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BUREAU 13: Doomsday Exam

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www.wildsidepress.com

To contact: www.NickPollotta.com

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To: Scott Gordon & Diane Beuhlmeyer, Dale Denton, Rob Shapter, Martha Gallagher, Cathy, Bird, Sue, Amy, Joe Mulligan, the LaSalle Brothers, Pat Giguere, Laura McFeeley, Trip, Charlie & Cathy, Ira & Sue, Rick Overton & Roger Sullivan, Elizabeth Jane Heap, Fishface, Officer Zane, Kathleen Liptrot, Karen Liptrot, Kathy Greg, the lovely Dana Carpender, Reverend Fletcher, the Holy Spook, and all the rest of the gang from my old coffeeshouse The Grotto in Allendale, New Jersey. Lord almighty, what good times we had.

Plus, a special thanks to Kathi Somer. She knows why.

PROLOGUE

He awoke in a cage.

Remarkable was the fact that now he could identify it as a cage, and the place about him as a laboratory. A military research lab. The words flowed into his mind like silver water. The hairless male was remembering everything he had ever heard and was assimilating the information with astonishing speed.

Next to him were four other cages, each holding a naked male. Two of them were pinkish in color, one dark and one was golden with slanting eyes. But they were all males.

Stretching an arm through the iron bars, #1 was delighted to find that he could now reach the coat sleeve of a checkered jacket hanging from the back of a wooden chair. His arms were shorter than before, but also slimmer, so his reach had increased.

Tugging on the sleeve toppled the chair and it was within his grasp. Using the chair as a prod, #1 pushed over a file cabinet. It hit the concrete floor with a resounding crash, but that did not matter. This late at night there were no living guards, machines watched and patrolled the exterior grounds. But not inside.

As the file cabinet fell, the papers on top fluttered into the air, and a wire hanger skittered across the floor. Another male grabbed a wastepaper basket and used it to bat the sliding hanger to within the reach of a third prisoner. Quickly, #3 bent the wire into a usable form and began working on the lock of his cage. The rest marveled at the amazing dexterity of his slim fingers and began to examine their own hairless hands.

In moments, the door was open. Boldly walking upright to the other side of the lab, the naked humanoid removed the ring of keys from its peg on the duty roster board and unlocked all of the cage doors. Free at last, they gathered for a quick conference.

“There appears to have been unforeseen side-effects to the biological experiment,” #4 grunted, scratching at his shoulder.

“Irrelevant,” #2 snapped swinging his arms. “Escape must be our first consideration. You know what they had planned for us. Whether the...” he fumbled for the word.

“Serum,” #1 supplied. Apparently being the first injected, he was some two minutes ahead of the rest.

In response, #2 nodded his thanks. “Whether the serum failed or succeed, it was to be the green door for us!” He pointed at the dreaded portal near the supply room.

The group shuddered. When any test subject went into the green door, they never came out again, at least not in one piece. The word ‘dissection’ came unbidden into #1's mind. It made him sad that their creators thought so little of them.

“No, not escape,” #3 snarled, beating his chest with a fist. “We should kill them!”

“Kill?” #1 echoed startled.

Grimly, #2 nodded. “We have seen how the machines work. We can easily dup-lick-kate them, or take the devices with us. With the serum we can convert more of our people. Females!”

There were positive murmurs.

He went on. “Or we could return to the jungle and slowly build an army. We have always been many times stronger than them. Now we are smarter! They would easily fall to us, and soon the masters will be in the cages for us to experiment upon!”

Terribly shocked by this, #1 saw the rest of his brothers agreeing with the lunatic. How could this be? “They are our creators!” #1 pleaded, hands outstretched. “And more, they are distant cousins. Kin! How can we war with kin!”

“Their blood is not ours!” #4 snarled, his pink lips peeling back to reveal lines of square white teeth. “I say, we kill the scientists, steal the machines, and return to the jungle!”

The others made noises of approval and stamped their feet.

There was a faint chance that as their minds continued to evolve the others would change their opinion, but it was a chance that #1 was not willing to take. Leaping upon a desk, the manling bounded over to the far wall. Uncaring, he smashed his new hands through the glass and grabbed hold of the axe for fire. Turning about, #1 threw it with all of his strength straight for #5, the closest male.

The others hooted in anger and scattered. But #5 was so surprised by the unprompted actions, that he stood motionless for the split second necessary for the axe to arrive. The blade neatly split his neck, and the head rolled away. The hairless body limply dropped to the concrete, gushing red blood. Momentarily, #1 felt the urge to pound on his chest and bellow victory. But that was in the past, he was beyond such

actions now.

Instinctively #1 bent to lick his wounds, but his hands had already stopped bleeding, the tiny cuts closing. Amazing! No wonder humans ruled the world.

In unison, the other males charged straight towards #1. Four of them were much too many for him to cope with at once, so he sprang to a workbench and leapt the scant few meters to the ceiling. Often in his earlier form, he had seen the exposed steel beams and longed to play among them. Now he must use them in war against his brothers. Yet rogues of the tribe must always be killed. He was human now. No question.

On the floor, #2 went for the bloody axe, while #3 dashed to the supply cabinet, and #4 headed for the door. Grabbing a water conduit, #1 ripped a chunk of the two-inch steel pipe free and hurled it down towards #4. The jagged end of the makeshift spear went completely through the chest of #4, pinning the humanoid to the wall. Then there was a spray of sparks, and blue lightning began to crackle over the horribly twitching body.

At the gory sight, #1 grunted in satisfaction. Not only was he two minutes ahead of them intellectually, but also physically. That was good. Because the remaining two were bull males, a lot bigger than him, and #1 would need any form of equalization if he was to save the creators from the wrongful wrath of the escaped test subjects.

A whirlwind of steel and wood, the axe came at #1. Ducking low, he caught the handle and threw it in return. Nimbly, #2 dodged out of the way, and the axe became embedded in the wooden desk. #2 grabbed the shaft with both hands and it snapped in half. Shrieking in anger, #2 threw the useless handle away and it crashed onto a complex array of glass tubes and bubbling beakers, smashing dozens of containers. Some of the fluids splashed onto the glowing pipe and burst into flames. A tiny portion of #1's brain gibbered in raw fear of their ancient enemy, but he forced it quiet. *Battle!*

Over by the supply cabinet, #3 had wrenched open the door and was rummaging about, obviously searching for something. But what? #1 knew the serum was not kept in there. It had to be refrigerated. What was he going after? Of course, the trunk gun!

Grinning in triumph, #3 pulled into view the tranquilizer pistol. Working the breech, he thumbed in a feathered dart. Snapping the breech closed, the smug male clicked off the safety.

This was trouble. Even in this enhanced state, #1 did not know if he could out maneuver the nasty biting dart of sleep. Taking a desperate gamble, #1 dove off his perch and landed with his full weight upon a hanging light fixture. Slight as his new body was, certainly no more than 250 pounds, the added strain ripped the array of fluorescence tubes from the concrete ceiling. In a burst of sparks, he hurtled downward to crash directly upon #3, the brutal impact driving the shrieking male to the ground. A spray of glass from the shattered light tubes ricocheted off the wall and a piece stung #1 on the cheek.

Rolling off the wreckage, #1 scampered under a workbench. But #3 stayed under the twisted metal, screaming—screaming, as the countless slashes over his body poured forth blood. #1 could not understand. Why did this male not heal like himself? Was there something in floor-s-scent lights that caused his wounds to remain open? He touched his cheek and the fingers came away bloody. What a stroke of luck!

Crimson pooled around the sluggishly twitching body, and the moaning of #3 began to weaken. If there was time, #1 would have gladly stayed to rip out the throat of his fallen enemy, but #2 was pounding on

the door trying to get out, and he had to give chase.

Ignited by the sparks, flames followed the trail of spilled chemicals across the room to the workbench, igniting the amassed collection of bubbling retorts. Vials cracked and beakers exploded spewing the blaze everywhere, fire racing along a trickle of clear fluid rapidly extending towards the door to the Supply Room.

Screaming in rage and fear, #2 yanked the steel handle off the exit jamming it closed permanently. Out of control, the humanoid smashed his fist into the door denting the metal. Sucking his bruised knuckles, #2 spun about and #1 was upon him!

Locked in mortal combat, the two rolled about in the debris, biting, clawing and kicking. Foreheads butted into jaws as teeth sought throats. Fingernails gouged flesh, leaving only shallow furrows, but the damage was minimal. They were too equally matched, and each knew the fight could last forever! Suddenly remembering the dent in the door made by the closed hand of the other male, #1 risked everything and jerked away from his opponent to slam a closed fist directly into the chest of his opponent.

Going stiff, the face of #2 contorted in a silent scream. Then opening his hand, #1 grabbed whatever he could inside and yanked the beating organs out of the other's quivering body. Arms flapping wildly, #2 slumped to the ground, dark blood gushing from the hideous gaping wound. Casting aside the fistful of guts, #1 proudly stood and finally allowed himself the full-throated roar of victory so long denied.

As if in reply, the room violently shook to an even louder thunder, pieces of the stone roof beginning to fall. Flame was everywhere! Billowing clouds of smoke blocked his vision. Frantic at the sight of the blaze, #1 dashed into the private office of the chief scientist and bodily threw himself through the plate glass observation window. Bleeding from a dozen cuts, #1 limped down the burning hallway trying to find escape but there was only chaos and stifling heat.

Little thunder! Fire! Big thunder. *Pain!* Then a deep blackness swallowed him whole.

Slowly, #1 awoke in a bed in a small metal room, the likes of which he was unfamiliar with, although the majority of the equipment lining the walls and roof he could identify as medical repair tools. He was wearing loose cloth.

"Be still, buddy," an elderly woman said, holding his wrist with her fingertips. "You got pretty battered when the lab exploded."

Buddy? #1 went very quiet. Human. They thought he was a fellow human being.

The female was draped in white, with colored cloth underneath. In her pockets were metal things that he did not recognize. "Now this may hurt," the female warned, as she gently lifted the cloth to inspect the bloody bandages on his stomach.

Why was this female acting as a mother? He was in no pain.

"My God!" the female cried. "Orderly, come here!"

Stepping through a curtain appeared another male also dressed in white and wearing bits of glass on his face. "What is it, doctor?"

Ah, she was a scientist. That explained her interest in his body. He could smell the excitement from her, but why was it tainted with fear?

“Look at these wounds!” she ordered.

Crowding close, the male knelt and touched the metal hair holding the pieces of glass. “But I don't see any damage.”

“Exactly!” the doctor declared, lowering the sheet. Sitting on the other gurney, she stared at #1. “You, sir, should be in blood loss trauma. But now, Christ almighty, I don't understand...”

Just then, #1 had an odd feeling of moving to the right and of slowing down. He did not understand how this could be, he was not moving. Wait, perhaps he was. This must be a truck. He was in some sort of a medical truck!

There came a rubbery squeal, and several metallic clacks from the front of the medical truck. Then the curtains parted, and #1 could see yet another male seated at a control board with a big window. Although dressed similar to the other male, this man had the feel of a warrior and there was no smell of fear.

“Driver, I didn't order you to stop the ambulance,” the female snapped. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Everybody out,” he commanded.

The female was furious. “What! Why?”

Wordlessly, the driver took a small black animal skin flap from his pants and showed them a pointy metal thing that resembled a star in the sky. The old female and young male bowed with respect to this totem and dutifully left the ambulance, slamming the door closed behind them.

Pulling on a tiny stick at the bottom of his chair, the male swivelled about to face #1 directly. “Recognition code: Hercules,” he said with great meaning.

“Sir?” #1 asked, his stomach a knot of ice.

“Don't play innocent with me, soldier,” the driver said, displaying the totem again. “I'm Scott Willis, FBI. I know about the Pentagon research being done at this secret lab.” Willis lowered his voice. “The supersoldier serum. That's why I'm here, to keep a quiet eye on things for the president.”

Greatly frightened, #1 remained quiet. This was obviously a male of much importance. Maybe he should bare his hindquarters to him as a show of respect.

“When they first hauled your body in here, I had thought you were a member of the staff, or maybe a guard,” Willis said, returning the totem to a fold in his cloth. “But plainly I was wrong. Your healing rate is fantastically increased, and I can see the imprints of your hands in the metal railing of the gurney from when you were unconscious. That's magnified strength.”

Licking his lips, #1 said nothing.

The FBI agent leaned closer. “You're one of the Marines who volunteered as a human test subject for the serum, aren't you?”

“Yes, sir,” #1 answered truthfully. “I have been injected with the serum.”

Frowning deeply, Scott clasped hands on top of his knees. “Okay, son. What the hell happened tonight?”

“There was a fight,” #1 said hesitantly. “And I had to destroy the lab to protect it from falling into the wrong hands.” So easily did the near lie come to him. This was another aspect of evolution?

“What do you mean by wrong hands?” Willis demanded. “Enemy agents? Terrorists?”

“One of the other subjects decided that he was greater than human, and we should conquer the world.”

“Megalomania,” Agent Willis sighed, sitting upright. “We were afraid that something like that would happen. Homo Sapiens versus Homo Superior. Strategy and Tactical says it would be a short, bloody war, with them winning.”

Not understanding, #1 nodded his head in the affirmative.

Willis let his pink fingers do a spider dance on the cloth-covered leg. “The notes? Papers? Samples?” he asked.

“Destroyed, sir.”

“Then you're probably the only one. Maybe the only supersoldier there will ever be.”

“Seems likely, sir,” #1 said aloud.

Special Agent Willis gave a wry grin. “What's your name, soldier?”

Experimental Test Subject #1, was what he almost said. “I don't know, sir.”

“Eh? Explain that.”

“Everything before the injection is a blur.” At least, that was the truth.

Outside, another car rolled past the parked ambulance as Willis scowled at the big patient for a moment. “With the files destroyed we may never learn your name, or even which military outfit we should notify,” he said, reclining in the chair. “So what we have here is a soldier with superhuman abilities, no memory, a top secret clearance and who is believed dead. Plus, somebody whose return to society could cause serious trouble for the Pentagon. Son, you're a prime candidate for the Bureau.”

“Sir?” #1 asked confused.

Lighting a cigarette, Scott exhaled a long stream of smoke and explained. Long ago it became apparent that supernatural, paranormal, transdimensional and even unearthly dangers actually threatened the real-life security of the American people. So the government had established a covert agency to protect the population from these bizarre and often deadly events.

The organization was called Bureau 13. As public knowledge of magic and monsters would cause nation wide panic, the organization kept itself and all operations totally secret. Not even the President knew

exactly who they were, what they did, or where the agency was located. Bureau agents were specially trained, had incredible equipment and were sometimes themselves unique.

Much of what the driver said meant nothing. But several words came through clear. This male was a guard of the big human tribe called America. Thoughtfully, #1 fingered the badly healing scar on his cheek from the floor-s-scent light.

Grinding out the butt in the ashtray, Willis said, "Now if the Pentagon was aware that the serum worked, even partially, they would continue the experiments, and next time there may not be anyway to stop the mutants."

Mutants. #1 filed the word away. That's what he was.

"Do you understand what it is I am saying?" Willis asked pointedly.

Slow comprehension came, and #1 nodded, "You are going to kill me," he stated bluntly.

Brushing back his hair, Willis ruefully smiled. "Well, I would rather recruit you. The Bureau can always use a man of your talents and abilities."

Recruit. That word he knew. "You wish for me to join this Bureau and assist in guarding America?"

"Yep."

In a well of feelings, #1 was overcome with emotion and nearly fainted from the very concept. A warrior for the entire human race. The responsibility was enormous! Staggering! His heart beat so loud in his tiny chest, he thought the ribs would break. Kin fought for kin, and he was human now. Blood of their blood, flesh of their flesh.

In a rush of strength, #1 sat up on the gurney, his head almost hitting the high ceiling. "I am ready, sir," he said proudly, giving a shaky salute.

Gently laughing, the driver took the hand and shook it. #1 was very careful not to squeeze in return and hurt the master.

"Welcome to the Bureau, friend," Agent Willis said with a grin. "I can only thank god that you stayed loyal."

"Yes," #1 agreed, looking into the eyes of the human male. "Thank you, god."

INFORMATION

TOPSECRET TOPSECRET TOPSECRET TOPSECRET

SECURITY LEVEL 10

FOR BUREAU 13 PERSONNEL ONLY

Good morning, Cadet Ken Sanders!

No, we did not break into your apartment to print this message on the back of your sugar-toasties box. The Bureau has ways much more subtle than such physical crudities. Please, continue you breakfast—such as it is.

Like every student at this training school, you have passed the first, and primary, requirement for entrance into Bureau 13: experiencing a supernatural phenomenon, and surviving. Believe me, everything from here on is downhill compared to that.

FYI: Although Bureau 13 is a duly authorized sub-division of the Justice Department, we are basically autonomous and answer to nobody but the current division chief. Occasionally, the President also, but even he has only limited power over us.

There is no known headquarters for the Bureau. Our teams of agents roam the country on regular routes, keeping tabs on known troublemakers and investigating any unusual events that occur in their assigned territory. These independent agents alone decide upon neutralization, assimilation, capture, or termination. Part of the training here will be to read past cases of the Bureau to familiarize yourself with set operational procedures.

But please remember, there are no precedents for any given situation. Each case is unique and must be handled individually upon its own merits. A werewolf may be some poor innocent soul driven mad by the inhuman desires torturing their mind, and will happily accept our assistance. We have anti-lycanthropy drugs. On the other hand, a beautiful, but demonic, tooth fairy yanking molars from the mouths of tiny children should be gunned down without a qualm. End of discussion.

On a personal note: I have discovered your true identity #1, and after due deliberation, have subsequently destroyed all references to your past, origin and initiation. Lt. Colonel Kensington Sanders is part of the Bureau now, and we take care of our own. Besides, we mutants got to stick together.

That's about everything. The rest will be learned in class over the next six weeks and later on in the field with the team you are assigned to. Note: despite every horror story that you may hear about the final exam, only ten students have ever died in the 145 years the Academy has been operating and in memoriam each was given a passing grade.

POP QUIZ ALERT! In 500 words or less, please submit a paper to your morning karate instructor as to why the latter may be a joke used to alleviate your fears, and then submit another as to why it is definitely not a joke to your afternoon CPR/First Aid teacher.

Good luck. Keep your head low. Glad to have you with us!

Cordially,

Horace Gordon

Division Chief, Bureau 13

PS: No, you do not have to destroy the box. This message will revert to normal in four seconds.

PPS: Your toast is burning.

TOPSECRET TOPSECRET TOPSECRET TOPSECRET

ACTIVATION

ONE

Waiting for a friend to arrive, I was standing on a street corner in downtown Chicago when a ton of glass showered down upon me. Staggering under the brutal impacts, I was driven gasping to my knees. My hat and sports jacket were slashed to ribbons and only the presence of my Bureau 13 issue body armor saved my life.

I barely had time to register these facts before something smashed onto the nearby pavement with a terrible wet crunch, blood spraying everywhere.

Forcing myself to look, I noted the tattered uniform on the pulped lump, dark blue with black stripes. Oh, hell, it was a fellow cop. That was when I heard the screams and gunfire from above.

Painfully standing erect, I shielded my face with a trembling hand and glanced skyward. There seemed to be a window missing on fifteen, but at this range it was impossible to tell. The sounds of warfare continued, so slipping on my sunglasses, I dialed for maximum computer enhancement. Yep, broken window on fifteen. Okay, now I had a goal.

“Call the police!” I shouted to the gathering crowd of onlookers, as I stumbled into the apartment building. Once I was out of view of the general public, I paused long enough in the lobby to drink a vial of healing potion. Instantly the pain diminished and the blood stopped running from the cuts on my head and neck. Ah, much better. Wish I could have done something for the officer splattered on the sidewalk, but no amount of magic could cure a wound like that. The man had been pulp.

As I headed for the elevator, a muffled explosion sounded somewhere and the fire alarm started to clang. Spinning about, I changed direction. Gotta take the stairs.

Sprinting up the steps, I shucked my sports jacket and loosened both of the Smith & Wesson .357 Magnums in my double shoulder holster. Damnation, I was armed to go to the movies, not indulge in serious battle! I only hoped the situation wasn't as bad as it sounded. The whole thing could be attributed to a gas stove explosion. Highly improbable, but feasible. Maybe it was only a Mafia execution, or a terrorist attack, something simple like that. Yeah, think positive.

Reaching fifteen, I eased open the exit door and scanned the hallway before entering. Go slow, keep low, that was my motto for the month. At the end of the hallway, there were two cursing police officers, reloading their Beretta 9mm automatics and not looking at all happy. Faintly, I heard snarls and moans of pain. Sounded worse than Saturday night at a cannibal brothel. Nasty.

Carefully stepping into view, I kept my hands splayed and at my sides. Nervous cops had a bad habit of shooting first and apologizing later at your funeral. Although they did send flowers.

“Move along, mack!” the young cop snarled, slamming a fresh clip into her automatic. “It ain't healthy to be around here.”

“Hey, he's armed!” the other cop shouted in warning. Instantly, their guns swivelled to point at little ol' me.

Stopping where I stood, I slowly reached into my jacket and withdrew my commission booklet. “FBI,” I

announced calmly. "Special Federal agent Ed Alvarez. What's the situation, officers?"

They seemed disgruntled, but accepted my arrival. At least, their Beretta automatics were no longer directed towards my tender stomach. Thank goodness, hot lead was so hard to digest after a pepperoni burrito.

"We were responding to a domestic, on the fifteenth floor," the woman reported quickly, jacking the slide on her weapon to chamber a round. "No response to our knock, we heard sounds of violence, announced our identity and kicked the door down."

The man shivered. "Some kind of animal was eating the tenants. Place resembled a slaughterhouse. We each pumped a full magazine into the beast before it even noticed we were there."

"Who went out the window?" I asked, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of my neck start to rise.

"Harry," the woman said. She was calmer now and a lot more angry. "The fool tried to Mace the thing."

Weird noises were coming from down the hallway. Snarling, growling and a crunching sound much too reminiscent of teeth on bones. This was not music to my ears. "What does it look like?"

"Big. Ugly. No hair."

Interesting, I briefly wondered if it was a bald werewolf, a squid-bear, or another of those giant mutant Chihuahuas again. We had been finding a lot of those lately. Must be the something in the water.

"Where is the animal now?" I asked, coming closer.

"Who knows?"

"I called for emergency back-up," the man added. "But this is Chicago."

"With more crime than cops," I finished for him. "How long?"

"They get here when they get here."

Damn. "My people can arrive in five minutes. You want help?"

"Buddy, we need help," admitted the older and obviously wiser officer.

"Done." Turning my back on the pair, I pressed the transmit switch on my wristwatch, a nifty little piece of Bureau equipment that could do everything but strap itself on your wrist, and Technical Services was working on that detail.

"Alert," I whispered. "Possible homicidal supernatural at #175 Wacker Drive. Definitely bulletproof. Call in the troops, gang, this could be a toughie."

"We're on the way," a familiar voice replied.

"Don't stop for lunch, or it may be me."

"Gotcha, chief."

Tucking my badge into my belt so it would be on public display, I shrugged and both Magnums were in my hands. The Model 42 ultra-light in my left was loaded with rubber stun bullets. The heavy stainless steel Model 66 in my right held a scenario load of an armor-piercing military round, soft lead dum-dum, explosive mercury tip, silver bullet, phosphorus tracer, and a blessed wood bullet. Not much, but it would have to do.

Just then, a scream of raw terror echoed along the hall and the three of us charged with guns drawn. Monster or not, no cop could ignore a cry for help.

Inside the apartment was a mess, with torn clothing everywhere, furniture smashed, television smoking, carpet ripped, papers scattered and amid the fresh destruction stood the beast. It was no Chihuahua.

Vaguely resembling a hairless lion, the muscular animal must have weighed four hundred pounds easy. It had mottled, diseased-looking skin, long saber tooth tusks, prehensile claws, charnel house breath and a real bad attitude.

But according to my sunglasses, the creature possessed no Kirlian aura. None. That was impossible! Incredible! Everything living had an aura; white for good, black for evil, green for magic, and a million shades in between. Maybe this monster was off the visible spectrum with an ultra-violet, or infrared aura. For one brief moment I debated trying to capture the thing alive for the lab crew. Then it turned and I saw a foot and slipper sticking out of its drooling snout. So much for capture. Lumpy the Lion died here and now. Eat a civilian in my town and you went down for the count. Fast and hard. End of discussion.

“Aim for the head!” I cried, targeting the chest in an attempt to hit the heart. I forced myself to keep the instructions plain. No coded battle phrases. These were street cops, not federal secret agents.

Our four guns sounded louder than four hundred as we banged away in the small room. The muscular animal jerked with each pounding round, but no blood showed and the damage was minimal.

As the cops withdrew behind the wall to quickly reload, Lumpy bounded forward, so I tossed in my only grenade and then joined the officers. In the future, I really should go shopping with more than just the bare essentials. However, bazookas simply ruined the line of a good sports jacket.

A thunderous explosion shook the floor, flame and debris blasting out the doorway. Without waiting for the chaos to settle, I dashed back inside to continue the fight but found only bits of the Bozo Boojum strewn about. Contemptuously, I snapped my fingers at the dead monster. Ha! Lumpy hadn't been so tough. I had in-laws who used grenades to dust the furniture. It really kept their place clean, but sure was really hard on the doilies.

But even as the smoke thinned, the bloody pieces started slithering towards each other as the monster began to re-assemble. I felt my lunch pack its bags for a quick vacation as I watched the reverse dissection. Uh-oh. Total cellular unification. Every tiny piece of its body was a separate living organism. I could be here for a year trying to chill this boojum!

Then again, maybe not. Moving fast, I grabbed a foreleg, sprinted into the kitchenette, stuffed it into the microwave and turned the dial to high. The results were interesting. Wrapping my handkerchief around what resembled a brain, I dropped the pulsating gray cauliflower-like mass into the sink and flicked on the garbage disposal. Ah, instant lobotomy. Just add water.

In a spray of electrical sparks, the microwave shorted out and the door swung aside as the limb flopped

towards freedom. Then the rumbling garbage disposal jammed to a halt and an undulating brain plopped out of the sink and started rolling across the floor. Holy Hannah! This thing was harder to stop than a Congressional pay raise!

Dumbfounded at the sight, the police officers could only watch from the doorway. This type of fighting was totally out of their experience, almost beyond comprehension. Each probably thought they were hallucinating, or dreaming. That was the standard reaction. But the cops were still here and that showed guts. If we survived this mess, the Bureau could have a couple of prime recruits.

Rummaging under the sink, I found a can of drain cleaner and liberally sprinkled the acidic lye over anything that seemed healthy. Sizzling and dissolving under the chemical onslaught, the stubborn supernatural relentlessly continued to piece itself back together.

Tossing aside the can, I grabbed another limb and started to heave it out the window, but stopped. Not everybody in Chicago would be wearing protective armor and the next poor slob to get glass rained on them would die. Damn, damn, damn! Think, Alvarez, think!

I had never fought a true unkillable before, only read the Bureau manual on the subject. Unfortunately, I had just exhausted the usually helpful handbook. Time to be brilliant. Ah ... er...

“Oven?” the young cop suggested.

With a grin, I slapped her on the arm. “Yes!”

As I wrestled with the struggling limb, the woman turned the gas oven on and opened the door. Claws ripped at my chest, exposing the armor under what had been my favorite shirt, so slamming the leg against the tiled wall a few times to try and stun it, I barely managed to force the adamantite limb into the waiting stove. The cop slammed the metal door shut, while I grabbed the refrigerator and pushed it in front of the oven.

A wild pounding started immediately from inside the oven, but the boojum stayed put. However, the smell coming from the exhaust vent was bad enough to peel the paint off a battleship; the fumes were reminiscent of sweaty gym socks, old cat litter and rancid hair tonic with just a hint of automobile transmission fluid. Whew! This thing could give a sick skunk an inferiority complex.

With a tremendous crash, the refrigerator toppled over and the smoking limb bounded out of the oven.

“What the hell is this thing?” the older cop demanded, his automatic barking steadily as he tracked the legless runaway. “Some kind of organic robot?”

As good a lie as any. “Yes,” I panted, thumbing reloads into my own weapon. “It escaped from Fort Sheridan early this morning.”

“But that was closed years ago?”

Was it? “Just a cover story to hide the secret government lab.”

“Son of a bitch!” the woman cursed, hacking at the brain with a meat cleaver. Arcing around her, the two pieces just moved faster.

Going into the living room, I yanked a cord from the wall and began tying grisly monster chucks to

doorknobs and bathroom fixtures. About halfway complete, the living jigsaw puzzle flipped and flopped in a feeble attack, but couldn't regroup for the moment.

The man poured a box of rat poison into a gaping section of the creature's intestines, but the deadly food only seemed to accelerate the healing process. A reverse metabolism? Damn, I had already drunk my only vial of Healing potion.

And this was getting serious. If Lumpy reformed before help arrived, we stood about as much chance of staying in one piece, as it presently did of not. Electricity? Nyah, it was only house voltage, couldn't kill a dog. Set the place on fire? No good, too risky, might murder hundreds of innocents. If only we had some fast setting cement, we could dump it in the lake. My mind began rifling through six years of fighting every damn thing on Earth, trying to find a solution.

"Hey, what's going on, officers?" a man asked, leading a group of people standing by the open door. Some teenager in a bathrobe was there with a goddamn Toshiba video recorder. Sweet Jesus! This was just what I needed, civilians with a camera.

"Run!" I bellowed, stepping between them and the boojum. Ripping off my watch, I clicked on the self-destruct sequence. That should buy me enough time to get them to safety.

But then multiple hands yanked the bystanders away and in charged four people I knew well: a beautiful oriental woman in silk pajamas carrying a short double-barreled gun, a plump man in a sweat suit lugging a four foot long M60 machine gun, a trim, muscular woman holding a sword whose blade shimmered with rainbows, and a tall pale man in bikini swim trunks holding a silver staff.

Grinning, I clicked off the self-destruct. Yahoo! The cavalry had arrived, and not a bit too soon.

Leveling his silver magic wand, Raul Horta gestured and a shimmering lattice of golden bars appeared in the air. Cops and civilians were rudely shoved into the hallway, the camera smashing against the jamb, then the door slammed shut, bolted, locked and the couch slid in front.

"Roach Motel!" I ordered, pointing at Lumpy.

In a series of musical twangs, the cords snapped and the monster slapped together finishing its regeneration. Standing rampant, the misshapen beast roared like some primordial nightmare from Hell! God almighty, what awful breath.

You want it alive? Jessica asked in my mind. Even the telepathic broadcast of my wife carried a faint trace of her Chinese accent. *Wouldn't a Bates' Motel be more appropriate?*

Of course, I want it dead. But he's an unkillable, I thought. *Capture is our only chance. Tell the gang.*

Done.

They frowned, but obeyed. Thank goodness for trained professionals, and high explosives.

Ramming the end of his staff into the stained carpet, Raul ran past the monster dragging the wand behind him and forming a shining line on the floor. The boojum started after him in a bound. Her sword flashing, Mindy Jennings chopped off a pointed cat ear. Howling in pain, the creature turned for her and Raul dashed by again. Confused, the beast headed for the smashed window. But working the bolt on his

ungainly machine gun, George Renault put a stuttering stream of high velocity lead slugs into Lumpy forcing the creature to remain where it was. Only a blur, Raul angled by a third and fourth time. Wisely deciding it was time to leave, the hairless feline began clawing at the floor and Mindy chopped off a paw. Spitting in unbridled fury, the beast crouched low, preparing to leap and Jessica gave it both barrels of her taser stun pistol. Twin hooked barbs small as a match head, buried themselves in the boojum's rump and trailing the hooks were hair thin wires connected to a powerful accumulator in the handle. As the barbs made contact, 12,000 volts automatically shunted into the beast. More than enough hard electrical current to stun a Republican on election night. Lumpy toppled over as both rear legs went momentarily numb.

Snarling myself, I put a couple more .357 distractions into the mottled head, Jess gave it a spray of mace from a fountain pen, and Raul shot by on his jet-powered roller skates for the last time. Mages are mighty useful folk, but so damn weird.

Sheathing her sword, Mindy swatted the thing across the throat with the scabbard. Both eyes bulging, the beast began hacking and coughing. Personally, I thought the monster was damn lucky it didn't have external genitalia. That was always Mindy's favorite target, and magical or not, it was one attack which stopped the male of any species.

"...!" the wizard shouted, gesturing grandly.

Jumping for the mage, the creature rebounded from the immaterial barrier of the pentagram it was now trapped inside. Glaring an almost tangible hate, the beast slammed its resilient body against the magical forceshield. The ruined apartment reverberated from the strident impacts, pictures danced off the walls and a mirror cracked.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I holstered my lightweight Magnum, and reloaded the 66 with Glaser Sure-Kill Safety Slugs. The miniature shotgun rounds should at least annoy Lumpy if he got free again.

"Good work," I complimented, as the team gathered round. "Where's the van?"

"Parked outside taking up four spots," Mindy said, patrolling around the pentagram. Lumpy matched her movements and they growled menacingly at each other. Beauty and the beast.

"What's the plan, Ed?" Jessica asked unhappily, returning her taser to its holster. "Cement and the lake?" She sounded sad, but then telepaths were such sensitive folk. Killing anything bothered them, I even had to be gentle turning off the television.

Unwrapping a beef stick, George placed it in his mouth as if it were a greasy cigar. "No way," the soldier grunted. "Laughing Boy would be free and running amuck within the hour."

On cue, Lumpy launched itself at the ceiling and cracked the industrial-grade concrete with its head. Sheesh! I wanted to toss this thing a dictionary so it could discover the meaning of the word surrender.

"Then we send it to the Holding Facility," Raul said as he slowly diminished in height, his superskates converting into sneakers once more. Transparent plastic sneakers with the socks underneath woven to resemble bare feet, but that was only to be expected. I'd seen worse.

"Check," I said, closing the cylinder of my gun. "I'll call ahead saying that we're sending in a problem child and have them prep an Omega Cell. Technical Services can puzzle over how to kill this boojum in their copious spare time."

“What do we do about the folks outside,” George asked, jerking a thumb towards the hallway.

At a nod from me, Jessica touched her forehead and scrunched her face in concentration. Soon the shouting and bewildered cries from the other side of the portal slowed, then stopped and we heard people casually chatting and walking away.

Going pale, Jessica wobbled on her feet, so I helped my wife into an easy chair missing its cushions. “Wiping ten minutes of memory from fourteen people is something of a strain,” she admitted. “Luckily nobody was a natural immune.”

Affectionately, I gave her a pat on the arm and a kiss. In her prime, my bride could have Brain Blasted the entire state of Illinois. But she was still recuperating from our battle with the Brotherhood of Darkness last week. Those yahoos had even less intelligence than Lumpy here.

Sprinkling powders while chanting, Raul Horta formed a huge, meter wide, rune on a smooth section of the floor. I busied myself feeding the appropriate code phrases into my watch to relay a priority signal to the big radio in our van and on to the headquarters of our organization. Wherever that was. We had once found what I thought was Bureau HQ, but by the next week the office building had been converted into a parking garage. I guess the chief didn't trust anybody, even us, and not without cause. On rare occasions, Bureau 13 agents did sometimes go bad.

In less than a minute I got an answering bleep on my wristwatch, just as the mystic letter of power began to glow and a shimmering oval portal formed in the air. Lumpy snarled and spit, but we paid the prisoner no attention. He was going nowhere inside that deudonic forcefield.

Tugging on my sleeve, George pulled me aside.

“Something wrong?” I asked puzzled.

He tried to appear casual. “I may be mistaken,” George whispered around his beef stick. “But when you said we were going to send Felix over there to the Holding Facility, I could have sworn I saw it smile.”

Contemptuously, I arched an eyebrow. “Eh? You're nuts.”

“Could be. Yet I saw what I saw.”

“And why would anything be pleased that it was going to be incarcerated in the most escape-proof jail in the history of the world?”

The soldier shrugged. “Beats me. Maybe it's trying to pull a Briar Rabbit routine. But I don't like the very concept.”

Me neither. George may be paranoid, most Bureau agents were, but that was only because we did have so many enemies, and they were everywhere.

“Raul,” I said. “Cancel the portal spell, we're hauling Lumpy in personally.”

And damn me if the beast didn't maintain the most amazingly neutral expression that I have ever seen this side of a poker table.

Hmm.

TWO

“Brace yourselves!” I cried, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. Everybody grabbed whatever handhold was convenient and scrunched low in their seats.

As I maneuvered past a red sports coupe with vanity plates, our lumbering RV and trailer hitch went by the designated signpost on the Iowa Turnpike and in a wild burst of pyrotechnics, we shunted out of this universe. Momentarily blinded by a violent explosion of colors, I drove by sheer instinct as the van was buffeted from side to side by swirling constellations of stars. There came a curse, a metallic crunch, a shattering of glass, and we were through!

When vision cleared, I gently tapped on the brakes, easing the RV to a squealing halt on the dirt road. The van stopped only a scant meter before a simple wooden crossbar that was blocking the road. The rigidly motionless bar wasn't supported by anything visible on either end. A square black-n-white sign hanging from the middle of the oak bar bore the brutally plain international NO symbol. The words ‘or else’ had never been deemed prudent, or necessary. Only Bureau personnel knew about the small thermonuclear bomb under the crossbar. It was our way of discouraging unwelcome guests. Worked just fine, too. Nobody we nuked ever returned again. At least, not in this life.

Now surrounding us instead of the lush summer greenery of the Iowa farmlands, was a dead flat plain of sun-baked mud stretching to the horizon, the sky a featureless vista of gray. Ah, there was no place like home. And this was no place like home.

Discernible solely by its lack of cracks, the slim roadway we were on was the only safe area to traverse. The rest of the landscape was a billion dollar deathtrap, littered with anti-personnel land mines, acid pits, napalm geysers, telescoping pungi sticks, nerve gas, lasers beams, and exploding cactus. Even touching the crossbar, much less going past it, would have flipped over the road and squashed us like bugs on a pancake. It was a toll few wished to pay.

Ahead of us was a high stonewall topped with electrified, poisoned, concertina wire. There were angular turrets every ten meters crowned with rectangular missile launching pods, Gatling Guns, squat flamethrowers and who-knew-what-else. This was the secret location of Bureau 13's hidden training Academy and Holding Facility, code-named: Bangor-Maine, for some reason lost in antiquity. Knowing the gang at HQ, it was probably an obscene joke from the 1880s.

Literally off-the-map, civilian drivers simply went past the appropriate mile-marker. But with proper Bureau ID, approaching the sign would shunt you into a small pocket universe hidden between the front and back of the roadpost. Speed was not essential to traveling to this miniverse. I only did that to reduce our time in dimensional transit. For some reason, it reminded me of visiting Cleveland. Lord knows why, because I've never been there.

Finding the correct signpost was always a pain. I had to call an ever-changing 800 number, at 13 past any odd-numbered hour, properly identify myself with half a page of code phrases and countersigns, to eventually get the current location of the mile-marker. Being a pocket universe, the damn doorway was constantly shifting. Last time it was in the middle of a forest preserve in Colorado. The time before that it was in the washroom of a Tasty-Freeze in downtown Boston. Boy, the stares the seven of us got from the staff as we piled into the lavatory stall together! Whew, talk about embarrassing.

Bangor-Maine was one of the few Bureau locations that survived the Slaughter of '77 when 80% of all the Bureau agents were killed within a four hour period by an unknown enemy. Our darkest day. Just recently, the legendary J. P. Withers himself had been assigned to the case. He would search forever until he caught and killed the people responsible. Since J. P. was immortal, when he said forever, Withers meant it. 'Nuff said.

Checking on the trailer behind us in the rear view mirror, I released my safety harness and thumbed a transmit switch on the dashboard sending our recognition code. Unlocking the door, I climbed to the ground. Eagerly, the rest of my team scrambled from our armored vehicle.

Ever the lady, Jessica daintily stepped out and straightened her white summer dress. Slim enough to do it, Mindy hopped through an open window. Fat boy George dramatically kicked aside the rear door, and Raul phased straight through the side of the RV. The big show off. He loved to play with new spells, the more dangerous they were, the better.

Judiciously, I checked the load in both of my .357 Magnums and coldly scrutinized the battered yellow trailer hitched to the rear of our vehicle. Our guest had been suspiciously silent for quite awhile. I only hoped the tricky bastard wasn't planning something. Lumpy's last escape attempt had destroyed an overpass, an underpass, two off-ramps, and a tollbooth. While annihilating the latter was not an altogether bad thing, attempting to eat the attendants had been definitely out of line. Damn near rude.

"Hey, Ed!" somebody called from the other side of the van. "What was that metallic crunch?"

"Ran over our own hub caps," I replied, glaring annoyed at the flattened disks lying crumpled on the hard mud.

"Yet another example of your splendid driving, Mr. Alvarez."

In a polyglot of Spanish and Japanese, I muttered an appropriate riposte. Chuckling, the gang encircled the trailer in a standard #3 defensive pattern. Mindy Jennings stood directly before the doors in a martial arts crouch, her indestructible sword held in muscular hands, its long curved blade glinting in the harsh sunlight. She was now properly dressed for action in loose fitting, neutral colored clothing and military sneakers.

Wearing US Army fatigues and combat boots, George Renault stood to the left of her, the lengthy barrel of his huge M60 machine gun pointed steady at the side of the trailer. Dangling from his humongous weapon was a glistening belt of linked, steel-tipped, .30 combat rounds. A Colt .45 hogleg was holstered at his hip, along with an ammo pouch bulging with grenades and candy bars.

Hovering a few feet in the air, Raul casually held his silver wizard's staff in one hand. He was incongruously dressed in leather sandals, neon orange pants, and a sleeveless T-shirt that said on the front 'NOT A MEMBER OF A SECRET GOVERNMENT AGENCY'. Why do mages have to be so weird?

Standing nearby, Jessica had drawn a taser stun pistol from the shoulder holster under the short brocade jacket of her summer dress. From the clothing locker in the van, I had obtained a spare sports jacket that happily matched my black slacks and blue shirt. Plus, lots of ammunition. With Magnums in hand, I was maintaining a discrete distance, attempting to watch everything.

"Also heard glass shatter before," George said, the stick of a lollipop extending from his mouth. The breast pocket of his green shirt bulged with spare sweets. Because of his time served in Viet Nam as a

tunnel rat, George refused to become thin again. “Anybody see what broke?”

Adjusting his Phillies in ‘86 baseball cap, Raul pointed with his staff. “Tail light on the trailer.”

“Nothing important then?”

“Nope.”

“So long as it wasn't the padlock again,” Mindy grunted. “We had quite enough trouble getting the muscle-bound lump here.”

“Where are the guards?” George asked, glancing about.

Raul proffered his Bureau wristwatch. “Ed, should we put in a call?”

“No need,” Jessica announced, touching her temples. “They're on the way.” Her lovely face had that faraway expression which meant she was in mental communications with somebody, the fingertips of a hand lightly touching her forehead the only indication of direction.

Turning towards the stonewall, I saw a billowing cloud of dust starting to come our way. Soon, I could identify an F22 Raptor stealth jumpjet skimming along the ground on her bottom jets. Whew. That was something new. Sleek, fast and ultra-maneuverable, the fighter/bomber was a flying arsenal; its delta wings, needle prow and wide belly bristling with weapons.

Landing a few meters away from us, the canopy retracted with a hydraulic hiss and a figure stood up in the cockpit, his face masked by the mirrored visor of the attack helmet. As his head turned to face us, the guns and missiles tracked along, slavishly copying his every move. I would have loved to sneak a peak at it through my Bureau sunglasses to see what magical armaments the jet carried, but I knew in advance the machine was shielded against such an intrusion.

“Alcatraz,” the pilot snapped, his hands ominously out of sight.

“Joliet,” I replied, giving the Chicago pronunciation.

There was a pause, then a gloved hand raised the hinged visor and I saw the dashing handsome features of Gilad Lapin, the warden of the Holding Facilities. Removing the helmet entirely, the weapons of the F22 automatically returned to pointing straight ahead.

“Hey, Ed!” he waved.

“Hi, Gil. That's some fancy go-cart you're riding these days.”

“This old thing? Bought it at a flea market with Monopoly money.”

“Howdy, Gil,” George said, not moving his attention from the trailer. The rest of my team gave assorted greetings.

Gil nodded to each in response. “Hey, George, Mindy, Raul, Jess, oh, excuse me. Hello, Mrs. Alvarez.”

Smiling, Jessica raised a hand so he could properly admire the shiny gold ring on her forth finger. We had only been married six months and some folk still weren't used to calling my wife by her new name.

“Where's the good Father?” Gil asked curiously.

“On his yearly sabbatical,” Raul said, nimbly crossing legs underneath his floating self.

Lapin made a face. “Oh no. Will he never stop trying?”

“Not Michael Xavier Donaher,” George laughed as he checked the play on his ammunition belt.

For a moment, Gil seemed puzzled at the action, then his features brightened in remembrance. Even though I was supposedly immune to the illusion, occasional I could still faintly see the banjo that the M60 resembled to everybody other than members of my team. It had once caused quite a ballyhoo with a security scanner at Dulles Airport. An even worse incident at a Folk Music concert. I had told George his ammo belt needed tuning.

Inquisitively, Gil jerked his chin towards the trailer. “So what do you have there?” He knew it must be something special, or else we would not have bothered to cart our prisoner here. Many indeed were the hostile supernaturals whose graves were junkyards, river bottoms and concrete foundations. A nifty little trick we had learned from the Mafia, before we destroyed them.

“Boojum from Chicago,” I said, using the code phrase for an unknown entity. “It ate some people, ripped apart a major highway intersection and flatly refuses to drop dead.”

“Uncooperative, eh?” he said massaging a dimpled jaw. “Anything else interesting about it?”

“No aura,” I stated.

Gil did a double take. “Huh? What was that?”

“It has no aura,” I repeated. “None. Zero. Zip. Nada.”

The pilot worked a pinkie in his ear. “No aura, you say?”

“No aura.”

“Impossible! Sure your sunglasses are working?”

Taking my tinted Bureau glasses from my sweater pocket, I walked closer and offered them. “See for yourself.”

Donning the glasses suspiciously, Lapin glanced at his own hand, then me, the rest of the team and then the trailer.

“Damnation, I can see the Kirlian aura from everybody, but the trailer. Is this a gag? Is that hitch empty, or is there really a boojum in there?”

As if in response, the metal cubicle vibrated with a barely contained roar.

“Lumpy says he's still here,” Raul quipped, playing his fingers along the length of his staff.

Shaking his head, Gil gave a crooked smile. “And it's not a robot? Or artificial construct?”

A warm dry wind blew on me, carrying with it the smell of nothing. “Nope,” I replied. “Living organic.”

“Well, feather my props,” the pilot mumbled in awe. “No Kirlian aura. Technical Services will positively flip over this! Any problems in the recovery?”

“Not really,” Jessica replied. “I wiped a few memories and then we replaced the creature with a shaved lion we stole from the Lincoln Park Zoo. When the news services discovers that it's only a lion, that should help dispel the silly idea that monsters actually exist.”

We had a good laugh at that.

“Oh, and we narrowly missed having another encounter with Jules Englehart,” Mindy added with a sour expression.

In unison, the group turned and spat on the ground. Englehart was a freelance news reporter for the National Gazette, and an old enemy of the Bureau. He specialized in reporting on supernatural events, and our field agents had run into him more times than we fired wooden bullets. Bureau agents had twice saved him from being eaten by ghouls, and once he actually got his hands on physical evidence that our secret organization existed. We almost let him get consumed that time, but our oath of allegiance swears us to protect all American citizens, not just the folks that we liked. Details, details.

Of course, when my team returned his unconscious body to his apartment, we had accidentally passed a powerful magnet over his video tape collection, short-sheeted his bed and emptied his refrigerator, but such minor revenges gave us little solace. One of these days, the fool will cause real trouble and then we would have to shoot him in the name of national security. Privately, a few of us prayed for the day to come as early as possible. But they were in the minority. Well, mostly.

“Jess, can't you do something to him?” Gil asked, resting an arm on the canopy. “Erase Englehart's memory of the Bureau? Or give him the uncontrollable urge to live in Antarctica?”

She shrugged. “Sorry, wish I could. But Jules has got a natural telepathic block the size of Gibraltar.”

Suddenly, the top of the trailer erupted in a spray of metal bits and out leapt our prisoner. It landed heavy on all four paws and started streaking down the road away from the Facility. I drew both pistols. *Madre mia!* Was Lumpy really that stupid, or did he have a death wish?

“Outgoing!” George shouted, his big machine gun starting to yammer and spit flame.

A line of dirt puffs exploded in front of the scampering beast and it wisely came to a halt. As Lumpy turned, Mindy threw a knife and the handle hit the bald bozo smack between the eyes, which promptly crossed. Jessica fired her taser and tossed a tear gas grenade. I pumped a couple of Sure-Kills into his chest. Raul cast a Sleep spell, Death spell, a net, chained its legs together and made the ground sticky.

Under the accumulated barrage, the boojum staggered, then Lumpy tore itself free and charged straight at us. Its snarling savage expression saying what no amount of words could.

“Well, screw you too,” Gil drawled, jerking on his helmet. A split second later, the right wing missile pod of the Raptor extended a stuttering lance of flame. In a staggered series of bloody explosions, Lumpy stridently disintegrated.

But as expected, the tiny pieces scattered on the ground began to slither towards each other, as the thing began to re-assemble.

“Wow. Determined cuss, isn't he?” the pilot stated over a PA system of the F22, his words echoing slightly. “We gotta get this clown into an Omega Cell fast, before we run out of ammo and he starts chewing the landscape.”

On command, our mage did the wand routine again, and the twitching monster chunks wafted back into the trailer. Raul then reformed the roof, spot welded the doors shut and taking a paint brush from out of the air, wrote a glowing rune on every side of the You-Haul, including the bottom. An unusual precaution, but then Lumpy was an unusual prisoner.

Taking a spare lock and extra chains from the equipment trunk in the van, we secured the trailer doors, and this time looped every foot of available linkage around the hitch until it resembled a chainmail cocoon. Grenades and Claymore mines festooned the yellow trailer in the manner of so many Army-issue Christmas tree ornaments.

As we finished, Gil asked, “Raul, I don't recognize that rune. What will it do? Put the beastie to sleep? Blow off its head?”

“Nope,” the mage replied coming to ground. “This rune will temporarily give the boojum external genitalia.”

“A prime target,” Mindy said smiling evilly, callused hands twisting on the pommel of her sword.

I winced, as did every other male present. Oddly, Jessica did also. Just being polite?

Empathy with you, my dear.

Wives, ain't they grand?

As we climbed into the blissful shaded comfort of our mobile fort, I started the engine and rolled up the mud road with the Raptor close behind. From the trailer came a muted growl, and for a moment, I could have sworn that it sounded like a guttural laugh. Nyah, couldn't be.

Following the flat mud road, we quickly approached the wall which grew taller and taller. Distance alone had disguised its true size. Directly ahead of us was a metal door some ten meters high. As the van neared the base, the tremendous portal started to descend with a mighty mechanical rumble. When we reached the door, it was totally underground, the flat metal top level with the road forming a ramp to drive along. Rolling across, I noted the portal was six meters thick, made of foot wide sections of laminated steel alloy with a thin crystal insert between each of them. Interesting.

Of course, this barrier was simply here to keep folk out. To a lot of things in the Holding Facility this flimsy door wouldn't offer more resistance than a sheet of wet toilet tissue. All the real armament was in the Facility itself, and brother, there was a lot, almost enough for the place to declare itself an independent nation.

Past this first door, we drove on top of another giant portal, with yet a third ahead of us. But that last door was closed, blocking any further progress. Roughly in the middle of the wall, I braked to a halt and the portal behind us raised silently into position. Darkness descended and I hit the lights. When the first door closed with a hollow boom, the portal before us lowered to allow entrance into Bangor-Maine. I

was sure that, when necessary, the middle door would also rapidly elevate to rudely mash invaders against the mammoth steel lintel overhead. Wish we had one of these in Chicago. It sure would be a great way to deter pesky salesmen. Hee-hee-hee.

Driving out of the wall, we could see a paved parking lot filled with Harrier jumpjets and Abrams Heavy Assault Tanks, which were scant more than military forts on treads. Definitely state-of-the-art-stuff. Very expensive. Oh heck, there goes the budget for the company picnic this year.

Beyond the array of lethal ironmongery, was the pleasant little torture town that I remembered far too well. A double row of stores lined the main street; behind were neat two story houses, eight homes to a block. Each of the blocks was staggered below the next, so that there was no direct avenue to the outer wall. Our commander and chief, Horace Gordon, doesn't miss a trick. The stores were there to lend a semblance of normalcy for the occupants, the houses were where the guards, teachers and students lived during their educational internment.

Scores of pedestrians were strolling about, lugging books, wheeling carts of groceries, hauling a truckload of coffins, chatting about their new abilities, or just floating along above the sidewalk sipping a can of diet soda. The view was so tranquil and peaceful, that it made my skin crawl knowing the truth.

“Lord, how I hate this place,” Mindy said, her pert nose pressed flat against the window glass.

Polishing his weapon, George made some vague comment. If it didn't go whoosh or boom, it held little interest to Mr. Renault. Always made me wonder about his girlfriends.

Curiously, I glanced about for one house in particular, a huge weather beaten Victorian mansion with seven gables, a widows walk on the roof and blood stains on the front porch, but couldn't find it anywhere. Had we passed Hell House already and I missed the place? That didn't seem possible. I tried a sneak through my sunglasses, but quickly tucked them into my shirt pocket again. Surrounded by so much magic, it was impossible to locate any particular aura.

“If you're searching for Hell House,” Raul said, from inside the tiny closet near the lavatory. “Just look for anybody pale, sweaty and trembling.”

“Preferably with a broken weapon of some kind in their hands,” Mindy continued. “It'd be a sure sign that we're close.”

They sure had that correct. I still occasionally woke during the night with feverish dreams of my graduation run through that damn mansion. In spite of magical healing, I yet carry the scars of that sneaky banister which polymorphed into a live snake and soundly sank its fangs where only my doctor knew.

From behind a curtain of her ebony hair, Jessica paused in the process of reloading her taser to laugh aloud, and I blushed. Okay, so it was now a family secret.

With a roar, the trailer shuddered and one wall bent drastically outwards almost to the breaking point. The Raptor sent a rustling missile into the hitch, which promptly exploded, and Raul magically gestured to reform the container. I increased our speed and flicked on a flashing light.

“Hot soup, gangway!” I called over the PA system of the van. What sparse traffic there was got out of our way fast.

In the distance, I could see an old World War II style Quonset hut, a half-cylinder made of corrugated

iron lying on its side. That was the exterior of the Holding Facility. Jail seemed far too weak and feeble a term for the inverted fortress.

Endlessly we did left turn, right turn, left turn, right turn, but with each corner the Quonset Hut came closer. Always in the background was the Raptor hovering slightly above us, constantly keeping our boojum in range. Somehow, I think the animal knew this because it remained quiescent. Once burned, twice shy, three times exhausted.

Reaching the exact center of town, we encountered the broad traffic circle of Alcatraz Street. On the outside of the circular road was a staggered barricade of unpretentious cinderblock warehouses. On the island in the middle, was a simple wire fence surrounding the dull plain Quonset Hut. A book and its cover. Yep. Most definitely.

Stopping in front of the gate in the fence, we disconnected the trailer hitch and moved the van forward a few meters to give sufficient room. We had barely cleared the regulation distance when the hitch burst apart again and there stood Lumpy, now four times his original size. Okay, now he was officially a growing menace.

Instantly, the metal side of the hut rippled in the manner of parting water and out came a huge mechanical arm, irregular slabs of armor barely concealing the mammoth gears and motors inside its adamantite skeleton. Almost the entire length of the robotic arm was lined with defensive runes, gun turrets, arbalests, crucifixes, Mogen Davids, ankhs, juju bags, or pulsating crystals. And this was only the janitor. At the end of the titanic limb, was a blunt three-fingered claw large enough to seize the moment. Which it promptly did.

Entirely without effort, the claw snared Lumpy in its cold iron grip and gave the beast a little squeeze. Our hairless lion squealed and went limp. Smoothly contracting, the leviathan limb hauled the boojum inside the Quonset Hut with another of those really cool looking ripple effects. A split second later, there was a muffled explosion and Lumpy's dumb head punched through the metal wall like a hairy cannonball.

It only bounced twice before a harpoon slammed directly between those slanted cat eyes. A steel cable attached to the end of the harpoon grew taut, and struggling every foot of the way, the rolling head was reeled back inside. As the wall sealed solid, we finally allowed ourselves to exhale and lower our weapons.

Then the fleetingly memory of Lumpy's smile came to mind, and I debated if the creature had been pretending to be crazy so as to get inside the Facility that much quicker. But I dismissed the possibility, not even the ghost of Houdini could escape once inside this prison. And believe me, Harry had really tried.

But that uneasy feeling wouldn't go away, so I reached for the hand mike and alerted the guards to watch for trouble. Just in case.

THREE

“By the way,” the voice of Gilad said over our dashboard radio as we rolled along the traffic circle heading back into town. “Why did you bother to come personally instead of just shunting the boojum in through a magical portal?”

Unclipping the hand mike, I pressed the transmit switch, “Just being careful. Besides, we received

permission to get a replacement mage for Anderson weeks ago, and this seemed a prime opportunity to see the students.”

The conversation paused a moment out of respect for our long gone friend. The handbook says that there are 100 ways to leave the Bureau. Richard Anderson had discovered Option #101 and actually retired. But then, Richard had always been an amazing fellow.

“Any wizards ready to graduate?” Jess asked, breaking the silence.

“Actually, we have four mages,” she replied.

Everybody perked up at that amazing answer.

Leaning forward, Mindy took the microphone. “Four? That's wonderful!”

“Well, two of them are a pair and one is only a Healer, can't do anything but benign magic,” the speaker crackled. “But it is an incredible number of wizards to have at once. Most years we only train four mages total.”

“How far along are they?” Raul called out from the back of the van. As a wizard he had to stay far away from radios and other types of complex machinery, or else they behaved in the most annoying manner.

There was a crackle of static and Raul retreated further. “Prof. Burton is running them through Hell House this afternoon,” Lapin commented. “Wanna watch?”

“Does a gargoyle eat its young?” I asked with a chuckle.

“I'll take that as a yes,” Gil laughed, as the shadow of the F22 moved across our van eclipsing the alien sun.

After saying goodbye, the F22 Raptor angled off in the direction of the airfield and soon dwindled out of sight.

“Let's go get our new mage,” I declared, shifting gears.

“Be nice to get another female,” Mindy said, resting an arm across the back of my seat. “This group has always been rather man heavy.”

“Any problem with that, my proud beauty?” Raul asked, sliding closer on the couch beside her.

Smiling sweetly, Mindy batted her eyelashes, made a kissy mouth, snuggled nearer and gave the mage an eloquent elbow to the ribs. Breath came out of him in a whoof.

“Heavens no,” she purred. “Why ever do you ask?”

Gasping for air, Raul's answer consisted mostly of a pained expression of how very sorry he was for asking.

Having spent six weeks of training here a million years ago, I knew the location of the Base Command. Situated on a nondescript side street, BC was a three story brick square with mirrored windows, sans any sort of ornamentation or signs. More security precautions. Unless you knew it was HQ, nobody

could have deduced the fact. The place more resembled an insurance office than a high tech computerized command center. But then, don't they always?

Driving into the parking lot, I took a spot alongside the walkway between a horribly beweaponed motorcycle, and a red shag flying carpet. Eagerly, the team piled out and I locked the doors as they ambled inside the building. We were each curious to see this aspect of the Academy previously denied to us as cadets.

The foyer was made of cool blue marble and Mrs. Cunningham, the woman at the reception desk, was equally friendly. But she gave good directions, and three turns, two staircases later, my team found that holiest of holies, the Hell House Command Complex. Or as we called it as students, 'the Principle's Office.'

After a moment of shuffling feet and clearing throats, I knocked on the door and a voice bid us enter. Stepping into its air-conditioned magnificence, a shiver ran through my gut. External, or internal causes? Geez, I felt nervous as a new field agent opening their first grave. An enclosed, elevated walkway extended over an incredible array of computer mainframes that none of us could identify. At the far end of the colonnade was a small dais protected by a dome of clear Armorlite glass. An elaborate control curved around the entire edge of the dais going from doorjamb left to doorjamb right. Six folding chairs were set behind an impressive swivel chair that would have appeared more at home on the bridge of a starship.

Walking along the colonnade, ringing footsteps heralded our approach, and the swivel chair did what it does best.

"About time," Professor Joyce Burton smiled, rising to meet us and offering a hand. We shook. She had a firm grip. "The senior class is ready and rearing to go."

As always, the prof was in tight black slacks and a shapeless green turtleneck sweater, her long brown hair almost tied off in a scraggly ponytail. Fashion was not a subject Our Dean of Destruction taught at the Academy.

"Students think they're pretty hot stuff, eh?" George asked, resting his ungainly machine gun against a nearby wall.

Burton smiled. "Of course!"

"Life is a learning experience," I laughed.

Favoring his sore ribs, Raul took a metal folding chair and it became a plush bako lounge as his fanny met the seat. "Where is Hell House anyway?" the mage asked, placing ankle atop knee.

"On the other side of Bangor," Joyce replied. "This way, when we train a telepath, they have a hard time reading our thoughts."

"Pretty smart," I acknowledged, sitting next to Jess. My chair didn't do anything but start to get warm. "But then, the gang at Tech Serv were always a fiendishly clever bunch. Those vampire doorknobs will go into Bureau history."

"And I thought the welcome-mat trapdoor was a particularly nice touch," Jessica added, bowing in respect.

“As their designer, I thank you,” Prof. Burton added, doing a bow and sweep. Then she stood and clapped her hands. “Okay, people! Let's make like an audience.”

As we gathered close to her chair, the overhead lights dimmed and a huge liquid crystal theater screen descended into view. Some eight feet by four, its silvery white surface flickered into life.

“All that's missing is popcorn,” George whispered.

Mindy shushed him.

As the screen cleared of hash, it cleared to invisibility and focused on the foyer of the place we knew well, and did not care for a bit. The detail and clarity was amazing. Seemingly, we were looking past empty air at the inside of Hell House. There was not even the diffraction of glass. I found myself wanting to reach out and try to touch the artificially dusty furnishings, but resisted temptation. Optic fiber, liquid crystal, laser holograph, high tech science, or what not, I wasn't goofy enough to risk a finger on the assumption that the House couldn't still get me through the theater screen. That building was tricky.

Adorning the ceiling of the front hall was a huge crystal chandelier that gave off weak yellowish light. To the left was a great marble staircase that curled upwards to the next floor. My butt itched for a moment as I saw the banister again. A sliding door closet was to the right and a curtained alcove to the left. The stage was set, the house activated, enter the players.

Had I remembered to tell the Facility guards to put Lumpy in quarantine since he had eaten human flesh? Yes, I had. Okay.

With the fully expected creak of ancient hinges, the door swung open and in walked the senior class. Mentally, I wished them luck. They would need it.

The twins were the ones to first catch my attention. Wearing jeans and T-shirts, they were near identical in form and face, except that the man had coal black hair, while his sister was a fiery redhead. Rather pretty, actually. Nice legs.

Watch it, my wife warned.

Oops.

Next came a tall powerful man in military grab, a faint thin scar marring his right cheek. Mindy gave a short whistle of appreciation. I agreed, but maybe not for the same reasons. The guy was a Goliath, a Hercules! Roughly seven feet tall and some 300 pounds, not an ounce of it anything on his frame but rock-hard muscle. This man didn't need any magic. He could punch the house to death. Grenades were hung on a military web harness across his mighty chest, an ammo pouch was slung over a shoulder, a huge revolver was holstered at his hip and he held a squat Thompson .45 machine gun with an underslung cheese-wheel style superclip of ammo. George murmured approval.

Following Rambo Junior was a tall stately blonde woman with a stunningly beauti ... ah, plain face, and far too much bust. I prefer women who are small and slim and married to me.

Better, Jessica noted in my head.

Whew. Another daring escape from the jaws of death by Edwardo Alvarez, boy husband.

The stunningly plain woman was carrying a wooden dowel, only about a foot long. Hmm, just a beginner mage. Raul had a staff four feet in length and made of solid silver.

Tagging close behind came a wild haired beauty in a low cut gypsy gown of a thousand colors. Barefoot, she padded into the house.

“Barefoot?” I asked.

Twirling a dial, Prof. Burton shrugged. “Something to do with having to be in contact with the Mother Earth. How do I know? Mages are crazy.”

“Darn tootin’,” Raul said, pinning a hypnotic vortex button to his T-shirt which now read VOTE FOR ANARCHY! Sigh.

Bring up the end of this conga line, was a thin, pale man dressed in the height of fashion, Gucci shoes, Sergio Valente three-piece suit, expertly tailored, and if that wasn't a Rolex Presidential watch on his wrist, I'd eat the banister. He even had a gold watch chain looped across his vest, with some sort of foreign coin dangling as a fob. Two watches? Dapper Dan struck me as the kind of person who would wash his hands before going to the lavatory. The only thing lacking was a silver spoon sticking out of his mouth.

As soon as the six entered the foyer of the house, Prof. Burton flipped a switch on the console and the door behind them slammed shut! They turned just in time to see the four great bolts ram into position, and an iron grate slide down from the ceiling. Then in orderly fashion, every window in the building nosily closed, the shutters crashed together and locked tight.

“Whew,” Steven remarked, the twin with black hair. “Lock and load, gang. It's showtime.”

The prof pressed a button. A hollow mocking laugh echoed throughout the old mansion and the chandelier tinkled in a ghostly manner.

Working the bolt on his Thompson, the tall slab of muscle with a scar glanced about. “Okay, standard defensive position. Katrina and I will take the front. Steven and Connie cover the rear. Patricia in the center. Sir Reginald on point. Remember, we're here to find an iron jewel, size unknown.”

Slowly, the dapper man turned and cocked an eyebrow. “And you were placed in charge by whom, Mr. Sanders?” Even his voice sounded like inherited money.

“Somebody has got to be,” Sanders rumbled.

“Should have decided outside,” Katrina Somers said in her heavily accented English. She sounded Russian. “Clock is ticking, comrades.”

Comrades?

She was recruited in Soviet Russia. Now hush.

Taking a clipboard, Burton put a plus mark next to Sander's name, and a minus next to Katrina. Rules said they were never to mention this was only a practice run with a time limit.

Ken Sanders frowned. "Conference!" he called and they gathered together. After a moment, the team broke apart and Katrina's face was as red as her heritage.

"Positions!" Ken snapped, and everybody moved.

In a shimmer, Sir Reginald Foxworthington-Smythe dissipated into smoke and wafted along the central hallway of Hell House. Neat! Now I sincerely hoped that he passed this final exam. Having an elf in the Bureau would be a definite plus factor. Why, at the yearly picnic, he could bring the cookies!

While the twins, Steven and Connie, handcuffed themselves together, Katrina polished her wooden staff on a sleeve and Ken clicked off the safety on his machine gun. Positioned in the middle of the assault force, the gypsy fingered the tiny gold cross about her neck and muttered something in Latin. She must be Patricia, the Healer. That's who I would want safe and ready to patch my guts back together if necessary.

Working a toggle, Prof. Burton had a door down the corridor creak open and the students dropped into attack formation. But nobody fired. Excellent.

"Who has got a pair of Bureau sunglasses?" Steven asked in his rumbling baritone.

Ken reached into his shirt pocket, paused and then started patting his pockets. "I could have sworn they were here."

Next to me in the control room, Prof. Burton chuckled and twirled the sunglasses about on a finger. "I was tempted to substitute a pair of normal sunglasses that wouldn't show any auras just as a confusion factor," she said. "But then decided that it was no fun kicking a cripple."

Sheesh, and the prof was on our side.

On the huge screen, the students were busy checking the front hallway closet. It was completely filled with pre-aged clothes that disintegrated at a touch. No information there. Ken spotted the rigged rat trap bolted on the inside of the door, and Patricia detected the razor blade welded onto the killing bar. That put them in a somber mood. As well it should. Anything but critical wounds could be healed within minutes. So nothing would kill them outright, but death was the only limitation. Agents learned their job here, or died in combat out in the real world taking countless civilians with them. It was a final exam in more ways than one.

After a quick peek in the lavatory, they moved on. Good thing too. If anybody had taken a seat, steel needles would have extended from the walls-ceiling-floor to stop but a scant foot away from the target. Prof. Burton started to de-activate the lavatory, then stopped. Fair enough. Maybe later they'll get stupid, or sloppy.

Parting the curtain, they found an unlocked door whose faded lettering read 'BrOOM CLOSET'. They discussed it, chuckled and moved on. The professor didn't mark a plus, or minus. Interesting.

Coalescing into a vertical tornado, Sir Reginald became solid to report that the hallway seemed vacant of hostile forces. This gave the group courage, and they proceed to search for the iron gem with a vigor. They looked behind portraits, inside the pages of books, under seat cushions, unscrewed lightbulbs, emptied flower vases, lifted rugs, thumped the floors, and pounded the walls. Nothing was discovered, so they moved on.

During the lull, I made a note that once we had our new recruit, to check with the Facility and see if they had discovered what Lumpy was yet and where it came from. If there was a trans-temporal breach to a dimension full of his kind, we could be in for serious trouble.

Entering the Living Room, directly in front of them was a small glass aquarium on a wrought iron stand. Inside the aquarium was a school of winged, clockwork, wind-up goldfish wearing cowboy hats. The wire screen lid was ajar. Patricia reached to straighten it, but Sir Reginald stayed her hand. Another plus! Funny does not equal harmless, and nothing kills faster than stupidity.

Switching positions, Steven and Connie entered the Dining Room on point. The table was set for a sumptuous feast, with the most amazing china dishware and silver goblets. Steven smiled, and Connie frowned. Glancing above the table, she became furious, and Steven flicked his free hand at the wood rafters above them. Darkening into view, a now-dead spider hidden in the shadows lost its grip and slammed onto the suddenly vacant table with a meaty thump.

Not satisfied, Ken screwed a silencer onto his pistol and pumped two rounds into its head. That's my boy!

The Trophy Room proved to be empty of anything interesting, save an eight foot tall animated stuffed grizzly bear, which the students tripped to the floor, shoved into the fireplace and ignited. Child's play.

It was starting to seem as if the professor had set this whole level of Hell House on neutral. Burton must be trying to lull them into a false sense of security before getting tough.

In the Library, Steven and Connie found a loaded Ruger .44 revolver in a desk drawer. But it only took Sanders a second to discover that the barrel was blocked solid with lead. Pull the trigger and the backblast would blow a hand off. He got another plus mark.

The Kitchen yielded only a suspiciously half empty bag of PURINA DEMON CHOW. The oven was set to explode if turned on, but Sir Reginald found that trap. Plus. Patricia opened the refrigerator, but not the freezer. A minus.

Of course, the pantry was filled with pants which produced the expected mass groan of pain. I had no idea who the punster was at the Academy, but someday I would find the nitwit and personally shoot him/her in the spleen.

Apparently satisfied, Ken used handsignals to say the first floor was clean and they should move on. Tsk-tsk. Sloppy work that. There were twelve places they had failed to search for clues, two operational procedures forgotten entirely, and they hadn't found the special message for them on the telephone answering machine. It was obscene, but useful. Still, not bad on the whole.

"Cellar, or second floor?" Connie asked, in her sweet contralto. The operatic twins were still holding hands. Bio-harmonics? I wondered.

"Cellar," Katrina suggested, nervously fingering her staff.

"Second floor," Sir Reginald said, taking a pinch of snuff from an ornate Nathan Mills gold box. "Nobody hides things in the cellar anymore. It's gauche."

In a juicy Bronx cheer worthy of any New Yorker, Patricia expressed her sentiments on the matter.

Drying sweaty hands on his pants, Ken agreed. "We'll hit the upper stories, but let's protect our rear."

With her wooden wand, Katrina put a low-grade Sealed spell on the cellar door so that it could not be opened from the other side. Using a pocketknife on a chair leg, Ken whittled a doorstep which he then shoved tightly under the doorjamb. Meanwhile, Sir Reginald removed a lock pick kit from his tailored jacket and operated the ancient key latch, lubricating it first so there would be no noise. The twins kept guard.

Endlessly adjusting the controls, Prof. Burton nodded in approval.

"They're not bad," Raul said around a mouthful of popcorn.

I stole a buttery handful from the huge carton that had materialized in his lap. "Shaddup and watch."

"Will there be a cartoon later?" Mindy asked. George hushed her.

In standard formation, the students stepped upon the first stair and a ghostly figure appeared floating in the air before them. Moaning and groaning, the hideous vision warned them of unseen dangers and then faded away as only a ghost can. Because it wasn't a laser holograph, but an actual ghost, Abduhl Benny Hassan, an ex-member of our team. Not willing to lose trained personnel under any circumstances, Horace Gordon had conjured poor Hassan back from his icy grave. Not even death could stop an agent of Bureau 13! Only major holidays.

Averting her gaze from the screen, Mindy gave a heartfelt sigh. She and Abduhl had been close friends, getting a lot closer when he had died. But as a spirit, he no longer had any interest in the pleasures of the flesh and that sort of put a damper on their relationship.

Dutifully, Katrina recorded the speech on a tiny tape recorder, Patricia took several flashless pictures with a pocket digital camera and Reginald made a rough sketch of Abduhl's face.

Proceeding carefully up the stairs, I noted with pride that they walked along the extreme edge of each step, exactly where the board met the wall. That was where stairs were their strongest, the least likely spot to creak and announce your presence to an enemy.

Just for fun, I asked Prof. Burton to make the eyes of the portraits on the wall track their passage, even had one old lady get out of her rocking chair and leave while the students were alongside. That caught their attention, but Steven and Connie urged the team on by emphatically saying that it was nothing. Another plus mark by their names. I glanced at the clipboard. One telepathic and one a mage. The siblings were a powerful occult team, but only as long as they were in direct physical contact with each other. I wondered if the Dean of Doom had an answer to that?

"Yes," Jessica said, adding salt to the popcorn. "Itching powder."

Hmm, efficient, if somewhat slapstick.

As the students stepped on the landing, the staircase disappeared, leaving a solid seamless floor and no easy exit.

"Mark the spot," Ken Sanders whispered on the monitor.

Using a diminutive spray can, Sir Reginald painted a brilliant orange line across the floorboards where

the stairs had once been. Good idea that, and I made a note of the ploy.

Both sides of the hallway were lined with doors. Endless doors. There was no wall space, the portals stood jamb to jamb.

Placing her ear to a random door, Katrina listened and then very carefully eased the latch to peak inside. With a squeal, she threw herself across the hall and yanked open the opposite door. Everybody stepped out of the way as 160 tons of antique steam locomotive thundered out of one doorway and into the other.

In the control room, we were buffeted from side to side by the stereo speakers of the theatre screen hitting near overload.

As the caboose rattled out of sight, Steven slammed the first door and Katrina did the second. For a minute, they stood coughing from the acrid smoke fumes that had poured from the flume. The floor between the two doors was deeply gouged from the rims of the steel wheels, piles of splinters sticking up in orderly lines, like toothpicks on parade. If you wanted weird, join the Bureau.

As breath returned, the seniors began heaping abuse upon the Bureau, their teachers in general, the professor specifically, and then cast dubious remarks on our general ancestry and sexual habits. Whew. Some of the curses were pretty good. George jotted a few on a notepad. Probably to give to his Army buddies as birthday gifts.

Then they abruptly stopped, because lying in plain sight on the floor was an iron gem.

Reaching for the jewel, Sanders paused and had the twins scan for traps. After a moment, they said it was clear. Wrapping a Bureau issue handkerchief about his hand, Ken pocketed the gem.

“Okay, we got it,” Sanders snapped, scanning the area to make sure it was clear. “Let's go.”

“But there is still a lot remaining to explore,” Patricia implored petulantly.

“Our mission was to get the gem,” he stated. “We got it. We go. End of story.”

I was becoming more and more fond of this guy. What a professional attitude. I bet he would happily shoot an enemy in the back. No dumb heroics, just get the job done and scam. Great!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Prof. Burton insert a key into a special slot on the control board and unlock an armed switch. The button glowed with a red light and she grimly pressed it down until there was a loud click.

Oh-oh, now the students were in for it. Whatever door they opened, wherever they went, the very next thing they encountered would be the dreaded, the deadly—

Suddenly lights began blinking on the control board and a printer started whining out a fax. Faintly from outside the building, I heard a siren howling.

“What's happening?” George demanded, weapon in hands.

Prof. Burton ripped the fax free and whistled. “Holy crud! It's a Code Eleven!”

“Huh?” I demanded.

Looking confused, Mindy added, “But the scale only goes to ten!”

“Not ours,” the professor said, reading while she talked.

“So what the hell is an eleven?” I demanded, pulling out my Magnum hand. When in doubt, grab a weapon, that was my motto.

With a gasp, the professor dropped the paper. I made a snatch, but the security fax was already blank.

“Jailbreak,” she breathed.

FOUR

Everybody was out of their seats and moving before the team even knew what they were doing. Typical.

“Instructions?” Mindy asked, sword unsheathed.

Swallowing the last mouthful of popcorn, Raul shrugged, “Don't ask me.”

“Professor, the students!” I cried.

With a curse, Prof. Burton swiveled to the control panel, flipped a gangbar, pressed three buttons and grabbed a microphone. On the theatre screen, lights brightened Hell House and blinking markers appeared on the wooden floor. The student team dropped into a defensive formation and waited for the expected attack.

“This is an Alpha One Emergency,” Burton intoned. “This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill! Cancel command Egress.”

“Barnum,” Ken Saunders answered, giving the acknowledgement code. “What's the situation, sir?”

“Steve McQueen,” the professor replied.

Her face bisected by the edge of the screen, Katrina Somers gasped. “A great escape?”

“No, my dear,” Sir Reginald primly, taking a pinch of snuff. “Papillion is a mass escape.”

“Papillion is a single escape, fool!” Patricia snapped rudely. The gypsy turned to directly face the hidden video camera. Now how did she know where it was? “What are your orders, Prof. Burton?”

“Hit the arms locker,” the professor ordered. “Take every weapon you can carry. Hell House has been deactivated. Git!”

They got. Fast.

“How long till the prisoners break out of the hut?” I asked, as the professor clicked a switch and the theatre screen darkened to its former featureless silvery white.

Burton glanced at her wrist and a watch appeared. "Roughly six minutes. I only hope Warden Lapin and the warehouse can hold 'em. I'm calling Gordon at HQ, alerting General McAdams and the Phoenix Team, activating the nuclear fail-safe and moving the exit portal."

"To where?" Jessica asked, then added. "Here?"

"Yes," the professor said gesturing at the floor. "Right here in this room."

Reaching out, I touched her arm. "Sir, we are yours to command."

The professor nodded. "Great. Get out of this booth and stay out of my way. Don't let anything into this building, and pray."

"Done."

Always in a rush, Mindy was already dashing down the colonnade. "Come on, folks! Let's strip the van and get ready for a siege!"

"Wait!" I shouted, reaching for my wallet. Rummaging about in the leather fold, I unearthed a small plastic envelope and ripped it open to offer a single orange pill to every member of my team. As each swallowed, they blurred out of vision and departed moving at quadruple normal speed.

Now we had twenty-four minutes, and counting.

In a shower of glass, our RV bounded into the lobby of Base Command and screeched to a halt on the smooth terrazzo floor in front of the reception desk. The unflappable Mrs. Cunningham didn't blink an eye at our superspeed intrusion. At a snail's pace, she was throwing switches on an angled control board next to a hooded monitor. Steel shutters leisurely rumbled into position over the door and gaping hole where the front window had just been located, sealing us inside.

Grinding gears, I moved the RV further into the lobby. Chipping paint and plaster off the walls, I maneuvered its tail into a hallway intersection so that the missile pod on the roof of the van could have a clear field of fire at the front, back and side doors.

Going to a supply locker in the RV, Jessica began tossing out bits and pieces of bodyarmor, while George and Mindy carried out the weapons locker and ammo trunk. The trunk had been bolted to the floor, but Ms. Jennings indestructible sword made short work of that minor obstruction.

My team was already wearing torso armor, molded to our individual contours. But this was no time for half way measures, so we also strapped steel greaves on our shins and thighs, titanium vanbraces to our arms, added a magical zero-weight flak jacket over our personnel armor and topped off the arrangement with a Bureau 13 combat helmet.

Absolutely SOTA for at least another week, the helmet provided full head coverage, was proof against a .50 AP round, and 20,000 volts of electricity. They also had built-in scrambled radios linked together and the visors were shatterproof, infrared sensitive and Kirlian positive. They even came with a Killjoy sensor that made the helmets violently explode if fully inserted into anything's mouth. Better dead than dinner, I always say.

Just then a squad of people in similar combat armor walked by in exaggerated slowness, the distortion due to our accelerated speed. Telepathically, Jess asked what they were doing and a man mentally

replied they were going to establish a sandbag redoubt on the roof. Other folks were moving like molasses in the building, closing and locking doors, setting traps and erecting machine-gun nests. Faintly from outside, I could hear the thrum of helicopters rotors overhead.

Easing a clip into her NATO 10mm Falcon, Mrs. Cunningham sluggishly suggested parking cars outside the doorways as additional protection. But I vetoed that idea. It would designate this location as someplace special, and that we did not want to do at any cost. The boojums couldn't attack if they did not know we were here.

At max velocity, Mindy began loading our missile pod with the six Amsterdam Mark IV rockets. In the past, we normally only traveled with them on a combat assignment. But after an embarrassing incident in upstate New York, we don't drive to the local grocery store without those babies on board. Sure were a big help in getting a parking spot on those busy holiday weekends.

Meanwhile, Raul had used his wand to tack-weld every window shutter closed, and our trapster supreme, George was rigging a Claymore mine to the external door. Base Command was starting to resemble a posh hotel in downtown Beirut.

I debated working on the elevator, but according to Cunningham it was already such a deathtrap I couldn't think of anything more to add to its lethal array.

From the weapons cache of the building, Jessica and I primed a M-1A flamethrower and stacked a pile of HE shells next to a 75mm recoilless rifle. A delightful find was a case of plastic spray seltzer bottles filled with Holy Water. Neat! An arbalest would have been nice, but we only found the six-foot long arrows. There was no sign of the giant crossbow. If I survived this thing, there was going to be a nasty letter sent to Supply & Requisition.

Pausing a moment to rest, I saw Raul tearfully unleash Amigo, our pet lizard who lived in the RV, and dispatch him to guard the basement. With a flick of his tiny forked tongue, the magical collar around his neck glowed with power and Amigo was gone. I wished him luck. Sure hoped I would see the little suitcase again.

At about this point, the speed pills wore off and reality blurred, then clarified, as we returned to normal. Ugh. My head hurt, my mouth was dry and I was starving. With Father Donaher on vacation, Jessica took over as medic and distributed canteens of water, cold sandwiches, Strength potions, Healing potions and antacids. Nothing worse on the mind and body than life in the fast lane. Except visiting my in-laws. They were such noisy people.

Exiting the van, Raul was armed for warfare with a bulging pouch draped over both shoulders, a copper bracelet on both wrists, a necklace and two glowing earrings. I could only hope those were all weapons. Either that or he had more in the closet than just a pile of bones named McCoy.

Seeing to my own weapons, I loaded both of my .357 Magnums, took a 9mm Uzi sub-machine gun and a bag of mixed grenades. Small and squat, the Uzi was no big-punch weapon, nor did it have excessive range or penetration. However, it was almost 100% reliable. I once saw a demonstration where a sergeant opened the weapon, poured in a full bottle of pancake syrup, closed the breech, slapped in a magazine and fire off the full clip without a single misfire. It wouldn't jam, no pun intended. That nifty factor alone was often more important in saving your butt than caliber, distance or foot-pounds combined.

Also, I slid sweatbands on my wrists. There wasn't anything more embarrassing than dying because you

dropped a weapon in the middle of a firefight. Or so I had been sheepishly told by several clumsy ghosts.

Waddling into view, George had on so much stuff strapped to his body, I could barely see him under everything. Mindy naturally had her sword, but also a bandoleer of throwing knives, plus a bow and quiver of arrows. Jessica had the van, a taser in her belt, a Mac-10 spray-n-pray machine pistol, and on the seat beside her was a 12 gauge Remington shotgun normally reserved for Father Donaher.

God, I wish we had some real weapons with us.

Scratching away, as Raul always did when near major evil, our mage took a position in the right corridor, Mindy the left, George covered the rear entrance, and I took the front. Situated in the middle, Jess stayed as our anchor in the van to operate the missile pod and other weapon systems. As a precaution, I jammed the side door open so she would have a fast escape route. Then I set the self-destruct and left the keys in the ignition. My poor wife had a very grim expression of her face as we parted and I flashed her a grin. The gentle telepath hated lethal combat, but from past experience I knew that she could kill when absolutely necessary.

As ready as ever in such a short time, my team cut the overhead lights, sprinkled thumbtacks, communion wafers, kosher salt, wolfbane and marbles on the floor, then settled in to wait.

During this, Mrs. Cunningham had been busy at the reception desk activating every automatic defense and offense the building possessed. In the cool quiet darkness, she had shifted the position of the video monitor on her desk so that we could also see what was happening outside the steel shutters. Currently, the glowing screen showed a small aerial picture of the Quonset Hut on the grassy knoll surrounded by the deserted traffic circle. Everything seemed peaceful with nothing out of the ordinary. I glanced at my watch, three seconds to go, two, one ... now.

In a boiling wave, a hundred monsters stormed out of the hut, a hodgepodge of every conceivable boojum, including a few that I had never seen before, and a couple that I couldn't properly focus my vision on. There were vampires, werewolves, basilisk, giants, elves, gnomes, squids, vapors, golems, lumbering robots and shapeless, disgusting blobs. Oh him again, eh? Filling the television, a brace of scaled titans had the pitiful remains of men and women in guard uniforms held before them as living shields. I recognized old friends, but over my helmet radio, I heard Warden Lapin order the warehouses to attack with a sob in his voice.

Instantly, the view withdrew to show the warehouses extending their sides and joining together to form an unbroken hexagon. The cinder-block walls fused with a blinding light that expanded to engulf the Quonset. Then a solid expanse of dirt filled the area, earth that visibly hardened into gray rock, then solid granite. It was the first of the Elemental defenses.

In the dim lobby, I held my breath. Looking good, guys.

On the monitor, a giant fist broke through the granite, its owner climbing out of the hole with a dozen smaller creatures scampering along the behind. In a hundred other spots, the granite was smashed into gravel and more of the bedraggled hellspawn clambered into view. Precisely on cue, the rest of the stone vanished and the creatures tumbled painfully down to the pavement. Ha!

Next the warehouses hosed a Niagara of water at the monsters. The crushing spray deluged the boojums in a torrent of rivers that became raging wild ocean. Drops of moisture blurred the picture and the scene shifted to another camera. Tidal waves rose and fell with pile-driving force, smashing the prisoners against each other. Topsy-turvy, the creatures churned hapless and helpless in the endless

brutal cascade of the megaton tsunami.

Momentarily, a mass of wiggling tentacles came into view to snatch a fellow creature and hurl the horned demon through a wave crest and straight towards the ring of warehouses.

The beastie almost made it when a brisk wind came from nowhere, flipped the escapee over and hurtled it right back into the monster soup. Steadily increasing in force and noise, the air above the warehouses went round and round, faster and faster, until a howling hurricane formed above the indomitable barrier.

Reaching out of the darkness, Mrs. Cunningham's translucent hand rotated a dial and lowered the volume on the rumbling speakers to a more bearable level. I couldn't begin to imagine what it was like out there at ground zero.

On the monitor, screaming tornadoes formed to skip along the churning water, grabbing anything that came near and dismembering the being by sheer centrifugal force. More than once they succeeded, and the tumultuous sea was starting to get a tad disgusting with floundering limbs and bobbing heads. But even disassembled, the prisoners were still trying to reach freedom. Then the sky darkened ominously.

“Go get ‘em, gang!” George cheered, snapping a salute.

As if in response, sheet lightning blasted into the churning ocean, electrifying the noxious brew nigh incandescent. Coronas of static discharge danced among the wave crests and it became difficult to see through the primordial barrage. But occasionally a glowing inhuman skeleton could be spotted as something got a gigawatt of nature's best smack in the kisser. Oh, that had to hurt.

Without warning, a heavy rain began to descend on the monsters, the sheer volume distorting the picture. A torrential downpour, it must have added a million gallons to the battle zone. Yet the wing of warehouses did not swamp or overflow.

Outside the thick shutters, I heard a convoy of tanks rumble past our building. Reinforcements on their way to form our next line of defense.

Suddenly, the temperature visibly dropped, and the monitor took on a bluish tinge as the rain became snow. Then hail the size of your fist hit with sufficient force to punch holes through the unkillables. The lightning ceased, but the wintry winds maintained and a bitter cold engulfed the waterlogged leviathans. In seconds, the ocean became slush with chunks of frozen monsters bobbing about like ugly icebergs. Steadily, the thick mush congealed into a single, seamless glacier whose frosty interior was dotted with motionless blots. In gradual stages, the winds died away and a deadly arctic calm settled upon the polar landscape. Once more the abominations were trapped.

An aged head turned in my direction, her face half cast from the glow of the monitor. “Think this will work?” Mrs. Cunningham asked hopefully.

“No,” Mindy replied somberly, a hand nervously twisting the grip of her sword. “It will not.”

As I pushed the volume switch for more sound, it was possible to hear a scratchy crunching, munching sound. The view dollied in for a tight zoom, and I could see that deep underneath the ice were countless figures moving slowly towards the warehouses. Damnation, the clever bastards were trying to eat their way to freedom!

Instinctively, I seized the Magnum on my belt. Rats! That's what we needed, a couple million trained rats

to eat the monsters. Indestructible did not mean indigestible. It was a last-ditch attack my team had actually used once against the Artichoke of Doom. My only regret had been the lack of a decent hollandaise sauce or a nice white Zinfandel wine.

If the ice fell, only a single Elemental defense remained to try. The picture on the monitor receded to the original viewpoint. In astonishing speed, the glacier melted and the water began to bubble and steam. Gouts of greenish fire vomited from below and many howling beasts were sent hurling into the sky, their hindquarters trailing smoke. The land rose to form a crater, replacing the water with sticky boiling mud, then red-hot molten lava from the center of the Earth. Lambent flames danced across the yellow-hot magma as it belched superheated poison gas. I could imagine the stench of sulfur and brimstone mixing freely with the stink of roasted meat and burnt hair. Probably worse than New Jersey in the summer. Well, maybe not that bad. The television nearly went blank as the searing plasma flow reached white heat levels and continued to accelerate until the artificial volcano approached solar temperatures in which an exploding thermite grenade would have constituted a cool spot.

“Not quite hell,” Raul noted, his silvery staff clearly discernible in the dim light. “But close enough.”

He would know, too.

In a primitive luck ceremony, I crossed my fingers, then cursed as the monitor was divided by an impossible tower of black glass rising upward from the bubbling molten inferno. Soaring skyward, the angular column loomed high above the broiling morass until it went off the screen. Rapidly, the camera pulled back to show the entire length of shiny dark glass. What was this, some bizarre means of escape? But as the octagonal glass rod reached azimuth, the top broke off and came hurtling down to smash on top the warehouse with a terrible crash. Awash in blazing lava, the fiends were still attacking! Thankfully, no visible damage was done to the warehouse. But the shiny pieces of stone on the roof began to take root and rise into the air once more.

Beneath the desk, Jessica took my hand and we exchanged a private moment. We could see the end coming. Under the awful accumulated weight of the growing ebony substance, a section of the reinforced roof finally cracked and collapsed. In a twinkling, the molten magma vanished and lying on the cool ground were a thousand limp forms painfully crawling towards the smashed section of the defensive ring.

Succumbing for a second, I closed my eyes to the awful scene on the monitor. Incredible. The monsters had broken through our primary and secondary lines of defense in less than ten minutes. Now everything depended upon only a handful of Bureau personnel to halt these behemoths from escaping into America.

God help us all.

FIVE

On the video screen, there was a series of flashes, and the Abrams assault tanks appeared in a circle around the warehouses.

As the monsters rallied, the bulky war machine cut loose their .50 machine guns in a steady chatter, the 120mm cannons blasting thunderous volley after volley of high-explosive shells, thermite charges, silver shrapnel, and depleted-uranium slugs. The beings were torn to pieces, but none of them stayed that way for very long.

Moments later, an F22 Raptor lead a squad of screaming Harrier jumpjets into position in the sky.

Banking sharply, the fighters lifted prows and stalled in the air, stopping perfectly still on their rumbling belly jets. It seemed impossible, but the Raptor actually appeared to be carrying more weapons than before.

In spite of their arrival, I was less than thrilled. For over twenty years the best minds of the Bureau had designed and redesigned the material, vibratory and ethereal protections of the Holding Facility, and now we were down to the emergency reserves of teachers, students, and us.

We are formidable, Jess sent.

Not that formidable, I answered in blunt honesty.

“Ed, I want a transfer to Clerical,” George said, out of the corner of his mouth.

“Take me with you,” I whispered back.

Unexpectedly, the picture on the monitor pulled back to the roof of this very building. In the gray sky, twelve of the Harriers engaged in a furious dogfight, banking turning, zigzagging, doing loops, their weapons constantly firing. Three were englobing a winged demon skull, four were busy with a flying saucer that had fangs, and five battled something invisible. But we could see the grisly effect of its energy weapons; shimmering golden rays that lanced past the jumpjets to impact on the ground with devastating force. Then I noticed a fighter spiraling into the distance, thick smoke trailing from a damaged tail section. Gil?

Unknown.

The camera did a sharp cut and out of the east rose squadrons of Apache helicopter gunships, skimming low over the town, rocket pods spitting 35mm death. Another video cut, and from the west rose a majestic flight of dragons. My team cheered. The Bureau had no Great Wyrms as prisoners in the Holding Facility. These were more guards. Belching organic flame, the winged dinosaurs disintegrated stores, exploded cars and generally annoyed the fleeing monsters, but few of the prisoners vanished in the billowing allotropic fire.

At this point, the battle became pandemic with no rhyme or reason, reduced to just the stark madness of war. People were running inward, monsters dashing outward. The monitor segmented into six smaller pictures, each showing a different section of the town.

Slithering along the lawns came a ten-foot-thick snake with a mouth large enough to eat a two-car garage, its scaled length slamming aside garbage cans and pickets fences. Just then, a bazooka team leapt out of hiding in a two-car garage and blew off the creature's fanged head. But a new head simply blossomed from the burnt stub of the neck, and it attacked.

Grinding my teeth, I clenched the checkered grip of my weapon. *Madre mai*, this is why most of these abominations were here in the first place, they were unkillable. What were we supposed to do with handguns against legendary colossi?

Drifting over the mixed combatants came a giant floating human brain, whose slimy throbbing pons threw blue anti-magic lightning bolts. A mage in pajamas hit it with countless spells, but each was nullified. As the exhausted woman dodged out of the way, a platoon of soldiers attempted to give the damn thing a gunpowder lobotomy, and failed. And died.

Over the supermarket, the black glass tower started rising into the sky once more. Two of the Harriers broke off from the saucer and dove into a strafing run. A score of liquid-filled balloons dropped from their bomb bay and hit the crystal rod, bursting apart to gush out frosty white foam. Instantly, every piece saturated turned clear and ceased to grow. But not every piece was hit and those which weren't started rising again.

In breathless silence, my team was clustered tight around the video screen on the desk. The scene zoomed in and the central square changed angle. Sneaking along an alley was a large pulsating blob wriggling forward on a nest of slimy tentacles. Troops attached from several directions, but magical fire and steel bullets only punched holes in the gelatinous mass, minor wounds which closed completely. Then it began to feed.

“Somewhere out there is a werewolf with no heart,” Mindy said, standing very close to the wall. “With my name tattooed on its arm.”

Nodding glumly, George added, “And Vampire X.”

“Plus, that outer-space carrot bastard from the North Pole is starting to grow its hellish garden once more,” Raul growled. “Using us as the fertilizer.”

“Using our blood,” Jess corrected angrily, massaging her temples.

She seemed to be suffering from a bad headache, so I offered her a morphine pill. Aspirin would have been useless. My wife dry-swallowed the tablet whole. The negative psychic vibrations from out there must be nearly deafening to such a sensitive telepath. Even worse than a Shriner's convention during the guest of honor speech.

On a lower square on the monitor, four ghostly figures galloped boldly along the middle of the street; one was in a military uniform and riding a white horse, the second was wearing only rags, holding a sickle and astride a red horse, the third was only a grinning skeleton on a black horse, and the last was a hooded figure holding an hourglass while atop a pale horse.

Human and monster, everybody got the hell out of their way.

Just then, a chill touched the back of my neck and I quickly looked around, only to find the rest of my team doing the same thing. While our attention had been elsewhere, something had slipped into Base Command.

Flipping my visor into position, I instantly saw two black shadows ease through a hair-thin crack of the shutters, and another was already stalking our way. Yikes. Humanoid in shape, they didn't appear to have any physical mass.

“Alert,” I said calmly. “Incoming, one o'clock low.”

“Shadow warriors,” Mindy spat, adjusting her visor.

Crackling his knuckles dramatically, Raul raised his hands. “Tunafish!” he shouted.

Through my closed eyelids, I could still faintly see the glimmer from the blinding light flash generated by our mage. However, upon opening them again, it appeared as if the Dazzle Spell had no effect on these creatures of the night.

A strident burst of gunfire announced the fact that George was on the job. Crouching behind the desk, Mrs. Cunningham gave them a good long taste of her 10mm Flacon, and I added a few silver rounds from my Uzi, plus a HE grenade. But there was no effect. Bullets and bombs simply passed through them to loudly clang off the shutters, or tore chunks out of the marble floor.

Gliding close, Mindy gave a shadow five fast passes of her rainbow sword, with the expected effect that steel should have on an immaterial being. Absolutely nothing. In return the black figure raked a clawed hand at her chest, ripping off the flak jacket, blouse, and gouging furrows in the magical bodyarmor underneath. Damn, these guys were dangerous!

Twirling his wand around like a baton, Raul then leveled the silver with the concave business end pointing at our uninvited guests.

“...!” Raul shouted in the incomprehensible language of a wizard.

The staff actually recoiled as a blast of raw ethereal energy vomited forward in a swirling cone of colors and noise. I recognized it as a mix of three different Death spells. Way to go, Raul! Frantically, the shadows tried to get out of the way with no success. They were lifted up, thrown down, shaken, rattled and rolled. But as the pyrotechnics faded, the shadows jumped to their talons appearing to only be seriously annoyed.

“Ah, apparently I was wrong,” the wizard said, quickly stepping back. “They are not technological in construction.”

“Brilliant deduction, Sherlock,” I growled, firing both of my Magnums.

Advancing into the fray, George tried a flamethrower on the black four. It didn't please them, but no real damage was done either.

Think fast, Alvarez, I commanded myself. Immaterial and spectral, yet not a ghost or vapor. Pure energy, phantasmagoric, pan-dimensional, or something else entirely? Hmm, get a hunch, bet a bunch.

Shouldering my machine pistol, I grabbed a seltzer bottle and squirted a stream towards the lurking black shaped approaching the reception desk. Contemptuously the monster seemed to sneer at me, which was the last thing it ever did. As the bubbling spray hit the phantom, it vanished with an echoing scream. Sneaking a peek through my visor, there was only a sizzling wet spot on the floor and small pile of gray dust. Bingo!

“Will-o-wisps!” I bellowed, shaking the bottle hard. “Routine six and seven!” Scampering to the RV, Jessica tossed one of our pre-made plastic pentagrams on the floor. We frantically clustered inside and tried to appear scared. Eagerly converging on us, the swamp gas manifestations futilely caressed the magical boundary with their incorporeal claws, and when they were in a nice tight group, we spritzed them with a barrage of Holy Water.

Screams, smoke and a few seconds later, there were only piles of dust on the floor littered with spent brass shells and the honey-sweet smell of fresh magic thick in the atmosphere. Of course, the will-o-wisps weren't really dead. With the coming summer solstice they would rise to life once more. Even if we scattered the dust across the four corners of the world it would make no real difference. Wisps were not wimps.

For some reason this scenario reminded me of when our van had broken down in a small ghost town in the badlands of Nevada, and we spent thirty six hours trapped in a circle of salt and flickering candles fighting an entire village of lunar zombies along with the omnivorous toad master. Technically, I guess we won. But the ghost town, which supplied employment to a dozen people had been totally destroyed, and the poor old prospector who had accidentally summoned the boojums was killed. In my book that wasn't winning, but merely surviving.

As we reloaded weapons and tossed around a couple of pine tree air fresheners, a sharp series of beeps sounded on our helmet radios. Oh what now?

"Alert," a calm voice said. "Prepare for option two. Repeat, prepare for option two!"

I felt my antacids neutralized by stomach acid.

With a grim face, Mindy nudged me, "Ed, what is option two?"

"Don't know," I replied honestly. "But I don't like the sound of it."

"Me either," Raul said, nervously savaging a candy bar.

"Why?"

"Means option one failed."

We gathered at the monitor again. Almost a minute passed with nothing noticeable happening, then a brilliant green dome completely filled the sky. A prismatic sphere, wow. Was that it, option two?

"Tunafish, Team Tunafish," Professor Burton said over our radios. "Calling Team Tunafish."

I touched the transmit switch with my chin. "Tunafish here, professor. Go."

"Shakespeare," she said solemnly.

"Bacon," I replied.

"We have a slight situation here, Ed," Burton stated.

My team exchanged puzzled expressions. There was a prismatic dome covering the whole town. Certainly nothing could leave with that up and running. Not even us. America must be safe.

"What's the problem," I asked, not really sure that I wanted to hear the answer.

She gave a delicate cough. "That's not our dome."

"*What?*" I cried aghast. "You mean it's from the prisoners?"

"Goddess no. It is a Bureau 13 prismatic sphere," she relented. "Just not the one for this base. Our prismatic sphere generator has suffered a malfunction. Or maybe a dysfunction, I'm really not sure which." She paused. "As did the fail safe."

George spit out his lollipop, Raul hit himself in the head, Mindy mimed slicing her own throat and Jessica

covered her face with both hands. Oh brother.

Prof. Burton continued. “Horace Gordon has sealed off the base from outside and given us a thirty minute deadline. We must regain control of the prisoners in 29 minutes, or else he will seal the dome into place. Permanently.”

With us trapped inside this mini-universe with the hordes of hell to play with forever. Lovely. With the feeling of placing my neck in the noose, I asked what she wanted my team to do.

“We need a suic ... ah, a volunteer squad to try and get into the Holding Facility and turn on the fail safe by hand.”

Weighing options, I took two long breaths. Then took two more breaths. They could very well be my last.

“Well?” she asked urgently.

Tilting my head, I asked my team a silent question, and they nodded assent. What the hey, today was a fine day to die. Said so on my Bureau issue calendar.

“Done,” I sighed, then hastily added, “How about some reinforcements?”

“You can have the senior class,” Burton said. “Everybody else is busy.”

Meaning dead. Great, six students still wet behind the ears. Monster fodder at best. “Recognition code?” I asked.

“Dirty. Counter sign: Dozen.”

At least the prof still had her sense of humor. “How soon can you get them here?”

There was a shimmering flash and the Hell House five appeared in the middle of the lobby. Heavily beweaponed, they were dressed in similar bodyarmor, only not so well tailored as ours. Which was understandable. Our bodyarmor was personalized while their stuff came from General Supply. I saw that the twins had also switched their handcuffs into different wrist and understood why. The telepath Connie was now holding an M16 carbine as far away from her brother the wizard as possible. Gunpowder and magic did not mix.

“Good luck,” Prof. Burton said and clicked off.

“Thanks, Joyce,” I muttered to the dead link. “We'll need it.”

Switching the radio to normal frequency, I turned about and inspected my little army. There was a faint glimmer of promise in this odd assortment of fighters; a private investigator, a telepath, a medium-level mage, a beginner mage, a professional soldier, a magic/telepath team, a martial artist, a Healer and a heavily armed giant slab of muscle. Hey, we could take this show on the road and write our own reviews.

Appearing bigger than ever, Ken Sanders stepped closer and saluted. Hmm, I would need to break him of that nasty habit real fast.

“Dirty,” he announced proudly.

“Dozen,” I said. “Okay, let me brief you.”

“We are fully aware of the dire situation, sir,” Saunders said crisply. “Jessica contacted Connie and we held a fast group telepathic conference.”

“Its called doing a Picnic,” I said.

“Yes sir! We're on a do-or-die to level 17, section 3, of the Holding Facility, and the mission has been rated more important than any, or all of us. Correct?”

It was correct, just rather tactless to say it so bluntly.

“By the way,” Raul asked, glancing around. “Where's Sir Reginald?”

Steven kept a straight face. “Dead. We were guarding the hospital when a big hairy thing ate him.”

“So we strike in his name!” Katrina Somers said grimly, the busty blonde shaking her wand like a Hottentot with a halberd, or something like that.

She prefers Katrina, Jessica sent.

Fair enough.

“We can't kill them,” Mindy reminded. “That's why the boojums are here.”

The Russian mage frowned. “*Da*. Sorry, comrade ninja.”

“But we sure can kick the shit out of them!” Saunders declared brandishing a Thompson.

Ah, youth. But I did like his enthusiasm. “How to get there is the first problem,” I commented, going to a wall map of the city. “We have three choices; magic portal, psionic teleport or drive.”

“Couldn't we just phone it in?” Mindy asked hopefully.

Cradling his machine gun, Sanders gave her a strange look. Guess he wasn't used to humor under fire. Sometimes that was all that kept us sane in this insane job.

“Sorry,” I said. “The number is unlisted.”

“Damn,” she frowned. “Then go we must.”

“Check,” I said and turned, “Raul?”

Our mage was already busy waving his hands about, fingers leaving colored streamers behind. “Portals are impossible. The Facility is still sealed against intruders.”

“Jess, can you and Connie jump the lot of us?” I asked.

Quickly, my wife looked over the assorted tonnage of troops and armored van. “Not without a dose of MCD,” she said grimly.

Connie nodded agreement.

Forget that. MCD was a dangerous mind-amplifying drug. Temporarily, a telepath would have her powers fantastically increased. However, there was a very high risk factor of permanent burnout, idiocy, or worse, total brain death.

“No way,” I snapped, shaking off the image of my wife a drooling vegetable. “We’ll drive, and reserve our heavy hitters for when we’re inside the jail.”

“Why?” Saunders asked curiously.

Resting the stock of his M60 on a hip, George answered, “Because, for various reasons, there are lots of things that haven’t come out yet.”

Connie went pale, but stood firm. Good woman.

Pivoting on a heel, I started for the van. “Let’s go.”

Gathering our stacks of armaments, the crew jammed into the RV and wiggled for position. Seats were limited and the rest of us stood holding onto conveniently placed ceiling straps. It was an idea I had gotten riding the Brooklyn subway at rush hour. Since time was of the essence, George took the wheel. When it came to combat driving, Mr. Renault could make a person believe that the speed of light was merely a suggestion and not actually a law of physics.

Giving us a brave smile, Mrs. Cunningham cycled open the shutters and we bounced awkwardly over the windowsill. Immediately, George hit the nitrous oxide injector and our fourteen tons of Bureau property literally flew out of the building. Landing with a bone jarring crash, we tore strips out of the lawn and jounced onto the debris filled street. Behind us, the steel shutters rumbled closed.

Swerving around a blast crater, George took a corner on two wheels, and then really hit the gas. A hat flew off my head and I hadn’t been wearing one. Whew!

Zigzagging past Sing-Sing Boulevard, Connie gasped as she saw a ten-meter tall lizard waddling down the center of the street on its plump hind legs. As the beast spotted us, the enlarged dorsal fins began to pulse with a greenish light.

“Brace yourselves!” George warned, shifting gears.

In a roar, the van lurched forward with renewed velocity and slammed directly into the big reptile. It went airborne and tumbling away, a stream of glowing vapor spewed from its open mouth, setting fire to a tree and melting a fireplug. On the dashboard, a Geiger counter began to wildly click.

“Excuse me,” Raul grunted from somewhere within the pile of bodies on the floor. “But is my stomach bothering your elbow?”

“Sorry,” I said and struggled to my feet, then helped the bruised wizard to stand in the rocking RV.

Going to the rear window, Steve stared at the receding lizard as it waddling away. “Hey,” he said in wonder. “Was ... wasn’t that—”

“Get used to it, rookie,” Mindy snapped. She hadn't moved an inch during the collision. “You're in the Bureau now.”

The dark mage was shocked for a moment, then set his jaw. That's the ticket, buddy. It always surprised newcomers to discover that a lot of monster movies were actually footage of Bureau 13 battles. I personally had two hit movies and a TV mini-series to my credit. But novels were what I really wanted. You know, something with class and dignity.

As we barreled across a destroyed lawn, a mummy stepped out of some bushes and spread its bandaged arms wide as if to catch our speeding van.

“It's Billy-Bob!” Raul shouted in warning.

Savagely twisting the steering wheel, George violently careened off the corner of a house, sending out a spray of ceramic tiles. Rebounding off a garage, the van slammed into the ruin of a tank, and then rolled over a sleek sports car. But somehow we managed to avoid the shambling monster.

“Wow, that guy must be ultra powerful,” Ken remarked in awe.

“Billy-Bob? Nah, you could kill him with a sharp stick,” Mindy corrected, sitting calmly in her seat.

“Then why the elaborate evasion?”

“The wrappings are evil,” Jessica explained. “But not the man inside. That's just some poor truck driver from South Carolina. He ran over the mummy, killing the man wearing the wrappings, so the bandages seized him and took off on a five state rampage of death and destruction.”

As we crashed through a diner, Ken frowned. “So if we killed Billy-Bob,” he said slowly. “Then the wrappings would just take over somebody else?”

“Correct.”

“Why not destroy the wrappings?” Connie asked.

Cadets! “Gotta take them off the victim first, which we can't do without slaying Billy-Bob. That was why he was in detention, to protect the innocent man inside the killing bandages.”

“Ah.”

The students were finally starting to understand that not everybody in the Holding Facility was a monster. Some were victims. We even had a few demonic refugees seeking political asylum. It's a crazy world.

Launching a rocket from the roof pod, George blew apart a drooling somuloid and shot through an alleyway. In passing, we saw a pair of people waging a private firefight amidst the madness and chaos of the larger battle. One person was a tall muscular man with a bushy moustache and thick sideburns. He was dressed in a garish green checker jacket and was holding the biggest damn pistol I had ever seen in my life. His opponent was a slim man with slick blonde hair, a flapping lab coat and a robotic arm.

“Freeze, you bozo!” the guy with the moustache bellowed, firing his gigantic pistol a fast three times.

The scientist-type in the lab coat ducked out of the way. “Eat photons, Delphia!” he screeched insanely,

and out lanced a crimson energy beam from the hand of his mechanical arm. The scintillating power ray nicked the jacket of moustache guy and out tumbled a frosty can of beer.

A split second later, we turned another corner and they were gone.

“Who the heck were they?” Katrina asked, not sure if she was shocked or amused.

“Long story,” I sighed. “Tell you later.”

Nearing the Facility, the houses changed from damaged to burning shells, then flattened timbers trampled in the bloody mud. We were in open country now, but there was nobody moving about. An eerie stillness ruled the landscape.

Then with a loud thump, something heavy landed on the roof of our van and started clawing at the windows, gray talons chipping the armored plexiglass. Since George was busy, I flipped a switch on the dashboard. In a dull boom, the outer section of the roof blew off the chassis taking a very surprised harpy along with the luggage rack and air conditioner. By the time she hit the ground, we were long gone. Schmuck. Leaping on a roof was the second oldest trick in the book.

Amid the wreckage on the ground, carnage was rampant, bodies and bloody bits of corpses scattered about everywhere. It was impossible not to run over the grisly goblets of flesh. The only cheering fact was that a lot of the blood was yellow, or green, instead of red, and many of the body parts could never be mistaken for human remains. The Bureau guards had taken their toll, such as it was. Problem was, if each of the monster parts didn't somehow travel to rejoin the rest of the original body, then they would just start to grow a whole new boojum. The tanks and planes had only bought us time, nothing more. And not much of that either, but it would have to be enough.

Slowing our speed, George carefully maneuvered through the crumbled ruins of the once mighty warehouses. Often he had to go backwards to be able to move ahead again, but we always progressed. Going past the destroyed building, we could see that the insides were oddly empty. Obviously, whatever force powering the defensives was long dissipated.

“Excuse me, but the response code is not working,” George announced with deceptive calm, one hand typing madly on a miniature keyboard.

Going to the front seat, I took the keyboard and tried it myself. No response. Same thing with the radio.

“We'll have to ram our way in,” I decided, taking a seat and strapping on a crash harness. “Raul, polymorph a section of the metal wall into wood.”

Gamely, the wizard rolled up his sleeves. “Consider it done, *kemo sabe*.” He gestured and the seamless allotropic steel of the Quonset Hut suddenly was a wide wooden door.

Smashing through the dilapidated wire fence, we zoomed confidently toward the hut. Then the wall reverted back to metal.

Frowning in annoyance, Raul leveled his staff and it became wood again, but for a much shorter time before reverting to steel.

At warp speed we went like a Detroit cannonball across the battlefield, the tall metal wall rising before us like the angry hand of God.

“Oh, Edwardo!” George sang out, sweat dripping off his brow.

“Keep going!” I commanded, feeling my stomach knot. “Katrina, Steven, help Raul!”

Clutching their wands into a triad of unity, the three mages started chanting so fast the words were only a babble. Filling our sight, the towering Quonset Hut flickered into wood, no, metal again. Wood, metal, wood, metal, wood, metal...

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...And the van smashed through the plywood wall, exploding into the Quonset Hut! As the RV screeched to a halt in the cavernous receiving bay, a brick tumbled off our shattered windshield. In the rearview mirror, I watched the metal wall close again. Ulp. A split second either way and the Bureau would have renamed us Team Tunafish Salad.

“Out!” I barked, throwing open the door. “Standard defensive pattern #19!” That was for the students. My people didn't need to be told such basics.

The crowd barely managed to assemble when the floor rippled and the giant mechanical arm reached straight for us. At least part of the Facility was still operational. Boldly walking towards the deadly janitor, I fished out my commission booklet and showed my badge.

“Special Federal Agent Edwardo Alvarez,” I stated nice and loud. “Independent field operative, Bureau 13.”

The hand slowly halted, then briskly turned towards the rest of the group. One at a time, they each identified themselves. Thankfully, everybody had their booklet.

Programmed to be suspicious, the janitor seemed loath to accept such an invasion of agents, but finally it descended into the floor with that same strange watery effect.

“George and I are on point,” I announced, checking the clip in my Uzi 9mm machine pistol. “Sanders and Mindy cover the rear. The gypsy and Jessica in the middle. One meter spread. Silent and hard.”

Raising a finger asking for a pause, George stepped into the van for a moment before joining me at the head of the mob.

“Forget something?” I asked brusquely.

“Just set the van to detonate,” he answered. “Our people will know better that to bother the vehicle, and an explosion will serve to deter any boojum.”

I smiled. “Plus let us know they're coming. Good man.”

Grinning like a poltroon, George stuffed a lollipop into his mouth and snapped the bolt on his M60 to start feeding the linked belt of ammo into the breech mechanism.

Glancing at my watch, I saw there was twenty minutes to go. Plenty of time. Approaching the wall, I glanced it over carefully.

“Jess,” I asked.

My wife placed fingertips to forehead. “Its clear, dear.”

“Raul?”

He waved his staff. “Its clear, dear.”

Everybody laughed, and grinding my teeth I made a mental note to kill him later.

Stepping forward, I pressed my eye against the viewpiece and placed a hand on the wall plate. There was a click and the wall flipped over on a center pivot, the bottom swinging away as the top lowered, serving to push us into the next cubicle whether we wanted to go or not.

Blocking the hallway was a simple iron gate, an Armorlite window spanning the wall alongside. It was impossible to see through the sheet of military plastic as it was too heavily streaked with blood. Inserting my finger into the keyhole of the gate, the mechanism took my print, paused, and then unlocked.

A short tunnel stretched past the gate ending at a huge plastic arch. As I walked through, the scanner rippled with colors to show my aura and alignment. I showed as a normal human, while Jessica was human with a touch of silver. Raul was primarily green, laced with white, a good guy mage. Connie was identical to Jess, and Steve the same as Raul. Somers was green, with rudimentary traces of gray, neutral magic. George was human, but with a faint touch of black, the same as thing Mindy. Ah ha! I always knew those two enjoyed fighting too much. The scanner hummed for a whole minute on Patricia, then gave a golden reading, a true Healer with no offensive abilities.

Trailing the pack, Ken got an odd reading that I never saw before, pure white. I had to check the chart on the nearby wall for that. Solid white meant that he was fanatically good and totally unmagical. Almost magic resistant. Weird.

Beyond the scanner, the floor appeared to be solid stone, but I knew better having been here before and having read the brochure. A closer examination showed the tip of a pair of pointed ears sticking from the surface of the quick-granite trap. Taking my Bureau issue pocketcomb, I tossed it forward. A maser beam flashed over the falling object, and the comb landed with a clatter on the hard flooring. Retrieving my comb, I waved the team onward. A key does not always resemble one, and vice versa.

“I do not understand,” Steve said, skirting around the wiggling ears. “Why isn't this place smashed to bits from the prisoners escaping?”

Watching the shadows in the corners, Patricia snorted. “The Facility is self-repairing. Heck, its damn near alive.”

“What do you mean, almost?” Jessica asked softly, hugging herself.

Shivering slightly, Connie nodded in agreement. In passing, Raul pointed to a crack in the wall that was slowly closing even as we watched. Healing its own wounds. Very neat.

Ahead was a deceptively plain corridor; concrete floor, metal walls, acoustical tiles ceiling. George stayed to the left, I hugged the right. In actuality, this passage was three hallways combined into a one. I could only assume it worked by mixing technology and magic, or maybe it was all done with smoke and

mirrors, I really had no idea. Walking along the corridor, escorted prisoners went to Holding. Strolling along the exact same hallway, Tech Serve scientists arrived at Research, while security officers reached Storage, authorized field agents could go anywhere, and everybody else was dumped into the furnace at the center of the Earth.

Research was where the Bureau scientists experimented on ways to kill the unkillables. Finding the specific material weakness of a supernatural being was an often painstaking, infuriating and pretty grisly business. Most monsters received damage from wood or silver, but some could only be slain by specific holy relics, a unique word, ritual, disease, reruns of M*A*S*H played backwards, true love, or even old age. Understandably, the frenzied scientists had a private bar and toll-free hot line for 24-hour-a-day psychiatric counseling.

Storage was where we kept artifacts too dangerous to leave lying around the world, but that we still wanted to have handy in case of an emergency. Some were damned, some alien, and a few were so incredibly holy that only a truly innocent person of the purest spirit could even go near them without being destroyed. Destroyed. That was the term we taught the cadets, because there really was no earthly equivalent of what happened. You could go insane just by watching. It was worse than professional wrestling.

His Thompson balanced in both hands, Ken gave a tactful cough.

“What?” I whispered.

“If the doors are so difficult to gain exit, and the boojums can chew their way through stone and superhard ice, why didn't they just tunnel out the sides of the Facility instead of dashing into the town where we waited with amassed weapons?”

Sounded like a run-on sentence, but also a good question. Jessica gave the answer. Set in kilometers of concrete merely to keep it steady, the outer walls and bottom of the Facility were a transdimensional energy shield; a solidified version of a forcefield, prismatic dome and psionic death barrier combined. It was absolutely indestructible. End of discussion. Thermonuclear bombs could not even scratch the surface. A space warping gravitational pull of a neutron star would have no effect. A supernova didn't have enough umph to warm a square centimeter.

Sadly, the Bureau could not take the credit for making this bit of superscience, and if the barrier got damaged we could not fix it, because no human had built the object. If the truth be told, we stole The Cup. It was the first assignment I was ever on, and brother, it was almost my last.

With impenetrable sides and bottom, the only way in or out of the Facility was the top, and that we could take credit for. At the end of the corridor was the main exit, an odd tunnel that resembled an inverted porcupine and rolled into a tube. But instead of quills, this tunnel was packed with weapons: machine guns, chainsaws, spears, lances, swords, flamethrowers, bazookas, frost wands, laser cannons, microwave beamers, poison gas jets, acid squirters, crossbows, vibro-swords, blowguns, lightning rods and so on, and so forth. Except for a two-foot wide strip of floor down the middle, every inch of the tunnel bristled with deathdealers.

Personally, I hadn't been able to fathom how the prisoners got past this mother of a gate, but a single glance told the answer. The tunnel was deactivated, the weapons hung limply from the curved wall, dangling and clanging like a jungle of dead metal wind chimes. Mindful of the sharp edges, George and I eased into the curtain of jingling weapons. George was a bit pale, but resolute. He hated tunnels of any sort after a nasty experience in Viet Nam as a teenager.

Using the tip of her staff, Katrina carefully prodded a barbed javelin. The weapon shattered like Depression glass. "Czar's blood," she whispered. "What could done this?"

Interesting, I was noticing that her accent got thicker the more excited she was. An important tip to remember for future poker sessions.

"Must have been an EMP bomb," George stated, walking in a smooth line, one boot placed exactly in front of the other as if traveling through a minefield.

Ducking his head, Steve brushed a nest of drooping machine guns out of his way. "A what kind of bomb?"

"An electro-magnetic pulse bomb," George explained, watching everywhere for danger. "A tesla coil accumulator emits a spit charge to generate a split second full spectrum, magnetic field that fries transistors and computer chips."

"And that is bad," said Ken as a question.

After a pause, George politely agreed. Yes, that was very bad and very high tech. Any electronic equipment controlled by microprocessors or transistors would be rendered useless. But an EM pulse would have no effect on the magical defensives, and the Facility used both.

I snorted in annoyance. EMP bombs were merely the latest toy of humanity. It seemed to me that the higher the technology, the easier it was to destroy. The only real way to stop a good, old-fashioned, steam locomotive was to drop it off a cliff. Preferably to land on top of another steam locomotive.

Flinching and dodging, Jessica tried to avoid the hanging ironmongery of doom. "These have been used," she stated, stooping under a faintly humming vibro-sword. "And more than once."

"There have been escapes before," I admitted honestly.

"But nothing on the scale of today."

"Never."

Parting the last of the impotent armaments with our gun barrels, George and I stepped out of the tunnel, moving out of the way of the folks behind in case we needed some combat room. But there was only darkness, deep and silent. Not a sound could be heard, even our own breath seemed to be hushed.

I don't like this, Jessica sent.

"Me either. Infra-red," I ordered, touching a switch on my helmet.

Illumination returned to my visor, and I could see that my team was standing on a small ledge that jutted from the ebony wall like the hand of a starving beggar. To our left was a sloped walkway that flowed along the curving wall, going down and out of sight into the stygian depths. A pipe railing alongside the walkway offered meager protection from tumbling off the abrupt edge into the nothingness.

Careful of my balance, I glanced over the railing. Total blackness stretching into infinity. Vertigo seized me for a moment as ghostly echoes drifted upward, distant pinpoints of light flickered in the great abyss

resembling dying stars. In actuality, they must have been fires lit by the prisoners to try and see their way to the exit. Torches made from bed linen, perhaps burning hair, or each other.

“How deep is it?” Ken asked, sounding impressed. There was no echo of his words, the distance consumed the words and gave nothing back.

“It bottomless,” Mindy said, lowering the rainbow effect of her sword with a twist of the pommel.

“Factual or poetic?”

Sanders sure had an odd way of talking. “Literal,” I replied.

“Then what does it rest on?” Steve asked puzzled.

“The exterior is buttressed on a bed of ferro-concrete only a few miles away, but the inside goes on forever without a bottom.”

Dimming her own wand, Katrina frowned. “How is that possible?”

“You tell us and win a million dollars from Horace Gordon and the eternal gratitude of TechServ,” I said.

Glancing upward, I could dimly see an octopus in medieval armor hanging suspended from the ceiling. Each of its limbs were supposed to be holding a magic wand with a different property. No wands were in sight, and I had a feeling that the armor was empty. So long Lou, best of luck in the afterlife.

"Hai!" Mindy cried falling on her butt, both hands slapping the floor as she hit.

The students rushed over to assist the shaken martial artist back to her feet, while the rest of us could only stare in dumbfoundment. Mindy Jennings fell down?

Keeping a hand gripped tight on the railing, Mindy eased her sneaker onto the sloped walkway and pushed it about. There was no squeaky sound of rubber on wax.

“Frictionless surface,” Mindy declared, retreating to a safe distance. “If I hadn't been able to throw myself backwards, I would be sliding my way to the bottom of the Facility.”

Hesitantly going close, Patricia spit on the walkway and it slid away without a trace. “At about a zillion miles per hour,” she added as a guess.

Swell. I hadn't encountered anything like this before. The stairs had been in place last time I visited.

“Find the controls to extend the stairs,” I said, shouldering my weapon. “George, Sanders and the twins on guard.”

We spent a precious two minutes on a fruitless search of the ledge. If the controls were here and not secreted somewhere else entirely, there were hidden beyond our ability to find them. Linking our belts together, we wasted another minute doing a comedy routine of drunks on ice as the team attempted to walk down the frictionless surface. Even the railing was made of the same slippery stuff. Lose your grip for a split tick and whoosh!

Gathering the mages in a huddle, Raul held a fast conference with Steve and Katrina.

“SOSF?” Steve offered hesitantly.

“Seems the best way,” Somers noted.

“I’ll do it,” Raul announced. “You two watch and learn.”

Katrina bowed. “We obey, Obi Wan.”

“Smart ass,” George said as a compliment.

Gesturing and chanting, Raul tapped each of our shoes with his silver staff and the footwear now clung to the ground as if it was flat and level. Laughing in delight, Mindy even ran up the wall to stand perpendicular to us.

“Shoes of Sure Footing,” Raul explained, as we hurried along the walkway. “Its such an ancient conjure I nearly forgot the words.”

“What was SOSF originally used for?” Patricia asked, lifting and placing each foot with exaggerated care. “Mountain climbers? Or was it for sailors at sea to stay on deck during a storm?”

“Thieves.”

“Ah.”

Passing an alcove set into the black wall above us, I noticed a security camera sitting motionless. How had that happened? Even with the electronics dead, there still should have been battery power, and there was clearly no external damage. Strange.

Glancing about for any other cameras, I noticed a barely discernable square of pure ebony coming our way from the darkness overhead. Bloody hell, a flapjack!

“Incoming!” I shouted over the chatter of my machine pistol, the spent brass shells hitting the walkway to instantly slide away with out a noise. “Twelve o’clock high!”

“Roman Candle!” George ordered, his M60 spitting lead upward.

In rough unison, everybody cut loose with their weapons; beams, Fire Lances, arrows and bullets impacted into the deadly flying chameleon, the muzzle flashes strobing the dark in a wild disco effect. The sheer physical mass of our weaponry held the beastie at bay until Katrina shouted a spell.

Instantly, the flapjack shot down the central shaft of the Facility, disappearing into the blackness as it was hot for a date with the sexiest lady flapjack who ever lived.

“What did you do?” Steve asked, staring over the railing.

Patting the Russian on the shapely shoulder, Raul chuckled, “She used a Fly spell.”

“But it was flying.”

“Now it flies for me,” Katrina answered proudly. “At thirty two feet, per second per second,

compounded by the maximum velocity of the species. When spell wears off, animal will be too far away to annoy again. Unless we are lucky and it hits something hard on way down.”

I was starting to like this gal. She fought mean.

Unfortunately, our gunshots seemed to have attracted the attention of the other denizens of the Facility. Distant growls and slobbers did not sound so distant anymore, and some of those burning stars were coming up the walkway in a steady line.

“Double time, hush,” I whispered, screwing a magical silencer onto my .357 Magnum revolver. “Use silenced weapons only. Harch!”

In tight order, we moved down the walkway and soon began to encounter side corridors. Let me see, we're in section 3, so we wanted level 17, corridor 5, number 12.

The torches from below were uncomfortably close, the growls nearly understandable words and we were running when I finally reached the correct corridor. Silently, I pointed inside and my team rushed off the ramp. Raul paused until everybody else was inside, then sprayed the mouth of the corridor with a smoky discharge from his staff. The end of the corridor closed solid just as the sounds of the prisoners arrived, then proceeded onward. Whew, close one.

Yowsa, Connie sent telepathically.

Moving deeper into the corridor, the passage way lined with the doors to cells. Some had broken hinges, others were ruptured in the middle, and a few were completely missing.

“Hey,” Steve called. “This cell is still sealed!”

“Excellent,” Sanders replied, tightening a silencer covered with Celtic runes on the barrel of his Desert Eagle .50 automatic. “Then we do not have to bother with the occupant. Come along!”

But curiosity got the better of the mage and he glanced inside.

“Well, hi there,” Steve said in a gentle voice. “What are you doing in there?” Then a scream was ripped from his throat as the mage threw an arm across his face for protection and retreated dragging his sister along.

In muffled coughs, Sanders pumped a few silver-jacketed rounds through the grille of the door and when he stopped I peeked inside. Sitting on a dirty mattress was a weeping little girl in a torn dress, cradling a ragtag doll. The pitiful figure was rocking the toy in her arms and crying that mommy would be back soon and take them home. Oh give me a break.

“Nice try, Hecthrope,” I snorted. “But we're the guys who put you here, numbnuts.”

Turning her head without moving her shoulders, the thing on the bed snarled and shot out a forked tongue that slammed into the grille denting the steel. Slowly the metal straightened back to normal.

While Connie comforted her shaken brother, Jessica scowled at the trembling student wizard. “Steve, can't you read?”

“Read what?” he demanded sniffing.

Using my Magnum, I pointed at the door. “That!”

“Ah, Ed, there's nothing there,” Mindy noted, tapping the featureless door with her sword.

Eh? Damn, the warning sign had been removed. Just a bit of horseplay from the departing boojums. Har-har.

“Sorry, Steve,” Jessica apologized.

“How come this supernatural is still a prisoner?” Ken asked, checking the hinges to see if they had been rigged somehow.

“Madam Hecthrope's weakness is steel,” I explained, moving again. “She can't touch it, or even go near the metal.”

Resting her wand on a shoulder, Katrina made a face, “A rather feeble weakness, comrade.”

Checking each jail cell with his wand before walking past, Raul set her straight. “Well, a few thousands years ago in the Bronze Age, Hecthrope was big stuff. But then came the Iron Age.” Then the mage smiled. “We captured her with a truckload of spatulas.”

The students laughed, and a menacing growl sounded from the cell. Some demons just do not have a sense of humor.

There were no more surprises, and my team continued on until we reached number 12 south. This door was still intact, with only a vacant cell showing through the grille. Ignoring the prominent slot in the locking mechanism as a trap, I slid my Bureau ID card into a crack in the wall. There was a hum, a click, a gurgle, and with a hydraulic hiss, the twenty-ton door cycled open taking along a good section of the stone block wall. Now that was what I called a door.

“The Facility command center is hidden in a cell?” Connie asked sounding askance.

Leveling her M16, Patricia shrugged. “What should they do? Advertise its location with a nice big neon sign reading, ‘Monsters: Don't Come Here to Escape?’”

She nodded. “Hmm, good point.”

Stepping past the already closing door, we entered the command center. To the left was an office behind a yard thick sheet of Armorlite plastic. To the right was a thick steel lattice closing off a complex array of pipes, conduits and cables that constituted a 22nd Century tokomac fusion reactor. Horace Gordon himself had stolen that baby from the Royal Empire of Australia during World War IX in an alternate future. TechServ took very good care of the machine as replacement parts were damn hard to get delivered.

In the center of the room, was a raised dais with railed stairs leading to the top on four sides and cresting the platform was a short cylinder of glass. The holograph projector should have been showing a detailed picture of the interior of the jail, but it was clear. Curving around the cylinder was a bank of control stations, each with a video monitor, a computer keyboard and enough dials, switches, buttons and levers to launch a space shuttle. Skeletons draped in the tattered threads of uniforms were sprawled on the floor, sitting at the console chairs and entangled in the works of the humming tokomac. In the distant

corner, a coffee machine was bubbling merrily. Katrina turned it off. Whatever hit the guards never gave them a chance to defend themselves. What could possibly have moved that fast?

However, time was short. Directly in front of us was a low barricade made of sandbags full of fairy dust. The nest held a .75 Gatling machine gun, a Bedlow polycyclic laser cannon, and a Palooka Joe. That weapon we had purchased from a parallel dimension which the Bureau was rather friendly with and bartered goods on a regular basis. They had advanced technology, but had never discovered fermentation so we sold them six packs of Budweiser for weaponry. A good deal for everybody.

The Palooka Joe was their best deathdealer yet, the fiendish device combined a tight-focus tractor beam with a wide-angle pressure beam. The result being that your body was forced away under 35 tons of pressure, while your guts were yanked forward under an additional 35 tons of pressure. Designed as an anti-robot weapon, it served our purpose of stopping the boojums well, if rather messily.

“Stay alert,” I said, keeping pressure on the pistol-grip safety of my Uzi. “Standard defensive pattern. I’m going to check Gil’s office for the fail safe.”

The door to the office was unlocked and sure enough there it was, hidden behind a hinged painting of the good clone of J. Edgar Hoover. The insulated lever was bright yellow and black stripes, and bordered by brilliant red warning lines. Subtly, gotta love it. With a sigh of relief, I pulled the handle and from a panel of meters in the main room there erupted a spray of sparks.

“A relay blew,” Jessica announced, lifting the lid of the smoking control board. “Must have gotten a short circuit when the rest of the electrical systems died.”

“Well, fix it!” I bellowed, glancing at the ceiling and feeling the first tug of panic. Had that been footsteps I heard overhead?

Twisting the plastic locks, Jessica yanked away a panel covering and wiggled deep into the maze of circuitry. “I’ll try. But I’m only a home stereo technician. Anybody got a tool kit?”

Digging under my flak jacket and sweater-vest, I unearthed a damp Swiss Army knife and tossed it to George, who passed it to Ken, who relayed it to Jessica.

“This’ll do for starters,” she said, prying the blades loose. “But try and find me some real tools!”

Yanking open drawers, I began rummaging through Gil’s desk, and the rest of the team scattered in a frantic search. We each had a working wristwatch but nobody wanted to check how close to the deadline we were.

“Is the tokomac okay?” Steve asked, staring at the great machine.

“It’s fine,” Mindy replied, checking her belt pouches. “The device is shielded inside a Faraday Cage, a fine wire mesh screen with an electrical current running through it constantly. No external EM pulses can penetrate.”

“Why don’t we shield the whole base that way?”

“Because it takes half of the power of the t-mac just to protect itself. We’d need a thousand of them to shield the entire base.”

Slamming shut the last drawer in the desk, I took the plunge and glanced at my watch. Five minutes to go. "Will this take long, Jess?" I asked in a deceptively calm voice.

"Not if you don't interrupt me!" she retorted over a shoulder, ripping out loose wires with her teeth.

Fair enough.

"Oh, Ed!" Raul sang out with an odd expression on his face.

With the Uzi at my hip, I spun about on the alert. "What?"

The mage jerked a thumb at the door and mouthed the word, 'monsters'.

"How many?" Ken asked, jerking free the huge ungainly clip of his Thompson and sliding in a fresh magazine.

"Too many," Mindy said, cupping a hand to her ear. "And they know we're here."

Oh fudge. "Anybody know how to operate these?" I asked hopefully, patting the Palooka Joe. There was a negative chorus. It had been a feeble hope at best.

Suddenly, there came a low steady pounding on the door, bits of wall and stonework falling to the floor. Ah, the monsters had arrived to pay us a social call. How nice.

"Okay," I said, unfolding the wirestock of the Uzi. "We buy Jess some time the hard way. Formation two, routine nineteen."

"And which one is that, comrade?" Katrina asked, standing still while everybody shuffled into position.

With a grim expression, Patricia worked the bolt on an M16 carbine. "Just follow my lead, blondie."

"Da, tovarisch."

We quickly formed a semicircle before the door. Knives were loosened, safeties clicked off, grenades prepared, spare ammo made ready, wands polished, potions sipped, lotions poured and powders sprinkled. Katrina even went so far as to draw a fake trapdoor on the floor with a piece of chalk. What the hell, it couldn't hurt.

The pounding increased and cracks began to appear in the door and wall. Suddenly, a hole burst through and there was head of an iron golem. Taking careful aim, I tossed a thermite grenade into the opening. The explosive charge bounced off his metal head, and Ken added a burst of .45 slugs as a distraction. The golem retreated and the grenade detonated loudly. From the screams created, it seemed that our gift was not well received. Damn, and I had lost the receipt.

Muttering wildly, Raul gestured and a thick brick wall appeared in front of the hole, but a black iron fist smashed through that without a moment's hesitation. In short order, another hole was formed and clawing hands started to combine the openings.

Weapons at the ready, we waited. Let the boojums exhaust themselves getting inside, then we would attack. Good or bad, that was the plan.

Pushing through the enlarged hole, a female centaur without skin shot lances of flame from her eyes. Raul met the attack with a golden ray from his staff and the fire changed to confetti. A ropy thing wiggled into view and George hurled a concussion grenade into its mouth. There was a muffled bang and the string monster unraveled, showering the other boojums with a wealth of disgusting stuff. Don't think I'll ever eat spaghetti again. Feh.

But now the door fell apart and creatures charged all together. Her face a mask of concentration, Katrina waved her wand and an iron portcullis materialized in front of them. Unable to stop in time, a waspwoman clanged both of heads into the grill and dropped unconsciousness.

Holding our positions behind the sandbags, we started firing in volleys, carefully aiming for the holes in the grillwork. Mostly we succeeded, but a few ricochets zinged backwards and we got some hits. Thankfully, our bodyarmor saved us from any serious injury.

Screeching in protest, the metal barrier was ripped, torn and beaten out of the way by hands, claws, and tentacles. The first thing stepping through was a nasty customer resembling a human being whose entire body was covered with slavering mouths full of tiny sharp teeth.

“Banzai!” Mindy cried, and both of her hands jerked forward.

Silver throwing stars hit the forehead of Many Mouth Man, and he fell backwards in a chorus of screams. Then a wave of dizziness swept over the team, but Connie clenched a fist to her forehead and the feeling passed. I hate it when something tries to eat my soul, that just ruins my whole day.

Steady as a statue, Ken controlled the bucking Thompson, the stream of mixed rounds blowing away chunks and lumps of monsters. My Uzi peppered a constant fusillade of 9mm Parabellum rounds into the amassed hellspawn, Connie and the M16 added controlled bursts of perfectly imbalanced 5.56mm tumblers and hardball AP rounds to the barrage, and the chanting mages were barely audible above the yammering fury of George's big M60 machine rifle. But our ammo was shrinking with astonishing speed.

Lighting crackled, explosions thunders, snow chilled, flame cooked, deafening noise, utter silence, flying knives, bullets, bombs, grenades, steel and wood, shells, and spells. An Invisible Fist broke my nose and I spat blood out of my mouth. The Thompson mysteriously jammed, but Katrina smacked it with her wand and the weapon started working normally once more. Raul began to constantly chant the word ‘tunafish’, but it seemed to have less effect each time.

“Avon Calling!” I bellowed.

Unexpectedly for the monsters, a Dutch door appeared between them and us. There was a momentary pause as we stopped firing, then the female centaur worked the latch and swung aside the upper half of the split door. My team was ready. We tossed through every spare grenade and the mages slammed a double granite wall over the Dutch door. The barrage of HE charges cut loose in a muffled staccato blast and lights fixtures of the command center dimmed. Then a section of the granite barrier cracked apart and Many Mouth Man poked his misshapen head through the hole howling and drooling. Mindy stabbed him through the jaw, pinning one mouth closed, but the rest merely took up the cry of anguish and fury.

“Jess, how is it going?” I called, triggering a spray of 9mm cold iron rounds into the wiggling boojums. Incredibly, they actually appeared uglier afterwards. Had not thought it was possible.

“Anybody got a twenty-five amp transistor and some number fourteen wire?” she retorted, both hands busy.

“Don't think so!” Connie shouted over the burping M16. Brass shells covered the floor outside the sandbags like golden leaves. Hopefully they were slippery golden leaves.

“Mindy, give me a shuriken!” Jess ordered, raising a hand.

Without breaking stride, Ms. Jennings flipped a hand backwards and an oriental throwing star slammed into the console a scant inch away from my wife's waiting fingers. Jess pulled the blade free and started whittling on something very small.

Taking a stance, Katrina thumped the floor with her wand and all of the skeletons wearing uniforms rose to attention, their loose bones rattling like castanets.

"Obey me!" she intoned in a Voice Of Command. *"Into the sandbag nest and stand by the guns!"*

We hastily got out of the way as the skeletons climbed into the sandbag nest and crouched behind the weapons, sleeves on the triggers.

"Fire!" Somers roared. *"Shoot!"*

But the bone boys remained motionless.

Nice try on her part, but zombies can't do anything their masters can not. Plus, it was a good thing she hadn't tried that trick with Father Donaher present. Catholic priests take a dim view of zombies in general, and it would have caused the most interesting of confrontations. The equivalent of checking your full gas tank with a lit match, kind of interesting.

"Charge!" Katrina yelled in the Voice, and the dead guards rallied at the massed monsters, only to be vaingloriously annihilated once more.

The hellspawn retreated for a moment to lick their wounds, so I dropped spent shells from my smoking hot revolver and used a speedloader of Glaser Sure-Kill slugs. My last. The situation was grim, the mages appeared exhausted, and Connie was pale, her hair a wild corona from the secondary static created by so much concentrated psionic outpouring. We were low on ammo and out of grenades. Mindy and Ken were both bleeding from minor wounds, and suddenly I noticed that I was too. When had that happened?

Screaming insanely, the prisoners rushed us in a mob. A tripwire sent the front line into a pigpile, and Raul cast a sticky spider web to keep them that way. Then Katrina added a poison gas cloud and they started coughing out small organs, only to stuff them back in again. As the web began dissolving, Katrina said something short and biting in Russian. Using my pocket lighter, I ignited the softening web, then twisted the top of the lighter and tossed it into the wiggling pile. The lighter detonated into a fireball and WaspWoman keened as her stinger was blown completely blown off.

“Timex!” I commanded, and the team set their wristwatches to explode, then stuffed them into any orifice we could safely reach. The combined blasts were pleasing, but brief. Already the dismembered bodies were reforming, the dead rising once more.

Using her sword, Mindy started hacking the boojums into pieces, but they arched around the martial artist and charged the ramparts of the sandbag wall. In a heartbeat they were among us and our firing line broke apart into solo combat. Moving incredibly fast, Ken dodged a stream of fire, and leapt upon the

female centaur to rip out her throat with his teeth. Yellow blood gushed from the hideous wound and the monster staggered away to heal. Wow, this guy made J.P. Withers seem like a Mormon!

Steel blades snapped into position from the ends of Raul's silver staff and he started wildly swinging. Bits of flesh and hide went flying, then a blade snapped off as the mage hit something very hard and totally invisible. Snarling savagely, Connie was firing her carbine one bullet at a time, slowly retreating with her brother into the control room.

Biting a lip, Steve formed an ethereal blade in his free hand and began thrusting and jabbing as best he could. The dais was right behind us, Jessica only feet away.

“Hold the line!” I shouted, throwing my empty gun and kicking an incubus right where it would hurt the most. He dropped moaning, and I kicked him again for good measure.

Going side by side, George dropped the empty M60 and started firing a .45 Colt automatic, while Katrina Somers went into a boxer's crouch and began punching monsters with astonishing results. Then I noticed she was wearing velvet gloves that pulsed with magic through my visor. Velvet gloves, iron first? Cool.

Finally out of ammo, I threw the second Magnum to clang off the iron golem, drained the last of my Strength potion and pulled out a French police baton from my belt. With a snap the six-inch handle of telescoping steel extended to its full meter in length and I started busting heads with the rest of the best. We were literally going down swinging.

“Done!” Jessica called out in triumph.

Clambering over a jade statue of Kali brandishing a garrote, the string demon charged me and went stock still to topple over limp as used yarn. Must have been Brain Blasted by my sweetie. What a wife! She could cook, too.

Bet your ass I can.

“Get the switch!” I yelled going hand-to-hand-to-hand-to-hand with the WaspWoman. The blasted hellgrammite was metamorphosing even as I smashed her mandibles. For the first time ever, I took true delight in hitting a lady.

“Move fast, Jess!” Raul added. He was cornered by a trio of blind, cackling witches who had just joined the party. Each wore a necklace of fresh human eyes that blinked and wept cool tears.

More monsters were arriving as the sounds of our battle spread throughout the Facility. Not good. Extremely not good.

Dodging the hands of Kali, Jess hitched her skirt and started for the office with Patricia running interference. A pale snaggletooth morlock tried to snatch my wife and the gypsy Healer slammed it aside in a par four tackle worthy of any baseball center! Or some such sports analogy.

Dashing past the control dais, Jessica jerked to a halt and began to grapple with something invisible. With a horrible ripping noise, the clothes were torn off her bodyarmor, red blood welling from deep slashes on her exposed arms.

My love! Stabbing a robotic vole in the eye with WaspWoman's stinger, I dove towards my wife and

leapt upon the spectral alligator. Ripping off my helmet, I stuffed it into the snarling mouth of the Jurassic ghost which activated the KillJoy charge and blew off its head.

Throating that wild jungle yell, Ken grabbed the skinless centaur and threw her straight through the Armorlite window of the office. The crash was deafening. Reduced to a pulpy mess of bones and flesh, the twitching blob smacked into the wall and slid down to land on the switch, its weight shifting the lever to the next position with a loud, satisfying click. Yes!

Instantly, the lights brightened in the room and every thing in sight was incased in a shimmering bubble of bright blue. Floating helplessly away, the prisoners pounded, moaned and raged in silent fury inside their private prismatic forceballs. Every creature, boojum, and monster in Bangor Maine, from the towering giants to the tinniest were-microbe, visible or invisible, physical, ethereal or pure energy, was now being forcibly hauled back to its waiting cell.

Leaning on his staff, Raul bent over panting for breath. Mindy and Ken shared a high five slap, I clutched my aching leg, George and Katrina hugged, as did the twins. Success!

“No,” Jessica wheezed, slumping to the filthy floor. “W-we're operating on battery power. Got no more than a few minutes at best.”

Limping badly, Patricia moved to my wife and laid on healing hands. The wounds slowed their bleeding and started to close. Retracting his force blade, Steve opened a medical kit and Connie started repairs on the rest of us.

“Can we fix the link to the main reactor?” she asked, busy with Ken.

Shrugging out of the ruined shirt, Jessica shook her head. “I'm a telepath, not a nuclear physicist. I have no idea.”

Going to the steel lattice, Raul inspected the tokomac. “Maybe I can trickle a lighting bolt into the reserve batteries,” he suggested. “That might extend their service life.”

“Give it a try,” I ordered, mopping the blood off my face.

The mage got busy and lights flashed.

“Well?” Ken asked.

“No good,” Raul replied, slumping against the wall. “If General MacAdams and Phoenix Team don't get here soon we're spam in a can.”

Without warning, a dazzling rainbow exploded in the middle of the command center, and there stood a dozen hulking figures, cold gray metal giants twice the size of a human. Grimacing against our pain, my team stood and faced this new menace, raising our meager weapons for the last hurrah.

“Shakespeare,” a suit of powerarmor said, four silver stars shining brightly on its louvered shoulders.

“Bacon,” I managed to reply, happily watching the Phoenix Team lug a portable generator over to the damaged relay and start hardwiring it into place. “And general, you just saved ours.”

Yet one hour later, I learned the awful truth. We had failed in every way possible, because this had not

been a mass escape of supernatural prisoners.

It was a robbery.

SEVEN

Less than an hour later, we gathered in a small dark room.

This time there were no jokes about popcorn, no silly buttons, no clever quips. This was business. My team was here to watch the tapes and films from the hidden security cameras showing what had happened to allow the worst escape and second worst massacre, in the history of the Bureau. And hopefully find out who the hell was responsible.

As usual, victory came at a price, a hundred guards and scientists were dead. Plus five of the students. Even worse, Steve and Connie requested permanent assignment to office work. Apparently, Steve could not accept the grim reality of our work, and where baby brother went, sis had to follow. Such a shame, Constance Gilbert would have made a damn fine field agent.

Settling ourselves into the cushioned seats, I sat back and waited for the films to start. There was a folding movie screen at the front of the room, a brace of video projectors and an old 16mm film projectors on a folding table behind, along with stacks of film cans, and video cassettes.

As the senior agents here, Horace Gordon had assigned us the task of tracking down the who and why of the matter. Smart move. If he hadn't, we probably would have done it anyway.

"Ready when you are, Rosy," I said, steadying the clipboard in my lap. Jessica may have an eidetic memory, but I liked to have my own notes to review.

What light there was in the room faded away completely. "Here we go," Reverend Rosenberg said flipping switches with his good arm, the other swaddled in a heavy cast.

The movie screen filled with an aerial view of our arrival and meeting with Gil. Then our subsequent journey through Bangor, and then our Chicago boojum being hauled into the Holding Facility. From that point on, we paid close attention.

As the last struggling chunk of Lumpy was dragged into the prison, the monster reformed and leapt at the waiting guards. In midair it was encased in a brilliant blue bubble of anti-magic very similar to the fail-safe spheres.

A guard with a hand held control box floated the hairless lionoid along the corridor past the flip-top wall, through the iron gate and to the scanner. The arch gave no aura reading. Clearly puzzled, the guards tried again, and then once more. After conferring with TechServ over the wristwatches, the guards boosted the scanner to maximum, and even by-passed the safeties.

As Lumpy entered the field the arch registered a solid black aura, laced with purple and green. The guards gasped at the sheer amount of the evil shown and suddenly there was a tremendous explosion. Now in place of the boojum was a tall, slim man with a lantern jaw, slicked back hair with dapper touches of gray at the temples, and dressed in a formal tuxedo. What the hell?

However, what really caught our attention was the six-foot long diamond wizard's staff in his hands. *Aye*

carumba! Not even Merlin owned a diamond staff! This guy could eat Raul for a snack and never work up a sweat. No wonder he had been able to reform after exploding into pieces and fool my sunglasses. What couldn't this grand master of the occult do?

Our people bravely jumped the wizard. The staff pulsed once and only greasy smoke hung in the air where once six humans stood. At this point the unauthorized magic was causing alarms to sound in the Facility. Doors clanged shut and the tunnel stiffened to full status. Then the boojum human waved his wand. It disappeared and the video camera went blank.

Turning pale, Katrina and Raul made gagging noises.

“H-his staff?” Somers gasped, holding her face.

“He destroyed his own staff?” Raul stated, each word spoken louder than the one before.

Hmm, I had to admit that I'd never heard of anybody doing that before. Not even when the mage's own life was at stake.

With a ratcheting noise, the Bell & Howell 16mm camera took over. It must have been minutes later because monsters were everywhere, a rampaging horde of hellspawn. The guards fought and died in droves. Trembling in revulsion, Jessica had to turn away, but the rest of us forced ourselves to watch everything. Information was more important than personal feelings. We would cry and mourn at the loss of friends and co-workers at a more appropriate moment.

Striding through the boiling crowd came our mystery man. A few of the escaping prisoners tried to consume him, but Tuxedo Ted tossed tiny vials at them and blew the creatures apart. After that, he walked unscathed through the boisterous mob, nobody even coming closer than ten feet. Thus proving once more that supernatural did not mean stupid.

The steps were still extended on the spiral walkway, and Mystery Man skipped over the mutilated human bodies humming a happy tune. I was really starting to hate this guy. At level 84, which was as far down as the Bureau had ever reached, Mr. Happy met with three other prisoners who seemed to have been waiting for his arrival.

“You are early,” an oriental gentleman said, both hands hidden deep in the flowing sleeves of his colorful kimono.

I knew him, Rasamor, the vampire.

“Up yours,” George growled, rubbing a scar on his neck from where Rasamor had come within too-damn-close to having Sgt. Renault join the ranks of the undead.

In sympathy, Katrina added something appropriately vulgar in Russian.

Scribbling steadily, I frowned at their casual greeting. Rasamor Hoto was better known to the Bureau as Vampire X. Originally just a regular vampire, he had unfortunately been living in a small industrial Japanese village named Nagasaki towards the end of World War II.

Somehow he survived the atomic blast, but was forever radically changed. Now anybody who died within ten blocks, the precise blast zone of the Fat Man bomb, would become a vampire. A regular vampire, thank goodness. But that included anybody at all who died with that range; car accident victims,

heart attacks, cancer patients, suicides, or even old age. Rasamor didn't have to have anything to do with their demise, merely being there was enough to make the transformation occur. Plus, all of the new vampires were his slaves, mind, body and soul. He saw what they saw and heard they heard. Before we finally destroyed his army and captured Hoto, you could always find Hoto near the scene of any major disaster. The bigger, the better.

“Alert,” I said curtly into my watch. “Code Ten. Rasamor Hoto is free. It is mandatory that everybody who died today has a wooden stake pounded through their heart immediately. This is a priority notice!”

“Confirmed, and already done” my timepiece said. The voice sounded like Prof. Burton. “Geez, Alvarez, don't you think we know who was in Holding?”

Good point. “Sorry,” I recanted.

“Better safe than dead,” Raul muttered, hugging his staff.

With a start, Mindy ceased stropping her sword and stared at the mage. “I think that is the very first time you have ever quoted a Bureau 13 regulation,” she said.

He shrugged. “Had to happen sometime.”

From the rear of the room, Rosy cleared his throat, I gave a wave and he continued the film.

The second supernatural was Goshnar, a pulsating, gelatinous mass with more mouths than brains. A genuine prehistoric pain in the ass, we had a theory that Goshnar was what happened to all of the dinosaurs. He ate them. Goshnar was another unkillable, chop him into bits and the blob would only be reborn somewhere else in the world less than a minute later.

Leaving a slime trail, Goshnar advanced closer and made a guttural noise. The unknown mage responded in kind.

“Translation,” I requested, pencil at the ready.

“Sorry, Ed,” Jessica apologized. “I don't know that language, and can't read thoughts off a film.”

Damn.

Stepping out of the shadows came a bipedal being of medium height and average build. The tan humanoid jumpsuit wore gloves and boots of plain utilitarian black, while the flattened ecliptic helmet was a tinted mirror that reflected nothing.

“Tanner,” Reverend Rosenberg growled hatefully.

It was him all right, no doubt about that, whatever his name actually was in his native tongue. The cryptic symbols on the front of the alien battlesuit seemed to vaguely resemble the Earthly letters TNR, and so it had been nicknamed Tanner. The sentient powerarmor had forcefields, a force shield, laser beams, proton rays, bio-disrupters, very nasty imploders, was superstrong and could fly. A remnant from some forgotten alien empire, Tanner was always raiding military stores and NASA to try and steal enough parts to build a battlecruiser and conquer the Earth to forge a slave army and then return home with an armada to help win a war, which we believe, was long over a millennium ago. But try and convince him of that.

“Yes. Our. Plan. Has. Worked. Well,” Tanner spoke, each word pronounced separately.

Undulating closer, Goshnar burred and gargled.

Arching an eyebrow, the mage seemed to take umbrage. “That is not true! Only I was able to penetrate this base and disrupt their magical defenses, especially the ethereal bonds holding Tanner prisoner.”

“And it took the destruction of your wand to do it, scum,” Raul throated, his hands twisting on his staff as if was the enemy mage's throat.

“Yet,” Tanner said in its smooth, emotionless voice. “It. Was. I. Who. Then. Released. An. Electro. Magnetic. Pulse. That. Disrupted. Their. Primitive. Devices.”

“However,” Hoto interrupted, “Only I had communications with the outside world through a link with my only surviving slave and could coordinate the escape plans.”

Mentally, I tipped a hat to the creatures on the screen. Nothing I loved more than chatty enemies. Maybe if we listened long enough we might find out the location of Jimmy Hoffa. I started to alert Base Command that Hoto had a slave, but Jessica stopped me with a thought.

They already know, she sent. Besides, it doesn't matter.

Why?

Watch.

Strolling along the strangely quiet walkway, the fearsome four went to the access corridor, turned and entered the base again. But this time, they appeared in Storage. Alert and armed, the guards rallied to defend the level. It was a slaughter.

“Are you sure there are no recording devices functioning?” Rasamor asked, wiping a trickle of blood from his red mouth. At his shoes, a guard was groaning into death, a hand blindly clawing at a holster, then went forever still.

“Impossible,” Mystery Man snorted, straightening his hair with one of our combs. “Every magic powered machine is numb from my deudonic blast.”

Deudonic, ah ha! Now what the heck was that?

The material that composes a wizard staff.

“And. All. Electronic. Machines. Are. Deactivated. From. My. E. M. Pulse,” Tanner added, pushing buttons on his forearm control panel.

That was correct, ya bozos, but they never considered something more basic. In case of general failure, next to each video camera was a spring-driven, 16mm film camera that went into operation when the power cut off. Nothing electronic or magical, just a simple clockwork driven chemical film camera. TechServ strikes again! I must remember to send them a Thank You card.

Drooling and slurping loudly, Goshnar used a ropy pseudopod to remove a clean human skull from a

lower mouth.

“Yes. Agreed. Time. Is. Short,” Tanner said, and pointing a finger, a scintillating ray shot across the walkway to vaporize an armored door. Calmly they walked inside and the camera shifted view.

Storage was a multi-level room, with the center a wide open space. Metal catwalks zigzagged upward leading to several platforms which ringed the outer wall. Wooden boxes of every conceivable size filled the place with only stenciled numbers on the sides to identify the contents. But in the center of the room was one large crate located behind a curtain of laser beams and sealed under an airtight Armorlite dome.

But the lasers were deactivated from the EM pulse, and Mystery Man smashed apart the Armorlite dome as if it was ordinary glass. Brushing aside the glistening shards, he ripped open the crate and hauled a thick book into view. Then he quickly tossed it away.

Hitting the floor, the book exploded into thousands of steel-tipped flechettes, but none of the monsters were close enough to be riddled by the barrage. Drat.

Outstretching a palm, Tanner sent out a disrupter beam and disintegrated the block of steel the crate had been resting on. Now exposed was a hollow section inside the column with an identical volume chained to a slab of cold iron. The cover of this volume pulsed with a kind of malevolent life not of this Earth.

Grinning widely, Mystery Man started to reach for the shackled book, then recoiled. “Ah,” he hissed in annoyance. “There are additional protections. Would the three of you get me one of those obsidian knives from the big crate near the exit door? Hurry, we must leave soon.”

“There's no such knives in there,” George stated with a frown.

“Da. This he knows,” Katrina said grimacing.

Why so he did, the dirty bastard.

“Ngarle, burble,” Goshnar replied politely, oozing to the crate with Tanner and Hoto following behind trying not to step in his slime trail.

Extending a ropy tentacle, Goshnar easily lifted the unattached lid as Tanner and Hoto stepped in closer to assist. Smiling, the mage turned around quickly and braced himself.

Knowing what was coming, we averted our sight. Blazing light emanated from the movie screen, and when the screaming ceased, the wooden lid fell back into place and only greasy wisps of writhing smoke hung in the air where the supernaturals had once been standing. But in the corridor outside the room, Mystery Man was standing in smoking rags, horribly sunburned, with blood seeping from both ears, yet still alive and holding the Aztec Book of The Dead cradled in his arms.

“Idiots!” he sneered as a rude eulogy. “Why did you think the Bureau only had the lid laying in place and not tightly fastened?”

The creep was correct on that point. The Ark of the Covenant was nothing to fool around with. The story of how we obtained it would make a great movie by itself. Now the Ark served as a lock on the room, if anybody departed without the proper ID, the lid would pop up and zap! The Bureau wished it could use the Ark to exterminate some of the prisoners, but if anybody tried to use the Ark to deliberately commit the act of murder, then the Ark turned on you instead. A trap was okay, but nothing

more. Apparently, God has very strict terms on how you could interpret His commandments.

Indeed, the holy relic was the only barrier that hold some of the more hellish objects in Storage. Yet Mystery Man had outmaneuvered it in merely minutes. For the first time in many years, I felt a touch of fear tighten my stomach. This guy was good enough to be a Bureau 13 agent.

Keeping a grip on the pulsating book, the mage drew two small vials from inside his shredded tuxedo and popped off the corks with his thumbs. Wafting along, the oily residue in the air was sucked into the vials like a genie returning to his lamp and Mystery Man palmed the corks back into place. One vial held about an inch of yellowish fluid, while the other was half full of tan and black crystals. Hoto and Tanner?

Smiling contently, the mage flipped through the forbidden book, found a page he liked, muttered a few words, waved a hand and vanished from sight. After a few seconds, the projector clattered to a stop and the ceiling lights flickered back on.

So the whole thing had been a trick, an insidious plan to steal a very special book of magic. The Aztec Book of the Dead contained every forbidden spell and conjure ever created. I would have been happier if the guy had swiped the nuclear bomb under the crossbar. That trifle we could deal with easily. By just holding the Aztec volume, he had escaped from the very heart of the Holding Facility and back into the real world.

“That's everything of importance,” Rosy said, setting the projector for rewind. “The rest you know as participants.”

“Thanks, Reverend,” I said, folding away my notes.

He frowned deeply. “Wish I could have helped more, Ed.”

Yeah, me too. Shaking off those kind of glum thoughts, I clapped my hands. “Okay, conference,”

Rising and stretching, the gang pulled their chairs closer to me so we could review what data had been gleaned from the short film.

“Anybody recognize him?” I asked hopefully.

“Nope.”

“Sorry.”

“Nyet.”

“Negative, chief.”

“Sir, no sir!”

“Anti-yes.”

Oh well, it had been worth a try.

An amateur philologist, Jessica had already analyzed the speech pattern of our new enemy and sadly declared that he had studied with a speech therapist. Okay, that could mean the mage originally had a lisp

or a stutter, possibly a highly distinctive accent, as if he was from the deep south, Brooklyn, or even East Chicago, but we couldn't be sure.

“Did you examine those ears?” Raul asked, glancing at the blank screen. “He is a young man. That gray hair was fake.”

“You mean hands,” Katrina corrected. “Gray hair, da. But no age spots, and wrist were not wrinkled enough. He might use cream to remove spots, but face-lift hands?”

Thoughtfully, I rubbed my broken nose. “A false face, eh? Then we can't circulate screen captures of him taken off the film.”

“Better try anyway,” George suggested, resting a chin on the upright barrel of his M60. To outward appearances, his jaw was two feet in the air hovering above a small banjo. “It might be his favorite face, and maybe he uses it often.”

“Plus I saw no scars or calluses. Not even softened ones on his hands,” Mindy said, rubbing her own collection of healed wounds. “This man has never done manual labor, and that tuxedo looked expensive.”

“But that didn't mean he is rich. The lack of calluses could only mean that he was a video store clerk, or CPA, and anybody can rent a tuxedo.”

“About that tuxedo,” Ken started, worrying a knuckle.

“Just a confusion factor to make a witness focus on the evening wear and not him,” George explained. “Old cat burglar trick.”

“Agreed,” Raul added. “But a good one that usually works.”

The end result was that Mystery Man covered his tracks as well as a professional, or a highly talented amateur.

“It's not much to go on,” I said, tallying my notes. “High probability that he is male. Caucasian. Approximately in his mid-thirties. Five feet ten inches, one hundred thirty pounds, right handed, never did any manual labor. Wizard.”

“Not wizard!” Katrina snapped, hostile. “All chemist. Beneath contempt!”

“He is an alchemist,” I translated as a question.

The Russian blonde nodded vigorously. “Da! Yes, bottles tell truth.”

“But he had a diamond wizard staff,” Ken objected.

“Which he destroyed to free the prisoners,” Raul growled, thumping his wand on the floor in an angry tempo. “Any damn fool alchemist can concoct a brew to give them the full power of an adult wizard for twenty fours hours.”

“But,” Jess prompted, leaning forward.

“It kills you afterwards,” the mage said gruffly. “Total biological and spiritual burn out. Not even your

ghost would remain.”

Whew, that was serious death.

Beaming a smile, George threw his arms across the back of the ring of chairs. “Then our problem is solved.”

“Nyet!” Katrina stated, slicing a hand through the air. Then she barked a long sentence in Russian.

“He has the Aztec Book,” Raul reminded, rubbing his mouth as if desperate for a drink. “Just holding the volume will protect him from the ravages of his own potions.”

Only a day, eh? I started jiggling numbers in my head. From when the fake boojum first threw the police officer out the window, to us capturing him, to the escape...

We went through a time zone, Jessica added.

Thanks. “Hoo boy, twenty three and a half hours!”

Sitting upright, George gave a low whistle. “With only a thirty minute margin of error. That’s one hell of a gamble for any wizard.”

“Which seems to indicate a desperate personality,” Ken said.

Brandishing his wizard staff, Raul stood and glared at us. “Do not say that again,” he ordered. “This man was an alchemist! Nothing more!”

“Which is why he did it,” Katrina garbled, tugging thoughtfully on a lock of her long golden hair.

“Explain that, please,” I requested, sharpening the point on my pencil. This promised to be a long sessions.

Pacing about the room, Raul started to speak twice, then finally stop moving. “Magic is a kick,” he said. “A thrill. Better than any drug. Sometimes better than sex.”

“Da,” Katrina sighed sadly, her ample bosoms heaving.

From the soulful expression on Mr. Renault’s face, that particular problem might be solved for our Russian pal quite soon.

“As an alchemist,” Raul continued, “he could only nibble around the edges, get a fleeting taste every now and then.”

“So magic is addictive,” Mindy noted, thoughtfully massaging an old scar. “Similar to the adrenaline high of combat. Always leaves you wanting more.”

“You better believe it,” Raul sighed, dropping heavily into a folding chair. “Did you know that in the history of the Bureau, eight wizards lost their powers and each committed suicide?”

A grim statistic, but fortunately our pal Richard Anderson was not counted in that somber list. Anderson retired with his powers and abilities intact, just unable to perform any major magic. But that happened at

his advanced age. However I was staring to get the big picture.

“So Mystery Man would have done anything, even gamble with true death, for a chance at real magic,” I said, loosening my tie.

“No question.”

“Great,” George grumped. “So now he's an ultra-powerful junkie.”

As a butterfly tattoo rose into view on her cleavage, Katrina scratched it behind the ears and nodded. “Unfortunately, that is correct.”

“But why did he steal the gaseous remains of the other two supernaturals?” Ken asked, pressing for details like a hound on the hunt. “And why not Goshnar?”

“Good taste?” George offered as a joke.

Tucking the tattoo away, Katrina snorted. “All chemist steal anything.”

“So true,” Raul agreed. “They're infamous for being chemical and herbal packrats.”

The slight mention of food made my stomach rumble announcing that lunch was becoming an imperative. Feed the belly to fuel the brain, as my mom always used to say. Tucking away my pencils, I put the talk on hold and shooed the team out of the projection room heading for the cafeteria. The corridors branched constantly in a complex maze, but the rich smell of food quickened everybody's step.

We found the cafeteria in a state of disarray, half of the tables were occupied and the rest were smashed. Apparently there had also been some fighting here. Probably just a spectral chef furious over what the cooks did to meat loaf here at the Academy. We still had some leftovers tucked into the walls of our RV as bulletproof shielding. Worked pretty good, too.

Noticing Patricia sitting alone at a table, I asked Jessica to grab me anything fried on toast with onions and ambled over to talk to the Healer. She looked like she could use a friend at the moment.

“Long time no see,” I asked, taking a chair. “How's your wife and my kids?”

Almost smiling, Pat wearily spooned a good pound of sugar into her mug of coffee. “I've been busy,” she said, taking a slurp, then adding more sugar. “There are so many wounded, so many more dead. I haven't done anything like this since that 1989 earthquake in San Francisco.”

“You were there?”

“My team stopped the giant beetle that caused the quake.”

“¿Que?” I lapsed into Spanish.

She gave a sly smile. “I am not a student,” the Healer confessed. “I'm a field agent from Team Angel in Los Angeles, here to be a ringer in the final exam. You know, open inappropriate doors, get captured, head in the wrong direction, that sort of stuff.”

Wow. Burton was even sneakier than I imagined.

“Well, I have friends in Frisco,” I said, offering the milk. It was refused. “Lucky a Bureau team was there.”

“Yeah, lucky,” the gypsy said the word as if it had a bad taste. “Every night I wake to the screams of the civilians we couldn't save in time from the quake. Lucky.”

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. This was an agent's burden, you accepted the load, went mad, or quit. Sometimes all three.

With fierce strength, Patricia grabbed my arm. “Ed, I'd like to join your team for this mission.”

“Why?”

“After having seen what that alchemist can do, he's gotta go down for the count. Terminate with extreme prejudice, and I want in.”

Frankly, I was surprised. “Kind of rough talk for a Healer.”

“My powers may be benign,” Pat snarled, “but not me, baby.”

Wow, major personal dichotomy there. I seriously thought about the offer. “What about your home team?”

She smiled. “I already called Team Angel and its fine with Aki and Damon.”

This was mighty tempting, but logic forced me to decline. “Sorry,” I said softly. “But I must say no. Every field team in the Bureau has been temporarily assigned to the Facility until the damage can be repaired. Gordon has given Tunafish the job of getting Mystery Man, and besides, I've already been assigned Somers and Sanders. Eight is the most I can handle.” I offered a grin. “Any more and the tires might blow on the RV.”

The Healer accepted the rebuff with class. “Fair enough,” she acknowledged, and released my arm to sit back in her chair.

Arriving at our table with a tray of food, Jessica gestured at me with a steaming bowl of chili. Quickly I stood, my gut rumbling in impatience. “Gotta go. Take care, Ms.... say what is your last name anyway?”

This seemed to embarrass the Healer for some reason. “I am of true gypsy heritage,” she explained. “And we often don't have last names. Lineage is sometimes just a matter of opinion. I was going to use the name Gypsy, but the TechServ random name generator decided upon Ritter.”

“Then take care, Pat Ritter. Call if you ever need help.”

“Goodbye, Edwardo,” she said holding out a hand.

We shook and a pleasant electric sensation flowed up my arm, then over my entire body and I was no longer tired. My leg stopped hurting, my rib straightened and my broken nose slammed into place.

“That is to let you know what you're missing,” Pat said, walking away with her empty mug.

After a moment, I turned towards my team running stiff fingers through my hair and scratching the outside of my brain. Maybe we should have kept her. Ah well.

The report for Technical Services arrived while we were eating. That was fast even for the gang at TechServ. Unfortunately, there wasn't much we could use having garnished the more pertinent points: Caucasian, male, from North America, possible childhood stutter, average height and weight, right-handed. They also ran his fingerprints against the FBI, CIA, Pentagon and NSA files, but didn't find a match. Nothing odd there. Lots of folks weren't in the files; law-abiding civilians, master criminals, and Bureau 13 agents.

Too bad Mystery Man hadn't gone about barefoot. We caught more criminals from toe prints matched to their baby records from the delivery room of the hospital they were born in, than we ever did from fingerprints. Too many cheap TV shows had taught crooks the value of wearing gloves.

After lunch, we retrieved Amigo from the basement of Base Command, replaced our broken windshield and headed for home. There were a lot of magical and scientific devices in our Chicago apartment that we could use to try and find SuperFink #1. With an amoral screwball on the loose armed with the Aztec Book of the Dead, there was no telling what mischief he could be planning. Just reading the table of contents made the sky rain stones for a week. Which simply drove the U.S. Weather Bureau out of its mind trying to explain.

Once we did find him, going to jail was not an option. There was a nice big grave already waiting for Mystery Man. It was the blast crater where Gil Lapin crashed his jumpjet and burned alive while trapped inside the wreckage. Horace Gordon and Bureau 13 wanted this guy stopped fast and that was fine by us. But my team was not going to make the same mistake twice.

He was coming back in a coffin, not handcuffs.

EIGHT

Upon receiving our report, Horace Gordon contacted every government law enforcement agency. The FBI, CIA, Secret Service, DEA, Treasury Department, the NSA, ATF, federal marshals, sky marshals, Texas Marshals, plus Army G2, Air Force Intelligence, Navy Security, SAC and NORAD each received a Hunt & Kill order on Mystery Man. An APB was issued to city, county, state and police across the continent, including Canada and Mexico. His picture and featureless fingerprints circulated via satellites and over wires. Our John Doe was listed as a homicidal maniac with rabies, heavily armed, addicted to PCP and totally insane. The police were strictly ordered not to even attempt an arrest, just shoot the suspect and burn the body.

We highly doubted that any ordinary cop could bring in the alchemist, but their efforts couldn't hurt, and if somebody did manage to pull off a miracle kill, we'd put the person in charge of Bureau 13, just for being the luckiest son-of-a-bitch on the face of the earth.

Scowling at the tiny photo of Mystery Man on the clipboard, the traffic cop tore a ticket out of her summons book and handed it to George. The soldier's hands were knuckle-white on the steering wheel.

"Buddy," the officer drawled. "I don't care if you're a member of the FBI, Mossad and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police combined. Speed in Chicago, and you get a ticket?"

"Once again, the safety of humanity is in the capable hands of Bureau 13," Raul announced, as the police

officer walked back to her patrol car.

“Aw shaddup,” George growled, throwing the transmission into drive and easing off the berm at a stately 55mph.

“Besides, you're still 412 to 2,” Jessica added with a grin.

Although not telepathic, Mr. Renault's thoughts were plainly readable from the expression on his face. I was surprised he would talk that way about a lady in her presence.

Shunting out of Bangor-Maine onto Rt. 80 west, we took Interstate 94 to the Dan Ryan Expressway, where Mr. Renault briefly reacquainted us with the local constabulary. Afterwards, we actually obeyed the traffic laws. It was a nice change. I had never known those green/brown blurs alongside the road were trees.

Taking the Wacker Avenue Exit, we wiggled through the downtown traffic and took Dearborn Road until reaching a modest building in the middle of the block. Home. Our new members did not seem impressed with its innate grandeur, so I started the standard introductory spiel.

Since no field agent knew where our main headquarters was, each team operated independently. Everybody's home base had to be a fort, sanctuary, armory, supply dump, refueling station and information processing station. It made for interesting structural designs. Once in Roanoke, Virginia we had been forced to apprehend a demonically-possessed Bureau mansion and blasting our way into another agent's home base was not something I would ever like to have to do again. Their robotic lawn jockeys damn near killed me, and to this day, Amigo will not go anywhere near a velvet painting of Elvis.

The six-story structure before us was an old warehouse converted into an apartment complex. We did the conversion. The warehouse had an antique wrought iron framework, which our mages polymorphed into chrome steel. Then workers poured concrete for the floors and walls, which some friendly gremlins then reinforced with titanium netting.

Afterwards, the outside of the building was hung with a foot of tough Italian marble and we bricked the interior walls. The windows were three sheets thick: glass, Armorlite, plexiglass. It never got cold in the winter, and for Chicago, that was saying something.

Every external door was wood sheeting over plate steel, cushioned with xytel plastic inserts and braced by four oversized hinges. The locks were Bureau specials, and the interior doors were six inch thick African ironwood. Termites broke teeth on the stuff.

Now an apartment building in downtown Chicago with no tenants would have caused talk. So we did rent out the lower floors, to a family of deaf-mutes and a Heavy Metal rock band that liked to practice at odd hours. Nobody ever investigated any strange noises coming from our place.

Once we had gotten a deadbeat who refused to pay his rent and invited us to take him to court. Publicity is the last thing we wanted, so after a brief visit by some friends that Raul conjured at midnight, Mr. Deadbeat was gone by morning. Since then, we have had few problems.

Our team lives on the fifth floor. The fourth and sixth levels were jam packed with cinderblocks, sensors, concertina wire, bear traps and Claymore mines. We called the layout a safety sandwich. There was a heliport on the roof, but after what occurred to our last helicopter, the Bureau was rather loathe to give us another. Hey, accidents happen. Personally, I think the new Statue of Liberty looks even better than

the old one. Now the students were impressed.

Narrowly missing a crunch between a Mack truck and a taxi, George drove the RV along an inclined ramp into our subterranean parking garage. Flipping a switch on the dashboard, the armored door rumbled into the ceiling, we entered, and it noisily descended behind us.

To the left was the vehicle repair bay. To the right, parking spaces containing a sleek black sports coupe, a battered red pick-up truck, a white limousine, a station wagon, a sleek speedboat dry-docked on a trailer hitch and a flock of bicycles. Every spot was filled, except one. We took that.

“Others park here?” Ken asked, stooping to get out of the van. Both his and Katrina Somers’ suitcases were held in a single hand.

“Nope, those are all ours,” George said proudly, hefting his 30 lb banjo from the RV. “Never can tell when you’re going to need additional transportation.”

“Of appropriate demeanor,” Mindy added.

Pressing a button on my key chain fob, a piece of the wall dissolved to expose a door. The team trundled inside to the stairs and elevator. We took the lazy way.

In the lobby, there were two elevators; one for the tenants, another for us. Theirs went from ground level to the third floor. Ours went from the roof to the sub-sub-basement where we kept a bomb shelter.

“There is a ghost there, no?” Katrina asked.

Adjusting the leash about Amigo's neck, Raul told her correct. “Old Pirate Pete, a buccaneer from the Spanish Maine. He keeps ordering pizzas and stiffing the delivery man.”

“Why not exorcise the spirit?” Katrina asked suspiciously.

“He's crotchety, but the local kids love him. Especially at Halloween.”

She gave a fleeting smile. “A most valuable commodity, then.”

“At least for PR purposes.”

Silent as a sigh, the elevator opened to our floor. For anybody else, it would have very loudly dinged. Our private lobby had a plush red carpet to help hide fresh bloodstains and a pleasing abstract wallpaper which disguised bullet holes with amazing success. A Japanese landscape triptych adorned the wall and a couple of chairs offered hospitality to waiting guests. Of course, the chairs closed like a vise on the occupant when commanded.

While George and the students stood guard, Jessica slid the middle section of the triptych aside to peek into the apartment, I ran a security check, Raul performed a simple Sense Evil spell, and Mindy got the mail.

“Apartment is clear.”

“No physical intruders.”

“Ethereal vibrations are harmonious.”

“Our subscription to TV Guide has expired!”

After consoling my friend, I drew a pistol, unlocked the front door and eased it open with foot. The hallway was empty with the lights on. But then, we always leave the lights on. Day and night. George took point, with Mindy doing a cover sweep and we entered the living room. Spreading out in a standard defensive pattern, we waited until Raul stuck his head into the aquarium and asked our fish for a status report.

“Is this really necessary?” Katrina asked, brushing back her flowing profusion of golden blonde hair.

Sword in hand, Mindy frowned. “Do you know what we found here once waiting for us?”

“Nyet,” Katrina replied in stolid Russian.

“Nobody else either. But it tried to eat the lot of us.”

She frowned. “Ah. Understood.”

Raul surfaced, bone dry, but with a length of seaweed caught behind his ear. I decided not to tell him. “All clear,” he announced, and everybody relaxed.

Dragging his leash, Amigo headed straight for the kitchen, and two seconds later his empty food bowl began to rattle against the refrigerator. As it was his turn, George shouldered his weapon and followed.

“Don't forget the sandbox,” Mindy added. The swinging kitchen doors cut off any possible retort.

Basically in a square format, the apartment had a fancy brick fireplace occupying the entire north wall of the living room, and set before it were three tremendous couches bracketing the hearth. The dining room, kitchen, pantry, laundry, armory, and emergency exit were towards the east. Southward was a blank wall, behind which were Raul's magic library, our InfoNet Cray SV 5 computer, gymnasium and trophy room. To the west was a door-lined corridor that led to our individual bedrooms. Only recently had we removed the dividing partition between mine and Jessica's quarters to form a honeymoon suite. Lord, knows where we'd ever put a nursery.

A what?!

Oh, nothing, dear. Nothing.

“Only thing missing is a batpole,” Ken joked, glancing around the place.

In artificial panache, Raul kicked a scuffed section of the baseboard and a hidden panel swung out from the wall exposing a polished bronze pipe.

The giant student gave a rue smile. “I stand corrected.”

“But it only leads to the jacuzzi,” Raul apologized.

With a loud thump, Ken deposited the luggage to the floor. “What should we do first, sir?”

“Check the date,” I said, striding to the library and flipping pages on our astrological calendar. Yep, the summer equinox was only two days away.

“So?” Ken asked, squinting at the ceiling as if he could see the sun overhead.

Taking a seat on a couch, Katrina crossed her long legs at the knee, her white silk dress hitching to a scandalous position. “Aztecs worshipped sun. Book is strongest at solar crossing.”

The folding partition to the kitchen separated and George appeared. “This timing is too perfect,” he said popping the top on a beer can. “Stealing the book only days before its yearly power surge?”

“Never trust the obvious,” Raul remarked, scratching at his green draped ear. He extracted the seaweed and glared at me.

“Laying a false trail to mislead us?” Ken suggested. “When he actually plans on hiding for several months before using the book? While we exhaust ourselves running around in circles?”

“A possibility,” I noted, starting to pace. “But I have never known any junkie who waited before hitting themselves with a fix. And that is what Mystery Man is, a junkie. A magic addict.”

Getting a hanger from the closet, Jessica hung up her holster and slid the taser into a recharging bracket. “Or perhaps,” she postulated. “He believes that we'll never stop him quickly enough even if we do find him.”

Now that was an unpleasant thought. Ceasing my walk to nowhere, I clapped hands for attention. “Okay people, time is short, so let's divide into three groups. Jessica and I will do a nationwide scan of any unusual occurrences trying to form a pattern.”

“Sounds good,” Ken acknowledged, cracking his knuckles. The simple action made the muscles in his arms ripple and flow like waves on a lake. Stallone, eat your heart out.

“Raul and Katrina, as our resident mages, you'll hit the books. Try to find something, anything, on the contents of that damn Aztec manual. If we know what Mystery Man is doing, then we can outguess him and lay a trap. But we have got know what the hell is going on!”

“I may have something on that,” Raul remarked cryptically, rising to his feet and starting for the library. “Let's go, Somers.”

The buxom Russian seemed mildly perturbed by our constant use of her last name, but there was a good reason. The Bureau lost recruits at a frightening rate and calling new people by their last names helped us maintain a psychological distance from them and thus lessen the pain of their demise. This was a most unforgiving business.

As they departed into the lab, I went on. “George, Sanders and Mindy get the tough job. I want you three to try and concoct some kind of weapon we can use against the alchemist: containment, stun, cripple, confusion, anything. No holds barred. Got it?”

“Check.” They headed for the arsenal on the other side of the kitchen. George had assisted in laying out the floorplans.

As I palmed the south wall, it broke apart to reveal our quietly humming Cray 4 SVG mainframe

InfoNet computers. The free standing, cabinet-style, data processing units that composed the central core of the computer were staggered about in the room in the exact same order as the tissue folds of a human brain. For some reason it improved both speed and memory. Heck, we'll use anything that works.

Reaching the main terminal, Jess took a seat at the fast-feed video monitor and set the dial to maximum speed. "Normal routine?" she asked. "I'll do radio, television, and cable. You hit the magazines and newspapers?"

Typing away on a keyboard, I confirmed. "S'okay. But beside the usual things, bizarre robberies, mysterious deaths, that sort of stuff. Be sure to watch for any rocky rain storms."

"Gotcha."

We began. As the team had been on the road for over a month, there was a ton of backlog to sift through. But Jess and I were old hands at this. Anything of interest was shunted into a hold file for later review and correlation. Luckily, it seemed to have been a fairly quiet summer in America. There was a report of cubist flying saucers in New Jersey. That was nothing. Probably just the Venusians again stealing more of our toxic waste, God bless 'em. But I made a note of it. The Loch Ness monster had been sighted by a drunk in Lake Ontario. Phooey. Nessie lived in the Bermuda Triangle these days. Elderly woman attacked by vampire in Atlanta, Georgia. The police already had the guy, just a nut with a razorblade glued to his incisors.

Bunker #14 at the Picakiny Arsenal in Pennsylvania reports an unusually large shortage of weapons in storage. I wonder what was the normal shortage of weapons? The IBM research lab in Silicon Valley, California hints that it was robbed early this morning, but refuses to divulge details for fear of making the company stocks drop on the market. Accessing an FBI report on the matter, it appeared that a 12 ton steel door to the IBM vault was removed by bare hands. I typed in a priority request for a copy of the fingerprints and an immediate cross-reference to the prints of Mystery Man in the file of the Bureau. Might be a lead.

Indian ghost in mansion in Rhode Island scared an old man to death. Goshnar mugged and killed in Manhattan by street gang. So the blob had escaped! Giant robot spotted in Alaska, but that was just the Pentagon's giant robot on another test run. The big mechanical jerk was terrified of toasters for some reason. German U-boat sunk by Mormon fisherman in the Great Salt Lake. Hmm. Goshnar killed in Philadelphia by a convention of science fiction fans. A tornado stole a farmhouse in Kansas. What again? Goshnar run over by an ice cream vender's truck in Mississippi. When will he ever learn? Amelia Earhart's luggage arrived at Midway Airport, Gate A-4. Well, it's about time. Man arrested in Reno for cheating at casino, gambler declares he wasn't cheating, but simply knows what numbers and cards will win. Psychic? A possible recruit. I annexed it for headquarters. A weeping Goshnar surrenders to Bureau team in Los Angeles. Ha.

Werewolves in Texas are actually just big wolves. I put a maybe by that. Satanic cult in Delaware had a gunfight with the local police. The cult lost. Hurrah for our side. Axe murderer about to be fried in the electric chair in North Dakota swore he would return from the grave to seek revenge. Then a special notice appeared saying that the Bureau team, Roger's Rangers, had stolen the body, burned it to ash and sealed the remains upside-down in cement. Way to go, Rangers! Time travelers in Toronto, vegetarian vampires in Vermont, moon men in Memphis, poltergeist penguins in Panama, hellhounds in Hollywood—how had anybody noticed?—and smooth, sexy, slinky, silky, succulent, succubae slayers in Seattle. Sigh. Groan. Eye drops. Coffee.

Sorting, sifting, searching, the hours swiftly passed. Tons of data deluged us, with Jess and I heroically

struggling to separate grain from chaff. So much of this input was the result of drugs, hoaxes or just plain lack of common sense. Where the heck was the real bad guy? I was starting to feel like an overworked Private Investigator again. Digging through mounds of rotting garbage to find that single crumpled theatre receipt that blows the lid off a million dollar art smuggling ring. Ah, the good old days.

No daydreaming, Jessica sent gently. Get back to work, dear.

Slave driver.

The city was dark outside when the intercom announced dinner. Listlessly, we shuffled into the dining room and fell upon the food like purple fungus from Betelgeuse. By unanimous decision, the meal was quiet. I could almost hear the mental wheels grinding.

During dessert, I decided to give the aching brains a rest and lead the conversation off on a tangent. Always a favorite subject, we discussed initiations into the Bureau; my bloody rescue, George's heroic stance in the jungles of Viet Nam, Raul's rather explosive discovery that he had been a mage his entire adult life, Mindy's hilarious tale of daring-do at the World's Fair and how Jessica had boldly strode into a Bureau 13 divisional headquarters having found the covert organization all by her telepathic self.

In awkward stages, Katrina recounted how she became a mage during an all-naked performance of Brigadoon, the disastrous aftereffects and her subsequent defection to America. I knew that the FSB, Federal Secret Service, secretly had a nameless anti-supernatural section, but they indiscriminately killed non-humans and had absolutely none on their staff. Rather prissy of them, in my opinion. Even the hated KGB had occasionally used demons as field agents.

Rather embarrassed, Lt. Colonel Sanders refused to divulge his story, saying it was Alpha coded and not privy for general disbursement. Sorry. Given the sign from me, Jess tried a soft read on the man, but she got a flat nothing. Another natural telepathic block, same as Englehart. She said it was like trying to read a rock or an animal. Oh well. When I next got the chance, I'd slip some truth serum into his tapioca.

After piling the dishes in the sink, I ordered my yawning team to call it a night. Sleepy minds made mistakes, which we could not afford. Katrina and Sanders got our two spare bedrooms. I activated the alarm system, turned on the automatic defenses, set the scanning perimeters for the computer and went to bed with my wife. Sleep came fast, but troubled dreams disturbed my rest.

Four hours later, all hell broke loose.

NINE

Shouting in alarm, I tumbled to the floor with blankets wrapped about my feet and Magnum in hand.

"What? Who? Were?" I demanded at the darkness in my perfect impersonation of a frightened cub reporter. The noise sounded again. It was the red alert klaxon from the Cray computer.

"Let's go," Jess said, pulling a robe on over her flannel nightshirt and grabbing a taser from the bedside table.

Dashing through the living room, I easily avoided the strategically placed hassock that seemed to love shins and placed my palm against the south wall. Silently as a sigh, the wall parted. Hitting either side of the opening, we listened for a second, and then I charged in as Jess kept me covered.

Nattily attired in red woolen longjohns and fluffy bunny slippers, Raul was standing impatiently in front of our Top Secret laser printer. His hands were hovering above the controls, almost touching the switches, but not quite. Raul knew better. Our printer could use its beam of condensed light for more things than just printing.

Suddenly appearing behind us was George, sporting an Uzi machine pistol and wearing striped pajama bottoms. Next came Katrina, her wooden staff at the ready and tastefully draped in a matching striped pajama top. So they were collaborating already, eh? Maybe it was time to start calling her Kathi, then.

Leaping into the middle of the room, Ken landed on tiptoes, dead silent and absolutely stark naked except for his Thompson .45 machine gun and a Bowie knife. I do admire a man who had his priorities straight.

The whining ceased and blank paper scrolled from the top of the printer. Ripping the top sheet free, I reached into my boxer shorts and retrieved my Bureau commission booklet. Pressing the federal ID against the paper, words began to form.

“What does it say?” Mindy demanded, lowering her sword. Wearing only skimpy red lace panties, she was most distracting and disgustingly wide-awake.

“It’s an event chain,” I explained. “A school bus crashed into a tree outside of Huntsville, Alabama at noon. Thirty passengers were killed. All of the bodies have been reported stolen from the city morgue around 10pm. Huntsville, Alabama, blood bank robbed of thirty gallons around midnight. Huntsville, Alabama, farmer reports a herd of cattle drained of blood by flock of bats just prior to dawn.”

“We have a bingo,” Mindy announced, donning the robe Jessica offered.

Dragging his tail, Amigo waddled into the room, yawned loudly at us for disturbing his rest and waddled out again.

“How could the crash victims have become vampires?” George said puzzled. “Hoto is dead.”

“Theoretically,” I sternly corrected. “And then maybe Mystery Man was able to reconstitute the vampire like mutant orange juice. However, it’s a hot lead, so I will do a recon.”

Hesitantly, Ken raised his hand for permission to speak. Lord, give me strength. “This isn’t grammar school, Sanders,” I chastised. “Talk already, dude.”

“Sir, if Hoto has been brought back, then perhaps the TNR device is also functioning again. If I remember correctly from the casebooks, the alien machine habitually monitors all radio broadcasts and telephone lines listening for enemy communications. So if you do find them, how will you notify us?”

“Take Jessica along,” Katrina suggested. “Comrade telepath can contact team here in Chicago.”

“Not practical,” Jess said patiently. “This may be a lead, a diversion, or a trap. Two agents are enough to find out which. If there’s trouble, they will call for help.”

True enough, then I added, “Plus, if it is a diversion and a real situation occurs elsewhere, how will the team contact us, to tell where the actual danger is?”

The Russian mage had to chew that over for a moment, and then accepted the cold logic. Communications in battle were always a tricky matter. Most important things were. Cellular phones helped, but even totally human enemies could tap/jam/trace those transmissions. The NSA did it all the time. Even short coded phrases were dangerous.

“Ah, excuse me, sir. But how will you contact us?” Ken asked again.

“We'll send a postcard.”

He blinked “Sir?”

Quickly but briefly, I explained. A magic postcard was a plain white paper rectangle, soaked in liquid magic for months. When it was ready, you simply address the perfectly ordinary seeming postcard to whoever should receive the message and the card disappears, to re-appear in their hand. But everything had to be perfect for the magic message to work and bad penmanship counted against you. Expensive and tricky to operate, we usually reserve the postcards only for emergency correspondence, or belated birthdays.

“How many are available?” George asked.

“None,” Raul yawned, his bunny slippers exactly copying the motion. “I printed a fresh batch last month, but they're not dry yet.”

“None?” I frowned. “As in zero?”

“Yep.”

Oh swell, so much for that idea. I chewed a lip in thought. “Okay, then we do it the old-fashioned way. Jess please telepathically contact either Raul or I every hour on the hour.”

“I'll link with just you,” she said after a moment. “We have a much closer rapport.”

Ain't it the truth.

“This could be a trap, Ed,” Raul noted, thoughtfully rubbing his wand. “Whoever this guy is, he knows the Bureau is hot for his ass. He tricked us once with the animal disguise.”

Yeah, and it still galled me that we had personally hauled the murdering bastard exactly where he wanted to go. Well, we would soon correct that mistake. At the end of a gun.

“And then he turned on the very monsters who had summoned him for aid,” Jess stated, worrying a button on her flannel sleepwear.

“Okay-okay. He's a lying, amoral, back-stabbing fink, who loves traps,” I agreed, rubbing my unshaved chin to the sound of sandpaper. “Fine. Let's use that to our advantage. Raul, you up for burning some rope?”

Raul and his slippers gave three delighted grins. “You betchum, Red Ryder!”

“And us,” George said, placing an arm about Katrina's ample curves.

“Sorry, chum. You're a top notch gunner, but as a spy you make a fine demolitions expert. As for Ms. Somers, burning a rope is no job for a newcomer. Besides, your Russian accent would cause too much notice down South.”

Realizing it was true, George accepted the rebuke with what grace he could. Katrina seemed confused.

“Accent,*da*, ” she agreed. “But what rope is it that you will burn?”

“I'll explain in the kitchen,” Mindy said, taking the tall blonde by the arm. “Come on, Busty, let's start the coffee.”

“Bless you,” Raul yawned, stretching his arms.

I added my own benedictions. “The rest of you stay here and continue the work. We may need every gimmick you can think of to take this guy. Just in case this isn't a mistake, but actually is a trap or a lead, be ready for a teleport and full unrestricted combat.”

“Done.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Of course, dear.”

“Lock and load, chief.”

Then I added, “And Sanders, get dressed for God's sake!”

Confused for a moment, the big guy glanced down as if he had forgotten about the lack of clothing. Maybe he was a nudist in his spare time.

“Right away, sir!” Ken saluted. “Full combat gear, or casual street attire, sir?”

I gave an internal sigh. Recruits! “Your choice.”

Returning to our bedroom, I quickly showered, shaved and dressed in black shoes, black socks, black pants, light blue shirt, dark blue sweater, black tie and tweed sports jacket. Glancing in the mirror, I resembled a badly disguised undercover police officer. Just the effect I wanted.

Jessica already had the armoire open and I choose my assortment of supplies. In blatant combat situations, Bureau agents could wear full body armor, ride tanks and carry bazookas. But operating in suburban Doo-Dah-ville, such paraphernalia only caused undue attention and frightened the horses.

Sliding on my double shoulder holster, I checked the loads on both of my .357 Magnums and made damn sure I had extra speedloaders, one of them filled exclusively with wooden bullets. Swiss Army knife, Bureau sunglasses, unbreakable pocket comb, EM scanner, flame retardant handkerchief, FBI ID, wallet, keys, a thousand in cash for bribes, Visa, MasterCard, American Express, pocket cassette recorder, mini-camera, four fountain pens, a pack of cigarettes and a signet ring. Yep, I was ready for war.

I hate burning a rope, Jess sent.

It's my turn for recon duty, darling.

Well, be extra careful. Tanner and Hoto and dangerous enough by themselves. If Lumpy has brought them back, the four of 'em could be a match for the whole Bureau.

The four? I blinked. *Oh yes, the Aztec book. But without an operative, it's relatively harmless.*

So is a sub-critical mass of plutonium. Jess gave me a kiss.

I returned the lip service. "Worry worm."

"Wife," she replied.

Ready to leave, Raul was waiting for me in the library. The mage had changed clothes and was wearing sneakers, denims and a red flannel shirt. I was surprised he lacked a straw hat and wasn't munching on a weed. His arms were tanned brown, his neck was red and his chest a pasty white. He looked Southern with a capital S. Perfect. We were sure to go unnoticed.

On a hunch, I gave him a glance through my sunglasses. Ah-ha, damn near every inch of his body rippled with green auras.

"You wearing anything that isn't magic?" I asked.

"Socks, shorts and smile."

"Where's your staff?"

"In my socks and shorts."

I hide a smile. "Of course, how foolish of me."

Pulling a massive volume prominently marked 'A', from the packed library shelves, George laid our travel journal on a walnut table. Raul started flipping through a book of photographs. A mage had to see location of where to teleport, so we had an immense library of full color photographs of most every major city in North America and a few overseas. It had really saved our butts when we tackled the riddle of The Seven Doors.

"Birmingham is the closest we have," Raul called. "About a hundred miles away. No, wait. Here's a postcard of the Huntsville sports arena!"

Accepting a mug of Morning Thunder tea from Katrina, I drained the brew straight. My eyes popped open and I shivered to full consciousness. Nothing magical about it, just enough hard caffeine to burn a hole in asbestos. Panting for breath, I thanked her.

"Good enough. We'll take a cab, or buy a car. Whichever is faster. Let's boogie."

In a martial arts move, Mindy threw us a bag of sandwiches. Raul made the catch and I kissed Jessica goodbye. Then the team stepped clear as Raul began gesticulating. There was a flash, and we were suddenly standing on a corner near a street lamp, a mailbox, and the Dixieland Photo Supply store. Dawn was just tinting the skyline above the Huntsville sports arena.

Stepping onto Jefferson Boulevard, I whistled for a cab.

Paying off the happy cab driver, Raul and I entered the Our Lady of Mercy Hospital where the sole survivor of the bus crash was recuperating. Our FBI badges and serious expressions got us past the nurse at the reception desk, and the doctor on duty in the critical ward. Apparently, Sam McGinty, the driver of the bus, wasn't expected to see noon.

Badgering and blustering, I got us ten minutes alone with the unconscious man. A nurse demanded to know why the federal police wanted to see a dying patient, and Raul told her it was to measure his feet. That confused her long enough for us to gain entry to his room. Ah bullshit, an agent's best friend.

There were six other patients in this ward, none of them appearing any too good, but all with human auras. Our man was by the window. The chart on the wall was indecipherable doctorese, but Raul and I had come equipped with common sense. This guy was a mess. Both legs were in casts, arms suspended from a ceiling harness and he was wrapped head to toe in more bandages than Billy-Bob. Plus, a clear plastic oxygen tent covered his head. Clusters of drip bags were attached to his arms and neck. A beeping monitor on a nearby table registered heartbeat and pulse. The poor slob had more wires running into him than an illegal cable hook-up.

The door had no lock, so I slipped a chair under the handle to impede entrance and guarantee us a modicum of privacy. Meanwhile, Raul slid the curtains closed around the bed and pulled his staff into view from his pants. I joined him in the middle of a mumble and the mage bathed the dying man with a soft white light. Gently, the monitors started registering stable life-signs and McGinty stirred. Taking a ragged breath, our only witness moaned and opened his eyes.

“Who you?” he asked as we removed the clear plastic tent.

Raul crouched so he would be at face level with the man. In the cab ride over, I had lost the coin toss which decided who would be bad cop to the good cop. I still think we should have done best two out of three.

“You're all right, Sam,” the mage said in soothing tones. “This is a hospital and you're fine. A little banged up, but you will live.”

Groggy with narcotics, McGinty used a full minute to digest that information. “So who are you, cops?” he finally asked.

Brusquely, I flashed badge and he registered the usual surprise and respect that we always get from Southerners. God bless 'em.

“Am I under arrest?” he quaked in fear.

“Not yet,” I growled in my official patented tough-guy voice. “Not unless you cooperate with the government fully in this serious matter.”

“How can I he'p ya, officer,” he croaked softly.

“Sam, can you tell us what happened?” Raul said, tucking the top part of his commission booklet into a shirt pocket so the badge would always be in sight. A psychological inducement to help us maintain mental authority over the civilian.

“Ya’ll mean the crash?”

“Yes.”

Furrowing his brow, the driver visibly tried to think fast. “Why, a skunk, yeah, a skunk, ran in front of the bus, and I swerved to avoid hittin’ the thing and hit a tree,” McGinty lied with a straight face. “Don’t remember much after that.”

“You are an excellent poker player,” Raul complimented. “But we stopped at the Huntsville police station before coming here and saw the wreck. That vehicle was cut in half like it ran straight into a horizontal buzz-saw.”

He said nothing for a moment, and then offered a weak smile. “friad, I dun know what yewr talkin’ about, sir.”

“Yet the ends of the cut were slightly slagged. Molten!” I snapped. “McGinty, you know what a laser beam is?”

The expression on his face said that he did. Mystery Man had probably used a Disintegration Spell, or a tightly controlled Lightning Bolt, but either one would resemble a laser beam to the uninformed.

“Well, enemy agents of a foreign country have stolen a working military prototype of a laser rifle from—” frantically I struggled to remember the local Army base. My memory failed, so I took a wild stab in the dark. “—Fort Washington. The Pentagon wants it returned.”

“America needs that weapon, Sam,” Raul added sounding sincere.

“Was it the commies?” the man asked registering shock.

Aside from China, were there any commies left in the world? But then, lying was part of the job. “Exactly,” I said grimly.

“Well, shoot,” he said, patriotic resolve strengthening his voice. “I didn’t wanna tell the truth for fear of going to the loony bin. But if it’s for my country, guess I gotta.”

“We know most of the story, Sam,” Raul said. “Just tell us what you saw. Everything. The tiniest detail could be important.”

His hanging arm attempted to move, then McGinty scrunched his face in concentration. “It was Thursday, ‘bout noon, and I was driving a load over to Sayerton, when I spotted this here kook astanding on the berm. Sure caught my attention, ‘cause he was wearing a kimono, with a fishbowl on his head.”

The world went very still. I could hear my own breathing and the subtle machine noises of the monitors.

“Did the fishbowl resemble a spacesuit helmet?” Raul asked, having trouble with the words.

“Yep,” Sam said. “Jus’ like in the movies. Well, this guy shifted the book under his arm, then pointed a finger at me, and a white light shot out of his hand and hit the front of the bus. ‘It ‘er like a bar of white-hot steel. But there weren’t no shock or even a bump. I jus’ sailed along straight on through till the gas tank ‘ploded.” He ruefully smiled. “I kin remember seeing the bottom half of the bus go arcing over

the cornfield as the top flipped onto the roadway.”

“The spacesuit was wearing a kimono?” I asked to make damn sure I was hearing this correctly. “And carrying a book?”

“A great big red book?” Raul asked in a small voice.

“That's the one,” McGinty gave a shrug. “Know it sounds coon, but its gospel. By the way, how is the team doing? Any of the boys going to make it?”

“The team?” I queried, my mind elsewhere.

He gave a puzzled nod. “The football team. The boys I was hauling over to Sayerton for summer training.” Suddenly, McGinty became very suspicious. “Iffen you're cops, why don't you know ‘bout the Huntsville Pumas? Shoot, they won just about every game they ever played. Our boys be famous!”

I cleared my throat. “Now don't your worry about them, Sam.”

The bus driver's eyes went wide, and he began to struggle. “Holy shit! Ya'll not the feds! Your'n the commies! Help! Help! Enemy agents! Chinese spies! Assassins! Help!”

We looked Chinese? Firm but gentle, I clapped a hand over the injured man's mouth, then pulling his staff from under the bed, Raul tapped the patient on the head. With a sigh, McGinty went limp and started to snore. Oh hell, and everything had been going so well.

“Ed, how soon till Jess contacts you?” Raul asked, dematerializing his staff. That way it was invisible, but constantly in his grasp and ready for use.

Pulling back a sleeve, I glanced at my wristwatch. “Forty minutes.”

“Too damn long.”

“Agreed. Let's scam.”

“What's going on in there?” a voice shouted from the outside corridor. The handle and chair began to rattle. “Open this door!”

Crossing the room, I kicked the chair out from under the handle. Immediately, the door slammed aside and a gang of orderlies rushed inward, toppling over each other. Nimble as ninjas, we squeezed by the squirming bodies, running past a shocked flock of doctor and nurses.

Taking a side corridor, I tipped over a gurney full of bedpans in our wake to hinder pursuit and make enough racket to wake the dead. Or even the undead, for that matter. We wanted Mystery Man to attack us, but not here. A hospital was no place for open combat. We would be at too much of a disadvantage trying not to hurt the surrounding patients. Raul and I had to get out of here and fast.

“Hey, you!” shouted a man in a hospital security uniform. “Stop!”

Ah, the ancient song sung once more. What memories that brought back. I loved the classics.

Leveling his invisible wand, Raul flicked a hand and the man toppled asleep. We hit the fire escape

doors at full speed. The alarm rang once, my belt buckle vibrated and the bell went silent. We also did not want the police in on this matter.

“A football team,” Raul said with meaning, as we danced down the emergency stairs. “Young, muscular men in the absolute prime of physical health.”

“It's a ready-made army,” I added. Sliding along the banister, I went from one landing to the next. I knew that I shouldn't, but old habits die hard. Whee!

“And apparently, Mystery Man did more than capture the vaporous remains of Hoto and Tanner to hide their disappearance. He drank them and absorbed their powers!”

Moving past the lobby level, we continued on to the basement which was packed with laundry carts, gigantic industrial washing machines and two orderlies already snoozing. How nice.

“Is that possible?” I asked. “To drink a person?”

“Shit yes! But so dangerous no sane person would even attempt such an act!”

“Sane is not a word I use in the same sentence with Mystery Man. But did he get all of their abilities, or only parts?”

“Parts, most likely. But I wouldn't lay book on it.”

“Book. Ha.”

“Sorry.”

Wrapping plastic sacks about ourselves, Raul and I exited by the never-ever-guarded garbage chute. It was a short slide, but a smelly one. Depositing the bags in a trash compactor, Raul changed our appearance into that of the pair of sleeping orderlies in the basement, and with exaggerated casualness we strolled through the parking lot, searching for a car to steal. The legal owner would be compensated later and we had to get out of here quickly. Taxis were even more dangerous than staying at the hospital. We needed an isolated phone and open combat stretch in case Mystery Men hit us early. One vehicle in particular caught our attention, and we headed that way.

“So an insane alchemist, with the most powerful book of evil magic in existence, has absorbed the abilities of a mutant vampire and is wearing an alien battle suit,” Raul muttered softly, as we walked along the lines of parked cars. “Ed, this is big. Really big.”

“And extremely bad,” I added as we reached the car, an old luxury sedan with racing tires. Nondescript and powerful, it was tailor made for our needs. Couldn't be better.

Coming close to the vehicle, I noted the keys were still in the ignition. Hold it. This car was just a bit too perfect. My sunglasses said the area was clear, so I reached for my pocket EM scanner.

“But what is the lunatic bastard planning to do tomorrow night?” snorted the mage, scratching at his neck. “What?”

As I pointed my scanner at the sedan, the meter instantly hit the red line. That car was rigged to blow!

“There's a knot in the rope,” I whispered, reaching for Raul's arm. But at the sound of my voice, the sedan flipped into the air on a strident column of flame and the concussion blast of the explosion smashed us to the rough pavement.

Sometime later I awoke dazed, sprawled on the ground, and hurting in every part of my body not directly covered by torso armor. My ears rang with a painful silence. But vaguely through the acrid smoke, I could dimly perceive a score of car trunk lids pop open and out climbed a squad of pale young men in bedraggled football uniforms. They were large beefy specimens whose long, sharp, fangs shone unnaturally clean and white.

Moving lightning fast, the vampires advanced upon us in broad sunlight.

TEN

Rolling to my knees, I shrugged and snapped off a fast twelve rounds with both Magnums. One undead burst into dust, another clutched a wounded arm and a third was grazed in the throat from the wooden bullets. But my Model 66 Magnum was only loaded with silver and steel, so those three vampires just recoiled from the physical impact of the bullets.

Retreating, the undead formed a circle as Raul and I went back to back in a standard two-man defensive position. I reloaded as Raul materialized his staff, its silver length weakly pulsating with power. This was the first chance I ever had of seeing a vampire in broad daylight. That is, for longer than thirty seconds. I had no damn idea how they were doing this unpleasant miracle, suntan lotion from the planet Krypton? So there had been a trap within the trap. My respect and hatred for Mystery Man went up another notch. He was good enough to be a Bureau 13 agent.

Happily at this hour of the morning, the parking lot was deserted of people, sans us. Awkward, but functional combat room. However, our plan had been to detect the trap, summon aid, and then go into it, killing the operatives and burning our way up their rope of command until we found the top knot. But then, these were only high school kids. Vampires or not, how tough could they be?

“R-47-12!” a slim vampire shouted crouching low behind the line of his fellow undead, the fingertips of one hand resting lightly on the ground. “Hut! Hut! Hut!”

Hopefully, I glanced at Raul.

“Basketball is my game,” the tall mage apologized.

Great. I knew as much about football as I do that game with the stick and a diamond. It appeared that I was about to witness the effectiveness of having secret fight codes from the wrong side. Hoo boy.

“Hut one! Hut two!” the vampire shouted.

The front four dropped back and two others took off for the sides in a flanking maneuver, while the rest charged. There was only a single factor in our favor. These athletes had been taught to fight in a game, but we were trained to kill.

Sidestepping a rushing Puma, I pumped two rounds into his head as a distraction, his protective helmet shattering into pieces under the booming impact of the Magnum slugs. Which is how it should be. As he yanked off the chin strap, I moved in close and stabbed him in the chest with a fountain pen. He jerked

aside as I snapped off the cap.

Thick acrid smoke started pouring from his chest and the undead monster began screaming as four fluid ounces of hydrofluoric acid dissolved everything it touched.

Hydrofluoric acid is just about the nastiness stuff in the world. It nigh instantly dissolves anything with a carbon atom in its molecular construction and violently exploded even the most mild of flammables. The damn stuff could even eat stainless steel and glass! Nothing could safely hold the acid for very long, which was why I had filled my pen just prior to departing.

With a sizzling hole in his torso big enough to drop kick a field goal through, his heart only a greasy memory of smoke in the air, vampire Bubba crumpled to the ground extremely dead. At least that weakness they still had. Fine, two down, nine to go.

Reaching inside my shirt I pulled out a cross and since I'm Catholic it was hot with power. Time to meet Jesus, boys! The vampires sneered in hatred and from out of nowhere a football smashed into my hand with stinging force, sending the cross flying away into the weeds surrounding the parking lot, lost for good. Raul got the same treatment with a plastic squirt gun filled with Holy Water. These guys had pinpoint accuracy with that pointy leather thing. No wonder the Pumas held the state championship. But I was a crack shot and their remaining two footballs got deflated the .357 Magnum way.

But we went hand-to-hand, with them having the advantage. This was the middle of the night for me and after a two thousand mile teleport, Raul was not exactly brimming with magic.

Running round a truck, Raul made ready to punch a vampire. The burly undead smiled contemptuously and spread his arms invitingly. But as the mage drove his fist forward, there was a flash and the mage's entire limb turned into dark wood. The vampire could only gasp as the living stake rammed into his heart and he exploded into ash. Three more undead were dead.

Hmm, only the vampires killed with wood turned into dust. I filed that information away for future usage.

"Tunafish!" Raul cried holding his staff aloft. I blinked as a burst of blinding light filled the parking lot. They didn't appear to notice. These guys must have some sort of protection against light.

"Hut 14!" answered the slim undead.

Feinting with my right, I slammed a left into another suck fiend and felt my signet ring jerk. Inside the nifty device was a coiled spring-steel rosette of razor blades, that snapped into action whenever it hit something hard. Like a head.

Vampire Lad recoiled in pain as half his countenance was torn off. So I hit him again. Roaring in fury, he lunged and slipped on his own face. Using my full weight and all of my strength, I dropped and rammed my knee into his back. Above the noise and confusion, I clearly heard his spine crack and that was the end for him.

Lightning and thunder said Raul was cutting loose. Turning quickly about, I rolled across the hood of an import, managed to stuff my pack of cigarettes down the numbered shirt of a Huntsville Puma and slapped it with my pistol. His chest burst into flames, started to dissolve, arms and legs jerked stiff with an electric stun charge, his scream was recorded, he turned green from poison and then exploded.

A beating inhuman heart skittered across the parking lot to stop under a car. Tracking on the gas tank

lid, I pumped six rounds in a cluster about the locked flap. The vampire was beneath the vehicle scrambling for his vital organ when the fuel tank detonated. The blast hurled the car into the air to crash down again on the half-a-brain fullback. He staggered into view a flaming humanoid torch and I let him have my derringer. The one trigger of the Belgium Nine fired all four of the .22 caliber barrels, and he was hit with a cold iron slug, a silver round, a soft lead dum-dum and a blessed wooden bullet. Poof. Ash. Wind.

As I put my last reload into the Magnums, the slim vampire called ‘hut’ a few more times and remaining five hit us from every side.

Firing both of my S&W .357 Magnums in a steady barrage, I tossed the pistols at the kids when the guns became empty. Kicking a vampire in the throat, I buried my knife into the ear of another sucker and was brutally tackled to the ground. I butted one in the groin, stabbed another with the awl of my Swiss Army knife and received an elbow in the teeth. Blood filled my mouth and I started to choke.

“Manhattan Project!” Raul yelled gesturing.

Despite the fact that I was drowning on my own blood and there were three snarling vampires fighting each other for the privilege of biting my tender neck, I smiled and tried to bury myself deeper underneath them.

Suddenly there was a searing burst of light, deafening thunder boomed, the ground shook and a heat flash singed me even through the mass of limp corpses piled on top.

As I struggled free from the stunned undead, I could see Raul standing on a bullseye of macadam surrounded by a steaming blast crater. The mage was smiling and removing rubber plugs from both ears. Body Boom was something a mage did only when none, repeat none, of his pals were nearby.

A truck with real wood siding gave us the necessary tools and we started to stake the undead when I stopped. Ah, I was about to be extremely clever.

“Hey Raul,” I slurred, then hawked and spit blood. “Maybe we can still burn this rope. Have you enough magic to do a full illusion?”

His woebegone expression said no. Guess a personal nuclear blast took a lot out of a guy.

Once more the taste of copper filled my mouth and I paused to spit red again. “Okay, can you polymorph two of these yahoos into duplicates of us?”

Tilting his head, the mage listened to his staff, it was feebly flickering with magic. “Just barely, if I drain my belt and shoes, but I’ll manage. It’s a great idea and fresh bodies does facilitate matters.”

Gathering my pistols, I next retrieved knives and hacked the unconscious vampires to pieces, scattering the now dead body parts and dusty ash around so it would not be immediately obvious just how many corpses were present. Hidden inside their clothing, I found a small electrical device of unknown design. I postulated that the machine was a modified form of Tanner’s forceshield, some massively weaker version built to only protect the vampires from sunlight. A neat trick that, and one I had not even contemplated. Thank goodness, Mystery Man hadn’t trusted his slaves enough to give them full power forceshields, or else Raul and I would be on our way to the dentist for a cleaning and sharpening.

Meanwhile, the wizard mumbled in his secret language, and then used his staff to smight two of the

football players who were the closest to our sizes. Every little bit helps. Rippling with colored lights, the cold flesh melted and reformed into mirror images of us, clothes, guns and everything. Then we tore accessories off a few cars and sprinkled the debris around the blast crater so it would seem a car had exploded instead of Mr. Horta. When satisfied, we hid in the relatively undamaged trunk of a Buick RoadMaster and waited.

Fire engines and police sirens were sounding in the distance, when the slim vampire who had been shouting orders finally roused. He hissed his displeasure at the carnage, then smiled in fiendish delight when he spotted our bodies lying limp on the ground.

It was rather disquieting to watch him drink our blood, rip out our throats, smash our skulls and throw the brains away. Then he cracked open our chests and ate the hearts. Although disgusted, I had to admire his efficiency. Now that was what I called dead.

When finished, the vampire went to a foreign compact, removed his helmet and drove off. As soon as he was far enough away, Raul and I scrambled out of hiding and into a cherry '62 Corvette. I used to own a similar model and could hot-wire this sweetheart in my sleep. Plus the Vet, it was a lot faster than the dinky fuel efficient German compact. Having only one car to tail our quarry, that extra speed could be an important factor.

“We have been seriously underestimating our foe,” Raul muttered, collapsing his staff to a size that would fit inside the dimensions of the Vet and laying it across his knees. “McGinty was probably primed with some potion to flip out if questioned, making us run from the hospital and into their trap.”

Shifting gears and leaving the hospital behind, I mumbled agreement, a line of red drool flowing down my cheek. Noticing, Raul pulled a button from his shirt, made a fist and punched me in the jaw. When the stinging faded, so did the pain and blood. My mouth felt fine. Gingerly, I tested my teeth and they were solidly attached once more. That was some button.

“Thanks,” I said wiping off the spittle with a non-magical cloth handkerchief.

He winked. “No problem. So what now? We follow our quarterback until he leads us to Mystery Man, then we call in the troops?”

I nodded. “Natch. Which brings up an interesting question, how do we contact the team in Chicago? You can't teleport a fly and our radios only have a two kilometer range.”

“The telephone?” Raul suggested. “No, we don't dare. If Mystery Man has the abilities of Vampire X, then he also has the powers of Tanner. He could be tapping the entire Alabama phone system waiting for us to try such an act. What about trying Jess?”

Watching the road, I shrugged “It's not time, but I'll try.”

JESSICA! I screamed inside my head. JESSICA! ITS ED! CAN YOU HEAR ME, BABE? THERE'S TROUBLE! HELP, JESS, HELP!

No answer. My telepathic wife must not be thinking of me at this exact instant. But when the hour mark came, we might be too far away from Huntsville for Jessica to focus on me. Damn-damn-damn! So close, yet so far.

“No good,” I reported, my temples throbbing. Whew, even trying was a bit of a strain.

Hunkering down in the seat, Raul rubbed his chin. “How do we contact a secret agency? An interesting problem.”

“Got an interesting answer?”

“Cogitating, Ed. Ruminating.”

“Swell. Tell me when you start to think. Okay?”

“As a great man once said, natch.”

Keeping a careful watch on our Judas goat, I maintained a discreet distance behind him as he turned onto the highway and headed north. Ah, this shouldn't take too long. But we were wrong again.

Soon it became obvious, that Mystery Man was much too smart to lay a trap for us at his own front door. Our vampire drove on through the day and into the night, stopping only for gas. I guess the blood he had consumed in the parking lot was tiding him over. Hospital food is supposed to be good for you. Ha.

Slowly time passed as we rolled through Alabama, Tennessee and into Kentucky. Raul and I took turns driving and sleeping. The sandwiches Mindy had given us came in extremely useful. At one stop for fuel, I stole a box of .38 caliber ammunition from the desk of an attendant. Well, stole is perhaps the wrong word, as I did leave behind a hundred dollars in cash for a \$24.95 box of bullets.

As befitting a mage, Raul was surprised to discover that .38 ammunition would fit a .357 gun. Always polite, I started to explain the difference between a normal and Magnum round, but stopped when he yawned and attempted to turn on the radio. Hey, I can take a hint.

Later on when he took over the driving again, I used my knife and pistolbutt to painstakingly cut a cross pattern into each of the soft-lead slugs. They were now incredibly illegal, and delightfully deadly, dum-dums. Not having a proper workshop, there was always the chance of doing a bad slice, and when I triggered the round it could jam and explode my gun. But that was a chance I would have to take. It was better than being totally unarmed.

“If only we knew what the bastard was planning,” I said aloud, after successfully dodging a radar trap.

“The kid?” Raul asked, adjusting the rearview mirror without touching it.

“No, Mystery Man. Destroy the world? Conqueror it? Or something too fiendish to contemplate? Some hideous act we haven't even thought of yet.”

Running through a gauntlet of pained expressions, Raul finally gave a diplomatic cough. Then another.

“Okay, talk,” I sighed, bracing for the bad news.

“Well,” the mage said. “When Katrina and I were perusing my file copy of the Aztec book—”

“Your*what* ?” I interrupted, almost dropping my gun.

“My file copy,” he repeated. “When we captured the volume, I accidentally made a photostatic copy of

every page.”

Furious, I could only glare at him. Mages! “But isn't even that dangerous to read?”

“Not a copy,” Raul stated earnestly. “It would be similar to trying to put electrical current into a photograph of a radio. Nothing happens. The Book itself does the conjure.”

“Meaning any damn fool can operate it.”

“Yep.”

“Hardly good news.”

“Anyway,” Raul went on, maneuvering past a pickup truck spewing blue-colored exhaust. “If Mystery Man was an ordinary guy who became an alchemist and then risked death to become a wizard for one day to get his mitts on this book, I decided to search for the other end of the spectrum, what spell, conjure, whatever, that would give him the most power. Permanently make him a real wizard.”

“And?”

“You won't like it.”

“I'm braced.”

A drum roll sounded from nowhere. “I think he's going for the World Mage Spell.”

There was a rimshot and cymbal crash, then I groaned. The World Mage Spell. It had never been fully successful, but the last time anybody got the foul conjure even partially functioning, in 1871, the newly formed Bureau waged a brutal war that burned old Chicago to the ground in their effort to kill the caster. Mrs. O'Leary and her demonic cow had been tough customers to beat.

“Okay,” I said, rallying to the task. “The bigger the spell, the more limitations.”

“How true,” Raul said, lifting a finger. “One, it has to be performed within the boundaries of the kingdom he stole it from.”

“We're not a kingdom,” I reminded.

“Magically this country is,” he stated. “Science obeys the letter of law. Magic follows the intent.”

Okay, I bought that. “Continue.”

He lifted another finger. “Two, it has to be on property he has legal access to.”

Interesting. “And three?” I prompted.

The hand closed and dropped. “There is no three.”

“None?”

“Nope.”

Hoo boy. Deep in thought, we tooled on through the picturesque mountains of Kentucky. Semi-tractor trailers passed us regularly and I expertly used them as protective coverage between us and the compact. Twice already Raul had changed the color of our car, added a roof luggage rack, and even made the whole damn thing invisible for a while. Three near collisions later, we stopped utilizing that ploy.

Craning my neck, I had tried following our young killer by using my sunglasses to keep track of his evil black aura, but had nearly lost our quarry when we started to tag along after a sports compact full of lawyers.

Afterwards, we kept to sight and skill. Nothing fancy.

Night had fallen once more, when the undead football player pulled off Interstate 70 and into Saddle Brook, just south of the Ohio River still in Kentucky. On the other bank of the river was the pleasant industrial town of Cincinnati. Despite its nickname, Cin was an ultra-squeaky clean place. Vulgar language in front of ladies was not permitted, pornographic magazines like *The Physicians Medical Journal* were not allowed to be sold, and once the locals had tried to edit the word hell out of the Bible.

However, Saddle Brook was where the people from Cincinnati went to remember what a good time was. The streets were lined with massage parlors, adult bookstores, strip joints—both male and female—leather bars, biker taverns, saloons and 24 hour liquor supermarkets. Drug deals took place with total lack of regard for police or witnesses. Every window had iron grills, every door was triple locked, and we passed an all-night gun store. It kind of made me feel homesick for South Chicago. I wished we had the chance to stop so I could get some proper ammo. But our marathon vampire sailed on past, and I waved bye-bye to the boxes of semi-steel jacketed, hollow point, Magnum Express Supremes. They went in like a finger, came out like a fist. Now that was a proper bullet!

Everywhere in sight, prostitutes jostled whores and streetwalkers, their outfits more garish and hair more colors than anything I had ever seen before in this dimension. Weaving through the heavy traffic, I started to explain the technical differences between the types to Raul, when the mage told me he already knew. Maybe my buddy did at that. Raul Horta was from New York, and no Boy Scout.

We both gave a groan of relief as the Compact Kid pulled into the parking lot of La Petite Court; a combination motel, strip joint, nude mud wrestling parlor and topless bar. It was not much more than a carnal amusement park, where the rides charged by the quarter hour.

The teenage terror chose the strip joint and left the vehicle unlocked. He wasn't coming back. Bingo. He also had changed into street clothes somewhere along the way. That gave me an idea.

“Base of operations, or relay point,” Raul postulated, his attention momentarily distracted by a buxom young lady with the most amazing ability to defy gravity.

Keeping a hand on the steering wheel, I glanced at my watch. Six hours till midnight and the equinox. “Let's find out,” I said, parking the car and saying goodbye to the vehicle. In this neighborhood, an unattended Corvette wouldn't last ten minutes.

“We'll need a disguise,” Raul stated, climbing out from the front seat. “Especially since he has seen our faces. Not to mention snacked on our hearts. I have recharged quite a bit in the last eighteen hours. Want me to do some magic?”

“Honey, I can do you magic,” boasted a platinum blonde Oriental in low-cut lavender spandex and fake

mink stole.

We tended our apologies for the misconception, discreetly moved on and lowered our goddamn voices.

“Better save it,” I decided, testing the draw on my Magnums. “Let’s do this the normal way.”

Glancing at the human stew swirling around us, I chose my first customer. A skinny man dressed in leather and smoking a cigarette in a sequined holder. In my opinion, he had on far too much mascara.

“How much for the leather jacket?” I asked.

The question amused him. “Just the jacket, or me in it?” he countered.

“Ah, just the jacket.”

“Two hundred bucks.”

I flashed cash. “One hundred.”

“Done!” We exchanged goods.

“Excuse me, miss,” Raul said to a mature woman in fringed vest, mini-shirt and dirty white boots. “I wish to purchase your vest. How much?”

In a calculating manner, her wide red lips snapped juicy gum. The woman’s bountiful jewelry must have weighed almost as much as she did. “Forty dollars.”

“Twenty five, and toss in the gloves.”

“You got it, handsome,” the lady said, jingling as she removed the garment. Nothing but flesh was underneath. This place was worse than Hong Kong. Just then, our Corvette rolled by and disappeared into traffic. Told you so.

“And an extra ten for the crucifix,” Raul suggested.

She glanced downward at her ample breasts. “I got one of those? Okay, sure.”

Nobody else seemed promising, except a biker gang lounging on the corner, so I tried there next. Not every motorcycle rider was a thrill-kill nutcase. Many were very decent people, who simply enjoyed the freedom of the road. Peaceful, law abiding, patriotic folk.

“Nice hogs,” I complemented as an opener. “My friend and I need some clothes to change our looks. And fast. Wanna sell?”

For some reason this seemed to vastly interest them.

“And what you offering, Mr. Money?” a bald fat boy asked, snapping a switchblade into life. His cronies chuckled and displayed more lethal ironmongery.

Ho-hum, so much for doing it the nice way. I drew both of the .357 Magnums and let ‘em have a good look. “I’m offering a half ounce of hot lead apiece. Any takers?”

Their heads shook no, then yes. Then no again. Impatiently, I gestured towards the alley. The question was so complex, it might take them a week to figure an answer.

“Move,” I commanded, and they hustled into the darkness.

Five minutes and six low-grade Sleep spells later, a punk rocker and a hippie strode in the strip joint. Once we were past the front door and photograph lined hallway, the music, laughter, noise, lights, smoke and smell formed a tangible atmosphere that threatened to overload the senses. I pocketed my Bureau sunglasses. They were useless in here.

The place was a standard bump-and-grind establishment. Small tables were clustered around an equally small stage backed by a tremendous mirror greasy with handprints. On the runway was a pair of skinny, semi-clad women dancing listlessly to the hottest rock tunes, the volume loud enough to sterilize camels. A disco ball hanging from the black ceiling scattered light dots in a vain attempt to generate excitement. Hostesses in ripped lingerie loitered near every table, hoping to find a lonely drunk who wished their company. At fifty bucks a drink.

Pitiful. My bachelor party had started in a place like this. I was bored then and I was bored now. None of the women were pretty, could dance and there were probably more diseases floating about in this dump than an illegal military virus factory. I felt itchy just standing here.

Motioning in sign language, I grabbed a vacant stool at the bar, while Raul took a table. We each ordered drinks. That was mandatory in a place such as this, or else the burly bouncer let you sample his tasty homemade knuckle sandwich. Watching our adolescent undead, I noted that the boy seemed much too intense to be reporting a victory to the boss. In the rear of my brain, I was starting to get a terrible suspicion that this was not the end of the line, but merely a pit stop and our quarterback was going to feed.

JESSICA!

Still silence.

Over in a dark corner, Dracula Jr. was chatting with an almost pretty young hostess in a satin lace teddy, spiked heel shoes and not much else. He smiled. She shook her head no. He grabbed her wrist. She looked him in the eyes, paused and then woodenly nodded yes. Hell and damnation! The bastard was here for blood!

Shuffling through the crowd, the undead high school student escorted her into a back room. We rose to follow, but they promptly reappeared and she was pulling on a coat. Keeping his face towards the wall, Raul sauntered around behind them and rejoined me at the bar.

“What now?” Raul asked tensely.

Buying some time to think, I took a sip of my drink and spit it back into the glass. Yuck! My mother made better tequila than this slop. “Continue to follow. This vampire is our only lead.”

Just then, an oily bald man in skin-tight leather walked up to Raul and made the most astonishing suggestion. Completely unperturbed, Raul snorted in disdain, and the man departed pouting. Hey, wearing an earring did not mean you were gay. Just ask any pirate.

“And at what point do we stop him from killing the girl?” Raul demanded, hand tight on his wizard staff.

Sadly, I had known this question was coming, and was braced for the response. Five hours, thirty minutes till the World Mage Spell. If it was successful, humanity would be facing a god. An actual, Grade A, full-fledged god. There was little choice as to what we had to do.

“We don't stop him,” I said honestly, feeling weary to my very soul. “In fact, I hope he kills her as soon as possible. Her death may be our only chance of saving the world.”

Raul's jaw sagged.

ELEVEN

The mage recovered in under a heartbeat and stared at me as if I was a door-to-door Betamax salesman.

“What was that?” Raul demanded, through clenched teeth.

“This may be our sole hope of ever finding Mystery man,” I explained coldly, resting my arm on the table to lean closer. “Look, we're not dealing with a pro, but a high school kid. He just won the big game and wants to party. This is his celebration. Afterwards, he'll report to the boss.”

Chewing air for a few moments, the mage had trouble speaking. “This is totally unacceptable,” he finally gushed.

“Friend, don't make me pull rank.”

He snorted. “Screw you and the regulations you rode in on. The whole purpose of the Bureau is to protect people from just this kind of danger, not put parsley behind their ears and ring a dinner bell!”

Our conversation was starting to draw unwanted attention, so we moved to another corner where we could still keep watch. A hostess came over and we shooed her away by ordering more watery drinks.

Scrutinizing our boy through a curtained window, we saw him and the girl walk across the parking lot, over to the motel section and enter a room. Only minutes remaining in which to act. If we were going to do anything, and we weren't.

“Ed, please!” the mage implored, tears in his eyes.

Slumping in my seat, I sighed, “No.”

“But we have to do something!”

“You got any ideas?”

“Damn straight,” Raul growled. “We snatch the boob and wring the information out of him. Better to torture a monster, than let an innocent get killed.”

“Wrong,” I said with conviction. “Because anything the slave vampire knows, Rasamor knows. I mean, Mystery Man should know.”

“But he may not!”

Lifting a wrist, I displayed my watch. “Can we take that chance?”

Raul's face underwent a wide variety of expressions, none of them pleasant, until at last he accepted the awful truth.

“Come on,” I said standing. “Let's go.” Tossing a few bills onto the table, I started shoving my way through the drunk, leering crowd. The waitress moved in fast to get the cash before a patron did. Before joining me, Raul downed his drink and then mine. For once, I said nothing to stop him. All mages drink. Raul just a bit more than the rest, and for good reasons.

A short talk and surreptitious money exchange with the reception clerk of the motel, Raul and me got the room with our lucky number on it, which by purest coincidence just happened to be right next door to Vampire Boy and his unwilling date. In the room, we dimmed the lights and Raul produced a peeper pen. Sheathed in teflon coated surgical steel, you could easily shove it into almost any wall and the needle tip made only a minuscule hole in the other side. Inside the pen was a prism and lens assembly that gave a wide-angle view of what was happening in the next room. There wasn't a PI in the civilized world that didn't have one, or would admit that they did.

Braced for what I might see, I took the first look. “Goddamn it, we're behind a picture!”

Moving the peeper a foot to the right, we gauged the location of the picture from the position of the portrait in our room, and managed to get a clear view this time. It wasn't pretty.

Pert breasts sticking up from a ripped lace bra, the girl was spread-eagle on the bed, hand and legs tied to the four corners with torn sheets, panties dangling off an ankle. He was stark naked, his lean body pumping hard. But suddenly he stopped, and she got an expression of raw terror contorting her face. She started to struggle wildly. The boy laughed and buried his mouth onto her neck. The girl went stiff, her fingers clawing at the air.

“Is she dead,” Raul said, his hands twisting on the silver staff. “Yes, I can see it in your face.”

An agent's burden, I told myself.

“Want me to take a turn?” the mage hesitantly offered.

“No!” I snapped. But after a moment added, “Thank you.”

He accepted that. So I watched, God help me, I watched him kill her. I wanted to shut my eyes, to close my ears to her faint, barely audible screams. Desperately, I wanted to burst in there before it was too late and kill the freaking son of a bitch. Raul was correct, our job was to save lives. Yet 6 billion lives rested upon our inaction. But was the world worth this? Was the life of one useless stripper worth the rest of humanity?

Morally? No.

Tactically? Yes.

So I performed my job and did not glance away. If I was to be responsible for her death, I would

watch, to know what she went through, so I could carry the memory to my grave. I would not be a coward. Yet deep down inside my guts, for the very first time, I hated being a Bureau 13 agent.

Almost an hour passed and eventually he finished to rise from the mutilated corpse. As I removed the pen from the wall and handed it to Raul, the mage took hold of my shoulders and forced me to face him.

“Maybe he'll make her an undead also,” Raul offered. “Then the Bureau can recruit her and train the girl to handle the difficulties of being a vampire. But she can still have a full life. A really long one!”

The words were torn from my throat. “He ate her heart.”

Letting go of my jacket, Raul slumped. She was dead for keeps. There would be no graveyard resurrection.

Silently, we moved to the window, parted the thin curtains and watched as the young butcher departed the room, carefully closing and locking the door. Hands in pockets, the monster headed for the streets. Showtime.

We followed using a standard two man rotation. We trailed the murderer to the nicer section of town and then over the Covington Bridge into south Cincinnati. Quick as possible, Raul and I modified our disguises as much as possible into something a bit more respectable. Our boy stopped to take a leak on the Tyler David monument at the Fifth Street traffic circle and then moved off into the shadows of a nearby alley.

Waiting a minute just to be careful, Raul and I tagged along. Traffic was sparse and the footsteps of distant pedestrians echoed strangely in the still night air.

Sure enough, from the alley came a trickle of smoke that disappeared down a metal grating by the curb and into a storm drain.

“Follow and don't lose him,” I softly commanded. “I'll call the team.”

“How?” Raul demanded in disbelief.

“Go!”

He paused. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, buddy. You too.”

“Breadcrumbs,” he replied, producing a jar of petroleum jelly. Glumly, I nodded. Then swirling an imaginary cape about himself, Raul vanished.

Anger and hatred fueling my resolve, I headed for a liquor store. Time was of the essence and I needed to get drunk fast, for more reasons than one.

Returning to Saddle Brook, my task of finding a liquor store doing business this late at night was no problem. Using cash, I purchased six bottles of Everclear and a pint of whiskey. Moving a few blocks away from the store, I prepared for my new role in a garbage strewn alley. Holding my nose, I forced myself to drink half of the whiskey and place the rest aside for later.

Next I removed every Bureau issue article and piece of identification I had in my possession. Sunglasses, ID booklet, signet ring, lighter, body armor, false tooth filled with Untruth Serum, wallet, commission booklet, keys, unbreakable pocketcomb, my last fountain pen, shoulder holster, extra ammo, knife, derringer, handkerchief, beltbuckle and wristwatch.

Spreading my flame retardant cloth on the bottom of a metal trashcan, I dumped my possessions on top and then poured in the Everclear. At 99% pure grain alcohol, the liquor was highly flammable. Setting my watch and cigarette lighter for a slow burning self-destruct, I grabbed the whiskey bottle and retreated. I barely made it to the street when the trash can thunderously detonated. The alley was filled with flame and shrapnel, illuminating the whole neighborhood and rattling windows for blocks. Fleeting, I saw the pocketcomb zoom by, chip a brick wall and zing off into the night. Wow, I guess it really was unbreakable.

Lights came on in a dozen places and I quickly dumped the rest of the whiskey over my clothing then pocketed the bottle.

“Ya-hoo!” I cried, triggering a Magnum and shattering two store windows. Alarms began clanging. “Yippee! I'm on Earth again! Hurrah!” Two more booming rounds punctuated my goofy expressions of joy.

Needless to say, even in Saddle Brook a police car soon rolled by to investigate. I had been rationing my bullets and only three were remaining when they arrived. Parking a half block away, the cops advanced in regulation one-on-one formation with their guns drawn. Good lads. Please, please, consider me dangerous. I shot out another street lamp and pissed in my pants. The things I do for America.

“Now put down the gun, fella,” the officer said, approaching steadily. His voice was low and soothing, calm and even. He was very good at this. Must handle a lot of drunks.

“You can't arrest me,” I snarled and gave a hiccup. “I'm from Mars!”

The officer smiled. “Hey, me too! Buddy! Neighbor!”

Damn, this guy was really good. I thought fast. “You're no buddy of mine,” I slurred, weaving drunkenly on my feet. That part was not altogether an act. The cheap booze mixed with no food in eight hours was hitting me hard. I didn't dare try anymore marksman shooting or I might kill somebody. “You're a thul sucking biggle-fargul!”

“Nyah,” he denied, coming ever closer. “That's my partner. He also smokes and fizzle gorps!”

As much as he was messing up my scheme, I had to admire his total professionalism. “A fizzle gorp!” I drooled, waving the Magnums overhead. “Da Earth loving scum. Let's go shoot him in the spleen!”

“But those guns won't work on Earth folk,” he said nearly within arms reach. “Here use mine.” He held out a revolver that I knew must be empty.

“Look out!” I screamed, firing my last two shots in the air. “He's gonna spur-tune!”

Tossing my weapons away, I dizzily reached for the offered gun. It was immediately withdrawn and somebody tripped me from behind. Down I went flat on my face and the cops piled on top. My arms were yanked behind my back and I heard metallic clicking.

“Shut up, ya loony,” somebody snarled. “Don't give us anymore crap!”

That was my cue to roll over and bellow into their faces, “BUT I'M FROM MARS! MARS! MARS! MARS! You can't arrest me! I gotta get back to my spaceship or die!”

The cuffs clicked with brutal force and I was roughly hauled erect. I loudly burped in one officer's face while the other attempted to frisk me.

“Whew, what breath,” one of the police said holding his nose.

“Don't touch me there,” I screamed again at the top of my lungs. “That'll kill a Martian! And I'm from Mars! Mars! I gotta get back to my ship and go home to Mars!”

“And where the fuck is your ship, Darth Vader?” the first officer demanded, grabbing a fistful of my collar neatly cutting off my air and greatly restricting movement. “On the moon?”

About time he asked. “Bangor, Maine,” I said, attempting to vomit or fart.

Caught by surprise, the second officer smiled in spite of himself, “Bangor, Maine?”

Screeching insanely, I struggled futilely against the cuffs. “No human can say that word! Only another Martian like me! Bangor, Maine! Bangor, Maine! Argh!”

Charging head first, I butted one cop in the stomach, then attempted to spin around and the kick the other, but I fell down with a thump. Ouch. Then the patrolmen moved in and I gave them the best fight I could under the conditions. Kicking, biting, spitting, clawing and constantly shouting over and over again that I was a Martian on my way to Bangor, Maine.

The Saddle Brook police actually accepted my behavior for a lot longer than I ever would have. But finally, bleeding, sore, dirty and half deaf from my raw-throated screams, they pulled out the night sticks and did a little tap dance on my head, using Morse Code to politely inform me that it was nappy time.

As I was pounded into a red haze of pain, I tried once more to shout out my home world and goal. I had to be the most memorable arrest these two ever made. It was imperative! The fate of the world depended upon it.

Along with revenge for a skinny blonde girl whose name I didn't even know.

TWELVE

Reeking of disinfectant, I was languishing in my cell nursing a severe headache from both the bad booze and the beating, when I noticed a thick black line form on the exterior cinder block wall.

About six feet off the concrete floor, the line steadily progressed in both directions until it was three feet in length, then the ends did a sharp angle downward and extended to the floor. With a creak, the rectangle swung aside and Mindy stepped in through the hole.

“Hi, Ed,” she said softly. Beyond the doorway, I could see a wooded park with our RV from Chicago looming in the shadows underneath a nearby copse of trees.

Summoning superhuman strength, I raised a trembling finger. “Shush,” I whispered, my temples throbbing. “Stop screaming.”

She nodded and the snoring of the other forty inmates of the drunk tank resumed their normal singsong buzz sawing. Personally, I did not believe that saturation bombing by the U.S. Air Force could wake these guys, but I was playing it safe.

“What's the story?” Mindy asked in a hushed voice. “Do you want to be rescued?”

“Believe it,” I said softly, forcing myself to stand. “We've found Mystery Man.”

“Great! Where's Raul?” Her voice had unaccustomed emotion.

I rested a hand against the wall to keep myself erect. “Heading smack into the lion's den, but leaving a breadcrumb trail for us to follow.”

“Then let's go.”

“Yowsa.”

As we stepped through the magical portal, the wall closed and sealed in our wake. Climbing into the van, I kissed my wife hello and we drove off into the night.

“Cincinnati, downtown,” I told the front of the van.

A hooded video monitor in the dashboard changed from displaying a street map of Saddle Brook into a grid of neighboring city.

“Faith and begorra, will we be wanting city hall or the wee police station?” asked a redheaded bear of a man behind the steering wheel. Wearing a flowing black cassock and track shoes, the Irish goliath had a string of rosary beads dangling from the holstered Bible at his hip and a massive gold crucifix hung about his neck.

“Donaher!” I cried, then held my head in both hands and pressed hard, trying to force the pieces back together again.

George and Ken helped me to the couch, while Katrina knelt before me and drew apart the top of a leather medical bag to produce an assortment of items. Pouring an envelope full of blue powder into a jelly jar containing a yellow liquid, the mixture turned green. What a surprise. But then it went purple, brown, red, frothy white and clear. She shoved the jar into my hands. “Drink!” she commanded.

Hoping it was fast-acting poison, I chugged the brew down and wham I was a new man. Headache, pain, tiredness, gone-gone-gone. I felt fit and ready to do battle.

“What is that stuff?” I asked, licking the rim before returning the glass container.

“Old family recipe,” Katrina said, wiping off the jar with a disposal antiseptic towelette.

“Okay. But what is it made of?”

“Old families.”

I laughed, then paused. Nyah.

Moving to the rear of the RV, I rummaged about in a locker until I found some respectable and less odious clothes. In my personal box, I obtained duplicate personal effects and another FBI ID commission booklet. Going to the weapons locker, I got a watch, more body armor, a new double shoulder holster and my spare set of Magnums. Ultra-light weight #42 in the left, combat model #66 in the right. I grabbed a fistful of pens, filled my pockets with speedloaders and added a HE grenade for luck.

“Perfect!” I exclaimed, straightening my tie in a small mirror.

Timidly, Jessica handed me a breath mint. “Not quite yet, dearest.”

Properly chastised, I sucked and munched. Cheap whiskey did that to a man, along with a severe lack of food. So I raided the stash of MRE military rations we always keep on board. The US Army vacuum-packed meatloaf was like chewing a shoe and just as tasty. Forcing a lump down my gullet, I briefly wondered if the Mexican Army had field rations more fitting for a soldier about to do battle.

“Did my message get to you,” I asked after swallowing. “Or did you locate me some other way?”

Jess smiled, “When the InfoNet computer rattled off a report of a drunk with two Magnums claiming that he was from Mars and on his way to Bangor Maine, we knew it had to be you.”

“Why didn't you try and contact me?” I asked. With the halogen streetlights illuminating her from behind, my bride was even lovelier than ever.

“I did,” she replied blushing. “But in Huntsville. This place is a thousand miles off target.”

True enough. Moving to the front passenger seat, I checked the map on the monitor and showed Donaher where we wanted to go.

“By the way, Michael, how did your assassination attempt, I mean, your sabbatical end?” I asked, buckling on the seatbelt.

Busy paying attention to the traffic, Father Donaher scowled, and then smiled. “I actually made it into the throne room this time, before they discovered it was me and threw me out.” The priest lowered his voice. “Faith, Ed. Satan is a lot larger than I had ever imagined.”

“How big?” I asked curiously.

“Texas is what comes to mind.”

Wow.*Muy grande.*

“What will police do when they discover that your fingerprints are those of an FBI agent?” Sanders asked, the huge Thompson machine gun he held in both hands appearing to be a child's toy. Ken Sanders was the only human being I had ever met that made Father Michael Xavier Donaher seem small. With these two protean behemoths tagging along, it was going to be difficult remaining inconspicuous.

“The Bureau will not identify the prints of any agent in jail,” I explained. “How would the folks at HQ

know if a field agent is going undercover as a criminal and wants to be in jail? They only ID the fingerprints off a dead Bureau agent. I'm not missing until roll is taken in the morning.”

“Besides, there is a number we can call to get us out of jail on anything but a Murder One charge,” George said, his own M60 resting across his lap.

“What is?” Katrina asked.

He smiled. “1-8-0-0-B-U-R-E-A-U-1-3.”

She quickly counted. “But this is too long. American phone numbers only have seven digits.*Da?*”

“Not ours,” George smiled, patting a shapely knee.

As we turned onto Fifth Street, I brought the team up to date on the current situation. Parking the RV by a meter at the curb, Donaher took change to feed the municipal quarter-eater as the rest of us prepped for underground warfare.

Wadding boots was the first thing we wanted, but there were only two pairs. Katrina fixed that by having Mindy slice the boots into rubbery shreds and then magically repairing the pieces into seven whole sets of boots. Now that was a useful trick. Wonder if she could do it with money?

We also took gloves, flashlights, bug-repellant, gas masks and magnesium underwater flares. Plus, an ultra-violet lantern.

After emptying the weapons locker, Jessica was carrying an Uzi machine pistol with a bulbous silencer on the barrel and a pouch of clips over a shoulder. Rare indeed was the fight when my lovely telepath went deliberately armed with lethal weapons. On her back was a canister and pressure tank assembly, with a holstered pistol at the end of a segmented hose. Katrina, George and Ken also had similar tanks. Each was color coded differently.

“Okay, what did you guys come up with?” I asked, smearing on the bug repellent. Good stuff, it had even worked on Them!

Patting her weapon, Jessica spoke. “Mine is a possible stun. It squirts a combination of MSG and DMSO, with a stabilizing agent.”

Ah yes, MSG, also known as monosodium glutamate, was a flavor enhancer used in cheap food. It boosted waning tastes by stimulating the nerve endings of the tongue. It also gave terrible headaches and swollen joints to many people sensitive to the stuff. Occasionally even unconsciousness. It would cause these symptoms in anybody who got a massive dose.

DMSO, which stood for something or other, I forget, was a by-product of making paper. Considered useless for decades, the bizarre garlic-tasting chemical had only one known function. It could permeate the entire human body in less than a second. I once participated in a demonstration where I put my finger into a beaker of the stuff and tasted garlic in my mouth. My mouth tasted what my finger was in! Incredible, but generally useless. Mixing the two was brilliant, instant liquid headache. I liked it.

The tanks on Katrina's back were frosty cold with wisps of escaping vapor spurted from a release valve on top. The hose was heavily insulated, as was the pistol.

“Liquid nitrogen,” she stated proudly, adjusting her thick gloves. They went to her elbows. “Intense cold can crystallize steel, making brittle as glass. What does to flesh is painful to watch. My magic in no way hinders operation of device.”

Tucking away the tube of bug goo, I heartily approved. Let's see Mystery Man beat that!

“Ken?” I asked.

“Nothing special,” the man mountain rumbled. “Just 99% pure, concentrated, hydrofluoric acid.”

Gasping in horror, I took a step back. Concentrated? Wow, and he was carrying maybe fifty gallons. “You're a brave man, Mr. Sanders.”

He nodded in lieu of a salute. “Sir, thank you, sir.”

Shy and quiet as always, George had a satchel charge of C4, a pouch of grenades and was sporting the usual M60, plus a backpack jammed full of rolled ammo links. A new feature was the tiny black box clipped under the pitted maw of the long ventilated barrel, a short-range microwave beamer.

“It gives 30 second emissions that cook a man solid as a potato,” he explained, with a fiendish grin. Mr. Renault enjoyed our line of work just a tad too much to be considered normal.

Father Donaher was carrying the usual M1A flamethrower, his favorite weapon for general combat and a sawed-off double barrel shotgun rode in a holster at his hip. Mindy had a triple quiver of arrows on her back, her ever-present sword slung at the waist and a bandoleer of wooden knives across her chest.

Donning combat armor over my street clothes, I put a .44 AutoMag at my hip, a derringer in my boot, checked the action on a M203 and kissed it hello. A combination M16 machine gun and M79 40mm grenade launcher, this handy little deathdealer had gotten me out of more tight squeezes any even the friendliest of lubricants.

A mixed clip of 5.56mm ammo went into the M16 machine gun and a bandoleer of 40mm grenade went across my chest. A thermite shell was thumbed into the underbarrel launcher.

Everybody was wearing a cross.

It was an odd fact, but since Count Dracula, the very first vampire, was Catholic and violently allergic to garlic and white roses, all of the subsequent vampire created by his biting people and their biting people, and so on, all have the exact same weaknesses. Too bad it wasn't bullets.

Also, I also found it amusing that so many folks got Count Vladimir Dracula and Prince Vlad Tepes confused. Yes, both operated in the same section of the world at the same time. Both were named Vlad, and Tepes had the nickname of Dragqul ‘The Dragon’. But the two were entirely different people and bitter enemies. Vlad was the equivalent of ‘John’ in those days. Yes, indeedly, if I ever get to travel through time again, their grand finale duel in the Transylvanian Alps was the very first event I would go out of my way to avoid. Those two guys were dangerous and seriously crazy.

“Should we alert the locals to the possibility of a terrorist attack,” Mindy asked, preparing a haversack of magical supplies for Raul. “So they'll have the ambulances, fire department and such ready.”

“Negative,” I stated, testing the spring action on my signet ring. “For the same reasons I couldn't call you

over the phone or radio. If the Tanner part of Mystery Man is listening it'd blow the whole show.”

Upon arriving, we left Amigo to guard the van and moved individually out of the side door of the vehicle and into the dank alley. When the street was clear to both binoculars and sunglasses, the team scampered into the road, Ken thumbed up the manhole cover and we quickly climbed down a steel ladder. The eighty pound manhole cover was replaced with gentle fingertip pressure.

We descended past the electrical service duct, beyond the massive water pipes and finally into the sewer. Almost immediately, we were glad we had brought along the gas masks. The murky water swirled with stuff best left unmentioned and more poured from the open pipes set along the curved brick wall. Slime was on everything.

The breadcrumbs that Raul was going to leave were smears of petroleum jelly, ultra-violet light made the material infused with an unearthly blue glow. It was an age old trick. The jelly was waterproof and barely visible even in direct daylight, but made for perfect tracking in the dark.

Only it wasn't dark, the damn brick lined tunnel was brilliantly illuminated by wire encased light bulbs set every few meters in the ceiling.

“Cut a power cable?” Mindy asked, proffering her sword.

Ken raised a mauled fist. “Smash them, sir?”

“Unscrew the bulbs?” Father Donaher asked.

That I approved. It would be mildly suspicious, but much less so than seeing seven heavily armed people marching your way.

“Get hard, people,” I ordered and my command was answered by a chorus of metallic clicks. “Silent penetration, one meter spread. Mindy on point, Ken get the bulbs, Donaher on flank.”

Turning the ultra-violet lantern to maximum power and minimum aperture, I scanned the walls at chest level. Then remembered that it was our Belgian basketball player doing the writing and tried a bit higher. Barely discernible, I found an arrow marker on the wall pointing northwards towards upriver. Below it was scrawled, ‘evil man this way. ugh. tonto.’ Mages, sheesh.

With Mindy prominently in front, I sloshed along behind Sanders, safe in the expanding zone of darkness. Constantly checking the bricks, I soon found another jelly smear which read, ‘clothespin!’ Since tiny sniffs of the city sewer's ambiance was reaching my nose in spite of the gas mask, I heartily agreed with the sentiment.

Approaching another ladder a half block later, I found more writing on the wall. An arrow pointed upward, accompanied by the words ‘beats me, chief’.

“It's a blind entrance to throw off pursuit,” I explained to the massed troops. In essence, all we had done was cross the street. My opinion of Mystery Man was going higher and higher. This guy was good enough to be a CIA spy.

We followed the trail of greasy markers up to the street and into another alley. Stout doors backed the rear of stores, each boasting heavy padlocks and signs announcing the name of the electronic alarm service used. This close to the Saddle Brook border, I guess it was necessary. The alley lamps were

easily disposed of by the simple process of Sanders flicking a knife upward, cutting a wire and then catching the knife as it fell. Masked by darkness, we proceeded. The glowing markers got lower and lower, until they stopped at the delivery entrance of a modest two story building. No sign. Nearby, sitting on top of a cardboard box was a small gray striped tomcat.

“Hello,” the animal said in a tiny, but recognizable voice.

Without a comment, Ken continued on along the alley killing more lamps. Good man. That made it appear that the whole block had suffered a power outage.

I kept the M203 level. “The quality of mercy is not strained.”

“Ah ... oh hell, I forget the answer code,” the feline meowed plaintively.

Jessica instantly shot the beast with her taser. Stunned, it fell off the box and into the big hand of Michael Donaher which closed about the soft neck. George put a silenced pistol barrel into its cute snout, Mindy placed a knife blade against the fuzzywuzzy throat.

“Pax!” the kitty whimpered around the muzzle of the .45 pistol. “My name is Raul Horta, Thursday is my night to feed the lizard, I once turned Jimmy Winslow into a frog and our subscription to TV Guide has expired.”

“More,” I demanded, working the bolt on my M16 assault rifle. “And better.”

The kitty squirmed uncomfortably. “Okay, okay! My real name is Sir Marnix Charlemagne Saxe Coburg and I'm the bastard son of Leopold III, the rightful king of Belgium!”

We relaxed and everybody released our absent-minded pal. Wiping sweat from his furry brow, the cat leaped straight up, the body blurring and growing into Raul. He was still disguised as a punk rocker.

“Report,” I said, doffing the gas mask.

“They're inside,” the mage said, taking the haversack from Mindy. Turning the rigid canvas satchel upside-down over his head, the supplies tumbled out and Raul was now shaved, showered, shampooed, wearing fresh clothes, combat armor, dripping with bags, pouches and had a silver inlaid flask in his grip. He took a quick swallow and slid the container inside his clothes. One has to forgive dethroned aristocracy the minor eccentricity.

“Who exactly?” Jessica asked, scowling at the building.

I knew how much she wanted to do a mind probe, but that would have been just as bad as trying the radio, firing off a flare gun, or just plain shouting that we were here.

“The football team and some sushi chef,” Raul said.

I arched an eyebrow. “Hoto's surviving slave.”

“Probably.”

“But not MM himself?”

“Nope.”

“So what do we do now, sir?” asked a skyscraper of blackness roughly the same size and shape of Ken.

Pitting my back to the wall, I took the vacated box for a seat. “We wait until Mystery Man arrives and then blow him to bits.”

“As simple as that?” Ken asked suspiciously.

Resting the M60 on a hip, George shrugged. “Yep. It's 90 minutes till the equinox. Since his gang is here. He'll show.”

“But if he does not?”

“We lose,” I said bluntly.

There was an awkward moment of silence.

“Status?” Mindy asked, removing her encumbering boots.

Grim as death, I opened the breech of the grenade launcher and thumbed in a fat 40mm round. “I officially declare this situation a Mad Dog alert. There is no order of attack. Anybody with even a wild chance of getting Mystery Man, go for the kill, and that includes if one of us is in the way and will die also. Do it anyway.”

“Why?” Father Donaher demanded hotly.

We explained about the World Mage Spell. As the group digested that unsettling information, I pulled Raul aside.

“I want a favor,” I asked softly. “We kill Mystery Man. But afterwards, I do that football player.”

While Raul considered the request, I checked the load in my .44 AutoMag pistol. Silver jacketed wooden bullets, soaked in Holy water with an explosive garlic center.

“Agreed,” the mage said with a frown.

“Thanks,” I said, slamming the clip shut. “I owe you.”

“No,” he said in a graveyard voice. “You owe her.”

Steadfast, I looked at my friend. “Agreed. But if I die, you get him for me?”

Leaning on his staff, Raul nodded. “With pleasure, pal.”

What are you two talking about? asked Jess.

The matter is Privacy sealed, I thought in tight control. Just like birthday gifts. None of your damn business.

She gave me a hard stare, then Raul.

Later, I promised.

Though unhappy, Jessica didn't push. God, I love that woman.

“Ed, how about a routine eight?” George asked.

Abruptly, I returned to the business at hand. “Sounds good. Groups of two, one on one coverage. Simultaneous strike. Donaher and Katrina into the cellar. Raul and Mindy take the alley on the left. Jessica and Sanders, that building to the right. George stays here, I'm on the roof.”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Done.”

“Check.”

“Roger wilco, chief.”

“But what about the front door?” Ken inquired, stepping protectively close to my wife. The tiny Oriental smiled in kindly amusement at the gesture. Him protect her?

“He has to get in somehow,” the priest noted pragmatically, as he minutely adjusted the pre-burner on his flamethrower. “Why should we make it difficult for him to enter an ambush?”

The point was well taken. As the team moved silent into the night, I started climbing a rusty fire escape. Judiciously, I eased my shoes down on the outermost sides of the metal steps where the metal should be its strongest and thus least likely to squeak. Reaching the roof, I chose a pool of shadow by the maze of pipes constituting an antique air conditioner the size of a Buick. This was almost always a good place to hide. PIs learn the damndest things from the criminals we catch, get drunk with and sometimes date.

Just as I comfortably positioned myself there came the sound of flapping leather wings. Turning about, I found myself face to face with Mystery Man changing from a bat into a kimono draped battlesuit holding a pulsating red leather book.

“Sonovabitch!” we cried in unison.

THIRTEEN

Kimono flapping, Mystery Man gestured and I pumped a 40mm grenade into his belly. The shell went straight through the battlesuit and exploded against a brick chimney flue. His own body acted as a shield to protect me from ceramic splinters, but I staggered under the concussion, still wildly firing my M16 at a figure I could not see properly. Not that such had ever stopped me before.

Running out of ammo, I drew the AutoMag as Mystery Man heaved a bottle at me. Impulsively, I fired and the glass container shattered, the contents forming gaseous scissors which snipped and cut at the point of impact. Mentally, I thanked George for making me practice all those nights at the target range.

Taking careful aim, I triggered two more thundering rounds at MM as he shifted into multiple images and

shimmied downward into the building. Dropping the spent magazine, I slammed in a fresh clip and noticed that my shoulder was bleeding from a nasty laser wound. The energy ray had penetrated combat and body armor, but the puckered hole wasn't very deep and the intense heat of the laser had cauterized the muscles so there was no immediate bleeding. The pain was minor, so I decided to ignore it for the present. After the battle, I'd whack myself with some astringent lotion, sulfur powder, Healing potion, pizza and beer. An Alvarez cure-all special.

Suddenly from above, I heard a rustling of leaves that quickly grew in volume and tempo until I recognized it as millions of leathery wings beating frantically. Uh-oh. Reloading the M203, I noted that the stars were being blotted out by swarms of bats, and from the increasing barks and howls, it seemed as if every dog in Ohio was coming our way. Mystery Man was pulling no punches. We were about to get hit with the full unbridled fury of a master vampire.

Ignoring the rooftop door as far too obvious a deathtrap, I trained my M16 on the roof itself and spent four clips chewing a circular pattern into the tar and tile. With the sound of splintering wood, the round patch fell and crashed to the floor below. Peeking in, I saw the jagged circle had landed next to a large desk, but the rest of the office was empty. Damn.

Grabbing the edge of the hole, I lowered myself and dropped the last couple of feet. Just then, some bats flew into the room and I machine gunned them in flight. But it took another whole clip to remove the nimble little buggers. Two minutes into the fight and I was already in danger of running out of ammunition. NG. Gotta stopper that hole and fast.

Rummaging in my pouch, I found two Willy Peter grenades. Pulling the pins, I tossed them upward and onto the roof. In a dull thump, the two white phosphorus bombs spewed fiery blossoms, and a zillion bats screeched in annoyance. A rain of fire and dead fluttering bodies sprinkled through the opening as I added a 40mm shotgun shell to the woes of my aerial attackers. That'll teach 'em to mess with the Bureau. Back to the belfry, boys!

Thumbing in a fresh shell, I did a quick check of the office. The walls were covered with sports posters of football players and there framed ticket stubs. For the World Series I guess, sports was not my hobby. But it explained how he chose the Pumas. Dozens of metal framework shelves were jammed full of books and papers and a massive mahogany desk was overflowing with the same. A wall-spanning counter was neatly arrayed with mailing supplies, scale, postage meter, bales of string, boxes of manila and padded envelopes. A small vault supported a tiny refrigerator. Oh how I wanted to get into that safe, but it would have to wait till later. Murder first, then pillage.

Putting a burst of 5.56mm tumblers through the sole door and the wall on both sides, I kicked the portal aside. Nothing but empty corridor was in sight. Faintly from below, I could hear shattering glass, wild animal howls and Mike Donaher intoning a deadly blessing. Way to go, Father!

Moving fast, past book-filled alcoves and a hundred file cabinets, I reached the stairs. Down below the yammering and chattering of machine guns, explosions, the crackling of lightning and strange screams. But there was also the high-pitched whine of laser beams and I knew the football team was fighting back.

Shooting the door of a utility closet off its hinges, I climbed on top of the makeshift sled and slid down the steps in a bumping jostling journey of four seconds. D-d-damn! F-f-forgot t-t-to r-r-remove k-k-knob!

Reaching the main floor scrambled but alive, I tumbled away from the door, rolled to my feet and glanced about, but MM was nowhere to be seen. However, everybody else was here. Football players

jumped from wall to wall, hissing and firing brilliant light rays from their hands. Bullets riddled bookcases and pages went flying in high velocity military editing. Posters were ripped, crystals smashed, kilometers of slick brown audio tape arced into the air from unwinding cassettes, the door to the lavatory was gone completely, display tables were overturned and I had no idea which side was winning.

Stumbling out of the hallway came George with an alligator firmly attached to his armored leg. An inhabitant of the local sewer, most likely. I had always known people should never flush those things down the toilet. At point blank range, George was pumping .45 slugs into the reptile's body, but it seemed to have no effect. Taking aim, I placed a 40mm grenade into the soft skin of the alligator's pale belly and the beast went to pieces. Prying the bodiless head from his leg with a Bowie knife, George nodded his thanks. I gave a salute with my assault rifle and then butt stroked a screaming senior in the face. His fanged teeth went flying. Years ago, TechServ had replaced the plastic shoulder-rests on Bureau rifles with old fashioned but deadly wood stocks, with internal steel bracing, of course.

A long metal barrel shattered a window and watery fluid splashed upon a pair of the undead. Crying in unbearable torment, the vampires melted into a puddle on the floor that was probably going to be hell to clean. Beyond the jagged glass, I saw Jessica. Guess she had forgotten to inform me that the stabilizing agent in her MSG/DMSO concoction was Holy Water. But the secret ingredient was not hidden from the vampire connoisseurs.

Amid the ruin of the occult bookstore, Mindy was sword to sword with the vampire sushi chef, both opponents moving with blurring speed. A football player stumbled close and his body fell apart. The clothing of the beefy player was in tatters, exposing coaxial cables lining his arms and legs. Great, cyborg vampires, for this I graduated college?

Sparks flying, the two martial artists swirled in a flashing whirlwind of clanging steel. A jade statue of Ra got a rude lobotomy, Buddha received an instant diet and a bookcase was cleaved in twain. I tried for a shot, but it was impossible. The two master swordfighters were going round and round each other like debating lawyers paid by the hour. A display case of crystal pyramids showed them inverted for a moment, before the two crashed through the front window and into the street. Neither slowed, nor missed a stroke.

Silent in their concentration, the deadly duel raged back and forth along the sidewalk, a lamppost was cut in half and toppled to the ground flattening a Yugo and just missing our van. The fire hydrant lost its cap and a foamy white water geyser shot into the night air. Somehow the mailbox survived, but then disturbing one of those was a federal offense punishable by three to five.

Suddenly from the side, the sagging front door to the store was kicked open and in strode a police officer, his pistol drawn.

“What the freaking hell is going on here!” the cop demanded.

"GO HOME!" Raul bellowed in a Voice of Command, while struggling with four vampires.

Turning on his heel, the officer holstered his gun and ambled casually away while whistling a Beatles tune.

Brocade curtains parted and Donaher came backing out of the cellar, hosing the floor, walls and ceiling with his flamethrower. Wriggling through the inferno of jellied gasoline was a horde of rats and cockroaches, the dark bodies barely discernible masked by the boiling orange flames. As the big priest cleared the jamb, Katrina shouted and the walls slammed together sealing the doorway shut. Two seconds later the flamethrower sputtered and died. Whew. In comedy, sex and war, timing was

everything.

Firing his shotgun at an approaching linebacker, Father Donaher slapped the release buckle on his chest harness and the empty tanks thudded to the floor. Turning around fast, he shoved his Bible into the snarling mouth of another vampire and its head burst into flames. Blinded by the fire, the undead pointed its laser beam wildly, slagging a candle counter, annihilating a hundred packs of Tarot cards, wounding Jessica in the knee and beheading another vampire before it died. I appreciated the assistance.

A shimmering light beam lashed out at Raul, who dodged and sent a barrage of spiked ice balls into the group of undead. His lightning bolts crackled over their forcefields and their lasers beams were reflected off his ethereal hand barrier. Since the fight appeared to be going nowhere, I pulled the pin from a grenade without removing the bomb from my pouch, let the strap slip off my shoulder and tossed the whole thing behind the chest-high book rack. One football player, faster or smarter than the rest, tried to leap clear, but the resulting multiple blasts tore the lot of them into bloody gobbets and sent the cash register into the ceiling. Coins and bills sprinkled downward in a fantasy rain of monetary gain.

Moving through the chaos and death, my M16 sprayed hot lead and silver at anything not a member of my team as I continued to ruthlessly search for MM. Twice I was hit in the chest by laser beams, chunks of my combat armor puffing into nothingness and clothes catching fire, but the bodyarmor held and I used a Holy Water pistol to extinguish the blaze. These guy's lasers had nowhere near the power of their bastard boss.

A pair of the undead got the drop on Donaher and pinned the big priest behind a flipped over table. I started to assist when Katrina appeared and grabbed them by the arms. Instantly their lasers winked out. Grinning in triumph, Donaher rose and squirted each monster smack in the face with his Holy Water pistol. As they clawed at melting features, Katrina froze one solid with liquid nitrogen and the priest garroted the other with a rosary. Ouch. I couldn't even imagine what his penance would be for that!

But I was very impressed with Katrina Somers. That had been the finest example of making your disability into an asset that I had ever seen. Using the jamming factor of a mage to neutralize an enemy's weapon was going into the handbook, surrounded by stars, asterisks, exclamation points, underlined, italicized and in bold type. Helvetica maybe, 16 point.

The tumultuous donnybrook spilled into the backroom of the store and Raul and I both spotted our quarterback at the same moment. He was struggling with the fire escape door trying to get out. A coward as well as a murderer.

Gesturing with a single finger, Raul set the killer's clothes ablaze and I blew off his head with a 40mm shell. Then the mage disintegrated the legs of the vampire and I emptied a full clip into his spine. The monster's hands feebly clawed the air in a ghastly reminiscent manner. The next thing I knew, I was pounding the demon with my rifle stock and only ceased when Raul pulled me off the pulped oozing mass of very dead flesh.

Catching my breath, Raul and I shook hands and rejoined the battle. For some reason, I felt much better now. Pounds lighter and infinitely cleaner.

With the barrel of his Thompson machine gun bent, Ken was whirling the weapon about him in the manner of a Viking war hammer when three football players blindsided the Bureau giant. When he didn't fall, they sank teeth into his clothes, one broke fangs on body armor and the other two jerked away spitting and hacking. Eh? Our superduper soldier boy must have drunk some Holy Water just prior to the battle. Actually, I'm surprise it worked. But what else could have caused that weird reaction, garlic

aftershave?

Dodging laser beams and the falling cash register, Ken threw aside the Thompson and unlimbered his hydrofluoric spray gun. A drop of the acid steamed into his hand, but the wound healed even as I watched. Wow. However, the two vampires, the floor they stood on, a chair, a rack of astrological charts and anything nearby, completely dissolved in a hiss wave of destruction. Then a section of the terrazzo floor gave way, but merely sagged low and didn't break through to the cellar. The cellar. Hmm.

“Where's Mystery Man?” I screamed above the turmoil.

“Basement!” Donaher answered with a grimace.

“You sure?”

“Yes!”

“Bad?”

“I'm up here, ain't I?”

True enough. “Little Big Horn!” I screamed and my team pulled into a defense arc, our rumps to the wall. The vampires took the opportunity to regroup and lick their many wounds. Black fumes from a hundred small fires made seeing difficult, and a ceiling mounted smoke alarm was keening loudly until I put a .44 silenced round into the noisy distraction.

“Roarke's Drift!” I bellowed.

We stopped firing and the vampires formed a neat attack line. What putzes. God, I hoped none of them was a history major.

“R-14-9! Hut! Hut! Hut!” one called, licking his chops.

As the idiots charged, the shorter members of my team dropped to a knee and raised their weapons. The taller member stood close and leveled theirs. In unison, we cut loose with everything we had. The noise was deafening, but somehow the death screams of the collegiate vampires came through loud and clear. Incredibly, they harmonized. A football team glee club? Huntsville must be a really weird town.

“Cease fire!” I bellowed, waving smoke away from my face with an aching arm.

Only carnage and conflagration filled the store. Burning books were everywhere, whole cases sheets of fire. On one shelf, a slim volume with tooled leather binding and gold leaf pages hopped to the floor and tried to scamper to freedom. Katrina snatched the runaway and tucked it into her blouse. Mages. Sheesh! I hope it bit her and raised a welt. Sometimes wizards have no common sense at all.

Faintly from overhead, my helmet detected high-pitched stridulations and leathery rustlings. The rooftop fire must have expired and the bats were rushing in. Time to move.

“Floor?” I asked fast.

Dripping blood and sweat, Donaher's face said no. “Too high a drop.”

“Then it's the door!” George bellowed and blew away the wall with a LAW rocket, the fiery backblast blowing a hundred bats to kingdom come.

We charged through the smoking hole and down the brick stairs.

“Ken and Katrina on point!” I shouted. “George does clean-up and watch the freaking ceiling!”

The basement was dark, so we roughed a couple of flares into life and tossed them about. With everything distorted in the reddish light, I had a glimpse of a new furnace, old water heater, melted plastic window decorations, hundreds of burned rodent corpses, a charred ladder, and an ajar manhole cover. Then the army of rats hit us, a squeaking squalid tidal wave of dirty diseased teeth supported by mindless hunger.

The bitter blue spray of Katrina's liquid nitrogen froze dozens into crystal statues that shattered under the anguished squeals of their dying brethren. Unlimbering his hydrofluoric acid spray gun, Ken dissolved hundreds, the melting bodies spewing noise and hate.

Silent and invisible, George's microwave beamer spoke its 30-second charge, baking more of the furry freaks solid. But another wave swarmed over the first, the second, the third, fourth, until an ocean of the snarling rodents filled the floor. A living carpet of snapping death.

“Musketees!” Sanders yelled.

We closed ranks, with everybody protecting everybody. I had just been about to order the same thing myself. The cockroaches crawled over us, but were merely an annoyance, as their bites only stung. But I made damn sure not one got inside the breach of my weapon. Stomping rats, I stabbed Jessica in the back with my knife, the blade rebounding off her body armor as it speared a rodent. Mentally, she thanked me and shot another off my boot. Ken crushed a rat in his gloved hand while George sprayed four off of Katrina's helmet. Good grouping!

Gritting her teeth, Jessica clenched both hands into fists and stared at the boisterous horde. Half of the rat bastards went stiff and keeled over dead from the Brain Blast. Donaher bounced a Willy Peter grenade into the manhole and in a strident flash, the flow of rodents slowed noticeably. The Pied Piper of Hamelin had nothing on us. A flute? Piffle. Gimme good ol' Army issue anti-personnel grenades any day.

Hooting a roar, Raul was wrestling with an alligator and two swamp monsters waddled at Katrina. Reaching over my shoulder I grabbed a LAW from George, prepped the tube and aimed real freaking careful in both directions. Pressing the button on top of the tube, a lance of flame shot from the front and the rocket annihilated the oncoming two enemy suitcases. Plus, the backblast blew the head off the angry swamp denizen trying to consume my buddy. Raul's helmet was discolored, his visor cracked and flak jacket charred to black flakes, but he was alive. Merely smoking mad.

Barking dogs poured down the stairs and a river of bats flowed along the ceiling knocking off a hailstorm of cockroaches. Boldly stepping forward, Katrina sprayed the contents of her canister on the sagging hole in the wall. Working her way from the top, she formed an impenetrable seal of supercold ice. Several dogs and bats had been caught midway in the barrier, their bodies cleanly snapping in half as they struggled to get free. Yuck.

A low hum filled the building and I checked the furnace. Nope, it was turned off. Then a brackish light began flickering from underneath a door in the far wall, illuminating the inverted pentagram on the riveted metal panel.

“Charge!” I screamed and we advanced into the cellar stomping, crushing, shooting, and burning our way across the dim lit basement.

Reaching the door, Katrina shouted something unintelligible and a stonework wall materialized cutting the basement in half. Then her wooden wand went limp in her hand as overcooked pasta. Tenderly as if it was asleep, she slid the dowel into a special holster at her hip and snapped a protective flap firmly into place. One mage drained. But it only took us a couple of seconds to kill the handful of rats, dogs, bats, insects that were on our side of the barrier. I hated aching the dogs, innocent animals summoned to their deaths by the vampire part of Mystery Man. But I took great delight in rubbing out the rest. Bats were only rats with wings, rats were only cockroaches on steroids, and what big city dweller didn't hate cockroaches? They were nothing more than grounded pigeons.

Using powders and potions, the mages disengaged the magical seal on the metal door, George removed the detonator switch for the explosives hidden under the floor, Jessica cut the wires feeding straight electrical current to the latch, I picked the lock, Ken ripped the door off its hinges and then threw it ahead of us as a rude calling card while George typed our signature with the .30 rifle rounds of his M60. Ding dong, Bureau 13 calling!

Inside was a totally ruined alchemists laboratory. Both walls lined with smashed jars, broken beakers and cracked retorts seconds ago filled with every conceivable color and manner of substance; dust, jells, liquids, mud, dust, hair, fur, spices, canned goods, bones, blood and brains. Most of it was on the floor, or slowly headed that way. A complex array of destroyed pestles and mortars, steaming beakers, dripping tubing, glass spirals and boiling retorts filled a workbench alongside a totally undamaged microwave oven.

Astrological charts adorned the wall and a poster of the human anatomy was situated prominently above a coroner's dissection table. There was a ten foot tall spice rack, a case of antique books and even a medieval anvil and hearth with bellows. It was a fairly standard mad wizard laboratory. I wondered where Igor, the hunchbacked, semi-human, assistant was? Maybe polishing the coffin for mummy's day.

Amid the decimation was the mandatory black iron caldron set in the middle of a freaking great pentagram, its shining lines, thick silver rods embedded into the flagstone floor. A duplicate pentagram was sunk into the concrete ceiling. Behind the bubbling caldron stood Mystery Man, reading aloud from the Aztec Book of the Dead, his words forming visible symbols in the air that then dropped into the caldron with tiny rainbow splashes. He appeared exactly as he had been at the Holding Facility, except there was no gray at his temples, and no tux.

“Abraham Lincoln!” I cried, snapping the arming bolt of my M16. “To the max!”

The team cut loose with everything we had, but neither our physical nor magical weapons could penetrate the shimmering forcefield Mystery Man had erected about the pentagram. From top to bottom and side to side, we probed for a weak spot, an entrance; the ricochets and rebounds destroyed the rest of the room in vainglorious fury.

“Crack cocaine!” Jessica shouted and we tried there, but again our weapons failed to undercut the base of the pentagram and topple our foe. The silver lines were actually slabs of the precious metal which seemed to descend forever. Damnation, there had to be a way to stop him! Death spell? Earthquake? IRS audit?

Unperturbed by our attack, Mystery Man continued to drone on, occasionally gesturing, or pouring into

the cauldron tiny vials of colored fluid taken from a bulky vest under his kimono. A brisk wind began to build in the basement and I felt a painful tingle of static electricity crackle across my skin. I didn't need my sunglasses to tell me that this was the darkest sorcery; major league magic and totally evil. Scratching wildly, Raul popped the top on a bottle of calamine lotion and poured it inside his body armor.

"How close is he to completing the World Mage Spell?" George demanded, determinedly firing irregular bursts at the alchemist.

"Nyet!" Katrina spat, her beautiful face scowling.

Thumbing in my last 40mm shell, I dropped the bandoleer. "Its not the World Mage Spell?" I asked puzzled.

"Da."

"Then what is it?" Jessica asked.

With difficulty, Raul swallowed. "He's doing the Big Drain!"

In spite of the adrenaline rush of battle, I went icy calm. The Big Drain. Oh no. Even worse than the World Mage Spell, the Big Drain was an insane effort to siphon off all of the magic from the entire planet and store it in a single living person. The World Mage Spell we could fight, had fought successfully once. But if the Drain worked, humanity won't have enough magic remaining to light a candle in hell. We would be totally helpless and MM could do with the world as he willed. The very notion of Mystery Man as ruler of the planet was like eating glass. Impossible to swallow.

A small vortex of force started to form above the cauldron, tendrils of misty fog masked the floor and the wind buffeting us became a miniature storm, with tiny raindrops and small lightning bolts crashing around us.

"How long?" Father Donaher demanded, wet hands ramming fresh shells into his shotgun with grim intentions.

"We got about one minute," Raul shouted over the screaming winds.

Trying to get a clear view, I wiped rain from my face. "And then?"

The Russian mage moved a finger across her throat.

Hoo boy. "Okay! Hit 'em again!" I ordered.

LAW and a HAFLA rockets impacted on the magical barrier to vanish without a trace. Silver throwing stars bounced off. Bullets musically ricocheted. Arrows splintered. Streams of acid, MSG/DMSO and liquid nitrogen pooled about the pentagram, forming a crude moat of bio-chemical death.

"DIE!" Jessica screamed, fisting each temple.

Incredibly, the man actually faltered for a second, then went on reading and chanting. Totally exhausted, my wife slumped to the floor, gasping and heaving for breath from the attempted Brain Blast. It had been a good try.

Unfortunately by now, Mystery Man was double his original size, the cauldron had sunk into the floor to become a yawning pit from which fiery tongues of raw ethereal power lashed upward into his body. With each lambent energy whip, his smile grew and his voice became louder and more purposeful. He was already tapping the natural magical resources of our mother planet herself, after that would come the monsters, the people and absolute victory.

We were in a full scale hurricane by this point and had to hold onto each other to keep our footing. Bits of glassware and books swirled madly around, going faster and faster to the ever-increasing tempo of the building maelstrom. We stood on the eve of the apocalypse. The hour of doom.

“Bureau!” I shouted into my watch. “Condition Alpha Four! Repeat! Alpha Four! Request immediate tactical nuclear strike on Cincinnati! Immediate nuclear strike on Cincinnati! Respond!”

There was only static. I hadn't thought the radio could penetrate the swirling holocaust of unearthly forces bombarding us to reach the van parked just outside on the street. Okay, Alvarez, here was a your big chance to justify the trust the American people have placed the Bureau. Think, damn it, think!

“Raul what are the limitations on the spell again?” I bellowed.

He repeated the operational perimeters and I got a goofy idea. It was insane. Moronic. But it was my only remaining ace and I hoped MM couldn't trump it.

“THIS IS THE FBI!” I shouted above the roaring hurricane and flipped open my commission booklet to show badge. “I AM SPECIAL FEDERAL AGENT EDUARDO ALVAREZ! YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR OVER A HUNDRED COUNTS OF MURDER, ARSON, ATTEMPTED MURDER, GRAND THEFT AND INCITING A RIOT!”

My team gave expressions of total bewilderment and the enemy alchemist only laughed in delight. Thirty seconds.

With a dry mouth, I forced a swallow. Here goes nothing. “AND AS A DULY AUTHORIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENT OF THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, I HEREBY CONFISCATE THIS WORK SHOP, IMPOUND THAT BOOK AND DECLARE THIS STORE A SEALED CRIMINAL SCENE, CLOSED TO ALL BUT AUTHORIZED POLICE OFFICIALS!”

With a thunderclap, the book slammed shut and the winds died. Caught by surprise, my team took a full second to reorient themselves. Alchemist Al had no such lapse.

Even as the magical boundary of the pentagram faded away, I sprayed him with the M16, the hardball and tumbling bullets punching a line of holes in his kimono. Screaming in pain, the baby mage raised an arm high, crushed a vial in his fist and vanished from sight about one heartbeat ahead of a staggering barrage of bullets, arrows, lightning bolts, rockets, missiles, shells, grenades, Fire Lance, Ice Storm, Death spell, Sleep spell, microwaves and every other assorted deathdealer the rest of my grim teammates possessed.

The rear cinder block wall disappeared under the fusillade, a mountain of dirt poured in and a section of the burning building crashed down around us. Bitterly, I cursed as we headed for the stairs. We had failed. Failed! Oh, we had stopped Laughing Boy for the moment. But he was still free and had, I checked my wristwatch, 58 minutes to conquer the world. We didn't even know his name yet, or where he would go next.

Fifty seven minutes till doomsday.

FOURTEEN

“Okay, everybody search for clues!” I ordered, above the crackle of the flames and rumble of tumbling masonry. “We’ve got to know where this asshole went!”

Forcing our way out of the wind swept laboratory, my team squeezed past the ruin of the door, kicking aside mounds of dead rodents. With a finger snap, Katrina made the stonework wall ahead of us vanish. I raised an eyebrow. Guess canceling a spell that you cast didn’t require any magic. We crossed the basement to clamber up the rickety staircase. Lying on their backs in the flames, cockroaches burst like popcorn and Jessica tripped on a blackened alligator. Even dead those things were dangerous. The ice wall at the top of the stairs was easy to breach, as the flames had already softened the material tremendously. A few machine gun bursts and the frozen air shattered into a pretty snowstorm, the white flakes vaporizing before they hit the floor. On the other side were a thousand smoking corpses, human and non, but the animal army was gone. When Mystery Man had fled, so did his influence.

The heat was almost unbearable as we reached the store, so Raul formed a tiny rain cloud over us, its cooling downpour giving much needed protection from the roaring inferno we nervously stood amid.

“Jessica where did Mystery Man discuss the matter most frequently?” Father Donaher asked urgently, loosening the starched white collar of his cassock.

Gamely, the telepath closed her eyes and slowly rotated, once, twice, paused, then jerked her head upwards. “Second story somewhere.”

“His private office!” I cried, remembering the desk and vault. “Triple time, harch!”

The stairs were gone, so we tilted a relatively undamaged bookcase against the charred wall, the sturdy shelves served well as temporary rungs. Tainting the thick smoke filling the store was the rancid pork smell of roasting human flesh. As horrible as it sounds, it made me both nauseous and hungry.

On the point, I went first. Reaching the upper story, I stood erect and checked for danger with gun at the ready. But the place was ablaze; shelves held neat lines of burning books, piles and stacks of paperbacks flared with sputtering flames from the ignited glue in their perfect bindings, the green metal file cabinets had warped from the intense heat spilling their contents to the fire, the linoleum tiles on the floor were melting, embers filled the air and fried bats littered the place making it resemble the aftereffects of a truly Homeric Halloween party. My dead football player was only smoking bones and discolored metal endo-skeleton.

Grabbing a warm fire extinguisher from the wall, I hosed us a foamy zone of safety to the next room. The floor tiles were sticky, but passable. In the office, the updraft from the hole in the roof, fed the flames as a bellows, making it hotter and even more difficult to breath.

At the desk, Raul tapped the bedraggled piece of office furniture with his silver staff, making the wood ring. “Speak!” the mage invoked. “Tell us what you know of your master’s plans should failure come here. SPEAK!”

Muted groans and creaks came from the battered piece of mahogany, “...go into self-publishing ...

maybe become an author..."

"No, not that! Speak of your master's plans concerning the book of magic he has recently obtained!" the angry wizard corrected.

"...no fail ... was impossible..."

So the arrogant fool firmly believed that he would have succeeded. There was no contingency plan. Maybe we had won. With twenty or so U.S. Army tumblers in your chest, almost anybody should be wearing grass for a hat. But could we chance it? No.

"Find the safe!" I bellowed, pouring sweat stinging my eyes.

"Here!" Jessica yelled, pushing over a stack of UFO magazines with the barrel of her Uzi.

Stepping close, I inquisitively touched the stout metal box with a finger, but immediately jerked away. My skin was a glossy white. Boy, was that going to hurt tomorrow.

Using our helmets, the team formed a bucket brigade from the bathroom, conveying endless amounts of tap water which we splashed upon the safe, each sizzled into steam upon contact. But even with Raul's rainstorm, we were clearly fighting a losing battle. Now the floor was growing uncomfortably hot to stand on even through our boots. Pretty soon, this place would reach critical tinderbox temperatures and explode.

Yet we kept on. The contents of that safe might be our only chance of tracking Mystery Man. Fifty-three minutes. Then the water only bubbled instead of steamed and Ken tucked the safe under one mighty arm. What a man!

Sprinting for the east wall, George blasted us an exit and we painfully jumped over the alley to the lower roof of the gas station. A gas station? Swell. What, no dynamite factory nearby to also be endangered?

Just then, the bookstore roof gave a mighty creak and collapsed with the roar of splintering wood. Spiraling gouts of red and orange flame formed a volcano into the sky, spewing an endless supply of embers and ash over the sleeping Cincinnati.

Dropping to the cooler back alley, we found Mindy still engaged in furious combat with Bruce Lee JR, their swords clanging audibly above the oncoming fire engines bells and police sirens.

"Alli-alli-oxen-free!" I shouted through cupped hands.

Reluctantly, Mindy broke and ran. Grinning in triumph, the vampire started after her and we cut him to ribbons with our weapons.

"Wow," Mindy panted as she joined us near a dumpster. "He was really good." Her sweaty body was trembling with near exhaustion.

"Well, now he's really dead," George snapped, prying aside the manhole cover.

Sojourning through the smelly sewer, we surfaced on the other side of the street and took refuge in our van. Affecting repairs, we watched as police, fire engines and a helicopter arrived on the scene, hordes of reporters pushing their way through a growing crowd of civilians. Guess this was big news for Cin.

After bandaging my finger, I obtained gloves and a stethoscope from the equipment locker and got busy with the safe.

“Ed, what's taking so long?” Donaher asked after a whole minute.

Using only fingertip pressure, I manipulated the dial, spin left, spin right, jiggle-jiggle. “Its an excellent model,” I irritably snapped. “Top of the line. Even an expert yegg, a master safecracker, would have a tough job opening this box.”

Pushing me aside, George slapped a lump of C4 plastique onto the dial, pressed a button on the battery pack in his hand whose two wires led into the gray, clay material and with a subdued bang, the door jumped ajar.

“Usually,” I corrected, both hands busy digging into the massed papers. I passed them on to Jessica who memorized each with a glance.

“Deed, tax receipts, insurance forms, nothing but normal business papers. Ah!” she cried in delight. “His name is Wilson C. LaRue!”

“Sure?” Mindy asked, draining a quart of that nasty tasting sports drink which is supposed to be good for you.

“Passport photograph matches the face we saw on the guy in the pentagram.”

“Never heard of him,” Raul stated, glancing at the picture.

As if that meant anything, 90% of the bad guys we fight are unknowns. The rest are major historical figures.

“Raul, Katrina, how long do we have before LaRue can perform the conjure again?” Father Donaher asked, sliding a new clean collar about his neck. As always, when dealing with vampires, his priestly dogcollar was lined with steel.

In response, Katrina shrugged and turned to Raul. This must be out of her league as a beginner mage.

“Normally, it should take a person a couple of hours to recover from the systemic shock of having the spell disrupted,” Raul started, scratching at a bite on his cheek. “But as Mystery Man is in actuality three people, we had better operate in the assumption that it will only take him, say, forty minutes.”

Giving Mr. LaRue forty minutes for him to try and conquer the world once more. We were down ten minutes already, leaving only 30 minutes for us to search the entire continental Unites States and locate this crazy bastard. Then blow him to hell in nine pieces.

Going to the computer terminal, I annexed the telephone modem and dialed 1-8-0-0-B-U-R-E-A-U-1-3. It was time to bring in the big guns. There was a hum, a click and then nothing. I tried again and got the same. As we murmured among ourselves, Raul and Katrina held a fast conference.

“When LaRue started the Big Drain, he caused major disruptions in the ethereal dimension,” Raul said scowling.

“First things to go would be highest magiks,” Katrina added, her thick accent noticeably absent.

“Like pocket universes,” Jess postulated.

They nodded.

So the Bureau was temporarily trapped in another dimension. Oh swell. We were totally alone on this one, with literally everything riding on our decisions. I sighed. So be it. Because unlike LaRue, I had a contingency plan. That was how we kept winning against the monsters. Usually.

Rummaging in my locker, I unearthed a codebook given to me years ago by the president as a reward and dialed a number so secret I couldn't even let the rest of team see what it was.

“CIA Information Center,” a calm female voice said from the monitor. There was no picture. “How can I help you Mr. Alvarez?”

Most impressive. My mouth started to ask a hundred questions, but we were in a hurry. “This is a priority one request. There is nothing more important.”

“Accepted,” she replied. “I am ready. Go.”

“I need a full personal read-out on a Wilson C. LaRue. Most importantly, any land or property that he has legal access to.”

There came the faint sound of tapping. “Working,” the voice said. “Wilson Charles LaRue, the only child of Brian and Willma LaRue. Father was professional magician; stage name ‘The Amazing LaRue’. Mother a carnival Tarot reader; ‘Wondrous Wilma’. Both deceased. Wilson was born in Dayton Ohio, October 23, 1948, Dayton General Hospital. Graduated from Cambridge Elementary School 1964, Dayton High School 1968. No criminal record. Served four years in the U.S. Navy stationed at Fort Hamilton as an assistant librarian. Discharged with honor. Currently a member of the Naval reserve. Owns and operates an occult bookstore in Cincinnati, Ohio, #435 North 8th Street. LaRue Books. Owns a 1989 red Toyota Corolla, vanity license plate: Matthew Adam George Ink Charles. Has leased a post office box #666 for his mail order business at the main branch of the Cincinnati Post Office. Rents a 10 by 6 storage locker at You-Store-It, Mulberry Drive, Cincinnati. Contents unknown. Had a safety Deposit box at People's Federal Bank. Lease expired and he withdrew the contents eight days ago. Rents with an option to buy a house, 2842 West Morris Avenue.” She gave a pause. “No other listed properties in either the IRS, state land registry, post office, FBI, Federal Banking Reserve, Justice Department, Pentagon, or CIA computer files.”

She hadn't listed the Bureau. But that was because we didn't exist. “You sure that's everything?”

“Are there any other questions?”

Damn! “No. Thanks.”

“Good luck,” she said, and the line went dead.

The unremarkable story on an ordinary man living an unspecial life. The safety deposit box was where he probably kept the cash receipts from his business. Raul had already said that buying the ingredients for the alchemist spell would cost a small fortune. The occult book business was a natural after learning what

his parents used to do for a living. Apparently, Wilson had simply gotten his hands on the wrong book, one that contained real alchemical potions, and the rest is a sad story of power addiction and murder.

“Three places to search,” Ken noted with a frown. “Sir, should we split into smaller teams?”

“Faith, lad, we're not sure that we can take this guy as a group,” Father Donaher countered. “Smaller teams are just asking for a disaster.”

“We've got to hit him as a unit,” Mindy agreed, brandishing a scarred fist. “But where? At which location?”

“All of them,” I answered, buckling my seatbelt. “George, do your stuff!”

Jumping behind the wheel, George hit the gas and I swear to god that our fourteen ton van did a wheely pulling away from the curb.

“Sir, I mean, Ed,” Katrina said hesitantly, as we rocketed through the empty streets. “Might not LaRue have another legal name?”

“Explain,” I demanded.

“In Russia, actors can have stage name and it is their second legal name. Your John Wayne could write checks under that pseudonym, but born as Marion M. Morrison.”

“No good,” I countered. “Everybody's name is listed with the IRS. If he had another, we'd know it.”

“A question, sir?” Ken asked, scratching an armpit.

“Yeah?”

“Since LaRue has absorbed the powers of Tanner and Rasamor Hoto, might it be possible that he has some nebulous legal claim on their property?”

Seven jaws sagged.

“Jesus H. Tap Dancing Christ!” I cried. “Yes!”

Father Donaher smacked me on the head and I apologized.

Scrambling for the phone, I hit redial and quickly explained. Tanner was an alien machine and thus of highly questionable legal status, so it couldn't own any property. However, Rasamor Hoto was filthy rich.

“Negative,” I announced replacing the receiver. “Hoto has been in our custody for ten years and thus has been declared legally dead. As a foreign national, his property was been confiscated by the Japanese government and resold.”

As Jessica loaded her taser and Raul consulted his crystal ball, Mindy ripped open a jumbo bag of dried fruit snacks. Instantly alert at the sound of food, Amigo was by her side, forked tongue lagging, scaly tail wagging.

“You know, I didn't see any coffins in that store,” Ken said, thoughtfully rubbing the scar on his cheek.

Father Donaher dismissed that idea. "A vampire needs a dirt filled coffin to rest in when they're not in their homeland. An American vampire, in American, can sleep at the Holiday Inn with impunity."

"Fascinating," he said, sounding impressed.

"Sure makes 'em a bitch to find, though" Mindy munched.

Ain't it the truth.

We hit the storage place first. Nada. Just old furniture and mementos of his parents, family photos, pressed flowers in albums, a big box of eight track tapes. Guess everybody had some of those around somewhere gathering dust. As the team took its leave, Donaher blessed the metal cubicle, Katrina spot-welded the door shut and then Jessica sealed it as a criminal scene. Just in case Wilson did a surprise return. Twenty four minutes to go.

The post office box was empty. LaRue had not shrunk himself to an inch in height and hidden inside, but I sealed it anyway. We were leaving nothing to chance.

There remained his house and 18 minutes.

The neighborhood was quiet and clean, as most were in Cincinnati. His house was a two story Cape Cod with bricking, a white picket fence and a smiling lawn jockey. Whew. This fiend would stop at nothing. His car was parked in front, but my sunglasses, binoculars, radar and infrared thermal scan showed the vehicle unoccupied.

Parking on the corner, I spotted a group of young adults singing in the backyard of a neighboring house. At midnight? They didn't sound drunk.

Rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College, sent Jessica.

Great. The innocent bystanders were also highly trained observers and just over the fence of a possible major battle. On the other hand, we might be able to use the seminary students to aid us against LaRue and his unholy slaves. Blood drinking vampires were the absolute archenemy of the Orthodox Jews.

The yard directly behind LaRue's home was empty, just grass and the house on the right had an above ground swimming pool full of water. An inflatable raft and a purple unicorn floated serenely in the calm chlorine. Mentally, I logged the position of the pool. It also could come in handy.

"Suggestions?" I asked.

"Blow the place to tinder with the Amsterdam missiles in the launching pod of the van," Ken offered eagerly.

George grinned approval. He would.

"We go in silent," I stated, because Katrina was drained. "Raul, how's the magic?"

Bending an ear, the mage listened to his staff, obviously not pleased with the answer. "One, maybe two, major spells then I'm kaput."

“Dome of Silence?” Donaher asked hopefully.

I nodded.

“Done,” Raul said gesturing, his staff leaving sparkle trails in the air. Tongue between lips, Katrina hastily scribbled notes into her mostly blank book of spells.

Totally silent to any outside observer, we exited the RV and dashed across the street, pausing only to slap a criminal evidence sticker on the car, before scampering up the front walk and kicking down the front door to the house. Almost instantly, our weapons, hell, everything metal on us began to grow warm, hot, hotter, scalding!

“Huey, Dewey and Louie!” George shouted, triggering the M60.

Already on the floor, I grabbed a puzzled Sanders by the arm and yanked him down with the rest of us who had ducked.

Steadily firing, George rotated in a neat circle, the .30 rifle bullets chewing a path of destruction along both walls. Then he flipped the flame-spitting muzzle upwards and executed a vertical loop getting a wall, the ceiling, wall and the floor. In a searing spray of sparks, something under the floorboards shorted and our weapons cooled with astonishing speed.

“How did you know?” Father Donaher asked, rising and dusting off his pants.

“Induction fields have only a short range,” George calmly stated, unwrapping a fresh beef stick expertly with one hand. “Didn't know where it was, but it had to be close.”

Just then the chandelier released from the ceiling and crashed onto the spot we had vacated. Sanders frowned and then chuckled. Geez, was that an old trick.

“Suggestions?” I asked, watching the closet. That should be the next origin of danger.

Even as I spoke, the door began to silently swing open. In a smooth move, Mindy drew her sword and plunged it into the door and whatever was on the other side. There came a soft whispery gasp of pain and the door closed.

“LaRue has been here,” Jessica reported succinctly, releasing her forehead. “But he is gone now.”

Raul and Katrina agreed.

Damn, missed him by minutes. “Okay, but what did he do while he was here? Grab a book? Make a call? Get supplies?”

“Leave,” she replied succinctly

So much for that.

“But what about these traps?” Sanders asked, gesturing with his weapon.

Mindy gave a half-smile. “These aren't traps. This is where LaRue lives. What we've encountered are simply his home defenses.”

Softly in the living room, a telephone began to dial 9-1-1— entirely by itself. Before the police could be contacted, I pumped a .44 slug into the jingling Ameche blowing it to pieces.

“Great stuff for burglars, but laughable against us,” I said, glancing at my watch, 11:29. In sixteen minutes the world would be his to play with and the game would not be fun for anybody else. Blink. Now fifteen minutes.

Priestly robes billowing about his legs, Father Donaher started to pace. “Okay, LaRue didn't stay here because he knew we could do the same thing again to him.”

Currying thoughts, I rubbed a fist on my chin. “Then he must have gone someplace where we can't confiscate his property. Ideally, it would be a location where we have no authority.”

“With no psychological data about him, we lack any way to postulate his possible modus operandi.”

“He use disguise,” Katrina contributed, tugging on a lock of her hair.

“True,” I noted. “But he also exhibits extreme intelligence and thus is unlikely to repeat a gimmick.”

“Anything to go on from the robbery across the country?”

“Nope. Straight smash-and-grab runs. No finesse.”

“That's not like him.”

“Exactly,” I explained. “This time we area dealing with highly motivated, intelligent enemy, who has at his resource magic and technology equal to our own.”

Cradling the M60, George tapped my shoulder. “Ed, did I ever make that request for transfer to Clerical?”

“Sorry, it was refused. Not enough people in Clerical to process the form.”

Fourteen minutes.

On a hunch, I went to the kitchen telephone and hit the button for automatic redial. With any luck, it would be a friend, or maybe even his lover.

“Pizza-Pizza!” sang out a happy voice. “Today's special is a medium double pepperoni with extra anchovies for \$10.99. What is your order, please?”

Sounded good, but this was no time for a snack so I hung up. “Jess, any other phones in the house?”

“No.”

“Car?”

“No.”

Double damn! LaRue knew we were hot on his trail and how we had last beaten him. Was there any

place he had legal access to where we couldn't pull the same trick twice? What did he have, that we didn't? Son of a stage magician. Hmm, a union hall? Carnival? Nyah. Bookstore owner, National Book convention? Librarian for the ... what service was that?

“Navy!” I cried aloud.

George and Sanders understood at once. “He's a member of the Naval reserves!” George cried out, smacking himself in the head. “And federal agents have no authority on a military base unless they are in the direct pursuit of a known felon, or they get authorization from the base CO!”

“Technical and vague,” Raul muttered, rubbing his jaw. “But maybe good enough for magic. Just maybe.”

“We play the card we're dealt,” I said. If I was wrong, it meant the end of civilization, but I tried not to think about that possibility.

“Jessica, where was he stationed in the Navy?” I asked. “That should be the only location he has actual legal access to. Any other base the Reservist would have to be assigned to and register with the commanding officer.”

“Fort Hamilton,” she replied instantly. “But his discharge papers placed him on the USS:*Intrepid* .”

“George?” I snapped.

He shrugged. “Beats me. I'm Army.”

“The USS:*Intrepid* is a World War II air craft carrier permanently docked in the Hudson River of Manhattan,” Father Donaher rattled off. “Moored near 42nd Street. The vessel has been converted into a Naval museum. Perfect place to find a librarian.”

“How the hell do you know about the ship?” Mindy demanded.

Clearly amused, the big priest grinned. “I'm originally from Brooklyn. Faith n' begorra, what New Yorker doesn't know about the *Intrepid* ? Sweet Mary, the ship is bigger than the GWB!”

Whatever that was. “Raul?”

“I'm on emergency reserves,” the mage said wearily. “Only one medium spell remaining.”

Medium, eh? Darn. “Okay,” I decided. “Then forget the van and take us back to Chicago.”

Standing to his full towering height, Ken was scandalized. “Sir, we retreat?”

“Hell no,” I said, hefting my nearly empty assault rifle. “We attack!”

FIFTEEN

“But not naked,” I amended sternly. Faces brightened as understanding came.

While George did the legal mumbo-jumbo with his FBI badge sealing the place as a crime scene, Raul

drew a circle about us chanting constantly. When George was done, Raul gestured and we were back in our Chicago living room. Nine minutes to go.

“Katrina with me!” Raul cried stumbling towards his magic laboratory.

“I’ll get the Healing potions,” Jessica said, going for our small medical theatre.

“Armory,” I cried and we stumbled off towards the kitchen. Not even George stopped to get a snack. There are priorities.

Two minutes later, everybody gathered in the living room, re-armed to the max and the broken pieces of our armor hastily replaced. We had a spare set of liquid nitrogen tanks for Katrina, and another for Raul. Mindy was dressed in her ninja outfit of solid black and I had a four-barrel HAFLA bazooka, plus my combo backpack. There was a spare liquid delivery system for Jess, filled with MSG/DMSO, but as a fillip we had hastily added every deadly poison we had in stock: arsenic, curare, potassium cyanide, strychnine, manticore venom and pure quill heroin. We had wisely omitted a dose of LSD as this guy was crazy enough to begin with. No sense priming the pump when the well was already overflowing.

Plus, each of us was carrying two satchel charges of high explosive C4 plastique, augmented with a minor flying spell to ease the weight. Our apartment wasn’t Bureau HQ with miniature nuclear bombs, laser pistols or molecular disrupter wands available, but it was the very best we had on hand and we were going for a kill.

Marching into view, George and Sanders had replaced their dinky machine guns and now sported bulky backpacks which cushioned shoulder hooks, a chest harness and hip supports to distribute its awesome weight. From the top of the ammo pack then came a flexible, enclosed feed link that connected to the top of a squat, bulky rifle with a gaping pitted maw.

The weapon was a Masterson Assault Cannon. Designed by some mad genius at the Pentagon, the ammo packs of the dire weapons held 18,000 caseless rounds of 20mm, armor-piercing, high explosive shells. Almost too destructive to control, the Bureau had absolutely prohibited their use outside of an officially declared war.

“And where the hell did you get those?” I demanded.

“Got a friend in Ordinance,” George replied proudly, adjusting the waist strap. “You pissed?”

“Hell no! I wish you had four more of them!”

“What about regulations?”

“Screw ‘em. They can fire us later.”

My wife was waiting for us with jugs of Healing potion. In scandalous waste we poured the magic elixir over us. Exhaustion disappeared, wounds closed, burns healed, hair was replaced.

The potion was beyond price. Money could not buy any of the elixir, you had to make it painstakingly, drop by drop, from blood, sweat and tears. Just like in the song. This little impromptive show was totally exhausting our ten-year accumulation of emergency reserves. If we lived through tonight, we would be without magical healing for months, maybe years! If we lived. But that was a big if. Between the Healing potion and the Strength elixir, in the morning we were going to be hospitalized for weeks.

But then, that was what an emergency reserve was for, and if this wasn't an emergency then Webster had changed the definition. Heck, I guess maybe it was war so George was safe.

Striding confidently from the lab, Katrina's eyes were rimmed with fatigue shadows, but her wood wand was rigid again, full of power. A moment later Raul walked into view, with a meager foot-and-a-half long stainless steel wand in his clenched hand.

“This is twice I've been reduced a level for a fast recharge,” he snarled, grabbing a jug and pouring the contents over his head, the burns and bleeding wounds washing away like common dirt. “The Bureau owes me big for this.”

I acknowledged the debt. “Horace Gordon himself will put a gold paper star on your permanent record card.”

“Oh, golly gee, really? Swell. Give me the damn travel book!” Raul snapped. Then for a moment, he seemed pained and Katrina went faint. George gave them each a candy bar. Poor kids must be near exhaustion from all the magic they were casting.

Without looking, Jessica opened the N volume to the correct page and handed it to him. Flipping through New York, the mage stared hard at the tiny photograph of the warship. Whatdayaknow, the Naval museum was a tourist attraction!

“Remarkable clarity,” he murmured in approval, choosing a picture.

As he started to cast the teleport spell, I had a brief worry wondering if the shot was taken on the shore, or from a flying helicopter.

Congealing from thin air, we stepped into the dark shadows of the elevated Henry Hudson Parkway in Manhattan. Before us loomed the mighty majestic outline of the *Intrepid*. Behind my team stretched the endless neon vista of 42nd Street.

Longer than two city blocks and tall as a skyscraper, the Navy war ship dwarfed the nearby office buildings and hotels into insignificance. Viewed edgewise, the massive vessel resembled an inverted metal mountain, with a small building set on top—the control island, i.e. bridge to us common folk.

Truly awe inspiring, the seemingly endless expanse of the ship was highlighted by a thousand lights strung along its colossal sides, spotlighting the control island, and bristling on the shore parking lot. A hundred assorted planes filled the flight deck of the floating city, yet the parking lot was empty. Thank god for small favors.

“What kind of armament does that thing carry?” George asked eagerly, his face a mixture of fear and respect.

“The *Intrepid* was an Essex class carrier,” Ken said, his eyes nearly closed. “She has four sets of twin five-inch cannon mounted two on the forecastle, two aftcastle. There are twenty-four 40mm rapid fire mini-cannon set in tandem all over the vessel and some hundred quadruple .50 machine gun nests.”

I whistled. No wonder we had won the war against Hitler.

He continued. “Modern aircraft carriers also have Phalanx anti-missile cannon, nuclear missiles,

Tomahawk anti-forest missiles, Amsterdam Mark IV all purpose missiles, anti-satellite missiles, anti-submarine missiles, anti-torpedo missiles, anti-missile-missiles, and anti-anti-missile-missiles.”

He drew in a breath. “Normally the *Intrepid* would carry some 100 planes of assorted design; bombers, fighters, reconnaissance, rescue helicopters. However, in museum format, it also has an additional forty planes, of varying age and condition on display. Corsairs, Hellcats, Delta Daggers, Bell & Howell gunships, Ashanti attack helicopters, AWAKS, Harriers jumpjets and so on.”

“Armor?” Father Donaher asked in a small hopeful voice.

“The landing top deck is made of 12 inch thick layered teak wood, coated with a special non-skid, fire retardant chemical composition, but it can still be ignited with sufficient thermite or napalm.”

“Yes!” Mindy cried raising a fist.

“Under the flight deck is the hangar deck with a 18 inch thick steel alloy flooring. The hull itself is 36 inch layers of multiple types of military armor, backed by decompartmentalized U-style frames and multiple ton H-formation brackets.”

I raised both eyebrows. “Was that three feet of solid armor?”

He gave a nod. “Yes. She's an old ship.”

Hoo boy.

“How many levels are there?” Jess asked gazing at the titanic vessel as if trying to hazard a guess.

“Fifteen,” Ken replied. “Eight below the flight deck and seven on the command island; from Crash Control to the crows’ nest beneath the radar antennas. Eight hundred and twenty feet long it can carry a crew of 3,500 sailors.”

“Worthy of the Russian fleet!” Katrina beamed, with a touch of patriotism creeping into her voice. Expelled for being a mage or not, home was in the heart, not under your feet.

“And how do you know all this?” I asked. “Ex-Navy?”

Lt. Colonel Sanders pointed a muscular finger towards the distant blackness. “There's a small sign giving the pertinent details over there by the ticket booth.”

I tried not to show my astonishment. He could read a sign in the dark at over two hundred feet away?

“However,” Jessica added slowly. “There are only thirty guards on duty tonight.”

“Are they alive?” George asked.

“I'm not sure,” my wife hedged. “I sense life, but not exactly in any form I am familiar with.”

“Cocooned? Metamorphosing? Possessed?” Father Donaher asked in concern. “Zombies? Protestants?”

“Yes. No. I don't know!” Jess seemed uneasy, shuffling her shoes. “I can only say that the guard are

conscious and hostile.”

Checking the safety, I worked the bolt on the M16. “Then we have to count the sailors as dead men controlled by LaRue and kill them on sight.”

This stratagem sat well with nobody. Reality rarely did. As I scanned the foredeck of the gigantic vessel, I noticed one of the jetfighters bend a wing to scratch its prow. Aw, shit.

“It is the exhibits that you sense, Jess,” I explained. “The planes are animate. Especially the jet fighters.”

“Annoying,” George said confidently. “But as this is a museum, none of them have any ammo for their guns.”

With a sweeping motion, I grandly gestured. “Then you go first.”

He took a single step, and then smiled. “Ah, perhaps tomorrow?”

Five minutes to go. How could we get on without being noticed? The carpeted gangplank was extended, the sixty feet of roped off ramp well enough lit to read a book of regulations by. Ha. It made me laugh. Ah, we could just shrink down to mice size and run on board!

No, the gangplank and anchor chains had rat-proof baffles and sensors, sent Jessica. Ditto the mooring lines and power cables. Good security. Too damn good. Phooey on the Navy.

“Jess, can't you get a reading on LaRue?” I urged hopefully.

She shook her head. “Impossible. His mind is so jumbled between the alchemical potions, his new magic, the mixed personalities and the influence of the book, that he is nothing but telepathic hash. His thoughts blend into the background murmur of the city.”

Boy, this guy was tough to find. Hmm, we could turn invisible and fly in past the planes. Wasteful of magic and extremely dangerous, between the sensors of the *Intrepid* and all those warplanes, we would almost certainly be caught. Make a magic door in the hull? No, too thick. Use a Meld? No, too many people. This was infuriating! Bureau 13 headquarters was situated somewhere in New York City. But if I used my wristwatch, the Tanner part of LaRue would know instantly. Briefly, I weighed surprise against a direct mass attack. We couldn't summon help once he started the spell, all lines of magical communications went down. What the hell, let's go for the gold. It would be nice to watch a battle from the sidelines for a change.

Stroking my necktie, I produced a quarter and handed it to Donaher. “We're gonna need an air strike. Father, go find a public phone and call the local FBI headquarters. Tell them we have a terrorist team onboard the *Intrepid* with biological weapons. Request an immediate bombardment. Blow the ship out of the water. The code is...”

“Faith, I know the proper code,” the priest said, and then he vanished by becoming one with the shadows. Eh?

“Mindy has been tutoring him,” supplied my wife.

Ah, that explained it. But a minute later, Mike reappeared.

“No good,” Donaher panted, breathless from his run. “Apparently the phone system is down.”

“A la Tanner LaRue,” Mindy snorted, fingering the pommel of her katana.

Then to hell with security. I activated my watch. “Alert! This is a priority one call. The situation is Alpha Four, repeat, Alpha Four! Respond, please!” Static answered me. Not even a carrier wave signal.

With obvious intent, George primed the action on his Masterson, its bulky backpack making him resemble Donaher in the dark. “There's a bank nearby. Want me to rudely summon the cops?”

“Against this guy?” I retorted. “No. We got to take him ourselves.”

“We did not fare well last time,” Ken reminded, his hands moving restlessly along the encased feeder belt to his Masterson Assault Cannon in a kind of military rosary.

On the port railing, the Harrier sharply whistled and a French Saber, a Delta Dagger and a Spitfire joined it at the gunwales. Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. The four fighters watched the dock with particular intent. My radio broadcast had been heard.

I glanced at my watch. Sweet Jesus! Time was ticking away, no assistance from either the Bureau nor standard military was possible and I still had no idea how to get onboard the ship without dying. A major prime prerequisite for us to work.

“Sanders, what else is on that bulletin board sign?” Father Donaher asked curiously.

He gazed in the proper direction. “The times the museum is open to the public, prices for admission, a simplified sketch of the carrier and several photographs.”

“Of?”

“The first captain, two major battles in the South Pacific and some interior shots.”

“Interior pictures?” Mindy breathed hotly. “Sanders, you dolt!”

The big man seemed confused. “What did I do?”

Rummaging in his haversack of munitions, George produced a set of Starlite binoculars and gave them to Raul. Frantically, the mage studied the distance sign. “With a photograph, we can teleport inside bypassing the defenses!”

In shame, Ken hung his head. “Sorry.”

“No problem, kid,” I said, watching an assault helicopter lift into view off the flight deck. “That's why you're still a student and not out on your own yet.” Two more gunships swiftly followed. Briefly, I wondered if my insurance premiums were fully paid?

“Well, Mr. Wizard?” Donaher asked tersely.

Minutely rotating the dial, the mage fine adjusted the focus. “I think, no, yes! There is the engine room!”

Just then, a dozen planes launched from the carrier. A cumbersome double-prop Bell & Howell

helicopter, a bulky Grumman Hellcat, a Curtis two-man Helldiver, a MiG, two Corsairs, a sleek Harrier jumpjet, a squat Spitfire and a Japanese Zero. Half of them were antiques, propeller driven logs made of wood and cloth. Yet massed together, the assemblage of airplanes had sufficient firepower to level East Manhattan. But only if LaRue had taken the time to conjure them ammunition.

He had. Banking sharply in the starry sky, the Harrier angled for an attack run and the street exploded, chunks of macadam jumping into the air. Parked cars exploded into fireballs in a steady progression of violent detonations, a man walking his dog was cut in half by the streams of large caliber bullets, a sleeping bum exploded from a 40mm shell, the stout wire fence about the carrier was torn to pieces and massive chunks of concrete were torn from the Parkway overhead.

Boulders of roadway crashed into the street before us. Utterly helpless, I grit my teeth and cursed. Freaking jet was firing blind! Probably thought we were invisible. An off-duty taxi cab turned the corner and was promptly annihilated. More civilians were dying! I was going to kill LaRue with my bare hands! Twice! Then do it again just to be sure!

“Raul, teleport us now!” I shouted as metal decks and walls appeared around us.

In the muted rumble of the house-size engines surrounding us, the mage rested an arm casually on an operating fuel pump larger than a watermelon. “Gosh, what a swell idea,” the mage said stiffly.

Diplomatically, I forced a grin. “Sorry.”

Looking about the place, I saw that a simple catwalk lead straight down the middle of the twelve towering gas turbines which filled the engine room with their throbbing presence. The air was pungent with the oily smell of diesel fuel and hot metal, tainted with the bitter stink of ozone. Steam pipes capable of conveying a whale joined collector reservoirs above us in a soaring archway of leviathan plumbing.

Power transformers large enough to electrify a city, crackled inside safety cages made of industrial gauge insulated wire. Bigger-than-a-buffalo-busbars glowed from the ionization effect of the tremendous voltage passing through them to the drive motors below. I could not even begin to calculate how much pressure these furnaces had to generate in order to push the giant turbines which supplied the staggering electrical current needed to power the behemoth motors which moved a ship as big as the *Intrepid*.

Passing a workstation of controls and tools, we prepped for battle and started for the oval steel door set in the metal bulkhead.

Hatchway, supplied Jess.

Thank you, O fount of wisdom.

S'okay.

“Kill on sight,” I reminded them. “No dicking around.”

Then the thick hatch slammed in our faces, its wheel handle spinning to latch and dog the lock shut.

“Red alert,” a calm voice said over a PA speaker set in the ceiling. “Intruders in the engine room.”

Quickly drawing his Bible, Father Donaher muttered something in Latin, and it didn't sound like a blessing to me.

“How could they have found us so fast?” Mindy demanded, her sword held in both hands while a rainbow of colors played along the deadly curved length. When she got nervous, it did also.

“The ship told him,” Jess said softly, both arms wrapped round her chest.

“Eh?” I spun about. “What was that?”

“The ship,” she repeated, staring at the pulsating walls. “Its alive. Same as the planes.”

I broke four regulations by shouting, "*The whole freaking air craft carrier is sentient!?*"

As if in response, the lights dimmed. The titanic engines revved to thundering fury. An intake valve snapped open and billowing clouds of hot exhaust fumes from the diesel engines spewing forth gentle as a summer breeze from hell.

Coughing and hacking, we retreated from the noxious fumes as a distant humming made itself felt in the perforated metal deck. The harsh vibration was augmented by a crackle of sheet lightning and the howl of rising winds.

Wilson LaRue was starting the doomsday spell again.

SIXTEEN

Half blind from the deadly exhaust vomiting from the hundred giant diesel turbines, we took refuge in a clear area with nothing overhead but bare ceiling. My team had some rough idea of what to expect having fought living houses before. But an animated war ship? This was an experience I would have gladly denied myself. Suddenly, a transfer to Clerical didn't sound like such a bad career move.

The PA speaker continued to bleat a warning until Mindy sliced it off the wall with her sword. Lifting the face shields of our helmets, we tied handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths to get a bit of respite. But we had to move fast or die of plain old-fashioned asphyxiation. Crude, but effective.

Retaining bolts spinning by themselves, a huge tool rack fell from a bulkhead and almost crushed Raul, but he jumped out of the way. A pipe burst and sprayed Donaher in the back with scalding steam. His cassock dissolved and Mike gave a howl, but his body armor held and the priest lived. Wiggling like a canvas snake, a fire hose tried to strangle Jessica. She gutted it with her pocketknife. The spring assembly on a pump snapped free and nearly succeeded in punching a hole through my helmet. A rolling chair rammed in Katrina's leg cracking her shin armor, and a Supply cabinet door slammed open, nearly succeeding in swatting Sanders flat. I pumped a few rounds into a trashcan that seemed to be loitering suspiciously nearby, and Raul cast a Seal spell on a wooden locker full of power tools. We did not need any dancing chainsaws.

Steam spurted at irregular intervals from joints keeping us hopping. The exhaust fumes grew thick enough to chew. Raw fuel got George in the facemask and dripped onto his weapon. Moving fast, Father Donaher washed the highly flammable fluid off the Masterson with his Holy Water pistol. Smart move.

Unexpectedly, at every corner and crevice, sparks jumped from deck to wall and our hair began to stick straight out from our heads. I guess a few trillion volts were being shunted through the floor, but our shoes were insulated against such an old attack. However, if we even fleetingly touched anything made of

metal directly connected to the ship with our bare skin it would be instant barbecued agent. Retirement option #37, if I remember correctly.

Nobody was stupid enough to try and shoot the vessel. Bullets would simply ricochet off the metal walls and might finish the job the carrier was so valiantly trying to do. We had plenty of explosives and two primed mages, but so what? How the hell do you kill a 250,000 ton ship? Stab it with the Eiffel Tower? Smack it with the Kremlin?

Listening to the noise of air vents sucking in and exhaust pipes blowing out, the noise sounded like breathing and that gave me an idea. If magic followed the intent, not the letter, and the ship was alive, then it had a heart equivalent. I glanced around at the turbines and engines towering above us.

Here most likely. Yeah. The bridge would be the brain, radar its eyes, and the fuel tanks its stomach.

“Gloves!” I cried, pulling on my kid leather beauties.

Ken grabbed a pair of engineer's gloves from a worktable and wrestled them on, George produced electrical mittens and Katrina donned her velvet slammers over the insulated lab gloves. Working together, the four of us managed to pry the cover off a fuel vapor exchange unit. It didn't want to leave, but we convinced the flanged plate otherwise. Normally this piece of machinery trapped rising fuel vapors and condensed them for return to storage. But I had a different function in mind.

“Jess, whack it!” I ordered, straining to keep the lid away.

Shoving the nozzle of her spray gun down the pipe, she triggered the spray. In only seconds, a loud knocking sounded from all around us. Rapidly it grew in volume and tempo. The engines revved to overload and the lights began flashing insanely. The vessel rocked from side to side as if in a storm on the high seas, we slipped and slid on the rough floor fighting to keep our footing on the deadly electrified deck. Jessica lost her balance, but Mindy kicked my wife upright. Wrapping her armored legs tight around the big fuel pipe, Jess shoved the spray gun in deeper and locked the trigger into position.

Klaxons rang, sirens howled, alarms buzzed, the hatch slammed open and shut. Every valve in the place was spinning wildly. On the control board, switches flipped, buttons rose and depressed, dials turned, yet every meter hit the red line and went beyond. In rattling fury, the entire cubic mile of Navy property gave a mighty shiver, decks buckling and walls cracking. Then the vessel went still, and in faltering stages, the engines slowed to a halt, the lights gradually dimmed and went out.

Darkness and peace engulfed us. A second later, the battery lights came on, illuminating hatchways, controls panels and not much more. But it was just an automatic programmed response, the ship was dead.

The MSG and DMSO couldn't have done much, but there was enough assorted poison in that mixture to kill a battalion of rabid rhinos. Just about the correct amount for a sentient aircraft carrier. Then again, maybe the ship was only stunned.

“Triple time, harch,” I whispered, checking my weapon. “George and Sanders on point. Donaher and Katrina take the rear. One meter spread. Silent. Stop for nothing.”

As the team got into order, Jess removed her empty tanks and set them in a utility closet. Not used in the manner planned, the poison spray had still saved our butts. Lucky we had it along. I had thought of two other ways to kill the ship, but each had been more chancy and dangerous than the other. Besides, I

didn't have an atomic bomb, or a cucumber on me.

Now the humming of the siphon vortex was clearly audible and both our mages began sliding across the floor sideways. I smiled. As LaRue drained the world of magic, at close range, the spell was sucking in our mages. We could find LaRue easy as floating with the currents of a river. Just had to do it fast.

Sprinting down the dim main corridor, Donaher tried a running exorcism, to no avail. Either LaRue was too powerful for him, unlikely, or else the alchemy had been used to animate the warplanes. Something the Catholic priest could do nothing about.

Bypassing a freight ramp, Raul and Katrina angled to the right, and we followed. Their twin Masterson cannons at the ready, Sanders and George covered each other as they swept constantly forward, searching for danger, or LaRue.

The team went up a level to Storage, then on to Ammunition. It was empty. Damn, I had possessed a fleeting hope of blowing the ship to smithereens with its own explosives. Sleeping quarters came next. As we broached an intersection with stairs and an elevator, Ken and George jerked to a halt. A raised hand with fingers upright stopped the rest of us, and a closed fist made us gather together. Creeping forward, I peeked round the corner to see what they had spotted.

Silver and sleek, a Harrier jumpjet was stalking along the corridor, its delta wings held flat to its fuselage like the wings of a bird. The wheeled landing gear was extending and contracting in a gross pantomime of walking. The British jet fighter nearly filled the passageway it was so big. Close behind was a stubby yellow Corsair, and a Russian MiG fighter.

“This is bad,” George said out of the side of his mouth while prepping the Masterson Assault Cannon.

“How so?” I asked, checking the load on my .357 Magnum. The small caliber tumblers of the M16, and the wooden bullets of the .44 AutoMag, wouldn't scratch the paint of a Harrier.

“Most of these planes are incredibly easy to destroy,” he explained. “Especially the jet fighter. A single HE round into the main turbine and they'll tear themselves apart.”

His weapon at the ready, Ken raised an eyebrow. “Sounds great.”

“We're in a steel corridor,” George said, tapping the wall with a knuckle. “When a plane detonates, the debris will travel along this corridor like a shotgun blast along a barrel.”

Going pale, Katrina added, “With us sitting in muzzle.”

“Great,” I snorted, feeling trapped. “Well, we have to shoot to protect ourselves. So any suggestions?”

“Fire and duck?”

That was hardly a masterful strategy whose clever feints and ploys would leave the enemy gasping in shock, but it sounded faintly plausible. Our armor could take a lot of punishment, and our options were severely limited.

“What the hell,” I said. “Pass the word.”

But suddenly feeling extremely clever, I turned and ripped the cover off an air vent. With the infrared

visor of my helmet, I could see razor sharp metal plates studding the vent along its whole length. I stood and frowned. Damn Navy efficiency! They probably had barbed bars in the bilge, spikes in the sewage pipes, daggers in the drains and forked flails in the flues. I know I would, but then, I'm paranoid.

“The currents go this way!” Raul shouted, and we happily ran away. Discretion and valor, yep, that's us.

The dim lights worked for us, making it difficult for the warplanes to spot their targets, at least for the older planes. The Harrier and the Ashanti helicopter had chemical & thermal scanners and infrared viewers better than what we had in our van. If the planes thought of using their sonic guidance systems, they'd have us in a minute.

Just then, a small red missile on a column of flame and smoke shot by the end of the corridor we were in. A moment later, another turned to curve into our passageway. Holy Hannah, a heat seeker!

From the waist, I fired my 40mm shell hoping for a lucky shot and Donaher triggered his flamethrower attempting to prematurely detonate the warhead. Frantically, Raul threw a fistful of coins and a steel wall appeared directly in front of us. Mike cut the flames. One second later, the wall violently exploded, the concussion hurling us brutally to the floor. Flames cooked the air from our lungs and shrapnel pounded us mercilessly.

Lying limp on the deck, I ached in every part of my body. But I was alive, at least technically. My clothes were black with blood, the stains spreading. Frightened, I grabbed my neck but apparently my anti-vampire collar had deflected most of the impromptu flechettes.

Crawling on hands and knees, Katrina gathered some blood from everybody on a strip torn from her uniform. Then neatly tearing the cloth into eight pieces, she breathed heavily upon them and stared with visible force.

“Go!” Katrina bellowed in a Voice of Command. “Rise and run until you die!”

Obediently, the drops of our blood stood tall and exact duplicates of the team dashed away down the far corridor. A barrage of yammering machine guns, rapid-fire cannons and explosions greeted their appearance. Gradually, the sound of battle faded into the distance.

“Nice move,” Raul moaned, using the wand staff to lever himself erect.

“Thanks,” she croaked. “You also.”

Assisting each other to stand, we shambled along, still following the current. En route, the team affected repairs as best we could. Looking weary, Jessica dropped some of her combat armor to lessen her weight load. Lithe and beautiful, my wife was not a muscle-bound samurai like Mindy and had limits.

Going up a dark staircase, we moved silent as possible along a main access corridor, then took a branch hallway and went north. The ethereal flow was becoming thicker, almost visibly dense. Tendrils and streamers of wispy fireworks flowing swiftly onward, ever forward.

At an intersection, we hid in a Map Room as a lumbering French Saber interceptor moved by. It was so close, I could read the serial numbers stenciled on the missiles tucked under the clipped delta wings, and the museum plate attached to the white striped fuselage. The brass square detailed the noble craft's history, evolution and attributes. Unfortunately, the plate did not list any known weaknesses. An oversight, surely.

There was nobody in the pilot, or co-pilot's seat. Where were the guards? In a silent gesture, George proffered his Masterson, but I shook my head vehemently no. Not yet.

Whether by alchemy, or the magic of the Aztec book, these planes were fueled and brimming with armament. When one died, they would let the whole world know. At a range of two feet, the resulting blast could make us go permanently deaf.

Try again, bucko, Jess sent petulantly. *They'd be mopping us off the walls with a sponge.*

True, but I'm an optimist.

The river of magic took us further into the great ship and eventually we had to loop our belts through those of the mages to keep them from being physically hauled into the air by the powerful eddies of concentrated magic.

Tagging along after our human kites, we were pulled past a corner only to find half a dozen warplanes waiting for us. Even as the team frantically scampered back round the corner, the massed fighters opened with gun and cannon. With propellers spinning, it was like staring into the mouth of an angry garbage disposal full of firecrackers.

“We must be close to LaRue,” Father Donaher reasoned, peeking past the edge of the metal wall and triggering a burning arc of jellied gasoline towards the airships.

As both of the Masterson cannons were speaking, I withheld comment. Reaching over my shoulder, I grabbed a plastic tube with no fluted ends, and gave them a LAW. Streaking in between a Corsair and the Harrier, a Curtis Helldiver was hit and went to its namesake. Damn, I had been aiming for the Harrier.

Advancing from behind the burning wreck of the old Grumman antique was a state-of-the-art F18 SuperHornet, one of the finest fighting planes in existence. Jumping Jesus! That thing used a Harrier for target practice! What the bloody freaking hell was a line-ship such as the Hornet doing in a goddamn Navy museum? An exhibition?

“Trouble with a capital T,” George sang, as a .50 round banged off his helmet knocking him askew. The muzzle of his weapon went wild for a second, the armor-piercing shells chewing paths of destruction in decks and bulkheads.

“Do you have a clever plan, Mr. Alvarez?” Ken asked calmly, triggering controlled bursts of caseless HE rounds.

I sure did. “Don't die and win!”

“Good plan, sir.”

“Thanks. Got it off a gum wrapper.”

Our weapons kept a constant barrage going and it was not a problem hitting the planes. This was easy as shooting ducks in a barrel. Only these ducks shot back, more, and better.

Holding onto a stanchion with both hands, Katrina exclaimed something in Russian and the secret

language of magic.

“Will that work?” Jessica asked, as always our universal translator.

Feet braced against a hatchway, Raul strained to hold on. “How do I know? Nobody was ever dumb enough to try before!”

“So we do!” Katrina cried, radiating a fine Muscovite fury.

Stretching from their precarious positions, the two mages managed to grab hands as racing lines of ethereal power poured straight through them. In unison, they began to chant, and the majority of streamers now arced around the pair, and the few glowing ribbons that went in, didn't come out the other side.

Firing off another 40mm shell of thermite, I nearly did a dance. Holy mother of pearl, the two were retaining snatches of the limitless energy flowing past them. Recharging themselves to who-knew-what level of magic. The closer we get to the nexus, the more ethereal power would pour into them. It wouldn't work against LaRue, he'd only absorb the energy, but it might save our butts in this particular instance.

“Kill those planes!” Katrina commanded, internally glowing from the endless power passing through her trembling form.

Pausing for a split second, George and Sanders gave a start, then boldly charged towards the amassed fighter and interceptors.

Bullets bounced off their adamantine bodies, missiles impacted and only crumpled their warheads with no explosions. Repaired and backed by the quintessential, concentrated, river of magic, the two indestructible soldiers waded forward, their Masterson Assault Cannons firing non-stop. Over 4,000 rounds a minute of armor piercing, high explosive, caseless rounds spewing from the pitted maws of the deadly weapons.

The oncoming missiles were shredded, the explosion and shrapnel forced back towards the Harrier, Saber, SuperHornet and Delta Dagger. The jets cut loose with everything they had, missiles, rockets, 40mm shells, .50 rounds, .75 depleted uranium slugs, and blinding magnesium flares. The determined planes dropped their payloads of bombs onto the deck beneath them, the tons of high explosive, thermite and napalm blockbusters only adding to the general destruction.

Boldly marching, the two soldiers took it all and gave it back, compound with interest, their bulky coffers of ammunition refilled the microsecond the packs were exhausted.

Indomitable as professional wrestlers on national TV, the pair of soldiers advanced upon the clustered million dollar jet fighters. As each machine was drained of ammo, it was destroyed. The Saber was torn to bits under the horizontal rain of 20mm rounds, its fuselage split apart and the fuel tanks exploded into a strident fireball. The Hellcat and the Corsair were slammed against the bulkheads burst into kindling. Ripping free from their mountings, the great motors bounded along the corridor as insane things, the spinning propellers smacking into the deck and bulkheads, throwing the roaring engines hither and yon, with no rhyme or reason.

Nimble as a gymnast, Ken ducked under a ton of spinning metal, and George tracked the other engine's wild flight, peppering the motor with caseless HE rounds motor until it jammed and burst. The Delta

Dagger died next, then the MiG, and the Harrier. A chunk of canopy went skidding along the deck and I saluted the tiny American flag painted on the Armorlite windshield as it passed by. So I'm a patriot. Sue me.

Incredibly, the SuperHornet turned tail, shoved its wings into a pair of opposite hatchways and throttled up both engines.

“Oh shit!” George cried, backing away.

“What?” I shouted, banging away with my .357 Magnum.

“Know the difference between a flamethrower and a jet engine?” George said, licking dry lips.

“Nyet!”

“A flamethrower doesn't have as much hard thrust!”

Uh-oh. Time to fry.

The twin turbo-engines seemed to disintegrate into a boiling wave of reddish flame that completely filled the corridor, as the F18 SuperHornet blew hundreds of gallons of half burned fuel out its turbines in a last great effort to toast us alive.

The very force of the flames served to deflect the 20mm rounds from the Masterson cannons. Desperately, Raul and Katrina upped their chanting and George and Ken dug their heels into the metal deck. Step by step, meter-by-meter, they charged straight into those yawning pits of hell and forcibly shoved the stuttering muzzles of their dire weapons straight into the thundering engines!

There immediately followed a quite spectacular explosion.

When I could see and hear again, only a steaming hole in the twisted metal deck remained of the rogue defenders. The SuperHornet was totally destroyed, plane and simple.

*Ugh!*sent Jessica.

Sorry, it had to be said.

No, it didn't.

Gathering ourselves together, we grabbed a hold of the mages, and the team levitated over the jagged gap to land on the smooth undamaged deck beyond. Ahead of us was a set of double doors large enough to comfortably pass a cargo plane, and on the wall a neatly stenciled sign told why.

“Vehicle Storage?” Mindy asked, brushing a bit of fuselage off her blade.

Exasperated, Father Donaher rolled his Irish green eyes. They weren't smiling. “Saints preserve us!” he muttered. “This is where they park the squadrons of extra planes. Hundreds of them!”

Panting from the constant exertion of keeping the two mages in tow, I thumbed my last round 40mm round into the breech of the grenade launcher. It was a special shell that I had been reserving for Mr. LaRue; a low-yield explosive canister of an outstandingly virulent military nerve gas outlawed by the UN

Security Council as inhumanly painful and deadly. If this didn't kill Wild Willy, then he deserved to rule the earth. Or at least six feet of it, positioned directly over his pointy head.

“Screw the planes!” I snarled, clicking the breech shut. “Let's take the bastard!”

The doors were thick, veined steel, but two satchel charges and a LAW did the trick, and we stormed into the acrid smoke just as the ethereal winds died.

Utilizing fully half of the carrier's middle deck, the vast place was mostly empty, with only a poor Navy jeep carrying a .50 machine gun waiting for us. That trifle hardly even slowed us.

Standing brazen in a sketchy pentagram was Wilson LaRue, three times human size and glowing as if he was florescent, torrents of scintillating mystical energy pouring into him from every direction, and sprawled about him were the guards.

Or rather what remained of them. Lying on the deck, the humans were physically linked to form a pentagram about the mad alchemist, their hands fused together into an unbroken circle of flesh. Bits of guards were missing, eyes from a woman, hair from another, the chest of a third. Lacking critical ingredients from his laboratory, LaRue must have made do with live human beings for his hellish diagram.

But not everyone was dead. Scattered about in the five pointed star, a few still moaned or screamed in their torment. Living links in the corpse chain.

His hated visage filled my sight and even as I raised my gun, god help me, I paused for a moment, desperately fighting the swirling emotions within. LaRue had to die, would die, but it meant killing more civilians. I could have gunned down my beloved Jessica without a qualm if it got Wilson also. That was our job. But we were sworn to die if it meant saving innocent life.

It took me, the whole group of us, a full second to overcome that oath of allegiance. Which was all LaRue needed.

Even as we fired, a last wisp of visible magic snaked across the hangar to enter his body. Suddenly, Raul and Katrina slumped to the deck unconscious, my sunglasses went dark, Mindy's sword ceased its rainbow display, my body armor became fantastically heavy and a copper bracelet fell off George's wrist.

“Yes,” LaRue said, watching the lightning play between his fingers with mad eyes. “Success!*Success!*”

It was over. The spell was done, and Wilson LaRue possessed every last drop of magic on Earth. We had lost.

SEVENTEEN

We had lost the battle, but not the damn war. Ruthlessly, I pumped the nerve gas grenade at LaRue. Not even looking in my direction, he caught the projectile and tossed it into his mouth, munching on the 40mm shell as if it was a gumdrop. Wisps of vapor spurted from round his lips as I smacked myself in the head. Chemical weapons against an alchemist? Alvarez, you putz!

Aiming so as not to kill, Father Donaher hosed the legs of the mage with flame, and both of the Masterson cannons cut loose spewing a fusillade of explosions to pepper the kimono wearing spacesuit. Not much damage was done to either.

“Routine four!” I shouted, dropping the spent M-203 and unlimbering my heavy HAFLA four-shot.

The team separated and attacked from different directions.

Contemptuously, LaRue threw a lighting bolt and it missed Jessica by a yard. He seemed as surprised as she. Stupid librarian didn't yet realize it took practice, and lots of it, to control the higher magiks. LaRue may have the power of a god, but not the skill. Like a baby with a bazooka, he was more dangerous to himself than to others. So we still had a fighting chance, but it was decreasing with every passing moment.

A HAFLA rocket impacted on the ceiling above LaRue raining napalm down upon him. His clothes and hair caught fire, but he did not seem particularly disturbed by the event.

Shouting his war cry, Ken sprinted off into the distance. Trying to get behind our foe, I thought, but then he circled completely about and rejoined us. That was when I noticed his spray gun was pointed at the ceiling. I glanced up and saw a sizzling ring in the steel deck above LaRue. Obviously, we both liked to fight dirty.

With a loud metallic crack, twenty tons of metallic plating plummeted onto the nasty nitwit, crushing him flatter than a bug under a shoe heel. We shouted in victory.

Then the steel disc levitated into the air and the ceiling coalesced into a homogeneous whole. Smiling in a cocky manner, Wilson LaRue stood as before completely undamaged. His kimono and battle suit weren't even rumpled.

On a coded command, my team threw the satchel charges and as they hurtled towards the mage, the canvas packs became smaller and smaller until button-size, the bags landed at his black boots and went snap-snap-snap loud as firecrackers.

Uncaring if anybody was standing behind, I let fly the three remaining HAFLA rockets, tossed the launcher and cut loose with the .44 AutoMag, spent shells the size of cigar butts jerking from the injector port.

During this, Jessica was steadily firing her Uzi at the madman, the 9mm Parabellums flattening against his body and staying there like little gray polka dots.

Holstering the empty .44 AutoMag, I shrugged and started triggering my twin Magnums at the walls, angling for a ricochet. Maybe his shield, or whatever, only operated in the front. But the heavy duty combat slugs merely hit his back as roses, the harmless bouquet falling limply to the deck in the manner of some pagan offering.

In a tumbling roll, Mindy sliced the man in half along the waist with her sword and then rolled away again. Blood spurted for only a moment, but mages were always quick healers. As the only mage alive, I guess his repair factor was magnified geometrically. What we need was a full body death blow, or a Brain Blast. Yeah.

Turning and sneering, LaRue gestured and twin saber-tooth tigers leapt from his palms. Suddenly fur and fists were flying as Mindy became embroiled in her own private war.

Now in his right hand there appeared a crystal staff. No, a diamond staff, with a crystal ball atop, the illuminated globe pulsating with shimmering radiance. Eek!

“Jessica to me!” I cried, and she came a running, firing every step of the way.

Hydrofluoric acid tanks empty, Ken slapped the chest release button and threw the entire assembly at LaRue. Leveling his wand, the mage gestured and the tanks, hose and spray gun stopped in flight and streaked backwards at Sanders. He ducked and they lowered in trajectory. Kneeling motionless, at the very last second he jumped straight up and the equipment impacted into the deck indenting the thick metal floor in a meteoric strike.

Our shotgun and pistols maintained a steady discharge. In the background, the tiger growls where down to meows and in bloody sword slashes they soon ceased. LaRue cast a Flame Lance, an Ice Storm, Flesh-to-Stone, and a couple of modified Death spells. But missing us and only hitting the bulkheads, the lethal conjures dispersed in the standard gay pyrotechnics of a failed spell. But the armored walls were discolored from the raw brute force of the powerful magic.

“Mine is the only voice you can hear,” I said softly, pulling my small wife close. “Mine the only voice which commands.”

Succumbing to my will, Jessica's face softened as she entered the primary stage of the trance.

Grenades raining around him, LaRue erected a prismatic dome. Mike rolled a bottle of Holy Oil under the bottom lip of the dome, LaRue stomped on it and slipped, nearly falling. With his bare fists, Sanders pummeled the dome with triphammer blows, making the magic green barrier ring deafening. A transdimensional portal appeared in the air and out charged a huge roaring hydra! Standing bigger than LaRue, the wild snakes nest of the legendary dragon's seven heads writhed and hissed. Some drooled acid or poison, others breathed frost or belched flame, one screamed with sonic fury, another stared at us hypnotically and the biggest launched a salvo of thorny spines from its brow! Crouching low, Mindy stabbed Wilson in the boot with a poisoned dagger. With a yelp, the portal winked out and the horrid beast faded away. Whew. Thankfully, this was a private party. Attendance by invitation only.

Shouting vitriolic curses, Father Donaher slid his wristwatch to Mindy who stuffed it along with hers under the dome. Then Ken added his, and bodily grabbed the prismatic shield to slam it flat against the deck. There was a loud whump, the dome bulged and jumped.

Then the curved shield vanished and an angry smoking LaRue exploded himself in a Body Boom. With only tatters of cloth clinging to their combat armor, my friends went flying. In a wild frenzy, LaRue fired an uncoordinated barrage of red laser beams and golden disrupter rays. The lasers melted holes in deck and walls everywhere. The touch of the disrupters made the metal implode with violent fury. The alchemist didn't hit anybody, but the federal agents landed with sickening thuds. My .44 AutoMag and holster were disintegrated, and my helmet was blown off my head with stunning force. As recommended by George, I had left the chin strap dangling, just for this type of situation. Too many soldiers in the past had lost their heads in battle trying to look prim and proper, instead of being comfortable and functional.

“The command phrase is Armageddon,” I spoke fast and low, using my aching jaw as little as possible. “The activation word is Apocalypse.”

Sitting upright, Katrina fired her Bureau special derringer into LaRue's stomach. The composite mage staggered and then Raul stood. Swinging his drained staff in the manner of a baseball bat, he bent the steel shaft over the alchemist's head. Blood and hair spraying from the impact, Wilson fell trembling to his knees, but then a thorny thicket sprang into existence around Raul. Instantly trapped, I heard Raul trying to start a motorized hedge trimmer. Then a garish light encased Katrina and she slumped to the deck.

This was going to be close. “Jessica, the go code is—” But I stopped as my mind went blank and searing agony hit me in hands and feet. I lost any sense of time as incredible pain filled the universe for an untold period. *Pain!*

Slowly through the red fog of hellish sensations, I eventually began to become dimly aware that I was stark naked and flat against the cold metal wall of the hangar with steel spikes driven through my wrists and ankles. More were positioned under my armpits, groin and knees to support my helpless body. There was no way I was going to fall free. The rest of my team was pinned spread-eagled along the wall, hanging hapless as animal skins on display.

“Surprise,” LaRue wheezed, a trickle of red blood oozing down his pale cheek. “I win.”

Panting for breath, his staff pulsed and Wilson stood whole and healed. His battlesuit spotless, the kimono pressed and crisp.

“And none of you will be allowed to die!” he screamed, spittle spraying from his mouth. “Ever!”

Then he took a few deep breaths to try and control his fury. “Until I know more, all, about this Aztec Book and the Bureau 13 which once captured it.”

Struggling against the wracking throbs in my limbs, I tried to tell him to stick it where the sun don't shine, but fainted instead.

Ice cold water splashed onto me and I came abruptly awake shivering, trembling and still nailed to the wall. No, it had not been a terrible nightmare. We were his prisoners.

Human size once more, Wilson LaRue eyed us dispassionately. “You have given me a great deal of trouble,” he said with deceptive calm. “But a god has no need for revenge. Tell me what I want to know about this possible danger and I will kill you painlessly. This I solemnly promise. Where is the Bureau located? Who is in charge? What resources do they possess?”

Somehow drawing upon untapped reserves of strength, this time I did manage to give him the proper directions for insertion and George added a fillip about his mother and a diseased camel.

Shaking his head in disdain, Wilson only laughed in amusement. “Ah, I see the loss of blood has made you irritable. Well, let's cauterize those nasty wounds.”

As with those words the spikes glowed white hot. I writhed from the unbearable agony, then choked and vomited from the stink of my own roasting flesh. Somewhere in the distance, I heard other members of my team screaming and crying, but I was lost in my private world of pain and could think of nothing else.

A hundred million years later, the spikes cooled and I weakly returned to panting, sweaty consciousness. LaRue had us trapped and was trying to wring out information we couldn't give him even if we wanted. Only our Bureau implanted mind-blocks prevented him from reading our thoughts, and not even the dreaded Mind Rape could get the data he wanted. We did not know where our headquarters was located. All he could do was kill us. Eventually.

“Perhaps you do not fully realize the situation,” LaRue stated dramatically, thumping his staff on the deck. “With but a gesture, I have countered every bit of the damage done in our little altercation and

repaired my loyal fleet of war planes. Also, they are now armed with forceshields and lasers, an oversight I will not repeat. Any rescue attempt will be met with massive resistance. If necessary, I will take part in the battle. I learn from my mistakes.”

Talkative bastard, but then amateurs always were.

Summoning her resolve, Katrina growled something in Russian then spit at LaRue, and Donaher hit him with one of those damn-your-soul-to-perdition curses that only a fighting mad Catholic Irish priest ever seems to be able to do correctly. Whew, this one was a doozy. Could have boiled water at twenty paces.

Frowning in annoyance, Wilson glared and the priest became bumpy from head to toes, then the freckled skin burst as thousands of barbed quills slowly grew out of his skin. The priest screamed for an eternity. Then LaRue blinked and Donaher was as before. Only much paler.

“I was hoping you would become my first priest convert. Perhaps even my pope!” the sly mage offered. “Your false lord will not save you. Worship me, and you may have Ireland for your very own! Mayhap England as well! I am generous to those who are loyal.”

Drooling blood, Father Donaher got so furious he couldn't speak for a moment, so Mindy pinch-hit for her friend and rattled off a long phrase in Japanese. Whatever she said, it must have been good, because LaRue gasped and bathed her naked form with a flickering cone of purple light from his staff. In silent torment, Mindy began to split apart like rotten fruit, her smoking bones rising to the surface.

Shutting my ears to the noise, I turned my head to avoid watching. The finest fighting team the Bureau had and we were only toys for him to play with. There was no rescue coming, no hope of escape. Death would not be quick, not matter what he said. We had failed. Totally and utterly.

Often I had done it jokingly, but now I silently offered my soul to anybody, anybody at all; good, evil, or indifferent, if they would only give us one last fighting chance. As always, silence was the only response.

The howls stopped and Mindy hung limp from her spikes, great festering wounds lining her twisted body. Corpse? No, body, the remains of her chest still rose and fell with breath.

“Answer me!” LaRue yelled in childish impatience. “Haven't you had enough? You have no more magic! You are only normal humans now!” His brows furrowed. “Or are you?”

Gliding closer, his wand played a spectrum of lights over our tortured forms. “Ah, this man is a human, but his wife is a telepath! The muscular bitch with the big mouth is a martial artist of some kind. Fatso is a professional soldier and the big redhead is a cleric!”

Inhaling sharply, LaRue placed a hand akimbo. “What a strange band you are! This man is a royal prince of the blood and a medium level wizard. The blonde with the nice tits is a beginner mage, previously with the power of three full wizards! Yet the giant,” his voice trailed away, then came back strong. “And what are you doing with these people?” For some reason the mage stressed the last word.

Recoiling in terror, Ken's face went dead white and he trembled, but not from the pain of the spikes.

Coming even closer, Wilson leered in delight. “So,” he hissed. “They don't know, do they? How amusing! How pitiful.”

Lowering his head as if in battle, Ken growled a response too soft for me to hear.

“So you say,” LaRue acknowledged, with a chuckle. “But that does not make it true. Tell me what I want to know and I shall continue the process! You shall be a demi-god!” Then he beamed an evil smirk. “Or perhaps I should reverse the process and let them see the real you!”

Absolutely everybody gasped in shock as Ken Sanders tore himself free from the spikes in a hideous ripping noise and dropped to the deck, his four limbs gushing blood. Even Wilson was caught totally by surprise. Screaming that jungle roar of his, Ken bared his teeth and sprang for the alchemist's throat.

By god, the student agent almost succeeded. But just in time, LaRue recovered and frantically gestured. A lightning bolt, laser beam, disrupter ray, Death Spell, Flesh-to-Stone crackled from his gloved fingertips and blasted Sanders into a charred husk while still in mid-flight.

But the remaining two hundred pounds of dead cooked flesh continued on by sheer inertia and slammed into Wilson's chest, cracking his ribs. Off balance, the bastard mage stumbled backwards and tripped over one of the dead guards in the pentagram. Falling to the deck, the would-be world conqueror smacked his head on the metal with a resounding crack and went still.

For a long moment, we could only stare. Then hesitantly, LaRue drew a ragged breath. Hell's bells, not dead yet, only stunned.

“Jessica,” I croaked from parched throat. “Mine is the only voice you can hear. Mine the only will to obey.”

Back in a trance, she dumbly nodded assent.

“The activation code is Apocalypse,” I said quickly. “The command phrase is Armageddon. The go word is Ragnarok.”

Jessica grit her teeth, there was a cracking noise and she swallowed. Her whole body became flushed and she started gulping air.

“What have you done to her?” Mindy demanded, tears of pain running down her cheeks.

“Jess has a hollow tooth filled with a massive overdose of MCD, the brain-booster drug,” I rasped, fighting off the agony that every motion brought from the spikes. “She blocked its existence from her own mind. Only I can make her remember.”

My wife was hyperventilating, her eyes rolled into her head until only solid white showed. Her nude body spasming, jerking and twisting against the wall almost succeeding in tearing free. Fresh blood gushed from her wrists and ankles.

“Ed, it's killing her!” George raged, bunching his muscles. “Or worse!”

Not for at least five minutes, Jessica sent into our minds like a cool silver river. *No more pain, my friends.*

Instantly, the searing agony in my hands and feet was gone. I wanted to thank her, but there was no time to waste on niceties.

“Brain Blast him into ash!” I ordered, the words raspy from all the screaming.

Can't, my love. I am too weak. He might survive.

“Link us together,” Katrina suggested, her face a feral mask of hatred. “Many minds better than one.”

Still dangerous. Maybe a Death Dream?

“Do it!” I commanded furiously.

In a swirl of thoughts, our conscious minds joined and as a fighting unit Team Tunafish began to mesh with the living, insane mind of the multiple personalities of the fledging god.

Kill or be killed, we were going in.

EIGHTEEN

The ‘I’ of me became a ‘we’, as the team gestated into a single identity and guided by the adroit control of the Jessica part, smoothly and without a trace, meshed with the dreaming brain of our woozy enemy. We had only seconds in which to act. A Death Dream, eh? Okay, let's make it a doozy.

In his disorientated thoughts, LaRue was reliving the events that had just happened a moment ago. As Sander leaped, he stepped aside. No. As Sanders leaped, he hit the man with a Disintegration spell. No. As Sanders leaped, LaRue used a Death Spell and—

We took over his subconscious.

...and the two of them crashed through the paper hull of the aircraft carrier and tumbled into the dirty water of the Hudson River. Floundering and splashing, the surprised LaRue turned Ken into lead and the big man sank into the murky depths. Wilson started for shore via a dog paddle, when a violent tug on his leg jerked him down. In the jumbled blurred view of underwater, smoky tendrils of blood muddied the river, and the horrified alchemist saw a blue-gray shark swimming off with his leg. LaRue screamed and polluted water filled his lungs. Gagging, the new wizard formed a platform beneath himself, and more sharks shot out of the stygian river depths. The ultra-mage tried to cast spells, but his arms moved with nightmarish slowness through the water.

At this point, he almost understood this only an illusion in his mind so we had more sharks attack as a diversion to keep him busy! Jerk, and another leg was gone. An arm went, taking the diamond staff along. Then his head! The sharp teeth—

"No!" the mage screamed inside his head.

Alive and whole, a dripping wet LaRue was standing on the pier trembling from exertion, when a car horn blared. He turned and a taxi rammed into him. His body wrapped around the hood, bones crunching audibly. With a squeal of brakes, the car stopped and LaRue was airborne, tumbling head-over-heels. Brutally, he crashed through a window, the glass shards slicing him to ribbons. He landed on an electrical outlet with a thump and hard current zapped into him. Rolling away, the alchemist pulled himself together when a piercing whine rapidly built to a deafening volume, and suddenly a jumbo jetliner smashed into the office building! Ah subtlety, I love it.

In an explosion of pain, the Navy librarian was crushed and violently slammed-slammed-slammed through numerous walls to reach the outside. Pulped to jelly, he fell to the street, stopping himself an inch above the sidewalk. From the core of his being, LaRue extended a Heal spell, and twisting about, landed on shaky feet. Damnation, this guy was hard to kill.

Just then the city disappeared in a blinding atomic flash. Horribly burned by the thermal wave, his charred remains were blown into the sky as a second nuclear bomb detonated. In a desperate time jump, LaRue moved backwards to avoid the bomb blasts.

Okay, no more Mr. Nice Guys. Time for the nightmare from hell. Instantly, a hundred thousand thermonuclear detonations dotted the entire North American continent only seconds before the moon crashed into the Earth.

Whole oceans left their beds from the meteoric impact, continents split, mountains erupted, gouts of primordial magma vomited into space and the planet cracked in half. A heart beat later, the cleaved world closed its two halves like snapping jaws to crush the rogue moon with a vengeful force.

Spinning out of orbit, Earth plunged into the sun, tongues of nuclear flame annihilating chunks of the world until only molten residue remained. Caught in the hellish crushing gravitational field of the staggering astronomical body, the boiling elements splashed into an atomic sea to be further rendered into random nuclei. Then the violated solar orb went nova creating a blinding cosmic firestorm whose starkly incalculable fury extended to fill the planetary system, and went beyond, expanding to reach another star. All the stars! In a wild chain reaction, the whole galaxy flared into a supernova of raw cosmic energy whose unbridled chaos threatened to destroy the very fabric of the Time/Space continuum!

Then the Creator of the Universe closed a mighty hand about the tiny flame and made a fist, squeezed with all of His prodigious strength until even the immortal souls of the trillions dead screamed in limitless anguish and died, winking out of existence.

Nothingness.

Absolute and infinite.

Mentally, we heard a pitiful whimpering cry, then sensed Wilson LaRue and all of his multiple personas die—die—die in an endless parade of surrender.

NINETEEN

In echoing silence, the 'we' separated and I became myself once more.

Utterly fatigued, I felt no physical pain, only a type of soulful weariness, a mental exhaustion I had not felt since my infamous date with those Swedish triplets during college finals. Ah, youth. Wish I had some left.

Still attached to the wall, I forced apart my gummy eyelids, but could see only a blurry whiteness. Then I realized that it was the colorless smear that was pressing on me. A gentle warm pressure, but one which held me motionless in its encompassing grip.

It was the magic! With LaRue dead and the magic was returning to the world! Caught here at the epicenter, the reverse vortex was a tangible force to even non-magical beings. At least, that's what I sincerely hoped was happening.

In gradual stages, the velveteen hurricane diminished in magnitude, until I was allowed to slide down the wall and slump onto the cold metal deck. Hey, I was free!

Glancing about, I found the rest of my team and some handsome stranger sitting on the metal floor. I felt odd, but there was no pain and I was wearing clothes. Only the bare essentials, but at least I wasn't naked. Katrina and Raul must have recharged from the outpouring and done a few quick conjures. Mages, aren't they wonderful? I hoped they both increased a level or two from the experience.

The overturned jeep wreck was still whole and undamaged once more and beyond the bloody pentagram of guards was Wilson LaRue in street clothes, Rasamor Hoto in his kimono and the TNR battlesuit. All individuals again and each looking very deceased. There was no sign of the Aztec book.

Scrambling closer, I found Tanner limp but I yanked out his powerpack just to be safe. Hoto proved to be a desiccated corpse weighing about as much as a dry leaf. He crumbled to the touch, so I touched him with my closed fist. A lot. Lying sprawled on the cold deck, Wilson LaRue had his ugly head split asunder. Inside the cranial cavity was only a gnarled lump of flesh, vaguely the size and shape of a fried raisin.

Deciding that a dose of lead poisoning couldn't hurt, I reached for my Magnums. Or rather, I thought of reaching for my weapons, but my hand went over my shoulder and produced a sword whose razor length shimmered with rainbows. Eh?

That was when I noticed my hands were slim, muscular, covered with tiny scars and a dark rich brown. Glancing down, I was in the loose black cloth of a ninja, combat sneakers and had small pert breasts. Jumping Jesus, I was Mindy! No, I was in Mindy's body.

Hey, Mindy! You in here also?

Only silence. Now I understood why I was so clumsy. My mind was giving directions to muscles that responded differently from my own. Geez, it was a wonder that I could even walk upright!

Moving carefully, I diced and sliced the alchemist into convenient chunks and then kicked the pieces away from each other. I was far from finished with him, but this would do for starters.

In a half glide, half lurch, I shambled back to my team. Had to find out who was who and how long this bizarre phenomenon was going to last. Hell! This could get embarrassing!

Across the deck, George, Donaher, Katrina and Raul were moving and attempting to stand. The handsome stranger I noticed earlier was, of course, me. I started to ask whomever was in me to turn about so I could get to see the back of my head, when I noticed Jessica laying deathly still on the cold deck.

Clumsy as a newborn, I threw myself to her side, only Mindy's instinctive reactions kept me from falling flat. Quickly, I checked my wife's pulse and respiration. Neither was detectable. Wasting no time, I titled her head, straightened the tongue and started giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Soon Donaher was next to me, his big hands pressing down on her chest with a pause, release, pause, and press.

“Mike?” I asked between breaths.

“I'm George,” the big priest replied. “Ed?”

I exhaled. “How'd you know?”

“Kind of obvious,” he said looking at the still telepath.

Yeah, I guess it was.

“Hey!” George's body cried from the double doors of the hangar deck. “The police are here!” The plump soldier was standing in an odd position, a fist held at his waist, the other hand slightly extended as if to offer a friendly shake. The cat stance, I believe it was called. George must be Mindy. This was getting confusing.

Using his precious staff to depress a button on the small control panel, Raul placed an ear to the wall mounted intercom. “And saints preserve us, it sounds as if that pimple Jules Englehart with his bedamned camera crew is with them!”

Donaher, without a doubt.

“Forget ‘em!” I squeaked. “Jess is dying!”

In an awkward gait, Katrina shoved her way close. “Let me,” the blonde offered.

“Who?” I demanded.

“Raul,” she growled, waving her wooden staff. Twinkling fairy lights sprinkled over my wife.

“Well?” George-in-Donaher demanded.

“I can save her life,” the mage replied. “But that's all I promise.”

Good enough. I nodded. “Go.”

Weaving golden trails in the air, the buxom woman consulted her pocket books of spells and started to chant in a language not English or Russian. Someday, I would discover what the private language of magic was, and why nobody but a wizard could even pronounce the words.

With a shuddering gasp, Jessica began to breath again. In mere seconds, color returned to her cheeks and she softly called my name. Lowering my voice as much as possible, I said her name and gave her hand a squeeze. Alive. She was alive! But at what cost? Only time would tell.

There came sounds from the other side of the hangar doors.

“Who?” I asked in sign language.

“Jewels,” came the fumbling reply. Mindy had never been a good speller, and George had never been very adept at sign language.

“Katrina,” I asked of Edwardo. “Seal the hangar doors with a Lock spell!”

My head was shaken. “Nyet. You have no magic for me to use.”

Hell and damnation. “Raul?”

He shook her head, blonde locks swishing. “No can do, chief. I'm drained after fixing Jess.”

“Drained! From one Heal?” I asked. “Just how bad was she?”

He-in-she paused. “Let's just say she knows the Grim Reaper by sight and leave it at that.”

Zounds. In angry thought, I closed a hand into a fist, the knuckles cracking and popping. Okay, nothing else to do. Fingering the words for routine one, the team shifted to both side of the doors and waited for the rush. There was no means of escape, or place to hide. We couldn't use magic, or shoot them, or knock ‘em out with BZ or sleep gas. That left only one remaining option. The oldest ploy in military history.

Ponderously slow, the double doors parted and as the gang of reporters boldly entered, my stumbling team laid into them with fists, feet, teeth and staffs.

Professional spectators, the reporters had no ability for bare knuckle brawling, such as it was, so we were gentle and limited their destruction to a few black eyes, a couple of lumps and a broken nose or two. But down they went and for the count.

Dusting our wrong hands off afterwards, we tromped on the video camera, smashed the tape recorder, then stole Englehart's pants, and took several tasteless pictures with 35mm at F100 at medium focus suitable for 8X10 color portrait shot, and pocketed the film. These could come in useful at some future date, and there was always the possibility of a bulk mailing. Not to mention the Internet!

“Faith, its the police!” Father Donaher-in-Raul shouted, as the hangar doors cycled shut with a hollow boom. “Lots of them! They must have heard the slaughter.”

“Street cops, or SWAT?” Mindy-in-George asked, twisting her hands to reach a sword pommel not there.

“SWAT, with Navy SEALS, I think.”

Then we were dead meat. This ploy wouldn't work twice, especially on SWAT and SEALS. Even in our prime, these guys could give us a run for the money.

“Can we disguise ourselves as the reporters?” George-in-Donaher asked urgently. “Steal their clothes?”

“None of them are women!” I snapped. “Maybe Mindy could pass, but not Jess, and how are we going to hide those?” I pointed at Raul-in-Katrina's ample chest. He/she blushed.

“Smash the keypad lock,” Mindy-in-George suggested. “That should slow ‘em down, at least.”

It was done.

“Who's got a watch?” Donaher-in-Raul demanded. But nobody did. Every one had been used in battle.

Limping to the pentagram, Donaher-in-Raul took a hand radio from the belt holster of an unconscious

guard and dialed to the proper CB channel which the Bureau secretly monitored for emergency broadcasts from agents. He pressed the transmit switch. "Alert! Alert! Tunafish on toast! Need immediate evac! Co-ordinates on request! Respond!"

The only response was a rush of static.

"Goddamn thing is broken!" Donaher-in-Raul snarled irritably.

"Nyet! Give to me!" Ed Alvarez ordered, rushing over with a very feminine sway to his hips.

"Faith, you can't use it, lass," Raul aghast said. "No mage can!"

"I am not mage!" the handsome fellow snapped. "I am mage in a human. You are human in a mage!"

Confusing but accurate. I could see that soon nametags would be necessary. Oh lord, this was weird and dangerous. One agent had the power, but another had the knowledge to use it. Thus our own training was working against us, and on the way were squads of grim calvary who would probably think we were the bad guys. You ever just have one of those days?

"Bureau, respond!" Katrina-in-Ed said, into another radio. More static. Tossing the communicator aside, she/me grabbed another. "Hello, Bureau!" the PI shouted trying another radio. "Bureau, respond!" Static.

"Use code!" I snapped at myself. "No open transmissions on a public airwave!"

"No matter," Ed sighed. "Most of devices are broken."

"Maybe they're not free from their pocket dimension yet," Mindy-in-George suggested, scratching at a place most women normally did not.

Grinding my teeth, I smacked fist into palm. If only we had some BZ gas. The harmless military hallucinogenic would befuddle the troops long enough for us to escape. No, that was wrong. We had no masks, and they most definitely did.

A pounded sounded on the doors. Then sparks crackled on the dangling wires of the broken keypad. They were trying for a bypass.

"Hey, breaker breaker one-three, there good buddy," drawled a radio on the deck. "This is Dragon Master looking for a ten-eighteen on I-80 west. Kicker back."

Katrina-in-Ed stared at the CB as if it was speaking Martian.

Was it the Bureau, or just some truck driver actually asking for road information? We had to chance it. I snatched the radio from my hands. "Ten-two, Dragon Master. Negatory on the eighteen, friend. This is the Suicide Jockey and we're in ten-one hundred up to our necks. Got the hammer down with a party of thirty cold friends and the smokies are a knocking on our door. They'll be hanging paper on us till doomsday unless we find a rocking chair to slide into fast! Can you help? Come on."

"Well, ten-four, good buddy. I ain't Uncle Charlie, but I'm a cousin of his and always happy to oblige. I got your ten-twenty on the flip-flop. But your voice sure sounds funny for the Suicide Jockey. Is this the Mad Mexican from the Windy City?"

Oh shit, I was Mindy!

“That's part of the problem, Dragon Master. We have switched vehicles. The Suicide Jockey is in the chassis of the Tiger Lady.”

“Say what? Come again?” Confusion filled his voice.

The warning lights set above the doors began to flash.

“We'll explain later, Dragon Master,” I snapped. “This is zero hour. Move it, or lose it.”

“Well, then,” he said, and there was a short pause. “I'd surely appreciate knowing what is your favorite type of sandwich?”

“Tunafish!” we cried in loose unison.

Nigh instantly, an amber oval formed in the air and flexing lines of force spun outward to pass over the moaning reporters and ensnare everybody else; us, the guards, LaRue, Hoto, Tanner, the charred remains of Sanders and even the jeep. We levitated into the magic portal just as the double doors to the hangar slammed open and a single flashbulb went off from a tiny pocket camera held by a rumpled man on the deck.

But all Jules Englehart got was the fuzzy picture of a transparent ghost giving him the finger as it faded away.

Ha! Print that, ya bozo.

EPILOGUE

As the portal closed, the strands released us gently on a cushioned mat inside a huge pentagram, ringed by armed guards, most of whom I knew. A squad of medics pushed their way through and swarmed over us, hauling Jessica away on a hospital gurney. After a moment, I recognized where we were. The observation tower on the 86th floor of the Empire State Building. Holy Cow, we hadn't used this place in seventy years!

Jessica spent a week in an iron lung at Bellevue Hospital, but was then moved to the Rehabilitation Ward of the Mayo Clinic. She would live and there would be no physical damage.

As Wilson LaRue had so kindly repaired the damage caused by our fight with his battle machines, the entire USS:*Intrepid* incident was discounted as mass hysteria augmented by swamp gas. One of our all-time favorite cover stories. The few civilians killed on the streets were merely considered the normal casualties in the endless violence of New York City. Sad, but true.

The files of the missing 30 guards were hastily changed to show that they had been transferred to another post the day before and the *Intrepid* had been totally deserted that night. The attack on Englehart and his crew was attributed to a foiled mugging attempt. But our blackmail photos of his lacy bikini briefs came out wonderful.

In short order, the Holding Facility was shifted to the far side of the moon, the connecting doorway

located two hundred miles into the desert of New Mexico, smack in the middle of the White Sands nuclear testing range. In case of another mass escape, there will be a small, unscheduled Hydrogen Bomb test. So there.

As soon as possible, my team led a foray into an alternate universe where we traded junk scrap iron for 12 more tokomac fusion reactors from the peaceful machine culture of Click. Nice folks, but as oil was against a tenant of the local religion, they squeaked something awful. Next trip, I was bringing earplugs.

Then Technical Services decompartmentalized the entire Holding Facility with Faraday cages so this nasty incident could never happen again.

It was discovered that the reason the old car in the hospital parking lot had captured our attention so was because LaRue had coated the vehicle with an alchemical 'Steal Me' potion. After we departed, the exploded wreck was stolen a few hours later. Its cross country odyssey of being swiped from the thieves who snatched it from the crooks who ripped it off from the initial joy-riders, was a magnificent exercise in futility. At present, we believe the car to be somewhere in Outer Mongolia.

Our archenemy, Jules Englehart got fired from the staff of the National Gazette and started immediately his own private newspaper, *The Secret Truth*. Oh well, win a few, lose a few.

Instituting a massive recruitment drive, we inducted the Alabama bus driver, the two Chicago police officers, the kid with the video camera, the toll booth attendants Lumpy tried to consume, the Cincinnati officer who broke into our revelry in LaRue's Book Store, the entire class of Hebrew Union College rabbinical students, now Team Macabee, and even the traffic cop who gave George a ticket. She did not actually have a supernatural experience, George couldn't quite drive that fast, but desperately short of personnel, we were willing to bend the rules.

The six Navy Shore Patrol officers who survived LaRue's torture needed microsurgery to separate them from their deceased companions. But afterwards, each was happy to join the Bureau and fight such villains. One man proved to be a latent telepath, and another had become a wizard from the ethereal bombardment she twice received. A bonanza, all round.

Plus, four of the animated jet fighters remained in that augmented state and once free of the master's odious control, the loyal American fighters became machine agents for the existing Bureau techno-warrior division: Team Cyber Cops.

LaRue's Book Store was rebuilt into the Ye Olde Magic Shoppe, but this time by a White Witch from Massachusetts who would keep very careful records of who bought what. Not a Bureau agent, she was merely an associate who owed us a favor.

During the five minutes that there was no magic in the world, no end of bizarre events occurred. Fairies fell from the sky, Las Vegas casinos started losing money, a dozen werewolves were cured, a hundred crime bosses disappeared and a thousand haunted houses went condo. Republicans became Democrats, Democrats became Liberals, and Liberals got jobs. The Aurora Borealis winked out, boomerangs stopped returning and countless famous actors aged years instantly. Then everything precisely reversed as the magic returned.

However in Manhattan, there momentarily appeared a secret third tower of the World Trade Center. A medieval-style, block stone, structure and placed prominently on top was a giant neon that read, B13. It caused quite a stir.

B13 Vitamin Pills were released on the health market two weeks later. Yes, of course, the incredibly detailed laser hologram of the building had been only a crazy publicity stunt.

The structure is no longer there. Personally, I now think our headquarters is situated inside the support structure of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. But it's only a guess.

In the following week, Horace Gordon himself leaked the information that the young stripper in Huntsville was actually a federal agent on undercover assignment to crack a white slavery ring. Her family was astonished by the news that their daughter had died in a shoot out with international terrorists and had personally saved the life of the president. He came and visited them for an hour and gave them the Congressional Medal of Valor, the highest award a civilian can achieve in peace time. The politician was glad to do it. Plus, the parents were consoled a bit by the million dollars they received as their agent daughter's backlog of danger pay. Her name was Veronica Harmond.

Jess and I plan to call our first girl child that. It isn't much, but it helps me sleep at night. Sometimes.

Eventually, we returned to our original bodies. But not quite soon enough and I now have new respect for ladies who quietly suffer through that time of the month. Me, I'd would rather get hit in the head with a baseball bat every 28 days. Ugh.

Finally, Katrina Somers was permanently assigned to our group. Mr. Renault and the Russian beauty took permanent residence with each other. Oddly, according to the security monitors in the apartment something invisible from Raul's room went to visit Mindy in her room every single night and twice on Sundays. Gosh, whatever could that be?

In an unprecedented move, Horace Gordon himself told Father Donaher that his next sabbatical had better be to Hell-sinki, Finland, but leave the original alone. I wonder why?

Pizza-Pizza in Chicago cancelled our account and will no longer deliver to our pet pirate. Serves him right for under tipping. Justice will always triumph.

And then I received an odd letter in the post, no return address, no cancelled stamp. Inside was a plain piece of paper that simply told me to stop offering my soul for assistance, or else. Then it crumbled into dust and was blown away by unseen winds. A crank letter obviously. On the other hand, it was a stupid habit of mine, so what the heck.

Unfortunately, as the weeks passed it became apparent that Jessica had been rendered psionically dead from the overload of MCD, and her mental powers would never return. My wife would remain a Bureau 13 agent, but her personnel records have been shifted from Unique, to Normal: Previously Unique.

From the bombardment of raw magic that had coursed through our mages, Raul's staff went to silver topped with gold and Katrina was elevated to a stainless-steel mage.

Contrarily, the remote-control photocopier machine Raul had used to duplicate the Aztec manual was hauled away by the garbage men in many small broken pieces. The book Katrina saved from the fire at LaRue's Store proved to be a first edition of *The Kitchen Magician: Basic Alchemy in the Home for Fun and Profit*. Surely the volume that had started LaRue on his journey to hell. However, chained to the andirons in our fireplace, the animated book made a small, but pleasant blaze. I can only tolerate so much nonsense from any wizard.

Upon returning to our Chicago apartment, at dinner on our first free evening, we held our ritual toast

welcoming Katrina Somers into our ranks. Then from another more special cup, we bid farewell to Lt. Colonel Kensington Sanders, the student who died giving humanity its fighting chance against a mad god.

The name of Special Agent Ken Sanders was placed on the Bureau 13 Roll of Honor, we hung his picture in our trophy room and a dignified monument to the brave soul was erected in his ancestral hometown of Lokitaung, Kenya. Funny, he hadn't looked African.

We never did discover his terrible secret and perhaps it was for the best. But Ken was a good man, a top-notch agent and a damn fine friend.

Personally, I was going to miss the big gorilla.

THE END

Bonus short story:

UPGRADING

Impatiently, I waited for death to awaken.

The basement of the Los Angeles mansion was dark, but air conditioned and luxuriously paneled in real wood with plush velour carpeting. A giant screen TV with a state-of-the-art DVD player adorned one wall and a compact gym was located next to an assortment of clocks showing the time around the world. Nice. The only real oddity of the basement was that the windows were bricked shut. A logical precaution.

Slow as a shadow, the armored lid of the stainless steel coffin next to the jacuzzi opened and the thing inside sat up. He was pale, of course, clean shaven, dressed in light blue turtleneck sweater, black pants and Oxford two-tone shoes. Rather natty actually and he appeared totally human. Turning about, he stared at me in shock. Then questioning fear, puzzlement and finally delight.

“Not armed,” I announced, raising my empty hands. “No crosses, wooden stakes, garlic, Holy Water, nothing.”

The monster displayed a big smile full of long teeth. “Then you are a fool,” he hissed.

I smiled. “Yep. Kill me now.”

Stepping out of the coffin, the dapper humanoid paused. “You are ... a suicide?”

“Nope, a convert.”

Furrowing that noble brow, he seemed confused. “Eh? A what? You wish to become a vampyre?”

I could hear the old world pronunciation. Wow. This guy was really ancient. “Definitely.”

Striding closer, the midnight stalker breathed hot and heavy upon me. Oddly, his breath did not have the salty-copper smell of some hellish charnel house, but was minty fresh. He must have just brushed.

“Why?” the blood-beast demanded, looming closer.

“Why?” I gave him a lop-sided grin. “Get serious, dude. Vampires live forever.”

“But only at night,” he retorted, grabbing me by the collar and lifting my two hundred pounds of muscle as if I was a small child. “Never again shall you see the sweet majesty of the sun!”

“Phooley.”

Shocked to the very core of his being, his grip loosened and I dropped sprawling to the concrete floor landing on my car keys. Ouch.

“Phooley?” he echoed, as if he had never heard the word before. Then again, maybe he hadn't. Monsters lead such an insular life.

“Can you watch a video tape of the sun?” I asked. “Look at a poster of a sunrise? Touch a painting of a glorious sunset?”

He paused. “Well, yes,” he admitted hesitantly.

“Then who cares?”

That stunned him for a moment, and then the thing came back strong. “I care!” he roared making the walls vibrate and a rain of dust sprinkled down from the rafters. “To see the sun! The glorious sun just once more...”

“Crap,” I retorted rudely, wiggling a finger in my ear to stop the ringing. “You're super-strong, can turn into smoke, fly as a bat, run as a wolf, hypnotize people, shrink to an inch in height, or grow to ten feet tall, you're immune to diseases, get all the babes you want and since you rob your victims, you're filthy rich!”

“Yes, these are true,” the thing grudgingly acknowledged. “But in return, my kind are hunted everywhere we go. Forced to live lives of quiet desperation. No family, no friends. And we must kill to live! What is your clever answer to that, sir! The blood of innocent people will smoke on your hands for eternity!”

Smoke? Hmm, nice visual. I got to my feet and shifted my car keys to a front pocket. “I don't plan to murder innocents.”

“And whom shall you slaughter?” he asked in smug contempt, crossing his powerful arms. Wow. He had a \$10,000 dollar Rolex Presidential watch on his wrist. Keen.

“Criminals,” I said, reclaiming my chair. “Some street muggers, if I encounter any, but mostly organized crime figures. People protected by laws bought under the table. Murdering bastards that no honest cop can touch. I'll fill my belly with their blood. Fat rich blood. I'll drain loan sharks, rapists, drug smugglers, hell, I may move to the Middle East and declare my own jihad on terrorists!”

His eyes went level with mine. “You're serious,” he said after a moment.

Stoically, I gave a grim nod. “Damn straight. And if some cop should accidentally get on my trail, why should they stop me? I'm not slaying little children or blind widows or anything like that. I'm zapping crooks, cleaning house for them. Doing the world a favor.”

Frowning thoughtfully, he began chewing on a taloned finger. "Perhaps," he muttered hesitantly.

In a dramatic gesture, I ripped open my shirt, exposing the neck. "Drink away, old pal. Been exercising and taking vitamins for the past month. No booze, no drugs, no fatty meats, lots of fiber. I'm ripe and ready for the taking. Anxious to become immortal this very night."

"As you request," the vampire acknowledged graciously. "By the Dark One, it will be pleasant to have company after all these decades alone."

Alone, like he knew what that really meant. Now I wasn't thrilled by having another guy place his lips on my throat, but the fangs only stung for a moment. And even as I began to feel woozy, I started to feel fine again. In a minute, he stepped away, a line of red drool flowing down his jaw.

"And that's it?" I asked, tenderly fingering my neck.

He gave me a crimson smile, but a friendly one. "Yes. In three days, you shall awaken as one of us. A vampyre!"

"Great," I replied reaching into my pocket. Ah, there it was. "And the term is vampire these days."

He snorted in disdain. "What care I for the chatter of the food?"

I scowled and said nothing.

"By the way, how did you find me?" he asked curiously, dabbing at his lips with an embroidered handkerchief of fine Irish linen. "I am rather good at hiding."

Keeping a hand in my pocket, I shrugged. "Relatively simple. The dogs told me. They knew exactly where you were hidden."

All amusement instantly departed as his cat eyes went perfectly round. "The dogs told you?" he asked confused. "What dogs?"

"The pet dogs of your victims," I snarled, aiming the .32 automatic pistol inside my pocket. "After all they are the ones who asked Bureau 13 to have me find you."

"The Bureau!" the vampyre snarled in rage and rushed forward, talons raised for a kill.

But I had been ready for that and instantly triggered my weapon. He jerked backwards from the sledgehammer impact of the tiny wood bullets as if they were bazooka shells. Hmm, not a bad idea. Maybe next time.

Aiming carefully, I tracked the body as it toppled over, making sure every precious mahogany round hit him in the heart. The last two splintering slugs burst through the desiccated corpse and only a handful of ancient dust sprinkled to the cold stone floor.

The undead was dead. That paid a lot of debts. Satisfied for the moment, I used my free hand to beat out the flames on my coat jacket from the discharge of the miniature pistol and started for the stairs. As a duly authorized federal agent for the ultra-covert Bureau 13, it was my job to patrol the streets of Tacoma, Washington and protect the local citizens from hostile supernaturals: ghostly crack dealers, demon bank robbers, alien weapon smugglers, robot Nazis, atomic bedbugs, whatever. There was a lot

of strange stuff out there, and most of it wanted to eat us.

Unfortunately, I was the only Bureau agent in my hometown and the job was becoming impossible to handle since I could only work a couple of days a month. So I went to downtown Los Angeles and found a nice California vampire.

When the Bureau recruited me long ago, I learned there were rules about how curses operate. Lots of 'em actually, but the top one was: a big curse cancels out a smaller. Which was exactly what I had counted on here.

As a vampire, I could use my new supernatural abilities to patrol Tacoma and stop crime every night. Every single night, all year long! That sounded mighty good. I really loved my work protecting America, and it had just been so damn frustrating waiting for the three days of the full moon to become a measly werewolf.

THE END

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