

Book XIV
This Oppressed State

Chapter I We, the People

For all the violence and misery the inhabitants of George Manor saw on a regular basis, the grounds of the Mansion itself were remarkably peaceful. Baring an incident over a year prior involving a high-kicking vampire, a lightshow of robotic firepower and some very bad poetry, the savannah grass and tress of the grounds had not been disturbed in living memory. In large part this was due to the Manor's obscurity. Few even knew of its existence: fewer still deigned to approach it. Day after day, night after night, the grounds stood inviolate and peaceful.

That was, until the darkest hour of one November morning when a black pickup truck pulled up outside the Wall's front gate. The driver quickly killed the engine and left the vehicle, heading for the Wall just to the right of the gate, which he scaled with graceful ease. Soon he was running across the front yard through the tall grass to the Mansion's front door. There he rang the bell twice and stepped back to wait.

Moments passed with the only sound the gentle rustling of the grass in the breeze. After several long minutes locks clicked and bars rolled back. One of the doors opened and there was George.

"Hawk?"

"We gotta talk, George," Hawk said. "Wake everybody up. Like, right now."

"Calm down, Joseph. What's this all about? Why didn't you call about your visit?"

"I couldn't risk a call. Look, can I come in? I don't like being exposed like this."

George looked at Hawk, then past him into the empty yard and back again. "All right, come on in."

"Everybody here asleep?" Hawk asked as George closed and relocked the door.

"Everyone is here. Will is awake," George said quietly. "Cynthia was hurt four nights ago."

"What?! What happened?"

"We aren't sure." They mounted the stairs, heading for the private rooms. "The team found a vampire gang and encountered difficulty with a hostage situation. Cynthia devised a plan to turn the situation around, but something went wrong. Jake found her in an empty room with a disabled vampire, unconscious and dangerously low on blood."

Hawk was quiet for a moment. "Is she ok?"

"She's in and out of consciousness. It was touch and go for a while."

"Damn..."

They walked in silence the rest of the way to Cynthia's room. Inside, Will was sitting in one of two chairs next to the bed where Cynthia was sleeping peacefully. When Will saw George returning with Hawk, he got up and came to meet them.

"Damn, man," said Hawk. "I've got to stop coming by after disasters."

"It's all right," Will replied as he gave his old friend a hug. "What brings you out this way? How's Angie?"

"She's good. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm under the gun here."

"What's wrong?" George asked.

"Something's up, something big," said Hawk. "I need every active agent back in the city with me as soon as possible."

"What's happening?" asked Will.

"I'm not sure," Hawk said. "But I know something has already happened and I know where we can find out more if we move fast."

"Very well. I will find Nails while you two wake the others," George said.

In twenty minutes' time the team was mobilized, heading for the city in their typical caravan with a load-out of weapons for heavy combat.

"*What's this about, anyway?*" G.R. asked for the seventh time through a yawn as the caravan pulled off of the Mansion's dirt road onto the highway.

"I can't tell you much," Hawk admitted. "What I can tell you is that we have a very narrow window to gather intel about something big. Real big."

"*Any background you can give us?*" asked Jake.

"Yeah, but you won't like it. You've all seen about Senator Wildman?"

For a moment the Jakecam™ network was silent. Then, abruptly, Marc broke the quiet.

"*Oh, hell no! You are not telling us his dying had something to do with what we do! The news said he died of a heart attack!*"

"The news said it was a heart attack," Hawk said. "The same news that's monitored by the same government that runs the police, the military..."

"*Where are we going now?*" asked Will.

"The only place I know of where we can find a source that may be able to tell us what really happened. I just hope he's still there."

"*Who is the source?*" George asked.

"Another Storm. Word's been circulating that he saw whatever went down. It's got him scared. He don't get scared."

"*What's the rush?*" Jake asked.

"If he saw something bad enough to both scare him and have the government covering it up, someone may try to make sure he doesn't talk about it."

Again, silence over the Jakecams™.

"Make no mistake," Hawk said softly. "This is going to be dangerous. When we get there, nobody move a muscle or say a word I don't tell you to, got it?"

"*Yeah, what's this place that's so much worse than what we're used to?*" Marc scoffed.

It was a bar, actually. Low-class, poorly-lit, with smoky air and warped floorboards like dozens of other dives along the waterfront. The entry was down a steep and narrow flight of rough concrete stairs running beneath an old tenement.

There were only three people in the place: the bartender, a drunk snoring loudly at a corner table and a man in camo fatigues sitting at the bar. It was this last one that Hawk approached, sweeping the room with his gaze and stepping carefully, as if the floor were a minefield. While still a respectable distance from the man Hawk signaled the others to put away their Jakecams™ and sit separately around the room, close enough that they could hear what the man said but not near enough to be threatening.

Hawk himself sat next to the man, a fair-skinned bruiser with thick eyebrows and piercing gray eyes. He was fingering a small glass of deep amber liquid. When Hawk sat next to him, he gave his fellow Harbor Storm such an unfriendly look that for a moment Will was afraid the man was going to start a fight.

"What brings you down to my level, Hawk?" he asked. "Decide to bring some friends to gloat?"

"Moran," Hawk said somberly, "they're not here."

Moran turned on his bar stool and scrutinized each of the Winds. Though he didn't examine any one of them for more than a fraction of a second, they all knew when someone was sizing them up to evaluate a threat.

"Whole lotta nothin' to bring with you," Moran said.

"Tell me what happened, Moran," Hawk said.

"The whole story, huh, Hawk?" Moran laughed bitterly as he sipped his drink. "Sure, it's only a matter of time before I disappear, might as well spread the story around among you and a few close friends, eh?"

"Moran, they're not here," Hawk said again.

"Fine." Moran finished his drink and signaled the bartender for another. "You know all about the call, right?"

"Tell me like I don't," said Hawk.

Moran waited for his drink to come, then dropped a ridiculously large bill into the tip jar. Will thought he understood why after some of what Hawk had said: Moran didn't think he was going to be

around long enough for it to matter if he gave all of his money away.

“Two nights ago, at the base,” he began. As he spoke he continuously scanned the room, as though he expected an attacker to leap at him from nowhere. “The call comes in: hostage situation...”

It was nothing the Harbor Storms couldn't handle.

They were suited and ready to go in a flash. Little intelligence was provided about the scenario. The Storms weren't worried about that: covert operations were what they did, after all. What they were told was simple enough: there was a hostage situation in the Capital Offices, the antique building that served as the seat of government for Ylelon. Parties involved were unknown: numbers involved were unknown. Thus far the incident had been kept from the press and public knowledge.

These were the occasions Charles Moran lived for. Even among the Harbor Storms, Moran was renowned as an exceptional talent. His colleagues (he couldn't really be said to have “friends”) often said of him, with earnest lack of hyperbole, that he was quite possibly a sniper without peer in the world. He was also regarded as one cold-hearted son of a bitch.

It's a common misconception that snipers, by dint of their profession alone, are all stone-cold killers. This is largely an unfair observation, as your average sniper is no more or less inherently evil than any other soldier. They are warriors, chosen by their leaders to do a specific task. Moran certainly didn't see himself as cold. He saw himself as a devoted patriot willing to make full use of his unique skills in the service of his country, regardless of whom the target was or why they were a target. *That* was what made him a cold-hearted son of a bitch. That, and how much pride and enjoyment he derived from his work.

When the order came to sortie Moran was the first to be ready. He kept prepared kits of custom equipment set aside for use at a moment's notice. “Custom equipment” meant padded carrying cases loaded with specialized ammunition and rifles, many of which were highly illegal even for a Harbor Storm.

Moran selected two such cases, gathered his other gear and reported for assignment. One team would breach the building itself and stand by to storm the office where the hostages were being held. Another squad, including Moran, would provide cover from nearby windows and rooftops. The others would go into peripheral positions while Moran himself would be placed where he could directly observe the scenario itself.

Initial placement went smoothly. Moran found himself setting up in a lawyer's office directly across from the capitol building. When he scanned that building, however, it immediately became clear that something was very wrong.

The first clue was the hostages themselves. One of them was an attractive blonde woman: Moran could only guess she was a receptionist or someone else that had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, since her face was not one he recognized from the many political figures of Ylelon government that he knew so well.

The other hostage was one that Moran knew: none other than Senator Timothy Wildman. Both were gagged and bound to office chairs set side-by-side, facing out the office window. Both of them looked terrified.

The real kicker, the thing that made Moran do a double take through his rifle's scope and frown to himself, was the only hostage taker he could see in the room. The fact that there was only one present was strange enough in itself, but the man himself presented a bizarre appearance. He was a large man wearing a long coat, a dark shirt and well-pressed slacks. He was also wearing some kind of mask or makeup. All of his visible skin was a bright red, including his bald scalp. He had pointy ears and what looked like yellow contacts and exaggerated plastic fangs. As he paced back and forth in front of the woman and the Senator, his movements and facial expressions were very animated as he gestured and spoke, swinging like a pendulum between what looked like bestial rage and huge gales of laughter. Moran never took his eyes off of the strange scene as he reported in.

“Position One in place and standing by. I have a partial view of the scenario, including two hostages and one captor.”

“*Stand by, Position One,*” a petulant female voice said over the line.

So Moran waited.

He watched the freak in makeup prancing back and forth, speaking to the Senator while the woman sobbed hysterically. Seconds ticked by without questions or instructions from the line, so Moran checked his equipment again. He was using his favorite rifle, a heavily customized model that had served him well on numerous occasions. It was loaded with a four-round clip of heavy-core explosive rounds, more than enough to punch through body armor and do horrendous damage to the soft flesh underneath.

His check complete, Moran settled in to wait again. Still the line was silent. Patience was an essential part of his vocation, but Moran still couldn't help wondering just what the hell all of this was about.

Then things really got weird.

A voice finally came over the line, a gravelly male bass. "*All positions, stand down and withdraw.*"

Moran pulled away from his rifle's scope. "Say again, command?"

"*Stand down and withdraw now!*" the voice said. Almost immediately, the original female voice countermanded it:

"*All agents remain in place. Position One, prepare to fire on the hostage-taker.*"

For just a moment Moran hesitated before leaning back into his rifle. The scene had not changed since he'd looked away. As he followed the freak, keeping his crosshairs trained on the head as much as possible, the male voice came over the line again.

"*All agents, pull out now!*"

Moran looked up from his scope again. In the office the terrorist, or whatever the hell he was, passed behind a window partition as he walked, vanishing from sight for a moment.

"*Do not disengage!*" the woman's voice blurted. "*Take the shot at the primary target!*"

"*Do not fire!*" the male voice shouted exactly as the freak came into view again.

"Command, please clarify," Moran said, more than a little impatiently. The freak was already walking back the way he'd come.

"*Under no circumstances is any agent to engage the hostage-taker!*" the man said.

"*Take the shot! This is a direct order!*" cried the woman right as the hostage-taker passed in front of Senator Wildman.

"*Do not fire! Do not fire!*"

"*Take the shot, now!*"

The freak was safely away from the Senator, walking toward the far wall, gesturing and laughing.

"*All agents withdraw now! That is an order!*"

The hostage-taker walked further into the room, so that the angle of Moran's view meant he could only see the man below his heart. Moran adjusted his aim accordingly, to the liver.

"*Fire! Fire!*"

Moran pulled the trigger.

Two separate windows shattered into diamond fragments. It was a supremely difficult shot, trying to allow for how the glass and the air between them would affect the bullet's trajectory. It also involved a moving target and the distraction of the inexplicable orders being shouted in the ear.

Moran never doubted he could make the shot. When the glass shattered and the target lurched forward he knew his work was done. He had hit the freak dead in the center mass. Any body armor he might have been wearing would now have a huge, ragged hole in it. The bullet had entered the body cavity and burst, doing to the organs what a fire cracker tuckered into a pound of ground beef will do. The man would be dead before he fell, before he even knew he'd been shot.

But the man didn't fall.

He lurched, fell to one knee, held his wound, but he did not hit the floor dead. Moran stared at him through the scope, looking at what he knew to be impossible.

Fall down, he thought. *Your guts are a sticky paste, there's no way you can be standing, fall over, damn it!*

The hostage-taker did not fall. He looked up. As Moran looked on disbelievingly through his

scope, the man he had shot looked back at him across the nighttime gap between the buildings, *looked him in the eye*, and grinned. Hideous slender fangs glistened in the office lights. They no longer looked plastic.

“He looked at me,” Moran said. “He fucking *looked* at me!” In one gulp he finished his drink and plunked the glass down on the counter.

Hawk looked at the others as they listened intently, then back at Moran. “What did you say about it in your report?”

“There was no report,” Moran grumbled. “Right after I took the shot we were called back. There was no debriefing, no report, nothing. No one said a damn thing to any of us. It was like the operation never happened.

“Next day, my name’s not on the duty roster anymore and it’s all over the news that Senator Wildman’s dead. I didn’t bother waiting around the base.”

“Did you see what happened to the Senator?” asked hawk.

“Do I really have to answer that?”

The bartender approached and refilled Moran’s glass. Moran glared at him until he retreated again.

“Are you still here?” he snapped at Hawk.

“I’m wondering why *you’re* still here. You could still disappear, Moran.”

“Sorry, but no. That’s your thing. I just kill people.”

Hawk signaled for the others to start heading for the door. Take care of yourself, Moran,” he said as he stood.

“It won’t matter if I do,” Moran growled.

“That was enlightening,” grumbled Jake when the group was outside, standing together on the sidewalk half a block from the bar.

“I’d have said disturbing,” Will said. “Did we really just hear a first-hand account of the murder of a prominent political figure?”

“*Maybe you did*,” said George.

“Sorry, George, but I couldn’t take the chance on Moran not being willing to talk,” Hawk said. “I can’t believe we got as much as we did!”

“‘As much’? You woke us up for *nothing!* What the hell are we supposed to do about this?” growled Marc.

“What we always do,” said Jake with a smirk. “Kick ass and look good doing it.”

“Can we investigate the Senator’s office?” asked Will.

Hawk frowned. “I wouldn’t try it. If everything went down the way Moran said, then the whole Capital Office is probably locked down and under observation.”

“What about his house?” Jake suggested. “It’s a long shot, but maybe something there will give us some idea of what this mess was all about.”

“Hold on, I’m confused,” G.R. said. “Just what is it that we think is going on?”

“Ok, look,” Jake said. “Remember the thing about a year ago with Simon and the idol?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“*At the time, Simon and the dragon Kenthis implied that Ylelon’s system of government is actually a puppet entity*,” said George. “*The fact that the good Senator, one of so few of integrity in Ylelon’s history, apparently had dealings with a supernatural being that may have also been directly involved in his death both casts aspersions on his deeds and lends credence to that claim.*”

“Our government is making deals with the same monsters it hides from its people,” Will said. “Dear heaven.”

“Can we find out where the Senator lived?” asked Jake.

“Damn right we can,” Hawk said as he pulled a cell phone from a pocket. “You boys load up. I’ll lead the way in two minutes.”

Two minutes and forty seconds later the team members current and erstwhile were well en route, with Hawk leading the way to an address given to him by a contact.

"Are we sure we don't want to check out the offices first?" Nails said. "I could go alone with some of Jake's gizmos, fly in the windows from the top..."

"Not a chance, big dog," said Hawk. "I guarantee you the place is being monitored now. Flying at night or not, there's too much chance someone will see you and take a shot. Trust me, you do *not* want a .450 round through your head."

"Not to countermand my own suggestion, but how do we know the Senator's house isn't being watched as well?" asked Jake.

Hawk shrugged in his cab. "We don't."

"Guess this is the kinda fun you get to have all the time, huh, secret agent man?" Marc chortled.

"Yeah. Usually I'm not AWOL like this so I'm not risking arrest and I'm getting paid. Oh, and I'm not facing the possibility of having to go up against my fellow agents. But other than that, yeah, this is a regular day for me."

"How does Angie stand it?" Will asked.

"She's a strong woman," said Hawk.

"Does she know where you are now?" asked Jake.

"What are you, nuts? I left her sleeping at the base. I'll be back before dawn and she'll never know I left."

At that exact moment in the Mansion, the phone rang.

"There is a call incoming, George," Sullivan said. "I believe it is the Hawks' home number."

With a solemn expression George muted the Mansion's audio-out feed to the Jakecams™. "Put it through the direct link please, Sullivan," he said.

Sullivan went rigid: she had effectively become an *avante-guarde* receiver.

"George Manor, we're open at all hours," said George.

"I don't even know where to begin, George," the voice of Angela Hawk came over the line.

"I can't say I blame you."

"Can you tell me where my husband is?"

"Indeed, I can. Moreover, I intend to."

"I think you can tell I'm not in the mood for games, George."

"No games, just my trademark sense of humor. Your husband came to us a couple of hours ago with what he claimed was pertinent information. Since then we have made the astonishing revelation that Senator Wildman appears to have been assassinated by supernatural forces."

"You're joking!"

"Not anymore, I'm not."

"Where is he now?"

"With the others. They are en route to the Senator's residence in hope of learning more."

"I see."

"I take it Joseph did not tell you where he was going?"

"He didn't tell me a damn thing. He waited until he thought I was asleep, then got up and took off. Why in hell would he do that to me?"

"I have Jakecam™ lines here. Do you want me to ask him?"

"You know what I mean, damn it! If he can't be honest with me I don't see the use in you asking him!"

George took a long, deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"Angela, your husband loves you dearly. I have never seen a man more devoted to his mate. The fact that he deigned to leave without telling you why indicates that he felt it was something he needed to protect you from."

"After all we've been through? That's not very flattering."

"After all you've been through, I would think that the one thing you were not made privy to would

be an indicator of how serious the situation is.”

Crow huffed. *“I suppose. Promise me you’ll keep an eye on him?”*

“I’m sitting in a very expensively-appointed room designed expressly for that purpose.”

“All right, George, but don’t think this means I’m not going to yell at him later!”

“I would expect no less. Depending on how things turn out with this mission, I may join you.”

“Ok. Call me with any updates?”

“Absolutely.”

Chapter II Enemies of the State

The estate of the late Senator Wildman was located on the northern fringe of the city in an extremely upscale neighborhood. Like most of the residences in the area, the Senator's home was a spacious mansion surrounded by a generously-sized plot of tilled land. Other manors dotted the landscape, vast silhouettes that stood as silent monuments to personal wealth, dark in the stillness of the night.

But in one high window of the Senator's house, a light was on.

The team was gathered on a low hillock, just beyond the boundary of the property, looking it over. All was quiet but the whistling of the wind from the bay, everything dark but the city lights behind them, the occasional property light and that one lit window.

"Explain this to me," Jake said. "The Senator lived alone, right? Lifelong bachelor?"

"Life-long bachelor," Hawk affirmed.

"No kids, no live-in relations?" asked Jake.

"None on public record," Hawk said.

"So, the place is supposed to be *empty*, since its owner is now *dead*," said Jake.

"Could it be household staff? A live-in employee who hasn't moved on yet?" Will suggested.

"It's possible," Hawk said in a skeptical tone.

"I'll take a look," said Nails.

"No way!" Will said. "We're not going anywhere near the place until we have a better idea of what's going on."

"Isn't that what we came here for?" said Nails. "I'll make it quick. One peek in the window to see what that room is and who's in there. I'm guessing they're not expecting anyone to peer in through a third-story window at four in the morning."

"Ooh, bonus points for using the word 'peer'!" G.R. laughed.

"You're the infiltration expert, Hawk," said Jake. "What do you think?"

Hawk rubbed his chin in thought. "I don't like any of this. Ain't one damn thing we've seen or heard tonight that made any sense at all. Big dog," he said to Nails, "you check this out, you keep out of sight, we clear?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I mean it! You go take a look, but keep out of sight. Under no circumstances do you engage anyone or anything, understand?"

"Yes. Uh, roger that."

"Get goin', smartass."

With a rush of air Nails hurtled into the night sky. Almost instantly he was lost in the darkness. Up where he flew the wind did not whistle, it howled. Nails flew in a high arc over the tiny point of light below, then descended toward it slowly. By the time he reached it he was actively wondering why they were making such a big deal about a room someone had left a light on in.

Then he came close enough to see inside.

"Guys," he said, "we're into something bad here."

Moments later the angel drifted down amongst his teammates. In his hand was a folded piece of yellow legal paper, while on his face was an uncharacteristic look of fear and uncertainty.

"So, what's in the room already?" grunted Marc.

"Oh, there was some nice antique furniture, this cool old-timey wallpaper and oh yeah, there's a frigging summoning circle on the floor!" Nails said.

"You're joking!" Jake exclaimed.

"No, I'm not. The furniture was really very nice."

"Nails!" Will and George said together, over G.R.'s laughter.

"Hey, you saw it too, George!" Nails grated. "It's a nice room in a big old house. It's just that

someone has painted one of those summoning circles on the floor. On the carpet. It's all these dark brown stains in an antique room. I think someone has painted a spell for summoning monsters in blood on the floor."

"Well, that's just unreal," Jake said softly.

"Was anyone in the room?" asked Will.

"No one."

"What's that?" Hawk asked, pointing at the paper in Nails' hand.

"This was taped to the window," Nails replied as he held out the yellow page to Hawk, who took it, opened and read it.

"This was taped to the *outside* of the window?" he asked.

Nails nodded.

"Don't keep us in suspense!" Jake complained.

Hawk held out the page for the others to see. Scratched out in a crabbed hand, barely readable in the darkness, were the words:

Monster hunters, please use front entrance

"What the *hell*?" blurted G.R.

"Apparently the residents have had problems with monster hunters using the servant's entrance," said George.

"Great Banoh, George, can you not be serious?" Jake exclaimed.

"I can, I just thought Nails was onto something trying to defuse the situation with humor."

"Guys, focus!" Hawk said. "Whoever left this knew we were coming. We may need to get out of here in a hurry."

"How could they know we were coming?" Will asked.

"Was it really for us specifically?" said G.R.

Marc grabbed him by the shirt collar. "How many monster hunters with guys that can fly do you think hang around here at four in the morning, stupid?"

"Lay off!" G.R. growled as he pulled free.

"Enough," said Hawk. "We need to either move out or fall back, but we can't stay standing here. Hell, we look like cat burglars casing the place on top of everything else."

"Well, we are casing...the place..." Jake's remark withered and died under the look Hawk gave him.

"Why don't I just go knock?" said Nails.

"What, did you miss the part where they knew we were coming?" Jake said. "Not to mention that there's not supposed to be anyone here! What happens when you go to the door and someone gives you both barrels of a shotgun for your effort?"

"If that happens," Nails said grimly, "I'll beat them to a pulp before they can reload. Look, if someone is in there waiting to try something, at least I can probably live through it. This is pretty standard stuff for us, really."

After the briefest of pauses, Will said, "Nails, move up, the rest of us give him cover."

"Yes!" Nails pumped a fist in the air and immediately began sprinting toward the front door of the Senator's house.

"Anyone else think this is going to end badly?" Jake muttered as he checked the chambers of his sub-machineguns.

"Don't jinx us, Jake," Marc growled.

"Yeah, we get enough flak without adding in our own bad vibes," said Hawk.

"Certainly, a shift in focus toward positive thinking might help circumvent the potentially disastrous consequences associated with a self-fulfilling prophecy brought about by a negative mindset," said George.

"Huh?" said Marc.

"Think positive or we're all gonna die," said Jake.

“Oh,” Marc said.

Moments later Nails reached the front door of the Senator’s house. Behind him the others had taken up positions around the yard, hidden as well as they could be among the sparse, decorative vegetation.

“Everybody ready?” Nails whispered into his Jakecam™.

“We’re ready,” Hawk said after seeing hand signals from the others. “Hit it.”

“Here goes nothing,” Nails said and rapped soundly on the door. Nothing happened. After a moment’s wait he tried again. Still, nothing happened.

Nails looked back over his shoulder toward the others. “Maybe there’s nobody here right now. Should we--”

The front door flew open and a hand extended from the darkness beyond to seize Nails by the wrist. A face loomed in the opening, one of an unnatural red complexion and an expression of malicious glee.

“EeeeeeeYeeeeees?” he cackled, hauled the started Nails across the threshold and slammed the door closed.

“...did that just happen?!” Jake exclaimed.

“Hit the door running!” ordered Hawk. The five men shouldered their weapons and sprinted to the entrance.

Nails hurled through the dark entryway and crashed backward into an end table, demolishing it. Lights came on as he sprang to his feet, revealing a posh foyer and the red-skinned man dressed in, of all things, a casual suit and smoking jacket.

“It’s about time you got here!” he laughed in a voice like gravel. “I was starting to wonder when you would put it together!”

Nails crouched in a ready position and looked the situation over. There was no one else in the foyer that he could see, but there were several open entries into other rooms that were dark. The weirdo was still by the front door: presently, he flicked a switch.

“Gotta light the way for your buddies!” he said, then burst into throaty guffaws as though he had just told the funniest joke in history.

Nails launched himself at the weirdo at top speed.

“Company coming, and I’m just a me--” The weirdo was cut off as Nails plowed into him with a crushing punch, driving him backward through a nearby wall. Nails waited for several seconds, but there was no movement in the dark room beyond the gaping hole.

“Oh yeah, he’s not getting up,” Nails chuckled as he dusted off his hands and opened the front door.

“It’s ok, guys,” he called, “the coast is clear.”

“Tag!” The weirdo lunged out of the hole in the wall and tackled Nails, sending them both crashing through the wall on the opposite side. The sounds of their fighting were reverberating in the entryway as Will, Hawk, Marc and Jake charged through the door and checked the area while G.R. hung back at the entrance, watching their backs.

“Nails! Sound off!” Hawk called as he trained his assault rifle on the second hole in the wall, where rapid crashes and heavy thuds could be heard coming from the dark room beyond. A final loud thump preceded Nails slamming against the ragged edges of the wall, flipping over and tumbling into the room.

“Careful! He’s strong as hell!” Nails warned as he flipped back up onto his feet. Hawk responded by firing a long burst into the room, followed by the others as Nails dragged G.R. inside and kicked the front door closed. Shell casings rained onto the floor and the smell of cordite filled the air. Hawk held up a hand and the barrage ended. Smoke was still drifting about in wisps as Hawk inched forward, peering into the dark room.

Two red hands clamped down on Nails’ shoulders and flung him against the front door.

“Good plans include interlocking rooms!” the mystery man guffawed. He was still laughing when Marc and Jake whirled around and blasted him at point blank range. The buckshot and bullets gouged ugly wounds in the man’s stocky frame, but he still kept his footing and moved forward through the gunfire to slap the shotgun out of Marc’s hands.

“That’s not a proper housewarming gift!” He was laughing, still laughing maniacally even as Jake shot him again, Will shot him, Hawk shot him. Marc came at him with a punch: the blow never landed as the man shoved him to the floor as though he were a small child. He turned to attack Jake only to be shot again by Hawk, then carried across the room as Nails slammed into him in a full-speed flying tackle. They rocketed through the foyer, battering each other in mid-air until they slammed into the back wall, tearing a huge hole right through it.

“Nails, hold tight! We’re coming!” Will shouted as he and the others sprinted for the hole. Once again they could hear vicious blows landing on the other side of the wall as they approached: the scene earlier was mirrored as the mystery man hurtled back into the foyer. He flopped hard against the floor and lay there spread-eagled on his back.

“Ow,” he moaned.

“Turnabout is fair play, chump!” Nails said as he hopped through the wall back into the room.

“Stay down!” Hawk warned. Half-a-dozen guns were aimed at the man’s head.

“Look! A huge distracting thing!” he said while pointing at the ceiling, then sprang to his feet.

“Let him have it!” G.R. blurted.

“Ah-ah-ah!” the man laughed. “You shouldn’t shoot first and then ask questions. Your ears will be ringing.”

“He’s got a point,” Jake quipped.

“Not now, Jake!” said Will. “You! What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same cliché,” the man laughed.

“Cut the crap! You were the one in the office the night the Senator died, right?” said Hawk.

“No, that was my evil twin, Mortimer,” the man sneered. “It as one of your pals that shot me, huh? Ha! You should’ve seen the look on his face. Bet he was glad to be going commando *that* night! Bwahaha!”

“You’re seriously telling us you could see him?” Jake asked.

“What are you, kidding? I could see the piece of spinach stuck in his teeth.”

Hawk’s eyes were riveted to the man through the sight on his rifle. “Did you kill Senator Wildman?”

“Of course not. Senator Wildman’s *desk* killed Senator Wildman. I just picked it up and threw it at his head.”

“Who the hell are you?” G.R. asked. “*What* the hell are you?”

“I thought we’d established that. I’m the guy who throws desks and gets shot by wetworks agents that don’t floss.”

“Enough bullshit!” Marc snarled as he held the barrel of his shotgun bare inches from the creature’s face. “Give us some straight answers or I’ll blow your head off!”

The creature leaned forward, bit off the last two inches of the shotgun, straightened and began to chew loudly.

“That’s it! I’m caving this guy’s skull in!” Nails said as he cracked his knuckles.

“You and what army, junior?” the weird thing laughed around his mouthful of gunmetal.

“Once again, he’s got a point,” Jake said.

“You’re not helping, Jake,” snapped Hawk.

“Hey, this guy took an explosive sniper round in the gut and shrugged it off! Not to mention that we’ve just shot him enough times to kill an entire Tessa team *and* he just *ate Marc’s shotgun!*”

“He’s got a point,” the creature said, smacking his lips loudly. Will’s nostrils flared.

“So what do we do?” G.R. asked.

“Oh! Oh! Let’s play twenty questions!” laughed the creature.

Will shot him once in the leg. “I couldn’t take any more of that laugh,” he said in response to the

questioning looks of the others, then shot the creature again. “That one is for the games. We already know you’re capable of murder. Either you start giving us some answers, or we’re going to find out exactly how many times you *can* stand to be shot.”

The creature responded by reaching into the wound in his leg with two fingers, digging out the bloody bullet and flinging it against Will’s chest. “That’s the problem with you mortals,” he said. “You think everyone’s as afraid of dying as you are. Let me lay it out for you: I’m a pure force of strife and chaos. Living or dying is all the same to me, I just wreak havoc in the meantime.”

“What are you trying to say?” Jake scoffed. “That you’re a demon?”

“Hmm!” The creature feigned musing in a mocking tone. “To think that all this time I’ve been saying ‘extra-dimensional being of paranormal traits and snappy dresser’ when ‘demon’ is so much easier!”

“This is a waste of time,” grumbled G.R.

“What did you expect?” said the demon. “That you would just turn up here and grill me under a hot light? If you’re so clueless that you think that would work, it’s no wonder you’re so ineffectual.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Jake asked.

A sudden pounding on the front door startled the team. It sounded as though someone were trying to batter the door down with a brick. After four heavy blows it flew open, nearly torn from its hinges. The Winds’ hearts sank as they saw the Glass Man enter the house and come walking purposefully toward them.

“Oh, *good*,” Nails complained.

“What the hell is *that* doing here?” blurted Marc.

“Guess someone else thinks you may learn something here, too!” the demon said. “He’s here to kill me.”

Chapter III State-Sponsored Violence

“I am so *sick* of golems!” Nails snarled as he flew at the Glass Man, swinging with a wild punch.

In mid-stride the Glass Man’s manner changed from a rigid walk to a smooth gait. It weaved away from Nails’s fist with the fluid grace of a seasoned boxer and struck back at him with a perfect hook punch.

Nails was ready; the practiced form of the golem as no match for his speed. With one hand he parried the Glass Man’s attack while driving the other into its neck in an open-handed blow that would kill a mortal person. The golem only jerked slightly from the impact before swinging at Nails again.

Still, Nails was too fast for it. He stepped within its reach and threw his arms around it in a crushing bear hug. Instantly the Glass Man’s demeanor changed again, going from pugilist to wrestler. Its arms wove around Nails’ own and a foot came up to pop the back of one of Nails’ knees, sending them both to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

The demon seized the moment as the Winds’ attention was diverted by the fight, socking Marc in the jaw and grabbing his at shotgun. Only Hawk was not caught off-guard: he stopped the potential tragedy of the monster taking Marc’s gun with a well-placed burst of fire that tore ragged wounds in the brute’s grasping hand and arm. Startled, Will and Jake joined the point-blank barrage, so that the demon was forced to flee by bounding over Marc’s stunned, prone body and through the hole he and Nails had made before. He was covered in gunshot wounds, his once-fine livery now singed rags drenched in his own blood, one forearm reduced to little more than shreds of flesh clinging to thick bones--

--but as he fled away into the unlighted rooms of a murdered head-of-state’s home, while two powerful beings fought to determined his fate, the sound of his raucous laughter filled the air.

Nails and the Man of Glass still struggled, fighting like wild beasts. Nails battered at the apparition from Yd legend as much as he could, but the svelte construct of spun crystal flowed and countered with the skill of a champion grappler. Now it tangled Nails’ arms in a cunning lock so he could not strike it; now it jammed its thumbs at his eyes and rolled him onto his back so it could pound his face. At length Nails broke free, drifting away and settling onto his feet. As the Glass Man rose its demeanor changed again, its stance, mannerisms and movement those of a dedicated and fearsome martial artist. Nails watched it shuffle toward him, still feeling much of the beating it had given him. When it lunged in a smooth attack Nails countered it in a blur, hitting it dead in the chest with a blinding straight punch. The Glass Man’s limbs trailed its body as it hurled backward to make yet another hole in the increasingly untidy foyer walls.

“I *really* hate golems,” Nails muttered. Very nonchalantly he walked to the front door and tore it off its hinges. A hideous squeal filled the air as he ripped the metal door in half width-wise, then began to crumple the thick metal sheets into a massive, gnarled club. “Really, *really* hate them.”

The other team members stared at him as he slapped the improvised weapon against his palm and hopped through the newest doorway after the golem. The room beyond was quite dark and Nails half-expected the Glass Man to tackle him, but it took him only moments to find a light switch next to one of the original doors. He was in a spacious parlor, comfortable, richly-appointed and completely lacking in golems of any sort.

“Interlocking rooms. Right,” he grumbled as he marched through the door and deeper into the mansion.

“*Nails*,” George said, “*it might be prudent to keep the team together.*”

“Let him go, George,” said G.R. softly.

“You think it’s a good idea to let him run off?” Hawk asked.

“It’s what he does,” G.R. murmured. “Besides, I think...I think he just wants to work out a few things.”

“You mean the thing with Pab?” Will said.

“Maybe, but mostly...I think he’s still upset about Desert Autumn.”

“Oh, come on!” growled Marc. “What is it with you guys cryin’ over your lost women?”

Silence filled the foyer as the others looked at Will, who was glaring daggers at Marc. “Let’s find Nails,” he finally said in a dour tone and led the way through a nearby, original door. G.R. brought up the rear, trailing behind the others.

“*Are you certain of Nails’s mental state, G.R.?*” George asked only through G.R.’s Jakecam™.

“No, not certain. But I’ve known Nails all my life. Trust me when I say that I can tell something’s bothering him.”

“*Do you believe that he is driven to distraction or otherwise a threat to himself or others?*”

“I don’t think so, he’s just agitated, maybe a little depressed. I think he just needs to get brutal and blow off some steam by beating the crap out of something.”

“*Then I pity the next adversary he encounters.*”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

The entity that the team had come to think of simply as “the demon” would have laughed if anyone had asked him to give a name. He might have claimed to be a figure of some prominent mythology, or made up something entirely, or fallen back upon the standby so popular among extraordinary beings, “I have had many names.”

The truth was, he didn’t really have a name at all. He didn’t need one. He was telling the truth (a comparative rarity) when he had spoken of being a force of strife and chaos. Very few on any given world had the knowledge and power necessary to call forth one of his kind, but multiplied among the countless worlds of the endless dimensions those few became a great host. The demon had wreaked havoc on thousands of worlds over as many years at the behest of those forces that could summon him. Many of these made the mistake of believing that the spell that reached beyond the boundaries of their own universe and called out to the demon’s kind afforded some degree of control over them, but nothing could be further from the truth. The demons merely responded gleefully to the magic as exactly what it was: a notification of a time and place they would be encouraged to do what they loved most.

This time had been no different. The power that had called the demon to Ylelon needed an agent, one willing and able to deprive a beleaguered people of a precious rare benevolent leader as part of a much larger design. The demon was only too happy to comply, at first. It was not until he met the Senator and engaged him in a little pre-murder banter that he began to understand not only that there was a plan, but also what his part in it was to be.

Naturally, being an agent of discord, the demon was not the least bit upset. Instead, he decided to make his own revision to the grand scheme. Just to keep things interesting, of course.

This was why he had left the light on in the room upstairs along with a note that only someone like Nails would be likely to find, instead of keeping a low profile. With his masters intent on assassinating the assassin this might be his last night of existence. That genuinely did not bother him, but what said he couldn’t go out with a bang?

Although, he admitted to himself as he crouched beside a wardrobe in a dark room listening to the crashing sounds of the Glass Man searching for him, while being an agent of chaos might make one inclined toward improvisation, it did not necessarily make one good at it.

The instant the Glass Man entered the room, the massive wardrobe came crashing down on it, slamming the golem against the floor.

“May I take your coat?” guffawed the demon as he vaulted over the wardrobe into the hall. The Glass Man had been systematically searching the rooms for him, ransacking each one in turn and demolishing everything large enough to serve as a potential hiding place for someone half the demon’s size.

I wonder which of the echoes in its empty head came up with that brilliant tactic, the demon thought with a chuckle. *This is going to be even more fun than I thought.*

The Glass Man lifted the half-shattered wardrobe off of itself and walked stoically from the room. Down the stretch of hall it had come from the Glass Man could hear the demon laughing and immediately began to run that way. At the end of the hall it came to an abrupt stop: the laughing sound was coming

from a hand-held digital recorder left standing on end against the wall. The Glass Man picked it up and found a sticky note on it:

Fooled ya!

Undaunted, the Glass Man began its search anew. The demon was still bleeding copiously. A trail of blood led to where the recorder had rested and back again. The Glass Man followed it, unhindered by the dark, to a stairwell and up to the second floor.

No sooner had the golem set foot off of the steps than it saw a bizarre sight. The demon was half-concealed in a large hole broken in the hallway floor, wearing a hard hat and pantomiming digging with an imaginary shovel.

“Watch your step. The whole street’s in bad shape,” he said.

The Glass Man took three steps forward and fell through another hole concealed under a throw rug.

“Told ya,” the demon said. Tossing the hard hat aside, he climbed out of his hole and strolled to the one the Man of Glass had fallen through. “You know, it kind of undermines your value as a threat if the only times you come out from under your rock you either stand around doing nothing or get made a fool of by the guy you’re supposed to be killing.”

A hand of spun crystal clamped down on the edge of the hole. The Glass Man hauled itself effortlessly back up into the hall.

“Ok, that’s better,” said the demon.

With a growl he struck at the golem with his ragged yellow claws. The Glass Man caught the offending arm with both hands and in one smooth motion shifted its grip into a brutal wrist lock that held the demon long enough for a solid kick to the ribs. The demon landed in a heap several feet away, still drenched in his own blood and a section of his torso now unnaturally concave--and yet, he was laughing again.

“Help!” he bellowed. “Rape! Crystal statue domination of red-skinned strife promotionalist! You just can’t find a market for that kind of fringe fetish!”

The Glass Man approached, not the least bit unnerved by its target’s abrasive humor, and hammered the demon on the cheek with a fist. There was a sickening crack as the demon’s jaw broke.

“Wait!” the demon cried and held up his hands for mercy as the Man of Glass raised its fists for another blow. “Before you kill me, there’s something you must know!”

The golem hesitated for an instant and the demon shoved it right back into the hole it had fallen through before. As it clambered back into the hall for a second time the demon’s voice echoed back down the hall while he ran away:

“Oh, I can’t *believe* you fell for that!”

Still undaunted, the automaton started forward again. If whatever processes and information that passed for its mind could experience frustration or embarrassment, there was no visible sign of it as its manner changed once more into a smooth, stalking gait. Yd legend held that the Glass Man was a thief of souls, that it kept forever captive the spirits of those that it murdered. The truth, while less dramatic, was no less frightening. When the Glass Man touched someone it could duplicate the entirety of their mind within itself: their intellect, their memories, skills and talents, *everything*. A given mind could be stored indefinitely within the golem until its abilities were needed. Now the golem called upon the mind of one long-dead, a warrior well-versed in the practices of espionage and guerilla warfare. George was not able to see the shift in the golem’s mannerisms to an exact copy of the dead warrior’s every trait, but if he could he would have been livid. The person being emulated had been a Lonely Wind.

Down the hall the Glass Man marched, now alert for more tricks from the demon. The bloodstains on the floor ran in crazy zigzags throughout the hall and rooms. Even now the demon was playing games.

“What’s the matter? Need a hint?” his voice echoed through the hall.

“Come out now and your death will be painless. Somewhat,” the Glass Man said in a woman’s voice.

“Oooh, let me think that over! In the meantime, I think you have other things to worry about.”

The Glass Man stopped in its tracks. “What are you talking about?”

“Remember me?” Nails shouted as he charged the golem from behind and struck it in the back with his club, driving it prone into the floor. No sooner was it struggling to right itself than Nails fell upon it, battering it with the mangled door. The blows drove the Glass Man back to the floor, then *into* the floor, as cracks spider-webbed across its back. Again and again Nails hammered the golem as the floor beneath it caved in, only stopping when he caught a glimpse of the demon in the corner of his eye. The creature had changed his outfit to a worn gray t-shirt, faded blue jeans, a novelty drink-holding hat loaded with two beer cans and a massive foam rubber “#1” finger. He was crouched a few feet away, waving his hands in the air in enthusiastic cheering motions.

“What the *hell* are you wearing?” blurted Nails.

The Glass Man lashed out in the beating’s pause, sweeping Nails’ feet from beneath him and lunging for the club. Nails caught himself in mid-fall, suddenly hovering and setting down on his feet just as the Glass Man locked its hands on the cudgel. They grappled back and forth, slamming each other into the walls while the demon cheered like a drunken sport fan. It was this bizarre spectacle the other Winds came upon as they ran down the hall.

“It’s official. The universe has lost its mind,” Jake said.

“Supporting fire?” suggested Hawk.

“We might hit Nails,” Will replied.

“Two hostiles against one super-tough ally. I like the odds,” Hawk said.

“Screw it!” Marc growled as he popped the button on one of Jake’s party favors. “Nails! Heads up!” he shouted and hurled the firebomb at the battle.

Nails heard Marc’s warning, saw the explosive coming and leapt away, abandoning his improvised weapon to the Glass Man an instant before the party favor struck it and burst. Liquid fire ran in a wave over the golem and sprayed over the demon and the hallway all around. Walls, carpet and ceiling all blazed, the Glass Man became an apparition wreathing in fire...and the demon, his clothing burning and his hat and foam hand melted, was laughing again.

“*Marc!*” Will almost screamed.

“Wut?”

“We have to get out of here!” said Hawk. “In this neighborhood the cops and the fire department show up *before* a fire starts!”

“Aw, quit yer bitchin’, ya babies,” Marc grumbled as he unzipped his duffle bag. From it he took two small fire extinguishers and tossed one to Jake.

“I’ve been revising his carrying list,” Jake said. “Nails, can you give us some room to work?”

Nails nodded and flew into the Glass Man just as it came walking out of the inferno, grabbing and carrying it down the hall in mid-air. The two were battering each other even as Nails’s club, now quite hot, thumped onto the floor.

Quickly Jake and Marc went to work extinguishing the hall. The demon, *still* laughing, held up one arm at a time and twirled as through for a hose while Jake sprayed him down. No sooner was he extinguished than Hawk and Will leveled their guns at his face.

“Last chance,” Hawk said. “Talk!”

“You just don’t get it!” laughed the demon. Grotesquely, the blackened skin of his face crackled and split as he spoke, but he still smiled.

“You have nothing to threaten me with! You came here thinking you might find the truth? Learn why the Senator died? Discover some great secret that will help you in your noble quest to save Ylelon and all the orphans and kittens? It just doesn’t *work* that way, kids!”

From down the hall came an ear-splitting sound of porcelain shattering.

“We’re not looking for lectures. Get with the info or so help me, I will devote the scientific method to finding a way to making you *want* to talk,” said Jake.

“Go ahead! Even if I told you everything I know, it wouldn’t help you!” the demon straightened the blackened lump of plastic that was all that remained of his beer hat.

“See, you still think that you can do some good in all this. You stake a few vampires, gun down a few slimy things, but you’re still only treating the symptom.”

“We *know*. That’s why we’re *here*,” said Jake.

“We know about Terek Domar. That he’s trying to regain total control of Ylelon,” Will said. “We know about the summoning circles, too, we just don’t have all the pieces to understand what this is all about.”

“That’s all you’ve got?” the demon chuckled.

“It’s a start,” said Hawk.

“So? You think your ragtag band is going to be able to do anything about it? Going to take on a dragon by yourselves, are you?”

“Do you really think you can stop what’s happening? Ha! You’ve already seen that the powers at work even include the government! It’s been this way since long before any of you were born. Think your peppy attitudes and good intentions mean anything against that? This isn’t a serial where the wacky do-gooders win against impossible odds. You aren’t the heroes of this piece. You’re just the front row spectators!”

He was laughing again, louder and harder than ever before. He kept laughing even as a distraught Will shot him, first once, then repeatedly. The others joined him and the demon dropped amidst a hail of gunfire. Laying on the ruined carpet, burned, broken-jawed, shot many times, the demon *still* laughed, an agonized chuckle gurgling in his own blood, until Marc held the barrel of his bitten-off shotgun over the orbit of his eye and fired thrice so the hideous mess on the floor was finally quiet.

After the laughter and the gunfire, the silence in the hall was deafening.

Chapter IV Lines in the Sand

When Nails engaged the Glass Man his first priority was to segregate it from the rest of the group. He still believed that some good could come from preserving the demon's life and he had no intention of letting the golem anywhere near his friends.

Of course, he thought as he rocketed through the dark hall while grappling with the svelte construct, that still left the question of what to do with the damn thing. The Glass Man was strong even for a golem and its striking Nails as he carried it away was doing nothing to improve his mood. The fact that it was still covered in burning accelerant didn't help, either.

A thought seized him. Nails could not see in the dark as well as the golem or the demon, but he was able to recognize a glimpse of a bathroom as they sped by and turned back. The room was quite luxurious, spacious and clean with a bathtub larger than some backyard pools. Nails sped over the tub, hurled the Glass Man into it and turned the shower on full blast. Steam hissed as the accelerants were washed into the tub and Nails' clothing was extinguished and drenched. The Glass Man rose to its feet and turned to fight, but Nails was already gone: in a blur he ran to the sink, tore the basin free of the wall, returned to the tub and shattered it on the Glass Man's head.

The golem, not the least bit distressed, reached for Nails. In a flicker he moved aside and dealt the Glass Man a thunderous punch to the face, sending it crashing into the tub's back wall.

"Let's see your fancy skills deal with that," he said.

"Nails," said George, "*you may want to return to the others. There is a situation--*

The roar of gunfire filled the house, drowning out the echo of the demon's laughter.

"Oh, hell!" Nails blurted and pointed a finger at the golem-shaped hole in the wall. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

As fast as he could go Nails was out the door and down the hall. He was terrified that he would find the demon had hurt one of the others. With a pang of guilt he realized that he had been so lost in his determination to fight the Glass Man that he had even been ignoring his mental link to his cousin. If anything had happened to G.R...

No, everything was fine, Nails saw as he reached the others. Everything except that the demon he thought they were protecting now resembled a couple hundred pounds of burned ground beef.

"What the hell happened here?" he exclaimed.

Hawk was checking his rifle. "He didn't tell us anything helpful."

"Why? What did he say?"

"I'll fill you in on it later," whispered G.R.

"What happened to the Glass Man?" Jake asked.

"Aw, crap!" Nails turned and sprinted back to the bathroom. The Glass Man was no longer embedded in the wall.

"Damn it!" Nails spat and spoke into his Jakecam™. "He's loose somewhere, watch yourselves!"

"This night just keeps getting better," Jake grumbled.

"Jake, you're with Marc. Joe, you're with me," said Will. "Comb the place and try to find it. We've got five minutes, then we have to get out of here."

In those five minutes the team swept as much of the house as they could. There was plenty of destroyed furniture and other signs of the havoc that had occurred that night, but no sign of the Glass Man.

The team left the house without incident. The ride home was quiet for most of the members. G.R. and Nails turned off their Jakecams™ so G.R. could give his clumsy approximation of what the demon had said. After he heard it, Nails became quiet, too.

Cynthia awoke just before dawn. She was feeling stronger all the time, waking more frequently. Very often Will was there watching over her when she awoke. This time she saw the soft first light of the day on her ceiling and thought that Will would be asleep. She inwardly considered it a pleasant surprise

when she rolled onto her side and found that he was sitting in his chair.

For just a moment she moved her hand under the blanket as if to take his. Then she pulled it back, rolled onto her side, and smiled. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Will replied in a somber tone.

"What's wrong?"

A pause and a long sigh. "We went out on a mission. It didn't go well."

"What happened?"

"Hawk came by this morning and took us to meet a friend of his, someone who was there when Senator Wildman died."

"And?"

"The Senator didn't die of a heart attack. He was killed by this...thing."

"Was it something Terek Domar summoned?"

"We don't know. There was a circle, but it wasn't like the others we've seen. It was painted in blood."

"Ew!"

"That was my reaction."

"Where did you find the circle?"

"It was in the Senator's house."

"In his *house*? The thing that killed him came from a magic circle in his own home?"

"We don't know. We tried to question the creature, but...I just don't know. It was either the most evil or the most crazy thing I've ever encountered. Maybe both."

"Did you at least get any useful information?"

"Not a bit!" The creature kept playing games with us, like it was all a big joke. Even when we shot him he wouldn't take us seriously."

Cynthia laid back and looked at the ceiling. "But you killed him, right? That's something, at least."

"Yeah..."

"Will, what's wrong? Really?"

Another sigh. "The creature, he said something before we killed him. He tried to tell us that we aren't doing any good. That we're fighting a hopeless war we can't ever really win."

"What do George and the others think?"

"The others were pretty shaken up by it, too. Who cares what George thinks?"

"Will!"

"All right, fine. He gave us the usual garbage. 'We have no idea what's going on or why, but keep your chin up and keep senselessly risking your lives while I remain ineffectual!' Of course, it took him a lot more words in a lot more sentences to say that much. Who the hell does he think he's impressing?"

"Senselessly?" Cynthia sat up and leaned toward Will. "That creature really got to you, didn't he?"

"I know it shouldn't have, but what if he was right?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, what if he was telling the truth about Terek Domar, and Atla, and whatever the hell is going on? Are we really deluded in thinking we're doing any good with all this?"

"You tell me."

Will blinked. "What?"

"In case you didn't notice, Will, I almost died the other day. At the time, I really thought I was going to die." A faraway look glazed her eyes and was gone in an instant. "Do you think I regret that?"

Will lowered his eyes and was quiet.

"Smart boy," Cynthia said. "My point was we did some good that night. How many people do you think are alive now because of us? That woman we rescued? Anyone else those vampires might have hurt?"

"I know that!" Will said, stood and walked around his chair. "I'm not talking about saving a few

lives here and there. That's good, it's what we *want* to be doing. But what if it doesn't really matter? What if the big, scary whatever that's coming is going to make it all moot? We've almost died just trying to find out what this is all about! And George is no help at all..." He trailed off in frustration. Cynthia held out a hand. After a moment's hesitation Will came to her bedside and took it.

"Then we do what we can," she whispered. "Maybe the monster was right. Maybe we can't win an entire war by ourselves, but that's not what we've ever been about, is it? We've about giving what help we can to those that need it. If that means Terek Domar causes some big disaster we can't stop, then fine. It also won't stop us from helping the survivors. How does Jake put it? 'Damage control.' We're Ylelon's monster damage control."

For the first time in quite a while, Will smiled. "You know, for a shallow, self-centered brat, you're pretty wise."

"That means a lot coming from a cliché hero from a cheap novel."

"Hey!" Will feigned indignation but could not completely hide his smile.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Will. Do me a favor now and get yourself some rest, ok?"

"But--"

"No buts! You've had a rough night. You need to take care of yourself. Promise me you won't stay up fretting about this until you're sick, ok?"

"All right, I promise."

"Come see me anytime, all right? I'm always here if you need to talk some more."

"Thank you." Will leaned over and gave her a hug. "I'll come check on you this afternoon."

"Only after plenty of sleep." She snuggled down under her blankets and smiled up at him. "Good night."

"Good morning," Will said with another smile, and left.

After he was gone, Cynthia laid awake for a while, a worried look on her face.