

THE ORDER OF THE FOUR SONS
BOOK I

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The Order of the Four Sons, Book I

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PROLOGUE

HELIOPOLIS, 3100 BCE

It was early in the lifetime of mankind and all was well in the kingdom of Khem. The sun-disk, guided by the sun god Amun, glided across the sky each day before setting in the blood of slain Apep, to journey through the underworld and be reborn from Nut the following morn. The floods came every year, layering the earth with rich, black soil for fertile crops; the ancient kings ruled wisely and well. All went according to Ma'at, the guiding principle of universal truth and good. (Or, if not all, at least as much as can be expected within human events.)

Then came the Other.

Some said It came from the depths of Nun, and that Its form was that of a serpent; others said It came first as something unclean, cast out from beyond the realm of Ma'at and somehow It learned to walk upright like a man. It is certain that Its journey, whether pilgrim or outcast, took a great toll upon Its power. But regardless of how or why, It came unto the lands of Khem in those days, from beyond the sight of gods, into the realm of Man.

It wandered for an unknowable time in Its weakened state, leaving strange wounds in the earth and in the animals It found, until, at last, It sought out a small group of magicians. It showed them great powers of the mind. It promised to share Its powers and teach many wondrous things to all who wished to learn. It promised them power, knowledge, even immortality itself, if they would but give It worship.

The magicians agreed. Yet they were wise in many things, these men of the gods, and cunning. Once they had availed themselves of Its wisdom, they betrayed and bound the alien Thing from beyond. It was a thing of Isfet, and had no Name. It was from outside, and had no form by which It could be bound. And so, with their own Heka they did Name It, so that It might be bound. They called It the Atum. They did form a priesthood to Osiris, but their true, secret purpose was not merely to worship. To the initiated, they became the Order of the Four Sons of Horus. Like the four canopic jars, their task, with the aid of the gods, was to contain.

Betrayed by Its own would-be worshippers, trapped as a spirit into form and thus bound into the fetters of magic, the Atum could only wait.

And hate.

As the priests of this would-be god continued their careful vigil, year after year, It watched them well, and grew wise in the ways of Man. Rumors inevitably rose, sparked by the dreams of the more sensitive commoners, of a hungry, hermaphroditic Thing of the setting sun that predated the gods themselves. The priests did their best to quell these rumors. Across the generations, Atum was given a place of sorts within their own gods' history. As Its prison became more and more secure, all trace of Its presence was finally contained and the dreams faded from living memory.

Finally, Its patience was rewarded.

Amenhotep IV, a sorcerer-priest of the Atum temple, had become heir to the throne of Kemet. He chafed under the hold the priests of Amun had over the kingdom. His very taking of

the throne depended upon their approval and their declaration that he had passed mystic tests of purity. As a master sorcerer himself, he understood such tests far better than they. Long had he resented his teachers within the Atum priesthood, whose gifts could never hope to equal his own, who unjustly held him back from his rightful power as a sorcerer and as Pharaoh. Eventually, he came to master the lore they guarded, but he found it was not enough. He wanted more.

None shall ever know whether he somehow found a way to reach and bargain with the Atum, or whether, over centuries of patience, It had somehow found Its way to him. Neither does it matter. What is known is that when he broke away from the priesthood of Atum, some members of the priesthood and its inner circle went with him.

Together, the new king and his followers formed a secret order, the Keepers of the Starry Wisdom. They pledged themselves to the quest for power and to the Atum as the means to that power. Publicly, Amenhotep proclaimed the rule of a new god, Aton, and he re-named himself Akhenaton, meaning, "Aton is pleased."

Akhenaton ceremonially dedicated all pain and suffering in his kingdom to Aton who was previously Atum. The people cried out and prayed to him for succor. The royal family of Akhenaton, his wife, Nefertiti, and their children, were all declared to be gods who walked the earth and worshipped accordingly. Aton grew powerful again, and Akhenaton was granted his share of the power.

Aton was indeed pleased, and it seemed the sun had set upon the Two Lands of Khem for good and all.

With the kingdom's temples closed, the poor began to starve. And their new ruler, their king in yellow, so named for his legendary fondness for gold, planned to move the capital city away from its traditional place to a desolate site ill-favored by both the gods and good sense alike. This he named Akhetaton, the Horizon of the Aten.

At first, the priests and the common folk had taken this to be a political coup, the actions of a heretical sect bent on revenge. Deplorable, yes, but well within the scope of human capability. But in time, it became apparent that otherworldly forces were at work, as Akhenaton's skin had begun to darken.

It was scarcely noteworthy at first—after all, skin and hair dyes were as common as wigs among the noble houses. Then it turned black, blacker than the silt from the Nile, and no human color. It lost all luster and absorbed whatever light touched it. His eyes also took on a strange hue, glowing as if all the light taken in through his flesh collected in them and showed out a brilliant shade of lapis. Finally, he began to display signs of womanhood, his waist offsetting his broadening hips and breasts.

So carefully made was the Atum's prison, that only when the inner circle of priests examined the vessel that had held It did they realize what had happened. But now they saw the truth: the king was becoming something other than human.

The Atum had not only escaped, It had found a host.

In destroying and pillaging the temples, Akhenaton had destroyed the Kemetic way of life and brought the world's most civilized nation to the very brink of destruction. Enemy kingdoms had begun to chip away at the ill-defended borders over the years, even as the sick and the starving filled the streets.

So it was that in 1395 BCE, a secret war was declared, to be fought in the shadows of an unsuspecting nation. Acting in secret, the priests of Atum would fight to save their kingdom and their world from Starry Wisdom...and the Thing from beyond that ruled their land.

With the help of the gods, Ma'at would be restored.

PART ONE
THE MIDWEST

Chapter One

The smell of decay was everywhere. He tripped over something in the dark and fell to the floor. The lighting was strange here, as it was everywhere else in this place, like being underwater, dim and wavery and yellow. The shadows seemed to ripple around him as he rose unsteadily to his feet. The rotted wall crumbled slightly under his hand as he pushed against it to rise, mingling new odors of dust and plaster in his nostrils. Motes flew into his eyes and coated the back of his throat. Squinching his eyes shut, he struggled to suppress a cough. He couldn't recall what fresh air smelled like. It occurred to him that he may never smell or taste fresh air again.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. There wasn't much time. If he was lucky, they hadn't missed him yet. If he wasn't, then they were hunting him. Right now.

Despite the humid air of the place, he shivered. Willing his limbs to move, he staggered on. *You're not hurt, dammit! Make contact. Give the report. That's all that matters now. Give the report.*

He'd seen a shape in the gloom before. It was a chance..a chance in hell. Literally. But a chance nonetheless.

There it was: an old telephone hanging from the wall, black, heavy, coated with dust, but intact. It might still work.

He half-expected the call to cost twenty-five cents. Out of long habit, his hand went for his pocket to root for change. A few hours ago, (*Days? Weeks? No way to tell*) that might have been funny. Now he was just trying to hurry without rushing. If he rushed, he might fuck up. And surely they'd noticed by now that he'd gone. Surely they were coming.

He gripped the receiver, terrified it would be silent, dead, as dead as he was. *Don't fuck this up. Can't fuck up. Dial the number. Make the report.* He put it to his ear.

It was there—the dial tone. It worked.

Amazement and disbelief coursed through him, causing him to sway a bit. His right hip and shoulder fell against the wall. Tucking the receiver under his chin, he fumbled with the old rotary dial.

It rang once.

A cool, female voice came on the line. "Good morning, IMSET. How may I direct your call?"

He closed his eyes. Some part of him had finally accepted that this would be his last contact with another human being.

There was the tense exchange of signs and countersigns and, without bothering to wait for the transfer to finish, he began to speak, quickly, intently. The call would be recorded anyway. He started as he'd always been trained: the important details first, then the context, always assuming that he could be interrupted at any time.

He'd just begun to identify his captors when he heard the growls. And then they were upon him.

Chapter Two

O4S Headquarters
Kansas City, MO
April 23, 2005
9:26 a.m.

The Director's assistant was asleep on a cot in her office when the call came through, jolting her awake. She sprang off the cot and crossed quickly to the desk, knowing as soon as she laid her hand on the receiver that they had another emergency. Blinking in the early morning light, she groped for something on which to scribble a few notes. Then stopped short as she heard the voice on the other end.

Her eyes widened briefly then narrowed. She was a serious-looking young woman in her early twenties, but looked much younger. She had let her hair down to nap and the thick dark waves now brushed the desktop as she leaned over, listening. Only the last twenty seconds or so of the call had come through, but it was enough.

Wide awake now, she hung up the phone and went quickly over to the door that connected her office to the Director's and banged on it. "Clayton!" she called. "Clayton, get up! Another one."

The door opened and he stuck his head out. Clearly, he hadn't slept. "Where and when?" he asked resignedly.

"Call just came in from Excelsior Springs." She snatched up her boots and sat down in a chair to pull them on.

He stepped out into her office, a tall, whip-thin man in his mid-sixties, wearing only his shirtsleeves and a pair of rumpled slacks. His once-dark hair was now almost completely gray. His eyes, also gray, usually twinkled with irrepressible good humor. Right now, they were pouched and blood-shot with equal parts worry and sleep deprivation. "Reliable source?"

"Fernando Rios."

The Director paused. It was the exhaustion. If he had been well-rested, he would have known the name immediately. "Rios...Rios... The Rios who disappeared in—what, '85?"

Her expression told him everything he needed to know.

"My God. Is he all right? Where is he?"

"I don't think so." She finished lacing up and rested her elbows on her knees. "There's something else."

"What?"

She frowned. "I don't know. Something."

Balefully, he scratched at his three-day-old-beard. "I don't like it when you don't know."

She said nothing. At the best of times, she wasn't a chatty person and these were distinctly not the best of times.

The Director went over to the coffee maker and removed the pot from its burner. Peering into the stagnant brew, he shook it a little, gauging its drinkability. Grimacing, he turned to the sink and dumped it out. "Who have we got left? Last team was administration, right?"

"Administration, three trainees, and a reserve."

He changed out the coffee filter and added fresh grounds while the pot filled up with water. "Then it's time to hit the rest of the reserves."

"Not quite. Bill Welsh is back from the field."

"Good. Did his cameraman make it back, too?" The wet pot hissed as he set it back down on the hot burner.

"Yes."

"Put them both down. Who else?"

She scribbled a note, then went over to the filing cabinet. "Dr. Grigori?"

"Yes, he's the most qualified we have left."

With their backs to each other, they both shook their heads. She pulled out Grigori's file, then flipped through folders in a second drawer. All the names were in the computer but with conditions being as they were, they couldn't afford to take chances with unexpected energy surges or disappearing data. Plain old paper and manila were a little more impervious. "Okay," she said. "Who else?"

"Murphy."

"Ryan Murphy? The Sicily guy?"

"He's good."

"He's not even a full member."

"He's a cop, which means he can handle field work."

"He's a skeptic."

"Good. Should be one on every team."

"How about Jim Hale?"

"Jim's in Calcutta. I want Murphy."

"All right, all right." She drew the second file slowly, as if it pained her. "Who else? A trainee?"

"I was thinking...Kate West." He braced himself for another argument. When none was forthcoming, he stole a glance over his shoulder. She had drawn the third file and added it to the stack without comment. Apparently, she was reserving judgment on West. Interesting.

At last, the coffee was ready. He poured two cups and offered her one. She accepted it gratefully. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He took a sip. "So we've got Bill and his guy, Grigori, Murphy and Kate."

She nodded, fanning the files out on the table so he could read their labels. “Team leader—Murphy?”

“No. Garnett.”

She jerked her head up at that.

“He has the experience.”

For a moment, she stared at him, hands still splayed on top of the files, clearly at a loss. Then, all at once, her expression went neutral and she straightened, smoothing her shirt. “Okay.”

To anyone else, it would have looked and sounded like resignation, but Clayton knew better. “He has coolness under fire.”

“Yeah.” She dug in her pocket for something. Not finding it, she frowned and turned the pocket inside-out. Clayton watched sourly. He *hated* it when she did this. It made him feel like he was being put on the defensive.

“Most importantly, he’ll bring them *home*.”

She shrugged and tried the other pocket. Finding what she was looking for -- an elastic band -- she idly raised her arms and smoothed her hair into a low ponytail. “Yeah.”

“Dammit, Alyssa! We don’t have time for this. Just *tell* me if you know something.”

She looked down at the desk, running her gaze over the spread of dossiers. Two geeks, an old man, a burned-out detective and an amnesiac. Have them all walk into a bar together and it sounded like the set-up for a really bad punch line.

And now Garnett. Colonel fucking Garnett. There had been a time when her trust in him had been second only to Clayton, but there was a reason he’d been put on indefinite leave. Now Clayton wanted to bring him back in. Could it really have come to this?

Clayton set his coffee cup down. “Alyssa?”

She’d gone completely still. Occasionally, her eyes would skip back and forth as if she were reading something. She might have been daydreaming, except for the fact that she didn’t blink. Not once.

A minute passed, then two. Clayton waited. He hoped she wouldn’t be long.

Her eyes skipping a little more quickly, scanning. Then she closed them. “You know...”

He leaned forward slightly, but knew better than to expect some big Delphinian pronouncement or hokey rhymed couplets.

“Er...” she looked around at him, still somewhat tranced out. She lifted one shoulder, “You’re right?” The tiniest hint of a question at the end of that sentence was not to indicate doubt, he knew, but to convey that there was a lot more to it than that. But for now, the briefest explanation would have to suffice. The girl just wasn’t a talker. In his experience, the really gifted Oracles weren’t.

He smiled, gratified, and sat back in his chair. “Good,” he patted his shirt pocket for his reading glasses. “Let’s start making calls.”

Chapter Three

Kansas City Site #14
East Bottoms, 10:15 a.m.

“KC,” Bill Welsh spoke into a microphone, “This is quarterback 345-31-8472, commencing pre-mission audio/visual check. Does anybody copy?”

“We copy, 345-31-8472. What unit?”

“Unit 56138, Dispatch 14.”

“Roger that. 14-56138, standby for satellite uplink.”

“Standing by.”

No stranger to early morning calls to the field, Bill had been the first to arrive at dispatch, an old warehouse building on the riverfront. At the moment, he was hunched over the laptop in his “office,” the back of one of the Order’s surveillance vans. A voice spoke again through Bill’s headset. “Uplink completed. Van cam one and two are now recording.”

In his peripheral vision, Bill saw as VC1 came on. He checked over his shoulder for the red light in the rear. When that, too, winked at him, he waved. “Hiya, Ken.”

“Hey, yourself. Unit 14-56138, audio/visual checks and satellite uplink now complete. Commence equipment checks with dispatch and beat surveillance.”

“Roger that.” Bill began adjusting controls and comparing read-outs on the screens in front of him.

“We’ll be in touch.”

“You know it, brotha.” Tilting his head back, Bill downed the last of his coffee, making a mental note to stop by cold storage where he stashed his beans. All quarterbacks customized their own workstations, and Bill was no exception. In his case, non-regulation equipment included not only the coffee maker, but an electric grinder, a steel storage canister, a French press for when he was feeling fancy, and a shaker of sea salt. A placard he had sitting beside his laptop docking station proclaimed, *There is no such thing as strong coffee. There is only weak people.* He had considered getting a small refrigerator to keep the beans cold, but he drank them up too fast to justify the cost.

Bill rolled his head once, slowly, from left to right, stretching out his arms as he did so, wagging his fingers. Then he stretched his arms out in front of him and cracked his knuckles.

At first glance, Bill seemed entirely unremarkable: late thirties, medium build, thinning hair that was neither blond nor brown, and pale eyes the color of stonewashed denim. Yet he had a smooth, pleasing voice. Before he’d joined the Order, he’d worked in radio and while he hadn’t always been a quarterback, he couldn’t deny the position suited him.

Clearing his throat, he leaned into the microphone. “All right, ladies and gentlemen, this is double-oh-four-es, broadcasting live from IMSET studios right here in beautiful KC. The highs today are going to be seventy-two, partly cloudy, with a seventy per cent chance of Armageddon. I’ve got some James Taylor coming up in just a moment, but first we have some

exciting giveaways this morning. Every second caller will have a chance to win a free trip to exotic Excelsior Springs. Let's go to our lines now... Caller number one, you're on the air."

An image flicked onto one of Bill's screens. It was of a conference room on the other side of the building. The voice of an office tech came over the mike, "KC Dispatch Number Fourteen, conference cam test."

"I'm sorry caller number one, you are not a winner. Thanks for listening." The tech grinned and shook his head. Bill's partner, Cecil, was also grinning.

Cecil had arrived at dispatch that morning shortly after Bill. He was in his early thirties, with blond hair that he usually concealed under a ball cap and a sun-reddened, freckled face. He and Bill had begun working together some six years before, when Bill first moved from field investigator to quarterback, and the pair had become fast friends.

Right now, he had five small cameras spread out on the conference table. Known within the Order as beat cams, each one was about the size of a Bluetooth headset, and designed in much the same way to fit over the ear. Cecil slipped the first one on.

"Caller number two, you're on the air," Bill prompted.

Cecil panned the conference room. "Beat cam one, check."

"Congratulations, caller number two! You have just won an all-expenses paid trip to *Excelsior Springs!*" Bill clicked the mouse. In the van, on one of the monitors, BC1's feed came on. In the bottom right corner of the screen, there was a blinking line of dashes: - - - - . "BC1, audio/visual confirmed."

Cecil slipped the next camera on. "Beat cam two, check."

"BC2, good to go."

As they tested the rest of the equipment, the Oracle had come into the conference room. Cecil panned the camera up and down her body. "Aaaaand beat cam five, check."

"Careful," Bill said. "Need I remind you, she's an—"

"Hey, Morgan?" the Oracle said without looking up. "Why don't you stop filming my ass and go find something constructive to do?"

Whistling innocently, Cecil hastily turned the camera aside. The Oracle turned away as well, to hide the small smile that touched the corners of her mouth.

"How many times, man?" Bill asked, "How many times have you been caught doing the naughty close-ups on the psychic chicks?"

"I live for the thrill."

"You're a wild man, Cecil B." Bill took another sip of coffee. "And six?"

"There is no BC six."

There was a pause, then Bill chuckled. "Roger. What've we got for seven?"

"No, that wasn't a Monty Python reference. There really isn't a beat cam six. Or seven. There's just five."

Bill put his mug down. A five-man team, for a level five mission? This whole thing was hinky. For one thing, the Oracle had called him in herself. That never happened. For another, he and Cecil had just gotten back from a mission yesterday and here they were, not twenty-four hours later, getting called out again. Typically, field personnel were given at least thirty-six hours to recuperate between missions—*typically*, but he knew that was by no means mandated. And with a level five, you don't quibble about needing time off to get your golf game in. You got your ass up and got down to dispatch. That was why he didn't question it when the Oracle had called him earlier. But what was this about having only five people on the team? And why was the office and the security personnel so short-staffed?

Definitely hinky. More than hinky, in fact, it was downright unnerving. And that mission he and Cecil had just come back from...

Bill shook his head slightly as if to clear it. *Save it for the briefing. You've got an equipment check to run.* Besides, when you'd been with the Order as long as he had, you don't let a little thing like nerves get you. Bad things happen when you lose your cool. He knew from experience.

After the cameras, he and Cecil checked the scanning equipment, which consisted of motion detectors, thermograph sensors, photosensors, pyroelectric sensors, infrared, and a halo scanner-- this latter device had been developed by the Order in the 1840's. It was similar in principle to aura photography, but far more accurate.

In the conference room, the security personnel got into position. Clayton had appeared, and he and the Oracle stood at the head of the table, talking quietly. To look at them, one would never have suspected they had spent the past two nights at the office. Clayton stood, freshly combed and shaven, his suit crisp, his tie impeccably knotted. Next to him, the Oracle was dressed in a fresh T-shirt and fatigue pants, all in black. She was small but not delicate, (she barely came to Clayton's shoulder), curves that belonged on a pin-up girl. Dark glasses glinted on top of her head. A pistol rested in a holster against her hip. She probably would not have been pleased to hear it, but the attire only accentuated her youth. In fact, at a glance, she might've been mistaken for a high school kid trying to look tough with her combat boots and her cigarette pack rolled up in her sleeve.

A buzzer sounded as the outer door was opened. The air in the conference room changed immediately. After a moment, a second buzzer sounded, announcing that the security door had been opened with a keycard.

The briefing was about to start.

* * *

Dr. Doug Grigori had arrived, looking bemused. He was tall and slightly stooped; a gaunt, bespectacled man with white hair and a quiet, dignified air. He was dressed comfortably and well: a tan trench coat covering a fine linen shirt and tailored slacks. He had never been to this dispatch location before, and he was impressed-- the warehouse was much like all the other warehouses in the area: a squat, flat-topped structure with a concrete slab base, with rolling stainless steel doors that opened out into loading docks. On the east end of the building was a

vestibule. In the early spring light, its glass was mirrored, reflecting only the passing traffic. Even the faded sign that hung above the warehouse doors, Information Maintenance Systems Equipment & Technology, Inc., and the navy blue logo of what appeared to be a silhouetted building, failed to make it remarkable in the industrial parks along the river.

Doug paused to study the sign, smiling faintly. Only those familiar with Egyptian symbols would recognize the blue Isis throne. And only those who were supposed to find this particular building, those who already knew what was inside, understood what it truly meant.

He put his hand to his chest, fingering the shape of an old amulet he wore on a black leather cord under his shirt. Then he went quickly up the cement stairs.

Once inside, he was greeted by a security camera, which turned at his approach. Doug had more than a passing familiarity with the Order's security measures, so he slowly removed his keycard from his jacket pocket along with his sign, careful to keep his hands visible at all times. He swiped his ID card and the steel door glided open, surprisingly silent for all its heft.

Doug heard the buzzer announcing his presence as he stepped inside. An armed security guard was seated behind a desk to his right. He looked at Doug expectantly.

The signs and countersigns, which changed frequently, had been lapin-based these days. Doug didn't have the faintest idea why. Sometimes it seemed the people in charge had bizarre senses of humor. *And, Doug thought grimly, in this place, if someone is unable to produce the countersign after an appropriate interval-- the river is less than a hundred yards away, and always hungry.*

He produced his sign, a white rabbit's foot on a keychain, and the guard visibly relaxed. "My heart has joined the thousand."

"For my friend stopped running today," Doug replied promptly.

"All the world will be your enemy."

"Wogdog."

The guard directed Doug down the hall, past some offices. By the looks of things, they were usually occupied by administrators, perhaps a few archivists. There was a stack of old texts on one desk. At the moment though, all of the offices were empty.

Frowning, he went on to the last door, where another security guard stood. Doug put his hands, letting the guard wave a security wand over him. Then the guard opened the door to the conference room.

Doug shook hands with Clayton, nodded politely to the Oracle. "Would you like to tell me what I'm doing here?"

She handed him a case folder. "We're waiting on a few others to arrive. We'll explain everything then."

He looked at it curiously. When had he ever seen a case file so thin? Maybe never. Everything about this briefing seemed off so far—the fact that he'd been summoned at all, coupled with the empty offices outside, brought a hard knot of worry to his stomach. "All right."

"Dr. Grigori," Cecil extended his hand. They shook. "I'm Cecil. We'll be working together."

“Cecil,” Doug said. “A pleasure.” He took the chair to Clayton’s right and opened the file, adjusting his glasses as he read.

A few moments later, the pair of buzzers sounded. Again, the guard said, “My heart has joined the Thousand.”

There was a long pause.

In a tone that was somehow both concerned and threatening, the guard repeated, “Miss, *my heart has joined the Thousand.*”

“Just give me a minute, okay?” a woman replied. “I can remember this.”

The Director and the Oracle both turned toward the door, concerned. Doug peered up over the top of his glasses.

Then the woman spoke again, very quickly and triumphantly, “*Formyfriendstoppedrunningtoday!*”

The guard sounded relieved, “All the world will be your enemy.”

Outside, Kate West snatched a small stuffed bunny off the guard’s counter. “You can say that again, *wogdog.*”

The guard directed her to the conference room.

Doug rose as she entered. She was, in his estimation, quite comely. Perhaps in her mid-thirties, she had red hair cut in short, fashionable layers, leaving soft waves to frame her forehead and delicate cheekbones. She had the ivory complexion typical of redheads, with a dusting of freckles and large, wide-set blue eyes. It was plain she was a dancer, with the body that went with it-- tall and slender, all long limbs and easy grace as she crossed the room.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she apologized to the room in general, setting down her book bag. “I just read that book. I can’t *believe* that I almost forgot. . .”

“It’s all right. No harm done,” Clayton said. The two of them introduced themselves.

Then Kate spied Cecil in the corner. “Hey! What are you doing here?” she peered around the room. “Is Bill with you? When did you guys get back?”

Cecil grinned, evidently as pleased to see her as she was to see him. “Working. Yesterday. In the van,” he paused. “Was that it?”

Kate laughed. “Yep... Wait. Bill’s in the van-- ?” she glanced around the room again. Her voice grew tentative as she asked, “Am I in the right place?”

“You’re in the right place,” the Oracle affirmed, holding a file out to her. “I know this is kinda weird, but just have a seat. We’re waiting on a few more before we get started.”

Kate looked back over at Cecil, who smiled reassuringly. Encouraged, she selected the seat next to Doug. When he introduced himself, her eyes grew wide. “*Doctor Doug Grigori?*”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve read some of your work. Your last article on the relationship between the Babylonian Genesis and the Lemurian Manuscripts was phenomenal!”

Doug eyed her with new interest. “Thank you. You’re very kind. Are you in archives?”

Kate laughed. "Oh, no, I'm an apprentice."

"Who's mentoring you?"

"Um, well, I haven't been assigned anyone yet." Kate glanced at Clayton and the Oracle. "I assumed that was why I was here...?"

"Well, I imagine we'll find out soon enough." Together, he and Kate began looking over the case files, their voices low and earnest.

Across the table, Clayton and the Oracle exchanged a knowing look.

Eventually, the buzzers sounded again. And then, instead of the first sign, they heard, inexplicably, the sound of laughter.

After the guard had composed himself, he gave the signs. There was a martyred sigh, and a second voice asked, "Oh, Jesus, do I really have to say this?"

A few minutes later, the door opened and a man limped ponderously in. He'd been made old not so much by time, but by some unspeakable wear-and-tear. What remained was a man with graying and thinning hair who had lost some of his height. It was his left leg that dragged, and if one looked carefully, they could see that his left arm was thinner than his right. His features, rugged to begin with, were now badly pitted and scarred; there was a particularly nasty gouge in the hollow of his right cheek, a long vertical rut that tapered and disappeared under a sideburn. Yet Detective Ryan Murphy appeared remarkably strong, having retained his broad shoulders and barrel chest. His slow, dragging walk suggested more caution than infirmity. He wore jeans, sneakers, an old EMT T-shirt, and a shoulder holster beneath his black BDU jacket. His stone-gray eyes, while deep-set and heavily lined, were still sharp, mechanically surveying the room out of long habit: *twenty by twenty-five room, two exits, plus the two-way mirror on the right. One at the table's head, the guy with the phones, plus four guards, all heeled. Three civilians.*

He gimped his way over to the table. There were handshakes all around, then the Detective turned to the Oracle, hands on his hips. "You're the Oracle, right?" An eyebrow went up and she nodded. A less confident girl would have wilted under his scrutiny, but she didn't even blink. The Detective privately admired this. "So. What's in my future?"

She merely looked at him, refusing to take the bait.

"Ah, well. I guess we can't all be Nostradamus." He took a seat next to her. Facing forward, the Oracle rather pointedly ignored him, though, beneath her irritation, she surely perceived that his seating selection had more to do with the fact that it allowed him a view of both doors.

Murphy, for his part, looked over to the long two-way mirror, where he knew a camera must be watching and recording everything, and winked. "She wants me."

The Oracle looked to Clayton for help, but he seemed absolutely engrossed with some last minute modifications to his notes.

At that moment, Bill came bursting in. "All right, Murph, spill!" He tossed a book on the conference table. It slid across to Murphy, who caught it easily.

"*The Book of Bunny Suicides*," Murphy read, leaning back in his chair. He tossed it back on the table. "Yeah, that was a nice try. But you have much to learn, young padawan."

"Well? Teach me, Obi Wan."

In no particular hurry, Murphy sat up, reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a well-worn magazine. With a snap, he presented them with a front cover.

Bill laughed, while Doug and Cecil merely smiled. Kate rolled her eyes. "*God*, you guys."

"What?" Murphy asked. "They said bring a bunny. I brought a bunny."

Wiping tears from his eyes, Bill managed to get out, "How *old* is that thing?"

"Excuse me, *Stacy* is not old," Murph corrected. "Stacy was Playmate of the Year, 1996, a very good year, I might add." Re-folding the magazine, he tucked it back into his jacket pocket. "I chose this magazine for the cover, of course."

Clayton sat at the head of the table with his hands folded. The corners of his mouth did not so much as twitch, as he said, very dryly, "Of course you did, Detective Murphy. We understand."

"Bill," Kate said sweetly. "When you're done looking at the *Playboy*, I'll be over here, okay?"

"Kate, don't think I didn't see you over there." He walked over quickly and they embraced. Then Bill turned to Doug. "Bill Welsh. Quarterback."

"Doug Grigori. Archives."

They shook. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Likewise. If you don't mind my asking, what exactly is a quarterback?"

Bill was momentarily taken aback, but recovered quickly. "Well, I'm the guy in the van. While the rest of the team is in the field, I monitor the scanning equipment that the field technician here -- say hello, Cecil --" Cecil waved, "-- and the team's beat cams --" Cecil tapped the camera he was wearing. "--relay. And I run interference with the field offices, and if necessary, the main office. Hence the term, 'quarterback.'" He finished with a small bow and a flourish.

Doug considered this. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean by 'run interference.'"

They were interrupted by two door buzzers in quick succession.

The strident voice of a man accustomed to being instantly obeyed rang out loud and clear, cutting easily through the room. "Well, come on, son. I ain't got all day!"

"I don't know what you mean, sir. Are you here to inquire about employment?"

"Oh, knock off the bullshit. *God* damn it, here you go. Give me that *daggum* thing... All right, *there*, god dammit. For my friend stopped running today, wogdog. You happy?"

"My heart has joined the Thousand."

"God dammit, son! Did your mother have any children that lived?"

“Sir, my heart has joined the Thousand.” Interestingly, this time, the repeated sign contained no hint of a threat.

“Are you really going to make me say it again, you pansy-assed cocksucker?”

At this point, the Oracle leaned toward Clayton, “You know, time is an issue here.”

Clayton sighed and started towards the door.

“Boy, I strongly advise you not to fuck with me right now! I will tear your head off and *shit* down your neck!”

Clayton opened the door and called down to the guard, “It’s all right, Tom. Let him through.”

“Clayton!” Colonel Garnett bellowed. “It’s about goddamn time!”

“How are you, Colonel?” The Colonel had already reached the door and was pumping the Director’s hand.

“Well, I’m doing good, sir. I’m just waiting to hear what’s going on and what we need to do about it.”

Clayton guided the Colonel into the room and closed the door.

The Colonel was an older man but obviously still strong and spry. It was also immediately obvious that he did not fit in with anybody else in the building. It wasn’t his salt-and-pepper hair and mustache. It wasn’t his blue jeans, his cowboy boots, his hat, or even his duster. This was Kansas City, after all. If you went forty miles in any direction, you were going to hit cattle country. No, it was his two-gun rig, with two well-worn and fully functional six-guns in quick-draw holsters that made him unique. It was also this self-same rig that explained why, at no point in time, did the security guard outside consider himself a threat to this man. Not even when the Colonel had grabbed his logbook away from him and quickly sketched a rabbit on the sign-in sheet.

The Colonel had an unlit cigarillo clamped tightly between his teeth as he stepped more fully into the room. Seeing the Oracle, he nodded curtly. She nodded back.

Upon spying Kate, however, his demeanor changed instantly. “Miss, I do apologize. I didn’t realize there was a lady present when I was giving that jackass outside what-for.”

Kate looked at him cautiously. “So I heard.”

Bill stood up. “Colonel, how the hell are ya?”

“Bill Welsh! Good to see you again, by God.” The Colonel came forward and pumped Bill’s hand as he had done the Director’s. “God damn. What’s it been, son, five years?”

“Six.”

The Colonel nodded gravely as something unspoken hung in the air between them. Once the moment had passed, the Colonel remarked, a little more quietly, “Well, it’s good to be working with you again.”

A ghost of a smile passed over Bill’s features. “Likewise, Colonel.”

Hat in hand, the Colonel turned to Kate. "Excuse me, miss." He extended his hand, angled so she could accept it as either a handshake or reverence, as she chose; the gesture of an old-world gentleman making a lady's acquaintance.

Kate eyed him skeptically for a split-second, before accepting his hand in a firm grasp that communicated equals.

The Colonel's smile grew a bit wider. "Colonel Joel Derringer Garnett, US Marine Corps, retired. My friends call me JD."

"Kate West."

"A pleasure, ma'am." His eyes passed from her to Bill and back again approvingly.

"Colonel," Bill nudged Cecil forward, "I don't believe you've met Cecil. He's one of the finest field technicians I've ever worked with."

"Comin' from Bill, that counts for a lot. Damn glad to meet ya, son."

The Colonel moved on to Doug, who rose for his turn to shake the Colonel's hand. "I'm Doug Grigori. Archives."

"Glad to meet you, Doc. Good to have you on board."

As the Colonel finally turned to the other side of the table, Murphy raised his hand in greeting. "Detective Murphy. Nice to meet you."

The Colonel squinted. "Murphy? Is that *Ryan* Murphy?"

"Uh...yeah."

The Colonel pointed his finger. "I remember you."

"Great."

"Sicily, wasn't it? You were that fella who—"

"Yes," Murphy said quickly. "That was me."

"Well, it's good to see you up and running again there, pard."

"Great," Murphy said again, though more to himself than to anyone in particular. "I'm famous. For *Sicily*." He glanced sideways at the Oracle, who had covered her mouth to conceal what might have been a smirk. She looked away.

At last, the Colonel dropped into the chair at the foot of the table. Holding up his cigarillo, he inquired of Clayton, "Am I gonna be here long enough to light this up?"

"I don't think there's any smoking in here," Kate muttered.

Clayton replied, "No, Colonel. We won't be here that long."

"Well, all right then. Let's get this show on the road." The Colonel settled back, replacing the cigarillo behind his ear, his boots propped on the table.

"Now that everyone's here, we'll do exactly that," Clayton smoothed his tie and suddenly everything was business.

The Oracle slid a folder across the table to the Colonel, who caught it deftly.

Clayton began, “We have an emergency situation. At approximately 9:30 this morning, we received a call at regional headquarters. We have confirmed the caller as being one Fernando Rios, MIA since April, 1985.”

He struck a key and the recording of the call came on:

“--ernando Rios, field operative 045-96-5742. Royal Hotel, Excelsior Springs. Level five event. Isfet breach in progress. Repeat, Isfet breach in progress. Must be re-sealed. She thinks she can control it. Unknown adversaries, at least two females. First, Caucasian, appears to be middle-aged, five-eight, one-twenty, dark brown hair, brown eyes—”

The report ended as suddenly as it began, with a series of screams and snarls, not quite animal but not really human either.

Murphy leaned abruptly forward in his chair. “What the hell is that?”

There was another sound, more distant than the others, that was not unlike baying. And just before the tape ended, there was a fraction of a second that sounded like a young girl’s laughter, and what might have been clapping.

Clayton closed the laptop.

No one spoke. Murphy was frowning. Kate and Bill had gone dead-white. She clasped Bill’s upper arm with knuckles that were also white, her nails biting through his shirt. Beside them, Cecil sat rigid and horrified. Doug ran a hand through his hair, making the fine white strands stand on end. The Colonel stood up and began pacing the room. Turning to Clayton, he said, “Jesus Christ, Clayton. What the hell is this?”

“In the past forty-eight hours, we have had ninety-two events world-wide, of a level four or higher. Twenty in the continental United States alone.”

Doug snapped his head up. “Twenty?”

Clayton bowed his head in affirmation. “In the past forty-eight hours.”

“My God.”

Murphy’s frown deepened, as this new information clearly did not process.

Bill looked shell-shocked. But when he spoke, his voice was steady. “How many teams?”

“I beg your pardon?” Clayton asked.

“How many teams have you lost, Clayton?”

“I don’t have information on any teams outside the US.”

“How many *in* the US?”

“We’ve lost contact with seven. The rest are still engaged.”

Bill and Cecil exchanged a glance. Cecil turned to Clayton. “What about Levin’s team?”

Clayton’s voice was also quiet. “Still engaged.”

Cecil and Bill both looked relieved—slightly. Kate, meanwhile, had been looking desperately between her friends and Clayton and back again, clearly growing more and more distressed. “But what does any of that mean?”

“I’ll tell you what it means,” the Colonel snapped. “It means we’re dealing with fucking Starry Wisdom!”

“That’s great,” Murphy said. “The what?”

The Colonel shot Clayton an accusing look.

“That’s bad, isn’t it?” Kate asked, still looking to Bill. “That’s like red-alert bad?”

“Yes, that would be bad,” Bill said tersely. “As bad as it gets.”

The Colonel turned to stare at her, then turned back to the Director. “Clayton, what the hell *is* this?”

Murphy looked around at all of them. “Hello? Anybody? What is a ‘starry wisdom?’”

Doug steeped his hands, leaning across the table toward Murphy. “Well, Detective, simply put, Starry Wisdom is the single greatest threat to mankind and the world as we know it.”

“And I’m just now hearing about it?” Murphy yelped, shooting up out of his chair.

“If you’ve been fully vested, in theory, you were briefed,” Doug said. “You...*have* been briefed?”

Murphy gaped at him. “Vested?”

“Oh. Oh, dear.”

“All right, Clayton, I’m going to have to interrupt here because I need to know what the *fuck* I’m dealing with.” Without giving Clayton a chance to respond, the Colonel whirled on Murphy. “You! How many missions you been on?”

“Just Sicily.”

“Were you briefed at any time before you went to Sicily?”

Murphy gestured helplessly. “Just on the mission itself... Apparently there’s *vesting*.”

“And nobody thought to mention Starry Wisdom?”

“No, but that was six years ago. My memory might be a little hazy.”

“Jesus Christ,” the Colonel turned to Doug. “What about you, Doc? How many missions you been on?”

Doug frowned. “I’m an archivist.”

“But have you ever been in the field?”

“No.”

The Colonel turned to Bill. “All right, Bill, I know you’ve got the experience and I’ve worked with you before, so I’m not worried about you. And if you vouch for Cecil here, that’s good enough for me.” He turned to Kate. “How about you, little lady?”

“I’m just a novice. I’ve only been with the Order for. . .” Kate paused to think. “A little over a year.”

“Ma’am, that’s not what I asked you. I asked you how many missions you been on.”

Bill put his hand on Kate’s. “Easy, Colonel.”

"It's okay, Bill." Kate met the Colonel's hard eyes. "None. When I got the call, I thought I was coming here to meet my mentor."

"Oh my God." The Colonel turned to Clayton. "We need to talk." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "*Now.*"

Clayton nodded and rose. Seeing the Oracle's stricken look, he shook his head slightly, indicating that she was to remain in her seat. She obeyed, but cast a dubious look at the Colonel.

The two men moved off to the side. "What the hell, Clayton?" the Colonel growled. "Just what in the hell is this? I can't use these people. We go out there, they ain't gonna have any idea what they're doin'--"

"I know, but they're all that's left. That's why I'm putting them with you."

"I was a United States Marine for twenty-five goddamn years. I know a clusterfuck when I see one."

"The last team we sent out was administration. Do you understand? There is no one left." Clayton put his hand on the Colonel's shoulder. "If anyone can make them into a working team, it's you. You'll get them in and find whatever is happening, and get us the data we need to deal with it. And most importantly, you'll get them out."

The Colonel nodded. "You're goddamn right I will."

At the table, Murphy had moved to a seat nearer to the others. "So, these Starry Wisdom guys, they're like the Mormons of the occult world?"

Bill considered this. "More like the Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Ouch."

Kate's mouth pressed to a thin line. "So it's down to us?"

Bill gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "We can handle it."

"How many people do we need for an 'Isfet breach'?" Murphy asked.

Doug was leafing through his folder again. "Ordinarily, such an event would be classified as a level five, which calls for no less than a dozen fully-vested and experienced operatives. Ideally, we'd be sending out a team of twenty-five. There would also be a pre-team already there, doing a passive sweep of the area. But that's under ideal circumstances."

"Great," Kate said.

"If Clayton didn't think you could do it, he wouldn't have called you here," the Oracle said. "For what it's worth."

"Wait a minute," Murphy interrupted. "Everybody, stop. What're we being asked to do here? We're being asked to find this Rios guy? Who is he, anyway?"

"Fernando Rios was a member of the Order. He disappeared in 1985 in the Clay County area," Doug said.

"He was alone?"

"Apparently."

“Why?”

“He was on his own time,” the Oracle said. “We have included his dossier in the files we’ve given you, as well as the report on the investigation the Order conducted. We couldn’t find anything to indicate anything supernatural about his disappearance.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” Murphy gestured to the report. “Doesn’t look like you found much at all.”

“No.”

“So what’s all the hubbub about a missing person’s case, then?”

“Not a missing person’s case, a possible Isfet breach.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“Dr. Grigori can explain better than I can. Preferably when you’re on the way.”

Murphy looked at her, incredulous. “I thought this was a briefing.”

“And it is,” Bill cut in, “*brief*.”

The Oracle shook her head. “You’re a cop. Think of it as a crime-in-progress. Rios was alive when he called this morning. He might still be.”

“So,” Murphy said slowly. “The mission is, find the Isfet Breach-- whatever the hell that is. Find Rios-- whoever the hell he is. Bring him home-- if there’s anything left of him. And then there’s a bunch of other crap going on, so you have no teams. And there’s a bunch of evil Jehovah’s Witnesses running around, who might be responsible for-- all of it. Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

“So I got it?”

“You got it.”

“I didn’t leave anything out?”

“Nope.”

Murphy nodded once. “But I did leave something out.” He stood up. “The part where you’re all fucked.” He started toward the door. Bill quickly followed him.

“Murph, wait a second.”

“I don’t have time for this, Bill.”

“Oh, we both know *that*’s bullshit.”

“Let me tell you something,” Murphy paused at the door. “You need to brush up on your persuasion skills.”

“How about a bottle of scotch? Is that persuasive enough?”

Murphy turned around. “It might buy you a minute.” He held up a finger. “*One*.”

“Look, it’s not going to cost you anything to check it out. We’re not using your gas. It’s your day off. And if there’s nothing there, then everybody goes home, you get to point and laugh at all the weirdoes, and when you need a lead on an occult case, you can still call us.”

Murphy crossed his arms. “Glenmorangie.”

“Done.”

“And I don’t have to share it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Murph.”

“Okay,” Murphy edged back toward the table. “I’m in. But I’m going on record right now and saying you people are all freaks... All right. So where do we start?”

“Well,” Doug said, “I imagine as soon as the Colonel returns and we have a designated team leader, we gather our equipment and go.”

Clayton and the Colonel finished their discussion, and now, the Colonel turned to the team. His voice filled the room. “All right, people! We got a job to do and precious little time to do it in! Now, Murphy here has the most combat experience aside from myself, so Murphy, you will be my second-in-command. The rest of you will take orders from Mister Murphy or me. When I say jump, I don’t want to hear a goddamn ‘how high’! I want you to by God *jump*! You do what we say, when we say to do it and maybe, just *maybe*, we’ll all live through this mess. Understand?”

The responses were fragmented and varied, about like he’d expected: Murphy gave a prompt enough, “Yes, sir,” professional, but decidedly less than hearty. Doc merely nodded. Cecil nodded as well, but his was a single, swift affirmation, rising as he did. (*That one’s a trooper, by God*, the Colonel noted with some satisfaction.) Bill had given a half-salute and a, “Yes, sir, Colonel.” And the redhead had just stared at him, still looking dismayed. But they would just have to pull together. That was what was important.

The Colonel nodded once. “Then let’s move out!”

The newly-formed team gathered their things and filed out, Bill to his van and the rest to a fleet SUV, a navy blue Ford Explorer, which was also parked in the warehouse area.

In contrast, the sudden quiet in the room was palpable. Only the Director and the Oracle remained. “Seemed to work,” she said, more to herself than to Clayton. “I’m surprised Murphy didn’t walk.”

“He *wants* to be convinced,” Clayton said. “He’s not as skeptical as he thinks he is. For one thing, he’s too intelligent.”

She shrugged. “If you say so.”

Clayton glanced at her, amused. “The Detective struck a nerve, did he?” He was further amused to see her shuffle her feet and look away, looking not even as old as her twenty-four years.

“I was a little concerned about the Colonel,” she finally said. “When he broke in and dragged you off to the side like that...”

“Oh, I went willingly.”

“Yeah, but I still didn’t like it. All the times I’ve worked with him, I’ve *never* seen him talk to you that way.”

“He has to get those people to become a team and he has no time. So he took all the authority he could as fast as he could get it. And I can certainly spare it.”

Chapter Four

11:10 a.m.

While Murphy and the Colonel loaded equipment from their respective vehicles into the Explorer, Cecil outfitted the team members with beat cams. At the same time, Bill handed out separate earpieces, which were smaller and fit directly inside the ear canal.

“Were these cleaned after the last team used them?” Doug inquired, holding his up to the light for closer inspection.

Bill looked wounded. “Of *course*. What kinda operation you think this is, anyway?” He hastily drew back the ear piece he’d extended to Kate and pretended to wipe it on his shirt.

Kate snatched it away from him. “Oh, yeah, *that’s* sanitary.”

Bill shrugged, opened the van door and climbed in the back. “Catching somebody else’s ear infection is going to be the least of your worries anyway.”

“Coming through,” Murphy grunted, carrying a large wooden chest.

Kate moved aside and watched him heave the chest into the storage compartment of the Explorer. “Do we really need all these guns?”

“Yeah,” Murphy said shortly, somewhat out of breath as he shifted things around to make room for the chest. Turning back, he leaned against the edge of the compartment bed to wipe his brow. “It’s like a condom. Better to have ‘em and not need ‘em, than to need ‘em and not have ‘em.”

The Colonel’s voice came from behind her. “Look out, girl!”

She moved again to let him pass, and, seeing what the Colonel was carrying, she forgot all about Murphy. “What is *that*?”

The Colonel loaded a huge, tube-like metal structure with a canister mounted on top into the Explorer. “Tear gas dispenser. Murphy’s.”

“A *tear gas dispenser*? For *what*?”

Murphy grinned. “For *just in case*.” She looked so mystified, he almost laughed. Kate was fun.

Bill spoke into the Colonel’s earpiece. “Colonel, we didn’t have the manpower to do a passive sweep.”

The Colonel snorted. “Figures.”

“Do you want me to go ahead—?”

“Nah. If there’s any trouble up there, I don’t want you hitting it alone. We stick together.”

“Roger that, Colonel.”

Murphy went back to his car and pulled yet more supplies out of his trunk. He unceremoniously dumped a green satchel into Kate’s arms. “Medic bag.”

“I hate to tell you this, but I’m not a medic.”

“That’s okay. I am. I can talk you through it.” He knelt and began loading a shotgun.

Dutifully, Kate slung the strap over her shoulder.

The Colonel finished loading and checking his weapons. “Anybody ever been up to Excelsior?”

Murphy did not pause as he continued loading his own shotgun. “I have. Worked a couple of cases up there.”

“I thought you were a Kansas City cop,” Kate said.

“I am.”

“So why did you investigate a case in Excelsior Springs?”

Murphy shrugged. “It was weird. They always give me the weird ones. Sometimes I get whored out—I mean, loaned to other precincts.”

“What was so unusual about it?” Doug asked.

“In 1995, five kids disappeared up in Excelsior within a few hours of each other,” Murphy said. “It happened again in 2002. I made the rounds. Would you believe Excelsior has an occult shop? Or it had-- don’t know if it’s still there or not.”

“Oh,” Kate said a bit stiffly. “And what does an occult shop have to do with kidnapping, may I ask?”

“It’s where one buys ritualistic gear. I figured if there were any cults in the area, an occult shop would be the place to find them.”

“So you assumed that somebody who would kidnap a child had to be in the occult? Is that what I’m to understand?”

“Well, there are those that do. The FBI has a whole division dedicated to occult crimes.”

“Oh, well. If you can’t trust J. Edgar Hoover, who can you trust?”

Doug, meanwhile, had quietly gone off to see if he could assist the Colonel.

“Uh, guys?” Cecil tried to interject as Kate and Murphy’s voices got louder and louder. “Guys?”

They ignored him, or just didn’t hear him.

“Oh, come *on*. Witches don’t sacrifice children!”

“I never said they did.”

“I’m just saying that there are enough misconceptions about alternative religions without law enforcement breathing down their necks about crimes that are statistically committed more often by people who call themselves Christians!”

“Okay, *look*. I wouldn’t have considered the occult shop a lead without good reason. I talked to just about *everybody* in that damn town. Christians, Buddhists, Pastafarians, *whatever*.” He sighed and stepped closer to Kate. “The kidnappings happened in 1985, 1965 and 1935. Then

in 1995, when I was there. Then I went back in 2002 when it happened *again*.” He spread his hands. “There’s *something* going on there.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of sick people out there that don’t have anything to do with magic or the occult.”

“Yeah, but not on a *schedule*.”

“’35, ’65, ’85, ’95,” Kate ticked the years off on her fingers. “I wouldn’t exactly call that a schedule. There’s no pattern.”

“There *is* a pattern—it’s an *accelerating* pattern. Five kids every time? You don’t call that a pattern? And five just happens to be the number of points on a pentacle, the five wounds of Christ--”

“Look,” the Colonel stepped between them. “We don’t have time for this shit. We need to get movin’.” He pointed toward the warehouse. “C’mon, Murphy. We got more over there.”

The Detective nodded. “Yeah. We should probably make sure everybody’s armed.”

“What, there aren’t enough guns here?” Kate called after them.

“Well, yeah, but we thought it’d be nice to share,” Murphy said over his shoulder as he followed the Colonel into the warehouse armory.

Kate turned to Doug, who had been standing quietly by. “Don’t look at me,” he said. “It’s been years since I fired again.”

“What are we *doing* here?” she asked helplessly.

“Providing our expertise.”

“Which is what?”

“Knowledge.”

“Isn’t that what Bill’s for?”

Bill’s voice came over her earpiece and both she and Doug started. “No, field archivists provide knowledge that I don’t have access to. Not all of the occult literature has been translated and updated into our database. We have *years* to go on that.”

“And God knows,” Murphy’s voice chimed in through their earpieces, “We wouldn’t want to go without Kate’s expertise.”

She rolled her eyes.

Moments later, Murphy and the Colonel re-emerged carrying several more weapons, including two shoulder rigs with pistols. “I’m not gonna give these to you now,” he said to Kate and Doug. “You’ve never fired one of these before, and we don’t have time to teach you. But sometimes it’s better to arm an amateur than to leave you unable to return fire.”

Doug gazed at the guns, considering, then nodded briefly. Kate swallowed. “What about Cecil?”

“Have one,” Cecil patted his pants pocket. “But thanks. *I* love you, Kate.”

She smiled.

The Colonel handed Murphy the last of the weapons before turning aside. “Bill, could I get a word?”

“Sure thing, Colonel,” Bill changed the Colonel’s audio settings. “You’ve got a private line. What’s up?”

The Colonel moved out of earshot of the others. “I just wanted to tell you that no matter what happens, I’m going to do everything I can to get Kate through this and get her back to you safe and sound.”

“Uh, gee, Colonel, that’s awfully sweet of you. But Kate and I-- we’re not an item. I really appreciate what you’re saying and it means a lot to me. But we’re not, you know, *together*.”

The Colonel blinked. “Oh. Well, shit, son. That’s all right. I’ll get her out of this anyway.”

“I know you will.”

The Colonel’s frustration broke. “God dammit, why didn’t you say something sooner? You had to know what I was thinkin’!”

“Won’t happen again, sir.”

“You see that it doesn’t.”

“Copy that.”

“All right.” The Colonel stalked back to the Explorer. “God *damn*.” The others were standing around the vehicle, looking at him expectantly. “What the hell y’all standing around for? Let’s move.”

“Where to, Colonel?” Murphy asked.

“Rios was talkin’ about the Royal Hotel. Sounds like a good place to start.”

Kate sighed as she got in. “Keep me alive, Bill. I don’t know about the rest of these guys.” Her door slammed closed, punctuating the remark.

“It’s the *Colonel’s* job to keep you alive,” Bill replied. “I’m here to keep you sane.”

Murphy shrugged as he got into the driver’s seat. “I’d rather keep her annoyed.”

There was some nervous laughter, even from Kate. Doug lowered himself into the seat next to her as the Colonel, unsurprisingly, took shotgun. The scholars were just making themselves comfortable, spreading books and folders across their laps, when there was a tap on the glass.

Kate popped the door open. “Yes?”

Cecil cleared his throat. “Can I come along?”

“You’re not riding with Bill?”

“Nope,” he said as he climbed in and got his backpack situated. “Where goes the team, so goes I. Or something.”

The steel warehouse door went up and Murphy started the car.

“Buckle up, children,” Bill’s voice sounded tinny in the confines of the car. “And go the speed limit.”

Murphy revved the engine in response.

Cecil shook his head. “Murphy. C’mon, man. It’s a company car.”

“Oh, son,” Murphy replied. “You are very young and have much to learn in the ways of abusing the company equipment.”

The Explorer rolled down the slight incline to the parking lot outside, then the crew pulled away from the warehouse with Bill following in the van.

Chapter Five

Once they were on the highway, Murphy said, “Okay. So. I’m still waiting on the rest of my briefing. Somebody care to fill me in?”

“Well, let’s see.” The Colonel picked up his copy of the case file as if he were about to open it. Instead, he held it up. “Anything useful here?” he inquired of the back seat.

Kate shrugged. “Mostly information about Excelsior Springs and the Order’s investigation file from 1985.”

“That’s a big fuckin’ no.” The Colonel tossed the file back onto the seat. “Doc?”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“I believe this is where you come in.”

“Certainly,” Doug leaned forward in his seat. The reasonableness of his tone immediately put everyone at ease. “Let’s begin with what we do know. We have a phone call. That’s why we’re here. One of our field agents has reported an Isfet breach.”

“Yes, and while we’re on the subject,” Murphy said, “what *is* an Isfet breach?”

Doug peered over his glasses at his four companions. “How much do you all know about metaphysical dimensional theory?”

Murphy shot a mock-serious glance at the Colonel. “Colonel, how much do *you* know about metaphysical dimensional theory?”

“Actually,” the Colonel lifted his hat further on his head and readjusting it thoughtfully. “Let’s just say, most of my experience has been strictly hands-on.”

Murphy was taken aback. “Is that so?”

Twisting slightly to face Doug, the Colonel continued, “I been in a construct or three. I haven’t studied them real in-depth, though. My main concern was always gettin’ in and gettin’ out.” The Colonel jabbed his pointer finger forward, then jerked his thumb back as he spoke, barely missing the brim of Cecil’s ball cap.

Murphy was suddenly very absorbed in the road, trying very hard to pretend that he *wasn’t* driving a carload of lunatics.

“I know basic theory,” Kate said. Beside her, Cecil nodded in agreement.

“For simplicity’s sake,” Doug began, “I will fall back on some of the models that mankind has used to try to explain this for thousands of years now. Different cultures have envisioned this in different ways. The Hebrews and the ancient Germanics, for example, envisioned it as a tree—”

“That’s all very fascinating, Doc,” the Colonel interrupted as politely as he knew how. “But the ride to Excelsior is *only* half an hour, so if you please—”

Doug nodded and opened his mouth to start again, when Murphy broke in, “What kinda doctor are you, anyway?”

Doug smiled slightly. "I hold PhD's in several fields."

"Piled high and deep. Sure."

"As I was saying, picture the universe as a tree." Doug spread his hands. "Within that tree are a variety of worlds, realms, dimensions and so forth." His hands described a globe. "Each of these realms or dimensions has a certain surface tension that prevents them from breaking into one another." He brought his hands together gently, as if he were about to pray. "Now, around the universe as a whole there is the greatest degree of surface tension." Again, the doctor's hands described a globe, although a much larger one this time. "Outside the surface, is what we refer to as the Isfet realm."

"What, the final frontier?" Murphy snorted. "The place where no man has gone before?"

"Actually, one man *has* been there-- in ancient times. But we're getting ahead of ourselves."

Murphy's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Pray, continue."

Doug cleared his throat. "Isfet is the ancient Egyptian or Kemetic term for the principle of *unmaking*. *Un-Naming*."

"You're talking about destruction," Kate said.

"No, I'm talking about *un*-creation. There is a very important difference. Destruction has a place in a rational universe. Isfet does not." Doug paused, peering at Murphy's rigid back and shoulders. He waited a polite interval to see if the Detective wished to interject again. When he did not, Doug continued, confident that if even the cynic did not believe what he was saying, he could at least understand what was being said. "It's categorically impossible for a rational mind to envision a manifestation of the Isfet realm."

Murphy perked up. "Great! We can all go home then! If we can't see it, then it isn't happening as far as I'm concerned. I'll just turn this thing around—"

"How charmingly medieval of you," Doug said dryly. "As it happens, you can see them when they come into our universe, because unlike the Isfet realm, our universe is a place of form. And the formless madness that exists outside of our universe does take some form when perceived by a structured mind. Attempts to describe something from that outer realm have included the great serpent, Apep, and some of the writings of H.P. Lovecraft."

"Wait." It was Kate's turn to interrupt. "Didn't Lovecraft write *fiction*?"

"He thought he did," Doug replied. "Lovecraft was a sensitive who was not stable enough to be recruited into the Order. He was also a very powerful dreamer. It was his visions that eventually ruined his health. His father was said to have had the same abilities, which drove him insane. He died in an asylum."

"Holy *shit*." Kate sat back in her seat, clutching her head.

"Quite. Now understand, these are fine reference points. But don't take it too literally. If you start looking for Innsmouth, you're going to be sorely disappointed. Likewise, you're not going to find a Necronomicon written by a mad Arab. I've had novices ask me before. But the principle is the same."

“So what you’re saying is, it’s not that Cthulhu’s coming, but what *inspired* Cthulhu’s coming,” Murphy said.

Kate and Doug blinked at him in surprise.

“What?” he said defensively. “I read!”

“Essentially, yes,” Doug said. “There’s some debate as to whether the so-called ‘Elder Gods’ are actually individual beings or simply manifestations of the Isfet principle when it gets close enough to the structured reality—”

“Okay, Doc,” the Colonel said. “Is any of that relevant to anything we’re doing here?”

“The theories? Probably not. But there is one more thing.”

Kate stared at him, her blue eyes wide and foreboding. “The man you mentioned earlier. The one who stepped outside of our universe.”

“Yes,” Doug looked at her approvingly. “His name was Solomon and I’m fairly certain you’ve all heard of him.” He paused as his eyes swept the car again. No one spoke, so again he continued. “Solomon was a genius and a gifted magician, the likes of which, so far as I know, has never been seen before or since in human history. Having already mastered the innermost magical secrets of his own people, he journeyed to Egypt and encountered an order of priests. These priests could best be described as the precursors to Starry Wisdom.”

“Hold on, there!” the Colonel suddenly flared. “You’re telling me that *Solomon* was in *Starry Wisdom*?”

“*Initially*,” Doug emphasized. “Remember, King Solomon was not always a nice man. The details on this portion of his life are a little sketchy. Most theories hold that he was probably hoping to find a way to permanently dispose of certain djinn and earthbound demons. In any case, he managed to gain sufficient mastery of the magics that Starry Wisdom held. With his combined knowledge and talent, he created the Staff of Deleth, which we have come to call the Staff of Solomon. The Staff of Solomon, in essence, functions as a diving bell through the surface tension of different dimensions and even out of our universe entirely.”

“It’s a key,” Murphy clarified.

“That’s right.”

“So—it opens doors to other places.”

“And allows you to survive the experience. That’s an important detail.”

“So what happened then?” Kate pressed. “He went outside the universe and then what?”

Doug inhaled thoughtfully. “Put simply? Solomon repented.”

“What, that’s it? He opened the door to Isfet and then said, ‘Oops, sorry, wrong gate’?”

“Solomon stepped outside the universe of man and beheld, firsthand, exactly what he was on the verge of allowing Starry Wisdom to set loose in our world. He found that he couldn’t destroy the staff because it had become a manifestation of the principles it represented. So he divided it into four parts, and erected a temple fortress to house them-- the ancient equivalent of Fort Knox. He also asked another order of priests – the Order of which we are all members today

– to help guard them. And then he went back to the business of ruling his kingdom, forsaking the majority of his magical knowledge from that day forward.”

“I’m always one for Sunday school, Doc,” the Colonel said. “But I still don’t see what that’s got to do with us.”

“If there is an Ifset breach in progress, whether or not one of the sections of the staff is involved, we will need a section of the staff to close it back up again in a stable fashion.”

“So it’s just a matter of getting one of the sections and closing the hole,” Kate said. “That’s it? That’s all we have to do?”

“Well, *all*...”

“We *have* those sections, right? We were the temple guardians, so we should have at least one of them. Right?”

Doug peered at her over his glasses. “You do know what happened to Solomon’s temple, don’t you?”

“Sacked,” Murphy said succinctly. “First by the Babylonians, then by the Romans.”

Once again, everyone stared at him. “I *said* I read, people!” he repeated, a little more irritably this time.

“The Detective is correct,” Doug said. “However, because they did not appear to be anything of material value, and because they were so well hidden, they managed to stay within the temple grounds until the 12th century.”

“The Crusades,” Murphy said.

Doug smiled. “You like history, Detective?”

“I’ve been known to dabble.”

“Very good. Then you can probably figure out who was sent to recover the artifacts?”

“Knights Templar?”

Doug nodded. “The Knights Templar. Who were *also* members of our Order.”

“Okay, you had me there, Doc, then you lost me again,” Murphy said. “If everybody who *said* they were connected to the Knights Templar actually *were*—”

“You’re right. A lot of groups claim a connection to the Knights Templar, and it simply isn’t so. If we had time, I could take you to the archives and show you the paper trail. Suffice it to say that the Knights Templar had connections to *us*.”

“If we live through this,” Murphy eyed Doug in the rearview mirror, “I’m holding you to that.”

Doug extended his hand. “By all means.”

“So where are these-- what do you call ‘em? Solomon’s sticks? Where are they now?” the Colonel asked.

“The sticks, or staff segments, are known as the Wands of Deleth,” Doug said. “By last count, two of them are in the hands of Starry Wisdom. We’ve been stealing them back and forth

from each other ever since the Knights recovered them from the Temple. The other two—nobody knows.”

“What do you *mean* nobody knows?” The Colonel’s voice rose, causing some feedback in everyone’s ear pieces. After the collective wince had passed, he asked again, more quietly this time, “What do you mean nobody knows?”

“Their last known locations were in the hands of known operatives of the Order. Unfortunately, both of those operatives went off and died. Or at least, they are presumed dead. I know one was during the Mexican-American War. And the other died in California during the Gold Rush.”

“That’s great,” Murphy said. “That does us exactly *no* good.”

Doug shrugged. “It was the 19th century. Communication was not exactly what it was today. There were wars, earthquakes, fires, you name it. And they were a million miles from nowhere.”

“Bill,” the Colonel growled, “As soon as we stop, I want you to get on the horn, type something up—do whatever it is you do to find out the last known location on this staff thing.”

“No problem, Colonel.”

The Explorer slowed as they exited to US-69 north. From there, it was virtually a straight shot. There was a stoplight at the end of the exit ramp, and beyond that—country.

The hills rose and fell on either side of the narrow, two-lane road, fields parceled out in low, barbed-wire fences. Cows dozed; horses drank from slender, quick-moving streams. Then a long dip took them into a stretch of dark green flood plain that was accompanied by an odor of permanent saturation. Dead-end gravel roads branched off the highway, leading to muddy lots, double-wides stained with high-water lines.

At last, the ground rose again, subtly, almost imperceptibly, into a long plateau. Two minutes later, they passed the brown sign:

CITY LIMIT
EXCELSIOR SPRINGS

Chapter Six

April 6, 1995
10:32 a.m.

Jesus. Six kids in two days. Five of them in less than three hours.

Detective Murphy shook his head as he walked back to his car, away from the stink of fear and desperate parents. Six families, six groups of people wanting hope that he couldn't give them.

At least the FBI guys had been okay. Mercifully, the days when FBI and local cops competed in a case were fading fast. Not that there had been a whole hell of a lot to go on, but still...

That last house had been the worst. The parents had actually been home when it happened, but by the time Dad had kicked in the door, little Chris was gone. The window had been broken out, the screen torn clean off. The kid had apparently put up a hell of a fight: he'd left little furrows in the windowsill. Forensics had found a piece of his broken fingernail embedded in the wood. The sight of those desperate scrabblings made Murphy sick to his stomach.

So of *course* the Dad blamed himself, and of *course* the Mom was hysterical, and of *course* they wanted answers -- if not their kid back -- in thirty minutes or less. Or, at least, they wanted to know the reason *why*.

I can't blame them, Murphy thought, *I'd be ready to kill somebody myself*. The only good thing was that the bad guy had left some muddy footprints behind on the bedroom floor. They matched the ones outside, leading away. Barefoot. The perp had just *walked* off with the kid, through the Bosleys' yard, through a neighbor's yard, and up to the street. And nobody saw shit.

What the *fuck*?

He sighed again as he closed the door. Ever since the Butler case, he'd found himself saddled with these cases-- a rapist who thought he was a horseman of the apocalypse, a burnt-down Buddhist center with pentagrams burned into its lawn, that schizo who thought that Marilyn Manson had stolen his brain, and who knows how many so-called psychics, Satanists, juju men, and various other bullshit artists who swindled little old ladies with blue hair out of their social security checks.

The FBI guy from Quantico had a profile, but so far, nothing had come of it. At least two perps, the dominant one probably Caucasian. Smooth operators. They had the patience of an older man, probably with priors, though nothing had come up. Problem was, Excelsior Springs was so small and so mixed, they could be almost any background, with almost any vehicle, and not be too memorable. They'd cased out their targets, judging by their speed and success rate. Careful planners, again suggesting older perps and (hopefully) priors that could be used to ID them.

But the vics, besides being kids, had no pattern at all. Age? Anywhere from infant to twelve years old. Gender? That didn't seem to matter either. Race? Again, not picky. Income? Low- to middle-class, but that described the majority of Excelsior Springs residents.

The location of the kidnappings was almost a pattern: five of the six kids' homes were within a few minutes' walk of each other, and the perp was apparently on foot. Murphy thought of Richard Trenton Chase, the so-called "Vampire Killer," who had killed indiscriminately and had drunk his victims' blood. He had been disorganized, though. *These sickos* were so organized it was scary.

Tragically, these poor kids were most likely being used up. Eaten or something. Maybe even used to build something, like the throne Dahmer had planned to build from human skulls. This broad a target base just didn't feel right for a straight-forward sex motive. And whatever they were doing, whatever they had in mind, they were going to need a lot of space. They would also want cover and privacy, which meant indoors. Lots of nice, old houses in the area...

But what if it wasn't a local? Murphy rolled this over in his mind again for the fifth time in as many houses. Plenty of teens coming through the Job Corps. It was always possible that a team of adolescents could pull something like this off, and five of them all within twenty-four hours could be signs of someone getting impatient.

No, I have to agree with Agent Douglas. We're dealing with old pros here. Most likely it's a local. Maybe they just drugged them all, piled them into a van, and hit the highway... But no. That just didn't feel right. They've been here a while. They know the town. They're around here somewhere.

He realized he was still sitting in his car, staring at the steering wheel. When he looked back at the house, sure enough, there were the parents, watching him through the picture window. Waiting.

He waved once, started the car, and drove.

You've got a big house, or you're taking them out into the country, or you're squatting. Taking them out to the country this time of year...maybe. But no leaves means no cover from Mother Nature, unless you know some hidey-hole we haven't found yet. One big enough to hide you, them and your vehicle. Fat chance.

So if you're not a local with a house or a hidey-hole, then there's a nice, big, abandoned hotel just waiting to be used. All the kids won't go there. They say it's haunted or full of monsters. Everybody else says it's an occasional transient pit-stop. If you're a total psycho, that place might even seem inviting, especially if you do live here and know the rhythms of the town well enough to blend.

And all the kidnappings but one were within walking distance of the Royal.

ESPD was trying to find the guy who owned the hotel even now. But in the meantime, there was still one family left to check out.

Jessica Degler, age ten, latchkey kid who never made it home from the bus stop. Mom divorced, live-in boyfriend. Jessica's backpack was found in a wooded area, maybe thirty feet from the corner where she was dropped off.

And once again, no witnesses. And once again, odds were that if their little girl wasn't already dead, she would be by the time she was found. And once again, Mom was going to ask if she'd ever see her kid again.

Murphy pulled into the cul-de-sac and drove up to the house. Mom and Mom's Boyfriend were on the porch, waiting for him.

Yeah. Here we go.

* * *

Murphy got back into the car and slammed the door harder than he'd intended. It would have been nice if Brent had been the bad guy, or at least *a* bad guy. But no. Nothing so simple. Mom and Might-Someday-Be-Husband were scared as hell over their daughter, and it was pretty plain that Brent loved little Jess to pieces. And here they were, looking at him to bring their daughter home again. Shit, shit, shit.

The radio crackled into life. "Detective Murphy."

He picked up his mike. "Yeah?"

"Good news."

"Hit me. I could use some."

"We got ahold of the guy who owns the old Royal Hotel, told him about the kids. He said B&E the place and to hell with a search warrant. He'll get a new lock later."

"Hot damn. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Detective Reynolds wants to know if you're going to be in on the search."

Murphy started the car. If he'd been standing on it, he could have seen the hotel looming over the other buildings. "I'm already there."

* * *

April 12, 1995

4:17 p.m.

Murphy finished his burger and wiped his hands with a paper napkin. Fast food litter was getting thicker underfoot, the price you paid for trying to live out of your car. He started the engine and pulled out into the street.

The hotel had been a total bust. No sign of bad guys, bodies, not even a scared wino. They'd even searched for secret doors, brought dogs in. Nothing. Just a creepy, derelict place that had become a central figure in just about every juvenile superstition in town.

On the other hand, one kid had been found hiding out at a cousin's place. With Terry found, there was a pattern restored to the kidnappings, for what it was worth: five kidnappings, within a two-mile radius of the hotel. All ages and backgrounds. And it had happened before, in '35, '65 and '85.

Though of course, those cases were officially closed:

'35. There had been a lynch mob. Moses Wright, African-American, thirty-two years old, strung up by person or persons unknown. The kidnappings did not continue, so it was assumed that justice had been done.

'65. Thankfully, no one was strung up, but it was a kangaroo court. Richard Langston, again, African-American. Tried and convicted of kidnapping and murder, even though no bodies were found. He had been serving a life sentence in a federal penitentiary when he died in 1970, listed as suicide.

'85. Some vagrant by the name of Paul Henry, already under arrest for multiple charges, confessed to that year's killings to the Texas authorities. Of course, he'd confessed to *everything* he was asked about, including homicides in Connecticut and New York. Henry was sentenced to death by lethal injection, carried out in 1993.

Was Murphy the only one who could see a pattern here? Five kids, in years ending with fives, in some kind of accelerating pattern, all centered around the local Boo Radley House. Which would leave him with a set of serial killings spanning sixty years. Multigenerational families killing people and eating them were unusual, but not unheard of. And Albert Fish, the infamous "Gray Man" killer, had managed to keep his operation running for at least that long, according to some.

Okay, so not only locals, but possibly a family. That would account for the smooth timing and the secrecy. And the house they'd need. And the area knowledge.

That pointed to an occult crime. Damn.

Murphy drove carefully, winding his way through the one-way streets, keeping an eye out for the next address on his list. After talking to all the friends, relations, teachers and everybody else he could find with connections to the missing kids, Murphy had started talking to the alternative religious-types.

There was a coffee shop where a lot of them hung out. Most places with any amount of so-called "magicians" and "witches" usually formed their own little community within the larger one, just like anyone else. So, he'd started looking for any leads, such as they were. He'd looked for anyone who knew a family reputed or claiming to have a special secret tradition, or to be very powerful in the "dark arts."

But aside from a couple of kids claiming to have a family tradition in Wicca going back to before the "burning times," he'd found nothing. Just lots more crap about what flavor of boogeyman was supposed to live in the hotel, how the devil lived in the basement or Dracula threw his frat parties in the loft. One self-professed "witch queen" even said that she and her coven spent every Halloween (sorry, *Samhain*) chanting, concentrating, and generally exhausting themselves to keep whatever they thought was trapped in the hotel's top floor asleep and imprisoned. She'd also invited Murphy to attend their Beltane rites. He'd declined. Politely.

Murphy grinned and shook his head as he parked. They'd been an odd bunch, but they were okay.

Well, on to the shop, then. Whoever these perps were, they might, just might, have contact with the grown-ups who sold the paraphernalia to these people. They might, in a fit of irony, even *be* the grown-ups who sold to these people.

There was exactly one occult shop in town. It was run by a family that had been here since the town was founded. They had an old house with a basement, within the radius of the crimes.

He went up to the door of the place and saw the sign: Swithin Bell & Candle. A series of brass bells jingled as he opened the door.

It was surprisingly bright and cheerful for an occult shop. The storefront windows were large and let in a lot of light. At the front of the shop, the owner had wisely set out relatively innocuous items to draw in the curiosity-seekers: a pretty jewelry arrangement, racks of homemade soaps and candles, tins of herbal teas, angel and wizard figurines. The shop itself was long and narrow. As he walked toward the back, Murphy saw the items became progressively less mainstream: spiritual iconography and statues, Tarot decks, packets of herbs for spell-working, stones, crystals, ritual knives, and finally, books.

Murphy looked over the titles and his heart sank. It all looked pretty par for the course—Aleister Crowley, Raymond Buckland, the Kama Sutra. Hell, there was nothing here you couldn't get at B. Dalton's at the mall.

This is a waste of time, Murphy thought, turning to see the cash register in the rear left corner. The owner stood behind it, leaning on the counter with his arms folded. "Help you?"

Murphy took out his badge and approached the register. "Detective Murphy."

Without straightening up, the man took the edge of Murphy's wallet lightly between his fingers and inspected it thoroughly, his lower lip pooched out. After a moment, the man nodded and released the wallet. "I wondered when you'd show up here. This about the kidnappings?"

Murphy nodded and put the badge away. He took out a small notebook and pencil. "You the proprietor?"

The man nodded. "Luke Swithin. Nice to meet you, by the way."

Murphy smiled. "Likewise." He gave his surroundings a pointed look. "Get a lot of business up here?"

"In Excelsior, you mean?"

Murphy nodded.

A thin smile came to Swithin's lips. "You'd be surprised."

"Really." Murphy studied the man closely. He figured Swithin must be pushing forty and looked like he had a lot of Native American blood. His straight black hair was long and threaded with gray, held back with an elastic band. The long hair emphasized his sharp features and tanned, rugged face, but the eyes were blue. "So you'd say there's a lot of occult-related activity around here?"

"I don't claim to know what people do, but I make a comfortable enough living."

"I'll grant you that," Murphy said companionably. "And yet, you weren't surprised to see me."

Swithin shrugged. "Small town like this, somethin' strange happens, somebody was bound to look my way."

“And why is that?”

Swithin peered at Murphy. Murphy couldn't tell if it was a cagey look or if the man were simply trying to decide if he was dealing with a simpleton. “Small town,” he repeated.

“What's the size of the town got to do with it?”

Swithin shifted irritably. “Look. Those that ain't Baptist're Mormon. Whenever anything bad happens, who do you think a bunch of redneck Bible-thumpers blame first? Lemme tell you: it ain't Pastor Dan. Believe me, it ain't the first time.”

Murphy nodded, scribbling something on his notepad. “Yeah, my wife is half Sioux.”

“Really? What tribe?”

“Oglala.”

Genuine interest sparked in the man's eyes. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. You wouldn't think it would make a difference, but she gets her share of crap.”

“Well then, I don't have to tell *you*. You know what it's like.”

“Sure.”

Swithin thumped the countertop. “I'm sorry. Can I get you a cup of coffee or somethin'?”

“Thank you, but I'm not much of a coffee drinker.”

“Pop?”

“What do you have?”

“Coke, root beer, cream soda?”

“Sold. Cream soda.”

Swithin turned and bent down. Under the shelves behind the cash register was a small refrigerator. He produced a bottle of cream soda for Murphy and took a root beer for himself. He set them on the counter and popped their tops with a bottle opener.

“Thank you,” Murphy said with genuine appreciation. Aluminum cans just couldn't do justice to a good cream soda.

They sipped for a few moments in companionable silence. Then Swithin said, “It's happened before, you know. The kidnappings.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Swithin nodded as he tilted his head back and downed the rest of his root beer. He set the bottle down and belched thunderously. “My family's lived in Excelsior a long time. I was a little kid last time it happened. My daddy used it to scare the living shit out of me. Worked, too. I stuck close to home till I hit about fourteen.”

“What happened when you turned fourteen?”

“I discovered girls, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Married one of 'em, too.”

“Not at fourteen, I hope.”

Swithin chuckled. “Naw. Nineteen.”

“Still married?”

Swithin shook his head. “Divorced.”

“Ah. Sorry to hear.”

Swithin shrugged.

“Kids?”

“A daughter. She just turned seventeen. You?”

“Three girls and a boy.”

“My sympathies.”

Murphy grinned, “Yeah, never a dull moment.” He finished his drink and set it on the counter. “Mr. Swithin, you know I’m investigating the disappearance of some children in the area, and as a police officer I have an obligation to examine any possible leads as to their whereabouts. Would you mind if I took a look around your store with that in mind?”

“You already looked around my store.”

“I was thinking of any storage areas, basement, that kind of thing.”

Swithin’s eyebrows went up. “That’s pretty cold, there, Detective.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. But I have to ask.”

Swithin nodded. “Missing kids. I guess I don’t blame ya. But there’s no basement, and storage is employees only.”

“Fair enough.” Murphy took out his wallet again. He passed Swithin a business card. “If you think of anything, if you see or overhear anything that might have something to do with this case, please give me a call. I don’t care how far-fetched it may sound, go ahead and ring me up. You’re not going to be wasting my time.”

Swithin took the card and slipped it into the breast pocket of his worn button-down. “Sure. Let me get you my card, too.”

As he rummaged around under the counter, Murphy took one last look around the shop. Yeah, there was nothing here.

They shook hands and said goodbye.

Murphy went back out to his car and sat for a while. He took out his notepad and looked at what he had written: *Careful. Guilty until proven innocent.*

The guy fit their profile—rough though it may be. He was an older, single male. He had occult knowledge. He was smart. His store was centrally located. It was just a few blocks from the residential areas where the kidnappings had taken place. He owned his own house. He owned his own business. The guy’s family had lived in the area for a long time. He knew the town really well.

It fit perfectly. On paper, at least.

Murphy knew that he had but to pick up the phone and call a judge to get a warrant. Any warrant he asked for would be rubber-stamped within the hour.

But Luke Swithin was no kidnapper. No way.

God dammit, Murphy *liked* the man. And not just because he had given him a cream soda in a bottle. Swithin had been tense when he questioned him, sure, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

And yet.

Murphy came out of his reverie as he noticed people across the street were talking and pointing at his car. He'd been in Excelsior Springs long enough, people recognized his car—and him. No wonder Swithin knew who he was.

The people who were pointing at his car were now pointing at Swithin Bell & Candle.

Aw, crap. Swithin had been right about that, too.

* * *

April 13, 1995

7:00 a.m.

“Captain, you're making a mistake,” Murphy said again. “I *talked* to him. He's *not* a kidnapper.”

“Look, if you don't want to participate in this investigation, then you can go on back to Wyandotte.”

“I didn't say that. I'm just saying, for the record, that I feel that this is a mistake. And I think that this mistake is really going to wreck a person's life.”

“Lives have already been wrecked. Five families. That's why we're here. So instead of sittin' here talkin' about it, let's get some police work done.”

Murphy grit his teeth, “Yes, sir.”

Other officers were already approaching the house, talking among themselves quietly. Murphy could hear a few words here and there, all of them loaded with venom.

GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT.

They waited for him and the Captain. Murphy followed the older man, putting on his best cop face. The Captain rapped on the door. Hard. After a second, he did it again.

The door opened. A teenaged girl looked out at them, first annoyed, then confused. “May I help you?”

“Miss Swithin?”

“Yes?”

“My name is Captain Baker. I have a warrant here to search these premises. Is your father home?”

“What?”

“Miss, we have a warrant to search your home. Is your father here?”

Murphy winced. *Ah, hell.*

Luke Swithin appeared behind his daughter and put a hand on her shoulder. “Honey, let me handle this.”

“Mister, there ain’t nothin’ for you to handle about this. We have a warrant to search your premises, including your vehicle, your garage and your place of business. You have the right to attend the search, the right to contact an attorney, and the right to get the hell out of the way.”

Swithin glanced at Murphy.

How do you convey regret and apology to somebody without breaking the neutral expression? Murphy tried.

Swithin nodded curtly and opened the door. “All right, I’m not stoppin’ ya. But I’m callin’ my lawyer.”

The Captain stepped in. “You do that.”

“Just lettin’ you know.” He crossed the floor to his phone. “Eileen, why don’t you head over to Katherine’s for a bit, till this blows over.”

She shook her head. “I want to stay with you, Dad.”

“You don’t want to see this.”

“I know. But I’m staying.”

There was a pause, then Luke Swithin nodded. He held out his arm and she went to him.

Sure doesn’t look abused, Murphy observed. *Go figure.*

Luke Swithin was still holding his daughter when his attorney finally answered the phone. He had to shout to make himself heard over the sounds of the search.

* * *

From the *Kansas City Star*, April 15, 1995:

OCCULT SHOP OWNER RELEASED BY EXCELSIOR PD

By Donna Grassley

Excelsior Springs, Mo. -- Occult shop owner Luke Swithin, owner of Swithin Bell & Candle, Excelsior Springs, Mo., was released today on his own recognizance by Excelsior Springs Police Department. Swithin, 37, was described repeatedly as a person of interest by Capt. Charles Baker, ESPD, and was held in connection with the disappearances of five Excelsior Springs children.

“At this point, the Excelsior Springs Police Department has no intention of pressing charges against Mr. Swithin,” said Baker. “However, we are obligated, especially under the circumstances of these crimes, to investigate every possible lead to our fullest ability.”

Police searched Swithin’s home and business. Among the items found at the properties were occult paraphernalia and art depicting various scenes of human sacrifice. Also found were assorted knives and swords, Satanic texts, and assorted Native American artifacts, some of which include eagle feathers. Possession of Native American artifacts and eagle feathers is against federal law under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the Eagle Feather Law. ESPD has opened an investigation into Swithin’s holdings as Swithin claims Native American heritage.

Mr. Swithin was unavailable for comment.

* * *

May 24, 2002
11:26 a.m.

Murphy found himself again at the storefront of Swithin Bell & Candle.

Captain Baker was no longer with the force, so Murphy couldn’t tell him, “I told you so.”

The kidnapping case of 1995 had one good outcome—no innocent people died or went to jail in place of the real kidnapper. But the case had gone unsolved. And now there were five more kids missing, and in a year that didn’t end in five. Which pretty much put to pot Murphy’s theory, in the opinion of all the other investigators.

Yet, here he was. Working their case for them again. In front of Swithin’s shop. Trying to get up the cojones to go in. This was one of those times when Murphy ardently wished he was one of those cops who drank on the job.

He got out of his car and went up to the door. As he turned the handle, he said to himself, *Just remember, if he reaches behind the counter and pulls out a shotgun, you are allowed to duck.*

The shop looked pretty much the same—toys in front, real stuff in the back. It didn’t feel as cheery though, even with the May sunlight pouring through the windows. Swithin was in the back, moving books from a rack onto a table. As Murphy approached, he saw the table had a sign on it, LAST CHANCE, 70% OFF BOOKS.

Swithin stopped what he was doing when he saw Murphy. His face turned to stone. Turning his back, he resumed de-shelving books.

Murphy maintained a respectful distance. “You know why I’m here.”

“Can’t be to apologize. You already did that. For all the good it did me.”

“Right,” Murphy looked away for a moment. “I just wanted to make sure you still had my card. I’m working the case again. Nothing’s changed.”

“Not for you.”

“I tried to call.”

“Had to go to an unlisted number. Crank calls.”

“Yeah. So I, uh, just wanted to make sure you still had my card. If you know anything, anything you might see or hear, it’d be appreciated.”

Finally, Swithin turned around. He reached into his breast pocket and produced a card, which he set on the far edge of the table, nearest to Murphy. “That’s my lawyer. If you need to talk to somebody, you talk to him. I got nothin’ to say.” He turned away. “No offense.”

Murphy took the card. “None taken.”

That was the last time Murphy saw Luke Swithin.

Chapter Seven

April 23, 2005
11:45 a.m.

Murphy turned onto the main drag and marveled silently. Excelsior had changed a lot in a few short years. It was still far from a bustling metropolis but at least it no longer looked like a dying floozy.

The sign said MO-10 east but the locals knew it as West Jesse James Road, which went on for about half a mile. Modern suburban amenities had quietly appeared along its narrow corridor, Wal-Mart and McDonald's and other fast food joints, buoyed by their proximity to the Kansas City area, the town branching out the way a plant strains toward sunlight.

After the first half-mile, the road was still flat and straight, but the scenery became decidedly more dated—'70s and '80s style strip malls filled with mostly empty storefronts, liquor stores, used car lots. There was also a farm equipment dealer, a last bastion to the town's rural underpinnings, though Excelsior had never been ideal farm land, being mostly situated on steep, rocky bluffs that overlooked more flood plain.

After the first mile, West Jesse James Road became Kearney Street, dipping abruptly before passing under an old bridge. On the other side was where the city's historic district began. Stately old homes with wide, green lawns overlooked the road below. Cheaper, post-war era housing languished in front, closer to the road, scowling at the passing traffic with their ripped screen doors and splintered porch posts.

The main strip suddenly wound up another hill, around a bend, and back down a steep slope, passing an old hospital that was now the Job Corps center, where dissolute youth lounged about outside until curfew: carless, hungry, bored.

Situated in the valley was the old downtown. Back to the west, the grand old houses still commanded the bluffs. Great slab stairways from the town's heyday zigzagged crazily down the steep sides, forming what had once been a riverside promenade leading to the old square, (where Swithin Bell & Candle had once operated). This was lined with the expected shoppes: an ice cream parlor, an antique store, a florist, the old bank where the local historical society was housed, a quilt shop, and even an old drug store that still had a soda fountain and sold penny candy.

The eponymous springs were discovered in 1880. A farmer's daughter, ill with tuberculosis, was reportedly healed after drinking from a spout that had formed on the banks of the Fishing River. Almost immediately, people flocked from all over the country to drink and bathe in the miraculous waters. Waters found almost nowhere else in the world.

Resorts sprang up. Doctors began to prescribe water treatment for virtually any ailment or infirmity. Athletes and film stars came to Excelsior to stay at the spas. The railroad put in a line from Chicago, ushering even more visitors into the city, which by this time, had uncovered as many as twenty separate springs. The water's medicinal properties were lauded by scientists at the 1893 World's Fair. More hotels went up, as did boarding houses, an opera house, a Mason Hall, a theater, stables, stores—Excelsior had become a real honest-to-goodness boomtown. At

one time, it was the largest city in Clay County. No other town in the state had experienced as much growth in a single year.

One of the few hotels still standing, and the undisputed grand dame, was the Elms on Regent Street, overlooking the Fishing River falls. It had managed to retain its fin de siècle splendor, still taking guests and chartering events despite having been destroyed twice by fires, once in 1898 and once in 1908. Harry Truman slept there the night of his victory in 1948, and Al Capone was said to have been a guest as well.

The Hall of Waters was built in 1936, which, in addition to having its own pool, spa, and water bar, shipped bottled mineral water around the world. So even during the Depression, Excelsior managed to prosper.

Then came the post-war years, the Space Age, the age of skepticism. The FDA publicly and loudly denounced hydrotherapy as having no proven medical benefits whatsoever. And as quickly as the city had boomed, it went bust. A group of devoted citizens got together and had the Hall of Waters declared a historic site; it was now a civic building. All the hotels but the Elms had since closed their doors.

The Royal Hotel, named for the Royal Spring upon which it was built, was just one of many ghost buildings on a one-way street just off of what used to be the beaten track. Across the street from a low-rate barber shop and a lawyer, it stood between two other abandoned hotels.

For all of the stories and rumors surrounding the Royal, it should have been another House on Haunted Hill. Yet there really didn't seem to be anything remarkable about it, flanked as it was by two other buildings just like it. Sagging old brick structures leaning drunkenly together, unadorned windows, and falling, burnt-out signs, epitomized the town's long, slow decline from 1950 to the new millennium. It was a place more sad than forbidding, full of shuttered-up memory and regret.

Bill had turned off once they approached the older section of town to find a secure location. As soon as he was settled, he logged in to the Order's mainframe and queried "Solomon," "staff," and "Deleth."

A text box popped up: ACCESS DENIED.

Bill laughed mirthlessly. "Cute, guys. Now is not the time." Keeping one eye on the feeds from the beat cams and scanners, he hit a button on his headset that connected him to HQ. "Ken? My man. Yeah, I've hit a bit of a snag. What? Sure, I'll hold."

The team had parked on the street in front of the hotel. Murphy glanced briefly upward at the place, then got out of the car. The others followed suit.

"You been in here before, Murphy?" the Colonel asked as Murphy came around the front of the vehicle.

"Yeah."

"Kidnapping case, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"And?"

“We didn’t find anything,” Murphy said shortly. The five of them got out of the vehicle and stood before the building. The Royal was on a corner lot, so there were two entrances, one on the north side and one on the east. There was a cement wraparound porch that looked relatively solid, although the banisters were rotting.

“Detective, may I inquire, did you utilize the Order’s resources during your investigation?” Doug asked.

“You may, and I did. In 2002.”

“I take it, it was less than fruitful.”

“Less than,” Murphy affirmed. “There were no conjunctions, no high holidays, not even on all the religions you guys keep track of—there was nothing on anybody’s calendar to account for this crap.” He started walking around the side of the building. “What concerns me more is what kind of shape this place is in. The ground floor *was* relatively stable. The upper floors were iffy in spots. Got worse as you went up until you hit the ballroom, then you *really* had to watch your step.”

They walked around. On the east side, electric signs installed sometime in the 40s hung by threads of wire, their bulbs long-since broken out. The doors on this side had stained glass windows above them with colorful art nouveau designs that still caught the sun in ruby and emerald though they hadn’t been washed in years. The back of the building didn’t even look like a hotel, just a flat brick face with boarded up windows and rickety fire escapes.

“Doors,” Kate said questioningly. “There are doors up there.”

Murphy nodded. “I think there used to be a series of balconies here, or maybe another building—see, there’s the foundation there. Anyway, yeah, you’ve got doors up the rear wall here.”

Kate looked up. “That’s a five-story drop.”

“They’re probably still sealed pretty tight. If nothing else, look before you step.”

They picked their way through a narrow alley that was overgrown with weeds. The alley appeared to have been some sort of connecting corridor at one time, with glass doors leading back to the front. The glass was gone, but the frames remained.

“Everybody, be careful,” Murphy cautioned. “Oh, and the basement—” he shook his head. “Let’s try to avoid going down to the basement.”

“How are we going to get in?” Kate asked. “I assume it’s locked.”

They circled back to the main entrance.

“Well, when we were here as part of an official investigation, the owner of the hotel was very helpful. But we’re in a bit of a hurry,” Murphy produced a lock-pick gun, “So let’s not bother him.”

Their voices had grown hushed as they went up the wide cement steps that led to the front door.

Kate hung back, unnerved. “I don’t think I want to go in there.”

“Nothing to fear but asbestos,” Murphy said cheerfully.

“Do you sense something in particular?” Doug asked Kate.

She tried to smile as everyone turned to her. “No, no, I’m not psychic. I just don’t like it.”

Bill’s voice spoke into her earpiece, “It’s okay, Kate. I’m here. The Colonel’s with you. Everything will be fine.”

“We’re going to *have* to go in there at some point,” the Colonel said. “We got a job to do.”

Murphy went to work on the lock. “I wasn’t kidding about the asbestos, you know. I’m probably dying of mesothelioma as we speak.”

“Then what are you worried about?” Kate asked, echoing the tone he usually took with her. “You only die once.”

“Not in my experience.” He removed the padlock and opened the front door.

“Ground team, there are masks and gloves in the Explorer,” Bill said. “You might want to put them on.”

Murphy dangled the keys close to Kate’s nose and wagged them. She heaved a sigh, snatched them out of his hand and went to get the equipment out of the Explorer. She returned carrying not only painter’s masks and gloves, but five flashlights as well.

Once everyone was outfitted, they proceeded cautiously. The Colonel went in first, followed by Murphy. As they crossed the threshold, both drew their guns, the Colonel a six-gun in each hand, Murphy his single automatic. When they were satisfied the lobby was secure, they motioned the others inside.

Kate and Doug stepped inside and Cecil brought up the rear, pistol in hand.

The first impression was one of utter stillness. The dust swirled through the air at their passage as if it had not been stirred in years, accenting the beams of sunlight as they sliced past yellowing pillars and made abstract designs on the stained green carpet. The dirty windows gave the outside a peculiar faded quality, as if the outside world was far away. The smell of mold and mildew was thick on the stale air. Antique chandeliers and elaborate mouldings still adorned the ceiling, out-of-place echoes of lost elegance, overshadowed by chunks of loose plaster, exposed pipes and drooping duct work.

The floor was scattered with trash and human refuse, the walls splashed with graffiti and stains, some from water leaks and some from other, more predictable sources.

“All readings normal,” Bill said, scanning the data on his screen. “Nothing moving but you guys.”

“Roger that,” the Colonel replied. “Mr. Murphy, you’ve done room-sweeping before, I presume?”

Murphy nodded, looking relieved. For a moment, he’d thought they were going to proceed relying solely on Cecil’s equipment. “You go left, I’ll go right.”

“You two hang back,” the Colonel said to Kate and Doug. “Keep your eyes open. Cecil, you’re rear guard.”

“Right.”

“What exactly are we looking for?” Kate asked, spying a corner someone had used as a latrine. She turned away with a shudder.

“I guess we’ll know it when we see it,” Murphy said. “Anything unusual—well, *more* unusual.”

They went up the back stairs to the second floor, where there were long hallways with rooms on either side, the flooring black from years of disuse. Here, the graffiti took a more sinister turn: human forms copulating in swarms of spiders; skulls leering out of women’s mid-sections; twisted, irregular shapes bent in disturbing ways that were hard to look at for long.

“Was all this here when you were here before?” the Colonel asked.

“Yeah, it all looks pretty much the same.”

They stepped into the first room together. As the Colonel opened a closet door, Murphy pulled some old mattresses back from the wall, checking behind them.

“So, you said you work ‘weird’ cases. You see a lot of stuff like this before?”

“What, graffiti?”

“I mean stuff like this,” the Colonel gestured to one of the walls, which featured a child vomiting blood like a waterfall, with a young woman bathing in it beneath him.

“No,” Murphy admitted. “And come to think of it, there’s more of it now. Our Picasso has been busy the past few years. But ooky pictures by themselves don’t really mean much, you know? We couldn’t tie them to anything.”

Doug and Kate examined the illustrations as well.

“What about you, Doc?” the Colonel called. “What’s your take on all this weird shit?”

“Kate has studied art history,” Bill offered.

“Well, I’ll be happy if anybody can explain,” the Colonel said agreeably.

Kate took a step back, trying to survey the expanse of wall as a whole. “It may just be outsider art.”

Doug nodded. “Possibly. But it seems an awfully large coincidence that there have been so many disappearances near this place and there just happens to be such a large quantity of these images.” Stroking his chin, he leaned in closer to a mass of eyes, fire and tentacles. “There may be something here—this one closely resembles some of the mandalas that Jung’s more disturbed patients created during his day. But the imagery here is more overtly demonic.”

The five of them stood contemplating the hallway for a few moments more.

“Well, come on,” the Colonel grunted.

They went up to the third floor. It was darker on this level. Most of the windows had been boarded up. They all switched on their flashlights. There were more pictures on this floor—more than on the two previous floors combined. They continued to grow in violence and grotesquerie. The team progressed wordlessly, not looking overmuch at the images anymore. They had moved closer together, not huddling exactly, but tightening up the ranks.

“Guys,” Bills voice made them all jump, “Can somebody get a shot of that left side again? I didn’t get that.”

They all turned. Cecil panned carefully down a long scene he wouldn’t soon forget, painted vividly in yellow.

“Is everybody all right?” Bill asked. “You all got quiet.”

“It ain’t exactly cozy in here,” the Colonel said. “Let’s hurry the hell up.”

* * *

Jess was ten years old. She could only remember her first name. She didn’t know how long she’d been here. She tried not to think about that too much.

There were other kids here, too. In the Picture Hotel. That’s what they all called it, because of the nasty pictures on the walls. Some of the kids had been here for a very, very long time. All of them were there for the same reason. The Big Girl with the mean laugh, the Blood Woman, and the Bad Thing. Nobody liked to talk about the Bad Thing.

The Big Girl and the Blood Woman stayed in the Other Hotel where the Bad Thing happened. Monsters lived there, too. Only Pet liked to go to the Other Hotel. No one remembered her name anymore. She was just Pet. Pet was mean. She tattled. They tried not to make Pet mad or she got them in trouble with the Big Girl. The Big Girl liked quiet and secrets, but she liked hurting people more.

Somebody bright had come into the Picture Hotel again, and everybody was waking up. It was hard, sometimes, to stay awake. But when bright people came, everybody got up to look.

Bright people were usually grown-ups. Some were brighter than others. These were really bright, four men and a woman. Everybody got up real quick. They all wanted to come and see. It had been such a long time.

One of them, Jess thought she’d seen there before. She asked Nicholas if he remembered, but he said he didn’t. Jess thought the man was a police man. You were supposed to be able to trust a police man. But she had trusted the Big Girl before. And then the Bad Thing happened.

“Don’t think about it,” Nicholas told her. You could always tell if somebody was thinking about it. Or trying to.

She thought about the Police Man instead. He had seemed nice. She remembered, now, he had been talking to the other police men when they were here before. They had been talking about missing kids. He had said her name. He’d been worried. Mad, too, but not at her.

What if she talked to him?

Pet was looking over at them and frowning. “Don’t do it,” Nicholas said.

Jess quickly turned her back.

The bright people were coming up the stairs and everybody hid. The Police Man was with them.

Jess didn't hide like everyone else. She stayed where she could watch. But she was careful. No one saw her.

The bright people were looking at the pictures on the walls. All the kids thought they were gross. Some of them were about things that had happened in the Other Hotel, which scared them. How did those bright people know about those things? Why did they paint pictures of them?

When bright people painted the pictures, some of the kids yelled at them until they went away. They would pretend they couldn't see or hear you, and it could take a while. But that was all right, the kids didn't get in trouble for yelling at the bright people. The Big Girl said it was best if they all stayed away.

The bright people weren't talking about her this time. They were talking about the pictures. Maybe it wasn't the same man.

From where he was hiding, Nicholas pleaded, "Jess!" But she ignored him. She really wanted to see if it was the same man or not.

The bright people were getting close. She waited, listening. Then ran. In school, nobody could run faster than her and the hall was just a tiny run. She looked as she ran, and she got a good look.

It *was* him. The Police Man.

But he was here for the pictures. He was here with four others and they were just walking around, looking at the walls. They weren't there for her at all.

She went to a corner and sank down against the wall, her lower lip trembling. She knew she shouldn't cry. Babies cry and she wasn't a baby. And besides, if Pet saw, she would make fun of her.

Jess covered her mouth so no one would hear.

* * *

The Colonel and Murphy had continued their search. Kate and Doug stood nervously in the doorway, with Cecil keeping watch in the hall. Doug ventured a few steps inside.

"This still has food in it," Doug nudged an ancient-looking wrapper with his shoe.

"Yeah," Murphy said. "I'm surprised rats haven't gotten it."

"Wait outside in the hall, Doc," the Colonel ordered. "You and Kate help Cecil keep an eye out."

Doug edged back towards the door, frowning. "Why *haven't* the rats gotten it?" he said, more to himself than to anyone in particular.

Kate stared at him, then at the wrapper.

"I haven't seen any droppings, have you?" Doug asked her.

She shook her head, eyes widening in comprehension. "If there were rats, we'd be able to hear them in the walls. But I haven't heard anything. Not a sound."

"No raccoons, either. No birds' nests in the rafters. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Not a good sign."

"Not good at all."

"Good catch, Doc," the Colonel said as he stood, dusting his hands off.

"The owner may have had the place fumigated, had exterminators in," Murphy said. "Might have some of those sonar things to keep pests out."

"Negative," Bill interjected. "If there were any type of sonic devices, I'd be able to pick it up."

"Exterminators, then," Murphy nodded as if to agree with himself.

"Aw, hell, Murphy," the Colonel said. "There was shit in the corner downstairs. I saw some crack pipes. What makes you think the owner would waste his time fumigatin'?"

"Well, what do you suggest?" Murphy asked somewhat snappishly. "Monsters came in and ate the rats? I'm trying to be rational here."

"No, but what do rats do on a sinking ship? They get the hell off the boat, son."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"Cecil, pan left again," Bill said. "What was that?"

"Oh, very funny, Bill," Murphy said. "Great timing."

"I'm not trying to be funny. Something just moved down the hallway."

Cecil raised his gun. "I didn't see anything, Bill. What're you getting?"

"Nothing now," Bill said. "Hang on. I'll re-play."

"Great." Murphy closed his eyes for a moment. "That's just great." He and the Colonel exchanged a look. Then they both raised their guns as well.

"Doc, Kate. Cecil, you too," The Colonel motioned for them to come into the room. They did so without delay. "What have you got, Bill?"

"Image picked up by the camera's halo scanner showed a figure, about four and a half feet tall, run from one room across the hall into another. Had long hair. Looked like a girl. A little girl."

Their disagreement forgotten, Murphy and the Colonel stepped forward and peered out into the hall. They both moved calmly, professionally.

"Did any of you see anything?" the Colonel asked. Everyone shook their heads. For an agonizing moment, no one moved. "Bill, can you at least tell what door it was?"

"Checking that now, Colonel. Hang on." Another moment dragged by, then at last Bill came back with, "Fifth door down, on the left. The far wall."

Murphy looked at the Colonel. "Your call, boss."

The Colonel held up his hand. “Bill, can you get any other readings on this thing?”

“Nothing on the heat scan, except for you guys. But whatever was down that hallway is still there.”

“Shit.” The Colonel glanced back at the others, who had not moved, then at Murphy. “If we run, we’re fucked. If we go after it, we’re fucked. If we stay put...”

“I’m comfortable. You comfortable?” Murphy responded evenly.

“Hell no. But if we’re dealing with a ghost, there’s a chance that we can try and talk to it.”

“Take it away, boss.”

“Not *me*, idiot,” the Colonel growled. “That’s where *they* come in,” he jerked his head back towards Kate and Doug. “How ‘bout it, Doc? You feel up to it?”

Doug shook his head. “Not even remotely.”

“Kate?”

Her face was sheet-white. “I could try.”

“Atta girl. Why don’t you just try it from there?”

“Um.” Kate cleared her throat. “Bill? What should I say to it?”

“If it is what it appears to be,” he replied, “then you are dealing with a child. Probably a scared child. So keep that in mind.”

“Right. A kid.” Kate swallowed. “Uh, hello?”

No one moved. No one breathed.

There was no response.

“Try again,” the Colonel said.

More resolute this time, Kate called, “Hello? It’s okay. We don’t want to hurt you. You can come out.”

The minutes continued to creep by.

* * *

In the van, Bill stared intently at the dot of blue light on his screen. It had been shuffling about until Kate called to it, and then had gone stock-still. Like the rest of the team, he too held his breath to see how it would respond to Kate’s overtures—if it would respond at all.

Then, all at once, the dot of light vanished.

It was so sudden, he started a bit in his seat. He assumed it was a ghost—there were plenty of terms to describe such entities, but it all came down to the same thing: something that had at one point been human, and therefore, potentially benign. Ghosts often turned tail and

disappeared back into the ether from whence they came, which is what this thing appeared to have done.

But it might not have been a ghost. It might have been something else. It could have reared and attacked, or called for more of its kind, or opened a dialogue, or tried to possess someone.

It still could. There was no way to know.

After a deep breath, he spoke into the mike. "Ground team, whatever it was, it's gone."

Doug sagged with visible relief. Murphy and the Colonel both raised their heads.

"You sure?" the Colonel asked.

"It was there and then it wasn't. My readings are all normal now. Everything looks clear."

Murphy lowered his gun. "You might want to re-check your equipment there, Bill."

"Oh, really?" If Murphy was being a smart-ass, then he must have relaxed. If Murphy was relaxed, Bill could relax. Sitting back in his chair, he allowed himself a sip of coffee. "Why is that, Murph?"

"Just to make me feel better." He laughed a little. "Some ghost. You people almost had me going there for a minute. And then what happened?" He looked at Kate. "*Nothing*. What a surprise."

She arched an eyebrow. "I notice you had your gun cocked and ready to go."

"Yeah, well. Just because I don't believe in it doesn't mean it isn't out there."

"What? Was that a concession?"

"I'll let you know." Murphy turned to the Colonel. "Now what?"

"We keep moving."

"After *that*?" Kate asked. "You just want to keep *going*?"

"We need to know what's going on. You got a better way of finding out?" the Colonel asked. "Good Christ, woman. We ain't even run into anything nasty yet."

"What would you call that—what just happened?" Kate demanded.

"A near-miss." The Colonel shrugged. "Do you want out? Tell me now while we can still walk you back downstairs. Once we get up past this floor, if you decide you want out, you'll be seeing yourself out."

"I'm in," she said quickly.

"Then dammit, quit asking questions and *move*."

They re-grouped and went slowly into the hall. Murphy and the Colonel resumed searching, while Doug and Kate stood back-to-back outside, now keeping a very careful watch down both lengths of the hallway. Cecil, as usual, was behind them.

At this point, since a plausible risk had been established, Murphy and the Colonel abandoned the thorough searching method they'd been using in favor of room-clearing. Yet their pace slowed even further. Everyone was extremely cautious.

They knew they were being watched. They just didn't know by what.

* * *

"Hey, Jess, you okay?" It was Nicholas again.

"Yeah," She looked up at him. "Why?"

"You were asleep when I got here. The grown-ups went up—hey, you been crying?"

She swiped at her face. "No."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Pet saw what you did, you know. She's gonna tell."

Jess sat up quickly. "Where is she?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. What are you gonna do?"

"I don't *know*, okay?"

Nicholas backed away. "Okay, okay. *God.*"

They both froze, looking guiltily around. One of the Big Girl's rules was no cursing. That included saying G-O-D. But neither Pet nor the Big Girl showed up at the moment, so they must not have heard.

They didn't know everything.

The Police Man had gone upstairs. That was a bad place, too. Not as bad as the Other Hotel, but still... She had to stop him and his friends. If she was going to be punished anyway, it was the least she could do.

Jess stood and ran. Behind her, she heard Nicholas calling, but she didn't slow down. Nobody could catch her when she ran.

* * *

The team had finished the third floor and had moved up to the fourth. It was, by comparison, almost clean. The litter was sparse, the graffiti minimal.

Bill's voice suddenly blared into their earpieces, "Guys, *incoming!*"

The Colonel whirled, pointing his gun at the last room they'd cleared. "*Go! Move!*"

Kate and Doug leapt into the room.

Bill narrowed the halo scan to isolate the signal that was moving in on the team— or more precisely, moving toward Cecil. The halo scanner suddenly filled with the sight of a young girl's face, twisted in feral-like intensity, her mouth open.

“*Cecil!*” Bill shouted.

Just as Bill shouted, Cecil felt a blast of cold hit him. He jerked back with a cry, colliding with the Colonel, who shoved him forward, “I said *move*, dammit!”

Cecil staggered forward for balance. “Wait, there’s something there—”

Murphy and the Colonel spoke at once. “*What? Where?*”

“A girl. She was right in front of Cecil.” Bill said, his eyes on the halo scanner. “Maybe the same one.”

“Well, find her!” the Colonel barked.

“There! She’s right in there with you! Next to Murphy.”

Murphy stared crazily over the top of his gun. “What the fuck—*Bill?*”

“She’s right next to you,” Bill repeated.

Doug gingerly put a hand out, feeling for the tell-tale cold air. “I think she’s in *front* of you.”

Murphy took a small step backward, still gripping his weapon.

“Colonel, it’s a little girl,” Bill said, “I suggest—”

The Colonel nodded at Murphy. “Stand down.”

“*What?*” Murphy looked at the Colonel incredulously, but pulled his weapon back, so it pointed at the ceiling.

“We’re dealing with a little girl here,” the Colonel said. “I don’t think we need our guns.” Very slowly, the Colonel holstered his guns and spread his hands. At that, Murphy’s posture relaxed infinitesimally.

Something was definitely there, struggling to form itself in the half-light that was filtering through the slotted boards over the windows. A child’s voice seemed to drift in as if they were hearing an echo from somewhere else. “—*out of here!*”

Kate inched closer, staring intently at the wavering form. Doug looked from it to Kate and back again, his blue eyes sharp behind his spectacles.

The form became an outline, which gradually solidified into a young girl, wearing jeans and a pink T-shirt. As the team watched, her white tennis shoes became visible against the dusty floor. She was under five feet tall—level with Murphy’s chest, which she frantically beat with her small fists, apparently trying to get his attention.

Murphy’s hands immediately went up in a pacifying gesture. “Hey, easy, easy. It’s okay...”

“No, it isn’t!” Her voice was perfectly audible now, hoarse from shouting and crying. Tears streamed down her face. “Go away! Go away! This is a bad place!”

The girl paused, alerted to something the rest of them couldn't hear. She looked over Murphy's shoulder at the door and let out a scream, her small face contorting into an expression of abject terror. "*They're coming! You have to leave now! Get out of here, PLEASE!*"

Bill's voice came in quickly over the earpieces, "She's right, Colonel. Something's coming. A lot of them, strong signals, high temps."

Murphy opened his mouth to speak but the Colonel's voice cut through the room first, "We have to pull out."

"What?" Kate cried.

Murphy looked at the Colonel, stricken, "We can't just *leave* her here!"

The Colonel shook his head and re-drew his revolvers. "We can't help her now. We have to go."

"But—" Murphy started to argue, then broke off. The girl had disappeared. "Where'd she go?"

"Come *on!*"

Murphy looked from the Colonel to the spot where the girl had been, clearly torn.

"We'll be back," the Colonel assured him. "Just come on, now."

"What about her?" Kate asked.

"We do the best we can by her. And that means not letting her warning go to waste."

The five of them all but ran down the stairs, across the lobby, and back out into the daylight.

Chapter Eight

2:13 p.m.

The team leaned against the Explorer, pausing to catch their collective breath.

“Well,” Murphy said at last. “That was interesting.”

Kate ripped off her face mask. “*Interesting?* What is that, you covering until you get your skepticism back?”

“My skepticism is quite intact, thank you very much.”

“Oh, I suppose you have an explanation for what just happened in there?”

“Absolutely.” They all turned to him expectantly. “Hallucination.”

“Oh, come *on*—”

“No, really. *Think* about it.”

Kate made a show of pretending to think it over. “Hm. No. No, that makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. Can you imagine what kind of chemicals might be decaying in that place? Chemicals that we were inhaling? Plus, given the general atmosphere of the place, we were bound to imagine something.”

“Murphy, I realize you think a lot of this stuff is bullshit,” the Colonel said, “But there’s a lot of things out there that *are* real. Stuff you can’t explain. I wouldn’t even try. Your idea of so-called ‘reality’ may just get broadened more than you would like by the time we’re done here.”

“Really. Well, no offense, Colonel—”

“Bill,” the Colonel turned aside, cutting him off. “We need to get off the street here.”

“Roger that,” Bill replied. “I think I may have found a spot.”

“All right, then. Let’s get to it.”

* * *

Doug looked around. “I’ll admit I’m curious as to how you arrived at this being the ‘secure location’ we needed, Bill.”

The Sonic Drive-In was about half-full. The car-hop had brought them their food without so much as a second glance.

“Actually, it’s pretty secure,” Bill assured him, “Here we are, parked side-by-side in case we want to show each other something, surrounded by other parked cars doing the same thing we seem to be doing. And if we continue using the earpieces, we don’t even have to roll our windows down. And hey—*food*.”

Kate had already devoured her hamburger and fries and was now eyeing Doug's tater tots. "You gonna eat those?"

"Please." He handed them over.

"Thanks!"

As she went to work on them, Doug pulled out an order of onion rings for himself. "Helping ghosts come through can be hungry work, can't it?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Kate said, abashed. "Look, if you wanted these—"

Doug held up an onion ring. "I ordered those for you. You've been working hard and your body needs the carbohydrates. Also, they have iodized salt which will help balance your body's electrolytes."

Mouth still full of fried potatoes, Kate looked at him questioningly.

"A ghost is almost never able to materialize such that it can be clearly seen by the naked eye, much less to such detail. It requires a great deal of energy, and ghosts, by definition, don't have very much. Poltergeists, on the other hand, can generate a great deal of crude energy by channeling violent impulses, but almost never manifest at all. When we were all looking at the young lady in question, we all extended some energy toward her to help with her manifestation. But there is no way she should have been able to get that much." He looked at Kate pointedly. "She didn't get that kind of energy from Detective Murphy or from the Colonel. And I know she didn't get it from me."

"What about me?" Cecil asked.

"Nor did she get it from Cecil," Doug continued. "That would leave you."

Kate stopped chewing.

Murphy sighed heavily. "For the last time, people. There are no such things as ghosts. Or poltergeists. Or magic."

The Colonel shrugged. "All right, then. Let me ask you this. If you had someone you trusted – and I mean trusted with your goddamn life – come to you and say, 'Hey, I just saw a werewolf and it's headed this way,' what would you do?"

"Well, I would assume they saw something and investigate."

"Uh-huh. Any extra precautions you might take there, Detective?"

"Well, seeing as I don't have any silver bullets, I suppose—"

"But if you did, would you load with silver bullets just in case?"

"Well, yeah, of course. If it was someone I trusted that much, just in case I was wrong."

The Colonel nodded. "Bill, I need the best image of that little girl's face printed out for us. Would you please?"

"Coming right up."

Bill disappeared to the back of the van momentarily, then returned with the picture blown up to an 8 ½ x 11. The Colonel rolled down his window, accepted the photo from Bill, and passed it to Murphy. "You trust your own eyes, Detective?"

Murphy paled as he examined the image. After a moment, he handed it back to the Colonel. Balling up his half-eaten burger in its wrapper, he tossed it into the sack. Clearly, he had lost his appetite.

No one said anything for several minutes.

“All right there, Murph?” Bill asked at last.

When Murphy did not respond right away, the Colonel cleared his throat. “I know this is a lot to take in here, pard, but—”

Murphy’s face, still quite pale, contorted in irritation. “Jesus, would you people stop playing *Ghost Hunter* for just one goddamn minute? That was Jessica Degler!”

A stunned silence greeted this—stunned and uncomprehending.

“Jessica Degler!” he repeated. “Disappeared in 1995!”

“Shit,” Bill said. “Are you sure?”

“Would I be saying it if I wasn’t sure?”

Bill wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then got up and disappeared into the back of the van once more.

“Where’d you go?” Murphy asked.

“I’m looking up Jessica Degler,” Bill replied. They waited while Bill cross-referenced the image from the halo scanner with the picture in the missing persons report. “You’re right. It’s her.”

“Of course I’m right. Where’ve you been?”

“Which means that that big-ass signal that I saw coming at you guys? May have been the rest of those missing kids. Five every time, that’s what, twenty, twenty-five kids?”

“Twenty-five,” Murphy nodded. “That we *know* of.”

“So there’s at least twenty-five souls trapped in that hotel,” Doug said.

“Kids,” Murphy corrected. “Twenty-five *kids* trapped in that hotel.”

“Except whatever was coming after you guys,” Bill said, “It wasn’t ghosts. If it *was* the spirits of those kids, they’ve been turned into something else.”

“Why do you say that?” Kate asked.

“Because of the temperature readings. They were all 110 degrees or higher.”

“Definitely not ghosts,” Doug agreed.

“Well, what are they then?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know yet. I’m still trying to find that out,” Bill said. “Oh, and there’s one more thing.”

“What?” the Colonel asked.

“The energy levels at the hotel were inconsistent with the amount of activity you encountered.”

“Inconsistent—how?”

“Well, the amount of energy was slightly above normal, but not high enough to support a ghost and a flock of 110-degree critters.”

“So what you’re saying,” Doug said. “Is that whatever’s going on in there is *hidden*.”

“Exactly.”

“So what *is* going on there?” Kate asked. “We know...” she glanced cautiously at Murphy’s back. “We know Murphy’s kids ended up there. But what does that have to do with Rios?”

“Well, he did disappear in ‘85,” Doug said. “One of the years in which the kidnappings took place.”

Murphy turned his head at that. “What does that mean?”

Doug steepled his fingers. “Well, we can’t be certain how Rios was involved. It may simply be that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But let us say that there *is* an Isfet breach. Rios said there was. I would like to point out that he vanished in 1985, and we’re only hearing from him today, twenty years later. Certain dimensional phenomena can cause time to become *soft*, for lack of a better word. The closer you are to the phenomena, the softer time becomes. An Isfet breach certainly qualifies. It would also account for the energy that Bill is *not* picking up. And it would account for the strange paintings and the lack of animal life at the hotel.”

“How so?” Kate asked.

“Well, given that an Isfet breach would have certain deteriorating effects on any human psyche that comes into contact with it, however peripherally, it might manifest in dementia, which, let us not mince words here. Those paintings were the products of a deranged mind or minds. So any would-be squatters who happened to have any degree of psychic sensitivity were driven insane by their proximity to it, leading them to paint those images.

“Let us *further* suppose that Detective Murphy’s assumption when he was investigating the missing children cases was correct, and we *are* dealing with some sort of sacrifice, which would account for so many ghosts in one location. A series of sacrifices on an accelerating schedule.”

“1935, 1965, 1985,” Murphy threw Kate a pointed look. “I *knew* there was some significance to the dates. I just didn’t know what.”

“It would be necessary to have that level of energy,” Doug said. “To attempt to stabilize such a breach when it was fully formed.”

Kate looked ill. The Colonel was staring at the doctor. “Let me just—see if I got this straight. Some sick bastards were sacrificing children, on a schedule, to make an opening into—”

“Into Isfet,” Doug nodded. “Yes, you’ve got it right, Colonel. Assuming that *I* am correct.”

“So is it open?” Kate asked.

“I think it’s safe to assume that it is—an aperture perhaps. But an important question would be *how*?”

“What about that staff you talked about before,” the Colonel said. “The Staff of Solomon. You said Starry Wisdom had at least two segments of it.”

“Yes, a segment of the staff could in theory be used, especially in conjunction with the human sacrifices and the accompanying rituals. But naturally-occurring Isfet breaches are not unheard of. Going back to the metaphor of a tree for the universe, many of the branches and roots extend through and between some of those bubbles that contain different realities. They do this without causing any harm to the surface tension that protects them from each other. Well, some of those roots and branches press against the outermost shell of our universe. So do some of the smaller spheres themselves.”

The Colonel shook his head. “Slow down, Doc.”

“I’ll simplify. Certain *places*, when the stars are right, can allow for something to slip through from the outside. That is a naturally-occurring Isfet breach. Which I think, given the town’s history, might be what we’re dealing with here.”

“If it occurs on its own, then why the sacrifices?” Murphy asked.

“To control and stabilize it, as well as to open it when you want,” Doug replied. “From *this* side. Then the staff segment is not needed. Not to *open* it.”

“But we still need it to close,” Kate finished.

“To close it stably? A section of it, yes.”

“This is the staff that nobody knows where it is,” Murphy said bitterly.

“Yes. So our task then would be to find it.”

“Bill, how ya doin’ on that search?” the Colonel asked.

“I put in a request to the field office,” Bill replied.

“And?”

“They haven’t got back to me yet.”

“God *dammit*,” the Colonel banged his fist against the dashboard. “I knew it! I knew they’d pull some shit like this! Them worthless, two-timing, lying, bureaucratic, sons-a—”

“Sooooo—” Bill interrupted. “I asked around, called in a few favors. I got the clearance necessary to access the information directly.”

Pacified, the Colonel nodded. “I don’t care what people say about ya, son. God dammit, I like you.”

“You’re too kind, sir.”

“Don’t mention it. Now what did you find out?”

“Well, as the good doctor said, one of the staff segments disappeared during the Mexican-American War. The member of the Order who last had it was Julia Gordon. She died somewhere between September eighth and September fifteenth, in or around Mexico City. Reports from the time are sketchy.”

“So one is lost somewhere in Mexico?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. The last person *who knew where it was* died in Mexico.”

Kate flopped back in her seat at that. “Joy.”

“Well, we ain’t got time to hop a flight to Guadalajara and start asking natives if they’ve seen el stick,” the Colonel said. “What else did you find?”

“Oh, boy. Are you ready for this?”

“Just spit it out.”

“The person who had the other segment was *Robert James*.”

“You are shitting me!” the Colonel threw back his head and laughed. “Robert fucking James!”

Everybody else in the car looked at him, puzzled.

He looked around at them expectantly. “Robert James? Father of *Frank and Jesse* James? The James brothers? Am I the only one who lives in Missouri?”

Murphy shrugged. “I’m on the Kansas side.”

“Ya jayhawkin’ bastard. That figures.”

“Anyway. . .” Kate said.

“Anyway, Robert James was the last person who knew where the staff segment was,” Bill said again. “He died in California in 1850. But he *was* from Missouri—Kearney, in fact. Not ten miles from here.”

“What about Frank and Jesse?” the Colonel asked.

“They were members of the Order until 1882,” Bill replied.

“Wait. Jesse James was in the Order?” Kate asked.

“Yes.”

“The outlaw?”

Patently, Bill affirmed, “Yeah.”

“*And* he was a keeper of a part of the Staff of Solomon?” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Murphy nodded. “Welcome to the club.”

“1882. When Jesse died,” the Colonel mused. He caught Murphy’s sideways look. “What? I like history, too. I’m just more specialized than you and the doc is all.”

“Officially, Frank and Jesse claimed they had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the staff segment.”

“Officially,” the Colonel repeated. “That don’t mean a whole helluva a lot. I mean, we *are* talking about Frank and Jesse James, after all.”

“But it stands to reason that the sons would have taken over guardianship from their father,” Doug piped up. “And with the James farm, as you said, not ten miles away...”

“Negative. It’s not at the James farm,” Bill said.

“How do you know?”

“Because the Order has been over that place a dozen times. If it were there, they would have found it.”

“So then we’re back to square one,” Murphy said. “Hurray.”

“Well, hold on,” Bill said. “I was checking out the history of Excelsior and a name came up that sounded familiar. So I cross-referenced the information from Murphy’s police file—”

“You what?” Murphy jerked his head up. “You have access to police files?”

“Sure. Anyway, turns out, I was right. The Order has a file on one of the people Murphy interviewed back in 2002. Well, on one of their ancestors, I should say.”

“Whose ancestor?” Murphy asked.

“Luke Swithin, the owner of the occult shop,” Bill said. “He had an ancestor, Jonas Whitefeather, who has a file from 1874 in the Order’s records.”

“Relevance, please.”

“Jonas Whitefeather was a friend of the James brothers and also a friend to the Order. You’ve interviewed his descendants, Luke Swithin and Eileen Swithin, in connection with the kidnappings. Awful big coincidence, ain’t it, Murph?”

Murphy mulled it over. “So you’re saying that if the James brothers knew about the staff segment, maybe Whitefeather did too?”

“It’s a connection. That’s all I’m saying. It may be tenuous, but it beats searching all of Mexico.”

Chapter Nine

3:20 p.m.

“So, do you remember how to get there?”

The question was from Kate. The team had split off from Bill to go to the Swithin house. Bill was once again a faceless voice in their ears, having gone to find a quiet location where he could monitor.

Murphy considered the question carefully as he drove. “Well, it *has* been three years. When you get old, your memory does start to go and... ah, I forget what else.”

“Can’t you just answer a simple question?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

There was a pause.

“*Well?*”

Keeping a straight face, he signaled a turn. “Well, what?”

With gritted teeth, Kate asked again, “Do you remember where the Swithin house is?”

“Yeah, I remember. We should be there in about three minutes. It isn't that big a town.”

“Murphy,” the Colonel broke in, “You talked to these folks before. What’re we dealing with?”

“I spoke with Luke Swithin in 1995 and again in 2002,” said the Detective. “I heard he died since then. His daughter, Eileen, has a little bit of an attitude, from what I remember. She's going to love seeing me.”

“Why? What did you do?” Kate asked.

“Why do you automatically assume *I* did something?”

“Oh,” Kate rolled her eyes in mock thoughtfulness, “I don’t know. Let me see...”

The Colonel grunted. “You *do* have a way with women.”

“So it would seem,” Murphy agreed.

“Is she going to be so pissed off that she isn't going to tell us anything?” Kate asked. “Not that we really know what we're gonna ask.”

“Yeah, we should probably talk about that,” Murphy said. “We're going to have to get our foot in the door somehow. The only way that I can think of is to tell her we're doing some sort of follow-up on the kidnappings, in connection with Rios.”

“Do you think she'll buy that?”

“Why wouldn't she buy it?”

Kate shrugged. “What do we ask and what do we look for?”

“We'll just keep her talking about the kidnappings, initially. Try to get her to open up. We're going to be in her home. Some of her family history is going to be around-- pictures, heirlooms, I don't know. We'll know it when we see it. Just let me take the lead.”

They pulled up to the Swithin house, which was on the bluff overlooking old downtown Excelsior.

Next to Kate, Cecil piped up, “Okay, guys. We're interviewing a civilian. Please pass your cameras back to me.”

“Good idea,” Murphy said.

“All right.” Cecil said. “Who wants the spy cam?”

“That's *illegal*.”

“Tell it to your lock-pick gun, Murph. We record on missions. At all times. Sometimes we have to be sneaky about it.”

Bill spoke up as well. “It's not like we'll be using it in court.”

Murphy was about to respond, but the Colonel interrupted, “Give it to the Doc, son. He'll know what to look for.”

“Lapel cam!” Cecil said brightly. “Very good! Kate, trade me places. I've got to get the Doc ready.”

“Hey, Colonel,” Bill broke in, “You packing?”

“I'm always packin', Bill.”

“You're walking into somebody's house that may not appreciate the presence of firearms.”

Kate looked at the Colonel. “He's got a point.”

“All right, all right,” the Colonel said. “I read ya.” He began buttoning his duster up to cover his revolvers.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Murphy interjected. “All due respect, Colonel, but who the hell said you were coming?”

“Who the hell says I'm not?”

“Okay, let me put this another way. We're going to be interviewing a potentially hostile witness in her own home. How many people do you think she's going to be willing to talk to without feeling like she's under invasion? I need to be there because I have the experience. Doc needs to be there because of his experience and expertise. And we're going to need Kate there because there is no way we'll be able to pull this investigation off without a female present.” He turned to Kate. “Not trying to be a chauvinist.”

Kate shrugged. “Why change now?”

“Anyway, that's three people. There's a reason they say three's a crowd. We're pushing it as it is. More than that and there's no way she's going to talk.”

The Colonel was unmoved.

“Colonel. Really. No one’s going to believe you’re a cop.” Murphy looked him up and down. “A marshall, maybe. In Dallas. Not here.”

“I’m just not over-fond of splittin’ up the team, is all.”

“Sorry. Concessions have to be made sometimes.”

“Fine. Everybody,” the Colonel turned to the others. “Turn your ear pieces on so Bill can still hear you. Cecil!”

“Yes, sir?”

“You’re with me.” With that, the Colonel got back in the Explorer.

Kate, Doug and Murphy switched on their ear pieces. Bill did a quick check on the equipment, and they were ready.

“Now remember,” Murphy said, “We’re investigating a *missing persons* case. Nothing else. So don’t mention the ghost crap.”

“And don’t mention the fact that we’re impersonating police officers?” Kate asked innocently.

“As long as nobody actually claims to be a cop but me, you’re not impersonating anybody. So don’t make any claims, and I won’t arrest you.”

Doug nodded. “That sounds fair.”

The house was a ramshackle Victorian that was just beginning to show signs of disrepair. The once-vivid blue paint had begun to peel, the chain link fence sagged. The wide front porch had not been swept in some time and was littered with dead leaves.

Detective Murphy knocked on the door, lightly and respectfully.

The young woman who opened the door was dark-haired. Her facial features showed her native ancestry, having high cheek bones and a rather aquiline profile. Her hazel eyes, at first polite and inquisitive as she took in the crowd that had assembled on her front porch, hardened instantly as they landed on Murphy.

“You can get the fuck off my porch. Right now.” The door slammed hard enough to knock one of its ornaments loose.

“Apparently, she remembers you,” Kate said dryly. “Now what?”

Instead of replying, Murphy raised his fist again, this time banging on the door in what was unquestionably a policeman’s knock. When he spoke, he used a loud and authoritative voice that none of them had heard him use before. “Miss Swithin, it’s very important that we speak to you.”

Eileen Swithin yanked the door open again. “I have absolutely nothing to say to you.”

Murphy opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. “My father had a *business* until you came along. He had a *life*.” She turned to the others. “When he started coming around the shop, asking about missing kids, that was *it*.” Her voice rose, her face working. “Business was ruined! My father lost the shop so he couldn’t support his family. Then he became depressed, started drinking.” It was obvious the woman was fighting back tears. “I found him dead in the

back room. He hung himself with his belt.” She jerked her head toward Murphy. “All because of *you*, you fucking asshole.”

Murphy was silent. He looked down for a moment, clearly at a loss.

Kate came to his rescue. “Ma'am, I am sorry-- we *all* are sorry for everything that's happened. I know it doesn't help. The only reason Detective Murphy is here is because he's the most familiar with the case. If we'd had any idea about your father, we would have brought someone else. But it *is* vital that we speak to you. Please.”

Eileen hesitated, studying Kate. Then she shot a sideways glance at Murphy. “*He* can't come in.”

“That's fine,” Kate said quickly.

“Now wait a damn minute--” Murphy began. Kate cut him off with a look.

“Miss Swithin, would you excuse us for just a minute?” Kate asked kindly.

“Uh, sure.” Eileen closed the door.

“All right,” Kate turned to Murphy. “What exactly is the problem?”

“Do you know how to interrogate a witness?”

“No.”

“Do you know how to tell when someone is lying?”

“I can tell when someone's lying.”

“But have you had professional training?”

“No, but--”

“Then I need to be present when we talk to this woman. Period.”

Kate shook her head. “But you heard her. There's no way she's going to let you in there!”

“People,” said Bill, “I think I have a solution.”

* * *

Kate picked up a book that was lying on the coffee table and read the title, “*Babylonian Magic and Sorcery*. Wow, a little light reading?”

Audible to the team, both in the house and in the car, Murphy's voice came quietly through the team's earpieces. “Okay, that's good.”

Eileen shrugged. “Studying ancient religions is a hobby of mine.”

Kate looked around at all the other books. “Yes, I can see that.”

“Good,” Murphy said. “Now find some common ground. Maybe you have a relative who's into--” he cleared his throat, “Babylonian magic. Or whatever.”

Kate set the book back down. “You know, I have an aunt who's into Wicca.”

“Really,” Eileen said politely.

“Yeah,” Kate sat down on the edge of the couch. “I didn't understand how it worked for a long time. You know, a person hears the word 'witch' and they just have all these ideas in their heads. . .”

Murphy listened as the conversation continued. He had been prepared for a little more coaching, but it became increasingly clear that Kate had the situation well in hand.

Little by little, Eileen Swithin began to talk. Before long, she was seated on the opposite end of the couch, chatting animatedly.

On the other side of the room, Doug prowled from shelf to shelf, nearly disappearing into the background. He inspected the books and knickknacks crowded thrice deep in some places. The books consisted of topics that ranged from psychology, to the Kabbalah, to something called *Nocturnal Magick*, to a biography of the Dali Lama. Shoved in whatever space remained, there were statues of various deities, (some serving as bookends), incense burners, stones and crystals, animal pelts, dried branches and bunches of herbs, candles and candleholders, Tarot and rune sets still in their boxes-- in short, whatever had remained of her father's inventory seemed to have been liquidated here.

He sighed inwardly. There was nothing remarkable about her collection. Her books were almost all later editions; the items all reproductions, some of which were laughably poor. He straightened up and scanned the room again. Bags of all different sizes were slung casually over shelves or hanging from doorknobs, along with various amulets.

These latter items gave him pause. To his left was a table and lamp. Several sheer scarves had been thrown over the lampshade, and draped over them were about half a dozen long-chained ankh pendants. He considered these and shrugged. It was a long shot in the extreme, but it was all he had left to try, short of slipping off to ransack the rest of the house.

He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and worked from beneath it an amulet on a long leather cord. Casually, he turned back to face the others, the medal he always wore now plainly visible: a circle with five raised lines radiating out from the center point.

Kate had managed to get Eileen to speak of the case. She was showing Eileen the photograph of Rios from their files. Eileen looked at it carefully before shaking her head.

Eileen had opened her mouth to say something, but as she did, she happened to glance Doug's way and stopped.

Kate followed her gaze. Doug simply stood, hands in his pockets, waiting.

“Did something just happen?” Murphy asked from outside. “Hey, Bill, is everything all right in there?” His hand had already gone to his holster.

“It's okay, Murph,” came the reply, “Just stand by.”

Inside, Eileen slowly stood up, reaching momentarily for the table for support. She reached into her shirt and brought out an identical amulet, just as old, but on a modern silver chain.

Kate looked at the two in open bewilderment.

“This symbol is called the seba,” Doug said. “It was used during the late nineteenth century, much like the rabbits are today.”

“What’s going on?” Eileen asked in a shaky voice, “You people are *not* the police.”

Outside, unheard by Eileen, Murphy muttered reflexively, “No, ma'am. We're musicians.”

Inside, Doug took a step forward, wearing his gentlest, most scholarly expression. “No, miss, and we're very sorry to have deceived you. But if you recognize this symbol, surely you must understand our need for discretion.”

Eileen stared at him for several moments before closing her eyes, as if she felt ill. “I never thought this would happen. I never thought anyone would actually come.”

“Eileen, are you all right?” Kate asked with genuine concern.

She shook her head. “No, I'm sorry. I'm just... Jesus.” She sat back down.

Kate waited a moment for Eileen to compose herself and then tried again. “Eileen, if you know anything, anything at all, please tell us. Some of what we said earlier wasn't the complete truth, but you know we're here following up on the kidnappings. If you help us, we can help them.”

“Fine, okay. Just...give me a minute, all right?”

“Hey, guys,” Murphy said, “Remember me, the guy who can't see what the heck is going on? Anybody want to clue me in?”

After a moment, Doug asked, “Just to satisfy my own curiosity, might I ask how you came to be waiting for us?”

Eileen nodded. “The amulet has been in my family for a long time. I don't know how far back it goes, exactly. But my grandfather had it and before he died, he gave it to my dad. I was there and he talked to both of us. Then my dad gave it to me when I turned eighteen.” She paused. “He said that if anyone ever showed any of us something that matched it-- not necessarily an amulet, but just the symbol, we were supposed to give them something. Something we've been keeping safe. Until they showed up.” A nervous laugh escaped her. “I thought it was just a story. You know, just a tradition. That it would never go anywhere.”

Kate lightly touched her shoulder. “But you remembered. And you *did* keep it safe.”

Eileen smiled gratefully, then took a deep breath. “My family has a lot of traditions. We're French, but we have a lot of Osage blood too. We've always lived on this land, since before the town was here. My Grandpa used to say our ancestors guarded the sacred springs, well before the Hall of Waters was built. They used to be healing springs, but anything sacred loses its power when it gets trivialized.”

Doug leaned forward, his eyes glittering behind his glasses. There were a thousand questions he wanted to ask, but there wasn't time. “What is it you've been keeping? Will you show us?”

She looked almost embarrassed. “Well, it's, um, it's a head.”

Outside, Murphy groaned. “It's a head shop! Perfect. That's what was missing. My day is now complete.”

Eileen saw and misunderstood her visitors' stifled amusement. "No, really. It's this little, stone, ugly thing with some carvings on it. I can get it for you."

Doug recovered first. "Miss Swithin, that would be lovely. I look forward to seeing it."

As soon as he heard Eileen close the door behind her, the Colonel said, "Dammit, Murphy, you are not helping this situation at all."

"Sorry, boss."

By the time Eileen returned, the moment had passed and she found Kate and Doug looking serious again. "Here," she held it out a little uncertainly. "It isn't much, I know, but I'm supposed to give it to you, so... Here."

Doug stepped forward to take it.

It was, as Eileen said, ugly, and not very much. It was a stylized head made of unfired red clay, with a square bottom. It was about five inches high, four inches wide and three inches thick. The bottom and the back were covered in carvings.

"Thank you very much, Miss Swithin," Doug said sincerely. "Er... you don't by any chance know what we're supposed to do with it, do you?"

Eileen shook her head. "Sorry."

He glanced back down at it. "Well, I suppose if we're supposed to have it, it's bound to help somehow."

As Doug continued to examine this new find, Kate made their farewells and they left.

Once they were back in their own vehicle, and everyone had their beat cams on again, Bill said, "Doug, would you hold that up for a minute so I can get a good image? I'd like to cross-reference it."

Doug complied as Cecil removed the small camera from his lapel. "It looks Meso-American."

"Here, let me see." Murphy held his hand out and Doug passed it to him. Murphy turned the figurine over a few times. "Hmm. I think this is Chalchihuitlicue."

"Who?" the Colonel asked.

"The Aztec goddess of water. But the carvings are Mayan."

"How do you know?" Kate asked.

"I have a degree in ancient languages."

"*You* have a degree in ancient languages?"

Murphy shrugged. "Well, yeah, I needed something to do when my *Jugs* subscription ran out."

"People!" the Colonel said sternly, and Kate bit back a reply. The Colonel turned to Murphy. "You were sayin'?"

"That was it," Murphy said. "The head is Aztec. Chalchihuitlicue. It means, 'She of the Jade Skirt.' The carvings are Mayan. I can translate it if you want."

“By all means!” Doug nodded enthusiastically.

“Well,” Murphy pointed to one of the glyphs. “This means 'head.' And then this one means 'water,' or 'submerge.' And this one means, 'river.' Which all makes sense, since she’s a water goddess.”

Doug rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “And Miss Swithin did say that her ancestors guarded the sacred springs. We have a water deity, with writing on it that all points to water.”

“We're in Excelsior Springs,” Murphy said. “There's water all over the place.”

The Colonel nodded. “It's a goddamn flood plain, Doc.”

Doug shook his head. “Gentlemen, you are forgetting we have another resource right here in this car.”

The four men turned to look at Kate, who looked uncomfortable. “Why is everyone looking at me?”

Chapter Ten

5:07 p.m.

At the Monterey Motel, Doug booked the five of them a room. A maid saw them as they went in. Kate gamely ignored her scandalized look-- one woman, four men.

Cecil followed last. At the last moment, he'd turned to the maid. "This isn't what it looks like," and shut the door.

The woman was not soothed.

Kate still didn't see how all this was necessary but Doug had insisted that a quiet, isolated environment was absolutely essential, and the Colonel had backed him. So here she was, after what seemed like hours, holding Doug's amulet in one hand and the clay head in the other, staring at the map of the town Murphy had spread out on the bed.

"The important thing is," Doug said, "as you focus, to relax. I realize you've probably never done anything like this before, and that's fine. Just let your mind open up and feel for the counterpart to the idol you're holding."

"Right. That'll happen." Partly to stall and partly for her own curiosity, she added, "You know, Murph, you seem to be taking all this in stride."

He shrugged. "Nothing you people do surprises me at this point."

"Mm." Her hand started to shake. "Well, I-- look, could everybody please not spend the entire time staring at me? Thanks."

Politely, they all averted their eyes except Doug.

"It's okay, Kate," Bill's voice reassured her, "I'm right here. You can do this."

Right. She put down the amulet and sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Um, guys? Seriously, could you all step outside for a minute? Not that this is going anywhere, anyway."

Doug nodded. "Let's take a short break. Gentlemen, would you excuse us?"

The Colonel frowned. "I'm still not one for splitting up during a mission, Doc."

"And I'm not suggesting that we do. But you, Cecil and Detective Murphy could adjourn to the restroom while we focus on the task at hand."

Murphy nodded. "Sure, we can talk about women and exchange gun tips."

Kate's eyebrows rose. "So that's what you guys do when you go to the bathroom together. I always wondered."

The Colonel smiled. "Same thing you ladies do, isn't it?"

"Call us when you're ready," Murphy said as he shut the door.

Kate sighed. "I don't suppose we can shut off the cameras, can we, Bill?"

"That's a negative, Kate. Sorry."

“That's all right,” Doug said. “This will do fine. Now, Kate, I want you to go ahead and set aside the statue and the amulet. Close your eyes for a moment and listen.”

She did.

“Now, Kate. If I may ask, why are you so nervous?”

She didn't answer right away, taking the time to gather her thoughts. “I always imagined my first magical experience would be in a classroom, with a teacher. With other beginners. Not in a hotel room on camera.” Suddenly she laughed. “That didn't sound quite right, did it?”

He smiled. “I understand. That's part of the reason, aside from the need for quiet, that I wanted to have this room in the first place. Think of this as one of your classrooms. And I am one of your teachers. So, continue to keep your eyes closed, and listen. Now, what do you hear?”

“The air conditioner. The guys in the bathroom, talking.” A pause. “I think I hear the lights humming.”

Nodding, Doug took a few steps toward the window, his back to Kate. With her eyes still closed, she turned her head toward the sound of his footsteps.

Peering through the slots in the blinds, he spoke quietly, reminiscently, “When I was younger, I worked out of a field office on the east coast. I was fortunate enough to get very good seats at a *Mostly Mozart* concert. I was near the front and it sounded as if the orchestra completely surrounded me. I could hear every cello, every violin, every crescendo that Mozart had written throughout the three-hour performance. I could almost see every spire of sound that he had built with his genius... Now, he turned back to Kate. “Listen. What do you hear?”

She frowned, then her eyes snapped open. It had almost seemed, just for an instant...

“Symphony Number 25?”

He nodded. “Very good. What you have just experienced is a very basic human ability. You have it a bit more than most, because you have a high magical aptitude. But ultimately, anyone could do what you have just done. And this,” he nodded to the amulet still in her hand, “is a variation on that same talent. But you will always have the advantage that others do not.”

She blinked. “And that is?”

“You will be doing it through magic.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“I'm not saying you will be able to pluck people's thoughts out of their heads simply by concentrating. That's a very popular symphony and I was concentrating on it very hard-- broadcasting it, if you like. We were in a very quiet, controlled environment. I have a background in magical studies and I was able to guide you to that particular memory. You said ESP is not your strong point.”

“It isn't.”

“But you didn't just guess which symphony I was thinking of-- you *heard* it. Even if it was only for the briefest of times, you shared that moment. You'll never foretell the future as the Oracle does, nor are you likely to ever read minds, and I doubt very much if you will ever be able to levitate objects using the power of your mind alone. But you have the rarefied senses you

need to feel out and wield magical energies, and we can use them, I believe, to find whatever it is that we're looking for.”

“So, what's the difference between doing this with magic and doing it with ESP?”

“For your purposes, the main difference is that while magic is more versatile, it's much easier with ESP. But since we've demonstrated that you *can* do this, it is only a matter of training. Shall we?”

She nodded slowly, feeling for the first time like this wasn't an exercise in futility. “Sure.”

Doug held his hand out to the objects scattered on the bed. “If you will, pick up the statue again in your left hand and the amulet in your right.”

Kate did, gripping the statue close to her chest and extending her right arm so the amulet dangled over the map.

“Good. Now, once again, close your eyes and listen again.”

Her posture was visibly more relaxed this time. She let her head settle back comfortably, her chin tilted up. “How do we know that what we're looking for is even in Excelsior?” she asked.

Doug was a little startled. Part of it was that her tone was deeper, more commanding than he'd ever heard from her before. But there was something more-- some subtle difference he couldn't exactly describe.

Well, well.

“It would seem likely. The Whitefeathers have always lived in this area.”

Kate's brow furrowed. The amulet, which had been still up to this point, began to spin. Doug was unable to suppress a triumphant smile.

“What did the Whitefeathers guard?” Kate asked.

“The sacred springs.”

“The sacred springs. Right.” In mid-swing, the amulet halted and began to trace the blue line of the river that ran through the center of town, occasionally doubling back on itself as it followed the smaller tributaries and creeks that branched off.

“Water!” Kate said. “I hear water!”

“Yes?” Doug prompted.

“I hear water,” she said again. She gripped the clay head even more tightly. “*Under water?*”

Doug started to open his mouth.

Kate hushed him explosively. “Shhhh!”

He shut his mouth with a snap. Incredible. She hadn't been speaking to him to begin with, he realized. She was asking *herself* the questions. How long did it take most acolytes to reach that stage?

The amulet wandered up and down the waterways marked on the map, quivering like a dowsing rod. Suddenly, it stiffened, cord and all, pointing at an almost perfect forty-five degree angle toward a spot on the map, the amulet straining against its cord. Then the amulet tore loose and punched a hole in the map.

Kate's eyes opened. Her face was flushed, her eyes gleaming. "I did it!"

Doug laughed. "You certainly did."

Chapter Eleven

5:22 p.m.

The hole the amulet had made in the map was about a quarter of an inch in diameter. That gave the team about 300 meters to search along the Fishing River.

“Assuming what we're looking for is still there, is above ground and is in a state in which we'll recognize it, we should be in good shape,” Doug said.

“That's great, Doc, real encouraging,” the Colonel said dryly. “But we're losin' daylight here.”

“Yeah, I especially like the part where we really have no idea what we're looking for,” Murphy said.

“We start at one end,” the Colonel said, “And move on till we reach the other. If needs be, we turn around and do it again.”

Fortunately, the spot on the map was in a public area-- a city park. They found a place to park along the river and got out. At the moment, the waters were low.

They climbed down and began to search along the bank. Less than fifteen minutes later, the sky darkened. A chill wind came in. Coats and jackets were buttoned up and Doug donned a pair of gloves, but they kept at it. When they were lucky, the rocky banks formed a navigable slope; when they weren't, there was just a sheer drop-off and they had to wade around, slogging across small peninsulas of mud and gravel.

“Doc, you okay back there?” the Colonel glanced back at the older man, who had fallen several yards behind, picking his way carefully through the brush.

Gamely, Doug replied, “Fine, Colonel.”

Suddenly, Kate dashed ahead. “Look!” she shouted excitedly, pointing as she ran. “Over there!” Across the river, almost completely hidden by greenery, was a stone facade with a face carved into it. “Do you see it?”

The Colonel pushed his hat back with the tip of his thumb, squinting at it. “Katie-girl, you must have eyes like an eagle. I never would have seen that thing. Not from over here, anyways.”

Murphy peered at it. “Tlaloc. That makes sense.”

When Cecil caught up to them, Kate stood at the river's edge, pointing at the facade eagerly. “Do you see it, Bill?”

“I see it, Kate. I got it.”

“Great! I'm going!” At that, Kate shucked off her jacket. Beside her, the Colonel removed his duster and two-gun rig with professional speed, handing them both to Murphy.

“Watch the depth,” Bill cautioned.

Kate splashed into the water. The Colonel drew a backup piece from the small of his back and waded in after her. “Dammit, Katie, slow down!”

She was already on the opposite bank, climbing up the slope for a better look at the facade.

Cursing, the Colonel re-holstered his gun and climbed up after her. "Now what?"

Kate looked sheepish. "Um. Bill?"

"You got me, Kate."

Across the water, Murphy stood with Doug and Cecil, arms crossed. "Problems?" he called.

"The hell did you say this thing was, Murphy?" the Colonel asked.

"Tlaloc. That," Murphy pointed first at the facade, then at the statue in Kate's hand. "Is *her* husband."

"So it's a god, then," Kate said.

"Yeah. The god of rain and flood." Murphy glanced down and edged back ever so slightly from the river's edge. "You gotta admit, he's in the right place."

"Bill, any energy readings or anything like that?" the Colonel asked.

"Negative. Murphy's right—it's Tlaloc."

"Fascinating. But what the hell does it all mean?"

Murphy nodded toward the fanged visage. "It means that even among the gods, the totally hot babes go for the ugly ones."

Beside him, Doug was muttering, mostly to himself, "We have a facade, and we have a statue. We were *meant* to have the statue. Whitefeather *wanted* us to have the statue. And we were meant to find the facade. The two are related. What was he trying to tell us?" Louder, he called out to Kate and the Colonel, "Do you see any writing?"

Kate examined the facade closely. It was old and weathered, the god's face streaked with dirt. "No," she called back. "No writing."

Doug put his hand on Murphy's shoulder. "Detective, we're going to have to go back up to the road and get around the other side somehow. I'm going to need to get a better look." He started to pick his way carefully back up the embankment. Murphy started to follow.

"Wait!" Kate called. "Murphy, what did you say it says here on the bottom?" She held up the idol.

"It says, 'submerge,' and 'head.'"

"What do you think that means?"

Murphy gestured to the river. "Well, we've got water, and we've got a head. So submerge it."

"You don't really think it could be that simple?" Kate asked doubtfully.

"I'm just telling you what it says. I'm not in charge of this little expedition."

Kate quickly made her way down the steep incline and knelt at the water's edge. She held the idol under the surface of the river and waited. The red clay grew soft under her fingers and

she shifted her grip. As she did, large clots came loose, washing away in the current. “No!” She yanked it back up, out of the water.

And that's when she realized the eye of the idol had mysteriously turned blue.

“What is it?” Doug called.

“Bill! Do you see this?” Kate cried. “There's something there!”

“The eyes are blue,” he said. “What does that mean?”

The Colonel, who had taken up a silent vigil on the riverside, turned to see what Kate had found.

“Do you have a knife?” she asked. “Can you get those out?”

The Colonel dug in his pocket.

“Wait,” Doug called, “What are you doing?”

“There's something in its eyes,” Kate called back.

“And you are doing *what*?” he asked sharply.

“Cutting them out?”

“*Why*?”

“I think we're supposed to. The facade doesn't have any stones in its eyes. This one does. The clay covered them up.”

“Okay,” Doug held up a hand. “I just want to go on record here and say that gouging out a god's eyes, even symbolically, might lead to very bad things. At the very least, you're doing damage to an historical artifact that we can't repair.”

“Well, in all fairness,” Murphy said, “I think we already did that much.”

Doug winced but said nothing further.

The Colonel looked from Doug to Kate, knife in hand. Kate nodded and he slid the tip of the blade in the statue's right socket. The eye popped out so easily, Kate had to catch it. The Colonel let out a little “Huh,” of surprise. He and Kate exchanged a look and he went to work on the other eye. The second stone was a little more stubborn. He dipped the idol into the water again to loosen it.

“Got it,” Kate said as she plucked out the second stone. She washed both pieces off in the water. They were made of turquoise. Each had a groove cut through one side, like the head of a screw.

“Should we hang on to the head?” the Colonel asked.

“Yeah,” Bill said. “The Order's a little picky when it comes to archaeological findings.”

The Colonel waded out to about mid-stream. “Murphy, catch!”

He tossed the head and Murphy caught it with a wet plopping sound. He opened his hand to see streaks of red clay running down his palm, over the back of his hand. “Ewwww.”

He handed it off to Doug, who regarded the now-empty eye sockets forlornly.

Across the water, Kate pocketed the stones and scaled back up the embankment. “I think these go in the eyes.” Producing the stones, she held them up to the holes in the facade, their grooved sides facing in. Then she stopped. “You might want to stand back,” she said to the Colonel. “I don’t know what this is going to do.”

“I’m fine right here, you go on ahead.”

Kate took a breath. Then she pressed both stones into the facade simultaneously.

Everyone waited.

“Aaaaand?” came Murphy’s voice from across the river.

Frowning, Kate removed the stones, then put them back. She thought of the grooves, and tried turning them with her fingertips. One slid smoothly and slipped further into its socket, but the second wouldn’t turn, grinding to a halt against something. “There’s something blocking it. Colonel, can I see your knife?”

The Colonel handed it to her, hilt first. She used it to pry a small army figurine out of Tlaloc’s left eye.

“Kids,” the Colonel said as she handed him back his knife. Then Kate turned back to the façade and adjusted the stone, turning it until it fell into place. There was an audible click, and the god’s mouth dropped open like a drawbridge.

Inside, there was a stone compartment. It held a large blue Mason jar with something inside it.

Chapter Twelve

6:06 p.m.

Back in their motel room, Cecil had plugged in the coffee maker in the alcove beside the bathroom. The scent of Bill's designer coffee filled the air, and everyone breathed a little more deeply in appreciation.

Outside, a light rain had begun to fall. It drummed lightly on the roof, one of those spring showers that had a tendency to turn any interior cozy and inviting. Kate kicked off her wet shoes and set them on top of a radiator to dry. She was still soaked from the waist down. Wrapping herself up in a blanket, she perched cross-legged on the bed.

Doug sat at the table, carefully examining the Mason jar under a lamp. "This is a very rare antique. You know, the jar itself is probably worth a lot of money. At least ten thousand."

"For a *jar*?" Kate asked.

"Oh, yes. Collectors will pay three times that much for a colored Mason jar from this period. And cobalt is especially rare."

"Oh, good," Murphy said, "We just covered our expenses."

Kate leaned forward. "I found it, does that mean I get to keep it?"

Doug chuckled. "I'm afraid the Order has very clear regulations on any precious artifacts found during an investigation." At Kate's expression, he added, "Don't feel bad. Imagine if you'd found something like the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan or the Ring of Gyges." Kate did not look comforted.

The Colonel had been standing quietly with one boot on a chair, lit cigarillo clamped between his teeth. Now he took the cigarillo from his mouth. "Doc, are we gonna yak about it all night or are we gonna open the damn thing?"

"Oh, yes." Doug began wrestling with the ancient lid as Cecil passed out cups of coffee.

Murphy shook his head as Cecil offered him one. "Don't we have any hot cocoa?"

Kate's eyebrows went up slightly. "You drink cocoa?"

"Yeah. Problem?"

"No."

"I suppose you think I eat donuts too. Well, you're right. But I also happen to drink cocoa. Somehow, you'll just have to learn to reconcile that."

Doug continued to struggle with the lid of the jar, sealed by a hundred years of dirt and disuse.

"Give that here a minute," the Colonel held out his hand. Doug handed over the jar.

With a brisk twist, the Colonel had the lid off and stuck his fingers down into it.

Doug held up his hand. "Easy, easy—"

“Doc, you sound like an old woman.” The Colonel pulled out what appeared, at first glance, to be a bundle of leather. But when he unrolled it, they could all see papers bound into the leather with thick, homemade stitches.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

The Colonel did not answer immediately. He opened it, leafing through the first few pages. “Looks like a diary.” The Colonel felt in his front right pocket and produced a pair of reading glasses. He slid them on.

“Can you tell whose diary it is?” Doug asked.

The Colonel settled himself down in a chair to read. As they waited, the Colonel began turning the pages with mounting excitement. Every now and then he paused, his lips moving silently as he lingered over a particular passage. Then he took his glasses off and looked back up at all of them. A gleam had come to his eyes that they had never seen before. When he spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically threaded, as if he had a lump in his throat. “This is Frank James’ diary.”

“Frank *James*?” Kate and Murphy cried, almost in unison.

“Are you sure?” Doug asked.

“Pretty damn sure,” the Colonel ran his hand over the cover. “The handwritin’ for one. The quality and age of the leather, for another. And the paper... All looks from the right time period to me, Doc. Then you got that jar over there.”

“But Frank James?” Doug pressed.

“Says so right here. Have a look,” the Colonel held the book out for Doug to see, but as Doug reached out to take it, he snatched it back. “I said have a *look*, goddammit, I didn’t say you could finger it!”

“I’m not exactly an amateur when it comes to handling old documents, Colonel. If you please--”

“Now you just hold on right there!” the Colonel spoke over the top of him. “I don’t mean no disrespect. But this is *my* field of expertise.”

“Fair enough. But I would like a look at it when you’re done.”

The Colonel nodded curtly and settled his reading glasses back on his nose.

“Does it say where the segment is?” Kate asked.

“Well, I don’t know, *somebody* keeps yammerin’ at me and keeping me from reading the goddam thing. So why don’t you all just hold your horses, settle down and shut up. I’ll get back to you when I’m damn good and ready.

The Colonel went back to the book. Murphy lowered himself onto the bed next to Kate.

“Hey, Kate--”

She had just taken a sip of coffee. “Mmm? Ow, that’s still too hot,” she fanned her mouth.

He waited a moment and tried again. “Kate?” She turned to him. “I wanted to tell you, you did a good job back on that Swithin interview.”

There was a pause while she waited for the joke. When one wasn’t forthcoming, she nodded uncertainly. “I was afraid maybe your ego wasn’t happy sitting on the porch for so long.”

Smiling, he shook his head. “Interview and interrogation is an exact science. Ego has *nothing* to do with it. It’s all about the roles you play to get what you want out of, well, in this particular case, your witness. She hated me so much, she would have told anybody else *anything*. Blaming me for her father’s death...” He broke off. “You can’t ever blame a living person for a suicide. That’s an individual choice. But it got us to this point,” he raised his voice slightly, to include the rest of the team in the discussion, “though besides being a really cool historical footnote, I’m not sure what this is going to bring us.”

Kate didn’t say anything for several moments, staring at him with round eyes, the cup of coffee forgotten in her hand. “Um...thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” Settling back, Murphy took a drink from his Styrofoam cup.

“You found some cocoa?”

“I did, thank you.”

“Awwwww,” Bill’s voice piped up. “You guys are just too *adorable* together! Murph, you found some *cocoa*?”

“Fuck off, Bill,” Murphy said good-naturedly.

Kate covered her mouth to keep her coffee in while she giggled. Cecil went around the room refilling cups. He handed Murphy another packet of Swiss Miss.

Murphy emptied it into his cup. “What, no marshmallows?”

The Colonel, seemingly oblivious to their chatter, had been reading intently. “Doc, just wait till you see this,” he said. “This is amazing.”

“Yes?” Doug said eagerly.

“It seems that Frank and Jesse were guardians of several artifacts, including – are you ready for this? -- a segment of the Staff of Solomon.”

Chapter Thirteen

The James Diary

September 22, 1867

I had another visit from Miss Wakefield today. She was rather adamant that I begin this journal, or what she calls chronicling. So I reckon I should get down to it.

I hardly know how to begin. This feels very strange. I reckon it would be best to start with who I am. My name is Alexander Franklin James. At the time I am writing this, I am 24 years old. I've known about the Order since Pa died. Pa was in the Order, and so is Ma. At that time, I was 7 years old, so for most of my life I have known about this, so it does not seem like any big thing to me, just another thing that must be done.

Miss Wakefield is only the fourth Son I have ever met. The other three I met during the War. The first one I met was in Lawrence. The second one I met was after Lexington. I had a legful of grapeshot, and he was a doctor. He'd actually heard of Ma. He made sure I got home safe so she could patch up my leg. I was lucky, I could have lost it. The last Son I came across was after I had joined up with Anderson. All three of them saw the sigil I wore that Ma gave me to wear in battle; otherwise I never would have known they were Sons either. I did not get to converse with any of them for very long though. Aside from the doctor, the other two were captured Union. I made sure they escaped.

So meeting Miss Wakefield sure has left me with a lot on my mind. She gave me this book to read about some of the other Sons of Horus to learn about what they do. I guess I'll have more to write later.

September 25, 1867

I met Miss Wakefield at her schoolhouse near the College. She's a clever one. She's helped me along with this chronicling. I think I have a better idea of how to go about this now. Turns out, she's a school teacher. Or at least, that's what she's going to do while she's here. She's been here over two weeks and I didn't know a thing about it, never mind knowing that she's been watching our family, waiting for the proper time to make her introductions. Of course, neither Jesse nor I nor even Ma would have thought to look for a woman, which is funny since we all know Ma's been a Son longer than Pa was.

Anyhow, I came over here to see Miss Wakefield and converse with her some more. She was glad I did since she picked up on the fact that Ma, well Ma just hasn't warmed up to this whole idea yet about changes going on in the Order, and ain't real keen on Miss Wakefield herself. Jesse likes her well enough, but I get the idea that being around him flusters her, least as much as an educated English woman can be flustered. Jesse just has that effect on women. I feel I can talk a little more freely here now as Miss Wakefield's assured me that a Son's diary is his own, and the reports back to the Head Office are entirely separate. She was very understanding about my interest in privacy. Even if we weren't all in the Order, my family's business is a tad delicate, and there are things I might be compelled to put down here that I don't care to share with just anybody. Miss Wakefield said that was just fine, just fine indeed, a Son's diary is a

tool, every bit as important as a staff or a wand or a gun. But more dangerous, I think, if the wrong person gets a hold of it.

Miss Wakefield came from London a few years ago, already a member of the Order of the Four Sons. Her mother and father are both Sons there. Her father is a professor at Oxford, imagine! And her mother is a Mage. Miss Wakefield herself is a Mage, of some power. They let her set off for Boston on her own, at only twenty! She worked at a Regional Headquarters for a while (that's what they're calling these Head Offices they have going up everywhere—I guess right now, they're all up North—Boston, New York, Chicago, but more are fixing to go up everywhere else now) then she said she got to reading some of them stories folks is printing about Jesse and the Younger boys and me, they're real big back East, they find tales of riders and outlaws real fascinating, and when she found out Jesse and me are members of the Order to boot she just had to come out here and meet us, the outlaw Confederate Sons.

It's the strangest thing. I think if anybody, and mark I say anybody, else would have said that to me, I would have had some choice words to say—about them dime novel hacks for a start. My Pa was a Reverend, an educated man. He helped start the college here. Ma is educated. Reuben, the same. If any of them had caught us reading any such trash as that it would have gotten taken away and burned, and we would have gotten striped for good measure. It was nothing but the Bible for us, for starters, and then fine literature, Shakespeare, Thackeray, even some Tennyson and such that we read at home. They made sure us kids got to school. If anybody else had suggested that their curiosity was piqued about Jesse and me from some cheap hack I would have thought they were talking down to me, or else pulling my leg, and I don't take that well. Not well at all.

But Miss Wakefield, she just had this real earnest way of saying it. I could tell she wasn't teasing, and she really doesn't know anything about our ways here in America, not in Boston really and certainly not here. But she's real clever, as I said, and eager to learn, and eager to teach too. The fact that she's a school teacher might have something to do with it. I didn't tell her that that's what I wanted to be once. That's how's she's going to make her way out here. She's got funds from her parents back home and from the Order, but to live here without arousing any suspicion, she's just playing like some young lady whose parents died, and she's made her way here. So I gathered she's planning on staying on a while. She's still going to have it a little rough because of her accent and all, and having come from up North, but I think in time, they'll get to respect her. She's been real patient, and I think that bodes well for the type of schoolteacher she could be. I got the feeling she's every bit as steely as Ma though. And if she's not now, she will be.

I guess that's enough for today.

September 26, 1867

Ma does not like the fact that I'm now officially working with Miss Wakefield. She calls her things like Her Nibs and Miss Prim and Proper. I told her she could think whatever she liked, but this was my chance to take up some learning, and nothing she could say was going to stop it. Jesse's not averse to the whole idea, but he's not real keen on keeping diaries or things such as that. I made them promise they would come with me on Sunday after church to visit Miss Wakefield at the house she's turning into a school building, and all the books she managed to

bring with her from Boston. I bet there'll be less cattiness out of Ma then. I ain't mad at her though, it's just Ma's way to be suspicious of outsiders—and women. She doesn't spend much time with them, except my sisters, but Ma's done got all of them cowed into submission. Susie in particular is looking forward to meeting Miss Wakefield though.

September 27, 1867

To get along with this writing, Miss Wakefield suggested to just start with the past and follow it along in a straight line. It sounds so easy when you just say it like that, but I am not fooled. I had to wait till today before I could really get to it. I've been thinking it over, for one thing, trying to put everything in order in my head. So I got a bunch of chores done yesterday and then I finished up what little I had left this morning, so I have the afternoon to sit and write. It works out real well, too, today being Saturday. I've noticed every time I finish writing a bit, I feel empty and clean somehow, and that seems fitting for a Saturday night, so tomorrow I enter the Lord's House with a fresh spirit. Ma sniffed that that was downright papist.

So to start at the beginning. Ma and Pa came here from Kentucky. They were Sons. Pa was a minister, and a full Mason as well. He was a very solemn person, Ma says this is because he was in constant communication with the Unseen God, or Gods. That part always confused me, since the Bible teaches there is only one God and anything else is diabolical. I'm aware of the Gods of the ancient civilizations, and what of them? Ma says I ought to know by now that things ain't that simple and I ought to use my head a little. Ma says I'm a lot like Pa was in temper, but I have had no communication with the Unseen that I'm aware of. All the Evils in this world I have faced have been perfectly seeable, too real in fact. But I'm jumping ahead.

Ma herself, I remember her when she was a sweeter, gentler soul, and she still is underneath it all. She's just seen so much, as I have, it's made her hard. She's technically what's called a Mage, but her main abilities seem to be in the way of healing, unless you get her good and mad, then sometimes, only sometimes, she can make other things happen. I guess she's really more of a Witch, but I don't mean that negatively. It's really no surprise when you think about it, with a heathen name like Zereida. Lady Zee, I sometimes call her, the Gypsy Queen, and she laughs. I just think it's kind of funny when you consider two people like her and Pa falling in love, much less getting hitched. The most pious of Christians yet the most versed in heathen practices, and yet the disparity never really seemed to occur to either of the two of them. What's right is right is what Ma always told me, the heart always knows.

I didn't know the real reason Ma and Pa moved out here until I was 15. And the truth of it is, Pa was in possession of some rather important Artifacts. Jesse and I now share responsibility of them. But I don't dare write them here. Perhaps someday I will have the courage to do so, but not yet.

Pa took up a ministry right away at the Kearney Baptist Church and became well-liked in the towns around here. It was a matter of course that he helped found William Jewell College, which I eluded to earlier. Part of his nature, Ma said, was he always projected a great calm, almost serenity, which is wholly unlike myself, in that we differ as well. Ma says it was the war what done it, and there's nothing to be done for it. It scares me when she speaks so, with such dreadfull finality. It's almost as if she speaks prophecy, but she claims that is not among her considerable gifts. She says I am much rougher in carriage than Pa, formidable, even that I exude

something not unlike menace, even though I don't mean to (most of the time). I guess that makes me more like her.

When I was seven years old, Pa struck out with a bunch of men going to California. They needed a chaplain, but in more ways than Pa said they knew. I remember he and Ma talking about it. Mines are dangerous in more ways than regular men know. He feared the types of Evil they could unearth there, the hidden portals to other Realms, demons stirred by greed, the goldlust. He didn't expect to be gone long, a year, eighteen months at most. He died almost right after he arrived. They said he contracted cholera by drinking contaminated water. The Good Lord only knows what really happened, what he may have confronted. His personal effects were never recovered. We do not even know where he was put to rest.

Ma, being the sort of woman she is, carried on. I believe now she married Simms for convenience. She says now she must have been possessed to think just any man would do for a Son. He asked too many questions, claimed too many things were not fitting for a Reverend's widow. Then there was the way he treated Jesse and me. Ma was always protective, but after Pa passed, she was ten times so. And what's more, she feels, has always felt [this sentence was scratched out] knows, rather, I should say she's always known, that her children, particularly her boys, had greater destinies in store for them, and not just anybody was going to have a say in our upbringing.

I don't [scratched out]

I'm not [scratched out]

This is a difficult part for me to write without referring to the Artifacts directly. Of course she was speaking of our destinies as Sons. But there is much more to it—I can't rightly explain it all. I'll say plainly that Ma's got some peculiar ideas that don't always make sense to me. And she swears she's no oracle, seer or prophetess, but sometimes I wonder. After Pa died, it seems things just stopped surprising her. One wonders why she ever married Simms in the first place.

At any rate, she found him too hard a man to be a stepfather to Jesse and me. He used to thrash us black and blue at any little infraction. But I don't think that weighed so heavily upon her so much as his lack of affection the rest of the time. She expected a husband of hers to discipline when it was called for, but then she also expected him to offer praise as well. Perhaps he would have been more tender to his own children. We'll never know. Ma was set on divorcing him, no matter what anybody thought. Some of the old cats in Pa's congregation tried coming out to the house to talk Ma out of it. Ma ran them off.

I try not to think of those times. They are not the darkest I have seen in my life, but they were dark enough. Before things could get any nastier, Simms was killed in a riding accident. His neck snapped clean as a chicken bone. After that, people were uneasy around Ma for a time, and it's no wonder. That's the only time I can ever recall her being really upset. She blamed her foul temper. She hadn't meant to strike out at Ben Simms, if that is indeed what happened. Being who and what she is, she naturally blamed herself. I didn't believe then and I don't believe now that it was her fault.

I was twelve when she married Reuben, who could not be more different than either my father or Simms. In a way, I think Reuben was the ideal match for Ma, simply because he is also a healer. He is without exception the kindest man I've ever met, and much too smitten, even after all these years, with my mother to ever challenge her in any real way.

I guess it was not long after she and Reuben got married when we met the Whitefeathers. We came out of Church one Sunday. I had lost sight of Jesse, he'd darted out ahead with a bunch of other boys. When I finally did see him, he was playing with this Indian boy, who looked to be about Jesse's own age. The two of them, just roughhousing like the pups they were. I felt somebody standing behind me, and I turned around. That was my first look at Rene Whitefeather. He asked me where my mother was. There weren't and aren't many Indians in Kearney by that time, most of them having chosen to move on or having been relocated by the government of our great Union (in its infinite wisdom). I pointed my mother out to him. She had already seen us talking and was already striding across the flocks of church ladies in their Sunday dresses. She told me to go on and mind the younguns. I did as I was told, but I hung around close as I could, trying to overhear what they were talking about. By and by Reuben drifted over and joined in the conversation. I saw them all keep looking at me and Jesse and Susie.

After a while, I gave up and went over to talk to the Indian boy. I found out his name was Jonas. He and Jesse were already the best of friends. I took to him right away, too. He was much more serious than Jesse though, even then. It wasn't long before I found out why. Ma would say nothing about it on the way home from church. She said they were concerns best left for another day. But later that week, she managed to catch me alone to talk. She told me the Whitefeathers were a family of shamans. Rene Whitefeather was a healer like her, but much more powerful, and knowledgeable in the ways of the Unseen. He told her it had come to him in a vision that his family and ours should form an alliance. She told me they were part French too, being descended from fur trappers, and that accounted for their sometimes peculiar turns of speech. So ever since then, the Whitefeathers have been like blood. We visit with them twice a week or more. They live about eleven miles southeast of our farm, near a sacred spring. We've learned much from Rene, though sadly, he passed away just before I left to join up with Quantrill. I count Jonas as my nearest and best friend, different as he is from myself. When we met him outside church that day, I was only thirteen, which means Jonas and Jesse were only nine. Lord how the time goes! But Jonas was already a novice of sorts to his father. I guess technically he had been his whole life, learning the art of the Unseen: how to divorce his spirit from his body and go traveling invisible, making his spirit take on the shape and characteristics of animals, sometimes even becoming an animal himself in body, learning the ways of herbs and stones, and I don't know what all. They taught much of it to Ma and Jesse, Susie and me, and less to Reuben. Reuben didn't really care to know, he said, this world was more than enough for him to understand. He didn't begrudge us though. He always understood how some of us have different callings. Yet even I can't imagine what it was like to have been raised such, to live it every minute of every day. When we met them, it was only Rene and Jonas, Jonas' mother having passed on years before of some fever Rene couldn't cure. It must have been some terrible ailment, though. I ain't seen a one Rene couldn't cure, even when Reuben and Ma couldn't. Anyhow, Jonas was always a serious boy, very intent like, it's kind of hard to describe. He's not like I remember Pa being, quiet and sure of the Lord's presence, nor is he like me, in that he ain't got a mean bone in his body. I guess it's what comes of always having one foot in this world, planted square on the green earth, and one foot in some other world, where God only knows what color the soil might be. I feel like he sees everything I do, maybe everything I have done or will do, but he don't make judgment upon me, or anybody. I asked them one time how come they never became members of the Order. They said it weren't for such as them, being Indian. They said their dealings with us was enough. I didn't understand at the time, but now that I've come of some

age, I do. Lately here folks have come to refer to Jonas as Frank's Indian. I feel pretty sore over it. It just goes to show how much insight they have into men's souls.

Well, to go on then. I could fill this whole book and three more about the Whitefeathers and still not be able to tell all there is about them, and I intended to just write a little history. But I will say if Miss Wakefield is truly set on staying around here, I'm eager for her to meet Jonas. She knows the ways of Mages, I'd like to see what she'll make of one of this world's real Priests.

But after the Whitefeathers, then came the War. I don't know if it's appropriate for me to record much of that here. That aspect of my life probably has little to do with my life as a Son. Jonas begged me not to go. He said such behavior in men would do nothing to stave off the Darkness it was in my blood and in my destiny to protect. That's all well and good, but he couldn't expect me to sit idly by and allow good people to fall to the whims of tyrants. I wrote before that that the War made it possible for me to cross paths with other Sons. I don't know if that was the hand of Providence or not, but I am grateful that I had the opportunity for that to happen. It proved in my mind beyond a shadow of a doubt that, despite what the Unionist dogs might have called us afterward, some of us were capable of civil and humane restraint, capable of dispensation where it was called for. I also would not have met the Younger boys had it not been for the War, so again, I can't help but feel the word Providence is fitting. When I was hurt, I came home so Ma and Reuben could put things right. When Jesse was shot out at Lexington, he could have died, but Ma was able to restore him to health as well. You can't hardly see the scar. But really, nothing has spurred me toward the fight against evil like the War. Jonas was right. Evil must be staved off. The War of which I was a part did nothing but feed it.

September 29, 1867

The visit with Miss Wakefield went well. The time was just right, she said, for serving high tea. I could all but hear Ma thinking, Her Nibs, but everybody else seemed to enjoy it, myself included. Miss Wakefield got on well with Reuben and the younguns. Jesse she'd already met, and they continued to pass on well. Susie was in quite a state as well, meeting a fine lady from London with all of her fine clothes and real sapphire hair pins and real bone china teapots. What got me though was how many books the lady has. She told me she'd brought a small collection with her from Boston. Small collection my ass! (Not that I would have used such words to the lady's face, Lord no. Ma would have been stepping over Jesse to skin me.) Books all over! She had a whole library, and still books scattered all over the house—on tables, stacked on chairs, I even saw some in the dry pantry, stacked on top a barrel. I could see Ma thinking she was a tad untidy, but I didn't see a speck of dirt anywhere. Everybody getting on famously which meant one can always count on Ma to be as chilly as autumn rain, wanting to know why the Miss didn't favor us with her presence in church? Miss Wakefield laughed kind of uneasy like and said she thought a Son would surely know that not all people worshiped the God of the Bible. Oh Lord, didn't the rest of us prepare for the feathers to fly then. Reuben excused himself to go check on the horses. Poor old Reuben, he ain't really been right since them Unionists took after him a few years ago and he can't stand any kind of upset, and the kids all pushed their chairs out from the table like they was fixing to run for the hills. Jesse laughed. I didn't say nothing, I just waited. I never expected Ma to keep her cool, but somehow she did, smiling like she could gnaw on a raw hunk of lead and spit bullets. She said she hoped very sincerely that Miss Wakefield would change her ways and come to Jesus, that her very soul depended on it. Miss Wakefield

thanked Ma for her kind consideration before turning to me pleasantly and inquiring how the chronicling was coming along. Swimmingly, I told her. She said she was really eager to discuss further our experience with otherworldly forces. I said I didn't mind that at all. I got to telling her about this time Jesse and Jonas and me went out riding right before the War and flushed a nest of goblins out of some caves nearby. She asked me all kinds a questions, like how did I know they were goblins? I said what else could they have been? They weren't human, that was for sure, and they'd been at the livestock. We found the carcasses of some pigs and a goat near where we fought them. She wanted to know how we fought them, and I told her it was our standard maneuver. Jonas hangs back and casts some enchantment over us, Jesse and me, to keep us from getting hurt, and we ride on ahead with rifles. Ain't encountered much that's bigger than us on horseback. Excuse me, said Miss Wakefield. Who's Jonas? So we told her about Jonas and Rene. Well, that got her. She said she must meet Jonas as soon as possible. So we rode up this morning to fetch her. Jesse insisted on bringing the wagon to ride, but she'd already saddled up her horse when we got there. So we left the wagon in front of her house. Of course, she wears a proper riding habit and all, and looks damn out of place passing through town, but she didn't appear to care. So we took her around to Jonas' place. Jonas, as usual, had heard us coming and was standing out front as we rode up. I'd never seen him smile like that before. It was like he was expecting her, and [scratched out] I don't know. I just never seen him look like that.

Curious, I looked around at Jesse and caught sight of Miss Wakefield. In her dark riding habit and cap, her hair was like bleached silk, almost silvery. In the clear September day, even if you didn't have eyes as sharp as I know Jonas' are, her eyes were very clear and bright and gray, smooth like river stones and her mouth and cheeks were pink from the brisk air. She had a peculiar expression too. I didn't know why but I felt the hearty greeting I had begun to utter falter on my lips when I saw my friend, and I drew up the reins on my horse, Solomon.

Jonas helped Miss Wakefield down from her horse. He treated her with that easy familiarity with which he treated everybody. But it was different somehow. I didn't let on that I'd felt a funny turn. I just got down off my horse and walked behind them, as if everything was normal. Jonas, I said, meet our friend, Miss Madeleine Wakefield. Another Son, he said, touching her hand. She smiled and said yes, laughing, but in a way that I knew she wasn't surprised that he knew. And she asked him to please call her Maddie.

[The rest of this page was scribbled out, followed by large a section that had been torn out.]

[Upper portion of page torn off, so date not visible]

went back to where Jesse was hiding with Maddie. They both looked pretty shook up. I was pretty shook up myself

January 22, 1869

Susie has gone into trance again. She's been out for a few hours. Ma's staying calm, but just the same, she sent Jesse to ride out and get Jonas.

June 14, 1873

It is unthinkable. If I had any strength at all, I would stick a gun barrel in my mouth and put an end to myself. Sweet Jesus, God the Father and all of the Angels. What kind of a world is this? The fiends [no end to this sentence]

It's been such a lovely summer, lovely and so quiet. We haven't seen as much of Maddie, having been busy with our other vocation, but when we have, it's like nothing ill ever passed between us. She is as calm and logical as ever. But since that incident in February, there's been no activity. That should have warned us, but we were stupid. We allowed ourselves to be lulled. It has happened before. Months elapse and not so much as an elf sticks its nose out of a hole. Still, we should have seen it coming. Why didn't we? Why didn't Jonas or Susie see it? Damn them. Damn us all.

Then, the events from last August keep playing and replaying themselves in my mind. All the stupid things I said to her, the bitter words. So dreadfully stupid. How could I ask her to love a cold-blooded, lowdown, murdering cur like myself. She didn't love me. Couldn't. Couldn't-- I refer to the past now. She's gone.

I took it upon myself to send word to the field office back in Boston. Jonas prepared her body, then buried her on the hill overlooking his house, using the ritual she specified. I wasn't even allowed to say goodbye, no one was. She wanted it that way. She knew the life she led was likely to kill her early. She told Jonas what she wanted done to the letter. Even now, as I sit here, writing in sickness and hatred and rage, I marvel at her courage. She certainly did not tell me any such thing. I can't bear it. I couldn't bear the thought of him touching her, not when she was alive, I certainly can't now that she's dead. That dreadful bond they shared, the love, I will never understand. I feel as if my brain is coming apart.

I am through with this Order business. Let the beasts overrun the world. What difference does it make?

June 15, 1873

I don't know how I passed the night, but somehow I did. Jesse and Jonas are here, keeping a vigil, as it were, outside my door. I assured them I wouldn't do anything rash. What difference would it make if I followed her into the afterlife? She wouldn't have gone to the Christian heaven I may or may not be bound for, and she certainly wouldn't be in its Hell. Where I already am.

One thing is certain. I am done with the Order. Ma was right. The Order isn't what it once was. The War marked the turning point, and Maddie was part of the new way. It's now some fearsome machine, grinding the bones of its ranks so that it may keep on churning and churning. And for what? We may delay the world's end, but we cannot prevent it totally. We are too few. I say let the world get what's coming to it.

[A loose page, with no date—very creased and folded.]

Where the springs run back into the earth, behold the doorway

[The page had Mayan characters. Murphy identified them as, “1985” and again, the symbols for “water” and “submerge.”]

[Hastily scribbled, the ink splotted, a few spatters of candle wax] Jonas has seen something strange and terrible. I’ve never seen him so agitated. He’s had visions come unbidden before, but this one fair seized him. He said he found himself in some terrible Other World, with creatures no mortal man could see without risking madness. And then these symbols came to him, and somehow, he knew their meaning, which I have written here. We consulted Maddie’s books and found them to correspond with Mayan writings, but neither of us can explain how that is possible. But he does not know their true meaning. He guesses it has something to do with the springs it his duty to guard—for it is not just the water itself, though its magical properties are potent, but the source of the spring. He fears it is a doorway. And 1985—a year? Over a hundred years hence? What it means, we cannot divine, but my poor friend, he is near mad himself with fear. Never have I seen him such [abruptly ends]

[There was a blank page. And then:]

April 8, 1882

So much has happened, I scarcely know where to begin. It is hard to believe that fifteen years have passed since I first took pen in eager hand to begin this journal. I began it for a simple reason: I was in love with Madeleine Wakefield from the moment I first saw her. I can make that declaration now with greater ease than I ever believed would be possible. It has been nine years since Maddie was killed. Nine years since I renounced my duties as a Son of Horus, forgetting that it was more than duty, more, even than birthright. It was destiny, just as Ma and Rene Whitefeather declared it was all those years ago.

Since I have no choice now but to accept it, I shall begin with that information I left out all those years ago.

I was sixteen when Ma passed the Artifacts on to me. She'd taken on the responsibility of Guardian when Pa passed on. She was a Guardian just as Rene and later Jonas Whitefeather were to the sacred spring, and I fear that now, all three are in jeopardy.

The Artifacts of which I speak are none other than a segment of the Staff of Solomon. The other were the codices, Egyptian scrolls containing the secrets of an ancient creature called Atum. A god some said, though I am not inclined to believe it. While I was away initially with the War as Jesse came of age, they were entrusted to him, and jointly, we have been their custodians ever since. Alongside us, Jonas also was charged with guarding the sacred spring. The very house his father built rests not a mile from the source of it. For a time, Jonas, Jesse, Madeleine and I were a team, sharing the responsibility in standing guard over such things, never pausing to consider the strangeness of the situation—the unlikelihood of such a convergence. Except, of course, where the hand of Providence makes the arrangements.

After Maddie died, Jesse and I agreed to split the responsibility of the Artifacts, Thereby we hoped to confound the enemy. I took the staff segment, and Jesse took the scrolls. What I didn't know was that Jesse, the fool, had drawn up a map to the codices.

I lost Maddie. Five days ago, I nearly lost my brother.

For years now, I'd felt the stirrings. A storm gathering. Jonas knew. He'd driven off beings that had come poking around the springs—some men, some beasts. We spoke of it from time to time, but he knew I'd renounced such things. I know he only spoke of them to me to try and reinstate my sense of obligation. I was unmoved. Until now.

The Fords went to Jesse's home five days ago and confronted him about the Artifacts. It was so ridiculous, Jesse laughed at them. They claimed to have become involved with Starry Wisdom. I would have laughed, too. To think, those ignoramuses! Then-- it's impossible to say what happened next, exactly. The map was hidden in the frame of the sampler on the wall. They found him lying directly beneath it, shot in the head. Perhaps he turned toward it, unthinkingly, intending to block it, I don't know. Then Bob shot him-- that bastard shot my brother. He's a dead man when I catch up to him.

Susie knew. She had a vision of it happening, and was nearly hysterical when she came and found me. She kept saying over and over, it may not have happened yet, Frank, don't let it happen, get up there. So I rode off as quick as I could. I stopped and got Jonas and off we went. We rode like hell, made St. Joe in just under two hours. I prayed harder than I've ever prayed before in my life. Please Jesus, Jesse's been shot in the chest before and come through that all right. Let him be all right now. And if he was already dead, I couldn't bear the thought of the law swarming all over the place, carting his body off, pestering Zee and the children. The thought made my blood boil. But when we found him, he wasn't dead. Near to it, but not dead.

The children were huddled outside the door. I went in, and saw Zee covered in blood, my brother's head in her lap. She looked up when I came in the door. I think under ordinary circumstances, she would have been surprised to see me there, but she was in shock. She told me in a flat voice that he was still alive, still breathing. It was madness, the blood all over the wall, the sampler hanging askew. Without entirely knowing why, I ripped it down, and saw something hidden between the frame and the backing. I tore it out. Zee gasped when she saw what I'd found. I knew in one glance what it was—a hand drawn map, and I knew it could only lead to one thing. Oh, fool! Cursing in a way to make the devil blush, I tore the damn thing up. What if it had fallen into the wrong hands? As long as it existed, it still could. If what Bob and Charles said was true, (and it must have been, for how else would they have known about the Artifacts?) the place could be crawling with Starry Wisdom ghouls, sure as hell would, it was only a matter of time. Jonas knelt beside Zee and Jesse. Jonas touched his head, and Jesse moaned. I burned the hell out of myself on the stove, trying to shove the pieces of paper in with the coals, and I was still swearing and trying to shut the oven door when Jonas said we had to get a move on or we were going to lose him. I agreed at once. I don't know what my own thoughts were. Zee was screaming at me not to take her husband, but I didn't pay her no mind. I just helped Jonas bundle Jesse up and load him into the back of a wagon. We covered him with a blanket. Jonas said to just leave it to him. He was so damn calm, it was eerie. I said all right. He patted Zee on the arm and told her everything would be all right.

You'd think it was him who'd been through the War, and bank robbing, and hell raising. And here I was, all flustered like a damn woman. I had to stay, you see. I had to stay behind, wringing my hands, and let Jonas take off with my brother. Jonas kept the horses at a nice trot, not hurrying, not dallying either. In all the excitement, nobody was going to take notice of some Indian and his cart, wheeling a slow course southeast.

Zee stopped screaming and became very grave and calm herself. She said other Sons would come. No, I said. She seemed shocked by my tone. I told her if any of them came, she was to send them away. The James brothers had not been involved with the Order in any official capacity for nine years. This business with that infernal stick and that damn heathen script has got to end. She asked if I thought it was really my decision. Would the Order really listen to what I had to say?

Don't I? I been guarding them for more than twenty years. If Jesse dies, that means I'm the sole Guardian. Nobody else knows where to find them. I aim to keep it that way. It stops here.

She asked me, as I made to leave, just what I figured on doing. I told her not to worry, and to keep the law, the Order and whoever the hell else might come poking around out of the house.

She followed me out, begging to know what I was up to. I told her to tell them that Jesse was dead, that she had the body in the house, and ain't nobody could touching it. I told her to tell them whatever it took to keep them out, and to keep the door barred. But above all, I made it clear that she was not to tell anyone Jonas or I had been by. I'd be back before dark, she could hold them off for that long. For Jesse's sake, I told her.

I took off, cutting through the countryside, a different way from which Jonas and I had come in.

And I did what should have been done a long time ago. I got rid of the Artifacts. I put them where no one would find them.

When I got back, it was well after nightfall. The house was surrounded by lawmen, by reporters, and I know I spotted a few suspicious types that could only have been from the Order. I hollered at them all to go away, to go to Hell, I didn't care, whichever was most convenient, what was going on was a family matter. Didn't a family get a chance to grieve, for fuck's sake? When they all stayed put, I fired off a few rounds. That sent a few of them scattering.

At last, the door opened. Jonas was there, but nobody saw him. He'd made himself Dim.

Laid out on the bed was what appeared to be my brother's body. Zee wept openly over it, and Little Jesse cried quietly in a corner.

After some more loud protestations on my part and a bit of fisticuffs, I relented and let the law haul the body away.

When we were sure they were all gone, Jesse came creeping quietly into the house, and this time, Zee's tears began afresh.

Jonas had taken Jesse, as near to death as he'd been – how far he'd journeyed across that threshold, even I do not care to know – and taken him to the sacred spring. There, Jonas had bathed his wound, gave him water to drink, and did the proper spells to revive and restore him. Still weak and ill, but alive, he'd loaded Jesse back into the wagon and brought him home.

The body the law had carted off was a Glamour, a figment made to look like Jesse's body. It had taken all of Jonas' strength and concentration to complete a convincing look alike. It did not just look like Jesse either—the police had carted off what felt to them to be a real dead

body, with weight and substance. Jonas assured me the likeness would be long in the ground before it dissipated. Jonas, our dearest, oldest friend. Thank God for him.

Alas, the sorrow does not end. Jonas had only brought back Jesse to say goodbye to his wife and son. We had fooled the law, the Order – and most importantly, we should have fooled them Starry Wisdom sons a bitches – that Jesse is dead. The location of the Codices dies with him. And if they ever do find out I know where the staff segment is—well, they can just come and try and get it out of me. I'd welcome it. I may be through with the Order, but I still share their foes.

Jesse's "funeral" was today. The body – or what everyone believed was his body – was packed on ice and shipped back home, so he could be buried on the farm, so Ma could watch over him. We did not even tell her what had really happened. The less who know, the better.

April 9, 1882

Last night, we had to tear Jesse away from Zee and little Jesse. It was an awful scene, but it had to be done. We brought him out to live near Jonas. A town has started going up there, people are coming in from all around, drawn to the springs. Word has spread about their wondrous healing powers. I'm glad of it, since it will be easier for Jesse to disappear into a crowd rather than retreat into isolation. Also, he is such a high-spirited lad, facing the prospect of solitude was making him a little stir crazy. Though at the same time, I worry. People gathering in this strange place-- what might it do to them?

No one will realize who Jesse is if he keeps his head down. And speaking of his head—we intend to dye his hair dark again, as we've done before, to disguise him. Jonas and I will see that he has everything he needs. Meanwhile I have vermin to see to.

October 7, 1882

I know now that Starry Wisdom has been behind this whole thing, from start to finish. I've just come from the Mayor's office where I've been in custody for two days. My suspicions were correct about him, that bastard who pardoned Bob Ford. He made the deal and set my brother up. I've got Ma to help me take care of this.

May 7, 1884

Happy, happy occasion. We just received word Charles Ford committed suicide. One down.

June 8, 1892

Bob Ford is dead now. Shot in a saloon in Colorado by an unknown gunman. What an unsafe world we live in.

December 15, 1894

All should be well. Excelsior Springs has grown into a place of some note. John is getting on well there. No one has ever suspected a thing.

And yet, I feel uneasy. There is definitely some force lurking about here.

July 21, 1895

We all feel it now, stronger than before. It feels as if we are being watched, stalked even. We keep waiting for it to make its move, but it does nothing.

April 13, 1905

For ten years, we have lived with an uneasy alliance with whatever force has taken over the town of Excelsior. It has shot its roots deep into this town, and I fear there is nothing left for us but to leave this place. Once, we would have stood our ground, Jonas and I, but old age has crept up on us, and I'm afraid it's not likely that we could be of much use anymore.

We buried my brother today, under one of his aliases. It is a fair a way as any to break clean with what has happened. We buried the ghastly bauble with him, and to that, I say good riddance.

I go, Jonas stays. I asked him to go, but he will never relinquish the burden his father placed upon him, just as his father before him.

As for myself, despite my other life, and what people may think they know about my brother and me, I can only say here [scribbled out] Whatever I am, whatever I have been, it pales in comparison to the Darkness I have faced.

Chapter Fourteen

“Only part that doesn’t jibe with the history I know,” the Colonel said, “is that Frank James was living in Virginia when Jesse was shot. He didn’t get to attend his own brother’s funeral. Officially.”

At last, he suffered Doug to look over the pages.

“History is full of blank spots and open gaps that historians fill as best they can,” Doug said. “Sometimes, common wisdom on a historical event ends up being completely wrong.”

“Yeah,” Murphy piped up. “Let’s start with the fact that the *James brothers* were in the Order and go from there.”

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “I’m still working on that one, too.”

“Let’s see,” the Colonel mused. “The diary says Jesse was buried under one of his aliases. Bill?”

“Way ahead of you, Colonel. What am I looking for?”

“Thomas Howard, J.D. Howard, William Campbell, J. Frank Dalton... He had a few more I’m forgettin’, you can look ‘em up. Be in April 1905.”

“Well, Excelsior’s newspaper archives don’t go back that far, so I can’t exactly check the obituaries. But I can tell you that the only cemetery at the time was the Salem Christian Union Church. I can get you the rest of the aliases, and you could all go out there and have a look.”

Murphy nodded to the darkening window. “So it’s almost dark and we’re going to a graveyard. That’s smart. I feel secure.”

“If Jesse James’ secret grave *is* there, do you wanna wait for daylight to start digging?”

“And there’s *digging* now. This just keeps getting better.”

“And grave robbing,” Doug pointed out. “Don’t forget that.”

“This may sound silly to the rest of you,” Murphy said. “But has it occurred to anyone that, rather than traipsing off to a graveyard to dig up a body in the middle of the night, that we could come back tomorrow, with an exhumation order, and do it, I dunno, *legally*?”

“We don’t have time for that,” Doug said.

“An exhumation for a hundred-year-old corpse?” the Colonel added. “There are people who’d take note of that. And we don’t want them getting in our business. If they’re not here already.”

“What, those Starry Wisdom guys you all were talking about?” Murphy asked.

“Them,” the Colonel’s eyes narrowed. “And others. And we have orders to avoid confrontation at all costs. Not exactly my idea, but I do see the logic.” He looked around at the others. “Any more questions?” When no one spoke, he stood up and shook out his duster. “Bill, we got any shovels?”

“Standard issue E-tools, one per customer, Colonel. I do suggest you guys grab a bite to eat, though. Let it get darker and you’re going to need the calories.”

“All right then. Finish what you got to do and load up, people. We need to be on the road in two minutes. Let’s go.”

Murphy got up and started towards the back of the room.

“Where the hell you goin’?” the Colonel asked.

“Little boys’ room.”

“All right. Better make it five.”

* * *

7:43 p.m.

The rains had let up for the moment, and the moon had risen, nearly full. Salem Hill Cemetery sat on a back country crossroad, beside a little white chapel on a hill. The team filed out, each holding a shovel and a flashlight.

The Colonel cast an appraising eye on the landscape. “I’d say the time has come to arm the amateurs, wouldn’t you, Mr. Murphy?”

Murphy, shovel slung over his shoulder, heaved a trademark sigh. “Must we?”

“We’re marching right out into the open. No cover.”

“You make a compelling argument.”

“Glad you agree.” Without waiting for a response, the Colonel turned to re-open the hatchback. “All right. Doc, Kate, the moment has arrived. I want you to belt these on,” he drew out two pistols in holsters. “Now understand, these are fully loaded and ready to go. You are only to use these in an emergency situation. By which I mean when none of us are in front of you, in any fashion. Questions?”

They both shook their heads and accepted the holsters. Murphy helped get them strapped on.

When everyone was ready, they set off. In the moonlight, all of the tombstones, even the most weathered ones, could be read easily enough.

“Hold on,” Murphy stopped just inside the cemetery wall and took a flask from his jacket pocket. “I’m at a graveyard and I’m sober. That’s just not right.” He took a swig and passed it around.

The Colonel took a swig and grinned, wiping his mustache on his sleeve. “Why, Detective Murphy. That’s some damn fine sippin’ whiskey.”

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks,” Bill broke in. “So I can sit around and watch you people drink *scotch*.”

Murphy shrugged. “Sucks to be you, Bill.”

“All right,” the Colonel said. “You’ve all got your list of names. We’re looking for 1905. Probably going to have family plots, so the dates aren’t going to be in one place but scattered around.”

The ground team fanned out amongst the tombstones to search. They made their way up to the crest of the hill and down the other side, occasionally remarking on names or dates, speculating as to how this person or that person died. They made notes of the ones that were illegible, in case they had to come back and re-examine them later.

After they’d been searching for a while, Murphy remarked to the Colonel, “You been on a lot of missions. Are things always this easy?”

“The hell you talking about, son? This ain’t easy, right here,” the Colonel gestured to the gravestone he was inspecting.

“Well, it’s not my preferred pastime either,” Murphy conceded. “But that’s not what I mean.”

The Colonel made a noncommittal sound and moved on to another stone.

“I haven’t been on a lot of missions, but I’ve worked a lot of cases,” Murphy went on. “I just find it odd that all of the pieces are just falling into our lap in the course of a day. Eileen Swithin, whose family I just happened to be familiar with, the statue, the river, the diary... And then the segment of the staff, which just happens to be exactly what we need, and just happens to be in the same town where this Isfet breach may be happening. Strike you as odd?”

“Actually,” Doug pointed out, “all of these things are not *that* unlikely, when you consider the history involved. Particularly if Whitefeather had any kind of precognitive ability.”

The Colonel turned to them both. “Actually, Doc, I’ve been thinking the same thing Murphy has. Things have been have been too down-pat for my tastes.”

“Well, what do you think is going on then?” Doug asked.

“The way I figure it, there’s two possibilities,” the Colonel said. “Kate! Cecil!” he called. They had wandered ahead and turned at his shout. “Get over here, you need to hear this, too.” He waited for them to make their way back to the group before continuing. “The way I figure it is this: one, it just happens that things work out this way, and we really lucked out. In which case, we keep doing what we’re doing, and be careful. Two, there’s something else going on entirely, and we don’t know what it is yet, because we don’t have enough information yet. In which case, we need to keep doing what we’re doing, and *be careful*. We can’t afford to make any mistakes here, people. We’ve got a job to do, so let’s keep at it.”

They continued their search, pausing only when passing clouds robbed them of moonlight. It was going to rain again. At length, when the fence that marked the rearmost boundary of the graveyard was in plain view, Murphy muttered “Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.”

The grave was wide open. The soil to either side had been obviously and hastily dug aside. And the headstone: Thomas Howard, Died 1905.

At the bottom sat the coffin, waiting for them.

“This stinks like a French victory,” Murphy said.

The Colonel's voice was clipped and urgent. "Bill, you getting this?"

"I'm reading it, Colonel."

"All right, people, form a perimeter. Doc, Kate, get your goddamn guns out. Bill, patch this over to HQ. See if they can send somebody down here yet. Anybody."

"Roger that."

"Colonel," Doug said, "I'd like to examine that coffin, if I may."

The Colonel gave him a hard look. "I don't like it." Doug's face barely had time to register disappointment before the Colonel sighed heavily. "Well, hurry the fuck up about it, Doc! This goddamn place is givin' me the heebie-jeebies."

Doug knelt beside the hole and beamed his flashlight down into it. Kate put her hand on his shoulder. "Here, let me help."

"No--" the Colonel began, but it was too late. Kate had already jumped down. "Kate, god dammit!"

She swept some dirt away from the wood, revealing carvings beneath. "Bill, are you seeing this?"

"I'm getting the visual."

She looked up at Doug. "Can you see this from there?"

Doug nodded. "That looks like a variation of the Greater Seal of Solomon, though I don't recognize some of the characters."

Murphy was still scanning the graveyard around them, silently cursing the amount of cover the other gravestones might provide for an ambush. "Which means...?"

"It's protected," Doug said. "Evil spirits -- most any evil being, for that matter -- can't touch or open it."

"So it's safe?"

"Unless we open it, yes."

"Ah." Murphy considered this. "Can I get that on a T-shirt or something?"

"Okay, ground team," Bill broke in, "I just spoke to Clayton. The situation has not improved."

The Colonel frowned. "So I guess there ain't nobody then?"

"Right."

The Colonel's shoulders drooped. "Shit."

"Shit'?" Murphy echoed. "What do you mean shit? Why shit?"

"I tell you, folks, this ain't my line a work--" the Colonel began.

"What do you mean?" Alarmed, Kate stuck her head out of the grave.

"I mean right about now, I would ordinarily be steppin' aside and letting the eggheads take over—the goddamn archaeologists and archivists and whatnot. I kill what needs killin', I

find what needs findin', and then I get the hell out of the way. What happens next—beats the hell outta me." He paused. His team was staring at him. "All right. This is what we do know: the situation is obviously some kind of set-up, as Mr. Murphy so eloquently pointed out. There's something in that hole right now. Whether it will help us or not, I don't know. But *somebody* dug down there and then stopped. Now just why—I don't have any earthly idea. But my guess is, that *somebody* is probably still hanging around here somewhere."

"Nothing on scanners," Bill said.

"Well, the hotel was cloaked. So let's not get too comfortable."

"So," Murphy said, "I ask again, what now?"

"Well, the journal was genuine," the Colonel said. "Of that, I am certain. So I guess the only thing left to do will be to open that coffin."

Everybody looked down at Kate, who grinned. "I'm on it." From somewhere near the top of the hill, where the other graves were, came a growl. "Or not."

"Incoming!" the Colonel held out his hand. "Kate, get up here." She took it, and he hauled her up fast. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she saw, over his shoulder, shapes on the hill, moving through the moonlight towards them.

Her eyes went wide. "Colonel--"

He half-shoved her. "Get over there with Cecil. Get your gun back out! You two," he addressed Doug and Murphy as he turned, "Stay where you are."

* * *

Bill watched tensely as the team took up their positions along the grave's perimeter. No auras or other detectable energy signatures showed on any scans, except for the team and a slight reading from the coffin itself.

The coffin's seal *should* have registered on the camera's scans. If there was a staff segment in there, it should've lit up like a beacon. But there'd been no reading of the seal until the ground team had practically been on top of it. The segment might have special properties to avoid detection, as the Colonel said, but the seal itself should've shown up, bold as brass, unless there was a cloak woven into the coffin as well...

And if Whitefeather did it, there was no reason to think the bad guys hadn't, as well. In a case like this, a blank screen was a far cry from good news.

Nervously, Bill said, "Talk to me, Colonel."

Multiple energy readings suddenly appeared, in motion, closing in on Murphy and the Colonel. The halo scan and motion detectors showed shapes that appeared to be human, but their temperature readings were well over a hundred degrees.

"*Guys, incoming!*" he shouted. "North and south, lots of targets, high heat, high halo, probably the things from the hotel, at least a dozen—"

The beat cams showed him five different perspectives of the same thing: a mass of black figures shining in the darkness, charging the team.

“Jesus!” What could only be the sound of the Colonel’s six-guns going off followed. Murphy’s automatic immediately joined in. The BC screens blinked white with every shot, giving him only terrifying glimpses of what was happening—the creatures’ teeth and eyes glowing almost phosphorescent, muzzle flares an uneven strobe of chaos and destruction.

“Christ, they’re getting back up--”

“Dammit, stay down! Bad corpse! Bad!”

“Watch your backs!”

“I’m jammed up here, JD!”

“That’s why I carry a goddamned revolver!” The Colonel’s firing slowed. Then Bill heard the sound of what was probably Murphy beating the creatures with something, perhaps a baton.

“Cecil,” Bill said, “Get your gun to Murphy and take Kate’s. Colonel, as soon as Murphy’s armed--”

Suddenly the halo screen seemed to blossom a bright orange. Something—some force had emerged right in the team’s midst. Bill imagined it must’ve resembled vapor rising from the open grave.

“Guys! More incoming--”

“Yeah, no shit!”

“Behind you--” Bill paused. The mist or whatever it was had split into two extensions like arms. Two of the attacking signatures vanished. “Uh, guys? Apparently you have back-up.”

“Where?”

“Right behind you. From the grave.”

* * *

Kate felt her breath stop. A snarl had come from her left, and she turned slightly, bracing herself.

Out of nowhere, a massive shape -- or shapes -- came out of the darkness and attacked the Colonel. From somewhere behind her, she heard Murphy shouting. The flare from the guns made it hard to see. Whatever was attacking them-- they appeared to be human, but nothing human made sounds like that. And their skin seemed black in the moonlight, their eyes and teeth unnaturally bright. There was a stench of burning hair and flesh. And the Colonel and Murphy were shooting at them. They were shooting them, sometimes with the muzzles of their guns pressed right up against their blackened flesh, *and they weren’t going down*. The creatures just got up and went on attacking, trying to sink their teeth into the men’s throats. The Colonel and Murphy were still shouting. She thought she heard one of them say her name.

“Here!” she heard herself say. “I’m here!”

There was still more shouting and gunfire. Bill said something, but she couldn’t hear what. Then she felt a rush of cool air come up from somewhere below, and she jumped back, startled. It came directly out of the open grave. She could sense it hovering in the air in front of her. She was vaguely aware that Cecil had removed the gun from her slack grasp. Then there was a *whoosh* as the cool air dispersed into two wide streams, reaching for two of the creatures attacking the Colonel.

The creatures fell over, lifeless.

The Colonel looked back at her. “Holy shit. Did you do that?”

Numbly, she shook her head.

Then, a flash of something silver caught her eye, and she turned to face Doug, who was standing directly across the open grave from her.

Like her, Doug had turned toward the grave when the creatures began to attack. This had allowed what appeared to be a young girl to come up behind him, and the flash Kate had seen was the knife she’d driven into Doug’s abdomen.

Kate’s mouth opened but no sound came out. She saw the girl shift her grip on the knife so she could twist it in the wound.

Incredibly, despite the girl’s small stature, she appeared to be holding Doug up, one tiny hand held firmly at the base of his neck. Grinning, the girl put her head on his shoulder. She hauled Doug back a few steps, carefully putting some distance between them and the grave. “Oh, I’m sorry, but I’ve always had a weakness for older men.”

The Colonel had frozen at the sight of the girl with Doug. Across from him, Murphy stood, Cecil’s gun in one hand, baton in the other, a bludgeoned body at his feet. Four other creatures lay prone around him, the strange force that had risen out of Jesse James’ grave having snuffed out their peculiar anima.

Now, all three men turned and trained their guns on the girl.

“She has human heat signature,” Bill spoke into their earpieces, “But her energy readings are pretty high-- mage levels. And she seems to have some sort of amulet. Be careful.”

“Let go of the knife, and put him down slowly,” Murphy said. “Then back away.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t recall giving you permission to speak.”

Murphy grimaced, but kept his mouth shut.

The girl gave him a small, cruel smile. “Better. Now,” she looked at Kate, “You. Open the coffin. Inside, you will find something that belongs to my mistress.”

Kate hesitated, looking first at the Colonel, then at Murphy.

“By all means,” the girl stroked the knife handle with her thumb. “Get permission first. *I* have time.”

“Do what she says, Kate,” Bill said.

Doug shook his head infinitesimally. At that, the girl stood on her toes and whispered something into his ear. His eyes closed.

Kate willed her limbs to move. She jumped back down into the grave as she had before.

“Good girl.”

Kate hooked her fingers under the edge of the lid and tugged. It had been nailed shut. The old pine was mostly rotted, but in some places it still held. Struggling against panic, she forced herself to straighten back up and shift her position, tugging from another angle. She managed to wrench the lid free. The grave itself smelled of damp earth, but a stronger, mustier scent escaped as the body was exposed. The arms of the skeleton were crossed over a bundle of cloth, darkened by dirt and rot. Gingerly, Kate moved one of the arms, shuddering as it came apart at the elbow.

Sweat beaded her brow and temples. She set the forearm to the side of the coffin and slid the bundle out from under the other arm. She started to lift the bundle out to set on the side of the grave, then stopped.

Faintly, through the moldering wrapper, she felt...what? A vibration? Thrumming? Whatever it was, it compelled her to unroll the cloth, and inside...

She couldn't bring herself to touch it right away. It was a length of wood about twelve inches long and less than an inch and a half in diameter. The carvings etched along its surface were unrecognizable, worn soft with time. If it was supposed to attach to something else, she couldn't see how; both ends were sanded smooth. Her stomach sank. Maybe this *wasn't* what they were looking for.

“Kate?” Bill's said. “I know you can't answer me, so just listen. There's one rule that the military, the police, and the Order all have in common. And that is you never surrender your weapon to the enemy. Right now, everyone in your team is trying to think of a way of not handing this thing over, assuming there's anything there at all. If you hand it over, Doug will almost certainly be killed. And if that really is a segment of the staff, that's only the beginning.”

What Bill was saying to her made sense, but, by that time, it was beside the point as far as Kate was concerned. She'd already picked it up, the remainder of the cloth falling from between her fingers.

“Okay,” Bill said, “I can see you're holding the segment. Now this is very important—if you can sense energy when you hold it, then might be a segment of the Staff of Solomon. It gives no impression on any of the scanners whatsoever.”

Kate had already made up her own mind.

Without giving herself a chance to form any second thoughts, Kate climbed up, heaving herself backwards over the edge of the grave like a swimmer emerging from a pool, leaving her legs dangling over the coffin, staff segment in hand.

The girl's eyes widened. Eagerly, she leaned forward, her hand loosening on the knife handle.

That was all Kate needed. Without even standing up, Kate drew the segment back and cracked it down like a whip handle, so the wand and her will were pointed directly at the girl.

The air rippled violently between them, sending up little tufts of grass as if a strong gust of wind had torn along the ground. There was a muffled explosion as a cannonball of raw energy struck the girl, knocking her away from Doug's side. She flew back about ten feet and Doug slumped to the ground.

"Fire."

At the Colonel's word, the three men emptied their remaining rounds at the spot where the girl had landed. When they could see clearly again, she was gone.

"Reloading," called Murphy.

"Me too," said Cecil.

"Yeah," said the Colonel.

Murphy had his next clip in and a round chambered. "Going in. Cover me."

The Colonel nodded. "Go." Murphy made his way to Doug, shouting, "The med kit! In the truck! Get it!" Mercifully, the old man had landed on his back.

"Keys!" the Colonel shouted back.

Without looking, Murphy tossed them over his shoulder.

Retrieving them, the Colonel said, "Cecil, you're with me. Let's go."

The Colonel sprinted off across the graveyard, his duster flapping behind him, Cecil doing his best to keep up.

Murphy tore open Doug's shirt. "Doc, we're going to get you through this, but I need you to help me. Okay? Stay with me."

Doug nodded with difficulty. "Okay."

Bill cleared his throat. "Colonel, sheriff's department is being dispatched to your location."

The Colonel's voice came over their earpieces, "Copy that, Bill."

Kate stood up, still holding the-- staff segment? Wand? What exactly was this thing? She still wasn't sure that this was what they were looking for. What had Doug called the segments? Wands of Deleth. That was it. He'd said the individual segments were called Wands of Deleth, but he hadn't said anything about them being used as a weapon.

"Little help here?" Murphy's voice jolted her back to reality.

She rushed forward and knelt beside him and Doug. "What do I do?"

He looked at the wand. "Can *that* do anything?"

"I don't know."

"Never mind, then. Don't try. Just keep watch."

Kate stood up and looked wildly around, not really seeing. "How bad is it?"

"Here, hold this--" Murphy tapped her with a flashlight, which she took and held. "--and he just got stabbed in the gut. How do you think he is?"

Doug made a weak sound, and Kate looked back at them. Murphy was parting the wound with his fingers. Her eyes went wide. "Oh, God."

The light was none-too steady. "Kate, I know you're upset. But for right now, please, shut up and hold that light steady!"

She did her best to comply. Suddenly, bright lights and a roaring noise made them both jump.

Murphy turned around. "The *hell--?*"

Kate had dropped the flashlight, but to her credit, she was now clutching the wand with both hands, pointing it at the pair of lights bouncing unevenly toward them.

Some maniac was plowing a vehicle through the graveyard. What they'd heard was the engine gunning as it jumped the hill, followed by the scraping and groaning of the undercarriage bottoming out. Tires ripped up the earth, dirt flew like water cresting to either side of a ship as it circled around, fishtailing as it dodged a particularly large obelisk. One side of the vehicle sank as it appeared to get caught in a sinkhole. The driver reversed, gunned it again and plowed its way down the incline to them, tombstones crumpling against its grille. Kate and Murphy watched, mouths agape.

The juggernaut's wheels locked and it skidded damply to a halt about ten feet before them, its headlights flooding the gravesite. Squinting, they heard the car door open.

"I thought you maybe could use some more light there, Murphy," the Colonel's voice volunteered from behind the glare. He hurried forward with the medic bag.

"Yeah, that's just fine Colonel. Thanks." Murphy grabbed a plastic bag from it, handed it to the Colonel as he searched for more. "Here, open this thing."

"How is he?"

"Bad. Penetration of the anterior abdominal wall. Looks like maybe the knife went into the peritoneal cavity as well. He needs irrigation, stitches, maybe surgery." Murphy stuck a hypodermic into Doug's flesh, carefully pressed the plunger down. "This'll help the shock, but--"

"No time, Murphy. We need to get out of here now! Why the hell do you think I was four-wheeling it over a goddamn boneyard?"

Murphy snapped his head up, disbelieving. "*What?*"

"I said, get him in the truck! Sheriff's on the way! Don't know how long!"

"Good! They can bring an ambulance."

"Guys!" Kate cried. "Whatever we're going to do, we need to do it now!"

Murphy shook his head. "No way. I ain't moving him."

"Dammit, Murphy, listen to me!" the Colonel grabbed Murphy's shoulder. "We got no time. The law is already on the way. Now, we don't have clout with them right now, but the enemy will. And if they aren't already watchin' the hospitals, they will be after they find this mess." He jerked his head towards the bodies piled around the open grave, where Cecil seemed to be running around with a flashlight, looking for something.

Murphy stood his ground. “I don’t give a damn. We need to get him to a hospital.”

The Colonel took a step back. “All right, Murphy. You take him to a hospital, where he can fall into enemy hands, and what do you think’ll happen to him then?”

Murphy’s face was a battleground of indecision: years of EMT training warred with a whole new set of concerns. At once, his whole body sagged with resignation. “*Fuck.*”

“You *have* to get him ready to move. Now.”

Murphy turned back to the doctor. “*God* dammit!” His hands worked quickly. “Hand me that bag! I’ll have to Steri-strip this closed for now. Get that disinfectant ready. Doc, this is going to hurt.”

“That’s fine,” Doug managed. The flesh around his eyes had gone gray. The lines in his face looked deeper, almost like cuts. “It already hurts.”

A minute crept by, then two.

“Bill, how we doin’?” the Colonel asked.

“ETA, three minutes. Five, tops.”

“What’s the best way out of here?”

“I’ll get you around them, don’t worry. Clearly, you don’t mind a little off-roading.”

Cecil glanced back at where the SUV was parked, and the trail of wreckage behind it. “Clearly not.”

Murphy said to Doug, “All right. We’re going to need you to stand up. We’ll be on either side of you to help. But we still need you to be able to walk to the truck. Think you can do that?”

Doug did not look at all certain, but he spoke bravely. “Yes. I think I can.”

Murphy stood up. “All right. Help me, Colonel.”

They helped Doug to stand. He leaned heavily on the Colonel for a few moments. “Okay. I’m ready.”

The thunder growled its warning as Murphy and the Colonel gently situated Doug into the back seat of the SUV. Then Murphy climbed in and crouched on the floor beside Doug. Kate got in the front, and Cecil wedged himself into the rear cargo area.

They started to wind back down the hill, away from the graveyard even as the moon hid her face from view. There was another flash and the storm that the sky had been holding back was finally released.

“Well, I tell ya, it’s typical Missoura’ weather,” the Colonel said, “one minute the sun’s shinin’, and the next it’s raining like a cow pissin’ on a flat rock.”

Murphy didn’t take his eyes off his patient, but his mouth twitched in amusement. “Colorful.”

“Thank you. I do try to be.”

Kate looked up from Doug’s injuries to stare at the two of them. Her face was ashen, her eyes full of barely-controlled panic.

The Colonel glanced at her. “Kate, listen to me. You’re tough, I’ve seen that. You can do this. You’re just gonna hafta suck it up. It’s time to get tough.” He paused, and added, “You hear me? You’re gonna *have* to do it.”

A moment later Murphy broke in. “Y’know, I just don’t get this. I mean, if you’re going to start up an evil empire, why start it in Excelsior Springs? That’s like if Adolph Hitler settled in Nebraska.”

Doug opened his eyes. It obviously pained him to talk, his voice ragged and hoarse. “Because this is where the power is. Whoever this ‘mistress’ is, she obviously wants the wand. A segment of the Staff of Solomon could stabilize the breach Rios was telling us about into a gate she could try to control. And a gate opening between our realm and Isfet is an event that has repercussions across space and time: shockwaves of synchronicities, getting closer together as we get closer to the event, physically or chronologically, with time itself getting softer as we approach it. Her being here could be one of those synchronicities, even as she works towards the event itself. Like tumblers in a lock.”

Murphy nodded. “You had me up until ‘because.’”

“Look at it this way, Murphy,” Kate said. “What better place to hide?”

Murphy half grinned. “Say, Bill, could you patch me into Clayton’s office? I just wanted to thank him for calling me up and dragging me into all this. I was enjoying a nice retirement from the Order when all this happened. Thanks a lot.”

“Well, you could call it a ‘nice retirement,’” Bill said, “or you could tell the truth and say you were bored as hell.”

“Well, there is that.”

“Colonel,” Doug said, “I know this may not seem like the time, but just how many of those headstones did you completely destroy in your zeal to arrange our escape?”

“Try not to worry about that, Doc,” said Murphy, “It’s more important that you’re still alive.”

“Mister Murphy’s right, Doc,” the Colonel called back, “And anyway, they’ll get taken care of all right in the end.”

Kate looked up. “Who will?”

“The *stones*, Kate.” In the rear view mirror, she could see his eyes smiling. “After all this rigmorole gets sorted out, there’ll be an anonymous donor - maybe a bunch of ‘em - come to straighten out the graves and see that all the markers an’ stones get replaced. Names, dates, everything. You’ll see.”

Feeling lost, she looked down at Doug, who nodded. “We are the Order of the Four Sons. We will not have the names of the dead forgotten.”

Chapter Fifteen

8:35 p.m.

Bill guided the team northeast, along a back route, before circling back into town. They pulled into the motel. Murphy and the Colonel helped Doug inside, his coat buttoned to conceal his torn and bloody shirt. Cecil and Kate followed.

As soon as they got into the room, Kate shut the door and immediately began pacing with quick, jerky movements. Murphy and the Colonel had already laid Doug out on the bed. “Well,” Murphy said pleasantly, “it’s been more than three minutes. I guess that means we have time to work on you. Colonel, where’s my bag?”

Cecil shrugged his backpack off and plunked it down on the table. He took a beat cam out of his shirt pocket, examined it closely. “Bill, we need to run a field check on BC4.”

“I got nothin’, man. Try again.”

Cecil turned the camera off and opened the battery case. He shook his head. “Cancel field check number two on that. Battery’s fried. As in liquidated. It’s soup.”

“Not the first, my brother. Not the first.”

Kate had been watching these proceedings with mounting disbelief.

Cecil put the camera in his bag and took out a second camera. “This is field test one, BC6—”

“Jesus,” Kate snarled with uncharacteristic venom, “Can’t you just give those things a fucking rest?”

“Actually, no, I can’t. Doug lost his camera. I found it, but it’s broken. He needs a new one.”

“Doug has bigger problems than a broken camera. Or hadn’t you noticed? The man. Was. *Stabbed*. He may have a broken *spleen* and you’re worried about a fucking camera?”

Surprised, Cecil looked at her. “I know that. But I don’t know anything about medicine. I do know something about cameras. And regs are very specific about these situations.”

“Is that what this is? A ‘situation’?”

At Doug’s bedside, Murphy prepared a needle. “Doc, you really don’t want to look down while I’m doing this, okay?”

“Thank you, Detective. I had already reached that conclusion, myself,” Doug replied tiredly.

“Kate—” Bill began.

“*Shutup.*”

“Kay.”

“Okay, Kate?” Cecil said. “Look, I’m setting the camera down. See?” He set it carefully down on the table. Then he stood up slowly, hands out toward Kate. “Better?”

She stood with her arms crossed protectively over her chest. “Of *course* it’s not better! Quit trying to fucking talk me down from a fucking window ledge, David!”

Cecil sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Murphy, who was cleaning out Doug’s wound, glanced briefly upward. “You’re name’s David? I thought your name was Cecil.”

“Cecil’s a nickname.”

“What’s wrong with David?”

“Nothing.”

“I call him Cecil,” Bill chimed in helpfully.

“Bill calls me Cecil,” Cecil confirmed. “Consequently, so does everybody else in the Order.”

“Which do you prefer?” Murphy asked.

“Oh, you know. Either way.”

“I’m so glad we cleared that up.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Kate gave Cecil a withering look. “His mother calls him David.”

“My mother calls me David,” Cecil echoed. “And so does Kate, apparently, when she gets upset.”

“I think I have a pretty fucking good reason to be upset.”

“Hey, Katie,” the Colonel said casually. “Can I borrow that stick?”

“What?” Kate blinked at him.

“The stick. Doc here wants to have a look. You mind?”

She stared at him for a few moments, too outraged to speak. Then she set her jaw. Slinging her book around, she slammed it down on the bed where surgery was *not* being performed. Violently, she yanked open the zipper and whipped out the wand.

Despite themselves, both the Colonel and Cecil recoiled slightly.

“Oh, what?” Kate asked coldly as she handed it over to the Colonel. “So now I’m hysterical *and* dangerous?”

“You were always dangerous, Kate,” Bill said from the safety of the van. “Hysterical? Not on my watch. Didn’t I promise to keep you sane?”

Kate opened her mouth. And closed it. Then opened it again, “Who *are* you people?”

Murphy was contentedly staying out of the whole thing, and gave every appearance of being utterly absorbed in suturing. *Knit one, purl two, not my problem, the others have it well in hand, tra-la-la-la.*

“What do you mean?” Cecil asked.

“How can you all crack jokes and babble about nicknames and make like nothing is happening here when Doug is bleeding and I just blasted that girl...and there was a ghost and...we’re *here*...and what is *wrong* with you?”

“Kate--” Bill began.

“No, let me take this one,” the Colonel said. “Look, I can understand what you’re sayin’, darlin’. Let me put it to you this way: when I was in the Marines, there was this friend of mine, knew him since basic. We went through ten kinds of hell together, and over the years things got pretty rough for him. Him and me were in the same unit, and after a while, he started drinking codeine. From the bottle.” He paused for a moment, remembering. “We were on one of those missions where we were never there to begin with, know what I mean? An *unofficial* mission. By this time, he was doin’ a bottle of the stuff a day. Anyway, we were setting nitroglycerine tubes into a cliff top, and to do that, you have to drill the hole into the rock to set it in first.

“Now, a normal man knows to leave his nitro tube in the vehicle while he’s drilling, but like I said, he’d been doing a lot of that rotten stuff, and we knew something was wrong when we heard this ‘foomph’ sound. We figured, ‘Holy shit, the explosives,’ and went back to the vehicle. But no, everything was still there. Then we noticed my buddy was missing.

“He’d been workin’ on the short end of the cliff by himself. Vibrations from the drill had set off the nitroglycerine he was carryin’ in his pocket.”

The room was silent for several moments.

At last, Kate managed: “God.” Her face was so white, even her lips had gone a funny shade of gray.

The Colonel gave a sad kind of shrug. “All we said at the time was, ‘Well, that’s him all over.’ And then we went back to work.”

“Scream or laugh,” Bill’s said.

The Colonel nodded reflectively. “Got that right, son.” Then, he moved over to Doug’s bedside and very gently held the staff segment out for Doug to examine.

Chapter Sixteen

8:25 p.m.

MJ-12 Agent Vickers stepped from his vehicle into the parking lot of the Salem Christian Union Church. Visibility was bad enough in this shithole town, and the rain wasn't helping. From gravel road 'highways' to treacherous, narrow, two-lane flattops with no fucking street lamps, it had been a grim pain in the ass from the word go.

Bad enough they had to allow the locals to tag along on their case, but it had taken almost a full minute to convince Backhills Bob and his Country Bumpkin Band that their place in this little parade was in the back. And even then, they'd just had to play their goddamned sirens all the fucking way, which, granted, was only about three minutes from the police station to the graveyard—but it destroyed any chance they might have had to actually *catch* anybody in the area.

Four Clay County deputies had been the first to arrive in response to several calls from neighboring farm houses about "a goddamn war" going on "up to the old graveyard." Now they were trying to secure the area and probably destroying almost as much evidence in the process as the fucking rain.

Agent Vickers took in the scene disgustedly, Agent Spencer beside him, umbrellas keeping off the worst of the rain. Four deputies fumbling all over themselves trying to keep fucking farmers from wandering onto the crime scene and not a goddamn one of them taking charge. Word was the sheriff was on his way, for all the fucking good that would do.

Well, as of right now, *they* were in charge.

The cops stepped out of their way as the agents made their way across the undisturbed portion of the graveyard toward the open grave, easily visible from the piles of bodies to either side.

One of the deputies came scurrying up as best he could on the muddy hillside. "Agent Vickers, I'm Deputy--"

Vickers cut him off. "Spencer? Handle this, will you?" And with that, he strode ahead, leaving his subordinate to start issuing orders.

Dutifully, Spencer addressed the deputy. "First, we need to get this area secured. I want those people out of here," he pointed to the small crowd that had gathered along the road. "Then I want both roads blocked off. I don't want to see any vehicular traffic coming from either direction. Third, post a couple of officers along that fence, I don't want anyone coming in on foot. Fourth, why don't I see any forensics out here? We have some nice tire tracks here, we might be able to ID a vehicle if you people can get some casts made before the storm washes it all away. We've got shells all over the place. We've got shovels-- that might mean fingerprints. But again, *it's raining*. We're losing evidence as we speak. Are you getting all this?"

Another deputy stood nervously by the open grave. "Can I see some ID, sir?"

Without speaking, Vickers reached into his back pocket, flashed his federal ID, then jerked his head back toward where Spencer was still haranguing the Barney Fife. To his credit, the kid took the hint without further discussion.

Ignoring the heap of bodies around him, Vickers hunkered down and peered into the open grave. The grave itself was unquestionably old, the skeleton at the bottom crumbling. He could see an arm had been removed, then mysteriously discarded. Its hand was still curved, its thumb almost completing the circumference of something. Some sort of rag partially covered the torso. Not clothing, but something that had been discarded.

He looked almost idly at the corpses around him, counted sixteen. All had been facing the grave when they went down. Snapping on his light, he stood up and began to examine them one by one through the downpour. Burned but intact, all with the same grimace of bestial rage. Yet their clothes, while ragged and filthy, were not burned. So fire hadn't killed them. He also saw that many of them were riddled with bullet holes, all at very close range. So somebody shot them and *kept* shooting them, point-blank, while they stood there and took round after round.

They'd have to examine the bodies to be sure, forensically and otherwise, but it was safe to assume that these bodies were not human. The one inside the grave—probably human. Outside the grave—definitely not human. Which meant someone had brought them here. O4S didn't use necromancy; they liked to think they were the good guys. Probably Starry Wisdom then.

They had, however, been *fighting* humans. Well-armed humans. That was more likely O4S.

He'd have to wait for a more thorough examination to be completed, sure, but burned walking dead usually meant eretics. High magic. High stakes. But what the hell were they doing *here*, on American soil?

He shined his flashlight on the tombstone. Thomas Howard. Didn't ring any bells. What had been in this grave that would attract both O4S and Starry Wisdom? And why now, after a hundred years of sitting here in the middle of nowhere?

He clicked off his flashlight and stood up. "Spencer!"

While Spencer picked his way over the wet terrain to him, Vickers took out his cell phone and hit speed dial. It was answered immediately.

"Sir?"

"Status report, young man."

"Still at the police station, sir. You're at the only disturbance tonight. Rumors are coming in over the radio from the sheriff's office--"

"Good," Vickers broke in, "Agent Barnes, you get those *officers*," he loaded the word with sarcasm, "into a perimeter around town-- call in other towns as needed. Highways, dirt roads, everything. Tell them we may have a mass murderer in the area. Have them call other jurisdictions. There are to be choppers over the area inside of an hour. I don't want so much as a mouse getting in or out of Excelsior Springs without my knowing about it."

"Sir, that won't leave anyone for--"

Vickers' eyes narrowed. "Do it."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. So glad you approve."

"I only meant—" Barnes began.

"Out." Vickers cut him off, put his phone away and turned to Spencer. "Get me a match on this name," Vickers gestured to the tombstone. "I want to know everything about this person. But first, get these bodies out of here. They're XHS. Bag 'em, tag 'em, get 'em to the morgue for retrieval. While you're at it, set up a monitor for every admittance into every hospital within a hundred-mile radius. There was a fight here. People in fights get hurt. I want to know every injury in every ER for the next seventy-two hours. If Billy Joe Bob gets his dick caught in a combine, I want to know about it."

"I'm on it," Barnes whipped out his own cell phone.

"Get in touch with Agent Hayes and tell her to stay sharp, we've got a positive contact. I'm going back to Excelsior PD. Make sure those morons at least photo everything before they move it." Vickers turned to leave, then paused. He quickly took his phone back out and snapped several pictures of something on the ground, glinting red and blue in the lights of the squad cars. Taking a handkerchief and a pocketknife out of his coat pocket, he reached down. When he straightened, he was holding a small antique knife, bloodied, leaving his own knife in its place to the side of the grave.

"Have them run this," he added, handing it gingerly, handkerchief and all, to Barnes. "Remember what I said about the hospitals. Red flag the stab wounds."

"Yes, sir."

He turned again, and walked through the rain, which was quickly turning into a downpour. Hopefully, forensics would turn up something useful. But that was going to take time, and from the looks of things, time was not on his side. Whatever had gone on here, they got here after the fucking fact, despite what the pre-cogs back at Icarus had said. He got in the car and slammed the door closed.

Whoever had opened this grave, they had definitely found something. And they had taken it with them.

Too bad for them.

Chapter Seventeen

8:55 p.m.

Having done all he could for Doug, Murphy went to the bathroom to wash his hands. Cecil had the back of his chair against the table, facing everyone else as he continued to work on BC6. Kate sat on the bed with her back to the men, spent and silent. The Colonel sprawled, seemingly relaxed, on the bed behind Kate, boots crossed at the ankle. He had a complete view of the door, the room and everyone in it.

In the other bed, Doug was propped up on a pillow, still examining the wand.

The only sound they could hear was the subdued dialogue between Bill and Cecil as they finished testing the equipment, and then even that stopped. Then Murphy, in the bathroom, running water and shutting it off.

He came out of the bathroom still toweling his hands dry and took his seat next to Doug's bed. "All right, Doc. I wish I had something I could give you for the pain, but I just don't have much other than aspirin."

"That's all right," Doug said. "It's not that bad."

"Not now it isn't. But trust me, pretty soon it will be. Once that local wears off, life is going to suck pretty hard for you. And there's really nothing I can do about it except warn you." Murphy looked at the Colonel. "Unless, of course, we get you to a *hospital*."

The Colonel neither moved nor looked over. "No."

"Yeah, well. Just checking," Murphy leaned back in his chair, one arm sprawled loosely on the nightstand by Doug's bed.

Again the room fell silent.

Absently, Murphy began to drum his fingers on the nightstand. The Colonel glanced at him, once, warningly. Murphy stopped drumming and shifted so his elbow was resting on the nightstand instead, his chin in his hand.

After a few more moments of tense quiet, the Colonel cleared his throat. "Hey, Kate?"

"Mm?"

"Can I ask you somethin'?"

She shrugged.

"I mean, I don't want to stress you out or anything. I know you've had a hard day and all..."

Kate's back went rigid.

"Remember when you were askin' us just now who we were," the Colonel continued, sitting up as he did so. "Well, I was just wonderin,' if it ain't too personal, if it ain't *pryin'*..."

At last, Kate turned around. "What?"

"Well, just who in the hell are *you*?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I been with the Order for thirteen years. I’ve worked with mages, psychics, and everything in between. I ain’t never seen anybody just pick up a stick and *blast* somebody with it! I mean, you musta tossed that little....so-and-so...fifteen feet if it was an inch.”

Despite herself, Kate grinned. “So-and-so?”

The Colonel sniffed, “There are some words I just ain’t gonna use. But my language is hardly the point,” he pressed on. “I asked you a question: just who the hell *are* you?”

Kate looked away. “I wish I knew.”

“Okay, guys,” Bill said. “I’ve got an ID on the undead you fought, as well as the little so-and-so.”

The Colonel ignored that. “All right. Talk to me, Bill.”

“Looking over the footage, it looks like you were fighting eretics.”

The Colonel looked at the ceiling and said through gritted teeth, “God *dammit*.”

Kate started to say something to him, but addressed Bill instead. “Okay, meaning what exactly?”

“Eretics are a blend of necromancy and demonology found mostly in the Ukraine. A dead body becomes a host to a minor demon, usually an imp, who has been summoned and bound by its master. The process burns their flesh and they put off a lot of heat, by human standards anyway. They’re easy to pick up on thermo.”

“What matters is that the sonsabitches are tough to kill,” broke in the Colonel. “They don’t use their organs and whatnot, except the brain. So only truly massive system shock or headshots are gonna do a goddamn thing to ‘em. And they’re fast, so you can forget about that zombie shit you see in the movies.”

“Sounds like shotguns, Colonel,” observed Murphy.

“You bet your ass it does. That, or figure on plugging everything you got into one target until it goes down, and then you shoot it in the goddamn head, too.” He paused, and then exploded again, “God *dammit*.”

“Nobody would expect you to make that kind of an ID in the middle of a firefight, Colonel,” Bill said, “And nobody would expect to see eretics this far west.”

The Colonel looked at Doug. “That don’t cut the mustard, Bill.”

“It wasn’t those eretics that got Doug,” Kate interjected gently. “I mean, it seems pretty obvious they were just a decoy for Doug getting knifed. And with as many of them as there were, I don’t think it would have made that much difference. They got in that close because they were cloaked by—um...”

“That little so-and-so?” Murphy offered helpfully.

The Colonel sighed and looked heavenward, with the expression of a man who knows his suffering has only begun.

“And speaking of that little so-and-so,” Bill said, “We have a positive image match, upwards of ninety percent. The girl is Katarina Benicka, or Katalin Benicska, depending on the source. High-ranking Starry Wisdom associate. Known to be the personal servant of Elizabeth Bathory, one of the highest-ranking members alive. Bathory must be the ‘mistress’ she was talking about.”

“So she’s named herself after the 16th century Blood Countess,” Murphy said. “That doesn’t exactly speak well of her intentions or her sanity.”

“She’s not named after anyone,” Doug said. “She *is* Elizabeth Bathory. Katarina is the same servant girl who assisted her in killing-- some say over six hundred girls and young women.”

Murphy’s eyebrows sought his hairline. “So, you’re saying that her whole thing about bathing in the blood of young women *worked*?”

“Well, her method almost certainly involved sacrifice of some kind. What we do know is that she was able to successfully fake her death and join Starry Wisdom in the mid-17th century. As to why she’s here...”

“She’s here for the wand,” Kate stood up. Wordlessly, Doug handed it out to her. It felt right in her hand.

“Okay, so if we’re dealing with a goddamn Isfet breach, that takes a high-powered mage, right?” the Colonel said. “So if she has a background in using blood magic for her hoodoo, then does it make sense that she’s behind the kidnappings?”

“It does,” Doug agreed. “Terrifying, but it fits. She could potentially stabilize a naturally-occurring breach through a succession of sacrifices along the pattern that--”

“Doc, save your strength,” Murphy said shortly. “So. We’ve got the wand. We go get this broad, we close the breach, and we all go home. Right? Everybody lives happily ever after.”

“But where is she?” Kate asked.

“The hotel, of course. That’s what the little girl was warning us about,” the Colonel said.

“Jessica Degler,” Murphy nodded. “But what about Doug? We can’t drag him all over that place.”

“Leave me here,” Doug suggested. “I’ll be all right. Eventually, there will be personnel available to perform an evacuation.”

“I was getting to that,” Bill said. “I talked to dispatch. It seems the police found the mess we left back in the graveyard, and they’ve got the town in lockdown. Turn on the news.”

“I don’t have time for that bullshit, Bill, just give it to me straight,” the Colonel said. “Are we talking MJ-12?”

“Unconfirmed. But seriously, Colonel. We’re talking over a dozen dead bodies next to an open grave. The local police aren’t the only ones going to be involved.”

“So what does this mean about Doc?” the Colonel asked.

“It means that even if our people could get to him, they probably won’t be able to get him out safely. Assuming that enemy forces are in control of local PD -- and with Bathory and

possibly MJ-12 around, that's not unlikely -- any attempt to reach us right now will lead them right to us."

"So now what?" Murphy asked. "We're back to square one." Then added, "No offense," to Doug.

"None taken. In fact, I have a radical suggestion."

"I'm all ears, Doc," the Colonel leaned down. "Whatcha got in mind?"

"When they were held as something sacred, the springs underneath the Hall of Waters had very powerful healing properties. They healed Mr. James, didn't they? Perhaps under the right circumstances, they could be persuaded to do the same for me."

A gleam came to Kate's eye. "They did, didn't they?"

"So in lieu of say, *surgery*, you want us to bathe you in mineral tonic? Is that what we're talking about here?" Murphy asked.

"Well, you got any better ideas?" the Colonel asked.

Murphy nodded emphatically. "*Surgery*."

"Well, you're a detective, Murphy. How long before they have choppers going over this place, with that many bodies lying around?"

Murphy sighed. "If they're coming, not long."

"Then we best move."

Resignedly, Murphy nodded. "All right. Ready, Doc?"

He and Cecil helped Doug to his feet once more. The Colonel stepped cautiously outside, making sure that the way was clear, then they all hurried out into the rain.

Chapter Eighteen

9:01 p.m.

It was a striking piece of architecture, art deco, with thick stone walls and glass front doors, lined with tall windows. The right wing of the building curved into a horseshoe shape. A tower rose from the top floor with a strip of stained glass running up its center, with a metal phoenix mounted on top.

Along the top of the front wall were the words, in bronze: HALL OF WATERS.

Murphy stood behind the Explorer, the hatch keeping the worst of the rain off him. “Hey, Bill, I just want to get a few things straight here. I need to break into a city monument and historic site. I am going to be chasing down a mass-murdering 400-year old sociopath with an army of undead -- those guys who just tried to eat us, and are pretty much impervious to bullets - - and there’s that little so-and-so Katarina, who we all shot at and she pretty much just laughed at us.

“And this is considered a *good idea*, because there’s supposed to be *magic water* in this public building -- the one full of alarms and not half a block down the street from the police station – that’s going to cure Doug better than any ER, on our way to stop the Whatleys from opening up a revolving door to some pre-Babylonian hell. Do I have a firm grasp of our current situation?”

“Your grasp is firm,” affirmed Bill.

“So I got it?”

“Got it in one.”

“Did I leave anything out?”

Bill took a sip of coffee and shook his head. “Nope, I think that’s pretty much it.”

“All right, then. Gonna need a flashlight.”

BC6’s screen showed Murphy under the night sky, rummaging through the back of the team’s SUV. With professional speed he donned his police web gear: vest, sidearms, ammo. Spare shotgun shells were pocketed safely away for later. Lastly, he pulled out another pump shotgun, and worked the action. There was a small flashlight mounted on its barrel. Its tiny light winked on. “Okay. Ready.”

“Yes. Let the forces of darkness beware,” Bill intoned.

“Indeed.”

Cecil, who had been watching the entire exchange, shook his head. “Dorks.”

Murphy turned to the Colonel. “I’m ready. You ready?”

The Colonel pumped his own shotgun. “Ready.”

Murphy nodded to Cecil. “Let’s go.”

Kate was still looking at Doug, reclined in the back seat. “Are you going to be okay for this?”

He looked up at her and frowned slightly, as though she had said something peculiar. “I think I shall have to be.”

“I still think you should be in the van with Bill.”

The old man shook his head slightly, then winced. “We’ve been through this. We cannot risk bringing the team that close to the quarterback. I wouldn’t last the drive to a secure facility, even if that were an option. It seems to me that the springs are my best bet.”

Kate nodded. She and the Colonel helped Doug out of the car and up the steps. The rest of the team waited for them by the doors, Murphy staring up at the carved stone reliefs.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

There were Mayan symbols carved around the entrance. Murphy pointed to the one at the top, centered over the doors. “1985,” he said. “Guess we’re in the right place.”

There was also a sign on the door itself:

NOTICE

THE POSSESSION OF ANY WEAPONS INCLUDING CONCEALED FIREARMS, IS PROHIBITED ON THIS PROPERTY.

CITY ORD. 230.575

“Oh, yeah. Nice,” Murphy said, shotgun in hand. “Well, they’re not concealed... Okay, guys. Remember, once we get in there, we have to move fast. Bill looked for computer-accessible alarms and there weren’t any. So what they’ve got, ironically, is too primitive for us to disable ahead of time. We move fast, keep it quiet, and hope that this kind of thing happens so rarely that between disbelief and the storm, local five-oh will figure it for a false alarm.” Almost on cue, the sky rumbled again. “So we’ll at least have a good head start. Everybody ready?”

“Just get on with it, son,” the Colonel said, “The good doctor here is heavier than he looks.”

Mortified, Doug said immediately, “Colonel, I am *so* sorry--”

“Cheer up, Doc. You can carry me next time.”

Murphy, his lock-pick gun ready, checked the door. Then hesitated.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

The Detective put a hand on the door and pushed. The door was unlocked.

They were expected.

* * *

The sky flashed again as lightning split the charcoal sky. The rain was coming down steadily now and it was still cold. Water pooled on the roof of the Excelsior Springs Police Station. Lying in one of the pools of water was Field Agent Emily Hayes, MJ-12. In her hands was a sniper rifle. She had been covering the Hall of Waters for the past two hours, ever since they'd first arrived in town and Vickers had planted her there.

Fascinating as the history of the building might be, she was frankly sick of looking at the place. The on-and-off storm had been playing hell with visibility, and the counter-IR gear she was wearing, for all that it sealed in her heat just fine, gave exactly dick in the way of rain protection.

She listened with half an ear to the cops' chatter on the radio and shook her head. Much as she admired Vickers as an agent, she couldn't blame the locals for hating his guts. He had a real blind spot when it came to small towns. The cops weren't stupid or incompetent; they were just ignorant of what was really going on here. That was the way it was supposed to be. But Vickers had completely alienated every cop within ten minutes of their arrival, and probably every sheriff and deputy in the county since. If he hadn't been able to put the "mass murderer" spin on it, they'd have spent the whole mission getting by-the-book cooperation, and no more.

As things stood, whatever he'd found at the graveyard had every law enforcement official in the area hopping. The first thing he'd done was empty the town of its police force-- which sealed the bad guys in and got the cops out of the way. That suited her fine. Most cops were honest folks trying to do their jobs. She didn't want to sanction any of them for seeing something they shouldn't have.

With practiced ease, she tensed and relaxed her muscles again, staving off stiffness that might slow her down later. *God, it sucks here*, she thought. Then, remembering the old Marine joke, she grinned to herself, adding, *I wish it would suck more*. Maybe after all this was over, she could come around as a tourist, check things out. Maybe even camp out nearby before the weather got too tame to be any fun.

Unlike her superior, Hayes liked small towns, having grown up in one herself. She'd never told Vickers about that, and considered that to have been one of her better career moves. She was pretty sure she'd have gone from protégé to cannon fodder in about two seconds if she had.

She frowned. She'd let her mind wander again. Hard not to do when a post was this damn dull, but it was still a problem. According to Spencer, Vickers had ID'd a positive contact and had said to stay sharp. She had every intention of doing exactly that.

God only knew why Starry Wisdom or the Orderlies would come to a historical curiosity like this. But not for her to say. When they arrived, the first thing Vickers had done was plant her up here and have her keep watch over the Hall. Not the PD, not the hotels. The Hall of Waters. The pre-cogs in Icarus had sensed something in the Midwest, something major. Vickers had come to Excelsior and had brought Hayes with him. He'd put her here on a hunch. His hunches, she'd noted, usually panned out.

She heard the vehicle driving through the rain-slicked streets before she saw it. It came up the drive in front of the Hall of Waters, and stopped. *Probably out-of-towners*, she thought,

checking out the hours of the place. Just as something to do, she sighted the driver as he got out of the vehicle. Older man, Caucasian. Mustache. Bang. Twenty points.

The drizzle slacked off to almost nothing as the old man got out. A passenger got out of the back seat: another male, not quite so old, also mustache. Bang. Twenty points.

When the old man adjusted his duster, she could see a two-gun rig under it. *What the fuck?* Two more got out, male and female. There was one more person in the back, lying down. All of them were wearing what looked like Bluetooth headsets. They all but ignored the building at first, talking to one another as the driver opened the hatchback.

Agent Hayes blinked. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.* She pressed her earpiece, keeping the cowboy in her sights at all times. “Hayes here. I have unconfirmed contact.”

“Spencer here. Go ahead.”

“Five persons. Three males, one female, one unidentified still in the back, possibly injured. Driving a Ford Explorer, can’t see the tag. First male is an old cowboy with a Stetson and a two-gun rig--”

“Wait. Stand by.” In less than ten seconds, he was back on line. “Good work, Hayes, Vickers says that’s them. Avoid contact, get down from there and get ready to hop and pop. You’re going in with us.”

She grinned as she rolled away from the ledge. “Yes, sir.”

* * *

Murphy looked through his shotgun’s sights. Cecil was right behind him, also carrying a shotgun. One swept right, the other left.

“Clear,” Murphy said.

“Clear,” Cecil confirmed.

Behind them came the Colonel and Kate, supporting Doug between them. The Colonel still carried his shotgun in his right hand. He didn’t like this. He knew he was the best shot, but two carrying Doug meant they could move a bit faster.

On the other side, Kate carried her sidearm in her free hand, moving if not like a seasoned professional, at least like a woman who knew what she was doing. The Colonel had noticed this as soon as the door had opened, and had been doing his damndest to ignore it. The last thing he wanted at that moment was to call her attention to what she was doing. If he did, she might get self-conscious and stop.

The hallway opened into a lobby. Inside, there was more art deco architecture, more Mayan symbols and some brick columns. Doors to the sides, elevators in front.

“Clear,” Murphy said again.

“Clear,” Cecil echoed.

The rest of the team entered.

“Where to now, boss?” Murphy asked.

“Okay, folks,” Bill said. “You’ve got motion. Three humans, coming in fast behind you. Time to move.”

“Let’s go!” the Colonel shouted. To Kate, he said, “Run! I’ll get the doc.”

She hesitated for just an instant. Then obeyed.

Turning slightly, the Colonel saw them coming up the stone steps. They had guns. “I see ‘em!” The Colonel leveled his shotgun at them. Behind him, Murphy did the same.

“Where do we go?” Kate called.

“The elevator!” the Colonel called back. “Move!”

The front doors burst open. Two men in suits, the woman, a blond, in black fatigues and web gear. She was the first through the outer doors, down the hall, and into the lobby. “Freeze!” she shouted. “MJ-12!”

Kate had reached the elevator and ducked to the side for cover. The Colonel retreated awkwardly, trying to shield Doug while keeping his shotgun pointed at the enemy. Cecil and Murphy were in front, backing up slowly, their own guns trained on the three interlopers.

“Drop your weapons and put your hands in plain sight!” ordered the younger of the two men.

The Colonel knew how to give orders, too. “Drop yours first!”

The older man moved expertly to the side. The younger followed his example and they split up, moving behind columns, leaving the woman, to stand her ground in the middle of the lobby.

“Dammit, I said freeze!” she yelled.

Murphy grinned at her. “Sorry, kitten, did you say something?”

The older man called out from behind the column, “Running away again, Garnett?”

“Kiss my ass, Vickers!” the Colonel shouted with surprising vehemence.

“Sir, we can take them!” The woman again.

“Don’t try it,” Cecil advised.

“Nah,” the Colonel growled. “Go ahead and try it.” His weapon, steady as ever, stayed trained on the older agent as he backed into the elevator. Kate immediately took Doug, allowing the Colonel to cover Cecil and Murphy as they boarded the elevator as well.

Murphy blew a kiss as the doors closed.

“I wonder where we’re going now,” Kate said. “Probably someplace dark and creepy. Again.”

“Well, we’re needing the springs,” the Colonel said. “Let’s go down.”

He pushed the button, and the car started its descent.

Chapter Nineteen

9:08 p.m.

For a moment, all of Bill's screens showed the elevator and scans of the surrounding area. Then the images glitched out and Bill found himself looking at a row of blue screens and the words, NO SIGNAL, NO SIGNAL, NO SIGNAL.

His guts went cold. Bill put his coffee cup down so quickly, liquid sloshed out over the desk. "Cecil!" he cried, fighting panic. "Cecil!"

Silence.

"Cecil?" he repeated. "Hello? Kate?"

Still nothing.

"Colonel? Colonel, can you hear me?" Bill's voice sounded small to him as he spoke into the mike.

"Cecil? Murphy? Where are you? I got the blue screen o' death here." He laughed uneasily. "Okay," he cleared his throat. "Nothing on video, nothing on audio, nothing on the scans. Nothin' on audio... um, okay." Years of training and experience took hold, and he worked feverishly for a solution. He checked the van cams, the cameras he usually forgot about that sent his video back to home office. They weren't working either. He tried to radio back to the home office. Static.

"It's a local problem," he breathed. "It's something with the van. They're fine, I just need to find out what's wrong and fix it. They're fine. It isn't them, it's me, I just need to find..." he bent over the hardware, adjusting, cursing, checking for any sign of malfunction. His movements got faster, more desperate. "Not again. Not again, not again, come on, come on, Kate, Cecil, talk to me, Colonel, Murph, where are you?"

BILL WELSH.

His head snapped up. That was *not* a voice he recognized.

BILL WELSH.

It sounded like it was coming from somewhere outside the van. But it was...wrong somehow.

He had just enough time to think, *Oh, shit! I've got company*, when the rear doors flew open. He went for his gun, opening the drawer with one hand and reaching in with the other. It was probably the fastest he'd ever--

NO.

And he stopped, muscles locked in rictus, his fingers just brushing the handle of his firearm.

The dim streetlights just allowed the invader to cast a shadow, human-shaped, into Bill's world.

YOU MAY SEE ME.

Bill's head turned (he was pretty sure he was the one turning it) as the invader stepped into the light of the van's interior.

It was just under six feet tall and slim. The suit It wore was expensive, yellow and gold, a custom job, and appeared completely untouched by the rain. Long, cultured fingers gestured to him with a spider's grace, adorned with gold rings. The eyes were blue, unnaturally bright, almost radiant. A woman's breasts and hips, the head hairless but for an immaculately pointed beard. The skin was black-- not a human hue of brown, or even the blue-black of some African tribes, but absolute coal-black that seemed to drink in light even as Its expressionless eyes expelled it. Right down to Its nails and the palms of Its hands.

It was not human.

I AM HERE FOR YOU. BILL WELSH. I NEED TO USE YOU.

Its voice filled the cabin effortlessly, like a muffled explosion. There was no emotion in Its speech, and Bill thought of bugs. *THERE IS AN OPENING. CARCOSA. THE OTHERS. YOU ARE MORE HERE THAN I AM. I NEED TO USE YOU.*

Slowly, It reached out for Bill's hand.

MY SIGN UPON YOU. It paused, studying him like a mantis. Then, *YOU MAY SCREAM.*

It grasped his hand, gently, nails sliding lightly over his palm.

Bill did scream.

When It released him, he cringed away, gasping, cradling his burnt hand, paralyzed only by his own agony. The pain pulsed through his arm, and he wept.

MY SIGN UPON YOU. YOU DO NOT SPEAK OF ME. I NEED TO USE YOU. BILL WELSH. I KNOW YOU. It intoned again, very deliberately, *BILL WELSH. BILL WELSH. BILL WELSH. BILL WELSH.*

* * *

Bill awoke with a start. Had he been asleep? The laptop had said nine-oh-something. Now the clock on his coffeemaker was saying it was twenty after! "Ground team?" He had no visual, but he thought he heard something. "Ground team!" Sleeping at the switch, how the *fuck* could he—

His hand. Oh, God, it was right there, on the palm of his hand.

"Bill!" Cecil cried with evident relief.

"Bill, is that you?" Kate said.

Like an old scar, it would be something easily overlooked by others. But he saw it plainly. He recognized its twisting shape, its decaying image. He'd seen it as part of a ground team in the Caucus Mountains, years ago.

"Bill, are you all right?" the Colonel asked.

No, I'm not all right! I've been compromised! “Ground team, I can barely hear you. Where the hell are you?” Which, while it was on his mind, wasn't what Bill had meant to say at all.

“Hell's Basement, Bill,” Murphy returned.

“Bill!” The Colonel's voice was insistent. Did he suspect? “We are up to our necks in crap! Where the hell are you?”

Bill rooted quickly through the drawers, searching for salvation. “Up to your necks?”

“Well,” Murphy said, “We are standing on our hands.”

The Colonel said, “We jumped dimensions.”

Found it. Yes! “How can that be?” It was an excellent knife, an old Gerber Mark II he'd had for years. Even if he couldn't mar the Sign, it still might take off his hand. He tried to bring the combat knife down. It hovered, shaking, over his upturned palm as the muscles in his other arm locked and warred with one another. “Shit!” He tossed the knife away, useless. Out of the corner of his eye, Bill saw that the van cams were still down. He didn't need to run diagnostics to figure they were probably fried for good. Visual contact with the ground team, while salvageable, was still down. He refused to believe that was for the best. *There's got to be a way out of this. I can still help them if I can warn them.*

“Bill, are you all right?” the Colonel asked again. JD Garnett had tested negative for just about every ESP test in the book, but sometimes, the man just knew.

Bill opened his mouth. No sound came.

“Bill!” the Colonel demanded once more, “Are you all right!”

No, I'm not all right, he thought, and I probably never will be again. I've been turned into a time bomb or a spy, turned against my dearest friends, and I can't even warn you.

“I'm good, Colonel,” he heard himself say, “Thank you.”

He held his shaking hands to his face, a prisoner of the Yellow Sign.

Chapter Twenty

9:08 p.m.

“Okay, Bill,” the Colonel said. “We’re headin’ down. You got the schematics on this place. Where do we go, and what’re we lookin’ for?”

Bill did not respond.

“Bill?” the Colonel repeated. “Do you copy?”

Cecil frowned. “Bill?”

He shifted the backpack from his shoulders to balance on his knee, where he checked the row of devices packed in gray plastic before trying again. “Bill?”

Kate and Doug leaned together against the wall opposite, their arms around each other. She looked up, concerned. “Bill?” she called.

“Bill!” the Colonel barked, “Bill, do you read me, over!”

“Bill? Where are you?” there was a note of panic in Kate’s voice.

“Okay, everybody stop.” Cecil finished checking his equipment. “I’ve got nothing on my link-up to the van. It may be a local phenomenon. Sometimes sudden energy surges can play hell with transmission, but we’d better assume the worst. I can still get us all the scans, but my attention will be divided. We are also, officially, cut off until further notice. Colonel, how do you want to play it?”

The Colonel shook his head. “Only one thing we can do, son. Keep going and keep our heads down.” He eyed Cecil’s backpack. “Can you still carry the shotgun?”

“Affirmative,” Cecil said, re-positioning the backpack so it rested against his torso. He left the top of the pack open so he could look down at the scanners. That left his arms free to hold the gun.

“Good man.”

“And Bill?” Kate asked.

“Best way we can help him -- *if* we can help him -- is to get this mess taken care of,” the Colonel said.

The doors opened.

Murphy looked around. “Oh yeah, dark and creepy. You pegged it.”

The elevator opened into a narrow hallway, which ran to their right and left. Straight ahead yawned a massive space, shrouded in dampness and gloom. They stepped out into a pool area framed on all sides by immense square columns. They were standing under an overhang that might have formed a balcony, but it was too dark to tell. Their tentative footsteps echoed in the tile and concrete expanse. On either side, the walls were tiled to a height of about eight feet. Above the tile were frosted glass windows, reaching up towards the cavernous dark of the ceiling. They let in just enough light from the streetlamps to make out shapes in the darkness. Lightning flashed, illuminating the ceiling, at least twenty feet high, and the back wall. No doors.

But what drew their attention principally was the pool-- easily seventy feet long and thirty feet wide. Its bottom was lined in old concrete that had once been painted white, but the paint had chipped and flaked off. The remaining white glowed in the eerie half-light. Outside, thunder rumbled.

The pool was empty. And not only empty—it was dry.

It had obviously been in disuse for years. Inexplicably, rows of bicycles crowded one side of the pool. Boxes overflowing with junk were stacked against another wall.

Murphy looked around with mounting dismay. One of the great comforts of being a pessimist was that it was okay to be wrong. And he had been proven wrong throughout this little foray time and time again.

Dammit, this was a hell of a time to be right.

Wordlessly, he looked back at the others. They looked worse than he felt. Especially the Doc. The old guy had volunteered to be left behind in really crappy circumstances, and was probably thinking he'd somehow gotten them into this situation. Oh, and those lovely people from upstairs should be along any time now. Actually, they should already be here...

As if reading his mind, the Colonel pointed his shotgun at the entryway. "There's only one way in here."

"And only one way out," Vickers answered him from the shadows. Movement in the darkness betrayed the other two agents, taking positions in the entryway.

Murphy and the Colonel lay down fire, allowing Cecil and Kate to get Doug to safety behind a column. The exchange of gunfire took less than ten seconds, and left the woman agent lying in the doorway. The other agents retreated back into the darkness. The Colonel and Murphy continued to keep the entryway covered while backing away, edging towards the rest of the team.

"Damn it, Hayes!" Vickers shouted at the fallen agent. Then said in the calm, modulated voice he had been using earlier: "For those of you not in the know, gunning down a federal agent is not the wisest thing you could have done."

"Who *is* this yutz?" Murphy asked.

There was a pause, then they heard Vickers speaking again. "Barnes, Agent Hayes is down. Get over here, we're on the pool level. Bring a med kit."

The younger man's voice shouted over his, "Throw down your weapons and place your hands on your heads. Place the artifact you stole from the gravesite on the ground in front of you."

Kate paled slightly. "How do they know--?"

"Shut it," the Colonel snapped. "They don't know shit."

Vickers spoke again, "Stab wound, isn't it? I'd say about a six-inch blade, narrow. Nasty wound. Cooperate, and he gets to a doctor. Don't cooperate, and he gets to a coroner."

"Vickers, you cowardly piece a'shit! Why don't you get your ass out here and we'll fucking settle this right now, stead'a hiding behind a girl and threatening injured old men. Jesus Christ, when you gonna fucking grow a pair?"

“Just simple tactics, Garnett. When you have the upper hand, don’t relinquish it.”

“Well, any time you feel like taking the upper hand into that doorway, be my guest. That little lady looks lonesome all by herself down there.”

“Agent Hayes never did learn when to stay back. But what about you, Colonel? You already have a man down. Who’s next?”

“Why don’t you just step on out here and I’ll show you?”

“Look, we’re not getting anywhere here. Why don’t I just make this simple: leave the artifact and you can all go. My back-up will be arriving shortly.”

Abruptly, the rain outside grew heavy, pelting noisily against the windows. The lightning cast strange, spotted shadows over everything.

Behind the column, Kate was clutching the wand. She and Cecil exchanged a look.

“Can you do that, you know, *thing* again?” Cecil whispered.

White-faced, she shook her head. “I don’t even know how I did it the first time. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Well, could you *not think* for a minute?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Right. Just checking,” Cecil glanced down at the scanners. The halo screen caught his eye. “Whoa.”

“What is it?” Kate asked worriedly.

“Colonel?” Cecil said softly, “I’m getting a reading.”

“From what?” the Colonel asked under his breath.

“From the pool.”

“What is it?”

“I dunno. But it has really high energy readings.”

There was a faint sound. “Did you hear that?” Kate asked.

They all went still. It was almost like music, a sound that was no sound. There was no instrument in existence that could create such pure melody, but it was not something that one sensed entirely with the ears. It was like water running across glass bells, or wind chimes in the rain. *If ice flowers could sing while they melted*, Kate thought, *they might sound like that*.

“What is that?” the younger agent asked.

“Quiet,” Vickers hissed. “Barnes? Hurry up and get down here. We may have a situation.”

The sound that was no sound continued to flow, reverberating in the glass-and-tile space. They looked around for the source, but there was no movement anywhere. The pool still appeared to be empty.

Whatever it was, Kate had a feeling it was speaking to them. She thought she knew how to answer. She jammed the wand into the waistband of her jeans, opened her book bag and rummaged through it. She brought out a bowl of hammered silver and a wooden pestle.

Taking a small step forward, toward the edge of the pool, Kate held the bowl in one hand, extending it slightly as if in offering. Here, she was still shielded behind Murphy and the Colonel. In the other hand, she raised the wooden piece and ran it lightly around the lip of the bowl. The lightning threw her outline into stark relief for just a moment, revealing her pinched, determined face.

The bowl produced a soft ringing that grew slowly in volume as she continued to run the wooden piece around the edge. The ringing filled the room, slowly rising to match the sound coming from the empty pool.

The song of the water – for that’s what it was, there was no mistaking it for anything else -- seemed to reach out, to harmonize with the music coming from Kate’s bowl. They twined together, joined, made something new.

Suddenly, the music from the pool stopped. Kate stopped, too, her bowl’s tune dying away like an exiting bird. Outside, the thunder answered.

Despite himself, Murphy glanced back at her. “Kate? What did you just do?”

Before she could answer, water spilled from the pipes with a mighty rush, filling the pool with startling rapidity. Huge flakes of paint were torn from the bottom by the force of the current. The water reflected the light coming in through the frosted glass windows, filling the room with the refractions of a rippling blue gem.

There was a surprised silence-- for just a moment.

Then the roar of a shotgun blast filled the room. “Go on!” the Colonel bellowed. “Try that again!”

“Don’t be a fool, Barnes, hold your position,” Vickers hissed from behind cover.

“All right, then,” the Colonel said. “Kate, Cecil, you wanna give the Doc a bath?”

Kate managed to get her legs working long enough to go help Cecil get Doug upright. Cecil zipped up the bag and shifted it to his back again in a single, practiced motion. Gently, carefully, they walked him over to the pool and descended the stairs into the water. Both Kate and Cecil had been prepared for it to be cold, and were surprised to find that it was quite warm—indeed, like slipping into a warm bath. They were both aware at once of a deeply soothing sensation.

Doug’s shirt was open, the black stitches very visible in the clear water. As they watched, Doug’s flesh seemed to shift, like a muscle flex. Then the seams of the wound mended together, shedding the stitches which floated limply upward onto the surface of the water like discarded shoelaces. For a few seconds, there was an angry, jagged scar where the wound had been. Then it, too, faded into the surrounding flesh and was gone.

Doug’s eyes opened.

Kate and Cecil beamed down at him. “Hey, Doc,” Cecil said. “How ya feelin’?”

Doug blinked at them with dawning comprehension. “Quite well, thank you.” He sat up in the water, looking around with undisguised wonder. He scooped some water up in his hands and drank, splashed some on his face.

Murphy called, “Hey, Doc? Getting any younger?”

“I don’t think so, Detective.”

“Damn. I guess we’ll just have to settle for miraculous cures, then. Who’s got a canteen?”

“You’re talking like you’re getting out of here,” Vickers said.

“Just try and stop me!” Murphy shouted gleefully. “Shoot me! I dare ya! I could use a dip.”

“Agent Barnes,” Vickers said, “The grenades.”

“*Shit*. Fall back!” the Colonel shouted. He fired once, shattering a window. “Up and over, people! Move!”

As he and Murphy fell back, firing, the first grenade arced into the room. It didn’t go in very far, but the light and noise still filled the room. *Only a flash-bang*, the Colonel thought as he staggered towards the rest of the team. *He’s still wantin’ prisoners.*

Kate, Cecil and Doug started to splash out of the water. Then Kate stopped, aware of the same, strange thrum coming from the wand that she’d felt in the graveyard. She yanked it out of her waistband. It was stronger now, like a tuning fork. She shouted, “Everybody, wait!”

Another grenade flew in. It landed further into the room this time, but it was not close to any member of the team.

“Katie, no time!” the Colonel hollered. “Get up here *now!*”

“No!” she yelled back. “Everybody, into the water! Quick!”

The Colonel hesitated for a split second. Against all instinct, he turned back.

Aghast, Murphy called, “*Colonel!*”

The Colonel grabbed his arm. “Just listen to her.”

With no time to argue, Murphy let himself be dragged off away from the window and down into the pool. He and the Colonel waded in, guns held over their heads. Around the five of them, the water foamed almost angrily. It churned, then parted, revealing a shimmering, rectangular membrane. The Colonel grinned, relieved. Here, at last, was something he recognized. “Everybody through that gate!”

They passed through the thin, wet curtain.

The MJ-12 Agents saw as the last person – Cecil -- went into the opening.

For perhaps the first time in his career, Agent Vickers acted on sheer impulse. He rushed forward, after the retreating O4S team. Spencer and Barnes followed.

There was a roar and the opening closed seamlessly. The waters receded.

The bottom of the pool was, once again, dry.

INTERLUDE

THE HUEY FILE

O4S Regional Headquarters
Kansas City, Missouri
9:43 p.m.

Dr. Beatrice Bentley rushed through the hallways, her arms filled with files and loose papers. An apprentice archivist followed, awkwardly carrying an easel.

Besides them, the only people left in the building were a few staff members, mostly archivists who were too old to be sent out to the field. The halls were empty, the rooms they passed dark. The unmanned desks were littered with abandoned paperwork, pens, cell phones-- in a few cases, even half-eaten lunches. At various points throughout the day, every extension light on every phone was lit up as their lines were jammed with calls, but that had begun to taper off.

Bentley finally came to the tech work station. The door was open, so she went straight in, "Clayton, we have a situation."

Clayton and the Oracle both looked up from the bank of van cam feeds they had been monitoring, Ken having long since departed for the field.

"We have a variety of them, Bea," Clayton said. "Do you have a solution?"

Bentley was in her forties, her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail that had come partly undone in her dash from the sub-basement archives. "I have an explanation, and possibly a path towards a solution," she said as the young man set up the easel. "You know that these events are most likely the results of a larger, unknown event."

"Yes."

She handed Clayton and the Oracle each a Xeroxed copy of a report with a title page reading, *The Huey Scenario, Dr. Thomas Schartz, Ph.D.*

Bentley handed the stack of papers off to the young man, who stood aside, waiting. "A few years before he died, Dr. Schartz had a theory of the exchanges of possibility energy based upon . . ." She stopped, appeared to re-arrange her thoughts, and then tried again. "Okay, there are ways that events in different worlds affect each others' timelines. He was exploring that. He theorized that if a sufficiently dynamic event occurred, something which by its nature transcended linear time--"

"That's why I couldn't see it," the Oracle murmured.

"Likely," Bentley agreed, "It would have a shock wave effect through multiple dimensions. The shock waves would be happening *before* the event, not just after."

She took a black marker from her pocket and turned to the easel, drawing as she spoke. "Okay, see this x-y graph where the x is time and the y is space. Past is left, future is right. The axis point is the event. Normally, an explosion goes out only this way," she waved her hand over

the right side of the paper, “Forward, into the future, and of course, over distance. But in this case, since it’s a dimensional disturbance,” she drew arrows radiating out from the central point, “It’s from a fifth-dimensional perspective, so it goes *outward*, omni-directionally. It’s not following standard linear time. So from a linear-time perspective, which is what we as human beings have, we perceive it as imploding and then exploding. And instead of waves of force and heat, they’re waves of synchronicity. Violent ones. Like now. Sort of like an earthquake, this is a possibility-quake. What we have been experiencing have been the pre-tremors.

“The waves have probably been going by for centuries, unnoticed. Small ones, spaced far apart. *Ripples*. Now we’ve got the big one just before the event itself— what Dr. Schartz called Event Huey. And that wave is what’s passing through our dimension on its way to, and from, its eventual source.”

She held out her hand. Her assistant handed her a stack of folded maps. She unfolded one of them. Smoothing it out against the easel board, she clipped it into place. “Look.”

The first map was of the world. A series of lines radiating out from a central source in the US had been drawn over it, with all of the locations of the events highlighted in yellow.

“Here,” she pointed to the central US, “is the epicenter.”

She flipped the page to a second map, showing the US, and pointed again, to Missouri.

“Oh my God,” Clayton paled.

She flipped to the final page, showing a map of Missouri, and pointed, at last, to a town.

“So you’re telling me that Excelsior Springs is the source?”

“No. Something of this magnitude is farther away than that, or we’d be in the middle of a minor Ragnarok. But these probability waves travel from world to world through their points of contact. Gates, stable or not.”

“Could this create a temporary gate?” the Oracle asked.

Bentley shrugged. “It might. But there could be one there we don’t know about. It would be a hell of a coincidence, but,” she shrugged, “that is what we’re talking about here. We track where the waves are heading, we find where Event Huey will be located. *When* it happens.”

“Could this be caused by a local Isfet breach?”

“I doubt it. This isn’t just a dimensional disturbance. If it *is* a breach, it’s freakin’ huge. And probably several worlds away. And after the fact, we’ll have the after-tremors, which will gradually sort themselves out.”

Clayton was looking through the folders she’d brought. In his experience, such matters never just sorted themselves out. “When did we lose contact with Bill?” he asked the Oracle.

“A little after nine.”

“Nothing on your radar?”

“No.”

Clayton turned back to Dr. Bentley. “Okay. So do we just need to hunker down and survive this? Is that what we’re looking at?”

“Not necessarily.”

“All right. Give me options.”

“You’re probably not going to be able to prevent Event Huey itself from happening. In a way, it has already happened.”

“I didn’t hear any options there.”

“Free will has not been cancelled out by it. We’re not talking about pure destiny and doom. Dr. Schartz theorized that it will be shaped by our reaction to it. It’s extreme, no doubt. It could be the end of a world; it could also be the beginning of a new one. In his notes, Dr. Schartz had considered calling it either the Alpha or the Omega Event. But in the end, he settled on Huey.”

“Dare I ask...?”

“He didn’t say why.”

“Hm.” Clayton shook his head. “Mathematicians.”

“All right, you want options?” Dr. Bentley put the cap back on the marker. “For our purposes, we may need to just hunker down and survive. But I think we’re experiencing a lull, so whatever we’re going to do, we need to do it now.”

Clayton stood up. “All right. If there’s nothing more we can do here, then, Dr. Bentley, I’d like you to take charge of the people downstairs. Get everybody out. We’re evacuating.”

“Where to?”

“Someplace safe. That’s all you need to know for now. Get everybody gathered in the lobby in ten minutes. Go on.”

“All right,” Bentley turned, gesturing for her assistant to follow.

Clayton turned to the Oracle. “We need to get a message to all of the teams we’re still in contact with. Let them know we’re pulling out, and that flights will be arranged for each team at the designated locations. They’re to evacuate at the discretion of their team leader.”

“Got it.” The Oracle turned to her computer, and began typing up a blanket message to the surviving teams. Though she didn’t include it in the email, she knew where they’d be going.

The Council of Names.

PART TWO
THE OTHER HOTEL

Chapter One

April 5, 1995
3:40 p.m.

The seats of the school bus were green and hard. Yellow foam spilled out where people had slashed holes in them with their compass points. The brakes wheezed and squealed as the bus came to a laborious halt, the door opening like an intake of breath.

Jessica Degler made her way through the aisle between the seats. She kept a tight hold of her jacket as she went, her bag over her shoulder. Last week, Paul had grabbed her pencil bag out of her unzipped backpack. He and Jeremy Gragg had played keep-away with it, then threw it out the window. Jess, nearly in tears, had spent half an hour hunting in the grass along the curb in the rain to find all the scattered pencils and erasers. Brent had just gotten her that marker set. She never did find the blue and the brown ones.

A few kids tried to trip her, but nothing too bad. As she neared the open door, the fresh air greeted her and she walked a little faster. The rain had stopped and the sun was out. Even better, she'd gotten her math test back. The B meant they'd be going out to Sonic tonight after Mom and Brent got home, which meant tater tots and a fudge brownie sundae.

George the Bus Driver grinned and gave her a quick, "Bye, Jess," as she went down the steps. George the Bus Driver was cool. He didn't yell if the kids stood up in their seats, but one time he had pulled over to stop Paul and Jeremy from beating up Jason Babcock.

The bus doors swung closed and the bus pulled away. Jess started walking down the cul-de-sac towards home. But she stopped when she saw a girl sitting on the curb. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" Jess asked.

The girl's face was buried in her hands. She peeked up at Jess. "Nothing," she said in a quivery voice. Jess only got to see her eyes for just a minute, but she could tell the girl was very pretty. She had long, auburn hair woven into two braids that fell down her back.

"Are you hurt?"

The girl shook her head and went on crying.

"Then why are you crying?"

"I'm not!" The girl straightened up and wiped hastily at her cheeks.

Now that Jess could see her face, she saw that the girl was older, at least junior high age. But she was very small and thin. Jess wanted to put her arm around her, but she didn't quite dare. Instead, she sat down on the curb beside her, letting her backpack fall with a clunk on the sidewalk. "Your parents fight?"

The girl looked at her, curious despite her tears. "What?"

"Nothing. I just thought..." Jess's voice trailed off.

"Do yours?" the girl asked, sniffing.

"Not anymore. Brent lives with us now."

“Is he nice?”

“Yeah, real nice,” Jess said. “He got me a new bike.”

The girl smiled as she turned to face Jess more fully. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of green. She held out her hand. “I’m Kat.”

Jess took it. “I’m Jess.”

“Would you like to come over to my house, Jess?”

“Really?”

“Sure. Come on,” Kat stood up. Jess noticed Kat was wearing those cool boots with the laces that go all the way up, and blue jeans slung low on her small hips like a model. She also had on a short black jacket dangling with bright silver zippers. Underneath that, she had on a tiny white T-shirt with a perfect little red heart in the center. As Kat stood up, Jess could see a little bit of her stomach.

Kat looked Jess up and down. “I bet some of my things would fit you. You could try them on.”

Jess stood up eagerly. “*Really?*”

Kat laughed. “Sure.”

Jess followed Kat across the street and down an embankment.

“How old are you?” Jess asked.

“Thirteen.”

“I’m ten. I like your boots.”

“Thanks.”

“So we’re going to your house now? Is it far?”

“Not far.”

“Is this a shortcut?”

“You could say that.”

Kat entered a small cluster of trees. The bare arms of the trees cast vein-like shadows over the ground, and the air was chillier here, damp. A small ravine wound its way along the hill slopes, a tiny tributary of the Fishing River.

Jess hesitated, eyeing the deep, slippery piles of wet leaves, the standing pools. She did not want to get her shoes muddy. She wondered what time it was.

Kat turned. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah,” Jess said quickly. She slid her arms into the sleeves of her jacket. “I just need to make sure I get home on time.”

“You will.” Kat held out her hand.

Jess hurried forward to take it. When she did, it seemed less cold somehow. Enough sun peeked through the branches to illuminate the red-gold in Kat’s hair.

As they walked, Kat swung Jess' hand. With her free hand, she toyed with her braids. "So, you wanna know why I was crying?"

Jess stopped. Kat didn't sound like a kid any more, despite the baby-voice she was using. Kat turned to face her, still holding her hand. There was nothing childlike in her face now, nor in the strength of her grip.

"Why?" Jess asked guardedly. She tried to take a step back. Found she couldn't.

The world had become a beautiful shade of green.

"Because," Kat leaned forward, as if she were about to whisper in Jess' ear. "*My Mommy is sick.*"

"Sick?" Jess repeated. She felt funny, as if she were falling.

Kat's face was inches from hers now, not so pretty. The red veins stood out in her eyes. Her little teeth looked sharp. "*She needs you to get better.*"

Jess wanted to open her mouth to say something more, but she couldn't. She wanted to turn and run away, but she couldn't do that either. She felt her backpack fall from her arm. Heard the wet smack as it struck the ground.

"Get up and come here," Kat commanded. "Hurry up."

Something arose from the leaves in the woods further in, and leapt forward to crouch at the older girl's side. For a second, Jess thought absurdly of the Trash Heap from *Fraggle Rock*. But it was a person – at least, it was shaped like a person -- covered in leaves and muck.

"Take her to the sixth floor and wait there. She is not to be harmed in any way." She looked at the monster sternly. "Don't eat her."

It bowed, then reached toward Jess was blackened fingers. And oh--

It *hurt*.

Its hands *burned* her. *Everywhere* that the creature's body came into contact with Jess's body burned, like having her hand held against a hot stove. Jess wanted to scream more than anything. But she couldn't move-- she couldn't do anything. She could only let herself be swept up by the monster.

"Wait," the girl said.

Obediently, the monster stood stock-still, Jess balanced neatly in its arms.

Kat prowled forward, narrow green eyes riveted on Jess. She passed her hand from left to right in a slow arc. "Now go."

The monster set off, trailing leaves and mud. Under the smell of wet leaves and creek water, it smelled like burnt meat and burnt hair. In some parts, its face was blackened. In others, the skin was mottled pink and white, like raw bacon. It appeared to have no eyelids, its wet eyes gleaming, yellowed and open, perpetually staring, rolling in the patches of red and black flesh surrounding them. There were misshapen lumps where its nose and ears should be. The mouth was a long, twisted black line that pulled back to a row of crooked yellow teeth in oozing, bloody gums. Scraps of skin dangled from its neck and cheeks, threatening to fall in her face. As it ran, its breathing came in short grunts, like a boar.

Jess wanted to run, or at least to yell for help. But she couldn't even close her eyes.

It carried her back onto the street, and started heading towards downtown. People passed by, some of them people she knew, and none of them did anything. None of them seemed to care. She tried to move, to wave her arms at them, but nothing happened. They all just ignored her and the monster that carried her away.

They crossed busy streets. They went through intersections, past shops and houses. She felt tears running down her temples and into her hair.

No one cared. No one even looked up.

Wake up! Her mind screamed. *Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up...* She knew that this was a bad dream. It had to be. There was no such thing as monsters, things like this didn't happen. But the monster carried her on, to the old hotel.

No! Not in there, not in there, please--

It took her inside, up the stairs to the very top. It dropped her on the floor, and when she saw the other kids there, she knew.

This wasn't a dream.

* * *

Jess opened her eyes. When you were taken back to the Other Hotel, it made you remember whether you wanted to or not. Coming here, and then the Bad Thing that followed. The Big Girl and her knife, and the Blood Woman. Their laughter.

Kat. And her Mommy.

Jess had been here before. It was always the same.

She was sitting in the middle of the floor. The floor had a fine layer of dust, except for the edges of the room, where it was in piles like snowdrifts. The floor looked like it had once been a dance floor. Around the edges of the room were dining tables that looked if they had been set for a party, long, long ago: plates and silverware, candlesticks and flower vases, chairs. To her right, a set of stairs led up to a balcony, where Kat slept. There was an old-time cage elevator with glass doors that looked as if it no longer worked. There was an old wooden banister with stairs going down, but Jess didn't know where they went.

Behind Jess were the monsters. She didn't have to turn around to look at them -- didn't want to -- but she knew they were there. She didn't know how many of them were. If she looked, she knew it would seem like hundreds, their eyes very bright in the gloom. They liked to watch when someone was about to get hurt, whining and making hungry noises like dogs.

Kat stood off to the right, her arms folded behind her back, rocking on her dainty heels and shaking her head. "What *are* we going to do with you, child?" she sing-songed. "You've been a very bad little girl."

Pet had told.

Pet was standing next to Kat, her arms folded. Jess glared at her and Pet smiled—smiled like she was better than everybody else.

“You!” Jess shrieked.

She hadn’t meant to move – hadn’t thought at all – but suddenly she was on top of Pet, pounding her with her fists, screaming “You! – You! -- Tattletale! – You -- told! You – stupid -- !” Pounding again and again, panting, crying so hard she could barely get the words out.

Then, she was yanked off of Pet and held suspended in the air, small fists still flailing. Kat hadn’t moved, but she was good at doing things like that—she just had to think about it and it happened. “Poor little Pet,” cooed Kat with no concern whatsoever. “Did the bad little girl hurt you?”

Pet looked up at her, scared. “No, Miss.”

Still smiling, Kat turned to Jess. “Dear, dear, dear. What to do? Poor little thing. So misguided. So very *naughty*.”

“Still,” came the voice from behind her, “They are so adorable when they turn on each other.”

It was the Blood Woman. Her voice was like smoke; like a smooth drink of poison. If there were vampires, Jess thought they might have voices like hers, cruel secrets meant to be whispered in the dark.

Jess drew in a deep breath and screamed, “I’m not an adorable thing! I’m not your toy! I’m a person! I have a name! My name is Jessica Degler! Jessica Degler! My birthday is October 17, 1985! I live at--”

Kat made a gesture like holding a ball, and Jess was suddenly silenced. She found herself crouching in a small invisible sphere. “I think that’s quite enough.” Kat turned to the Blood Woman. “I’m so sorry, Mistress. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

The Blood Woman stepped out of the shadows, into the candlelight. When she walked, her strides were long and languid, her jutting pelvis clearly defined against the front of her dress. There was one place where the dust never fell, one perfect circle under the dark skylight above. The Blood Woman strode up to the edge of the circle and stopped, hands on her hips. The Blood Woman never walked in the dust.

Jess recoiled.

The Blood Woman had changed. When Jess had first seen her, she had been slender. Now, she was so emaciated she seemed to hunch, her rich red dress that had once clung so artfully now hung in swaying gaps like a cowl, exposing her jutting collar bones, the shoulder bones pointed like a bird’s, the cords in her neck. The three-quarter sleeves revealed the shriveled sticks of her arms, the wrists like knobs. A silver ring with some sort of flower carved into it had once fit the middle finger of her left hand. Now it dangled precariously from her thumb. Her flesh was tight and shrunken, every vein standing out as if it had been drawn with blue ink, every hill and depression in her skull painfully visible. Her dark hair, once silky, now seemed brittle. Her feet were bare, pale and high-arched, surprisingly frail.

It should have been pitiful. But somehow, she was still the Blood Woman, and all the more horrible for her transformation. Her cruel smile became a demon grin in that tiny face, lit

by a terrible force from within. Her teeth were still perfect. Her dress, though it didn't fit, was still perfect—not a spot or a wrinkle in sight.

Jess had tried to prepare herself, so she wouldn't be scared. She'd thought of a hundred things to say or do to be brave. But now she was here, and all she could think of was the Skeksis from *The Dark Crystal*.

The Blood Woman said, "In reality, my dear, it isn't Pet who is the tattletale here. Were you not the one who saw fit to make yourself known to those busybodies downstairs? That's why you're here. If you hadn't done something wrong, we wouldn't be seeing to your punishment. Vile, defiant girl." She smiled. "Still, discipline, exercise, affection to train a healthy young lady. Wouldn't you say, puss?"

Blushing with pleasure at the endearment, Kat nodded.

"Well, then." The Blood Woman turned away. The knobs of her spine poked through the sheer fabric of the back of her dress.

Kat, still pink, turned back to where Jess floated in her invisible bubble. Slowly, she closed her hand. The bubble began to shrink. Jess gritted her teeth, determined not to scream.

With her back still turned, Lady Bathory said, "Tell me, my dear, what news of the Wand of Deleth?"

Katarina's hand paused in its contracting motion. "It's...coming, Mistress."

"But it's not here yet."

"No, Mistress."

"Why?"

The silence stretched for a moment as Katarina gathered her courage. "There was a mage, Mistress."

Bathory stifled a yawn. "The Sons always have mages."

"This one was skilled. She used the wand."

Bathory turned. "Used the wand? How?"

"As...as a weapon, Mistress."

"Oh, my poor poppet. Were you harmed?"

"Only slightly, Mistress." Spoken with some pride.

"But you did not get the wand."

"It will come. I wounded one of theirs. They will go to the springs, and then they will seek the breach."

"Ah, yes. The breach." Bathory ran her hand gently along the barrier that kept the world out and her in. "By all means, let them come. Let them seek the breach."

Relieved, Katarina turned her attention back to Jess. "Oh, I'm so sorry, child. I did not mean to neglect your education."

She contracted her fingers.

Eventually, Jess did scream.

* * *

Čachtice. It was Čachtice all over again.

They all had gone – Katarina and the rest. She was alone.

She would not allow herself to despair. She would not.

No one but Katarina would recognize the creature pacing the floorboards as the Countess Báthory Erzsébet. No one but Katarina knew she was here. Katarina. Her beloved, her heart. Katarina would get her out of this. Dear, dear Kat. Her rescuer, her defender, her little fallen angel. It was Katarina who was performing the blood ritual to keep her prison stable, collecting the young sacrifices. Kat was her only solace in this place, drawing as close to the barrier as she could so they could whisper together across it, little murmured promises to be kept once she was free and they could be reunited. But sometimes, Katarina had to leave her to go do what needed to be done. And there was no one.

Her world had shrunk to a space barely eight feet wide. The walls of her prison were invisible, but when she looked at it with her mage eyes, she could see it pulsating with the life energy of the construct itself.

She paced until weakness and hunger forced her to stop. Sitting in the very center of the circle with her knees drawn up, she found herself talking anyway, despite the stillness, despite the solitude, despite the queer echoes in this prison. But she spoke, imagining that there was someone to listen—Katarina, of course, but others as well. Others lost or dead. Mihaly, Jack, Klara, even that rat bastard Jakob.

Sometimes the dead were so real she thought perhaps she wasn't imagining them. For who knew better than she: the dead do walk.

Whatever they were, figments or phantoms, she spoke to them all the same. She feared unconsciousness above all else—the possibility of closing her eyes and never opening them again, bested, after all these long years, by simple starvation. It was damnable—damnable! So she fought it—she fought sleep. She fought the fear and the hunger. She would not be vanquished. Would not.

Wrapping her arms around her legs, she rocked to keep herself awake. She wasn't always sure if her lips were moving. The dryness in her throat. And the damn echo--

Before me, only goddesses in old tales were allowed the hunt, the slaughter.

Were her lips moving? No matter. The words were in her mind. She ran her mind over the words like holy beads, sharpening her focus.

Before me, there had never been a female killer. A woman was born to nurture, to bring forth. Never to banish. Never to destroy. To give a woman the power to destroy was to give her too much power. It was enough that women were bearers of life. To be bearers of death as well—ah, that would have been too much.

Since the beginning of time, women were never allowed to cultivate that kind of shivering, distilled hatred. That kind of rage. We were taught only impotence and despair. To raise sons that would grow up and shun our company, and daughters that we must eventually surrender to husbands and the marriage contract.

She rocked faster, the squeak of the floorboards beneath her kept rhythm with her words, which grew hushed yet ever more urgent.

To be sure, on occasion, a woman might have murdered her husband, or perhaps a lover. But they were almost assuredly low women and peasants. And everyone knew whores kill in order to rob. Now I hear of mothers who murder their children—and I speak not of the ones who end the child in the womb. I speak of women who put their children in automobiles and push them into lakes. I speak of women who hold their children's heads underwater, ignoring their feeble thrashings. They forget the ancients who left unwanted babes on hilltops, for the night air and the wolves to claim.

Now they have stories of women assassins, women with swords, women with guns. Lithe, muscular, unwavering. *Sexy*. Yet curiously blameless. Death and sex may be dealt by women, but they must not be held accountable for it. As if we are animals, driven only by instinct. That we cannot conceive of a higher purpose. In their stories, a woman is always *driven* to kill. Killing for women must be an act of revenge, or else, an act of collusion. But many consider it the ultimate depravity, a woman killer. Practically the harbinger of the apocalypse.

They do not say what they really mean: that woman is too *weak* to kill.

But I ask you. The strongest of men, when faced with pain and mortal fear—who do they cry out for?

Mama, mama.

Four hundred years and more have passed since I made my first kill. And still they cannot conceive of a woman who is capable of the kill for the sheer sport of it. Woman is blamed for the fall of mankind. Woman is original sin. But killers? Women cannot be killers. Something must have made her this way.

I say, has woman not endured so much that she has rather earned the privilege? To spit into the very eye of God?

To no longer be merely a consort, but the rebel?

The Countess stopped rocking and raised her head.

“I am sin.”

“I am the huntress and the rebel. When I am free—”

When she was free, first there would be the ritual, to restore her strength. And then...and then...

Four hundred years and more she had lived, and she still wanted more life. She had glutted herself and still she wanted more. More life. More blood. More of everything. There could never be enough. Until the end of time. Her and her Katarina and their pleasure.

If it was Čachtice all over again then this would end very happily indeed.

* * *

Ecsed Castle
Nyírbátor, Hungary
1564

The servants were already frightened of young Erzsébet. She knew they were, for she'd heard them whispering amongst themselves.

As an infant, it was said that whenever Erzsébet cried, if she was not fed or changed immediately, her playthings would fly about. Candlesticks would be tipped over. Paintings fell from the walls. Once, the nursemaid found the carpet smoldering from an overturned oil lamp. Servants complained of either a terrible chill in the child's room, or an intense heat.

But now she was four, and a young lady. They crossed to the other side of the halls as she passed by, and scurried like little mice when she needed something. They crossed themselves when they thought she couldn't see.

But she could see. And she could hear. Even when they didn't speak, she could hear them. *Witch. Changeling. Devil-child.*

"How dare you!" she would scream. Her fists would clench, and she would rage at them with all her might, "You can't say such things about me! I'm your mistress!" And things would fly apart, shatter, especially if the servant was holding them. And they would run.

It felt good when they were scared. It felt good to know she could scare even her elders. Still, sometimes she wished for someone to like her. She wished for someone who would play with her, at least now and again.

One morning, her nursemaid was brushing her hair. Erzsébet screamed that the woman was doing it wrong, that she was hurting her head. The nursemaid, taking no heed, yanked at a particularly troublesome tangle.

Erzsébet shrieked. And as she shrieked, the nursemaid suddenly felt her body flush with heat.

The nursemaid dropped the brush. There was a sound like a sudden wind. Suddenly, all at once, the nursemaid was on fire. The woman leapt to her feet, screaming.

Erzsébet had already stepped back, away from the worst of the heat and the flames, not alarmed, merely watching with mild interest to see what would happen.

The woman turned and ran, still screaming. Like a comet, she trailed flame and sparks down the hallway. Doors flew open along the hall. Servants stepped out and stopped in horror. There were more screams, and shouts of "Fire!" And the flaming woman kept running, directionless, in a agony, until someone threw a pitcher of water on her. Then more servants did the same.

At last the blaze was gone. Only a charred lump remained, one hand pointing, clawlike, to the ceiling. The smoke-filled hall reeked of burnt meat.

Erzsébet looked on, satisfied.

The servants milled about, wringing their hands, afraid and uncertain. None of them looked at her. It wasn't until the seneschal arrived, saying that his Lordship was on his way, that she realized what she'd done, and her eyes widened.

Father was coming. She would be punished.

Without a word, she turned and fled from the hall. She hid herself away in a cupboard in a seldom-used room at the east end of the castle. She knew that eventually she would be found and punished regardless, but she hoped to postpone it as long as she could. In the cupboard, she tried to stay as still and quiet as possible.

Twice, she heard footsteps in the hall. Then silence.

No one came for her.

No one came for her.

She fell asleep, her knees drawn up to her chest, her chin resting on her knees.

Several hours later, she awoke, stiff, hungry, and very, very cross. Remembering what had transpired, she went stock-still for a moment, listening.

Still nothing.

She crept out from the cupboard and went back to her room. She needed the chamber pot in the worst way. The hallway had been cleaned. The carpets had been removed—no doubt they'd suffered some burn marks. The stone floors were impeccably clean. In her rooms, carpets had been replaced, rugs brought in from other rooms of the castle. Otherwise, her room looked undisturbed.

She rang for a servant.

Some time passed before one finally appeared—the oldest servant in the house. He came as close as propriety demanded but no closer and stood very stiffly, his hands clasped behind his back.

She cast a bemused eye upon him. "I'm hungry. I want to eat."

"Yes, Mistress." He bowed and left. Returning with a tray of food, he set it on her table.

Famished, she applied herself vigorously, particularly to the meats.

"Will there be anything else, Mistress?"

"No. You may go."

He bowed again and departed.

Weeks went by. No punishment was forthcoming. Mother and Father never mentioned the incident. She saw fewer servants than usual, but of those she saw, their behavior had not altered in any way.

A stillness had come to the castle. With that stillness, came a certain understanding: *she could do whatever she pleased*. Yet the stillness irritated her. She was alive with possibility, eager to explore this curious new freedom. But there was no one to share it with; no one to practice on.

Until one day, several weeks later, her uncle came to pay them a visit.

He knocked at her door.

Even as she called out, "Yes?" he opened the door and sauntered in.

He was a man in his forties, with the face of a prince and the hands of an artist. Light calluses across the whole of the palms, a writing callus on the right middle finger. He wore a large silver ring, inscribed with a seal she did not recognize. His clothes were immaculately cut, in shades of blue-gray that brought out the red in his waist-length hair and his perfectly trimmed beard. His green eyes were hawk eyes. Relentless and predatory, they watched everything, feared and treasured nothing.

She rose as he came in, startled to see a strange face. "Who are you?"

"I am your Uncle Mihaly. I am here to see to your education."

She regarded him suspiciously. "What does that mean?"

His tone grew sharp. "It means that I am going to teach you things, young lady. It also means that you are going to learn them."

"And what if I don't want to learn?"

Very deliberately, he advanced until he was less than half a pace from her, eyes narrowed dangerously. "I assure you, you will want to learn." And behind that: *I can make you want to learn.*

She flew at him, instantly enraged. "I don't want to learn! Leave my room this instant!"

He smiled. His teeth were white and even. "Make me."

She clenched her fists and screamed, "*GO AWAY!*" at the top of her lungs,

He rocked back on his heels. For a moment, the expression on his face wavered from amused challenge to one of almost comical surprise. Then he righted himself. There was a tiny dribble of blood at his right nostril. He took out a handkerchief, daubed it gently, and then peered at the bit of blood on the white cloth. "Impressive," he murmured, tucking the cloth back into his coat pocket. "Unfocused, but impressive."

He made a casual gesture in her direction. Her small body flew across the room and slammed into the stone wall opposite. Her breath flew from her in a gust of pain and surprise. She landed on the cold floor, her skirts in a heap, dazed and bruised.

She peered up at him with new interest. When she got her breath back, she asked, "How did you do that?"

"Mistress Bathory, a lady is not to be found lying on the floor."

She scrambled up instantly. "How did you do that?" she asked again.

"Meet me in your father's study in one hour's time. Your first lesson begins today."

He turned and left. The door to her rooms closed silently behind him.

She looked after him in wonder.

* * *

Three years passed. Mihaly stayed with them in her father's house. He was her tutor. He was her uncle.

He was not her friend.

The outbursts, as he called them, had stopped. No longer did things break or fall. No one else had been set ablaze. Uncle had made it very clear that such losses of control were not acceptable, and he had ways of enforcing both his will and his displeasure.

The servants called him Master and cast their eyes down when they spoke in his presence, which was seldom. They still called her Mistress. And they still avoided her. They still feared her. And they feared Uncle.

No, he was not her friend. But he was like her.

They were again in her father's study, where the vast majority of her tutelage had taken place. She stood on the fine rug before Mihaly.

He looked at her casually, almost lazily. This was always the calm before the storm. "So, girl. Have you been attending your studies?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Indeed."

There was a long pause. She stayed absolutely still, her face neutral and respectful. He paced for a moment, then went and stood by the windows, his back to her. When he spoke, his voice still had a subdued quality, as if he were awakening from some deep trance. "Then you will of course be prepared for a test of your so-called knowledge, the extent of your studies?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Very well, then." He turned and focused his eyes on her for the first time. "Tell me, what are the four qualities of the Celestial Elements?"

"Light, agility, solidity, and diaphanousness."

"Then what are the four triplicities?"

She hesitated. "Astrological signs or intelligible hierarchies?"

His face remained passive, but his tone dropped a register. "Are those the only groups of four triplicities you can think of?"

"No, Uncle. There are also the tribes of Israel, and the Apostles, but you asked me those last time, and—"

"Hierarchies."

"Yes, Uncle." She hastily began ticking off the list on her fingers. "Seraphim, Cherubim, Throne; Dominations—"

"Young lady, do you think with your fingers?"

Her hand vanished behind her back. "No, Uncle."

"Control. Your. Hands," he growled.

"Yes, Uncle." She started again. "Seraphim—"

"Your hands are to be at your sides, young lady." His voice like a lash.

She brought her hands back into view. "Yes, Uncle."

"And controlled."

“Yes, Uncle.” She cleared her throat, using the spare moment to recollect her thoughts. “Seraphim, Cherubim, Throne; Dominations, Powers, Virtues; Principalities, Archangels, Angels; Innocents, Martyrs, Confessors.”

He nodded curtly. “Now, tell me the five corporeal torments.”

She closed her eyes for an instant, then recited, “Deadly bitterness, horrible howling, terrible darkness, unquenchable heat, and piercing stink.”

He began pacing again as he continued quizzing her, more rapidly this time. “What is the third reward for the blessed?”

“Power.”

“What is the significance of astrology in divination?”

“The powers of the heavenly bodies permeates all things, and their relations to one another command the relations of all other universal things. Without astrology, no divination is complete.”

“What is mandrake?”

“A root most easily found for magical purposes beneath the places where men have been hanged.”

“Its most common use?”

“An aid to the act of love.”

“And if too much is taken?”

“Madness, and eventually death.”

“What is the lunar metal?”

“Silver.”

“And the solar?”

“Gold.”

“What is the significance of gold to the prima materia?” His back was to her.

“Some say that gold *is* the prima materia. It is more widely held to be a symbol for the Great Work.”

“Which is?”

“Symbolically, it is the transmutation of lead into gold.”

He turned. “And in actuality?”

Her eyes gleamed. “In actuality, it is the transmutation of self into a higher being. Powerful, immortal, pure.”

He met her eyes briefly and an understanding passed between them then. He nodded. “I think you are ready,” he said. “Erzsébet.”

She looked at him, startled. He had never addressed her by name before. She opened her mouth to say something—she didn't know what, but the moment seemed to call for some sort of response. But before she could, she found herself *thrown*.

She flew across the room backwards – she didn't even have time to flail -- and slammed into the rear wall, much like that first time she had met Uncle Mihaly. Except much, much harder.

When she came to, Mihaly was looming over her, sneering. “Never let down your guard.”

“Yes, Uncle,” she managed.

“We will begin,” he pointed a finger at her, “with *defense*.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Now. Get up.”

She stood.

Chapter Two

ETE: 0:00:00

Kate stepped through and –

Falling.

One moment, she had been walking upright. The next, she found herself falling face-first through the darkness. A dark stone floor burst up and her body slammed into it, the wand rolling out of her grasp. The impact was seconded immediately by Doug's weight landing full-force across her back. She barely had time to draw in a breath before two more impacts -- cushioned through Doug's own body -- slammed the air back out of her lungs.

"What--?" started one of the new arrivals, and then he, too was silenced by Cecil's arrival on top of the pile. There were a variety of groans from different levels of the pile—except for Kate, who was incapable of making noise.

"Get the hell off me!" the Colonel managed, his voice slightly muffled.

Cecil rolled off. "Is everybody all right?"

Murphy groaned again as he heaved himself up and checked himself over. "Well, nothing's broken. Or at least nothing hurts more than usual."

"Jesus Christ, Murphy!" the Colonel grunted as he staggered to his feet. "You got lead in your ass?"

Doug refrained from comment as he pushed himself into a kneeling position beside Kate who noisily tried to inhale. "Somebody please check Kate for injuries," Doug called. "She seems to be having trouble breathing. Might be a cracked rib."

"In a minute, Doc," the Colonel said, looking around. "Where the hell are we?"

"Don't move her," Murphy said. "Kate, if you're awake, stay still."

Kate moaned an affirmative.

"Cecil, get me some scans running and get me some light," the Colonel said. Murphy clicked on the flashlight mounted on his shotgun, and Cecil produced some small Maglites. Their beams were slender and dim, as if the batteries were low.

Murphy and the Colonel stood back-to-back, their guns ready, as Cecil checked the scanners. They were standing in a dark, seemingly subterranean corridor. A rivulet of moisture ran down the center of the floor which was made up of uneven flagstones. More moisture dripped from the walls.

"We just went through a gate," Cecil said. "The equipment's scrambled."

"Unscramble it," the Colonel said shortly.

"Working on it." He turned off the scanners. "Our stuff's pretty well shielded, we should just need to reboot. Sixty seconds, tops."

The Colonel didn't turn to face him. "You got ten."

“Where’s the spooks?” Murphy asked. “Weren’t they right behind us?”

“If they’re lucky,” the Colonel replied grimly, “they got sealed off on the other side. If we’re lucky, they ended up someplace else.”

“Like Pacoima?”

“Like Timbuktu,” the Colonel snapped his head around. “Cecil, *hurry the fuck up.*”

“Re-starting now, Colonel. And...*clear.*” Cecil stood up and re-adjusted his pack.

“Nothin’ moving?”

“No motion or heat but us. The background has a high energy level. But again, we just went through a gate.”

“Well, all right,” the Colonel nodded once then touched Murphy on the shoulder. “Go see to Katie.” He turned to Doug. “Doc, you all right there?”

Doug put his palm against his abdomen and pressed experimentally. He repeated the gesture with his chest and a few other places on his body. “A little bruised, I think, but otherwise, fine. Thank you.”

The Colonel shined his flashlight upward. The ceiling was also stone, the smooth pieces fitted together seemingly without mortar, arching a good ten feet above them. Almost directly above, there was a faint shimmer. The Colonel passed his flashlight over the spot again. A circular area rippled, as if it were a liquid surface. As if that weren’t odd enough, he felt as if he were looking at the surface of a pool rather than the bottom.

Murphy, who had helped Kate struggle into sitting position, followed the beam of the Colonel’s flashlight and whistled. “Damn. That’s a good ten feet. And nothing broken. You were lucky, Kate.”

“Yeah,” she wheezed. “I feel real lucky.” She turned over onto her knees and began feeling around for the wand.

He patted her on the back, then turned to Doug. “How about you, Doc?”

“Oh, no. I’m fine.”

“That’s the adrenaline talking. Let me have a look at you.”

Doug stood still as Murphy poked and prodded. “*Ouch.*”

“See there? That’s a cracked rib,” Murphy said. “Ordinarily, I’d tell you to take it easy. But since we’re *here*, I’d say just try and stay alive until you can take it easy... It really is a shame that nobody brought a canteen.”

“I don’t think that would have made much difference one way or the other,” Doug replied.

“Why is that?”

“What I experienced was not simply a property of the water. It was something that was done for me. Obviously, whatever entity or entities are concerned with that water heard Kate’s entreaty and determined that they were willing to help. I imagine that would be a one-time-only proposition.”

“So it’s not magic water?”

“Most assuredly, it is *special* water. The springs were considered sacred for a reason. But the magic cannot be bottled for later. And it bears repeating, gentlemen, that *Kate* summoned them.”

There was a pause as they all turned to her. She smiled. “Well, actually, it was the *spirits* who did the calling. I just answered the phone.”

“Didn’t look like any *phone* I’ve ever seen, Katie,” the Colonel said. “Just what was that thing you were doin’?”

Kate and Cecil exchanged a small smile and Cecil shrugged. She opened her book bag and once again removed the silver bowl. “It’s a singing bowl,” she explained, holding it out to the Colonel. “When they called me to the office this morning, I thought I was going to be meeting my mentor. To begin training as a mage, you need a bell. This is a type of bell.”

The Colonel turned the bowl over in his hands. He flicked the rim a few times with his fingernail, producing a flat *plink* sound. “Well, as I live and breathe.” He looked at her with admiration as he handed it back. “Girl, you sure are *somethin’*.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“Katie, didn’t I tell you my friends call me JD?”

She smiled. “JD.”

Chapter Three

9:17 p.m.

Bill took off his headset and stood up slowly. The knife hadn't worked. Telling the team hadn't worked.

When all else fails, get the hell out of Dodge.

He climbed into the front of the van, trying not to think about what he was doing too loudly. *One-two-three-four-five-out, one-two-three-four-five-in*, he counted as he breathed. Sweat beaded his brow. His heart was beating painfully fast as he tried to keep his mind blank. He took his keys out of his pocket.

If he couldn't mar the sign, and he couldn't warn anyone, the least he could do was take himself out of the equation. Whoops. *One-two-three-four-five-out*.

He turned the key in the ignition and was mildly surprised when it started.

You know you've taken a wrong in life when you're reduced to being a shoplifter in your own mind. Oh, crap. One-two-three-four. . .

He put the van in gear and rolled forward. He stopped at the lot entrance. Signaled. Pulled out into the street. Circled the parking lot. Signaled. Turned. Then stopped again.

He was back in the parking lot, not five feet away from where he'd started.

"Fuck."

He put it back into gear. The van began to roll forward again, but his foot froze, hovering over the accelerator. He was sweating profusely now. His forehead was beet-red. The Sign itched and burned as if he were being stung by fire ants. A cramp shot up his leg as the muscles froze.

At last, he let his leg go limp. *"Fuck!"* he shouted again and beat the steering wheel, the dashboard, the seat next to him with his fists.

He stopped. Not because he wasn't still angry. Not because he wasn't still hurt. Not because he wasn't still enraged.

There was a knock at the window. He rolled it down.

"Everything okay here, sir?" the cop asked.

Fuck you! Arrest me! Throw me in the pokey! In the clink! In the can! Put me where I can't hurt anybody! But he heard himself say, "Everything's fine, officer."

"You seemed awfully excited there, just now."

"Yeah. I just got off the phone with my girlfriend and—"

The cop held up a hand. "Say no more, son. Just be sure and calm down before you drive."

"Yes, sir. That's why I pulled over." He felt his face pulled into a rueful smile.

"Well, I hope your evening gets better."

“Thank you. Me too.”

The cop turned and went back to his car. There was almost a *snap* as Bill felt control over his body return to him. He watched the police car drive off.

Then he quickly opened his door and got out. He didn't even bother closing it behind him, he just started walking. Fast. He got about twenty feet before he began to slow, clutching his hand. He got another five before he stopped.

Turning, he took a few steps back toward the van. Immediately, the burning sensation in his hand ceased. He tried walking backwards away from the van and his legs froze. He tried shifting his body sideways, testing to see if there was set radius to his freedom.

But there was no wall, no barrier. There was only the Sign. For his trouble, he just lost more ground.

Finally, defeated, he went back to the vehicle and climbed into the back, where he lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling. There was no way out except for the path the King in Yellow had drawn for him. He was trapped. “Now what?”

The answer was obvious. He fired up the Order's database and started querying: “Akhenaton,” “King in Yellow,” and any other key words he could think of in connection with his little predicament. Most of his searches came back with his favorite cop-out: ACCESS DENIED.

“Oh, fuck you, guys!” It wasn't as if he could call Ken up about this one. Even if the Sign would allow it, which was doubtful. He leaned his head back against the headrest of his chair, his mind racing. Akhenaton, King in Yellow, the Black Pharaoh...all had thrown up a brick wall.

Wait. What was it the Thing had said to him? He racked his brain.

“*Carcosa*,” he whispered. That was it.

He typed it in. At last, some material came up.

He began to read.

Chapter Four

The team picked their way carefully along the corridor. Their flashlights had been dim, but as they walked, their beams gradually brightened, revealing crumbling stones along the floor, nasty holes in which it would be easy to lose one's balance or twist an ankle.

"God, what is that smell?" Kate asked.

"Sulfur," Doug replied. "From the mineral water, I imagine. Of course, that's assuming we're anywhere near Excelsior Springs at this point."

It had been on the tip of Murphy's tongue to inquire where the hell else they might be, but he just shook his head. He had nothing to say anymore.

"Cecil, you got a direction yet?" JD asked.

"No magnetic north," Cecil replied.

Murphy's only reaction at that was to pause, mid-stride. Then he continued walking.

"Hold up here, people," JD announced abruptly. The team stopped. "Let's synchronize watches."

"People really do that?" Kate asked. "I thought that was just in movies."

"Yeah, standard operating procedure," the Colonel replied. "We went through a gate and there's no magnetic north. Time being relative, it helps to know how long we've been here even if we don't know where we are. That's ETE-- extradimensional time elapsed. I've got 9:20."

Murphy looked at his watch. "I've got 12:03."

"I've got 12:07 on my screens," Cecil said.

"I've got 9:30," Doug said, peering at his pocket watch.

Kate checked her cell phone. "I've got nothing. My phone's dead."

"Doc, what kinda watch you got there?" the Colonel asked.

"Pocket watch."

"I mean does it run on batteries or gears?"

"Gears." Doug paused. Then his eyes lit up. "So mine would have been least affected by the gate!"

"That's right," the Colonel said, winding his watch. "Let's sync up to 9:30. Until we find out different, we have to assume we're runnin' on earth time."

They walked for another minute or so before the Colonel called another halt.

The stone floor and walls had ended. The corridor they'd been following opened out into a dark space with a dirt floor. The bit of water had dried to a trickle at their feet.

JD went forward cautiously, shining his flashlight around.

"Anything?" Murphy asked.

“Naw,” JD replied. “More dirt. C’mon, let’s turn back.”

“Do we really want this behind us?” Kate asked.

“Well, I’m not real thrilled about it myself. But I’d just as soon walk somewhere folks *built* somethin’ than into a hole.” He walked back toward Kate and Doug. “C’mon, now, change up.”

Once again, he set off in the lead, followed by Murphy, then Doug, with Cecil in the rear. Kate lingered a moment, shining her flashlight into the earthen darkness before resuming her place beside Doug.

They thought they’d retrace their steps quickly, coming back to the point where they’d fallen through the gate. But one set of segmented stones looked very much like another. It was not long before they were muttering amongst themselves.

“It was about here, wasn’t it?”

“Nah, I’m telling you, I think it was further back.”

“No, no. Right there—*right there*. See, that imprint on the floor? I recognize the shape of Kate’s front anywhere.”

There was a sharp crack.

“Careful, Murphy,” Cecil said. “She’s standing right behind you with a stick.”

“And a gun,” added JD.

“Owww.”

“But especially the stick,” finished Doug.

“Nice to know you’ve got my back, Kate.”

“I’m here for you, Murph.”

“Yeah. I appreciate that.”

“Okay, now, less talking,” JD said. “There’s nothing on Cecil’s scans now and I’d like to keep it that way.”

After a few more moments of walking, they thought they detected a slight incline in the floor. Within ten minutes, it was certain: the corridor was leading upward. The rivulet at their feet was also getting wider.

The corridor ended in a curved area, sort of a small rotunda. The flow of water here was steady, with the rivulet being fed by a steady dripping from the edges of a hole, approximately seven feet wide, in the ceiling. Rungs cut into the stone led up into it. As they looked up, more water dripped down onto their faces. Their flashlights reached some twenty feet up, to what appeared to be a heavy ceramic grille.

“Aw, hell,” JD muttered.

“And there’s *climbing* now,” Murphy observed. “It just keeps getting better... I nominate Kate.”

“Why me?”

“Because you aren’t old or limping. No offense to anybody here.”

“I’ll go,” Cecil volunteered.

“No,” JD said. “I’m point.”

Kate shook her head. “Murphy’s right. I’ll go.”

“Don’t get me wrong. You went up that hillside like a monkey on a *stick*,” JD said. “But if there’s anything up there, it’s best that I meet it first. You come in behind me. All right?”

Kate grasped her wand firmly. “Got it.”

“Cecil?”

“Sir?”

“I need you to stay here and man the equipment. If somethin’ shows up, give a holler. How’re we lookin’ so far? We clear?”

Cecil glanced at his scanners. “Clear.”

The Colonel nodded, tilting the brim of his hat back to look up the shaft again, considering. “You got any rope there, son?”

“Standard issue, fifty feet, retractable cord.”

“Hand it over.”

Cecil dug the case out of his bag and handed it to JD, who tucked it into one of the big pockets of his duster.

“All right.” JD slung the shotgun onto his back and put his boot on the first rung. He climbed cautiously. “Careful, Katie, this shit’s slicker than snake snot.”

“Say that five times fast.”

“No.”

The stone rungs were wet, covered with moss. More water dripped down the sides, which were streaked from years of run-off. The shaft itself felt narrower than it looked from below. The Colonel tried to look up and realized that the brim of his hat was blocking his view of where he was going. He pushed it back so it hung loosely on the cord around his neck.

Kate waited till the upper half of JD’s body had disappeared into the shaft before starting up after him. If the stone had been dry, it would not have been that big of a deal. But because it was wet and slimy, it took all of their strength to hold on to the indentations in the wall.

Then, at the top, was the grille.

“Okay, Katie,” JD grunted. “I gotta get this offa here, somehow. My apologies in advance if I fall on ya.”

“That’s okay,” Kate peered down. “There’s just one of you this time.”

Still holding to the top rung with one hand, JD reached up with the other, testing the weight of the grille. It didn’t budge. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Damn thing weighs a friggin’ ton,” the Colonel fumbled inside his duster for something. “Katie, fire in the hole.”

“What?”

He brought out one of his revolvers. “Brace yourself, darlin’. I’ll get the sumbitch off.”

“Oh, fuck me.” She couldn’t very well cover her head, so she flattened herself against the wall as best she could. There was nothing she could do to cover her ears.

In the confines of the stone shaft, the pistol’s report was like a cannon shot. Despite herself, Kate started violently, and found to her pleasant surprise that she had spread her hands apart on the rung, pressing them against the far sides, while maintaining her hold. Dust rained down.

“Damn. Hang on, Kate. One more coming.”

The second shot didn’t bother her ears as much, but more dust fell, and this time, debris fell with it, clattering down the shaft. Kate felt it coat the back of her neck and her shoulders.

A few seconds later, she heard the noise of something grinding against stone.

“Did you get it?” she called.

“I think so. Hang on.”

“Like I could do anything else.” She leaned back a little, trying to see what he was doing. Half of the grille had been blown away. The other half – the half directly above them -- he was struggling to lift. At last, it came loose.

“Look out, below!” he called then let the grille drop back down the shaft beneath them. It fell with a crash.

“And we’re golden!” JD shouted, hauling himself out over the edge of the grille. Water splashed down the drain onto her head.

“Hey!”

“Katie, get up here, you gotta see this!”

She poked her head out of the shaft. “Oh. Another pool.”

She spoke nonchalantly, but the room was actually a vast, impressive chamber, like a Roman bath. The shaft they had just climbed up was actually the drain, in the center of a very large, round pool. It was at least seventy feet across, though not very deep-- perhaps six feet at the deepest. The room itself was also round. Greenish water lapped against the sides of the drain shaft, leaving brownish streaks against the marble. The sides of the pool, too, were mottled. There were other drains around the sides, their grilles crusted with mineral deposits. The water was coming in at a steady rate from a fountain in the wall. The mouth of the fountain had been carved into an arch. It also had a grille.

Three stone benches were the only furnishings that remained around the perimeter of the pool. Eight grand archways led off into dark corridors. There were carvings everywhere—on the pillars, around the edge of the pool, over the archways, even around the mouth of the fountain. They depicted decidedly modern – twentieth century, anyway – style carvings, water nymphs with long, flowing, art nouveau hair; art-deco type geometric designs, some of which looked

floral, others simply mathematical. The floor of the pool had a complicated geometric design that looked vaguely familiar to Kate, but she didn't have time to think why. It didn't look like anyone had been in here for years, yet the torches set into the walls and the pillars were burning.

Kate jumped down into the water. Her weight raised the water just so it sloshed into the drain. JD splashed over to the side of the pool and set his guns down on one of the benches. Pausing to re-situate his hat, he brought out the plastic case containing the retractable rope.

He handed it to her. "Here, hold this."

As Kate took it, he walked away from her, uncoiling the cord until it was fully extended. Then he wrapped one end around the shaft.

The shaft itself was also elaborately carved-- it was made to look like the decorative columns around the room, so that the lip on top resembled a capital. So if the rope was not secure in the grooves of the carvings, it would definitely be secure against the lip at the top.

"I'm sending down the rope!" the Colonel hollered into the shaft. "Somebody, tie up the Doc and we'll haul him up!"

Below, Doug blanched. Murphy grinned. "Doc, you got a preferred knot?"

"Yes. Something secure."

"But not hangman-secure?" At Doug's look, Murphy spread his hands. "Well, Kate's not here. I have to abuse someone."

Cooperatively, Doug lifted his arms to allow the Detective to secure the rope like a harness around his chest and legs.

"How's that? Too tight?"

"Fine."

Murphy tugged twice on the rope. "Ready, Colonel!"

Topside, JD braced one leg against the shaft and began to pull, grunting from sheer exertion. After a moment or two, he shot a sheepish glance back at Kate. "Katie, how about giving me a hand here?"

From the shaft: "I'm terribly sorry about all this, Colonel."

"Quit'cher quackin', Doc. You're fine."

Together, JD and Kate sweated, cursed, and heaved until the crown of Doug's white head was in view. Then JD held the rope while Kate helped Doug climb out.

As soon as Doug was in the water, JD sagged against the wall of the shaft, panting. "Well, Doc. I lied. You didn't get to carry me this time, after all."

While Kate and the Colonel rested, Doug untied the ropes and let them back down for Murphy and Cecil. They used it to climb up the shaft.

Murphy came up first, slowly because of his bad leg. He was panting heavily by the time he got to the top, and Kate had to help him, too, over the side. "That's the most fun I never want to have again."

When Cecil was up and the rope was back in its case, they all waded to the edge of the pool and sat along the edge.

“So what do you think?” Kate asked.

“I think I don’t care what Doc says. That was some fascinating water we went through to get here,” Murphy said. “Cause I should be a lot more tired than this.”

JD nodded. “I agree.”

“Right triangles,” Doug said, adjusting his spectacles as he peered at the bottom of the pool. “Interesting.”

“Yeah, I thought that looked familiar,” Kate said.

“It should. It’s a Sri Yantra, a form used in mandalas by Buddhists and Hindus. Nine overlapping triangles, whose base angle is 51 degrees, which is also, incidentally, the angle of the Pyramids. And it was on the floor of the lobby in the Hall of Waters.”

Shaking his head, Murphy chuckled. At Doug’s quizzical look, he said, “Only you, Doc. Only you would stop to admire the architecture while you were being dragged, *dying*, through a gunfight.”

Chapter Five

Nyírbátor, Hungary
1576

Erzsébet was about three months along when she arrived at her Aunt Klara's estate.

It was right after her engagement to Nadasdy was announced that she went out riding in the fields and saw the handsome peasant lad. Gyorgy was his name. Her parents did not know that. Her parents were not going to know. But she knew.

And now she had this child growing in her belly. This child that everyone said she must not be allowed to keep. *We'll just see about that*, she thought to herself, over and over.

Uncle Mihaly had known before she knew herself. And he had been *furious*.

Even as she had entered the room in answer to his summons, she could feel the rage radiating from him like heat from a forge. He stood at the window, his back to the door. Every muscle in his body was pulled taut, as if he were straining against all endurance.

"Sit."

Mystified, she had obeyed, taking a chair facing him.

"Is it too much to hope for," he began in his dangerous, silken voice, "That you would have the sense that God gave a field rabbit?"

She went cold. "Uncle? I don't understand. What—"

"Fascinating creatures, rabbits. Timid, yes. Even pathetic, as animals go. But even they have a simple wisdom to their ways."

She had sensed that there was no right thing to say, but had tried anyway. "What have I done?"

He had turned on her, his eyes glowing with anger and even contempt. "Rabbits, my niece, do not breed without want for offspring."

She paled. *No! I can't be--*

"*Are you a dumb beast to be caught rutting just because you happen to be in season?*" he bellowed, snapping her out of her reverie. "*What have I been telling you all these years? Control your passions! Control yourself or others will control you.*"

"*I am controlling my passions,*" she snapped. "*You're the one who's out of control at the moment. Uncle.*"

He advanced on her, and that's when she saw—he held a riding crop in his right hand. "When an animal is out of control, when an animal fails to act in accordance to its training, that animal is disciplined."

She stood up. Drawing herself up to her full height, drawing upon every ounce of strength and dignity she possessed, she said, "I am no animal to be whipped, Uncle Mihaly."

Despite everything, he smiled a little at that. "All evidence to the contrary." He tossed the riding crop aside. "Still, do you truly understand what it is that you have done? You have humiliated yourself. You have shamed and insulted the entire family..." he paused, allowing this to sink in. "And you have insulted *me*."

She lowered her eyes. "I did not mean to offend you, Uncle. That was never my intent."

He looked at her with genuine curiosity. "Just what was your intent, might I ask?"

She met his eyes. "You ask if I'm an animal, and I say that I am not. Yet I am being sold like a prize sow to that *pig* Nadasdy. I ask you, what good did self-control do me? What good has all your lessons and all your lecturing done when I am nothing but a womb with legs?"

He sighed a little, and pulled up a chair for himself. "Erzsébet, there are times that, despite myself, I forget how young you truly are. There are certain realities in life, my dear, that must be addressed. And one is that you will be used. For money, for politics, and yes, for pedigree. Do you remember when I first started to teach you chess?"

She studied him for a moment, frowning. "Are you saying that I am a pawn?"

He smiled again. "You are young. We all begin as pawns. It is up to you whether you can cross the board. And who is the most powerful piece?"

She smiled back. "The queen."

He reached out, gently smoothed a lock of hair back into place. "I tell you, you are, without a doubt, the greatest student I have ever had. Probably the greatest student I will ever have. But when will you learn how to *wait*?"

* * *

Aunt Klara was waiting outside to greet her. It was difficult to miss her aunt, even in the rain. Her aunt was an enormous woman who outweighed most men, and favored crimson frocks.

"Erzsébet!" she cried, holding out her arms. Erzsébet noticed that her aunt was wearing the ring with a familiar flower on it. They embraced. "So," her aunt said, her hands resting on Erzsébet's shoulders, "Your first mistake was sleeping with a man."

Erzsébet laughed, but her aunt was absolutely serious.

"Tell me, was it Mihaly?"

Erzsébet affected shock, then laughed again. "No. Just a man."

"Pity. The offspring of you and Mihaly would have been..." her aunt shook her head. "Something to behold." Her aunt paused again, considering her. "Did he tell you he loved you, this 'just a man' of yours?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, thank God for that. You are not as stupid as your condition would lead me to believe."

Erzsébet smiled tightly and followed her aunt into the great house.

“Rule number one,” Klara said. “Never trust anything that thinks with its genitalia.”

“I know that, Aunt--”

“Rule number two,” Klara continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Never risk what you cannot afford to lose.” She looked pointedly at Erzsébet’s abdomen. “Or gain. Rule number three. There are forces in the world more powerful even than magic. One of them is politics. Don’t ever embarrass the family again.”

Erzsébet stared at her aunt. Her lower lip trembled slightly. She drew in a deep breath and controlled it.

Her aunt smiled. “Good. Now come. You have much to learn. I have much to teach you. And we may yet save that child of yours.”

“You mean I may yet keep her?”

Her aunt smiled beatifically. “Don’t be naïve, child.”

* * *

Expounding upon the first rule, Erzsébet’s aunt Klara initiated her into the mysteries of pleasures beyond men.

To begin with, for the duration of Erzsébet’s stay at Klara’s estate, all men, including male servants, were barred from entering the house. They continued their work in the stables and on the grounds, but all of the household chores were assumed by women.

Stripped naked, Klara bade Erzsébet to stand before a mirror, and examine her body by the light of day, explaining the female body’s erotic centers and points of sensitivity. She even handed Erzsébet a silver hand mirror to better see up inside of herself— to see her own lotus.

Afterwards, alone, Erzsébet spent many hours admiring herself before the mirror. She had always been proud of her beauty, but she was now aware of it in a way she had not been before. Her pregnancy made her feel more alive than ever, her flesh and her nerves desperate to be touched, to be drawn to the surface, and Klara taught Erzsébet how to masturbate, at first just with her fingers, then introducing her to phallic items. She even entrusted Erzsébet with a smooth, wooden item about nine inches long and two inches thick.

“Understand, my niece,” Klara had emphasized, eyes twinkling mischievously, “this is only for loan.”

Erzsébet, while appreciating the obvious pleasures of such teachings, was intelligent enough to grasp the underlying message: that men were not necessary for ecstasy. The message was further demonstrated by the introduction of certain young women in her aunt’s employ.

The final lesson was an introduction to group sex.

By the time Erzsébet was in her ninth month, she had had experiences beyond reckoning.

* * *

Simultaneous to these lessons, were Klara's lessons in history. Not the history of her church or her country, which Mihaly had taught her, but of something far older, with a much deeper meaning.

The history of her family and of Starry Wisdom.

She had known for some time that Mihaly's ring was an Egyptian lotus. But now she learned the ring showed the insignia of Starry Wisdom— symbol of regeneration, rebirth, and the Aten's coming forth from the primordial waters of Nun.

Her aunt owned a vast library, from which she pulled text after text. Mihaly had taught her Greek, Latin and Hebrew. But from her aunt, she also learned the Egyptian mystery language of pictographs, so she could read for herself the story of the Aten, and the coming of the two factions: the Sons of Horus and the Keepers of the Starry Wisdom.

She read of their founder's transformation into the King in Yellow. She read of the battle of the Library of Alexandria, in which the vessel of Aten was destroyed forever. She read of the Knights Templar, the strange, militant offshoot of the Sons.

She read of the Aten's secret and greatest gift: the immortality ritual. The secret was lost, but the fact that they'd had it was remembered.

It was at this point that her lifelong fascination with the Great Work truly began.

And finally, it was in her aunt's library that she first learned of the Staff of Solomon.

Chapter Six

ETE: 01:02:04

As they all rested, Doug searched his pockets. He produced a notepad and pencil, both obviously well-used. He flipped it open, and, seeing its water-logged pages, shook his head and tucked it away again.

He turned to Kate. "May I impose upon you for a notepad?"

"Sure." Kate dug a spiral notebook out of her backpack and handed it to him.

"Thank you." He stood up and began to walk around the room, stopping to study the carvings above the arches, or the torches mounted in regular intervals along the walls, jotting down notes as he did so. After he got to the fourth or fifth arch, on the far side of the room, he looked back at the rest of them, frowning. After a moment, Doug took out his pocket watch and peered at it intently. Then he began to shift it about, holding it this way and that way, like a man searching for a cell phone signal.

Murphy shook his head as Doug completed the circle, then began slowly and ponderously to make a second revolution. "We're sitting and the old guy with the cracked rib is not only doing laps, he's timing himself."

Doug seemed to be doing just that, completing his second trek around the room, notepad and watch in one hand, pencil in the other. Occasionally, he glanced speculatively back at Kate before moving on to the next arch. He sat down at one point, opened the back of his watch, examining it carefully. Then, closing it again, he splashed out into the water itself. He spent several more minutes moving his watch in the air, chest-deep in water, his frown deepening.

"What is it?" Kate called.

"My watch. The second hand goes slower in some places, and faster in others."

Murphy nodded. "It's been banged around a lot tonight."

"No, it isn't that."

"Are you picking up different times?" Cecil asked. "Could the archways be gates?"

"As far as time goes, not in the way you mean," Doug replied. "Regarding the gates themselves, I'll go one better. I'd say this place has all the earmarks of being a locus."

Cecil looked around, visibly impressed.

"Come again?" Murphy asked.

"A locus," Doug repeated. "A point of connectivity between multiple dimensions. A hub, in other words."

The Colonel relaxed. "Oh, I know what you're talkin' about. Never knew the technical name for it. What makes you think so?"

"Well, first of all, on a minor note, the fashion in which we arrived. We did, after all, come through a dimensional gate in order to arrive here. Of course, it's also possible to arrive in

the same world that you left by the same means, but I find that unlikely, given our current environs.

“The second thing is, the small host of apparent contradictions and anachronisms that surround us. This place is obviously ancient, but the décor is actually quite modern. The grating was ceramic. All the torches are burning, but there is no smoke, and they seem to require no fuel. Then, of course, there are the arches. Eight of them. Each one in a slightly different style, as if carved by a slightly different artist from a slightly different culture.

“The synchronicity between the design on the pool floor here and on the floor of the Hall of Waters implies a connection between the sacred springs and this place. Probably each of the worlds connected here have a similar place of power -- probably water-based -- that helps maintain their connectivity to one another through this place. From what I gather, each world will have such common elements: places that have developed along almost identical lines that unite them. The basic style and décor of a locus varies widely, depending on how the possibilities of the different worlds have interacted to form it...” He trailed off, lost once again in contemplating the images.

For a moment, no one said anything. Doug walked back and forth between two of the archways for several moments, taking out his pocket watch once again, then re-pocketing it, clearly working something out. No one wished to interrupt his train of thought.

“But there is an instability here, as well. Once I had distanced myself from the rest of you, I noticed there inconsistencies in your rate of speech. Experimenting, I found that at rare intervals my watch will move fast or slow, depending upon its location. Normally, the idea that that this would indicate a variable in time would be ludicrous. After all, if a timepiece is in a particular time field, so is the man holding it. His perceptions will match the actions of the machine. Yet, I have observed on occasion dramatic changes in the speed of the second hand for which mere mechanical failure cannot account. Further, I have examined my watch, just in case it was damaged by our ordeals. It was not.

“The placement for these anomalies would also appear to be a variable. While certain anomalies seem to be more prevalent near certain gates, on the whole it would appear that we are in a situation of perpetual chronological flux. It may be that the locus will stabilize itself, or it may eventually decay completely. But regardless, our remaining here for any longer than necessary would be unwise, even if we were not already in a hurry. The effects this might have upon the human condition—”

“All right, all right,” the Colonel interrupted. “We got a few minutes?”

“We shouldn’t be in any immediate danger, no.”

“Good to hear.” JD raised his voice slightly as he addressed the others, “You heard the man, people. We gotta get it in gear.” He felt around in his pockets and produced a collapsible canteen. “Cecil, you got a canteen on ya?”

“Just the standard-issue, Colonel. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“That’s all right. But I think now would be the time to fill it up, don’t you?”

Cecil unzipped his pack, “Yeah.”

“You had canteens all along?” Murphy accused.

Cecil brought out another collapsible canteen, larger than JD's. "Sorry, Murph."

"And you didn't say anything." He sighed deeply, shaking his head.

"Well, in Cecil's defense, there were grenades," Kate said.

Cecil began, "And anyway, the Doc said--"

"Well, you don't know till you try."

"I'm sorry," Cecil said again helplessly.

"Cecil, ignore him and just fill the goddamn thing," the Colonel said evenly. "Anybody else got one, let's fill 'em up."

"Mmmm, green water," Murphy said. "Delish."

The Colonel said, "Murphy, let me tell you something my grandmother used to tell me all the time: shut the *fuck* up."

As Cecil and Kate laughed, Murphy shrugged good-naturedly, "That explains a lot about you, Colonel."

"Green water's better than no water. We don't know where the hell we might end up. And anybody needs to make a pit stop, I'd suggest doing that now. While there's pillars to do it behind."

Kate blushed, then stood and walked briskly over to the farthest pillar.

When everyone was ready, they looked around at the circle of doorways. "Which way?" Kate asked.

JD slung Cecil's full canteen on his back. "Cecil? There a direction you like?"

Cecil looked at his monitors again and shook his head. "They're all the same to me, Colonel."

"All right, then. Kate? Doug? Ya'll wanna make with the mojo?"

Doug and Kate eyed their choices. The others followed suit.

"Door number one? Door number two? Door number eight?" Murphy muttered.

Each gateway had a carving over the doorway. One depicted a woman standing between two suns. She held one hand to her face, wiping away a tear. Another had a curtsying woman, her face hidden by her hair. A third woman appeared to be dancing and laughing, but she could just as easily have been screaming. Another woman scattered a handful of stars. One held a bird by the neck as if preparing to wring it. Another sat with a cat in her lap.

But again and again, almost against their will, the team found their eyes drawn to the gateway to the right of the fountain. Carved above it was a woman with an inviting smile, holding a dagger behind her back.

Doug had gone a little green at the sight of it. His hand moved to touch his abdomen, covering the place where the wound had been.

But there was no denying it: this gate seemed more real than the others, somehow. More present.

“Everybody feel that?” Kate asked softly. There was a murmur of general assent from all but Doug. Kate reached out and touched his arm lightly. “You all right?”

He still looked like he might be ill. His eyes never leaving the image over the archway, he nodded. “I imagine I shall have to be.”

The Colonel stepped forward first, eyeing the archway suspiciously. “Doc, you said sometimes your watch acted a certain way near certain gates. What’d it do here?”

“Inconsistent, of course, but sometimes it ran slow. Once it stopped altogether, then resumed.”

“Okay, so, what does that tell us?”

Murphy looked around at them all and said simply, “Rios.”

Everyone turned to him in surprise.

“Rios,” he said again, more emphatically. “Our missing person, remember?”

“Yes, Fernando Rios. What about him?” Doug asked.

“Guy disappears in 1985. You guys get a call from him as though he had just disappeared, talking about this weird gate crap, now, in 2005. Doesn’t that imply to you that he is somewhere where time moves more slowly? Maybe even, occasionally, stopping?”

There was a pause. Doug frowned thoughtfully. “Detective, you may want to be careful. The Order might try to induct you as a scholar one day.”

“Yeah, I thought your skepticism was intact,” Kate said.

“Don’t read too much into it. I still think you people are freaks. But until we find a way out of here, I’m stuck with you. So I’ll play along.”

“That’s fine, Mr. Murphy. You do that,” JD said. “But point made. We’re keepin’ an eye out for Rios. Unless there was anything else, I suggest we move forward.”

“Just one thing, Colonel,” Doug interjected. “We’re about to pass through another gate, and since we’re actually at leisure this time, I would like a chance to study it a little more closely.”

The Colonel inhaled deeply. “Doc, I wouldn’t go so far as to say we’ve ever actually been ‘at leisure’ with this mess.”

“I assure you, I won’t take a great deal of time--”

“I assure you, you won’t.”

“One minute, Colonel.”

JD held up a finger. “One.” Then he turned away, muttering something about *goddamn eggheads*.

Doug stepped forward and, very gingerly, put his hand and arm through the gateway. Doug’s expression was braced, then relaxed as he reached in up to his shoulder. “Hmmm.”

Kate leaned forward eagerly. “Well?”

“There’s a pressure. But it’s not exactly physical.”

Murphy snorted.

Ignoring him, Doug stepped through the gateway.

Kate, Cecil and even Murphy half-expected him to disappear or something. He did not disappear, but he did look different. It was as if all the colors had been muted—his face, hair, and clothes were grayer except for his slacks, which were no longer black but a sort of grainy off-black like newsprint.

He turned around quickly, as if *he* had expected *them* to disappear. Seeing them, he brightened, then began to shout, as if they would have difficulty hearing him, *“I experienced... nausea and light-headedness...definitely disorienting! You’ll see...what I mean...about experiencing a change in pressure!”*

The Colonel whirled around. “What the fuck are you doing? You said you were going to examine the goddamn thing, not go through it! The minute I decide that you need to be this team’s point, I will, by God, *assign* you this team’s point! Now get your fucking ass back here!”

Doug, flustered, stepped back over the threshold quickly, clutching Kate’s notebook to his chest. “My apologies, Colonel.”

“Apologies are not gonna do you a lick a’ good if you wind up with your head on backwards because you stepped through the wrong fucking door, Doc. Now, I’ll allow that part of this is my fault. You’ve never been in the field before, and I forgot that. That being said, you’ve got to remember, this ain’t a goddamned field trip. If Murphy’s right, the assholes behind this are somewhere past that door. In the ten years I have been with the Order, I have yet to lose a man, and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna start with you. Are we clear on that?”

“Absolutely.”

“All right then. ‘Nuff said.” He turned to the rest of the team. “All right, people, let’s move out.” He stepped forward and re-drew his shotgun. “Murphy?”

“Right behind you.”

They passed through the archway of the woman with the hidden dagger and found themselves standing in a short corridor.

“Colonel,” Cecil said, “My equipment just went out.”

“Everybody, stop.” The Colonel turned to Cecil. “Can you get it back up?”

Cecil grimaced. “It might be fried permanently this time. I’ve got nothing.”

The Colonel nodded. “Okay, people. Stay frosty.”

The team proceeded down the hallway. As Doug had described, they all experienced light-headedness and something that felt, not like nausea, but like their stomachs were perpetually dropping, as if they were riding an out-of-control elevator. The air felt different here, too. It had been very humid by the pool, and while there was still a great deal of moisture here, it felt more like a cellar with a dirt floor.

The hallway ended in a wide staircase, leading up. There were two torches to either side, but there was no light on the staircase itself.

Murphy turned his flashlight back on, and, as before, it was dim for several seconds before the light seemed to clarify itself. He shined it on the stairs. All they could see was a landing and a turn with more stairs.

They went slowly up into the darkness. As they walked, there was a noticeable increase in pressure. At the first landing, the décor changed—in fact, it became almost nonexistent. There were no carvings here, and the stone had been replaced by exposed brick. The floor became rough concrete.

Kate found her eyes watering. Cecil kept yawning, trying to pop his ears. Murphy pinched the bridge of his nose. “Headache?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

“Likewise,” added Cecil.

“Colonel?” Doug ventured, “We may need to stop at the next landing and rest for a short while. It sounds like everyone is experiencing these symptoms.”

“Yeah, it’s the effect of the place. We’re in a between-stage. Between dimensions, Doc. Or the place where they overlap. Hell, I don’t know. What I do know is we can’t stop here. It’ll just get worse until it drops you. We keep goin’, it’ll get better.”

The stairs continued upward, one landing after another, the water’s mineral scent gradually replaced by the smells of dust and decay. The motes played thickly across the beams of light as they emerged into a long corridor. The ceiling had dropped ominously low, only six and a half or perhaps seven feet high, made of sagging wood planks.

“Wait,” Cecil said, “I’ve got power.”

They stopped. Shining his flashlight around, the Colonel said, “Well? Got anything?”

“Rebooting.” This time, just over a minute passed before Cecil spoke again. “Okay, we’re back up. No movement ahead. But this is a high-energy area, so it would take a major spike to register on my equipment right now.”

“You just keep me apprised of any fuckin’ spikes.”

“Roger that.”

The way was narrower here, forcing the team to proceed single-file. In some places, the walls were plaster, crumbling to expose the bare wire mesh. In other places, there was relatively modern-looking cinderblock. The team’s progress was further impeded by heaps of moldering furniture: chairs, headboards, tables, a writing desk, a piano bench, stacks of rotting timber. Occasionally there would be a window, bricked up from the other side. After they had gone about fifteen feet, they found a gaping hole in the floor, almost the entire width of the hallway.

JD shined his flashlight down into it. They couldn’t see anything. He reached into one of the pockets of his duster and produced a flare.

“They teach you that in the marines?” Murphy asked.

“Nope. Boy Scouts, Mister Murphy.” The Colonel pulled the tab. “Be prepared.” He dropped the flare into the hole where it tumbled end over end, down to a bare dirt floor.

“Whaddaya reckon, forty feet?” He shook his head. “Deep enough to kill ya, at any rate. Everybody, watch your step.”

He led the way around the pit, pressing himself against the wall, gingerly testing the floorboards with his boots for loose areas.

After that, they could make out the end of the hallway, and a door.

The Colonel opened it cautiously. His flashlight revealed a corridor even narrower than the one they were in. It turned sharply to the right.

The others followed him in.

“Everybody still with me?” he called over his shoulder. “Murphy-Kate-Doc-Cecil?”

There was a chorus of affirmations.

“Just checkin’. Tighter’n a bull’s ass in fly season in here. Can’t turn around to look for ya. Everybody stay right behind me.”

The flashlights revealed wooden walls here. There were also--

“Colonel, we’ve got doors,” Murphy said.

“Well, shit.”

“After you, sir.”

“Cecil?”

“Looks clear.”

“All right, then.” The Colonel opened the first door. It led to another corridor full of doors. “Well, shit again.” He shut it.

“Colonel, if I may...?” Murphy pulled a plastic doorstop from one of his jacket pockets.

“You carry doorstops?” Kate asked, incredulous.

“Standard SWAT issue,” he dropped it onto the floor and kicked it firmly under the door.

“I mean...*really*?”

“Really.” He jiggled the door handle to demonstrate. It wouldn’t budge. “Simple physics. Nobody’s coming through *that* door. Not easily, anyway.” She looked impressed and he gave her a wry grin. “Don’t applaud, just throw money.”

They continued on.

Kate wrinkled up her nose. “Anybody else smell that? Smells like—”

“Burnt hair,” Cecil finished.

“And burning flesh,” Doug added. “You realize what that means.”

“Eretics,” JD said. “Looks like we’re in the right place.”

“What is wrong with our lifestyle, that the smell of roasted undead means we’re in the *right* place and-- oh look. Blood,” Murphy pointed his flashlight at the floor.

There wasn’t a lot. But enough.

Murphy knelt down and touched a droplet. “Still sticky.” He shined his flashlight along the floor. There were more splashes further ahead-- larger splashes.

No one said anything as they crept along. They tried two more doors. One led to a room barely bigger than a closet, stacked with wooden crates. The second led to yet another hallway. Murphy secured it with a doorstop.

At last, their flashlights landed on an old black telephone mounted on the wall. The whole section of wall surrounding it was awash in blood. Beneath it, more blood stained the floor.

“Movement,” Cecil said. He raised his gun, but couldn’t fire because everyone else was in front of him. Kate followed where his gun was pointed, swinging her flashlight from the phone to the end of the corridor.

The Colonel threw his hand up to shield his eyes. “Get that damn thing out of my face—” As he spoke, the phone rang abruptly, piercingly. Kate shrieked, leaping back against the wall.

“Movement!” Cecil shouted.

“I can’t see shit!”

“There it goes—”

“*Colonel, down!*” Murphy raised his shotgun.

The Colonel dropped to the floor and Murphy fired, but the creature at the end of the hallway was too quick. The shot tore a section of the wall where it disappeared around the corner.

“Fuck,” Murphy pumped the action. “I guess now we know what happened to Rios.”

“Could he still be alive?” Kate asked.

Murphy looked again at the blood stains. “Maybe.”

“They dragged him off!” she cried, pointing to the trail of blood leading down the hall.

“And we’re goin’ after him, Katie. Just hold your horses,” the Colonel picked himself up off the floor, blinking away the rest of the after-glow as best he could. “Nice shootin’, Murphy.”

“Thank you. We’re going after him?”

“We’re sure as shit not leavin’ him behind. Not when he could still be alive.”

Murphy hesitated. “Okay.”

They followed the blood trail. It went around the corner-- the same direction in which the eretic had gone.

More hallway. More doors. More blood.

“It’s on the *ceiling*,” Kate marveled.

“Major arterial damage,” Murphy said.

The trail led into a doorway on the left. The door had been torn off.

“Cecil, any movement?” the Colonel asked.

“Neg—” Cecil began. “Wait. Yes...very slight. And some heat.”

Kate looked hopefully from Cecil to the Colonel.

“Murphy,” JD said simply. Murphy nodded. The two of them went into the room and checked it.

Fernando Rios was lying on the floor on the right wall. He was on his right side, his back to the wall. His eyes were open.

“*Socorro*,” he whispered.

Murphy didn’t say a word but charged forward, dropping to his knees on the floor beside Rios. In a single motion, he set his gun down on the floor and drew up his medical bag.

“*Estoy aqui*,” Murphy squeezed Rios’s outstretched hand. “Sorry, buddy, I don’t speak that much *español*.”

“I’ll cover the hall,” the Colonel said shortly and stepped out, his shotgun ready.

Cecil had taken up guard position.

“Katie, Doc, get your guns out,” the Colonel ordered. “We need to be ready for whatever’s comin’.”

“Rios...?” Kate asked.

“Murphy’s seein’ to him. You just help me guard this goddamn hall.”

“Colonel, I speak Spanish,” Doug said.

“Fluently?”

“Fluently.”

“Then get your ass in there, Doc. He might know somethin’.”

Doug held his gun awkwardly toward the Colonel. “Would you like this?”

“If you’re gonna hold it like that, yes, I would.” JD took it and thrust it into his pocket.

Doug went into the room with Murphy and knelt on the floor beside him and Rios, whose eyes had closed. “*Estamos con la Ordena de los Cuatro Hijos*,” he said. “*Recibimos tu llamado*.” Rios did not respond. Doug turned to Murphy. “How is he?”

“Hemorrhagic shock. He’s lost most of his blood volume. He has no carotid pulse. I mean, if I *had* enough vein, I couldn’t start an IV.”

“Can we take him with us?”

Murphy shook his head. “No. I’ve given him five cc’s of morphine to kill the pain.”

“What’re we going to do?”

“Don’t know, Doc. Hadn’t gotten that far.”

Rios opened his eyes then and looked groggily up at Doug. “*¿Eres un padre?*”

“*Lo siento--*” Doug began, but his voice was drowned out by a shotgun blast.

“*Murphy!*” the Colonel’s voice bellowed over more gunfire. “*Get up here NOW!*”

Murphy grabbed his gun and stood up. “Doc, get my bag for me, will you?” He limped as fast as he could to the doorway.

Kate was firing at three eretics that were rushing at them from the right. Her shots were mostly wild, though there were a few red sprays as she got them in limbs. Cecil and the Colonel were side-by-side, facing at least a dozen creatures coming from the other direction. Cecil was a better shot than Kate, but he still only succeeded at slowing them down. As Murphy watched, the Colonel landed four out of five shots to the head. The heads of the eretics burst apart, sending fragments of bone and brain in all directions.

“Here, Colonel!” Murphy slid in beside Kate and took down an on-coming attacker.

The Colonel didn’t look away from the shadows that moved towards them as he fired. “Talk to me, Murphy!”

“No blood, no pulse. Can’t move him.”

Kate started. “He’s dead?”

“Not officially,” Murphy had to shout to be heard over the gunfire. “What’s the word, boss?”

“We don’t leave a man behind. You do what ya gotta do,” the Colonel fired a few more rounds. Then: “I’m out!”

“I got five!” Murphy and the Colonel traded guns.

“What?” Kate shouted.

Murphy reloaded the Colonel’s weapon. “Kate, the man is dead. His body just hasn’t gotten the memo. We can’t leave him here, and we can’t take him with us.”

“What are you saying?”

“There’s a syringe in my bag. Morphine.” A shadow fell over Kate’s face as he went on, “Shoot it into the vena cava-- that big sucker going right into the heart. Here,” Murphy pointed to the spot just above his collarbone. “Give him the whole thing and he’ll just go to sleep. That big vein right there, you can’t miss it. We don’t have much time, Kate. I need you to do it for me.”

“Out!” the Colonel shouted. He and Murphy traded guns again. The pile of dead eretics grew.

Murphy said something else, but Kate didn’t hear. Gunfire was still erupting from the Colonel’s and Cecil’s guns, and from somewhere even more distant, she heard a pounding. All sounds became a dull roar to her as she turned, white-faced, her mouth pursed into a fine line, to enter the room where Doug was sitting with Rios, holding his hand.

At first, she thought that they were talking. But in the few steps it took to reach them, she realized Doug was saying the Lord’s Prayer.

* * *

Out in the hallway, Murphy and the Colonel continued to switch off—the Colonel firing and Murphy re-loading.

The pounding Kate had noticed—Murphy recognized it instantly. It was *them*, pounding on at least one of the doors he had secured with a doorstop. There had to be a lot of them, too. He could hear their growls and snarls of outrage.

“We’re gonna have to move,” the Colonel said.

“I know, but Kate—” Murphy began, then had to whirl and face an oncoming eretic.

From somewhere down the hallway, there was a crash as the door gave way. The odor of charred flesh, already powerful in the narrow space, became nearly overwhelming. A red-and-black sea of burnt rage rushed around the corner and surged for them.

“Cecil!” JD shouted back, and Cecil whirled to help Murphy. Behind him, he could hear JD blasting away. Then JD dropped his shotgun and started firing his revolvers. Fast. In front of him and Murphy, they kept coming, getting closer and closer, new ones stomping over their fallen.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Kate!” Murphy called. “I don’t mean to rush you--!”

* * *

She recognized only a few words in Spanish, but the rhythm was unmistakable. “*Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo, santificado sea Tu nombre...*”

Rios’s eyes were open, fastened on Doug. Every now and then, his lips moved almost imperceptibly, praying with Doug. She knelt beside them, took off her pack. She opened it and took out one of the medallions she carried—St. Christopher. She gently took Rios’ hand and wrapped the chain around his hand and wrist so he couldn’t drop it, then pressed his hand to his chest. Then she took out the needle. Felt for the vein Murphy had described. There it was, exposed by the wounds he had suffered.

Murphy was yelling at her to hurry up. Gently, she slid the needle into Rios’s flesh and pressed the bulb.

Fernando Rios’s eyes slipped half-way closed, and he died.

Doug reached down and closed his eyes the rest of the way.

Murphy’s voice again. “Kate--”

“It’s *done*, all right? It’s done!” Her voice broke. She jerked her bag closed and stood up. “Fuck you, Murphy. *Fuck. You.*”

* * *

Outside, Murphy fired off another round. "Yeah. I know."

And kept on firing.

A voice he barely recognized as Kate's spoke up from behind him, so close he could feel the heat of her breath as she hissed, "Get the hell out of my way."

Without thinking, Murphy stepped to the side, raising his rifle as he did so. He glanced back over his shoulder.

Kate stood in the doorway. The wand was in her hand, her eyes blue fire.

The eretics ran forward in a tide.

She stepped out into the hall to meet them.

* * *

They were in front of her.

She strode toward them, the wand raised. There was no fear. There was not even anger. There was nothing. Everything else simply fell away, and there was just this moment.

She brought the wand down. It coursed through her, the power. Through the wand, and into them.

For a split second, she felt something like a thin gossamer cord connecting her to them. Inwardly, she recoiled. Her nostrils were filled with the scent of burnt hair and flesh and sulfur. Her lips peeled back from her teeth as her vision danced with fiery imps. For just a split second--long enough for an azure glow to build into the tip of the wand.

And then the power burst out into the hall before her, a perfect arc of blue.

There was a taste of ozone and a sense of disjoining, of something being pried loose as the blue hit the eretics. The creatures froze, contorted, howling, as they were lit seemingly from within, a blinding white circuit connecting middle, eyes, brain, before the power passed through them. It emerged on the other side, blue once more.

At least half a dozen eretics fell over, hissing and smoking.

The blue struck the walls in rises and eddies, then vanished like mist.

The remaining eretics paused, uncertain, their claws splayed along the walls of the corridor. Several of their fellows were on the floor before the mage.

The mage raised the wand and brought it down again.

Some of them had time to turn and flee. But only some of them.

Again and again, Kate raised the wand and brought it down, sending out greater and greater arcs of blue, until the hallway before her was empty but for the smoldering bodies scattered along the floor. She did not have long to contemplate her handiwork before the sound of gunfire intruded on her hearing. She turned toward it slowly, almost dreamily.

Behind her, Murphy had pressed himself against the wall. He shrank away slightly as she passed.

JD and Cecil still had their backs to her, firing at the creatures coming from the other end of the hall. She put a hand on each of their shoulders. They shifted aside, expecting to see Murphy. They were startled to see that it was she, eyes hard, wand ready.

She fired four arcs of blue, destroying the remaining eretics.

When it was over, she stood still for a moment, straining to see in the new darkness, her body tensed, the wand half-raised. Behind her, the three men had gone motionless.

At last she turned to them, her face ashen. She took a shaky step forward, then two. “Oh, God. I think I’m going to be sick.”

JD took her arm. She collapsed against him, skin clammy. He gathered her hair back off her neck, “That’s fine. You just go ahead and be sick.”

She clenched her eyes shut and held onto him until the world steadied again.

Doug, who had been standing in the doorway the whole time, spoke up, looking at Kate with concern. “I don’t suppose anyone has any food?”

“I have some power bars.” Cecil dug in his pockets.

“Oh, no,” Kate moaned, waving the thought of food away. “If I try to eat right now—that would be—not good.”

“Guys, I hate to interrupt,” said Murphy, “but if we’re going to get out, we should be moving. Kate, can you walk?” She nodded. “Good. Colonel?”

“Just hang on a second, Murphy. Kate, can you drink?”

“Water or scotch?”

“Water.”

“Gimme.”

As she drank from his canteen, JD looked at Kate for a moment appraisingly. Sure enough, the gal had just blasted a shitload of undead with that stick she was totin’ around, and looked like she’d be okay. But who could tell what it had cost her? Even that one Japanese fella he’d rode with back in ’98 wasn’t up to that. Not without El Stick, anyway. And Christ, she was barely an apprentice. Still, she was bouncing back fast. Tough little gal.

She handed him back the canteen, grimacing as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Christ, that *is* nasty.”

Doug handed Murphy his medical bag, along with Kate’s book bag. Murphy slung them both over his shoulders. “We ready to move?”

“Yeah,” the Colonel said and Kate nodded in agreement. They started up the hall.

“Colonel,” Murphy called after them, puzzled. “Aren’t you point?”

“Yeah, I’m point, Murphy. Where the hell are you?”

Murphy pointed back down the hallway, in the direction in which they'd come. "I'm closest to the way in which I *thought* we'd be going. Our missing persons case is DOA and there's nothing for us in that direction except for lots of red-hot death."

Cecil and Doug looked from Murphy, to Kate and the Colonel.

"Ain't no way home that direction, Murphy," the Colonel said quietly.

"There were seven other doors left, by my count," Murphy retorted. "Isn't it possible that one of them will get us back home?"

"And what about the Isfet breach?"

Murphy opened his mouth, then closed it again. He looked down at the smoldering corpses littering the hallway, then back at JD. His gaze wandered over Kate's wand, then back at the smoldering corpses again.

"*God* dammit." Murphy leaned against the wall for a second. Then he looked down and checked to make sure his shotgun was fully loaded. "*God dammit*," he said again, in a low, furious tone that none of them had heard from him before. He turned on them almost savagely, "I don't believe in any of this crap. Never have. Don't believe in *zombies*," he jerked his head toward the dead bodies on the floor, "I don't believe in *magic*," he pointed at Kate, who flinched, "I don't believe in *psychics* or *vampires* or—or--" he unshouldered Kate's backpack and thrust it at her, "or *any of it*. And I *especially* don't believe in an *Isfet breach*."

"All right, Mr. Murphy," Doug said. "Then what are you doing here?"

"*Loading with silver*," Murphy hissed through clenched teeth. "Because I don't believe in *werewolves* either." He pumped the action on his shotgun. "Colonel? Lead the way." Without waiting for the Colonel to comply, Murphy stalked off.

The Colonel followed. "Glad you're on our side, Murphy."

Doug, Kate, and Cecil hung back for a second, stunned. After a moment, Doug shook his head. "My friends, that's what we call a true philosophical crisis. Still, you have to admire a man who can, while in the midst of that crisis, continue to fight the things he *doesn't* believe in."

Chapter Seven

Sárvár, Hungary
Winter, 1608

There was nothing so invigorating as a brisk ride in the morning.

Erzsébet was still a striking woman, for all that common wisdom insisted that she should be well beyond her prime. She had given Nadasdy four children. They had all grown up and gone away, married, or off to fight Turks. Nadasdy, himself, had had the good grace to die some time ago. Some war injury or other. And good riddance.

Snow had fallen overnight and her horse's hooves made a satisfying *crunch, crunch* as she trotted it along, watching the sun rise across her silver-colored lands. The air was utterly still with that unearthly silence and beauty that accompanies snowfall.

But wait. There *was* a sound—something that distinctly did not belong. It sounded almost human.

She veered off to the trail to investigate. She had no patience for foolishness. If someone had needlessly disturbed her peaceful morning ride, then they would pay dearly, for she never went out without her riding crop, and she held it at the ready now, giggling her horse up a rise. And on the other side she saw the source of the noise.

Since girlhood, she had been aware of certain truths concerning human existence. One of these was sex. As she had gotten older, she had learned more about the subject, and determined that there were several variations on a theme where such matters were concerned:

In general, poets and dreamers made love. Lords and ladies had sex. Peasants fucked.

But what greeted her as she came over the rise could only be termed *rutting*.

She guessed the man to be about forty, though with commoners it could be hard to tell--they aged too quickly to be sure. The girl, from what she could see of the child, was perhaps seven years old. How positively ghastly.

Even as she took in a breath to command the pig to stop, he gave a kind of gurgle, twitched, and fell on the child, full-force.

Her lips curled in disgust. *Oh, for goodness' sake!* She had dismounted, when he started moving again-- oddly.

He gurgled again. And there was a strange keening sound under him. The child had managed to brace her legs against the ground and pushed. The man rolled the rest of the way over on the incline, and Erzsébet saw that there was a small piece of wood on his chest, just below the breastbone. A nail was embedded in the wood.

Most of the nail was in the man's body.

The girl grabbed the piece of wood with both hands, planted one foot on his chest, and yanked. The nail was very long; it took her two tries. Steam rose from the wound into the morning air.

Erzsébet watched as the child kicked the body a few times. Then the child turned around and saw Erzsébet standing there for the first time.

It was the face that decided her: the child was probably closer to nine or ten. She was just very small, not to mention very ragged and dirty. But despite that, the child's face was positively angelic. Her skin, the bits of it that were clean enough to tell, was nearly as white and pure as the ground around her. Her limbs, while pitifully thin, were delicate and finely formed. She didn't look like a peasant at all. In fact, Erzsébet detected, however faintly, the pulse of a witch. This girl... was a *mage*. Her power was not great, but it was there nonetheless.

Most remarkable though, was her brilliant green eyes, currently blazing with hatred. The girl dropped into a crouch with a feral snarl, makeshift knife at the ready. She made no move to come toward Erzsébet, but it was clear that if Erzsébet took so much as one single step closer... well, the child had already killed once. She was ready to do so again.

Erzsébet stared at her, astonished. *What an adorable child.*

She held out her hand. "Here, now, it's all right. No need for that with me, dear."

No change. Good. Only fools were quick to trust.

She smiled, in spite of herself. Then she noticed the child was barefoot. "How would you like a nice hot bowl of stew?" No change. Erzsébet went on, modulating her voice into a low, seductive purr. "A warm bath. Warm yourself by the fire, wrapped in furs. We could find you some lovely clothes and a pair of slippers. Would you like that?" The child's expression relaxed infinitesimally. "You could ride on my horse with me to my castle. You know, I had a little girl once, a long time ago. I had to let her go. You must have had a mother once who had to let you go." A wistful expression crossed the girl's features, and so great was her beauty then that Erzsébet felt her heart melt. "Would you like to come and live with me?"

The girl did not say anything. She lowered the piece of wood and simply stood for several moments, gazing at Erzsébet. Erzsébet could not read anything in those green eyes.

At last, the girl tucked the piece of wood back in the folds of her rags. She took a hesitant step forward. Then another.

Erzsébet held her hand out again. The girl came forward and took it. Together, they walked back to Erzsébet's mare. With surprising grace and agility, the girl climbed on without assistance.

Erzsébet took off her cloak and bundled the child up in it, making sure to tuck her feet into the wool, then mounted behind her. As they rode back to the castle, Erzsébet told the child all of the wonderful things that awaited her.

The child stared straight ahead the whole time. She gave no sign that she was even listening. She kept holding her makeshift blade to herself, clinging to it the way another child might cling to a cherished toy or blanket.

Erzsébet paused. "And you shall have a proper knife."

For the first time, the little girl looked at her and smiled.

Katarina stepped carefully around the fallen minions, her pretty features furrowed with uncharacteristic concern. It wasn't the eretics that concerned her; they were easily created, under the proper conditions. No, it was the Sons that wandered, unhindered, through Mistress' home.

And Mistress would ask why they were still alive.

She reached the little room where she'd had the eretics leave Rios after they were done playing with him. There he was, dead as the Sons should have been. Idly, she lifted the coat from him. Something glittered.

A chain around his wrist. She unwound it and examined the gold medallion that dangled from it. A saint's medallion. How quaint.

She reached up and propped his eyes back open, then lifted him by the hair so he was propped against the wall. She sat down in his lap, stretching herself luxuriantly to examine the medallion more closely. St. Christopher. She turned it from side to side, lost temporarily in its shine.

Her hand closed tightly over the image of the man crossing the river. Three broken-down old men, a boy, and the little mage girl. Fought their way through a pincer trap in a hallway. It was unthinkable. And how?

Doorstops.

Mistress was waiting for her to come back with the wand. And what was she going to tell her? That the plan had failed because of *doorstops*?

This did not bear thinking about.

She stood up to leave, then turned and shoved Rios's body back down with a pointed toe.

She went back out to the hallway and picked her way daintily through the smoldering bodies, twirling the medallion by its chain like the fob of a pocket watch. Some had collapsed, their insides reduced to ash while the outside was still...

Wait. That's not right. Her frown deepened. The medallion stopped twirling.

The amulet Mistress had given her to draw upon rested under her shirt, but as a matter of pride, she reached out without it, using her own energy to scan the corpses and see what was to be seen.

Well, well. They hadn't all been killed after all, as much as such things can be *killed*, per se. Many of them had been banished. Dispelled. Unwoven, and sent screaming back to the hells from which they'd been summoned.

Katarina smiled, her pretty face smoothing. She could go back to Mistress without worry after all. Their mage was powerful, indeed. She'd used the wand, used it to destroy their minions. Worrisome, yes, but not insurmountable. And certainly better than doorstops.

With a light heart, Katarina resumed twirling the medallion and skipped her way back to the hidden door from where she'd emerged. She climbed the secret stair, and the door closed seamlessly behind her.

Chapter Eight

The team had been wandering along more corridors for what seemed like hours, winding along many twists and turns, though according to Doug's watch, only twenty minutes had passed, give or take. Everyone else's watches had begun to drift. Cecil's had stopped completely. The Colonel's had reset to a blinking 00:00.

The team had progressed in silence for most of the time, except to confirm that their watches were unreliable again, and to agree with JD's suggestion that Doug's watch, while questionable, was the best they had.

Murphy, however, had remained completely and utterly silent throughout. He paused occasionally to block a door that just led to more hallways, never speaking until, at last: "Okay, that's the last one. No more stops. I'm out."

JD nodded. They trudged on.

Doug cleared his throat. "Colonel, if you don't mind, I'd like some water please."

After Doug had drank, the Colonel screwed the top back on and they had just resumed walking when a faint voice came over their earpieces. "Ground team?" There was a pause, then it came again, clearer, more urgent, "Ground team!"

Everyone's head came up at once and they stopped.

"Bill!" Cecil's face broke into a grin.

"Bill, is that you?" Kate called excitedly.

"Bill, are you all right?" demanded the Colonel.

"Ground team, I can barely hear you. Where the hell are you?"

"Hell's Basement, Bill," Murphy said tiredly.

"Bill!" the Colonel's voice was insistent. "We are up to our necks in crap! Where the hell are you?"

"Up to your necks?"

"Well," Murphy grinned humorlessly, "We are standing on our hands."

"We jumped dimensions," the Colonel said.

There was a pause. "How can that be?"

"We passed through a locus--" Doug began, but broke off as they heard a commotion on Bill's end: the sound of drawers opening and slamming shut, and other sounds of a frantic search.

"Uh, Bill?" Cecil tried.

"Shit!" It was Bill's voice, but they didn't recognize the note of panic. Something clattered in the background.

"Bill, are you all right?" asked the Colonel again. He motioned for the rest of the team to be silent.

No answer.

“Bill!” the Colonel demanded loudly, “Are you all right?”

Without missing another beat, Bill said in a perfectly normal, pleasant tone, “I’m good, Colonel. Thank you.”

The five members of the ground team exchanged a look. JD moved his right hand down, below camera range. He caught Cecil’s eye, and made a series of gestures. Cecil nodded.

“Hey, Bill,” Cecil said, “We need to re-run systems check.”

“Roger that, Cecil,” Bill replied. “I got nothin’ on visual and no scan.”

Cecil and the Colonel exchanged glances.

“Bill, you still hooked up with HQ?” the Colonel asked.

“Negative, Colonel.”

“Well, god dammit, what the hell happened out there?”

“I’m working on getting my satellite uplink re-established,” Bill said, “And if you’ve jumped dimensions, you know the probability of A/V and security scans reaching across is nil, Colonel. We’re lucky we’re talking to each other right now. I expect audio to continue to be spotty until you all can get the hell out of there. Now bring me up to speed.”

Throughout this exchange, Kate was practically hopping up and down for a chance to address Bill. The Colonel kept giving her the stink-eye and chopped his hand at his own throat. She didn’t need ESP to read him thinking, *Dammit, girl! Keep your pie-hole shut!*

The Colonel looked at Cecil again, pointedly. Cecil looked at his equipment and nodded. The Colonel reached up and shut off his camera, motioning for the others to do likewise.

When the rest of the team had followed suit, JD said, “Okay, people. We ain’t got much time. Thoughts?”

“Well, he’s clearly lying,” Kate said immediately. “But why would he lie? Bill would only lie if someone was making him. So there’s got to be somebody with him!”

“There are codes to let us know if he’s under duress,” Cecil said. “He used *none* of them.”

“So Bill’s lying and we don’t know why,” Murphy said. “Are we sure it’s Bill?”

The question seemed innocuous enough, but it hung in the air between the five of them. Kate and Cecil shared a terrified look.

“It seems to me that we have two options before us,” Doug said. “Option one, we simply maintain radio silence, go on without him, and hope for the best. The other is, we re-open communications, as much as our current situation allows, and hope that it *is* Bill and he will find a way of letting us know what is happening. Agreed?”

“But I *know* it’s Bill,” Kate said.

“Do you?” Murphy asked. “How?”

“I *know* Bill.”

“So do I,” Murphy replied as kindly as he could. “So does Cecil, and he doesn’t look too sure. So does the Colonel. And you’ve already said that this whole ESP thing isn’t one of your strong suits.”

“This has nothing to do with that—”

“All right, people,” the Colonel said shortly. “What’s it gonna be, A or B?”

“B,” Kate said quickly.

“B,” Cecil agreed.

Murphy nodded. “Yeah.”

“Agreed,” Doug said.

“All right,” the Colonel reached up to his camera. “Any last thoughts?”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “Kate has to pay my therapy bills when we get out of this.”

“Noted. Anybody else?” the Colonel looked around. “No? Okay.” He switched his camera back on. “Bill, you read?”

“Loud and mostly clear, Colonel.”

“We found Rios. He’s dead.”

“They murdered him, Bill,” Kate said bitterly.

Bill exhaled. “May he have a thousand.”

They all paused respectfully at this. Then the Colonel continued, “We fought it out with MJ-12 in the Hall of Waters—fucking Aaron Vickers. The waters healed Doug, Kate opened a gate, and here we are. In a basement full of doors, corridors, and old rotting crap.”

“And eretics,” added Murphy.

“Which Murphy doesn’t believe in,” added Kate.

Murphy looked at the ceiling. “Thank you, Kate.”

“Okay, do you have any idea where you are?” Bill asked.

“Well, if it wasn’t so huge and labyrinthine,” Murphy said, “I would think we’re in the basement of the Royal Hotel.”

Everyone gave him a pointed look.

“Well, I wasn’t sure!” he said defensively. “I’m still not sure. I’m telling you, the basement I was in was not this big. Or this weird. Plus, Fernando Rios reported his location as the Royal Hotel. Rios was here. Ergo, we are in *a* Royal Hotel.”

“In that case,” Doug said, “It seems likely that we are in a construct—a construct that has either been deliberately modeled, or has naturally evolved into some, er-- *alternate* version of the Royal Hotel. That’s why we didn’t see anything at the Royal Hotel that exists in Excelsior Springs. Because all of the evidence ...is *here*.”

“Sure. That’s where I was going with that.”

“No, no, it all fits,” Doug insisted. “Because this means that Rios arrived here from Excelsior Springs. It means that Katarina and the etics have been moving back and forth between this place and Excelsior as well. Which means that not only are we in the right place, but there’s got to be some other way out. Whatever way Katarina and her minions have been using.”

“So after we get done with this, there’s a way home,” the Colonel clarified. “Best fucking news I’ve heard all day. Cecil, keep an eye out for that goddamn gate. Bill, call up the schematics on the Royal Hotel. Maybe you can help us find a clear path through this shit. Everybody else, look alive. We ain’t out of the woods yet. And, above all, we’ve got to *keep movin’*.”

They started walking, with more purpose this time.

“Bill, did you copy that?” the Colonel asked.

No response.

“Bill?” After several more seconds of silence, the Colonel sighed. “Well, *shit*. No tellin’ when he cut out.”

They walked for several more minutes. Then, unbelievably, they came to a hall of doors with doorstops shoved snugly beneath many of them.

They stopped, staring at them in dismay.

“Did we actually get that turned around in this goddamn maze?” the Colonel asked.

“No,” Murphy replied shortly. “But if I see some big guy with a bull’s head rush around the corner, I quit.”

“Don’t worry,” Cecil said, “Kate will protect you.”

Murphy turned to her. “You bring any golden thread with you?”

“Sorry.”

“So much for the classics.”

“All right,” Doug said. “Let’s stop, and think about this rationally. We didn’t get turned around. This place is changing.”

Murphy hissed through his teeth. “No, Doc, listen. What you did just now? That wasn’t rational.”

“Here, that is probably very rational.”

In front of them, there was an all-too familiar snarl.

“*Fall back!*” the Colonel bellowed.

For once, Cecil led the team, followed closely by Kate, who tugged Doug along, and JD and Murphy covered them from behind as the hall flooded with monsters.

“*Stairs!*” Cecil shouted.

JD shouted back over the gunfire, “*Take ‘em!*”

Kate shouted, “They weren’t there before!”

“Take ‘em anyway!”

Cecil charged up the wide concrete stairs, his pack with the scanners flapping at his side, his gun ready. He counted two landings before a pair of double-doors loomed at the top. The stairs continued, but Cecil had no particular desire to press his luck at outrunning the undead.

He slammed against the metal push-handle, curiously modern in the decrepit surroundings, and nearly lost his balance. Clinging to the edge of the door, he managed to maintain his footing.

Kate was right behind him, still dragging Doug, whose face had gone dangerously red with the strain of dashing up three flights. Kate deposited him just inside the door, then turned to grab the edge of the Colonel’s collar. She yanked him in and he swept right, blocking the other door.

Last in was Murphy. When he was close enough, Kate seized his arm and yanked. He toppled backward on top of her and they both hit the floor inside the door.

As soon as they both had gotten their legs cleared of the doorway, Cecil pushed the door shut. Almost immediately, the doors rattled on their hinges as the creatures outside shoved against it, their claws scrabbling against the steel.

“Murphy!” the Colonel shouted.

Murphy pushed Kate off, struggled none-too gracefully to his feet and threw his weight against the door. Kate followed suit.

“Where’s a goddamn lock?” Murphy shouted.

“Ain’t no goddamn lock!” the Colonel shouted back.

“We can’t hold it!” Kate cried. No one answered her, they were all straining against the door. “JD!”

“Katie, weld it shut!” he panted.

“What?”

“Weld the goddamn thing shut!”

She gaped at him. The door bucked hard against their backs.

“Doc!” JD bellowed. “Talk to her!”

Doug, whose face was sagging with fatigue, struggled to his feet. “Kate, the wand!”

Kate tried to keep her back against the door and draw the wand at the same time. There was a mighty heave from the other side, which sent Cecil, the Colonel, Murphy and Kate bouncing forward in a sickening lurch. They fell back against the doors with a thud.

“Will you hurry the fuck up?” the Colonel screamed.

Kate drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. The tip of the wand immediately began to glow. She held it to the door frame until it began to spark. Slowly, she drew it downward, leaving a hissing trail of glowing metal in its wake.

The men retreated from the doors’ heat, and she finished welding the edges of the doors.

As the scrabbling and pounding continued, she backed away from the doors, and sank down against the wall, trembling. She was, once again, white-faced and slightly green. She passed a shaky hand over her sweaty brow. Her hair clung to her cheeks and forehead in damp wisps.

Without a word, the Colonel handed her the canteen. She took it and gulped.

When she lowered the canteen, she asked, “Those power bars, are they peanut butter?”

Cecil passed her one, which she consumed in three bites. The others leaned against the wall, trying to recover. Doug drank from the canteen, as did Murphy.

“JD,” Murphy said after his breath had evened out. “I’m dyin’ here. We can’t keep this up. We need a better plan.”

“I’m all ears, Murphy. What’cha got in mind?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

The Colonel snatched the canteen from Murphy. “If we don’t find the breach and fix it, then it don’t matter if we reach the door or not.”

Chapter Nine

Katarina knew what a bear trap looked like. She knew what a lobster trap looked like. She knew poisoned meat and trip wire and fish hooks.

What did a *Kate* trap look like? A *hero* trap?

She pondered. This mage, this Kate person, needed to be ensnared. And how did one ensnare a selfless, noble warrior?

The answer was absurdly simple. *Someone in need of saving.*

So Katarina summoned Pet.

“Yes, Miss?”

“Pet, do you remember that girl?”

“What girl, Miss?”

“The *naughty* one, Pet.”

“Jess?”

“That’s right.” Katarina’s smile became more pointed, her green eyes hard. “Go get her.”

Pet dropped a curtsy. “Yes, Miss.”

Katarina looked after her with approval. Well-trained children were so lovely.

Chapter Ten

“Have a seat, Hayes.”

The office wasn't large by any means. The walnut desk took up much of the space, sunlight safely shuttered out by blinds. A small stack of first edition hardbacks were prominently displayed on one end of the glass desktop. An ancient Aztec calendar wheel was mounted on the wall behind him, framing him and his huge executive chair like a stolen halo. Other artifacts – all of them absolutely authentic, she had no doubt – littered the other surfaces in the room.

Lance Corporal Emily Hayes sat uncomfortably in the smaller chair, looking up at him.

“There seems to have been a misunderstanding about things here,” MJ-12 Agent Aaron Vickers rolled a gold fountain pen between his palms. “You don't seem to really understand why you're here, and what's at stake. So I'm going to tell you.” He set the pen down and leaned forward. “It's all about the little girl with ice cream on her face.”

She gave a short, polite laugh. Agent Vickers did not crack a smile.

“Did you ever read comic books as a kid?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

“So you know about super heroes, and super villains. My favorite was always the X-Men, but any super-group will do, really. The X-Men were a group of people set apart from the rest of humanity by having special powers and so forth and so on, and they had their nemesis, Magneto.”

“Sir, I have four brothers. I know who the X-Men—”

“Don't interrupt.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Magneto had his team that backed him up, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. And they kept coming and kept coming, and the X-Men just kept on beating them back. But even after Magneto left the Brotherhood, or vice versa, he still just kept coming on, undaunted, because he knew, and so did they, that they could beat him a million times, but he only needed to win once. You see, they were fighting to keep the world free, and he was fighting to enslave it. And if they lost once – just once – he would rule the world. He'd have killed all of his enemies – including them – and he'd have his own happily ever after. Every time they won, they secured the world being business as usual.

“What the villain understands in that scenario is that all he has to do is win *once*. All he has to do is have one plan, it doesn't matter which one, succeed and he's got it all. Forever. Well, I have news for you. We have enemies with super powers that are trying to take over the world, too. And you know what? We keep beating them and beating them, and they just keep on coming. Coming and coming and coming. And they only need to win *once*. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Guess what else. We aren't super heroes. We don't have any super powers. We don't have any special ability that lets us persevere where mere mortals fail, because we *are* mere

mortals. And here we are, trying to keep a bunch of mutant psychopaths from opening a gate to let god knows what in to take over the world.

“And someday, you’re going to be face-to-face with a little girl with ice cream on her face, and you are going to put your gun to her head and blow her away. And you’ve *got* to be able to do that, without hesitation, and then get on with the rest of the mission. The stakes are just too damned high for anything else. We cannot lose. Ever. Not once.

“Maybe she’s possessed, and you have to kill the host before a demon finishes taking over her brain. Or maybe she’s a monster in disguise. Or maybe she’s just a witness that might, years down the line, say the wrong thing to the wrong person and compromise our operations and help the bad guys win, whether she meant to or not. You won’t know, and you won’t have time to debate or find out.

“So you kill her, and you get on with the mission. Without hesitation.

“It’s understandable to hesitate. It’s the human thing to do. And let’s face it. It’s humanity we’re fighting for. Under normal circumstances, that would be laudable. It’s the moral high ground. But the fact is: you aren’t here to be a human being. I don’t need you as a human being. I can’t use you as a human being. I need you, without hesitation, to go where we send you, and do what must be done.

“Don’t get me wrong: I don’t want you to be some kind of psychopath either. If you were some kind of sociopath or psycho-killer, they would have more to offer you than we do. That’s not why you’re here. Hell, if all I wanted was a mad killer, I could get that from any prison or back-alley street in any city in the world. I wouldn’t have bothered seeking you out, with your background and training, and helped you harness your skill. You come highly recommended, and I watched you carefully before picking you out. You’re not here to be a psycho, or a sociopath or even a human being. You’re here to be a weapon. You are, at all times, to eat, breathe, walk, talk, move, sleep and think like one.

“Maybe you’re the kind of person that would take comfort, while all the little girls with ice cream on their faces in the world are turned inside-out in body, spirit, and mind, that the one you saved could be in the state she’s in today piping around some gibbering mouthless thing, along with all her little friends. I certainly wouldn’t. But that’s what will happen if we are anything less than weapons in this war.

“As of your induction into MJ-12, you are no longer a human being. You cannot afford to be, and the world cannot afford you to be. The world needs you to be a weapon or else humanity loses everything it has, and everything it might ever have. And when the time comes, you put your gun to that little girl’s temple and blow her shit away. You act like a fucking weapon. Because if you don’t, you might just throw away your chance to ever be anything else.

“We are in a war. A war for the future of humanity and the world. We have been for many years. And you must be ready to kill any number of little girls with ice cream on their faces to win.”

* * *

Her eyes snapped open. Her head hurt. Her leg hurt. The room was warm and humid, but somehow she was freezing. Her firearm was beside her on the concrete. There was blood on the floor around her.

She moved her head, and pain shot through it. Not too bad, though. She could still walk, which meant that she could fight. “Fucking cowboy,” she managed. She started to sit up, and the room spun slightly. “Dammit, get up,” she growled to herself.

After a few tries, she got her legs under her. *You’re not hurt if you can walk. Get up, damn it.*

She stood. Her light was the only one in the place. She started to call out for the rest of her team, then stopped. *That’s the human response. Stop thinking like a person. Think like a weapon.*

First, retrieve firearm. Then secure area. No trace of the O4S agents or her own team. Vickers had left her and gone ahead. There was a rush of resentment that she quickly quashed. That was just SOP. The stakes were just too high for anything else. And besides, he hadn’t put her down before moving on.

Think like a weapon.

Her earpiece was shot, likewise her watch and all her other electronics. That meant a portal had opened somewhere nearby. Her body ached enough that she must’ve been lying there for a while. Local PD might be freed up by now. Failing that, O4S always had two teams in the field: ground team and van techs. If she couldn’t find her own team, she’d use theirs.

She turned towards the stairs, and forced her legs into motion. The first thing she looked for when she left the Hall of Waters was the O4S vehicle she’d seen earlier.

Still there. Right *there* in the motherfucking parking lot. But it was empty. So where had they gone? And what had happened to her team?

God, her head hurt. Her leg hurt, but her head hurt more.

She limped down the stairs and went up to the Explorer. She peeked in all the windows. Predictably, they hadn’t left much gear. A tear gas dispenser. Paint masks. An old blue jar and a leather book. And, curiously, a Ziploc bag that contained a lump of red clay. Walking around, she noted there was some blood in the back seat. Quite a lot. One of theirs had been wounded, possibly in whatever shit had gone down at the graveyard. She tried the hatchback. Locked.

She went back around to the passenger side. Briefly, she considered all of the ways in which she might pick the lock, jigglers, Slim Jims—

“Oh, I am *so* not in the mood for this,” she muttered. Doubling up her fist, she snap-punched the glass. Then reached in and unlocked the doors.

She crawled in. The temptation to just curl up on the seat and go back to sleep was nearly overwhelming.

“No.” Quickly, she pulled herself into a sitting position in the driver’s seat. “Don’t go to sleep. Got to wake up.” She looked at herself in the rearview mirror and winced. The left side of her head was coated in blood. She touched it cautiously. “Dried.” That was good. She checked

her leg, found the little holes in the pant leg. The whole outer seam was stiff with blood. It was messy, hard to assess the damage. The skin was sore and hot. Not so good.

She had to get back to the police station. It was only a block and half away, but she didn't feel like walking it. Reaching under the dashboard, she got the Explorer started (Hot wiring was not as easy as it looks in the movies, but MJ-12 training was comprehensive) and wheeled it around.

As soon as she walked in the front door, the officer sitting at the front desk stood up, startled, "What the hell happened to *you*?"

She did not answer but gave him a withering look as she swept past and went straight for the showers.

Ten minutes later, she returned in clean clothes -- blue jeans and a T-shirt instead of her BDU's -- holding a towel to the re-opened wound on her head. "You got an EMT on staff?"

He nodded. "Phillips is EMT-trained."

"I need to see him, please."

"Yes, ma'am." The officer hurried off. Hayes went to the office she, Vickers, Spencer and Barnes had been using and sat down on the sofa.

Officer Phillips had a milder reaction than his colleague. He took one look at her head and said flatly, "You need to get to the hospital."

"No."

"I'd bet my next paycheck you have a concussion."

"No takers."

"Well, what is it exactly you want me to do for you?"

She started to unhook her belt.

"Well, okay. But I'm not cheap."

She looked at him levelly and dropped her jeans. He winced at the sight of her swollen thigh.

"If you can, dig out the shot. Oh, and," she pointed to her head, "stitches would be nice. Do you think you can handle all that?"

He sighed and opened his bag.

"That's right," she said dryly. "Earn that big paycheck."

He glanced up. "Well, okay. But the local's extra."

She rolled her eyes. "Just sew."

There was a knock at the door. Hayes closed her eyes, knowing what was coming.

One of the captains came in. "Agent Hayes."

"Captain Sorgo."

“I’m just a little curious—you all show up and fourteen bodies turn up in my town. You order road blocks all night to keep a bunch of kill-crazy mass murderers from leaving town-- or maybe from getting in, nobody’s too specific. Now the bodies are gone, the rest of the agents are gone, and you’re here. Wounded.” He paused. “I’m don’t want to infringe on your authority or anything, but since we *do* work here, and this is *our* jurisdiction, and we have taxpayers to answer to, just what on God’s green earth is going on?”

Hayes looked at him steadily. Captain Sorgo was a helluva nice guy. She liked him. And it was a testament to his niceness that he was exercising such restraint—most cops would not be quite so calm at three in the morning in a situation like this.

But she had to be a bitch to him now. And that sucked.

She gave him her best dead-eyed stare. “I’m very sorry, Captain, but I can’t divulge that information.”

“What the *fuck* does that mean you can’t ‘*divulge*’ that information?”

“The suspects have moved beyond your jurisdiction. This is a federal matter, and we’ll handle it from here. If you and your department can be of any further use to us, we’ll be sure to let you know.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me, right? I mean, you’re sitting there, bleeding on my fucking couch, and you’re giving me this ‘federal jurisdiction’ song-and-dance bullshit--”

Hayes sighed as the tirade continued. She could threaten Sorgo with arrest – at this point, for assaulting a federal officer, if she wanted – and she knew that that’s just what Vickers would have done. But dammit, she liked Sorgo, and he deserved better. And anyway, she was tired of this shit.

She held up a hand, and waited for him to stop.

“Sorgo, if I could tell you more, I would. Hell, if I could just check into a nice hospital for a week and sleep, I would. But neither one’s going to happen. And we can either sit here, pissin’ and moanin’ about it all night, or we can accept this tragic turn of events and deal with it.” She turned to the EMT. “You ‘bout done?”

He didn’t look up. “Just about done with the leg. Then I can start on your head wound, if you want.”

“I won’t stop you.”

“So you’re from down south, huh?”

She looked at him sharply. “What makes you say that?”

“Accent.”

“Jesus,” she said, careful to drop the accent again. “I must be more tired than I thought.”

“All right,” Sorgo said, turning to leave, “If you contact this department, we will of course cooperate to the best of our abilities. In the meantime, try not to die, okay?”

“Workin’ on it.”

“There’s that accent again,” Phillips observed.

“I thought you were done with that leg.”

“It’s a very nice leg. The accent’s cute, too.”

“You know what? Don’t touch my head.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Hayes was on the road in the O4S Explorer, looking for the van.

She was familiar with the Order’s MO. The van would have the tech team. It would be in a utility van or similar so nobody could see in the rear compartment. They’d been stuck in Excelsior for over six hours now, hemmed in by the roadblocks. They had to be here somewhere. The roadblocks had lifted, but she didn’t think they’d left yet. Not with their ground team missing.

So. Where can you park a utility van at 3 a.m. and not be noticed in a town like Excelsior?

Hotels and motels were unlikely; they could be checked out easily by the cops, and there wouldn’t be many late-night check-ins-- too memorable. Save that for last. There were only four or five, anyway.

Businesses were better. The bars and Sonic closed at two. That left gas stations, a grocery store, and the Wal-Mart open twenty-four hours. The gas station parking lots would be no good—they’d be noticed if they decided to just camp out there.

That narrowed her search down to two places.

Chapter Eleven

Three hours. Three hours and forty-eight minutes since Bill had heard anything from the team. He'd long since stopped reading his search results for Carcosa. Some weird place a helluva long way away from here. Great. This did him no good whatsoever.

An email popped up from HQ. It seemed Clayton had issued an order for all remaining personnel to evacuate immediately. That was a laugh. Somewhere over at KCI, somebody at a ticket counter had six reserved seats waiting to go. Yeah. We'll get right on that.

It wasn't exactly Chief Joseph Surrenders. More like the Rock Ridge telegram in *Blazing Saddles*:

From the office of the Regional Director:

Teams vanishing. Personnel depleted. World threatened by unknown event. Report to nearest international airport. Tickets are waiting. Good luck.

Clayton didn't write that. Bill wasn't sure who did, though he had his suspicions. At least it didn't end with, "Have a nice day."

So there he was, sitting there with his thumb up his ass, sweating bullets. He had said, "Ground team, does anybody copy?" so many times he was starting to get hoarse.

He'd been through this before—it was Lima all over again. Except this time, he was in a *van*. This was a whole new level of helplessness that he was only just beginning to appreciate. Impatiently, he jabbed a key to replay the last transmission he had received.

"Well, if it wasn't so huge and labyrinthine," Murphy's voice said, "I would think we're in the basement of the Royal Hotel." There was a pause. "Well, I wasn't sure! I'm still not sure. I'm telling you, the basement I was in was not this big. Or this weird. Plus, Fernando Rios reported his location as the Royal Hotel. Rios was here. Ergo, we are in *a* Royal Hotel."

"In that case," Doug said, "It seems likely that we are in a construct—"

Then the feed cut out.

They were in a construct. That was why he'd been able to pick up any audio at all. If they were in a different dimension altogether, then forget it. It was *hasta los nachos*. With a construct, the doors could sort of swing open, like a screen door in a breeze. They weren't stable. With a dimensional gate, it was open and shut. Literally.

Bill hit the key and the recording played again, but he wasn't listening anymore. He was contemplating the hand resting on the keyboard. He turned it over. The mark wasn't visible. But it was there. He could still feel it—not on the surface of his skin, but deeper somehow. He could feel it in the bones, like a weight had been surgically inserted into his hand.

His team was in a construct. Perhaps that was the best place for them.

Yet he found himself checking the clock. It had been nearly ten minutes since he'd tried last. Time to try again, "Ground team, does anybody copy?"

A shudder of relief went through him when Kate's voice came back, "Bill! Thank God."

"Where are you? What's been happening?" Bill asked.

"We're in a stairwell," Kate said. "There were eretics, but I welded the doors closed."

Welded the doors closed? Bill wished ardently that the halo scans were up and running on his end. Kate had always shown brightly on them before; he wondered what she must look like on them now.

"Bill," the Colonel said, "Talk to me."

"I just got word from home office. Clayton's called for evac for all remaining personnel. We've got tickets at KCI if we can get there."

For a moment, no one spoke. The Colonel sighed. "Well, that doesn't do us a whole helluva lot a' good right now."

"Yeah," Murphy added, "we're kind of committed now."

"Have you found the breach?" Bill asked.

"We've only been in this place—what? An hour, hour and a half?" the Colonel said. "Keep your goddamn shirt on."

Time difference, Bill thought. *Great*. "But everyone's okay, nobody's hurt?"

"Fine," came the Colonel's reply, and there was another pause. "What else you got? Anything on the scanners yet?" His voice was perfectly neutral, as if he was merely curious.

Another wave of relief coursed through Bill—that his friends were okay, but more importantly, they realized something was wrong. "Negative, Colonel. I'm still working on it."

"Well, it don't matter all that much here presently. We're in a hallway that only heads in one direction."

"So you're moving down the hall?"

"Right now, we're just trying to catch our goddamn breath. I tell ya, it's been a long fuckin' day."

"I hear you," Bill said sincerely.

"Bill, can I talk to you privately?" Kate asked.

Bill closed his eyes, knowing what was coming. "Sure, Kate." He cut Kate's audio transmission to the other ear pieces. "What's up?"

"What's up with *you*?"

His mind screamed, *I am compromised! Cease talking to me right now! Cut off all communication with me because I am only going to hurt you!*

But his mouth was moving, forming other shapes. His throat worked, but he had no control over the sounds coming out of it. "Well, I'm just trying to get the equipment up and

running, and I'm worried about you guys. Other than that, everything's fine." A dull throb began in his hand.

"Come on, Bill. This is me."

"Everything's fine," he repeated. The dull throb turned into a roaring pain. He clutched it with his good hand, sweat beading his brow.

"Are you alone?"

He felt a temporary relief—mentally anyway. Here, at least, was something he could answer honestly. "Yeah, I am." He hesitated. "Now."

"What's going on?"

"Well, there was this, uh—" The pain flared suddenly from his hand, up his arm, to his head. For a second, the world swam in yellow.

"Bill?" she asked worriedly.

He tried again. "I had a--" It flared again, the pain pounding behind his eyes, seizing the muscles in his neck. He swayed a bit in his seat, had time to think, *Christ, I'm going to pass out.* "No." He fought against it. "No-- no, no, *no.*" He straightened in his chair, gripping the sides of the makeshift desk. The pain was insistent, but he pressed on, squeezing the words out, barely aware of the tears that streamed down his face. "You like medieval art, don't you, Kate? You've got all those—all those--" his voice cracked, "books on your shelves-- and the, and the pictures. You know how, in all the paintings of the Last Supper, Judas is always on the other side of the table?" His arm and his hand were on fire. More pain pierced his head again like a spear. His face jerked to the side, as if he'd been slapped. He felt the blood pounding in his face, the vein on his temple stood out. *Pass out, hell*, he thought. *I'm heading for a stroke.* But he managed to force the words out. "You know how Judas is always on the other side of the table?"

Kate's voice was quiet and terrified. "Yeah?"

Bill managed to press on, though his voice was now hoarse and ragged. "Except Leonardo da Vinci-- he changed that. He put Judas on the same side. He put Judas...*on the same side.*" His breath was short.

"I gotcha. You know, when I look at those paintings, you know what I always wondered? I always wondered what made—"

"--Judas turn," he finished with her, nearly in a whisper. He was panting by this time. "Yeah. Well, I figured it out," he choked. "The devil shook him by the hand."

"*Fuck.*"

* * *

"Kate?" JD had come up behind her.

She whipped around, startled, her eyes wide.

"*Kate?* What's wrong?"

“Not now,” she said with a firmness that surprised even her. “We’ll talk later.”

* * *

In the van, the pain receded, but Bill collapsed onto the floor anyway—from sheer relief. He raised his shaking good hand to his sweaty brow. *Thank God*, was all he could think for about five minutes. *Thank God, thank God, thank God.*

But even as he lay prone on the floor, his mind was racing. *Okay, I got my message across. It was oblique, and it hurt like a motherfucker, but I did it. Which means as long as I don’t refer directly to what happened, I can still let my friends know.*

A terrible grin spread across his features, more grimace than mirth. *Fuck you, Yellow King.*

Chapter Twelve

“Stop it! Let me go!” Jess struggled, kicking and hitting as she was dragged along, her hair twisted in Pet’s grasp. “No! I’m not going back!”

“Will you shut up!”

“No!”

Pet stopped, and shoved Jess into a wall. “You’re being stupid. You’re not gonna be punished. Miss just wants to show you to some people. Stop being dumb. It won’t help.”

Jess’s face was pressed against the wall. Her voice was suspicious and sullen. “What people?”

Pet shrugged. “Miss just said to show you to them and get you to--” She stopped. “It doesn’t matter. You’re going. Come on.”

Jess twisted around to face Pet. “Them?”

“Come on.”

Jess shoved, and incredibly Pet gave way. Jess glared at the younger girl. “You stupid brat! Why are you doing this? They just want to *help* us! What are you doing?”

Pet tried to look confident and scary, like Miss. “I’m doing what I’m told. I’m taking you to the Other Hotel. And you’d get in less trouble if--” she broke off, frowning. “You remember?”

Jess’ eyes bored into her. “Yeah. I tried to go back to sleep. I tried to forget again...” Her voice broke. “It didn’t work. I remember. All of it.”

Pet gave her a scornful look. “You’re such a freak.”

“Even what happened the first day.”

“Shut up.”

“You were there. They’d already done it to you.”

“I said *shut up!*” Pet screamed and hit her again, hard enough to knock Jess sideways. Before Jess could regain her balance, Pet had grabbed her by the hair again. Pet leaned in and got right in Jess’s face, trying to look mean. But Jess could see how scared she was. “You’re always in trouble because you’re *naughty*. You never shut up!”

Jess stared at her with growing comprehension. “You were the first one, weren’t you? You’ve had to watch...every time.”

Pet stared back. Her hand opened, and Jess’ hair fell out from her fingers. She backed up an inch, then two. Her mouth fell open but nothing came out. Her shoulders sagged. She didn’t look tough or scary anymore. She didn’t even seem scared. Instead, she just seemed very, very tired.

Jess could have run then but she didn’t. Watching Pet carefully, she moistened her lips and said, “You had a name once. Before they brought you here. Remember?”

At that, Pet blinked. She shook her head. Then she seized Jess by the hair again—but not really hard this time. Just doing as she was told.

“Don’t you get it?” Jess breathed. “They’re here to help us!”

Pet shoved her toward the stairs. “Nobody can help us.”

Chapter Thirteen

Čachtice Castle
1614

Dear cousin Jakob. Who would have guessed he had it in him?

Erzsébet had first met Jakob some four or five years after her marriage to Nadasdy. Jakob, little more than a boy at the time, had come to stay in their home. When they had been introduced, Jakob, with considerable flourish, had displayed his lotus ring. As soon as they had a moment alone, he said to her, "You know, Uncle Mihaly trained me as well?"

Erzsébet was surprised. "You look a little young for Mihaly to be done with you."

The young man immediately took offense. "My training was as complete as yours."

Erzsébet smiled a private smile. "I doubt that."

Jakob blinked. Then, as her meaning sunk in, he muttered, "No...I suppose not."

Apparently, that was all it took to make the boy an enemy. Throughout his stay, he alternated between being sullen and wrathful. Constantly trying to challenge her verbally, socially, even magically. It was quite tiresome, really. Even her dullard of a husband grew sick of him. When the boy left with the spring, it was to the relief of all concerned.

She and Jakob continued to have occasional contact through Starry Wisdom. As the years went by, she rose within the ranks with the same rapidity she had shown in her studies. Crossing the board, as Mihaly might have said. And Jakob the pawn's dislike blossomed into a deep, healthy hate.

As soon as he had arrived with the palatine, as well as with two men bearing the lotus rings, Erzsébet knew she had been betrayed.

Betrayed by blood and betrayed by brethren.

The palatine began, "My lady, in the name of His Majesty--"

She waved a dismissive hand, "Spare me," and turned immediately to the others. "Everything that you have, all the progress that has been made toward the Great Work, has been by *my* hand. All that you possess flows from me. But there are more of you ants than there are of me. And that is the only reason that you have gained this much ground against me."

Jakob sneered. "That remains to be seen, cousin."

Coldly, without another word, she turned her back to them and retired to her rooms, the entire affair beneath her concern. She did not realize at the time that her room was where she would be spending the next four years.

The trial had been mercifully swift, its outcome never in doubt. The palatine had found four women in the castle the night he'd come with Jakob. Witness after witness had testified, her faithful servants tortured into confessing. Even her beloved Dorko, in the end, had broken. As if that hadn't been sufficiently damning, the fact that the king owed her money which he could not pay did not help her case.

Ironically, the absence of almost any of the six hundred victims' bodies had not bothered the court at all. Probably they'd thought she was being convicted of exaggerated charges.

She was, after all, only a woman.

But even if she'd wanted to tell them of the creatures she had called up from the spaces between to take the corpses, she could not have. Once in her room, she had been kept there. She was well fed, politely addressed, but ultimately, a prisoner. A prisoner in her own castle.

Once the trial was ended, she'd been bricked in. And Jakob, smiling Jakob, had been there to put on the final magical wards to keep her bound. Not alone, of course. He had neither the skills nor the power.

Fool.

The four years Erzsébet spent at the top of the castle were not idle years. It gave her the opportunity to identify other members of the faction that had betrayed her. She tested the bounds of her prison and the wards that were worked into it, into the very mortar. And she refined her plans for revenge. She had learned that Katarina still lived, having been spared the hangman's rope for her tender age. She never gave up hope that Katarina would return to her.

But to be imprisoned for life when she was, in fact, immortal. Neither ailment nor age could take her. The irony choked her; she spent many days in a pure, milk-white hate. And what would happen in ten or twenty years' time when someone peered in the slit of a window they allowed her and realized that she had not aged? She had no desire to be burned at the stake. More and more, she turned the scope of her considerable focus to a single purpose: escape.

It was four years before salvation came through the window to her in the shape of a single word:

"Mistress."

Her heart had nearly burst with joy. "Katarina!"

Erzsébet had put her face to the window, just wide enough to pass her hand through, and saw that it was she-- the green cat-eyes peering in were unmistakable. A moment later, the small hand reached in to grip hers with astounding strength, though the hand was filthy and the nails shredded down to the quick.

"Oh, my poor poppet, what have they done to you?"

"That is not important, Mistress. How do we get you out?"

"The walls are warded, love. My magic is of no use."

"I am strong, Mistress. There were many who barred my way, and others along the road. Much of their strength is still mine."

"How long can you hold it?"

"Long enough." She was determined, but the strain was in her voice.

"Pry loose a small piece of stone from the window. Take it with you and use it as a focus to break down the wards. Then I will do the rest."

"Yes, Mistress."

The small hand disappeared back out the opening, and immediately she heard the scrabbling of those childish fingers scraping against the stones.

Then: "I have it, Mistress. I'm going to climb down. Shall I return tomorrow?"

"No need. I will come to you."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other side. Erzsébet peered through the opening again to see Katarina's eyes shining with tears.

Such a sweet child. How could anyone not love her? "You musn't fall, child. Go on. Everything will be all right."

She heard Katarina carefully picking her way back down the side of the tower.

For the first time in far too long, Erzsébet allowed herself to relax. Katarina would not fail her. The wards could do nothing to slow her mind, and Erzsébet had had four years to plan the spells that would not only allow her egress through her tiny window, but leave a reasonable glamour in her place, as well.

Her freedom was assured. Vengeance was assured.

She closed her eyes and let her mind roam lightly along the walls of her prison. As soon as Katarina had destroyed the wards, she felt it-- a gentle release of pressure, like lifting a glass and letting a moth fly out.

Without opening her eyes, Erzsébet, motionless in her room, dissolved into a heavy red mist. The mist floated through the narrow space and drifted out the window. Behind it, a copy of her own seeming lay prone on the floor, ready to be discovered.

Once outside, the red mist continued its slow descent, expanding as it went. It wafted around the side of the castle to the ground where Katarina stood waiting; it wavered and Erzsébet re-appeared, prone, hovering a few inches above the grass before touching carefully down beside her servant. She lay for a moment among the pebbles and damp earth, limp, exhausted.

Katarina peered at her worriedly, her hands clasped tightly to her chest.

Then Erzsébet opened her eyes.

She smiled, and reached out her hand. Immediately, Katarina took it, dropping to her knees beside her mistress. She kissed the palm, pressed it against her cheek.

Erzsébet chuckled, despite herself. "Mercy, child. You are filthy."

Chapter Fourteen

“Bill?” Kate tried to resume their conversation. “Bill?” He had cut out again.

She sat down on the floor, (noting that the floor here was very old ceramic tile in a black and white checkerboard pattern) her back against the wall. She glanced back at the others. Murphy and the Colonel had turned off their earpieces and quietly tallied up the ammunition.

“Not good,” Murphy said.

“What?” Kate asked.

“Ammo. We’re getting low. One shotgun full and then the sidearms. We still have some clips left, but we saw how well they work in the graveyard.” He re-loaded the clip and chambered a round. “How about you? How many shots you got left in that thing?” Murphy nodded toward the wand.

Kate looked down at it thoughtfully. “You know what? I’m good.”

JD’s eyebrows shot up. The Doc caught his eye and shook his head ever so slightly. The Colonel, understanding, carefully arranged his features into his best five-card draw face and settled back against the wall. “Well, then. Things are lookin’ up.”

“So, Kate,” Murphy grinned. “You feel up to taking point? You got the biggest gun here.”

She looked at the Colonel. “Can I?”

“No,” he retorted from under his hat. “Not just no, but *helllll* no. You can be right behind us, darlin’. I still need somebody up front who knows how to sweep a room.”

Murphy snapped his fingers. “Damn.”

“Are we ready to move?” the Colonel asked. “Doc, Cecil, you two okay?”

Doug nodded and tried to push himself to his feet. Cecil helped him up, the older man leaning heavily against him.

They only had to walk a few yards when the tile beneath their feet became dusty velvet carpet, so filthy and worn that it was impossible to tell its original color. The walls retained most of the original plaster, as well as mouldings and wainscoting, all of which were badly stained. On either side, heavy wooden doors appeared, brass doorknobs gone to verdigris. Murphy and the Colonel checked the rooms behind them. They were all empty, save for some old mirrors hanging on the wall in tarnished frames. One of them had a bathroom with the fixtures torn out, leaving antiquated clay pipes exposed in the walls and floor.

As they continued, the hall split off. To the left were some swinging doors with porthole windows. This took them to what had once been a posh lounging area: a mahogany bar, rows of champagne glasses suspended from racks on the ceiling, and a few rows of tables and chairs, all under inches of dust and grime. Someone had written with a fingertip in the dust on the bar: *Ring around the rosies*. The handwriting looped and squiggled in old-fashioned cursive. The walls were lined with old kerosene sconces, their domes black and dark. Another set of double-doors

behind the bar led into a kitchen area. It held an old wash basin and a large table, but was otherwise empty, except...

“What?” Kate asked, “What’s in there?”

JD turned his light away from the pile of small bones. “Nothin’. Let’s move.”

They made their way back into the hallway, then followed it around the bend. All at once, it seemed the ceiling opened up and they found themselves in a cavernous space.

“Hold up,” JD motioned for everyone but Murphy to stay back. They stepped carefully up to the edge of the hallway and checked around the corners to see if the coast was clear. They even checked overhead. He and Murphy exchanged glances, and the Colonel struck another flare. He tossed it underhand, arcing it high. Its red glow seemed to be swallowed up by the blackness as it slowly revolved then fell sizzling onto the ruined carpet. Decaying columns at least six feet thick rose upward into the gloom. The walls and ceiling could not be illuminated; the room was simply too big.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Murphy muttered. He and the Colonel drew back into the hallway.

“Okay, folks,” JD said, “We can’t go but one direction, and that’s forward. There’s only one thing that’s really changed-- the size of the room. That means that these fuckers might try to surround us, but they’ve tried that trick before and we’re still here. It also means we might run into something we haven’t seen yet. Best thing to do is stay together and stay tight. Now remember, we can’t see shit, and *they* can. So keep your goddamn ears open. You hear something, you by God let somebody know. And Doc?”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“Here’s your gun back. Just point and shoot if we’re surrounded. Otherwise leave the shootin’ to us.”

“Rest assured.”

“Hold on,” Kate said. She raised the wand.

Fumpfh.

The area around them was instantly flooded in bluish light so bright the men had to shield their eyes for a moment.

When their eyes adjusted, there stood Kate in the center, looking at them hopefully. The wand in her hand had become a torch, burning with a blue flame.

“Is that enough? I think I could turn it up—”

“That’s fine for now, Katie girl,” JD said. “You just save it for when we need it. Besides, you flare that thing up much more and I’d be minus a couple a’ eyebrows.”

They stepped out. Immediately, there was a sense of terrible exposure. The light from the wand now illuminated more of the walls to either side of the doorway from which they’d emerged, as well as the pillars, but even with that great light, they still could not see what was above them. Around them, there came the hollow sounds of water dripping.

Occasionally, a stale breeze whispered through the immense area, chilling them, and they huddled closely together. As they moved among the pillars, shapes appeared out of the darkness around them, floating in strange pools of light—not the light from the wand, nor from any source that they could see. The light was merely *there*, creating a faint ambience that cast no shadow.

The first thing they saw was an old-fashioned loveseat with a carved wooden back—the kind that would have had slippery cushions and velvet throw pillows if the upholstery had not been eaten away by time. Next to the loveseat was an end table with a few old books stacked on it.

Without stopping or turning around, the Colonel said, “Ignore the books, Doc. Just keep walkin’.”

Doug did not reply, but he was thinking how *not* tempted he was by any of the items they passed. In fact, he wanted to stay as far away from them as possible. He had been considering the nature of the place, this pseudo-hotel, and its implications for some time. Its similarity, in its own twisted way, to the Royal Hotel. Its connection to the locus. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that it hadn’t been built at all. Everything *looked* like wood and upholstery and glass, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that they hadn’t been manufactured so much as *grown* there. Old wood and plaster might have been horn and flesh, textiles like hide, chitinous glass-- everything had a curious organic quality to it. An *alive* quality that he found disturbing, including the very darkness surrounding them. It was as though everything around them had come to be as part of the natural life-cycle of the hotel. And all of it was deteriorating.

He shuddered.

As they passed, the lights disappeared. Cecil shined his flashlight behind him after they got a few feet away, and noted that the furniture, also, seemed to disappear.

They passed a small round table with a Victorian-style glass lamp, a roll-top desk, finely carved bookshelves, and, most bizarrely, a spinning wheel.

They had been walking for about twenty minutes when JD motioned for them to stop. “Somethin’ up ahead.”

About a hundred feet in front of them was a dim light.

“What do you think it is?” Murphy asked.

“No tellin’.”

“A way out?”

“We can hope.”

They moved forward again, even more cautiously than before. The light grew brighter. Murphy noticed the bluish hue.

“Kate,” he said, “Move that torch up and down.”

She complied, and the light ahead of them bobbed up and down.

He sighed. “It’s a mirror.”

“Well, we found everything else in this goddamn place. Why not a mirror?” the Colonel said.

But as they approached, it slowly dawned on all of them that it wasn't a mirror. As they grew near, and the reflected light of Kate's torch grew brighter, they realized they were looking at a wall of glass. Panes became visible, as did enormous swags of material, like movie-theater curtains only *bigger*, held back by coils of silken cord thicker than any rope any of them had ever seen.

"Oh, my God," Kate whispered. "They're *windows*."

"Halt," the Colonel said quietly. "Nobody get close to the glass."

The five of them stood for a moment, dumbstruck, staring at the expanse before them. Kate shined the light around. The wall went further than her light could reveal—an endless expanse of glass, punctuated very sparsely by delicate panes of wood. It didn't seem possible that such narrow beams of wood could support such enormous panes of glass. And beyond the glass was just more darkness. They could see absolutely nothing outside of the room they were in.

"Uh, boss?" Murphy said, "If this is the lobby, then that means there's a door somewhere on this wall."

"All right," the Colonel said evenly, "We're gonna just back up a bit, and go left. Understand?"

Then there was a movement in the endless darkness. Something had *flexed*. It oriented itself towards them.

Everyone froze but the Colonel, who hissed, "*Kate. The light.*"

The light seemed to get sucked back into the length of the wand, illuminating it momentarily like a neon tube, the etchings on it glowing blue before the whole thing went dim in Kate's hand.

"Now back it up, people," the Colonel whispered. "*Move.*"

They caught only another glimpse of the thing outside the glass before they all turned and hastily withdrew. Kate and Cecil looked back and saw an indistinct rippling, giving them an impression of size – *huge* – but little else.

They crept along in the darkness until they reached another wall. A hotel desk appeared, like somebody's idea of a bad joke, complete with a bell and sign-in book. They half-expected a liveried bellboy to appear and take their luggage. Behind the desk were rows of pigeonhole mailboxes, as well as a pegboard holding rows of gold keys, which gleamed dully in the partial light.

To the right of the desk, the mouth of another hallway opened.

They stopped for a moment. The Colonel turned around and appeared to take a quick count, making sure everyone was still with him.

"Colonel," Cecil said. "We have motion on halo."

"Where?"

A faint sound came from the hallway. They all stiffened immediately.

It was a child crying.

They all knew without having to see her that the child was Jessica Degler.

The crying did not grow louder so much as it just suddenly blared into the room, like a radio being cranked to full volume. Jessica faded into view at the end of the hallway, her head at an odd angle.

“Stay back!” she shrieked.

Chapter Fifteen

Chicago, IL
June, 1893

Like so many, the World's Fair had brought Erzsébet to Chicago. But they'd been in America for some time, and in America, she was Erzsébet no longer, but Elizabeth. One evening, she and Katarina were out strolling in the evening, enjoying the marvels of electric and neon lights, Kat tripping alongside in her high button shoes, her skirts rustling in the cool evening air.

"Kat, darling, you really—" she began, and then stopped.

It was in the strange illumination of the red and blue tubes that she first saw him. Their eyes met.

After three hundred years of wandering the cities of Europe, she had developed an eye. Most people were prey. But among them, now and again, like torches among guttering candles, were hunters. This man, whoever he was, was a hunter.

He smiled, took off his bowler hat, and bowed.

Beside her, Katarina frowned deeply.

A throng of giggling sheep passed in front of them, blocking their view for a moment. And he was gone, as if he had never been.

Bathory reached out with her mind, mildly curious, and found... nothing. No trace of him whatsoever. She reached further. He was, even to her refined senses, completely gone.

She smiled, covering her mouth with her hand like a schoolgirl. How utterly *fascinating*.

Katarina was still frowning.

Elizabeth fixed her with a bright smile. "Oh, don't sulk, dear. It's unbecoming." She offered her a sweet from a little bag she carried. "Cracker Jack?"

* * *

The next day, they did not see him again. But as they were leaving the fair grounds to return to their hotel, they became aware of footsteps following behind them, accompanied by the tap of a walking stick on cobblestones.

They both turned—Elizabeth a ladylike glance over the shoulder, while Katarina whirled, on guard. Her hand went to her pocket, to the reassuring steel of the knife she kept tucked away there.

But there was no one.

"Mistress?" Katarina said uncertainly.

"It's nothing to be alarmed about, I'm sure, my dear," Elizabeth reached for her arm. "Our gentleman seems to have a sense of humor, that's all."

Katarina allowed herself to be guided along, though her green eyes flashed backward once more, suspicious.

They did not hear the footsteps again, though when they returned to the hotel, a bouquet of flowers awaited them. There was a note attached, written in a very fine hand:

My Dear Countess,

I would be honored if you would join me tomorrow for tea.

*Yours sincerely,
Henry H. Holmes, M.D.*

He named a restaurant on the fair grounds.

“It’s a trap, Mistress,” Katarina said pleadingly. “Don’t you see? We have to find him and kill him.”

“My dear, don’t you think that’s a bit extreme?”

“No.”

“*Really*, dear.”

“We need to kill him lots!”

Elizabeth tucked the note into her purse, tsking, “Katarina, I am surprised at you! Jealous.” She took Kat’s chin in her hand. “As if anyone could take your place.”

Katarina softened for a moment—but only for a moment. “I don’t trust him.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Of course not, puss. Neither do I. I am simply intrigued.”

Katarina looked away, disgusted. “He’s not even *tall*.”

* * *

The next afternoon, Elizabeth and Katarina arrived at the appointed restaurant promptly at 3:30. He was waiting for them outside.

He was, as Katarina had noted, not very tall. But he was nonetheless extremely attractive, being dark-haired and sporting a fashionable mustache.

At their approach, he doffed his hat, “Ladies, please allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr. Henry Holmes.” He bowed and offered reverence to the Lady Bathory while Katarina looked sullenly on.

“I am the Countess Elizabeth Bathory.”

“Enchanted.” He turned to Katarina. “And who is this charming young lady?”

Elizabeth placed her hand on Katarina's arm, "This is my companion, Katarina."

Katarina smiled widely, baring her sharp little teeth.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said graciously. "Ladies, shall we?" He extended his arm. Elizabeth placed a gloved hand on top of it, and they went into the restaurant, with Katarina trailing unhappily behind.

As the afternoon went on, Katarina moodily sipped her tea and rather pointedly refrained from eating while Elizabeth and Holmes spoke animatedly about history and philosophy. As evening approached, they discussed ancient civilizations and metaphysical theory. By nightfall, they had ordered dinner and wine.

The good doctor owned his own hotel on a ley line nexus near the fairgrounds; his "castle," as it was commonly called. He had designed and built the castle himself, carefully mapping out the floors along diagrams from a grimoire of geomancy he had acquired in London, along with some improvements of his own design. This had resulted in some oddly angled halls and stairways that led up to nothing, but for the most part, he assured her, the layout yielded some very fine results.

He also operated a pharmacy.

He also hunted women, and took his prey in his castle through a variety of ingenious innovations within the very walls, disposing of the bodies via lime pits in the basement.

The Fair lasted five months. They were the most romantic five months of Elizabeth's life.

But all good things must come to an end. Eventually, the local constabulary traced too many girls to the castle to be able to ignore it any longer. At Katarina's insistence, Bathory agreed that the time had come for them to depart, leaving the lord of the castle to face the oncoming siege alone.

* * *

From the Excelsior Springs, *Standard*, April 18, 1905:

RENOVATIONS TO BEGIN ON OLD SNAPPS TAVERN

By Harold Schumacher

Groundbreaking took place today at the old Snapps Tavern on East Broadway. Present were Lena Hill, new proprietor, as well as Jeffery Fleming, architect, and Dr. Hugh H. Musgrave, designer. Plans were unveiled to build a large addition on the west side of the existing structure, as well as new façade work. Many townspeople turned out for the event as it presents an exciting opportunity for more jobs to be created for the already booming Excelsior Springs hospitality community, as well as a new attraction for health seekers. The site is on an existing salt sulphur aquifer.

"We plan on serving spring water, free of charge to our guests when we open," said Ms. Hill.

This will be the thirtieth major public building designed by Mr. Fleming, an architect with the Lawrence-O'Brien Architectural Firm of Kansas City.

Dr. Musgrave hails from Chicago, where, in addition to running his own pharmacy and medical practice, he designed and managed his own hotel. "I had a lot of exciting experiences in Chicago," said Musgrave. "I learned all sorts of things. I hope to bring a bit of that to this project, and indeed, this fine city. There's no reason, with all our great resources, we can't have the prestige and the glamour of a city like Chicago."

Construction is set to begin the first week of May. Plans for completion, with a full-scale grand opening event tentatively scheduled for October.

* * *

From the Society Pages - Regular Column, "Who's Who and What's What in Excelsior with Mary Walker," *Excelsior Springs Standard*, March 4, 1933:

Doctor Appointed Chief of Neurosurgery

By Mary Walker

Dr. Hugh Edward Musgrave is a difficult man to classify. He has attained a certain level of prestige and dare I say, even mystique here in our community. He is a man of many talents, being responsible for the elegant design of the Royal Hotel back in 1905. He lived in Chicago during the World's Fair. He has done a fair amount of traveling, having spent time in London, Amsterdam, Lisbon and even parts of the Orient and South America.

And this is all in addition to running his own private combination medical and pharmaceutical practice.

Dapper in dress and manner, he has the air of a globetrotter. His office, where he meets with his patients, is trapped in the finest leather and Brazilian mahogany. Impressive brass instruments gleam on the bookshelves. Yet, for all his involvement in the society around him, he is an intensely private man. It took every ounce of charm this reporter possesses to persuade him to even grant an interview. And she is very glad that he did.

Being witty and handsome, Dr. Musgrave was the most elegant host Ms. Walker has had the pleasure to come across. It is truly a mystery that Dr. Musgrave has never married. If Excelsior Springs had a most eligible bachelor's list, there would be no contest. You might be asking, given all his accomplishments, how old, exactly, is Dr. Musgrave? (Yes, that is a recent picture, shown above.) He does not appear to be any older than 40.

"I'll never tell," said the good doctor with a wry smile. "I was a very young man when I was in Chicago."

Well, this reporter is all ears, and I'm sure there are a few readers out there as well, just dying to know the secret to his remarkably youthful appearance?

The response? Good living.

"I am truly a fortunate individual. I have a lot to be thankful for in my life, when so many are in need. I have a good life. It keeps a person young."

Well, if you could bottle that and sell it in your pharmacy, Doctor, you could retire rich.

"I'm not interested in money," said Musgrave. "I'm more interested in people."

So it is no wonder then, that this calm, personable man has been appointed chief of neurosurgery at the Kansas City Neurological Center, a state-of-the-art facility. Dr. Musgrave has spent four years in Portugal. There, he had the privilege of studying under Dr. Antonio Moniz, the man who is considered an authority on the lobotomy procedure, the very latest in psychiatric medicine.

"It's very exciting work," says Musgrave. "We now have the technology to alter people's brains essentially, people in psychological torment, people with severe behavioral disorders. It affords us a lot of power. I look forward to working with the staff of the Neurological Center. We're going to affect a lot of lives."

The Neurological Center is replacing the old Christian Church Hospital on 27th and Paseo in Kansas City.

So what is to become of his practice here in Excelsior? Is Excelsior's loss Kansas City's gain?

"Of course not," says Musgrave. "Excelsior Springs is my home. I will divide my time between my practice here and at the Hospital. My patients can continue to meet with me by appointment, and I have an excellent staff -- my secretary, Julia Anderson, my nurse, Iris Novak -- waiting to assist them otherwise."

It will be interesting (not to mention amusing) to see how many lady *Dispatch* readers will find themselves in need of therapy after this article runs.

* * *

From the Excelsior Springs *Standard*, Society Pages - "Who's Who and What's What in Excelsior Springs With Mary Walker"; series of articles that ran from May, 1933-June, 1933:

EUROPEAN COUNTESS TO VISIT EXCELSIOR SPRINGS

By Mary Walker

May 8, 1933

In what is sure to be the social event of the season, Romanian Countess Elizabeth Bathory is scheduled to spend some time here in Excelsior during her tour of the American continent. Lady Bathory is currently enjoying her stay in St. Louis, Mo. Ms. Walker eyes and ears are open wide, and eager for any news Countess-related!

EUROPEAN COUNTESS SCHEDULED TO ARRIVE FIRST OF JUNE

By Mary Walker

May 16, 1933

Ms. Walker must apologize for her grievous error in the former column concerning the European Countess. Lady Bathory hails from Hungary, not Romania, but her arrival date has been confirmed. After having seen New York City, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis, she is scheduled to arrive by train the afternoon of June 1 to our (comparatively) humble berg. She is scheduled to stay in one of the Elms luxury suites. Talk around town reveals a flurry of anticipation, with not only hotel staff, but also local shopkeepers and restaurant owners hustling to get their establishments whipped into tiptop shape. They have expressed hopes that all citizens of Excelsior Springs will also contribute to making our European guest's stay a memorable one, not just as a reflection of our town, but of our great Nation.

LADY BATHORY COMMENTS ON ST. LOUIS ARCH, EXCELSIOR

By Mary Walker
May 22, 1933

Lady Bathory was quoted today by several St. Louis newspapers as saying the Arch was "intriguing," but she was very much "looking forward to a restful stay in Excelsior."

LADY BATHORY ARRIVES!

By Mary Walker
June 2, 1933

What an exciting day it was when Hungarian Countess alighted from the train, followed by her charming little Old World maid. The Countess was fabulously outfitted in a white and cream linen traveling dress and veiled hat. The Countess, so sad to say, will not be granting interviews, but rest assured, no detail will go unexamined by yours truly.

* * *

Excelsior Springs
June, 1933

"Why, Henry!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she stepped into the shade of the platform. "What a wonderful surprise!"

"My dear Eliza," he said, taking her hand. "When I read of your impending arrival in the papers, I could hardly be expected to stay away."

Eyes gleaming, she leaned forward conspiratorially. "But I'd heard you'd *died*, love. And here you are."

Katarina snorted. She'd heard that, too.

They both ignored her. Still holding her hand, Henry winked. "I took a page out of your own book, my dear. Though I did have to change my name. I'm Hugh Musgrave now."

“Hugh,” she pronounced it as if tasting some exotic new fruit.

With the very warmest of smiles, he turned to Katarina. “And *Kat*. How I’ve *missed* you, dear.”

Katarina curtsied, “Sir.” Hidden by her skirt, her nails cut into her palms.

Pleasantries out of the way, Hugh put his arm around Elizabeth’s shoulder. He led her away from the platform, leaving Katarina to get the bags. “So tell me, what brings you to Excelsior?”

“What brings anyone to Excelsior, my dear? The waters, of course,” she replied. “Kat, dear, are you coming?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Katarina called. She managed to sound cheerful for the Mistress even as she struggled with their steamer trunk.

“Please,” Hugh said, “My car is waiting. You must come and stay in my hotel.”

Her eyes lit up. “You’ve built a new hotel?”

“I’ve made some improvements. And I have some ideas that I just know you’d be interested in.”

“How well you know me, Henry.” She smiled. “Or Hugh. Tell me, which do you prefer?”

He laughed as he opened the door for her. “Please, my dear. After all we’ve been to each other? You may call me Jack.”

* * *

If she weren’t already in love with Jack, she would have been by the end of that afternoon—the wonders he had shown her would have been enough to win over any woman’s heart.

Except, perhaps, Katarina’s.

In his new hotel, which had a proper name this time (the Royal, no less) he had tapped into a uniquely complicated conflagration of ley lines, which by themselves would have been extremely powerful. But with the rare waters flowing along their circuits, he had discovered a naturally-occurring locus. He had taken advantage of the strange combination to build a construct, which he designed to mimic the hotel, right down to the fluted stemware in the ballroom on the top floor.

She had known before that constructs could be built by a gifted mage, but she had never seen it done.

Of course, the energy involved to create such a construct required a tremendous number of sacrifices—ideally, young ones. But as the locus gave him access to no less than eight different worlds, this was hardly a problem.

Laughing, giddy, they waltzed around the ballroom’s big empty dance floor.

“But let me show you my greatest ambition,” he said.

“There’s more?” she asked, breathless from laughing.

“Oh yes. *Worlds* more.” He strolled to the middle of the dance floor. Above them, a burgundy velvet curtain draped the ceiling.

She watched curiously as he lifted his arms in a minor show of power. The curtain fell away to reveal a dazzling skylight. The light flooded the room, shattering off the champagne glasses, dancing off the silverware, glinting off the china. But nowhere did it shine as brightly as it did in the floating, spherical, iridescent field of energy, about two feet across, rotating at the very center of the room.

She grew serious at the sight. “You’re trying to build a gate.”

“*Have* built,” he corrected, “Have built a gate. Opening it, however, is another matter.”

She looked from the gate to Jack. Gone was the giddiness of murder and love, replaced by professional, clinical appraisal. “As is controlling it. Jack, there is exactly one device in the world that can create a truly stable gate. *One*. And neither of us has it.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, I know. You’ve told me some of your people’s war with the Order and your precious staff. But this isn’t quite what you think, my dear.” He took her hands in his. “The waters. We can tap into them to gain the stability we need. And through them, the blood of others, and this gate,” he gestured grandly, “the locus will be ours.”

She considered this. “You intend to monopolize the locus.”

Jack laughed. “You underestimate my ambition, my love. I intend to control it. Think of it! Ten thousand women awaiting my razor touch. Ten thousand lands ready to be drawn upon, to be used as you and your Starry Wisdom desire. Worlds, perhaps galaxies, will await us from our own sanctum, as easy as opening a door.”

“And you believe you can do this?”

He cupped her cheek. “Not without you, my darling.”

* * *

Two years and countless sacrifices later, the sphere had expanded to eight feet.

It was an auspicious day, chosen for the alignment of the planets. Jack had carefully drawn the configuration on the floor of the ballroom in the blood of innocents. All three of them, him, Elizabeth and Katarina, were at least partially dressed now. While nudity had been required in the ritual’s early stages, as Jack had pointed out, it did not do to accidentally arrive on an alien world stark naked.

Below, in the subterranean chambers of the hotel, the waters churned.

Jack was laughing. In the lightning, his eyes and teeth were very white, his face dark with blood. “This is it, Eliza!” he shouted to her over the thunder. “We’ve done it!”

She, too, was covered in blood. “Not yet, we haven’t!” she shouted back. Turning to Katarina, she called, “Be ready!”

Katarina nodded, peering at her with anxious eyes.

The skylight was open. A wind whipped through the ballroom, fanning out their hair and clothes, threatening to rip the tablecloths from the tables and the curtains from all the windows.

“NOW!” Jack shouted. “DO IT NOW!”

The three of them pushed their finely honed and exquisitely powerful wills into the mystic structure they had so carefully laid out. A ringing sound like the striking of a massive gong reverberated through the room. They each felt the vibration to their very cores. The wind was howling so fiercely now that it was difficult to keep their eyes open.

Elizabeth managed to peek out through the thick veil of her lashes, to see the sphere begin to stretch and become distorted.

Yes.

It was no longer a sphere but an ellipse, growing wider and wider, the colors of its surface hissing as if it were angry, and perhaps even in pain. A high-pitched sound suddenly emanated from the opening, making their ears ring, their eyes water. But it was more than a sound—it felt like a living thing that reached out and grabbed them.

Katarina did not know she was going to move until she was already in motion. She flung herself out of the circle, her small feet a blur as they scampered over the wood floor. She took cover beneath the balcony overhang.

Jack, driven by his own instincts, went forward into the center of the ellipse and vanished into a point of brilliant white light.

Elizabeth saw her two companions leap away from her in opposite directions. Then she screamed as the ellipse warped and collapsed onto her.

Silence fell.

Katarina turned fearfully to see that all the light had abruptly been sucked out of the room, and her mistress, disoriented, at the center, her palms pressed against the sides of something Katarina could not see.

No. Oh, no.

“Jack?” Elizabeth called. Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were trapped inside a glass sphere.

Katarina ran back and knelt down in front of her mistress. She pressed her hands against the force that kept their palms from touching. “I-I think he’s gone,” she whispered.

Trying not to panic, Elizabeth pounded on the walls of her prison. “Get me out!”

Katarina looked at her helplessly.

“Get me out! Kat! Get me out of here!”

“How?”

Elizabeth hung her head, her hair falling down like a curtain to hide her face.

It did not do to let one’s servants see one weep.

Chapter Sixteen

“Jessica!” Murphy shouted, taking a step forward.

“No!” she screamed back. “Don’t come any closer!”

He held out a hand to her and opened his mouth to speak. The stock phrases he’d always relied upon in rescue situations – *it’s gonna be all right, come to me, we’ll keep you safe, everything’s gonna be fine* – did not apply here. He found himself asking the unbidden question: how do you comfort the ghost of a murdered eleven-year-old girl? “Jess, we’re here to help. It’s okay—”

“*It’s a trap—*” she screamed and suddenly, something jerked her head back. She was dragged around the corner, still screaming at them to run.

“*Something’s got her,*” Murphy rushed to the stairs.

“It’s another ghost,” Cecil said. “Smaller, but stronger signal.”

The four of them turned to the Colonel and he looked back at them. They’d started out as a group of people with nothing in common except that they’d been called to deal with this terrible goddamn situation, and now they were a team. People he didn’t know then-- hell, still didn’t know, beyond their names. But he was proud to face whatever was waiting for them in their company. The five of them had done well to get this far with no major casualties, outside of Doc’s getting gut-stabbed, but long odds in that continuing. Which one was he going to lose?

None of them. If somebody had to die in the upcoming fight, he could only hope it would be him.

“Let’s roll.”

Kate had re-ignited the blue flame effect from her wand, chasing back the shadows around them as they rounded the corner and followed the ghost girl up a flight of steps, then another, then another. Above them little Jessica kept on screaming for them to turn back.

Eventually, there came a point when Jess’s voice took on a queer echo, as if she had been led out onto a roof. It grew fainter and fainter.

The team quickened their pace. The stairs grew narrower as they went. At last they reached a claustrophobic flight where the sloped ceiling almost touched their heads, and their elbows grazed the walls.

“Guys, three big signals up there,” Cecil said. “One hot—eretics. Lots of ‘em. Can’t tell how many for sure. Then two big signals I’ve never seen before. One inside the other.”

“The breach?” Doug asked.

“No, one’s a mage. Off the scales.”

“Bathory.”

JD nodded. “She’s got some kind of defense up, sounds like. So she’s ready for us, too.”

“Possibly,” Cecil said. “Like I said, I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

The Colonel raised his gun. “And you won’t again.”

The landing was five by five, at best. They followed the turn, which led up to an open room.

JD and Murphy went cautiously up the remaining steps. Their soles creaked on solid oak floors. To their right was a row of double-doors with blackened windows. Perhaps fifteen feet in front of them, they could see the opposite wall, lined with double doors. To their left, the carved oak banister curved around, overlooking the stairs they had just come up. In the corner, slightly behind them, was an old-fashioned cage elevator, its glass doors broken out. Slightly ahead and to the left was a blind corner that made both of them very nervous.

It looked just like the grand ballroom on the sixth floor of the Royal Hotel. In fact, Murphy would have sworn it was the very same room, except tables were set up around the dance floor, set with silver and linens. The silver was tarnished black, the linens yellow and tattered. Dead flowers curled limply in crystal stem vases. Slender columns rose to the twenty-foot ceiling, which was dominated by a skylight. A bit of moonlight passed through it, though it was difficult to tell if it was the moon any of them were familiar with.

“So,” Murphy said tensely, “Where’s this fucking breach?”

The team moved forward cautiously. As they turned the corner, they got a better look at the skylight. It had wrought-iron panes dividing it into sixteen sections. The pale light illuminated the ballroom in all its desiccated glory. At the far end of the room was a row of French doors, presumably leading to a balcony. Through the door glass, more of the unfathomable blackness they’d seen downstairs could be glimpsed. In a far corner, a smaller semi-transparent girl was holding Jess to the floor.

In front of the doors, directly below the skylight was a figure in crimson silk.

Behind her, the doors burst open.

* * *

In the van, another five hours had gone by. Bill had changed location three times. Each time, he’d driven carefully, trying not to think about how any given moment could be the only time the team was somewhere reachable, and here he was, stuck behind the goddamn wheel.

But with MJ-12 in town, paranoia was just survival instinct.

He’d parked in the Wal-Mart parking lot, well away from the front doors. He loved Wal-Mart parking lots. As long as you were careful not to take a handicap spot, you were golden. He gulped down more coffee, not tasting it, and tried again. “Ground team, do you copy.”

Noise flooded the speakers and the screens came to life. The NO SIGNAL blinked out and was replaced on every monitor by visions of a firefight in a huge room, bursts of blue light and gunfire cutting into more and more eretics from every direction.

“Ground team!” Cecil’s scans were running. The five of them were surrounded by the high-temp signatures that accompanied eretics. At the far end of the room, there was something giving off one hell of a halo signature, surrounded by a massive energy field.

He clicked the screens from one view to the next, glad to finally be doing something, hoping they could hear him. “Colonel, you’ve got another group coming from your left.” The Colonel turned his field of fire. His attackers slowed, then dropped from a flare of *something* from Kate’s direction. The wand—had to be. “Doug, look to your right, one’s coming in low.” Doug was firing gamely, and though the thing did grab him, he quickly shoved his gun in its mouth and fired. It went down.

It looked like the bad guys were running out of minions quick. Then, a sudden green signature popped onto Cecil’s six from nowhere. “Cecil--” It was on him, and BC1 showed a burst of arterial spray from below. There was a flash of Kate’s horrified face. Then the world tilted crazily to the left. And then it was just floorboards and dust and an outstretched hand.

* * *

At least it’s better than the graveyard, Kate thought.

Yes, they were outnumbered. Yes, they were being attacked from all sides. But they could see the bastards, and they were ready for them this time. And this time, she had the wand.

And she knew how to use it.

She was riding a wave of energy, of power, that she’d probably pay the price for later. In the meantime, the eretics were getting taken care of, and her friends were still alive. And it looked like they were running out of targets.

She was almost disappointed.

Wait, where’s Katarina? Last time, Doug... But Doug was there, terrified but holding his own, pushing away an eretic he’d just shot in the mouth.

Faintly, she heard Bill over the carnage, realized he’d been talking for a few seconds at least. She heard him say, “Cecil,” then she felt something hot and wet splash against her back. She turned just in time to see Cecil, choking, throat cut from ear to ear, falling to the floor.

She screamed. “*DAVID!*”

There was a bit of movement in front of her. The figure of Katarina blurred and was gone.

Kate knew she was still there. *Coming for my throat next.* She focused her mind. Kate could almost feel part of it reaching out, seeking the girl’s essence...

Katarina flickered into her view again. Swiftly, Kate leveled the wand right at her: sweet smile, bloody knife and all. “*You bitch!*”

The world filled with a burst of blue flame.

When it cleared, Katarina still stood, smiling, her hand raised in an almost nonchalant gesture. Hovering neatly in the palm of her hand was a ball of quivering blue flame. Kate’s eyes grew wide.

Katarina winked. “*Amateur.*”

She brought her arm back and fired it straight back into Kate.

The next thing Kate knew, the gunfire had stopped. There were no sounds. She was flat on her back, looking up at the ceiling—or trying to. Her eyes weren't working that well, and she felt like she'd just been beaten to death. Something was running down the back of her throat. She swallowed, tasting blood. Her body felt like it weighed about ten tons. When she stopped concentrating, the ceiling slid out of focus again.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could make out the silhouette of Katarina's head.

Katarina stepped over something carefully, clucking her tongue. "I just *knew* I should have worn red today."

Kate rolled her head to the left and saw Doug lying beside her, unconscious.

Katarina came into view. She looked Kate up and down, slowly, appraisingly. Her eyes finally settled on the wand where it had fallen on the wood floor, mere inches from Kate's fingertips. With a childish hand, she plucked it up and examined it, her rosebud lips curling into a thoughtful little pout. Then she caught sight of Kate's open eyes and broke into a grin. She dropped to a graceful crouch, careful not to get any of her clothes dirty. Her green eyes raked up and down Kate's prone form.

"Ohhhhh, she is a stroooooong one," she purred, and delicately traced the tip of the wand along Kate's collarbone. Kate recoiled as much as she could, but found that she had very little control over her muscles. "I am going to enjoooooy--" the tip of the wand found Kate's breast, "-taking my time with this one."

Kate squeezed her eyes shut.

"*Katarina*." It was a woman's voice, a voice of absolute authority.

Disappointment flashed across Katarina's features for just an instant, immediately replaced by demure subservience. "Coming, Mistress."

Kate heard her skipping along the floor to the other woman. Blinking, Kate closed her hand experimentally.

"Give it to me." Bathory said.

"Mistress?"

"The *wand*, darling," Kate could hear Bathory's gritted teeth. "It will pass through—now hand it over, quickly!"

Kate rolled onto her side just in time to see Katarina holding the wand out to Bathory.

Before, there had been nothing there. Now, there was this mysterious, rippling membrane, spreading slowly outward from where the wand crossed its threshold, until Bathory was standing in what appeared to be a globe. Angry-looking light arced and hissed along its surface.

As Bathory grasped the wand, the globe flooded with light. At the center of it, the figures of Bathory and Katarina faded to thin, spidery figures.

Kate put up her hand to shield her face as the surface of the globe shattered.

* * *

Bathory looked out from her prison with satisfaction. The etics had been destroyed by the blast, but that mattered little. What mattered was that all the Sons were neutralized. Of course, she had expected no less. The Order had some fine mages, as far as short-lived beasts went, but few could hold a candle to--

What on earth was that child doing, toying with their mage? Now, of all times?

“*Katarina.*” She put a whip into her voice and Katarina obeyed, skipping to the barrier, empty corpses and broken heroes in her wake. *Honestly, there’s a time and a place...*

“Give it to me.”

“Mistress?”

“The *wand*, darling.” Had Katarina expected to dispel the barrier herself? “It will pass through—now hand it over, quickly!”

It was a simple matter: the Wands of Deleth were, after all, keys. The barrier fought, after its fashion. It recoiled with a sizzling sound, its energies arced around them in tendrils of burgundy, red and green. There was a blinding light, a terrible sound... then it was undone.

Her voice was a hiss of victory in the vast chamber. “*Yes!*”

The space surrounding them rippled slightly, like heat waves. Then, nothing. The barrier was gone. Bathory staggered forward. Kat rushed forward to help, but she waved her off.

“I can stand.” Bathory straightened painfully and examined the wand, then smiled at Katarina. *Dear Kat. Blessed puss, beautiful darling girl. You’ve freed me again.* Bathory held out her hand. Katarina dropped to her knees and kissed it, then pressed her mistress’s hand to her cheek. *At last, this ridiculous masquerade is ended,* Bathory thought. *And it is all thanks to you, my faithful Kat.* She caught Katarina’s chin, raised her head gently. *Such eyes.* “Well done, as always.” Katarina blushed and lowered her eyes. Bathory stroked her hair, smoothing a lock back in place. “Come dear, it is time to go.”

Katarina’s eyes widened with concern. “Mistress? Are you strong enough--” A sharp glance silenced her. Of course. Mistress was always strong enough.

Bathory tightened her grip on the wand with a skeleton hand. She did not sway as she walked to the balcony. It did not do to show weakness before one’s maid, even after the months of fasting she had endured. Her bare feet made no sound as she approached the doors, ignoring the little ghosts scuttling away from her.

Katarina opened the doors. This was her victory. For months, her poor mistress had been trapped in that terrible orb, abandoned by *him*. In other worlds, decades had passed by, taking their opportunities with them in their stride. But now, for the first time since the accident, her mistress was free. And she, Katarina, was with her. And they need never be parted again.

Elizabeth Bathory strode with liquid grace onto the balcony, her maid in perfect form behind her. She grasped the wand with both hands, one hand to each end. She closed her eyes, and prepared herself for what lay ahead.

In another world, the balcony of the Royal Hotel looked out over the town of Excelsior Springs. But here, it looked *out*, into the shapeless spaces Between. Standing on the balcony, she was surrounded by it on all sides, save for the open doors behind her and the crumbling boards beneath her emaciated feet. It would be easier here.

The building that was no building groaned. The barrier had been a part of the construct, however accidentally, and its collapse had taken its toll. The construct might not last long enough for them to reach another world through one of its gates-- assuming the gates were even still stable.

Only a fool would take such risks now, with no need.

With a will hardened by centuries of blood and sorcery, Bathory ignored her body's screams for food, water, and rest. With practiced ease, she shaped her goal in her mind's eye, held it in perfect focus. Aside from the Locus, two worlds touched the construct, and thus could be easily breached and entered. One was overrun with squabbling bureaucracy and their petty laws. But the other should still have the suitable place for her to recover from her ordeals, regardless of the years. It was upon this place that she focused her will.

She would rest, and regain her strength and beauty. And after that, there would be much to be done.

Seeing to their safe transport – and to a suitable place to arrive– would require draining the construct. Even with the wand, that would hasten its demise considerably. But that was a price she could live with.

She was free again. And little Kat was by her side. All was well.

Now then. She reached out with another part of her mind, into the heart of the thing Jack had created. A gentle tug, then a long draw with the strength of a torrent.

And then the magi were gone, collapse and ruin in their wake.

Chapter Seventeen

5:48 a.m.

After Cecil's camera went down, the last thing Bill saw, via Doug's camera, was Kate as she raised the wand and brought it back down, her features twisted with a fury that he would never have imagined of her.

Then the screens had gone back to no signal.

Bill tore off his ear piece. "*Dammit!*"

The bright red spray. Cecil's camera falling. Kate.

"No, no, nononono," he muttered, his hands working frantically, "I did not just lose you. Come on, guys. Come on. Talk to me." His hands worked faster, and all the while, some rational part of his mind, completely detached, took it all in.

There's a time difference, he thought, nothing I have tried in the last eight hours has helped. They're out of contact until I hear from them again.

And somewhere beneath that: *And it's not like you could hear them with your headset off, anyway, jackass.*

And beneath that: *That was Cecil's blood covering Kate and Doug, before they had time to turn around. You know that, right? There was a fucking lot of blood. And if anybody can slit a throat and do it right, it's that little so-and-so Katarina.*

"No, no," he went on, "Come on, guys, not again, come on..."

I couldn't see for sure. It all happened too fast. He's not dead... If you've got the balls, you can rewind it and watch it again. In slow-motion. You can zoom in to see all the juicy little details. Every gasp. Every scream. Every last little droplet.

His hands stopped working. His mouth stopped working.

No signal.

* * *

It was about ten minutes later that the explosion rocked the van.

* * *

It was enough to make his roll-around chair veer dangerously to one side, threatening to unseat him. He clamped a hand onto the desktop, waiting to see if there would be another blast.

Seconds or minutes went by. Then Bill's mind started up again.

You know, I should go see what that was. That would be an intelligent thing to do. Yeah. I'll do that.

He had to will his limbs to move, to push himself up out of the chair and grope for the rear door handle. He opened the door and stepped out.

The fire was a crimson column of roaring flame, rushing up into the pre-dawn sky, lighting up the town. It was not a natural color of fire, and gave no indication of spreading. It rose high enough that the clouds parted above it.

A small crowd had fanned out along the edge of the parking lot, staring and pointing.

Bill hung back. His mind was still more or less a blank, though it had latched onto a peculiar repetitive chant, *Oh god, the team, oh god, the team, oh god--*

Then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

A woman was standing next to him. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, with a black LBE vest over them. She had fresh stitches in her head. Her face mirrored his own: shock giving way to realization.

“O4S?” she asked.

Bill’s gaze skipped down to the sidearm holstered on her hip. He nodded. “Yeah. MJ-12?”

“Yeah.” She nodded her head toward the fire. “Your people?”

“Nope. Yours?”

“Nnnn...maybe.”

He nodded again. “What’re you doing here?”

“Well, I *had* come to commandeer your van.”

“Hm. Budget cuts are killer.”

“You got that right.”

“So. Where’s the rest of your team?”

“Lost ‘em.”

“Huh. What a coincidence. I’ve lost my team as well.”

“That *is* a coincidence.”

“And what did you hope to accomplish by hijacking my van?”

“Commandeer. I’m a federal agent.”

“I don’t like to split hairs. I have so few of them.”

Still staring at the raging inferno, Hayes made a dry sound in her throat. “Funny.”

“You said you *were* going to commandeer my van. Is that no longer the plan?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well, you will let me know.”

“Sure. When I get there.”

“Take your time.”

The flame raged on, a geyser of crimson raging straight up into the sky.

“I think I may need to sit down.”

“There’s coffee in the van.”

Her eyes stayed on the fire. “No. Just a seat.”

Bill took her arm and led her back to the van. She moved stiffly, as if something else besides her head was bothering her. They sat down facing each other in the back.

Hayes sighed. “That’s better.”

“I think that was the Royal,” Bill said.

“What?”

“The Royal Hotel.”

“On fire, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” She considered this. “Definitely not my people then.”

“So glad to hear.”

“This may be hard for you to believe, but we don’t make a habit of blowing up buildings.”

“You’re right. I do find that hard to believe.”

Hayes gave him a hard look.

“That offer on coffee still good?”

He blinked, then nodded. “Gimme a second.” He went over to a grinder and started pouring in beans.

She stared at his back. *Think like a weapon means putting two shots in this guy’s head. No problem. Then take the van and use the equipment. But then...how would I know how to use the equipment?*

The sound of the grinder filled the small compartment.

Plan B. Pull my gun on this guy. Let him see it when he turns back around. Then take the van. Make him run the equipment for me...but this guy strikes me as the type to say, “Uh-uh. No way, lady. You can pull your gun, but I won’t cooperate. What’re you gonna do about it?” Good question. Shoot him in the leg? That would make him less likely to cooperate.

The O4S geek started to whistle while he worked. She didn’t recognize the tune.

Plan C. Be nice to him. Be really nice to him. Let him know that you’re on his side after all. In a situation like this, he’d believe it. Maybe even pull him into bed. And then, when he’s helped you get everything you need, then you put two in the back of his head and dispose of the body.

Suddenly, she felt sick. *No. No. Christ. Where did that come from?*

It's because you're thinking like a weapon.

He turned around. "You take cream?"

She shrugged and made a small dismissive gesture.

"Right. No cream. I don't have cream. No sugar either. If the van breaks down, it doubles as motor oil." He handed her the cup, careful not to touch her fingers.

She took it impatiently. "So you've lost contact with your team."

"That's right."

"So now what?"

"I—" His mouth opened then shut. "Working on it."

She took a sip of the coffee. Despite the motor oil crack, it was pretty damn good. "Well," she set the coffee cup down on the console next to her. "It helps to have a plan."

His gaze flicked down to her sidearm again. "I think I would think better if you took that off."

She considered this. "Where's yours?"

He made a move toward the drawer next to him.

She pulled her weapon. "Slowly, please."

He raised his hands in a placating gesture. Then he slowly reached to a drawer next to his keyboard. He opened it and took out his gun, which was still in its holster.

"Jesus. You don't even wear it when you're in the field?"

"Do I tell you how to do your job?"

"Sorry. I'm having trouble crediting that you would go into this situation effectively unarmed."

"There is no situation. I'm in a van. My job is to talk."

"But--" she shook her head and instantly regretted it.

"Maybe you should lie down."

"The damn EMT says I need a hospital."

"Yeah, they do that. You can put the gun away, and we'll get underway."

"We? You have a plan?"

"Let's call it an *idea*. And yes, I'm afraid I come with the van."

"All right." She holstered her weapon. "We're working together, then."

He nodded. "Together."

"I can handle that."

"Me, too." He stood up and moved to the front of the van.

“So what do you think’s happened to your team?”

“Well, that’s ...complicated,” he said slowly as he put the keys in the ignition. “You know what an Isfet breach is?”

She shook her head. He beckoned her to join him in the front. She climbed into the passenger seat and buckled her seat belt. “I’ll explain on the way.”

“Where are we going?”

“Trust me.”

For some reason, she did.

Chapter Eighteen

The dance was over.

The construct shuddered, groaned and died. What remained of its power shattered like a crystal sphere. Shards of dreams and memories danced in the shrinking vacuum, breaking against each another. In the midst of the kaleidoscopic tangle, a tiny bubble of light appeared. It bounced irregularly, spinning as it was struck now and again.

It burned with a blue flame. Within, four tiny figures clung to one another.

It spun, it bounced, it zigzagged through the void, a star caught in a pinball machine. It was squeezed through a crack to another when and where, a small and fast-healing wound in another, vaster sphere. The entryway finished closing behind it as the two realms came together, and no trace was left of the tiny light's passing.

Chapter Nineteen

“Jess?”

Pet’s voice was small in the darkness. Jessica Degler paused, then kept going. The others were going, too, Nicholas and Chris and dozens of others.

“Jess, please! Don’t leave me here!”

Jess stopped. “What?”

“I’m scared. Please help me.”

Jess looked back at the younger girl. She was crouched on the floor, hugging her knees. “Can’t you see where to go?”

Miserably, Pet shook her head.

Jess sighed. “Oh, all right. Come on.” She held out her hand, and Pet took it. Jess pulled her up. “It’s this way.”

After a while: “Jess?”

“Uh-huh?”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay, Pet.”

Another pause.

“Jess?”

“Yeah?”

“My name is Lindy.”

Jess smiled and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad.”

Chapter Twenty

6:29 a.m.

Agents Vickers continued his odyssey through the damned soybeans and wheat fields, silently cursing the Midwest in general and shit-crazy cowboys in particular. *Hey, look-- a light*, Barnes had said, *That means a house*.

Moron.

After a night of walking through miles of nothing but bugs and crops, Vickers was getting a keen understanding of just how far the light from someone's porch could travel. His two assistants wisely kept well behind him. He was in no mood to converse, or to hear those two conversing either.

For the hundredth time, he checked his phone. Sweat dampened his chest and underarms. His button-up and coat were carried over one shoulder. Still no signal. Fuck. He replaced it in his pocket and continued his trek. And for the hundredth time, he swore bloody vengeance on O4S in general and JD Garnett in particular.

Finally, the house had come into view.

An hour later, they'd arrived on the porch. The inside lights were on. Apparently, the inhabitants were having an early breakfast.

"Barnes, Spencer, get your gear back on." Vickers donned his white shirt over his T-shirt, and his coat over that. Years had shown him that when dealing with the brain-damaged masses, you couldn't overdo looking the part. He replaced his holster and sidearm, and went to the front door. He took out his ID, checked to see if Barnes and Vickers were flanking him. They were. Vickers nodded once, then knocked.

A voice drifted out: "Who in the world is that?"

"Federal agents."

"Whaaaat?"

Oh, spare me. "Federal agents, sir. I'm Special Agent Vickers, these are agents Barnes and Spencer. We need to use your phone."

The door opened and a shriveled-up raisin of a man squinted out at him. "Well sir, I'm sorry to tell you, but I ain't got a phone."

Vickers stared for a moment, unbelieving. He tried again. "Sir, it would only be for a moment--"

The old man shook his head. "Nossir, I told ya. Ain't no phone. I'm on a fixed income. And anyway, neighbors ain't too far away to visit, and my son comes by every week or so."

Vickers pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed shut. "Can you at least tell us where we are?"

The man's look of puzzlement deepened. "You're in Chambers, Kansas. On my porch." The man pointed to a dirt drive. "About a quarter of a mile up that way is old Route 12. If ya like, I can give you a ride up to town."

Vickers heard Barnes ask, "Will we have cell phone reception there?"

The old man shrugged. "Well, I don't know about that. They got a phone you could use, though. Call for a tow and whatnot."

"Fine, fine," Vickers almost snarled, "Just get us there. We'll pay you."

"All right, mister. Just let me get my billfold. Ya'll mind waiting here?"

Vickers felt his features freeze in a painful expression, half smile, half grimace. "No, we don't mind."

"All right, then." The old man shut the door gently.

Vickers turned on his heel to look out over the fields of nothing.

"Where the fuck is Chambers, Kansas?" Spencer muttered.

"Somewhere around this old guy's porch, apparently," Barnes responded.

Vickers ignored them both, looking out at the miles of prairie wasteland as the sun slowly began to rise. *There is indeed a hell, and I am in it.*

Chapter Twenty-One

Akhenaton sits upon Its throne. It sips Its pomegranate juice and contemplates the Flow. The dust-motes bring It what It wants. They do this whenever they are told. The taste washes through It in waves, to be savored. The taste is fleeting. The taste is dust. It always is.

Akhenaton is the Aten, free of Its prison. It is Amenhotep, screaming as he is betrayed and devoured. It is Akhenaton. It is more Here than the Others.

Akhenaton contemplates the Suliman. It contemplates the one that can See. It contemplates the Speaker of Names. Akhenaton contemplates the staff and the Order. Akhenaton contemplates the Others.

Akhenaton is in Excelsior Springs. Bill Welsh is screaming as It places Its mark upon him. It is Akhenaton. He is more here than It is.

His pain washes through It in waves, to be savored. His pain is fleeting. He is dust. They always are.

The dust-motes fight and kill each other. They do this whenever they are told.

Akhenaton sits upon Its throne. It sips Its pomegranate juice and contemplates the Flow.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kansas City International Airport
April 24, 2005, 10:05 a.m.
Flight 1119, Kansas City to London Heathrow

The nine remaining members of the O4S regional office had settled into their first-class seats. The plane was not scheduled for take off for another twenty minutes or so.

Beside Clayton, the Oracle had gone still and quiet—quieter than usual.

Clayton waited. It didn't take long. When she blinked, he asked, "What did you see?"

"Colonel Garnett's team. They're alive."

"In Excelsior?"

"No. Somewhere else."

"All of them?"

"No. I only see four."

"Bill?"

"He's not with them. I can't see Bill. I just see..." she trailed off. She paused for so long, her eyes fixed on a distant point, that Clayton thought she had tranced out again. "I see the sun."

"The sun?"

"Yeah. Very bright."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"But the team. Will we see them again?"

"Yeah." Suddenly, unexpectedly, she smiled. She rarely ever smiled. "We will."

EPILOGUE

Someone was moaning. Kate wanted to find them and tell them to shut up. Her head was pounding. They moaned again. A sharper pain cleaved her skull. "Is somebody hurt?" she asked. Her face and her jaw-- even her tongue and her teeth ached, so the words came out slurred. She wanted to add, *Please make them shut up*, but couldn't quite manage it.

"Yeah, *you*," someone replied, "Genius."

An even more piercing voice: "Murphy, I think you oughta work on your bedside manner."

The voice was like a nail gun and her brain was soft plaster. The moaner started up again. She thought about asking them to shut them up anyway, but wasn't sure if that was a good idea. Just in case it was her.

She drifted off.

* * *

Sometime later, when she came to again, she heard, "Katie?"

She opened her eyes, tried to focus them. The pain was less now. "JD?"

"I'm here, Katie. How ya feelin'?"

"Like I need a bath in Absorbine Jr. What happened?"

"Just rest and don't worry about it for now. We got a lot to do, but there's time yet. And you've been through enough."

She wanted desperately to stay awake, to find out what was happening. But despite her best efforts, her eyes slipped shut again.

* * *

She was lying on an old plank bar in the ruins of an old cantina. The men stood around her, Murphy by her head, JD in the middle, and Doug at her feet, watching her anxiously. Her breathing grew steady again, her eyes moving beneath her lids as she dreamed.

Doug shook his head. "This is a very remarkable young woman."

Murphy replaced the wet cloth on her head with a fresh one. "Oh, yeah. She's special all right."

Doug ignored him. "The fact that she was able to continue her magical activities, untrained, at the rate she did? Yes, that's unusual. Very noteworthy, to say the least. But I didn't want to make her self-conscious—"

“Cause then she mighta stopped,” JD finished for him.

“Exactly. But consider, she not only absorbed enough of the blast Katarina threw back at her that we survived, but she apparently remained conscious, as well. And then, in whatever state she was in at that point, she somehow shielded us from the ravages of the spaces Between while that construct *died*. And then, brought us here, I can only assume through whatever aperture Bathory tore open for her own escape.”

JD scratched his chin. “Yeah.”

“But look now,” Doug gestured to Kate’s still form. “She’s not only still alive after such a feat – a feat that would have cost any other mage their life – she’s *sleeping*. Not unconscious, not comatose, not dying. Just sleeping—quite peacefully, from the looks of it. Regaining her strength.”

Murphy shrugged. “Okay, so she’s Dr. Strange. Fine. Where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us alive and in one piece, for starters,” the Colonel answered. “And if the Doc here is right, we been played like a drum. And if Katie got us here the way that Bathory got here, then *she’s* around here somewhere. Her and that little hench wench a hers. *With* the wand. We’re still the Order, and they’re still Starry Wisdom, and we’re goin’ after ‘em.”

“That’s great,” Murphy said. “I’m glad we have a plan. But *where* is *here*?”

There was a long pause. Despite themselves, the three men glanced out what remained of the window. Overhead, strange bituminous stars like lumps of coal formed alien constellations. Five moons cast a sickly light on a flat, arid landscape. Something howled.

No one answered.

-Coyote Kishpaugh
Lauren Scharhag
June 29, 2008
6:21 a.m.

Excerpt from Carcosa

The Order of the Four Sons, Book II

Nathan DePriest was a god of death. The thunder of running steeds hailed his coming, and all before him fled or perished.

He rode into town and his posse was his shadow. They rode through the main street, and the whores fled their balconies, slammed their doors shut. The saloon music stopped as they grew close, and the streets cleared as fast as the townsfolk could run, clutching their babes.

This was as it should be. All life trembled before him. The grass did not grow where he stopped and stood.

There were no war-whoops or cheers from the men behind him. There was, rather, a grim excitement. Nathan was hunting. And, like any good hunter, he left something behind for scavengers. They rose in near silence but for the pounding of the hardpan beneath their meks' feet.

In the road ahead, a girl ran. Confused, scared, she called for her mama. A woman ran to her, terrified, pale, but not used up yet. She ran to her daughter and looked up, knowing she was too late. She clutched her child to her so she wouldn't see and shut her eyes as the posse thundered towards them.

Nathan held up his gloved hand for a halt that was instantly obeyed. He wore a green bandana that covered the bottom half of his face. The collar of his duster was up, and the brim of his hat was wide. Some said he was a demon from a gate, and that sunlight would burst him into flame. Others said he was deformed, or badly burned from a fire. He looked down at her with the expressionlessness that only smoked glasses can provide.

She opened her eyes again. Tears ran freely. There was no begging from this man, everybody knew that.

“Go on,” she said, “Get it over with.”

He nodded slightly, touching his brim. “Ma'am.” Then there was a blur of motion, and a gunshot filled the air. Her face splashed with blood. She looked down and started to scream.

Nathan dismounted, ignoring the woman and the lifeless husk she cradled. The wind caught his long white hair and played it around him as he walked up to the saloon. “Chanoch!” He called softly. “Chanoch Brown! Somebody find that half-a-man and tell him that his wife needs him to get over here!”

There was a frenzy of muttering and scraping chairs and around a dozen men emptied out of the saloon. A crowd was gathering now. Nathan had chosen his prey, so the rest could watch almost safely.

“Chanoch!” He called again. No answer. “I do hope,” he said, almost to himself, “I don't have to seek that half-a-man out myself.” Several men ran in different directions, calling out the dead man's name.

A man came running down the dirt street, wide-eyed, panting loudly. "Mavis! Stella! Oh, God!" He fell to his knees next to his wife, staring at their child. "Mavis! Oh, God, no . . ."

"Don't pray to your god now," Nathan chastised. "It ain't up to nobody but us." Chanoch was at his wife's side, shaking, trying to give comfort where there was none to give. "Now then," Nathan continued, "Somebody get this fella a gun."

One of the posse stepped forward, unbelted his gun and tried to buckle it onto Chanoch's waist. Chanoch was borderline hysterical, fighting him off, when Nathan said, "No, no, that's no way to be. Here. Let me." He stepped forward, looked down at the man. The street was a graveyard with a dry wind running through it as he spoke.

"Now, then. You know how this works. You and me, and one shot each. If you can take me down-- well then, you're the hero, and it all ends today. If not, then you died a man." He looked at Stella's broken little form, then back to her father. "You already failed your little girl. Let's see if you can be there for your wife."

There was a moment of tension, of suspense. Despite themselves, the townsfolk and posse alike wondered *Will he just cut and run?* Some had, and Nathan had always let them go. But Chanoch's face hardened. Apparently he was more than half-a-man after all. He stood and snatched the belt. He started to belt it on, but something went wrong and the gun fell out onto the dirt.

"Whoa, whoa," smiled the hunter. "Let me help." He reached around the other man and snatched the belt. He jerked it into position, pulling Chanoch off-balance in the process. Nathan didn't seem to notice. He picked up the revolver and holstered it for his prey.

"There, now," he said, almost friendly. "All loaded up and ready for bear. Almost like a man."

Chanoch stood trembling while his wife wept over their daughter's still form. Nathan smiled again, studying him. Then he turned and walked away, toward the other end of the street.

Again, there was that moment of suspense. Would he try to shoot Nathan in the back? It had been tried before. Once, it had almost worked. But while Nathan gave honest duelists a quick death, dying by a gutshot is a slow, painful business. By the time Chanoch had worked up his nerve, Nathan was turning around again.

"Somebody count us off." Caressing, almost a whisper.

Isachar stepped forward. He'd been sheriff of Pata Sur for two years, ever since Nathan shot the last one. He knew where his bread was buttered.

"*Three . . .*" he began

Nathan nodded slow and deliberate to his opponent.

"*Two . . .*"

Chanoch nodded back, fast and scared. He put his hand on his gun, and prayed to the gods of his fathers.

"*One . . .*"

Nathan let his hand fall casually near his hip.

Mavis looked up, as though suddenly realizing what was happening. “Chanoch, no!”
“*Shoot!*”

Another explosion, and Chanoch’s head snapped back, a third red eye in his forehead. He fell back and down, twitched, and was still.

The scavengers howled and whooped, and the townsfolk turned away, deaf to the screams of the widow in the street.

* * *

Three of the moons above were halved that night, one was new, and the fifth, as always, hid her face from his coming. He led his posse through the trackless expanse he called home, to the oasis he claimed by knowledge and kept by dint of strength.

“All right, boys. Food, water, and shade. Conway, get the meks to the lee and get ‘em water. Jasper, you and Pete get ‘em rubbed down. Phillip, make sure the saddles are taken care of. Everybody else-- water.” He gestured with a thumb towards the old cantina, and with a chorus of whoops and cheers, the men dismounted and started bustling around, some going for the wellspring in the cellar, others milling about, talking and smoking. Two were unloading a long bundle from one of the larger steeds. It gave a muffled sound and tried to kick.

There was the unmistakable sound of a revolver’s hammer being drawn back. The two men froze. The others turned quickly to see who had drawn his ire.

“Gentlemen,” he drawled. “Business first.”

There was just a heartbeat’s pause. “Yessir, Nathan. Sorry.”

Nathan smiled. No one moved.

The older of the two nudged his partner sharply. “Dammit, Gumbo, you heard the man!” They all but hurled the bundle onto the desert floor and began taking the tack and harness off their meks.

Nathan watched them for a few seconds, then let the hammer back down again. He could smell their fear, and it was sweet.

Leaving the men to their tasks, he strolled to the steps of his oasis, loose-limbed and sinuous, the very picture of the contented predator.

Inside, some of the men were already availing themselves of the bar. That was fine; they’d suffer for it later if they were fools, but likely they’d use caution enough. Nathan ran a tight ship. Those who fell behind stayed fallen.

He reached the doorway, and stopped, his head cocked. *Well, now.*

“Everybody freeze,” he said. Again, instant obedience was the response ...at least, as instant as their clumsiness allowed. One even stumbled. He shot a terrified look at Nathan.

But Nathan’s mind was on other things.

He looked around from the doorway, aloof, appraising, dangerous. The men eyeballed one another, as if to say, *What the hell did we do now? Was it you, you asshole? Did you bring this on the rest of us?* But the boss paid them no mind. He seemed beyond anger, all the way to thoughtful. But then, he was always a hard one to read. At least he wasn't amused. Thoughtful was bad. But amused was far worse.

Nathan walked deliberately to the center of the room, his eyes, hidden behind the smoked lenses, all the while looking at the place, ignoring the men completely. His head turned, his nostrils flared evenly, testing the air like a dog.

"I realize this is a futile question," he said to no one in particular, "But I don't suppose any of you had the wherewithal to notice this nice li'l pile of skins someone left for us? And I further suppose that no one had the presence of mind to come and tell me about it?"

As he spoke, he meandered over to the table, gently lifting a corner of leather and thumbing through the stack. The silence tightened as each piece fell.

Then, so quietly they had to strain to hear: "Why? Why was I so cursed with such a pack of fools?"

No answer.

He folded his arms behind his back and paced the room. "Somebody's been in my place, boys," he lifted his face and inhaled thoughtfully. "All out."

"But Nathan--"

The shot rang out and thin smoke filled the place. Nathan was still staring at the ceiling, as though still trying to solve some abstract problem. But now he had only one arm behind his back.

The speaker let out a breath and collapsed. Nathan re-holstered his revolver.

The dead man's companions looked at each other and released a collective sigh, a mix of resignation and relief. Two of them nodded to each other. They came forward and bent, one at the head, and one at the feet. They hefted the body and carried it out, the others shuffling out behind them, leaving the boss-man his space.

Nathan wandered over to the bar. Some of the salt, seasonings and flour had been taken. Hooch, too. And the scent was stronger here.

Two-- no, three men. All older. He sniffed. One fella real ancient. Three men. He sniffed again.

And a woman. Well, well.

He pulled back the curtain that separated the smaller room with the basin from the bar area. It had, of course, been used, though his shaving kit appeared untouched. He ran his fingers over the leather case thoughtfully. Whoever these folks were, they weren't from around here. Curious, strongly-scented perfumes, with *chemical* undertones. Wrong diet, too. Whatever they'd been eating before they came here, he couldn't place any of it. And it, too, had a sharp, chemical edge to it.

Outlanders. When was the last time that happened? Not for generations.

He stepped back and let the curtain fall back into place. He prowled the larger room once more before descending the stairs.

You stayed here some days, didn't you? Took water, staples, what you needed. He examined his cot. The old man slept here. Reg'lar old softies, ain't ya? He looked around the stone room again. And magic. He let out a low growl. Magic was done here. Magic didn't smell all that dissimilar from gunpowder. And this was real magic, not some ol' farmwife rattling chicken bones or twisting poppets out of cornstalks.

Well, well.

He was becoming more intrigued by the second.

He walked the perimeter of the building's remains. They'd used the outhouse to smoke the leather, and filled up their latrine again when they were done. Downright polite, these folks. Left rent and everything. Yes, indeed. His curiosity was piqued.

And they had a woman with them. He sniffed the air again, this time as if tasting it. A young woman, healthy, with plenty of juice still in her. Yes, yes. He grinned, fangs flashing in the pale light. And here he'd thought it was going to be a dull night.

"Load 'em back up, boys," he called back over his shoulder. "We ain't stayin'."

The men goggled at him. They'd been on the go for well over a fortnight, and they'd been looking forward to fresh water and rest. And the bundle, of course.

"Nathan?" It was Conway.

Nathan cocked an eyebrow.

"What about Pedro?"

Nathan shrugged the question off and walked to his mek. "Snakes gotta eat, too."

Conway swallowed. "All right," he called, addressing the others, "You heard the man and you know the drill. Up and ready, two minutes!" And the posse was a flurry of activity again, putting saddles back onto the meks, tightening down straps, and wondering what was going on now.

Nathan looked out at the stars, ignoring the bustle behind him. He knew what direction they'd gone, even without tracking. Hell, there was only one direction, for anyone but him. If they had the knowin' of that kind of power, then they had something he wanted. With luck, they'd go on being so polite and sharing. His gut told him that it was the woman who had performed the magic, and it was the woman he was going to find. Assuming that the desert or the gates didn't eat them first. He liked to consider himself a philosopher, but still, he hoped not.

Because snakes gotta eat too.

The boys were ready. He gave the signal, and they rode back out into the waste.

About the Authors

Coyote Kishpaugh has been writing prose and poetry most of his life, and alternately entertained and terrified his children by telling them stories late at night. Now that they are older, he enjoys entertaining and terrifying adults as well. Currently, he is pursuing his degree in psychology at Rockhurst University and working on a horror collection, *The Faithful of Azash*. He lives in Kansas City, KS.

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A lifetime resident of Kansas City, MO, **Lauren Scharhag** is a multi-genre author and poet. In addition to *The Order of the Four Sons* series, her works include *Under Julia*, *The Ice Dragon*, *The Winter Prince* and *West Side Girl & Other Poems*. Her work has appeared most recently in *A World of Terror* anthology, *The SNReview*, *The Rockhurst Review*, *Infectus* and *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*. She is the recipient of the Gerard Manley Hopkins Award for poetry and a fellowship from Rockhurst University for fiction.

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