

IN THE NICK OF SOCIETY

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Chapter 1

"AH, THE FRESH MORNING FALL air....so clean, so fresh, so-"

"So Goddamn cold," I interrupted as Mark kept walking. "Man, you know I hate mornings ; you know I hate cold. This had better be good."

"Ahhh, Nick.....it isn't that cold. You just hate everything....you always have "

Mark replied, grinning. "It's only October. Anyway, we'll stop soon ; there's a nice little shop just a block or so further." He paused a step. " And yeah, it's good. But, that all depends on how

you define good."

Something in his tone told me I wasn't going to define it the same as he might.

We had known each other too long.

"Nothing is good at 6 A.M. on a Fall morning, you nit, " I said. "By the way, do people really get up this early and actually, you know, walk and talk?". Mark grinned, but without a lot of humor.

"You used to, when we were in grade school," he answered. "Ok, here we are....best coffee shop in town!".

Shorty's was a small but obviously popular place. And yeah, sure enough, there were all kinds of people bustling about. I'd known of Shorty's for about 5 years, had frequented the shop when we were in town...but never this early. He was usually busy when I was there, though. I grabbed a table outside....Mark stopped with a question on his face.

"Ok, I don't like the cold....but I don't like non-smoking closed in rooms, either. Get me a mocha and get your rear end back here and tell me what's so all-fired important it

couldn't wait until after 10 - or noon - or, Hell, even two." Actually, I knew something had to have happened ; Mark seldom came to any of the cities we were gigging in, unless the muckies back home were nervous their balls were in danger. We hadn't had a assignment in 2 months...not unusual, as the band cover worked both as a advantage and a disadvantage. It gave us freedom to move about without raising eyebrows, but did require us to finish out our 'contracts' in most cities to keep the booking gerbils on the cooperative side. That meant we could keep going into places where we had to go. Not that we weren't good...we were. But out of necessity, we couldn't be 'big-time' good ; just good enough to be liked in a variety of places, and to find a niche almost anywhere in the country. A asset.

The chill October morning air reminded me of assets, since the outdoor tables had metal chairs, and it was on one of those I had set mine. Mark was back in a moment, carrying two steaming cups of life-giving caffeine : "I got us a couple pastries coming, Nick. Hope you're hungry.". He knew darn well I had eaten breakfast less than 4 hours ago, but Hell, he was

buying. He could have mine.

He knew that, too. The old dog.

"Ok, let's get to it," I sighed after a good swallow. " You aren't exactly one of our roadies, y'know. You had to have been up most of the night to get me outta the sack this early here in...wherever the Hell it is we are. And you know I know it, and you know I am gonna give ya shit about it regardless. So, you might as well ruin my day. Or week. Or life...naw, wait, you did that already."

"Nick, Nick, Nick.....can't a friend just look up a old friend once in a ----now, wait.....that stuff does more good if you drink it rather than throw it!" he laughed. As both our grins faded, he went on: "Ok, you know it has to be big. I won't lie to you. We have one that we misjudged ; we thought he'd be relatively easy to take down. But he has eluded 2 of our best Hunters, and rather handily."

"And? He's here or something? Not unusual for even a novice to get lucky and slip past the best we have, you know that." I said it...but I was beginning to get a funny feeling.

"No...he isn't here. Not far, though," Mark explained. " And actually, 'elude' might not be totally proper ; he didn't just slip past. They found him, all right, and cornered him - just like he wanted."

"Shit!" I said, lowering my head. Something told me we were going to default our remaining 3 nights here. "It's a old one, then? And he didn't just get away, did he?"

Mark shook his head. I noticed, not for the first time, how much more gray there was. We were getting older...there was no denying it. We had come a long way from that small town midwestern upbringing ; too far to go back, for sure. But not too far to recall it with fondness.

"Ok" I grunted. "Where? Who?"

"A little place just north of New Orleans....just like where we came from, it's a little no-place, small town, quiet. He had been operating out of there for almost a year when we finally tracked him. New Orleans gave him plenty of menu, but he didn't overdo it...he spread himself around." Mark shrugged his shoulders ; I had a momentary flashback of climbing on those shoulders to look over the backyard fence of a local girl who had a fondness for showers and a

dislike of drapes, back when we were....well....young enough to be excited about things like that. Back when. "Kept the locals from being more than overly concerned. He concentrated on the street folks, visitors from out of town, people without a lot of friends or a lot of money, power, or influence. Police figured it was maybe a serial or spree killer who was working more than one city in the south, kept trying to get a handle but kept coming up with empty baskets. We started monitoring about 5 months ago, and 2 months ago we had enough to send Aberra and Marcos down."

"Good ones," I nodded. I had known both. Sandi Aberra and Pete Marcos were top Hunters, capable and smart. More than a match for anything...or anyone. " So...how did he get past them?"

Mark looked off in the distance over my shoulder, his fingers tapping lightly on the glass tabletop. His expression said he was considering not what to say, but how to say it.

"He didn't get past them." Finally. " He...got *through* them. They're both dead, Nick. And from what Doc Hanready can tell, he had quite a bit of fun with them before they died.

It was like he *knew* they were after him. You know what that means, don't you?".

Oh, yeah, I knew all right. Jesus. Pete had helped me train young Hunters...what? Ten, fifteen years ago. And Sandi and I....well, we spent a night or two listening to old Beatle records together and talking about all the great stuff we were never going to actually do when...whenever...we quit this crap. But we had this one great advantage, that let us believe we *would* at least reach a point where we could quit. And that was...those we hunted didn't know we even existed.

Suddenly, it seemed we had lost, not only 2 good people, but our advantage as well. It was getting a heck of a lot chillier this October morning, and it had nothing to do with the season.

Chapter 2

So...there we were. That was why he had come in person rather than contacting us in the usual fashion.....that is, by phone or email. I had a hunch that the Society hadn't paid for this one.....he had made the trip out of his own pocket, because this time - for he and I anyway - it was personal. And because the rules might be about to change, and he knew only too well how I'd react to the 'corporate' approach to issuing a rules change.

Ok, the Society isn't your typical corporate organization, either...but they have their moments. Founded - well, no one really knows for sure, or if they do, aren't telling - let's say a 'long time ago', with it understood that 'a long time ago' might not mean as far back as the Crucifixion but doesn't miss it by more than a few minutes - originally as a 'secret' society, over

the centuries it grew and adapted itself. No longer secret itself, it's true purpose remains so, however. For the sake of the world population's sanity, it hopefully will remain so. Currently, it is known...to those who care enough to even learn about it..as The Society for the Preservation of Paranormal Information Through Technology - or, SPPITT for short. Sounds like a joke, doesn't it? Well, that's the intention. If you do happen to come across it for some reason, you will treat it as just another of those crackpot groups, hunting for ghosts and goblins and Dracula using 'modern, scientific methods'.

Truth, yeah, be stranger than fiction, young Master ; or, as Shakespeare penned, 'There be more in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Dickhead' - or maybe he didn't pen it quite that way. I, Nick Anders, will take credit for at least part of that one. Because I know, from decidedly personal experience, that if it exists in myth, legend, or nightmare, then it probably exists right here today - right here in River City, if you will, Main Street USA and regions hither and yon. And I'm not the only one who knows it. I work for - and with -

the others who do.

Who might they be? Ah, friend and reader, that is just as secret as what we do. Not much is known of those who started it....it is believed by some of the leaders today to have been possibly some of the Apostles themselves, but that cannot be proved. Is it affiliated with the Vatican? Nope...the Vatican does know of it's existence, though, and indeed at one time the Church was a part of it (though for less than a century, and the Church disassociated itself from the Society for reasons more of a financial nature than ecclesiastical). Today, it is headed, and financed, by some of the most powerful and influential people in the world - in two instances, entire governments - who, no matter how deeply you dig (as if anyone would) could not be found to be officially associated with it at all. What you would find are a small group of musty, dusty, doddering old scholars and crackpots who appear to have oatmeal for dinner - and for brains. I have gotten to know two of them personally....and if their brains are oatmeal, mine are water. Wouldn't want either one as a enemy, I can tell you. And they do have enemies. What I do for them, is hunt - and destroy - those enemies. I am a Hunter.

And through the centuries, Hunters have had one thing in common - their prey has never survived a confrontation. Thus, the prey does not know they have Hunters dedicated to searching them out. Until now, it seemed.

But I am unique among the Society's Hunters...not because I am any better or worse than others, but because I am part of a team of Hunters. Because of a special talent we all share, we are the only Hunter squad the Society has. We work, and are assigned, only as a team. Two of the others started with the Society as solo Hunters, but because of their ability, and Mark's vision, became the foundation of this team when I was added. If you meet any of us, there is a small chance you will recognize us, or think we appear familiar ; if you are a fan of the music of the 50's, 60's, and 70's, that is why. Known publicly as 'Retrorocket', we constantly tour the USA, playing concerts, clubs, or whatever gig we might be assigned. We are booked by, and managed by, the Society....officially, Mark is designated as our manager and booking 'agent', but it is a team effort there too. So, we can be sent where we are needed, when we are needed. All we need do to keep the 'cover' is be what we are...the band. The rest of the time...we Hunt.

Mark let me think in silence for a while, before saying, " You have to tell the others. I have to get back....Abbie has her hands full with little Nick, and her mother's sick, and the Society isn't happy I came to tell you in person. I figure you guessed that much already."

"Yeah, I figured as much", I answered. "Hey, how is your wife and my kid, anyway?".

Mark grinned ; " Darned if I know....but YOUR wife and MY kid are doing great!". We both laughed at the old dig ; we both knew and accepted the fact that, in that area of his life, I envied him. When I first met his new bride, I fell a bit in love with her myself...hard not to. They both knew it, too. When they named their first born child after me, that cemented it. God Himself would need all His powers to get to either one of them, cause He'd have to come through me first. I think God knows it, too, and gets a chuckle out of it once in a while. At least, if He exists, I hope He does. And I have no reason to believe He doesn't exist....not with what else I have seen. Mark went on: "You know Nick, I still wonder why you didn't stay in college, go on and do something else with your life. God knows you had all the tools....Hell, I got in easy, and you

kicked my ass in the entrance exams."

Not a subject I wanted to discuss, and he knew it, but he caught me right ; " I've tried to explain it, Mark, you know that. I can't, not so you can understand it anyway. With all that we did and went through growing up, all the shit we disturbed, you still were always the more serious, more responsible of us. I just always felt there was something - well - more, y'know? Something that went past the home in the suburbs, the bank account, the degree on the wall, the Rotary Club, the new-car-every-year-look-at-me-I'm-successful sort of bullcrap. Something that burned in one's soul, a special flame that took a special water to keep under control. Something that only was appeased when I picked up that guitar, and made it say something. Didn't matter if anyone else heard it, or liked it, or paid me for it....it filled a void that I felt with all my heart and soul, and I couldn't live with myself if I left it empty. Especially after...you know..that time, back home....back when we found out that maybe Saturday Night Frights movies weren't just movies after all.

" I think you understand some of it....I think that's why you are who you are today,

and where you are today. For you, it was the education, the degree, that filled that void a bit. But what really filled it was using it to benefit the Society. And, the rest was filled by Abbie and your family. It could be that is what I need, too, to finally put to sleep for good that beast inside. But it's too late for me for that now...the music, and the work we do, is enough. It's what I am. It's what keeps me from grabbing the thirty ought six, climbing the water tower, and starting to shoot at anything that moves. See? ".

I could see he was thinking about it, but I'd also touched a nerve with that remark about what happened when we were kids. That may have defined the future for both of us ; Lord knows it cut short our childhood. Growing up in a rural midwestern setting in the 60's, the age of 12 was a bit young to discover that there was indeed true and very real evil afoot in the world....and it could touch even little towns in Iowa.

"Ok...fine....you're right," Mark conceded. "I really don't quite get it. Yet, I think I do. Abbie does, bless her heart...and I think that makes me a bit jealous." That last came out behind a sheepish, but challenging grin. "That doesn't mean the next time you visit, I sleep in the

spare room and you go to our room, you thieving sumbitch!! ". By the time he had it all out, we were both laughing hard enough to draw stares.

"Ahhh, all right, I better get back and wake up those more fortunate than myself," I grinned. "Meaning, natch, those without friends like you! On the way, you can fill me in a bit more...like...we have 3 days left here. If the prey isn't here, where do we go and when? ".

Mark gave a quick nod ; "Taken care of, meaning the rest of your gig.", he answered, as we got up and started walking. "Have it arranged for a replacement group to start tonight. The crew are tearing down your stuff as we talk ; they will leave this afternoon. You guys can wait until the morning ; Hell, the rooms are paid for, ya might as well get some rest, maybe check out some of your competition here in Chicago."

Ah...yeah, we were in Chicago...I knew that. Ok...what I knew was it was a straight playing gig, no Hunts. We hadn't had one for a while, actually.

"As to your next 'stop'." he went on, stressing the word 'stop', "it's a nice hotel-lounge in Sioux City." I froze mid-step. So did he....he was expecting it. He wasn't looking at

me...but I knew he saw my expression. "Yeah, Nick....old home week, I guess you could say. Before you say anything, let me finish...". I was shaking my head....there was a clump of ice in my gut, and it wasn't from the October chill nor the coffee. I knew I didn't want to hear the rest.....ah, Hell, deep breath....it wasn't just me, I knew. I nodded.

"Good, " Mark said, a little relieved I could tell. "Ok...the prey isn't there...not exactly. But he works the area in and around....it's perfect for him. Not a major metropolitan city, but big enough for it's area that it attracts a sizeable transient population. Not a lot of jobs, meaning a lot of unemployed, people there one day, gone the next.

"Ah, crap, I don't need to tell you all that. Sheesh, we grew up around there...it's changed since we left, but only on the surface. Anyway, it's all in the file I had sent to your room after you left to meet me. What was most important - I thought - for me to tell you in person besides the news about Pete and Sandi was this: we think we have his 'living' arrangements located. Naturally, as is the habit of his kind, it isn't far from his hunting grounds. We're pretty sure - Hell, we KNOW - he's in Vandemeter."

Chapter 3

I guess I reacted stronger than he thought I would ; I slowly became aware of his hand gripping my left arm - hard - and him loudly asking me to calm down. I know I was swearing ; heck, I was using words I didn't even know I knew. And people were once again starting to look our way. I told myself to stop acting like a damn weak sister, and it helped. Not a lot...but enough.

"Sorry, man," I said. " Jeez, you know how to spring a shock, don'tcha? And here I always thought I was the best of us at that.

"Ok...I know I don't want to know this, either, and I know it's in the file.....but....just what is this one? I guessed he was a old one, and you didn't argue....but that covers a lot of the different types. I'm going to guess again...and you're going to tell me what I don't want to hear, right? Right. Vampire?"

"Yeah, Nick...vampire. And looks like not just any vampire, " Mark confirmed.

"The lab is claiming responsibility for Sandi's and Pete's death, but it isn't anyone's fault, really. Or, it's everyone's. We all blew it. We reviewed the information, concluded it was a standard case, it was a young convert, and teamed Aberra and Marcos for the Hunt. They had done suckers twice before, with others...we figured they'd be in and back in less than a week. We were wrong. They're both dead. We aren't wrong anymore ; and your team was assigned to this at priority level.

" Hey, Nick, I still have friends there too. And, unlike you, I even have family still there. I'm hurting..and I'm scared. But I'm glad, too.....glad I have you, and your bunch. You guys are good....damn, you know that, you know that's why your situation was created by the Society. I was sure you were right for us when I had the chance to bring you on....I never dreamed then, though, that I'd have so much reason to be thankful it all came together like it did. As far as we know, he hasn't touched anyone where he lives - that helped us track him. It's their style. But we all know that can change, and fast. So, it's your baby, now...and remember, this is

new to all of us, because this one knows we're out here, and he knows we - or someone, at any rate - are coming. We don't know if he knows who we are exactly, and yeah, it'd be nice to find out...but not at the cost of the life of another person. Find him, and eliminate him, as quickly as you can. Then, get back to that stupid music stuff of yours...and come visit next Spring for little Nick's birthday, just like last year. 'Cause you know, you asshole, Abbie'd kill me if anything happened to you....not that the world would miss you."

That was about as close as we ever came to admitting what our friendship meant. And we were comfortable with that. About a block from my hotel, a small silver sedan pulled up near us, and Mark went to it and opened the door. Figured....another little foreign jobbie, sheesh, weren't they all now? Typical Society, though...plain but not too plain, a everyday vehicle you might or might not recall seeing anywhere. We said the usual stuff, for the benefit of the driver, and he was gone. Me...I and my memories headed for the hotel, to read a file and brief the bunch of no-accounts I'd been saddled with for the last 15 years.

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I was having trouble keeping my thoughts under control as I walked into our hotel. I glanced at the clock above the lobby desk....it was only 8:30, no sense waking the others for hours ; I should have time for a little more sleep and the file. We had gotten off work at 1:30 in the morning, and by the time we had the breakfast and bullshit session done, it was after 4 before we got to bed....and Mark had me awake at 6:30. So, I checked at the desk - yes, a letter had been delivered for me, and it was in my room. So, up I went. Another tenant was exiting the elevator as I approached, and he remarked " Hey!! Saw you guys last night...man, you're great! I love that stuff. Nice day isn't it?".

"Yeah, if you're a duck. Glad ya enjoyed the show, man," I answered, stepping in the car he'd vacated. He stopped and stared.

"But...uh..it isn't raining...", he stammered.

"Hey, " I grinned. "Who says all ducks have to like water, eh?". The door slid

shut, blocking the expression on his face....the memory of which kept me smiling as I got to my room.

The file was on the desk next to my bed.....I ignored it for now. A shower and a nap was what I needed ; I left a wake-up call for noon, showered, and dived into never-land. Trouble was, memories kept fighting my entrance to the land of nod.

Summer. 1962. Iowa summers can be pleasant, if you're a kid.....Hell on adults with the heat and humidity, though. Mark and I were 12 that summer....I had seniority on him by a month...and it was shaping up to be one of the best summers ever since we had met and become friends back in 59. Lots of sunshine, so lots of baseball.....I had another friend who played guitar and I decided I wanted to learn, so I started on that....it was the season after Maris hit the 61 homers and we were all anxious to see what this season might bring. Popular music was still changing, but we all missed Buddy Holly already then (that never stopped, I think). We were all 'townies', kids who lived in a farming community. Town was less than 400 people...the

school, when in session, had almost that many kids in first through 12th grade. Mark's dad worked for the Union Pacific railroad, and mine for the State of Iowa, but most of our friends were part of farm families, and we spent quite a bit of time with some of them. Mark decided he wanted to learn guitar also, but gave it up before summer was out....he said it was too much work, I told him it was because he was a no-talent loser. That's the way we were then, and now.

So, it was all shaping up to be busy summer, with lots of fun things happening. Until the night of the camp out.

This was something Mark and I did every summer, usually as often as our folks would let us. Take tent and sleeping bags, hike them down by the river (about a 3 city block walk from my back door), and spend the night - sort of a 'guys' night out' before it was really invented. No plans...sometimes we'd just sit and talk until we fell asleep sitting up, other times we'd sneak back into town and try to get into mischief without getting caught (we never did - but it was a close thing a couple times). Of course, we;d tell ghost stories...even though we'd heard them all already, it was still fun. That was how this one started.

It must have been getting along about 1 am ; it was a nice, warm night in July, we had told our ghost stories, discussed the baseball season, the latest episode of Maverick, music, and the books we were reading that summer....and we were wide awake and bored. We had discovered earlier that summer that one of the high school girls who lived in town also had a habit of leaving her shades up on warm summer nights and sleeping nearly nude ; it was, after all, a small town, and there was little activity after dark...everyone was home in bed or gone on vacation. People in farm towns tend to go to bed early and get up early.

Except us, it seemed then. Our little camp outs had gotten us more knowledge of our friends and neighbors than a lifetime of investigation could have. And this night, we decided to see if our unwitting anatomy instructor was conforming to habit. So we did our 'Spy vs. Spy' imitation through town, down the alley behind her house, and shimmied up the six foot fence that separated her back yard from the alleyway. And were rewarded by discovering that she was keeping true to her faith. And that she was awake. Reading by the lamp next to her bed. For a few seconds, we couldn't breathe at all...this was more than we had a right to ever

expect, it was our fantasies fulfilled (ok, at 12, we didn't have any real fancy fantasies, all right? And especially not in a small Iowa farm town.). Then, we realized...both of us at about the same second, I think...that we were not alone, sneaking around out in the warm July night.

Now, you have to realize, in the 2 years we had been doing this (mostly just we two, sometimes with one or two of our other friends), we had never, once, come across anyone walking around outside at night after midnight. People just didn't do it ; they'd be outside in their yards or porches, or visiting, until 10 or 11, but that was it. After midnight, we had the town to ourselves. It was too small a town to have police....occasionally a county sherriff would drive through, usually around 1 or 1:30 ; other than that, even traffic on the state highway that went through the center of town was considered by us to be busy if we saw 2 trucks in a hour period. It was quiet, it was perfect, it was ours. Until this night.

Our first reaction was to scoot and hide....we knew every nook and cranny, and for some reason, never felt fear when we thought we were about to be discovered ; we kept cool, we hid, and we never got caught. But this time, as we sped out of the alley, we both stopped

short....we knew instinctively that we had nothing to fear for some reason. Not yet anyway. We were just surprised, and reacted out of instinct...now we stopped, driven by that same force. Whoever was out there, we knew, either didn't know we were there - or didn't care. That, of course, to 12 year old boys whose kingdom has just been invaded, is almost a insult. Our insinctive 'run away' consciousness changed to a 'hunt, seek, destroy' instinct. So, we started to look for the invader of our territory. Not that we knew what we'd do if we found it - something we sure should have thought about. Hindsight, yah. But we were really lucky we got to have hindsight at all. We just didn't know it right away. Keeping to the shadows (it wasn't a full moon that night, but it was approaching), back we went.

There was no one visible....not in the moonlight anyway. But we sensed a presence in the shadows, on the other side - the house side - of our original target's fence. Now...this was serious. She didn't know we were there (as far as we knew, anyway) but she belonged to us, she was our Goddess and it was our duty to protect her in return for the favors she had (unwittingly) bestowed upon us. Hey..we were 12. We had read Ivanhoe, we had

learned about King Arthur...we may have been perverts, but we were honorable perverts. We were Superman - with a black cape instead of a red one, maybe, but such distinctions didn't occur to us at that moment. We sensed that this presence was not exactly here to have a nice innocent peep session ; we knew she had a boyfriend, whom we also knew was vacationing with his family in Colorado, so the tiny possibility of that was dismissed without even a whisper. No, this was something new and strange....someone we didn't know was out here, with us but not with us, in the dark, where he or she had no right to be. Even worse, he was a lot closer to the object of our nighttime excursion than we were - and this was not to be allowed. But...what to do?

I looked at Mark....moonlight glinted off his eyes as he looked back at me questioningly. In much less time than it takes to tell it, I glanced at the gravel in the alley....reached down and picked up a stone about half the size of my hand, straightened, looked again at Mark, and then at the fence, bouncing the stone in my hand. Not a word was said...he was taller than I by about a inch, but I had the better arm, we both knew....he stooped by the

fence, cupped his hands, I stepped into them and up to his shoulders as he stood - in this way, I was able to see well over the fence without hanging on with both hands, and could get a good purchase to make a toss. Which I did...right through the upper glass portion of her parents' window, about 8 feet to the left of hers. At the sound of breaking glass, I leaped, hit the ground running, and Mark and I lit out of there like Hell itself was on our tails.

It was.

Right after the glass breaking, we heard what sounded like a cross between a high, stormy wind and a yowl of an enraged dog. We actually felt a wind....a hot, nasty, oily-feeling wind which had suddenly sprung up at our backs, like the Devil himself was breathing down our necks. And a voice...maybe a voice...nothing like we had ever heard, even in the horror movies we always watched....sexless, we thought later....right then, we were too scared to stop, look, or listen as our survival instincts had sprung into full operation. All we knew was that it was still behind us, and we intended with all our 12 year old might to keep it that way. Later, when we compared notes, we thought it wasn't a voice at all. That was still our instinct at work...the one

that keeps you sane. But we knew then, just as we knew years later, that it had been a voice....and it wasn't human. and it was royally pissed....but just a bit gleeful, too, as if it enjoyed the fact that 2 kids had spoiled it's fun. What it sounded to me like it said was "Children!! Bad children!! Brave children! Run, children, run....I may let you live.". Coulda just been the blood pounding in my ears, though. Except I knew better.

We ran for my house...it was closest...and we made it, yes. Obviously, or I wouldn't be relating this to you now. We hit my back porch at full speed, and it's a wonder we didn't just go through the screen door. We didn't - somehow I had the presence of mind to open it first..but we did nearly break each other's shoulders by trying to go through the door at the same time. How we kept from waking my folks or my sister, I haven't a clue...but they slept through it. Like I said...we could be fast and quiet....it's a talent, you see. Standing on my screened-in back porch, panting as only a 12 year old who has just run almost a mile full speed can, we stared out into my back yard with eyes that had to have been as big as baseballs, to see if we had indeed been pursued. And we pretty much agreed later that we must have been full of crap, acting like a

couple of pansies, and we sure weren't going to tell anyone, ever, about how we ran from shadows.

Except we both saw our shadow....standing in the middle of my back yard, with eyes as red as hot coals and teeth that were impossibly white and sharp, looking almost 10 feet tall and wearing nothing but what looked like the hide of a bear, and smiling....smiling like it was seeing a favorite loved one, with whom it shared a great secret.

And...then....it just disappeared.

Chapter 4

Well, that pretty much put a stop to our camp outs. Of course, we denied it all to ourselves...we were tired, overexcited, we were really scaredy-cats and got spooked by a dog, or a squirrel, or a bat. Strangely, we did not become after-dark-shy, as one might expect. But for about a year after, we seldom did anything at night unless we had a crowd. Our unknowing goddess eventually graduated, and moved on....and we moved on. I continued to pursue my dream of playing music, Mark began to develop interests in business law, but we stayed close until High School graduation. Mark went on to college to study law ; I gave college a shot, but found it boring, dropped out, avoided the draft, got the old band back together, and spent the next decade or so fooling myself into thinking I was making a living playing music. Well, guess I did...I didn't starve. Too often. That brought us to the 80's, - I hadn't mentioned that yet, had I? - and the life on the road of a run-of-the-mill band was wearing mighty thin. We had strayed into several different themes, trying to hit on one that would keep us working, finally settling on

country about 75 or 76. But I was on my fourth band - the original had long since broken up - and this one was showing signs of becoming quickly extinct. I was tired, disgusted, and disillusioned. Nearing 30, and nothing to show for it but a guitar, a amplifier, and a beat-up 1966 Ford. Didn't even have a permanent address ; if pushed, I still used my folks' address. A succession of women, none lasting longer with me than a few months. But I could tell my regular mistress - who resided in a bottle with a seal on it that didn't remain unbroken long after I got my hands on it - that I was doing what I loved, and by God I was happy and independent. And it was partly true...because when the music started, I was walking in the clouds, and nothing, but nothing, could bring me down. It was between those times that was getting to me.

That was the state I was in...well, I was in the State of Iowa, to be exact....one August night in a little motel in Cherokee, Iowa. It was about 4 am, the other guys - a husband and wife whose band it was, and the drummer....had been asleep in their own rooms for a while. I was working on a pint of Southern Comfort and a bottle of Dr. Pepper (don't knock it...I mean, it accomplishes the purpose, and it tastes great) when I heard a car pull up outside my room. Not

a biggie....the knock on my door was. Spilled better than a ounce....but I managed to get through my mellowing head that I wasn't wanted anywhere that I knew about, and I had no women friends in this area that might have jealous men around, or who figured I needed a lesson in monogamy, so I figured 'what the Hell' and opened the door. To Mark.

" You are a hard guy to track down " were his first words to me in over 10 years. But I wasn't about to let him know he had rattled me.

" Really? ' I asked, putting as bewildered tone into my voice as I could. " Gosh, I've been here...oh....let's see...all night. The mansion's being remodelled, but I told the butler where I'd be. " .

" You're drunk " he grinned.

" Hmmm...as a statement, that's very astute, " I said. " But as a question, I find it insulting. What was my name again? ". I pulled my guitar case off the nearest...the only...chair - at least, I think it was a chair, though I hadn't had the courage to actually sit in it - and told him he might as well sit, I'd be up in about 7 hours, and to help himself to a Southern Comfort and Dr.

Pepper cocktail. He made a gagging sound. I called him a uncouth Philistine. The amenities over, we spent a bit of time getting caught up, and then....over the course of the next two days...I learned about the Society.

Mark knew I'd be receptive, because of our experience back in 62 ; most folks would be calling for the white-coated attendants if they heard the stories I heard that week from my old friend. He had been pretty successful after college, had changed his major from Law to Business Administration, and had been working pretty nicely with one of the Fortune 500 companies when he had been contacted. They felt they needed someone with his reputation for organization and business 'savvy', as they called it. They also knew...somehow...about 1962. He thought it was probably from college...he 'might' have unburdened himself, at one time or another, while 'under the influence'. No matter....he accepted with very little thought, because he knew that, somehow, that was what he had been meant to do. He even had learned what we possibly had witnessed, and interrupted, that night...though he wasn't positive. " There are certain demon satyrs", he explained. "They really do exist, Nick. From what I've learned, I think that was what

we came across that night. We interrupted his fun...but they have the reputation of being playful, and I think we caught one on one of his 'good' nights.". Interesting. I didn't ask what they might be like on one of their bad nights. I was already figuring I'd find out soon enough. Mark went on to explain about Hunters, what they did and how, then explained that they had currently at least 3 other Hunters who had been professional musicians, and it had given him a idea that the Society gave him permission to try to set up. And that, if you're still with me, is how it got to here and now, 15 plus years later. Pretty good years, overall....I had found a purpose to my life and what I had done with it, and yeah, had some pretty decent companions to make some music with. When we weren't otherwise occupied ; and since we were unique among the Hunters and used only for certain types of hunts, we only got otherwise-occupied about 4 or 5 times a year. The rest of the time, we made a - well - very nice living, thank you, doing what we liked to do...play music. The Society paid well...and had excellent fringe benefits. And...we got a month off every year....it wasn't always the same month, but hey, one can only gripe about just so much, right?

I guess I made it to nap-land after all, as the purring of the phone on the nightstand brought me hazily awake. Right on time with the wake-up ; nice service. But then, everything about this place was nice ; the Society didn't scrimp on it's people, gotta give 'em that. Still, though, even after all these years, I once in a while missed the days of the good old never-functioning quarter-in-the-slot bed massager units, the plastic furniture, the dresser mirror that made you look either 25 feet tall and thin as a rail or 1 foot tall and wide as the New Jersey Turnpike. And the bathroom showers that sometimes provided better water pressure from the toilet stool than the shower nozzle. Anyway, long ago....besides, if I wanted to, I could stay in one of those rather than the pre-booked places. I just didn't want to. This room smelled faintly of disinfectant, but a faint, nicely scented deodorizer dominated. We all had suites, and they were nicely furnished, although evidence of the old motel cost-cutting days could still be found if you looked close enough. I didn't bother.

I ordered 3 pots of good French Roast sent up, asked the girl to please send wake up calls to Rooms 217, 218, 219, 220, and 221 (I was in 222) , then pulled up a nice,

partially padded chair to the adequate desk provided, and opened the file left for me that morning. Yes, there were 6 of us - some consider that overkill for the kind of music we played, and it has a righteous price tag to go with it, but we were good - and Mark and the Society took care of that part anyway. All we had to do was BE good. With this bunch, not a problem. Mark had it pegged, though how he figured I'd work out is a mystery to me. Thinks he knows me. Smart alecky old bugger.

Ariane (that's Ariane Methene) and Bill Ross were the original 2 Hunters who had music backgrounds ; a third - McKeever Jennings - had just been brought in prior to Mark looking me up. We 4 formed the basis for the original idea, and I have to admit, as I learned more about the entire operation, it was a good one. Ariane was a singer - a damn good one, could wrap her voice around almost anything country or blues, and was a natural for a lot of the classic pop and rock stuff - and keyboard artist. Bill was a drummer, raised on the acid rock of the 60's but idolized the old big band drummers, and he was nothing short of awesome. If something had a beat, he could play it. I'd seen him do drum rhythms to the sound of street

traffic passing by. He, too, could sing with the best of them. McKeever - he, and we, preferred just Mac - was a bass player, with a talent for bass riffs that constantly amazed us. He and Bill provided the rock we swirled our stuff around, and I swear, if Mac had taken up lead guitar, there'd have been no room for me at all. And, to hear him sing, you'd swear you'd heard his records somewhere.....he could do Elvis and Bobby Darin tunes so you would swear you were hearing the originals.

The final two members had been added within a couple months after my initial insertion into the Society. Louis DeBerg played sax....according to him, he had been born with the reed in his mouth, and if you hear him, you won't argue. He and I were the only ones in the group who didn't sing. Lou didn't need to, and, it was best for our reputation if I didn't.

I saved Melanie for last. Melanie Scott-Touel. Yeah, pronounced 'towel'. When we first heard her name, we all were sort of stunned, and on the verge of the usual jokes ; I asked her if Scott was her maiden name, and she had done the two-name thing so popular recently, and remarked what a coincidence that made it. She smirked...you can't call it anything else, she was

all of 5 foot one and 110 pounds, with a face so cute you wanted to frame it, or use it as a model for a artist to paint the perfect elf face, and her grins were really more smirks...and said "Nope. I just liked the sound and the absurdity of it,, so I had it changed. But yeah, originally, it was just Scott.". We knew then she was one of us, even before we heard her. She was in even if she couldn't sing or play a instrument. Except...she was also a great vocalist, and could play guitar, bass, and percussion with the best. She and I would often alternate on guitar solos, and had worked out some great dual guitar lines for a lot of our material. With her short, reddish-brown hair and great, mischievous blue eyes to complete the package, she was a natural crowd favorite. She could charm even the worst drunken heckler ; although, we didn't have many of them. People enjoyed us, they loved the music, the way we played it, and the memories it brought. When we played, you had to be happy. If you weren't, we'd kill you. No, I'm not serious.

Well, not *too* serious.

I figured I had at least a half hour to an hour to go over the file ; the coffee arrived about 10 minutes after I ordered it, and by then I was absorbed in what I was reading.

"File Date: September 15, 1995

Subject: Death of Hunters Sandi Aberra and Pete Marcos

Object: Suspected advance knowledge by prey of Hunters' presence

Prey: Adam Brissle (possibly originally Adolphus Brasillius)

Originally reported by agents within the New Orleans Police Dept., a series of brutal and seemingly related murders came to our local agents attention as possibly the work of a young, recently converted vampire, probably converted within the century. The killings evidenced haste and bloodlust, and were quite sloppy, the sign of a young convert. (See Training File #72-1078). Police were having difficulty in obtaining enough evidence to even have a suspect, and the pattern of the killings suggested vampire activity. This was originally reported in July, and New Orleans agents were assigned to canvas the area surrounding the city for further information, which they were able to obtain by the end of August. A small town about 18 miles

northeast of New Orleans, Uthana, being of less than 10,000 population (actual population 1300) had little to draw new residents, but in April of this year had seen the arrival of one Adam Brissle, who had opened a realty office in the town. This garnered some suspicion at first, but residents soon discovered that he seemed to do a thriving business, just not locally. As the town is mostly inhabited by several generations of the same families, this met with their approval...he seemed no threat to them, and he went out of his way to assure those who asked that there were no development plans in the area, and that, if they wanted to buy or sell property, he'd be glad to help, but he would not be contacting any of them. As they had no desire to see the town become larger, they accepted him from that point and thought little of it. By July, many of them even forgotten that he was a new citizen of the town, and things proceeded normally for them. This is the classic arrangement used by modern vampires, believed to be part of the instinct inherited when they become converted ; locate near to but not within a well populated area with a lot of non-resident traffic and high incidents of homeless and transient persons.

It is believed he started his feeding shortly after arriving in Uthena, confining himself to mostly rural areas around New Orleans, then striking in New Orleans itself about the beginning of June. Once this had been determined, on September 10th, Hunters Aberra and Marcos were brought together and dispatched to the area to locate and eliminate the prey, if he indeed turned out to fit the profile. Both Hunters were widely experienced with several varieties of prey, and, with Hunter Anders in 1981, had trained several new Hunters who have gone on to distinguish themselves in their own careers. Two better Hunters could not have been chosen for this routine task.

It is still not known completely what occurred on or about the evening of September 13th. It is known from the Hunters' own notes left in their rooms that they had indeed established that Adam Brissle was a vampire, and responsible for most, if not all, of the murder investigations being conducted by the New Orleans police. A vocal report from Hunter Marcos on that evening, via encrypted land line, stated that he and Hunter Aberra had enough information to

be able to locate and eliminate the prey before morning of the 14th. Nothing more was heard from them, until we were notified by our agent within the New Orleans Police Dept. that their mutilated bodies had been discovered in a old warehouse just near the docks along the Mississippi River. There was ample evidence that both had been tortured severely and painfully, and that they probably had both taken hours to expire. No weapons had been found at the scene, and there was considerable blood, indicating that the prey had not fed on them. (Photos attached).

There was also a note, found upon Hunter Aberra's remains (photocopy attached), which implied that Brissle knew, or suspected, that he was being hunted. It read in part ' These were interesting, and even almost adequate adversaries. I urge you to send more, as I have grown bored.' Immediate attempts to confirm that Brissle was still in Uthena were undertaken, but he had abandoned the area. At this time, there is no trace. All resources will be activated to trace this prey's whereabouts, and obtain more information on his background. End

Report."

The next sheet went on:

"Addendum to Report of 15th September

Date: October 2nd 1995

Subject: Adam Brissle, Further background and information

Subsequent to the events of September 14 this year, a concerted effort was initiated by Society resources to discover as much detail on the subject as could be traced. Contacts world-wide were alerted, and immediately some possible relevant information was discovered. Hunter D. Trazcyk in Prague recalled a suspected case of vampirism in his area approximately 10 years ago, involving one 'Alexei Balynishin', but several weeks' investigation revealed no concrete evidence on the subject. A former Hunter, now a Society agent within the

Vatican, recalled some literature in Vatican vaults he had seen several months ago, concerning one 'Aramis Billetti', who had aroused some suspicion in Italy but again, there was not enough evidence to assign a Hunter. The interesting point about this information was the date of the report ; it was done in the year 1578.

This information led to assigning several agents to begin searching Society records, which of course date back to nearly 800 A.D. though are mostly copies of originals. One observant agent noticed that the rolls of Hunters listed one 'Adolphus - or Adolfis - Brassilius', whose term of service covered the years 1322 to 1335 A.D. The reason for discontinuance of service was listed as 'unkown'. No further information was located, and no record of said Hunter's activities were found. This is not unusual in itself, due to the length of time involved and the margin for error contained in records dating back that far, but we feel it is enough to presume, for our own peoples' safety, that there is a very good chance this may be the same person. This would, of course, be unheard of by us to this point, as most prey is eliminated

before they can exist more than 2 centuries. This would be the first known instance, since the Society began keeping records, of a vampire existing for this length of time without elimination - and the first known instance of a former Society member being converted, or 'turned'. If the subject is, in fact, one and the same as we are presuming, that would provide the reason why his survival this long could occur. And would explain why the prey seemed to know he was, or would be, hunted.

This is of even greater concern when coupled with the fact that he has been able to avoid our detection all this time, then suddenly begin to act as if he were inviting detection. We cannot presume he has just grown tired of his own existence and longs for extermination, as Hunters Aberra and Marcos would have provided him with that opportunity. Although it is to be remembered that these prey have a great survival instinct, that may be inhibiting him from accomplishing what a human might consider 'assisted suicide'. Regardless of his motives, we consider this Hunt to be of the highest priority, with no effort spared to render the

prey exterminated.

A recent report from the area of Northwestern Iowa, in the United States, from alerted personnel, indicate a sharp increase in livestock disease and death in and around the area of Sioux City, Iowa ; it seemed to begin around September 20 to the 25th. Due to the nature of this action, both a agent and a Hunter from the area were dispatched. Hunter Terry Blackfield, from Bettendorf, Iowa, and agent Barbara Bloodworth of Vermillion, South Dakota spent 3 days in the vicinity. They reported that, in the small town of Vandemeter, Iowa, (population 435), located about 15 miles North of Sioux City, a new resident had appeared September 17th, opening a small Antiques establishment. This new resident, one 'Andrew Blasingame', had already become well-accepted and well-liked in the town, and could often be seen with customers not from the area, or leaving overnight on 'buying' trips. Town leaders are encouraged by his arrival, as they feel this could bring outside business their way, and thus he has fit in quickly in a environment not always welcoming to outsiders. As to the livestock

problems, all have been associated with major blood loss or anemic reaction. This has led local authorities to suspect a vampire bat infestation, though this is unheard of in this area due to climate.

We are convinced Andrew Blasingame is indeed the same Adam Brissle, and has avoided human blood in the area (as far as we know) thus far for reasons known only to himself. It is known that vampires can be nutritionally maintained just as well on animal blood as human blood, and many can escape suspicion and detection for decades by adhering to such a diet. The problem arises within the very nature of the vampiric instinct, which craves the excitement of stalking and taking humans as victims. Also thus far, there have been no livestock attacks in the vicinity of Vandemeter, so no immediate suspicion has been raised there.

Hunter Blackfield has requested to be assigned to this Hunt. It is our recommendation, however, that the Anders team be assigned to this, due to the facts available.

This, we feel, is a prime instance of the value of such a team, and the unique nature of the Hunt would seem to require a team of Hunters who are totally familiar with working with each other, which is why this team was formed. Hunter Blackfield has been requested to contact the Anders team on their arrival, but to hold off until then. He understands that it will be up to Anders and his team if he is to be included, a evaluation Mr. Anders can make upon arrival. We have no suggestion for or against Hunter Blackfield assisting. He has a steady and highly-appreciated background as a Hunter, and has performed all assigned tasks with diligence and uncommonly high intelligence.

It is therefore ordered that the Anders team be relieved of all current assignment and immediately placed into position in the area. Whatever assistance is required from the commanding structure will be immediately forthcoming without question.

End Report"

Holy Shit. Fifteen years is a eyelash compared to centuries, but in fifteen years, I had not seen this type of priority assigned to anything. I was starting to feel like a character actor suddenly thrust into a starring role he didn't want. It was like I'd been sleepwalking my whole life - but I was awake now.

Chapter 5

I expected to have my first visitor soon, and wasn't disappointed ; the door opened, and Bill Ross slid in.

"You ever knock?" I grinned at him as he slouched his 6 foot 2 inch muscularly athletic frame across the suite and flopped all 220 pounds of it onto my still unmade bed. "See any of the others? Have some coffee..if I left any. I'll call for more...but if you guys want anything else, you order it, and charge it to your own rooms, thanks.."

"I'm always hoping I'll catch ya with Melanie or Ariane, ya shrimp." he yawned, shaking his light brown mane - and mane it was, too. "And yeah, saw Mac in the hall...he loooked lost, but he always does. I think he's still trying to figure out who ordered the wake up call for him. I'd bet Lou is up already and down in the coffee shop.". Nuts. Lou would do that...he seldom slept as late as the rest of us.

"I knocked on Ariane's and Melanie's doors...they're both on their way," he went on, sounding bored, but I knew he wasn't. "And I told Mac to run down and check the coffee shop before coming over. Can I nap now?". He was grinning, and he looked wide awake, but he wasn't going to ask until the rest were here.

"Well, since you're here, and to keep you from pounding on the furniture like they were a set of Ludwigs, you might as well read this now, " I said, and tossed him the file. "I'm going out on the balcony and have a smoke. And, thanks for thinking about Lou. My mind is still bit loggy, I didn't get a lot of sleep.

"And hey, pass it on to the others as they come in if I ain't back yet, ok?" He nodded, I grabbed my pack and a fresh cup of coffee, and stepped out onto the balcony. It had turned into a beautiful Fall day, warm and full of sunshine. I needed that, to help me relax and get my thoughts together. This was my Hunter group, and Ariane's band...we divided it that way not because we had to, but because it kind of settled that way from the start. Sort of a unspoken arrangement. So, when I had them meet me like this, they knew it was a Hunt. Band meetings

and rehearsals were called by Ariane, who I heard come in about then. As always, even her speaking voice was pure pleasure to listen to.

"Hey, Nick," I heard her say, then laugh, "Damn....you been taking steroids? Oh, it's you Bill...shit, I thought this was Nick's room. Ok, what'd you do with him? Skin him and make a new drum set?"

"Not a bad idea," he rumbled, "But no such luck...heck, I've gotten used to that awful cacaphony he calls guitar playing. I need him now to even keep a beat. Naw, he's out on the balcony, trying to prove the Surgeon General wrong about smoking. Hell, he'll probably do it, too. Here, start on this, I'll give ya the rest when I finish. Hey, guys, about time!". With that, I heard the others arrive, greetings all around in the same manner. I decided to give them a bit more time, and lit a second cigarette. I heard Melanie's light, teasing tones ask "What? No lunch? Ok, who's buying? I'm starved!" and Mac laughing "Damn, girl, where do you put food in that tiny container you use for a body?". Mac was about 5 foot 10, and close to 200 pounds, with light hair and blue eyes and a smile that'd melt Scrooge himself.

"I have great digestion," Melanie laughed. " Heck, I crap turds bigger than you." Everyone was laughing now, except Bill. I knew that meant he'd finished the file...and probably looked at the photos. Melanie went on, " Sheesh...don't we have a rehearsal in a couple of hours? I gotta eat first.". There was some further laughter, but it died out pretty quickly as Bill spoke up.

"Don't think we need worry about a rehearsal today, " he said quietly. " Right, Nick? Come on, get your butt back in here before we all come out there and smoke your cigs for ya.".

Lou hadn't said anything yet, as I came back in. He was sitting at the desk, watching Ariane's face as she finished the file and handed it to Mac. As always, his face showed the world a calm, imperturbable front. He was one of the coolest people I'd ever known, nothing seemed ever to rattle him. But as he was watching her expression, I noticed just the tiniest crease forming around his eyes....at 5 foot 8 and 170 pounds, he would have been the shortest male member of the group if not for me. His brown eyes and thinning, wispy blonde hair gave

him the overall appearance of a college lit professor - which, in fact, he could have been. If he hadn't been so seduced by music. Ariane, finished, handed the file to Melanie. Both Lou and Mac, sensing a difference, changed positions so they could read over her shoulder.

I still hadn't said anything. Ariane was looking at me intently ; Bill was drumming some pattern heard only by him on the mattress of my bed, and watching his hands. I attempted a smile at Ariane....she could see past it, and remained intently watching me. Ariane was, one had to admit, in addition to being one of the best female vocalists you will ever hear, a absolute pleasure for a man to look at. At 5'10" and just slightly on the plump side, with sharply defined cheek bones standing out in a heart-shaped face below startlingly blond hair, she presented a striking appearance to go with the voice. Add long, shapely 'dancer' legs and well toned upper and fore-arms, and one could change that to strikingly sexy. All that covered a mind as sharp as anyone's I had ever known, and a toughness that belied the sexuality. And the ability to use both when she needed to. She was the prefect leader for the band part, and none of the males ever presented any sign of resentment. If she suggested something, we went out of our way to

accomplish it ; if we couldn't - and that was rarely - she never got angry or upset, but shrugged it off with a laugh and went on to something else. In truth, I think we all - even Mel - were just a bit in love with her. I knew, if anything ever happened to me, she'd step right in and the Hunter portion of the group would go on unchanged. Looking around at these people, whom I had gotten to know and care about over the past 15 years, I knew I was a damn lucky man. I also knew that I - nor any of the others if they felt the same - would ever admit it. To each other, anyway. That was part of what made it all so special. None of us had to say it. We knew it, and accepted it, and were thankful for it.

They all had finished by now; the file was back on the desk, and carefully closed so the photos were not visible. I walked over to the desk, and parked as much of my 5' 6" stocky frame as I could on it's corner. I called down for more coffee to be sent up, and whatever they recommended for lunch ; then, I picked up the file and tapped it against my knee. I looked at each of them, sitting quietly - except for Bill, who was still doing his hand drums on the bed - and tried to grin. Lou, however, spoke first.

"Ain't this a kick in the head?" he stated ; it wasn't a question the way he said it.

"So, this has never happened before?". I shook my head.

"Not as far as anyone with the Society knows, no" I replied. "This is a whole new ball game, with a new set of rules."

"Ok," Mac spoke up. " Obviously, we're the logical choice here. But I only see it in our numbers - none of us has dealt with a Hunt like this before. Hell, we're as much rookies to this as any of them. Right?". I nodded,

"As far as I know," I said. "We can keep in mind....they bungled the information once. They could have again. But I wouldn't count on it."

"You knew both of them pretty well, didn't you, Nick?" This was Ariane, and I'd expected this. "You and Sandi, in fact...weren't you two pretty close early on?". That got everyone's attention, even Bill's. "I mean -"

"I know what you mean, Ariane," I said, interrupting as politely as I knew how.

"Answer is, yes, we were. I was still fairly new to all of this, and she and I found several things in

common, and she helped me over a couple of my initial rough spots. Also, the experiences we had as kids...you know we all had them, it's why we were approached to become Hunters...but, hers and mine were very similar. We got to be pretty good friends, and shared some good times. So did I and Pete. You could say they were my brother and sister when I needed that...before you guys all came along. And, I know what you're thinking.

"You're thinking I may see this as a personal Hunt, and somehow needlessly endanger all of you or myself. All I can tell you is this : yes, it has a personal aspect to it. Just as much as if it had been any of you it happened to. But what we do is dangerous under the best of conditions ; these conditions don't qualify as 'best' by any means, and I am perfectly aware of that. We will handle this as safely as we possibly can, even if it means I stay behind on the kill if that serves the purpose best. The goal is to terminate this bastard, not get any more of our friends and colleagues killed. Best I can tell you."

Lou was nodding, and Ariane finally gave a small smile. "I knew it," she said. "I just knew I, and everyone else, would feel better hearing you say it.". We were all interrupted by

Melanie, jumping up and clapping her hands as she ran to a knock at the door.

"Lunch!! It's about time, " she yelled, and I could feel things settling back to normal as the food was brought in.

I watched the others as they attacked the lunch cart that had been delivered, going over in my mind what else we needed to cover before leaving tomorrow. I knew the travel and gig/lodging arrangements would be sent to us later today, so that part was taken care of. Plus, Ariane would want to go over music selection for the new gig, so she had to know where we were going and the type of place we'd be working in. I'd give her what Mark had told me so far, and the rest hopefully would be delivered soon. While I was doing this, I became aware that Ariane had sat down next to where I had transferred myself onto the big double bed.

"Not eating?" I smiled. "You didn't have all that much at breakfast.". She grinned,

shook her head.

"In a minute," she answered. " You're something else, Nick, you know that? You continuously amaze all of us with the stuff you notice ; you're like, I don't know, a Mother Hen, or one of those old World War 2 sergeants writers always put into books. You're really the glue - whether you know it or not - that has kept us the way we've been for all this time. With all the talent, all the ability, all the knowledge that each of us has, it's always you we look to for guidance, advice, and protection." I was shaking my head, holding out my hand to try to stop her. Might as well try to stop a third level Demon with a marshmallow. In fact, that might be easier. Third level Demons have a strange fondness for marshmallows.

"No, no, just listen for a minute, " she admonished. " I actually felt bad for bringing up what I did about Sandi, but I knew they all needed to know you had a handle on this. It's a strange life we lead, isn't it? We deal with things no other person in their right mind would or could ever accept, yet, we go about our regular lives daily just like anyone else. Or...well, being a band, *almost* like everyone else.". She laughed quietly. "Anyway, we are each others' moral and

soul support. But sometimes, we just need a reminder of exactly how much we - all of us - mean to each other.". With that, she reached out one of those lovely arms, and gave me a quick hug.

Hugging. It was still something I never felt quite right doing, but somehow we had gotten into the habit after about 6 months together ; the first time was after our first Hunt as a team, which ended up being a bit of a close call for Mac. We now engaged in it pretty regularly - except for Bill, who we wouldn't allow to hug any of us for fear our heads might pop off - and while I still wasn't totally comfortable with it, it seemed right for this bunch. With Bill, though, it was usually a pat on the back or a handshake. He didn't seem to mind....I think he wasn't totally comfortable with the idea, either. I spoke, looking straight into Ariane's mesmerizing green eyes.

"One of these days, you're gonna forget, and be standing up when you hug me," I winked.

"Not a chance!" she laughed. "I'd never get your head out of my boobs!". And she hugged me again, then jumped up to see what food the others had left. The others had overheard the last part of our conversation, and were all laughing around bites and swallows.

"Nicky, Nicky," Mac chided. "This is the 90's, my man. Men are supposed to 'get in touch' with their feminine side, so all the girls don't feel so left out by us macho studs."

"Nick doesn't HAVE a feminine side," Bill offered, smiling.

"Sure he does," threw in Melanie. "Only it's Lesbian, and it only wants women for sex, too!". I threw up my hands in defeat....I was laughing too hard to say anything anyway. As it died down, Lou reached over and handed me a plate.

"Here," he offered. "Took the liberty of fixing you up. Sandwich is beef...actually tastes like beef. Salad is excellent. And try some of this juice...nectar of the Gods. Goes down like the sweet sound of a tenor sax playing 'Georgia On My Mind' on a empty street at 3 A.M. on a warm June morning.". He was right.

"All right," I began, as we finished up and were relaxing with our drinks. "First, you've all seen the file, so, you know where we are going. I don't think all of you know, but some of you do, that I grew up in that area.". The expression on Melanie's and Lou's faces told me I was right, this was new to them. "Ok, it isn't the first time a Hunter has had a Hunt in his home

area, won't be the last. I just want to let you know, I haven't been there in years, and I know it has changed a lot ; so, most of it will be as new to me as it will to you.". I saw nods, so went on.

"All I know right now, gig-wise, is that we are booked into what Mark called a 'nice' Hotel-Lounge in Sioux City. In my day, all that signified was that at the nicer places they'd wait for you to get drunk and pass out before they rolled you and raped your companion.

"All right, hey, that was a joke!" I laughed, when I saw the raised eyebrows. "But, in those days, even the better places were about 90% country for dancing and entertainment. Sioux City is good sized, but it's no New York, St. Louis, Denver, Dallas, or Los Angeles. It hit it's boom as a cow town, and as far as I know, it's main business is still the transporting of grain and beef. Still, times and tastes change. Just thought we should all be aware, so we can prepare our sets accordingly.". Ariane nodded approvingly, already forming set lists in her mind.

"Next," I continued, " we won't be leaving until tomorrow, but Mark already arranged for our replacement to start here tonight, so, we have a free night..." . That brought smiles, fist-pumping, and applause. Gee...tough crowd. "And," I went on, "our equipment has

already been torn down and is on it's way, so, if Ariane wants a rehearsal, we'll have to arrange for some temp stuff and get a empty area from the hotel. There is plenty of time. Ariane?". I looked at her....so did the others. She was acting thoughtful, eyes closed, legs crossed, foot tapping, one finger motionless at her chin...she made us wait a good 30 seconds, then opened her eyes and grinned.

"Hell," she said. "I oughtta make you slackers work....but, there was this hunk in the crowd last night, and I'll bet he has a thing this I-----".

"Ok, and you're gonna try to find out," I interrupted as her hands spread apart to illustrate ; laughing, I jumped ahead, "And I think she has a great idea....so, tonight, we party!!". Again, this was met with applause, plus cheers. Easy to please, this bunch. "But...before we get to the serious business of enjoying ourselves, let's sit back and review some things that may come in handy when we start our other little party. Ok?". This was met with nods and sighs and groans, but a new attentiveness I hadn't seen since our first year together. And we got started.

Chapter 6

Vampires. Since you are reading this, you probably already have some familiarity with the myth, the legend. Through the centuries, the Society has gathered quite a encyclopedia of knowledge on the real things. We had only dealt personally with 2 in our 15 years as a team, and both proved to be exasperatingly easy prey, so a refresher course was needed. We combined and compiled what we had.

It really proved to be massively little, considering the centuries of research done by the Society and it's various members. Some of the more outstanding things, most helpful to us as Hunters, concerned exactly what they were, and what might cause them to do what they do. A lot of the information is buried in legend and myth, and it has taken these centuries to dredge the facts out of the fog of superstition.

Are they Undead? Basically, it's as good a description as any. They are not alive as we normally consider that state. Yet, they are not truly dead, since dead is often considered to be a state where humans don't get up, walk around, and eat or drink anything - blood included. The current theory - in existence for a considerable amount of time as the Society measures time - is that they are trapped in a state between life and death, kept functioning by the vampire host. What exactly this host consists of is still not known positively, but our modern researchers feel that it is a type of virus, carried by the blood of the parent vampire. How it originally was created and put to use in a functioning human is beyond knowledge. Unless we get one to come forward willingly who might happen to know. We hope there are none that old. It's a scary thought. But they can create beings like themselves, this is known. It is rare, very rare, which accounts for how few in number we Hunters have to deal with, and legend/myth has the procedure pretty close to reality as far as we have been able to determine.

By nearly draining a human of their entire blood supply, to the point of death but

just short of it, then forcing the drained victim to drink of the vampire's now re-circulated supply (and force it must be, as the human at this point cannot function on their own and must be force-fed), the victim undergoes a transformation to the vampiric state. This takes approximately 24 to 36 hours. And, it is not always successful, thus reducing the number of vampires further. Generally, it is believed that there are fewer than 15 to 20 in the entire world at any one time. If the process is successful, a new vampire is full-born. Contrary to legend, there is no tie whatsoever between the parent and the child vampire. The newly created vampire is a entity to itself, and in fact, will often become the parent's chief competitor for food. In many cases, it will also become the parent's enemy. Vampires, just like some humans, do not care for competition, especially for food, and do not care at all for enemies who know who they are. This is why it is rarely done.

But done it is, or there would be no vampires today. Why it is done is another of the questions we have been unable to answer. It is possible that vampires do retain some human traits other than physical ones. Perhaps, after a certain point, they long for companionship that

does not arouse the blood hunger in them. Though another question arises here. That is, why do they seem to prefer humans in the first place? We have discovered that a vampire can exist quite nicely on the blood of any mammal, animal or human. If one were to adhere to using animals only as it's food supply, it could actually reasonable exist forever with little or no chance of discovery. This was vitally important to our current situation, and we knew it. But for some reason, vampires seem to be unable to resist stalking and attacking humans. Considering some of the other areas where fact differentiates from myth, this becomes even more strange.

Vampires who feed regularly, say every 36 hours, can exist in normal society and pass quite nicely as human. Sunlight will not bother them, and in fact, they can tan or even burn as anyone else. But they need to feed regularly. Effects of a good feeding will last the host up to 48 hours in some vampires, but they will soon evidence the more familiar vampire characteristics if unfed too long past that time. Pale skin, severe reaction to sunlight, unable to vocalize clearly as the lungs stop working, heartbeat slows. Fed well, a vampire's human bodily functions become active, even reproductive organs to some extent. As the effects of the feeding wear off,

those functions again begin to cease, as if in death. The brain, however, remains active at all times. It is believed this is where the vampiric host, or virus, centers itself.

This all being the case, in modern times it is perhaps not unusual that vampires prey more on humans. There are more humans. But this was not always so, and for centuries, animal prey was much more accessible to the vampire than human. Yet, they chose humans. It is known that the vampiric host does create many enhancements in the new vampire, such as strength, agility, speed, sense of smell and touch, and cunning.

Vampires are not necessarily intelligent...conversion does not grant intelligence. It will enhance what the non-vampire already had, but it won't create it. Cunning, on the other hand, it seems to generate regardless of the being's pre-vampiric nature. Other enhancements, it is noted, are relative : yes, a vampire has greater strength than in his pre-vampire state, but it seems to be based on his strength in that pre-vampiric state. All enhancements other than cunning seem directly proportional to the pre-vampire's abilities. Basically, a moronic weak 'couch potato' will become a less-moronic but very cunning semi-formidable opponent, easily

overcome by careful planning in a Hunt. A Olympic Decathlon champion with a IQ of 140 will, upon conversion to vampire, become a veritable terror to deal with, and requires skill, patience, and determination - and a huge dose of surprise - on the part of the Hunter to be brought down.

But any convert can easily stalk and feed from animals, and obtain appeasement from the hunger generated by the host, while at the same time having the cunning to completely avoid suspicion. Why, then, prey on humans? It always comes back to that. There is only one theory that makes sense - there is something in the host that generates a desire or a instinct to kill beings like the vampire itself. Something like this seems reasonable, because logically, there is no other reason, as long as the animal food supply holds out.

Ok, what else?

Unlike myth, vampires can and do have reflections. They can be photographed or filmed. Moving water doesn't bother them at all, and those who could do so in life, can even swim quite well. Those who could not, find that they now can - but not as well as those who did in

life.

They can see better in the dark than most humans can in the daylight.

They have absolutely no control over weather. Vampires are as much subject to Nature's laws as we are. They can tolerate heat and cold to a great degree, but they can feel both. They cannot shape-shift or turn into mist....what they can do is use their enhanced speed and agility to move faster than the human eye can visually track, from a standing start. It is this trait, we believe, that led to the myth about being able to 'disappear', or turn into a animal or bat. This is one of the main reasons why it is so important that they not be aware they are being hunted.

On the subject of 'mind control', or hypnotism - it is thought that this is fallacy. However, the subject of just what the human mind is capable of when developed or enhanced properly is still under investigation even in humans. It is possible that some vampires, already possessing such abilities as humans to some degree, may indeed be capable of something like this, due to the enhancing by the vampiric host. It is not to be dismissed as being totally out of

the question. Hunters need to be aware of this, and also aware that such power, even enhanced, has no effect on some humans. At any rate, the possibility of a vampire having human 'assistants' under their control should not be ignored as myth, at least not yet.

The Blood Is The Life. A favorite line from the books and movies. Well, not necessarily so for the vampire. It appears a vampire can exist indefinitely, even without blood. They will, however, slowly decline into a state that, to the naked eye, appears like death. Most of their enhanced abilities will be useless to them in such a state. They will become bluish-pale, and appear to be wasting away or decomposing. The dessication will cease, though, before decomposition sets in, and they will remain in that state until they can somehow be fed. Society records show one such vampire being discovered, largely by accident, in the 1800's. He was immediately dispatched, of course. The thought of the will it took him to ignore the host and allow himself to attain such a state made the thought of him as a opponent a very sobering one. If a Hunter should happen to come across such a one, it is adviseable to not get too close unless one wants to become a breakfast entree.

Weapons....what works, what doesn't? Again, a lot of confusion shrouded in legend and myth, especially around Holy items. We examined some of the more common ones:

1. *The Cross* : Legendary. The symbol of Christ, and a few pagan religions, this one can have a small effect ; if, and ONLY if, the vampire had a strong sense of religious belief as a human. And then, only as a temporary deterrent. Otherwise, unless it happens to be pointed at one or more ends and you can shove it into his eye, useless.

2. *Holy Water* : again, legendary, but mythical. If, as in the Cross, the vampire was, as a human, particularly religious - and, if you can convince him that it is indeed water blessed by the Church - you might slow him up by tossing it at him. If his belief as a human was quite strong, he might even evidence some discomfort or even blistering, but will soon overcome that and be twice as dangerous as before. If you must use it, carry it in a nice, heavy bottle or container, and try to brain him with it. More effective.

3. *Wooden stake through the heart* : bingo!! This'll stop him cold...well,

heck, it would you too. With one major difference - it would kill you, all it'll do to him is incapacitate him for a brief time. However, this is often what is required before the killing blow can be delivered. If fed, and with the vampire's speed and agility, getting him to hold still while you lop off his head could prove a frustrating - and dangerous - experience.

4. *Burning* : Again, you bet. Just as effective on non-vampires, too, if you are out to rid the world of those you dislike. But be aware, flamethrowers can be awkward to carry around, and often as hazardous to the user as they are to those they are used upon.

Now, this last one is actually quite effective. Just not overly practical. And vampires are not known for being overly compliant if asked to hold still while you set them afire. A very large part of the survival of the vampire comes from the instinct of the host itself for survival ; thus, the cunning. However, and this comes as a surprise to many new Hunters, any standard weapon is effective against vampires. You can damage them with bullets, or stabbing, or even with a 2 by 4 up side the head ; this leads to a note here on the famous powers of regeneration of vampires. Yes, they can regenerate damaged or even severed limbs. Even the

brain itself. But it does not happen in the blink of an eye. It takes time, and the host requires massive amounts of blood and a period of rest to accomplish this. Depending on the severity of the wound, this can take anywhere from a few hours, up to 10 to 12 days.

Damage also affects a vampire's enhanced abilities. Thus, if a Hunter can inflict a wound in a area related, say, to movement, the vampire will not be able to use his enhanced speed and agility to 'disappear'. So, the first priority of a Hunter when taking the vampire prey should be to wound the vampire as quickly and as severely as possible, before the vampire can generate his instinctive defense mechanisms. Once this is done, further wounding may be necessary before the killing blow is delivered.

It should be noted here that, when hunting, Hunters should not fall prone to any feelings of 'gentleman's rules', and allow their prey time to recover or get up. The prey we hunt play by a different set of rules, and should a Hunter ever do this, those we hunt will be more than happy to teach the Hunter the new rules.

The killing blow is delivered, in the case of the vampire, by decapitation, followed

quickly as possible by burning the head - and body, also, if time. Myth again...the vampire will not turn to dust, even when dead. It might begin to smell rather badly, though, so burn it all if possible. Only removal of the head and burning it will kill the host, so that must be done. Thus, one important weapon the Hunter should have when hunting the vampire prey is a long, sharp cutting instrument. A good machete, a saber, even a scimitar. It should be pointed out that a good hunting knife will not suffice...it is extremely advisable not to engage in removal of the head as if you were a surgeon doing close-in work. As long as the head is attached, the vampire is still dangerous, and will show it if allowed to do so. It makes little sense to disable the vampire from a distance, then crouch down to saw off his head and allow him to turn you into his evening meal.

Other than that, among modern weapons, it is recommended to have any firearm with good stopping power. 12 gauge shotguns are good, as are the more modern military issue semi-automatic rifles. Hand guns of large caliber, such as .357 or .45, are also good. Crossbows, such as are used in hunting, or traditional hunting bows, are effective. The Society has several standard issue weapons of these types, but if a Hunter desires a certain brand or

design, they are advised they must provide them themselves. Cost will be reimbursed at a later date, with proper receipts.

"This is all well and good," Bill conjectured, " and it has served not only us but others well enough. Heck, we've only dealt with two other vampires since we've been together, and both of them were really not much of a challenge. What was the oldest one, about 90 years?". There were nods of agreement all around. Another note here: when speaking of the age of a vampire, it is measured from the time of the conversion, not added to it's human years.

"So, all right then, " he continued, "This guy presents a bit different problem. Just taking into account that he may know about us - or at least knows someone is after him - raises the risk factor beyond the point even Lloyd's of London would accept, I'm thinkng. And I haven't heard any suggestions or direction from the higher-ups about how we might deal with this one or

what to possibly expect. The other thing about it that bothers me is, if this one is really as old as they presume, how in the Hell did he escape detection all those centuries?"

From Melanie: " Well, we know that vampires don't really need to feed on humans....right? The blood of any large mammal, or several small ones, will perform the same function, and appease the hunger. Heck, a vampire could probably exist forever if they avoided ever killing humans, since that's how their patterns get detected for us. I'd guess this one has done just that for centuries."

"I'd guess the same," Mac added. "What bothers me...like it does all of us I think...is, if he was able to do that for so long, why suddenly change now? What happened that brought him out, so to speak, knowing as he seems to that there are people sworn to hunt him down? It's like he's inviting us to come after him ; I don't know, I have a funny feeling about that."

"I know," I agreed, nodding. " Same thing bothers me. Thinking about it like this : we know a vampire, faced with 100 sheep on one side of a hill and 2 shepherders on the other to provide his meal, will usually choose to attack the 2 shepherders, despite the fact he is

probably aware that he could feed well on 10 of the sheep, never killing one, appease the hunger, and avoid any possible detection or risk. Knowing this, it seems theoretically possible that one vampire could choose the sheep, and continue to do so indefinitely. Why, then, choose the humans?

"Answer: all we can come up with is, the thrill, the excitement. It must be part of the enhanced vampiric senses, and they crave the thrill of it. Overcoming that craving, as far as history has shown us, seems impossible for even the oldest of the breed. If this one has been able to control that craving all this time, and avoid detection by a organization devoted to looking for such signs, his desire to again prey on humans must be overwhelming. The fact that it occurs now is - well - coincidence.". I knew I didn't sound very convincing, but it was all I had.

"And you," Ariane mocked, pointing a finger at me, "are a huge supporter of coincidence, we all know. NOT.". Everyone was grinning, including me. I shrugged.

"Best I can do for now, until we have more information," I admitted sheepishly.
"Anything else? No? All righty then, what say we get our gear together to be ready to leave

tomorrow, then let's decide how we're gonna enjoy this night off, eh?". This was met with emphatic agreement. We agreed to meet downstairs in the lounge about 6, and I was left alone again with my thoughts. I busied myself with a inventory of what I needed to pack, then laid down again to try to get a few more hours of shuteye. I didn't bother with a wake-up request ; it was only 3:00, I was sure to be awake by 6, and truthfully, didn't really care if I was. I was still bothered by this whole incident, and it wasn't because of Sandi and Pete. It felt wrong ; we all knew it. This was going to be a first in the history of the Society, a Hunt for prey that knew it was being hunted, and perhaps even knew by whom. And maybe even welcomed it. It was like Sitting Bull and Custer talking before the Big Horn:

Sitting Bull: I got ten thousand warriors down here, I know you're coming with 200 soldiers, and I'm looking forward to it.

Custer: Yeah? Well, I don't care that you know, here I come with my 200 soldiers, ready or not!

I wasn't having any trouble casting the roles of Sitting Bull and Custer in our

current assignment.

Chapter 7

So much for the nap. Ariane rang me at 5 ; she had the travel and new location information. We would be working at, and staying at, a place called The Holly Inn, located near the Iowa/Nebraska border in Sioux City. We were to leave by plane tomorrow at 11 am ; a shuttle would be at the hotel to pick us up at 10 am. She mentioned she already had a preliminary set list, we could go over it tonight wherever we went.

"I thought you were going to hunt up that hunk from last night," I teased her.
"We'd be in the way, wouldn't we?"

"You're always in the way," she chuckled. "Anyhow, we talked it over....there's a nice blues club not far from here, where sometimes some of the greats show up. We thought that'd be cool. And we can eat dinner here. Of course, you can go where you want to...." She finished with a teasing question.

"I see," I chided. "You guys make plans without me....I can tell when I'm not wanted. See if I ever defend *your* honor again!"

"I'm still waiting for the first time," she laughed. "Besides, my honor is my best defense ; it's sneaky. It only shows itself when I least expect it. See you downstairs in a hour?". I busied myself with packing my few things, most of my attention given to my guitar, making sure it was clean and loosening the tuning knobs a twist or two for the trip. Clothes and personal items took me about 5 minutes ; my weapons case was already on the way, being picked up and packed with our other gear and sent with the Society road crew, as were those of the others. Some of the things in there were not what one would want discovered in a luggage check at the airport. Like the Colt 4 inch .357 magnum and the 200 rounds of 58 grain hollow point ammo, and the specially designed brass knuckles with the razor sharp edges.....great for those close encounters of the undesirable kind.

It was a good night, we all had fun. The music was out of this world, and Bill ended up having to choose between 3 quite attractive women to spend his evening with. I'm not positive, but I think he chose just one. Knowing Bill, I was probably wrong. Lou had brought his sax, and he and Mel and Mac all sat in with various artists ; we tried to talk Ariane into singing,

but she would have none of it. She said she was there to listen for a change, and that's what she was by God going to do. She and I had fun playing footsie under our table, which kept distracting Bill from his quest for female companionship for the evening. He was bound and determined that Ariane and I were a item and keeping it secret ; we enjoyed playing on his fantasy. There were times, though, I wondered if it really was all fantasy.

Relaxed, well fed, and rested - well, all but Bill, we suspected - we made our shuttle, and our plane, with time to spare. A few hours later, we caught the waiting shuttle from the Sioux City Airport to cover the last few miles to our new job site. I was having a war with my emotions ; this was the closest I had been to my home as a kid for a long, long time. I both missed it, and dreaded being here. I knew that the circumstances were the only reason I was here ; left to my own devices, I doubt I would ever have come back.

Riding through Sioux City, little appeared to have changed, at least outwardly. One thing was definitely the same.

"Jesus!!", Melanie wrinkled her nose, giving her a even more elf-like appearance.

"What in the name of all that's Unholy is that SMELL?"

"Stockyards and meat packing houses," I informed her, being the unwilling but de facto tour guide. "I used to love that smell. I remember it used to make me hungry."

"Oh, man, you really *are* one sick puppy," Lou chimed in. Mac and Bill just nodded knowingly. Ariane raised a eyebrow.

"Memories, Nick?" she asked, smiling slightly. I nodded.

"Welcome to my home," I lisped in my best Lugosi imitation. "Enter of your own free will, and leave - NEVER!". It got a laugh. Good sign.

As we neared our destination, I finally saw signs of what had changed....the traffic near the bridge connecting Sioux City, in Iowa, and South Sioux City, in Nebraska, was unreal. Nothing like I remembered it. This was a major connecting point for main highways to Nebraska and South Dakota, and it had always been busy....but never snarled like this. I was surprised, a bit, and amazed, a lot. The others chatted on as we pulled into the entryway of The Holly Inn, and I got yet another surprise.

The Holly Inn was huge...much too huge for my memories of this area's lodging and entertainment establishments. The Inn itself was 6 stories, and bound on either side by a strip shopping mall, several fast food joints, two large restaurants (one Italian, one good old American steak house, both looking like they required reservations, for God's sake!) and, in a building all it's own, the Holly Lounge. Pink exterior..pink, oh, Christ! - with lots of gaudy chrome facing, the front was done up to resemble - faintly - a 1950's jukebox. There were renderings on the front also of several 1950's and 1960's classic automobiles. Well, at least the outside guaranteed that you didn't walk in expecting hip hop, new wave, or heavy metal as music choices.

"Hmmm...classy," Bill drawled. He added jokingly, " Wonder if they have a jukebox inside that still takes nickels?". We all laughed. We found out later - it did.

As we approached the main desk to check in, we all took good looks around. The main lobby was done in 50's style furnishings, and besides it's main purpose as a check-in area, also featured a bar/lounge of it's own (probably with a lot of country music on the jukebox),

a gift shop, a deli, a coffee shop, a small Chamber of Commerce cubicle (nice touch), and a small Barnes and Noble book store.

"Not bad, for a place that smells like a dairy barn," Melanie said approvingly.

"This could be ok.". The desk clerk, apparently alerted by the instrument cases we were carrying, was ready for us.

"Hi!", he smiled, giving us a good look at his dental work. "We've been expecting you, really look forward to hearing you play here, we're all excited. Which of you might be Nick? If, haha, I have it right, and you are the band 'Retrorocket?'".

"Gosh, sorry," I put on my best 'oh, man, I'm so embarrassed' look. "But no, we're The Rolling Stones. Mick won't be here for a day or two...weren't you expecting us?". I was enjoying the flabbergasted expression on the young man's face, and the snickering behind me told me I wasn't the only one. The poor guy was actually flushing, really thinking he'd made a serious mistake. I mentally kicked myself for being such a ass ; I always mentally kicked myself

when I did this kind of thing. By now, I should have looked like the sole of a shoe, I'd done it so often. This time, Melanie added the real thing, from behind me. Hurt, too.

"Nick, you're a asshole," she piped. "Hey, uh, Danny? Danny. Yeah, we're the band, and this is Nick, the one with the crappy attitude. Please forgive him...he's from this area, and I think he's having pre-natal nightmares or something. We appreciate you being so sweet about it.". Well, that took care of that. When she turned on the charm, even guys half her age fell all over their size 12's trying to please her. And this guy wasn't half her age. Well, not quite, anyway. The clerk...yes, his name was Danny...went back to his Ultra Brite smile.

"Hehe, it's ok, really, " he laughed nervously, still trying to decide if he'd made a serious boo boo or not. "I hope I didn't offend you or anything?". He was looking at me. Trying to put it back on me, eh? Not so fast, ya little whelp. I prepared a comeback.....and Melanie cut it off at the pass.

"Absolutely not!!!" she gushed. "Don't mind Nick...he's really kinda nice once you get to know him. Trouble is, he never lets anyone get to know him.". She stopped for breath,

and ignored my look of sudden surprise. Now, where the Hell had THAT come from? " Have you got our rooms ready? We'd really like to get settled in, and explore a bit before tonight." I stood to the side and sulked...I'd had my candy taken away, and my hand slapped to boot. Melanie was looking sideways at me, and grinning like she knew she'd scored. I'd get her back. She knew it, too. Everyone got their room assignments straightened...we had first floor suites, 101, 2,3,4,5,and 6. Cozy. I spared another quick thought for the efficiency of this operation. Hell, we were probably taken care of BETTER than the Rolling Stones. As everyone started for their rooms, Danny the desk clerk remembered:

"Oh, Nick...uh, I mean, Mr. Anders?" he stuttered. "Uh, I do have a message for you. Wait one second, I have it right here." He handed me a neat little envelope, with '**Holly Inn**' embossed tastefully on the flap. " My apologies, I nearly forgot." I took the envelope, and thanked him, figuring I'd better make nice.

"Hey, it's ok, man," I said, meaning it. "Listen...she has that effect on everyone. She can make you forget your name, or even how old you are. Or, even how old SHE is." I said

it loud enough I knew she heard....I heard a hissing noise, and her stage whispered comment to Ariane: "Oh, he is SO gonna pay for that!". The clerk looked even more confused now.

"Hey, don't take any of it personally, Danny" I grinned. "You've just been baptised by the best classic rock band around. We think of it as a compliment...it means we like you.". I was feeling better now, but I knew I'd have to be watching my back for a day or so.

"Hey...question. Anywhere we can get maps of the area...you know, like maps of some of the surrounding towns and such?".

"You bet," he said confidently, now back on sure footing. "Let me know what towns you want, I can have them for you within a hour.". I thanked him, shook his hand to show there were no hard feelings, and headed up a short flight of stairs to room 106. Watching over my shoulder the entire way. Just in case.

The room itself was a bit of a surprise ; the bed was generous, the mattress firm. The furnishings were tastefully plain, and the color scheme was a creamy white with splashes of red. Appropriate.my mind told me, for the reason we were here. The walls were mostly bare,

with a framed photo copy of Buddy Holly on one wall and a framed copy of the newspaper article about his plane's crashing (it was in Iowa, in 1960, for those not familiar) with the words 'The Day The Music Died' embossed on the top of the frame. Light red curtains outlined a large balcony window - I was in luck recently, as I loved balconies - and the TV was fed via satellite, a nice touch. The shower and tub were spacious, the bathroom actually big enough to sit on the stool and not be able to brush your teeth and shower at the same time. And, there was actually real water pressure in all the plumbing. Impressive. In the corner to one side of the balcony window, there was a small bar area, complete with small refrigerator, which was fully stocked and actually had a note on it that informed the occupant that the stocked items were 'on the house' but that refills would be extra. Uh huh...on the house my Aunt Maybelle's marigolds. But, it was still a nice touch. I occupied myself with settling in, noting too that the closet was spacious as well, even having room to put my guitar case on the floor under the rack and hangars. Unusual.

Unpacked, I got out my 30 year old Fender Telecaster (completely restored last year to original condition by the Fender Corporation - for a healthy fee) and a new fangled

electronic tuner, or 'pitch pipe', and gave her a bit of a rubdown with my cleaning kit before tuning her back to pitch. As I was finishing, my phone rang.

"We're getting ready to go over to check the equipment and sound and meet our new 'boss' ", Bill informed me without preamble. "So...what was the message? Everyone - except me, of course - is dying to know." . I heard the grin in his voice belying his protest. Shit!! I'd forgotten about the message.

"Dunno what it is yet," I replied truthfully, "forgot all about it. I'll be ready in 5....I'll fill you all in when we get over there. Meet me in the lobby." . He said ok, and hung up, but not before I heard Melanie's voice in the background saying " He forgot the message, didn't he? Sometimes, that man, I just want---" . The rest was cut off by the disconnection purr. Jeez, I thought to myself, what kind of bee got stuck in her bonnet today?

When we walked into the club, we received even more pleasant surprises. For one thing, it was larger than it looked even from the outside ; a employee on duty told Mac that it could seat 500 total, and often was filled to capacity on weekends, counting both the bar and the

tables/dance floor area. Reservations were not required, but there was a ten dollar cover charge at the door....reasonable for the times, if a place provided good entertainment and a safe, responsible atmosphere. Another surprise was that the interior was considerably less garish than the exterior, decorated in a light rather than dark atmosphere. Tables were large enough to seat 4 people comfortably, spaced far enough apart so one could slide a chair out to get up without knocking the next table over, and the chairs themselves were quite comfortable, a welcome break from the standard. The bar itself was huge, and there were 4 wait stations and still enough room to seat a good 30 to 40 people. Restrooms were clean and fresh-smelling, and brightly painted and lit. There were framed photos and posters featuring some of the better-known performers of the 50's, 60's, and even 70's scattered throughout the club, and, yes, a jukebox stocked with classic songs from the era. At a nickel per play. Bill and I looked at each other, shook our heads, and grinned. This was almost like Heaven. Considering where we were, I was having trouble believing it. We were all quite pleased.

The stage continued with the great first impression. It was large enough to hold

a orchestra comfortably, and was positioned about 4 feet off the dance floor...which also was quite spacious, probably big enough to hold 30 to 40 couples jitterbugging if they were so inclined....so that both the band and the audience could get a good view of everything. Our crew had obviously been on the ball...as far as we could tell, everything was there, and set up and ready to go. There was a smaller raised platform - about another 10 to 15 inches - on the stage for a drummer, and it was large enough to hold Bill's set, and Bill himself - no mean feat. The backstage area was a bit cramped, but led to a spacious room, where all of our spare equipment and cases had been placed, and where performers could relax before and between shows if they chose. While we were anxious to get a sound check going, we wanted to get to know the people working in the club first, starting with our new 'employer'. A bartender informed him we were there, and out to greet us came a small, wiry man in his 40's, wearing a golf shirt, tennis shoes, blue jeans and sunglasses. My kind of businessman. I liked him on sight. His name was Darrell, he informed Ariane, and she introduced the rest of us. The usual pleasantries followed, he explained more of the layout and the format, introduced us to his sound and lighting person, and

begged off, saying he had a business meeting to attend but that he looked forward to having us there, and was excited by the response from his regular customers on our appearance here, he was expecting a great turnout, blah blah. Golf, or a great young mistress, wait for no man, I thought. But kindly. And somewhat enviously.

I headed over to the bar, to get a round of water/soft drinks for everyone as Ariane spoke with the sound and light tech. The others went to the equipment, and the usual cacaphony of a band tuning and testing filled the lounge. The bartender said he'd bring the stuff to us - on the house, no less - so I unpacked my Tele once more, checked that it had stayed in tune, and flipped on my old, but trusty and beloved, Twin Reverb amplifier. We skated through a couple of numbers - Holly's "It's So Easy", with Ariane and Melanie sharing the lead vocals, and "Under The Boardwalk" to check the mics together, and a few bars of the Stones' "Satisfaction" to check the boosted distortion levels of Mel's and my guitars. I checked my watch - 3:30 pm, it had been a busy day up to now, time to relax. We sat at one of the tables, sipping our drinks, and I opened the message the clerk Danny had given me earlier. The others watched me but, for

once, waited silently, if a bit impatiently. Given the unusual circumstances of what we had, over the years, come to regard as routine, I could understand the nervousness.

"Ok, relax," I assured them. "It's from that local Hunter, Blackfield. Says he is here, with his room number, and would like to talk to us when we have time today. Tell ya what - we could all use a little down time, it's been a hectic day. Let's talk this over now. I'm for having him help us out. He was first on the scene and prepared the prelims - he has a handle on the area, better than any of us, and he could be a big help as eyes and ears when we have to fulfill our playing end of the deal. What do you guys think?". There were nods all around, but not emphatic ones. Ariane brought up a disclaimer.

"I'm for it myself, but," she qualified, "I do think we should all meet with him first before we finalize this. We are talking our lives here, maybe more than ever before. In the past, we could cover each other fine if someone got lax, but this time....considering what we have....I think it best if we all are certain before accepting on the scene help.

"I'm sure he's fine," she finished, and got supportive nods from the rest, " but,

let's face it, he isn't one of us, he's been used to working alone or with whoever they pair him with. This is a different setup than he is used to, and one slip up could cost us dearly. Let's spend a little 'meet-ya-get-to-know-ya' time before we make a solid decision. Ok?".

I nodded. "Makes damn good sense to me, too," I agreed. " Right, then. We don't start here until 9. How about I give him a buzz when we get back, and have him meet us at that steakhouse for dinner?". Murmurs of assent greeted my proposal ; except Melanie, who was making little pouty elf faces.

"You could eat supper in a steakhouse after smelling that awful...yuck...*stench*?" she questioned, pouting. She looked directly at me and went on, " Of course, to a man as old as you, I guess that smell doesn't bother you much.". She made it all the way through before bursting out in a giggle. Whew. If that was the worst I was going to get, I'd light a candle and bow to the east in thanks. Somehow, though, I figured she wouldn't consider us even just yet.

Chapter 8

I reached Blackfield easily, and he agreed to meet us for dinner (supper, he corrected me....I knew he and Melanie would hit it off then). He had a good, solid trustworthy tenor voice on the phone and was polite without being wishy-washy, and sounded upbeat. He said he had heard us play once, in Kansas City, and thought we were 'pretty good'. I liked him already. I didn't tell him he was going to be 'interviewed' - I think he suspected it, though.

With a hour or so to kill, I figured I'd catch up on some reading with the local paper after asking our new friend Danny the desk clerk for 6 maps of Sioux City and Vandemeter, but once more was interrupted by my room phone. These last 2 days were getting to be nothing but interruptions, and I was starting to get a bit irritated by it. I debated on not answering, then figured I'd better. I guess I must have sounded out of sorts when I said hello.

"Well, Hell, is that any way to answer your phone, you big shot music idol?" Mark

laughed on the other end. I was glad he couldn't see my face...I think I may have flushed. Just a bit.

"Don't tell me," I sighed. "Now you're here, too. Well, at least it isn't 6 o'clock in the damn morning. Your family is going to disown you - I need to get to your house and get in good with your wife so she won't take ya back." He laughed, softly.

"Nope," he said. "You only wish I were there, so you'd have someone to do the dangerous work for you...you always were jealous that I was smarter than you. No, I'm at home, and Abbie says 'hello' and I am to stop teaching Nickie to sing 'Uncle Nick's a dick, dick, dick' to the tune of 'Old MacDonald Had A Farm'.". I heard Abbie in the background laughing.

"Ok, hey, you know, she's a Mom now," I scolded. "Moms have a thing about teaching sons naughty things....even if it is just you paying homage to your best friend's most famous and prominent feature.". That got him...I definitely heard something that sounded like 'you wish'....or something close to that. "So, then, to what do I owe the pleasure of your reassuring voice for 2 days in a row?"

"Well, a few things," he answered after regaining his breath. "One: Have you met with Terry yet?". I explained that one. "Ok, good...next, we have pulled up a little more info on our prey, and it has some of the researchers and older members concerned. More, that is, than they were. And they were pretty concerned already. But the water we've dumped you in might be deeper than we thought. There's quite a bit of confusion amongst the higher-ups right now, as to whether assigning you guys was the right move. Meaning....whether or not there will be enough of you.". Hello...he had my full attention now. I told him to get to it.

"Not to worry, Nick," he went on, "we aren't pulling you out. What we have done is arrange for some special additions to your arsenal - some kind of high tech stuff. We have arranged for 2 cars to be put at your disposal ; the keys are at the front desk as of - hmmm, let's see - about a hour ago. The gear is in the trunks of each vehicle. It was thought you might need full but separate mobility ; if you think you need more, just call me. The cars are not rentals, and are registered to a nonexistent music organization, so you need to be cautious but not overly so. You may need to move, and move fast...that's what they're for. And, they are -mmmm-

disposable. The extra weaponry, however, is not - try not to leave anything if you have to dispose of any of the vehicles.

" The info itself concerns Brissle-Blasingame. Some disturbing things have come to light ; not proof of anything, but speculation has risen that this Blasingame may *not* be the one who killed Aberra and Marcos. But, that he IS involved somehow nonetheless, and is very, very dangerous. Like I say, it's speculation, largely based on further information from New Orleans coupled with the latest reports from Blackfield. So, your first step must be to meet with him, and don't make any moves to begin the Hunt before doing so. Don't take that wrong - Blasingame is still your target, but have everyone fully aware that there may be - MAY be - more than one target in this.". I had refrained from interrupting, showing remarkable restraint in my opinion. I asked for the details they had, he said it had been faxed to a agent in Omaha who was having it delivered, and we should have it before supper. Dinner, I corrected him, garnering some satisfaction for the great unwashed and uneducated amongst us before we said our goodbyes. I checked the time: 5:15. I called everyone, including Blackfield, and told them to meet me in the bar off the lobby in

15 minutes.

I arrived first....I had hoped that to be the case...and told the bartender there would be several joining me. It was a good place....not too dark, comfortable, and surprisingly uncrowded for the time. Decorations and advertisements throughout of a ghostly nature reminded me that Halloween wasn't far off. Appropriate, I mused. And I confirmed another thing...the jukebox was laying out some good country tunes, thankfully at a level that made conversation possible. Not a beer joint, by any means.

I saw a man enter and look around....I took a moment to size him up. About 5'9", seemed solidly built, possibly late 30's-early 40's ; hair a tad on the long side, light and wispy. Good, strong face, and eyes that were taking it all in. I motioned with my hand....he saw it immediately, and came over, hand outstretched the last 4 steps.

"Terry Blackfield," he introduced himself. "You, I believe, would be Nick?". I stood to shake his hand and nodded, grinning. I noticed he was carrying a folder.

"That would be me," I confirmed. "You really did see us, and you have a good

memory, looks like."

"Too good sometimes," he laughed, sitting. "I think you were expecting a fax...it got delivered to me, as the reporting Hunter, so I brought it. I have something else for you, too - but I'll explain after everyone is here.". Cryptic...I didn't push it, as I figured he had good reason. Wouldn't be long, anyway - I saw Melanie and Mac enter, and the others close at their heels approaching from the lobby. When everyone was seated, introductions made, and refreshments ordered, I thought it best that Terry give us a bit of his background, but he beat me to asking him.

" I would imagine you're all a bit curious about me," Blackfield started, getting some approving looks. "Briefly : I have been with the Society about 8 years, and I am 40 years old. Unlike many, I didn't have my first 'contact' until I was in my mid-20's, which is why I was recruited so late. Most Hunters, I understand, are approached before they hit 30.". This was true ; Lou, our oldest at 48, was recruited in his early 20's. I was 45, and you know my story. Bill and Mac were both 42, Ariane 40, all 3 had been recruited by their mid-20's. Mel, our 'baby', which is why she and I had this teasing thing about age, was 36. She had been recruited at 20.

"I've had 10 Hunts in those 8 years," Blackfield continued. "Nearly all involved Inccubi/Succubi imps, a real problem in the midwestern states due to religious beliefs on sexuality and the farm life upbringing. Many of these young folks are prime fodder for these imps, as you can imagine. They aren't particularly dangerous, and pose little physical threat to their victims, but they can cause great mental problems in some, and even in some of the weaker victims, some physical harm. Hunting them is fairly easy, as long as you're patient and can catch them sated - and don't corner them. They're vicious when cornered, just like wild animals.". He laughed...."Yeah, I can see your grins forming...sounds like tough work, doesn't it?

"Well, heck, I won't argue the point," he conceded. " I know it sounds a bit like more of a pleasure than a danger. Wish it were. Remember, they're shape-shifters, and the shapes they use are human - very much so, in fact. My point is, I have not dealt yet with a vampire, although inccubi/succubi are considered vampiric, and I know that is what you've got. But that folder -" he pointed to the one in front of me "-has some of my latest findings here, plus some of the researchers' latest, and there are new developments. Oh. Uh...I maybe jumped the

gun...?". He had realized what he had said, and was looking embarrassedly at me. I shook my head to show it was all right.

"Not really, I was figuring part of this came through you," I told him. "So, I think it would be best if we all hear it from you first. And..." I looked at my watch.. "let's do it over a steak and a salad, how about it?".

"Well, I wasn't supposed to actually make contact with Blasingame," Terry continued once we had transferred ourselves and got our orders placed. "But, as anyone from a really small town knows, anyone who stops in one of them longer than it takes to get gas or a meal becomes a curiosity. People were saying hello to me, and passing the time of day when I would try to question them, and pretty soon it was apparent I was either going to have to have a damn good reason for hanging around, or pull off.". I nodded. I remembered well...when Mark and I were kids, we would know pretty much the life history of any new resident before the ink was dry on the paperwork. Terry went on.

"So, I made it known I was thinking of moving to Vandemeter, but my wife was in

the antiques business and I didn't know if the town could attract enough business to enable her to have a shop there if we moved. I was told, of course, about Blasingame and had several suggestions to speak with the guy. I knew all this would get back to him quickly, so I figured, what the heck, do or die. Ah, so to speak.

"I made contact with him yesterday, and this is where it gets really interesting. To me, anyway. Spooky, by the way, to talk to someone who looks as average as anyone but whom you know to be a vampire. Anyway, I walked into his shop, not surprisingly the only customer. He greeted me pretty naturally, but as we talked - I am pretty much in the dark about antiques, to be honest - I really got the feeling he was playing cat and mouse with me.

" 'You don't strike me as a married man' he told me after a few minutes, but he was friendly enough about it. 'In fact, you seem like a man wedded more to the work he does' and here he paused, then said 'and who might enjoy the old fashioned pleasure of the hunt'. It took all I had to keep from getting out as quick as I could. But I couldn't stop feeling that I wasn't in

any danger...in fact, almost the opposite. It was like he was sharing a joke with me, two men just talking man to man, who have a common bond. It was a strange feeling, I gotta say.

" I suppose I wasn't too suave about it, but I stumbled through. Even made a small purchase, still trying to keep the cover. He seemed amused but understanding about it, and in fact I think allowed me to talk him down to a price lower than he would have taken from someone else. Or, he's just a damn good salesman. At any rate, as I was getting ready to go, he asked me to wait a bit by my car....he had something I might appreciate.

"A few minutes later he came back out carrying this beautifully finished dark, aged-wood case, about 7 feet long and about 5 inches thick, held shut by leather clasps, and a enclosed round container about 5 foot deep and about 10 inches in diameter. 'This', he told me, 'is something that was given to me a long time ago by someone whom I admired greatly. I have kept it because of that, but have little use for it myself, and doubt I could sell it for a price that would make the effort worthwhile. I am given to understand,' and here he smiled that 'We're Buddies' smile again, 'that it is extremely old, and may be of great value to the right person.

Something tells me,' he finished up, 'that you may know the right person, considering the society you keep.'. That was exactly how he said it. Not 'the company you keep', which would have spooked me enough, but 'the society you keep'. That spooked me well and good. But he made me take it, no charge. Said I would know what to do with it, and who to give it to when the time came.

"As soon as I got back here, I opened the case....but, I won't tell you, you have to see it to really appreciate it. Mark is arranging for a team of experts to come in tomorrow to check it, but I think I can safely say that I, nor you when you see it, will have any doubt as to it's significance. Anyway, when I reported all this, instead of getting chewed, it seems what I did triggered something up top, the result of which is probably in that report.". He finished his report to us, and his supper, about the same time. We had finished already, and were digesting both the meal and what he had told us.

"All right, then, " Ariane spoke. "I'm satisfied. Hey, Terry, you got guts. I question your intelligence.." -here we all, including him, laughed- "..but not your guts. Good

enough for me. I think we need the extra eyes and ears here.". A chorus of agreement.

"Ok, welcome to the band," I grinned at him. "You get to be our designated 'eyes in the back of our head'. While we're filling our 'cover' every night, you can be our eyes and ears - and under the circumstances, I think it may be the difference here. Appreciate all you've done so far, but you're probably going to have to do a lot more. Still want a piece of this?". He grinned and nodded.

"Good enough, " I said. " And speaking of our 'day job', we'd best head back and start getting ready. Meet at my room first, we'll go over this report together.". Ten minutes later, in my room, I opened the folder he had given me, and read aloud:

"Reference: Anders Hunt Group/Suspected Prey Andrew Blasingame

Addendum Original File

Date: October 22 1995

Attached: Verbatim Report of Hunter Terry Blackfield, Oct. 21 1995

Following the above referenced Hunter report, our New York office received a call from our office in Prague, from one of our oldest and highest-ranking, most respected members. He claims actual personal knowledge of the prey known as Andrew Blasingame, and confirms he has known him for quite some time. And further asserts he is indeed the same Adolphus Brasillius, a Hunter who disappeared about the year 1335. He refuses to disclose everything he knows, but states that said Blasingame is definitely a vampire but poses no threat to the Society, nor humans as a whole. The reason for this is one of the things this member will not disclose, stating that Blasingame himself will disclose it when he is ready to do so.

The member further states that Blasingame has, in fact, continued to be of occasional assistance to Society personnel through these years, and in each generation has had a single contact well-placed within the Society structure.

It is to be considered that this member is a quite elderly gentleman, who has

given long and valuable service to us but nonetheless may be subject to certain mental frailties that accompany great age. Still, taken into account with Hunter Blackfield's report, and further information gleaned by Dr. Hanready from the Aberra/Marco autopsies, we feel it absolutely necessary that the Anders hunt team in the field at this moment be made aware of this information, and that they could be, even as this report is prepared, in greater danger than was originally considered. If these details prove to be true, there may be another player in this Hunt, and at this time, Blasingame's role or purpose is not known. If the opportunity presents itself, the Anders team is to continue as originally requested and complete the Hunt on prey A. Blasingame ; however, at the present time, they are NOT to actively pursue the hunt until more information can be obtained.

It is further requested that, if such information can be obtained by the team in the field, that they not act upon it before reporting it, unless it is absolutely necessary in their judgement to prevent further loss of life. Contacts can be made in the usual fashion.

End Report"

We were all looking at each other, with expressions ranging from shock to exasperation. It was Lou, though, who broke the silence.

"My, what a revolting development, " he said softly. "However...shall we prepare to meet our soon-to-be-adoring public?". And, we did.

Chapter 9

It was a good night, job-wise. The crowd was good, and receptive. Rapport was quickly established, and it was quit time before we knew it. Bartenders and servers were happy...we were told this had been one of the more profitable nights they could recall, and the crowd was in exceptionally good humor. This was largely due to the ability of Bill, Ariane, and Melanie to, for lack of a better term, 'work' the crowd. Males and females came away with the feeling that a lot of our act was for them personally - it's a knack, and those three had it. However, I kept getting the feeling that something more was to happen this night, though really all I wanted was a little winding-down time and a lot of sleep.

Terry met us backstage as we were packing instruments, and joined me in this unquiet feeling.

"Man, did you get the feeling there was something not right out there tonight?" he whispered to me. I nodded, and told him it was ok, he needn't whisper ; if he felt it, chances were

we all did. There were confirming comments all around.

"Did you see anything, though?" I asked him, and he admitted he had not, so I went on, "Ok, then....we have a couple things to check, and then sack time. First, those vehicles left for us - we need to collect the keys and check the toys in them. Then I think we should have a quick look at the item Blasingame gave Terry ; I'm pretty sure we're going to find it interesting. After that, we're on our own - for me, that means bed."

"At his age, it's a wonder he can stay up this late," Melanie quipped. I grinned, but resisted the urge to counter - maybe she'd think she won and give it up. We wandered back to the hotel to get the car keys from the desk in a staggered group ; Terry and Lou hanging back with me. Terry was grinning.

"What's funny?" I asked, helpless to keep from grinning with him. Lou was looking all around except in my direction, and softly whistling a old Ray Charles tune.

"Oh, I was just wondering," Terry said, with a note of sarcasm in his voice, "why the two of you don't save the Society a couple bucks and room together."

"The two of whom?" I stopped and questioned. Lou skipped a step, and something close to a smile wavered around his normally placid expression.

"He's serious, my man," Lou informed Terry. "He really hasn't a clue. A word to the 'new guy'; he won't believe you if you tell him, either. But, hey, it's your gig man....the bread's the same.". And with that cryptic comment, he moved on ahead with the others. Ariane was coming back from the lobby with 3 sets of keys, and heading for the parking garage in back.

"Ok," I put to Terry, "guess you better explain that remark. There's a reason why we each have our own rooms, and you know Society policy as well as I do. If you are hinting there is something going on between me and either Ariane or Mel, we'd best get that straight right now. They're both damn fine people, and both damn attractive, but there is absolutely no interest in either of them pertaining to me, other than being close-knit as a group. Which is as it should be - we are all close, but there is no 'entanglement'. That, as you know, would put the entire group in possible danger. Clear?". He had listened politely, and even nodded once or twice, but now gave me a bemused look.

"Lou was right, wasn't he?" Terry said easily. "You really aren't aware. Fair enough....heck, I'm probably reading it wrong anyway. But Lou's comment tells me I'm not the only one who sees it, and they've been with you a long time. Consider it dropped, though, for now, and I apologize if I stepped out of line.". He was still smiling as he said it, but the look he gave me now was more a 'boy, are you in for a shock' look. I shook my head ; I hated things like this, where others felt they knew something about you personally that you didn't know.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," I promised him. " I think I can convince you otherwise, and we can close this issue for good. First, let's see what we have here...". Bill, Mac, and Melanie were 'ooohing and aweing' over something in the trunk of one of the 2 cars - and, no surprise, they were little imports. We walked over and viewed what appeared to be a world war 2 bazooka...Bill explained to me it was a 'LAWS' rocket launcher, single-use and quite effective against mid-size vehicles of almost any nature. He saw the look on my face and grinned.

"I know," he chuckled. "As impressed as I am, I bet we are wondering the same thing - that being 'What the Hell?'. Well, I can say one thing - these babies will vaporize anything

solid enough to be hurt by a bullet. And I do mean vaporize. How the Hell they got these, and where, I don't want to know....but the 'why' has me really puzzled. And check out these little babies.". One of the little 'babies' appeared to be a semi-automatic weapon on the order of the Uzi, but with several twists. One - no magazine. Another - a small scope mounted on the surface. Turned out, it was a laser-guided sight with a built-in range finder with infra-red spotter. What use that could be against something that didn't always emit body heat, I was at a loss to understand. Then again...a fed vampire would emit some body heat, so.....ok, but the lack of magazine?

"This is gonna blow your minds." Bill enthused. "These little darlings are damn top secret, as far as I know. Remember your zero zero seven days? These are small, nuclear battery powered laser rifles...man!! I've heard of them, but never thought I'd see one. These are so accurate that, if you're steady enough, you can trim someone's fingernails with them at 20 yards and they wouldn't even know you're doing it. Slip a bit, though, and, shazaam!! Off with the finger! And cauterizes it, too. Nasty nasty...my kinda stuff! But these...and the

LAWS...makes no sense. These are damn dangerous weapons for a situation where we might have to deal with our prey when innocent civilians are around....though the heat tracking would help. But these are for highly trained military personnel in a defined war zone ; while we might be considered in a war, giving these to us seems highly irresponsible. These laser rifles especially....man, I could just tap the trigger and take big pieces off this car right now. Given the right concentration - look here, the size of the beam is adjustable - and time, I could cut the engine in half - or, even seriously weaken the foundation of the hotel. Jesus!". He was like a kid at Christmas who wanted to believe in Santa but was having trouble accepting the idea any longer.

"Just what," he went on wonderingly, with a slight note of awe in his voice, "are they expecting us to come across on this Hunt? Godzilla?". As he was describing this little cache, the general tone of everyone had gotten a lot quieter. We were all wondering the same thing. I motioned for him to close the trunk lid....I had heard some footsteps across the lot, and didn't want anyone peeking over our shoulders thinking we seven needed help changing a flat

tire.

"Ok, we'll contact the rental company tomorrow and tell them this one has a missing jack," I said loudly enough to satisfy anyone curious enough to try eavesdropping. "But, we should be good to go. I can give ya all a tour of ye olde stomping grounds before work tomorrow.". The footsteps had gotten closer ; sounded like 2, maybe 3 people, and none too steady on their feet. I heard a burp and a grunt as we started back toward the hotel entrance, then a slightly slurred voice.

"Hey...it's that band from tonight, guys!". The speaker was a young, rather large male, accompanied by 2 others, equally large and equally as inebriated it appeared. All were casually dressed, in jeans, work boots, and sport shirts under light jackets. Probably in their early to mid-twenties, they were all well over six feet and appeared to be in fairly good shape - possibly farm families, or construction workers, they bore the look of men used to physical labor outdoors. "Say, hey-up there, band folks!! Really liked your stuff tonight!" the speaker went on. They were all agreeing, and grinning, and acting friendly. I had a bad feeling, honed by years of music in

bars and years of hunting the things that lurk in the dark.

"Great!!" Ariane smiled. "Hey, come back tomorrow - we'll be here for a few weeks."

"Yeah, cool," answered a partner of the first drunk. "Only, we may not get back to town for a week or two. Say, how's about you girls come with us tonight and party? We got all night! I mean, well, if your *boyfriends* don't mind...". This last came out a lot less politely than it sounds, and I knew we were going to have a time after all.

"Naw, we can't, fellas," from Melanie. "I mean, nice of you and all, I'm sure we;d all have a great time, but we're beat, and need to get some sleep. Like the lady said, come back and see us again before we leave, we'll buy you a couple drinks for being such nice fans.". She had that sweet, elfin smile going full blast - but she had that twinkle in her eyes that said she expected them to argue the point, and she would welcome it. Ahhh, crap. And, of course, they were drunk enough they did just as she expected.

"Listen, little cutie," said the first one, taking over as spokesperson for the three.

"These old farts ain't gonna give ya half the fun we can. We know you band types - you want us to make it a little rough, we can play that, right guys?" he finished, turning to look at his partners. I had him marked as the leader now. The other speaker was a danger, but would back down to number one. The third hadn't spoken at all yet, and was hanging back a bit, as if uncomfortable with the scene but knowing he had to play along. Fair enough. Time to stop the show. Bill, Mac, and Lou had spread behind me left and right, motioning Terry to back out of this ; Ariane had come up on Melanie's left, seemingly relaxed, but I noted the flex in the legs and the loosening of her arms. Mel had crossed her arms across her chest and cocked one leg, leaning back a bit. This was about to get real active in a minute. I spoke up.

"Ok, fellas, enough's enough. You seem like decent guys, just maybe one too many drinks. We don't want trouble, and neither do you ; when you sober up, you'll know I was right.". The first one looked at me disdainfully, then glanced back at number three.

"Hey, Keith," he ordered the third one. "Take care of half-pint grandpa here, will ya? I'm afraid I'll step on him when I kick these other old geezers' asses.". It came out

ashes...he wasn't getting any more sober, even in the chilly October night. The one he'd called Keith looked back at him, as if to ask if maybe the joke hadn't gone far enough. Number two had split off to number one's left, nearer me but watching Bill and Mac closely. I sighed....I was gonna be sore in the morning, and that made me mad.

"All right, shitkicker - that's what you are, right?" I sneered. "A shitkicker. Bet you got shit all over those pretty cowgirl booties of yours. Lift 'em up like a good dray hoss so I can see 'em, yeah?". His face, already flushed from liquor, turned bright crimson from his jacket collar to the roots of his light brown crew cut hair. Damn...right again. Sometimes these guys were just too easy.

"You wanna see my bootsh, ya shrimpy asswipe?" he growled, shifting his weight and starting a swinging back kick - Lord, he'd been watching too many Kung Fu movies - "Well, HERE!!". Lifting my right arm, I caught his left heel easily, stepped through the kick, and brought my right foot square into the inside of his right knee, feeling great satisfaction in hearing tendons and ligaments tear. He started to scream from the pain, but as he toppled, Melanie

booted him expertly behind one ear, and he went out like a lamp. Ariane had swiftly but confidently caught his head before it smacked the concrete, and laid it gently down. It had taken less than a second, and his two companions stood in complete confusion ; Bill and Mac each had number two by an arm, and Keith was slowly but surely backing as far away as he could. Lou was leaning on the trunk of the car, lazily looking around and playing with a small pair of pliers he carried - there is a area in one's armpit that, when pinched properly, will make you promise to murder your own mother just to get relief. He demonstrated it for me once, just using his fingers, and I cried like a baby and screamed like a banshee.

Looking at the other two sternly, I spoke: "Now...I'm sorry about your friend. I told you we didn't want trouble, but he didn't get it, and now he's paid for it. No reason for you two to share in the payment. I can see you are both intelligent and decent men, and a bit more sober now, yes?". They both nodded, slowly and warily. "Ok, and I know you guys work hard, and like to play hard, and you've earned that. But sometimes play can get you hurt. Your friend may have some difficult weeks ahead - he's going to need a good doctor. In fact, I'd recommend

taking him now to a hospital...and by the way, tell them you guys were drunk and playing football in the dark in a empty field and he stepped into a hole, they'll believe it. No need for you to go to jail, too.". I was bluffing there, but they didn't know that. I pulled out my wallet.

"Here.....should be several hundred here. If you need more, one of you...and just one, mind you...come to me sober while we're playing and I'll get you more. Tell him I'm sorry - and that he could have taken me easy but I got lucky. Whatever you want. But be warned...if you guys are drinking, and we are around....stay away from us. Fair deal?". The looks on their faces told me all I needed to know - I think they thought we were going to kill them. I wanted to laugh, but resisted it. The one named Keith even thanked me, and tried to give the money back, but I made him keep it. We helped them get the sack of shit to their car and saw them off before heading back to the hotel.

"Man, I see what I've heard is true," Terry said as we approached my room. "You guys did that like you'd rehearsed it ; I almost thought I was watching one of those martial arts cop movies. And, I mean that as a compliment. Listen - you want to take a look at what

Balsingame gave me, or wait until tomorrow?". I looked at the others...it was going on 3 am, but we didn't have anyplace special to go next day. Yet, anyway. Ariane nodded for them all.

"Hey, just years of working together, that's all," I answered. "Yeah, let's get it and bring it back here. I'm curious.". He was gone about 3 minutes, returning with a beautifully lacquered dark wooden case, about 7 feet long and 5 inches thick, securely fastened by 3 leather clasps. It was surprisingly light. I unlocked my room door, swung it inward, and reached for the light switch - to be greeted by the sound of one person, clapping softly in the darkness across the room.

Chapter 10

I guess I had dropped my guard - startled, I froze for a second, and in our business, that

can usually be fatal. Fortunately, nothing happened except the clapping died off softly. I was aware that the others had spread in the hallway, taking up defensive positions, and Bill had me by the collar preparing to yank me away from the door. Someone had me by the belt, too...I found out later it was Melanie.

"Please, turn on the light by all means," spoke a smoothly cultured baritone from the vicinity of the little bar in my room. "I can assure you, none of you are in any danger whatever...if I had intended harm, I could have easily managed it outside, or waited for a more intimate moment with one of you. By the way, the little exercise in the garage ; I am impressed. I was told you were good, but it is ever so satisfying to witness the truth firsthand." In the light from the balcony window, I could make out part of a form of a man, apparently seated comfortably on one of the bar's chairs. I shook off the hands behind me, and flipped the light switch.

In the light, I saw a man in his mid-30's to early 40's, about Lou's height but stockier of build. Average complexion, hair dark and medium length. Wearing dark slacks and a lighter colored turtleneck shirt, with casual but obviously expensive and comfortable loafers, he

presented a handsome and confident appearance overall. His eyes...I was having a bit of trouble getting the color. That's when it dawned on me who it was, and I realized I had totally forgotten the strange vibes we had gotten back during the gig. Behind me, I heard Terry murmur 'oh, crap', and I knew he realized it too.

"I'm going to have to speak to the management about room service here," I ventured. "I think they're just supposed to leave the order, not wait around with it.". My mind was running over possibilities for defense as well as escape, and what we might use as weapons in this situation, but I was also getting the sense he was on the level - we were in no danger.

"Ah, I apologize for startling you, but I sometimes have a flair for a dramatic entrance. At my age, it's one of the few pleasures I can indulge in. Safely, anyway. Ah...I see my friend Mr. Blackfield is with you - and he has brought my gift. Please, Mr. Blackfield, if you would...perhaps you can perform the introductions?". I nodded to the others, and we slowly and carefully entered the room, closing the door.

"Hmm, yeah, well," Terry started. " Ariane, Melanie, Nick, Bill, Mac, Lou - may I present

Mr. Andrew Blasingame? Mr. Blasingame, this is the musical group known as 'Retrorocket'.". Having performed the introductions, he shrugged, and sat on the edge of my room desk, setting the case down next to him.

"Ah, yes, Bill...you were the one prepared to break Nick's neck pulling him to safety in the hall," Blasingame smiled, "and Melanie, having a grip on his belt, would have been left holding his trousers trying to pull him the other way. Admirable loyalty, if a bit hazardous to the recipient.". I blinked...that was how I found out who had grabbed my belt.

"Look, Mr. Blasingame, " I began, but he cut me off with a raised palm.

"No, no...as I said, I assure you I mean none of you harm. And, I do know it's late, and you are all tired. And please don't try to bluff that you don't know who - and what - I am. I am fully aware you have come here to end my existence, and I am not sure but that I would not welcome that, providing I can control my little inner demon long enough." Here he chuckled, a bit ruefully, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

"And I am sure you could accomplish it, from what I have seen," he sighed.

"Unfortunately, not without some damage to yourselves, however, no matter how hard I try to exert my will over my little demon's. But I ask that you hear me out first, and felt that catching you like this might give me the time to explain some things. I believe I was correct in the assumption."

Well, he was smooth, I gave him that much. He had figured it - or us - pretty well, and given our last instructions, it seemed we might as well let him talk. But, oh, God I needed a nap.

"All right, sounds ok to me," I admitted. "But, I am tired, so talk slow but loud, my mind gets blurry when I'm sleepy. How about you start with how you got in here?". I heard Mel snort behind me...I knew it was due to my remark about my blurred sleepy mind. I grinned inside...she was a great opponent, but how she stayed so alert was a mystery to me.

"Ah, a good start point, and a opportunity to educate you as well, " Blasingame said.

"Your Society..and don't look so surprised...has many things right about my kind. But some information is, well, shall I say, incomplete. The longer we survive, we can develop some of the

attributes depicted in legend. If we desire to do so. However, turning to mist is not one of them. The simple truth is, your balcony is but one floor off the ground, your window is easily opened, and getting from the ground to said balcony involved only a minimal effort jump on my part. Getting your room numbers from the desk proved a bit more difficult, and required some concentration - and here I can tell you that, yes, I do have some ability to control the minds and actions of humans, within limits ; and, it is very taxing. But, among the older ones of my kind, it is a ability that can be developed.

"Now, I say 'among the older ones of my kind', but I can tell you with some certainty that I am the oldest of my kind in existence right now. Well, not quite true...I am aware of one that is older. And it is he I hunt. And why I have contacted you.". He paused here, I guess to let that sink in. I suppose he didn't stop to think that having a rational conversation with a man supposedly dead for 600 years might not have sunk in yet ; particularly since we had instructions to kill him once and for all.

"I know as well that it is late, and you really do not have time to listen to my history, but I

think it may help you to understand a few things. I will be as brief as I can.

"I was born in the year 1300, near Vienna, the son of a Roman garrison commander. The Holy Roman Empire was dying, threatened by the Ottoman onslaught, and that was the reason we were stationed there. My father was a good soldier but more, he was educated, as was my Mother, rare for those times. I had one sister, 2 years older than I. I grew up educated both in the ways of the scholar as well as the ways of the soldier.

"When I was 17, I went hunting with a few of the soldiers from Father's garrison ; my family was at home, which was off the post, another rarity for the time. We had a good day but long, and I arrived home late that evening after separating from my companions at the garrison. When I arrived in the courtyard of our home, I was immediately aware something was wrong....no servants, no Father to greet me and ask of the day as he was wont to do, no sign of life at all. Until I entered. I have never forgotten that sight.

"My parents, my sister, the servants.....all dead, all in one room, the women's bodies showing signs of terrible, horrible things having been done to them....and a single, solitary figure,

glistening in blood, standing over the mortal remains of my Father. I lost my senses...I screamed my rage and, unarmed, charged the figure. Who, simply, disappeared, leaving behind the ringing of laughter that resounded in my brain. I was found wandering near the house next day by one of my Father's aides, carrying a sword and vowing vengeance but completely out of my head. That was my first contact with such things.

"A year later and somewhat recovered, I was in the army, and soldiered until I was contacted at age 22 by the Society, in the person of the Church. I spent the next 13 years as a Hunter - always, of course, in the hope of meeting that fiend that murdered my family. And, 13 years later, I did. Unfortunately, it was more prepared for the encounter than I was ; I was sure I was dead, but for a reason I did not then know, it instead chose to convert me."

Here he paused again. I think he knew he now had our complete attention. Bill started to ask something, but Blasingame held up his hand once more.

"I know you have questions, but perhaps it is best I finish, then allow you to ask, providing you still have questions then? Good. Yes....he turned me into a Vampire. One of his kind, were

my thoughts at the time. 'Why?', of course, was the burning question in my mind when I had reawakened and discovered what he had done. I have spent over 600 years trying to answer that question, and trying to hunt this monster down and stop it for good. I think I may have part of an answer, but to clarify it, I need to expand a bit. I could ask that we continue this tomorrow - rather, later today - but time is somewhat of the essence. May I go on?"

Like we were going to stop him now. I checked my room contents for drinks, found plenty....Blasingame passed....and Ariane told him to go on.

"Thank you all. Very well. I stated 'one of his kind'. Well, that is, in fact, not entirely true. Yes - he is a Vampire. But that is only part of what he is. One question the Society has yet today has to do with how was the first vampire created? I think this monster may hold that answer, for I think it - or 'he', as I refer to it, although I think it may be asexual - was one of the original creatures from which others were created. Where it originated, I do not know. I do not think anyone ever will. But I truly believe this thing is older than civilization itself, perhaps even primordial, if I use that term correctly. And one of the things it feeds on, besides blood, is human

misery, human pain, the devastation of the soul. And, I believe that is one reason why it converted me. It recognized me, from that time when I had discovered it gloating over the bodies of my family, and by granting me this 'gift', it knew I would have to carry that memory with me for as long as I survived. I hate it even more for that.

"Another thing I have discovered about it is that it does not need to continuously feed, nor even exist, really. It sometimes goes dormant for decades, becoming impossible to track. Then, suddenly, for some reason, it will decide it is again time to feed and terrorize. And to do this is relative safety, it 'creates' another like myself. Then, wherever that creation goes, it goes, using the actions of the created to cover it's own crimes. Generally, this will continue until the creation is caught and destroyed, usually by a Hunter. Then, the monster will again go dormant for a while. In this way, it escapes detection by the Society, though I believe it is not aware of the Society and it's purpose. This was another reason it turned me, I think ; because it was convenient for it to do so.

"I have learned much about it, but in so doing, have been no closer to capturing and

killing it than I was 600 years ago. Until now. The Society has no information on this evil abomination. The rules and descriptions built over the centuries to all manner of demon, devil, imp, or Hellspawn do not really apply to it.

"First, it can shape-shift. Into almost anything, human or animal - or even elemental. It's strength is prodigious. It's 'natural' form, for want of a better term, is hideous beyond belief. But it can look at you, and become you, down to the last physical detail. I have a frightening feeling - and yes, I am capable of feeling fright, if you were wondering - this is how it 'passes' the time during dormant periods...by becoming a human it has killed, and passing off as them for decades. I do not believe it is overly intelligent, but I believe it can 'mimic' intelligence, and for sheer cunning I have found nothing to compare with it. I have devoted my 'undeath', if you will, to finding it and killing it. But, I confess, I am not sure how I will accomplish that last. But I will do so.

"Now, I still see questions on your faces, and I know what some of them, at least, are. How did I escape detection all this time? Well, remember, I was a Hunter. I knew of the Society.

And I knew enough to cover my tracks. And, admitting thus, I will also admit...yes, I have taken human life. I make no excuses ; you have no idea of the torture one goes through at the change, the sheer pain of the hunger, the despair upon realizing what one has become, the hatred of humans as a race alone for NOT being what you have become. The loneliness alone - knowing you are apart from those you used to feel as one with - is indescribable. For several decades, I was thus possessed, but covered myself well.

"I cannot tell you exactly the date I experienced a change; a acceptance if you will, of my condition and a resolve to hunt down and kill this monster. But I can tell you with one hundred percent honesty that since that day, I have not touched a drop of human blood. I began to cultivate contacts within the Society, finding people I could trust in each generation, and giving information as well as receiving it. I have even taken on a hunt or two myself, but mostly it has been just information exchange. I have also, as the centuries passed, discovered more and more about my condition, and some of the things that I have become able to do that I could not do in the early stages. And, so, I near the last part of my story. Before I continue, though, now might

be the time to ask questions if you still have any."

Chapter 11

Lou, after a small silence, started us off.

"Accepting all you have told us thus far," he started (yes, he really did talk that way), "I guess what is uppermost on my mind - by a small margin - is this : if this man, or thing, really is a originator so to speak of the vampire creation - is he the only one?".

"I cannot answer that with authority." Blasingame apologized. Imagine that - a vampire apologizing to a human. I was getting downright dizzy with emotion, I was. "It is the only one I, personally, am aware of. If you ask of me a opinion? I do not believe it is the only one."

Full of downright positive news, this old fella was. I knew we all had hundreds of questions yet, but I wanted to speed this up a bit.

"You mentioned 'time', " I prompted. " As in a time limit, or a schedule. What, exactly,

did you mean by that?". He nodded.

"The creature - I suppose you regard it strange for me to refer to it as such, being the state I am in - seems to operate in cycles. They are not exact, by any means," he cautioned, "but they seem to go in 3 to 8 week cycles by location. I presume this is predicated upon how suspicious the local populace is, or the survival of his local 'cover'. I know you would think, after 600 years of tracking this beast, I would know more about his movement. But I have gone as long as a century without contact with him. He - how shall I put this? - he seems to know when I am close ; he seems to know 'me'. And, in reverse, I seem to be able to 'sense' him, after a fashion.

"I know this flies in the face of what you know of vampires, but as I said before, I have discovered many things the Society does not know, as they have not dealt with ones as old as I, or as this creature - who, I remind you, is not just a vampire, but many things. You may wonder why I did not pass this knowledge on - I can only say, my position with the Society is not such as yours, you will recall.". He smiled ; I think we all did, too.

Ariane stood and walked around, stretching. Not a unpleasant action to view, I might say, but our attention was slightly focused on other things at the moment.

"I think we have a lot of questions," she stated, "but they can wait, as the most pertinent one seems to be - why are you here? What is it you want of us? What can we do that you can't?". Bingo. Good girl, I thought.

He looked at all of us before going on. "Very well," he acknowledged, "I will finish my story for now, and perhaps it will be clear. I hope so, anyway.

"As I said, there does seem to be some bond between this demon and those whom he converts to vampire. I have never created another, so that particular fact may still hold true in the Society's knowledge ; but where this thing is concerned, it does not. I know it exists, because there are times I feel it - I can describe that no other way. It seems to be dependent upon my proximity to him. He, also, seems aware of me - if there is a limit to that, I am not aware of it. Sometimes, it is as if he likes to toy with me, knowing I hunt him, and lure me to places then use me as 'bait', as it were. This, and I assure you I speak the truth, is what happened in New

Orleans. And, you can accept this or not, had I been just a few moments quicker, your friends and fellow Hunters might be alive today, and this meeting never have taken place.

"He, you see, created another vampire there. The trail the Society followed was mine, and I admit I erred somewhat there, believing they would follow the other, as I was doing. I was able to distract them, and put them on the correct scent...this is why they were at that warehouse that night. Thinking they would find me, they found the other one, as I knew they would. What I didn't know was that this demonic creator would also be there - I knew he was in the area, knew he was behind this action, but did not know exactly where he was. I suspected, though, that he would be nearby his creation's next kill, and actually believed that now, after all this time, I would have my revenge.

"I watched the 2 Hunters arrive, witnessed their confrontation with the young vampire (whom they believed to be me) and saw them dispatch him easily, without them being at all aware I was there. However, my personal prey did not appear, and indeed, I felt his presence further away. I again erred, through impatience. I attempted to follow my sense of him, leaving the

warehouse. It took me nearly an hour to realize he had again anticipated me ; I returned to the warehouse with all the speed my enhanced form would allow - but found your friends in the condition you have been told about.

"It took me a while to calm my anger, which is tremendous in it's enhancement. Once I had done so, I became aware I could again sense my target, but that he was drawing away. I broke a long standing habit, and closed up my local operation hastily, and followed where my senses led me. Here." Blasingame was up and pacing now, almost panther-like in movement. I could see he would be a formidable opponent indeed, being forewarned of us. I couldn't help but feel somewhat relieved that we might be able to postpone his elimination. Postpone, however, being the operative phrase. He suddenly stopped, turned to me.

"So, to further answer your question and explain the time essence, " he said directly, "he has been here now almost 3 weeks, and no killings yet. I believe I know exactly where he is, and I sense that he may again be ready to begin, or perhaps to move on. Either way, I feel we have less than 4 or 5 days before he moves one way or another. The significance of the coming

celebration day also should not be ignored - he has demonstrated a fondness for the American celebration of Halloween, though a much more gruesome one than our civilized manners could accept. I think he will stay here, I presume he knows I am here, and believe he will organize a very special demonstration, just to frustrate me. I have to accept that I cannot get close enough to him to do him damage, unless - unless perhaps he can be distracted by those of whom he has no knowledge ; in other words, you.". I felt a gear clunk to a dead stop in my head. Hurt, too.

"Hold on, there - you saying you want us to be BAIT?" Bill said menacingly, rising up from his chair and speaking for the first time, Melanie right next to him, looking incredulous and angry at the same time. Mac had stayed seated, but was shaking his head ; Lou had barely moved, was sitting with his legs crossed, one foot bouncing slowly, arms behind his head, staring contemplatively at the ceiling. Ariane was perched on the edge of the dresser, arms folded in front of her, looking from me to Blasingame like we were the Wimbledon finalists.

I shook my head. "Not that simple," I began. "Yeah, this is 'my' Hunt group - on paper. But we do nothing without everyone agreeing first. Now, I, for one, have had a long past 48

hours, and I couldn't trust myself to say anything right now, especially if it might mean one - or all - of us gets killed.". I was facing Blasingame as I spoke, but I was talking to them all.

"Remember, you are the reason we are here," I went on, addressing him directly. "As far as we know, you still are. We have only your word for this, although I am awake enough to realize you could simply have waited for us to come, moved on, or attempted to strike at us first. In fact, this little meeting could still end in a blood bath....Bill needs something to pound on when he gets riled, and his drums are over in the lounge.". I yawned...it was contagious, I even saw Lou stifle one a second later. "And at this point, I'm so tired, I don't give a damn if it does.

"Tell you what. Let us get some rest - we don't have some of your advantages, and I'll promise you this - we will discuss it. Let's see - today is the 26th - unless we contact you before, meet us back here the morning of the 27th when we have finished our night, about 2 am. And we will let you know. No tricks, no surprises on our part - guess we will have to trust you for the same. Fair? Acceptable? Or...do we break out the stakes and Holy Water right here and now?". I yawned again ; Blasingame stared at me for a moment, then burst into laughter. Dang fool

sounded human. Against my better judgement, I was starting to like him. Okay, so, I'm not the brightest bulb in the 4-pack when I am tired. But it seemed to have worked, this time anyway.

"Indeed," Balsingame agreed as he brought his laughter under control. "Fair, and acceptable. And - thank you. For listening, for being patient, but most of all - that is the first time I can remember laughing like that in centuries. For that alone, I am in your debt.". He walked over to the case Terry had brought me, now on my bed, and easily opened the leather latches.

"You may find this helpful, should you decide to assist me," he said, standing back so all could see. Inside the case was a bow - not just any bow, either, but one that appeared very old and had been crafted with loving attention. "This is a English Longbow, especially crafted for me by a dear friend. It measures 72 inches from nock to nock, and is made from yew. It has a 40 pound pull at 28 inches, so it is quick yet can drive a shaft nearly through the chest of a full grown deer at 50 yards. I have no practical use for it any longer - I can accomplish that feat with my hand while chasing a deer. You, however, I think may find it useful. And yes, it is quite old, but I have kept it in good condition - I also gave Mr. Blackfield a container with 100 specially modern-

crafted arrows, quite lethal to anyone, human - or not.

"You will, of course, have it examined. But, I can again assure you, it was made in the 15th century, by a master of his craft. It is yours, if you want it. Hopefully, you will find a good use for it very soon. Sleep well, and I shall see you again tomorrow." He did have the courtesy to leave through the door, I noted. As soon as it shut behind him, everyone started talking at once - I held up my hands and raised my voice to be heard.

"Not now!!" I gritted. "No! Sleep!! Everyone!! And if anyone so much as whispers in my direction before noon, we may get to see if this thing really DOES still work as well as he says! Okay? Okay! Go, go, go to bed! ". It took five minutes, but they were as tired as I ; Ariane was last out, and as she stepped into the hallway, she turned to me.

"Don't shit me, guitar-man," she said, seriously but softly. "I already know you made up your mind. And, I'm with you. So will everyone else be...save one. We'll talk, you and I. Call me when you wake, I might even buy you lunch.".

"Well, Ma'am," I leered, "you all could just bunk in here and we could have lunch in bed,

you know, whenever...". I was pushing her out the door as I said it, though. She laughed.

"Close, but...no cigar, big fella." she smiled, and was gone. Whatever the Hell that meant....I locked the door, started shedding clothes on the way to the bed, and was asleep almost before I made it there.

Chapter 12

I woke up to the buzzing of my room phone. Ah, found something about the place I didn't like. Purring was preferable to buzzing. I picked it up.

"Yeah?" I grunted irritably.

"Ain't nice to keep room service waiting in the hall, sleeping beauty," I heard Ariane's voice. "He and I have been knocking for 5 minutes. I was starting to worry you fell asleep on your new toy and impaled yourself. Now, open your door before the biscuits and grits get cold.". She hung up. I looked at my room clock ; 12:45 PM it blinked at me. Damn....I was hoping it would be before noon, so I could impale *her* with my new 'toy'. Stumbling, I made it half way to the door before I remembered I was naked - I grabbed a towel off the rack in the bathroom, and opened the door to Ariane tipping the room service waiter and nearly running me down with the cart.

"I'm more used to leaving guys' rooms who are dressed like that, than entering them,"

she grinned. "Go pee and wash, or whatever you do when you wake up, and let's eat lunch. God, you look terrible when you've just woken. Glad I never gave into temptation. Want a carrot?". It was too much for me - I padded directly to the restroom and shut the door without a word. I was tempted to leave the door open, but then I'd have to listen to her ignoring that I had done so. She could be a loud ignorer. Fifteen minutes later and a bit more awake, I returned.

"Pants, you heathen," she tossed at me as I made for the coffee. "Shirt, too, or I might forget you don't turn me on.". Done as she requested, I sat and downed a cup of good strong French Roast, and started in on what looked like real, honest-to-God homemade french fries. They were, too.

"No eggs?" I chided. "This is Iowa - it's a law, when you wake up, you have to have eggs, or they execute you.". She smiled at me, then burped - a good, hearty midwestern burp. We both laughed. "Ok, then, great Goddess of song ; what is it? Why are we talking without the others?".

"Oh, they'll be here soon," she said. "In fact, Lou and Mac are down having lunch in the

deli in the lobby, Blackfield is marking maps, and Bill and Mel are stirring. We'll talk this vampire business out then. Like I told you last night, they'll all go along. Except one. That's what we need to talk about." I stopped eating, and looked at her quizzically....what the heck was up with this bunch lately? "All right, I'll bite," I conceded. "Which one?"

"That's the problem ; you don't know," she scolded me. "Oh, it'll be ok, that one will come around, but it's a weak spot. And we don't know how to handle this. The Society has rules about it, but generally they cover the situation when both parties are aware of what's going on. You, you dumb ass, haven't a clue. So, I guess it's time someone slapped you up side the head with it. Before someone gets killed for no reason."

A few things said during the past couple days started to nag at me ; I got a bad feeling I knew suddenly where she was headed. "Melanie?" I asked, a bit gingerly, afraid I was wrong but more afraid I was right. Ariane clapped her hands and giggled.

"Give the man a kewpie doll, we have a winner!" she hooted. "Hell, I thought this would be tougher. Maybe there's hope for you yet....wait...no, I doubt it."

"Look, I know I maybe said some stuff, you know, but Hell, we always tease each other about something, and----" I had to stop, because Ariane froze in place and stared at me like I was a lab rat fresh from the injection phase.

"I do not believe it. Do. Not. Believe. It." she finally said. " You have got to be the absolute dumbest male to ever walk the earth. Let me spell it for you, Kindergarten boy - none of us know quite when it happened, and none of us for sure understand HOW it happened - but she has a thing for you. She is in love with you, despite being a intelligent, talented woman who otherwise always exhibits sound judgement and good taste. And that could be serious, and you know why."

Well, yeah, I knew why. It was why the Society had a policy on Hunters becoming involved, and why we were the only multiple Hunter unit. It wasn't forbidden - no, they didn't go that far. There was recognition that such things could happen, and provisos were made. If such a thing developed between 2 Hunters, they were encouraged to bring it out in the open. The Society then 'retired' them, with generous financial packages and even, if it were desired,

providing them with property or even a business opportunity, wherever they wished to be, or a opportunity to work elsewhere within the Society. Anything that didn't involve Hunting. I had known of two instances in my 15 years, and in both cases the people involved were still living happy lives, but no longer directly involved in the Hunting aspect though they were still actively involved in Society work. It was simply too dangerous - the emotion could cause a Hunter to make a fatal error, a error which not only might not save the life of the other, but cost more lives. And many of those we hunted had psychic ability, able to pinpoint emotional weakness fast, and use it to their advantage. No. Too risky.

It was one of the early objections to Mark's idea of a Hunt 'group', the possibility of romantic involvement. Friendships, it was recognized, would be formed, and this was in itself considered a risk, but acceptable, once the idea was adopted. And Mark had convinced them that the likelihood of romantic involvement in this instance, while possible, might not have the same effect as on a 2 person team. So, they let him try it. After about 5 years, they forgot all about the possibility. It had become obvious we serious about 2 things - our music, and our

Hunting. Sex might rear it's countenance, and friendships indeed were made....but love? Not even a hint.

"You, I mean, how the heck can you be so certain?" I asked. I was confused, and unaccepting. "The woman is a knockout, physically. Men drool over her. I'm just a old, short guitar player with a smart mouth, lucky to have even survived this long I've pissed off so many people. Hell, we snipe at each other like brother and sister, And besides, I'm 9 years older than she is! I think you're wrong. Have you asked her?".

"Jesus, men!" Ariane swore. She gave me a look both exasperated and incredulous at the same time. "Or...some men, anyway. Lord, everyone in the group knows it but you. Even Terry picked up on it last night - don't deny it, either, I know he mentioned it to you. When you opened your door last night, you didn't see her reaction - she was scared to death! And not of Blasingame, or of what might be in the room...she wasn't afraid OF something, she was afraid FOR something. You. You inutterable twit. Everyone else was ready to take action if anything happened to you - she was ready to step in FRONT of you. Why, I don't know. I sure can't see

it....you aren't worth it!". Her face had begun to redden, she was actually getting angry. I put up both hands in surrender.

"Look," I said, "Okay. I admit I'm a dunce. I'm not the type, or, I don't see myself as the type, that women like Mel could fall for. Or you. And no, I'm not saying you are...jeez, it's hard to talk to you women when you're like this. You're making me feel like this is my fault, or something. I didn't encourage it. I don't think I did. Did I?". She was shaking her head, and starting to smile a little.

"No...I...hmm...I mean..." she spent a few seconds searching for words. "I - we - know you didn't encourage this. Hell, I even know I'm not being totally fair towards you....I've made it sound like we blame you or something. That isn't it. But we all love her, you know that. Heck, we all love each other...well, except me and you, I hate your guts, you ugly old man.". She laughed now, a little embarrassedly. "Ok, fine, make you feel better, get your tiny ego going, sure, I've felt a attraction to you once or twice. But, Nick, not like she's got. I guess I figured you needed to be told, since you were the only one not seeing it, and considering what we may be going up against

after today.

"Because we are, aren't we? And Mel is going to object at first, because she knows you are going to be the one who is going to insist on taking the biggest risks, the one who is always going to try to be in front if there's danger ahead, and it's starting to get to her. And we don't know what to do. I guess we were kinda hoping, maybe, you would." She got quiet then, busying herself with tidying up the lunch things and putting the cart outside the door. All I could do was sit, and think. This was getting to be all too much. I told myself, maybe I was getting too old, maybe I needed to go to Mark and say, 'Hey, pard, that's it. Get me a ranch out in Arizona or something and wave bye-bye, I'm used up'. I had some feelings of my own to search out, and I still - part of me anyway - denied any of this was true. They had to all be reading it wrong.

Apparently the lunch cart outside my door was a prearranged signal, because within 10 minutes, they were all there. "We were starting to wonder just what kind of talking you guys were doing," Bill chided us. Melanie, I thought, gave both he, and Ariane, a hard look.

Oh, great, now I was going to start reading things into everything she did. Wonderful. I

gave myself a mental slap, and told myself to get down to business. We did, and sure enough, Mel voiced pretty strong objections to the whole Hunt now. Everyone listened, everyone had input, and soon she was agreeing that we had to do it, as long as we understood she didn't trust Blasingame, and she'd get to say 'I told you so' as we all died when he betrayed us. And that we get this information off to Mark as soon as possible, and if the Society said 'no', then it was 'no'. All agreed that was fair, and it was settled. I already knew, once the Society had this story, there was no way in Hell they were going to pull us off.

I contacted Mark, gave him the story....he was as excited as a kid having his first Christmas, and told me by all means we should cooperate unless we heard differently. I knew the old dusty archives all over the world were gonna get a airing out over the next few hours.

We all met again in my room when a man from the University of Iowa (and a Society agent) showed up to examine the bow. He pronounced it genuine, insofar as a limited non-lab examination could show, and we thanked him and ushered him back to his University. We had already been pretty certain. Ariane had a few songs she wanted us to rehearse, so I sent

Blackfield to Vandemeter to just keep a eye on Blasingame, and let us know if he did anything that didn't fit in with what he had told us.

After the rehearsal, we broke up to get ready for supper, thinking we might drive around a bit and see what else was available. Bill, Mac, and Lou begged off, saying they were going to eat here and nap. Ariane and Melanie talked it over as I went to get a paper, thinking to catch up a bit on the local news. After all, it had been a while. As I walked back to see what the two of them had decided, a story on mid-page-one caught my attention.

'Two bodies found in alley near local bar ; police suspect wild dog attacks'.

They saw me stop to read, and waited patiently until I was done. I handed it to them.

"I think I'll take a drive," I said. Neither responded. But both walked with me to the cars. Melanie got in with me. Ariane stood by the window, holding the paper.

"Be back here in a hour, and no arguments," she told me. "I'm taking this to show to the others. You know they never read anything that isn't about sex or more sex.". I backed out, and headed for the area the paper had given as the location of the killings.

Chapter 13

Melanie was quiet for a few blocks, and I didn't feel inclined to speak. She finally broke the silence. "It said it may have happened between midnight and 4 am," she stated. "That doesn't rule out Blasingame as the culprit, you know."

I nodded. "I know that," I answered. "I'm considering it. Hey, I'm not always as dumb as I look, you know." I smiled to show her it was a joke. I didn't feel all that funny, though.

"And you couldn't be as dumb as Bill says you are," she finished for me, covering herself with that elfish grin. "Ok, good enough. So...what do you hope to accomplish by this drive?"

"Nothing, really," I admitted. "I just kind of wanted to see if I could recognize anything after all this time, or if it - or I - have changed too much. Kind of a head-clearing, I guess." I saw her glance at me.

"Oh, I...I mean, I didn't think...if you wanted to be by yourself..." she said hesitantly.

"No, no, " I assured her. "I needed the company. Glad it's you." I said it before thinking,

and wanted to kick myself. And then wanted to know why I wanted to kick myself. "Hey, by God, I remember this place," I went on, glad for the chance to change the subject. "I played here a couple times, way way back in the 60's. I'll be damned - it was a dive then, it's still a dive, but it's still here. Who woulda thought it?". Mel was wrinkling up her nose, and giving me strange looks.

"Gads, you played here?" she said. "Baby, that's desperation!". Given in her best Brenda Lee imitation, it was cute and funny at the same time. The place was a dive, a old fashioned, poor-side-of-town working-man's beer joint. It was in the alley behind it where the bodies had been found. Wild dogs? Not totally out of the question down here, a area that Sioux City had been trying to keep covered up for years. They had done a great job, the city was beautiful even back then...but like any beauty, it had it's flaws ; they were just sometimes hard to see.

"Does it bother you?" Mel asked suddenly, breaking a few moments' silence as I cruised a strip center parking lot, just musing. I glanced a questioning look her way. "Being back here, I mean, after all this time. You never talk much about that time of your life ; some of us were just, you know, curious.".

"Mmmm, well, no, actually," I replied after a second of thought. "But hey, none of us have ever talked much about our time before the Society, have we? I mean, other than what we experienced as kids or teens, that somehow got us here. I guess everyone wonders if it will affect me, being as this Hunt is on the home ground of one of us. But it really doesn't matter, honestly. I have no ties to here, and the memories are the 'take it or leave it' kind. Had some good times, a few great times, a lot of bad times. Gotta admit, though, it is a bit of a strange feeling....this isn't the kind of place where one might expect to have to ply our trade."

"No, I suppose not," she came back. "Still, we have had hunts in stranger places. And there is a certain beauty here, a feeling of being a part of the land somehow. So....no old girlfriends' or ex-wives' ghosts haunt you here?". Nonchalant. On purpose? Or was she really just making conversation? I hated this feeling of having to suddenly be on my guard around her, and hated the hating. Why should I? The others had to be wrong....they were bored, that was it, seeing things. But, why that particular question? Would Mac have asked that? Lou? Ariane?

Scratch that last...yeah, Ariane might. Dang her.

Man, I was going to drive myself crazy with this. I needed to concentrate on the job at hand....if I said the wrong thing, oh well, I'd deal with it when we were done. That was the best way. She was looking at me now, as I hadn't answered yet.

"No, no not really," I said as if that was what I'd been thinking about. "I mean, sure, there were women here and there, and a couple of school-boy crushes that never amounted to anything. Mostly, just, you know, a few weeks here, a month or two there, just - well, band relationships. Never really meant to amount to anything, you know?"

"Mostly, it's just family and friend memories. Everything that formed me, that molded what I am today, started here. Guess you could say 'roots', much as I hate that word. I wasn't born here, but I grew up here. Looking back, I liked it. I was pretty lucky. What about you?" I asked, as I guided the car back to the hotel.

"Me?" she said, a bit taken aback. "I guess a lot like you, only I'm from Nevada. Boring life. Early on, my folks discovered I had a knack for music ; Mom pushed me a little, Dad just let me do what I wanted but supported me in whatever I tried. Could I go back there, under these

same circumstances? I wonder....I doubt it, but I don't really know. I think it must be tougher on you than you admit.

"So...you've never been - you know - in love?". Oh, shit.

"Hell, I don't know," I said truthfully. "I tell myself no, never was. I think I can't, or wasn't meant to...there's too much to do, too many people who need what I can do. Of course, there was that little imp 10 years ago, she was kinda cute, got me thinking of a little house, some little demons running around....you know, just before we incinerated her...er..it." I was trying to joke my way out of the conversation. She did grin, and swiped at me with her little fist - caught me on the shoulder, and it did hurt a bit, by golly. "Watch it," I kidded her, "you'll make me wreck the car. Wouldn't that be a kick, trying to explain that stuff in the trunk?". We both laughed.

"Why, though?" she asked when we had stopped laughing. "Why come to the area where they found those bodies? You do think it's connected, I know. So do I. What could you hope to find out?".

"I don't know, Mel," I answered truthfully. "Maybe I thought I'd get a 'scent', or a feeling

about all this. Maybe I did. It bothers me, the coincidence. The meeting last night, all that's happened, and then the killing start now....and start behind a place I am familiar with, in a city I am familiar with. I don't like it, but - I don't see what we can do about it right now. I know you don't trust Blasingame ; I don't either, entirely. But I get the feeling he's on the level, kid, even if I think he isn't telling us everything. Or, hasn't yet. I have to be fair about that.". She snorted as we pulled into the hotel parking lot.

"Kid, my ass, " she blasted me. "You're only 9 years older than me ; doesn't exactly make you my granddad, so don't go acting all 'older and wiser' on me. Oh, and by the way, I was..." she threw out as she got out of the car.

"Was what?" I asked as I locked up.

"Married," she shot back. "Six months of wedded purgatory. In case," she added, walking away, "you were curious.". The set of her back told me I'd screwed up somehow. I told myself I didn't give a damn, and headed for my room.

Mac met me in the lobby. "We've been waiting for you," he collared me as I tried to pass

him. "Not so fast, oh great leader of worthless people such as we ; Ariane doubted you guys ate, so we took the liberty of providing. Step this way - and do not try to evade me, I was a All American High School defensive back, I'll have you know.". Ok...well, that explained his quickness at times. Didn't do a damn thing for my mood, but what the Hell. He led me to Araine's room, where the rest were gathered, including Mel. And Blackfield.

"Well?" Ariane probed, one eyebrow arched. "Learn anything?".

"No, not really. Just, well, vibes.".

"Hmmm...well, Terry did. Tell him.". I looked at Blackfield.

"Blasingame says," he started, and I interrupted with "I thought you were just supposed to keep a eye on him?". He shook his head.

"No good, Nick. He knew I was in town 10 minutes after I got there. He contacted me, not the other way around. Ok?". I nodded. It was a dumb outburst on my part, and looks from the others told me they knew it too. "Sorry", I apologized. He just nodded.

"All right. Blasingame told me about the killings here last night. He thinks the old one

has started, and he's pretty sure the killing were done by a newly formed vampire. And he thinks the vampire is from Vandemeter ; in fact, he is pretty sure he knows who it is. Someone he hired to do odd jobs around his shop/living quarters didn't show up for work yesterday nor today. No one has seen the guy, but he's just a drifter-type, came into town about 6 months ago and just stuck around. Folks felt sorry for him, gave him odd jobs to do, and one family let him stay in a old barn they have in back of their house. Ain't much, but it has a roof, a generator, and a portable heater. Anyway, the guy comes up gone 2, 3 days ago. No one is too surprised. A few folks were a bit concerned he maybe had a accident or heart attack or something, but a few hours of looking around town - and it doesn't take long there - turned up zip. So, they figure he skipped, moved on finally, gave in to the old wander lust.

"Our buddy Blasingame, though, has a different view. I didn't tell him about your decision to assist him ; thought you'd rather tell him yourself. But he told me to give you a message : he will be here again tonight, both during and after your gig, but he says to be extremely careful and on constant guard tonight. And, he wants you all to come to him tomorrow in Vandemeter. Eh...I

think that was all of it. Came back as soon as I could. Oh...and here, for each of you, is a map of Vandemeter - I took the liberty of marking it all out, including the location of his shop. Figured you might want that...well, except Nick, since he grew up there."

I thanked him, and told him that I too would find the map handy - I confessed I didn't recall much of the layout.

"All right," I addressed them. "We need to take this seriously, whether we believe Blasingame or not. If he's on the level, we can't say we weren't prepared. Make sure everyone has something with them tonight - no firearms, though ; we aren't exactly isolated here. Unlike what we're used to, we may not be able to pick our time and place, so we have to be careful of civilians and innocent bystanders - and yeah, I know, there ARE no innocent bystanders, Bill!" I grinned at him before he could say it, and he laughed. Ariane jumped up, clapping her hands...

"Ok, let's grab a bite, rest a bit, and get ready to rock and roll! It's Friday, big night in cow town! Drovers got paid today!" she laughed, handing out the sandwiches she had ordered.

Chapter 14

IT was a good crowd, all right, loud and boisterous in a good way. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like almost capacity....a lot of folks even for a Friday night in a city of 80,000, though between the tri-corner area of Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota it was around 160,000. Seemed like half of them were there. Well, it was the Halloween weekend, as Halloween was on Tuesday next, so that helped. Unfortunately, didn't help us much ; trying to watch for anything out of the ordinary with this size crowd of revelers was like trying to milk a bull. If you spent any time doing it, you'd end up with no milk and missing a limb, likely as not.

To make it even more interesting, many of the customers were in costume. Wonderful. Well...actually...quite a few of them were pretty wonderful. At least to the males in our group.

I had asked Terry if Blasingame had given him a description of the missing drifter, and he had, so we at least had that much. But, we didn't even see Blasingame ; if this other one was here, and didn't want us to see him, we certainly weren't going to. No, I figured it had to be later, after the show, or the guy would strike during the gig and be long gone before we were done. I hoped Blasingame had a handle on that, since there was nothing I could do about it.

We shut down about 1:15 in the morning, at the request of the employees, who needed to get the place cleared so they could clean up and go party a little themselves. I was glad of that ; if our friend had a timetable, this might throw him off a bit. Still, we had more than our usual share of groupies and hangers-on ; Bill, Mac, Ariane, and Mel always had customers after them, but tonight even Lou had to fend off several - and I could tell he was reluctant to do so with a couple of them. Even I had one or two tonight - all right, to be honest, I had 3 young women (ok, young to me) all wanting to spend more time with me, showing that between their masks and the liquor they'd consumed, their vision was extensively impaired. One proved a bit hazardous, as the man she had arrived with fully intended to be the man she left with, but I was able to convince him that this is what I felt was right, too. Anyway, it was after 2 a.m. before we finally got squared away enough to leave.

Even though it was a short walk back to the lobby, we stayed bunched up and took our time. The main parking lot was a noisy place, and well lit, yet we tried to be alert for anything out of the ordinary. So alert, it was 30 seconds before I realized there were 8 of us, instead of 7. The

adrenalin kick nearly killed me, before I saw it was Blasingame.

"Damn it, don't DO that!" I yelled at him, and had the satisfaction of seeing a expression of near surprise on his face. "Cool, Bill!!! It's ok!" I had to add, or we might have had a little blood spilling. "Look, don't sneak up on us like that, especially after you've given us a warning to be cautious. We're only human....our hearts stop, so do we.". He even managed to appear sheepish as he apologized.

"Ah, I am sorry. I forget sometimes how silent I can be. I did not intend to startle you, and didn't intentionally 'sneak up on you' ; I simply thought I'd join you here rather than use the tactic I used last night ", he confessed.

"Ok, fine " Ariane scolded, "just give us a little warning next time, or we might just fulfill our original hunt and call it quits.". He accepted that with no reaction, but now that I had calmed, I knew what he was thinking....if this was a example of how cautious we were, he may have made a mistake in thinking we could help him.

"Actually, I was just thinking of this as a compliment ", he said in response to my thought,

which reminded me of what he had told us last night. "It means that you - some of you, at least - trust me, or you would have reacted to my appearance as a danger since you were already on the alert. I am glad of this. Does this mean you will help me?"

"Yeah, that's what it means " Mel spoke out before I could. "But you're right ; some of us don't trust you. And if I find out you're lying, or you get any of my friends hurt doing your dirty work for you, I'll rip your head off your shoulders with my bare hands and piss down the stump before I burn your ass to Hell.". She had turned to face him as she said this, and though the top of her head only came up to his shoulders, he had to stop and tilt his own head back to look her in the eyes as she spoke. He even backed up a step. When she finished, everyone was grinning...even I had to. Mac leaned over to say in my ear:

"Damn - you know, the man that she allows to get her is gonna be one lucky fella ; good thing she likes 'older' men, eh?". I turned to him sharply, but he was already gone into the lobby. Mel and Lou were with him, leaving Ariane, Terry, and I outside with Blasingame, who was smiling broadly and staring straight at me.

"I believe I quite envy you, Nick Anders " he said, and Ariane burst out laughing. Exasperated, I simply turned and walked to the lobby door, motioning them to follow. I didn't make it, because a giant mechanical steel clamp seized my arm, making me nearly drop my guitar case. "Wait!!!" Blasingame hissed. "He IS here...in the back, the garage!" and he released my arm - it was his hand that had grabbed me - and was gone. And by gone, I mean - there, then - not there. We were too startled to move for a moment, then I barked at Terry:

"Get the others, fast, tell them to meet us in the garage area. Go!" The last wasn't necessary...he was already moving, knowing I didn't want to yell across the lobby to the others in front of the night desk clerk. As Ariane and I ran to the back garage, I saw her look at my case.

"Ever wish.." she panted, "That you had taken up harmonica instead of guitar?".

"I couldn't get into a harmonica case what I have in here." I grunted as the lot came into view. It looked empty, and we slowed to a fast walk, our heads pivoting like lawn sprinklers. Movement, off to my right, caught my attention as I became aware of a low-pitched, guttural growl that was increasing in volume. I didn't have time to even warn Ariane, as a giant wave of what

felt like wet cement took me off my feet, case flying uselessly away. I smelled rot, foul body odor, and something worse as I hit the pavement and skidded under my burden. A hand like iron closed around my throat, and I caught a glimpse of feral eyes, glowing red in the yellow vapor parking lot lights, just inches from my chin. I tried to pry his hand from my throat, but it was like trying to lift a building ; I had a brief sensation that I was about to die and might as well give in, when I saw Ariane's face over the vampire's shoulder, a short but very sharp sword held aloft in both her hands. The vampire turned to face her, growling again, and with one swipe of his other hand, knocked her out of my view ; he turned back to me, and then, suddenly - in what felt like a tornado-driven wind - he was gone, leaving behind a animal scream of rage and pain. I was too stunned to move, but became slowly aware that I was going to be decidedly sore in the morning ; I wanted to get to Ariane, but couldn't force myself to move. It was then I realized the others were there ; Lou and Bill were bending over me and were saying something I couldn't hear over the blood pounding in my ears, but I was able to lift one arm and give them a thumbs-up to show I was alive and, hopefully, not hurt too badly. I was trying to ask about Ariane, but my throat hurt

too badly for me to utter anything but a gasping sound.

In a few seconds, I was able to motion them to help me sit up. From there, I could see Mel, with Blasingame and Ariane, almost 15 feet away. She was standing, but being helped by both Mel and Blasingame, and I was feeling better enough by then to have it strike me as funny, with the disparity in heights - Ariane was taller than both her supporters. She looked dazed, but ok ; there was blood around her nose and mouth, and her jacket was torn beyond repair, but she seemed to be laughing, and I felt even better. I also noticed my hearing was returning, and additionally, that I hurt like Hell. All over. But I was alive. We both were.

"Man, you are one lucky dude." Mac said from behind Lou. "What a view you must have had when Blasingame threw that freaky S.O.B. off you. It was pretty awesome to see just from where I was.". I stared at him, then at Bill and Lou as they nodded agreement. I wanted to tell them that wasn't half the luck ; with the grip that sucker had on my throat, I was lucky he didn't rip my whole neck off when it happened. But it hurt to talk right now, so I didn't. At least that told me what the wind was. I pointed to Ariane, who was now walking on her own, massaging her right

cheek, and making her way over to me, with her rescuers in tow.

"I think she's ok," Bill told me, sensing what I was asking. "Gonna have a bit of a swollen lip for a while though, I think.". As she arrived to stand over where I sat, I reached up for her hand and gave it a squeeze, trying to smile as well as I could. She just grinned, grimaced, giggled, groaned, and nodded. "Want to try to stand?" Bill asked, holding out his hands for support. I made it, with what I hoped was a minimum of complaint. At least I didn't scream. I don't think I did, anyway - sore as my throat was, that would have hurt even worse.

With Bill's help, I walked around a bit and discovered that I was sore but nothing seemed broken. Apparently the vampire's rush was borne largely by my right arm and shoulder, and instinct had caused me to begin rolling away as he struck - probably saved me from having a few crushed ribs. As it was, they seemed bruised pretty badly, and the bicep on my right arm was starting to throb like a steam engine. Other than that, and my throat, a few abrasions from the concrete rounded out my injuries.

"I do not wish to sound alarming," Blasingame spoke up, "but I believe we should remove

ourselves from this area quickly ; the younger one did claim a victim before I could react, and nearly had 2 more. We should return to your rooms - I will try to answer any questions as we go, but go we should.". It wasn't a bad idea...I could see the others were fighting a urge to stay and find our attacker, but logic dictated that would be a waste of time. Mel looked at Blasingame for a long minute, then nodded and turned to Ariane.

"He's right. Here, Bill and Mac - you help Ariane," she said, over Ariane's protestations she was fine. "I and Lou will help Nick ; makes more sense, height-wise, you clowns. And don't argue, girl - we'll determine if you're ok once we are back to the rooms. We go to Nick's room, everyone....including you, Blasingame. And, by the way, thanks...not for you, these two might be memories to us right now. Not saying I trust you yet - but what you did goes a long way for me. So....just...thanks.". The others nodded agreement as we made our way back to the lobby ; Blasingame smiled, and leaned to me to whisper "You are indeed a lucky man, Mr. Anders."

Man, I was getting real tired of hearing that where Melanie was concerned. I considered myself pretty lucky just to be standing about then. As we approached the lobby, Blasingame

motioned us to wait - he entered and appeared to engage the night clerk in conversation, then indicated we were to enter. By now, both Ariane and I were pretty much moving on our own, but slowly....and we made it up to my room without assistance.

During the move back to the rooms, Blasingame had filled us in. He had heard the young vampire's victim cry out - a sound we could not have heard. He reacted immediately, but when he arrived, the victim - a employee of the lounge, a waitress - was already dead, and the young vampire already sated (a fact that may have contributed to my still being alive). The killer, as Blasingame had suspected, was indeed the drifter/handyman he had spoken of ; he was already on the move, as if sensing Blasingame's approach - or so the older vampire thought. Blasingame did sense the presence of the older creature, however, and momentarily was tempted to give in as he had in New Orleans and search for his own prey. But he had heard the younger one's attack on Ariane and I, and realized this was why the younger had moved...he had heard us running, and moved to claim us also.

Blasingame admitted, even with his enhanced abilities, he was nearly too late. He

arrived in time to grab Ariane's jacket and pull her away just as the other vampire struck, then turned back with full speed and slammed the younger off me. This was what the others had seen when they came running onto the scene - Bill commented it was really just a blur, they actually heard it more than saw it. The younger one's howl of rage seemed to come out of thin air, and was made even more bone-chilling by that fact. They saw Ariane, they saw me...then suddenly Blasingame was there too, beside Ariane, as they split and rushed to us both. Blackfield had wisely collected my short sword, placed it back in the guitar case, and brought it back with us.

I had to agree with Blasingame - I was indeed a lucky man. I just didn't agree with his implication of what that luck referred to.

Chapter 15

Once in my room, no one wanted to leave ; everyone felt they should stay and keep watch. I managed to convince them that no one, including us, would get any rest that way. I had to do it with help, as I still could not talk above a whisper, but Mel and Ariane gave me enough backup that, within 15 minutes, we were alone. Blasingame did not say where he would be, only that he would be there if he were needed. At this point, everyone, even Mel, believed him, and that seemed to settle it. Things were adjusting, it seemed. Terry popped in about 5 minutes after everyone had gone to say he had arranged for a local doctor - and Society agent - to see us both, here, at about 10 the next morning, and wished us good night.

Ariane mentioned she needed to go get some ice on her lip, and started to leave too, but Mel stopped her : "Uhn uh, nope" she stated adamantly. "You're both staying right here, and so am I. There's ice behind Nick's bar, and probably some bags...you both are gonna need it. First,

I'm going to check you both over, then I'm putting you both to bed and I'm staying right here until that doc comes tomorrow."

I blinked....looked at Ariane, then at Mel, then back at Ariane who had mimicked my moves perfectly. We both started to grin a bit, then wiped them as Mel's neck and face started to flush with anger.

"And. If. Either. Of. You." she started defiantly, biting off each word like a angry teacher bent on reprimanding a room full of unruly children, " do not do as I say, that doctor will be a little too late to help either of you! And don't even think you're in any condition to physically disobey me. You were dumb enough to both go running off like a couple of retards without waiting for us and were lucky enough to survive. I am going to see to it that you survive the rest of tonight, even if it kills you! Got it?". Hands on hips, eyes flashing, cheeks flushed...I had to admit, if what the others suspected was true about her feelings for me, maybe I oughtta be paying more attention. Well, thinking that kept me from being so frightened of her that I peed my pants - the thought of which, considering just how close I had been to dying back there, made me

surreptitiously check my trousers for wet spots. Anyway, it hurt to laugh. A little.

She called Lou and had him go to Ariane's room for a change of clothes, then checked to be sure Ariane could move around well enough to shower, and sent her to do that. Then she helped me off with my jacket and shirt - my right arm by now was throbbing badly with each breath I took, and she had to cut the sleeves away to get both completely off. I heard her hiss as my upper torso was revealed. Big macho stud that I was, I was afraid to look.

"Sheesh, if nothing's broken, it'll be a miracle," she said quietly. "Ok, when Ariane's done, we're going to get you in a nice hot shower - yes, I said 'we', and don't play the prude with me, you sexist pig ; you haven't got anything I haven't seen before. Hell, in fact, you probably haven't got anything even CLOSE to what I've seen before. But I promise not to tell the 'boys', as long as you don't fuss. So save the modesty for someone who believes you ; you're hurt pretty bad, old man, and it'll help you rest.". I wanted to inform her that being naked around 2 beautiful women wasn't exactly the best way for me to rest, but somehow I couldn't work up the energy - nor the courage - to do that. To make things worse, here came Ariane out of my shower wearing

nothing but a hotel towel.

I found one part of me that wasn't injured. Unfortunately, it's reaction reminded me I was injured elsewhere, and it quickly abandoned it's attention to the situation. As both of them helped me get into the shower, I hoped it would remember and stay quiet...but of course it didn't. I thought about apologizing, then thought better of it. If Mel wanted to play Florence Nightingale, she might as well get the full experience.

I confess to a let-down feeling, though, when neither of them commented, even in jest.

True to her word, Mel stayed with me as the hot water thrummed relaxation into sore muscles and joints; I was able to prop myself in the stall with my left arm, but couldn't move the right one more than a few inches. Ariane stayed close by, Lou having brought her suitcase from her room, and busied herself with doing hair things in case she was needed to help. I kept wondering, as the hot water did exactly what Mel had suggested it would and relaxed the pain, if maybe I was really dead, and this was just preparation for Heaven. As I moved my right arm to try to shut the water off, though, I discovered it was, after all, reality. Still, I was actually able to

bend it...a good sign, we all agreed. Especially me.

"All right," Nurse Melanie enthused after helping me dry and put on a fresh pair of jeans, "at least you both LOOK a little better. Ariane, that lip is looking better. You're going to have a wicked bruise on your right shoulder - must be where the bastard hit you - but I think otherwise you'll be better in the morning.". Pointing at me, she went on: "You, on the other hand, are going to need a few days of rest. I know, don't speak, you mush-brained old fart, you can't. But, I took the liberty of checking with Lou to see what he had in his medicine cabinet, and I think these will help you both tonight.". She was holding out a handful of little capsules and grinning like the evil Queen handing Snow White a apple ; oh, well, I thought, I at least hope it's a quick poison. We both took one, and Mel made us both get under the sheets of my bed - clothed, by the way - and settled herself on a small sofa against the desk wall of my room.

"Look," I finally was able to say as I got close to comfortable and Mel finally stopped yakking long enough for me to get a word in, "you can't get a good night's sleep there. Why don't we all just sleep in our own rooms? You heard Blasingame - he'll be close by - but I'm sure it's

over for tonight.". It took a while to say - I had to take shallow breaths. The last words were coming slower, as I was starting to feel the effects and drowsiness was taking me. Good stuff, I remember thinking, as she answered me.

"No chance, Nicky-boy," she said determinedly. "I'm NOT sure it's over, and I'm not taking chances with the two of you. If sleeping next to a beautiful woman bothers you that much, I can see why you never had any relationships that lasted long. Doesn't seem to bother Ariane any - of course, she could throw you across the room with one hand if you acted up. Somehow, though, I don't think you're in any condition for that. Tonight, you are both doing things MY way, and that's the end of it.". And it was. Another few seconds, and I was asleep.

In a dream, I was stalking a giant grizzly bear, armed only with a skillet. Don't ask - who can explain dreams? I tracked him to his cave, where he settled down to nap. I approached carefully, raising the skillet to brain him, when he rolled over and swiped a huge, boulder-sized

paw at me. I awoke to throbbing pain with a groan, trying to sit up and trying to run all at the same time. I slowly came to awareness of Mel and Bill holding me, trying to get me to lie back down. No argument.

"Er...Ow.." I managed, trying to hide the pain behind a grin. "Listen, could you guys peel me off this tractor's grille?". Bill shook his head, grinning, as I became aware that everyone seemed to be here, once again. "Damn - what time is it? Was I late for breakfast again? Gimme a hand, will ya, ya big strapping hunk of drummer you - I need to get up and see if I got taller, or it just feels like it.". Bill helped me to a sitting position, then he and Mac helped me stand. I motioned with my left hand for them to stand away ; I needed to see if I could walk. I could. And, it seemed I had more movement in my arm, though my ribs were barking like a kennel full of trained watchdogs. Lou let out a low whistle.

"Man, those are some awesome colors there, my man," he said, feigning admiration. "Takes me back to the days of psychedelic dreams and Ty-dye schemes.". I looked into the mirror across from my bed....damn, he wasn't exaggerating. "Oh, ah," he added, "it's 9:30. Doc

should be here soon. After which, our little elf-leader has called a meeting.". Mel shot a look full of daggers at him, to which he responded with his normal, you'll-never-guess-where-my-head-is-at-today enigmatic smile. Made me laugh....but not for long.

"Coffee?" I asked, and Ariane pointed at the little bar area ; I noticed rolls, too. I wondered if I might be hungry, decided not right now. "I gotta hit the rest room - and, no, I don't think I need any help." I ventured. She was ready for me.

"From what I saw last night, it'd take a bigger search party than we have to find it for you," she shot at me, grinning, then quickly looking concerned as I started to laugh with the rest and had to stop, grimacing. I assured her I was ok, it only hurt when I breathed. I looked questioningly at Ariane.

"I'm fine," she reassured me. "Not even sore, just irritated at this lip.". I had to admit, it didn't help her appearance, but kept that to myself. She did look ok, though. My lavatory trip took a little longer than normal, but was uneventful, and the coffee tasted - and felt - wonderful.

The doctor arrived about 10:15. He examined Ariane first, gave her something for her lip

and the abrasions on her shoulder, then went to work on me. The silence in my room was broken only by my occasional groans, and the doc occasionally clucking and tsk-tsk'ing. When he finished, he looked hard at me.

"Well, you'll live," he pronounced. "But I guess you knew that. The trained physician in me wants to give you Hell for not going right away to a hospital. But, I know, I know...". He sighed, shook his head, managed a smile.

"As far as I can tell, there is nothing broken," he said. "But I cannot state that 100% without further tests. You could have some cracked, or even broken, ribs. The bruising is deep, and it is going to take a long time to heal. I am going to give you something to wrap your chest with, but you need to know, it isn't going to help much. What you need most is rest, and light exercise - and don't try to tell me that exercising is what caused this.". He laughed at his own joke, and was rewarded by the laughter of the rest. Some friends they were. "I admit, I'd like to know what did this," he went on, "but over the years I have learned it's better I not know. I know too much as it is, to be considered sane.

"Anyway, I recommend bed rest for at least 2 days, though I know you won't follow that. I'll leave you a good supply of medication that should help with the discomfort ; between that and the wrap, you should be able to at least perform. I understand you play guitar. It will be uncomfortable, but you should be ok with that. What I will say, and insist upon, is this: if the pain gets very sharp, or you experience shortness of breath or notice blood in your saliva, especially within the next 48 to 72 hours, you will go immediately to a hospital. That is non-negotiable, and I will state it in my report. Understood?". I didn't get a chance to respond - the peanut gallery did it for me. He showed them how to use the wrap, put a bottle of pills next to my night stand, and left.

"You look like the mummy who decided he didn't want to be dead after all," Mac chortled. A few minutes later, Blasingame walked in. He looked at Melanie, who nodded, then informed everyone, "Ok, get dressed in your finest, and pack your favorite toys," she ordered. "We're going on a road trip. Hunting season just opened, and our guide here has informed me that we should have plenty of game. With any luck, we should have our limit within the week.".

I looked at Ariane - she was smiling. I had to return it. Unexpectedly, Melanie had

stepped up and taken charge - and no one was inclined to argue the point. My ribs felt better already.

Chapter 16

WE took 3 cars. Blasingame had his own, and Blackfield rode with him. We six split into two of the Society cars, with Mel, Lou, and I in one and Bill, Mac, and Ariane in the other. Before leaving, we took a few toys from the trunks. We were soon headed out of Sioux City, and onto state highway 75 for the 15 mile trip to Vandemeter.

Our target today, according to Blasingame, was to be the young, newly formed vampire. There was a chance, though remote, that we might get both ; however, he felt that it was close enough to Halloween that taking the young convert now would not drive the old demon off just yet. He admitted it was risky, and had considered simply taking the young one himself, but confessed he had never actually destroyed another vampire since his conversion, and wasn't certain if he could - wasn't sure, really, that the host in him would allow him.

That, of course, lead to more questioning about the older one...how could he be sure, then, if he caught up with it, that he could kill it? It was then he revealed that he wasn't certain,

not at all anymore, if he could. He felt that he could, but doubt had begun to affect him after all these centuries, something he wasn't used to ; so, he decided to solicit our help. He could be the antenna, he said, but the kill itself might have to be ours. This presented a sobering aspect, which Ariane and I spoke of briefly before leaving.

"I wonder," she had looked at me, "if, when the final meeting comes, not only will he not be able to help, but.....well...." she let it trail off.

"...Will he perhaps even try to interfere?" I finished for her. "Hell, Lady, I don't know the answer to that any more than you do. This is all uncharted territory. My mind is torn up, one minute saying let's trust him, the next saying no, don't, the risk is too big. But...he's been straight with us so far, and pretty much honest, I think. Even Mel seems to trust him more now, though I know she has the same question in her mind we do - why didn't he kill the young one last night?

"Maybe he couldn't - or - maybe he didn't want to warn off the older one until he was sure. He seems sure of something today, though. All we can do is make sure everyone is as careful as they can be - certainly more careful than we were last night - and go with this. Gut

instinct? I think we're gonna be ok." I finished, hoping I sounded more certain than I felt.

Something was bugging me - I just didn't know what.

I was aware of a peculiar feeling as Vandemeter came in sight. This was where I grew up - for years, it was my home. It had changed in appearance, yes, but at the same time, nothing was changed - like seeing a old, loved friend after being apart for years - you saw the same person, but yet a changed person ; it looked like them and didn't look like them, all at the same time. Your heart recognized them, even if your eyes tried to fool you. In this instance, both my heart and my eyes were flooded with familiar features.

I stood for a minute, just looking around after we stopped in front of Blasingame's shop, absorbing the memories, and assuring Mel and Lou I was ok physically. I was sore, yes...but that wasn't it. Over there - the house of the family where Mark and I used to play as kids ; there, the Post Office, where I'd stop every day to pick up our mail after school on school days. The other way, there was the hill the school sat atop - a intimidating hill, situated on the west side of town, seeming to rise out of nowhere and go almost straight up ; in winter, a great place to sled and just

slide down when it was icy - much to the discomfort of the drivers on highway 75, since the street emptied out there. And further past that point...the railroad tracks, the farmers co-op yard and silos, and a few shops, then hang a left, go down 2 houses on the right - and that was home, for many years. Go another half block instead, and you were out of town.

Well, it was obvious a lot of that had changed, been renovated, remodelled, or just rebuilt. But I still saw it as it was then.

There were few people about on this brisk October Saturday, but I thought I saw a couple of familiar faces as we entered the shop. I chose not to try to remember, and instead concentrate on the matter at hand. Something still niggled and nagged in the back of my mind, and until I got it out, I was going to be extra cautious from now on.

Blasingame waited politely until we all were comfortable in his living quarters in the back of his shop ; an old house he had converted into a partial business. I remembered the house...it had belonged to a elderly local teacher when Mark and I were in 8th grade. We had done some yard work for her during summers, for extra money, and had been inside a few times for snacks

and milk or lemonade. Damn...there go the memories again, I thought, and ordered myself to get back to the present.

"The new convert's name is - was - Dale," Blasingame was saying. "Not sure he ever told anyone his last name. You can almost see form here where he stayed - it wasn't much, but the owners didn't charge him anything for it, and he did odd jobs and yard work for them in return. He hasn't been back there for 3 days now. I went over there last night before coming to see you, and found that what few possessions he had were mostly gone...but in a coffee can under his mattress I found nearly \$100. I very much doubted he would have left town without that, but seeing him last night confirmed it for me. It is him, beyond a doubt.

"Now, I believe I know where he hides during the day - remember, he is newly converted and was fairly uneducated, and probably is more attuned to the myth and legend of vampires than most humans are today. He will avoid the sun for a while, at all costs ; sleep during the day, rise at night, likely will flinch and even exhibit physical aversion to a cross or Holy water. The old one could teach him otherwise, but I think it amuses him when his converts act that way; anyway,

he will soon discover what he can and cannot do. Until then, he is most vulnerable, as you can guess.

"Now - Nick, do you remember a old abandoned set of farm buildings out west of town, sometimes today called 'the old Severson place'?" I did....it was our local 'haunted house' for years - until Mark and I discovered the real thing. It was just over that hill, nestled in a little decline, and would have little sun until late morning and shade and shadows early in the afternoon. It was a spooky place, all right. This made sense.

"What about the other one?" I asked. "Any chance he would be there, too?". Blasingame shrugged.

"A very slight possibility," he conceded. " However, I suspect he is nowhere near his convert, it just isn't how he does it. His only purpose to be there would be as protection, and he never has shown any inclination to protect his creations. Plus, I don't sense him that close - that location is close enough to here that I would indeed sense his presence...and I do not."

"Good enough," I accepted. "Now, though, just one little thing that no one else seems to

have asked, and it's bothering me a bit. Last night, you could have killed this young one. You didn't. Why? For that matter, why us, today? Why not do it yourself?". He had the courtesy to blink, and appear somewhat embarrassed by the question ; I'd have to add that to our vampire knowledge base - they can be embarrassed.

"Yes....." he drew out the 's', making it almost a hiss, "well, as you say, I had the opportunity. But, as I believe I told you, I was not certain I could kill another of my kind, rather, not certain my nature would allow me. I could lie, and tell you I wanted to keep the old one nearby, but it is close enough to his favorite time of year that I was pretty certain that wouldn't matter.

"No, what occurred is what I had feared - I had it in my mind to destroy him, but something stayed my hand, and he was gone. Was it my instinctive vampire nature stopping me? I do not know...and I think this is too important to risk that possibility. No, I am afraid you must do it. Additionally, there is something else you should know - the elder doesn't always satisfy himself with one creation in a area - sometimes, he will create more than one, especially at

this time of year. One, such as Dale, who would likely not last long....and another, chosen carefully for their intelligence and human skill, who could last longer.". He stopped there - he knew we'd react, and we did. But I didn't, just yet - the little nagging thing in my mind was growing, and I felt might be near a breakthrough. I hoped it made it before I got myself or someone else killed, so I tried to let it find a path to the surface.

"All right," I interrupted the resulting questions. "I'm going to say, this doesn't really surprise me. I can't say why, but I had a feeling this might be the case. But for now, let's get rid of 'young' Dale before he does anymore damage. Bill....you, Mac, and Lou will take him. Mel and I...ok, ok, Mel and Ariane, if she feels up to it, will scout it and bird dog him. Let's do this, so I can go back to the hotel and lie down. Please?". Nods all around. Seemed I was back in charge....and Mel didn't seem at all put out by it. At the car, I pulled her aside.

"Hey, kid," I teased, and for once, she just smiled at it, "I brought Blasingame's little gift. But I obviously can't use it. You're welcome to, if you want ; I don't know how you are with archery, but it isn't rocket science, and at least with these, unlike a firearm, you can't blow your

own foot off with it.". She looked a little annoyed at that last, but I tried to smile to show I was kidding, and she seemed to accept that, too.

"Just keep outta my way, crip," she jabbed, grinning; then, more seriously, "And stay back, Nick. You're in no shape to even fire a handgun, and I know you brought that little Colt .357. If this guy is as backward as Blasingame says, this should be a walk in the park - so, keep back, and, keep it in your pants. The revolver, I mean.". The last was said with a saucy air, but her grin told me she expected me to obey. I knew I had no grounds to argue. So I didn't.

The air was brisk that October morning, the sky a deep azure blue with a few wispy white clouds, as we climbed into our cars for what we hoped would be the first step to a quick end to this hunt. The abandoned farm we were looking for was only a few minutes outside of the town, and the old barn and outbuildings looked bleaker and even more run down than I recalled. Any paint had long ago peeled away from the rotting wooden structures, leaving them gray and darkly foreboding even in bright sunlight. Nature had taken over most of the yard areas, with weeds over hip-high and gloden brown in their Fall attire. Nestled in between two steep hills to east and

west, the buildings themselves were already about one third in shadow; the only time the old house (now gone, all but foundation) ever got sunlight was at noon. We had to leave the cars about a quarter mile from the farm itself, as the old drive was washed out and overgrown with thick brush.

It was agreed, I would position myself with binoculars and hand-held radio - we had 4, courtesy of whoever had supplied the vehicles - and watch for any unexpected external interruptions, and be available in case I was needed. Blasingame would accompany Mel and Ariane on scout, and the others would split into 2 pairs and stand by at various entrances to move in when the vampire's location was found...if it was.

It didn't take long....the bird dogs entered the barn first, and within 5 minutes had discovered a cellar door nestled in a old stall, partially covered with straw. There were fresh shoe prints in the soft dirt around the door, and the odor when the door was opened was fetid and dank. I got all this from the two-way, and as the team proceeded to enter the cellar I felt pretty useless ; I wasn't used to sitting by during a hunt. Bill, Terry, Lou, and Blasingame made the

entry, while Mel, Ariane, and Mac stood by above and stayed in contact with me. I stayed glued to the radio, watching the barn entryways intently. I should have been watching my back.

I don't know how long he had been there ; I suppose I was a bit too doped up on pain meds to really have noticed anyway. He was quiet, though - he had to have come up through the high brush, and I hadn't heard a thing. But come he had ; it occurred to me that I could easily have been dead any time he wanted. Instead, he stood off about 5 yards behind me, and I only became aware of him because he laughed. My first reaction was to whirl around...a mistake in my current condition. The pain brought me up in a half turn, and took my breath away as I went to my knees. This, apparently, was quite funny, as it earned further laughter from him. It wasn't a nice laughter ; imagine the crackling of flames and the hissing of escaping steam combined, you'll have some idea of the sound. Sharp, but like it was coming from the center of the earth.

"You, I see, are persistent. " His voice carried the same quality. " Aided, of course, by my oldest protege. ". I became aware that Blasingame was standing next to where I was kneeling, and confess I was glad to see him. I heard the radio harshly keying, as it sounded like the others

were on their way, but as I watched this old being, I thought to myself that it might not do much good....well, at least I wouldn't die alone. Unless our good buddy Blasingame had a trick or two up his sleeve. I could literally feel the emotion from him. Emotion, from a vampire...that was a experience I would recall forever. Which was looking like it would last only for the next few minutes.

He was tall, this elder being. Eight feet, possibly. His build was roughly human ; by that I mean, he had 2 arms, 2 legs, a head, shoulders. His chest area was deep, and the shoulders almost too wide for a neck that was unbelievably narrow - not skinny, no, just narrow. The head, though - well, Blasingame hadn't exaggerated. He was one ugly bastard. His yellow-grey eyes were deep set under a bulging forehead, with wide cheekbones and a squared-off jaw. The mouth was wide and thin, appearing to have no lips - teeth were fang-like, looked sharp, and white as a new bride's gown. His legs appeared thick and muscular, but were hidden by jeans and a honest-to-goodness pair of sturdy farm boots, the incongruity of which hit me right away ; where in Hell did he find any jeans and boots to fit that frame? I might have laughed - but I wasn't

feeling all that clownish right then. His skin was, well, not skin - it was scaly, and grayish in color. Arms were thin, and ended in hands with 5 finger-like projections that were topped by razor sharp nails about 2 inches long. As he spoke, he folded those arms slowly, appearing almost like a professor addressing a class of attentive college students.

A damn ugly professor.

I was still struck by the fact that I was still alive, when the air was filled with a whistling sound - and a few inches of feathered shaft appeared in the center of the being's chest. He actually looked startled for a moment, and reached a taloned hand to grasp the arrow in his body as the sound of a second missile broke the sudden silence. With a move I never saw, however, he reached out and caught the arrow in flight, snapping it in two with a twist of two fingers.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't the reaction we got. He actually laughed again, and spoke to all of us in a tone I could only identify as admiring.

" Well done!! Very well done!! Oh, yes, indeed ; I have waited centuries for worthy adversaries such as you, and held out hope my young friend here would eventually lead some to

me. This is, though, beyond what I had hoped. I am pleased, very pleased. I look forward to our next meeting, and confess that for the first time in my existence, I actually doubt the outcome. Instinct tells me I should kill you all now, but it also holds me back, casting some doubt as to my success in doing so. This I find exciting, though I am sure you do not understand. Let me allow you a small hint....you have hurt me with this weapon. It is the first time I can ever recall being physically wounded, and it gives me great satisfaction.

" So...I shall take my leave...no, no, my young protege, do not even try. As great as your powers have become, you are no match for me - although I will tell you that when combined with these human friends of yours, I might well be defeated. I won't allow it...at least, not now. I presume you were successful with my latest little assistant ; he was a stupid cow, even as humans go. Ahhh....this hurts....what a wonderful feeling! " This was said as he pulled the arrow from his chest....there was no blood, just a clear thick liquid gushing that stopped almost as it started.

" I look forward to our next meeting with great anticipation, " he finished, and with that, he

- well, he dissolved. As he did so, Blasingame let out a roar of rage and despair....threatening to deafen the rest of us. By now, I was able to stand up again, and I looked at him questioningly.

" He froze me - or, I was frozen in place, one or the other, " he stated flatly, his rage over. ' This was my chance, and I could do nothing. NOTHING! All of this time, all these centuries...." He let it tail off. He sounded defeated, beaten, like he was giving up. I could see from expressions on the faces of the others that similar feelings were being generated after this little display, with the exception of two - Melanie, and Terry. Mel looked angry and concerned, Terry thoughtful. I knew we had to air this now, but I sure didn't feel much like it. The ribs were killing me.

"Everyone, stop, think, listen, " I said. " First things first - is the other hunt complete? ".

" Done, " affirmed Ariane and Bill together. Bill finished. " It was almost too easy. The barn had a old cellar....he was down there all right, wrapped in a old tarp. He didn't even stir when we unwrapped him ; had his head off and burned in less than a minute. He's done. ".

" Good...that much is out of the way. " I kept a eye on Blasingame, who didn't appear to

be listening. " Next...hey, Mel, nice shooting there....the Sioux in me is proud of ya. ". She gave me a slight grin, but her eyes showed no humor as Mac spoke up.

" Yeah, great shot, Mel ; but, did you see him grab that second one right outta the air like that? Hell, I couldn't even see it...I just heard it...man, how in the Hell are we gonna drop this monster? ". This was where I knew we had to get some things straight - in the excitement, not everyone had noticed certain important things. I looked at Terry.

" I think you may have a clue or two, " I urged him. " Speak up...I can see you noticed some things....I wonder if they were the same as I did? ". He looked even more thoughtful, and glanced doubtfully at Blasingame. I shook my head. " Don't worry...speak up. I think our new undead accomplice may have been a bit blinded himself. ".

" Welllllll..." Terry started haltingly, then let himself go, " there was the matter of the first arrow. Yeah, he snagged number two - but he totally missed even knowing about number one. So, he isn't infallible by a long shot. ". I grinned. Spot on, first try. I motioned for him to go on.

" Then, there were some things he said, " Blackfield continued. " Not so much what, as

how he said them....I thought both were important. Blasingame - you said you were 'frozen' - but he obviously felt that you could fight him. So, his control over you, if any, has to be limited. By what he inferred, I'd say it's a matter of concentration ; I think, and I may be wrong mind you, but I think he knew he would lose if he tried taking us all on at once. Question becomes...why? What does he know about himself that we do not? Or, more importantly...what does he know about US that we do not? ".

I could see the logic getting through on their faces. It was precisely what I had gained from the encounter. One on one, he had no fear of any of us. In multiples, though, he was cautious with us. I think I knew partly why, and I wanted to voice it before the reason lost any hope he had left.

" All right. I got the same, " I stated. " And I think I know that answer to question 2. And I want everyone to hear me out. I don't think he minds us, mortals that we are, though he knows that as a group we could be tough, and maybe even defeat him. I don't think he knew that before. What he fears most, though, I think, is you. " Here I pointed at Blasingame, and

addressed him directly. " He is fairly confident that, one on one, he can defeat you, but - he has doubts, if such traits can be applied to such a creature. Confidence isn't certainty, and he has been in no hurry to allow the confrontation, although he seems to relish the idea.

" But - and it's a big Bertha but - to find you allied with us, in my opinion, threw him for a loop so to speak. I don't know how long he was up here....he stood right behind me, could have finished me any time, but I think he was listening to the radio, was waiting perhaps for the rest to join me, to see how many we were. When you showed up, I truly believe he was surprised. And yeah, I know he had to know you were nearby....but apparently, that sense isn't refined to the point he knew you were WITH us. Does that make any sense? ". I could see a glimmer of interest, and perhaps knowledge cross his features. He was still disturbed, but not as badly.

" Ok, I see you're thinking about it, " I continued. " Good. Everyone think about it. What saved our asses just now was this guy right here, I believe. I think it took a lot of concentration for this thing to hold Blasingame at bay, as it were ; by having to do that, he was vulnerable, and Mel's first shot got through. The second, he was ready for, but my guess is that he had to release

some of his hold on Blasingame, just from the surprise, and to concentrate on this new threat. Was it enough? Chances are, you yourself weren't aware - your own emotions may have been in the way of your knowing. What you may have to do, in the event we can have the same advantage in our next meeting, is to recognize that moment when it happens. ".

" I can well see the logic in your perception, " Blasingame spoke. " And I thank you for recognizing it, and I'm sorry I did not see it myself. I should have. " He shrugged. " In my state, it is difficult to control my rage and anger once they are aroused....they blind me. I believe you are right, Nick Anders - I believe there was a moment, after he was struck, where I might have broken the hold. But my rage overcame my will. I lost control, and thus allowed him to keep control. Logic in battle - a hard thing to master for a human, nearly impossible for a vampire. But I must master it....or, we will all perish. I see what you are alluding to, for our next meeting. I will try...but, there is one thing to remember. " . I didn't need him to say it, so I said it for him.

"Yeah, " I grunted. " We won't have this advantage again. We may have just become the hunted. ".

Chapter 17

WE stopped back at Blasingame's briefly ; he to check on some 'business' matters, and we just to catch our breath. I suggested a stop for lunch before heading back, and gave them the nickel tour as we walked to the cafe across town ; well, about 3 blocks east. I suppose I was hoping I'd come across someone I knew, but I kept that selfish feeling to myself. However, nothing of that nature happened. Until we were back at the cars. A voice from behind stopped me as I was edging my way into the passenger seat.

" Nick? Is that you? ". The voice was female, very much so...and was one I thought I remembered only too well. From the driver's side, Melanie gave me a stare....in the back, Lou and Terry were straining to see who had spoken. Ariane, Bill, and Mac in the other car were not yet aware of the interruption. Painful as it was, I managed to gracefully stop my awkward entry and stand up, turning to face someone I wasn't sure I wanted to see.

" Hello, Rae, " I smiled - smiled because I couldn't help it. Had never been able to. Not since the first time I laid eyes on her, back in second grade. She hadn't changed - well, of course

she had, but I still saw her as I had last seen her at seventeen, a dumb teenager head over heels in love with someone he knew he had no chance to win. Did she ever suspect? I always wondered that. I think she did, but with me being too shy to approach her, and she being too nice to be mean to anyone, nothing was ever said. That I knew about, anyway.

" Good Lord, it IS you! " she laughed. " After all this time, whoever would believe we'd even recognize absent friends? ". I liked the sound of that word 'friends'. I don't know why. I just did. Okay, well, I suspected I knew why, all right?

She was a little plumper than her high schools days, but still remarkably put together. Her brown eyes sparkled, just as I remembered, and those wonderful lips in that beautiful face....I brought myself, and my memories, up short before I started drooling.

" How are you, Rae? " I asked, feeling no need to ask since she looked just fine but at a loss for anything else to say.

" Me? I'm just dandy, " she breathed, smiling that smile that made the teenage me nearly convulse with pleasure. I'd have amputated my own limbs if it would have made her smile ; yes ,

I had it that bad. " I have my own business, a little beauty salon here in town, doing great with it. Dave...you remember Dave, he was a year ahead of us? We got married right after high school, it's been wonderful, two kids, both in college now, and Dave owns a farm implement business in Sioux City. Gosh....hey, it's great to see you!! It's been so long....when was the last time? '67? Wow. I heard, though, about you a bit....I hear you finally made it with your music! I think that's awesome! ".

That shocked me a bit. We weren't exactly celebrities, and I was curious how she knew, so I asked her.

" Oh, really, no mystery, " she answered willingly. " Some folks we know saw your band was going to be playing in Sioux City, and recognized your name in the billing. So, we all got together and did a little research ; you know, the 'checking up on old friends' bit. I'm really happy for you ; we all knew back then that this was something you really wanted to do. Not that any of us understood it, of course ; and, you know, a few always made fun of you and your guitar. But some of us just knew, if it could be done by anyone from Vandemeter, you'd be the one to do it.".

I had to confess to a pleased feeling about that ; it made me feel good to think she was one of the ones who might be happy if I were successful. Even if it wasn't true. I secretly hoped it was, though. She then asked me what had brought me here today, and I explained we were just getting out and about, and I thought I'd visit the old home turf and reminisce a bit, dredge up some old memories, good - and bad. She laughed at that.

" I take it that this must be the band? " she inclined her head to a position over my shoulder. I turned to see all of them arranged in a semicircle behind me, looking at the two of us with bemused expressions. I felt a little like a butterfly specimen splayed out in biology class. I performed the introductions, keeping a wary eye on Bill and Mac, but they, to their credit, kept things clean. I knew that was gonna cost me a meal, at least. Lou was his usual reserved self, and Ariane and Melanie both started talking about getting their hair or nails or whatever women got done at beauty salons. I didn't mind....around Rae, I was happy just to be a spectator.

I guess they made appointments or something, because Rae turned back to me.

" I hope all the memories are good ones, Nick. " she smiled. " I suppose, though, we

can't help having some bad ones. At least that incident you had in Sioux City in '69 wasn't here, that's a good thing." I felt that gut wrenching again, the one that happens when you've been trying to get something in your head out in the open so you can look at it but it fights and fights, then suddenly something altogether innocent slams it right to the front of your brain. I guess it showed, as Rae gave me a concerned look.

" Oh, heck, " she said, putting her hand on my arm, her features showing concern ; and as far as I was concerned, she could leave her hand there forever. " I shouldn't have mentioned that, I'm so sorry!! We heard about it here, but since you were all right, it never meant much. Oh, crap, I'm such a big mouth. Are you ok? ". I was, I assured her, even though all I really wanted to do was tell her how I'd really felt about her all those years ago. And, apparently, since. My old buddies logic and decorum came to my rescue, though. The shitheads. Anyway, I needed to get back to the hotel and make some calls, quick. 1969. How had I forgotten that?

I reassured her all was fine, that we had to be going, and she too had a appointment to keep at her shop. She finished by mentioning that she and her husband thought they might come

to tonight's gig. Wonderful. Not. But I said we'd look forward to it, and we parted.

The ride back might have been uncomfortable, if I'd taken the trouble to notice Melanie's attitude. I didn't. I had something else on my mind, and spoke of it briefly, which changed her attitude anyway. She couldn't let it go without one remark, though, the meaning of which didn't hit me at first.

" Never, huh? " she snorted. I looked at her. " Never. Been in love. Nope, not the Nickster, not our little Nickie, the man whose only passions are music and the thrill of the hunt. Ha. Ha Ha Ha. ". It had taken a few minutes for me to recall our conversation of the other day. I let it slide. Didn't have time right now. But I'd remember, I was sure. Sure she would see to it.

Back at the hotel, I asked the others to make some calls for me. One to the local paper, one to the local P.D., and one to the site of the 'wild dog' killings of a couple days ago. I called Mark myself. He was both happy to hear we were all right, and concerned about the developments, but there was something I needed him to do.

"Remember the guys I was in a band with in '68 and '69? " I prompted him, and he said

he thought he did. " Ok. As best you can, I need you to run down their whereabouts for the last 15 years. This is important, Mark....may be that the whole outcome of this thing will hinge on this. And...uh....I need the info like, well, yesterday. ". I refreshed him on the names, told him what I suspected, and he said he'd have something for me inside the hour. I had to assure him - for Abbie, he said - I wasn't injured too badly, and that I was being careful. Like I could help it, with the others babying me like they had.

" So, you're onto something maybe? Nick? " he asked me, not for the first time. " This doesn't sound good ; maybe we should send a couple more teams? ". I told him no...it was getting too confusing to keep track of as it was. What he could do was alert all the agents and hunters located in the area and have them be extra cautious...and, find out from them if they had been experiencing any unusual activity over, say, the last 15 years. Anything, say, within a 100 mile radius of Sioux City. Naturally, he wanted to know why, and I told him I couldn't say right now ; if my suspicions were confirmed, I'd tell him.

As we rang off, Lou returned from making his call to the local P.D. Their information

wasn't confirmed, but the thing I asked about they were pretty sure was new. How new, they weren't sure. I then asked him, as it was hard not to notice, why he was carrying his pillows and blankets into my room. He grinned. But kept silent. Bill showed up next, having completed his call to the bar behind which the killings occurred, and similarly supplied. I was beginning to get the idea. Fortunately, Bill had the confirmation I needed.

" I got hold of the owner, " Bill told me. " He took over the place in '85. The graffiti on the wall in the alley you noticed - '69' - wasn't there the day before the killings. Okay, little man with big guitar sound, when you gonna fill us all in? ". I asked him to wait for Ariane to finish her call, and oh by the way, just to make himself comfy in a corner as far from my bed as possible. He grinned as evilly as he was capable....and he was pretty capable.

Ariane was a few minutes later...in the meantime, everyone else showed up with bedding. Looked like I wasn't sleeping alone tonight - or again until this was over. I was going to suggest it, anyway, though my original idea was more to pair up. This would work, and perhaps better. I knew from this point on, we were not going to be safe alone - I had the idea old baldy

might decide to pick us off one at a time. Problem was, I wasn't sure if he'd try it himself....or if he had further help.

" Interesting life you led, back in the day, " Ariane greeted as she breezed in with her pillows and blankets, accompanied by Melanie. Blackfield seemed a bit uncomfortable, but obviously he saw the sense in being together as much as possible. I had a fleeting thought along the lines of 'why was it always in MY room?', but let it pass, considering my condition.

" I talked to a real nice young man at the paper, who faxed me over a copy of the article of the incident, " Ariane went on. " Pretty nasty, eh? I take it you were playing there that night? The guy at the paper said he'd check, but he was pretty sure the attackers were never caught. The article says the victim was the girlfriend of one of the band members, but doesn't say which one...? ". All eyes went to me following that.

" Ok, quick story time, with a preface " I told them. " Listen up, cause I'm only telling it once. I feel like a idiot for not connecting it the other day, but I think it's important now.

" Yeah, the place is a dive - Mel, you saw it - and I did play there, off and on, back when.

We've all been there - you play where you can, for money and to keep busy. The group was mostly my original band....except for the other guitar player. That night, for some reason, the drummer's girlfriend wanted to go. They were pretty serious, looked like they might get married. Anyway.....it wasn't the kind of place you took a serious date. It was rowdy and nasty and anything could happen. He knew it...we all did. We tried to talk her out of going, but she was insistent. I was - well - friendly with one of the barmaids, and asked her to keep an eye on Greg's girl. That was the drummer - Greg.

" Naturally, of course, my friend had work to do, but she did her best. We had just finished our last break, and were into our last set about 3 songs, when Greg's girl got up and headed back to the restrooms. They were located near the back entrance to the place...go out the back door and you were in the alley where the killings took place the other night. We tried to get her attention, but no go. Greg leaned over to me and asked for a quick 5 minute break....I knew we should have, but the gig was a regular one, and we didn't have many of those. I refused ; we only had another twenty minutes to play, I didn't want to risk losing the gig. Stupid on my

part.

" Naturally, she didn't come back.....we played 5 more songs, and still no sign. Greg told me to stuff it, he was going to look for her. I didn't argue...I just called it a night, and we all went, owner be damned.

" She wasn't in the rest room. Her purse was on the floor by the back door, which was open about 2 inches. She was in the alley, about 25 yards from the back entrance. She was alive. Kind of. Two men apparently had forced her out the back as she came out of the restroom. That wasn't all they forced her to do. Actually, they forced her to do a lot. Physically. It was pretty bad, all right. She was hurt bad, but would live. Physically, she would walk with a limp, never have children, and had to have pretty extensive plastic surgery ; and not just on her face. Mentally....she might never recover.

" Naturally, Greg blamed me. I couldn't argue it, either - I felt responsible, even though I knew I had tried to talk them out of letting her be there. The band, of course, broke up - the others sided with Greg, and there was no way any of us could even be in the same room together

any longer. He hated me ; he had to have someone to hate, since the attackers weren't caught. The whole thing really had several victims - in a way, we were all victims that night. And of course, I always second-guessed myself about my decision to keep playing, even though I doubt we could have been in time to stop it.

" Well, that's the story....except for this. Greg, and the bass player that night, were both from Vandemeter. And I think that '69' scrawled on the alley wall was directed at me ; I think the two victims the other night may have been the original attackers....I think the next intended victim is supposed to be me, and whoever I am with...and, I think the ones who put the message on the wall are Greg and the bass player, whose name was Mike, and I think they are quite well known to our ugly old new friend. And probably have been for some time. ".

I let it all sink in, let them make the connections themselves from that point. I was pretty sure I was right, because I no longer had that little nagging in the back of my head that was bothering me earlier. I could see they all were coming to the same conclusions. I was also looking for accusing looks....it hadn't been easy, relating this, and I think a part of me wanted

punishment, and another part wanted the chance to defend myself. I got neither.

" Had to be hard, living with that " Bill said quietly. " I don't see where ya could have done any different - but, I wasn't there. You were. It wasn't your fault what happened, but man, what a fucked-up mess. ". Everyone else agreed.

" Goes to show you " Lou added, " no matter where you are, there has to be someplace for the feces to settle. As long as there are humans, there will be evil perpetrated on other humans ; what we deal with, at least, is usually beyond human. Sometimes I wonder which evil it is we should be hunting. ". Feces. I don't think he could say shit if it were the name of someone he loved.

" So, what we might be looking at, " Ariane tossed in, " is that old baldy - we really have to name this bastard - may have more local help, as Blasingame warned us earlier, right? And that this help may have a personal score to settle with our own little Nicky. And, I'll bet you're thinking, our little Nicky, that old baldy KNEW something along these lines when we met this morning? ". I nodded. I was pretty well talked out. I did have one thing to add, though.

" Uncle Fester " I said. Everyone looked puzzled - except Terry, who laughed.

" I was thinking the same thing! " he said, clapping his hands once. " I agree - let's call old baldy Uncle Fester from now on - may he soon rest in peace, the son of a - a - demon. ".

Great...another one who had trouble with everyday vocabulary. But the agreement was unanimous, and helped put a lighter note on the rest of the day. The phone rang about then, and Mel picked it up. We watched as she listened, said a couple things, commented that she would tell me, and hung up.

" That was Mark, " she said, looking directly at me. " Here's the scoop : the other guitar player, whose name was Steve, went to California, got married, has a family, and is still there, working for the railroad. Greg and Mike....another story...they knocked around this area for the next several years, staying in music but doing other jobs as well. Last known of, Mike was living in South Sioux City, and Greg was living in Vermillion, South Dakota. That was as of 6 months ago.

" Since then, they both seem to have disappeared. ".

That clinched it as far as I was concerned. Uncle Fester had his backups, and he had them well in advance of our arrival. And they knew who I was, and where I was. By now, they probably also knew why we were here. The only question now was, when and where would they hit. I had some idea of that, too, so since we were all together anyway, with plenty of time to kill before tonight's gig, I filled everyone in.

Chapter 18

I didn't get much rest, with my room full of people the way it was. Made me think of a old gang of bank robbers, holed up after a big heist. I let everyone know I thought we were ok for this afternoon, but it seemed no one had anything better they wanted to do. I asked if anyone knew if Blasingame was going to show here or later, or if he had given any hints what he might be up to, and received negative responses. After a short, medication assisted nap, I suggested we all go out to eat before we went stir-crazy, then maybe go for a walk before dressing for the gig. By then, no one seemed inclined to argue.

The evening was crisp and clear as we wandered along the shore of the Missouri River. Conversation wasn't a priority, we all had one thing on our minds, and it had been talked to death....hopefully, a talked death was all we would experience. We were pretty much all lost in our own thoughts, including myself, so I didn't notice that Melanie had fallen into step beside me, with the others a few yards ahead of us.

" Do you want me to take most of the guitar work tonight? " she asked as we ambled along. I considered that, and told her I thought it would be ok...I was actually feeling a bit better. She nodded. She was quiet for a few more yards, then spoke up again.

" So....do you really think we will have a confrontation with these guys tonight, then? ".

I could tell, she wasn't really interested in the answer...we had already discussed this back in my room. She had something else on her mind, and I figured we might as well get it out now, while we had some quiet time. I spoke softly, but there wasn't much danger of the others hearing...their conversations were inaudible to us.

" Look, " I began. " She was a high school infatuation, a crush if ya will. I was a teenager....she was the most gorgeous girl I had ever known up to then. Nothing ever came of it. I don't think she even knew. Mark did...he even told me to shut up about her, finally. But it was never love. I suppose, though, that it's the closest I have ever been, really. Means nothing now. ".

" Tell that to the mirror, " she laughed, missing a step. " You should have seen the look

on your face when she showed up - you looked twenty years younger. You old fart. And I'd bet she looked twenty years younger to you, too. ". Had to admit she had me there - I had indeed seen the high school Rae, not the 40+ year old mother of two. I was glad the sun was down, because I thought I was blushing. As we all turned to walk back to the hotel, I decided to change the subject.

" Hey, Mel, " I said, " You've done a good job with taking over the group when Ariane and I got hurt. This situation we're in right now, well, things could happen. I was wondering...would you consider taking this thing over if anything...not that it will....but if anything happened where Ariane or I couldn't continue? ". She didn't act surprised at the question, but she did come right back with a answer.

" No, I think not, " she said, firmly. " In fact, I'm thinking after this hunt is over, I may quit. There are things...well...I don't think it'd be a good idea if I went on after this, is all. ". Ok, she blindsided me there ; of all the possible answers, that wasn't one I was expecting. I didn't say anything right away, though it was clear she expected me to. I wasn't sure, exactly, what to say.

Finally, all I could come up with was : " Welllll...maybe we should talk about it, when this is over? I mean, I've been kind of thinking maybe it's time for me to get out, you know? I'm not getting any younger ; that vampire the other night took me completely by surprise. I've been doing some serious thinking about how lucky I am to even be alive right now. I'm having some doubts about myself....I don't want to be the cause of someone else getting hurt because I couldn't cut it any more. " .

She stopped, and blinked at me. I noticed, in the near full October moon, how bright her eyes were, and how softly the reddish tint in her hair shone in the moonlight. I tried to stop my mind from going there, but it had it's pwn will this time, and I realized that maybe, just maybe, I did have some sort of feeling for this woman. The thought of continuing on as a group without her struck me as surprisingly sad and empty. It wasn't a feeling I was comfortable with.

" I'll be damned, " she grinned at me. " Our Nick, the rock we all gather around for support, actually showing some human feelings? I'd better get to a phone quick, notify the Press - this is front page news. National networks may want to interview you - be prepared. ". I don't

know if she did it on purpose, or just couldn't rein in her nature, but it helped lighten my mood.

" Yeah, and next thing you know, you guys will be getting rich selling your 'inside' stories about me to the tabloids. I know how you all work. And, speaking of work, " I finished as we entered the lobby, " we better be getting ready for ours tonight. I figured we could use my bathroom in pairs, to make it faster ; I'll share with Ariane, you can share with Bill. ".

" Watch it, Anders, " she laughed, " or I'll put a hurt on you that'll make you forget your ribs. I think you should share with Bill....have you seen how he eyes your cute little rear end? ". I remarked that I had thought I'd seen Ariane eye her own cute little rear end a few times, and the mood as we entered my room was a whole lot better, from my point of view. The others gave us a few questioning glances, but said nothing.

It was another packed house we played for that night. The Halloween party mood was in full swing, and there were few who didn't have some costume or other. As is usual with a live band, we reacted to the crowd, and were in good form ; everyone was having a grand old time. The ribs didn't bother me hardly at all, and we soared together in the music in a way that only

musicians can understand is special beyond description. About 11, my attention was drawn to a couple dancing near my position on stage, who were obviously trying to get my attention ; it was Rae, and her husband Dave. He still looked pretty good...a outstanding athlete in high school, he hadn't let himself go like some did. Rae, of course, was stunning in a tight, low-cut black dress slit up both sides to the hip. I noted with a grin that they were both costumed as vampires, a fitting highlight to my evening, I thought.

I got together with them on our last break, and talked over old times and went through the 'what's happened to so and so ' phase, and the pictures of their kids. Dave and I had gotten along ok in school ; we hadn't been friends, as such, but had been friendly, and we talked about our old baseball days and the coach who we both admired but sometimes hated. I remarked I had had a bit of a crush on the coach's daughter, and this got a laugh from all of us. Mel and Lou had joined us at the table, and seemed to be enjoying the reliving of Nick Anders' high school foibles. Rae and Dave both were effusive in their compliments of the band, Dave remarking that no one all those years ago would have ever thought I'd ever get this far. He commented that it

wasn't anything against my talent, which was obvious to most back then...it was just, coming from a small town, who'd have thought it? I just laughed and thanked him ; I noted Rae give him a nasty look, so I said it hadn't been without it's lean, tough years when I almost gave up, and how lucky I'd been to find this bunch of talented people to cover how bad I really was. I asked them if they were going to stick around for the rest of the night. Dave answered for them.

" Yeah, we decided to make a weekend of it ; even got rooms here at the hotel. We haven't had a good night out in a long time, what with work and the kids, and this has been great ; we're really enjoying this, you guys are totally awesome, Nick. ". I felt a little stab of unease at the news they were staying the night, as thoughts of Greg and Mike slid into my mind. They knew me - they knew my past, too. Not as well as some...but well enough. If they were around - I put it out of my head. Mike could have been in here and I wouldn't have noticed...but Greg, no. I'd have known if he were here, I was sure of it. Still.....

" Well, all righty then, tell ya what, " I said, hopefully sounding sincere. " Stick around after we're done, and we'll all go out for coffee and breakfast together, my treat, what do you say?

". They both thought that sounded great....Mel and Lou supported me on it, though I noticed both gave me questioning glances. Once back on stage, I told the others of our plans, and whispered to Mel and Lou that I had my reasons ; they nodded. It was enough. I got Terry's attention - I was really impressed with his enthusiasm through this, he wouldn't have had to stick it out - and told him about Rae and Dave, and to try his best to see they did wait for us after the gig.

As soon as the last note had died away, and we had thanked the crowd, I quickly tore down and went back stage to get my other case. Noting my urgency, the others did the same, no questions. I found Terry waiting backstage.

" I tried, Nick, " he apologized, " But they wanted to go back to their rooms and get changed, said they'd feel silly going out with us in their costumes...told me to tell you they'd meet you at the restaurant. ".

" How long ago did they leave? " I snapped, but he took it in stride.

" About 5, no more than 10 minutes ago, " he replied, and I was moving before he finished.

" Everyone, let's go. Now! I don't like this at all. " I barked at them. I knew I'd feel silly if I turned out to be wrong, but I knew I'd feel a Hell of a lot worse if I were right and we were too late. They knew it, too, and were on my heels, Bill grumbling something about a missed opportunity at Little Bo Peep - I'd seen her, and reminded him that, since we were all barricading in my room, he'd have had to share, and he grinned, saying something about Shepherd's Pie.

Outside, I spoke again: " Ok, no rushing into anything this time. There are still lots of folks around, so chances are, everything's fine. Still, pair off, diamond formation, Terry left, Mac right, keep about 4 yards' separation ; Lou and I will take the tail, Ariane and Bill the point. Stay alert, you know the drill ; and be careful, you know Blasingame by now, he has a nasty habit of sneaking up on us. Don't mistake him for the bad guys - if there ARE any bad guys. If you see my old school friends, just point 'em out, and we'll make our way to them nice and easy.". I was trying to stay calm, but my heart was going at a racehorse clip, and the puffs of vapor from my breath in the chill October morning air gave me away. I was hoping I was wrong. I was feeling more and more, though, that I was right.

The front lot was still pretty noisy, lots of revelers making plans or saying good night, car doors slamming, engines revving. We stayed near the buildings and moved slowly ; that was trying to my patience, but it was the only way of staying safe. Mac suddenly turned, and pointed in the direction of the river, where we had all walked earlier.

" I thought I heard something, down there - a voice, maybe...a yell? " he looked at me, and the others stopped and waited. I nodded....it was about 200 yards to the river walk. " Let's go, " I concurred, and we went.

The walk had been nicely done ; wide cement pathways, lined with grass, and lit by small ground level lamp systems every 6 feet, ambling along about 10 to 20 yards from the shore. The nearly full moon shining off the water helped visibility somewhat. In the fall, the smells were rich and clean ; summer was another story. Tonight, there was a underlying putrid odor wafting through the cleaner smell. It took us about 5 minutes to reach a point where we could see them.

There appeared to be 4 of them ; they were still about 50 yards from us, and their backs were all turned toward us, but I recognized Greg immediately. They were standing in a semicircle

around something, and their voices were clear and taunting in the night air ; that's probably what Mac had heard. That meant they were not making any effort to be silent. I stopped everyone.

" They aren't trying to stay unnoticed, " I said, " so, we need to understand, they probably are expecting us. I can only hope they aren't expecting this many. Spread out, form two lines abreast, keep about 20 yards between the 2 lines. Stay behind me to the left and right ; I'll keep center, and advance first - count 3, then start after me. The second one from the right is Greg ; he's mine, and no arguments. The one to his right, I think, is Mike - team on my right, take him. Team to the left, take the other two. I don't know if all 4 are vampires, but we can assume they are, so be careful but be quick. Get the kill as soon as you can. As soon as we are in range, hit them with whatever you brought - and let's hope it slows them enough that this is over fast. ". Guitar cases quickly went to the grass and their contents unloaded. By now, we could hear a woman's voice, sobbing frantically, just beyond the 4 targets.

" By the way, " I added, looking to each of my friends as sternly as I could, " don't forget ; there could be more. And...Uncle Fester just might be around...so be alert. Ready? ". Nods, and

grins from Bill and Mac. I noticed Mel had the bow.....I hoped she was as accurate with it at night as she had been in the daylight. I nodded her direction.

" If we get close enough - we almost are now - for you to get a shot, take the guy on the left ; that'll leave 3 to deal with. As soon as you hit him, Lou, you get in fast and take his head. Hopefully by then, we'll have the others ready to finish off. Well..." I sighed, " here goes nothing. See to it ya don't hurt yourselves. Bill...watch where ya point that laser thingie....I've grown accustomed to having two arms and two legs. ". Again, he flashed a toothy smile, and gave me a sloppy salute.

" You just watch yourself, little boss man. We don't need you getting hurt by falling over your own feet again. ". It felt pretty good, knowing this bunch was at my back. I grinned, nodded - and moved toward the targets.

Chapter 19

THE ground naturally sloped toward the shore as we left the walk ; before, the 4 were visible only from waist up. As I moved closer, more of the scene came into my view ; at about 25 yards, I could see the river lapping against the sand and weeds choking the bank. The 4 still had their backs to me, but were now quiet. I knew for certain then that they knew we were coming. A glance to my left showed that Bill, Mac, and Ariane had moved over further to the left, while a check right showed Terry, Mel, and Lou closer to me, but slightly further back - I said a silent thanks yet again for this team, and felt a welcome surge of confidence ; we might be expected, but this wasn't going to be the vampires' show by a long shot.

Between Greg and the one to his left, I finally saw the objects of their sport. I felt a spark of the old rage build, the temper it had taken me years to learn to control ; I determined to check it, and hoped I'd be successful - but I could feel it want to explode.

Dave was lying face down, his shoes trailing in the lapping water of the river, his body

nestled in the sand, arms stretched ahead of him. From here, I couldn't see the extent of the damage, but he was obviously not conscious. Beside him huddled Rae, crouched with her right arm crossed over her chest, her left hand on Dave's motionless shoulder - gone was the black costume dress, and apparently anything else she may have been wearing. She was making sounds between sobs and whimpers, and looked to be trying to wake her husband. My right hand went behind me to grasp the hilt of the short sword I had placed in its scabbard behind my back earlier, and my left tightened its grip on the Colt .357 4 inch barrel. I stopped, to try to catch the rage before it blew past my control - too far yet for me, still 10 or 12 yards, but close enough for the others. I made a motion to show they were clear to open the attack, but at that moment, Greg turned to face me and his cohorts slipped further apart in a motion to quick to follow, their backs still to us. I moved forward nonetheless, hoping the others had stopped and were ready - it was all to be played by ear from here on. As I got to within a few feet of him, I could clearly make out his features in the bright moonlight. Even with vampiric enhancements, it was clear the years had not been easy ones for him.

" Greg. It's been a long time. How have you been? " I stopped, unwilling to advance any closer just yet. I was aware of a trembling building in my right leg - a old, old sign recognized by myself years ago as a sign my temper was reaching the no-retreat stage. I decided to let it go, but my voice stayed calm - another warning sign I had learned about myself long, long ago.

" Or...don't answer that, I can see you look like shit, " I went on. " I guess you let yourself go pretty bad, eh? ".

" I let myself GO?! " he spat at me. I could see in his expression he was fighting for control also, and managed it. He formed a rictus grin. " Ah, Nicky, old pal Nick. Good old Nick, always ready with the 'know-it-all' attitude. Business first, pleasure second, yeah, that's my old buddy. I was figuring you'd show up sooner or later, seeing how you felt about this here bitch back in school. Somehow, though, I knew it'd be later - business first, right? I remember that - only too well do I remember that. ". He growled the last words, like they were weapons thrown by his voice. " You were almost too late for the fun. But unlike those animals that night in 69, I thought I'd do you the courtesy of waiting, so you could watch while we tore cute little Rae apart.

I didn't get the chance to be present when they did what they did to Dany - you remember Dany, don't you Nick? My fiancée? The one who was so brutalized that night that she never recovered completely? Ever wonder how she was doing, Nick? Ever wonder how I was doing Nick?

" Well, hey, meet the new and reborn Dany, Nick old pal. ". He glanced to his right ; the person second from my left turned to face me, and I could see then it wasn't a male - it was indeed Dany, the girl from that awful night years ago. But a lot more aware than when I had last seen her ; her eyes glittered in the moonlight like fire, and her smile at me came from a soul that had been to Hell...and never returned. She had been a attractive girl - the vampiric enhancement had given her a beauty so ethereal it was almost breathtaking. Or would have been, had not the overall impression she gave off been so twistedly evil.

" Say Hello to our old buddy, Hon - our old friend who kept me from protecting you that night ". She didn't speak, however - just continued to smile and stare at me. " Aw, sorry Nick...I guess she just still doesn't understand, the job comes before friends, too bad, so sad, all that shit.

" But things change, old friend, and people change. I think you're going to find we are a

bit different now - oh, but, sorry, I think you already knew that, didn't you? That's why you're here right now, isn't it? You were expecting us to do something like this, if I'm not mistaken."

" Greg, not that you really give a rat's ass right now, but I'll fill you in on something, " I told him in return. " There hasn't been hardly a day pass since that nightt that I haven't blamed myself for what happened. But, you know what? I finally figured out - it wasn't all my fault. You didn't have to stay up there, there was no law said you couldn't have walked off that stage regardless of what I said, anytime you wanted if it was so important to you. What was I going to do? Throw a fit? Man, we started the band thing together, we would have survived that, especially in light of what happened - no one said I had to be the one in charge. Was it my fault you were such a wimp that you needed me to tell you what to do? Did you ever ask if that was what I wanted? No....you just rolled over like the family dog, content to play when asked and let others make the decisions. Man, I'd have been right there with ya if you'd have walked off and gone to find her - I'd have been right beside you tearing those bastards limb from limb if we'd found them. But no....you let me make the call, and you stayed. Yeah...it was the wrong call....I fucked up. But

you could have told me you were going anyway, and I'd have gone with ya - we all would have.

Did you ever stop to think that, huh?

" Tell me, Greg - have you ever stopped to think that maybe - just maybe - if you'd been a little bit more of a man, you could have stopped Dany from getting hurt? Have you? Don't lay it all on me, man. You don't have to - I've done a pretty good job of that myself. But I'm not taking it alone - I'm sorry for what happened, but by God I blame you as much as I blame myself."

While I'd been speaking, the others had turned to face me - Mike was to my right, but the one furthest to my left I didn't know. He didn't look at all certain about any of this. Even Mike had a neutral expression. Even Dany's expression hadn't changed, except I thought I noted a slight lessening of the glitter in her eyes. Greg, though, had listened in mounting fury ; his eyes had taken on a yellowish-red blaze, showing that he was losing control of his own vampiric emotion, at war with whatever was left of the human he had been.

" Speeches, " he hissed at me. " You were always good at speeches, Nick. But you shouldn't have made this one. I was thinking maybe I'd be forgiving toward you, maybe let you

have your little high school flame, the way you always wanted her, for a while - while we watched, of course, maybe even joining in for a playful nip now and then.". He laughed, a raspy, nasty chuckle with no humor in it. " But now, I've changed my mind. I think I'll just have Dany hold you where you can watch us do her, in our own special way, before I take my time and kill you. But, of course, I see you've brought friends....how nice...I think, though, you should have been honest with them before asking their help, and told them what, exactly, they'd be facing. Sad, that, but we can't let them go around telling people what they've seen tonight ; perhaps they won't mind dying, though, once they see what we are, that those like us really do exist outside of movies and story books. ". That surge of confidence I'd felt earlier took another huge leap - they didn't know! They knew I knew, but weren't aware of the team! Uncle Fester make a boo boo? Or, just overconfident? Was he close by? I didn't care suddenly - I knew how this was going to come out now, and I tensed slightly.

Then, I glimpsed something over Greg's shoulder that put the game in the bag. Before he could make a move to release his pack on my group, I said: " Before you let your emotions get

the best of you, Greggie my boy, you might want to check behind you. ".

" Don't even try it, " Greg sighed, but a flicker of doubt showed in his eyes - just a flicker, but enough ; I saw in his eyes that he was about to make a quick glance - which for a vampire is beyond a human's ability to see, and I gambled. With a strength born of more rage than I ever recalled having felt in my life, I drew the short sword and swung. Fueled by that same rage, it sliced cleanly and completely through his neck ; it was so fast, his head actually remained in front of me as his body seemed to disappear and reappear inches behind it. As this happened, the morning dark erupted - I was dimly aware of the whistle of a arrow to my right and Mike's face erupted into a fierce grimace of rage as the shaft penetrated his skull, his hands flying to grasp it there. To my left, Dany was staring in near shock as a thin beam of light sliced through her right leg, toppling her to the ground before she could react. She howled in frustration. a howl they could have heard in China, I remember thinking to myself. The chest of the fourth vampire had erupted from the impact of a large caliber rifle round, and he was staggering back in surprise and shock, staring at the blood escaping that not so long before had been sustaining his existence. I

could tell he was trying to relocate with his enhanced speed, but was discovering that ability suddenly denied to him ; the confusion in his vampire eyes indicating he had probably been a recent convert, still unaware that he wasn't invincible after all.

What I had glimpsed over Greg's shoulder took care of the rest ; with a speed and strength only a vampire could know, Blasingame took the heads of the other three with his bare hands, negating the need for the team to move in quickly for the kill. As quickly as that, it was over, except for the cleaning up.

I reached down to where Greg's head had dropped almost at my feet and lifted it to my eye level. His eyes were still very much alive....his mouth was working without sound, his eyes frantically searching for his body, the vampire host desperately trying to rejoin the wounded parts and begin the healing process. I stared hard at his face until the eyes focused on me.

" God, you're dumb, " I told him as I tossed his head into the pile with the others. The team by now was here, ringing the grisly scene ; Lou took a small aerosol spray bottle filled with lighter fluid from his trouser pocket, and Mac provided a slim, powerful cigar lighter. Within

seconds, the heads were blazing. The bodies they had been attached to were soon still. I noticed Ariane, Mel, and Blasingame were with Rae and Dave, and became aware as my adrenalin slowed down that Rae was no longer making the noises she had been making before. At some point, the discarded costume dress Rae had been wearing had been located and she had it back on, along with Mel's jacket. Dave was sitting, but seemed still only semi-conscious ; at least he wasn't dead. I could see blood on his forehead, but no other visible sign of damage. I started to walk towards them, but discovered my legs wouldn't hold me....I went down to my knees, then to a curled position - I was suddenly reminded of my own little hurts. Only, they didn't feel so little right then. Bill was beside me, and grabbed me before I could fall fully flat on my face. I tried to tell him we needed to get this scene cleaned up quickly, but he told me to shut up and let them handle it.

" Let's get you back to your room, little warrior, " he said flatly, then with a little more life, "

And, Damn!...remind me to never get you pissed off! " .

Chapter 20

Thanks to fate, or whatever was watching over us, we made it back to my room without incident. I told Bill I could make it myself, but he stayed with me, assuring me over my protests that the others had everything under control. I confess I didn't protest too vehemently - once the adrenalin had died down, I felt the pain and the tiredness pretty intensely.

Bill helped me get under the shower after seeing to it I took a pain killer, then helped me to rewrap the injured ribs. By then, it wasn't as bad....and I was wanting to know about the others' progress.

" Plus, that's torn it now, " I added. " Rae and Dave saw enough that this isn't going to be a very well kept secret any longer, I'd guess. ". I was sitting on the edge of my bed, wearing a fresh pair of jeans, and watching Bill across the room, who was looking out my balcony window.

" Hey, Nick, relax " he advised, speaking softly - softly for him, anyway. " Trust Ariane and the rest ; they know what to do. I think they should be back before long. Hey, man, that was

intense. You handled that pretty damn well ; gotta ask, though. Did you mean all that you told him? ".

" About the wimp part, you mean? " I pondered. " Yeah, in a way, I guess. Mostly I was just trying to see if I could get him mad. But yeah, I meant what I said...if he'd rebelled that night, I'd have been right beside him, and never have taken him to account for it. ".

Bill thought for a few minutes before saying : " So....do you feel the same way about us? ". Took me off guard, and I showed my surprise.

" Hell, no...what the Hell do you mean? Man, you weren't there then ; those guys would never have worked if someone hadn't taken charge. This is different - you guys are more than capable of going on fine without me. I don't mind being the leader here, as long as I know any one of you are willing to stand up and do the job too. And you all can, and have. Don't read shit into what I said out there, Bill ; we know each other too well for that by now. ". I guess I got a little heated, because he turned around to me grinning.

" Ok, then, calm down, little Conan, " he laughed, " and let them take care of the cleanup

and your friends. Trust us, just like we trust you. Fair? ". Abashed, I gave him a embarrassed grin back. " Fair," I said, " and, hey, thanks for setting me straight. Sorry. ".

" Don't be sorry, man, I wouldn't know how to take you apologizing, " he chuckled. " One thing has occurred to us, though, and that is whether or not anyone else saw this tonight. We're pretty sure the area above was pretty well cleared out by the time it all went down, but with all the places being open late, it's hard to say. Even if there were still people around outside that late, it was pretty far away, so I think we're ok. Really, there wasn't much noise, though you'd think there was. Loudest was that vampire bitch when I zapped her leg off - hey, I really like this laser thing! - but at a distance, might have sounded like a dog howl or something. When I brought you back up here, everything and everyone seemed pretty normal, business-as-usual, so I think we're ok. I do. ". I had to thank him for thinking of that, for noticing ; yet another reason I didn't feel the same about this bunch as I implied I felt about Greg and that situation. He just nodded. " Knew that already, " he said, letting me know he had broached the subject only to get my mind back on the right track.

It was then that Ariane led my weary, bedraggled but wide-awake team into my room. They all approached me, making sure I was all right and letting me know the cleanup was successful, not a trace remained of what happened. Lou let me know Dave was going to be fine ; apparently, he had been struck by one of the vampires when he tried to play the hero and fight them off, suffering a cut above his forehead and maybe a concussion. Physically, Rae was unharmed, Blasingame was still with them both, and had implied he would try to take care of certain things about what they had perceived as happening. If it worked, he'd let us know. So...I was to rest, relax, and not worry about it....both Rae and Dave were fine, we had scored a major victory in spite of the circumstances, and while it still wasn't over by a long shot, Uncle Fester might just be singing a new tune when next we met.

"Blechhh, " Melanie grimaced. " The thought of that old bastard singing anything makes me want to puke. Oh. Speaking of which...anyone hungry? " she asked brightly, drawing amazed looks from everyone, and I noticed she looked positively beautiful all of a sudden, standing there defiantly talking about food after what we'd just done. I felt - no, I forced it back.

Wrong time, wrong place, I thought to myself.

But I did also notice that I, too, had a appetite. I said so. After a few moments, the others did too, almost acting amazed at themselves.

" Well, Hell, you guys, " she bubbled, " that was hard work. Hey!! Let's call that restaurant and have them send something over. After all, we have something to celebrate, and remember, our band contract is only for Wednesday through Saturday nights....we have the next 3 nights off, and we're going to be seeing way more of each other than we might like!! ". This last was said with a burst of laughter as she picked up the phone. Ariane walked over to her and wrapped her in a hug before she could dial ; it was then I saw the tears in Mel's eyes that the joking had hidden. They were gone quickly, and her voice when ordering gave no sign. But I'd seen them, if no one else had.

Mac said he'd be right back, went to his room, and returned with a bottle of what he said was quite expensive brandy. " One shot each - none for Nick, we don't want him passing out, the wuss, " Mac told us, and was rewarded with a good bout of laughter. I did pass - I was a little too

relaxed from the pain killer, and I wanted my food.

Blasingame returned then, getting everyone's full attention - especially mine.

"Impeccable timing, " I told him. "I was wondering when - and IF - you were going to show up tonight." He had the courtesy to look abashed. " No matter, though, you did. And, pardon using my own name in a pun, in the Nick of time, too. Now...about my friends ; how are they? ".

"As to my late arrival, well, I had some things to do, " he paused, looking around and seeming to make a decision. " It had been two days since I last fed, and while livestock in this area is plentiful, it is best to confine my feeding activities to the evening hours. I'm sure you understand. And I didn't feel it was a topic any of you cared to know about this morning. ". I was properly chastised ; I hadn't thought of that, nor had anyone else, I could tell from their expressions. " Understood, " I let him know, " and, sorry ; it's taking us a bit of time to get used to teaming with someone we originally were sent here to kill. I'm sure *you* understand. ". He nodded to show he did, waving it away.

"As to your friends, " he continued, " well, they are tough people, Nick Anders. The

woman especially. You know, if you will excuse my saying so, you are a very fortunate man, to have the kind of friends you do." This said while he looked around the room, at each of them. "Again, I have to say, I envy you. Good, strong friends. Who, " he added with a bit of a twinkle, " are quite lucky to have you for a friend in return. ". Lou deadpanned a wink at me....I thought about throwing a pillow at him, but decided not to test the ribs so soon after tonight.

"Your friends from the past, though, are going to be quite fine. The man will have to be careful for a day or so, but the woman assured me she would see to that. Very lovely woman, by the way. Anyway - I managed to put a suggestion into their minds, easier with the man in his weakened condition, and while I cannot guarantee it will remain in effect, I am fairly confident it will. You all need to know what this was, in case you have to verify any of it. Hopefully, that will not become necessary with anyone but the two people themselves. So, listen carefully ; this is now what they believe happened.

"They wanted a romantic river walk before meeting you for breakfast, so they left a few minutes before the end of the dance - dance? Is that the proper term? Anyway, they wandered a

bit farther than they had intended, when they were suddenly accosted by 4 young toughs and forced off the walk down to the riverbank. There, it became apparent that robbery was not the motive, but sexual assault on the woman, and the man attempted to fight them. He was struck in the head by one of the toughs, and recalls nothing after that. The woman recalls this, as well as after her husband was felled, the toughs ripping her clothes from her and standing over her, taunting her about what they were going to do ; at this point, she saw you, Nick, and the rest of your group come charging down the bank, engaging in a scuffle with the toughs, and chasing them off. She also is prepared to give very good descriptions of the toughs to the police, should it become necessary, but since they are in essence unharmed, she is reluctant to contact the police.

"Most of this was easy to plant, as it pretty much happened just that way...except for your 'chasing off' the toughs, of course. It was rather enchanting, when I had her repeat it back to me - she thinking she was telling it for the first time - she remarked to me 'It was almost like those old Western movies, where the cavalry arrives just in time to save the girl, only in those old movies,

the girl wasn't naked.' . It was rather touching, and humorous as well, since it was altogether quite true. You poeple were the cavalry, and you did save her - saved them both. By the way, " and here he looked at me, " your handling of the situation with the vampire was really very well done. I take it you two had a 'history'. That is disturbing, of itself, but you handled it well. Though, " and here he paused again, " I do feel you put yourself in a very bad position being out ahead and alone like that. Still, I presume you knew who you were dealing with and used the best approach. Again, well done."

Everyone in the room heard Melanie's snort as he said the last.

"Oh, yes, didn't you know? That's our Nick. Doesn't matter if he knows what he's walking into or not. Got a pack of rabid wolves you need stopped? Nickie here will say 'Ok, I'll charge 'em head on, you guys line up on either side and pick 'em off with slingshots!'. Yeah, if it's dangerous, he's always going to be up front. One of these days, he'll get to be the only one buried afterward, too, the Goddamn idiot!". She hurled the last part over her shoulder as she rushed to the bathroom, Ariane on her heels. Everyone else looked a bit sheepish and

embarrassed ; Lou cleared his throat and said, " Gosh, wonder where our food is? ", earning relieved laughter from all - including me. Blasingame looked at me a little harder.

"Ah - I see I have caused a upset. Unintentional, believe me." He looked at the rest of the team. "Perhaps I should say here that the actions your colleague described are the actions of a man capable of great love for his friends, and indeed for all life. Some of you are aware, you will see this type of behavior often in the combat associated with war ; there are people who would rather sacrifice their own safety to protect that of those they care about. This is why you are all fortunate, in my view, to have the relationship you have. I believe you are all capable of doing the same thing....you showed me that this morning, and again tonight. Among such as you, one thing that is even harder to accomplish than going first into the storm is standing aside and allowing someone you care about do it, and waiting with patience to complete the task.

"If ever a group of vampires - or demons - were to form and be such as you, they would be unstoppable. ". The entire room was silent following this, only to be interrupted by a knock at my door, announcing the arrival of our food. Ariane and Mel emerged from the bathroom, Ariane

giving me a wink and a 'ok' thumb and forefinger sign to show Mel was all right. She did seem to have returned to her former chipper spirits, telling the delivery waiter to put the bill on my room tab. I laughed....small price, I thought. And anyway, they had all earned it, and I made a point of telling them so. Lifting a glass of tomato juice, I proposed a toast.

"To the best damn group of Hunters - and musicians - that ever lived. Too many others keep saying this, and i don't say it enough - I couldn't do what I did tonight if I didn't know it was you guys backing me up. Thanks - honestly, and sincerely - thanks, all of you, for covering my dumb ass. Lord knows, I don't deserve it.". Ariane moved over to sit beside me, and started to reach to hug me...then, she stood, held out her hand for me to stand, and completed the hug.

Yeah, you better believe I enjoyed it. Bruised ribs and all.

Bill stood and reached out for Ariane to hug, but she backed off, saying " Shut up, sit down, and eat your steak and eggs, heathen ", earning a pout from him and genuine belly laughs from everyone else. The relief was palpable. Even Blasingame accepted a small glass of brandy from Mac, and acknowledged it was quite fine. High praise from someone over 600 years old, I

thought.

"You know, you're a handy guy to have around," I told him sincerely between chews. "Not that I'm ever certain when you'll be around, of course. Still, there is the small matter of what you are. Not your fault, no, and admittedly, one would never know it unless they got to feeling snugly with you.". He honored my attempt at humor with what looked like a genuine smile. " I was wondering," I went on, nonchalantly, " I don't suppose you play a instrument or sing, do you?". The sudden quiet in the room was louder than a bomb going off.

"Actually, yes," he answered me, as if unaware of the stir I had just caused. "I play several instruments, and was told....well, centuries ago...that I sang quite well. Why? ". When no one spoke for several minutes after he asked, he became aware of the nature of my question. He blinked at me. "What are you suggesting, Nick Anders?" he asked me pointedly. I smiled, and waved off a reply.

"Just curious, that's all. Musician's curiosity, call it. We always wonder who else in the room might be competition. Speaking of competition - I'm a bit surprised old Uncle Fester wasn't

here tonight. Any thoughts?" I asked. He seemed to accept my explanation, for now, but I could feel at least two sets of eyes boring into me, ensuring I would have some explaining to do eventually. Not now, though...I wasn't ready yet.

"Well, yes, actually," Blasingame considered. "In addition to what I told you regarding my late arrival, I also spent some time today doing some searching of my own. I have lost the sense of him, and this concerns me. Perhaps he felt no need to be there, perhaps he doesn't use them as providers of his own desires ; I'm not sure. Perhaps they had no connection to him at all - a thought even more disturbing, but one which I hold in little regard.

"I heard the remark during your conversation indicating these vampires' incomplete knowledge of your team's purpose. This creature does not make mistakes like that. He is insufferably confident and egotistical, but has not survived this long by making errors in judgement. I did sense that only two of those tonight were his creations ; the other two were created by the one you spoke to. This, perhaps, was considered by - what do you call him, Uncle Fester? Interesting...- Uncle Fester as unacceptable, and he decided to leave them to their own

devices. If they were successful, he was ahead ; if not, they got what was coming to them without bringing any harm to him or causing him to expend any unneeded energy. He is capable of such thought. All life to him is a tool, for him to use or destroy as the whim takes him.

"But...I wonder. I do have some news. I don't know where he is right now ; I don't know why he wasn't there tonight ; but - I do know where he has been. I will take you there tomorrow.

"Because if he has been there, there is every reason to suspect that when he returns, he will come back there. And I fully believe he will come back. Soon.".

Chapter 21

SUNDAY dawned chilly and overcast - or so I was told, I slept through the dawning part. And most of the post-dawning. It was still overcast when I did finally wake up. I was either well out of it, or the others had been extra careful not to awaken me.

"We were starting to think we'd have to resort to drastic measures," Mac told me as I sat up: I noted with a groan that it was near noon.

"Coffee, and a shower," Lou said from my left. "Then, road trip."

"Where's everyone else?" I asked, after a healthy yawn and a long swallow of coffee. "They finally get uncomfortable and go back to their own rooms?"

"Confession time, " Lou answered. "We all slept late, except Blackfield. Everyone ordered coffee - thanks, by the way, you're buying, nice of you and all - we sat around for a bit and talked bad about you, saw that wasn't going to get you awake, and they got bored and went to their rooms to change and clean up. Which is where Mac and I are going when they get back.

"Oh..and...who's Blaze? You kept calling out 'More, Blaze baby' in your sleep."

He stayed deadpan through it all ; this time, I risked the ribs, and fired off one of my pillows at him. He caught it, never even breaking a smile. I was pleased to notice that the soreness, while still bad, seemed no worse. I started to unwrap and prepare for my own cleaning up.

"Never mind," Lou said admiringly. "I see Blaze....it's the color of your ribcage.". He wasn't kidding, either. When I'd finished my bathroom necessities, I felt pretty good; returning to my bedroom area, I found the others present. Ariane and Mel helped me rewrap, I wolfed down 3 more cups of coffee, a painkiller, and a muffin purported to be blueberry, and we packed ourselves up to meet Blasingame, about 2 miles east of Vandemeter.

"Anyone report the latest to Mark yet?" I asked in the car on the way.

"Ariane took care of it," Lou said from the back seat, where he and Terry were having a discussion that I think was about matter anti-matter, not that I could understand it. Melanie was driving again, and being silent. I couldn't tell if she was sulking or just didn't feel like talking.

"From what she said, I understand that Mark suggested you stay out of the rest of this one," Lou finished up.

"Suggested?" I asked, trying to turn my head to face him. While I was doing that, I caught the smirk on Melanie's face. "Ok, wait a minute ; you mean more like it was suggested TO him. So - you're trying to get rid of me, eh?".

"Oh, we don't have to do that, " Mel spoke for the first time. "You do a pretty good job of trying to get rid of yourself without any help from us.". She was smiling, though. Not a funny, 'ha-ha' smile, more of a 'what are we going to do with this precocious child that we care about so much?' kind of smile. I would have preferred 'ha-ha'.

"Look," I said, trying to sound reasonable, "it's the only way I know how to be. I can't explain it, other than to say that I can't ask any of you to do something I wouldn't do myself ; and since I can do it myself, I should do it myself. I guess it's complicated. But I can tell you, it has nothing to do with any lack of confidence in any of you, and in fact, I wouldn't do some of it if I wasn't 100% sure that you guys were backing me up, better I think than I could back you up.".

Terry had been quiet so far, but now he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Isn't for me to say, " he started, "since I'm really only a temporary addition to you guys, but I have noticed....well...sometimes, Nick, it's like you almost have a death wish, as trite and cliched as that might sound. Now, I'm not saying last night was a example - I think last night you did the only thing it was possible to do, given what we knew - but you do seem more concerned with protecting the team than with protecting yourself.". He paused here, and no one said anything. "But, I suppose that's why it's your team. I know even I felt pretty confident last night when you placed everyone, then marched right down to meet that monster. I felt it radiate from everyone ; it was like, ok, Nick has it under control, we're gonna tear this bunch a new one.".

I saw the expression on Mel's face as he finished. It was one of near surprise, and she gave a quick glance back, saw I was watching her, and returned to concentrating on her driving. Now it was my turn to grin....but I decided not to push it.

"But I wonder," Terry went on, "if maybe - and Lou and I have been talking about this a bit this week - if maybe, you know, fifteen years of doing what you guys do, seeing what you've

seen, hasn't sort of made you, well, cynical about your own survival? I mean, you all have each other ; most Hunters just have themselves. But most of the rest of us, well, we have families - spouses, girl or boyfriends - people we can go to when a hunt is over and return to what everyone else takes for granted is a 'normal' life, where things that we battle with daily are regarded as only fiction in books or films. We get a chance to go back to being 'just folks' for a while. But you...you all spend nearly every day together, knowing what you know, living with what you know. I think....well, for what it's worth anyway...I think it has to have some effect on you."

"It makes sense, Nick, " Lou added. "I think it's a valid point. We all have a good, close relationship. Kind of like a family. But maybe there's something more we need, something deeper, something that, the longer we go on, the harder it becomes for us to find. I have to admit, talking about this with Terry has made me think about it. I don't know....maybe we all should think about it."

I was starting to believe I was the target of a conspiracy here ; I knew what they were talking about. I was saved from having to come up with a answer to the unspoken question,

though, as we pulled off a gravelled road onto a well-packed dirt drive and caught sight of the other Society car and Blasingame's vehicle a short way ahead.

The buildings surrounding the drive and lane were drab in the sunless day, but showed signs of being imposing at one time. The main house was a two story affair, with the screened front porch facing east, a side door facing south, and a small set of steps leading off a back door facing west. A few feet from the side door was a cellar door, probably leading to the basement/storm cellar common to older houses in this section of the country where tornadoes were nearly as much a part of life as season changes. Further west and south was a maintenance shed, old and falling apart now but obviously once used for large farm equipment. Its open area was large enough to hold a small private airplane. South of that, several hundred yards, was a large barn with a fenced area attached, possibly once used for livestock. Visible in the upper area of the barn were still some old hay bales, obviously not touched for quite some time.

Behind the house was a large orchard, with what looked to be cherry trees mostly. The

yard itself was huge, and overgrown with all manner of weeds. There was a old, musty odor about the place that permeated even the familiar smell of Fall in this area, a slightly burning smell that was quite pleasant. We joined the other 3 who were already gathered around Blasingame near the side door to the house, and caught part of a statement he had just made.

"---no need, he isn't here right now," Blasingame was saying. "Ah, Nick - I was just telling your friends there was no need of their weapons, he isn't here right now, nor close by that I can sense. But he has been here, and I sense he plans to return. I thought it might be to your advantage if we went through the grounds before he does.". I nodded ; it made sense, of course, but part of it bothered me.

"Fine with me," I told him, then asked, " But...won't he be able to sense that you have been here?". I could see that the others, particularly Melanie, were wondering the same thing.

"He will, yes," Blasingame conceded. "To a point. He will know someone has been here. Perhaps he will even know it was I. But, yes, he will know others have been here. I think it doesn't matter to him, but I do admit, I can't be sure. If you'd rather not investigate----?".

"No, it isn't that," I shot back at him. "In fact, I agree, it may be a good idea. But first, what do you know about the place? I vaguely recall someone living here once, years ago. It looks abandoned now, but is it?"

"Actually, according to some locals I spoke with the past two days, it was abandoned for over a decade, but recently was rented by a reclusive but mannerly older gentleman," Blasingame said. " Just about a month ago, in fact. No one seems to know much about him, and in fact no one had seen him for several weeks after he rented the place. He spent about a week asking around in town about any older farms for rent, that's how the locals found out. I'm sure it was him ; it is one of his favorite guises, that of a older, mannerly but reclusive man. Once I came out here, I was sure of it.". It was starting to bother me, he knew so much about his nemesis in one breath, and so little in the next.

"All right," I acquiesced, "we'll have a look around. But, I'd like you and I to have a little chat sometime soon. Real soon, if you don't mind.". His expression didn't change, but I saw in his eyes what might have been approval - or it's opposite. I ignored it, and went on: "Now, I don't

care if it's locked or unlocked...somehow, I think that won't matter a whit to you. But we don't know the extent of old Uncle Fester's abilities, or exactly what he is. He could have locks in place that have nothing to do with keys, and could be pretty hazardous to mere humans such as we are ; so, wherever we start and wherever we go from there, we stick together - and, you go first.". I gave him my best smile, to show I was being a reasonable fella. He accepted the proposition without question, and agreed it was a wise course of action.

He started for the side door, and stopped when Ariane spoke : "Maybe we should try the cellar first" she suggested, and I concurred. He nodded, and lifted the door easily.

"Looks like it's been used a bit recently, doesn't it?" Lou offered, as I stepped in to follow Blasingame. Mac, though, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Why don't we change our order of battle a tad, boss? Seems logical that we might want our injured member sort of in the center, and maybe the taller ones front and back in case something needs to be seen? Eh? Sound like a plan?". I grinned....indeed, it did make sense.

"You got it," I said. "Pick your slots, but whoever is in front or behind me, if anything

happens, remember to be gentle on my ribs.". Laughter, then Mel saying she'd take my back, Lou at my front, Bill next after Blasingame, then Ariane, Terry, and Mac bringing up the rear.

"Oh, sure, make me the guy who gets trampled when everybody runs," he laughed. "Just cause it was my idea. Oh, well, if there's nothing to see, at least I can look down the front of Mel's shirt.". That earned him a elbow from our elfin lady. But a light one.

The cellar yawned darkly, and gave off a foul odor mixture of damp, mildew, old earth, and something else. The chill was bone-shattering as we descended the 8 cement steps to the floor. The only light was from what little daylight got through from the open door. Something scurried ahead in the dark...Ariane gave off a little shriek of disgust. "Rats, I bet," she said. "I hate rats, yuck!". Terry asked us to hold a minute, and produced a pocket flashlight.

"You might be able to see down here fine," he told Blasingame as he passed the flash forward, "But we don't have your vision.". The thin beam revealed a empty, dirt-packed floor, and some old crumbling wooden racks along the back wall. Whatever had been stored on them was long since gone, or rotted, probably accounting for some of the odor. A putrescent pile in one

corner was probably a old stack of potatoes, surrounded by mostly small bones, skeletal remains of rodents over the years. A few were in fresh states of decay, however. We didn't linger ; the smell was tickling most of our gag reflexes.

Next point of entry was the side door, which wasn't locked either apparently ; we used the same single file approach formation. This time, though, Blasingame hesitated as he stepped over the threshold, Bill nearly tripping over him.

"What?" Bill asked irritably, but stopped as Blasingame raised one arm to halt us.

"Something....wait...quiet a moment." he told us, standing motionless and attentive, as if listening. Or smelling. From where I was, I could see or hear nothing. Bill, though, suddenly took 3 steps back. "Is that what I think it is?" he asked, in a tone that I hadn't heard from him before. "Shitfire, yeah...damn snakes, aren't they? God, I HATE snakes!" he finished, as something long and reptilian slithered down onto Blasingame's shoulder. Appearing unperturbed, he reached around and took it off, causing it to flail wildly. He grasped the head, squeezed, and dropped it to the floor. I couldn't see any sign of blood or gore, though.

"Snakes, yes, of a sort," he informed us. "More...many more, around the door frame and the entire room, floor to ceiling. Appears to be a kitchen area, unused for a long time. Give me a few moments ; wait here at the doorway, I can clear this.". Behind me, Melanie snorted disgust and folded her arms, shuddering. "I don't like snakes either," she said.

We could see him in the room, now ; he was grabbing the reptilian forms by the handfuls, and crushing them. They weren't going quietly, though - the hissing and whipping of their bodies was almost deafening after the silence outside and in the cellar. Several he hadn't gotten to yet seemed to be attacking him, but he remained unfazed and unharmed, continuing to destroy them as if he were simply having a Spring cleaning. I continued to be struck by the lack of blood, or any fluids, from the crushed bodies. It took him about 5 minutes, then he motioned for us to enter.

"Creations of his, guardians of a sort," Blasingame explained as we tracked around the lifeless forms as best we could. "Truthfully, they are unable to actually harm you, but they are effective as a deterrent to humans. Even those humans not afraid of snakes can be revolted by a

large number of them seemingly intent upon attack.". None of us were inclined to argue the point. I wasn't a big fan of snakes myself, especially ones who chose to come AT you rather than slither away, but my curiosity led me to reach down and pick up one of the forms. It was dry to the touch, felt like rough paper, but had weight - solid through the body. I gave a experimental squeeze, and felt the body crumble, like dry, stale bread. Interesting.

"So, hold up a sec," I stopped our advance. "You say he 'created' these ; if I am going to accept that, then I have to wonder - just what else is he capable of 'creating'? What other 'guardians' might he have left for those intrepid enough to sally past his little reptilian freak show?". That brought us all up short....and earned me a approving nod from Lou. "Nicely phrased," he murmured.

"Nothing that will actually harm you, I'm certain." Blasingame assured us. "He doesn't want to draw undue legal attention to himself ; he keeps up with the times. Having harmless things to scare someone off....imagine a group of children claiming his house was full of snakes, and the police arriving to find no such thing. A missing child, though, whose last movements

could be traced to this vicinity? Not the sort of attention he wants, nor needs, where he has taken refuge - for that is one thing he holds in common with all things, he needs a place of refuge.

"No, whatever else may be here might be unsettling, but not harmful."

"You hope," I heard softly from Ariane.

The next room, apparently a living room, was as unused as the kitchen. Dust, mildew, cobwebs, covered the walls, floor, and ceiling. The windows, still intact, were so filthy that light barely filtered through. From the living room, a hall led toward the back of the house, partnered by a stairway going to the upper rooms. In one wall of the living room, a door obviously led to the screen porch in front. Our movement stirred up decades of dust and mold, but little else. Lou sneezed, a startling report in the stillness. We were all having a time trying hold in sneezes.

We made short work of the downstairs, staying together, keeping to the original formation as much as possible. Upstairs was much the same, but we did find evidence that someone had been there, and recently. A closet in one bedroom contained various items of clothing, all new, and several pairs of shoes and boots. It took only a glance to verify all were the size our old

Uncle required. Finished, we went back to the kitchen - we still had one more area we hadn't checked. Another door off the kitchen led to what we assumed was the basement ; these were usually separate from the cellars like we had checked outside, and usually contained the functioning equipment of the house, such as furnace, wood or coal storage, plumbing access. Once again, I bade Blasingame go first. By now, we were convinced...this was Uncle Fester's refuge, and I was already forming a strategy meeting back at the hotel in my mind. So, I wasn't prepared for what happened next.

He had opened the basement door onto darkness, and was reaching for what appeared to be a light chain connected to a light fixture ahead, when something hurtled up from below with a sound like a train speeding through a crossing. I was aware of Blasingame nearly disappearing in a red haze ahead of me, and Bill and Ariane being knocked aside as if they were mere plastic figures. Lou seemed frozen in place, and Mel behind me yelled "Left!" in my ear while grabbing my left arm ; from the corner of my eye I saw Terry and Mac dive to the right. I hit the floor rolling to my left, conscious of both Mel's arms wrapped around me and rolling with me. We stopped

with a crash, hitting up against what proved to be a storage cabinet ; the rotted door gave way to our combined weight, and several items crashed over us and onto the floor. Without thinking, my hands reached out and grabbed for something, anything - I still wasn't aware what we had stirred up, but I had a pretty good feeling of certainty that it could, and meant to, do us harm.

What I had grabbed turned out to be a old wooden broom ; Mel prevented me from standing, lying beneath my back with her arms still wrapped tightly around me (I had a fleeting humorous thought that it wasn't supposed to be like this, we were supposed to be facing each other), so I placed the bristle end between my feet and twisted with all my might, rewarded by the snapping sound of the bristle end breaking off. I then concentrated on trying to get my bearings.

I could see Blasingame still in the doorway ; he appeared to be clutching his chest, and that was definitely blood pumping out through his fingers. I took my attention elsewhere. I saw Bill leaning over Ariane, but looking toward where Mel and I were lying ; Mac and Terry were opposite them, crouching in a corner, Mac holding a old but quite serviceable switchblade loosely in his right hand. Lou was no longer standing, but flat on his back - standing over him was one of

the ugliest four legged beasts I had ever seen.

Pale-skinned, with huge shoulders tapering down to a narrow set of muscular hindquarters, it resembled - distantly - a giant bulldog. Its paws ended in talons that looked to be nearly 2 inches long, the two front paws gripping Lou by the shoulders. The snout was short and puggy, set below slitted eyes that glinted yellow, and opened in a grimace that revealed tooth-like fangs, long and sharply pointed at the front, going to more blunt as they receded in the mouth. A great drool of saliva hung down from the center of the lower jaw, nearly touching Lou's face. The pale skin had no fur, but glistened as if wet. In size, it seemed not much bigger than a good sized mongrel dog - if it stood on its hindquarters, it looked like it would top at about 5 feet. A muscular, murderous five feet.

A low moan from Lou ; the beast had tightened its grip on his shoulders, and I saw a small trickle of blood escape beneath his back. The thing had lifted its ugly snout, and was snarling around the room, looking slowly and carefully at each of us. I was aware of Mel's irregular breathing beneath me, and I tensed a bit, willing her to loosen her grip. She did, and I

felt ready to move. I made eye contact with Mac, moving my eyes from his knife to his face to the thing, then back. He blinked to show he'd gotten it. I tensed again, hoping I was on target first try - somehow, I didn't think I'd get a second one. A second passed...another...the beast's head swivelled away from Mac toward Blasingame...and Mac leaped to his left, toward me.

The thing's reaction was swift and immediate ; it rose on it's hindquarters, releasing it's grip on Lou, and leaped for Mac, who gripped his small blade in both outstretched hands. As it leapt, I pushed off the floor - I felt a added boost from Melanie, and had a moment's thought again, what a team this was - the broken broom handle thrust ahead of me like a spear.

For a moment, I felt we had lost, that I was a fraction of a second too late to get a killing blow, but out of nowhere, two muscular human arms wrapped themselves around the beast's midsection, arresting it's leap ; it was less than a blink, but it was enough. I caught the thing just under the snout with the jagged edge of the handle and used my momentum to drive it upward through it's head. At that same instant, Mac reversed his direction, and in three swift slashes, opened the beast's neck. With a sound more like a whimper this time, it's body went slack.

Blood and fluids with the consistency of blood flowed copiously.

I still grasped the handle, holding the thing in the air. There was a rasping sound that slowly became identifiable as our breathing that was the only sound now in the room. There was a touch at my shoulder - Melanie. "I think you can put it down, now," she said softly.

"Lou?" I grunted, as consciousness came back, and I let go the ugly burden.

"I'm ok," he said from behind me, where Terry had him sitting up and was looking at the gashes on his shoulders. They were still bleeding pretty freely, but didn't look deep. "Trick was, stay still or he'd tighten his grip," Lou laughed. "Staying still was the easy part. Getting these shorts clean is going to be a challenge." I blinked....I heard Mel gasp...then we all erupted into laughter. Even Ariane, who was sitting up also, dazed but quite with us.

"Think I bumped my noggin when I slid across the room," she admitted sheepishly. Mel went over to help her up. I walked over to Bill and Mac, who were standing next to Terry, ready to help Lou to his feet. I looked up at both of them, from one, to the other, and back. I was nodding, but couldn't find the words. They understood, though : Bill placed his left arm straight

out, palm down ; Mac did the same, with his palm over the back of Bill's hand ; I placed my left hand palm down atop theirs.

"Fuckin' A," we said in unison. No, it wasn't literate. It wasn't eloquent. But it said it all.

Lou was on his feet, pale but smiling. Everyone else seemed fine. I walked over to Blasingame, who by now had stopped his own bleeding and seemed none the worse for wear, other than being more pale than normal. He started to apologize. I held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't," I told him. "Ok, you were wrong. So, you're fallible. Vampires can be fallible....they'd better be, if we want to keep killing them. Something you might want to keep in mind, by the way. I could have refused the whole tour, you know. So, it's as much on me as you. Besides, I got sloppy, got inattentive. I'm human....I'm fallible too." I looked around.

"You're going to need to feed. It's getting late, and we need to tend to ourselves," I added. "But we've stirred him up again, I'll bet, and he isn't going to be happy. So...we might as well see what was so important downstairs to leave such a formidable guardian to watch over before we go. What do ya say?" I asked, looking around and getting nods of assent from all.

"Ok, here goes dummy," I said nasally, but got pulled up short.

"Dummy goes second," said Melanie, pulling me back and stepping around me.

"Unh uh," came Bill's voice as he gently pulled us both aside, "I'm the biggest dummy here ; only right, I go first.". And, he did.

The light did work, and shone brightly, a sign that this area too had been recently used - by more than our little doggy pal. The basement contained the furnace, several walls of shelving, a long workbench table, and two other tables. The smell was awful ; a stench that cannot be described in human terms. Sulfur was close...but sulfur itself would have almost been sweet compared to this. On one of the tables were several drawings, cabalistic in appearance, and several items. One the other was what remained of what appeared to have been the body of a male human, recently deceased. Possibly, our little dead puppy upstairs had been using the body for food.

Or, maybe just as a chew toy.

A brief examination of the items on the drawings table revealed them to be common

everyday human items, the kind of things people would carry around with them daily. Here, a set of keys ; a ring ; a fingernail clipper ; a plastic ink pen ; some coins; a pocket notebook. Nothing with any identification attribute. The notebook had some meaningless notes in it - disturbingly, the writing appeared to be that of a child. But whom, or what child, not a clue.

Back outside, we gratefully drew in deep breaths of fresh air. It was after 4, and some sun had finally broken through the clouds, warming us as well, though not for long now that Daylight Savings Time had ended.. Terry asked about the mess inside ; Bill remarked that Uncle Fester could clean it himself - if he even noticed it. As it was, we presented a pretty gory sight ourselves, a concern when getting back to the hotel. Bill said there were some things in the vehicle trunks that would take care of covering most of it, and there were : in each trunk were bags containing jackets for each of us, each with the name and logo of the band. Made me wonder briefly if someone in the upper ranks had known we were going to get bloody in this one, but I dismissed it. I knew it was Mark's idea ; he had mentioned it months ago anyway.

As we pulled away, I looked back at the place. Was this where the final meeting would

be? Would we be as lucky the next time? Would there even be a next time? We were getting more banged up each confrontation ; was that what he was waiting for, to get us weakened and be easier to pick off? Blasingame said he didn't sense him around right now - I didn't trust that anymore. I went back to trusting Nick's sense.

And, that sense said old Uncle Fester wasn't too far away. Not too far away at all.

Chapter 22

BACK at the hotel, we busied ourselves with cleaning away the grime and gore of our Sunday visit, each in their own rooms. Mel and Terry went with Lou, to tend further to his wounds. There was a message for me, asking for me to call another guest at the hotel when I got in. First, though, I needed to contact Mark and bring him up to date, which I did.

"I take it you are more wary of Blasingame now," Mark said, not really a question.

"Just say I am more convinced he isn't infallible," I clarified.

"Any ideas what that thing was that attacked you?"

"Maybe....I think it was a 7th or 8th level demon of some type. No intelligence, just good for killing and destruction. Dangerous to even the summoner if called up. My biggest question is now: just who IS this clown, that he has the knowledge and power to control these things even when he's not around?"

"Scary....Nick....we're working on it, but it isn't coming easy. We could use more

information about him from Blasingame, if he has it ; do you think he does?".

"Truth? I don't know. But I think he knows more than he's told us so far, " I finished up.
"And I'm not letting anyone else get hurt any worse until I get something satisfying out of him."
Mark wished me luck, and rang off, saying he knew a demonic expert in Scotland he was going to contact about the control issue. I then took a long, relaxing shower, reveling in the hot spray and the fact that the ribs seemed none the worse for wear, though I still had to be careful about certain movements. Like breathing.

Feeling improved, if not better, I rang room 310. I wasn't surprised to hear Rae answer.

"Nick!! I'm glad you got the message ; we so wanted to thank all of you for what you did, before we left," she said, sounding in good spirits.

"Didn't do anything, Rae," I told her. "Just glad we could be in the right place at the right time. How's Dave? ".

"I took him over to the emergency clinic this morning," she said, " and they said no concussion, thank God. He's going to be fine, the fool.". The smile in her voice belied the

insulting term. I laughed.

"Not a fool - just a damn brave man," I said. "Always was. A decent one, too. I'm glad you two have a relationship that's lasted. I envy you.". She was silent for a moment, then she giggled softly.

"You envy us - or him?" she said, and there was a teasing but serious note in her voice. I thought I should be surprised, but found I wasn't.

"So.....you knew? How long?".

"Worst kept secret in high school," she giggled again. "It was cute, and kind of funny how you always tried to hide it, but sad, too. I felt sorry for you, and almost came out and confronted you with it a time or two.".

"Glad you didn't," I told her. "I'd have died of embarrassment.". I was joking. I thought I was joking, anyway.

"Mmmmm....I don't think you would have, the way I was going to confront you," she teased. "Of course, now you've even seen me naked ; there are few men who can say that other

than my husband and my father," she laughed. So did I, glad she could laugh about it, and feeling grateful to Blasingame in spite of myself.

"And you are just as beautiful as I imagined you back then," I told her. "And you always will be. And very lucky to have a great husband like you do. I mean it...I envy you both. I think it's great, and I'm glad I could just once be able to help you guys out, as little as it was.". I was starting to find it hard to talk to her, feeling uncomfortable and a little guilty having this kind of conversation with her ; not because she was married, but because for some strange reason, thoughts of Melanie kept worming their way into my head as I spoke. I was suddenly feeling strangely lonely, and - naw, not jealous of the attention Lou was getting from her right now. No. Couldn't be it.

"It was more than a little," Rae brought me back. "Anyway - we have decided to stay over another night, and just be decadent. We were wondering - would you - and any of your friends - care to have dinner with us? Our treat - it's the least we can do to try to show our thanks.". I told her it sounded great ; I'd be happy to, and would let her know if any of the others

would be available. I'd call her back in about 15, thanked her, and hung up. I didn't want to spend much time pondering our conversation, so I started dialing Melanie's room. I didn't need to, though. My door opened and she walked in, looking fresh and damn pretty.

"Hungry?" I asked, and she stopped and blinked at me.

"Always, you know that," she stated. "First, though, how are you? How's the pain?"

"I'm fine...what pain? Even rewrapped myself." I grinned. "How's Lou?"

"Freaking lucky, that's how Lou is," she smiled. "He's probably gotten worse scratches from lovemaking - or, so HE says. I say, that'd make him even freaking luckier." She laughed at her own joke, and busied herself checking my wrap. "So...what's the plan? We all eating here, or going to Maine for lobster?". I thought a second about that one ; I love lobster.

"Don't sidetrack me, you know I get looney about lobster," I teased her. "No, actually, we've been invited to dinner with the couple we rescued last night from a fate worse than death, though they're already married which in my mind makes us too late to save either of them. I told them I'd ask everyone else, but heck, they're buying.". I was in good humor for some reason, too

good to notice the dark look on her face right away.

"What?" I asked, when it did sink in.

"Maybe it should just be you that goes," she said slowly. " We might just be in the way. You know, you guys talking about old times and all, we'd just get bored. That's all I meant.". She added the rest more quickly, as if suddenly aware of how it sounded, and was even blushing. I wasn't sure of myself yet, but a feeling came over me that said I better say something, that now was as close to the right time as I was going to get.

"Hey," I said, reaching out to put my hand around her arm. "I don't know for sure what's going on, and I'm no great talker, you know that. Some things I just don't know how to say, but - well - I hope this doesn't ruin our friendship or anything, but, well - uh - I kinda - I mean - I was sorta hoping - Jeez, I feel like a damn kid!! Why the Hell can't I just say it?". I was getting frustrated with myself. She was just standing there, looking up at me with those great, wide eyes, and waiting. It occurred to me that she might not wait much longer.

"What I'm trying to say," I tried again, "is...well...oh, for Pete sake! When she invited us,

the first thing that came into my mind was I didn't even want to, unless you were there with me. You. Not everyone, though don't take THAT wrong, but...oh, man, I suppose you should just shoot me, and put me out of everyone's misery. I mean, if you won't go, I don't want to, even if everyone else does...I mean....". I finally wound down, and stopped. She looked slowly at my hand, which was still on her arm, and I released it like it burned. Then she looked slowly back up at me. That pretty elfin face looked stern, then softened into a smile. She reached for my hand that I'd drawn away, and lifted it slowly up to rest on the back of her neck.

"If you'd have said it smooth, like you talk the rest of the time," she breathed softly, "I wouldn't have believed you. But it was perfect. Just perfect.". I was going to try to apologize anyway, but I couldn't, with her lips pressed so darn hard against mine. Oh, shit, I thought, now I've gone and done it - and I didn't care one damn bit. Ariane walked through my door at that moment, stopping halfway in - then, skipped in, slamming the door behind her. I found myself actually resenting the intrusion for a moment. Her throaty laughter changed that quickly, though.

"It's. About. Freaking. TIME!!!" she sang out, running up and grabbing us both in a huge

hug. "I don't know when you woke up, dumb shit, but I'm glad you did!! The way you were trying to keep your feelings in were going to kill you!". That confused me more - I thought - oh, Hell, it didn't matter what I thought. It was getting clearer every day that these people knew me better than I did. Mel stepped back, her face flushed and her eyes glistening.

"Jesus, my hair!" she shrieked. "I can't go to dinner with your friends looking like this! Ar, help me!". Ariane's turn to look confused - good, I thought. Serves her right. I was getting tired of being the only one who didn't know what I was feeling. Mel didn't give me a chance to explain, anyway - she begged Ariane to come help her get ready, she'd explain on the way, and they left me standing in the middle of my room like the fourth Marx Brother. To keep from feeling any more stupid than I already did, I busied myself calling the others. Lou, of course, begged off ; he was hurting. Bill and Mac both said sure, sounds good. Terry said he was going to stay in, call home, catch up on what was going on there, and maybe read a little ; I told him to keep one of the two-way radios next to him, just in case, and told him I'd have the other. I asked him to check in on Lou occasionally, and he said no problem, in fact, they were supposed to have dinner together

in Lou's room. That left Ariane ; I called Mel's room to ask her. She was reluctant, until she found out Bill and Mac were going, then she said sure, it'd be fun.

I was going to have to get some things straight about this situation ; I had no intention of anything involving Mel and I to change what the team had. We would quit, sure, but not until this was finished. And there was still a very high danger risk until this was over - the less time spent apart, the better. There would be plenty of time later for Mel and I to have 'quiet' time. And everyone - especially she and I - would have to accept that. I rang back to Rae's room to confirm, and this time Dave answered.

"Great!" he responded when I told him who'd be there. " Hey, Nick, listen - I know Rae already said thanks, but I just wanted to say it too. Being a guy, guess you can understand what it means, but she, y'know, she means the world to me, even after all these years. I tried, but I wussed out ; if anything had happened to her, I'd have killed myself I think. You - well, man, I owe you, you and your whole band."

"You most definitely did NOT 'wuss out!' " I told him sternly. "You were outgunned and

outmanned, and you still showed more balls than those punks did. The guy probably hit ya with a rock, or you'd have taken 'em all and thrown them in the river. It takes guts to do what you did - the world is full of men who wouldn't have. You took no crap in school, and it's good to see you haven't changed. She's lucky to have you, man.". I heard him chuckle.

"Thanks for that," he said. "It helps salve my wounded pride, which hurts a Hell of a lot more than my head did this morning. I won't say 'and you're lucky to have her', but I know you were thinking it. And I like ya even more because you do think it. Don't argue - I knew it too. And I don't blame you. She's special, to me anyway ; it's kinda nice to know she's special to another man, too. One that has some honor and decency to him. And - a great sense of timing!" he finished, laughing. "How does meeting in the lobby at 7 sound?". I told him it sounded like meeting in the lobby at 7, and he laughed even harder. I like people that laugh at my jokes.

It turned into a great evening, and we didn't spend it all talking about my old schooldays. Both Rae and Dave were curious, and then fascinated, by stories about the life of a group of musicians on the road, and what had to be gone through to go from wanting it, to actually doing it.

Of course, there was a lot we couldn't tell them, but we were used to sidestepping those issues. Ariane reminded us we needed to get a couple of rehearsals in before Wednesday to go over some rough spots, and both our hosts were impressed.

"Rough spots? Man, you guys sounded great last night!" Dave grinned, looking doubtfully at Ariane. She accepted the compliment for all of us, explaining that it wasn't unusual for the audience to not notice things the band did notice ; it was like a quest for perfection, which of course wasn't possible, but it kept everyone fresh and alert.

The evening ended pleasantly for all of us, with Rae confirming both Ariane's and Mel's appointments with her on Monday afternoon. It was obvious that Blasingame's 'suggestions' were holding, and I once again felt a little of my mistrust of him slipping away. I still had a feeling, though, that there was something he was holding back from us, and renewed my determination to try to find out what it was. With both of them going to Vandemeter tomorrow, I might get a chance to do just that. Presuming, of course, Uncle Fester remained absent a few more hours. I wasn't real confident of that happening.

We went up to Lou's room to check on him, and found he and Terry in deep conversation about literature, life, and the universe. Or, that's what it sounded like. Typical Lou anyway ; he and I had had similar conversations. I knew what he could be like. A pleasure to talk to - once you got used to his deadpan, I-don't-really-give-a-shit deceiving look. I always accused him of adopting that attitude and appearance because he thought saxophone players were supposed to be that way. And he always replied to me 'Well, that's cool, man' and would crack me up, then pretend to look at me quizzically as if he didn't know what I was talking about. I admit - once in a while, I wasn't too sure myself.

"I'm fine," he replied to my question. "It's gonna be worse as it heals. I've got salve, though, and plenty of medicine---" ____here I grinned at him, and he indulged me with a quick wink____"and I know everyone's gonna be checking on me. I just don't know how I'm gonna do spending the night in your room again, sleeping on that floor. Gets chilly - I thought maybe Mel would take pity on me and help keep me warm, but, I see she's now taken.". I guess I didn't hide my look of surprise very well, and he laughed.

"So, you think your friends can't see it?" he grinned. "Heck, the looks on both your faces gives it away to anyone perceptive enough to observe. But - the hand holding rather makes it more than obvious.". Everyone got a good laugh out of that, as Mel and I became aware that we were, indeed, holding hands, and quickly let go at the same time. I felt my face redden, but Mel just grinned at me.

"I feel like a kid caught with his hand in a candy jar," I said sheepishly, then went on to try to cover my embarrassment, "Now, first thing : I don't think we all need to fortify in one room tonight. Why don't we split it, with some here, and some in another room? You guys decide who and where - I feel good enough, it doesn't matter to me. I'll even park in here, and you guys take it from there. Agreed?".

"What about night visitors?" Mac asked. "You really think we're reasonably safe tonight?".

"Yeah, I do. Keeping in mind what Blasingame told us about Uncle Fester's apparent favoring of Halloween, I really think we have nothing to worry about for at least 24 hours. But that

doesn't mean we needn't be cautious, so we should stay in fairly close contact, and no one go wandering around outside our rooms without at least some of us. If he does come back, say tonight, and finds out what we did to his pets, he's gonna likely be highly perturbed."

"You think he'll know it was us?" Bill questioned.

"I think he'll know it was Blasingame," I clarified, "and he now associates us with Blasingame, so, yeah, I think he'll know it was us. And I'm still not certain just what this thing is ; that's something I need to talk more with Blasingame about. He told us this thing was powerful, but I'm seeing evidence that he's a lot more powerful than I surmised from what we were told. And, I gotta tell you all, I don't like it."

"So, what you're implying is," Lou put forth, "that this creature, our Uncle Fester, may be something we've only read about up to now? Something even the Society has never dealt with? Care to share any more of your thoughts? Because they sound a lot like our thoughts, too."

"I've got Mark still working on it, " I answered. "But, yes, I think we're all on the same page. The highest level demonic manifestation the Society ever has had to handle is third level.

From literature, they know Levels one and two exist, but since there has never been a confrontation, the surmise is that either they remain on another plane, finding humans too boring to play with ; or, that they are simply too intelligent to be tracked by any methods we are aware of. So, we only have the legend of literature to go on, and we know how fallible that can be."

"True," Ariane agreed. "So, you think Blasingame was correct when he said those things today were Uncle Fester's 'creations'? And what we found in the basement-----?". I nodded, and there was general agreement.

"I'm guessing, understand," I added quickly, "so let's not treat this as fact yet, until I can talk more with our vampire buddy. But everything I saw there today leads me to believe this may be a Level One demon, and if he is-----".

"We're screwed," Melanie finished for me.

Chapter 23

SURMISE and conjecture ; it was all we had to go on right then. Level One and Two demons had never been dealt with ; some older Society experts even conjectured that they didn't exist, that what we referred to as Level Three were actually the highest level. Hunters were still taught about them, though, given the possibility that the legends bore some seed of truth, just as they had for other forms. Problem was, there was little to teach. There was no recorded contact to go on. I responded quickly to Mel's remark.

"Not necessarily," I said, "though I'm certainly not opposed to the metaphor."

"Ah, a literate heathen, very good," Lou smiled beatifically as Melanie pinched me where it would be embarrassing to show. It wasn't easy, but I managed not to flinch.

"Remember our confrontation with him Saturday," I went on, "He was genuine, I think, in his supposition that we might, possibly, defeat him. I don't know how ; perhaps he believes we possess knowledge about his kind that we actually don't. Or, perhaps it isn't necessary. He has

power, yeah - if he can conjure, and control what he conjures from a distance, then he definitely has power. But we saw ourselves that it might be limited, that it takes a measure of concentration on his part, and that he may need much of that concentration to be directed at Blasingame. He, then, definitely has to be a part of whatever confrontation takes place, like it or not.

"What we need to figure out is how to best use this to our advantage. With the unanswered question still being - how does Blasingame intend to use us?".

"You think you can get him to tell you that?" Terry asked.

"Going to try," I answered with a grin. "Might not be too successful, but I'll try anyway."

"Got anything in mind if old Fester decides to not wait until we have Blasingame around?" Bill put forth.

"Nope. All I can say is, if that happens, we do the best we can - then run like Hell."

We made our overnight arrangements, my original proposal being overridden by everyone. It was decided that Ariane, Terry, and Mac would spend the night in Lou's room, and Melanie and Bill in mine. Everyone to have a two-way, and weapons handy. It was also decided

that I and Terry would accompany Mel and Ariane on Monday when they went to Rae's shop, and would meet with Blasingame if he was available. I was determined he would be. If Lou felt up to it, he, Bill, and Mac would meet us at Blasingame's, otherwise we'd all meet back here by five p.m.

We stayed with Lou and talked music until almost midnight, then Mel, Bill, and I headed for my room. Mel excused herself to go to her room for fresh clothes and bedding, and Bill sat around clearing his throat until I asked him what the matter was.

"About you, and Melanie," he started, "I'm sure glad. Both of you have been playing around the edge of it for a while now, and we were all afraid something bad was going to happen if one of you didn't make a move soon.". I chuckled a bit.

"Well, might have helped if one of my so-called 'friends' had tried to talk to me," I needled him. "Besides, what if all of you were wrong? What if, like, it was dyspepsia or something instead?".

"Would have been a case of terminal dyspepsia then," he grinned.

"Anyway, if you had asked me a year ago if I was in love with either of these two, I'd have had to say it was Ariane," I told him. "Not that I know just what the Hell love is, for sure."

"Naw, you know. Everyone does, really. And Ariane, damn, everyone loves her. Though it might be more correct to say everyone lusts after her. But all of us, well, we're more like her kids, or maybe her brothers and sisters, to her. She likes her men, yeah - but she seems to want to keep that separate from the team. Gotta admit, though, there was a couple of times when I thought maybe, you know, you and her might team up."

"You did?", I asked, a bit astonished. "I never got that impression.". He blinked at me, then roared with laughter.

"Hell, Nick, it's taken you damn near a year to figure out how Melanie felt about you! I'm not surprised you never noticed it with Ariane."

"What about you, Bill? I mean, you and Ariane seem to have something," I asked, interested now.

"Naw, you're kidding, right? Is that how it looks?" he asked me in return, looking

shocked, and I nodded. "Ah, Hell no, Nick. I never told ya, I guess, but I'm taken already. Got a nice girl back home, we got engaged a year ago during vacation ; she knows nothing about the Society, and has no problem with me and traveling with the band. She don't care to travel, and she trusts me. Naw, the stuff with me and Ariane is just kidding. God, if she ever got the idea I was serious, I'd be a dead man. Now...if I weren't already taken, though-----at least, for one night, I bet it'd be worth it!". More surprises ; I wondered how much about the rest of them I didn't know. What about the groupies?

"Never actually did anything, man," he laughed. "All for show. Good P.R. and all. Well, before Debbie, yeah...but that's been a while.". My door opened, and Melanie came in - Bill put a finger to his lips, and I nodded.

"Ok, enough jock talk, there's a lady present," she said cheerfully. "Bill, your stuff on the floor on that side of his bed, I'll take the floor this side. That way, if ya try anything you'll have to crawl over him, it'll hurt his ribs and he'll yell. I presume from that point I'd have to defend my own honor. Good thing I don't have a lot of it left to defend.". She spoke while laying out her

blankets, and we both were laughing before she finished. I realized, in spite of everything, that I was feeling better than I ever recalled having felt in my life.

Monday was brighter than Sunday had been, a few wispy clouds but mostly clear and sunny. We spent a couple of hours before lunch with our gear and going over some material. I got my Tele cleaned up and a new set of strings in place, getting them stretched and broken in with the rehearsal. It was promising to be a nice day with the weather ; I hoped it would be nice in other respects, too. As I was getting ready for lunch, my phone rang. It was Mark.

"Talk with Blasingame yet?" he asked straight out.

"Fine. And how are you?" I shot back.

"Ah, sorry," he chuckled. "Guess I have a lot on my mind today. Good to hear your voice, I suppose that means you survived the night. Now...talk to Blasingame yet?". I chuckled back.

"Not yet; going to try to see him this afternoon, why the rush?".

"Well, isn't that obvious? I'm worried about ya, old bud, all of you. I keep catching myself, thinking I have to get out there to help or something."

"The biggest help we can get right now is information, Mark," I told him. "Anything - it could make all the difference."

"Ah, yeah, thanks for reminding me. That's why I called - and don't you dare say 'liar' or I'll send Abbie out there to kick your ass."

"Well, at least I'd let her, which is more than I'd do for you," I returned. "Ok, what you got?"

"First - let's see, Blasingame. Be very careful, Nick. You know this older fella, his 'contact' within the Society who came forward with the information? Well, consensus now is that the old guy is definitely not senile - nor is he telling everything he knows. In fact, there is a lot of suspicion starting to spread in higher circles that the old gent may not be the only Society member who is familiar with this Blasingame. There is a lot of attention being paid right now to your situation ; I don't know anything more yet. Just be careful with how you handle him, Ok?". I thanked him for that information ; no, it wasn't much, but it let me know my feelings about him were right, and shared by others.

"What else?" I prompted him.

"Your Uncle Fester," Mark started hesitantly, "well, if he is what we think, then this could rewrite the entire history of the Society, do you realize that?". I assured him I was well aware of that - presuming there was anyone left alive to tell the tale.

"Yes...ah, well," he went on, "I hope some of what I found out helps. I made contact with that Scots gentleman, the expert I told you about? Or...well, he's as much expert as we can have on a higher-than-third-level demon. Anyway, I passed on the details as you gave them to me, and he seems pretty excited, too. He says he agrees, definitely higher than third level ; quite possibly Level One. He can't be certain if Level Two possess the same powers of conjuration plus control - he doubts it. To conjure one guardian and control it when absent is one thing ; to be able to call forth a lower level demon to do your bidding and control it when absent is another altogether. The snakes...easy, required little effort on his part once created. They had no purpose but to move about and create unease or fright. But that 7th level demon-imp, that requires major effort, and arcane knowledge of the highest order.

"The items, including the body, you described match what is required to call forth such a being, to our knowledge. Once called, though, there are few spells that can hold it to a location. But he held this one in a basement, and he wasn't even there ; Nick, it could have come through that door any time it wanted, but it waited until it's area had actually been breached before attacking. These things have no ability to reason, they exist only to torment, feed, and kill. Even if your Uncle Fester were nearby, it's still a sign of great power to exert such control over such elemental creatures."

"So, ok....Mark, I kind of had most of this already figured out, don't get me wrong, I appreciate the knowledge and the effort it's taken to get it. But, you know, any hints on how we might dispose of this thing without any harm to us, now, that would be pretty helpful.". I was expecting - well, more hoping - to get a chuckle out of him, and have him go on to give me a real simple way to accomplish just what I had asked. Expecting OR hoping, I was disappointed either way.

"I wish.....ah, Hell, I don't have much," he finally replied. "In fact, the man I talked to was

pretty pessimistic about your chances. Truth. I won't lie to you, you know that.

"He did say the thing should be subject to the same rules as anything else we've dealt with. Key word there is 'should', because we don't really know. You already found out it can be hurt with conventional weapons, though it's reaction wasn't encouraging; the wound didn't prevent him from disappearing in front of you. All I can say is, Blasingame still seems to be your best bet for eliminating it ; his information should be more up to date than ours. After all, he's been tracking it for six centuries.". I had to agree, but I was disappointed. I'd hoped to come up with something more.

The ride to Vandemeter was relaxed ; both Ariane and Mel were in good spirits. Terry and I walked the 3 blocks from Rae's shop to Blasingame's - only to find the front door locked and a 'Closed' sign in the window. I decided to check the back, where his living quarters were. After I had knocked twice, his voice came from a second floor window. In another minute, we were inside.

"I didn't feel up to opening today," he explained to us. "I'm not exactly poverty-stricken, so

I can choose my hours. I need the time to allow my healing enhancements to function. While not even close to being life-threatening, the wounds inflicted by that imp did impair me pretty badly. However, it was mostly blood loss, and that - er, well - was easily replenished. The tissue damage should be completely repaired in a few more hours, providing I stay inactive.

"However, I'm sure the state of my health wasn't the concern that brought you here. How is your friend Lou? And what can I do for you?". I told him Lou was going to be fine, if a bit uncomfortable for a few days, then got to the point.

"Pretty simple, really, our reasons for being here," I told him. "I'm convinced you're telling us the truth on everything you've told us, but I also have the feeling you haven't told us everything. Now, you may have your reasons for that, but I want one thing perfectly clear ; if there is anything, anything at all that you haven't said that has a direct bearing on our survival against this thing, tell me now. If you don't, and I find out later you could have, you better hope I don't survive. And, that's it. That's why I'm here.". I paused as he considered what I had said.

"I think we've been pretty cooperative with you so far, based on our trust of you and what

you've told us - but I nearly lost Lou, Ariane, and myself over the past few days, and yesterday was in danger of having the whole team wiped out by a 7th level imp we should have been able to deal with in our sleep. I'm seriously considering withdrawing the whole team right now ; I'd probably do it, too, except now it knows us. Last thing - your selection of us to help you was no accident, was it? You've known about us for a while, and been thinking of this for a while.

"I admit I'm guessing. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You aren't wrong, Nick. Very well. Instinct is a wonderful thing ; those of you and your friends are strong, and you should trust them. Yes - there are some things I have withheld from you. I can tell you they have no bearing on how to deal with this fiend, and that I do intend to reveal them when the time is right, but all I can say is that you will have to trust me on that.

"As to our opponent - really, I can add nothing more than I already have said, other than supposition. I am sure you have lots of your own already. For example: is he, or is he not, a Level One demon? Believe me when I say that I do not know for certain. Do I think this is what he is? Absolutely. Am I aware of some long forgotten arcane way of defeating him if this is what

he is? No. Do I have a special knowledge of a particular weakness of his that I am not sharing?

No. What you learned about him Saturday, I learned for the first time also.

"But yes, your assumptions that there are things I am not telling you are correct. If you choose to cease assisting me because of that, I must accept that, and go on as well as I can."

Nothing he hadn't really already told us, I thought to myself.

Terry: "You mentioned suppositions. Yes, we have ours ; let's hear yours, if you don't mind. For instance, this business at the house yesterday ; for him to retain control enough of a 7th level demon to keep it in one place unless/until that place was breached - and not be close by - seems almost too much even for a Level One demon. Yet, you said you sensed he wasn't close. For supposition's sake, just how far do you trust that sense of yours?"

"Valid point," he conceded. "Very well, perhaps my vampire ego has over-reached. It may well be that I can sense him only when he allows it. That would be a blow to me personally, to find I cannot trust myself. But it's possible. As supposition, though, based on the centuries I have sought him, I do believe he cannot mask it within a certain distance. Based on your

question, though, I'd tend not to trust that."

"Well, we need to trust something," I inserted. "Ok, and this: did you know about his ability to conjure others of the kind we saw at the house? "

"I suspected it, but had never actually seen proof of it."

"I think you neglected to mention that. It almost got us all killed yesterday. Is there anything else you've neglected to mention that might get us all killed today, or tomorrow?" I was having trouble keeping the sarcasm out of my voice.

"I do suspect - strongly - that he cannot exert his will directly over humans for any length of time, as he did me on Saturday. He needs a bond, I believe, such as the bond formed when he creates a vampire, or conjures another demon. And even that requires full concentration ; perhaps less so with creatures such as that imp at the house. More, if the controlled being has a will of it's own. I suspect that concentration can be broken with injury - the more severe the injury, the more disruption. Saturday - I felt his will release me at the moment he disappeared. I suspect he needs his full concentration to perform a task such as that.

"However, I'm sure these have all occurred to you. You mentioned it Saturday, Nick, and I have thought about it since. When the arrow struck, I do believe I might have been able to break his hold on me, had I used my own powers of concentration. My rage prevented me - as I said then, I need to try to control that. Other than this, though, I doubt my suppositions are any different from yours."

"All right, I guess we'll have to accept that for now," I said, preparing to leave to meet the girls. "One thing more, though: even if you have to guess - how do we kill it?". He started to answer right away - then I saw him hesitate.

"My ego started to answer that, by saying 'the same way you kill vampires or any other demon', but I will try to be honest. I think the head is the key, true. But - truth? I am really not certain. I am not certain it can be destroyed. Oh, I don't speak of it's physical being - that can be destroyed, I am sure. But it's essence? For, in effect, that is what it is - it uses it's physical forms as we use clothing. But...supposition again, based on myth and legend...destroy the physical form, and the essence must reacquire another physical form, which it cannot do easily. For one

thing, it has to return to it's plane of origin. It could be centuries before it reshapes itself.

"That might be the best we can hope for."

Chapter 24

I was quiet on the way back, though I did remember to compliment Ariane and Melanie on their hair. They could see I was preoccupied, so didn't push the issue about filling them in on Blasingame ; Terry caught them up, though.

We got back about 4:30, to find the others still in Lou's room. Both our distaff band members were rewarded with appreciative comments, so I guessed I had been right to compliment them. Truthfully, I hadn't noticed much difference, but I did know enough to not say that. I asked for some time alone in my room to go over some of what had been said today, then requested they all join me about 5, I had some things I might want to kick around. Melanie gave me a grim - for her - look, but kept silent, thankfully.

Promptly at 5, they showed up. I was waiting on a call, but decided to start anyway.

"Ok, well, we were right about him not telling us everything," I started, "but he couldn't add anything helpful, so I want to run a couple of my concerns past you.

"First - we are going to presume we are dealing with a Level One demon. The abilities he has presented thus far indicate he has a wide variety of powers. We can't know the extent of them, in fact. We don't even know for certain he can be killed, although it is probable that if his physical form is destroyed, he will retreat to wherever in Hell he came from and not be back for a long, long time. However, getting to the point of destroying that physical form is going to be the most hazardous thing we've ever done. That's why-----" I paused here, trying to phrase this just right.

"That's why I want to put it to all of you, right now, " I went ahead. "Choice. Not a vote, understand, but choice. Anyone who wants, and who has more brains than I do, can opt out now. I just talked with Mark again, and the Society will support any and all of us who want out of this one. So....speak up now.". It was quiet, deathly quiet. No one looked anywhere but at me. The looks were discomfiting, and a little accusatory. It was Bill who broke the silence.

"Not sure what it is you're saying, Nick" he said. "But I'm not sure I like the sound of it. Let me see if I read between the lines correctly ; you're offering us the chance to get out of this

confrontation, no questions asked, right? But as individuals, not as the team? Is that what you're saying? If so, that means you've already made up your mind you're going through with it. So....now, how is that supposed to make us feel?".

"I know how it sounds," I told them. "And I won't try to explain too much - you feel like you want to feel. It's supposed to make you feel smarter than I, for one thing, because if I had any sense, I'd be on the first stagecoach outta Dodge tonight. But I know how it would sound to me, so, yeah, I know how it sounds to you. The choice is still there. Do I want you gone?

"If I even have to ask that, then maybe this team should disband right now.".

"Isn't that what you're suggesting?" Lou spoke up, softly and soberly. "Rather, what it sounds like you're suggesting? Because I think I know why you're doing this, and I'll give you my answer right now. I stay. We have too many years together, too many good years ; there is a piece of each of us that is a part of each of the others, and always will be. I doubt any of the others answers will be any different, so I'll stand out on a limb and speak for them all - we stay. Now, Terry isn't a part of this, and he should be given the option - but the rest of us? Anders, if

someone's going to get killed, we want to be there and either die with them or take out our revenge on the killer. Is that answer good enough for you?". The looks on their faces told me he was right - good enough. I'd given them the chance, now, if any of them got hurt, I'd kill them myself. I looked at Terry, with a question.

"You think I'd miss this chance at being part of history? Not a chance. Count me in, whatever I can do to help," he told us.

"Just remember one thing about History, " I said. "It's generally written by the living, about the dead.". I sighed loudly, to let them know I still questioned their intelligence.

"Right. Ok, you all know that idiot phrase that modern America has adopted from the neanderthals? The one that goes 'the best defense is a good offense'? Well, that's what I want to implement. I'm tired of sitting now, and waiting to see what great old Bald and Ugly is going to do next. We ran a little test up the middle on him yesterday, and we survived. Maybe it's time we test his best defenses. That's going to mean splitting up, and giving up some creature comforts for a few hours. Anyone not up to that?". Grins. Ok, then.

"Bill...what's the range of those laser rifles on max settings? What kind of damage will they do? What's the battery life? How many do we have?"

"Twenty-five yards max, at full power - you saw the other night what they can do. Her leg would have come off if it had been solid steel. Batteries are fully charged - should be good for 24 to 32 hours. We have four," he reported.

"Good. You have one. Mac. Ariane. Lou. That takes care of that ; Bill, you show 'em the operation of those gizmos, and do it in less than 2 hours. Ok....radios? How many? What's the range? Extra batteries?"

From Mac: "We have 8, but range is limited, 5 miles effective, I'd only trust them at less than 3. and plenty of charged batteries. I'll get fresh ones in all of them now.". I nodded my thanks.

"Infra-red binoculars ; I know we have two pair. Ariane, could you check them and make sure both are working? Mel - how comfortable are you with that bow?". She shrugged.

"I can hit a barn with it," she said. Terry spoke up then.

"I had some success with archery in my school days," he said. "I'm pretty good. If you want, I'll take it. But she was handling it pretty well so far, I thought." I nodded, and thanked him.

"Ok, then, Mel - you get the sniper rifle with the laser scope. As I figure it, we won't be further out than 100 to 150 yards. We may need a crack shot, and I know I'm not. You are."

"What about you?" Ariane asked. I grinned at her.

"Well, I was kinda thinking, since you all volunteered to stay, I might just stay here and catch up on my sleep and watch some TV." I heard Mac murmur "Oh, shit, he's gonna do it again". I kept the grin, but tensed up for the explosion, which came a few seconds later.

"Oh, HELL NO, you're NOT going to do what I THINK you're going to do!!" Melanie burst, eyes blazing and hands on hips. "No FREAKING WAY!!".

"Hey, hey," I protested, raising my hands, " SOMEone is going to have to be waiting at the house for him, if we're going to force the issue. If I have this laid out right, you'll all be in good position, so all I have to do is work him into one of your ranges, keep him occupied so he doesn't

sense where the shots will come from, and clean up the mess when you've bailed me out of danger. I'd switch places with you, Mel, cause you're quicker than I am - but, I'm not as good a shot as you, so it makes more sense this way. See? Logic.". As I spoke, she raised her steam level, but heard me out.

"Why?" she asked, biting off the words. "Why does ANY one need to be at the house? Tell me that. And who says he'll cooperate? You expect him to come trotting along after you like a happy puppy so we can turn his head into Cream of Wheat? What if he just decides you aren't worth the trouble, and simply conjures up another faithful imp-dog to rip you a new one, eh? Did you think of that? Did you? DID YOU?".

"Mel...gimme a chance, will ya?" I pleaded. "Ok, listen - I figure he's going to be trying to sense if anyone's been there, or is there, when he gets back. I also figure he'll range pretty much near the house first, figuring that's where someone might be. If he senses no one there, he'll scan the surroundings next. Blam, we're found. But...if he senses a presence at the house, he'll fix on that, and should miss the rest of you. See?".

"You're guessing!" she shot at me.

"I'm guessing," I admitted sheepishly.

"Damnnn you!!" she hissed at me, and I could see the wetness filling her eyes. "You'll die there, as sure as we're standing here now. You'll finally get your wish...."

"She's right, actually," interrupted a voice from the door, "So, perhaps it would be more logical, Mr. Anders, if I were the one to wait at the house?". Blasingame walked the rest of the way in. "Really, Miss, it actually is a fairly reasonable plan. I doubt there is a better one, based on the knowledge we possess. If, that is, you don't mind my joining in?".

"More the merrier," Bill said. "I was actually thinking I'd be the best choice at the house, being bigger and easier to see. But I'm happy to relinquish the position to you."

"I considered it," I said. "But I don't know ; he doesn't seem to want a direct confrontation with you. If he senses you there, he may just split, and it might be decades before anyone gets another chance.". I heard Lou mutter to Mac "And this would be a bad thing - how?" just loud enough for me to hear.

"But," I added, "it does make for a more balanced plan. Once again, your timing is excellent. But I doubt it was a accident - I didn't invite you.". He acknowledged that with a small smile.

"I - shall we say - caught the beginnings of your thoughts as you left today." he said. "It's something I was considering myself, actually, and came here to appraoch you about it. But you have anticipated me.".

"Well, then," I admitted defeat with more relief than I hoped I showed, "that leaves me kind of odd man out. Maybe I should be with you at the h---"

"Not on your life!" Melanie interrupted me harshly. "Where you'll be is with me, with a pair of those binoculars. Night scope or no, I'm going to need a spotter if I can get a shot. You didn't think of that, did you, Mr. I-Want-To-Die-No-Matter-Who-It-Hurts? Huh? No, of course not....just leave poor little Melanie up in a tree with a rifle and no eyes, a fat lot of good that would do!".

"She, I beleive, has a point, Nick," Blasingame smiled again. I think he was enjoying this. So, from their expressions, were the rest of them. I sighed, and shrugged.

"Oh, all right ; hand me a pair of those night-glasses, Ariane, I guess I've found my place in life."

"You better believe it," Lou confirmed for me. I told him to shut up. He pretended to pout.

"Ah, well....ok, it's 6 p.m. Let's get some food, and some rest...nap if possible...warm, dark clothing...no jewelry or anything that might glint and give away a position. Hot coffee in some non-shiny containers would be a good idea. Then, meet me back here at 10. It's gonna be a long, chilly night. Oh, and - might not hurt, if you know a prayer or two."

Chapter 25

I GOT the call I was waiting for 5 minutes after everyone had left for their rooms, with only Blasingame present to overhear. Mark wasted no time on preliminaries.

"Yankton, South Dakota police took a report within the past half hour ; a 10 year old girl, never got home from school ; rural family, she rides a school bus, the driver says she was on it and got off the bus at her driveway. The lane is about a quarter mile walk to the house, tree-lined ; police found her jacket about 10 yards from the lane, in the tree line. But no sign of her. How'd you know, Nick?".

"Call it a lucky hunch, Mark. This freak feeds on lots of things, one of his favorites is human misery. We found out he has a thing about our Halloween. Who gets the most enjoyment out of Halloween? Kids. Who would really suffer terror and misery at the sight of the boogeyman on Halloween? Kids. Added benefit....the suffering of parents, friends, and neighbors. Keep a eye out for more reports from this area, Mark - and, if you don't hear from me directly by noon

tomorrow, send in the National Guard, the Militia, the Army reserves, the Air Force, the Marines, and anyone else you can think of. Hell, if you can dig up King Arthur's Merlin, send him to Vandemeter. Fast."

"So." Blasingame looked at me. "You continue to amaze me with your perception. You knew he'd be coming back tonight, didn't you?"

"I guessed. Hell, for all I know, he's been back before this - maybe he's doing this as retaliation, instead of coming directly after you, or us. Maybe he even wants us there. But I'm tired of being on the hunted end ; I'm a hunter, and it's time to hunt, damn it."

"What made you focus on his taking of children?" Blasingame probed me.

"Oh, what you said, plus a idea I had along the same lines. His power to exert his will over humans. If it is limited - and I also believe it is - then a human child's under-developed will should be easier for him to overcome and hold. Although, considering modern society's trends and how individuals are rapidly becoming extinct in favor of the 'herd' mentality, I wonder if he wouldn't get the same effect with adults today."

"Pretty cynical view, for a human," he wagged his head at me. "Are you sure you aren't part vampire yourself?".

"Positive. However," and here I had to grin, "there might be one or two who know me who might argue the point. Anyway, I need a rest for tonight. Not to be impolite - but could you go play with some bats or try to mesmerize some beautiful young women, so I can catch a nap?". He chuckled heartily.

"Ah, yes....well, indeed, there are one or two things I need to do myself before tonight. One thing is to ready a vehicle : I have access to a van, of adequate size for all of us, which I propose would be preferable to taking separate vehicles, and I need to prepare it. One vehicle is more easily concealed than 2 or more, would you agree?". I not only would, but did, and told him so, and thanked him again. Just as he was leaving, something occurred to me, and I stopped him with a question.

"You told us earlier," I began, "that you had discovered with the passage of time that certain 'abilities', which the Society had relegated to 'myth and legend' status, were becoming

more pronounced with you - correct?". He confirmed this with a short nod, and waited.

"We've seen some of it, with the night clerk, and again with Rae and Dave - I never properly thanked you for that, by the way," I went on, musing, trying to let a thought surface.

"I try not to use that too much," he replied, "but to use it beneficially is, to my surprise, somewhat gratifying. You're welcome - I am glad it worked as well as it did."

"Have you tried it also on animals, by any chance?". He looked a little startled, but nodded.

"Yes, as a matter of fact ; it keeps them docile and quiet as I feed, and I think lessens their fear and discomfort. You are leading this somewhere, I surmise?". Well, I hoped so, I just wasn't sure where yet.

"Maybe. Ok, let's step ahead...or back, I'm not sure which. Why has the Society run across no others with these abilities? In hundreds of years? And suddenly, we have you - and the demon who created you - and you both seem to have these 'extra' abilities. I'm going to ask something of you ; during the next few hours, try to think back to where you first discovered you

had these enhancements - that other vampires hadn't evinced despite legend - and see if you can recall exactly HOW you discovered you possessed them. Have you ever questioned how you knew you had them? I am presuming you didn't ; I think you just assumed since you had survived so long, they just developed.

"But...what if....well, anyway, think about it. I'm probably way off base, but, if I'm right, it could be important."

"If you believe it may be important, then yes, I will try to recall.". With that, he left, and I busied myself a short time with preparation, and laid down to rest.

*

True to his word, Blasingame delivered the van, earning praise and thanks from everyone. With the gear and us, it was a bit cramped, but it serviced. The smell of winter not far off was in the night air, and the sky was clear and cloudless - both a good and bad thing for visibility.

"Full moon," Melanie commented as we neared Vandemeter.

"Well," I remarked before thinking, "that usually happens around Halloween, I think." That earned me a severe look of reprimand, but it couldn't cover the smirk in her smile.

"Gee, all that Nature lore just out there for the knowing, and here you are full of it," she quipped, earning a round of laughs, and gaining a tension relief at the same time.

As we neared our target, Blasingame pointed out a good sheltered orchard area where the van should be well hidden from all but accidental discovery. It meant another mile to cover on foot, but it was an easy trek. We hadn't gone far before the building and grounds were well visible to us in the moonlight. We approached as cautiously as we could, and made as sure as possible from a distance there was no activity. I was presuming he had access to a vehicle ; having to transport those kids without one would be tough even for him.

Presuming he intended to bring them here.

We had all agreed he must be planning on doing just that, though, when I filled them in on the situation. The news had a intensifying effect on the whole team - this was a new element added, and might call for some quick and unplanned changes, but it added strength to everyone's

resolve. I told them that, once in place, we were all on our own, and free to adapt whatever tactics they felt best. The purpose was to at least disable Fester, so someone could get the kill - it didn't matter who, or how. But the new element, the children, could complicate that - no one wanted to be responsible for any harm to them.

The maintenance shed was a old barn that had been converted, was the closest to the house, and had a loft that could be accessed ; I placed Terry with the bow up there, and Ariane with one of the laser rifles. In the lower area, Bill with a laser rifle. This put them well within 30 yards of the house, with room to move quickly. Mac and Lou I placed in the orchard behind the house ; it was only about 20 yards from the house itself, but a fence separated the yard and the orchard, and it was a difficult angle - I just wanted it covered in case any action moved toward the back. Otherwise, if things heated up, they were free to come over the fence and to the house itself. That left Mel and I.

The newer barn was further back from the house, but well within 100 to 125 yards. The loft was open and spacious, and the loft door opened directly toward the side door of the main

house. Visibility was excellent from that point, and the remaining hay had long since broken its bindings and provided a comfortable nestling spot. Once up there, the smell was sweet and musty, and I knew I would have a hard time staying awake ; it was almost too comfortable. Blasingame located himself at the side, or kitchen, door to the house. I had everyone check the radios ; I verified my binoculars were in working order and adjusted them using Blasingame as a guide ; Mel checked her scope and made adjustments. I rechecked my personal items - the short sword in the scabbard strapped to my back, the short barreled Colt .357 in the shoulder holster. I couldn't think of anything else ; we were as ready as we could be. I checked my watch - 11:30 pm. Still no sign of Fester and his 'guests'. Blasingame verified that the house seemed clear - there was still evidence of our visit yesterday that appeared not to have been disturbed. Good enough. Now came one of the most difficult and most important parts of the hunt.

Waiting.

Chapter 26

DESPITE the risks, I had asked for low volume radio checks every 30 minutes, both to verify the units were working and to make sure Uncle Fester didn't have any surprises of his own planned. And, I admitted to myself, to make sure no one fell asleep. It was going on 2 a.m. now, and still no sign of anything. Mel and I had a fair view of the road leading up the private drive, and it had been empty of any traffic at all so far. Our conversation, though, had not been empty ; Mel wanted to talk, and I didn't mind too much - it helped me forget how tired I was.

"What are you going to do when this is done?" she had asked me earlier. I had told her I hadn't really thought much about it, but we were due to request vacation time, and I thought I might go home and ponder my future, as the situation with she and I would likely necessitate our leaving the Hunt team. Home was a nice 5 acres in Virginia, provided for me by the Society, and watched over by a family of caretakers devoted to the property - and employed by the Society. It was relaxing, it was what I had always wanted, and it was peaceful and quiet, especially in winter,

though I always wanted to spend more time there in the summer. A large house, with 10 rooms covering two stories, it could get to be lonely, despite occasional companionship - which I didn't mention to Mel - but I had filled it with plenty to occupy myself, including one downstairs section devoted to a small recording studio and library. Add satellite TV in 3 rooms with the latest in CD and video playback equipment, and I had enough to keep me content for months. The caretakers acted as household help when I was present, and took care of most of my needs - here, Mel had snorted "Oh, reeeeeeally?" but I'd ignored it - including meals, shopping, and general cleaning. I then asked her the same question.

"I don't know," she had replied. "I was thinking maybe I'd look up my folks in Nevada. I haven't seen them in ten years, and I've felt a little guilty about that. Cards at Holidays, and a letter now and then, but never a visit. Maybe it's time, maybe I'll visit them for a week or so. Then, I don't know ; I have my Society home - it's in Texas, by the way - but it gets awful lonely there sometimes. I had Ariane down for a week last year, that was fun, but she had a thing going with some guy in Wisconsin - or was it Wyoming? Some state with a 'W' - so she couldn't stay

longer. You're right, though. about us - I guess we will have to think about quitting, if we are going to be serious about this relationship." I had listened contentedly to her up until the last word ; that one scared me more than the possible confrontation we were facing tonight. It occurred to me that, before the night was over, one - or both- of us might not have to worry about our 'relationship'. I didn't say it, though.

Since then, we had touched on various subjects, but by unspoken mutual agreement, hadn't returned to that one. Thankfully. I had again checked my watch after commenting on a remark of Mel's about changing the intro to one of her songs, to see it was approaching 3 a.m., when a flash of moving light on the road in the distance caught my eye. She saw it at the same time, and used the radio to alert the others to stand by while I used the binoculars to see if I could identify the traffic.

Through the night vision functionality, I could make out the shape of a vehicle in the style known as 'Sport Utility', a oversized, dangerous, vision-obscuring and worthless piece of machinery that was proving popular among younger Americans, proving most of them felt pretty

inadequate about themselves. However, it could be useful in transporting several passengers, and I noted that as it slowed for, and turned into, the lane.

"Showtime." I spoke softly into the radio, getting acknowledgement from the entire assembly. I felt my own adrenaline start to kick in, and fought to stay still and concentrate. Mel wriggled around, bringing the rifle to ready as she sought to find a comfortable prone position. I checked with her on visibility - she nodded. It was ok. We waited for the vehicle to come into view from below us and to our right ; seconds passed, and nothing. He was out of our view coming up the lane, but the others in the maintenance shed should have sight by now. Seconds more passed, then the radio.

"I don't see him" reported Bill softly. "Hear anything?". I had been listening for the sound of a motor, and nothing so far. I started to inform the others of this, when I saw in the moonlight the figure of Blasingame step away from the shadow of the house and approach the edge of the yard, which was visible from the lane itself. When he did, I heard the SUV's powerful engine kick to life, and it finally came into view below us, moving up toward Blasingame.

"Bastard knew we were here," I whispered to Mel. "Ok...now, we wait to see what happens. If you get a clear shot at him away from the vehicle, take it ; we don't need him getting time to prepare a defense nor a escape.". It was mostly my nerves talking ; I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

"Spot me, damn it!" she hissed, and I silently cursed myself for forgetting the binoculars. I brought them up to my eyes and focused on the vehicle as it came to a halt. I could see Blasingame easily, waiting inside the yard gate, but the interior of the SUV was cloudy and hazy - I could make out more than one form, though. How many kids had been missing at last report? One...just one....that we knew of. That had been hours ago. What had he been doing since? I tried to figure the time element, in terms of route and activity. I was willing to bet there were at least 3, perhaps as many as 5, in that vehicle. All but one were likely small children. I started to feel a anger that was almost nausea. Mel's voice, tersely, from my right: "I don't see any movement!".

"Wait!" I hissed, forcing myself to stay put ; I could feel every nerve ending in my body

urging me to move, to get down there. I dug my toes into the hay-covered boards of the loft floor. I swung the glasses slightly left, and could just make out Ariane on the far side of the shed loft ; she was kneeling, focusing the laser rifle, and waiting. Blasingame remained motionless in the vehicle's headlights, looking calm and relaxed, as if he were the owner of the house greeting a friendly visitor. I returned the glasses to the vehicle drivers' door, took a breath, and waited.

It seemed a eternity - it had occurred to me that Uncle Fester could have dissolved inside the vehicle and might at any moment reappear anywhere, even up here - when finally the door began to open. Well, he knew how to make a entrance, I thought out loud. I heard Mel grunt. "If you don't shut up," she hissed, "I'm gonna shoot you first!".

I was never gonna get the hang of this relationship stuff, I could see that.

It took a few more seconds, then I saw a leg emerge, followed slowly by the body of our friend and Uncle. He wasn't alone, though ; cradled in his left arm like a bag of groceries was a motionless body, the right size for a ten year old child. I started to tell Mel to hold, but she had seen it too.

"No shot," she said. "Might hit the kid, even if I could take him. Definitely no head shot."

"Leg?" I asked, knowing full well it was a stupid question. She didn't even honor it with a snort, just looked at me. "I know...never mind. Just nervous reaction." She turned back to sighting the scope.

A conversation had begun ; the crisp October night air carried the sound of voices to us, but we couldn't make out what was being said. I knew the others in the maintenance shed could, though, and I mentally crossed my fingers they would react accordingly based on the exchange. I heard Uncle Fester's distinct laughter at something Blasingame had said, then saw him motion for Blasingame to come around to the back of the SUV. When he opened the back, I could make out 3 more forms, all childlike, all apparently unconscious. He scooped one of the forms up with his right arm, then stood back - and Blasingame picked up the other two. Shit, I thought to myself ; is he playing along, or is he under control already?

This work is all about trust, and instinct. We, the team, knew each other, from years of being together. Blasingame was a unknown, a outsider, and considered prey by us to boot. It was

more than us and the prey right now ; a wrong move, a hesitation or a move too quickly, and these kids might die. If they weren't dead already ; somehow, though, I knew they weren't, or he'd never have brought them back here. I tapped Mel on the shoulder.

"You won't get a shot," I said, "I think we're going to have to go in. Unless Blasingame's acting, the others won't have a shot either. If they go inside, we move, quick. Leave the rifle here if we have to move ; it'll be too close in there.". She lowered her head a moment, then nodded.

"You were hoping he'd be able to resist, weren't you?" she asked me ; the look in her big, blue eyes told me she was sorry I was wrong. I just shrugged.

"I didn't know, but yeah, I was hoping.". I went back to focusing the glasses. The two were making their way to the kitchen door with their burdens. Fester continued to talk, then stopped as if to smell the air. Then, he turned to look directly at the maintenance shed. He stared for a long moment, then erupted into laughter again. Blasingame stood off to his left, like a faithful servant waiting for permission to move. After another moment, he did, and both disappeared into the house.

"Damn!" I swore, as I keyed the radio, hoping against hope that Blasingame had secured his before coming to meet his adversary. "Bill!!! Status?".

"We're blown!" Bill came back. "He knows we're in here - but we could hear everything that was being said, and I'll stake my reputation as a ladies' man that he only knows about the three of us!".

"Assuming Blasingame left his radio off!" I returned. "Mac! Status?"

"We're ok, and moving toward the back of the house. We've got the other set of glasses, Nick, and I'm pretty sure Blasingame didn't have the radio when he left the house. I think we're still clear."

"Just be careful - watch out for anything. We don't know that he hasn't brought more pets with him.". That got everyone's attention, it seemed. The radio went quiet, then everyone rogered that soberly. "Ok, looks like we have no choice - we have to go in. Get ready, but stay put until Mel and I can reach the vehicle ; we'll go from there. Bill, you guys cover us until we get there ; Mac, you and Lou move up to the yard fence line, then park it until I give the ok. Got it?".

They did. "Ok, we're moving.". I hooked the radio in my wasitband, and Mel and I moved.

As we reached the vehicle, I sensed more than saw the movement form the rear passenger compartment. The rear door blew open, and a twin of our little buddy from yesterday leaped out howling, covering a good fifteen feet in the air, landing and rebounding with a leap to reverse his direction at Mel and I.

"Not this time, bedpan breath," I gritted, grabbing the short sword and meeting it head on. I thrust the sword point first into it's jaw as it descended on me, and saw the blade disappear up to the hilt ; as it did, the thing's rear legs jerked forward, and I felt the searing pain of it's talons dig into my thighs just above each knee. At the same moment, I was aware of a flash, and half the thing's torso split off from the other half. I withdrew my sword from the imp, as both halves of it slid to the ground in death.

"Damn, Bill, these things really are pretty cool, " Ariane said from my left as Bill chuckled, saying "Nice shot.".

"Well, I guess he knows we're coming now," I said. "Shit, I think he actually wants this.

Stay alert, I can't believe this will be his only guardian, unless --- Bill, you could hear them.

Blasingame? ". Bill, Ariane, and Terry all shook their heads.

"Honestly - can't tell you for sure, Nick, but it looked ok at first. Blasingame was talking, then suddenly he went like rigid, and after that, the only talking was done by the voice of Hell in there.".

"Ok, so we assume he has Blasingame in control ; even if he can't get him to go against us, we can't count on him helping us. Could you get a good look at the kids?".

"Yes," Ariane answered. "They seemed asleep, but I saw at least one moving a little, and one sort of moaned when Blasingame picked him up. Looked like 2 girls, 2 boys ; I think the 10 year old was probably the oldest.".

"Then he has to divide his concentration between keeping the kids quiet and Blasingame in control," I said. "Let's hope that puts a strain on his abilities.". There was light on now in the house, and the sound of Fester's rotten voice. "I'm going to take a leap of faith here - I'm going to assume he doesn't know about Mac and Lou at all.". I contacted them on the radio - I heard no

answering echo from Blasingame's radio, and that gave me renewed hope.

"Read ya, Nick. What's up?"

"Mac - you and Lou may be our ace in the hole. I want you to get to the back door and see if it's unlocked ; do it now, we'll wait, but be quick, we're running out of time.". He was quick...it took less than 15 seconds.

"Unlocked," he whispered through the speaker.

"Ok, count 5 on my mark and go in," I whispered back. "We're gonna be your diversion, and I hope like Hell you liked playing cavalry when you were a kid, cause you gotta be ours. Ok?". He keyed up and chuckled, "Forgot my yellow bandana, but we'll be there with guns blazing.". I grinned, took a breath, let it out, looked at the others, and nodded. As we moved to the door, I keyed up the radio.

"Mark," I said, and we hit the door running.

Chapter 27

THE sight that greeted us when we burst through the door was one I would have nightmares about, I knew. Blasingame was standing in the open doorway of the basement, hands slack at his side. The creature was standing facing him, a arm-length away, holding the little 10 year old girl with his left arm, his right hand supporting her chin. The talon on the last finger of his right hand was poised over her throat, gently drawing back and forth, up and down, almost lovingly. His fearsome mouth was split in a ugly smile. I could see life of a sort in Blasingame's eyes - it wasn't a pretty life. It was abject misery and defeat that showed there, The corners of his mouth were twitching apart, and tiny rivulets of clear liquid were beginning to course down the sides of his chin as his vampiric fangs began to emerge.

"Ah, the human assistants!! I see you didn't heed my warnings earlier - I am glad, really, I am," he rasped, with that awful voice. "This battle shall be enjoyable to the last ; I believe I shall save one of your lovely young women for that. First, however, I have yet another lesson I must

again re-emphasize to my impetuous young creation here.

"He has deluded himself for centuries, denying himself the purest form of pleasure, that of drinking human blood. Of course, the blood of human children is the most delectable of the species, a special treat to be savored by those of his kind. But he has put on such airs for these many centuries, and refused to give in to his true nature. It has amused me to watch this, but I tire of it ; now, we shall end it. He will drink of this child, then, if I choose, he will assist me in dispatching you. Though I doubt it will be necessary.". I felt a tugging at the base of my skull - it took a moment, then I realized it was he, attempting to test my will. I fought it, and was rewarded with a look of surprise in his feral eyes.

"Or - perhaps it may be," he said thoughtfully. "No matter, I will still gain full pleasure from this day. Oh..I warn you - do not attempt any foolish trials of needless bravery ; I will kill the child. I have 3 others he can feed on below.". That explained the absence of the other 3 - they were in the basement. "No, I am afraid you must watch. Your misery in watching will add to my enjoyment. Ah! See? He fights, but his nature emerges - he has picked up the scent of your

blood ; my, were you injured?". He looked at me, as did Blasingame ; I had forgotten the talon wounds on my legs. Mel gasped beside me - she hadn't noticed them either before now. Blasingame's eyes were becoming slits ; the fangs now fully extended, and dripping with clear liquid. His hands were still at his sides, but beginning to clench, unclench.

"No, no my pet," the creature admonished Blasingame. "The child first - see how thickly and beautifully her blood flows?". He drew that talon lightly across the little girl's neck, and a thin red line appeared ; the child stirred slightly, and whimpered a little, as if softly crying. Blasingame's fanged mouth drew wider and further into a snarl, the eyes almost completely overcome now by the vampire within.

"You've made a couple mistakes, though, haven't you, you ugly piece of shit? " I said. He blinked, turning toward me. "Don't act like you don't know what I mean. For one, you've shown fear...don't even try denying it, I can see it in your eyes right now. You made this man your enemy, because you erred even then, didn't you? You thought it would be amusing, to take his family and then force him to live forever with the memory of his failure to protect them or die with

them. You didn't count on his desire for revenge overriding the vampire nature, did you? That isn't supposed to happen in your scheme of things, no, you're all powerful, all knowing. And you didn't know about us, either, did you? Yet he did, and you couldn't read that from him. Must have been frustrating for you, to realize you might be fallible after all. You know what that means? It means you can make mistakes."

"Of course I can make mistakes!" he hissed at me. "But they are inconsequential, human. You haven't the power to take advantage of any minor error I might make."

"Wrong, tall, smelly, and ugly," I sneered. Past him, I could see Mac and Lou peer around the door to the living room. Behind me, I could sense Bill and the others spreading out slowly to my sides ; Mel stood her ground next to me. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I had a idea - I just hoped they would be ready if I was right. If I was wrong, it wouldn't matter.

"For one thing, there are legends about your kind. You didn't know that we knew about those, did you, uh.....what was your name again?" I probed, and I got the reaction I was hoping for - he smiled, a snarling, triumphant smile.

"I believe you call me Uncle Fester. From a television program, if I am not mistaken. I rather like that ; that will do to address me," he laughed.

"Well, sure, it'll do, but ya know, when I'm about to be killed by someone, I regard that as a very personal, close, and emotional experience." I said, keeping my voice reasonable and trying like Hell to remember something important. "It would make it so much more dismal and sorrowful if I were to know the name of my killer. Might increase your enjoyment of the act, so to speak. Knowing someone by name is a very personal thing, don't you agree? I mean, you're going to kill me ; my name is Nick. See? If you know my name and can still kill me, then I will be so much more unhappy about it ; if I know yours, and you still kill me, that is devastating." From behind me, Ariane muttering "Nick...what the fuck are you doing?". I ignored her.

"This holds no reason for me," he told me. "Believe me, your suffering and misery will be total without knowing my name."

"Oh...oh, yes, gosh dang it, you know, I almost forgot," I said apologetically. "I should have remembered ; you cannot allow your true name to be known, can you? It strips you of your

power, if I recall correctly - or, is it that it gives the possessor of that information power over you? These myths and legends - so hard to keep track of, you know.". I was further rewarded by the beginnings - just faintly, but the beginnings - of doubt to creep visibly into his eyes. "Well, can you at least verify for us, since we're going to die anyway, exactly what you are? I mean - you have these amazing powers, we are actually impressed that you can conjure up the demons you do, the guardians, the spells, the mind control, the vanishing, the shape-shifting. You can at least tell us that - Level One Demon, correct?". He was now getting more amused, the look of doubt fading from his eyes.

"I will do you this much, as I am enjoying your company nearly as much as I will enjoy our brief combat. I haven't enjoyed a human this much in eons.". He actually seemed to mean it. "I possess powers you have not dreamt of ; even my mistakes can destroy you and bring little harm to me. If it pleases you to know that answer, I can be generous - I will just reverse that pleasure by keeping you alive long enough to watch me take the woman next to you, so you may suffer the agony of watching her squirm in pleasure at her own death. Yes, I am of that species ; and now, I

have my little chore to complete. Await your turn - Nick, wasn't it?". he laughed again.

"Ah, well, thank you for that," I went on, ignoring his order...and another probe attempt to my skull. He was getting irritated, I thought ; so, he had that weakness as well. By now, the child was showing more sign of waking, and Blasingame's eyes had lost some of their feral fire, and I could see the creature's irritation at having to re-exert some effort at control. "You know," I rambled on, "there is a legend about your kind that says, to conjure up demons and imps from other levels, part of the conjuring must be the use of your true name. I suppose there isn't anything to that - after all, wouldn't that give them power over you? Silly superstition, I guess."

"Yes!" he roared, causing plaster dust to sift from the ceiling. "It is indeed silly superstition!! Stupid human superstition, trying to find hope in the void of darkness, with your silly stories and religions and faith that your species will survive!! You will survive only so long as we allow it! And we allow it only because you provide sport for us!! There IS no truth to that stupid tale ; the demons I conjure have no power over me, as they don't KNOW I use my true name in the conjuring! Fool!". I saw it happen, a moment after he said it - the look of doubt was back. I

wasn't sure how, but the tables were suddenly turned, and I pressed what little advantage I felt I had gained.

"Ah...ok, I think I understand. And of course, you need certain things to conjure up certain demons, to make them perform a task you require, I guess," I babbled. "Things like - what? - personal items, such as pens, or notebooks, or nail clippers? And then certain diagrams have to be drawn, and within those diagrams - oh, two of which, by the way, are still outlined on that table in the basement - you must write your true name?". The look on his face told me that Hell was about to break loose ; the probing at my skull told me he was diverting his concentration totally to me, and it was starting to feel like a jackhammer was pounding at the back of my head. I felt I was losing focus, and desperately tried to stay on track.

"And if anyone sees it," I gasped, raising my voice to a yell and making final eye contact with Mac and Lou, "and can read it, they will know your true name and have power over you? IF YOU FORGET TO CLEAN IT UP??? ". I had to force the last part out ; the world was turning red, and I felt like my head was going to burst. I vaguely heard screaming behind me - or maybe it

was me? - as, with a roar of rage that shook the house to its very cement foundation, he hurled the child toward Blasingame and charged me.

"I WILL TEAR YOU LIMB FROM LIMB AS YOUR FRIENDS WATCH!!!!!!!!!!!" he bellowed, as I started to collapse. Mel screamed next to me - I knew it was her, and not me - but I grabbed her and shoved her backwards into Terry, yelling "NOW MAC NOW!" as I crumpled.

I vaguely heard the room come alive with sound; screaming, bellowing, and howls and yowls of pain and rage as the pressure began to ease in my head. I tried to roll over and stand, certain I was about to be dead, and found I was too dizzy to do more than look up as the scene unfolded.

My command hadn't been needed. The minute he had hurled the little girl away from him, my team opened a crossfire of laser light that sliced Uncle Fester from crotch to breastbone. When I looked up, one arm was gone, and one leg. He remained standing somehow, his great ugly head flung back and his other arm thrust into the air, taloned fist clenched in rage, and perhaps pain. His roars failed to drown out the yells and screams of the others, though, caught

as they were in the excitement of finally getting to do battle with a nightmare that had finally scared them. I could also hear the crying of children, the one here in the room with us the loudest.

And finally, I could hear Blasingame. Gone was the cultured, educated voice of the gentleman he had made himself - in its place was a roar like the wind makes in a tornado, the wrathful growl of a wounded predator. In a leap nearly too fast to follow, he was on the thing ; the team, seeing it in time, ceased their fire. The two locked in a physical struggle that was painful to watch ; I saw that the two had locked eyes, and that, this time, there was going to be a different outcome. The dawning realization in the creature's eyes that he was losing the battle for control was gratifying to watch, but as it completed, and Blasingame sunk his fangs into the creature's throat, even I had to look away. With a sickening, tearing crunch, Blasingame's head reared up, dripping with black, putrid fluid and chunks of scaly flesh. It was later I learned that he had bitten completely through the creature's neck, severing the head from the body with his teeth. It took several moments, moments when it seemed he might actually turn on the rest of us - and the

team was ready - but slowly, he began to relax. He stood finally, and looked around the room at all of us, his gaze lingering a moment on me. He blinked several times, then looked away, and disappeared through the basement door. Within moments came the sound of growls and roars from below ; we were to find later that there had been yet another imp in the basement, placed to guard against any attempt to rescue the children. Without it's conjurer, it was confused but still dangerous ; Blasingame had dispatched it readily, before it turned on the children themselves.

Ariane, Mel, and Terry had gone immediately to the child in the room with us, taking her in their arms and trying their best to comfort her and check for any injury. I had handed my short blade to Bill, who without a word had proceeded to dismember Uncle Fester even further ; Mac and Lou found a sheet in a downstairs bedroom at the back of the house, and had collected the head and taken it outside for burning. When Bill finished, another old sheet and blanket - moldy with age - provided enough container to remove the rest of the pieces and finish the job.

And it was done.

Chapter 28

I WAS sitting up by now, the dizziness past but feeling a tiredness I hadn't remembered ever feeling before. With my knees drawn up, I leaned forward and laid my head on them, wrapping my arms around my shins and ignoring the now drying blood on my thighs. Hmmm...bastard got me good, I thought to myself. I became conscious of someone standing over me ; looking up, I met Blasingame's eyes. Somewhere he had managed to clean up, and he looked again as we were used to seeing him. There was something in his eyes I couldn't place ; something almost like respect and admiration.

"I believe I am in your debt, Mr. Anders," he spoke, squatting down to make level eye contact. " A debt I will make every effort to repay, but which I believe cannot be repaid. You were right, about all of it. When his concentration slipped, I was able to regain control of myself ; and when I attempted to do so, I was able to gain control of him, just long enough to - ah - complete the job at hand.". I just half nodded. I felt too tired to speak just then.

"How did you know, though," Blasingame asked intently, "what his true name was?".

I couldn't answer right away. I didn't have to, though. Melanie did it for me.

"He didn't," she spoke up, coming to stand beside Blasingame and looking at me. With her was the little girl, her hand in Mel's. "He guessed. The stupid, death-wishing, ignorant, magnificently wonderful sonuvabitch guessed.". The others were grouping around ; Mac and Lou each with another child in tow. The last one was with Ariane, a very young one, no more than 5 or 6, cradled in her arms, his head on her shoulder. He'd been crying. So had she.

"You didn't?" Blasingame asked, sounding surprised. "But, you said it was written in the conjuring diagram?". I was finally able to find my voice. I sighed.

"Yeah, I guessed," I sighed tiredly, without much force. "Hell, I couldn't read that shit, I know squat about conjuring and spells and such. I guessed, is all, taking a gamble that there was more truth to the myth than we allow. Just like we're going to have to do with vampires from now on. Help me up?" I asked no one in particular, and uttered a healthy groan as Blasingame did, receiving protests from both the ribs and the talon wounds, which reopened a little. Blasingame

was laughing, a genuine laughter.

"You guessed? You GUESSED!!" he almost yelled with glee. There were smiles appearing on everyone's faces, and wags of heads.

"Well, I thought about what you said about his ego, and figured, well, if he's that over confident, he had to have a button to push somewhere. I kept pushing until I found one." I was a little put out by the laughing. "I fail to see the humor," I finished, acting insulted. I turned my attention to the little girl standing holding Melanie's hand.

"Hey, little lady. Are you ok? ". She nodded, staring at me with shiny blue eyes still wet with tears. "What's your name?".

"Cynthia - Cyndi, I mean, that's what Mom calls me," she said, disengaging her hand from Mel's and stepping up to me. She lifted her arms, and for a moment I didn't know what to do - then, instinct took over and I lifted her up. She wrapped those same arms around my neck and laid her head on my shoulder ; the ribs yelled, and I silently told them to shut up.

"Was that the real boogeyman?" her muffled voice came from beneath my chin.

"No, honey, there is no real boogeyman," I said after a moment. "But there are some very bad people, and he was just a very very bad man."

She pushed gently away from my shoulder and looked up at me earnestly.

"Do you work for God?" she asked. I heard a gasp from Ariane, and various other noises around the room ; Bill made a coughing sound, Lou was busy clearing his throat. Three times.

I was at a loss how to answer that one. In a moment, I held her out at arm's length and looked her in the eyes.

"No, Cyndi," I told her. "You work for God. We work for you." Bathed in the glow of her sudden smile, I hugged her and carried her outside.

Epilogue

THE NEWS reports on Halloween day in the tri-corner area were filled with the story of the miraculous return of the 4 children missing since the day before. Sioux City Police could provide no clue as to who found them, only that all 4 had wandered into the main station office just past dawn, tired, dirty, and hungry. One reporter managed to get to talk with the oldest child, a ten year old girl from Yankton, South Dakota who gave her name as Cynthia ; however, all she could tell him was that they had been taken by the boogeyman and that God had sent Angels to rescue them, and she wanted to go home to go trick or treating tonight. It took only a short time to identify all the children and notify the parents, and Sioux City itself provided police transport to take them home rather than have the families come to get them. National news wires soon picked up the story, but despite earnest efforts by experienced investigative reporters, were unable to unearth any more information.

Me? I just wanted to sleep. I knew I'd have to jump thorough some hoops first, though,

because everybody else seemed wide awake and ready for more. Maybe I was getting too old for this.

Melanie, of course, designated herself as my private nurse, and tended to the talon wounds. Don't go getting any ideas ; I was in no shape for that kind of physical activity. She got a reaction or two, though, during the treatment, and seemed to enjoy my discomfort. I was starting to wonder again just what it was people saw in love. Seemed mean to me. We followed that by joining the others for breakfast. Despite my weariness, I found myself with good appetite.

Terry let us know he was heading home this morning ; he'd rest when he got there. He had provided invaluable help, and we let him know it by trying to stick him with the check. He would have paid it, too, had we not convinced him we were kidding.

"Angels!! Imagine," Ariane had laughed after the waitress had left with our orders. "I mean, I've been called 'angel' before, but never had it mean this much. I dunno...maybe I've been living my life all wrong, ya think?" she finished with a twinkle in her eye. I noticed her smiling at Lou, and saw her hand reach over and give his a squeeze. Christ, I thought, this is

worse than influenza - somebody better call the Center for Disease Control before it gets out of hand.

Bill got a big, crap-eating grin on his face and talked for the first time to everyone about his fiancée and his plans to get married. Mac was the only one surprised. And even he started talking about a girl at home he'd been seeing 'sort of semi-seriously'. I waited until we had eaten to throw a pall on the party.

"I hate to be the one to bring it up," I said, "but the Society is pretty up front about the relationship rule. As long as it's not another Hunter, fine. But - " and I let it trail off, to let it sink in.

"Are you guessing?" Ariane teased me, giggling. I didn't know she could giggle like that - I nearly said something about it, then decided I'd better keep it to myself, since Melanie had her arm around my waist and could do severe damage if she chose to.

"It's what I do best," I grinned. My comments had done nothing to darken the mood, and we went to our rooms still cheerful and upbeat. Truthfully, I still hadn't decided whether or not to tell the Society about Mel and I, or let it go until they found out on their own. Figured I'd decide

that during some time off, which I intended to get once this gig was finished.

Back in my room, Mel and I sat back on my bed and mused about the coming weeks.

"Guess it's back to the daily grind of just playing music and partying for a while," she said, looking at the ceiling.

"I need a cigarette," I said. She sat up and looked at me.

"Those things will kill you!" she said sternly. I opened my shirt and checked the rib wrap, then pulled my jeans down to check the bandages she'd put on the talon wounds earlier, and then looked at her. She burst out laughing so hard she almost missed me with the pillow. She followed me out to the balcony.

"So. Decide what you're going to do? You know, about the team, the band, and, well, after?" she asked me, turning serious.

"And about us?" I teased. She turned serious eyes on me.

"You know, lovely little elf lady," I said, knowing she disliked being called elf, "you're going to have to get a little more used to me than you seem to be if this is going to work. We

have a lot to learn about each other, in fact. For instance, when I'm uncomfortable, I tend to tease and joke a lot. If that bothers you, might be we should just not try, and avoid getting hurt later.". She smirked at me. I found I really did love it when she did that.

"Oh, I'm well aware of your deficiencies," she said. "I still haven't figured out what I love about you. Maybe that's it.". I grinned. "Now, what is it you love about me?". Oops. I hadn't expected that one. I should have. I can only claim inexperience.

"Other than your body?" I shot back, and was rewarded by her throaty laughter.

"I guess that'll do for starters," she grinned. "Seriously, though - what about the team, and the band? I guess, you know, the Society would find out sooner or later.".

"Now you're guessing," I teased her gently. "No, I suppose we're going to have to quit. I hate to, actually. I thought for a while this past week that I really wanted to quit anyway, but after last night, well, not so sure any more.". She looked out over the Iowa October morning, but before she could make a comment, a voice behind us interrupted.

"Perhaps, then, you should consider NOT quitting.". I whirled, but not as quickly as Mel

had. Blasingame chuckled. Behind him stood the others.

"I took the liberty of calling a team meeting," he informed us. "I hope you don't mind. And, frankly, even if you do mind, I'm calling it anyway.". He was smiling at us.

"I thought I told you not to sneak up on us like that!" I snapped testily, once I had returned my heart to where it belonged and it wasn't blocking my throat.

"I am sorry," he said, but was smiling as he said it, "but really, I didn't 'sneak'; in fact, we were pretty open about entering. I'm afraid you were so engrossed in each other you didn't notice. Tut tut - if you're going to continue as Hunters, you'll need to work that out of your systems.". His smugness was irritating me, and I let it show.

"There is no 'if', " I told him. "Mel and I are serious about each other, and the Society has a rule about that. A good rule, too, I think, so we really don't have any choice in the matter. We're out, even if we could work it out to continue.".

"Ah, yes, the rule," he mused. "Well, even in my days as a Hunter, we adopted the philosophy that rules are meant to be broken. Though I confess, we didn't have that one then.".

"Well, this one has good purpose," Melanie said. "Anyway, even if there weren't a rule, it wouldn't be fair to the rest, would it? I mean, in our case, anyway. This is a team, not a bunch of individuals. It's as much for their good as ours."

"Is it?" Blasingame probed. "In that case, perhaps you should put it to them, rather than discussing it selfishly between the two of you as if it's a foregone conclusion?". He was still bantering with us, and so far, no one else had spoken besides us.

"Fine!" I said tersely, and looked at them. "What do you guys think? "

Ariane: "Well, it's a common sense rule for the most part. But - does it apply to us? After all, we are unique in Hunter history ; there's never been a permanent team of Hunters before, ever. Personally? I think it's a rule that should be waived in this case - we would suffer more without you - " she giggled again "- than we do WITH you.". And one by one, they all agreed with her.

"Moot point, though," I said, less tersely. "Once they find out, we're out, and you know it. Sure is nice to hear you all say that, though, and thanks. And it isn't like we'd be wondering

where our next meal was coming from - the Society is good about that."

"Well, nice to hear YOU say THAT," Blasingame said. "But, as you say, moot point. The team has spoken. Rule waived. I do so enjoy it when I get my way - it happens too seldom, even when one lives for centuries.". Now, he WAS being smug.

"And just who are you to say?" I questioned him. "You've already got them all worried sick, last I talked to Mark. You're probably going to be our next assignment. Come to think of it, I hope they wait until after that - I think I'd enjoy going one on one against you.". As I had been speaking, Blasingame had gone from smiles to full laughter.

"And I, my friend Nick Anders, would most definitely not enjoy that confrontation," he said after he had controlled his mirth. "However, as it is my rule, and I instituted it, I guess I can also waive it.". He watched for a reaction, and he got it. There might be a few local dentists who were going to get rich in the next few days, putting teeth back into the six jaws that had just hit the floor. He seemed satisfied with that result. He stood up, as if preparing to go.

"Remember we talked about things that I hadn't told you, but would when the time was

right? Perceptive you were to see that, but your perception didn't let you ascertain even remotely what those things were.". He thought for a few moments, then went on:

"Yes, I had been following your progress, as you surmised. Yes, I did pick you specifically for this task. It was in fact I who placed the final approval on the formation of your group, despite my own initial misgivings. Few know of me. Your friend Mark is one who does not. I believe it is time I rectified that, and am in the process of doing so. A very few core people have been aware of my existence and role within the Society ; it's time, I think, that also changed.

"It has been my experience with you that has decided me. With all the resources at my command, I never could track this beast to a final confrontation ; it was your invaluable assistance, all of you, that allowed me to accomplish this. Believe me when I say, that when you have my eternal gratitude, it is no idle promise. There is a chemistry among you that would be criminal to break over a rule. I truly believe that you are the kind of people, rare though they are, who can work past that. So - I leave you to work past it.". And he walked to the door, still surrounded by shocked silence.

"Oh, and, one more thing," he turned, his hand on the knob, "Your requests for leave following this musical contract - by the way, I really do enjoy your music - is approved. Have fun, relax. Be human.". And he closed the door behind him.

Melanie was looking up at me - it struck me that I was a lucky guy, at my height, to find a woman shorter than I was - and I grinned.

"Well, I never been to Texas....." I sang, looking into her eyes.

"But he'd kinda like to go there..." sang the chorus in the background.

The End

