

The Warrior

Written by Jim Butcher as part of The Dresden Files

I sat down next to Michael and said, "I think you're in danger."

Michael Carpenter was a large, brawny man, though he was leaner now than in all the time I'd known him. Months in bed and more months in therapy had left him a shadow of himself, and he had never added all the muscle back on. Even so, he looked larger and more fit than most, his salt-and-pepper hair and short beard going heavier on the salt these days.

He smiled at me. That hadn't changed. If anything, the smile had gotten deeper and more steady.

"Danger?" he said. "Heavens."

I leaned back on the old wooden bleachers at the park and scowled at him. "I'm serious."

Michael paused to shout a word of encouragement at the second baseman (or was that baseperson?) on his daughter Alicia's softball team. He settled back onto the bleachers. They were covered in old, peeling green paint, and it clashed with his powder-blue-and-white shirt, which matched the uniform T-shirts of the girls below. It said "COACH" in big blue letters.

"I brought your sword. It's in die car."

"Harry," he said, unruffled, "I'm retired. You know that."

"Sure," I said, reaching into my coat. "I know that. But the bad guys apparently don't." I drew out an envelope and passed it to him.

Michael opened it and studied its contents. Then he replaced them, put the envelope back on the bench beside me, and rose. He started down onto the field, leaning heavily on the wooden cane that went every where with him now. Nerve damage had left one of his legs pretty near perfectly rigid, and his hip had been damaged as well. It gave him a rolling gait. I knew he couldn't see out of one of his clear, honest eyes very well anymore, either.

He took charge of the practice in the quiet, confident way he did everything, drawing

smiles and laughter from his daughter and her teammates. They were obviously having fun.

It looked good on him.

I looked down at the envelope and wished I couldn't imagine the photos contained inside it quite so clearly. They were all professional, clear—Michael, walking up the handicap access ramp to his church. Michael, opening a door for his wife, Charity. Michael, loading a big bucket of softballs into the back of the Carpenter family van. Michael at work, wearing a yellow hard hat, pointing up at a half-finished building as he spoke to a man beside him.

The pictures had come in the mail to my office, with no note, and no explanation. But their implications were ugly and clear.

My friend, the former Knight of the Cross, was in danger.

It took half an hour for the softball practice to end, and then

Michael rolled back over to me. He stood staring up at me for a moment before he said, "The sword has passed out of my hands. I can't take it up again—especially not for the wrong reason. I won't live in fear, Harry."

"Could you maybe settle for living in caution?" I asked. "At least until I know more about what's going on?"

"I don't think His plan is for me to die now," he replied calmly. It was never hard to tell when Michael was talking about the Almighty. He could insert capital letters into spoken words. I'm not sure how.

"What happened to 'No man knows the day or the hour'?" I asked.

He gave me a wry smile. "You're taking that out of context."

I shrugged "Michael. I'd like to believe in a loving, just God who looks out for everyone. But I see a lot of people get hurt who don't seem to deserve it. I don't want you to become one of them."

"I'm not afraid, Harry."

I grimaced. I'd figured he might react like this, and I'd come prepared to play dirty. "What about your kids, man? What about Charity? If someone comes for you, they aren't going to be particular about what happens to the people around you."

I'd seen him display less expression while being shot. His face turned pale and he looked away from me.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked after a moment.

"I'm going to lurk and hover," I told him. "Maybe catch our photographer before things go any further."

"Whether or not I want you to do it," he said.

"Well. Yes."

He shook his head at me and gave me a right smile. "Thank you, Harry. But no thank you. I'll manage."

* * *

Michael's home was an anomaly so close to the city proper—a fairly large old colonial house, complete with a white picket fence and a yard with trees in it. It had a quiet, solid sort of beauty. It was surrounded by other homes, but they never seemed quite as pleasant, homey, or clean as Michael's house. I knew he did a lot of work to keep it looking nice. Maybe it was that simple. Maybe it was a side effect of being visited by archangels and the like.

Or maybe it was all in the eye of the beholder.

I'm pretty sure there won't ever be a place like that for me.

Michael had given a couple of the girls—young women, I suppose—a ride home in his white pickup, so it had taken us a while to get there, and twilight was heavy on the city. I wasn't making any particular secret about tailing them, but I wasn't riding his back bumper, either, and I don't think either of them had noticed my beat-up old VW.

Michael and Alicia got out of the car and went into the house, while I drove a slow lap around their block, keeping my eyes peeled. When I didn't spot any imminent maniacs or anticipatory fiends about to pounce, I parked a bit down the street and walked toward Michael's place.

It happened pretty fast. A soccer ball went bouncing by me, a small person came pelting after it, and just as it happened I heard the crunchy hiss of tires on the street somewhere behind me and very near. I have long arms, and it was a good thing. I grabbed the kid, who must have been seven or eight, about half a second before the oncoming car hit the soccer ball and sent it sailing. Her feet went flying out ahead of her as I swung her up off the ground, and her toes missed hitting the car's fender by maybe six inches.

The car, one of those fancy new hybrids that run on batteries part of the time, went by in silence, without the sound of the motor to give any warning. The driver, a young man in a suit, was jabbering into a cell phone that he held to his ear with one hand. He never noticed. As he reached the end of the block, he turned on his headlights.

I turned to find the child, a girl with inky black hair and pink-skin, staring at me with wide, dark eyes, her mouth open and uncertain. She had a bruise on her cheek a couple of days old.

"Hi," I said, trying to be as unthreatening as I could. I had limited success. Tall, severe-looking men in long black coats who need a shave are challenged that way. "Are you all right?"

She nodded her head slowly. "Am I in trouble?"

I put her down. "Not from me. But I heard that moms can get kind of worked up about—"

"Courtney!" gasped a woman's voice, and a woman I presumed to be the child's mother came hurrying from the nearest house. Like the child, she had black hair and very fair skin. She had the same wary eyes, too. She extended her hand to the little girl, and then pulled her until Courtney stood behind her mother. She peeked around at me.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded—or tried to. It came out as a nervous question. "Who are you?"

"Just trying to keep your little girl from becoming a victim of the Green movement," I said.

She didn't get it. Her expression changed, as she probably wondered something along the lines of, Is this person a lunatic?

I get that a lot.

"There was a car, ma'am," I clarified. "She didn't see it coming."

"Oh," the woman said. "Oh. Th-thank you."

"Sure." I frowned at the girl. "You okay, sweetheart? I didn't give you that bruise, did I?"

"No," she said. "I fell off my bike."

"Without hurting your hands," I noted.

She stared at me for a second before her eyes widened and she hid behind her mother a little more.

Mom blinked at me, and then at the child. Then she nodded to me, took the daughter by the shoulders, and frog-marched her toward the house without another word. I watched them go, and then started back toward Michael's place. I kicked Courtney's soccer ball back into her yard on the way.

Charity answered the door when I knocked. She was of an age with Michael, though her golden hair hid any strands of silver that might have shown fairly well. She was tall and broad-shouldered, for a woman, and I'd seen her crush more than one inhuman skull when one of her children was in danger. She looked tired—a year of seeing your husband undergoing intensely difficult physical therapy can do that, I guess. But she also looked happy. Our personal cold war had entered a state of detente, of late, and she smiled to see me.

"Hello, Harry. Surprise lesson? I think Molly went to bed early."

"Not exactly," I said, smiling. "Thought I'd just stop by to visit."

Charity's smile didn't exactly vanish, but it got cautious. "Really."

"Harry!" screamed a little voice, and Michael's youngest son, of the same name, flung himself into the air, trusting me to catch him. Little Harry was around Courtney's age, and generally regarded me as something interesting to climb on. I caught him and gave him a noisy kiss on the head, which elicited a giggle and a protest of, "Yuck!"

Charity shook her head wryly. "Well, come in. Let me get you something to drink. Harry, he's not a jungle gym. Get down."

Little Harry developed spontaneous deafness and scrambled up onto my shoulders as we walked into the living room. Michael and his dark-haired, quietly serious daughter Alicia were just coming in from the garage, after putting away softball gear.

"Papa!" little Harry shouted, and promptly plunged forward, off my shoulders, arms outstretched to Michael.

He leaned forward and caught him, though I saw him wince and exhale tightly as he did it. My stomach rolled uncomfortably in sympathy.

"Alicia," Charity said.

Her daughter nodded, hung her ball cap on a wooden peg by the door, and took little Harry from Michael, tossing him up into the air and catching him, much to the child's protesting laughter. "Come on, squirt. Time for a bath."

"Leech!" Harry shouted, and immediately started climbing on his sister's shoulders, babbling about something to do with robots.

Michael watched them exit with a smile. "I asked Harry to dinner tonight," he told Charity, kissing her on the cheek.

"Did you?" she said, in the exact same tone she'd used on me at the door.

Michael looked at her and sighed. Then he said, "My office."

We went into the study Michael used as his office—more cluttered than it had been before, now that he was actually using it all the time—and closed the door behind us. I took out the photos I'd received without a word and showed them to Charity.

Michael's wife was no dummy. She looked at them one at a time, in rapid succession, her eyes blazing brighter with every new image. When she spoke, her voice was cold. "Who took these?"

"I don't know yet," I told her. "Though Nicodemus's name does sort of leap to mind."

"No," Michael said quietly. "He can't harm me or my family anymore. We're protected."

"By what?" I asked.

"Faith," he said, simply.

That would be a maddening answer under most circumstances—but I'd seen the power of faith in action around my friend, and it was every bit as real as the forces I could manage. Former presidents get a detail of Secret Service to protect them. Maybe former Knights of the Cross had a similar retirement package, only with more seraphim. "Oh."

"You're going to get to the bottom of this?" Charity asked.

"That's the idea," I said. "It might mean I intrude on you all a little."

"Harry," Michael said, "there's no need for that."

"Don't be ridiculous," Charity replied, turning to Michael. She took his hand, very gently, though her tone of voice stayed firm. "And don't be proud."

He smiled at her. "It isn't a question of pride."

"I'm not so sure," she said quietly. "Father Forthill said we were only protected against supernatural dangers. If there's something else afoot... You've made so many enemies. We have to know what's happening."

"I often don't know what's happening," Michael said. "If I spent all my time trying to find out, there wouldn't be enough left to live in. This is more than likely being done for the sole purpose of making us worried and miserable."

"Michael," I said quietly. "One of the best ways I know to counter fear is with knowledge."

He tilted his head, frowning gently at me.

"You say you won't live in fear. Fine. Let me poke around and shine a light on things, so we know what's going on. If it turns out to be nothing, no harm done."

"And if it isn't?" Charity asked.

I kept a surge of quiet anger out of my voice and expression as I looked at her levelly. "No harm gets done to you and yours."

Her eyes flashed and she nodded her chin once.

"Honey," Michael sighed.

Charity stared at him.

Michael might have slain a dragon, but he knew his limits. He lifted a hand in acceptance and said, "Why don't you make up the guest bedroom."

By a little after nine, the Carpenter household was almost entirely silent. I had been shown into the little guest room kept at the end of an upstairs hallway. It was really Charity's sewing room, and was all but filled with colorful stacks of folded fabric, some of them in clear plastic containers, some of them loose. There was room around a little table with a sewing machine on it, and just barely enough space to get to the bed. I'd recuperated from injuries there before.

One thing was new—there was a very fine layer of dust on the sewing machine.

Huh.

I sat down on the bed and looked around. It was a quiet, warm, cheerful little room—almost manically so, now that I thought about it. Everything was soft and pleasant and ordered, and it took me maybe six or seven whole seconds to realize that this room had been Charity's haven. How many days and nights must she have been worried about Michael, off doing literally God only knew what, against foes so terrible that no one but him could have been trusted to deal with them? How many times had she wondered if it would be a solemn Father Forthill who came to the door, instead of the man she loved? How many hours had she spent in this well-lit room, working on making warm, soft things for her family, while her husband carried *Amorachius's* cold, bright steel into the darkness?

And now there was dust on the sewing machine.

Michael had nearly been killed, out there on that island. He had been crippled, forced

by his injuries to lay aside the holy sword, along with the nearly invisible, deadly war that went with it. And he was happier than I'd ever seen him.

Maybe the Almighty worked in mysterious ways, after all.

Another thought occurred to me, as I sat there pondering: Whoever had sent those pictures hadn't sent them to Michael— he'd sent them to me. What if I'd put Michael and his family into real danger by showing up? What if I'd somehow reacted in exactly the way I'd been meant to react?

I grimaced around the cheerful room. So much for sleep.

I got up and padded back downstairs in my sock feet to raid the fridge, and while I was in the kitchen munching on an impromptu cold-cuts sandwich, I saw a shadow move past the back window.

I had several options, but none of them were real appetizing. I settled for the one that might accomplish the most. I turned and padded as quickly and quietly as I could to the front door, slipped out, and snuck around the side of the house in the direction that would, I hoped, bring me up behind the intruder. A quick spat of rain had made the grass wet, and the night had grown cool enough to make my instantly soaked socks uncomfortable. I ignored them, and went padding through the grass, keeping to the side of the house and watching all around me.

The backyard was empty.

I got an itchy feeling on the back of my neck and continued my circle. Had I given myself away somehow? Was the intruder even now circling just the way I was, hoping to sneak up on me? I took longer steps and stayed as quiet as I knew how—which is pretty darn quiet. I've developed my skulking to professional levels, over the years.

And as I rounded the corner, I spotted the intruder, a dark form hurrying down the sidewalk past Courtney's house. I couldn't follow him without being spotted pretty quickly, unless I cheated, which I promptly did. My ability to throw up a veil wasn't anything to write home about, but it ought to be good enough to hide me from view on a dark night, on a heavily shadowed street. I focused on my surroundings, on drawing the light and shadow around me in a cloak, and watched my own vision dim and blur somewhat as I did.

I half wished I'd woken Molly up. The kid is a natural at subtle stuff like veils. She can make you as invisible as Paris Hilton's ethical standards, and you can still see out of it with no more impediment than a pair of mildly tinted sunglasses. But, since it was me doing the job, I was probably just sort of indistinct and blurry, and my view of the street was like something seen through dark, thin fabric. I kept track of the pale concrete of the sidewalk and the movement of the intruder against the background of shadowy shapes and blurry bits of light, and walked softly.

The intruder crept down the street and then quickly crouched down beside my old Volkswagen, the *Blue Beetle*. It took him maybe five seconds to open the lock, reach into the car, and draw out the long, slender shape of a sheathed sword.

He must have come to the house first, and circled it to determine where I was. He could have spotted my staff, which I'd left resting against the wall by the front door, when he looked into the kitchen window. And I was pretty sure it was a him I was dealing with, too. The movement of his arms and legs was brusque, choppy, masculine.

I took a few steps to one side and picked up Courtney's soccer ball. Then I approached to within a few yards and tossed it up in a high arc. It came down with a rattling thump on the Blue Beetle's hood.

Lurky-boy twitched, twisting his upper body toward the sound and freezing, and I hit him in a diving tackle with my body as rigid as a spear, all of my weight behind one shoulder, trying to drive it right through his spine and out his chest. He was completely unprepared for it and went down hard, driven to the sidewalk with a "whuff" of expelled air.

I grabbed him by the hair so that I could introduce his forehead to the sidewalk, but his hair was cut nearly military-short, and I didn't have a good grip. He twisted and got me in the floating rib with an elbow, and I wasn't in a good enough position to keep him from getting out from under me and scrambling away, the sheathed weapon still in hand.

I focused my will, flicked a hand at him and spat, "*Forzare!*" Unseen force lashed out at the back of his knees—

—and hit the mystic equivalent of a brick wall. There was a burst of twinkling, shifting lights, and he let out a croaking sound as he kept running. Something that glowed like a dying ember fell to the sidewalk.

I pushed myself up to pursue him, slipped on the wet grass next to the sidewalk, and rolled my ankle painfully. By the time I'd gotten to my feet again, he was too far away for me to catch, even if my ankle had been steady. A second later, he hopped a fence and was out of sight.

I was left there, standing beside my car on one foot, while neighborhood dogs sent up a racket. I gimped forward and looked down at the glowing embers of the thing he'd dropped. It was an amulet, its leather cord snapped in the middle. It looked like it had been a carving of wood and ivory, but it was scorched almost completely black, so I couldn't be certain. I picked it up, wrinkling my nose at the smell. Then I turned back to the car and closed the open door. After that, I untwisted the piece of wire that holds the trunk closed, picked up a blanket-wrapped bundle, and went back to Michael's place.

Morning on a school day in the Carpenter household is like Southampton, just before June 6, 1944. There's a lot of yelling, running around, and organizing transport, and no one seems to be exactly sure what's going on. Or maybe that was just me, because by a little before eight, all the kids were trooping out to their bus stop, led by Alicia, the senior schoolchild.

"So he grabbed the sword and ran?" Molly asked, sipping coffee. She apparently had a cold, and her nose was stuffy and bright pink. My apprentice was her mother's daughter, tall and blond and too attractive for me ever to be entirely comfortable—even wrapped up in a pink fluffy robe and flannel PJs, with her hair a mess.

"Give me some credit," I said, unwrapping the blanket-wrapped bundle and producing *Amoracchius*. "He *thought* he took the sword."

Michael frowned at me as he put margarine on his toast. "I thought you told me that the sword was best hidden in plain sight."

"I've been getting paranoid in my age," I replied, munching on a bit of sausage. I blinked at the odd taste and looked at him.

"Turkey," Michael said mildly. "It's better for me."

"It's better for everyone," Charity said firmly. "Including you, Harry."

"Gee," I said. "Thanks."

She gave me an arch look. "Can't you just use the amulet to track him down?"

"Nope," I said, putting some salt on the turkey "sausage." "Tell her why not, grasshopper."

Molly spoke through a yawn. "It caught on fire. Fire's a purifying force. Wiped out whatever energy was on the amulet that might link back to the owner." She blinked watery eyes. "Besides, we don't need it."

Michael frowned at her.

"He took the decoy," I said, smiling. "And I know how to find that."

"Unless he's gotten rid of it, or taken steps to make it untraceable," Michael said in a patient, reasonable tone. "After all, he was evidently prepared with some sort of defensive measure against your abilities."

"Different situation entirely," I said. "Tracking someone by using one of their personal possessions depends upon following a frequency of energy that is inherently unstable and transient. I actually have a piece of the decoy sword, and the link between those two objects is much more concrete. It'd take one he—uh, heck of a serious countermeasure to

stop me from finding it."

"But you didn't trail him last night?" Charity asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't know where I'd have been going, I wasn't prepared, and since apparently someone is interested in the swords, I didn't want to go off and leave .. ."

You.

"... the sword . . ."

Unprotected.

". .. here," I finished.

"What about the other one?" Michael asked quietly.

Fidelacchius, brother-sword to Michael's former blade, currently rested in a cluttered basket in my basement—next to the heavy locked gun safe that was warded with a dozen dangerous defensive spells. Hopefully, anyone looking to take it would open the safe first and get a face full of boom. My lab was behind a screen of defensive magic, which was in turn behind an outer shell of defensive magic that protected my apartment. Plus there was my dog, Mouse, two hundred pounds of fur and muscle, who didn't take kindly to hostile visitors.

"It's safe," I told him. "After breakfast, I'll track buzz-cut guy down, have a little chat with him, and we'll put this whole thing to bed."

"Sounds simple," Michael said.

"It could happen."

Michael smiled, his eyes twinkling.

Buzz, as it turned out, wasn't a dummy. He'd ditched the decoy sword in a Dumpster behind a fast-food joint less than four blocks from Michael's place. Michael sat behind the wheel of his truck, watching as I stood hip-deep in trash and dug for the sword.

"You sure you don't want to do this part?" I asked him sourly.

"I would, Harry," he replied, smiling. "But my leg. You know."

The bitch of it was, he was being sincere. Michael had never been afraid of work. "Why dump it here, do you think?"

I gestured at a nearby streetlight. "Dark last night, no moon. This is probably the first place he got a good look at it. Parked his car here, too, maybe." I found the handle of the cheap replica broadsword I'd picked up at what had amounted to a martial arts trinkets shop. "Aha," I said, and pulled it out.

There was another manila envelope duct-taped to the blade. I took the sword and the envelope back to the truck. Michael wrinkled up his nose at the smell coming up from my garbage-spattered jeans, but that expression faded when he looked at the envelope taped to the sword. He exhaled slowly.

"Well," he said. "No use just staring at it."

I nodded and peeled the envelope from around the blade. I opened it and looked in.

There were two more photos.

The first was of Michael, in the uniform shirt he wore when he coached his daughter's softball team. He was leaning back on the bleachers, as he had been when I'd first walked up to speak to him.

The second picture was of a weapon—a long-barreled rifle with a massive steel snout on the end of it, and what looked like a telescope for a sight. It lay on what looked like a bed with cheap motel sheets.

"Hell's hells," I muttered. "What is that?"

Michael glanced at the picture. "It's a Barrett," he said quietly. "Fifty-caliber semiautomatic rifle. Snipers in the Middle East who use them are claiming kills at two kilometers, sometimes more. It's one of the deadliest long-range weapons in the world."

He looked up and around him at all the buildings. "Overkill for Chicago, really," he said with mild disapproval.

"You know what I'm thinking?" I said. "I'm thinking we shouldn't be sitting here in your truck right next to a spot Buzz expected us to go while he and his super-rifle are out there somewhere."

Michael looked unperturbed. "If he wanted to simply kill me here, he's had plenty of time to make the shot."

"Humor me," I said.

He smiled and then nodded. "I can take you to your place. You can get some clean clothes, perhaps."

"That hurts, man," I said, brushing uselessly at my jeans as the truck moved out. "You

know what bugs me about this situation?"

Michael glanced aside at me for a second. "I think I do. But it might be different than what you were thinking."

I ignored him. "Why? I mean sure, we need to know who this guy is, but *why* is he doing this?"

"It's a good question."

"He sends the pictures to me, not you," I said. I held up the new photo of the sniper rifle. "I mean, this is obviously an escalation. But if what he wanted was to kill you, why... ? Why document it for me?"

"It looks to me," Michael said, "as if he wants you to be afraid."

"So he threatens *you*?" I demanded. "That's stupid."

He smiled. "Do people threaten you very often?"

"Sure. All the time."

"What happens when they do?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I say something mouthy," I said. "Then I clean their clocks for them at the first opportunity."

"Which is probably why our photographer here—"

"Call him Buzz," I said. "It will make things simpler."

"Why Buzz hasn't bothered threatening you."

I frowned. "So you're saying Buzz knows me."

"It stands to reason. It seems clear that he's trying to push you into some sort of reaction. Something he thinks you'll do if you're frightened."

"Like what?" I asked.

"What do you think?" he replied.

I put my hand on the hilt of *Amoracchius*. The sword's tip rested on the floorboards of the truck, between my feet.

"That would be my guess, too," he said.

I frowned down at the blade, and nodded. "Maybe Buzz figured I'd bring you the sword if you were in danger. So that. . ." I didn't finish.

"So that I'd have some way of defending myself," Michael said gently. "You can say it, Harry. You won't hurt my feelings."

I nodded at the true sword. "Sure you don't want it?"

Michael shook his head. "I told you, Harry. That part of my life is over."

"And what if Buzz makes good?" I asked quietly. "What if he kills you?"

Michael actually laughed. "I don't think that's going to happen," he said. "But if it does ..." He shrugged. "Death isn't exactly a terrifying proposition for me, Harry. If it was, I could hardly have borne the sword for as long as I did. I know what awaits me, and I know that my family will be taken care of."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure everything will be fine if your younger kids have to grow up without a father in their lives."

He winced, and then pursed his lips thoughtfully for a few moments before he replied. "Other children have," he said, finally.

"And that's it?" I asked, incredulous. "You just surrender to whatever is going to happen?"

"It isn't what I'd want—but a lot of things happen that I don't want I'm just a man."

"The last thing I would expect from you," I said, "is fatalism."

"Not fatalism," he said, his voice suddenly and unexpectedly firm. "Faith, Harry. Faith. This is happening for a reason."

I didn't answer him. From where I was standing, it looked like it was happening because someone ruthless and fairly intelligent wanted to get his hands on one of the swords. And worse, it looked like he was probably a mortal, too. If what Charity had said was accurate, that meant that Michael didn't have a heavenly insurance policy against the threat.

It also meant that I would have to pull my punches—the First Law of Magic prohibited using it to kill a human being. There was some grey area involved with it, but not much, and it was the sort of thing that one didn't play around with. The White Council enforced the laws, and anyone who broke them faced the very real possibility of a death sentence.

"And that's all I need," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Michael pulled the truck into the gravel parking lot of my apartment, in the basement of a big old boardinghouse. "I need to drop by a site before we go back to get your car. Is that all right?"

I took the sword with me as I got out of the truck. "Well," I said, "as long as it's all happening for a reason."

* * *

Michael's small company built houses. Years of vanishing at irregular intervals to battle the forces of evil had probably held him back from moving up to building the really expensive, really profitable places. So he built homes for the upper couple of layers of the middle class instead. He probably would have made more money if he cut corners, but it was Michael. I was betting that never happened.

This house was a new property, down toward Wolf Lake, and it had the depressing look of all construction sites—naked earth, trees bulldozed and piled to one side, and the standard detritus of any such endeavor: mud, wood, garbage discarded by the workers, and big old boot tracks all over the ground. Half a dozen men were at work, putting up the house's skeleton.

"Shouldn't take me long," Michael said.

"Sure," I said. "Go to it."

Michael hopped down from the truck and gimped his way over to the house, moving with an energy and purpose I'd seldom seen from him. I frowned after him, and then pulled the first envelope out of my pocket and started looking at the photos inside.

The photo of Michael at a building site had been taken at this one. Buzz had been here, watching Michael.

He might still be here now.

I got out of the car and slung the sword's belt over my shoulder, so that it hung with its hilt sucking up next to my head. Photo in hand, I started circling the site, trying to determine where Buzz had been standing when he'd taken his picture. I got some looks from the men on the job—but like I said before, I'm used to that kind of thing.

It only took me a couple of minutes to find the spot Buzz had used—a shadowed area of weeds and scrub brush behind the pile of felled trees. It was obscured enough to offer a good hiding spot, if no one was looking particularly hard, but far enough away that he had to have used a zoom lens of some kind to get those pictures. I had heard that digital

cameras could zoom in to truly ridiculous levels these days.

I found footprints.

Don't read too much into that. I'm not Ranger Rick or anything, but I had a teacher who made sure I spent my share of time hiking and camping in the rugged country of the Ozarks, and he taught me the basics—where to look, and what to look for. The showers last night had wiped away any subtle signs, but I wouldn't have trusted my own interpretation of them in any case. I did find one clear footprint, of a man's left boot, fairly deep, and half a dozen partials and a few broken branches in a line leading away. He'd come here, hung around for a while, then left.

Which just about anyone could have deduced from the photo, even if he hadn't seen any tracks.

I had this guy practically captured already.

There weren't any bubble-gum wrappers, discarded cigarettes, or fortuitously misplaced business cards that would reveal Buzz's identity. I hadn't really thought there would be, but you always look.

I slogged across the muddy ground back toward the truck, when the door of one of the contractors' vans opened, and a prematurely balding thin guy with a tool belt and a two-foot reel of electrician's wire staggered out. He had a shirt with a name tag that read, "Chuck." Chuck wobbled to one side, dragging the handles of some tools along the side panel of Michael's truck, leaving some marks.

I glanced into the van. There was an empty bottle of Jim Beam inside, with a little still dribbling out the mouth.

"Hey, Chuck," I said. "Give you a hand with that?"

He gave me a bleary glance that didn't seem to pick up on anything out of the ordinary about me or the big old sword hanging over my shoulder. "Nah. I got it."

"It's cool," I said. "I'm going that way anyhow. And those things are heavy." I went over to him and seized one end of the reel, taking some of the weight.

The electrician's breath was practically explosive. He nodded a couple of times, and shifted his grip on the reel. "Okay, buddy. Thanks."

We carried the heavy reel of wire over to the house. I had to adjust my steps several times, to keep up with the occasional drunken lurch from Chuck. We took the wire to the poured-concrete slab that was going to be the garage at some point, it looked like, and dropped it off.

"Thanks, man," Chuck said, his sibilants all mushy.

"Sure," I said. "Look, uh. Do you really think you should be working with electricity right now, Chuck?"

He gave me an indignant, drunken glare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you just, uh. Look a little sick, that's all."

"I'm just fine," Chuck slurred, scowling. "I got a job to do."

"Yeah," I said. "Kind of a dangerous job. In a big pile of kindling."

He peered at me. "What?" It came out more like *Wha?*

"I've been in some burning buildings, man, and take it from me, *this* place ..." I looked around at the wooden framework. "Fwoosh. I'm just saying. Fwoosh."

He worked on that one for a moment, and then his face darkened into a scowl again. He turned and picked up a wrench from a nearby toolbox. "Buzz off, freak. Before I get upset."

I wasn't going to do anyone any favors by getting into half of a drunken brawl with one of Michael's subcontractors. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but they were all at other parts of the house, I guessed. So I just held up one hand in front of me and said, mildly, "Okay. I'm going."

Chuck watched me as I walked out of the garage. I looked around until I spotted the power lines running into the house, and then followed the trench they were buried in back to the street, until I got to the transformer. I looked up at it, glanced around a little guiltily, and sighed. Then I waved my hand at the thing, exerted my will, and muttered, "*Hexus.*"

Wizards and technology don't get along. At all. Prolonged exposure to an active wizard has really detrimental effects on just about anything manufactured after World War II or so, especially anything involving electricity. My car breaks down every couple of weeks, and that's when I'm not even trying. When I'm making an effort?

The transformer exploded in a humming shower of blue-white sparks, and the sound of an electric saw, somewhere on the site, died down to nothing.

I went back to the truck, and sat quietly until Michael returned.

He gave me a steady look.

"It was in the name of good," I said. "Your electrician was snookered. By the time the

city gets by to repair it, he'll have sobered up."

"Ah," Michael said. "Chuck. He's having trouble at home."

"How do you know?"

"He's got a wife, a daughter," Michael said. "And I know the look."

"Maybe if he spent less time with Jim Beam," I said, "it'd go better."

"The booze is new," Michael said, looking worriedly at the house. "He's a good man. He's in a bad time." He glanced back at me a moment Later. "Thank you. Though perhaps next time . . . you could just come tell me about it?"

Duh, Harry. That probably would have worked, too. I shook my head calmly. "That's not how I roll."

"How you roll?" Michael asked, smiling.

"I heard Molly say it once. So it must be cool."

"How you roll." Michael shook his head and started the truck. "Well. You were trying to help. That's the important thing."

Harry Dresden. Saving the world, one act of random destruction at a time.

"Okay," I said to Molly, as I prepared to get into my car. "Just keep your wits about you."

"I know," she said calmly.

"If there's any trouble, you call the cops," I said. "This guy looks to be operating purely vanilla, but he can still kill you just fine."

"I know, Harry."

"If you see him, do not approach him—and don't let your dad do it, either."

Molly rolled her eyes in exasperation. Then she muttered a quick word and vanished. Gone. She was standing within an arm's length of me, but I couldn't see her at all. "Let's see the bozo shoot this," said her disembodied voice.

"And while we're at it, let's hope he isn't using a heat-sensitive scope," I said dryly.

She flickered back into sight, giving me an arch look. "The *point* is that I'm perfectly capable of keeping a lookout and yelling if there's trouble. I'll go with Dad to softball,

and you'll be the second person I call if there's a whiff of peril."

I grunted. "Maybe I should go get Mouse. Let him stay with you, too."

"Maybe you should keep him close to the swords," Molly said quietly. "My dad's just a retired soldier. The swords are icons of power."

"The swords are bits of sharp metal. The men who hold them make them a threat."

"In case you hadn't noticed, my dad isn't one of those men anymore," Molly said. She tucked a trailing strand of golden hair behind one ear and frowned up at me worriedly. "Are you sure this isn't about you blaming yourself for what happened to my dad?"

"I don't blame myself," I said.

My apprentice arched an extremely skeptical eyebrow.

I looked away from her.

"You wanna talk to me about it?"

"No," I said. I suddenly felt very tired. "Not until I'm sure the swords are safe."

"If he knew where to send the pictures," Molly said, "then he knows where your house is."

"But he can't get inside. Even if he could get the doors or one of the windows to open, the wards would roast him."

"And your wards are perfect," Molly said. "There's no way anyone could get around them, ever. The way you told me those necromancers did a few years ago."

"They didn't go around," I said. "They went through. But I see your point. If I have to, I'll take one of the Ways to Warden's command center at Edinburgh and leave the swords in my locker."

Molly's eyes widened. "Wow. A locker?"

"Technically. I haven't used it. I've got the combination written down. Somewhere. On a napkin. I think."

"Does it hurt to be as suave as you, boss?"

"It's agonizing."

"Looks it." Her smile faded. "What are you going to do after you're sure the swords are

safe?"

She hadn't thought it through. She didn't know what was going to happen in the next few minutes. So I gave her my best fake grin and said, "One step at a time, grasshopper. One step at a time."

I began pouring my will into my shield bracelet about half a mile from home. That kind of active magic wasn't good for the *Beetle*, but having a headless driver smash it into a building would be even worse. I fastened closed the buttons on my leather duster, too. The spells that reinforced the coat were fresh, and they'd once stood up to the power of a Kalashnikov assault rifle—but that was a world of difference from the power of a fifty-caliber sniper round.

Buzz had missed his shot at the sword at Michael's house. It's really hard to tail someone without being noticed, unless you've got a team of several cars working together—and this had all the earmarks of a lone-gunman operation. Buzz hadn't been tailing me today, and unless he'd given up entirely—sure, right—that could only mean that he was waiting for me somewhere. He'd had plenty of time to set up an ambush somewhere he knew I'd go.

Home.

The sword was my priority. I wasn't planning on suicide or anything, but at the end of the day, I'm just one guy. The swords had been a thorn in the side of evildoers for two thousand years.

In the long term, the world needed them a lot more than it needed one battered and somewhat shabby professional wizard.

As I came down the street toward my apartment, I stomped on the gas. Granted, in an old VW Beetle, that isn't nearly as dramatic as it sounds. My car didn't roar as much as it coughed more loudly, but I picked up speed and hit my driveway as hard as I could while keeping all the wheels on the ground. I skidded to a stop outside my front door as the engine rattled, pinged, and began pouring out black smoke, which would have been totally cool if I'd actually made it happen on purpose.

I flung myself out of the car, the sword in hand, and into the haze of smoke, my shield bracelet running at maximum power in a dome that covered me on all sides. I rushed toward the steps leading down to the front door of my basement apartment.

As my foot was heading down toward the first step there was a flash of light and a sledgehammer hit me in the back. It spun me counterclockwise as it flung me down, and I went into a bad tumble down the seven steps to my front door. I hit my head, my shoulder screamed, and the taste of blood filled my mouth. My shield

bracelet seared my wrist. Gravity stopped working, and I wasn't sure which way I was supposed to be falling.

"Get up, Harry," I told myself. "He's coming. He's coming for the sword. Get up." I'd dropped my keys in the fall. I looked for them.

I saw blood all over the front of my shirt.

The keys lay on the concrete floor of the stairs. I picked them up and stared stupidly at them. It took me a minute to remember why I needed them. Then another minute to puzzle out which of the five keys on the ring went to my front door. My head was pounding and I felt sick, and I couldn't get a breath.

I tried to reach up to unlock the door, but my left shoulder wouldn't hold my weight and I almost slammed my head against the concrete again.

I made it up to a knee. I shoved my key at the door.

He's coming. He's coming.

Blue sparks flew up, and a little shock lit up my arm with pain.

My wards. I'd forgotten about my wards.

I tried to focus my will again, but I couldn't get it to gel. I tried again, and again, and finally I was able to perform the routine little spell that disarmed them.

I shoved my key into the lock and turned it. Then I leaned against the door.

It didn't open.

My door is a heavy steel security door. I installed it myself, and I'm a terrible carpenter. It doesn't quite line up with the frame, and it takes a real effort to get it open and closed. I had grown used to the routine bump and thrust of my shoulders and hips that I needed to open it up—but like the spell that disarmed my wards, that simple task was, at the moment, beyond me.

Footsteps crunched in the gravel.

He's coming.

I couldn't get it open. I sort of flopped against it as hard as I could.

The door groaned and squealed as it swung open, pulled from the other side. My huge, shaggy grey dog, Mouse, dropped his front paws back to the ground, shouldered his way through the door, and seized my right arm by the biceps. His jaws were like a vise,

though his teeth couldn't penetrate the leather. He dragged me indoors like a giant, groggy chew toy, and as I went across the threshold, I saw Buzz appear at the top of the stairs, a black shadow against the blue morning sky.

He raised a gun, a military sidearm.

I kicked the door with both legs, as hard as I could.

The gun barked. Real guns don't sound like the guns in the movies. The sound is flatter, more mechanical. I couldn't see the flash, because I'd moved the door into the way. Bullets pounded the steel like hailstones on a tin roof.

Mouse slammed his shoulder against the door and rammed it closed.

I fumbled at the wards, babbling in panicked haste, and managed to restore them just in time to hear a loud popping sound, a cry, and a curse from the other side of the door. Then I reached up and snapped the dead bolt closed for good measure.

Then I fell back onto the floor of my apartment and watched the ceiling spin for a while.

In two or three minutes, maybe, I was feeling a little better. My head and shoulder hurt like hell, but I could breathe. I tried my arms and legs and three of them worked. I sat up. That worked, too, though it made my left shoulder hurt like more hell, and it was hard to see straight through the various pains.

I knew several techniques for reducing and ignoring pain, some of them almost too effective—but I couldn't really seem to line any of them up and get them working. My head hurt too much.

I needed help.

I half crawled to my phone and dialed a number. I mumbled to the other end of the phone, and then lay back on the floor again and felt terrible. Buzz must have fallen back now, knowing that the sound of shots could attract attention. Now that the sword was behind the protection of my wards, there was no reason for him to loiter around outside my apartment. I hoped.

The next thing I knew, Mouse was pawing at the door, making anxious sounds. I dragged myself over to it, disarmed the wards, and unlocked it.

"Are these shell casings on the ground? Is this blood?" sputtered a little man in pale blue hospital scrubs and a black denim jacket. He had a shock of black hair like a startled haystack, and black wire-rimmed spectacles. "Holy Hannah, Harry, what happened to you?"

I closed the wards and the door behind him. "Hi, Butters. I fell down."

"We've got to get you to a hospital," he said, turning to reach for my phone.

I slapped my hand weakly down onto it, to keep him from picking it up. "Can't. No hospitals."

"Harry, you know that I'm not a doctor."

"Yes, you are. I saw your business card." The effort of vocalizing that many syllables hurt.

"I'm a medical examiner. I cut up dead people and tell you things about them. I don't do live patients."

"Hang around," I said. "It's early yet." Still too many syllables.

"Oh, this is a load of crap," he muttered. Then he shook his head and said, "I need some more light."

"Matches," I mumbled. "Mantel." Better.

He found the matches and started lighting candles. "Next, I'll be getting out a big jar of leeches."

He found the first aid kit under my kitchen sink, boiled some water, and came over to check me out. I sort of checked out for a few minutes. When I came back, he was fumbling with a pair of scissors and my duster.

"Hey!" I protested. "Lay off the coat!"

"You've dislocated your shoulder," he informed me, frowning without stopping his work with the scissors. "You don't want to wriggle it around trying to take your shirt off."

"That's not what I—"

The pin that held the two halves of the scissors together popped as Butters exerted more pressure on their handles, and the two halves fell apart. He blinked at them in shock.

"Told you," I muttered.

"Okay," he said. "I guess we do this the hard way."

I won't bore you with the details. Ten minutes later, my coat was off, my shoulder was back in its socket, and Butters was pretending that my screams during the two failed

attempts to put it back hadn't bothered him. I went away again, and when I came back, Butters was pressing a cold Coke into my hand.

"Here," he said. "Drink something. Stay awake."

I drank. Actually, I guzzled. Somewhere in the middle, he passed me several ibuprofen tablets, and told me to take them. I did it.

I blinked blearily at him as he held up my coat. He turned it around to show me the back.

There was a hole in the leather mantle. I flipped it up. Beneath the hole, several ounces of metal were flattened against the second layer of spell-toughened leather, about three inches below the collar and a hair to the right of my spine.

That was chilling. Even through my best defenses, that was how close I'd come to death.

If Buzz had shot me six inches lower, only a single layer of leather would have been between the round and my hide. A few inches higher, and it would have taken me in the neck, with absolutely no protection. And if he'd waited a quarter of a second longer, until my foot had descended to the first step leading down to my door, he would have sprayed my brains all over the siding of the boardinghouse.

"You broke your nose again," Butters said. "That's where some of the blood came from. There was a laceration on your scalp, too, which accounts for the rest. I stitched it up. You're holding your neck rigid. Probably whiplash from where the round hit you. There are some minor burns on your left wrist, and I'm just about certain that you've got a concussion."

"But other than that," I muttered, "I feel great."

"Don't joke, Harry," Butters said. "You should be under observation."

"Already am," I said. "Look where it got me."

He grimaced. "Doctors are required to report gunshot wounds to the police."

"Good thing I don't have any gunshot wounds, eh? I just fell down some stairs."

Butters shook his head again and turned toward the phone. "Give me a reason not to do it, or I call Murphy right now."

I grunted. Then I said, "I'm protecting something important. Someone else wants it. If the police get involved, this thing would probably get impounded as evidence. That's an unacceptable outcome, and it could get a lot of people hurt."

"Something important," Butters said. "Something like a magic sword?"

I scowled at him. "How do you know that?"

He nodded at my hand. "Because you won't let go of it."

I looked down to find the burn-scarred fingers of my left hand clutching *Amoracchius's* hilt in a white-knuckled grasp. "Oh," I said. "Yeah. Kind of a tip-off, isn't it?"

"Think you can let it go now?" Butters asked quietly.

"I'm trying," I said. "My hand's kind of locked up."

"Okay. Let's just go one finger at a time, then." Butters peeled my fingers off the sword, one at a time, until he had removed it from my grasp. My hand closed in on itself, tendons creaking, and I winced. It sort of hurt, but at the moment it was a really minor thing.

Butters set the sword aside and immediately took my left hand in his, massaging brusquely. "Murphy's going to be pissed if you don't call her."

"Murphy and I have disagreed before," I said.

Butters grimaced. "Okay. Can I help?"

"You are helping."

"Besides this," Butters said.

I looked at the little M.E. for a moment. Butters had been my unofficial doctor for a long time, never asking a thing in return. He'd waded into some serious trouble with me. Once, he'd saved my life. I trusted his discretion. I trusted him, generally.

So, as the blood started returning to my hand, I told him more or less everything about Buzz and the swords.

"So this guy, Buzz," Butters said. "He's just a guy."

"Let's don't forget," I said. "Despite all the nasties running around out there, it's just guys who dominate most of the planet."

"Yeah, but he's just a guy," Butters said. "How's that?"

I flexed my fingers, wincing a little. "It's good. Thanks."

He nodded and stood up. He went over to the kitchen and filled my dog's water bowl, then did the same for my cat, Mister. "My point is," he said, "that if this guy isn't a super-magical something, he had to find out about the swords like any other guy."

"Well," I said. "Yeah."

Butters looked at me over his spectacles. "So," he said. "Who knew that you had the swords?"

"Plenty knew I had Shiro's sword," I said. "But this guy tried to get to me through Michael. And the only ones who knew about *Amoracchius* were me, a couple of archangels, Michael, Sanya, and . . ."

Butters tilted his head, looking at me, waiting. "And the Church," I growled.

St. Mary of the Angels is just about as big and impressive as churches get. In a city known for its architecture, St. Mary's more than holds its own. It takes up most of a city block. It's massive, stone, and as Gothic as black frosting on a birthday cake.

I'd watched my back all the way there, and was sure no one was following me. I parked behind the church and marched up to the delivery door. Twenty seconds of pounding brought a tall, rather befuddled-looking old priest to the door.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I'm here to see Father Forthill," I said.

"Excuse me," he said.

" 'S okay, padre," I told him, clapping his shoulder and moving him aside less than gently. "I'll find him."

"Now, see here, young man—"

He might have said something else, but I didn't pay much attention. I walked past, him, into the halls of the church, and headed for Forthill's room. I rapped twice on the door, opened it, and walked in on a priest in his underwear.

Father Forthill was a stocky man of medium height, with a fringe of white hair around his head, and his eyes were the color of robins' eggs. He wore boxers, a tank- top, and black socks. A towel hung around his neck, and what hair he had left was wet and stuck to his head.

A lot of people would have reacted to my entrance with outrage. Forthill considered me

gravely and said, "Ah. Hello, Harry."

I had come in with phasers set on snark, but even though I'm not particularly religious, I do have some sense of what is and isn't appropriate. Seeing a priest in his undies just isn't, especially when you've barged into his private chamber. "Uh," I said, deflating. "Oh."

Forthill shook his head, smiling. "Yes, priests bathe. We eat. We sleep. Occasionally, we even have to go to the bathroom."

"Yeah," I said. "Um. Yeah."

"I do rather need to get dressed," he said gently. "I'm giving Mass tonight."

"Mass?"

Forthill actually let out a short belly laugh. "Harry, you didn't think that I just sit around in this old barn waiting my chance to make you sandwiches, bandage wounds, and offer advice?" He nodded to where a set of vestments was hung up on the wall. "On weeknights they let the junior varsity have the ball."

"We've got to talk," I said. "It's about the swords."

He nodded and gave me a quick smile. "Perhaps I'll put some pants on first?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry." I backed out of the room and shut the door.

The other priest showed up and gave me a gimlet eye a moment later, but Forthill arrived in time to save me, dressed in his usual black attire with a white collar. "It's all right, Paulo," he told the other priest. "I'll talk to him."

Father Paulo harrumphed and gave me another glare, but he turned and left.

"You look terrible," Forthill said. "What happened?"

I gave it to him unvarnished.

"Merciful God," he said, when I'd finished. But it wasn't in an "oh, no!" tone of voice. It was a slower, wearier inflection.

He knew what was going on.

"I can't protect the swords if I don't know what I'm dealing with," I said. "Talk to me, Anthony."

Forthill shook his head. "I can't."

"Don't give me that," I said with quiet heat. "I need to know."

"I'm sworn not to speak of it. To anyone. For any reason." He faced me, jaw outthrust. "I keep my promises."

"So you're just going to stand there," I snapped. "And do nothing."

"I didn't say that," Forthill replied. "I'll do what I can."

"Oh, sure," I said.

"I will," he said. "You have my word. You're going to have to trust me."

"That might come easier if you'd explain yourself."

His eyes narrowed. "Son, I'm not a fool. Don't tell me that you've never been behind this particular eight ball before."

I looked for something appropriately sarcastic and edgy to say in response, but all I came up with was, "Touche."

He ran a hand over his mostly bald scalp, and I suddenly saw how much older Forthill looked than he had when I met him. His hair was even more sparse and brittle-looking, his hands more weathered with time. "I'm sorry Harry," he said, and he sounded sincere. "If I could ... is there anything else I could do for you?"

"You can hurry," I said quietly. "At the rate we're going, someone is going to get killed."

At the rate we'd been going, probably me.

I approached the park with intense caution. It took me more than half an hour to be reasonably sure that Buzz wasn't there, somewhere, lurking with another fifty-caliber salutation for me. Of course, he could have been watching from the window of one of the nearby buildings—but none of them were hotels or apartments, and none of the pictures taken in the park had been shot from elevation. Besides, if I avoided every place where a maniac with a high-powered rifle might possibly shoot me, I'd live the rest of my life hiding under my bed.

Still, no harm in exercising caution. Rather than walking across the open ground of the park to the softball field, I took the circuitous route around the outside of the park—and heard quiet little sobs coming from the shade beneath the bleachers opposite the ones where I'd sat with Michael.

I slowed my steps as I approached, and peered under the bleachers.

A girl in shorts, sneakers, and a powder-blue team jersey was huddled up with her arms wrapped around her knees, crying quietly. She had stringy red hair and was skinny, even for someone her age. It took me a minute to recognize her as Alicia's teammate, the second basem—person.

"Hey, there," I said quietly, trying to keep my voice gentle. "You all right?"

The girl looked up, her eyes wide, and immediately began wiping at her eyes and nose. "Oh. Oh, yes. I'm fine. I'm just fine, sir."

"Right, right. Next you'll tell me you've got allergies," I said.

She looked up at me with a shaky little smile, huffed out a breath in the ghost of a laugh—and it transformed into another sob on her. Her face twisted up into an agonized grimace. She shuddered and wept harder, bowing her head.

I can be such a sucker. I ducked down under the bleachers and sat down beside her, a couple of feet away. The girl cried for a couple more minutes, until it began quieting down.

"I know you," she said a minute later, between sniffles. "You were talking to Coach Carpenter yesterday. A-Alicia said you were a friend of the family."

"I'd like to think so," I agreed. "I'm Harry."

"Kelly." she said.

I nodded. "Shouldn't you be practicing with the team, Kelly?"

She shrugged her skinny shoulders. "It doesn't help."

"Help?"

"I'm hopeless," she said. "Whatever it is I'm doing, I just screw it up."

"Well, that's not true," I said with assurance. "Nobody can be bad at *everything*. There's no such thing as a perfect screwup."

"I am," she said. "We've only lost two games all year, and both of them were because I screwed up. We go to the finals next week and everyone's counting on me, and I'm just going to let them down."

Hell's bells, what a ridiculously tiny problem. But it was obvious that it was real to Kelly, and that it meant the world to her. She was just a kid. It probably looked like a

much larger issue from where she was standing.

"Pressure," I said. "Yeah, I get that."

She peered at me. "Do you?"

"Sure," I said. "You feel like peoples lives depend on you, and that if you do the wrong thing they're going to be horribly hurt— and it will be your fault."

"Yes," she said, sniffing. "And I've been trying so hard, but I just can't."

"Be perfect?" I asked. "No, of course not. But what choice do you have?"

She looked at me uncertainly.

"Anything you do, you risk screwing up. You could do a bad job of crossing the street one day and get hit by a car."

"I probably could," she said darkly.

I held up my hand. "My point," I told her, "is that if you want to play it safe, you can stay at home and wrap yourself up in bubble wrap and never do anything."

"Maybe I should."

I snorted. "They still make you read Dickens in school? *Great Expectations*?"

"Yeah."

"You can stay at home and hide if you want—and wind up like Miss Havisham," I said. "Watching life through a window and obsessed with how things might have been."

"Dear God," she said. "You've just made Dickens relevant to my life."

"Weird, right?" I asked her, nodding.

Kelly let out a choking little laugh.

I pushed myself up and nodded to her. "I never saw you hiding over here, okay? I'm just gonna go do what I gotta do, and leave you to make the choice."

"Choice?"

"Sure. Do you want to put your cap back on and play? Or do you want to wind up an old maid wandering around your house in the rotting remains of a wedding dress and thirty yards of bubble wrap, plotting heartlessly against some kid named Pip?" I regarded her soberly. "There's really no middle ground."

"I'm pretty sure that's not right," she said.

"See there? I'm not much good at offering wise counsel, but that didn't stop me from trying." I winked at her and walked on, around behind the backstop to where Michael sat on the bleachers on the far side of the field.

Molly sat on a blanket underneath a tree maybe ten yards away, with earbuds trailing wires down into her shirt's front pocket, as if she was listening to a digital music player. It was an effort to blend into the background, I supposed, since she couldn't have been listening to one of those gizmos any more than I could have. She was wearing sunglasses, too, so I couldn't tell where her focus was, but I was sure she was being alert. She gave me the barest trace of a nod as I approached her father.

I sat down next to him and waited for it.

"Harry," Michael said. "You look awful."

"Yes, I do," I said. I told him about the attempted assassination and about my discussion with Forthill.

Michael frowned out at the children practicing, his expression quietly disturbed. "The Church wouldn't do something like that, Harry. It isn't how they operate."

"People are people, Michael," I said. "People do things. They make mistakes."

"But it isn't the Church," he said. "If this person is part of the Church, he isn't acting with their blessing or under their instructions."

I shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. I don't think they were too happy with me when I was a couple of days late turning over the Shroud."

"But you did return it, safe and sound," Michael said.

"How many people know about the swords? How many knew that I had *Amoracchius*?"

He shook his head. "I'm not certain. Given the sorts of foes they contend with, the knowledgeable people within the Church are more than mildly secretive and security-conscious."

I gestured around us. "Ballpark it for me."

He blew out a breath. "Honestly, I just don't know. I've personally met perhaps two hundred priests who understood our mission, but it wouldn't shock me if there were as many as six or seven hundred, worldwide. But among them, that kind of important

information would be closely kept. Four or five, at most. Plus the Holy Father."

"I'm going to assume that Il Papa didn't personally attempt to blow me away," I said gravely. "How do I find out about the others?"

"You might talk to Father For—"

"Been there, did that. He isn't talking."
Michael grimaced. "I see."

"So, other than him—"

He spread his hands. "I don't know, Harry. Forthill was my primary temporal contact."

I blinked. "He never talked to you about your support structure in the Church?"

"He was sworn to secrecy," Michael said. "I just had to trust him. Excuse me." He stood up and called to the softball team, "Thank you, ladies! Two laps of the park and we'll call it a day!"

The team began discarding gloves and such, and fell into a line to begin jogging around the exterior of the park, in no great hurry, talking and laughing as they went. I noticed that Kelly was among them and felt a little less like a complete incompetent.

"I'd really like to keep my brains on the inside of my skull," I told him when he sat down again. "And if one of the Church's top guys is leaking information or has sprang a gear, they need to know it."

"Yes."

I stared out at the now-empty softball diamond for a minute. Then I said, "I don't want to kill anybody. But Buzz is playing for keeps. I'm not going to pull any punches."

Michael frowned down at his hands. "Harry. You're talking about murder."

"What a shock," I said, "after taking one of those monster rounds in the back."

"There must be some way to end this without bloodsh—"

Over his shoulder, I saw Molly abruptly spring to her feet and whip off her sunglasses, staring across the park with a puzzled frown on her face. Then the girls from the team appeared from the direction Molly had been staring. The girls were running as fast as they could, screaming as they came.

"Coach!" screamed Kelly. "Coach! The man took her!"

"Easy, easy," Michael said, rising. He put his hands on Kelly's shoulders as Molly came hurrying over. "Easy. What are you talking about?"

"He came out of the van with one of those electric stunner things," Kelly babbled, through her panting. "He zapped her and then he put her in the van and drove away." Molly drew in a sudden breath and almost seemed to turn green.

Michael stared at the girl for a second, and then glanced at me. His eyes widened in horror. "Alicia!" he called, stepping past Kelly and looking wildly around the park. "Alicia!"

"He took her!" sobbed Kelly, her tears making her face blotchy. "He took her!"

"Kelly," I said, to get her attention. "What did he look like?"

She shook her head. "I don't, I can't... White, not really tall. His hair was cut really short. Like army haircuts."

Buzz.

He'd threatened Michael to get me to bring a sword out in the open, where it was vulnerable. Then he'd tried to kill me before I locked it away again. And when that foiled, he tried something else.

"Molly," Michael said quietly. "Take the truck. Drive Sandra and Donna home. Call your mother on the way and tell her what's happened. Stay at the house."

"But—" Molly began.

Michael turned hard eyes to her and said, "Now."

"Yes, sir," Molly said, instantly.

Michael tossed her the keys to the truck. Then he turned to a nearby equipment bag and smoothly withdrew an aluminum bat. He whipped it around in a flowing *rondello* motion, nodded as if satisfied, and turned to me. "Let's go. You're driving."

"Okay," I said. "Where?"

"St Mary's," Michael said, his tone positively grim. "I'm going to talk to Forthill."

Forthill had just finished giving evening Mass when we showed up. Father Paulo greeted Michael like a long-lost son, and how was he doing, and of course we could wait for Forthill in his chambers. I suspected Paulo held deep reservations in regards to me.

But that was okay. I wasn't feeling particularly trusting toward him, either.

We'd been waiting in Forthill's quarters for maybe five minutes when the old priest came in. He took one look at Michael and got pale.

"Talk to me about the order," Michael said quietly.

"My son," Forthill said. He shook his head. "You know that I—"

"He's taken Alicia, Tony."

Forthill's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"He's taken my daughter," Michael roared, his voice shaking the walls. "I don't care what oaths you've sworn. I don't care what the Church thinks needs to be kept secret. We have to find this man and find him now."

I blinked at Michael and found myself leaning a little away from him. The heat of his anger was palpable, a living thing that brought its own presence, its own gravity, into the room.

Forthill faced that anger like an old rock thrusting up stubbornly through a turbulent sea—worn and unmoving. "I will not break my oaths, Michael. Not even for you."

"I'm not asking you to do it for me," Michael said. "I'm asking you to do it for Alicia."

Forthill flinched. "Michael," he said quietly. "The order maintains security for a reason. Its enemies have sought to destroy it for two thousand years, and in that time the order has helped hundreds of thousands, even millions. You know that. A breach could put the entire order at risk—and that means more than my life, or yours."

"Or an innocent child's, apparently," I said. "I guess you're going to take that 'suffer the little children to come unto Me' thing kind of literally, eh, padre?"

Forthill looked from Michael to me, and then to the floor. He took a slow breath, and then smoothed his hands over his vestments. "It never gets any easier, does it? Trying to work out the right thing to do." He answered his own question. "No. I suppose it's often simpler to determine the proper path than it is to actually walk it."

Forthill rose and walked over to a section of the wood-paneled wall. He put his hands at the top right and lower left section of the panel, and with a grunt, pushed it in. It slid aside, revealing a space the size of a closet, filled with file cabinets and a small bookshelf.

I traded a glance with Michael, who raised his eyebrows in surprise. He hadn't known about the hidey-hole.

Forthill opened a drawer and started thumbing through files. "The Ordo Malleus has existed, in one form or another, since the founding of the Church. Originally, we were tasked with the casting out of demons from the possessed, but as the Church grew, it became clear that we needed to be able to counter the threats from other enemies as well."

"Other enemies?" I asked.

"Various beings who were masquerading as gods," Forthill said. "Vampires and other supernatural predators. Wicked faeries who resented the Church's influence." He glanced at me. "Practitioners of witchcraft who turned their hand against the followers of Christ."

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "The Inquisition."

Forthill grimaced. "The Inquisition has become the primary reason Malleus maintains itself in secrecy—and why we very seldom engage in direct action ourselves. It's all too easy to let power go to your head when you're certain that God is on your side. The Inquisition, in many ways, attempted to bring our struggle into the light—and because of the situation it helped create, more innocent men and women died than centuries of the most savage supernatural depredation.

"We support the Knights of the Cross and do whatever we can to counsel and protect God's children against supernatural threats—the way we protected the girl you brought to me the year Michael's youngest was born. Now the order recruits people singly, after years of personal observation, and maintains the highest levels of personal, ethical integrity humanly possible." He turned to us, with a file folder in his hands. "But as you pointed out earlier, Harry. We're only human."

I took the folder from him, opened it, and found Buzz's picture. I recognized the short haircut, and the severe lines of his chin and jaw. His eyes were new to me, though. They were as grey as stone, but less warm and fuzzy.

"Father Roarke Douglas," I read. "Age forty-three. Five eleven, hundred eighty-five. Sniper for the Rangers, trained in demolitions, U.S. Army Chaplain, parish priest in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Rwanda."

"Good Lord preserve us," Michael said.

"Yeah. A real holy warrior," I said. I eyed Forthill. "And this guy was brought in?"

"I've met Roarke on several occasions," Forthill said. "I was always impressed with his reserve and calm in the face of crisis. He repeatedly distinguished himself by acts of courage in protecting his parishioners in some of the most dangerous locations in the world." He shook his head. "But he ... changed, in the last few years."

"Changed," Michael said. "How?"

"He became a strong advocate for ... preemptive intervention."

"He wanted to hit back first, eh?" I asked.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen what life can be like in some of the places Father Douglas has lived," Forthill said. "It's not so simple."

"It never is," I said.

"He was, in particular, an admirer of Shiro's," Forthill continued. "When Shiro died, he was devastated. They had worked together several times."

"The way you worked with Michael," I said.

Forthill nodded. "Roarke was ... not satisfied with the disposition of *Fidelacchius*. He made it known to the rest of Malleus, too. As time went by, he became increasingly frustrated that the sword was not being put to use."

I could see where this one was going. "And then I got hold of *Amoracchius*, too."

Forthill nodded. "He spent the last year trying to convince the senior members of Malleus that we had been deceived. That you were, in fact, an agent of an enemy power, who had taken the swords so that they could not be used."

"And no one thought to mention the way those archangels gave orders that I was supposed to hold them?"

"They never appear to more than one or two people at a time—and you *are* a wizard, Harry," Forthill said. "Father Douglas hypothesized that you had created an illusion to serve your purpose, or else had tampered directly with our minds."

"And now he's on a crusade," I muttered.

Forthill nodded. "So it would seem."

I kept on reading the file. "He's versed in magic—well enough, at least, to be smart about how he deals with me. Contacts in various supernatural communities, like the Venatori Umbrorum, which probably explains that protective amulet." I shook my head. "And he thinks he's saving the world. The guy's a certifiable nightmare."

"Where is he?" Michael asked quietly.

"He could be anywhere," Forthill replied. "Malleus sets up caches of equipment, money, and so forth. He could have tapped into any one of them. I tried his cell phone. He's not returning my calls."

"He thinks you've been mindscrambled by the enemy," I muttered. "What did you expect to accomplish?"

"I had hoped," Forthill said gently, "that I might ask him to be patient and have faith."

"I'm pretty sure this guy believes in faith through superior firepower." I closed the file and passed it back to Forthill. "He tried to kill me. He abducted Alicia. As far as I'm concerned, he's off the reservation."

Forthill's expression became distressed as he looked at me. He turned to Michael, beseeching.

Michael's face was bleak and unyielding, and quiet heat smoldered in his eyes. "The son of a bitch hurt my little girl."

I rocked a step backward at the profanity. So did Forthill. The room settled into an oppressive silence.

The old priest cleared his throat after a moment. He put the file back in the cabinet and closed the door. "I've told you what I know," he said. "I'm only sorry that I can't do more."

"You can find her, can't you?" Michael asked me. "The way you found Molly?"

"Sure," I said. "But he's bound to be expecting that. Magic isn't a cure-all."

"But you can find her."

I shrugged. "He can't stop me from finding her, but he can damn well make sure that something happens to her if I do."

Michael frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe he stashes her in a box that's being held fifty feet above the ground with an electromagnet, so that when I get close with an active spell up and running, it shorts out and she falls. The bastard is smart and creative."

Michael's knuckles popped as his hands closed into fists.

"Besides," I said. "We don't need to find him."

"No?"

"No," I said. "We've got the swords. He's got the girl." I turned to go. "He's going to find us."

Father Douglas called Michael's house later that night, and asked for me. I took the call in Michael's office.

"You know what I want," he said, without preamble.

"Obviously," I said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Bring the swords," he said. "Give them to me. If you do so without attempting any tricks or deceptions, I will release the girl to you unharmed. If you involve the police or attempt anything foolish, she will die."

"How do I know you haven't killed her already?"

The phone rustled, and then Alicia said, "H-Harry? I'm okay. H-he hasn't hurt me.:'

"Nor do I want to," Father Douglas said, taking the phone back. "Satisfied?"

"Can I ask you something?" I said. "Why are you doing this?"

"I am doing God's work."

"Okay, that doesn't sound too crazy or anything," I said. "If you're so tight with God, can you really expect me to believe that you'll be willing to murder a teenage girl?"

"The world needs the swords," he replied in a level, calm voice. "They are more important than any one person. And while I would never forgive myself, yes. I will kill her."

"I'm just trying to get you to see the fallacious logic you're using here," I said. "See, if I'm such a bad guy to have stolen the swords, then why would I give a damn whether or not you murder some kid?"

"You don't have to be evil to be ambitious—or wrong. You don't want to see the girl harmed. Give me the swords and she won't be."

There clearly wasn't going to be any profitable discussion of the situation here. Father Douglas was going to have his way, regardless of the impediments of trivial things like rationality.

"Where?" I asked.

He gave me an address. "The roof. You come to the east side of the building. You show me the swords. Then you come up and make the exchange. No staff, no rod. Just you."

"When."

"One hour," he said, and hung up.

I put the phone down, looked at Michael, and said, "We don't have much time."

The building in question stood at the corner of Monroe and Michigan, overlooking Millennium Park. I had to park a couple of blocks away and walk in, with both swords stowed in a big gym bag. Father Douglas hadn't specified where I was supposed to stand and show him the swords, but the streetlights adjacent to the building were all inexplicably dark except for one. I ambled over to the pool of light it cast down onto the sidewalk, opened the bag, and held out both swords.

It was hard to see past the light, but I thought I saw a gleam on the roof. Binoculars?

A few seconds later, a red light flashed twice from the same spot where I'd thought I had seen something.

This would be the place, then.

I'd brought my extremely illegal picklocks with me, but as it turned out, I didn't need to use them. Father Douglas had already circumvented the locks and, presumably, the security system. The front door was open, as was the door to the stairwell. From there, it was just one long, thigh-burning hike up to the roof.

I emerged into cold, strong wind. You get up twenty stories or so and you run into that a lot. It ripped at my duster, and sent it to flapping like a flag.

I peered around the roof, at spinning heat pumps and AC units and various antennae, but saw no one.

The beam of a handheld floodlight hit me, and I whirled in place. The light was coming from the roof of the building next to mine. Father Douglas flipped it off, and after blinking a few times, I could see him clearly, standing in the wind in priestly black, his white collar almost luminous in the ambient light of the city. His grey eyes were shadowed, and he was maybe a day and a half past rime to shave. A long plank lay on the rooftop at his feet, which he must have used to move over.

Alicia sat in a chair next to him, her wrists bound to its arms, blindfolded, with a gag in her mouth.

Father Douglas lifted a megaphone. "That's far enough," he said. I could hear him over the heavy wind. "That's detcord she's tied up with. Do you know what that is?"

"Yeah."

He held up his other hand. "This is the detonator. As long as it's sending a signal, she's fine. It's a dead man switch. If I drop it or let it go, the signal stops and the cord goes off. If the receiver gets damaged and stops receiving the signal, the cord goes off. If you start using magic and destroy one of the devices, it goes off."

"That's way better than the electromagnet thing," I muttered to myself. I raised my voice and bellowed, "So how do you want to do this?"

"Throw them."

"Disarm the explosives first."

"No. The girl stays where she is. Once I'm gone, I'll send the code to disarm the device."

I considered the distance. It was a good fifteen-foot jump to get from one rooftop to the other. An easy throw.

"Douglas," I shouted. "Think about this for a minute. The swords aren't just sharp and shiny. They're symbols. If you take one up for the wrong reasons, you could destroy it. Believe me, I know."

"The swords are meant for better things than to molder in a dingy basement," he replied. He held up the detonator. "Surrender them now."

I stared at him for a long second. Then I tossed the entire bag over. It landed at his feet with a clatter. He bent down to open it.

I steeled myself. This was about to get dicey. I hadn't counted on the dead man switch or a fifteen-foot-long jump.

Father Douglas opened the bag and the smoke grenade Michael had rigged inside it in his workshop went off with a heavy thud. White smoke billowed back into his face, and I took three quick steps and hurled myself into the air. For an awful portion of a second, twenty stories of open air yawned beneath me, and then I hit the edge of the other roof and collided with Father Douglas. We went down together.

I couldn't think about anything but the detonator, and I clamped down on that with my left hand, crushing his fingers beneath mine so that he couldn't release it. He jabbed his thumb at my right eye, but I ducked my head and he got nothing but bone. He slammed his head against my nose—again with the nose, Hell's bells that hurt—and drove a knee into my groin.

I let him, seizing his arm with both hands now, squeezing, trying to choke off the blood to his hand, to weaken it so that I could take the detonator from him. His left fist slammed

into my temple, my mouth, and my neck. I bent my head down and bit savagely at his wrist, eliciting a scream of pain from him. I slammed my weight against him, slipping some fingers into his grasp, and got one of them over the pressure trigger. Then I wrenched with my whole body, twisting my shoulders and hips for leverage, and ripped the detonator away from him.

He rolled away from me instantly and seized the bag. Then he was up and running for a doorway leading down into the building.

I let him go and rushed over to Alicia. The dark-haired girl was trembling uncontrollably.

Detcord is basically a long rubber tube filled with explosive compound. It's a little thicker than a pencil, flexible, and generally set off by an electrical charge. Wrap detcord around a concrete column and set it off, and the explosion will cut through it like a piece of dry bamboo. Alicia was tied to the chair with it. If it went off, it would cut her to pieces.

The detonator was a simple setup—a black plastic box hooked to a twelve-volt battery, which was in turn connected to a wire leading to the detcord. A green light on the detonator glowed cheerily. It matched a cheery green light on the dead man switch transmitter in my hand. If what Douglas had said was accurate, then if the light went out, things wouldn't be nearly so cheery.

If I let go of the switch, it would stop the signal to the detonator, which would then complete the circuit, send current to the detcord, and boom. In theory, I should be able to cut the wire leading from the battery and render it harmless—as long as Douglas hadn't rigged the device to detonate if that happened.

I didn't have much time. The electronics of the transmitter wouldn't last long around me, even though I hadn't used any magic around them. I had to get the girl out now.

I made the call based upon what I knew about Father Douglas. He seemed like he might have good intentions, despite all his shenanigans. So I gambled that he wouldn't want the girl to die by any means other than a conscious decision from someone— either him letting go of the trigger or me blowing the transmitter by using magic.

I took out my pocketknife, opened it with my teeth, and slashed at the heavy plastic tubing that held her tied down. I cut through the tube once, unwound it from first one arm, then the other, and she was free. She clawed away the blindfold and gag, her fingers still clumsy from being bound.

"Come on!" I said. I grabbed her arm and hauled her out of the chair and away from the explosives. She staggered, leaning against me, and I ran for the stairs.

As we got to the first landing, my ongoing presence apparently became too much for

the transmitter. Something sparked and crackled inside the plastic case, the cheery green light went out, and there was a huge and horrible sound from above and behind us. I managed to get between Alicia and the stairwell wall as the pressure wave caught us and threw us into it. It slammed my already abused head into the wall.

I staggered under the pain for a minute, and forced my way through it, like a drowning man clawing for the surface.

"Come on," I croaked to Alicia. "Come on. We have to go."

She looked at me with dull, stunned eyes, so I just grabbed her hand and started down the stairs with her, stuffing the heavy transmitter into my duster pocket with the other hand. We only had a few minutes before the place would be swarming with police and firefighters. I didn't particularly feel like answering their questions about why my fingerprints were on an expensive transmitter and showed trace evidence of explosive residue.

Going down all those stairs was only slightly less taxing than going up had been, and my legs were going to be complaining at me for days. We got to the bottom and I led Alicia out into an alley, then out to Monroe. I looked wildly up and down the street. Michael's truck was there waiting right where it was supposed to be, out in front of the original building. I put my fingers to my lips and let out a shrill whistle.

Michael's truck pulled into the street and stopped in front of us. I hurried Alicia forward. The door swung open, and Molly leaned out, taking Alicia's hand and pulling her in. I went in right behind her, though it made things awfully cozy in the pickup's cab.

"He's loose with the swords," I said. "Did you do it?"

"Did it," Molly replied, and promptly handed me a dashboard compass with one of her own golden hairs stuck to it with clear tape. The needle pointed firmly to the east, instead of to the north. The grasshopper had set up a basic tracking spell, one of the handier tricks I know.

"He's probably moving on foot through the park," I told Michael. "Circle around to Lakeshore, get us in front of him."

"Are you all right, baby?" Michael asked.

Alicia fumbled for his hand and squeezed it tight. Then she leaned against Molly and started crying.

"Hurry," I told Michael. "He's got to know we've bugged the swords somehow. If he finds those hairs Molly tied onto the hilts, we're done."

"He won't get away," Michael said with perfect confidence, and slammed the

accelerator down as we approached an intersection sporting a bright red light. Maybe it was divine intervention, or fate, or just good driving, but the truck shot through the intersection, missing two other cars by inches, and sailed on forward.

The needle on the compass pointed steadily toward the park as we went, but then abruptly began to traverse from one side to the other. I looked up ahead of me and saw a dark form sprinting across the road that separated the park from Lake Michigan.

"There!" I shouted, pointing. "There he is!"

Michael pulled over to the side of the road, and I hit the ground before the truck had stopped moving, sprinting after Father Douglas. He was in good shape, covering the ground in long, loping strides. Normally it wouldn't have been a contest to catch him. I run three or four days a week, to train for situations exactly like this one. Of course, when I practice I'm not generally concussed, weary, and sporting a recently dislocated shoulder. Douglas was holding his lead as we sprinted down the beach, and I was tiring more rapidly than I should have.

So I cheated.

I reached into my pocket, drew out the heavy transmitter, and flung it at him as hard as I could. The black plastic device struck him on the back of the head, shattering, and sending several heavy batteries flying.

Father Douglas staggered, and couldn't keep his balance at the pace he was moving. He went down in the sand. I rushed over to him and seized the bag with the swords, only to have him sweep one leg out in a martial arts move, and kick my legs out from beneath me. I went down, too.

Father Douglas ripped at the bag, but I clung grimly, while we fought and kicked at each other—until the bag tore open under the strain and spilled the swords onto the sand.

He seized the hilt of *Fidelacchius*, a katana-type sword that was built to look like a simple, heavy walking stick, until you drew the blade. I seized *Amoracchius*, scabbard and all, and barely brought the sheathed broadsword up in time to deflect a sweeping slash from Father Douglas.

He gained his knees and swung again, and I had all I could do to lift the sheathed sword and fend off the strike. Blow after blow rained down on me, and there was no time to call upon my power, no opportunity to so much as rise to my knees—

Until a size-fourteen work boot hit Father Douglas in the chest and threw him back.

Michael stood over me, aluminum baseball bat in his right hand. He put out the other one, and I slapped *Amoracchius* into it. He gripped it mid-blade, like some kind of giant crucifix, and limped toward Father Douglas with his bat held in a guard position.

Father Douglas stared at Michael with wide eyes. "Stay back," he said. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Who says you're able to?" Michael rumbled. "Put down the sword, and I'll let you go."

Douglas stared at him with those cold grey eyes. "I can't do that."

"Then I'll put you down and take the sword anyway. It's over, Roarke. You just don't realize it yet."

Father Douglas wasted no more time on talk, but came at Michael, the katana whirling.

Michael batted (no pun intended) the attack aside like a cat swatting down moths, the baseball bat spinning.

"Slow," he said. "Too slow to hit a half-blind cripple. You don't know the first thing about what it means to bear a sword."

Douglas snarled and came at him again. Michael defeated this attack, too, with contemptuous ease, and followed it by smacking Douglas across one cheek with the hilt of the sheathed sword.

"It means sacrifice," Michael said as Douglas reeled. "It means forgetting about yourself, and what you want. It means putting your faith in the Lord God Almighty." He swung a pair of blows, which Douglas defended against, barely—but the third, a straight thrust with the baseball bat's tip, drove home into his solar plexus. Douglas staggered to one knee.

"You *abandoned* your duty," Douglas gasped. "The world grows darker by the day. People cry out for our help—and you would have the swords sit with this creature of witchcraft and deceit?"

"You arrogant child," Michael snarled. "The Almighty Himself has made His will known. If you are a man of faith, then you must abide by it."

"You have been lied to," Douglas said. "How could God ignore His people when they need his protection so badly?"

"That is not for us to know!" Michael shouted. "Don't you see, you fool? We are only men. We only see in one place at one time. The Lord knows all that might be. Would you presume to say that you know better than our God what should be done with the swords?"

Douglas stared at Michael.

"Are you stupid enough to believe that He would want you to cast aside your beliefs to impose your will upon the world? Do you think He wants you to murder decent men and

abduct innocent *children*?" The bat struck *Fidelacchius* from Douglas's hands, and Michael followed it with a pair of crushing blows, one to the shoulder and one to the knee. Douglas went down to the sand in a heap.

"Look at yourself," Michael said, his words hard and merciless. "Look at what you have done in God's name. Look at the bruises on my daughter's arms, at the blood on my friend's face, and then tell me which of us has been deceived."

Again, the bat swept down, and Douglas fell senseless to the sand.

Michael stood over the man for a moment, his entire body shaking, the bat still upraised.

"Michael," I said quietly.

"He hurt my little girl, Harry." His voice shook with barely repressed rage.

"He isn't going to hurt her now," I said.

"He hurt my little girl."

"Michael," I said, gently. "You can't. If this is how it has to be, I'll do it. But you can't, man."

His eyes shifted back toward me for just a second.

"Easy, easy," I told him. "We're done here. We're done."

He stared for another long, silent moment. Then he lowered the bat, very slowly, and bowed his head. He stood there for a minute, his chest heaving, and then dropped the bat. He settled down onto the sand with a wince.

I got up and collected *Fidelacchius*, returning it to its sheath.

"Thank you," Michael said quietly. He offered me *Amoracchius*'s hilt.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

He nodded, smiling wearily. "Yes."

I took the sword and looked at Douglas. "What do we do with him?" Michael stared at him silently for a moment. In the background, we could hear emergency vehicles arriving to attend to the aftermath of the rooftop explosion. "We'll bring him with us," Michael said. "The Church will deal with its own."

I sat in the chapel balcony at St. Mary's, staring down at the church below me and brooding. Michael and Forthill had been seeing to Father Douglas, who wasn't going anywhere under his own locomotion for a while. They had him in a bed somewhere. It had hurt to watch Michael, moving in what was obviously great pain, hobble around the room helping to make Douglas feel better. I'd have been content to dump the asshole in an alley somewhere and leave him to his fate.

Which might, just possibly, be one reason I was never going to be a Knight.

I had also swiped Forthill's flask of scotch from his room, and it was keeping me company in the balcony. Two more reasons I was never going to be a Knight.

"Right at the end, there," I said to no one in particular, "those two started speaking a different language. I mean, I understood all the words, and I understood the passion behind them, but I don't get how they connect. You know?"

I sipped some more scotch. "Come to think of it, there are a lot of things I don't get about this whole situation."

"And you want an explanation of some kind?" asked a man seated in the pew beside me.

I just about jumped out of my skin.

He was an older man. He had dark skin and silver-white hair, and he wore a blue workman's jumpsuit, like you often see on janitors. The name tag read "Jake."

"You," I breathed. "You're the archangel. You're Uriel."

He shrugged. The gesture carried acknowledgment, somehow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked—maybe a bit blearily. I was concussed and half the flask was gone.

"Perhaps I'm a hallucination brought on by head trauma and alcohol," he said.

"Oh," I said. I peered at him, and then offered him the flask. "Want a belt?"

"Very kind," he said, and took a swig from the flask. He passed it back to me. "I don't exactly make it a habit to do this, but if you've got questions, ask them."

"Okay," I said. "Why did you guys let Michael get so screwed up?"

"We didn't let him do anything," Jake replied calmly. "He chose to hazard himself in battle against the enemy. The enemy chose to shoot him, and where to point the gun and when to pull the trigger. He survived the experience."

"So in other words, God was doing nothing to help."

Jake smiled. "Wouldn't say that. But you got to understand, son. God isn't about making good things happen to you, or bad things happen to you. He's all about you making choices— exercising the gift of free will. God wants you to have good things and a good life, but he can't gift wrap them for you. You have to choose the actions that lead you to that life."

"Free will, huh?"

"Yes. For example, your free will on that island."

I eyed him and sipped more scotch.

"You saw the Valkyrie staring at Michael. You thought he was in danger. So even though it was your turn, you sent him up to the helicopter in your place."

"No good deed goes unpunished," I said, with one too many "sh" sounds. "That's where he got hurt."

Jake shrugged. "But if you hadn't, you'd have died in that harness, and he'd have died on that island."

I scowled. "What?"

Jake waved a hand. "I won't bore you with details, but suffice to say that your choice in that moment changed everything."

"But you lost a Knight," I said. "A warrior."

Jake smiled. "Did we?"

"He can barely walk without that cane. Sure, he handled Douglas, but that's a far cry from dealing with a Denarian."

"Ah," Jake said. "'You mean warrior in the literal sense.'"

"What other kind of warrior is there?" I asked.

"The important kind."

I frowned again.

"Harry," Jake said, sighing. "The conflict between light and darkness rages on so many levels that you literally could not understand it all. Not yet, anyway. Sometimes that battlefield is a literal one. Sometimes it's a great deal more nebulous and metaphorical."

"But Michael and me are literal guys," I said.

Jake actually laughed. "Yeah? Do you think we angled to have you brought into this situation because we needed you to beat someone up?"

"Well. Generally speaking. Yeah." I gestured with the flask. "Pretty much all we did was beat up this guy who had good intentions and who was desperate to do something to help."

Jake shook his head. "The real war happened when you weren't looking."

"Huh?"

"Courtney," Jake said. "The little girl who almost got hit by a car."

"What about her?" I asked.

"You saved her life," he said. "Moreover, you noted the bruise on her cheek—one which she acquired from her abusive father. Your presence heightened her mother's response to the realization that her daughter was being abused. She moved out the next morning." He spread his hands. "In that moment, you saved the child's life, prevented her mother from alcohol addiction in response to the loss, and shattered a generational cycle of abuse more than three hundred years old."

"I... um."

"Chuck the electrician," Jake continued. "He was drunk because he's fighting with his wife. Two months from now, their four-year-old daughter is going to be diagnosed with cancer and require a marrow transplant. Her father is the only viable donor. You saved his life with what you did—and his daughter's life, too. And the struggle that family is going to face together is going to leave them stronger and happier than they've ever been."

I grunted. "That smells an awful lot like predestination to me. What if those people choose something different?"

"It's a complex issue," Jake admitted. "But think of the course of the future as, oh, flowing water. If you know the lay of the land, you can make a good guess where it's going. Now, someone can always come along and dig a ditch and change that flow of water—but honestly, you'd be shocked how seldom people truly choose to exercise their will within their lives."

I grunted. "What about second baseperson Kelly? I save her life, too?"

"No. But you made a young woman feel better in a moment where she felt as though

she didn't have anyone she could talk to. Just a few kind words. But it's going to make her think about the difference those words made. She's got a good chance of winding up as a counselor to her fellow man. The five minutes of kindness you showed her is going to help thousands of others." He spread his hands. "And that only takes into account the past day. Despair and pain were averted, loss and tragedy thwarted. Do you think that you haven't struck a blow for the light, warrior?"

"Um."

"And last but not least, let's not forget Michael," he said. "He's a good man, but where his children are involved he can be completely irrational. He was a hairbreadth from losing control when he stood over Douglas on the beach. Your words, your presence, your will helped him to choose mercy over vengeance."

I just stared at him for a moment. "But ... I didn't actually mean to do any of that."

He smiled. "But you chose the actions that led to it. No one forced you to do it. And to those people, what you did saved them from danger as real as any creature of the night." He turned to look down at the church below, and pursed his lips. "People have far more power than they realize, if they only choose to use it. Michael might not be cutting demons with a sword anymore, Harry. But don't think for a second that he isn't still fighting the good fight. It's just harder for you to see the results from down here."

I swigged more scotch, thinking about that.

"He's happier now," I said. "His family, too."

"Funny how making good choices leads to that."

"What about Father Douglas?" I asked. "What's going to happen?"

"For the most part," Jake said, "that will be up to him. Hopefully, he'll choose to accept his errors and change his life for the better."

I nodded slowly. Then I said, "Let's talk about my bill."

Jake's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"My bill," I said, enunciating. "You dragged me into this mess. You can pay me, same as any other client. Where do I send the invoice?"

"You're ... you're trying to bill the Lord God Almighty?" Jake said, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

"Hel—uh, heck no," I said. "I'm billing *you*."

"That isn't really how we work."

"It is if you want to work with me," I told him, thrusting out my jaw. "Cough up. Otherwise, maybe next time I'll just stand around whistling when you want me to help you out."

Jake's face broadened into a wide, merry grin, and laughter filled his voice. "No, you won't," he said, and vanished.

I scowled ferociously at the empty space where he'd been a moment before. "Cheapskate," I muttered.

But I was pretty sure he was right.