken aim, but he dared not fire for fear of hitting an ally in the confusion. Nails shifted to rise to his feet but cringed at the agonized scream of the crippled mercenary lying in a heap with him on the ground.

Harley continued to ravage the dying mercenary even as Matthew and the last merc blasted her at point-blank range with their pistols. Her blood ran in quarts on the ground and mixed freely with the blood of the man she continued to maul despite the mortal wounds being inflicted on her from every direction. Her victim screamed and flailed helplessly.

"Everyone get down!" Jake shouted at the top of his lungs. Marc heard the warning, knew what it meant and dove for cover; but Matthew and the mercenary were caught off guard as Jake unleashed his armor's guns. Twin streams of high-caliber rounds slammed into Harley's flank and the guns' muzzle flare flashed like strobe lights. The enraged Beta flinched backward, releasing her victim, howled once and flopped onto the alley floor.

Jake stopped firing when Harley fell. After the roar of his guns the alley seemed oddly quiet. Everyone else held their breath as Jake inched forward to Harley's side with guns at the ready. He stepped up next to her with his finger taut on the trigger and leaned down until the guns were only inches away from her, but she did not move. One great black eye turned toward Jake as if just noticing him, then rolled upward and closed slowly as Harley breathed out a last rattling breath.

Relief was almost palpable in the alley as the beast expired. The only sounds were the distant stirrings of the city at night and Matthew's voice as he urgently but calmly called for backup and medical aid. The last merc standing ran to check on the man Harley had mauled, but he was already gone. Nails and Crow were tending to the other wounded merc, who was bleeding profusely from his mutilated leg and in agony from his other injuries.

"Leave him alone!" the pistol-wielding merc ordered suddenly.

"He needs help!" protested Crow. "His ribs are broken, he may be bleeding internally--"

"I said back off!" the merc snapped as he pointed his sidearm at Crow.

"Why you--!" Marc grunted and leveled his shotgun at arm's length, pointing it at the mercenary's head. The merc turned his aim to Marc, but before the situation could deteriorate further Master Pana slipped to Marc's side with amazing speed and grace, once again laying a hand across the shotgun's barrel.

"I think it is time for us to be going," he said calmly.

"We can't just leave them here!" exclaimed Crow.

"Plus, their employers have a lot to answer for," added Jake.

"The police are surely on their way to investigate the noise we have been making," Master Pana replied, and Jake, suddenly feeling very self-conscious, deactivated his armor's guns. They settled back into position with a mechanical whine and a hydraulic *whoosh*.

Master Pana continued in his usual calm and rational tone. "These men will be hard-pressed to leave the area before the police arrive and they surely will have to choose between leaving the bodies of their companion and their quarry or remaining here with them."

"So we're going to leave them in the capable and trustworthy hands of the Ylelon police? Why not just give them a wad of cash and first-class tickets out of the country?" Jake spat as he angrily slapped his armor's remote back into its holster.

"I understand your anger, Jake, but it does not help us here. Please." Master Pana held out a hand to prompt the team to walk toward the far end of the alley. Jake, Crow, and Nails reluctantly obeyed. Marc took a moment for a last murderous look at the nearest mercenary, then turned and followed the others with his shotgun draped casually over his shoulder.

"I expect we'll meet again, should another of the Russell Foundation's "interests" escape," Master Pana said to Matthew.

Matthew's eyes flickered from Master Pana's face to the Jakecam™ on his shoulder. "I expect you're right."

"Good luck," said Master Pana as he turned and faded into the darkness.

"Hello! Situation Room! Sullivan, do you copy?" Jake said petulantly as he marched with the others through the inky black alley.

"*We read you loud and clear, Jake.*" Sullivan's voice was oddly loud in the quiet alley.

"Is George done with his home improvement yet?" Jake demanded. "We really need to talk about what's happened here tonight."

"*George is on his way to you, Jake,*" Will said. "*He wanted to talk to Wayne. We've been trying to get him on the phone, but he's not answering.*"

"Great. This is so typical! We need to catalog the things that happened tonight and George is out joyriding somewhere."

A light dusting of grit drifted from above and landed on Nails' shoulder. Nails stopped dead in his tracks, looked up, then lowered his head and closed his eyes in disgust.

What the hell is this, a trend? he thought bitterly.

"Nails? What's wrong?" Crow asked gently as she walked from behind him to stand at his side.

"There's something up there," Nails warned. Crow quickly created a force field around the group as Jake and Marc trained their guns on the sky.

While the four teammates were watching the empty air above, Master Pana slipped out of the shadows and calmly regarded the team.

"Have you all developed stiff necks?" he asked.

"There's another one of those things up there, dude!" Marc whispered.

Without hesitation Master Pana had his weapon drawn and took aim at the sky from just outside Crow's force field. Seconds ticked by as the team waited, but nothing happened.

"Nails, you sure there was something, man?" Marc asked tersely.

Nails made a show of dusting off his bare shoulder. "Yeah, I'm sure. Hey, Crow, can I get out through this thing?"

"If you're quick, but this works strictly one-way. You won't be able to come back again, and whatever you do, DON'T stop midway."

"Got it!" chuckled Nails as he made a tremendous leap that rocketed him through the force field and upward out of sight. It became true flight as Nails rose above the second story and continued to ascend. He half expected a snarling, furry engine of mayhem to pounce on him as he passed the rooftops

at two and three stories high, but none did.

Nails stopped his ascent when he was twice the height of the buildings nearby and took a look around. Because of the cloud cover it was still very dark. The team had been moving farther into the warehouse district, where there were far fewer streetlights. Nails was forced to abandon his high vantage point and drift downward toward the rooftops. His first destination was the two buildings lining the alley where his teammates still waited. He could see their lights sweeping back and forth in the alley below as they tensely waited for word of what was happening.

As he came closer to the rooftops Nails could see that the safety barrier in the middle of one wall, just above where the team had been when Nails had stopped, was badly damaged. It was gouged in four places and the bricks there were dislocated and crushed, as though some great force had pulverized it. Each gouge was a little wider across than Nails' torso. Broken bricks were scattered in uneven trails ten paces across the rooftop.

What the hell? Nails thought as he set down on the roof.

He turned in place to look around. The roof he was on was much clearer than many of the others around it. The only place Nails saw where a Beta could be hiding was a stairway shelter on the other side of the roof.

"Nails? Don't keep us in suspense," Master Pana's voice came through Nails' Jakecam™. Nails realized that the tiny camera was stuffed in his pocket, where he had put it after his fight with Harley, and he took it out again.

"Hold tight. I'm going to check something out," he said and began a cautious walk across the roof.

He was halfway to the shelter when his foot set down deeper than it should have and he nearly stumbled. Lifting his foot, Nails realized that he hadn't miss-stepped but that his foot had settled into some sort of shallow ditch in the gravelly surface of the rooftop. It was a ragged gash longer than Nails was tall and tapering to a rough point at one end. Looking around revealed three more such gouges running parallel to the first, and other sets, at least a half dozen of them, scattered about the rooftop.

For the first time in a very long while Nails began to feel frightened. He lifted off and flew a full story upward to take a look around. Slowly, he rotated, looking over the nearby buildings' roofs. He had nearly turned a full circle, seen nothing, and was starting to relax when he saw it.

More accurately Nails saw its silhouette, a great expanse of blackness that veiled the weak light behind it. The silhouette moved about, eerily silent, atop the building across the alley where the Winds waited. It was a colossal beast, as high at its shoulder as the building it trod upon. Enormous bat-like wings spread as the creature turned, blocking out still more of the dim gray sky. Higher still, two eyes appeared as the monster shifted, enormous orbs that blazed from within with blood-red light.

As Nails hung in the air shocked and amazed, a sound was carried to him on the wind. It was something like the huff of an animal that has found an interesting scent and something like the roar of hot air from a blast furnace. A wave of unnatural warmth swept over the rooftops on the trail of the sound, momentarily taking the edge off of the chilly wind. Then the great wings beat suddenly and the air from them was enough to force Nails out of place, blowing him backward in the sky. Nails lost sight of the bizarre spectacle as he struggled to hold his place. After several seconds of fighting, the wind abruptly stopped. Nails looked back across the alley to see what was happening and was struck by a force that plowed into him like a freight train and sent him plummeting to crash onto the rooftop. In the back of his mind Nails heard his Jakecam™ fall and break somewhere nearby. More out of shock than any injury, he lay still for several moments, while someplace high above the tremendous wings could be heard growing steadily more distant until their sound was lost in the wailing winds.

When the wing beats had faded Nails rose to his feet and walked slowly to the damaged safety wall. When he reached it he stepped through one of the gaps and plummeted upright into the alley below. He dropped right in front of the team, who all started backward at his sudden arrival as the concrete alley floor cracked loudly under his feet.

"Nails?" Master Pana prompted gently.

"Dude! What's with you?" exclaimed Marc.

Nails did not answer. Instead, he leaned against a nearby wall and stared into space.

“Nails?” G.R.’s frantic voice came through the Jakecams™. “Are you all right?”

Nails took a long breath as if to steady himself. “I used to think,” he said slowly, “that I had seen everything.”

“Nails,” Master Pana said firmly as he laid a hand on the stunned angel’s shoulder. “I need you to tell me exactly what you saw.”

So Nails did.

About two-thirds of the distance from George Manor to the city was a small rest stop. It was used primarily by truck drivers who ferried ore and goods between the city and the mining towns in the mountains and was usually deserted after dark.

At the moment, however, a single nova-blue luxury sedan was double-parked in front of the main structure where the bathrooms and vending machines were housed. Presently George emerged from the building’s glass double doors with his arms full of snacks of all sorts. He whistled excitedly to himself as he jogged to his car, not caring that he occasionally dropped the odd item. The plan was to have a peace offering handy for when he encountered this Mr. Wayne. To George’s mind there was no better way to smooth over hostilities than with yummy pre-packaged lumps of salt, sugar, and preservatives.

George was so caught up in trying to distract himself from how worried he really was about the team that he did not hear his Smileyphone™ ringing until he was almost at his car door. He had left the phone on the passenger seat and was forced to tug the door open with a finger and drop part of his cargo on the seat before fishing around the pile to find the phone.

“Haldo,” he said promptly.

“George, thank goodness! Where have you been?” It was Sullivan, her voice frighteningly urgent.

“I’m at a rest stop. What’s wrong?”

“We’ve been trying to get hold of you for five minutes. George, Nails thinks he saw a dragon!”

The only sound in the rest area was the crinkle of the rest of the snacks tumbling to the ground.

“George? Are you there?”

“Yes, yes, I’m here! Is everyone all right? Where are they now?”

“They’re on their way back to the Mansion. Nails was sort of run over, but he seems all right.”

Run over? George thought. “Sullivan, hold tight. I’m on my way home.”

Overpriced snack foods skittered and crunched as George slammed the passenger door and ran around to the driver’s side. In a heartbeat he roared out of the parking lot and back onto the highway.

“This has been...a most remarkable day,” Master Pana said as he walked with the others from the Workshop toward the Mansion’s front door. Jake nodded solemnly in response--this was the first time he had ever seen Master Pana so shaken.

“Are you sure about what you saw, man?” Marc asked Nails.

“I really more *felt* it than saw it, but yeah, I’m sure,” was the reply. “I got hit in the sky and fell on a building. Getting hit hurt more than landing did.”

The team trudged the rest of the way back to the Foyer in silence. The brand new double doors were standing wide open. George, Sullivan, Hawk, Will, Cynthia, and G.R. waited just inside near a pile of medical supplies.

“Is everyone all right?” George asked urgently the moment the team set foot inside the doors.

“We’re fine, my friend,” Master Pana said calmly, “no one is hurt.”

“What happened?” George demanded as Sullivan began to check each team member for injury.

“That’s what we’d like to know,” said Jake. His eyes locked with George’s and in that moment Jake thought they both understood each other better.

“Very well,” George said slowly. “If everyone is all right, then please tend to your own needs. Get some rest, and we can talk more in the morning.”

“What about reports?” asked Crow.

“Those can wait. You all have had a very rough day. Sleep first, then we’ll worry about other things in the morning.”

“Yeah, I don’t really follow you there, George,” Jake said. “See, we just saw a *dragon*. That’s pretty damn noteworthy even in our line of work, I’d say. So, I’ve got some questions for you about it all.”

“Now is not the time, Jake,” George said stonily.

“You’ve got a habit of saying that at the worst possible times, George,” snapped Will. “Here’s something I’d like to know: did you *know* there were actual dragons? Because, myself, I’m just a little surprised.”

George lowered his eyes. “Would it matter if I had? Now we all know. There is a dragon in Ylelon. The reality of it is rather less ridiculous than it sounds.”

“Yeah?” Hawk scoffed. “What’s with all the dragon stuff you’ve got around here? Hell, the damn library is halfway to being a museum of dragon artwork!”

“Not that it concerns you, Joseph,” said George coldly, “but it is simply because I appreciate the dragon esthetic. I always have.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Terrific. Now on top of all the freaks we gotta worry about fairy tale lizards too. Suddenly I’m not so worried about freaky companies making monsters in their basements anymore.”

The team walked away stolidly up the right staircase in the direction of their rooms. Will, G.R. and Cynthia went with them, and several excited conversations could be heard starting just as the team reached the edge of earshot. Sullivan took a cue from the way things were going and excused herself to return the medical supplies to their storage, leaving George and Master Pana alone in the Foyer.

“Nails saw Terek Domar,” George said, very blankly. It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, he did,” Master Pana replied.

“Now the team knows about him...”

“First thing’s first, George,” Master Pana reminded him wryly.

“What? Oh, yes, of course.” George took his tiny cylindrical microphone out of his pocket, and spoke into it: “Commercial sign.”

Powerful hidden servos swung the front doors closed and the newly installed locking bars could be heard sliding into place.

“Now we are safe for the evening. Unless, of course, you forgot to ensure that the windows are locked by the same code as the doors.”

“Laugh all you want, Harati, but this is going to cause problems. Jake has already been trying to learn more about the Mansion for some time,” George said and began to walk toward the east wing hallway. Master Pana went with him, once again calm and solemn.

“Will they still be willing to go into the field now that they know about this?” George wondered aloud as he led the way down the hall to the Kitchen.

Master Pana smiled wanly. “Ponder for a moment, George. You are suggesting that the brave youths who sally forth and routinely face vampires, monsters, and now artificially engineered abominations will be unable to face the reality of a dragon in Ylelon, yes?”

“Your sarcasm is noted, Harati.” The two veteran monster hunters reached the kitchen and walked to one of four refrigerators, the one dedicated to drinks. George selected a well-aged and very expensive bottle of whiskey, while Master Pana chose a bottle of spring water. The two sat down at the Kitchen’s large dining table.

“Speaking of the abomination, have we heard anything new?” asked Master Pana.

“Detective King called just before I got back,” George said slowly as he poured himself a double of whiskey. “He said the officers on the scene found dozens of spent bullet casings, huge pools of blood, and signs of some sort of massive struggle. The forensics and ballistics teams are already losing their minds trying to figure out what happened.”

“I can imagine,” Master Pana said and sipped his water. “Is Samuel up to speed?”

“Are you kidding? According to Sullivan, the first thing the Detective said was ‘What the hell have you lunatics been doing now?’” George sounded more annoyed than anything else.

“That sounds like the good Detective,” quipped Master Pana. “Mister Wayne certainly managed to salvage a poor situation. Under different circumstances I’d suggest he might make an interesting ally.”

“He still might.” George took a long draught. “He’s obviously privy to much of what’s happening here. I wonder how much he really knows.” He set his drink down and stared off into space.

Master Pana put his own drink on the table. “They’ll be all right, George,” he said reassuringly.

“I certainly hope so,” George replied, but he continued to stare into space with a haunted look in his eyes.

Epilogue

Only a few blocks southwest of the alley where the Lonely Winds had stopped and Nails had seen the dragon, in the dark and quiet hours of the very early morning while the team rested fitfully and shivered through dreams of the horrible things they had seen that day, Atla walked the unsafe streets of the district to arrive outside the personnel door on a certain warehouse. His robes were the color of dying embers, decorated all over with arcane glyphs and runes of silver thread. He opened the new lock and stepped through the door, leaving it ajar.

The interior of the warehouse was pitch black, except for the area just inside the door, which let in only enough light to illuminate the man.

"I was wondering how long it would be before you did something interesting again," he said into the darkness.

Far away near the back of the warehouse and up near the ceiling, a pair of enormous eyes that shone from within with blood-red light opened, illuminating the same enormous beast that Nails had seen earlier. Even under the peaked two-story roof, the dragon looked cramped. It carried its head held low, just above its own shoulder level, to keep from scraping its long curving horns on the ceiling.

"What are you babbling about, Atla?" Terek Domar said, its voice like thunder rolling across the desert.

Atla chuckled. "I am referring to you venturing out and managing to be seen by the local cadre of monster hunters. Definitely not your best moment."

The dragon's eyes narrowed and it rumbled out a low growl, but it said nothing.

"I see. You didn't know," laughed Atla. "You went traipsing about to watch the interlopers in your territory, but you didn't plan on being watched back!"

Atla's laughter was suddenly drowned out by another growl, this one so loud and low that it made the sheet metal walls of the warehouse vibrate.

"Something vexes you?" Atla mocked. "It's getting to the point where I don't have to oppose you. You're doing most of the work for me."

"Do you really think this changes anything, Atla?" Terek Domar snarled.

"No, not really. I'd say it's little more than an inconvenience for you by itself. But since when am I one to miss an opportunity like this?"

Terek Domar tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see," Atla taunted as he walked back to the door. "It's going to be a surprise. See you at your inevitable downfall!" He stepped outside and closed the door behind himself.

"We shall see," Terek Domar thundered. The beast walked toward the middle of the structure, near the door Atla had used. The concrete floor shuddered and the walls trembled with each step the dragon took as it came upon a section of floor that was little more than a pit of rubble, pulverized by the great wyrm days before in a moment of rage. In one enormous clawed hand Terek Domar picked up a fistful of the rubble and thoughtfully ground it between his fingers.

"A single flaw, a simple failure, one tiny misstep, and I'll bring your kingdom down around your ears." He opened his hand and fine dust and pebbles that had been chunks of concrete weighing hundreds of pounds drifted to the floor. Then he closed his eyes and the warehouse again became dark and silent.