

Book X
The University

Prologue

5:43 p.m. Tuesday, November 10th, 1961 T.E.

Susan pulled her bright blue windbreaker tighter around herself as she crossed the campus square. Today was considerably cooler than yesterday had been. The sharp, icy breeze tugged at her clothing and dark hair. Leaves fallen from the square's trees whipped and danced around her feet as they traced the invisible courses of the wind.

On a day like this, cold for an equatorial desert-dweller, Susan would have preferred to remain indoors but her best friend Cindy had just been through a bad breakup, so Susan put aside creature comfort to walk across campus and keep the poor girl company before they went to a movie later.

She shivered as the wind blew harder, wishing she'd brought warmer clothing while fumbling with the zipper on her windbreaker. Her jacket fastened, she looked up and stopped dead in her tracks.

She didn't recognize where she was.

It was definitely the square, dotted with trees, crisscrossed by footpaths, surrounded by ancient brick and adobe buildings. But none of it was *familiar*. It was as though she had never been here before, never seen it, even though she had crossed the square countless times in her three years at the university.

Susan turned in place, trying to make sense of what was happening. The square wasn't even that large: you could easily see any part of it from any other part, but as Susan spun on her heels she even began to think that the landscape was *changing* somehow. A given region did not look the same after she looked away and back again.

A chilling wind lashed her face. That was when she heard her name. It was spoken by a distant voice that was faint and unreal, as if from out of a dream.

Susan...

Panic clutched at her heart as Susan twisted this way and that, looking for anything that might reveal a way out. She had nearly decided to run at random in hope of finding her way as she went when the voice came exactly as before, as if it were an echo of itself.

Susan...

Susan had forgotten the cold, but she was still trembling as she slowly turned toward the distant call. The ever-shifting landscape rolled aside to reveal the speaker standing directly down a branch of the path that had not been there before...or had it?

He seemed to be too far away to see clearly, yet Susan could somehow make out details: a wild mane of unruly hair, a cold, hard-lined face and unnaturally red-tinged eyes that bored into Susan's mind as she cringed away from the sight of them.

When Susan was an hour late and didn't answer her phone, Cindy put on her coat and went to look for her. It was still chilly outside, but the wind had died down. As she crossed the deserted square, something caught Cindy's eye, something that showed like a beacon where it lay among the dead leaves: Susan's bright blue windbreaker. Though the breeze still blew steadily the jacket had not been blown away.

Susan's jacket was the only evidence that was ever recovered of her. To Cindy's dying day, she would never be able to rid herself of the feeling that it had been left for her to find.

Chapter I Alma Mater

When the sun rose, precisely on schedule, the morning after the Lonely Winds returned home to Ylelon from the Pit, its light crept over the eastern peaks of the Sentinel Mountains to fall upon a somber, worried Nails. He was on the roof of the Mansion, where he often greeted the dawn. Nails never slept, which lent him plenty of time for introspection. On most nights, he dealt with the loneliness of the quiet hours by watching TV, jogging in the desert around the Mansion and watching the sunrise.

This morning was different. When the team returned to the Mansion on the previous evening they had gathered in the Situation Room with George, Sullivan and G.R.. There Will and Jake had recounted the incredible story of the team's journey to the otherworldly Pit, the bid for freedom that had turned into a desperate fight for their lives and the arrival of Terek Domar. George had hung on their every word while saying nothing and the others listened quietly.

"I'll need some time to catalog your accounts," Sullivan had said matter-of-factly, then the team members had gone about their evenings. For most of them, this meant dealing with the enormous realization of the existence of other worlds in their own way, followed by going to bed.

For the sleepless Nails, however, it meant a long and lonely night of reflection. Nails was a spiritual being: the reality of other worlds and dimensions had been revealed to him long ago. Being transported to the Pit and seeing the myriad alien races had not been the disillusioning culture shock for him that it was for the others.

What bothered him was the way the team's fight in the Pit had ended. Nails had always relied on his raw natural ability in a fight. Usually that was more than enough.

That had changed when Nails had joined the Lonely Winds about a month before. In that time, Nails had only met a handful of individuals that were able to outfight him through sheer speed, superior martial ability, or both, but those instances had left an enormous impression on the young warrior. The last straw had come yesterday when the team had lost their fight in the Pit. Nails had been in little danger himself, but he felt that he had let his teammates down by not protecting them better. The next time the Lonely Winds were surrounded by a hostile force, there might not be an apathetic master of ceremonies around to save their lives by ringing a bell. That fact haunted Nails.

The fight the day before was the last straw, but it had not been the biggest. *That* had come a week ago, when the team had run afoul of the Order of the Moonless Night. The beating that Hammer and Anvil had spent the better part of an hour giving Nails had left quite an impression on him. The Lonely Winds routinely fought some very nasty things and if he planned to remain with them, Nails was going to have to become a true warrior, not just a gifted fighter.

He stopped his pacing abruptly. Worrying and fretting were not things his naturally care-free spirit was given to doing. The beauty of the sunrise offered an ideal distraction, which Nails gladly took advantage of. Once the sun was fully risen above the horizon the young monster hunter decided it was time to go inside. A brisk jog brought him to the northward-facing front edge of the Mansion's rooftop and with a small hop Nails very nonchalantly dropped over the side.

A plunge from the Mansion's rooftop would have been daunting for most people, to say the least. For Nails, it was child's play. He applied just a touch of his power of flight as he fell and slowed his descent so that he alighted on the ground as gently as a feather. Much about his nature remained a mystery, even to himself, but there were undeniable perks that balanced the uncertainty.

As he passed through the front doors into the massive Foyer, Nails caught sight of Cynthia and Will descending from the balcony above. When he saw their expressions he had to suppress a grimace. Will's somber look was matched by Cynthia's own. The lovely redhead had been sweet, bubbly and chipper from the moment Nails had met her, but something had happened the evening the team fought the Moonless Night, something that had caused Cynthia to become withdrawn and quiet. She had also given up her habit of openly fawning over Will. Nails had seen some truly horrific things that night, seen the people the vampires had been using as food and entertainment. Since he knew that Cynthia's psychic talents were prone to showing her terrible things others weren't even aware of he shuddered to think what

she must have seen to cause such a tremendous change in her personality.

Nails pushed the thought from his mind as he passed the enormous steel doors to the Armory on his way down the east wing to the Library, where he found G.R..

Nails had known he would find his cousin alone in the Library partially because of his anti-social tendencies. The real reason he knew, though, was more remarkable: he always knew *exactly* what G.R. was thinking. If asked to explain it, Nails would have compared G.R.'s train of thought to stock quotes running across the bottom of a TV screen during a news broadcast. It was easy enough to focus on other things, but at a moment's notice he could be aware of any threat his cousin faced.

"How's it going?" he asked casually as he strolled to the table.

G.R. started and an image of Cynthia flitting through his mind's eye was quickly pushed aside. His schoolboy infatuation with the redhead was no secret to the team except perhaps, to Cynthia herself. Nails marveled at the idea of a powerful psychic being unaware of someone having a crush on her, but he supposed the point was moot.

"It's ok," G.R. said quietly. Nails suppressed the urge to sigh. G.R. was in one of his frequent sullen, I-hate-my-life moods that always reminded Nails of a little gray storm cloud.

"What are you reading?" the angel asked as he turned a chair around and settled onto it gently. Its frame creaked under his weight. Whatever he was made of, he was very heavy.

G.R. turned the screen of his computer so Nails could see it. "Just a little reading. I've been researching Ylelon University."

"Yeah? Thinking about getting a few degrees?" Nails chuckled.

"Yeah, as if any self-respecting college would admit me," grumbled G.R.. "I'm reading about the history of the place. Turns out, there's quite an air of mystery to it."

"Do tell."

"It seems they have a long record of odd occurrences. I'm not talking about the usual stuff, like staff intrigue and campus crime. You have to expect that on any campus, know what I mean?"

Nails nodded.

"What I'm talking about is the *really* weird stuff. I've found some websites that deal with conspiracy theories, the paranormal and so forth. The university keeps coming up."

"What do they say?" asked Nails thoughtfully.

"Lots of stuff. It's hard to sift out what's genuine from what's just urban legend. This one guy, here, has an entire website set up to detail all the information he's gathered about the place. He's got letters, old diaries, even a few police reports. Some of this stuff goes back to the sixteen hundreds."

Nails nodded again. He didn't know much about Ylelon's single largest and most renowned university, but he did know that it had been founded in the mid-thirteen hundreds, making it one of the oldest functioning institutions of higher learning on Rond.

"This guy's researched and cross-referenced the daylights out of his source material looking for commonalities. Mostly, what he's found points to some sort of malevolent presence on the campus."

"Like what?"

"Gimme a sec." G.R. turned the monitor back toward himself and began to search the site. "Ok, here's an example. About ten years ago, this art student killed himself in his dorm room by taking a bunch of sleeping pills. His roommate found him with a note clenched in his hand that said, 'He won't stop staring at me.'

"It turns out, he was becoming increasingly nervous and paranoid. He started complaining to his friends a couple of weeks before that 'some weirdo with red eyes' was following him around campus, staring at him. Before long, he claimed that he could see the freak all the time, following him in public and looking in his dorm room window--which, incidentally, was four stories up."

"Charming," muttered Nails.

"Tell me about it. There's a long list of stuff like that on here. He's also gone through the old admissions lists and records and made two lists of his own. The first list is a record of violence and disappearances with strange circumstances, but which eventually were labeled with ordinary explanations. The other one, names of people that vanished without a trace. Both lists are pretty long and go back

hundreds of years.”

“And no one at the school thinks anything about this?” Nails exclaimed.

“It’s not exactly pandemic,” said G.R.. “This has all been going on for a very long time and like I said, the cases tend to go unsolved and be forgotten with time. The only reason we know about all this is that somebody made the connection way back when and now it’s conspiracy theory stock.”

“Wonderful. Time to switch activities,” Nails said.

G.R. huffed. He knew what came next: Nails insisting that he stop reading about morbid disappearances--what he *wanted* to be doing--and start the same boring, strenuous exercise regimen Nails and George forced on him every day.

“Actually, I was thinking we should tell George about this,” he said. “I know the team is on hiatus or whatever, but maybe George would let us take a day to walk around campus.”

Nails leaned forward and rested his chin on the back of his chair. “Going to college, huh? That *would* be nice.”

“I thought you’d like it.” G.R. hopped up from his chair in a motion that was surprisingly nimble for one of his bulk. “C’mon, let’s tell George!”

The cousins first looked for their landlord in the Kitchen, across the hall from the Library, then upstairs in the Rec Room. George was not in either place. Since he was not known to occupy any of the Mansion’s multitude of bedrooms, there was only one place left where he was likely to be found: his Study.

The room’s exquisitely carved doors were the first set on the north side of the west wing’s second floor. When the two men reached them, G.R. stepped forward and knocked loudly. Nails quickly grabbed his wrist and pulled him back away from the doors, which elicited an unrepeatable protest. George was notoriously secretive and protective of whatever he kept in his Study, so much so that most of the team members were hesitant to even approach the doors. Nails felt it best to err on the side of caution and not encroach too closely on George’s territory, even if it meant suffering his cousin’s verbal abuse.

After a very quiet couple of minutes they heard the lock in the doors open. George stepped into the hall and relocked the doors with remarkable deftness. He was wearing what appeared to be a tuxedo jacket overtop plaid pajamas and mismatched striped socks.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he said pleasantly.

“Hiya, geezer!” G.R. said in what Nails knew was intended as a harmless joke, but which sounded unintentionally unfriendly.

“Good morning, George. I hope you slept well,” said Nails.

“I didn’t sleep at all,” George replied flatly. “What can I do for you?”

“We were wondering if you’d let us take a trip to the city,” G.R. said without preamble.

Curiosity lighted George’s eyes. “What for?”

“Sullen thinks he’s found evidence that something nasty is lurking at the university,” replied Nails.

“My name is Fierce!” G.R. snapped.

“I see,” remarked George. “What do you intend to do with it when you find it?”

“We, er, we hadn’t planned that far ahead,” Nails admitted.

“Look, we just want to do a little reconnaissance,” said G.R.. “We’ll wander around and compare what we find with the legends about the place. It’ll be very scientific.”

“How enterprising of you,” George said, then turned to Nails. “You’ll keep him out of trouble?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Nails grinned.

The cousins left soon after in G.R.’s car, a fourth-hand black hatchback with a sound system worth more than the vehicle itself. G.R. loved music as few people did. Nails appreciated his charge’s fondness for a wide variety of styles, both mainstream and esoteric. Out of curiosity he picked the play list of music up from the dash and looked it over:

Forum Loudmouths: We're Stupid
Adam Walker: 8 o'clock Saturday Night
We Don't Speak Your Language: Console Gaming Ruined My Life
Sex: Just That Much
Final: Destination
Penicillin and Space Travel: Hinder
The Mountain Valley Echoes: Whispering Woodlands
Five Colors: No One Appreciates Our Work
Hegesludge: Disposable Mourners

"Don't you listen to any real music?" Nails teased.

"Get stuffed!"

The trip itself was uneventful. In just over an hour Nails and G.R. found themselves riding on campus in the very heart of the city. Many of the streets dated to the earliest days of the university: narrow, one-way brick or packed-earth affairs that wound in twisting paths among the equally venerable buildings. Despite the late month, the sky was clear and the sun bright, which gave the earth tones of the land and structures a picturesque beauty. Few students walked the campus on the chilly and classless Sunday and the timeless grounds carried an air of abandonment.

G.R. parked near the library, an edifice of seven stories. He scrambled out of his seat and stood looking up at the ancient adobe depository with something like open reverence.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

Nails' gaze had drifted across the small parking lot to settle on a pair of young women, who were toting armfuls of books to where a handful of friends stood waiting for them near a library entrance. After a moment of greetings and laughter the group went inside together, a happy gathering of young people going about their lives.

"Yeah, beautiful," Nails said quietly.

"We should split up," G.R. said. "I'll hit the library and see if I can dig up any additional pertinent data. You can do the social thing and talk to people."

"All right. If you find anything, you know what to do."

Nails waited until G.R. had vanished within the library before walking away in the direction of the campus center. The best plan of action he could think of was to head to a student center and start interviewing people. A walk of a few minutes brought him into an area dominated by small stores and restaurants. He arbitrarily picked a nearby coffee shop and sauntered inside.

The place was just like a thousand other coffee shops on a thousand other college campuses. Nails set his sights on an attractive young couple sitting near the back and approached as casually as he could.

"Hi! Mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Sure!" The woman said after the briefest of glances at Nails' arms. "I'm Joey, and this is Ted."

"Sun too bright in here, buddy?" joked Ted.

Nails unconsciously touched his sunglasses. "I have...an eye condition."

"Oh, sorry," Ted apologized.

"No worries. I was wondering if you could help me. I'm trying to gather information on some of the urban legends on campus."

Joey's face lit up, while Ted just rolled his eyes. "You mean, like for a research paper?" Joey asked.

"Something like that," Nails replied with his mouth half curled into a smile.

"Have you tried the library?" asked Ted.

"I have a friend there now. But, you know, you can only learn so much from books and I'd rather talk to people anyway."

"Ok," Joey said. "Well, I can tell you one story..."

"Oh, here we go!" lamented Ted.

“Will you shush? It’s a good story!” Joey chided him.

“It’s a *myth!*”

“Well then, that’s what he’s asking for, isn’t it?”

Nails raised his eyebrows. Joey saw the motion and sighed.

“Ok,” she huffed. “There’s this story they like to tell in my sorority. A few years back, there’s this girl in the house named Mary. One day, out of nowhere, she starts complaining that she keeps seeing this guy looking over her shoulder every time she sees her reflection. In mirrors, in windows, even in the fountain, she keeps seeing him, but he’s never there when she turns around.”

“What did he look like?” Nails asked.

“It doesn’t matter, because the stupid story is an urban legend and it changes every time it’s told,” muttered Ted.

Joey ignored him. “I don’t really know. All I remember is that he had red eyes. Anyway, Mary starts out seeing this guy once in a while, but as time goes by she starts seeing him everywhere. She got totally spastic and started breaking windows and mirrors. Finally she just lost it and threw herself out a window.”

“Charming. Any more details?” Nails asked.

“Not that I can think of,” Joey replied. “The girls in the house all know the story. We hear ghost stories and such from time to time, too, ‘cause you know, it’s college.”

“Hey, shouldn’t you be taking notes or something, buddy?” asked Ted.

“Naw, I got a really good memory,” Nails said as he stood. “I’ll just tell my friend what you told me and let him do all the hard work. He’s the literary one. It was nice meeting you!”

“See ya!” Ted and Joey said together.

G.R. hummed happily to himself as he fanned through the pages of the many books laid out on the table before him. He was humming the love theme of a very old and enduring opera from Attanz, the country on the far side of Ylelon’s Sentinel Mountains. He kept his voice low out of self-conscious fear of being heard despite the fact that there were very few other people on the sixth floor. It was his kind of place: stacks of books stretching as far as the eye could see and almost completely deserted.

G.R. had started with history books, focusing on the university’s early days and looking for unusual or violent incidents. He also picked out tomes discussing local ghost stories, both folklore-based and paranormal studies.

He sat back and stretched with a sigh. In the half-hour or so that Nails had been gone, G.R. had barely scratched the surface of everything he had picked out to read and found few solid details to go on. He was just pondering the benefits of taking a break to get a soda when a horrid sensation came over him. It was similar to the feeling you get when you think that someone is watching you, but it was not merely a feeling. This was a sudden, unshakable certainty as omnipresent and inescapable as the air. G.R. was so startled by it that he jumped up from his seat, knocking most of his waiting pile of books onto the floor.

“Who’s there?” he called. Only the roaring silence between the stacks answered him.

G.R. stooped and picked up one of the heavier books. Holding it clenched in both hands, he began to inch away from the table and toward the stacks, looking around for an interloper. As he edged between two bookcases, a footstep sounded on the floor behind him and he whirled around, swinging his book in a motion that was as much a flinch as a conscious attack.

“Whoa now, tough guy!” Nails said as he seized the book in one hand and pulled it free of G.R.’s grasp without effort.

“Dude, I just--” G.R. stopped in mid-sentence and looked around. “Man, I was *sure* there was someone else here.”

“I know. I came as fast as I could when your heart started beating like a hummingbird.”

“Hey, I kept my cool!” G.R. protested.

Nails turned the book he held over and read the title. “Is that why you tried to clock me with “An Illustrated History of Ylelon University”?”

“Yeah, yeah. Did you find out anything good?”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘good,’ but yeah, I heard a story,” Nails said. “We should get the others here. I think...I think there’s something wrong with this place.”

G.R. looked around again at the endless stacks, stretching away beyond sight, as silent as a tomb.
“I really agree.”

Chapter II Life on Campus

Nails and G.R. weren't the only members of the team making unsettling discoveries that morning. When the Lonely Winds had undertaken the wizard Atla's task, he had remunerated by giving them a scroll he claimed provided information about Terek Domar. Jake had quickly claimed the document and spent what time he could find during the last two days reading and taking copious notes. Presently he sat at a writing desk in his room, perusing what appeared to be a transcript of a written account.

Hereafter follows the words of the foreigner Qhor-Rahd as recorded by the priest Tiss in this, the twenty-third year of (here the scroll contained only a string of hyphens, as though to indicate where some detail had been deliberately omitted). I have recorded this account as faithfully as possible, but fear it contains many errors, as the stranger spoke with a curious heathen accent that made his speech nigh unintelligible. This vagabond was found wandering the grounds of our temple and was brought to us for humanitarian aid and comfort.

"It was some days ago, the count has escaped me. My regiment was standing along the base of a long ridge, waiting for orders. Our scouts had reported that the enemy waited for us on the other side of the ridge and that we outnumbered them almost three to one.

"We were preparing to advance and take the high ground when a peculiar din greeted us, at once like the voice of a great host, a stampede and many peals of thunder. I saw the cause of this as the ragged hordes of the ----- army appeared atop the ridge and began to run downhill at flank speed.

"I thought at first that this was a move made in desperation to keep the high ground. But the enemy ran without any hint of discipline or formation directly into our ranks. We greeted the charge with braced pikes and volleys of arrows. The enemy came on still, despite the crippling losses they suffered. I saw the wild look in the dark eyes of a man who ran blindly onto the spear of the soldier on my left and I wondered what madness possessed him to blunder so carelessly into his enemy's ranks. It was then that I saw the thing that has haunted my dreams since that day.

"I well-remembered the stories I heard as a youth of Terek Domar, but I never dreamed that I would ever see him. He loomed high above us as he perched atop the ridge and spoke his ageless rage in words of thunder. I thought how like a raging fire the dragon was, both beautiful and terrible to behold.

"I admit I understood then the mad flight of the ----- troops onto our very weapons. Terek Domar glared down at the fleeing troops for but a moment before leaping downslope. I saw men in heavy armor flung like dead leaves into the air before the dragon's wrath. Others he set ablaze. They ran as living torches, screaming for the mercy of death. Terek Domar bounded down the slope and scattered the clashing ranks of our two armies like a lion among a flock of birds. The monster slaughtered ----- and --- indiscriminately. I gave in to cowardice, turned and fled away across the plains as fast as I could. I had long since lost sight of friend or foe when the sun was setting and my strength failed me. I slept in the shadow of a boulder and ran when I awoke, and so have I passed the days since until you found me. Now I curse myself for my weakness when I am awake, but when I sleep I hear thunder and the screams of men burning alive."

Here ends the foreigner's account. Despite our ministrations he perished the next day from the strain of his flight.

Abbot Tiss

Jake pushed back from his desk and frowned. Atla's scroll was full of stories like this, providing plenty of horrific details about Terek Domar, but maddeningly devoid of useful, grounding information like dates and locations. The fact that mention was made of armies using archaic weapons and that the few names provided were completely unfamiliar (what language used the name "Tiss?" None that Jake was familiar with) only added to the confusion. This wasn't what Jake had imagined when Atla had promised to provide information about the dragon to the team.

"Jake?" a voice behind him asked. Jake jumped up from his chair with a start.

“Oh, it’s only you.”

“Sorry to startle you,” apologized George. “I knocked three times, but you never answered.”

Jake looked down at the scroll, which covered a sizable portion of his desk yet was only partially unfurled. “I was just doing a little light reading.”

“Indeed.” George also glanced at Atla’s scroll, then quickly looked away with a shudder. “The wizard’s record, I presume.”

“Yeah. It’s two shades shy of worthless so far. Want to take a crack at it?”

“No, thank you,” George said flatly. “I know all too well what Terek Domar is capable of.”

“I hear you. I had hoped to find some useful information in here, but this is looking more and more like Atla is trying to scare us into doing his dirty work for him.”

“I won’t say ‘I told you so,’ Jake,” George said with lowered eyelids. “I need you to gear up and join the others.”

“Really? What’s up?”

The old mentor grimaced. “We’re not certain yet. G.R. and Nails are on site at Ylelon University campus. They think there’s something decidedly out of the ordinary going on there.”

“Well, drunken stupid college guys definitely aren’t normal, but they’re still outside our area of expertise,” Jake grinned.

“Not funny, Jake. Please, make all haste and prepare your equipment.”

“Ok, ok.”

In just under two hours’ time Marc, Jake, Will and Cynthia gathered their equipment and made the journey to the campus. Cynthia rode with Will, while Marc and Jake took their own vehicles.

As Will drove the twisting roads in the heart of the city to the campus border, a sudden pall of dread fell over Cynthia’s mind. It was as though she had ridden across an invisible border into the realm of a lurking presence, a palpable, malevolent mindset that the inhabitants of the so-called normal world would not understand or perceive. The sudden touch of so alien a mentality was as stunning to her as being doused in ice water.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked.

Cynthia turned to face him so quickly that her hair whipped around her face. “What? Why?”

“You just sort of gasped and held your breath. Is everything ok?”

“I’m fine,” Cynthia said. She wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth.

The tiny convoy parked together in the library lot, where G.R. and Nails waited for them. G.R. leaned against his car reading a library book, while Nails stood nearby watching the area with a suspicious eye.

“This sucks!” Marc complained as the other team members walked to join Nails and G.R.. “Of all stupid things, I gotta be at school on a Sunday.”

“Just think of it as makeup time for all those days you spent in suspension,” Jake teased.

“Hey, I still graduated!” growled Marc.

“Only because your teachers and principal were afraid you’d beat them up if you didn’t.”

“What have you found out?” Will asked in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

“A lot of scary stuff,” replied Nails. “The more we look, the more hints we find that there is something *seriously* wrong around here.”

“Like what?” asked Jake.

“That’s what’s scary,” Nails said. “We can’t find any real trace of whatever is doing this, only what it does. Tell ‘em, cuz.”

G.R. ceremoniously took a small hardback notebook from a pocket and began to flip through it. “We’ve got news reports, rumors, and urban legends going back hundreds of years. Most of them deal with disappearances, bizarre accidents and so forth. Check this out:

“Back in the eighteen hundreds, there was this sociology professor. Older guy, really respected, pinnacle of the field, you know the drill. Anyway, one day this fellow starts talking about his new

assistant. No one seems to ever meet this guy or gal, but the professor is *always* talking about them in glowing terms.

“Before long, the professor can’t open his mouth without mentioning this supposed helper even though no one has ever seen him or her. He starts to get short-tempered and cantankerous, shouts into empty air for his assistant to come help him in front of his students, etc. Finally, the administration has no choice but to have the poor guy committed. The last anybody knew, he was huddled in the corner of a padded room, shrieking day and night that any moment his assistant was going to arrive and punish his captors.”

“Big deal. Everybody knows college professors are crazy anyway,” muttered Marc.

“As much as I hate to admit it in public, Marc has a point,” Jake said. “That guy could have just been schizophrenic.”

G.R. flipped over a notebook page and kept reading. “Two years ago, one Michelle Coda was found dead on the ground in a field next to her dorm. The official ruling was that she had committed suicide by jumping out of her window.”

“...and?” Will asked after G.R. was silent for several moments.

“It was ruled a suicide even though she somehow jumped thirty feet away from the building and, while supposedly falling only two stories, somehow hit the ground hard enough to break almost every bone in her body.”

Cynthia inhaled sharply.

“That’s just scratching the surface,” said G.R.. “These things don’t happen often, but they do happen. For every mangled body or loony professor, there are a dozen people who vanished while on these grounds. Men and women, students and professors, all gone without a trace...for hundreds of years.”

Marc snorted and cracked his neck. “So some beastie likes to eat co-eds. Let’s kick the crap out of it.”

“First we have to find it,” said Will. “Any idea what we’re dealing with?”

“No,” G.R. admitted. “No records, no official reports. The only consistency is a repeated description in campus lore of a man with red eyes.”

“That fits what I heard,” mused Nails.

Cynthia gasped again and whirled on her heels, then turned back to face the team again. Her eyes flashed around the landscape like a frightened animal’s, taking in everything but settling on nothing.

“Legs? What’s wrong?” asked Marc.

“He’s watching us!” Cynthia exclaimed.

The others exchanged a series of confused glances. “Who’s watching us? George?” Jake asked.

“No. It’s *him*,” Cynthia said absently. “He knows we’re looking for him. We aren’t safe here.”

“*Perhaps you should all gather in the library, away from prying eyes,*” George suggested calmly.

The others agreed that this was a good idea and walked together through the parking lot to the library doors. None of them heard Cynthia speak again, under her breath:

“It won’t make any difference.”

“Ok, what do we have to go on?” Jake asked when everyone was gathered around G.R.’s table on the sixth floor.

“You mean to find this thing? Zip,” muttered G.R.. He gestured toward the heap of books on the table beside him. “There are lots of scary stories here, but no real hints on what this thing is or how to find it. Not that I could find.”

“What the hell do we do then, idiot? Hit all the bars and pick fights with guys who have red eyes?” Marc said.

“Hey, if you think you can do better after the morning I spent researching, be my guest!” G.R. snapped back.

“We need to go downstairs,” Cynthia said.

“What’s that, Legs?” Marc asked.

“Yeah, is there--whoa!” Jake said. Everyone began to look around and shift uncertainly--everyone except Cynthia, who closed her eyes, and Nails, who looked very confused.

“*Folks? What’s happening?*” George asked.

“That’s a very good question!” said Nails.

“You don’t feel that?” Jake asked.

“Evidently not,” replied Nails wryly.

Jake was still looking around uncertainly. “It’s like...you know that feeling you get when you think someone is watching you?”

“I remember it,” Nails answered. “It that what you’re, er, feeling now?”

“No, it’s different,” said Jake. “It’s like...”

“It’s like something is *furious* with us,” Will explained calmly.

“He knows we can find him. This is were he used to be,” said Cynthia. She had the distant, strangely vacant expression the others were coming to associate with her using her psychic gifts. “We need to go downstairs.”

“What? You mean to the basement?” asked Marc.

“No,” Cynthia replied. “Deeper.”

The team followed Cynthia down elevators and stairs to the basement, which was little more than a very old and dingy reclamation room and storage area. The only person present was an attendant in a booth office, listening to an MP3 player on earphones and playing flash computer games online. He didn’t even notice the team as they slipped past the office in single file and followed Cynthia further past the rows of tall shelves packed with dusty, moldering tomes.

“It should be around here somewhere,” Cynthia said. “We need to find a way down. There’s an old sub-basement beneath us. See if you can find it.”

Nails, Marc, Jake and G.R. split up and began to search the room as inconspicuously as possible.

“How do you know all this?” Will whispered to Cynthia while the others worked.

“He’s inside my head, Will,” she said. “He’s been trying to push his way into my mind since we got here. I don’t think he was counting on me pushing back.”

Will was aghast. “What? What are you talking about?”

“They were all psychics, Will,” Cynthia said, “and a few wizards. The people that disappeared were just his victims. But the ones he hurt, the ones he drove crazy or pushed to suicide, those were the ones he was afraid of.”

“Slow down, you’re losing me.”

“*I confess to being befuddled as well, Cynthia,*” said George. “*Perhaps you should take a moment to compose yourself and try to explain?*”

Cynthia closed her eyes and grasped Will’s arm with one hand as if to steady herself. “I don’t know what he is. I know he...*rules* this place. He’s well hidden, but he knows some psychics and some people who know magic can find him, so he...breaks them.”

“He’s preemptively removing threats?” Will said. “But why didn’t these people protect themselves?”

“Because they didn’t know *how!*” huffed Cynthia. “Most people who’re psychic don’t even really know it. And in case you hadn’t noticed, there aren’t many wizards living openly in society.”

“*This entity has attempted to harm you?*” George asked.

“Not yet. He started out by trying to take what he wanted from my head, like a pick-pocket. He didn’t count on me being smarter than him.” Will thought he saw a hint of a smile on her face that quickly faded. “He’s not through with us, though. We have to be careful.”

“What’s downstairs?” Will asked.

“I don’t know. All I know is that when he was groping my brain for information, he didn’t expect me to grope back.” Cynthia blushed at her poor choice of words. “He was *mad* when I found that there’s something below that’s important to him. Now he’s *really* mad that we’re trying to get to it.”

After a few minutes Jake returned. “I think I found something,” he said and led them to a mound

of old boxes piled against a wall around a corner.

"I almost missed this," he explained as he showed them the edge of a door that was just visible around the boxes. It was made of ancient, rusted plates of metal that had been crudely bolted together.

"It's as good a place to start as any," Will observed. They gathered the others around the pile of boxes, then sent G.R. to make certain that the attendant was still distracted.

"He's on the phone," he said when he returned. "I think he's talking to his girlfriend or something. He kept calling her his 'hummingbird.'"

"Weird," said Jake.

The team worked to shift the pile of boxes as quickly and quietly as possible. After a few moments they had cleared the way, allowing them to examine the door up close.

"Wow! This thing is really an antique!" Jake exclaimed as he crouched to look at the handle and lock. "This door may be as old as the building itself."

"Think you can get us through, Marc?" asked Will.

"Damn right." Marc took a lock picking kit out of his duffle bag and knelt in front of the door. "Nine seconds!" he declared triumphantly when the lock clicked open.

"I've still got the record," Jake said with a smirk. Marc muttered something as Will pushed the door open, holding a pistol at the ready. Beyond was a dark, narrow staircase of worn stone that curved sharply out of sight. The walls of the stairwell were made of dusty rust-red bricks and the air within was as cold and stale as a tomb.

"Oh, good," Jake muttered. "I was afraid we might find something ominous."

"Don't start, Jake," Will warned. "Nails, I want you on point. I'm watching our backs."

"Got a light?" Nails asked. Marc tossed him a mini-flashlight and he led the team into the darkness.

The stairwell was so narrow it made Jake claustrophobic. The steps wound tightly down until the team was well below the level of the basement floor and finally opened into a small chamber. Nails took a cautious step down onto the sandy floor, and then walked forward freely, shining his light around.

The chamber was only the size of a small room, with the same aged brick walls as the stairwell. The ceiling appeared to be made of rough slabs of stone that were crudely mortared together while the floor was cold, plain sand. The only other feature was the remains of a rotted table collapsed in a heap against one wall.

"What's with this group always ending up in spooky subterranean rooms?" commented G.R..

Cynthia stepped down into the chamber and walked briskly to the far wall. She laid one palm on the dusty bricks and closed her eyes.

"I don't get it," growled Marc. "It's just an empty room. This is what Mr. Scary Guy didn't want us to see?"

"No, that's on the other side of this wall. We need to get to it," Cynthia declared without opening her eyes.

"How?" Jake asked after a pause. "There's no door."

"I know. We'll have to make one."

"They're playing our song!" Nails laughed and bumped fists with Marc.

"Ok, everyone line up," Will commanded. "Nails, you work on the bricks, the rest of us will give you cover fire from--"

"You don't need to worry, Will. He's not waiting for us," said Cynthia.

"But you said he was watching us!" Jake said.

"He is," Cynthia replied, "but he's not here."

"Legs, you are really beginning to creep us out," exclaimed Marc.

"Trust me." Cynthia finally opened her eyes and took several steps back from the wall.

Nails looked at her, then at Will, shrugged, stepped up to the wall and tapped it soundly. The brick resonated with a dull tone that hinted at an open space on the other side.

"You know what I love about this job?" Nails said.

"*What's that, Nails?*" asked George.

"I get to break stuff and say it's for a good cause," Nails laughed as he drew back his left fist and punched through the aged brick. Again and again he battered the crumbling masonry until he had created an opening large enough to walk through.

"What's inside?" G.R. asked tensely. Will, Jake, and Marc all had their weapons ready, despite Cynthia's assertion that the way beyond was safe. Nails stepped halfway through the opening and shone his light into the pitch darkness.

"Wow," he said. "You guys should definitely take a look at this."

Will nodded to the others and began to move forward. He kept one pistol ready as he walked past Nails and swept his flashlight beam around the area beyond.

It was another chamber much like the first in dimension. However, this one was so cluttered it resembled a disorganized storage shed. Against one wall rested the remains of a bookshelf that had long ago collapsed into kindling under the weight of its contents, which were themselves now just lumps of dry paper and flaking leather. Along another wall was a lump of rags that might once have been a bedroll. Virtually every inch of the room's floor space was taken up by a hodgepodge of tables, desks, and workbenches that were cluttered to capacity with books, strange arcane instruments and countless glass containers of various shapes and sizes.

"This is weird," Jake mused aloud. "It's obviously a laboratory, but why was it sealed up?"

"He walled himself in," Cynthia said. The team members stopped in their tracks and stared at her.

"Is...is that why it smells so funny in here?" Marc asked.

"No, he's not here anymore," explained Cynthia. "This was his workshop. He would spend hours down here, preparing. When he was ready, he bricked himself up."

"Ready for what?" Jake asked. His flashlight beam fell over a cluster of glass jars whose contents had long ago decayed into unidentifiable black crusts.

"I don't know," Cynthia admitted.

The Lonely Winds began to move among the room's furnishing, looking for clues but wisely touching nothing.

"I don't get it," Will said, "this is just a bunch of--"

"*Wait!*" George suddenly exclaimed. "*Will, pan left.*"

Will stopped in his tracks and turned so his Jakecam™ faced a small table. This one was not nearly so cluttered as the others: its only contents were a thick book laid open in the middle and a collection of deep blue, opaque crystalline polyhedrons that were arranged around it.

"*Let me have a closer look at the book,*" George requested. Will unclipped his Jakecam™ and held it down close to the book's yellow pages, which were full of strange line drawings. Clumps of text with a great many words and terms Will did not recognize accompanied the illustrations.

"*This is bad,*" George said in the tone he sometimes used that made it hard to tell if he was talking to others or only himself. "*If this means what I think it means, it will be all but impossible for you to find this menace.*"

"Why? Is he hiding somewhere in the university?" Jake asked.

"No," replied George. "*He is the university.*"

Chapter III Higher Learning

"I must not be the only one 'had a six-pack for breakfast," growled Marc. "Guess George can't hold his liquor."

"I'm not inebriated, Marc. If I'm not mistaken in my interpretation of what's written here, then the individual you seek is powerful, unique, and extremely dangerous."

"Big deal, you guys fight stuff like that about every three days," G.R. laughed.

"Clam it, Sullen," snapped Nails. "Ok, George, is there any way we can skip past the part where you speak in riddles and just have you explain what the hell is going on?"

"Yeah! And use small words!" Marc grunted.

"Very well." George could be heard taking a deep breath as if to steady himself, then he began.

"There is a spell of awesome, almost legendary power, called 'Cornerstone.' A mage that uses this magic can create an extremely potent metaphysical bond between herself and a single structure. This link essentially makes the structure in question an extension of the mage's senses, consciousness, and mystical power."

"Hee hee, you said 'potent,'" Marc chuckled.

"It that what this writing in the book is?" asked Will.

"No. These are notes and diagrams for something similar. It's built on the same principles, but it's geared toward a much larger, more encompassing effect, something I would have hardly thought possible. Unless I miss my guess, the mage who wrote these notes was attempting to form a bond with the entire university."

"Ok, fine," said Jake. "We've got a weirdo whose life goal was to weld his brain to a bunch of old buildings and drive co-eds crazy. How does this help us find him and kill him?"

"That's the problem, Jake. If my theory is correct--and it would certainly explain a great many things--then the red-eyed villain we have heard of is the undisputed master of these grounds. The windows and walls are his eyes and ears. He feels you walking on the ground the way you feel an ant crawling on your arm. He can move instantly from one point to another--you would call it teleportation--and he can assault you with magic anywhere among the structures of this establishment."

"That's quite a tactical advantage," Jake whimpered.

"It can't be as bad as all that!" Nails said. "There has to be some way of pinning this guy down and making him fight."

"Certainly. Theoretically, a powerful-enough mage could track down his physical body and nullify his teleportation. Any of you feel up to the task?"

No one did.

"Even leaving that aside," continued George, "the subject of our search is a mage of tremendous power. The crystals on the table are receptacles for magic energy, undoubtedly drained when this 'Super-Cornerstone' spell was cast. The amount of power to create the effects this mage now enjoys required a huge amount of magical energy just to begin them."

"Every bit of evidence suggests that this being has been haunting the university for centuries, and he would have been frighteningly powerful even before then. How would you fight him, or even find him? Is he sealed in another secret chamber somewhere, far below the earth? Disguised as a rock? Maybe even transformed and living as a student?"

"It may be difficult, but it's not impossible," Will finally said as he checked his pistols. "There's got to be a way to outsmart this thing."

"Will, he can hear you," said George sadly. "He's heard every word we've said since you arrived. How do you think you'll outsmart him?"

"There's gotta be a way!" Marc growled as he kicked the leg of a nearby table, causing the objects on top to jump. "Come on out, why don't you? You're not too tough to pick on school nerds, but you hide from us?"

"Calm down, buddy," urged Jake.

"I can try to track him down," Cynthia offered. "I can't guarantee anything, but I think I can mess with his head and find out where he is."

"It's as good a plan as any," said Will. "Let's move back outside. This place is giving me the creeps."

"*Marc, bring the spell book. It may prove useful later,*" said George. Marc picked up the old tome and dropped it into his duffle bag before following the others out of the room and back up the stairs.

Once the Winds had reached the top of the stairs they re-closed the door and stacked the boxes in front of it again. The attendant in the office was still on the phone, cooing sweet nothings to his darling. He clearly hadn't seen the team and Will breathed a sigh of relief to see that there was no one else around that might have seen them or heard the racket when Nails battered down the wall.

The air in the basement was still and quiet, yet there was still a palpable sense of menace to it; not the feeling that something was watching the team, so much as the feeling that something was glaring at them while taking aim with a weapon. No one spoke of it, but everyone was aware of it--except for Nails, who remained blissfully unaware of the crawling sensation save what hints the uneasiness of his companions lent him.

"So what do we do now?" Jake asked as the Lonely Winds finally stepped out of the library and into the parking lot. The weather was as clear outside as before, but the landscape felt darker somehow.

"I guess we just start. What do you need to do?" Will asked Cynthia.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I've never done this before."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to steady herself. The truth was that she had no idea how to begin looking for the "entity" they were seeking. She already knew she wouldn't be able to pry her way into this omnipresent consciousness the way she would with a normal person. There was the possibility of trying to pinpoint the man himself, but that would be like wandering around an enormous room while blindfolded, trying to find someone who did not want to be found.

Cynthia settled on a less refined approach. Her effective range was limited, but projecting her consciousness directly into the immediate area seemed as good a start as any. She was only mildly surprised to feel the presence of an intruding consciousness the instant she began. It fled back and disappeared without a fight, running after she had caught it trying to put its hands into her mental pockets.

Gotcha! she thought and sent her mind chasing after the retreating consciousness. It sped away and was quickly lost beyond her reach, but not before she could glean from it a sense of what was foremost in its thoughts: the distance and direction to a place where something sacred was hidden. Cynthia didn't find out what it was but was left with the ironclad sense that it was much more important to the university's controller than the chamber beneath the library, which had once been vital to his work but was now merely the sole surviving memento of his previous existence.

"Guys," Cynthia said, "I think I've got something, I've--"

She opened her eyes and found herself alone. The other Lonely Winds were nowhere in sight, nor was there any other soul around. Even the cars were gone from the parking lot and the nearby streets, leaving the campus completely deserted.

"Oh, this *sucks*," moaned Cynthia. "Hello? Anybody around?"

Cynthia...

"That's not the answer I was hoping for," the petite psychic muttered as she twirled in place, looking for where the sound had come from. She rotated several times and had found nothing when the call came again.

Cynthia...

Her eyes settled at last on a man, standing across one of the streets bordering the parking lot in an alley. He was standing motionless, shadowed by the surrounding buildings, yet Cynthia could see his burning red eyes and wild mane of dirty hair as though she were standing within touching distance of him.

"There you are!" she said, hoping she sounded braver than she felt. "You're in a lot of trouble, mister!"

He said nothing in reply. There were only those burning, hateful eyes. They were almost painful

for Cynthia to look at, but she didn't dare look away. Then the man moved without moving: he simply was much closer, on the edge of the parking lot.

Cynthia stumbled and flopped onto her back. "Stay away!" she cried as she scrambled back to her feet and raised a force field around herself. She didn't know how much of what she was seeing was real, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The ground under her feet shifted violently and she nearly fell again. As she staggered away from that lurching spot she saw that a jagged crack was forming in the blacktop, spreading in both directions and gradually curving upward. Cynthia looked up for the red-eyed man. No sooner did she see that he had disappeared than she felt her force field violently collapse and she was instantly wrapped in a crushing grip. A long strip of blacktop, striated with paint and flexing like a massive tentacle, had torn through her force field and held her arms pinned against her sides so tightly that she could barely breathe. She was lifted high above the surface of the lot and saw the crack far below opening wide like a nightmarish maw. Broken pipes stuck out in the opening like teeth and beneath them was only a gaping abyss. Then, two smaller cracks opened above the mouth and widened into eyes--the hateful red eyes of the man.

Cynthia kicked and thrashed and frantically tried to free herself by lashing out with mental bolts of energy, which did little more than pick small chunks out of the weathered tar that held her. The tentacle shifted and plunged downward toward the maw, which gaped open hungrily. Cynthia tried to scream, but there wasn't enough air left in her lungs.

"Cynthia!" Will shouted. Her eyes snapped open. She was standing in the team's midst in the parking lot. Will had his hands on her shoulders and was gently shaking her.

"What happened?" she asked as she pushed Will's hands away and looked around.

"You tell us!" Jake said. "You closed your eyes and wouldn't answer us for about thirty seconds, then you started screaming."

"Bastard!" Cynthia spat.

Will looked from her to Jake and back again. "We were only trying to help," he said apologetically.

"Not you, dumbass!" snapped Cynthia. "It was *him*. He was messing with my head."

"Are you all right, Cynthia?" asked George.

"I'm fine. If this loser wants to play mind games, he picked the wrong girl to mess with. I know where we need to go next. Follow me."

She led the others over a mile across campus at a brisk jog, reflecting on how pleasant it was to be in good shape. The team's grueling daily exercise regimen was stressful at first, but it had been worth it for the conditioning. A non-stop mile jog didn't even get her out of breath. Even G.R. was able to keep up with everyone.

They came at last to an outlying maintenance building on the edge of campus. The squat, windowless brick building appeared deserted. It was a stone's throw from anything else of note.

"This is it," announced Cynthia. "We need to get underneath it."

"Like I said, what's with always having to get under buildings with this group?" quipped G.R..

"What's underneath this?" Will asked.

Cynthia scowled. "I'm not sure. It's sort of...it's hard to explain, but I sort of chased him in this direction and he was thinking about how what's under this building is one of his favorite things."

"You chased him here? Just now?" asked Nails.

"No, before. When I was standing. In the parking lot."

"Ok, so she's loony," said Marc. "She's still hot."

"Look, just help me find a way under the damn thing, all right?" Cynthia moaned.

The team began to search around the tiny building. The only door was securely locked and the structure's foundation was rooted in the sandy soil.

"I think I've got something," Jake called from around behind the building. When the others went to join him, they found him kneeling near the middle of the rear wall. The ground sloped away slightly behind the structure, where the elements had conspired with the landscape to leave part of the cinderblock

foundation exposed to the air.

“We could chisel this out and get inside,” Jake suggested.

“Property damage? In broad daylight?” exclaimed Will.

“Dude! Right on!” Marc chuckled as he gave Jake a high five.

“I, too, must question the wisdom of Jake’s suggestion,” George put in. *“You’re in the heart of the city, on campus, in the middle of the day, completely visible in many directions. It becomes even more questionable when you weigh the fact that we do not know exactly what is here.”*

“Blah, blah, blah,” grumbled Marc as he took a short-handled sledgehammer from his duffle bag and turned to Nails. “You and me, we punch a hole through here right quick. If anybody asks, we’re workers for the city or something.”

“Check,” Nails said.

The two burly men moved to stand on opposite sides of the exposed section of foundation while the others fidgeted and kept watch. Marc used his sledge, Nails his bare fists. In less than a minute they had broken an opening large enough to crawl through easily. Beyond the hole was some sort of crawlspace, but the sun did not penetrate it.

“Gotcha now, you bastard!” Cynthia said triumphantly as she practically dove into the crawlspace.

“Wait! We don’t know if it’s--” Will said, but Cynthia had already disappeared inside.

“Where are you?” she asked the darkness. With one hand she felt the bottom of the building above her while groping in the dark with the other. She was only a few feet in when she stepped on something irregular that crunched under her shoe. When she tested the ground ahead with her other foot, her toe nudged a pile of something that clattered like a child’s building blocks.

What in the world? Cynthia thought as she reached down. Her fingers closed around a cold, tubular object. Realization made her drop it in horror at the same time Will and Jake shined their lights into the crawlspace.

“Hey, Red,” said Jake, “did you find--”

His words died in his throat. The crawl space was full of over a dozen skeletons. Here and there were a few misplaced bones, but most of the skeletons were intact and wearing the moldering remains of clothing--some current, some in styles from years or decades before. Cynthia was crouched in a heap of bones. The object she had picked up was an ulna.

“No, no, no,” she whimpered as she turned and ran almost blindly out of the crawlspace. G.R. had been trying to push past the others to see what was inside; Cynthia plowed headlong into him and knocked him onto his back, landing on top of him.

“Wow! My dreams have come true!” he said viscerally.

Cynthia didn’t seem to notice. She scrambled to her feet and rushed away from the maintenance building, making it several yards into a bordering empty field before Will could catch her.

“Cynthia! Wait up!”

Cynthia stopped and held Will’s arms as he laid his hands on her shoulders. The others were only just catching up when she began to speak.

“Her name was Luanne. She--she was an art student here. She got a call from her boyfriend, but it wasn’t her boyfriend, and he begged her to come and meet him, and she ran into the night and never came back...” Cynthia opened her eyes, and tears were welling up in them. “He takes them and he *hurts* them and then he leaves them in the dark to die alone. He keeps the bones...he keeps them like souvenirs, in places like this, all over campus.”

“There are more of these things?” Jake said and turned to look into the emptiness beneath the tiny building.

“We need to get out of sight,” Will said after a hideously long silence. As the Lonely Winds hurried away, the only sound was an occasional sob from Cynthia.

For lack of a better place to go, Nails led the others to the coffee shop he had visited earlier. The place was still quiet, with only the odd patrons minding their own business at tables here and there. The team gathered around a large table in a back corner. There they sat pondering the circumstances in the

awful quiet.

“There has to be a way to beat this thing,” Jake said at last.

“*Like what, Jake?*” George asked without spite.

“I don’t know...trick it somehow, or track it down? Maybe take it by surprise?”

“How, Jake?” asked an exasperated G.R.. “He’s probably listening to every word we say!”

“*I’m afraid I have to agree,*” George added sadly. “*This man has a unique advantage. It is not that he has a “home field advantage” so much as that he is the home field. This, combined with his incredible power and inexplicable depredations, make him a singular threat that none of you are prepared to counter.*”

“Why don’t we get something to eat? We can take time to think this through,” suggested G.R..

“Man, do you *ever* stop thinking about food?” snapped Marc. “If you skipped lunch one day, a poor family would have enough to eat for a month!”

“Lay off, dude,” Nails warned as G.R. turned beat red in humiliation.

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Will.

The team members went to the counter and ordered snacks or drinks according to their tastes--all except G.R., who sat sulking at the table. Marc and Nails decided to hit a bar for some hard liquor while they “thought things over,” while Jake and G.R. chose to return to the library in hope of finding some useful information, leaving Will and Cynthia alone in the coffee shop. Cynthia huddled in a chair against the back wall, nursing a large glass of fruit punch. She was staring into space the way she usually did when she was in deep thought, but her normally blank expression was haunted and fearful. Will had ordered a cream soda and a *zigo*, a traditional Yd dish of a medium pepper stuffed with cheese. Normally Will loved Yd cooking, but he found himself picking at his food with his fork.

George’s words haunted him. Will had seen plenty of horrific things in his time. Growing up in a city plagued by crime, a brief stint as a police officer and almost two years as a Lonely Wind had all presented an increasingly dismal view of the world as a place overrun by monsters supernatural and mundane. Yet through all the terrible experiences Will had remained stalwart and noble, believing that the world could be a better place as long as there were a few brave souls willing to work to make it that way.

In his reverie, Will leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling. He was completely unaware that he was absently scratching at the surface of the table with his fork.

Surely, Will thought as he remained blissfully ignorant of the increasingly violent scarring of the table, surely there was some way to bring down this menace. Even if it really were as powerful as George claimed, it had to have some sort of weakness that the team could exploit. The Lonely Winds would look until they found it, however long it took, then they would make this abomination pay for each and every one of the people it had hurt down through the ages.

Feeling somewhat reassured, Will sat up and froze. His eyes had fallen over something on the table that made his blood turn cold. Scratched into the wood, with Will’s own fork, were the words:

IT WILL
NEVER
STOP

Chapter IV The Burden of Knowledge

"I just don't get it," Marc growled as he made a keen billiards shot. "The freak wrapped his brain around all this turf? What kind of sickness is that?"

"It is very strange," said Nails. He kept trying unsuccessfully to forget the sight of the bones under the maintenance building. No matter how he tried to avoid it, his mind kept drifting back to morbid curiosity over just why those people had been taken and what had happened to them. "Very strange."

Marc leaned absently on the billiards table. "What do you think we outta do?"

"I have no worldly idea," Nails admitted. "I'm not even sure we *should* try to fight it. The last time we tussled with a wizard it didn't go so well."

"You mean that psycho magic guy?" Marc sniffed. "We coulda taken him."

"As I recall, he had you swatting the air, thinking you were covered in scorpions," said Nails dryly.

"You think this guy would pull the same crap?"

"I'm not sure. This guy linked himself to a college campus, just so he could spend hundreds of years killing students and hiding their bodies under buildings? Who knows *what* this guy can do or why he does it?"

"Good point," Marc muttered as he sank another shot. "You think they'll find the bones soon?"

"No doubt, which is probably a good reason for us to lay low for a while. I just hope nobody saw us by the hole."

A hand clapped down onto Nails' shoulder from behind and he spun on his heels, half-expecting a red-eyed wizard to be standing there.

"Will! Man, don't *do* that! I nearly took your head off!"

"I've been trying to call you guys. Your cameras are off," Will said. Cynthia was standing behind him, still looking nervous.

"Well, yeah," Marc scoffed. "We're not gonna walk around town with little cameras on our shoulders."

"You should have them on," Will said sternly. "We need to go."

"We've got a game," Marc protested.

"Now!" Will demanded with a hardness Nails had never heard him use. Marc scowled, dropped his cue stick on the table and fell in with the others as they followed Will out of the bar.

"What's the story?" Nails asked with slight hesitation.

"We're going to beat this thing," Will said. "Whatever it takes, we'll flush him out in the open and take him down."

"He's laughing at us now. He knows we can't fight him," Cynthia said to no one in particular.

"That's the sort of thing I don't want to hear, Cynthia," Will chided. "We have to stay positive. If he has been hidden for so long, he's sure to be overconfident. We'll get him on his own hubris."

"Will, don't," warned Cynthia fearfully as the team passed in front of a multi-storied dorm that loomed menacingly above them. "You're making him angry again."

"Damn it, Cynthia, you aren't helping!" Will snapped as he stopped in his tracks and rounded to face the team. "This guy isn't invincible, or he wouldn't have to hide from us like the coward that he is!"

A window on the dorm's fifth floor, directly over the team's heads, blew outward as a fiery explosion shook the front wall.

"Get down!" Will shouted. The startled Lonely Winds huddled against the building's face as hot glass and burning debris rained down on the sidewalk and street.

"Inside, quick!" ordered Will. Marc ran to the front door to haul it open for the others and was greeted by a shrieking fire alarm.

"Crisis response! Where are the stairs?" Will shouted at the desk attendant, who was cringing in her chair as stunned, frightened and confused residents began to filter into the lobby. She pointed to a door on the other side of the lobby, well away from the desk.

Will waved in thanks (*Always so polite*, Cynthia thought) and ran at the head of the team to the stairwell door. They wound up five stories of stairs as a steady trickle of residents ranging from disoriented to outright panicking raced downward past them.

The smell of smoke was thick in the air before the Lonely Winds even reached the fifth floor landing. Will tapped the door handle, found that it was not hot and pulled the door open. A wave of choking heat hit the team in their faces, followed by a wall of smoke that made it all but impossible to see. Faint screams could be heard coming from somewhere deep within the inferno.

“Hero time!” Nails said as he charged into the smokescreen. “Keep the door open! I’ll be back!”

The thick smoke didn’t sting Nails’ eyes the way it would a normal person, but it still obscured his vision, forcing him to grope blindly in the heat. He heard a frightened cry come from his right and when he moved toward it he blundered into a door that was mostly closed. Kicking it open, Nails hurried across the threshold and found the air in the dorm room beyond considerably clearer and cooler than that in the hall. The shockwave from the explosion had shattered the windows, allowing what heat and smoke had entered the room to disperse quickly. A single student cringed against a desk along the far wall in near-panic. He pulled away when Nails drew near.

“Hey! No, it’s ok! I’m here to help!” he said and scooped the terrified young man into his arms before he could protest. As fast as he could go Nails dashed into the hall and to the stairwell door--which was again closed. Nails banged his head against the door and badly rattled his already traumatized passenger in the process.

I’m rapidly gaining respect for firefighters, he thought as he kicked the door open and sprang onto the landing. The smoke and heat had already forced the rest of the team to retreat partway down the stairs; even Will had not been able to force himself to stay.

Nails hurried down the steps to the others and handed the student, who was now half-feint, to Marc. “Get him out of here! I’m going back to look for others!” he said and skipped running back up the stairs by simply leaping back up to the landing.

“Showoff,” G.R. groaned under his breath as he followed the others to the ground floor.

Nails grabbed the landing door in both hands and ripped it free of its hinges with a shriek of tearing metal. He leaned it against the wall inside the hall so it would be out of the way and plunged into the increasing heat.

“Hello?” he called over the rising crackle of nearby flames, “Anyone else here?”

“Help me!” a feminine voice came from somewhere on Nails’ left. He could just make out an open doorway through the smoky veil. He ran through it and found himself in a disheveled room that appeared to be deserted.

“Hello?” he shouted again. “Where are you?”

A black silhouette lunged at him from his peripheral vision. He reacted on impulse, spinning and lashing at the menacing shape, only to find it was nothing more than a wisp of smoke.

The same threatening shape dove out of the other side of Nails’ vision and he reacted again, turning and punching with thunderous force. His fist made a hole in a wall in the midst of a smudge of soot with a vaguely person-like shape.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Nails growled, turned and hurried out of the room.

In the end Nails made three more trips out of the fifth floor--once with another survivor, twice with lifeless bodies. Each time he ran back into the inferno, the faceless master of the university toyed with him. Disembodied cries for help, threatening shapes that turned out to be nothing, doors that closed and locked on their own and loose objects that mysteriously tried to trip Nails--all these things constantly harrowed him during his frantic search for other survivors. After finding the second corpse, Nails became convinced that there was no one else alive on the fifth floor and gave up his search.

By that time fire and police vehicles were arriving. Nails made the difficult, but wise, decision to leave the body. He laid out the corpse in the center of the lobby and chanced looking out the front window.

Outside the building was as chaotic as the lobby had been moments before. The police had already

created a makeshift crowd control barrier from plastic sawhorses and yellow tape. Paramedics were tending to burned and injured residents and attempting to revive several unconscious students, including the first deceased one Nails had carried to safety. The crowd was full of students sobbing uncontrollably or staring into space. Teams of firefighters were preparing to enter the building and mounting ladders, but there was no sign of the team.

“Time to make myself scarce,” Nails thought aloud.

“*An excellent suggestion,*” George commented as Nails turned and ran for the back door.

Once he was in the narrow alley behind the dorm, well out of sight of the crowds, Nails finally addressed the team through his Jakecam™. “What’s the situation, folks?”

“*We’re gathered in the square,*” Jake replied. “*Will thought we should stay out of sight, but we didn’t want to get too far away from the action.*”

“Right,” Nails said, as much to himself as to Jake. Now that he was no longer distracted, he could focus on G.R.’s thoughts and recent memories. The view G.R. had of the smoldering dorm from the square flickered through Nails’ mind’s eye. That tragic image was enough to stop him in his tracks.

“Nails!” an empty voice behind him whispered. Nails turned toward the sound in spite of himself and wasn’t in the least surprised to find he was still alone.

“Dammit!” he hissed and stomped out of frustration, hard enough to dislodge several of the bricks packed into the earth alley floor.

“*What’s wrong?*” Marc asked.

“This bastard’s toying with me!” Nails said through clenched teeth. “Nobody move until I get there. This guy is seriously pissing me off with his games.”

Nails found the team gathered under the branches of an ancient oak on the edge of the square. No one seemed to have noticed the ragtag band standing around in mono-black clothing. Word of the disaster was spreading across campus with incredible speed and people’s attention was focused away from almost everything else, even a terribly conspicuous group of strangers dressed like cat burglars.

“Everybody ok?” Nails asked as he approached them. “I half-expected our loon to try messing with you before I got here.”

The leaves in the oak above rustled in a sudden gust of wind.

“He doesn’t need to,” said Cynthia, her eyes wide and empty. “He knows we can’t touch him.”

Will opened his mouth to chastise her again out of pure reflex but his voice died in his throat as his gaze fell on the plumes of black smoke rising into the sky from the burning dorm.

Cynthia saw him lower his eyes. “I tried to warn you, Will. He could kill us all where we stand, but we aren’t worth the trouble. He decided it would be better to punish us by hurting others.”

There was an agonizing moment as the team looked on helplessly at the burning dorm.

“Well...what do we do now?” asked Jake.

“*You do the only thing you can, Jake,*” George said. “*You come home.*”

“We can’t leave this thing here!” protested Will.

“I don’t think we have much choice,” Jake said. “This guy blew up a building just to spite us. George was right all along, there’s no way for us to fight.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to kick a guy’s ass if he won’t put it where you can see it,” Marc growled.

“I’m going to have to add that to my collection of amusing Marc sayings,” Nails said.

“You’re kidding, right?” asked G.R..

Nails shook his head. “I’m up to volume three.”

“*Get out of sight, troops,*” urged George. “*Stay together on the return trip, come back swiftly.*”

Will waited for the others to pull out of the library parking lot so he could bring up the rear of the caravan. He and Cynthia had turned off their Jakecams™. The car was eerily quiet as they drove the winding street away from the heart of campus.

“Do you mind if I put on some music?” Cynthia finally asked as the team’s convoy crossed from the campus region into one of Ylelon’s northern residential areas.

“Fine,” Will said. Cynthia switched on the sound system, which was preset to some of the classical piano music that Will loved so much. The timeless strains of melody were very soothing, but judging by Will’s terse and haggard expression it was doing little to help him relax.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Cynthia ventured.

“You want to know what I think? I’m furious,” Will said with uncharacteristic force. “We’re running away from something that *needs* to be stopped.”

“We’re not running way, Will, we’re...retreating. Strategically,” offered Cynthia. “This is something we can’t beat. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself over something you can’t control.”

Will huffed. “This isn’t about me! This is about us not stopping a sicko who is going to go on killing people! We should be figuring out a way to get him into the open, not running home.”

“Will, you saw what he did just to get to us. If we’d stayed, he’d just hurt someone else.”

“He’s going to do that anyway,” Will grated.

“Yeah, probably,” Cynthia admitted sadly. “Like those poor people under the maintenance building. At least no one else will have to die on our account.”

“Is that all you’re worried about? If you have to worry about feeling guilty while other people are dying?”

“That’s not fair, Will. I meant if we can’t make the situation any better, at least we can avoid making it any worse. Maybe someday we could come back after we know more, but now all we can do is...go home.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Will said. They rode the rest of the trip with the only sounds the classical piano and the hum of the engine.

George was waiting on the front steps when the team returned. He was wearing brown bellbottoms, a powder blue golf shirt and black sandals. Though the wind was still chilly and George was not warmly dressed, he gave no outward sign of discomfort.

The team parked in the Workshop and met George at the front door, whereupon he led them inside to the Situation Room.

“Thoughts?” he asked when everyone was seated.

“I’m completely flummoxed,” Jake replied. “I really have no idea how to feel about all this. It’s unlike anything we’re ever dealt with and I can’t even decide if that’s a comforting thought or not.”

“Do you have the book, Marc?” George asked.

Marc took the spell book out of his duffle bag and slid it over the smooth plastic tabletop to George, who scooped it up and began to flip through it.

“This,” he said, “I believe can be of immeasurable benefit to us in the future. I will study it and share what contents I deem useful. In the meantime, salvage what you can of the day and take the evening off. Tomorrow is another day. Perhaps somewhere down the road we can face this menace again, when we are better prepared.”

Marc thumped the table with a fist. “So that’s it, then? We’re just leaving this thing where it is?”

“I’m afraid so, Marc. Unless you intend to return to the campus and bellow challenge in hope of provoking him into a confrontation.”

Marc muttered something coarse and settled back into his chair.

“What’s the point in fighting if we can’t beat an...an abomination like that?” lamented Will.

“Some battles are never truly won, only fought,” said George sagely. “Please, do not trouble yourselves over this any longer. You can wait until tomorrow to fill out your reports, but for now try to forget the horrors you have seen today.”

Nothing more was said. Each of the team members left to distract themselves in their own preferred style. As for George, he waited until everyone else had departed, then got up and walked slowly out of the room, flipping through the pages of the book as he went.

The tome was a combination journal, workbook and record of spell formulae. Its contents were even more ominous than George had feared. Interspersed among diary entries full of crude curses and vile threats toward the general population was a plethora of spells, many of which were intended to inflict

harm on others. Spells that could incapacitate an enemy with excruciating pain, that induced sanity-fraying nightmares, that allowed the caster to bind dark entities into servitude--there was even a copy of a spell George had rarely seen, a complex and sadistic magic that allowed the caster to completely rewrite the memories of a person as desired. A victim could be turned into a loving philanthropist or a twisted sociopath at the whim of the mage that could muster the energy required for the spell. George felt an increasing revulsion for the author of the book with each moment he read.

The final journal entry, surrounded by notes and observations regarding “improvements” to the Cornerstone spell, read simply:

I have finished walling up my laboratory. Tonight my apotheosis begins.

George snapped the book closed as he reached the doors of his Study. With his practiced grace he took the ornate key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and slipped inside.

Once the doors were locked again George marched to one of the many bookcases that lined the spacious room. He set the tome on a shelf that only held a few other books, then took a large parchment scroll from a higher shelf. This he carried to the podium and his enormous, yellowing-paged journal. George laid the scroll in the crease between pages and picking up his quill, began to write.

Sunday, November 11th, 2043 T.E.

My team learned a difficult lesson today, that sometimes even the noblest intentions and the bravest heart are not sufficient to undo a great evil. It seems that a wicked individual of tremendous mystical power has lurked undetected in Ylelon University for a very long time and has spent those years preying upon the innocent for reasons of his own. His power proved to be such that my brave warriors were helpless to stop him. Fortunately, this case need not go without resolution forever.

George set down his quill and unfurled the scroll across the book. At the scroll’s head, in George’s smooth penmanship, was the word “Someday”.

Beneath the heading was a catalogue of bizarre phenomena, meticulously detailed by date, place, and description of what had happened. At the bottom of the list George recorded the events of the day, in every detail he could think of, from the time Nails and G.R. had left for the city to how “Red Eye” had caused an explosion--evidently a gas main rupture--through an act of will. When he was done, he rolled the scroll up and took it back to its shelf. Then he went to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a very large snifter of brandy. Drink in hand, he went to his favorite armchair and sat, thoughtfully swirling the liquid as he stared into empty space.

“Someday,” he said to himself.